

e-flux journal

**Are You Working Too Much?  
Post-Fordism, Precarity, and  
the Labor of Art**

*SternbergPress* ✨

Let's be clear about something: it is infuriating that most interesting artists are perfectly capable of functioning in at least two or three professions that are, unlike art, respected by society in terms of compensation and general usefulness. When the flexibility, certainty, and freedom promised by being part of a critical outside are revealed as extensions of recent advances in economic exploitation, does the field of art become the uncritical, complicit inside of something far more interesting?

With essays by Franco Berardi Bifo, Ketj Chukhrov, Diedrich Diederichsen, Antke Engel, Liam Gillick, Tom Holert, Lars Bang Larsen, Marion von Osten, Precarious Workers Brigade, Irit Rogoff, and Hito Steyerl

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Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle

## **Introduction**

Let's be clear about something: it is infuriating that most interesting artists are perfectly capable of functioning in at least two or three professions that are, unlike that of art, respected by society in terms of compensation and general usefulness. And compensation—which is money—is not only for feeding lavish lifestyles or taking spontaneous beach vacations. Ask anyone who has children or sick relatives in a country without good health care—which could by now be almost any country, as the administration of life is deferred more and more to the private sphere of personal finance. This only makes the question of fair compensation all the more pressing. It is no longer an issue of some kind of moral or ethical principle, but of life itself. So why should so many talented and hyper-qualified artists submit themselves willingly to a field of work (that is, in art) that offers so little in return for such a huge amount of unremunerated labor?

For some reason, either due to artists' own vanity, to being hypnotized by some sort of authorial diva imperative that promises large-scale recognition, or to the expectations of the culture itself (not the field of "cultural production" but the de facto one, the less dynamic and slower moving one) and its own befuddlement with regard to artists' usefulness, the artist is left to expend an enormous amount of professional energy in the doldrums of a murky pseudo-profession that absorbs work under the auspices of some kind of common belief in its higher value.

But art is not a religion, and, though it often seems structurally similar, it is not a charity either. This idea of a "higher value" that presides over—and indeed fuels—an idea of art labor as free labor must be contested. All are to blame for it: though classical exploitation is rampant, it may actually pale in

comparison to the amount of self-exploitation—the willingly inconclusive, highly generative work that is either too useless or too stubborn to ever align itself with the mundane, but remunerated, field of average labor: that of bakers, garbage men, police officers, cobblers, lawyers, engineers, day laborers, and so forth. These are the people you make your work about, and perhaps who your parents are. Art, you would like to think, is a shining vision of a possibility for something else.

So you secretly support your art work with your money job, even a high-paying one. You are your own sugar daddy and trophy wife in a single package. Your gallery sells your work, maybe for a lot of money, yet something does not line up there either. The work does not find its reception even when it is well received. You keep dumping your personal resources into producing your work, your relationships crumble, and the work simply doesn't find its audience the way an engineer's building plan will inevitably be constructed, for better or worse. One option is to blame it all on authorship and the cult of the author. But that seems frankly ridiculous. Erase your name, and not only will you not get paid for your time, you will not get credited either. It's like performing an act of charity for a plant. The only option available could be to simply work more—but while claiming the privileged capacity of the artist within the fields in which your determined amateurism has made you a functional expert.

Diedrich Diederichsen

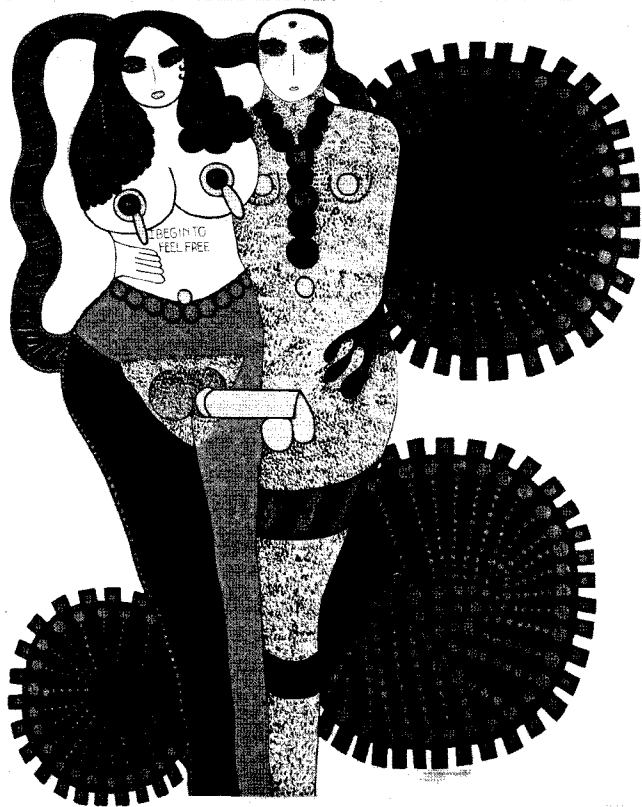
## People of Intensity, People of Power: The Nietzsche Economy

### 1. Classical Music vs. Free Jazz

When an adult in Berlin or Vienna wants to spend an evening with company, there are two basic options: one can have a cozy dinner with friends at a restaurant or someone's apartment, or one can go out. The second option may not be a radical step into the unknown, as there are familiar signposts, but nevertheless, when we go out, we switch into an entirely different mode of experience.

Now "going out" can mean all sorts of things: an art opening followed by dinner with the artist or artists and a visit to a club, or a certain constellation of bars and clubs where we are sure to meet acquaintances. Or we go to a specific club straight away, one that offers everything in a single package. But really, the distances we cover, the outside world fading in and out of the theater of our increasingly inebriated perceptions, the glistening pavement, diffuse light, car doors slamming, unexpected music in the cab: these are all part of it, the whole program.

The first variant, dinner with friends, is not necessarily any shorter or more sober. This sort of night among friends can be no less long—and no less boozy. Here, however, we get intoxicated not in order to enable ourselves to react more smoothly to new stimuli, but so we can bear the social density and concentration. Friends often show up in couples, and when they don't, there are many long-term friendships boasting of accumulated intimacy not too different from the monogamous relationships that become the dominant model as we get older. This means that many possible constellations of arguments, agreements and disagreements of taste, antagonisms and harmonies of temperament and mentality, have already been played out, and may well have reached a stage at which they no longer ruffle any feathers. Still, these evenings demand



Dorothy Iannone, *I Begin To Feel Love*, 1970. Collage, acrylic on canvas, 190 x 150 cm.  
Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York and Air de Paris, Paris.

our attention. We are curious to discern minute new details in well-rehearsed scripts.

To do so is a perfectly rewarding labor, one we are often fond of, but it is also taxing, requiring a focused mind. Those who prefer not to engage in it, who are not really interested in their friends, will quickly grow bored and provoke a scene or a fight—but this is not a big problem, nor does it really disrupt an evening that is otherwise business as usual. Meeting friends is precision work, and all sorts of events, even unusual ones, are permissible, as long as they are truly interesting, providing intellectual stimulus. Such a meeting calls for a review session with a best friend, partner, or *significant other*, as the Americans say. If we could put them into writing, these review sessions would read like reviews of classical music recordings: in a hyper-precise specialist's language, the participants frame observations in ways that only absolute connoisseurs could appreciate.

The night out is different. Here, casual sensation is always preferable to precise observation. A permanent state of distraction is desired. In conversation, our eyes permanently wander just past our interlocutor. Do I know the person back there, or would I only like to know him, or isn't he actually kind of butt-ugly? Even in the rare event of a truly detailed conversation taken seriously, the aim is to stage an intimate colloquy for the public, a form of ostentation, not the colloquy itself. That promises are made is what matters most, not that they are fulfilled. Everything breathes potentiality: Brecht's "So much might yet happen" rules the night.

And of course this pleasant feeling that so much might happen is sustained in the long run only by the things that do occasionally actually happen: the decisive events, beautiful or disastrous—either



one being preferable to the delicate work of the night in. Yet the sense that something must actually happen changes its meaning over the course of a lifetime of nights out. When we are young, the drama of going out is defined by the climactic event: sex, drugs, or sex. Later on, going out becomes an end in itself; any overly targeted attempt at picking someone up would disrupt its magnificent potentiality. The promise we sense, and the risk we feel, is more important than really having something to fear or to hope for. We need to realize, and commit to, only as much as is absolutely necessary for maintaining this diffuse mood. The important thing is to enter into brief and dense contact with as many people as possible, people who are as different and distant from one another as possible; realizing in each instance a maximum degree of commitment for a brief moment—and this moment had better be as brief as possible to keep the number of encounters high. In this way we playfully learn what the Nietzsche economy calls *networking*.<sup>1</sup>

We keep the number of encounters high, while perceiving each one as less binding, entailing less commitment, because this strategy maintains the sense of freedom and potential whose fundamental message is that we are all interconnected to each other, or at least to those present. In encounters that entail commitment—whatever that means—I must act as a responsible and self-aware I; in the dense but noncommittal encounters that make up a hyperactive social—and sometimes sexual—promiscuity, I can shed my self-awareness and step outside myself. It is only when I am ecstatic, outside of myself, that I can be with everyone, that I can float in a sense of potential. A networker must always be ecstatic, must maintain a slightly exaggerated enthusiasm, must get high on the potential

of so many contacts that can never be realized or translated into actual collaboration, using this high in turn to leap to the next encounter.

Coming home after an evening of this type—it is usually very late or already the next morning—we don't need to review anything, there is no need to go over our friends' texts with philological precision; it is enough to take pleasure in the birds singing outside our windows—so early and already so chipper!—signifying a world that is great and wide open. The word we use to describe the past six or eight hours is: *intense*. Now that was a pretty intense night. The resident of a metropolis like Vienna or Berlin leaving home at six in the morning will meet all these smiling faces, satisfied goers-out—sometimes even a newly formed couple, but most are alone—floating homeward, buoyed by the wealth of potential they have just inhaled. “Anything is possible,” they think before falling asleep.

We may dispute what the word “intensity” means. We might argue, for instance, that the focused self-examination of a circle of friends, the refined micro-debates over micro-problems or the molecular shifts in articulating grand and tenacious problems that mar familiar vitae—that is to say, all that we experience when meeting friends—could also be called intense; whereas the openness and potentiality of a night out fail to fit the term. If I nonetheless call the experience of a night out intense, it is for two reasons. One is a matter of musical aesthetics: both types of experience can be compared to certain aesthetic experiences. The dinner with friends corresponds to the focused attention to a piece of classical music that has long been familiar or at least potentially familiar. The point is not what the next note will be, but rather how it arrives—how, within a set of elements

defined with regard to instrumentation: timbre, sound, and so forth, everything is decided by subtle shifts and small movements. The key term here would be *focus*.

The night out, by contrast, corresponds to the aesthetic experience offered by free jazz and certain excessive styles of rock or electronic pop music: what matters is density proffered with a grand gesture, backed not necessarily by musical substance but, more often, by its social content. Physical exertion to the point of exhaustion tends to trigger euphoria or aggression: elevated registers of emotion, in every possible direction on the scale. Writers and critics who have followed the phenomenon, but also the musicians themselves, have always spoken of intensity in this context, down to a very technical use of the term in describing music: "And then he played an intense solo on the tenor sax"—that is to say, he used certain overblowing techniques, the solo had a certain minimum duration, and so forth.

The second reason for my suggestion of using the opposing notions of focus and intensity to designate these two ways of spending an evening is the role intensity played in the self-conception of hedonistic countercultures during the 1970s and 1980s—years I would describe as formative in the development of a phenomenon we see emerging today: the revaluation of this wasteful way of life as a form of work that is not merely productive, but a model of productivity. An important landmark in this process is an essay by Jean-François Lyotard that, although he presented it as a lecture as early as 1972, was first published in the German-speaking world by Merve publishers in a 1978 collection of Lyotard's essays that bore the indicative title "Intensitäten"—intensities.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Intensity vs. Intention

Lyotard's essay represents, as it were, the intermediary between what I would like to call on the one hand the Nietzsche economy and, on the other, the culture of intensity built by the hippies and, to a certain degree, by the punks, as well as by techno culture later on, and ultimately by the new type of metropolitan hedonist no longer distinguished by any subcultural identity. The concept of intensity allowed the so-called generation of '68 to preserve a part of its life, of its first decade after 1968, up through its political defeat. Intensity described a devotion to unreserved investment into the potential of grand moments—moments that were also a medium of collectivity—that might be salvaged and maintained even if the better world the movement foresaw could never be realized in this life. And it is clear that intensity was inscribed in people's biographies and aspirations as a concept that ran decidedly counter to the dreary everyday organizational chores of those who had chosen to become invested in politics.

In the abovementioned essay, Lyotard explicitly links his idea of intensity to concepts in Nietzsche as well as to the tradition of the artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century. Lyotard, like other French writers of his generation, wants to inscribe the Nietzschean *Übermensch* in a radical identity politics that would continue to fight the battle of '68. Lyotard explains:

These are the "people of intensification," the "masters" of today: outsiders, experimental painters, pop artists, hippies and yuppies, parasites, the insane, inmates. An hour of their lives contains more intensity (and less intention) than a thousand words from a professional philosopher.<sup>3</sup>

And thus he introduces a second term that can stand as the opposite of intensity: *intention*. Indeed, the idea of the evening among friends can be described as one in which the intentions of planning subjects are in every respect highly important. Set entirely in the world of intentions, for instance, is the full agenda, the date set after a great deal of coordination, the date we keep meaning to set but fail to; compare, on the other hand, the euphoria with which a date is set in the rush of networking. Another element related to intentionality is a subtext that is always on our minds when we meet old friends: our effort to produce a well-rounded biography. How much control does a subject have over his or her life? Is control even desirable? Is it nice when someone accomplishes a goal he or she spoke of as a teenager, as we who have known him or her for a long time can clearly recall? The entire hermeneutics of friendship—"that is so *him!*"—is built on the question of how we relate the self-descriptions we have heard for decades to people's actual practice. Have we perhaps misread one another? Should we reproach the friend for being unfaithful to him- or herself? And do we even think that the concept of being faithful to oneself is a good idea?

But what did Lyotard mean when he spoke of Nietzschean intensity? Or what did we understand him to mean? Well, on the one hand, *intensity* was a hackneyed term, a hippie word; when *Intensitäten* came out in German in 1978, I was an adolescent who had sympathized with punk, but had begun to grow disenchanted with it. I thought that the idea of intensity was a form of self-betrayal. On the other hand, perhaps it was not the concept that was wrong, but what the hippies had made of it. *Intention* was certainly a game we

didn't want to play, with all its miserable numbers: responsibility, calculation, categorical imperative. We wanted to be further to the left, true, but not moral leftists.

But the distinctive feature of Lyotard's true masters and people of intensification seemed to be: if there was any sign that they might represent nothing but a return of the *authorities* whom our anti-authoritarian older brothers had overthrown (and hence not potential allies, so long as we wanted to remain leftists), they countered it by being clearly recognizable as outsiders—experimental painters, pop artists, yippies, inmates. Even Gilles Deleuze, a great admirer of Nietzsche and the schizos, cautioned that, by affirming (with Nietzsche) the unreliability of the lumpenproletariat and the asocial, the revolutionaries might turn out to have fallen for a political unreliability as well (one that would give them a nasty surprise, entirely beyond their intellectual horizon); meanwhile, we were still thankful for having escaped family, Protestantism, the authorities—anyone who was asocial was to us a liberated personality.<sup>4</sup>

A few years ago, a very popular "oral history" of this period appeared in print, *Verschwende Deine Jugend* (Waste Your Youth) by Jürgen Teipel. The title refers to an early song by the band DAF.<sup>5</sup> From today's perspective, the zeal for wastefulness, ignited also by the writings of Georges Bataille, is the most salient feature of the era for good reason: wastefulness is not a cause anyone would champion anymore. But the book also suggests that those youthful wasters who didn't die in the process were able to invest their wasted youth in a very productive midlife. At the time, by contrast, it seemed unfathomable for this wastefulness to be unable to flout any calculation or economy in the conduct of

life (in the interest of grand moments of potential and infinity), but neither could we imagine, in our wildest dreams, that this very wastefulness might perhaps be none other than the loss of the ability to defend our own interests, that wasting might perhaps simply mean relinquishing such things as rights, or a strategic position developed over time. But then it isn't all that simple, either.

What is certain is that wastefulness stands on the same side as intensity, and both of them stand in opposition to intention and focus. We could construct a matrix composed of four elements that would give rise to all sorts of philosophical speculations: focus would play one role as intensity's counterpart, and another as that of wastefulness; intensity might act one way in opposition to intention, and another when set against focus.

If we hold on to this distribution of pairs of opposites, however, something else emerges: on the one side, we find the description of work, at least in the conventional sense; on the other, that of leisure. Intensity and wastefulness, at least at first glance, obey extra-economic, if not counter-economic, principles. Someone who is wasteful neither saves nor invests; he or she does not speculate, does not even submit to the ritual calculation of the potlatch and its indirect benefits. Wastefulness is the opposite of husbandry. Intensity enjoys potential and irresponsibility: whatever happens, we do not put it in the biographical piggybank of subjectivity, heaping up experiences; nor does it even need to happen at all—it may well remain a dream. And the responsible utilitarian subject permits this for a single reason only: for the purposes of reproduction. The complex of recreation and the domain called, in Marxist terms, the “reproduction of the commodity that is labor,” which is, of course, indirectly

subject to utilitarian calculation, permits intensity during hours of leisure, in extreme sports or in the experience of nature or, if absolutely necessary, during a night out.

Work, by contrast, especially the traditionally more highly-valued, white-collar work, classically resembles the evening among friends: its principle is that of focused mutual observation, the negotiation of social hierarchies, and the finely tuned micro-observations of the structures in which our own working selves must prove their worth. Only in the working environments of white-collar work's substratum—and I would argue that the boundary divides industrial labor down the middle—of day laborers and unskilled workers and in jobs under harsh conditions, on the high seas and in construction, does something similar to the intensity I described above reappear: physicality, inconstant conditions, the pleasure of potentiality in wild dreams and petty crime, the absence of husbandry, and an economy of the worker's own biography: *freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose*, etc.

But the phenomenon we are interested in here is this: a society in which intention and focus are on top and intensity and wastefulness are at the bottom—also existing, perhaps, on the romantic margins of leisure, of bohemianism and puberty—is being reshuffled into a society where all these relations are reversed. And if we accept that this is a social fact, we can describe this development in terms of a larger diagnosis of the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, from a society of discipline to one of control, as the victory of artistic critique described by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, or in terms of the much-touted ideas of the artist as entrepreneur and of the creative cities in which the creative class allegedly leads a life that is as

creatively intense as it is economically productive and successful.

Yet these diagnoses rarely account for how such transformations are framed in the experiences of those they concern, which are also the diagnoses these people use to make sense of these experiences. And in fact, these diagnoses often reveal how the structural transformations they describe have not truly entailed a migration of the old subversive lifestyles from the margins and the bottom of society to its center and to the top; rather, they often describe cases in which intensity and experience are at stake in name only, in which the values have actually been shifted only from one place to another—in order not to preserve them but to betray them, to use them as pure decoration. In other words, the familiar and slightly paranoid tropes of *cooptation* and *assimilation* are very often mobilized to prove that capitalism has not yet choked on the values of its opponents or antagonists. Measured against their original meaning, as this view has it, these resistant values themselves fall by the wayside.

My point, however, is not that these diagnoses are entirely wrong: it is probably impossible to draw a straight line between the structural transformation or migration of an ethical or anti-ethical, a political or biopolitical principle on the one hand, and the betrayal of such a principle on the other. Nor am I trying to prevent others from reading my own observations as further evidence of one of the overarching diagnoses I have mentioned. Rather, my intention is to reconstruct a line that leads from the attitude toward life and the self-conception of the punk and Nietzschean left to a situation in which their will to power, which has always already existed, and was always already felt as such,

blossoms in a practice that is far removed from their original intentions.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. The Schöneberg Customs Office

First, the diagnosis: the focused labor of intent workers was appreciated and rewarded as long as capitalism was primarily shaped by instruments such as the analysis of existing markets, the design of production processes, and the study of complex needs—including a cultural understanding of how these needs could be aroused. The corresponding attitude was one of discipline, of hard, precise, and focused work—work that was constantly confronted with, and involved in the production of, a society ever richer in ever more divergent cultural offerings, and whose contents usually swung back and forth between romanticism and escapism. The television series *Mad Men* and movies such as *Revolutionary Road* have recalled this era to great acclaim: an era when executives lived with the intrinsic conflict between two roles, producing leisure offerings while their own practice—hard work and the occasional excessive party, to let off some steam—remained unrepresented. The focused, intent worker of this era was described, especially in the existentialism-tinged movies of the 1960s and 1970s, as bigoted and deeply dishonest; in a Buñuel film, the reward for hard work was typically a masochistic relationship with a dominatrix.

It was in the early 1970s that—for the first time ever, to my knowledge—executives (in the advertising industry, of course) hired artists for the specific task of interfering with business as usual. In the 1970s, Henning Brandis, a young man with a background in the Fluxus network, was hired at the advertising firm G&K Düsseldorf, where his job was to think up little assaults on the safety and

continuity of everyday company operations. One morning, for instance, three creative directors found their desks nailed, legs up, to the ceiling. Everything that had been on the desks had been glued to them and covered, Daniel Spoerri-style, with a layer of white paint. Or there would be surprising noises, abused furniture, adolescent pranks, pointless assignments, and other critiques of conformist work, ranging in intellectual quality from class clown to Joseph Beuys. Around the same time, the owner of März publishers, Jörg Schröder, had founded the advertising agency Bismarc Media, whose employees were told to produce nothing, and, when they couldn't bear producing nothing, observe each other laboring under the pointless compulsion to be productive. A general manager was appointed whose task was to undermine any possible output. In 1984, I myself enjoyed an opportunity to spend half a year working at an agency founded by Michael Schirner that, following Bismarc Media's business model, undertook to do nothing, and had rented a former gallery for Conceptual art for this purpose. After a while, this agency ended up producing something after all, namely concepts—the *genius loci* may have been at fault—and ultimately it became a perfectly normal advertising agency.<sup>7</sup>

All these early models of a wasteful working environment, however, still have a good-natured entrepreneur holding the whole thing together. Someone who is, deep-down, a Fordist planner, incorporating the irrationalism of disruption and wastefulness at selected moments, much like a forest official who shoots some game to manage the wildlife stock or a firefighter who sets a fire to fight a larger fire. This situation changes the moment the traditional style of entrepreneurial subjectivity—planning—meets two new competitors: on the

one hand, the casino-style capitalism that has served as its own form of income, but has also come under increasing public scrutiny; on the other hand, the invention of the “passion to perform”—prominently manifested in Deutsche Bank's motto: “Leistung aus Leidenschaft”—which is to say, the introduction of entrepreneurial principles into the everyday operations of business.

Several writers, including Boltanski and Chiapello, have characterized this process on the level of values officially articulated in management seminars, in corporate communications, and in the self-conception of the actors. The question is: how does it feel from the inside when the magic of potential and the intoxication of highly promising noncommittal interactions assume the form of a permanent networking imperative incumbent upon middle management and executives as well as academics? The point is, after all, that principles of intoxication and wastefulness function only when they are precisely not subject to deflective interpretation, watered down by entrepreneurs, instrumentalized, devalued: when we can believe in them without allowing ourselves to get screwed.

In today's working world, that belief can be sustained by agreeing to an exchange (outsourcing, freelancing, and sham freelancing provide the corresponding economic and social form) that functions this way: I forsake any possibility of projecting myself as a private self, independent from my work, ultimately also renouncing any chance at negotiation, co-determination, or living the conflict of interest between capital and labor, and instead project myself as a holistic total self that is identical to my work. In return, I regain the intensification, the force, the power of my early years. All the miserable humiliations I suffer, as well as the successes that fill me

with euphoria, are pushed as far as possible into the sub-subjective realm, the realm of psychology—of emotional experience. I agree to talk about them in the language and imagery of a widespread narcissism and its models and stereotypes, as events taking place between me and myself, between I and the self, where they constantly engender provisional objectifications of these experiences as they are displaced into my inner life. The result are rituals of introduction and bar-chatter openings of “I’m the kind of person who....”<sup>8</sup>

Within this model, the subjectivation of the self seizes, time and again, precisely on those vestiges of the structure that shaped them as objective social relations just before they were fed into the illusion of omnipotence harbored by the outsourced subject of the post-Fordist economy. But this model also reveals a subject within the subject, a highly self-possessed and possessing subject that can triumph in the victories of the person who has to survive all of this in addition to his or her defeats. This subject is strong, harboring no illusions, and is a master that constantly dissociates from its own loser-ish qualities, either kicking them when they’re down or flirting with them, tender and bored. The sentences that start with “I’m the kind of person who...” allow for both.

And yet even the outsourced entrepreneur whose business is his or her own self, enjoying the self-possession that serves as compensation for economic defeat, has someone to look down upon: today’s version of the intent and focused worker—living in a small, low-risk world where coworkers’ birthdays, other coworkers’ absenteeism, the irregularities of third parties, and other incalculabilities still matter. It is a world in which the affably precise—or paranoically exaggerated—incessant

hermeneutics of small hierarchically organized groups, a lifestyle designed to privilege long-term projects and intentionality, is alive and well. And it looks pretty paltry in comparison with the contingencies our heroes deal with all day, every day, in the cultural, gastronomic, information-dealing, symbol-processing culture of self-employment.

Berlin is one of the sensational places where especially drastic and beautiful manifestations of the confrontation between these two worlds are staged daily. There is a customs office in a no-go area near a highway interchange in the south of Schöneberg. You are ordered to show up there when you have received a shipment from abroad whose value the customs officers were unable to determine, either because they were unfamiliar with the contents of the parcel (having already opened it) or because the shipment was not accompanied by an invoice. The people ordered to come here are not only those who, like myself, have scored records on eBay; most are self-employed *Übermenschen* dealing, in the owner-operated dumps they call stores, with things like bodybuilding medications, American vitamin formulas, strange luxury watches, designer hi-fi components, Asian food products, plant porn, and other junk—junk that, through one customs loophole or another, makes for good business once they’ve identified their internet-based sub-sub-clientele. This processing facility for unidentifiable goods is where one finds people up to their ears in micro-cultural awareness, scrutiny of the economy, self-marketing, and adventurism.

An approximately knee-high counter separates such people from an open area where the customs officers officiate. These are, to the last man, lovingly preserved museum pieces from Social-Democratic times, looking like television

kiddie-show hosts from the early years of public broadcasting: coarse fabrics, no sense for color combinations, fairly out of shape, their movements slow and without haste. A sophisticated division of labor governs these movements, an elaborate scheme in which the clients they serve, who usually have to stand in line, must be seen by three different authorities before they can take their merchandise home. They are pedantic and very polite, working in accordance with highly complicated rules, which also seem to determine the interactions between them and their desks, laden with documents and objects and covered with funny stickers. Before them stand the self-fulfilling selves, gussied up and unshaven, repeatedly stepping out to take a call, impatient, their fierce eyes roaming over the drama of a bureaucracy in demise—a scene from the museum of the public welfare state as though it were directed by Christoph Marthaler and set-designed by Anna Viebrock. Outside, the winds of hazard are roaring, a hazard they accept with forced euphoria, feeding it, doped up and amped up, into a constantly efficient and ceaselessly active economic person, while on the inside the officers shuffle back and forth, the last people to distinguish between private life and work.

Yet there is an upper echelon, too, one that the members of the Nietzsche economy, the masters of intensification, look up to—and it is not populated only by successful people. Rather, it consists of those who, without lying to themselves, without having to will the / triumphant and the humiliated / into a single soul in order to experience their triumph and power, have been able to wholly transform their old waste-your-youth leftist Nietzscheanism into a pragmatic Nietzscheanism of efficiency. That is to say, those

who had no difficulty combining the Nietzschean enmity against the state Deleuze had praised—it was probably in reality never a leftist enmity, but perhaps people had been able to do something leftist with it—and the vitalist enmity against bureaucrats, to translate the result into an entrepreneurial attitude; those who, rather than dreaming their will to power into their freelancer identities, have indeed acquired actual power.

Since novels such as *American Psycho* (1991) appeared, this type has circulated, at first as a fictional pathological monster, now as a reality, and most recently also in popular culture as a stock object at which to direct the general hatred of casino capitalism. If we look at the actions of this type in the way we ought to in a Nietzschean economy, that is to say, “in an extramoral sense,” his life, propelled by checks that might bounce at any moment, is not uninteresting. It is indeed this stuff that produces the truly great subjects, the ones that the contemporary arts repeatedly dream of, between Hannibal Lecter and Matthew Barney, between Jason Rhoades and Jonathan Meese—a theater of unfounded assertions, insane through and through, that has made it into the efficient heart of a well-organized economic routine. The dominant figure in this same routine, however, represents the other type described above, the omnipresent freelancer who doesn’t worry about tomorrow because he can’t afford to anyway, the overman driven not by the grandeur of excess but by naked want.

Several ideological constructs have been brought to the market promising to bridge the gap between these two models. The magazine *brand eins* is full of first-person biographical narratives from active economic agents who package the move from intention and focus towards intensity



and ecstatic involvement outside of themselves. The so-called digital bohème, as invented by Holm Friebe and Sascha Lobo, uses the term bohemian to dress up precisely the type I just called a Nietzschean. This brings a couple more people on board who prefer to describe the intensification of life through self-realizing work in slightly less brutal terms; it also leaves open the possibility of an implementation based on more than just will and vitality by using a technological paradigm shift as a solid foundation for calculation. The true economic Nietzschean, however, needs none of that—unlike thirty years ago, he doesn't want to be part of any movement: he just wants to move money into his own pockets.

Even back then, Jacob Taubes, back then a brilliant and dazzling lead character of those who would later find their way via leftist Nietzscheanism into the all-nighter of capitalist adventure doped up on euphoria, expressed a skeptical view of this development. Taubes, a scholar of religion and philosopher who was the founding editor of Suhrkamp's "Theorie" series, was always open to an intellectual adventure. Yet in an interview in an early issue of the magazine *Tumult*, he cautioned against the "Nietzsche boys" who suddenly popped up all over places where a very rigid left had prevailed: the other side of the critique of power, as it were, was a new will to power—and it would ultimately find its way to power as well.<sup>9</sup>

1

This essay is not about Nietzschean philology. In the following, the name "Nietzsche" is used to refer to a specific reception of Nietzsche's work in France during the 1970s, and then in Germany during the 1980s, and to the ways this reading helped shape an atmosphere and attitude toward life that paved the way for the aspirations and life-defining decisions of people who are now middle-aged—and have jobs.

2

Jean-François Lyotard, *Intensitäten* (West Berlin: Merve, 1978).

3

Jean-François Lyotard, "Bemerkungen über die Wiederkehr des Kapitals," in *Intensitäten*, 32. As quoted in Jean-François Lyotard, "Notes on the Return and Capital," in "Nietzsche's Return," ed. Sylvère Lotringer, special issue, *Semiotext(e)* 3, no. 1 (1977): 44.

4

See Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, "Many Politics," in *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 124–47.

5

Jürgen Teipel, *Verschwende Deine Jugend* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000).

6

For more on these types, see Jan Rehmann, *Postmoderner Linksnietzscheanismus: Deleuze & Foucault; Eine Dekonstruktion* (Hamburg: Argument, 2004). Especially instructive for the issues discussed here are pages 132–136, where Rehmann describes Foucault's strategy of mobilizing Nietzsche to outdo the Paris radical left in terms of its willingness to fight and its radicalism—but, as it were, on its own territory: the radical rejection of the status quo.

7

See Michael Schirner, *Werbung ist Kunst* (Munich: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1988).

8

See Diedrich Diederichsen, "Schönheitschirurgie am gewachsenen Schnabel: Der Genuß an der Selbstrezeption in der Floskel: Ich bin ein Mensch, der....," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 52, no. 2 (2007).

9

Jacob Taubes in conversation with Wolfert von Rahden and Norbert Kapferer, "Elite oder Avantgarde," *Tumult* 3 (1982): 64–76.

Hito Steyerl

## Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy

A standard way of relating politics to art assumes that art represents political issues in one way or another. But there is a much more interesting perspective: the politics of the field of art as a place of work.<sup>1</sup> Simply look at what it does—not what it shows.

Amongst all other forms of art, fine art has been most closely linked to post-Fordist speculation, with bling, boom, and bust. Contemporary art is no unworldly discipline nestled away in some remote ivory tower. On the contrary, it is squarely placed in the neoliberal thick of things. We cannot dissociate the hype around contemporary art from the shock policies used to defibrillate slowing economies. Such hype embodies the affective dimension of global economies tied to ponzi schemes, credit addiction, and bygone bull markets. Contemporary art is a brand name without a brand, ready to be slapped onto almost anything, a quick face-lift tout-ing the new creative imperative for places in need of an extreme makeover, the suspense of gambling combined with the stern pleasures of upper-class boarding school education, a licensed playground for a world confused and collapsed by dizzying deregulation. If contemporary art is the answer, the question is: How can capitalism be made more beautiful?

But contemporary art is not only about beauty. It is also about function. What is the function of art within disaster capitalism? Contemporary art feeds on the crumbs of a massive and widespread redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich, conducted by means of an ongoing class struggle from above.<sup>2</sup> It lends primordial accumulation a whiff of postconceptual razzmatazz. Additionally, its reach has grown much more decentralized—important hubs of art are no longer only located in the Western metropolis. Today, deconstructivist contemporary

art museums pop up in any self-respecting autocracy. A country with human rights violations? Bring on the Gehry gallery!

The Global Guggenheim is a cultural refinery for a set of post-democratic oligarchies, as are the countless international biennials tasked with upgrading and reeducating the surplus population.<sup>3</sup> Art thus facilitates the development of a new multipolar distribution of geopolitical power whose predatory economies are often fueled by internal oppression, class war from above, and radical shock and awe policies.

Contemporary art thus not only reflects, but actively intervenes in the transition towards a new post-Cold War world order. It is a major player in unevenly advancing semicapitalism wherever T-Mobile plants its flag. It is involved in mining for raw materials for dual-core processors. It pollutes, gentrifies, and ravishes. It seduces and consumes, then suddenly walks off, breaking your heart. From the deserts of Mongolia to the high plains of Peru, contemporary art is everywhere. And when it is finally dragged into Gagosian dripping from head to toe with blood and dirt, it triggers off rounds and rounds of rapturous applause.

Why and for whom is contemporary art so attractive? One guess: the production of art presents a mirror image of postdemocratic forms of hypercapitalism that look set to become the dominant political post-Cold War paradigm. It seems unpredictable, unaccountable, brilliant, mercurial, moody, guided by inspiration and genius. Just as any oligarch aspiring to dictatorship might want to see himself. The traditional conception of the artist's role corresponds all too well with the self-image of wannabe autocrats, who see government potentially—and dangerously—as an art form.

Postdemocratic government is very much related to this erratic type of male-genius-artist behavior. It is opaque, corrupt, and completely unaccountable. Both models operate within male bonding structures that are as democratic as your local mafia chapter. Rule of law? Why don't we just leave it to taste? Checks and balances? Cheques and balances! Good governance? Bad curating! You see why the contemporary oligarch loves contemporary art: it's just what works for him.

Thus, traditional art production may be a role model for the nouveaux riches created by privatization, expropriation, and speculation. But the actual production of art is simultaneously a workshop for many of the nouveaux poor, trying their luck as jpeg virtuosos and conceptual impostors, as galerinas and overdrive content providers. Because art also means work, more precisely strike work.<sup>4</sup> It is produced as spectacle, on post-Fordist all-you-can-work conveyor belts. Strike or shock work is affective labor at insane speeds, enthusiastic, hyperactive, and deeply compromised.

Originally, strike workers were excess laborers in the early Soviet Union. The term is derived from the expression "udarny trud" for "superproductive, enthusiastic labor" (udar for "shock, strike, blow"). Now, transferred to present-day cultural factories, strike work relates to the sensual dimension of shock. Rather than painting, welding, and molding, artistic strike work consists of ripping, chatting, and posing. This accelerated form of artistic production creates punch and glitz, sensation and impact. Its historical origin as format for Stalinist model brigades brings an additional edge to the paradigm of hyperproductivity. Strike workers churn out feelings, perception, and distinction in all possible sizes and variations. Intensity or

evacuation, sublime or crap, readymade or ready-made reality—strike work supplies consumers with all they never knew they wanted.

Strike work feeds on exhaustion and tempo, on deadlines and curatorial bullshit, on small talk and fine print. It also thrives on accelerated exploitation. I'd guess that—apart from domestic and care work—art is the industry with the most unpaid labor around. It sustains itself on the time and energy of unpaid interns and self-exploiting actors on pretty much every level and in almost every function. Free labor and rampant exploitation are the invisible dark matter that keeps the cultural sector going.

Free-floating strike workers plus new (and old) elites and oligarchies equal the framework of the contemporary politics of art. While the latter manage the transition to post-democracy, the former image it. But what does this situation actually indicate? Nothing but the ways in which contemporary art is implicated in transforming global power patterns.

Contemporary art's workforce consists largely of people who, despite working constantly, do not correspond to any traditional image of labor. They stubbornly resist settling into any entity recognizable enough to be identified as a class. While the easy way out would be to classify this constituency as multitude or crowd, it might be less romantic to ask whether they are not global lumpenfreelancers, deterritorialized and ideologically free-floating: a reserve army of imagination communicating via Google Translate.

Instead of shaping up as a new class, this fragile constituency may well consist—as Hannah Arendt once spitefully formulated—of the “refuse of all classes.” These dispossessed adventurers described by Arendt, the urban pimps and hoodlums ready to be hired as colonial mercenaries and

exploiters, are faintly (and quite distortedly) mirrored in the brigades of creative strike workers propelled into the global sphere of circulation known today as the art world.<sup>5</sup> If we acknowledge that current strike workers might inhabit similarly shifting grounds—the opaque disaster zones of shock capitalism—a decidedly un-heroic, conflicted, and ambivalent picture of artistic labor emerges.

We have to face up to the fact that there is no automatically available road to resistance and organization for artistic labor. That opportunism and competition are not a deviation of this form of labor but its inherent structure. That this workforce is not ever going to march in unison, except perhaps while dancing to a viral Lady Gaga imitation video. The international is over. Now let's get on with the global.

Here is the bad news: political art routinely shies away from discussing all these matters.<sup>6</sup> Addressing the intrinsic conditions of the art field, as well as the blatant corruption within it—think of bribes to get this or that large-scale biennial into one peripheral region or another—is a taboo even on the agenda of most artists who consider themselves political. Even though political art manages to represent so-called local situations from all over the globe, and routinely packages injustice and destitution, the conditions of its own production and display remain pretty much unexplored. One could even say that the politics of art are the blind spot of much contemporary political art.

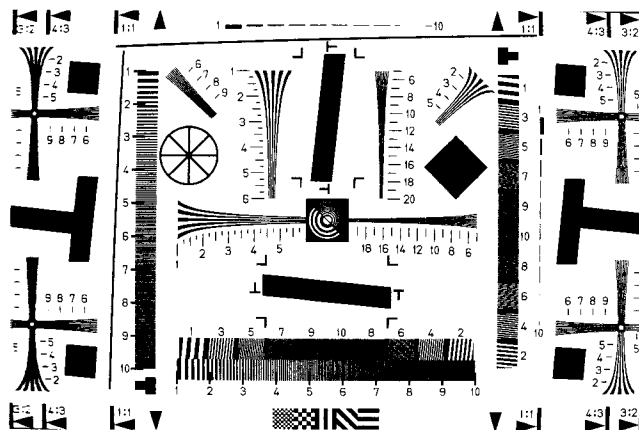
Of course, institutional critique has traditionally been interested in similar issues. But today we need a quite extensive expansion of it.<sup>7</sup> Because in contrast to the age of an institutional criticism, which focused on art institutions, or even the sphere of representation at large, art production (consumption, distribution, marketing, etc.) takes on a

different and extended role within postdemocratic globalization. One example, which is a quite absurd but also common phenomenon, is that radical art is nowadays very often sponsored by the most predatory banks or arms traders and completely embedded in rhetorics of city marketing, branding, and social engineering.<sup>8</sup> For very obvious reasons, this condition is rarely explored within political art, which is in many cases content to offer exotic self-ethnicization, pithy gestures, and militant nostalgia.

I am certainly not arguing for a position of innocence.<sup>9</sup> It is at best illusory, at worst just another selling point. Most of all it is very boring. But I do think that political artists could become more relevant if they were to confront these issues instead of safely parade as Stalinist realists, CNN situationists, or Jamie-Oliver-meets-probation-officer social engineers. It's time to kick the hammer-and-sickle souvenir art into the dustbin. If politics is thought of as the Other, happening somewhere else, always belonging to disenfranchised communities in whose name no one can speak, we end up missing what makes art intrinsically political nowadays: its function as a place for labor, conflict, and...fun—a site of condensation of the contradictions of capital and of extremely entertaining and sometimes devastating misunderstandings between the global and the local.

The art field is a space of wild contradiction and phenomenal exploitation. It is a place of power mongering, speculation, financial engineering, and massive and crooked manipulation. But it is also a site of commonality, movement, energy, and desire. In its best iterations it is a terrific cosmopolitan arena populated by mobile shock workers, itinerant salesmen of self, tech whiz kids, budget tricksters, supersonic translators, PhD interns, and other

digital vagrants and day laborers. It's hard-wired, thin-skinned, plastic-fantastic. A potential commonplace where competition is ruthless and solidarity remains the only foreign expression. Peopled with charming scumbags, bully-kings, almost-beauty-queens. It's HDMI, CMYK, LGBT. Pretentious, flirtatious, mesmerizing.



Resolution chart for digital cameras.

This mess is kept afloat by the sheer dynamism of loads and loads of hardworking women. A hive of affective labor under close scrutiny and controlled by capital, woven tightly into its multiple contradictions. All of this makes it relevant to contemporary reality. Art affects this reality precisely because it is entangled into all of its aspects. It's messy, embedded, troubled, irresistible. We could try to understand its space as a political one instead of trying to represent a politics that is always happening elsewhere. Art is not outside politics, but politics resides within its production, its distribution, and its reception. If we take this on, we might surpass the plane of a politics of representation and embark on a politics that is there, in front of our eyes, ready to embrace.

1  
I am expanding on a notion developed by Hongjohn Lin in his curatorial statement for the Taipei Biennial 2010. Hongjohn Lin, "Curatorial Statement," in *10TB Taipei Biennial Guidebook* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2010), 10–11.

2  
This has been described as a global and ongoing process of expropriation since the 1970s. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). As for the resulting distribution of wealth, a study by the Helsinki-based World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United

Nations University (UNU-WIDER) found that in the year 2000, the richest 1 percent of adults alone owned 40 percent of global assets. The bottom half of the world's adult population owned 1 percent of global wealth. See [http://www.wider.unu.edu/events/past-events/2006-events/en\\_GB/05-12-2006/](http://www.wider.unu.edu/events/past-events/2006-events/en_GB/05-12-2006/).

3  
For just one example of oligarch involvement, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/28/nyregion/28trustee.html>. While such biennials span from Moscow to Dubai to Shanghai and many of the so-called transitional countries, we shouldn't consider post-democracy

to be a non-Western phenomenon. The Schengen area is a brilliant example of post-democratic rule, with a whole host of political institutions not legitimized by popular vote and a substantial section of the population excluded from citizenship (not to mention the Old World's growing fondness for democratically-elected fascists). The exhibition "The Potosí-Principle," organized by Alice Creischer, Andreas Siekmann, and Max Jorge Hinderer, highlights the connection between oligarchy and image production from another historically relevant perspective.

4  
I am drawing on a field of meaning developed by Ekaterina Degot, Cosmin Costinas, and David Riff for their 1st *Jural Industrial Biennial*, 2010.

5  
Arendt may have been wrong on the matter of taste. Taste is not necessarily a matter of the common, as she argued, following Kant. In this context, it is a matter of manufacturing consensus, engineering reputation, and other delicate machinations, which—whoops—metamorphose into art-historical canoniographies. Let's face it: the politics of taste are not about the collective, but about the collector. Not about the common but about the patron. Not about sharing but about sponsoring.

6  
There are of course many laudable and great exceptions, and I admit that I myself may bow my head in shame, too.

7  
As is also argued in *Institutional Critique*, eds. Alex Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009). See also the collected issues of the online journal *transform*: <http://transform.eipcp.net/transformal/0106>.

8  
Recently on show at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Oslo was "Guggenheim Visibility Study Group," a very interesting project by Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas that unpacked the tensions between local (and partly indigenist) art scenes and the

Guggenheim franchise system, with the Guggenheim effect analyzed in detail in a case study. See <http://www.vilma.cc/2G/>. Also see Joseba Zulaika, *Guggenheim Bilbao Museo: Museums, Architecture, and City Renewal* (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, 2003). Another case study: Beat Weber, Therese Kaufmann, "The Foundation, the State Secretary and the Bank – A Journey into the Cultural Policy of a Private Institution," <http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/1145970626>. See also Martha Rosler, "Take the Money and Run? Can Political and Socio-critical Art 'Survive'?" <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/107>, and Tirdad Zolghadr, "11th Istanbul Biennial," [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/11th\\_istanbul\\_biennial/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/11th_istanbul_biennial/).

9  
This is evident from this text's placement on e-flux as an advertisement supplement. The situation is furthermore complicated by the fact that these ads may well flaunt my own shows. At the risk of repeating myself, I would like to emphasize that I do not consider innocence a political position, but a moral one, and thus politically irrelevant. An interesting comment on this situation can be found in Luis Camnitzer, "The Corruption in the Arts / the Art of Corruption," published in the context of The Marco Polo Syndrome, a symposium at the House of World Cultures in April, 1995. See <http://www.universes-in-universe.de/magazin/marco-polo/s-camnitzer.htm>.