

## **Counter-Production**

## Counter-Production

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## Contents

### Counter-Production Part 1

- 4 Sabine Folie  
Preface
- 9 Diana Baldon  
Rehabilitating Counter-Production
- 20 Luke Skrebowski  
Working against (Art) Work
- 28 Marine Hugonnier  
TRAVAIL CONTRE PRODUCTIF
- 39 Marion von Osten  
Irene ist Viele! Or What We Call "Productive Forces"
- 50 Seth Price  
Dispersion
- 70 Authors' and Artists' Biographies
- 72 Colophon

## Preface

Perhaps the only possibility for me to be an artist is to be a liar because ultimately all economic products, all trade, all communication, are lies. Most artists adapt their production like industrial goods to conform to the market.

Marcel Broodthaers

“Counter-production”: the term, it is somewhat obvious, dates from the early 1970s, more precisely from 1972, when—as Christian Schulte has shown in his essay “Kritische Theorie als Gegenproduktion. Zum Projekt Alexander Kluges” (Critical Theory as Counter-Production: On Alexander Kluge’s Project, 2010)—Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, with their book *Public Sphere and Experience* (1993; German original 1972), published the “basic text of the New Left,” in which they formulated the “concept of a critical counterpublic.” Specifically, Kluge was in a position to set up independent time slots on the German private television stations RTL and SAT.1; since 1988, he has broadcast his “counterproductive” arts programs weekly.

The connection to the Frankfurt School, to critical theory, and specifically to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s discussions of the culture industry, under the combative subtitle “Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in their standard work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972; German original 1947), is an easy one to make, especially as Kluge came from that circle as well. Horkheimer and Adorno’s negative teleology aimed at an irreconcilability of antitheses, particularly that between the autonomy of the work of art and the claim to inalienable “truth” formulated therein, on the one hand, and, on the other, its total commercialization in the spectacle of the culture industry, in which everything becomes a commodity. Kluge’s approach relied on infiltrating the ossified concepts and terms created and defined within the dominant power relations and on the transformative power of a practice that produces links between artistic work and social reality.

It is obvious: the counterproductive techniques explored in this publication and the exhibition *Counter-Production* have always been part of avant-gardes (even earlier ones); Marcel Broodthaers, cited above, is just one of their advocates. The employment of these techniques presumes that artists are pursuing the perhaps utopian notion that the social world can be changed and influenced by their “work.”

The counter- and antiproduktive and the nonproduktive as forms of criticality and *parresia* (Michel Foucault borrowed this term for “free speech” from antiquity and made it useful to the present) have since been lived out and commented on by artists and critics, using

mounting complex arguments. These forms have raised issues that are increasingly difficult for artists to resolve, within the plexus of production, productivity, autonomy, market, and the growing need for interdisciplinarity, with reference to artistic subjectivity and to the work of art as a “product” whose surplus value is ultimately owed to an ideological construction rather than a real value. Or as Horkheimer and Adorno put it: “The unified standard of value consists in the level of conspicuous production, the amount of investment put on show. The budgeted differences of value in the culture industry have nothing to do with actual differences, with the meaning of the product itself.”

These pressures and demands have crystallized in the post-Fordist economy. They reinforce processes of rationalization, flexibilization, and standardization; further emphasize communicative competence; and increase the networking of thinking and knowledge in the so-called knowledge society. In this process, artists, like all other workers in society, are necessarily actors with the ability to multitask; “immaterial work” is the central slogan here and one of its most prominent features. Artistic movements such as relational aesthetics ultimately follow these very premises and logics of participation, exchange, and communication, which are more in demand today than ever before.

The exhibition *Counter-Production* focuses its attention on the self-conception of artists who produce not only artifacts but also texts, networks, actions, politics, and so on, and on how society conceives of itself. These artists, in years of (artistic) practice, have sought and tried specific ways of thinking, reflecting, and acting in order to do justice to growing demands on the individual in general and on the artistic subject in particular, so that they might redefine the role of the latter under constantly changing circumstances; they are trying to keep step precisely to be able to position themselves critically.

Counterproductive practice is thus, as an instrument of “showing” and of resistance, a form of obtaining knowledge and articulating oneself politically and critically, just as, for example, the methods of the apparatus theories of the 1960s—which can be traced back to Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin—took aim not only at the product or work but also at the conditions to which its production was subject. Counter-production is thus about showing how what we consume functions; not necessarily about making it “unpalatable” but about establishing the necessary distance. This function of showing is inevitably a political act, and Jacques Rancière, in his *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2009; French original 2004), is not the only one to have asked how artists can walk this tightrope between artistic autonomy and increasing involvement in politically peevish times: “Indeed, it seems as if the time of consensus, with its shrinking public space and effacing of political inventiveness, has given to artists and their mini-demonstrations, their collections of objects and traces, their *dispositifs* of interaction, their *in situ* or other provocations, a substitutive political function. Knowing whether these ‘substitutions’ can reshape political spaces or whether they must be content with parodying them is without doubt an important question of our present.”

As we recently saw in the case of the 7th Berlin Biennale, today there are far-reaching—albeit understandable and necessary—gestures that aim to oblige artists to get involved

in politics or even completely annul the role of art in the existing system, because art seems to have become obsolete and can only demonstrate its right to exist through political effectiveness. There have, however, also been—including in the context of the present project, *Counter-Production*—more modest attempts to examine critically the role of art and culture and how they are institutionalized. Such an approach need not result in blind or even naive political activism.

It does not seem surprising that such an exhibition project has been produced by the Generali Foundation, especially since the Generali has from the outset dedicated itself to so-called institutional critique—with all the contradictions that result from its own status as a “corporate collection”—and it has explored and demonstrated counterproductive practices in most of its exhibitions.

I conclude with several memorable reflections by Seth Price—one of the artists represented in the exhibition—and specifically from his text *Dispersion* (2002–ongoing), which in turn bring us back to Marcel Broodthaers, whom we cited at the outset: “The last thirty years have seen the transformation of art’s ‘expanded field’ from a stance of stubborn discursive ambiguity into a comfortable and compromised situation in which we’re well accustomed to conceptual interventions, to art and the social, where the impulse to merge art and life has resulted in lifestyle art, a secure gallery practice that comments on contemporary media culture, or apes commercial production strategies [...]. This is the lumber of life.”

Following up on this conclusion, he raises the question of what task art still has today: “[...] must [I] consult some picture or trinket to understand that identity is administered, power exploits, resistance is predetermined, all is hollow?” Price ends his essay—despite his skepticism about the seemingly superfluous role of the artist—with the hope for utopia that art has always embodied and with the observation that art, despite stubborn attempts in recent centuries and decades, has not really “dematerialized” but has, on the contrary, expanded more and more into the field of the everyday, absorbed its forms of expression, and blended with them: “Production, after all, is the excretory phase in a process of appropriation.” The question is whether it is still possible to distill from this process remnants of the inalienable, and whether in this process of blending and appropriating it is still possible to generate cultural surplus value, which has, however, long since ceased to be due solely to the work of those we traditionally call artists.

With an awareness that all these questions of production and counter-production, counterpublics, and counterculture are of vital force for artists and cultural understanding in general, I invited Diana Baldon to curate for the Generali Foundation a project on a complex of themes she has been addressing for some time. Together with Luke Skrebowski, she has long been discussing fundamental questions on the theme of counter-production. With Ilse Lafer, a curator at the Generali Foundation, the project was developed, clarified, and realized in long, contentious, and fruitful debates and conversations. One element of this project is the online publication whose first part you have before you; it was conceived and designed by Dexter Sinister, who are known as “inventive counter-producers” in the area of design, art, and text.

I would like to thank Diana Baldon, Ilse Lafer, and Luke Skrebowski for bringing together in an extremely stimulating way important artists, theorists, and ideas, which, we hope, will promote lively discussions about and intense engagement with the works, advancing our understanding of the role of art.

I and the curators wish to thank sincerely all of those involved in the exhibition and publication, including the team from the Generali Foundation: Gudrun Ankele, Sabeth Buchmann, Diedrich Diederichsen, Tom Holert, Marion von Osten, Livia Páldi, Christian Schulte, Luke Skrebowski, Axel Stockburger, and Octavio Zaya for their important impulses in discussions with the curators; the artists Ricardo Basbaum, Mary Ellen Carroll, Dexter Sinister, Goldin+Senneby, Marine Hugonnier, Henrik Olesen, Marion von Osten, Johannes Porsch, Seth Price, Josephine Pryde, Lili Reynaud-Dewar, and Josef Strau for making their works available and for their outstanding collaboration; Dexter Sinister for the multipart online publication and Luke Skrebowski for co-conceiving it; the authors and artists Ricardo Basbaum, Julia Bryan-Wilson (tbc), Dexter Sinister, Sebastian Egenhofer, Marine Hugonnier, Marion von Osten, Seth Price, Lili Reynaud-Dewar, Luke Skrebowski, and Josef Strau for their contributions; Steven Lindberg for translation and Sam Frank for editing; Matthias van Baaren for implementing the exhibition graphics developed by Dexter Sinister. And from the Generali Foundation's team we would like to thank everyone who contributed to the success of the project, especially Katharina Holas for her circumspect and precise editing and coordination of the publication; Thomas Ehringer for conceiving the exhibition display together with Ilse Lafer and for installing it with his team; Peter Kulev for audiovisual technology; Julia Jachs for production assistance; Barbara Mahlknecht with Dario Pinales for marketing and communication; and Evelyn Klammer, Christina Nägele, and Patrick Puls of the arts-education team of the Generali Foundation. Finally, we would like to express our profound sadness concerning the sudden demise of Gudrun Ankele, who died shortly before this publication was completed.

Sabine Folie  
Director, Generali Foundation



**“ ‘The contemporary artist ... produces production itself, presentation itself ... images and ideas of these that are at the same time (like it or not) ethical propositions.’ ”**

## Rehabilitating Counter-Production

Diana Baldon

### I. How Do You Unbake a Cake?

The idea for this project was prompted in 2008 by long conversations between myself and Luke Skrebowski around the possible rearticulation of a term—“counter-production”—in the field of contemporary art today. It seemed to us that this concept had inspired artists as diverse in their practices as Marine Hugonnier and Seth Price. In her unfinished book *TRAVAIL CONTRE PRODUCTIF* (1996–ongoing), Hugonnier has been writing on subjects including gardening, recipes, and travel. Her notes also contain ideas for screenplays, private thoughts, poetic quotes, and a conversation with her father on the paradox of “counterproductive economies.”<sup>1</sup> For Hugonnier, there is a mutual influence exercised between the logics engineered by capitalism and those of the countereconomies that capitalism creates. These latter logics define forms of limitation or constraint, since they are oriented toward sustainable and self-critical analyses that confront the incoherent structures of global systems. As an unfinished manuscript, *TRAVAIL CONTRE PRODUCTIF* explores the operational modes available to artists to produce something with unproductive “gestures of restraint.” These modes constitute the form-giving method of most of Hugonnier’s work.

Counter-production also provides material and inspiration for Seth Price’s pamphlet *Dispersion* (2002–ongoing), which reactualizes the concept as an aesthetic maneuver, a “weapon” that is unveiled while it disappears.<sup>2</sup> In the booklet, Price engages with filmmaker and author Alexander Kluge’s 1972 designation of counter-production as a kind of self-defense posture, such as aikido, which articulates a mode of “counter-control” by organizing individual experiences in order to infiltrate hegemonic structures.<sup>3</sup> Similar to the way Kluge’s aesthetic practice was expressed in films, books, and unusually formatted work in television, within a mass-media and medial discourse influenced by pre-1968 countercultural movements, Price explores how the Internet and digitization have reshaped the mechanisms of art production and distribution. Price argues that these have enabled artistic approaches that can be resampled open-endedly in newer versions and experienced as “counter-products”:

If the “one-sidedness of the products of the media can only be defeated by counter-products,” it follows that these counter-products, rather than being fetishized, would need to be folded back into the experience of production so that the product would become the manifestation and expression of that experience along with its social relations.<sup>4</sup>

In support of the idea that art in the era of digital media circulates on the Internet in the same way as any other information—uncontrollable, vulnerable to manipulation, repackaged in many contexts without being regulated by them—his video lecture *Redistribution* (2007) reflects on how images, texts, and motifs can be continuously updated through computer technology. In conforming to how things are produced and “dispersed” online, art discovers new takes on materialization (as self-packaging, as communication, as distribution).

When I was invited last year to curate an exhibition for the Generali Foundation, I proposed to investigate the impact of such a notion on today’s artistic practice, even though I was conscious of its ambiguity and anachronism with respect to its original context. Simultaneously, I set out to explore how counter-production could be imagined within a curated exhibition. Inspired by Lucy Lippard’s belief that a curator must act in accordance with the art she or he presents,<sup>5</sup> prior to beginning to work on the exhibition I had mainly perceived counter-production as a curatorial model, an exhibition-making tool that could help me consider the changed conditions of both artistic and curatorial production. These thoughts guided Ilse Lafer, curator at the Generali Foundation, and myself in a number of attempts, some more successful than others, to interrogate and possibly evade curatorial norms, since it was obvious to us that an exhibition on counterproductive methods demanded a rethinking of “productive” curatorial strategies.

On one level, we attempted to rearrange the institution’s public-relations concept in order to redistribute power over and responsibilities for familiar procedures, and expose the effects that different institutional departments exert on one another due to hierarchical organizational forms and workflows. We thought of the designer-editor-publisher duo Dexter Sinister (David Reinfurt and Stuart Bailey) as the ideal candidates to perturb the Generali Foundation’s marketing principles by way of reorganizing predetermined publicity materials. These ideas were incorporated into an artwork developed as a graphic concept for a mischievous public-relations campaign. Dexter Sinister omitted all images and rotated texts by 180 degrees, thus forcing passersby to slow themselves in order to read upside down. This literal and bare inversion of the corporate visual-design concept formerly conceived by Martha Stutteregger for the Generali Foundation superimposes a simple line of text that acknowledges Dexter Sinister’s alteration as an artistic intervention, “an allegory for the way in which things become their own shadows.” Similarly, for the publishing process of the online reader, Dexter Sinister have overturned the roles of commissioner (the institution) and service provider (the designers), returning to the institution the responsibility to design and produce the book in-house. This should not be interpreted as a stylistic gesture mimicking fourth-generation institutional critique: Dexter Sinister simply encourage the institution to reflect on its own self-sustainable resources, labor capacity, and autonomy outside mainstream publishing structures. Their maneuver also forced us to consider the dynamic of the commission itself, when the actual production of symbolic value—not only the resources for production—is returned to the institution that had delegated it.

On a second level, to interfere with today’s professionalized practice of accompanying exhibitions with staged educational events, in which visiting art experts exercise a traditional ordering of knowledge, we tried to foreground unaligned, alternative models

in order to elicit a response from members of the general public. For instance, we devised small seminars and asked Ricardo Basbaum to carry out his musical-workshop sessions entitled *Me–You: Choreographies, Games and Exercises*. These activities, we hope, can turn public events, generally promotional in nature, into productive tools based on collective exchange and exploring counterproductive aspects addressed by the exhibition. Basbaum's "operatic events" depart from the understanding of the public sphere as a socioparticipatory model proposed by, for instance, activist and relational art in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Often realized by way of spoken or written language, they result from a modulation of circulation and surveillance and are dependent on open forms of social engagement by the participants, from whose interaction dynamic structures can be established. The artist's function is that of a conductor who gives form to "viral zones of contact," which later become the point of departure for further artworks. In this respect, Basbaum's actions, the interplay of identity positions, and participants' sensorial experiences are controlled by means of strange games. Particularly counterproductive in his practice is how, for more than two decades, he has worked on two virtually infinite projects—*Novas Bases para a Personalidade* (New Bases for Personality, 1990–ongoing) and *Você gostaria de participar de uma experiência artística?* (Would You Like to Participate in an Artistic Experience? 1994–ongoing)—realized in multiple formats. Among these are diagrams, like *local/global* (1996/2012), shown in the exhibition, depicting the invisible networks and circulatory logics that construct social relations but also considering how it is possible for an artist to operate within local and international art circuits simultaneously.

## II. The Shadow Work of Counter-Production

To which extent can counter-production be experienced and addressed in the current situation of artistic production? In our view, the works by Hugonnier, Price, Dexter Sinister, and Basbaum trace a kind of "productive displacement" (also the title of the first cluster of works in the exhibition); they define strategies that deviate from conventions of artistic production, presentation, and communication. In doing so, they make a distanced critique of principles that make art conform.

Our theoretical framework has branched out in two directions. On the one hand, it invokes the notion of counter-production in order to bring the actuality of the artwork itself and its processes of production into focus. On the other, it addresses the complex sociopolitical and economic realities in which cultural producers find themselves today. During our research, it became apparent that the meaning of "counter-production" is heterogeneous, changing connotations according to the historical, socioeconomic, technological, and cultural context in which it appears; for this reason, counter-production must be always defined anew. Such versatility throughout the past century was concurrent with profound changes in the denotation and applicability of the image of artistic productivity,<sup>7</sup> as well as mutations in the subversive character of the prefix "counter-." To interpret counter-production today, this exhibition has moved away from the tradition of critical negation for the sake of autonomy embraced by Romantic and modernist artists. We have also departed from the early 1990s, a time in which counter-production and the notion of

counterpublics were discussed in conjunction with forms of activist, participatory, and service-oriented art.<sup>8</sup> Instead, we have defined counter-production as a discrete operational or remodeling mode for artistic production that establishes a deliberate *distance* within the actual production system. Such a desensitized approach enables artists, and moreover all cultural producers, to participate in the hegemonic logics that govern the structures of art and culture, while at the same time confronting their rules and purposes and wavering between affirmation and negation. Yet one must be also aware that, as Mark Fisher has stated, contemporary “tactics of resistance” in the era of late capitalism, as well as

[...] the old struggle between *detournement* and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation, [seem] to have been played out. What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture. Witness, for instance, the establishment of settled “alternative” or “independent” cultural zones, which endlessly repeat older gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time. “Alternative” and “independent” don’t designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream.<sup>9</sup>

Examples of how the assimilation process has occurred in the art context have been thoroughly explored by Luke Skrebowski in his essay for this publication.<sup>10</sup> Under the heading “Creative Speculations: Hierarchies and Structural Movement” are grouped works by Mary Ellen Carroll, Goldin+Senneby, Marion von Osten, and Lili Reynaud-Dewar that, by means of performative and narrative methods, question fields as disparate as culture, urban planning, and banking—sectors governed by neoliberal economic policies. The artworks suggest how the normative order exerted by these fields’ structures ends up contradicting the original purposes of actions within these fields. In the pseudodidactic play of von Osten’s video *The Glory of the Garden* (2009), staff members of Arnolfini, a contemporary arts center in Bristol, UK, chronicle the changes in management strategies, spatial arrangements, and the language of communication that occurred there over thirty years. This institutional remodeling began in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government and has been visualized by the artist by means of Friedrich Fröbel’s pedagogical wooden blocks. Normally used in children’s games, these tools transform the dynamic of the game—oriented toward negotiating the form-giving structures of the institution—into a self-directed, therapeutic, concrete learning process, during which the employees realize how the free-market orientation of such changes has been accepted unquestioningly, even perceived positively as progressive new modes of programming, service, and fund-raising.

In Mary Ellen Carroll’s *prototype 180* (1999–ongoing), urban-planning policies are under scrutiny. This installation consists of a 180-degree rotation and relocation of a single-family house on its lot in the Sharpstown community of Houston, Texas. Such alteration calls attention first of all to urban land-use zoning and the fact that this United States metropolitan area has no building-development laws. The growth of Houston is solely regulated by real estate investment; houses can be knocked down or rebuilt at any time. Carroll’s performative

act sets the relationship of the house to the surrounding construction typology off against questions concerning the future of an urban landscape whose social, political, and architectural conditions are regulated by economic forces. A two-channel video projection shows the rotation of the house from opposite perspectives; this is accompanied by plans, contracts, and correspondence with public authorities that document the project's evolution. Furthermore, a timeline (stretching back from 2012 to 1951) strategically interweaves political and economic processes, architecture, and art in the public realm, including Land art projects like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977). In doing so, Carroll draws parallels between the monumentality inherent in these historical works, the spectacular architecture of the 1990s—for instance, Frank O. Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao—and the capital investments that keep Houston growing and are used to justify the city's absence of land-use policies.

The subject of inquiry in most projects by the artist duo Goldin+Senneby (Simon Goldin and Jacob Senneby) is the dispersed world of global finance. Since 2004, Goldin+Senneby have conceived a multilayered and fragmentary practice that deploys forms of distributed authorship by collaborating with associates from various fields (human geography, scenography, investigative journalism, etc.). Intertwining existing realities with fictions of different degrees of fabrication, their works describe how financial models create spheres of invisibility, deception, and theater. *The Discreet Charm* (2011/2012) is a lecture by the actor Hamadi Khemiri that, accompanied by a puppet theater, illustrates financial speculations that occurred around the economic crisis of 2007–08. The stage of this play is a 1:25 scale model of the Generali Foundation. (When this piece is shown elsewhere, the model changes correspondingly.) The artists draw an analogy between contemporary art, banking, and the vaudevillian techniques of Luis Buñuel's film *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972): similarly to Buñuel, Goldin+Senneby entangle fictional and actual events; during the lecture, scenes and sets are projected on a screen in the scaled exhibition space. By this doubling of the real spatial situation, spectators can observe themselves within the "magic" effect of an abstract construction of "meta-finance."

The absorption of hegemonic structures, including avant-garde formal vocabularies and institutional architectures, is how Lili Reynaud-Dewar's practice engages with counter-production. Her works invent a variety of "transcultural selves" that can be perceived as subtle forms of female activism opposed to the co-optation of the body. Seeking to liberate herself from her subjectivity and to stage moments of alienation and difference, the artist invokes historical figures of resistance such as the dancer Josephine Baker. Reynaud-Dewar paints herself in dark colors, takes possession of Baker's *danse sauvage*, and appropriates the actual exhibition space—the public having been excluded, since her activity happened when the Generali Foundation was closed—with an intimate dance performance. By denying the witnessing of the live act, she transforms the exhibition space into temporary housing, which plays on the sociocultural and gender-specific coding of private and public spaces, as well as the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. This becomes all the more evident when she cites Adolf Loos's eccentric design of an apartment building for Baker: the black-and-white-striped marble facade but also its fancy interior,

arranged according to theatrical visual axes, which Reynaud-Dewar correlates with video sequences of the dance performance and the exhibition space.

### III. Indomitable Bodies

From the outset, we've wanted this exhibition to consider how artists have responded to the constraints of artistic work today, modeled along postindustrial economic lines calling for efficiency, flexibility, and intelligent self-management. We've done so by situating these concerns within perspectives elaborated by postautonomist theorists and by feminist discourse. Since the mid-1970s, both have considered how in the post-Fordist economic era the mode of production and work itself have been reorganized. "Labor" has expanded to include the time a person spends on leisure, education, and unpaid work. In fact, all these vital spheres, including those dedicated to strategies of refusal and forms of social critique expressed by leftist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, have been incorporated by neoliberal capitalist cycles. This argument has been explored by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in their influential book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005).<sup>11</sup>

Canonical feminist art paved the way for strategies aimed at deconstructing dominant systems. An example is Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance Art Works* (1969–79), in which performative actions, such as scrubbing and washing gallery floors or the entrance steps of museums, addressed women's low status as unpaid laborers (mothers, housewives). As Gudrun Ankele has sharply pointed out, Ukeles's procedures defined a counterproductive strategy that, by preserving and literally maintaining the way women's low-wage, "unproductive" care work sustains men's "productive" work, made manifest the shortcomings of this system.<sup>12</sup> Like those of many of her contemporaries, Ukeles's counterproductive model was focused on redefining housework as productive labor. A similar argument has been recently emphasized by Marina Vishmidt, who, by describing how the "feminist activists and theorists in the 1970s were responsible for pointing out the necessity of unpaid labour to the system of production centred on waged labour," brings into the picture the term "counterproductive labour" (as used by scholar Christopher Arthur).<sup>13</sup> By addressing the notions of reproduction understood as a replicating force and of the organization of forms of subjectivity, Ukeles advances ideas similar to those of Helke Sander in her film *The All-Around Reduced Personality: Outtakes* (1978), as Marion von Osten's essay for this publication postulates, reading it from the perspective of the post-Fordist notion of "immaterial labor."<sup>14</sup> Shifting to a more contemporary realm, the artist, critic, art dealer, and translator John Kelsey has claimed that any work that holds our attention today does so because it shows the relation between an artist and his or her own activity:

The contemporary artist doesn't just produce and present objects or images; he [*s/c*] produces production itself, presentation itself [...] images and ideas of these that are at the same time (like it or not) ethical propositions. Like any worker today, the artist's job is also to talk and move, putting words, images, and his own body into circulation.<sup>15</sup>

On the basis of these thoughts we have titled *Counter-Production*'s final section "Modeling the Self." Here are works by Henrik Olesen, Johannes Porsch, Josephine Pryde, and Josef Strau that take into account the property relations of the body experienced as a territory of identity-related—sexual, juridical, and biological—negotiation. The range of approaches conveys how the realities of the subject—partly understood as the artist's biography and similar to those of aesthetic practice—are subject to and entangled with economic and juridical conditions. In doing so, they disclose new situations for production.

The considerations and processes that Porsch's series of collages *Project Proposal (The Work Is How to Become an Artist)* (2012) explores are already revealed in the title. Porsch proposed a work that began with an essay he had written about the consolidation of the entrepreneurial figure of today's artist, who is involved in the production of knowledge and symbolic value. This essay was typeset in "Shrooms," a mushroom-shaped font that he found on the Internet. The mushroom letters breed and invade the book-format layout of the numbered pages; however, their surface, a dense accumulation or collision of "comical word-things," remains attached to semantic and grammatical rules—they are still letters that form words in sentences. Porsch's humorous, absurd approach proposes a new encryption of artistic language and its formal vocabularies, whose meaning and interpretation are already subject to culturally biased decoding. Lastly, the mushroom is a motif that enables Porsch to play with art-historical references, from John Cage's *The Mushroom Book* (1972) to Cosima von Bonin's gigantic, soft-toy-like textile mushrooms.

The man/machine dichotomy, the understanding of production in terms of reproductive and self-productive structures, and—similarly to Porsch—encoding and cyphering are Henrik Olesen's main territories of concern. Several series of computer collages, among them *A. T.* (2012), follow the life of British mathematician and father of computer science Alan Turing. Turing is known for his scientific theses on computability and for his research on the relationship between man and machine. In 1936, he published a theoretical model of a machine whose diagram reduced all calculating mechanisms to configurations based on the binary code "0/1." A few years later, he was tragically confronted with the emerging belief that the human body and mind were modifiable apparatuses: to "cure" his homosexuality, he was forced to undergo hormonal therapy, as a consequence of which he became victim of sexual prejudice and eventually committed suicide. The question of how bodies are "secured by a system specifying who may be allowed to produce or reproduce what and how"<sup>16</sup> is the point of departure of *A. T.*, in which Olesen manipulates "0/1" into the cypher "male/female" and combines it with Turing's portrait. The mathematician's body becomes "a menu where you can choose your own body." In doing so, the artist summons and recomposes subjects and motifs from classical modernity, such as Francis Picabia's mechanic bodies and Antonin Artaud's "body without organs." *A. T.* shows the extent to which the production and reproduction of bodies are subject to political and sociocultural regimes. *I do not go to work today. I don't think I go tomorrow / Machine Assemblage I* (2010) displays the internal units, or the bodily "deflated organs," of a seventeen-inch PowerBook G4. Olesen has arranged each piece of his own dismembered laptop according to size: this disassembly, which he recounts as "taking apart my own body," not only critically interrogates the means of production in technological practice but literally destroys



them. The self-reflexive approach of this gesture foregrounds materiality and problematizes the value of computers in the production, reproduction, dissemination, and representation of artistic work today. In addition, it relates to Turing's claims that even if machines can think like humans, unlike them they cannot refuse to work or go on strike in order to acquire social and political rights.<sup>17</sup>

Josephine Pryde's oblique post-Conceptual approach to photography plunders the histories of the medium to appropriate the modes of fashion, commercial, and portrait photography. Her compositions alter photographic styles to thematize their aesthetic formalism and to analyze overdetermined social models, such as those of the artist and of womanhood, subverting imagery in order to expose its assumptions and contradictions. The black-and-white picture *I Love Music* (2009) and the color series *Adoption (1)–(13)* (2009) represent a toddler making various facial expressions. These images play with the imagery of studio photography but also function as conceptual screens that denaturalize the subject matter. The child's white underwear and Levi's T-shirt, the corporate-looking cotton shirt, and the drapes of richly patterned fabric are important props. They discourage narrative readings and focus on the symbolic staging of a fabricated identity that, beyond its affective cuteness, brings into correspondence gender-specific and social roles (male/female, child/artist) and social orders (infanthood/adulthood). Pryde's approach highlights a critical tension between artistic values and feminism, and questions what function the latter can play in the art market when its discourse is situated on the level of cultural and social production, instead of on that of identity. *Adoption (1)–(13)* comments on different levels of what "reproduction" itself may stand for: from biological reproductive sentiment via the reproduction of social and artistic practices to mechanical reproduction of the photographic medium.

In his contribution to the exhibition catalogue *Make Your Own Life: Artists In and Out of Cologne* (2006), Josef Strau coined the expression "nonproductive attitude" to revisit an artistic posture of the late 1980s, which, at times radical in form, questioned the nonproduction of art's value economies.<sup>18</sup> For Strau, his writing—whether as author of texts for art magazines or in connection with his artistic output—was to become a pivotal form of expression that was to give shape to the ambivalence and inconsistencies of nonproductive production. These thoroughly biographical texts are drafts of models of authorship and subjectification that resist simple readings. Strau brings together modes of textual production—written, transcribed, drawn, layered, rejected—with the use of architectonic spaces shaped like alphabetic letters and of lamp objects. His structures, such as the "letter tunnel for children" adapted for the exhibition, not only mediate between textual and real spaces but also mirror the phases through which his artistic production has gone: from junk dealer, director of a gallery, and author to artist. Thus, in a discreet and subtle manner, he brings value economies pertinent to different forms of production and nonproduction into play.

The affective combination between artistic production, life, and their economic reality gets to the heart of the ambivalence in artistic production that underpins this exhibition. Unfolding in the diverse contexts of the thematic zones described above, which subtly

expose, among others, “infantile” entry points that traditionally would have been read as counterproductive to normative systems dominated by the adult world, these artists indicate how counter-production can be reinvoked as an operational tool for bringing the artwork and its production into focus. The exhibition seeks to offer examples of how counter-production may help artists generate a critique that highlights the contradictory labor situation in which they find themselves: between demands to which subject and body are submitted, and efforts to undermine them. In such an environment, art becomes, to cultural producers, an act of self-positioning that vacillates between affirmation and negation; to beholders, it offers a space in which to interrogate their own standpoints in an increasingly precarious reality.

### Notes

- 1 According to a blog dedicated to Ron Paul, an American Republican politician from Texas, the counter-production industry consists of environmentally friendly “attorney groups that make their money through the invention of excessive laws that target other people or businesses which, in turn, end up over regulating the other businesses forcing many, once productive, businesses out of business. They operate by suing, impeding and restricting other business.” “The Business of the Counter Production Industry,” October 17, 2009, <http://www.dailypaul.com/111159/the-business-of-the-counter-production-industry> (accessed September 3, 2012).
- 2 Cf. Seth Price, *Dispersion*, <http://distributedhistory.com/Dispersion2008.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2012); see also pp. 50–69 in the present volume.
- 3 Cf. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 127, 128, 143.
- 4 Michael Newman, “Seth Price’s Operations,” in *Seth Price*, exh. cat. (Zurich: Kunsthalle Zürich; Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein; Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2010), p. 36.
- 5 Personal conversation in 2008 on the occasion of a symposium on canonical exhibitions of contemporary art held at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and co-initiated with Afterall in view of the Afterall Books publication series “Exhibition Histories.”
- 6 For instance, in his influential book *Relational Aesthetics* (2002; French original 1998), art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud postulated that much art produced in the 1990s could be defined as “behavioral” and that the ephemeral practice of a generation of artists—represented by Félix González-Torres, Philippe Parreno, Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and Pierre Huyghe—was able to create everyday micro-utopias by way of artistic principles concerned with new democratic forms of intersubjectivity, networking, and convivial interactivity; cf. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002). However, many theorists have written on why they don’t share these views; see, for instance, Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 51–79.
- 7 From the 1930s to the late 1990s, production gained a fetishized value in reference to modes of representing and organizing work against the demand of the art market for “good craftsmanship” and quantifiable “production values,” rooted in the concept of industrial, mechanical labor and immaterial intellectual activity.
- 8 Cf. Holger Kube Ventura, *Politische Kunst Begriffe in den 1990er Jahren im deutschsprachigen Raum* (Vienna: edition selene, 2002), pp. 230–234.
- 9 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009), p. 9.
- 10 See Luke Skrebowski, “Working against (Art) Work,” pp. 20–27 in the present volume.
- 11 Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).
- 12 Personal conversation, April 2012.
- 13 Marina Vishmidt, “Counter (Re-)Productive Labour,” April 4, 2012, <http://autoitaliasoutheast.org/blog/news/2012/04/04/counter-re-productive-labour/> (accessed September 5, 2012).
- 14 Cf. Marion von Osten, “Irene ist Viele! Or What We Call ‘Productive’ Forces,” pp. 39–49 in the present volume.

- 15 John Kelsey, "Decapitalism," in *Rich Texts: Selected Writing for Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), p. 68.
- 16 Henrik Olesen, "Henrik Olesen," in *Modernologies: Contemporary Artists Researching Modernity and Modernism*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009), p. 160.
- 17 Cf. Lars Bang Larsen, "On Striking and Body Making," in *Henrik Olesen: How Do I Make Myself a Body?*, exh. cat. (Malmö: Malmö Konsthall; Basel: Museum für Gegenwartskunst; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), pp. 14–25.
- 18 Cf. Josef Strau, "The Non-productive Attitude," in *Make Your Own Life: Artists In and Out of Cologne*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2006).

**“ Perhaps we have already moved too quickly. Is something *to be done* at all? Faced with the apparent emergence of art as a fully functioning industry ... might it not be better to take industrial action, that is to say to strike, to withdraw labor from the art system as it is now constituted? Maybe nothing is to be done.”**

## Working against (Art) Work

Luke Skrebowski

We live in times of rolling political and economic crises, reported by rolling news. Revolutionary sequences play out in the Middle East and find their resonances in Western riots and protests as the European (financial) Union teeters on the brink, brought to the edge by the ongoing fallout of the global financial crisis.<sup>1</sup> Revisiting (and recasting) Walter Benjamin's exhortation, pronounced in 1934 in the teeth of a previous crisis: "You believe that the present social situation forces the *artist* to decide in whose service he wishes to place his activity."<sup>2</sup> But this time around, unlike the major crisis of the 1930s, and even of the 1970s, contemporary art seems, years after the long-heralded death of the avant-garde, with its umbilical link to radical politics as well as to gold, to find itself thoroughly complicit in the globally extended economic system in paroxysm: contemporary artworks have become one of the primary vehicles for speculative capital as well as, at the top end of the market, a safe-haven asset in troubled times; ambitious contemporary art practice, in its post-Conceptual form, enjoins and promulgates heightened versions of those competencies—virtuosity, flexibility, self-management—most demanded of immaterial labor by the leading sectors of the economy. Contemporary art thus functions as a vanguard force for capital, scouting a path through the urban theater of operations for ensuing brigades of precarious workers. This is all to say that that distinctive form of production historically taken to be resistant to general social technique—art—now seems to exemplify it. Such issues are not new, of course; in fact, they have become almost commonplace.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, these issues have not been met with a clear artistic response, and it remains important to pose familiar questions in light of ongoing exigencies. How should artists/curators/theorists/historians, as well as other cultural workers—in whatever hyphenated combination of roles we might usefully, which is to say tactically, concatenate—work in the present, against the present, given the current realities? Is a form of counter-production still possible?

### On the Plausibility of an Art Strike

Perhaps we have already moved too quickly. Is something *to be done* at all? Faced with the apparent emergence of art as a fully functioning industry, thoroughly integrated into neoliberal capitalism, might it not be better to take industrial action, that is to say to strike, to withdraw labor from the art system as it is now constituted? Maybe nothing is to be done. This is a strategy recently suggested by Andrea Fraser in the course of her analysis of art's complicity with the 1 percent: "Let curators and critics and art historians as well

as artists withdraw their cultural capital from this market.”<sup>4</sup> We might object, with Gregory Sholette, that the vast majority of artists are already “withdrawn” from this market as “dark matter”/surplus labor/“failed,” and thus that the form of protest Fraser suggests is internal to the art world’s radical asymmetries of power.<sup>5</sup> John Roberts frames the issue more pertinently, acknowledging surplus labor and its own potential for agency:

It is only when productive and non-productive labourers refuse to labour—and, as a result, the value-form is dissolved, thereby opening up a self-reflective space for “aesthetic-thinking”—that the emergent totipotentiality of artistic labour will truly be able to enter productive relations and be able to transform the heteronomous conditions of labour and everyday praxis.<sup>6</sup>

This, however, is a call for a general strike, and while such a call no longer looks purely hypothetical, from the Spanish or Greek perspective at least, it is a different suggestion from that of an art strike. The question under consideration here remains one that concerns what might be effected by a cessation of *art* work.

Let us take a step back from the immediate controversies of the present and acknowledge the long history of this problem. In the post-Schillerian tradition, art work stands as the model for unalienated labor, and the artwork so produced as the negation of the commodity form, albeit, necessarily, in (a unique instance of) commodity form. As Theodor W. Adorno condenses it: “Artworks are plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity. In the context of total semblance, art’s semblance of being-in-itself is the mask of truth.”<sup>7</sup> And if we take the Adornian view that autonomous art holds open, however minimally, the possibility of things being otherwise, if art continues to embody a fragile utopianism, then ceasing artistic work would be to withdraw the evidence that another world is possible, however compensatory this might be, however great the risk of art becoming affirmative in the sense that Herbert Marcuse warned of in his early work.<sup>8</sup> If we take the opposite, Benjaminian, view that, in exceptional circumstances, art should cede its autonomy in the name of an instrumental politicization, a necessary taking sides, then we are obliged to be strategically pragmatic about the likely political outcome of such a sacrifice. Instrumentalizing art politically means subjecting it to means-ends rationality in the service of a “progressive” cause. The risk here is that ceasing to produce artwork would not have a crippling effect on the art world. Since contemporary art’s “value” is decided primarily on the secondary market, a cessation of primary production would not be able to stop business. Moreover, even contemporary art’s utility as an instrument for speculative capital could arguably be replaced: in place of the work of the breaking artist, rediscovered figures from the past and/or previously unincorporated regions could be employed as vehicles for speculation. This is to say that the “art world” could continue for quite some time, perhaps even indefinitely, without the living labor of living artists.

To be effective, any art strike would thus have to last far longer and be more broadly based than the three-year strike of working *artists* alone that Gustav Metzger proposed in his well-known but ill-fated 1974 proposal for a three-year art strike between 1977 and 1980

(Metzger himself was the only artist who took up his call).<sup>9</sup> While one might imagine the possibility for (anxious) solidarity between artists, curators, and critics, it is hard to imagine the durable strike coalition that would also include museum directors, auctioneers, corporate marketing executives, and hedge-fund managers. Furthermore, the possibility of an art strike raises the question of what to do with the inevitable art scabs, a problem Metzger foresaw and proposed to deal with unsentimentally—and somewhat surprisingly, given his background as an orphaned refugee from Nazi Germany—via recourse to the work camp: “Some artists may find it difficult to restrain themselves from producing art. These artists will be invited to enter camps, where the making of art works is forbidden, and where any work produced is destroyed at regular intervals.”<sup>10</sup> This is all to argue that the forms of solidarity, let alone the acceptance of the type of discipline, required to stage and enforce a tendentious art strike do not look to be available in the present.

This is not, moreover, a historical coincidence, but rather a direct result of the ways in which capitalism responded to the labor disputes of the past by reformulating itself. We can track these large-scale issues in relation to the art world through another micro case study. A more broadly based and strategically acute, albeit radically shorter, art strike than that proposed by Metzger had in fact been enacted four years earlier in New York, on May 22, 1970, against a background of ongoing labor agitation and anti-Vietnam War mobilization. Artists demanded that all New York museums close for the day, and while several agreed to do so, the Metropolitan Museum of Art did not and was consequently picketed by a group of more than five hundred artists. As Julia Bryan-Wilson has pointed out, this strike registered the fact that artists had “moved from thinking that ‘work’ consisted of physical making in the studio to understanding that ‘work’ occurred when art was on display.”<sup>11</sup> While noting the strengths of this strategy (shifting the strike from the site of production to the site of distribution), Bryan-Wilson also indicates its limitations, since the “strike” was really a boycott (artists do not staff museums, except incidentally), and because for artists “there is no consolidated employer, nor is there a factory line to halt.”<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the anomalous character of this 1970 art “strike” did not only consist in its oblique relation to its site: unlike the impetus of the protests that emanated from 1968 and were revolutionary, aimed at destroying the institutions of the state, the 1970 boycott of the Metropolitan was essentially reformist, aimed at holding that institution (and, symbolically, *the* institution) to its Enlightenment ideals of publicness, universality, and accountability (preventing its capture by corporate interests). In this sense, such a gesture, and the “genre” of institutional critique with which it was historically coincident, was, as Blake Stimson has pointed out, set against the New Left’s anti-institutionality and aligned with an older political tradition:

The principle of institutionality itself was always at the heart of the bourgeois concept of modern art, taking its lead, first, from the great historic figures of the bourgeoisie—the various allegories of liberty and equality, the citizen, the parliament, the museum, and the public sphere—and, later, from the great historic figures of socialism—the laborer, the factory, the soviet, the party, the international, the masses. That dream

of becoming social, becoming institutional [...], was also always the dream of becoming human, of self-realization.<sup>13</sup>

Paradoxically enough, as artists were striking in the name of a political paradigm perceived to be outmoded and even reactionary by the *soixante-huitards*, the political demands of the New Left took its inspiration from the perceived character of artistic labor: autonomous, creative, self-determined, liberated. And it was these “artistic” demands that the capitalist counterrevolution to 1968 took on board and realized in a distorted form under the guise of a “new spirit,” a historical process precisely documented by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello.<sup>14</sup>

The historical art strike and its shortcomings thus participate in the sequence that has led to the emergence of artistic work as the model for contemporary capitalist relations as well as of art’s immanence to these relations. Such a history, then (albeit explored here in radically condensed form), combined with its theoretical deficiencies, suggests the implausibility of an art strike in the present. A different strategy seems necessary.

### **Contre/Par Contre**

If not by means of a withdrawal of labor, how might art contest its current working conditions? I will discuss briefly two genres of critical artistic responses to the contemporary conjunction—institutional critique (in its current, late or third-generation form) and activist art—in order to distinguish a third position that establishes a theoretical frame for the diverse strategies employed by the artists assembled here under the title and strategy of “counter-production.”

We can begin by returning to Andrea Fraser, arguably the most prominent, and certainly the most widely published, exponent of third-generation institutional critique. Her recent work has renarrated the genre’s history in terms of a *defense* of the institution consequent on the failure of the neo- and historical avant-gardes:

[...] Institutional Critique turned from the increasingly bad-faith efforts of neo-avant-gardes at dismantling or escaping the institution of art and aimed instead to defend the very institution for which the institutionalization of the avant-garde’s “self-criticism” had created the potential: an institution of critique.<sup>15</sup>

It is in light of this claim that we have to understand Fraser’s proposal, discussed above, that artists withdraw their cultural capital from the commercial art market. Ultimately, however, Fraser conceives this gesture as being more like a temporary run on a bank than a durable strike, because she implies that artists should reinvest in the refoundation of the European art institution, newly conceived as an empirical realization of her hitherto speculative account of the “institution of critique”:



European museums have the potential to be the birthplace of a new art field [...] where new forms of autonomy can develop: not as secessionist “alternatives” that exist only in the grandiose enactments and magical thinking [of] artists and theorists, but as fully institutionalized structures, which [...] will be able to produce, reproduce, and reward specific and, let’s hope, more equitably derived and distributed forms of capital.<sup>16</sup>

Such a proposal looks questionable not only in light of its optimistic assessment concerning the conditions of European art institutions, one that is not necessarily shared by others on the ground,<sup>17</sup> but also, and more profoundly, at the level of some of its foundational assumptions. While Fraser recognizes that it is not in any sense self-evident that the state would fund such renewed institutional forms with financial capital—“In Europe [...] there may be more choices *as long as direct public subsidy exists*”<sup>18</sup>—she does not fully register the underlying rationale for the tenuousness of public funding for the arts in Europe: namely, the zombification of the institutional forms of the bourgeois public sphere, which is historically consequent on the triumph of corporate power (in Habermasian terms, the previously separate realm of the public sphere has collapsed into the marketplace). It is not only that funding is currently lacking for the refounding of “European museums” as “fully institutionalized structures” but also that we lack a social agent that would conceivably make such funding available and dispense it in this way. Social subventions now flow to capital such that the arts (indirectly) “sponsor” corporations. The proposal to reinvigorate the historical institutions of the bourgeois public sphere risks looking not only implausible (far beyond the contradictions that Jürgen Habermas himself acknowledged between his own normative claims for the public sphere and its empirical reality) and anachronistic but also voluntarist (a dying echo of the bourgeois public’s once-confident claim to articulate the general will).

What then of the attempt to cultivate counterpublic spheres that has characterized much activist art since the 1990s? These practices pick up on Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s work from the 1970s, which contested Habermas’s privileging of the bourgeois public sphere by developing an account of the proletarian public sphere or, as Negt and Kluge later came to prefer, from *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (1981; *History and Obstinacy*) onward, the counterpublic sphere.<sup>19</sup> It is, after all, in the discourse of the counterpublic sphere as theorized by Negt and Kluge that we also find a theoretical account of “counterproduction” understood as a form of proletarian fantasy (consequent on the separation of the proletarian subject from the means of public expression and representation in the bourgeois public sphere) concealed within and potentially opposed to the capitalist labor process, as well as the name for a practice of generating alternatives to this formal exclusion by means of the creation of alternative media that constitute counterpublic spheres and thereby assemble counterpublics. It is in Negt and Kluge’s terms that Gregory Sholette, implicitly working against Fraser’s suggestion for mobilization (which relies on participants having significant cultural capital to withdraw, that is, on being art burghers), has sought to characterize activist art’s embrace of counterproduction: “Dark matter and working class fantasy occasionally resist and interrupt the normative structures of production and appropriation.”<sup>20</sup>

The conventional objection to activist art is that it surrenders its autonomy and submits to instrumentalization in the service of activist causes, also thereby rendering itself susceptible to absorption by the very structures it subjects to critique. Sholette registers this risk and insists that activist art practices are well aware of it: "Least available for appropriation by the culture industry is not the 'slack' look of dark matter, but its semi-autonomous and do-it-yourself mode of production and exchange."<sup>21</sup> The issue here, I suggest, is not the relative degree of autonomy of activist works (if such a conceptual distinction is meaningful) but the fact that while they might "resist and interrupt" the "normative structures of production," they ultimately leave them functioning: in necessarily remaining "dark," activist practices cede the normative territory in advance. Multiple competing activistisms assemble diverse counterpublics that, even while working under the loose coalition of an artistic movement of movements, have not overturned the hegemonic bourgeois public sphere they set themselves against, however much this is now a zombie public sphere, living on as a grotesquely decayed embodiment of the values assumed in its "heroic" moment of constitution. Activist art self-consciously engages in "skirmishes" rather than revolutionary battles, as Sholette acknowledges, and this lends force to Fraser's pointed dismissal of such practices as "secessionist 'alternatives,'" that is to say alternatives that do not ultimately *constitute* (in the strong sense) an alternative.

The artists gathered in *Counter-Production* seek neither to refound the bourgeois institution of art on more "equitable" terms as a new Euro-institution of critique nor to "resist and interrupt" it by constructing multifarious proletarian/counterpublic spheres. Rather, the artists in *Counter-Production* address themselves to the issue of how the art world's normative structures might be inhabited and resisted *internally to their own normative logic* by holding to the fragile utopianism of artistic practice as a different type of work while acknowledging that this promise is travestied and parodied by the "creativity" of capitalism's new spirit. Such actions have to be understood neither as strike (which attempts to halt production) nor as sabotage (which seeks to destroy or at least damage the production process) but in another register, as a working against (art) work. Consequently, this position must also be distinguished from a straight transposition of the various autonomist and postautonomist strategies gathered under the banner of the "refusal of work": these artists insist on the necessity of art work as an alternative to alienated, productive work while at the same time recognizing that art practice has become the model for alienated productive work.

"Counter-production" as it is understood here is not simply a refusal of production, but rather, following Marine Hugonnier's formulation, a *travail contre-productif*,<sup>22</sup> which we might render as a "working against productivity" or, in Josef Strau's terms, a "nonproductive production." It is a practice that embodies a *contre/par contre*, an *against/on the other hand*, structure. Counter-production works to the side of or out of line with conventional professional protocols. It refuses immediate visibility, seeks to avoid formal completion, resists circulation, employs distributed authorship. Counter-production thus wavers between affirmation and negation in such a way as to destabilize the opposition through the constant flip-flopping of the binary polarity. Consequently, the interposition of the hyphen in the term as it is deployed here is essential: counter-production distinguishes

itself from counterproduction by the caesura interposed between the two terms, having the effect of simultaneously conjoining and separating them. “Counter-production” is a deliberately ambiguous, even contentious, term, and the work in the exhibition does not seek to resolve this ambiguity but rather to activate its full depth as a necessary problem.

Neither the term “counter” nor the term “production” is or can be taken for granted. Can we still speak of the persistence of the negativity historically implied by “counter” in the face of the market’s recuperation of and even dependence on such gestures? Can artistic practice still be distinguished from other forms of production such that a meaningful opposition might be constructed from the implied distinction between practice (self-determined and subject to its own autonomous law of value) and production (heteronomous, made for the market)? The work of the work in the exhibition worries these issues without resolving into definite proposals that would submit to a demand for artistic productivity, that is, to a demand for that which is precisely what has to be resisted.

## Notes

- 1 On the connection between Western “immediate” riots and Middle Eastern “historical” riots in the present, see Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2012). For a more general, journalistic account of the current conjuncture, see Paul Mason, *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (London: Verso, 2012).
- 2 Walter Benjamin’s original reads, “You believe that the present social situation forces him [the writer] to decide in whose service he wishes to place his activity.” Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1973), p. 85. The piece was originally delivered as a lecture to the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris, April 1934.
- 3 For a thorough, although contentious, account of the way in which much contemporary art seems to have “turn[ed] away from autonomy, opposition, or radical negativity and toward attitudes of affirmation and complicity,” see Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xi and passim. For a detailed account of the history of art’s incorporation into general social technique, and, contra Drucker, for some suggestions as to how an emancipatory artistic project might still be pursued under such conditions, see John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007).
- 4 Andrea Fraser, “L’1%, C’est Moi,” in *Texte zur Kunst*, 83 (September 2011), p. 124.
- 5 Sholette defines “dark matter” as artists who choose to work on the “outer margins” of the mainstream art world, having “learned to embrace their own structural redundancy.” Gregory Sholette, “Introduction: The Missing Mass,” in *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 4.
- 6 Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, p. 4.
- 7 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 227.
- 8 Cf. Herbert Marcuse, “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 1968), pp. 88–133.
- 9 “The refusal to labour is the chief weapon of workers fighting the system; artists can use the same weapon. To bring down the art system it is necessary to call for years without art, a period of three years—1977 to 1980—when artists will not produce work, sell work, permit work to go on exhibitions, and refuse collaboration with any part of the publicity machinery of the art world. This total withdrawal of labour is the most extreme collective challenge that artists can make to the state. The years without art will see the collapse of many private galleries. Museums and cultural institutions handling contemporary art will be severely hit, suffer loss of funds, and will have to reduce their staff. National and local government institutions [...] will be in serious trouble. Art magazines will fold. The international ramifications of the dealer/museum/publicity complex make for vulnerability; it is a system that is keyed to a continuous juggling of artists, finance, works and information—damage one part, and the effect is felt world-wide. Three years is the minimum period required to cripple the system, whilst a longer period of time would create difficulties for artists.” Gustav Metzger, “Years without Art 1977–1980,” in *Gustav Metzger: History History*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser, exh. cat. (Vienna: Generali Foundation; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005), p. 262; originally published as a catalogue contribution to the exhibition *Art into Society, Society into Art*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London,

1974. For a frank assessment of the limitations of Metzger's proposal but a sympathetic interpretation of the artist's wider impetus to "reject roles" in his proposal for an art strike, see Stewart Home, "Gustav Metzger and Auto-Destructive Art," in *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrism to Class War* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1991), pp. 60–64. Home was subsequently to propose an art strike of his own between 1990 and 1993, archly recognizing it as both "a hammer blow delivered to the heart of the cultural establishment and a very clever career move." Stewart Home, "Assessing the Art Strike" (1993), <http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/sp/postas.htm> (accessed August 30, 2012). Home also insists that "[t]he importance of the Art Strike" lay "not in its feasibility but in the possibilities it opens up for intensifying the class war." Stewart Home, "The Art Strike Papers," <http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/artstrik.htm> (accessed August 30, 2012). See also James Mannox, ed., *The Art Strike Papers* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1991).
- 10 Metzger, "Years without Art 1977–1980," p. 263. For an account of Metzger's work in relation to National Socialism, among other themes, see Andrew Wilson, "Papa What Did You Do When the Nazis Built the Concentration Camps? My Dear, They Never Told Us Anything," in Gustav Metzger, *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art* (London: Coracle Press, 1996), pp. 64–81.
- 11 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 117. I am indebted to Bryan-Wilson's work for alerting me to the May 22 strike and its context.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Blake Stimson, "What Was Institutional Critique?" in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 25.
- 14 Cf. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005). See particularly chapter 7, "The Test of the Artistic Critique," pp. 419–482.
- 15 Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2006), p. 134.
- 16 Fraser, "L'1%, C'est Moi," p. 126.
- 17 Hito Steyerl has suggested that it is "pretty absurd" to "argue that something like this [an institution of critique] exists, at a moment, when critical cultural institutions are undoubtedly being dismantled, underfunded, subjected to the demands of a neoliberal event economy [...]." Hito Steyerl, "The Institution of Critique" (January 2006), <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/steyerl/en> (accessed August 30, 2012).
- 18 Fraser, "L'1%, C'est Moi," p. 124 (emphasis added).
- 19 In the UK and US context this theoretical lag time is partly a consequence of the delayed translation of *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, which only appeared in 1991 from Holmes & Meier, New York.
- 20 Gregory Sholette, "Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere," in *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 3 (June 2004), <http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org/3/sholette.htm> (accessed August 30, 2012).
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Marine Hugonnier, *TRAVAIL CONTRE PRODUCTIF*, 1996–ongoing, see pp. 28–37 in the present volume.

I am sitting in a train heading to the French Alps. It is very early morning and being at speed in the landscape feels like I may have a chance to be faster than the day to come...

An artist could be, perhaps, a geographer, a sound engineer, a camera operator, an anthropologist. He or she would be the sum of these activities, because no single one would summarise what the artist is.

A shelter.

Sur la route du Col de la Bonnette (2802 m), 5 septembre 96, 19:50.

X— ...Sais-tu ce que veut dire l'expression "travail contre-productif"?

O— C'est un travail qui va à l'encontre d'un objectif attendu. On appelle ça "red tape" en anglais. Ce sont, par exemple, les démarches administratives qu'il faut faire pour créer une entreprise et qui en réalité entravent sa création. Ces démarches sont dites "contre-productives".

X— On parle donc de "démarches contre-productives", mais peut-on dire cela d'un travail?

O— L'expression "travail contre-productif" est correcte malgré le paradoxe...

X—Comment décrirais-tu un travail qui n'atteint pas son but, mais que l'on va quand même considérer comme un travail?

O—Un travail qui n'atteint pas son but n'est pas pour autant stérile, car il peut servir à quelque chose. Par exemple, si une femme de chambre fait un lit à moitié, son travail n'atteint pas son but, il pourrait être dit "inutile"; cependant, ce travail ne l'est pas complètement car la chambre pourra paraître rangée malgré tout.

Par nature, tout travail de recherche peut ne pas atteindre son but puisque toute recherche n'aboutit pas nécessairement à une découverte. Pourtant, aucune recherche n'est inutile puisque le travail d'aujourd'hui pourra éviter de refaire demain les mêmes expérimentations.

X—Y a-t-il une expression pour désigner ce travail qui n'atteint pas son but mais qui produit quelque chose qui sera tout de même considéré comme un travail?

O— Je sais que je n'ai pas encore répondu à ta question et je vois où tu veux en venir. Un travail peut devenir "contre-productif" lorsqu'un changement d'objectif intervient pendant son déroulement ; si l'on diffère un objectif pour le bienfait d'un travail.

X— L'expression "travail contre-productif" désigne donc un travail qui n'est pas toujours inefficace. Dans certains cas ce changement d'objectif ou cette retenue advenue pendant une recherche, peut être envisagée comme un progrès, les moyens de cette démarche devenant les fins de ce travail. Tu es d'accord?

O— Oui je suis d'accord.

X— Peut-on aussi envisager qu'un "travail contre-productif" soit un travail qui refuse de produire quelque chose?

O— Pourquoi pas?

X— C'est-à-dire que la personne qui effectue ce travail refuse consciemment de produire quelque chose de quantifiable, le but du travail étant sa démarche, la distance à parcourir pour comprendre ce qu'impliquerait d'arriver à une fin, à une production... Que ce travail reste toujours en amont d'une réalisation possible, qu'il procède par soustraction.

O—Le problème reste de savoir ce qui permet alors de parler de travail puisqu'il faut bien, pour parler de travail, qu'il y ait quelque chose d'effectué. La question reste alors de l'ordre de ce qui fait trace de ce travail et qui va le constituer.



“Cinema teaches me to tirelessly touch with my gaze the distance from me at which the Other begins” (Serge Daney, *Persévérance - Entretien avec Serge Toubiana*, Paris: Editions P.O.L, p. 39, 1994).

Créer une forme serait créer les conditions d'un échange (voire même d'inclusion de l'Autre).

“Et soudain...”

A force de réalisme, on devient idéaliste.

I am one and the Other... I am single and multiple at the same time...  
Do not mistake me for the author... I am no more then a *Secretary of the  
Invisible.*

Courir sur la cime des arbres.

**“ While her ‘free time’ is spent working with her female friends on an art project—as she says, ‘one interesting project or another is always blowing into my house’—her days remain filled with different activities characterized by usefulness and/or idealism, both informal and normally undocumented.”**

## Irene ist Viele! Or What We Call “Productive Forces”

Marion von Osten

### Irene ist Viele!<sup>1</sup>

An extensive 2004 study undertaken by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (BFS) found that, in one of the world’s wealthiest countries, of nearly fifteen billion annual work hours, eight billion went unpaid. Two-thirds of that free labor was performed by women, while women in the wage-labor sector were paid on average eighteen percent less than men.<sup>2</sup> The study shows that the “invisible hand of the market,” with its celebrated promise of economic equality, fails when it comes to social, cultural, and life-sustaining activities; furthermore, it appears that the “free market” has something against women. If, on top of this, the current form of capitalism is characterized by its extension of the logic of commodity production into the social realm (although, according to its classical self-conception, the capitalist economy actually claims to exclude the interpersonal realm), this means not only that wages and social services are reduced and cut but above all that the reproductive reserves are plundered.<sup>3</sup> According to many contemporary theorists, what was considered in the Fordist system to be external to the concerns of the economy—communication, personalized services, social relationships, lifestyle, subjectivity—today establishes the conditions for the generation of wealth. Social and cultural competences and processes—the most varied forms of knowledge production and dissemination—are central to what Antonella Corsani calls “cognitive capitalism.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus the current debate surrounding precarity in Europe, as a neoliberal condition and a comprehensive mode of subjectivity, doesn’t stop where wage labor or social-state welfare ends, but rather seeks out perspectives that help us to think beyond the reductive logic of the current conception of work, and beyond the nation-state as well. This also means being able to consider the material, social, and symbolic conditions necessary for life as interconnected entities that can overcome the traditional dichotomies of public/private and production/reproduction to set new standards for living life with all its facets and contingencies.<sup>5</sup>

But how does a life look when it doesn’t define itself in relation to the status of wage labor, but rather through the desire to freely decide one’s own conditions for living and working, effectively constituting a demand for a flexible labor market? What does it mean for our work and life when the social, the cultural, and the economic cease to be clearly distinguishable categories and instead condition and permeate one another? Beyond this, what does it mean when people come to terms with these new forms of work as isolated individuals?



What can forms of collectivity look like? And what does it mean when there is not only no consideration of the redistribution of wealth in the precarity debate but also no consideration of a good life for all? How do we expect to work politically to develop overall social conditions when the theoretical premises of their transformation remain to a large degree unexplained?

In this text I will pursue these questions in relation to a 1978 film by Helke Sander titled *Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit—Redupers / The All-Around Reduced Personality: Outtakes*. At the end of the 1970s, this film already tried to consider the immanence of liberation ideals and self-determination in capitalist societies. In a way, it represents a possible historical starting point for the current debate over forces of production, precarity, and critical potential by illustrating that, even in the upheaval of changes in the capitalist as well as gender order that took place in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, many networked and self-organizing production conditions (what today would be considered the source of “immaterial work”) were already present—and were being analyzed by feminists.

### **In the Magnifying Glass of Non-Work**

*Redupers* is set in the still-divided Berlin of the 1970s. The film begins with, and is continually interrupted by, pans across Berlin’s graffiti- and slogan-covered facades, reminding us of the social struggles of 1968 or the binary socialist and capitalist power blocs. Against this backdrop of the city’s ever-present division and the fading memory of the 1968 revolution, the film tells of the everyday life and work of a young press photographer and single mother who works with a feminist collective in addition to her regular job. Director Helke Sander plays the main character in *Redupers* herself: a photographer who “produces,” develops, prints, and sells images as a freelancer for a Berlin newspaper, lives in a shared apartment with her daughter and a friend, and is in a relationship with a man who is not the father of her child. She works with a feminist producers’ collective on a countercultural project in the public sphere and, as part of a Berlin art collective, on an exhibition directed against the dominant capitalist image of West Berlin. The whole construction of the film doesn’t only destabilize prevailing notions around the separation of public and private realms, or the classical division of labor between director, author, and actor, but can also be read as a document of a form of self-representation that destabilizes parliamentary democracies’ claims that the will and interest of “the people” or the subaltern must be represented by institutions and the media in order to be valid.<sup>6</sup>

From the beginning, this can be understood as political positioning on the filmmaker’s part. Helke Sander is also a central figure of the so-called First Women’s Movement. At the 1968 conference of the Socialist German Student Union (SDS) in Berlin she delivered the speech on behalf of the Action Committee on the Liberation of Women, an event that ended with a famous tomato being thrown at her comrades. In this speech, Sander demanded that the functionalist precept rooted in political economy according to which capitalism must determine all social conditions be set aside. Power relations in the private sphere,

which affect women above all, cannot be accommodated in this perspective, but are instead denied and dismissed as a secondary contradiction. The political project shared by leftist men and women could not, according to Sander, be successful as long as only “exceptional women” were recognized by the merit system of the leftist intelligentsia. The question of the political project lies, according to Sander, in the method by which it is practiced. What was necessary was a political practice that recognizes the private realm, the body, gender relations, and the realm of reproduction as a political sphere.

The politicization of the private is a central motif of the social movements of the 1970s and is found throughout the film. *Redupers* no longer places this critique of the normative role of the housewife at the center. Instead, the filmmaker uses the politicized perspective on the private to examine the most varied activities and constraints, drawing connections to the social, economic, and cultural fields, and the power relationships at work between them. The question of the mother’s care for the daughter and their relationship plays an important role, although social conditions in the film are indicated primarily by the ever-changing demands imposed on the overworked protagonist, whose career as a press photographer requires her to be on location at irregular times and with little notice.

Beyond the unresolved question of care, the film remains attentive to all the invisible operations that make up work within the culture as well—those not related directly to the sale of photographs: shopping for film, working in the darkroom, developing the film and printing the photos, drying and pressing the prints, as well as retouching the images; but also: negotiating assignments, remaining informed about social events, maintaining contact with the persons photographed, which also goes beyond a working relationship, as well as submitting invoices and collecting honoraria, preparing tax returns, etc. The cash value of the compensation that the photographer Edda receives in Sander’s film for her photos, with which she defrays all expenses for both her daughter’s and her own subsistence, and for all her other projects, can never make up for all of this activity. Even just with regard to the production of the photos, it doesn’t amount to a decent hourly wage. The sale of photographs as a finished product thus contains contradictions very similar to those of selling one’s own labor to capital. As the photograph is only a snapshot of an instant in a live event, frozen and commodified, so also is the work performed for the production of the image not contained in the price. In a similar way, life-sustaining, social, and communicative activities are also frozen in the concept of labor, consumed by capital like a commodity.<sup>7</sup>

This understanding has a historical side: that of the discovery of work as a source of property and wealth, from John Locke and Adam Smith to Karl Marx’s “systems of work” and political economy as science. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thinkers of all stripes apparently agreed that “work” alone represents human beings’ most productive means of shaping the world and forming value. Even though Marx, in his critique of the Gotha Program,<sup>8</sup> strongly criticized the claim that work is the source of all wealth (he asserted that nature is also a source of wealth and that the fetish for work is an expression of bourgeois ideology), during the period of industrialization and the corresponding radical reevaluation of the overall social status of work, it was assumed that a striking number of other activities could no longer shape the world or form value.

The most obvious reason why the theorists of the nineteenth century weren't aware of the radical limitations of this concept of work is rooted, according to Hannah Arendt, in the fact that they only attributed work to the production of sellable goods.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout industrialization, the concept of work came to be understood according to its capacity for maximizing profit and producing value. But this also meant that such a concept can neither encompass "work" in the life-sustaining sense nor productivity in any non-capitalist sense. Marx conceived of work in much broader terms than those of the male factory worker. He also considered "making the audience laugh" (cultural work/entertainment industry) to be work, and protested against those of the workers' movement who only understood traditional industrial labor as work.<sup>10</sup> Sweat and muscle power, real manpower, and the machine hall were apparently easier to politicize than the comics, entertainers, or women—for whom the "other" industry of unpaid caretaking, childrearing, shopping, and housework was intended—on the basis of their so-called feminine characteristics. The circumstances of their exploitation were hidden, but no less brutal in their effects. In contrast to the entertainment industry, which was quite small at the time, this second industry concerned almost the entire "other half" of society. Alongside the sticky psychosocial dependence of the genders, the dichotomy formed by the woman's dependence on the money of the man would determine the entire symbolic order of industrial capitalism.

But reducing work to production also went beyond this to lock the theoretical approaches inside the factory, so to speak. It did not take long for the critique of capitalism to consider the gendering of paid and unpaid labor alongside its role in producing capital as well.<sup>11</sup>

Living a life that unfolds in opposing directions, the main character in Helke Sander's film points to the imprecision of this discourse. While her "free time" is spent working with her female friends on an art project—as she says, "one interesting project or another is always blowing into my house"—her days remain filled with different activities characterized by usefulness and/or idealism, both informal and normally undocumented. While her work as a press photographer secures her income and is what she describes as her actual career, the other activity—working on a cultural project—fulfills her desire for a collective, feminist practice, for change and cultural and political empowerment. At the same time, both are work, as is caring for her daughter. But in these apparently self-determined conditions, as the film shows, the unpaid care work remains not only the responsibility of women but also invisible to the commodity forms of knowledge and cultural production.

Self-organized work is also split into remunerative work offering financial support and artistic, self-actualizing, collective work that brings in cultural and social capital. And yet the care work at home is taken into account by neither occupation. While her cultural-political work is coupled with the actualization of meaningful individual and collective desires, the care work must somehow be organized around it. Her work with a group of women on a project to design a counter-image to the dominant one of a divided and cutoff Berlin is indeed more meaningful than freezing into photographs "events which are of publishable value for the newspaper." The women's project for the Berlin art association

doesn't only reflect the devaluation of care work to that of a burdensome activity but also points to the different levels of their own participation in the same dominant condition, as well as to their individual desires for public recognition. The sexist logic of society and the desire to change it thus come dangerously close to each other. In this way, the film's politicization of the private dissolves into new concepts of occupation and career, but while it finds its place in the self-actualization of "more meaningful" work, it no longer locates this change in the social conditions themselves.<sup>12</sup>

### **All-Around Reduced Views**

Helke Sander's film focuses on this absence in its descriptions of all the daily activities we perform in private and public space. For more than thirty years, feminist economists have examined work relationships and conditions from the perspective of nonwork, calling our attention to the fact that the field of political economy (which is about two hundred and fifty years old) has until now only addressed commodity production and not the question of how to bring about sociality. This is, on the one hand, because the field developed alongside mechanization and industrialization and was in a position to theorize these new production systems and capital relations but also because a specific ruling form of subjectivity became central to the development of Western capitalist society: *Homo economicus*, the subject of this economy, with white skin and masculine gender, who follows his own interests and whose self-interest is also believed to serve the interests of all others. According to Elisabeth Stiefel, an economist from Cologne, *Homo economicus* represents not only the tasks of the public economic sphere but also those of the head of household, while the interior of the household is terra incognita for economic theory. The social and the cultural thus remain fundamentally exterior to the understanding of the economic. As classical economic theory assumed care work to be self-evident—and therefore performed for free—women had to take on unpaid "extraeconomic" activities for cultural reasons, and this gendering of paid and unpaid work, which even today finds a significant disparity in the pay of men and women, has not hurt capital in the slightest in two hundred years.

The separation of social, cultural, and economic discourses from those of production and reproduction has solidified a theoretical reductionism that has made it difficult to discern where and how to economically position the analysis and critique of post-Fordist work and life conditions, especially because it is precisely those extra-economic conditions that have become central to the production of added value. How can we begin to bring these into a discussion about the redistribution of wealth, when above all wage labor can no longer be guaranteed? How can we demand payment for something that is not yet considered in an economic sense work? And do we even want to recognize and monetize nonwork as "work" at all, thereby economizing all aspects of life?

It becomes even more complicated to address these questions when they extend, together with gender duality and its location in the (neo)classical work imperative, into the desire economy of a "good life." Sander's film also speaks to this. The figure of the photographer plays a double role in the film: both as occupation and as a self-actualization project.

The photographer historically represents an exception to the gendered division of labor, as it was one of the first occupations to witness an altered discourse of visibility brought about by new technologies, and this opened possibilities for self-sufficiency and financial independence to not just men. The female photographer thus functions as a kind of role model for women, since the possession of her own money in this “creative occupation” could be associated with liberation from the heterosexual regime. Thus it was not unusual for these self-sufficient women to live with other women and not be married to men. The techno-emancipative role model in Sander’s film witnesses this historical narrative at the end of the 1970s, in a new situation between diligent self-organization and a relatively bureaucratic information and culture industry, in which the underpayment of freelance workers has become the rule. At the same time, Sander’s figure of the photographer shows who has access to the representation of the world and who selects, determines, and utilizes it.

In a central scene, in which the photographer Edda calls the newspaper editors seeking payment due to her, and her just-awoken friend finds the bathroom full of developed film, a conflict emerges: the good, nonheteronormative life together—being self-sufficient and earning money from home—and being dependent on editors. The economic reality of self-employment that was previously understood as emancipatory eats more and more into Edda’s personal relationships. The emancipatory struggle that had the good life as its objective now reappears in the unsatisfied longing for change and the struggle to survive.

Against this backdrop, the film reflects the fact that the desires for feminist, occupational, and cultural-political self-sufficiency—the personal responsibility of earning money and working in the counterculture—have inverted to become their opposites. Not only are they unable to resolve the social contradictions that they set out to overcome, but they become mired in them instead. The protagonist’s various motivations for wanting to become self-sufficient (by becoming a press photographer and an artist) connect completely in the film for the first time when the protagonist enters a new relationship with herself by going on a visit to the editorial floor of the magazine *stern* to promote her feminist art project. In the scene, Edda puts on makeup and perfume, and, thinking as she walks down the hall to the journalist’s office, says, “If I really wanted to represent what is right in my job as press photographer, I would have to be at home here [in the halls of *stern*].” In this situation, it is her cultural self speaking, not her career self, and certainly not her activist self. The interplay of her various repertoires—the fragmentation of her person—is especially clear here. This scene suggests how, by working by herself and on projects outside her career, Edda finds options for a “better position” on the horizon. The mix of positions and activities also becomes a “portfolio”: what she has done without pay and possibly with a higher degree of political investment accumulates social or cultural capital that is usable in other markets for a better position or a career in art. This points to a practice that has transformed into a dominant work-related demand today, in which unpaid internships and other indignities are part of a “normal career.”

In Switzerland today, for example, job seekers show their unpaid work in their résumés, on the one hand to signal their “willingness to work,” but also to show their flexibility and

versatility in the tightening job market. The feminist demand for the visibility of unpaid work seems realized here, but at the same time, the documentation of the informal serves only the efficiency logic of existing capitalist conditions by indicating a capability and readiness for wage labor.

The *stern* editor was unresponsive to the film's protagonist. For him, she is "only" a figure of the women's movement—a feminist and a political activist. Not only is she denied the role of a cultural producer who can represent political conditions, but so is she denied any possible success. Here Sander illustrates what usually remains acknowledged in current theories on the emergent productivity of individual desires within neoliberalism: that pay for work performed in vastly different markets does not equal the sum of the parts. Viewed from today's perspective, the film not only caricatures government-funded start-ups and the plans of the Hartz Commission in Germany but also corrects the idea that the celebrated figure of the "entrepreneurial self" is not gendered or part of a hierarchy. The reflective, connection-forming, and knowledge-producing form of work sketched out here also points to a change in society through which new claims to activity, collectivity, and property can be negotiated.

The protagonist is not only photographer, feminist activist, and theorist, that is, cultural producer, but also a product of emancipatory demands and capitalist impositions, a subject who has pulled away from wage labor and its regulatory apparatus in the factory or in the office, as the *Autonomia Operaia* called for. At the same time, she is a "Reduper" (an all-around REDUCed PERson)—a figure who cannot be located biographically, and instead requires a new form of subjectivity to be realized in the contradictions of capitalist socialization. In this way, *Redupers* marks the post-Fordist convergence of work relationships, subjectivity, desires, and political demands that has consequently brought about a multitude of all-around reduced personalities.

### **Creating Probabilities**

More than three decades after *Redupers*, the call for self-determination and social participation is no longer only an emancipatory demand but increasingly also a social obligation. In the new conditions of governance, subjects are pushed toward maturity, autonomy, and personal responsibility. They seem to willingly subordinate themselves to the dispositions of power—they are "obliged to be free" (Nikolas Rose).<sup>13</sup> Forms of discipline that were used in the time of mechanization and industrialization have been extended in post-Fordist societies into new forms of control.

Contemporary forms of organization discipline subjects and their bodies less through "guilt and punishment," and more by aiming at internalizing productivity goals. This produces a new relationship of the subject to itself—friendliness toward customers, working with the team, increasing one's own motivation, self-organizing work routines, managing time efficiently, and being personally responsible for both the company's and one's own actions are demands being made not only on the work subject but increasingly also on the

unemployed. According to Michel Foucault, this new concept of governing “[...] is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself.”<sup>14</sup> One’s behavior in a more or less open field of possibility therefore determines the path of success. Exertion of power consists, in this sense and according to Foucault, in the “creation of probability.”<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, it is not a disciplinary regime that guides the subject’s actions, but rather a set of governing practices that mobilize and encourage rather than “survey and punish.” The new subjects of work should apparently be as contingent and flexible as the “markets.” A work subject who is able to find a productive relationship between work time and life time is “supported and challenged,” and within this relationship private activities are also geared toward economic use value. The entrepreneur of one’s own labor<sup>16</sup> should also be the artist of his/her own life. The hope that these paradoxical demands could become dominant labor-market politics is likely due to the fact that under such conditions, workers can always feel “liberated” from constraints, as Helke Sander’s film was already able to show in 1978. It must be worked out, therefore, how the transition from liberation programs to job specifications takes place, and whether and for whom they are effective. More than three decades after *Redupers*, we need to ask how the relationship between work and nonwork can be politicized when their coupling has already become hegemonic in its representation.

Although the economic field, in a double sense, mobilizes and controls the social realm, the paradigms of capitalist production remain the same. They do not inform the “resources” of our social lives themselves, even (and especially) if cognitive capitalism has parasitically positioned itself at the side of reproduction. Acceleration and maximizing profit continue to be advanced as the necessary logic of the market. Life itself is subsumed under the rules of efficiency and optimization that were first encountered under the regime of automated industrial work in order to synchronize the body with machines.<sup>17</sup> Today, it is our cognitive capabilities that we are expected to optimize, and our self-relation (to our work) that we are expected to correct in the interest of lifelong learning.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond this, *Redupers* shows that the anchoring of neoliberal ideology in the subject cannot only be considered to be a product of post-Fordist production or the information economy. Rather, the film points to arguments made by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, who in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* undertake a sociology of the critique of capitalism since 1968.<sup>19</sup> They examine the “social critique” that became engaged on the political level for the redistribution of wealth and for equal rights, as well as the “artistic critique” that emerged from the artistic and intellectual avant-gardes such as the Situationists and various social movements of the postwar era. With demands for autonomy, authenticity, and creativity, but also through artistic practices beyond the classical concept of the work of art, these critiques attacked the use of the social as commodity form, discipline in the factory, bureaucratic inertia, and hierarchical power relations in industrial societies. Boltanski and Chiapello then argue that it was precisely capitalism’s

adaptation to these “cultural critiques” that increasingly corroded the politicization of life and the social critique of property relations, thus paving the way for neoliberalism.

According to Yann Moulier Boutang, the classical conception of economic value and measurement changes in cognitive capitalism, since the growing use and exchange of knowledge in post-Fordist production extends far beyond its economic utilization as commodity.<sup>20</sup> The viral dynamics of new distribution technologies such as the Internet render information and knowledge far less accessible to supervisory bodies, as Sander’s film also suggests. In the transformation of the old economy, these new possibilities also point to a new field of struggle—such as the conflicts and arguments over intellectual property and the so-called commons.

After viewing *Redupers* against a backdrop of contemporary economic analysis, it seems insufficient to simply point out the limits in the study of political economy or to show that capitalism has incorporated certain concepts of life for its own advancement. Rather, we must also ask whether and how a critique of capitalism can make allowances for the alliance of work and life within the subject’s own domain—its biopolitical preparations and desires—without getting mired in merely describing them as another advanced form of exploitation.

Translated from the German by Jennifer Cameron.

Revised version of a text first published in *e-flux journal* 8 (September 2009). Reprinted in *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art*, ed. Julieta Aranda, Anton Vidokle, and Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), pp. 40–59. German original (“Irene ist Viele! Oder was die Produktivkräfte genannt wird”) first published in *Empire und die biopolitische Wende. Die internationale Diskussion im Anschluss an Hardt und Negri*, ed. Marianne Pieper, Thomas Atzert, Serhat Karakayali, and Vassilis Tsianos (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2007), pp. 109–124.

## Notes

- 1 “Irene ist Viele” refers to Helke Sander’s film *Eine Prämie für Irene* (A Bonus for Irene, 1971), in which the voice-over says, “Irene ist Viele” (Irene is many). In the film, the figure of Irene stands for the many factory workers who are single mothers. *Eine Prämie für Irene* was one of the first films in Germany to suggest the interrelations between the public and the private spheres. *Irene ist Viele* was also the title of a film program I curated together with art historian Rachel Mader in the Shedhalle in Zurich in 1996, in which films by feminist filmmakers from Germany and Switzerland were reviewed and reevaluated together with the filmmakers. Helke Sander was part of this important event that also tried to bridge older and younger generations.
- 2 According to a 2004 study by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (BFS), two-thirds of all unpaid work is performed by women. This corresponds to an equivalent of 172 billion Swiss francs or seventy percent of the gross domestic product. In the future, unpaid work is to be economically evaluated on a regular basis. Although this calculation, based upon an estimation of market costs, is necessarily inexact, this sum corresponds to nearly the entire yearly wages of employed workers in Switzerland.
- 3 Cf. Mascha Madörin, “Der kleine Unterschied in hunderttausend Franken,” in *Widerspruch*, 31 (1996), pp. 127–142. See also Pauline Boudry, Brigitta Kuster, and Renate Lorenz, eds., *Reproduktionskonten fälschen! Heterosexualität, Arbeit & Zuhause* (Berlin: b\_books, 1999).
- 4 Contemporary production models are characterized by their transformation of workers’ learned skills not used in the workplace into a productive force. The postoperaistic theorists in France and Italy have shown that all immaterial and affective work gains significance in post-Fordist production. With investigations into the reorganization of the automotive and textile industries in northern Italy and the image industries in Île-de-France, these theorists of “immaterial work” have also shown that



communication and subjectivity are not only components of postindustrial, informalized, and informal production but also themselves become an applied process in the industrial sector and the scene of new struggles. See also Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterielle Arbeit. Gesellschaftliche Tätigkeit unter den Bedingungen des Postfordismus," in *Umherschweifende Produzenten. Immaterielle Arbeit und Subversion*, ed. Thomas Atzert (Berlin: ID-Archiv, 1998), pp. 39–52; Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 133–147; and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Concerning "cognitive capitalism," see also Christian Azaïs, Antonella Corsani, and Patrick Dieuaide, eds., *Vers un capitalisme cognitif. Entre mutations du travail et territoires* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).

- 5 Affective and communicative interaction and the creation of sociality and subjectivity never become economically valuable, but are rather always valuable for life itself. The social doesn't stop when one leaves the workplace, whether this be at home or in the office, and thus it can also never fully be absorbed by capital, since affects cannot be exclusively industrially organized (even if this is attempted in the image and film industry). If immaterial work, interaction, and communication can become a resource for accumulation, or even become a commodity, then this means that a vital aspect of the workforce can no longer be clearly determined through measurements such as working hours, price comparisons, or possessions. The subjectivity of the workers doesn't end in an imaginary factory, but has rather a further effect on different social processes that are not only marked by their economic value, although they can, in the reverse argument, generate it. This also means asking how we ourselves reproduce or bring about the conditions that we criticize. See the project *Atelier Europa*, which I developed together with Pauline Boudry, Brigitta Kuster, Isabell Lorey, Angela McRobbie, and Katja Reichard, in which we carried out a "militant investigation" with cultural producers; see also *Be Creative! The Creative Imperative*, which I organized with students and theorists for the Museum of Design Zurich, <http://www.k3000.ch/becreative/> (accessed July 20, 2012).
- 6 The film is the expression of these demands for (self-)representation that emerged from the struggles against the exercise of control over subjectivity and are and were central to both the social- and the global- emancipation movements.
- 7 It was Marx's achievement to have analyzed the abstraction process in which work is transformed in the capitalist accumulation into labor (*Arbeitskraft*, literally "workforce"): into a seemingly measurable size. Capital doesn't buy all the necessary and living work, nor even the social, cultural, and spatial conditions to afford them, but rather a time-energy-money equivalence, in which life-sustaining activities are unnamed but apparently included. Labor was therefore also bought in the time of industrialization as a preproduced commodity, in which the actual production relations that produce the commodity labor remain hidden. Thus capital in the time of industrialization had command over care work, communication, and lifestyle.
- 8 Cf. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1947).
- 9 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).
- 10 Cf. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke. Band 26. Theorien über den Mehrwert I* (Berlin: Dietz, 1965).
- 11 This missing perspective refers to the "becoming-subject" of factory work as a masculine muscular body with white skin, which would have to be analyzed in order to make a complete critique of the discipline and the making-effective of the body and its exploitation—up through existential destruction in the time of industrialization.
- 12 Today, this means that migrants are underpaid to perform the remaining nonprestige care work so that the men and women wrapped up in their wage work or prestige work can carry out their paid or unpaid status work. Care work, which under traditional gender regimes was coupled to the subject position of the housewife, is now bought as a service on the market or pushed on those who can't buy it. After finishing cleaning and care work, the servant cannot afford a servant of his or her own who would perform this work in their own home.
- 13 Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 100.
- 14 Michel Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," in *Political Theory*, vol. 21, no. 2 (May 1993), pp. 203–204. Foucault's conception of governing as "[determining] the conduct of individuals" focuses on how "[t]he contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves [...]." Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock, 1988), p. 18; Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," p. 203. Foucault's argument is that, by means of these "technologies of the self," a much more profound integration of the individual into power takes place, without which the functional modes of modern Western society are difficult to imagine.
- 15 Originally *Schaffung der Wahrscheinlichkeit*, in Michel Foucault, "Das Subjekt und die Macht," in *Michel Foucault. Jenseits von Strukturalismus und Hermeneutik*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1987), p. 255.
- 16 See G. Günter Voß and Hans J. Pongratz, "Der Arbeitskraftunternehmer. Eine neue Grundform der Ware Arbeitskraft?" in *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, vol. 50, no. 1 (1998), pp. 131–158.

- 17 The effects of this acceleration and its attendant standardization are especially clear in the service sector, the care economy, and the health and social systems that come under the constraints of quality management and increased efficiency as well as austere fiscal policy. The same is also true according to the Bologna negotiations for the education system of the entire European Union.
- 18 See a collection of texts devoted to this question, Marion von Osten, ed., *Norm der Abweichung* (Zurich: Edition Voldemeer Zürich; Vienna/New York: Springer, 2003).
- 19 See Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).
- 20 Cf. Yann Moulier Boutang, "Neue Grenzziehungen in der Politischen Ökonomie" in von Osten, *Norm der Abweichung*, pp. 251–280. This crisis becomes clear, for example, in the suggested Volkswagen pay scale introduced in 2003 by Peter Hartz, member of the Volkswagen board and the personification of labor market reform. Here Hartz establishes the "job family," in which the different levels of a production process should now be viewed and paid as an "organic whole" of various productive forces. From a designer to a mechanic to a painter, a job family is a team brought into a dependence that is "productive" for the individual but nonetheless negative. We also see the crisis of the definition of necessary work in the discussion over a guaranteed income—in which the production of life as necessary prerequisite for a work life or an unemployed existence is considered.

# DISPERSION



**SETH  
PRICE**



# DISPERSION



*The definition of artistic activity occurs, first of all, in the field of distribution.*

Marcel Broodthaers



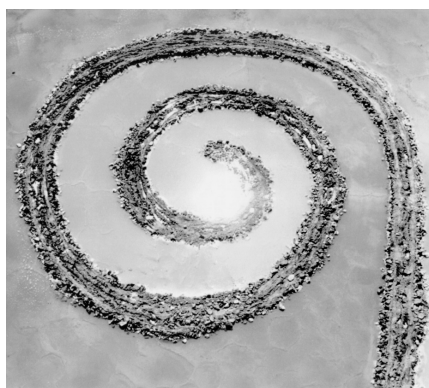
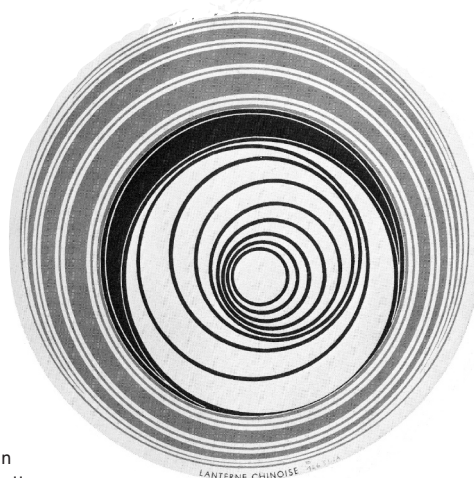
One of the ways in which the Conceptual project in art has been most successful is in claiming new territory for practice. It's a tendency that's been almost too successful: today it seems that most of the work in the international art system positions itself as Conceptual to some degree, yielding the "Conceptual painter," the "DJ and Conceptual artist," or the "Conceptual web artist." Let's put aside the question of what makes a work Conceptual, recognizing, with some resignation, that the term can only gesture toward a thirty year-old historical moment. But it can't be rejected entirely, as it has an evident charge for artists working today, even if they aren't necessarily invested in the concerns of the classical moment, which included linguistics, analytic philosophy, and a pursuit of formal dematerialization. What does seem to

hold true for today's normative Conceptualism is that the project remains, in the words of Art and Language, "radically incomplete": it does not necessarily stand against objects or painting, or for language as art; it does not need to stand against retinal art; it does not stand for anything certain, instead privileging framing and context, and constantly renegotiating its relationship to its audience. Martha Rosler has spoken of the "as-if" approach, where the Conceptual work cloaks itself in other disciplines (philosophy being the most notorious example), provoking an oscillation between skilled and de-skilled, authority and pretense, style and strategy, art and not-art.



Hermann Hugo. *Pia Desideria*. 1659.

Duchamp was not only here first, but staked out the problematic virtually single-handedly. His question "Can one make works which are not 'of art'" is our shibboleth, and the question's resolution will remain an apparition on the horizon, always receding from the slow growth of practice. One suggestion comes from the philosopher Sarat Maharaj, who sees the question as "a marker for ways we might be able to engage with works, events, spasms, ructions that don't look like art and don't count as art, but are somehow electric, energy nodes, attractors, transmitters, conductors of new thinking, new subjectivity and action that visual artwork in the traditional sense is not able to articulate." These concise words call for an art that insinuates itself into the culture at large, an art that does not go the way of, say, theology, where while it's certain that there are practitioners doing important work, few people notice. An art that takes Rosler's as-if moment as far as it can go.



Not surprisingly, the history of this project is a series of false starts and paths that peter out, of projects that dissipate or are absorbed. Exemplary among this garden of ruins is Duchamp's failure to sell his Rotorelief optical toys at an amateur inventor's fair. What better description of the artist than amateur inventor? But this was 1935, decades before widespread fame would have assured his sales (and long before the notion that an artist-run business might itself constitute a work), and he was attempting to wholly transplant himself into the alien context of commercial science and invention. In his own analysis: "error, one hundred percent." Immersing art in life runs the risk of seeing the status of art—and with it, the status of artist—disperse entirely.

These bold expansions actually seem to render artworks increasingly vulnerable. A painting is manifestly art, whether on the wall or in the street, but avant-garde work is often illegible without institutional framing and the work of the curator or historian. More than anyone else, artists of the last hundred years have wrestled with this trauma of context, but theirs is a struggle that necessarily takes place within the art system. However radical the work, it amounts to a proposal enacted within an arena of peer-review, in dialogue with the community and its history. Reflecting on his experience running a gallery in the 1960s, Dan Graham observed: "if a work of art wasn't written about and reproduced in a magazine it would have difficulty attaining the status of 'art'. It seemed that in order to be defined as having value, that is as 'art', a work had only to be exhibited in a gallery and then to be written about and reproduced as a photograph in an art magazine." Art, then, with its reliance on discussion through refereed forums and journals, is similar to a professional field like science.



What would it mean to step outside of this carefully structured system? Duchamp's Rotorelief experiment stands as a caution, and the futility of more recent attempts to evade the institutional system has been well demonstrated. Canonical works survive through documentation and discourse, administered by the usual institutions. Smithsonian's *Spiral Jetty*, for example, was acquired by (or perhaps it was in fact 'gifted to') the Dia Art Foundation, which discreetly mounted a photograph of the new holding in its Dan Graham-designed video-café, a tasteful assertion of ownership.

That work which seeks what Allan Kaprow called "the blurring of art and life" work which Boris Groys has called biopolitical, attempting to "produce and document life itself as pure activity by artistic means," faces the problem that it must depend on a record of its intervention into the world, and this documentation is what is recouped as art, short-circuiting the original intent. Groys sees a disparity thus opened between the work and its future existence as documentation, noting our "deep malaise towards documentation and the archive." This must be partly due to the archive's deathlike appearance, a point that Jeff Wall has echoed, in a critique of the uninvitingly "tomb-like" Conceptualism of the 1960s.

Agreement! A paragraph of citations, a direction, the suggestion that one is getting a sense of things. What these critics observe is a popular suspicion of the archive of high culture, which relies on cataloguing, provenance, and authenticity. Insofar as there is a popular archive, it does not share this administrative tendency. Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that depends on reproduction and distribution for its sustenance, a model that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal blur. The art system usually corrals errant works, but how could it recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?



"Clip Art," 1985.



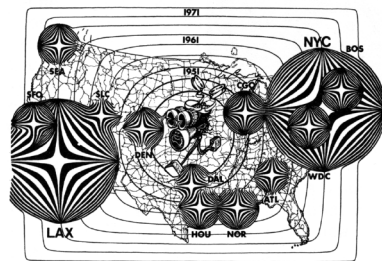
It is useful to continually question the avant-garde's traditional romantic opposition to bourgeois society and values. The genius of the bourgeoisie manifests itself in the circuits of power and money that regulate the flow of culture. National bourgeois culture, of which art is one element, is based around commercial media, which, together with technology, design, and fashion, generate some of the important differences of our day. These are the arenas in which to conceive of a work positioned within the material and discursive technologies of distributed media.

Distributed media can be defined as social information circulating in theoretically unlimited quantities in the common market, stored or accessed via portable devices such as books and magazines, records and compact discs, videotapes and DVDs, personal computers and data diskettes. Duchamp's question has new life in this space, which has greatly expanded during the last few decades of global corporate sprawl. It's space into which the work of art must project itself lest it be outdistanced entirely by these corporate interests. New strategies are needed to keep up with commercial distribution, decentralization, and dispersion. You must fight something in order to understand it.

Mark Klienberg, writing in 1975 in the second issue of *The Fox*, poses the question: "Could there be someone capable of writing a science-fiction thriller based on the intention of presenting an alternative interpretation of modernist art that is readable by a non-specialist audience? Would they care?" He says no more about it, and the question

stands as an intriguing historical fragment, an evolutionary dead end, and a line of inquiry to pursue in this essay: the intimation of a categorically ambiguous art, one in which the synthesis of multiple circuits of reading carries an emancipatory potential.

This tendency has a rich history, despite the lack of specific work along the lines of Klienberg's proposal. Many artists have used the printed page as medium; an arbitrary and partial list might include Robert Smithson, Mel Bochner, Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Stephen Kaltenbach, and Adrian Piper, and there have been historical watersheds like Seth Siegelau and John Wendler's 1968 show *Xeroxbook*.

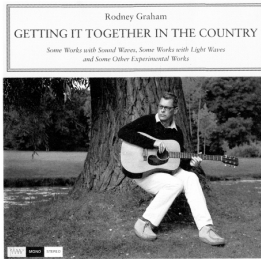


**You Are Information**

*Ant Farm, 1960s.*



"Literature being reeled off and sold in chunks"—Grandville, 1844.



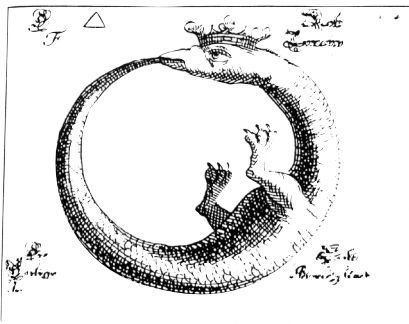
2000.

The radical nature of this work stems in part from the fact that it is a direct expression of the process of production. Market mechanisms of circulation, distribution, and dissemination become a crucial part of the work, distinguishing such a practice from the liberal-bourgeois model of production, which operates under the notion that cultural doings somehow take place above the marketplace. However, whether assuming the form of ad or article, much of this work was primarily concerned with finding exhibition alternatives to the gallery wall, and in any case often used these sites to demonstrate dryly theoretical propositions rather than address issues of, say, desire. And then, one imagines, with a twist of the kaleidoscope things resolve themselves.

This points to a shortcoming of classical conceptualism. Benjamin Buchloh points out that "while it emphasized its universal availability and its potential collective accessibility and underlined its freedom from the determinations of the discursive and economic framing conventions governing traditional art production and reception, it was, nevertheless, perceived as the most esoteric and elitist artistic mode." Kosuth's quotation from Roget's Thesaurus placed in an Artforum box ad, or Dan Graham's list of numbers laid out in an issue of Harper's Bazaar, were uses of mass media to deliver coded propositions to a specialist audience, and the impact of these works, significant and lasting as they were, reverted directly to the relatively arcane realm of the art system, which noted these efforts and inscribed them in its histories. Conceptualism's critique of representation emanated the same mandarin air as did a canvas by Ad Reinhart, and its attempts to create an Art Degree Zero can be seen as a kind of negative virtuosity, perhaps partly attributable to a New Left skepticism towards pop culture and its generic expressions.

Certainly, part of what makes the classical avant-garde interesting and radical is that it tended to shun social communication, excommunicating itself through incomprehensibility, but this isn't useful if the goal is to use the circuits of mass distribution. In that case, one must use not simply the delivery mechanisms of popular culture, but also its generic forms. When Rodney Graham releases a CD of pop songs, or Maurizio Cattelan publishes a magazine, those in the art world must acknowledge the art gesture at the same time that these products function like any other artifact in the consumer market. But difference lies within these products! Embodied in their embrace of the codes of the culture industry, they contain a utopian moment that points toward future transformation. They could be written according to the code of hermeneutics:

*"Where we have spoken openly we have actually said nothing. But where we have written something in code and in pictures, we have concealed the truth..."*



A. Eleazar. Ouroboros. 1735.

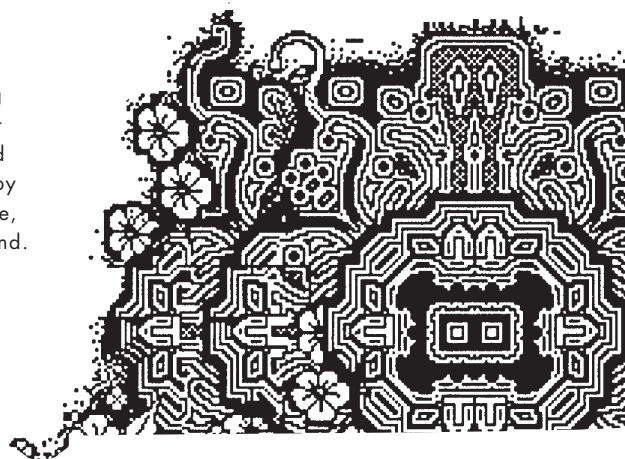
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Let's say your aesthetic program spans media, and that much of your work does not function properly within the institutionalized art context. This might include music, fashion, poetry, filmmaking, or criticism, all crucial artistic practices, but practices which are somehow stubborn and difficult, which resist easy assimilation into a market-driven art system. The film avant-garde, for instance, has always run on a separate track from the art world, even as its practitioners may have been pursuing analogous concerns. And while artists have always been attracted to music and its rituals, a person whose primary activity was producing music, conceived of and presented as Art, would find 'art world' acceptance elusive. The producer who elects to wear several hats is perceived as a crossover at best: the artist-filmmaker, as in the case of Julian Schnabel; the artist as entrepreneur, as in the case of Warhol's handling of Interview magazine and the Velvet Underground; or, as with many of the people mentioned in this essay, artist as critic, perhaps the most tenuous position of all. This is the lake of our feeling.

One could call these niches "theatrical," echoing Michael Fried's insistence that "what lies between the arts is theater... the common denominator that binds... large and seemingly disparate activities to one another, and that distinguishes these activities from the radically different enterprises of the Modernist art." A practice based on distributed media should pay close attention to these activities, which, despite lying between the arts, have great resonance in the national culture.

Some of the most interesting recent artistic activity has taken place outside the art market and its forums. Collaborative and sometimes anonymous groups work in fashion, music, video, or performance, garnering admiration within the art world while somehow retaining their status as outsiders, perhaps due to their preference for theatrical, distribution-oriented modes. Maybe this is what Duchamp meant by his intriguing throwaway comment, late in life, that the artist of the future will be underground.

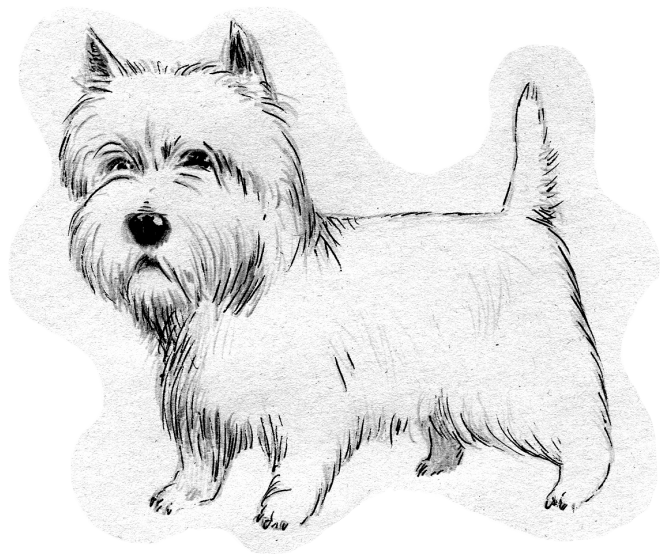


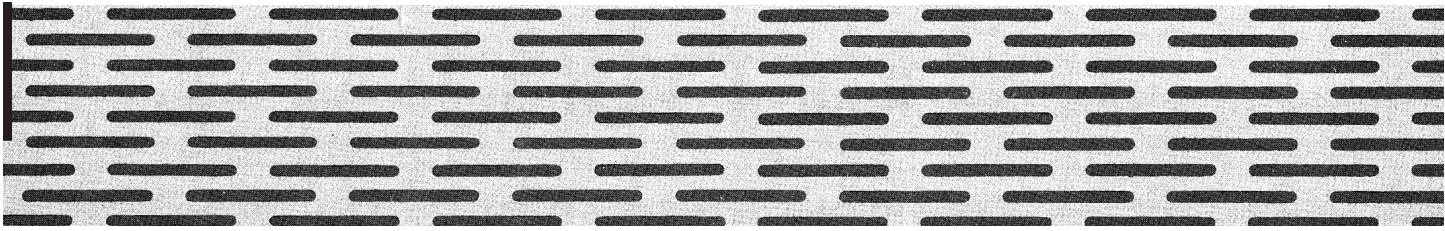
If distribution and public are so important, isn't this, in a sense, a debate about "public art"? It's a useful way to frame the discussion, but only if one underlines the historical deficiencies of that discourse, and acknowledges the fact that the public has changed.

The discourse of public art has historically focused on ideals of universal access, but, rather than considering access in any practical terms, two goals have been pursued to the exclusion of others. First, the work must be free of charge (apparently economic considerations are primary in determining the divide between public and private). Often this bars any perceptible institutional frame that would normally confer the status of art, such as the museum, so the public artwork must broadly and unambiguously announce its own art status, a mandate for conservative forms. Second is the direct equation of publicness with shared physical space. But if this is the model, the successful work of public art will at best function as a site of pilgrimage, in which case it overlaps with architecture.

*Puppy, after Jeff Koons. S. Price.*

The problem is that situating the work at a singular point in space and time turns it, a priori, into a monument. What if it is instead dispersed and reproduced, its value approaching zero as its accessibility rises? We should recognize that collective experience is now based on simultaneous private experiences, distributed across the field of media culture, knit together by ongoing debate, publicity, promotion, and discussion. Publicness today has as much to do with sites of production and reproduction as it does with any supposed physical commons, so a popular album could be regarded as a more successful instance of public art than a monument tucked away in an urban plaza. The album is available everywhere, since it employs the mechanisms of free market capitalism, history's most sophisticated distribution system to date. The monumental model of public art is invested in an anachronistic notion of communal appreciation transposed from the church to the museum to the outdoors, and this notion is received skeptically by an audience no longer so interested in direct communal experience. While instantiated in nominal public space, mass-market artistic production is usually consumed privately, as in the case of books, CDs, videotapes, and Internet "content." Television producers are not interested in collectivity, they are interested in getting as close as possible to individuals. Perhaps an art distributed to the broadest possible public closes the circle, becoming a private art, as in the days of commissioned portraits. The analogy will only become more apt as digital distribution techniques allow for increasing customization to individual consumers.

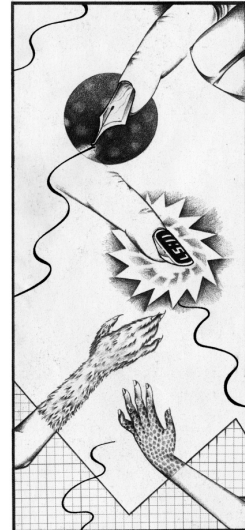




Ettore Sottsass. Lamiera. Pattern design, Memphis collection. 1983.

The monumentality of public art has been challenged before, most successfully by those for whom the term 'public' was a political rallying point. Public artists in the 1970s and 1980s took interventionist praxis into the social field, acting out of a sense of urgency based on the notion that there were social crises so pressing that artists could no longer hole up in the studio, but must directly engage with community and cultural identity. If we are to propose a new kind of public art, it is important to look beyond the purely ideological or instrumental function of art. As Art and Language noted, "radical artists produce articles and exhibitions about photos, capitalism, corruption, war, pestilence, trench foot and issues." Public policy, destined to be the terminal as-if strategy of the avant-garde! A self-annihilating nothing.

An art grounded in distributed media can be seen as a political art and an art of communicative action, not least because it is a reaction to the fact that the merging of art and life has been effected most successfully by the "consciousness industry". The field of culture is a public sphere and a site of struggle, and all of its manifestations are ideological. In *Public Sphere and Experience*, Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge insist that each individual, no matter how passive a component of the capitalist consciousness industry, must be considered a producer (despite the fact that this role is denied them). Our task, they say, is to fashion "counter-productions." Kluge himself is an inspiration: acting as a filmmaker, lobbyist, fiction writer, and television producer, he has worked deep changes in the terrain of German media. An object disappears when it becomes a weapon.



Anonymous.

The problem arises when the constellation of critique, publicity, and discussion around the work is at least as charged as a primary experience of the work. Does one have an obligation to view the work first-hand? What happens when a more intimate, thoughtful, and enduring understanding comes from mediated discussions of an exhibition, rather than from a direct experience of the work? Is it incumbent upon the consumer to bear witness, or can one's art experience derive from magazines, the Internet, books, and conversation? The ground for these questions has been cleared by two cultural tendencies that are more or less diametrically opposed: on the one hand, Conceptualism's historical dependence on documents and records; on the other hand, the popular archive's ever-sharpening knack for generating public discussion through secondary media. This does not simply mean the commercial cultural world, but a global media sphere which is, at least for now, open to the interventions of non-commercial, non-governmental actors working solely within channels of distributed media.

A good example of this last distinction is the phenomenon of the "Daniel Pearl Video," as it's come to be called. Even without the label PROPAGANDA, which CBS helpfully added to the excerpt they aired, it's clear that the 2002 video is a complex document. Formally, it presents kidnapped American journalist Daniel Pearl, first as a mouthpiece for the views of his kidnappers, a Pakistani fundamentalist organization, and then, following his off-screen murder, as a cadaver, beheaded in order to underline the gravity of their political demands.



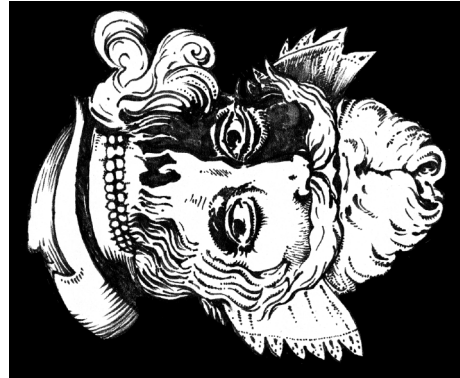
دانيال بيرل اليهودي



Computer Technique Group. Cubic Kennedy. 1960s.

One of the video's most striking aspects is not the grisly, though clinical, climax (which, in descriptions of the tape, has come to stand in for the entire content), but the slick production strategies, which seem to draw on American political campaign advertisements. It is not clear whether it was ever intended for TV broadcast. An apocryphal story indicates that a Saudi journalist found it on an Arabic-language website and turned it over to CBS, which promptly screened an excerpt, drawing heavy criticism. Somehow it found its way onto the Internet, where the FBI's thwarted attempts at suppression only increased its notoriety: in the first months after its Internet release, "Daniel Pearl video," "Pearl video," and other variations on the phrase were among the terms most frequently submitted to Internet search engines. The work seems to be unavailable as a videocassette, so anyone able to locate it is likely to view a compressed data-stream transmitted from a hosting service in the Netherlands (in this sense, it may not be correct to call it "video"). One question is whether it has been *relegated* to the Internet, or in some way created by that technology. Does the piece count as "info-war" because of its nature as a proliferating computer file, or is it simply a video for broadcast, forced to assume digital form under political pressure? Unlike television, the net provides information only on demand, and much of the debate over this video concerns not the legality or morality of making it available, but whether or not one should choose to watch it—as if the act of viewing will in some way enlighten or contaminate. This is a charged document freely available in the public arena, yet the discussion around it, judging from numerous web forums, bulletin boards, and discussion groups, is usually debated by parties who have never seen it.

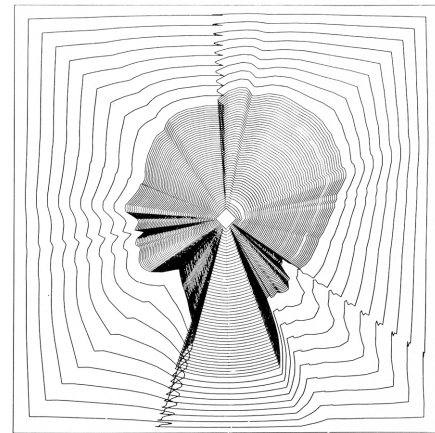
This example may be provocative, since the video's deplorable content is clearly bound up with its extraordinary routes of transmission and reception. It is evident, however, that terrorist organizations, alongside transnational corporate interests, are one of the more vigilantly opportunistic exploiters of "events, spasms, ructions that don't look like art and don't count as art, but are somehow electric, energy nodes, attractors, transmitters, conductors of new thinking, new subjectivity and action." A more conventional instance of successful use of the media-sphere by a non-market, non-government organization is Linux, the open-source computer operating system that won a controversial first prize at the digital art fair Ars Electronica. Linux was initially written by one person, programmer Linus Torvalds, who placed the code for this "radically incomplete" work on-line, inviting others to tinker, with the aim of polishing and perfecting the operating system. The Internet allows thousands of authors to simultaneously develop various parts of the work, and Linux has emerged as a popular and powerful operating system and a serious challenge to profit-driven giants like Microsoft, which recently filed with the US Securities and Exchange Commission to warn that its business model, based on control through licensing, is menaced by the open-source model. Collective authorship and complete decentralization ensure that the work is invulnerable to the usual corporate forms of attack and assimilation, whether enacted via legal, market, or technological routes (however, as Alex Galloway has pointed out, the structure of the World Wide Web should not itself be taken to be some rhizomatic utopia; it certainly would not be difficult for a government agency to hobble or even shut down the Web with a few simple commands).



*After an anonymous cameo, circa 18<sup>th</sup> century. S. Price*



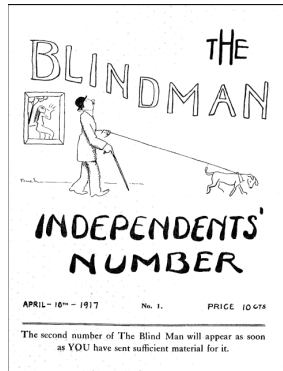
Both of these examples privilege the Internet as medium, mostly because of its function as a public site for storage and transmission of information. The notion of a mass archive is relatively new, and a notion which is probably philosophically opposed to the traditional understanding of what an archive is and how it functions, but it may be that, behind the veneer of user interfaces floating on its surface—which generate most of the work grouped under the rubric "web art"—the Internet approximates such a structure, or can at least be seen as a working model.



*Computer Technique Group. Return to a Square. 1960s.*

With more and more media readily available through this unruly archive, the task becomes one of packaging, producing, reframing, and distributing; a mode of production analogous not to the creation of material goods, but to the production of social contexts, using existing material. What a time you chose to be born!

An entire artistic program could be centered on the re-release of obsolete cultural artifacts, with or without modifications, regardless of intellectual property laws. An early example of this redemptive tendency is artist Harry Smith's obsessive 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*, which compiled forgotten recordings from early in the century. Closer to the present is my own collection of early video game soundtracks, in which audio data rescued by hackers and circulated on the web is transplanted to the old media of the compact-disc, where it gains resonance from the contexts of product and the song form: take what's free and sell it back in a new package. In another example, one can view the entire run of the 1970s arts magazine *Aspen*, republished on the artist-run site *ubu.com*, which regularly makes out-of-print works available as free digital files. All of these works emphasize the capacity for remembering, which Kluge sees as crucial in opposing "the assault of the present on the rest of time," and in organizing individual and collective learning and memory under an industrialist-capitalist temporality that works to fragment and valorize all experience. In these works, resistance is to be found at the moment of production, since it figures the moment of consumption as an act of re-use.



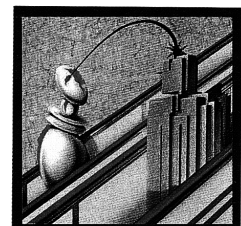
The Blind Man. 1917.

It's clear from these examples that the readymade still towers over artistic practice. But this is largely due to the fact that the strategy yielded a host of new opportunities for the commodity. Dan Graham identified the problem with the readymade: "instead of reducing gallery objects to the common level of the everyday object, this ironic gesture simply extended the reach of the gallery's exhibition territory." One must return to *Fountain*, the most notorious and most interesting of the readymades, to see that the gesture does not simply raise epistemological questions about the nature of art, but enacts the dispersion of objects into discourse. The power of the readymade is that no one needs to make the pilgrimage to see *Fountain*. As with Graham's magazine pieces, few people saw the original *Fountain* in 1917. Never exhibited, and lost or destroyed almost immediately, it was actually created through Duchamp's media manipulations—the Stieglitz photograph (a guarantee, a shortcut to history), the *Blind Man* magazine article—rather than through the creation-myth of his finger selecting it in the showroom, the status-conferring gesture to which the readymades are often reduced. In *Fountain*'s elegant model, the artwork does not occupy a single position in space and time; rather, it is a palimpsest of gestures, presentations, and positions. Distribution is a circuit of reading, and there is huge potential for subversion when dealing with the institutions that control definitions of cultural meaning. Duchamp distributed the notion of the fountain in such a way that it became one of art's primal scenes; it transubstantiated from a provocative objet d'art into, as Broodthaers defined his *Musée des Aigles*: "a situation, a system defined by objects, by inscriptions, by various activities..."

## i'm in heaven when you file

Hot on the heels of last year's Output compilation of Commodore 64 tunes comes *Game Heaven*, a collection of computer soundtracks from 1982-1987. This selection comes from across the board of home entertainment, culled from collections of internet files which have been hacked from ageing consoles and outmoded arcade machines before being traded by techno fetishists. Mercifully, the bulk of these tunes are rather easier on the ears than the psychosis-inducing Commodore collection; while sharing the same lo-fi aesthetic, the 19 tracks display a surprising level of invention and variation. The tracks have been compiled by the artist Seth Price, who is represented at the 2002 Whitney Biennial. Price was born and raised in Jerusalem's volatile West Bank but has lived and worked in New York since 1997. All the pieces on the CD are unlisted and uncredited, raising several issues pertinent to digital culture: the acknowledgement of authorship, the loss of information as systems become obsolete and the point at which commercially or mass produced work becomes artistically valid. "The genre represents unique limitations," Price explains. "Designed for adolescent boys intent on play, the tracks must be energetic, but not distracting; the consummate background music." Eight-bit muzak as art, anyone? JUSTIN QUIRK

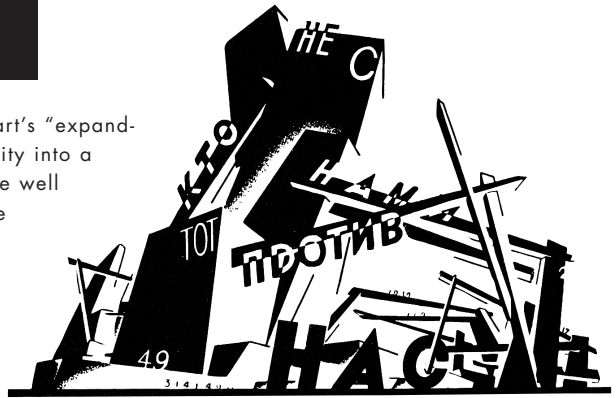
*Game Heaven* is available at the Whitney Museum Bookshop, 945 Madison Avenue, New York (212 570 3676).



i-D Magazine. 2002.



The last thirty years have seen the transformation of art's "expanded field" from a stance of stubborn discursive ambiguity into a comfortable and compromised situation in which we're well accustomed to conceptual interventions, to art and the social, where the impulse to merge art and life has resulted in lifestyle art, a secure gallery practice that comments on contemporary media culture, or apes commercial production strategies, even as its arena gradually has become, in essence, a component of the securities market. This is the lumber of life.



Iakov Chernikhov. Constructive Theatrical Set. 1931.

This tendency is marked in the discourses of architecture and design. An echo of Public Art's cherished communal spaces persists in the art system's fondness for these modes, possibly because of the Utopian promise of their appeals to collective public experience. Their "criticality" comes from an engagement with broad social concerns. This is why Dan Graham's pavilions were initially so provocative, and the work of Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, and Gordon Matta-Clark before him: these were interventions into the social unconscious. These interventions have been guiding lights for art of the last decade, but in much the same way that quasi-bureaucratic administrative forms were taken up by the Conceptualists of the 1960s, design and architecture now could be called house styles of the neo-avant-garde. Their appearance often simply gestures toward a theoretically engaged position, such that a representation of space or structure is figured as an ipso facto critique of administered society and the social, while engagement with design codes is seen as a comment on advertising and the commodity. One must be careful not to blame the artists; architecture and design forms are all-too-easily packaged for resale as sculpture and painting. However, one can still slip through the cracks in the best possible way, and even in the largest institutions. Jorge Pardo's radical *Project*, an overhaul of Dia's ground floor which successfully repositioned the institution via broadly appealing design vernaculars, went largely unremarked in the art press, either because the piece was transparent to the extent of claiming the museum's bookstore and exhibiting work by other artists, or because of a cynical incredulity that he gets away with calling this art.



Liam Gillick. Post Legislation Discussion Platform. 1998.



Ettore Sottsass. Design of a Roof to Discuss Under. 1973.

**A** similar strain of disbelief greeted the construction of his own house, produced for an exhibition with a good deal of the exhibitor's money. It seems that the avant-garde can still shock, if only on the level of economic valorization. This work does not simply address the codes of mass culture, it embraces these codes as form, in a possibly quixotic pursuit of an unmediated critique of cultural conventions.

**An** argument against art that addresses contemporary issues and topical culture rests on the virtue of slowness, often cast aside due to the urgency with which ones work must appear. Slowness works against all of our prevailing urges and requirements: it is a resistance to the contemporary mandate of speed. Moving *with* the times places you in a blind spot: if you're part of the general tenor, it's difficult to add a dissonant note. But the way in which media culture feeds on its own leavings indicates the paradoxical slowness of archived media, which, like a sleeper cell, will always rear its head at a later date. The rear-guard often has the upper hand, and sometimes *delay*, to use Duchamp's term, will return the investment with massive interest.



Michael Green. *From Zen and the Art of Macintosh*. 1986.

**O**ne question is whether everything remains always the same; whether it is in fact possible that by the age of forty a person has seen all that has been and will ever be. In any case, must this person consult some picture or trinket to understand that identity is administered, power exploits, resistance is predetermined, all is hollow?

*To recognize...the relative immutability of historically formed discursive artistic genres, institutional structures, and distribution forms as obstacles that are ultimately persistent (if not insurmountable) marks the most profound crisis for the artist identified with a model of avant-garde practice.*

**S**o the thread leads from Duchamp to Pop to Conceptualism, but beyond that we must turn our backs: a resignation, in contrast to Pop's affirmation and Conceptualism's interrogation. Such a project is an incomplete and perhaps futile proposition, and since one can only adopt the degree of precision appropriate to the subject, this essay is written in a provisional and exploratory spirit. An art that attempts to tackle the expanded field, encompassing arenas other than the standard gallery and art world-circuit, sounds utopian at best,

and possibly naïve and undeveloped; this essay may itself be a disjointed series of naïve propositions lacking a thesis. Complete enclosure means that one cannot write a novel, compose music, produce television, and still retain the status of Artist. What's more, artist as a social role is somewhat embarrassing, in that it's taken to be a useless position, if not a reactionary one: the practitioner is dismissed as either the producer of over-valued decor, or as part of an arrogant, parasitical, self-styled elite.

**B**ut hasn't the artistic impulse always been utopian, with all the hope and futility that implies? To those of you who decry the Utopian impulse as futile, or worse, responsible for the horrible excesses of the last century, recall that each moment is a Golden Age (of course the Soviet experiment was wildly wrong-headed, but let us pretend—and it is not so hard—that a kind of social Dispersion was its aim). The last hundred years of work indicate that it's demonstrably impossible to destroy or dematerialize Art, which, like it or not, can only gradually expand, voraciously synthesizing every aspect of life. Meanwhile, we can take up the redemptive circulation of allegory through design, obsolete forms and historical moments, genre and the vernacular, the social memory woven into popular culture: a private, secular, and profane consumption of media. Production, after all, is the excretory phase in a process of appropriation.



Albrecht Dürer. *Melencolia I*. 1514.

2002-  
With thanks  
to Bettina Funcke





## Authors' and Artists' Biographies

### Diana Baldon

Diana Baldon is an Italian curator and critic and the director of Index—The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation in Stockholm. She is currently writing her PhD thesis at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna on the crossover between art and politics in European post-Conceptual art after the year 2000. She received a master's degree in creative curating at Goldsmiths College, University of London, in 2002. Since then, she has realized many exhibitions internationally, most recently the 2nd Athens Biennale, *HEAVEN* (2009). Her critical writing has appeared in a number of catalogues and international art magazines, including *Artforum*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *Flash Art*, and *Afterall*. Since 2005, she has conducted lectures, public talks, and panels on curating and contemporary art at, among others, the Venice Biennale; Witte de With, Rotterdam; the Postgraduate Program in Curating at Zurich University of the Arts; and CuratorLab at Konstfack, University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, Stockholm.

### Marine Hugonnier

Marine Hugonnier lives and works in London. Her films, photographs, and works on paper have been exhibited internationally, including solo exhibitions at Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Gent; Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin; Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (Mamco), Geneva; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the Kunsthalle Bern. Her works belong to collections such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York; Fund for the Twenty-First Century, USA; Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (ARC); and the UBS Art Collection, London/Zurich.

### Marion von Osten

Marion von Osten is an artist and cultural researcher. She works with curatorial, artistic, and theoretical approaches that converge through the media of exhibitions, installations, videos, and text productions. Her main research interests concern cultural production in postcolonial societies, technologies of the self, and the governance of mobility. She is a founding member of Labor k3000, Zurich, as well as kleines postfordistisches Drama (kpD) and the Center for Post-colonial Knowledge and Culture (CPKC), Berlin. Recent research and exhibition projects include *In the Desert of Modernity: Colonial Planning and After*,

Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin / Abattoirs de Casablanca (2008–09); and *Projekt Migration*, Cologne (2002–06). Between 2006 and 2012 she was Professor of Art and Communication at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna; from 1999 through 2006 she was Professor of Artistic Practice and researcher at the Institute for the Theory of Art and Design (ith), Zurich University of the Arts. She has also lectured at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and at the Critical Studies Program, Malmö Art Academy. Prior to that, she was curator at Shedhalle Zürich from 1996 to 1999. Von Osten lives and works in Berlin.

### **Seth Price**

Seth Price was born in 1973 in East Jerusalem and lives in New York. His work has been shown in solo exhibitions at the Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna (2009); Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2008); the Kunsthalle Zürich (2008); and Artists Space, New York (2002). Price has participated in the Venice Biennale (2011), the Gwangju Biennale (2010), the Tate Triennial (2009), and the Whitney Biennial (2008, 2002).

### **Luke Skrebowski**

Luke Skrebowski is university lecturer in the history of art at the University of Cambridge. His work has appeared in *Art History*, *Grey Room*, *Manifesta Journal*, *Tate Papers*, and *Third Text*. He is coeditor of *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art* (Sternberg Press, 2011) and is currently at work on a book project reconsidering the genealogy and critical legacy of Conceptual art, entitled *The Politics of Anti-aesthetics: Conceptual Art after 1968*.



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## Counter-Production Part 2

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