

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

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

The effects of neo-liberalism imply a continued move towards the logic of market-oriented production and less state support, less public funding, deteriorating social and working conditions in the context of the so-called gig economy: an economy that runs on temporary jobs for most. In short, for artists and for artistic professionals (as for all workers) this means a structural move towards more precarity, as Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have laid out in *Inventing the Future* (2016).<sup>1</sup> This forces artists, and those working in education, the humanities and cultural workers alike, to become—and understand themselves as— entrepreneurs in a workplace that has become more market-oriented and that loses its social function, since it is only measured in economised terms. In concrete terms, this means more work for less money, permanent job insecurity, increased competition, and the resulting effects of exhaustion of those working in the field. On a political level this also means that the public infrastructure for art and cultural production is under severe pressure. In the Netherlands this was most noticeable through the budget cuts for the arts that were initiated in 2011 and completed in 2012, from which it is still recovering.<sup>2</sup> These are structural effects, given the political tendency towards further precarisation, without

substantial opposition to counter these developments in the foreseeable future. The term neo-liberalism is sometimes used too readily, yet it is the last remaining hegemonic political idea that continues to shape the world. As Wendy Brown has shown, neo-liberalism means the ongoing transformation of life and work into human capital, affecting artistic production and its organisation. According to neo-liberal ideology, production in the end has to comply with the laws and rationale of the liberal economic logic, although this has evidently shown to be a logic that benefits only a few and dismantles social cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

Philosopher Peter Osborne also identifies the solidification of neo-liberalism and its effects on art production, rather than a moving towards a post-capitalist situation. The misconception that we would be heading towards, or had an outlook on a post-capitalist situation was evoked by the term “late-capitalism” as used by Fredric Jameson in his famous essay on postmodernism, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1989).<sup>4</sup> But rather than being in a stage of transition towards a situation beyond its end, capitalism has on the contrary found an enduring foothold. An acknowledgement of this misconception is required to begin to think about how to address the persistence of neo-liberalism’s stranglehold. Such recognition is needed especially given the all-encompassing force of neo-liberalism that determines the conditional framework of production, effecting all production processes and social relations these represent, undercutting the democratic principle of empowerment of its subjects. As Brown argues, in the end it endangers democracy and a sense of the commons, as a shared space of political identity, expression and exchange. “What happens when the practices and principles of speech, deliberation, law, popular sovereignty, participation, education, public goods, and shared power entailed in rule by the people are submitted to economization?”<sup>5</sup>

Is it still possible, under these circumstances, for art as form of critique, to be considered as a meaningful force, once its structure of production ultimately follow capitalism’s logic? How can art, in its production of aesthetics, in shaping the way we perceive the world and our place in it, contest the undermining of the democratic principle by neo-liberalism. As Brown has argued, it is through neo-liberalism that all ideas on the cultural and societal organisation of our lives in the end are controlled by the principle of economisation, and organised by neo-liberalism. Here the way in which art production has transformed, along with the development of global neo-liberalism, into contemporary art—understood as the global network of institutions and its discourses—becomes of importance. According to Osborne, art production as we know it now has evolved out of the legacy of conceptual art—broadly understood as focusing on material and value in production and utilising art’s singularity—effectively constituting a critical address of the organisation of production in our technological, capitalist societies. The authorship of the artistic object, in Osborne’s view, as he identifies it in the post-conceptual condition, is spread across the institutional players concerned, as a co-authorial production assembly comprising artists, curators and institutions.<sup>6</sup> This assembled mode of producing is closely related to the post-Fordist economy in which there is no longer a categorical division in work to be made between aesthetics, labour and politics as analysed by Italian philosopher Paolo Virno.<sup>7</sup> This also means that the divisions between positions become relative: all participate in the networked and assembled mode of production. Virno also asserts that the autonomy within work is granted by capitalism, in so far as the worker has to remain productive according to the criteria set by capitalism. The question, then, of art’s critical leverage, its possible agency in relation to capitalist subsumption (its artistic legacy and promise), and the way in which it is organised, are deeply entwined in terms of form and content, and become a matter of its infrastructural organisation.

To understand the implications of the dominance neo-liberalism exerts now, and how labour is organised in post-Fordist production, we need to take a closer look at the basic infrastructure of artistic production, which designates the means and ends in the relations of production. How do issues of authorship and respective accountability shift and how are these to be considered under these developments? My approach in answering

these questions resonates with a form of critical inquiry that has recently been conceptualised by art theorist and writer Marina Vishmidt as *Infrastructural Critique*.<sup>8</sup> Here the infrastructure of art production as integrated assemblage of production, or infrastructural set-up, is considered as a coherent system. Such an infrastructural notion, according to Vishmidt, is to be approached through the specificity of relations in production, rather than by way of theories supposedly underlying them, since these social relations are the material embodiment of the infrastructural set-up of production. According to Vishmidt, “A move to infrastructural critique represents an attempt to mediate some of the closures of this position both discursively and pragmatically, with infrastructure focusing the link between the material and ideological conditions of the institution of art in a way that de-centres rather than affirms it.”<sup>9</sup> The closures Vishmidt here refers to relate to Institutional Critique’s critical approach, which finds its limits within the institution of art at which it addresses its efforts. The notion of infrastructure can be understood as the assemblage of positions and functions that in its totality enable production. This totality contains the conflicting ideas and communications on the relation between form and conditions of work and purpose. In my view, this principle has to extend to territories outside of the art institution that affect its production processes: the realms of governance and politics. These are to be considered co-authors (or co-authorial positions) of the “artistic object”. Since, in post-Fordism, these equally shape the ideologically defined conditions and parameters affecting the operation and outcome of artistic production, they are part of its infrastructure of production.

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

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

Up until quite recently, art’s agency was supported and guaranteed by the idea of its autonomy. Although working within, or even depending on the art market and public institutions, this artistic autonomy had been considered a given since the early nineteenth century, underpinned by its own strand of philosophy separate from art, that of aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> The idea was that from a position of autonomy, art held a culturally exceptional position and had something unique to offer, despite it being subsidiary to and dependent on a heteronomous field for its material existence. Through its economically exceptional status, that is, by being exempt from regular conditions of production—since its value did not follow regular economic rules of valuation, such as the accustomed remuneration for labour—it was able to perform its critique on society and the effects of commodification within capitalism.<sup>11</sup> This relatively protected position of art in European social democracies, underpinned by public support for museums, presentation spaces, in education and non-commercial art production, defined its infrastructure and structured art’s role within society. This agreement was in place while at the same time the idea of autonomy in production was maintained. The not-for-profit artistic sector, as part of this wider spectrum, was able to perform—as a critique on the general economic and political organisation of societies, seemingly independent from the market. However, with the hegemony of the capitalist order that carries no responsibility for such a (quasi-)autonomous and critical function, the conditions supporting this model of production are undermined. This model is increasingly threatened by the practically unchallenged capitalist order that occupies and determines cultural space through the sheer power of private capital, and through the ideologically deployed principle of economisation that permeates all layers of its structure. Art’s supposed autonomy therefore becomes not only exposed as determined by the heteronomy of forces that define the conditions of production; in addition, and more importantly—and for now lacking a response—it ideologically follows suit in how the space for production is organised by (neo-liberal) politics, voiding the

potential of any avant-garde ambition having co-authorial ideological societal agency.

A telling characteristic and illustration of this development is the fading distinction between not-for-profit artistic practices and their infrastructures on the one hand, and artistic practices that operate within the commercial art market on the other. These now have to a great extent to be considered as unified into one general realm of artistic production. As Lise Soskolne of W.A.G.E. convincingly argues, the economic relationships between the independent not-for-profit field of artistic production and that of the market are closely connected.<sup>12</sup> The commercial value of artists is channelled through, and increased by their performance and validation in the so-called independent circuit that acknowledges and establishes it for its critical value. This critique manifests itself often as critique on the conditions of art production itself, on art's and people's position and imbrication in the capitalist commodity economy. The financial and economic structures upholding the not-for-profit sector—in the US on a charitable basis—are structurally geared towards commercial success as well as being financially rewarding for the patronage supporting such rationale.<sup>13</sup> The ideological framework and end goal that is operational here is that of the market, to which end art's criticality then serves, supposedly benefiting the greater good that art as public function represents. At the same time, this is not the rationale of those engaged in the not-for-profit sector: they engage with and work in the arts precisely because for them it intrinsically represents alternative ideas on working relations and production. The working conditions and invested labour—in the not-for-profit context—are for them the factual ends, the ends that are non-marketised or commodifiable, and not the means towards marketised value. They work to foster the “general intellect”, as Paulo Virno calls it, in terms of putting the qualities of cognitive labour and creativity to a common benefit.<sup>14</sup> Those working and investing in its model aim to counteract the capitalist model of production, and the relationship between work and its validation.

Although Soskolne clearly speaks from an American perspective, which is marked by an evident neo-liberal structure in which any form of state financing, direct or indirect, fits the frame of investment, revenue and economisation, the rationale that underpins this structure is —albeit more opaquely—equally discernible in the European context. Here the general idea of market-driven production as end goal shapes the structure of artistic production too. Administrative criteria as formulated by most grant providers or other funding bodies comply with this rationale. Supportive arrangements and subsidies are framed as “temporary stimuli”, providing a bridge towards a future of self-supporting independence. They hardly ever mention the activity of producing independently as an end or as a quality in itself. At the same time, this end goal of market success is translated into societal objectives, or of audiences to be addressed, embracing the supposed emancipatory and social criticality of art, in turn confirming the market as an end goal. See for instance how the Mondriaanfonds—the Netherlands' most important grant-giving body in the arts—presents itself as a funder of production, thereby intervening in the market, albeit reluctantly since fundamentally it is supposed to be acritical of market mechanisms (or it cannot voice its criticism because of it being held to governmental neutrality). The function of art here is formulated as if it were a free haven for imagination as a common good, but with the subtext that ideally it should not need such support.<sup>15</sup> This creates a distinct and hybridised economy of artistic production and its accompanying language of funding, catering to both sets of criteria. The idea of art as a function of the commons, aligned with the social objective of emancipation or of diversity, for example, is channelled through capitalism's notion of the market. The respective discourses of both societal function and goals, and of capitalism as market are intertwined in an ongoing schizophrenia. Through the politically motivated regime of these funding structures—based on keeping the applicant, in terms of support for cost of living, on the threshold of the bare minimum—and the enforced stress on entrepreneurial capitalisation, the ambition to establish art as a thriving milieu of critique, as a working practice is unacknowledged, and the rationale of capitalist production remains uncontested. The understanding of public funding as such, as a structural governmental tool in markets,

stimulating or shielding processes deemed underdeveloped or precarious, is not expressed as a fundamental element of the “market”. As Pascal Gielen observes, a society that desires a viable art production, guarantees its autonomy by supporting its existence for which it itself cannot fully provide. Such decision then is a question of political contestation.<sup>16</sup>

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

Since precarious government support, the rationale of austerity and more market-oriented production compliant with the rationale of economisation characterise the direction we are moving in, we can consider it the starting point through which the frame of artistic production is politically determined. It is the hinge point of political contention. In response to the question on how small-scale art organisations create value, in her lecture at the Public Assets Conference in London in 2015, Soskolne laid out the rationale to W.A.G.E.’s programme, and the position of not-for-profit art production in the economy at large.<sup>17</sup> For W.A.G.E. the logical artistic consequence is to engage in the battle for fair remuneration for artists working in institutional settings, and for artistic labourers to be recognised as co-workers in the same workplace as other paid workers, such as directors, curators, communication employees etc.<sup>18</sup> Rather than continuing to work underpaid, or not being paid at all—on a voluntary basis, and therefore operating at the mercy of support structures that are ideologically in opposition to the economic exceptionality of art with its subsequent poor working conditions—the artist should be considered an equal in the production process. This strategy does not directly solve the problem of capitalism, but it politicises the workplace—and the institutional responsibility thereof—by re-introducing a counter ideology of artistic work with its alternative ideas on validation, within the frame of its working conditions. This re-connects the place of artistic work to the public good it professes to serve and binds its workers as equals within the assembled setting. It also exposes existing workplace rationales and protocols underpinned by neo-liberal capitalism that lead to structural under-valuation and the position of artistic work in it. The performative work of W.A.G.E. thus exposes and interrupts capitalism’s logic, and particularly the principle of economisation by which it is structured in the workplace.

Such an activist artistic approach would, however, as a critique on W.A.G.E. has been voiced, conform to the existing regime of workplace criteria and thus follow existing state political rationales and protocols that underpin neo-liberalism’s rationale of economisation. For the artist this would therefore mean losing out on freedom and autonomy as prerequisites and tools of artistic labour and eventual political agency. It is a critique that fits the wider debate on the art and activism schism and the question of how far art can engage with politics.<sup>19</sup> This notion of artistic freedom and autonomy is non-existent to begin with, in the sense that it is inert, analysed correctly in my opinion by W.A.G.E. Such assessment then first needs to be recognised and secondly politicised by affectively and cognitively activating it. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have indeed shown in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), their extensive sociological field study of production processes, it are precisely the qualities of collaboration and creativity, and the idea of independence that are appropriated in capitalist production.<sup>20</sup>

As an artistic and activist form of organisation, W.A.G.E. engages aesthetically with the conditions that shape its space for life and work. The self-administered suspension by W.A.G.E. of what is commonly recognised as the artists’ “creative work” and to substitute this for (more tedious) administrative, bureaucratic and activist work, here becomes art’s task. The performative abandonment of creative labour, to negate the presumed artists’ role in the market of the arts, is an artistic act, since the conditions set out by the market negate the space for creative work to become manifest in the first place. Addressing working conditions, then, is W.A.G.E.’s artistic

strategy and prime artistic target. This fundamental address acknowledges that working conditions shape the outcome of the political artistic space, and that any space for control over or recognition and affirmation of its relevance must be sought among the conditions that are to be engaged with. This then means that work—as the organisation of labour—itself is that *object* of artistic production that is contested within the current frame and condition of production under post-Fordist, neo-liberal capitalism.

Concurring with the argument made by Vishmidt and theorist Kerstin Stakemeier: it is the basic organisation of work itself that produces the notion of autonomy to begin with.<sup>21</sup> As all work takes place under the guise of, and is engineered by neo-liberal capitalism as labour, work becomes the object of expression that shows the relation between the potential of autonomy and heteronomy under the regime of capitalist production. In this sense the political organisation of artistic work becomes synonymous with the political struggle and organisation of any work and all workers as such.

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

The “contention over work”—as that what is ordered by politics and what may organise any form of autonomy—is therefore also the quintessential form of artistic inquiry. And it becomes art’s political task, if we follow through on French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s ideas on the relation between art and politics. In the *distribution of the sensible*, his well-known conceptualisation of aesthetics as political form, the space of politics is to be understood as the contestation over the arrangement of registers and forms of expression, visibility and agency.<sup>22</sup> According to Rancière, the artistic becomes expressed in the exposition and relation between art and politics as political-aesthetical antinomies. Through art’s operation, in postulating its sovereign singularity, the forces of political policing and rule, that what occupies and dominates as well as that which organises an idea of a common ground, become visible. This requires the free play between *aisthesis* and *poiesis*, between that what is made and the meaning attributed to it. The artistic act of the free play between *aisthesis* and *poiesis*, then, must be taken as the fundamental democratic principle to the formation of a sovereignly organised life. Under neo-liberal subsumption, where social relations are deeply determined by the conditions set out by it, the antagonism between neo-liberalism’s rule and the possibility to a sovereign life becomes obvious.

Art here directly contests and interacts with politics, since the production of aesthetics is automatically a matter of political action, as it enters and contributes to the arena of the political, where it competes with politics and establishes itself through aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, this model of art directly proposes a counter model to politics (as in the structures of representative democracies) as we have it, in that it proposes an alternative model to community building, worlding and meaning. According to Rancière, in honouring the principle of radical equality, there are also no boundaries or limitations to who contributes to the formation of the common space via the combination of art and aesthetics.<sup>24</sup> When we apply this premise to the assembled chain in artistic production, this ranges from theoretical critique and discourse, to critics, curators and artists, publics, workers and institutions, who all participate in the field of artistic production. The art-aesthetics bind and the notion of radical equality, and thus total accessibility of the political, follows, according to Rancière, from the history of emancipation in which humans formulate and organise themselves as sovereign subjects, not dominated by the authority of politics that would occupy the production, meaning and relevance of cultural knowledge. This is where the ideal of democracy and of art meet, and indeed overlap: in short, a space of the commons. However, as Rancière emphasises, this can never lead to a stable or fixed form, since it is an ongoing process of exchange. The commons can never be stable, but must each time be organised, re-adapted and re-affirmed. Its structural

incompleteness must be honoured.<sup>25</sup> The question on how to accommodate these processes, therefore, to designate a place for it, becomes a matter of political action and of ideology.

The organisation of the free play between *aisthesis* and *poiesis*, and the structural connection of art and aesthetics become important if we look at how contemporary forms of artistic production are shaped, in terms of the paradigmatic transformation of the field of art production as mentioned in the beginning of this text. The expansion of the field of art production resonates strongly with the notion of the idea of assembled production—of the *scene*—as formulated by Jacques Rancière.<sup>26</sup> Recent decades have shown an acceleration in the development of forms of artistic practices that deploy artistic research and interdisciplinary forms of organisation, promoting participation and social exchange, and that are leaning towards activism and resistance. Artists are exploring forms of practice in which the production of art is put forward as the production of politicised aesthetics, as Sven Lütticken observes in *Cultural Revolution. Aesthetic Practice After Autonomy* (2017).<sup>27</sup> This movement is characteristic in artistic practices such as those of Bik Van der Pol, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Renzo Martens and Jonas Staal, to list some more outspoken examples among many other less visible ones. As Lütticken's title suggests, the question of the flight from art's autonomy (or of the apparent depletion of such notion), and the acknowledgement of and engagement with the implication of the conditions through which it is shaped, prompt these new artistic practices. The issue then becomes one of a strategic positioning and of direct aesthetic interference—as outward aesthetics—aiming to overcome the institutional confines of the institute of art.

This tendency is not only limited to artists' practices, but similarly takes place in presentation spaces and the realms of education and academia, where presentation, research and operation are thought through in tandem. Examples in the Netherlands are Casco and BAK in Utrecht, DAI in Arnhem and Veem House for Performance in Amsterdam. Their programmes and output are the (self-)critical outcomes of research into artistic production processes. The question here is how these processes and structures organise the social relations between the actors involved, and how these are situated in and related to the world, and how these may engender effect. Here the artistic is connected to theoretical and discursive aspects, and to educational and curatorial practices—as modes of distribution—and most of the time it is therefore concerned and intertwined with institutional mediation. These forms of artistic production—which include modes of reception, communication and meaning—pursue or mimic “the institutional” as a form of independent and autonomous production. The artistic research conducted in these contexts translates intrinsically, and sometimes explicitly, into political demands or propositions.<sup>28</sup> These formations of artistic production thus manifest themselves as aesthetic agencies in a Rancièrian sense: as total and complete entities—connecting art and aesthetics into a coherent form—that counteract and contest the institutions or bodies that are expressions of the political distribution of power.

## Accountability in Assemblage of Production, Authorship

The problems that arise as a result of this development have been identified by British theorists and educators Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips in their critique on the workings of contemporary art. Extrapolating on the ideas of Rancière, they argue that art has to go beyond the problem of the mere demonstration of power as its negative, as the opposite of a politics that does enforce its aesthetics, and to grasp for political agency itself: in other words, to not solely identify the political frame that sets the conditions but to engage in its formation.<sup>29</sup> Art, as an organised form that is engaged in the politics of aesthetics, must consider itself as an institutional player versus the institutions of politics, and perceive itself as an institutional actor. In addition, a consequence that arises out of these art and aesthetics configurations is their diffused and assembled mode of production

that fosters a sense of indetermination. If the field of art wants to exert its political ambition and be the champion of artistic value versus that of politics through the means and deployment of aesthetics, it not only needs to give up on its internal open-endedness or self-referentially to accept such a concrete challenge. I would argue that the field of art also has to consider its relation towards politics from the viewpoint and through the assertion of its expanded form, and address the problems of accountability inherent in this assertion.

The diffused and assembled mode of production—considered as interaction between institution, curator, discourse and artist, and its connection to the broader political framework that sets the parameters of production, such as financing and grant-giving bodies—arguably presents such a challenge. The authorship of the artistic object, in the institutional structure of current artistic production, shows itself as intimately entangled within the broader economic setting and in production as totality. Its structural set-up accommodates an obfuscation of accountability.<sup>30</sup> It is internally divided between the direct actors at play: artist, curator and institutional platform. However, how this configuration is related to conditions outside of these platforms, to governmental or political frames—how it sits in, and is connected to, the bigger infrastructure of production and how this can be considered an institutional co-author—is often under-exposed. The importance of the infrastructure and how infrastructure determines artistic productions, like all production, therefore becomes ever more relevant. The infrastructure is the frame that houses and upholds the function of political exchange—of dissensus—as democratic societal interest.

In the post-Fordist condition the forms of the institution and that of its situatedness in the infrastructure affecting its conditions to production cannot be separated. Institution, infrastructure and its actors merge as co-authorial instances to the artistic object that is produced. As Vishmidt has noted, the issue of authorship in artistic production can be instrumental in mapping the accountabilities and functions performed throughout the production processes in the wider field of art.<sup>31</sup> How these accountabilities and functions traverse the fields of art production and the heteronomous outside to which it is connected and that partially structures and defines it, can then be made visible. This becomes especially pertinent under neo-liberal subsumption, in which all operations in the cycle are determined by it. These insights can be used to question the actions performed by these transversal authors and/or how relations are organised. How is one to consider oneself institutionally or positionally within this conflicted infrastructure? As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have stipulated, while critiquing the existing constellation and the role that institutions perform, an institutional format is still required to start to think about operationalising alternative values in production. In their push to propagate a non-hierarchical, non-representational and egalitarian form of production that does not exert a power relation, the format of the institution is still needed to gain agency, to foster collaboration, organisation and continuity.<sup>32</sup> The questions then become, I argue, how these new quasi-institutional forms operate within the assembly of production; how they relate to the economical frames set by these conditions and the ideologies these represent; how they address the fundamental questions as set out by W.A.G.E. And, finally, how new infrastructural configurations can be imagined and how these relate to the issue of absorption and what aesthetic strategies these insights prompt.

## Art Rotterdam, an Example

A case in point, where different responses to a complex constellation of positions in art production obfuscated accountability in relation to the common endeavour in the current conditions, is the problem that arose between the Art Rotterdam 2018 edition and the Art Initiatives (AIs) that were invited to participate in the art fair. In prior editions, the not-for-profit initiatives were presented in the fair's Intersections programme. The AIs had in previous editions been able to participate only because the costs were kept relatively low. This was enabled by

an, as it turned out, incidental reduction of rent for the location in which Intersections was housed, and because of a one-off subsidy. The participation of the Als gave Art Rotterdam the aura of a young and critically innovative fair—precisely by incorporating the non-commercial section as a token recognition of the interconnection of the profit and non-profit sectors—and boosted its artistic credibility and its subsequent value. In the competition with the more established and older Art Amsterdam, which had gone in decline in recent years, it was the aura of risk and experiment these Als brought to the fair, considered prime artistic qualities, that contributed to the success of Art Rotterdam. For the Als it meant a chance to tap into new audiences while keeping the costs manageable. Once the financial injections evaporated in 2018, the Als were confronted with normal market rates, which practically none of them were able to cover. Ironically, the chosen theme for the Intersections segment that year was the precarity of current conditions of production, which it critically aimed to address.

Many Als declined immediately, while a few others made the effort to negotiate—not only about the financial terms, but also to contest the thematic framing. The conditional and aesthetical framework of production were considered to demonstrate precisely the condition of precarity the Als have to work in, through the way in which Art Rotterdam had set up the cooperation. Since Art Rotterdam had benefited from the surplus-value of this cooperation in previous years, and had shown to acknowledge the economic entanglement, it would have been fair to expect some lenience in fees or a jointly agreed solution—for example a contribution by the other commercial galleries that had also benefited from Als' presence and input in previous iterations of the fair in which both sectors participated. Such ideas, which engaged with notions of common production, however, proved fruitless and remained unexplored. The iron logic of the market rent was firmly kept in place. The Als were supposed to invest their scarce resources without any prospect of a financial return, other than a potential—but speculative and precarious—remuneration through prospective and future applications, by means of which their participation in Art Rotterdam—as production through visibility—could or would be validated. As Soskolne rightly argues, art's critical value is transformed into market capital through precarious work.<sup>33</sup>

There were some attempts to formulate a joint public response. Ideas for a protest or strike were raised, but soon the united front of the Als evaporated.<sup>34</sup> The notion of a “strike” was rejected and considered too negative and reactive. Thoughts of bringing a complete alternative fair into existence, parallel to the regular fair, were soon abandoned because of a lack of time, funding and organisational resources. The challenge of taking this on in addition to the already difficult conditions of producing their own programmes, proved insurmountable. Some of them decided to present an alternative programme during the Art Rotterdam week, announcements for which were included in Art Rotterdam's communications. This programme was framed as “the independent scene” showcasing their platforms and activities dubbed as the *Not for Profit Art Party*.<sup>35</sup> However, this response kept the existing logic of unilateral extraction and dependency in production intact. It had cost Art Rotterdam nothing in the previous years, on the contrary, it had only added extra value, and it could continue to communicate the ongoing cooperation with the Als, and thereby continue adding to its own value. The Als in the meantime—despite being seen as structural co-author in the infrastructure of production—were fractured and fragmented, and left with nothing.

By wanting to continue to make use of the publicity provided in the Art Rotterdam week, maintaining a front of “independent” production, the Als that did participate undoubtedly continued the cycle of dependency, and subsequent deterioration of future conditions. The reasons for Als to continue to participate in this situation are obvious: the publicity and audience reach provided for here count as positive production results that are hard to neglect. These register as the “revenue”, as goals matching the criteria set by government grant providers to which the Als are accountable. These positive results then become speculative “production value” for future

applications. These are the “assets” in the competition for funding that is becoming scarcer, given the ideology of austerity, which needless to say generates competition among AIs themselves. Since the AIs had demonstrated they were able to function under precarious conditions and to meet set criteria, any incentive to increase support for them evaporated, maintaining and even justifying (or aggravating) the rationale for austerity for the not-for-profit sector, aiding thus the logic that underpins existing funding. So, to continue working within the context of Art Rotterdam did nothing to confront the idea of the market as art production’s end goal, in fact it only confirmed it.

This example demonstrates the cycle of dependency, precisely in contrast to the idea of autonomy as evoked by the *Not for Profit Art Party*, as a deeply internalised condition of art initiatives and art practices. It is important to understand these mechanisms, and the self-imposed ideas of exceptionality, autonomy and willingness to invest without reward in production that keeps this cycle going.<sup>36</sup> The not-for-profit artists, organisers and curators offer themselves willingly as dedicated and even productive workers in this system. This guarantees a continuation of the exploitation and the upholding of the market-driven idea of production, consolidating the neo-liberal scheme of production supported by public means and the supposed function of art.

The same logic of instrumentalisation of art production can be detected in governmental policies, where the input of artists is put to work in the context of urban gentrification, as part of the creative industries in general. At temporarily reduced costs artists are allowed to rent, live and produce in urban areas that then become profitable because of increasing property value and the influx of more affluent inhabitants, who follow the lead once the creative sector has done the groundwork. Once the objective of property value increase has been accomplished, artists and the original residents are forced to move someplace else as rents are raised.<sup>37</sup> The creative sector as gentrifying avant-garde, with those whose output cannot become profitable becoming martyrs along the way.<sup>38</sup> The artist’s autonomy here serves not the symbolic value of its independence in respect to its condition in heteronomy, its autonomy rather serves the amelioration of the conditions of heteronomy to its own detriment.

It is not a question of finding a singular response to this problem, nor is it my aim to frame this dynamic as a binary opposition between commercial and non-profit. The for-profit sector is also affected by the dominance of neo-liberal capitalism that reduces the space of production. Numerous galleries are forced to close under pressure of rising rents that cannot be covered by sales. Galleries either have to scale up or foreclose, which leads to fewer, and therefore less diverse production spaces, more stringent monetised conditions and subsequent monopolies in production conforming to this scheme of production. In addition, the AIs are not easily captured under one header in how they operate and participate. They have distinct profiles and modes of operation addressing these issues that are not to be unified under one (artistic) format. My argument is not that I insist on the necessity of AIs remaining connected to institutional formats like Art Rotterdam, or to the realm of commercial production in general. What I do propose and consider necessary is for artists acting in the infrastructural set-up of artistic production—and therefore as institutional actors/authors—to consider the relations and dependencies and how they function in the wider field. It is here where the AIs in Art Rotterdam failed to respond to their institutional role in the whole chain of production. It is also where they—as stakeholders, to adopt a fitting term—missed the chance to politicise their position by addressing the general working conditions for production. The notion of the institution here, as proposed by Hardt and Negri, must be understood precisely as the problematic notion concerning its autonomy, since, as they argue, the occupation of power vs its milieu becomes materialised as the competition between islands of autonomy. An institution can only become relevant if it considers itself as imbricated in the heteronomy of its conditions.<sup>39</sup>

## Art's Exceptionalism in Infrastructure

In an interview in *Politics of Study* in 2015, Suhail Malik criticises the general and generic mode of criticality in art production.<sup>40</sup> In his reading, rather than contesting existing situations, critique only serves as the token quality by which the professional institutional apparatus is measured and validated, and in which register it most of the time presents itself. To counter this, Malik argues that a direct enactment of critical ideas and theories *in* production makes the difference. The deployment of critical models in artistic production *as* production directly translates and connects idea and praxis. The recognition by Malik and Phillips of art's correspondence to politics, plus the recognition of the art-aesthetics bind, situates and isolates the chain of artistic production as focal point for potential artistic agency. If the artistic projects can be said to be produced by the chain as a whole or by its coherent unity, then its political aesthetical production resides there.<sup>41</sup> The cycle of production itself becomes the focus of address as that which is heteronomous, in the scheme of art's stipulation of its self-rule as its political medium. Extrapolated to the bigger scale of artistic production, and expanding on Malik and Philips, this would entail the direct connection to politics, to funding and the structure of artistic production as artistic enquiry. Such focus on the totality of production creates new entry points and strategies, not only for artists but for all parties involved, considering issues of address and of form. The resulting premise would be that any artistic endeavour is based on an idea of general co-authorship and on the condition of heteronomy, thus comprising a bigger set of participants, and an understanding of itself as worker/working in a communal project. If one takes the considerations and, this is important, the form of the art-aesthetics bind seriously, as the effectuation of institutional political ambition, then the differences marking production towards an aesthetical expression—the mistranslations, mistransferences and misappropriations that occur in it—are the nodal points in production for what emerges as the artistic object. And the project of art—rather than the institution—is then the place to work through these differences.

In an interview, Virno describes how art can be instrumental in mapping and expressing these differences that he calls the *dismeasure* between the conditional frame laid out by post-Fordist economy and those experiencing this rule. From such an investigation an index of alternatives could be proposed to negotiate these differences.<sup>42</sup> As the distinct division between aesthetics, politics and labour collapses in post-Fordism, the issue of a possible resistance against capitalism's rule becomes a matter of political-aesthetical work, as the act of indexing, by all involved in its infrastructure.

## To Conclude

The issue of art's exceptionalism—formulated as the space to performatively negate and contest the conditions set out for it—cannot be thought outside the conditions of subsumption we find ourselves in. The appropriation of criticality as artistic objects by capitalism now, forces us to look at the structure of cultural production as such. Given this preoccupation, art's prime tool of championing the singular does not suffice anymore. The division of labour and the increased stress for survival as structured by neo-liberalism organises the atomisation of resistance against it. As Isabell Lorey has argued, with the identification of one's sovereignty with work, biopolitical control also becomes a mode of self-administration, the disentanglement of which requires an introspective recognition of how one functions within the larger structure.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, the designation of function and the notion of work within the assemblage of production need reconsideration. Its idea of itself and its heteronomous relation must be rethought.

If all who take part are to be considered as contributing to the infrastructural set-up, and the points of

transference in position and function—the social relations—become the nodal points of interest, then the whole assemblage of production and the work within, is the artistic object. The question of how an artist, a curator or an educator acts, how platforms are organised, and how these functions operate in the mesh of interdependencies in capitalism—and how these are subsumed—becomes the material to work with, since this structure is made up of the social relations affected by the logic of neo-liberal capitalism. The latter system determines our time and space, and the way we operate and are in it. This means that a far greater investigation by all who participate in the existing mode of production is required as a mode of co-authorship to this “artistic object” and how we are *to be* in it. Its *total measure* is a matter of artists, theorists, curators, institutions and of governance and politics alike. As all these functions channel information and contribute to the form of infrastructure that produces the common object, the different labelling of these actions or positions within this assemblage becomes redundant. Art can be understood as aesthetic work to the commons, to the political as space of interaction. It is rather the focus on operations, on *what* is performed by *whom* to *what end* that becomes the institution’s responsibility, that is needed, where institution here is to be understood as a malleable form of organisation.<sup>44</sup>

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

## Footnotes

1. Srnicek, Nick and Williams, Alex. *Inventing the Future, Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. London: Verso. 2016.
2. The budget cuts by the right-wing coalition of VVD and CDA were enabled by the support of the populist party PVV of Geert Wilders in 2011. See Oudenampsen, Merijn. *Dutch Culture Wars: on the Politics of Gutting the Arts*. <https://merijnoudenampsen.org/2013/02/21/dutch-culture-wars-on-the-politics-of-gutting-the-arts/> (accessed 2019-05-08.)
3. Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York, NY: Zone Books. 2015
4. Osborne, Peter. *The Postconceptual Condition. Critical Essays*. London: Verso London. 2018
5. Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. New York, NY: Zone Books. 2015. p. 10.
6. Osborne, Peter. *Anywhere or Not at All*. London: Verso. 2013.

7. Virno, Paolo. *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, The MIT Press. 2004.
8. Vishmidt, Marina. "Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural". In *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice)*. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova (eds.) Cambridge, MA, and Utrecht: The MIT Press, and BAK. 2017.
9. *Ibid.*, np.
10. Starting with Kant and Hegel and subsequent philosophies of art, art—as object and as practice—has been investigated as the relation between art and aesthetics. Notably Theodor Adorno situates this relation at its core.
11. The different aspects of production of the artwork vis-à-vis commodification as the general characteristic in capitalism, is extensively laid out in *Aesthetic Theory* by Theodor Adorno. See for the relation between the economic and 'formal' aspect of artistic production Josephine Wikström's article "Art's Economic Exceptionalism", available online at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/art's-economic-exceptionalism> (accessed 2018-11-01.)
12. W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) started in 2008, informally researching precarity of working conditions in artistic production. Since then it has developed in an internationally active platform producing knowledge and making this public. It is also engaged in issuing certificates (W.A.G.E. Certification) to institutions that conform to fair pay for their workers. See <https://wageforwork.com/home> (accessed 2018-11-01.)
13. The injection of capital for "charitable causes" as contributions for not-for-profit forms of production are in the US considered tax-deductible, which mostly benefits bigger companies supporting such programmes. These benefactors arguably represent the affluent few in an increasingly unequal division of wealth.
14. Virno, Paolo. *General intellect*. In *Lessico Postfordista*. Zanini and Fadini (eds.), Translation by Arianna Bove. Milan: Feltrinelli. 2001.
15. All contributions reinforce the production or presentation of art and heritage from the Netherlands, both at home and abroad, where the market doesn't do this (yet): precisely there, art and heritage prove themselves as valuable havens of the imagination. The fund stimulates the public commitment and the development of these havens. See <https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/en/about/> (accessed 2018-11-01.)
16. Gielen, Pascal. "Autonomy via Heteronomy". *Open! Platform for Art, Culture and the Public Domain*, 2013, <http://www.onlineopen.org/autonomy-via-heteronomy> (accessed 2018-11-01.)
17. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou\\_VmDYNs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou_VmDYNs) (accessed 2018-11-01.)
18. W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) started in 2008, informally researching the precarity of working conditions in artistic production. Since then it has developed into an internationally active platform producing knowledge around this topic and making this publicly accessible. It is also engaged in issuing certificates (W.A.G.E. Certification) to institutions that comply with fair pay for their workers. See <https://wageforwork.com/home> (accessed 2018-11-05.)
19. See for example how Chantal Mouffe calls for the recognition of art practices as counterhegemonic form vs politics. This requires an institutional engagement; it is through institutional mediation after all that "common sense" is developed, and where the subsequent political arena—as area of contestation—is established.
20. Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Ève. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso. 2005.
21. In reading Mario Tronti, Marina Vishmidt and Kerstin Stakemeier argue that autonomy in capitalism can only be identified from within the determination of labour conditions: "Where Adorno locates autonomy in the realm of the aesthetic to construct a maximal distance from the reproductive

- brutalities of capital, Tronti argues that autonomy cannot be won at any distance from the production process but can be anticipated only as an autonomisation from within divided labour.” Vishmidt, Marina and Stakemeier, Kerstin. *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art*. London and Berlin: Mute Publishing. 2016. p. 28.
22. Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Gabriel Rockhill trans. and intr. London and New York, NY: Continuum. 2004.
  23. There are of course questions to be raised concerning the equivalence between power that is distributed through politics and through art and aesthetics. It is true that matters of ideology and politics, and the way in which these are established are closely linked by the ways these are perceived and culturally shaped. In that sense the assertion of equivalence between politics and art can be made, and does a politics of aesthetics have political agency.
  24. In Anna Wójcik’s interview with Jacques Rancière – October 2014, Cracow, Poland published on Versobooks blog, 09 November 2015 – he describes art not as medium-specific and an autonomous realm but as a form of heteronomous aesthetics-formation. Wójcik, Anna and Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Art: An interview with Jacques Rancière*. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2320-the-politics-of-art-an-interview-with-jacques-ranciere> (accessed 2019-05-08.)
  25. Rancière defines the space of politics through the notion of *Dissensus*, a continual exchange between the formation of dominance and subsequent political and ideological coherence and that what opposes this formation.
  26. *Ibid.*
  27. Lütticken, Sven. *Cultural Revolution. Aesthetic Practice After Autonomy*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2017.
  28. See for instance Dutch Art Institute’s REALTY study group in which the research into the relation between art production, gentrification and theoretical discourse leads to concrete political proposals.
  29. Malik, Suhail and Philips, Andrea. “The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy”. In *Reading Rancière*. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (eds.) pp. 111-128.
  30. In the format of contemporary art production as formulated by Peter Osborne in *Anywhere or not at all* (London: Verso, 2013), it is the amalgamation of the different functions in its totality: curating, distribution, the institutional platform, discursivity and theory, that acts as author-producer.
  31. Vishmidt, Marina. “Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural”. In *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists’ Practice)*. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova (eds.) Cambridge, MA, and Utrecht: The MIT Press, and BAK. 2017.
  32. Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio. *Assembly*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2017.
  33. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou\\_VmDYNs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aou_VmDYNs) (accessed 2018-11-01.)
  34. After an initial meeting between a representation of the AIs and the director of AR, Fons Hof, the discussion was continued in some follow-up meetings. An extensive e-mail exchange developed simultaneously, in which many AIs participated and which focused on how to respond. It resulted in divisions.
  35. See <https://worm.org/production/not-for-profit-art-party/> (accessed 2018-11-05.)
  36. What was telling in the discussions between the AIs on how to respond, was the perception of the negativity of a strike or protest. Deemed as a reactionary tool, the discussion veered to a “positivist” response: to produce or to perform rather than to halt production.
  37. See for instance the critique BAVO has laid out in *Too Active to Act*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2010; or David Harvey in “The Art of Rent: Globalization, Monopoly and the Commodification of Culture”, *Socialist Register*. Vol. 38. 2002. pp. 93-110.
  38. The trend of a retreating government and the influx of private capital that is left to structure public space can be witnessed now in Rotterdam. Big plans to create new large art spaces in the less

developed Rotterdam-Zuid area are in development. These plans, turning post-industrial buildings into creative hubs, will be funded by the native Rotterdam family van der Vorm, which also donates to charitable causes as foodbanks and language courses for immigrants (which are mandatory in order to be able to apply for citizenship), restoring the pre-welfare-state notion of public funding for social causes as a responsibility for patronage and charity.

39. Hardt and Negri, *op.cit.*
40. Interview with Suhail Malik *Politics of Study*, Sidsel Meineche Hansen & Tom Vandeputte (Eds.), Open Editions/Funen Art Academy, 2015
41. Lavaert, Sonja and Gielen, Pascal. "The Dismeasure of Art, An interview with Paolo Virno". November 2009. Available online at <http://www.onlineopen.org/the-dismeasure-of-art> (accessed 2018-11-05.)
42. Lavaert, Sonja and Gielen, Pascal. "The Dismeasure of Art, An interview with Paolo Virno". November 2009. Available online at <http://www.onlineopen.org/the-dismeasure-of-art> (accessed 2018-11-05.)
43. Lorey, Isabell. "Governmentality and Self Precarization". EIPCP, 2006. Available online at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en> (accessed 2018-11-02.)
44. W.A.G.E. can again be listed here as an initiative that has undergone a transformation from an organisation of advocacy and of artistic mediation into a semi-institutional platform that maintains and utilises artistic considerations in its operation.