

Assisting as a Mode of Artistic Deproduction

Reflective Documentation

Submitted by Tamara Antonijević

PhD Programme Artistic Research (PhD in Art)

Supervisor: Gerhild Steinbuch

Institute for Language Arts

Examination committee members:

Univ.-Prof. Gerhild Steinbuch

Univ.-Prof. Dr.phil. Anette Krauss

Heike Geissler

Dr. Rose-Anne Gush

Dr. Francis Wasser

Vienna, April 2026

Abstract

This dissertation examines assisting as a site within artistic production whose structural role is to conceal the labour and dependencies that stabilise the bourgeois subjectivity of the artist. It analyses how assistance can be formulated to reconfigure and (mis)use those relations and institutional resources. Drawing on the lineage of feminist materialist analyses of reproductive labour, and particularly Marina Vishmidt's work on management and maintenance and on infrastructural critique, the concept of deproduction is introduced as a method of working through institutional constraints. Deproduction implies redirecting flows of labour and access, and reorganising dependencies, thereby rejecting art's claim to autonomy. These operations are proposed through two artistic research projects that experiment with knowledge production and artistic subjectivity. The main artistic contribution, "Zero Slack", is a novel that explores the extraction of experience from the author's past and involves hiring an assistant and a financial advisor to develop a deferred payment system, thereby functioning simultaneously as a contract. The novel makes its promises material, rather than metaphorical. Referring to Joan Scott's critique of experience, the text constructs multiple subjectivities organised by the labour they perform. "Assistances," a research project and seminar collaboratively led and organised with Christopher Weickenmeier, was developed as a counter-practice to the individuating methodologies of research proposed by the university. While "Zero Slack" enacts vertical, employment-based relations, "Assistances" approaches the main research questions through collective study, as horizontally as possible. The theoretical frameworks developed and employed in the thesis are rooted in this process.

Abstract DE

Diese Dissertation untersucht Assistenz als Raum innerhalb der künstlerischen Produktion, dessen strukturelle Funktion darin besteht, Arbeit und Abhängigkeiten zu verschleiern, die die bürgerliche Subjektivität der Künstler*Innen stabilisieren. Sie analysiert, wie Assistenz so gestaltet werden kann, um diese Beziehungen und institutionellen Ressourcen neu zu konfigurieren. Ausgehend von der feministischen materialistischen Analyse reproduktiver Arbeit, insbesondere von Marina Vishmidt's Auseinandersetzung mit Management und Maintenance sowie ihrem Begriff der "infrastructural critique", wird das Konzept der Deproduktion als Methode zur Überwindung institutioneller Zwänge eingeführt. Deproduktion schlägt vor, Arbeits- und Zugangsflüsse umzulenken und Abhängigkeiten neu zu organisieren, wodurch der Anspruch der Kunst auf Autonomie zurückgewiesen wird. Diese Vorgehensweisen werden im Rahmen von zwei Projekten vorgeschlagen, die mit der Produktion von Wissen und der künstlerischen Subjektivität experimentieren. Der zentrale künstlerische Beitrag, "Zero Slack", ist ein Roman, der die Beauftragung einer Assistentin sowie eines Finanzberaters umfasst und zugleich als Vertrag dient. Dadurch werden die Versprechen des Romans konkret und nicht nur metaphorisch. In Anlehnung an Joan Scotts Kritik der Erfahrung konstruiert der Text mehrere Subjektivitäten, die durch die von ihnen ausgeübte Arbeit organisiert sind. "Assistances", ein gemeinsam geleitetes und organisiertes Forschungsprojekt und Seminar mit Christopher Weickenmeier, wurde als Gegenpraxis zu den von der Universität vorgeschlagenen individualisierenden Forschungsmethoden entwickelt. Während "Zero Slack" vertikale Arbeitsverhältnisse inszeniert, nähert sich "Assistances" den zentralen Forschungsfragen im Prozess

des kollektiven Studiums so horizontal wie möglich. Der in der Dissertation entwickelte und angewandte theoretische Rahmen ist in diesem Prozess verwurzelt.

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, thanks to my supervisor, Gerhild Steinbuch, for her guidance and support in navigating the logic and logistics of university and my artistic and research process. I'm grateful to Christopher Weickenmeier for our friendship, conversations, and our work that helped refine and overturn the ideas presented in this reflective documentation – these were the base conditions that made this dissertation possible. My gratitude to the context of "Assistances" and to everyone who joined and participated in workshops, seminars, discussions, and conversations. I'm also indebted, literally, to Simon Asencio and Jessica for accepting the highly uncertain and suspicious terms of our collaboration, and to Joshua Wicke aka swissbanking666 for the precision and generosity of his financial and dramaturgical feedback and advising. Thanks to Cory Tamler for her in-depth mentoring and editorial support and for the relentless Stabi-camaraderie.

Preface

"Assisting as a Mode of Artistic Deproduction" is an artistic research dissertation consisting of an artistic contribution (the novel "Zero Slack", written by me) and "Assistances," a collaboratively led research project and a two-part seminar workshop with Christopher Weickenmeier. Both works explore figures of assistants and the types of labour they perform in contemporary artistic production and enact different collaborative relations. The forthcoming publication, *Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts*, co-edited by both of us, contextualises and expands on this project and includes contributions from more than 17 writers, researchers, and artists and, as such, expands beyond the scope of this dissertation. To contextualise and account for the importance of collaboration and co-thinking that this reflective documentation theorises, portions of Chapters I and II draw on the collaborative introduction to the publication with Christopher Weickenmeier and are attributed accordingly. The research questions and conceptual framework originated in my PhD proposal and have been further developed through both this dissertation and our collaboration. Chapter II reflects on and contextualises the workshops and the edited volume as research methods.

Autonomy is the feedstock of precarity.

Marina Vishmidt, Infrastructural Critique: Contemporary Art Between Reproduction and Abolition, 2026

Should art be work?

TT: The question of whether it should or shouldn't be work is superfluous to the unavoidable fact that it is work.

Terre Thaemlitz, A Quietus Interview, with Ryan Alexander Diduck, 2012

What does it mean, then, to work for an institution whose disappearance you desire, particularly when the expression and refinement of that desire is the work you do? What does it mean to work against the institution you work for when your working against the institution is extracted by the institution as surplus? It's a real problem, in conditions of "freedom," to work for the institution you work against. But that's a better problem than not working against the institution that works against you and your needs, and desires, and calling. We can work through the contradictions of working for and working against the university. It requires practising non-cooperation rather than petitioning for shared governance. It requires generative, degenerative generosity, not the citational affirmations and shady dismissals of intellectual property management. We're not stakeholders in the university. Let's not share in its governance. We are neither producers nor consumers of intellectual property. Let's not enact its management. And why should we want to hear from the motherfuckers who run it as they tell us why they have no choice but to run it like they do?

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, university: last words, 2020



Remembering the Future (2014), by Alan Yentob

Image description: Still from "Remembering the Future," a documentary on Anselm Kiefer, in which he describes how his sculptural representations of books should appear light, as if moved by the wind, while two assistants struggle to move them.

Introduction, or: As if Moved by a Wind

In the context of contemporary art and cultural production, it is nearly impossible to imagine art institutions without assistants, nor could the careers of successful artists and their studios function without their support. Assistantships take many forms, depending on the field and type of artistic production; working as a director's assistant in a German state theatre requires a different set of skills from being a studio manager for an artist with an international career. Even over the course of the same contract in the state theatre, the assistant's tasks will shift depending on the production and the director, while the tasks of contemporary studio managers and artist assistants might cover everything from doing personal errands to installation, or perform work that could be identified as a "desk" job. Another case can be identified within the jobs whose descriptions include the term (or status group mark) "assistant," such as assistant curator or assistant professor. In these cases, the status of assistantship denotes their hierarchical position in the institution and serves as a means of reducing the wage. In the context of the university, the positions of teaching assistants (mostly part-time artistic and scientific collaborators and researchers) are institutionalised as qualification positions (German term: *Qualifizierungsstelle*), which are supposed to support the employees in pursuing higher qualifications. The other, "free" half of their contract is meant to leave room for a PhD or habilitation. In these terms, further qualification operates as a way of concealing the unaccounted labour, which in most cases surpasses the percentages indicated in the contracts, as I will expand on in Chapter II. Additionally, there are many jobs and positions in the sphere of cultural production that support, shape, co-produce, co-

think, structure, and mediate artistic processes with and between artists, institutions, and audiences. These are dramaturgs, editors, stage and lighting technicians, secretaries, production managers, cleaning staff, friends – anyone who maintains, manages, advises, and enables the work of the artist. The gaps in payment and the value of work differ according to the type of support that is performed and are structured by the racialised and gender based divisions of labour; those in the possession of specialised knowledge (i.e. dramaturgs, producers, and curators, although the distinctions between the three are also blurred) find themselves on the side of the more managerial aspects of reproductive labour in comparison to those in the positions of the technical or cleaning staff, whose assisting tasks are flagged as manual and maintenance labour. Both in the theatre and visual arts context, those contracted as assistants, regardless of their level of education and experience, may be given tasks that range from making coffee and printing texts to giving feedback to the artist, from sending emails and building up the stage or the studio. If it seems impossible to stabilise these terms – assistant and assistance – in any way or form, it's because their slipperiness is intentional and structural. The position serves as a buffer for whatever might go wrong or arise as a need within the artistic process and demand to be pacified or integrated. Ideally, an assistant's job is to hold, mediate, and delegate up and down, and to treat another artist's process as a training ground for their own future career. In Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's words, their never-ending training becomes their discipline.¹ Caught between reproductive and artistic labour, the assistant is best defined as an "under-labourer," to use Marina Vishmidt's term,

¹ Harney, Stefano and Moten, Fred. "*The University: Last-Words*." Accessed 17 February 2026. https://blogs.ubc.ca/virtualkoorners/files/2020/09/moten-harney_university-last-words.pdf.

as “the condition of possibility of the system’s ability to reproduce itself as a whole, the ‘work’ that must disappear in order for ‘the work’ to appear, whether that work is the waged worker or the art installation.”² The assistant is supposed to pass through their position as a rite of passage and, in the process, carve out their inner artist. Guided by a dream of their own artistic subjectivity and singular authorship, they are supposed to disregard the fact that there are currently “more artists working for other artists as assistants than there are artists working for institutions”, as Vika Kirchenbauer notes in her essay “The Aesthetics of Exploitation.”³ As Kirchenbauer elaborates, when focusing on institutional critique, the vast majority of artists emphasise the structural problems within art institutions, while the institution of the artist remains a blind spot, as it requires examining one’s own process of institutionalisation, position as an employer, and entrepreneurial modes of working. From this perspective, addressing the complexity and flexibility of the term, as well as the job and the labour of assisting, requires a reorientation towards a politics of art-making that decentres the bourgeois subjectivity of the artist. As Simon Leung states, an assistant’s subjectivity maintenance is one of the main, hidden aspects of their work and should be analysed as a type of maintenance of infrastructures of artmaking.⁴ This can be recognised in the way they approach and frame their position: always in flux and looking towards the future, in which an artistic career will release them from waged labour and other, in relation to the exceptional

² Vishmidt, Marina. “The Aesthetic Subject and the Politics of Speculative Labor” in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics*, ed. Randy Martin. Routledge, 2015. pg. 10.

³ Kirchenbauer, Vika. “Aesthetics of Exploitation: The Artist as Employer.” Accessed 3 February 2026. https://www.vk0ms.com/aesthetics_of_exploitation.html.

⁴ Haas, Anika, Kopel, Dana, Leiter, Olivia, Leung, Simon, Shaked, Nizan: “The Assistant, or Maintaining Crumbling Fantasies“, in “Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts“ ed. Antoničević, Tamara and Weickenmeier, Christopher, b_books, forthcoming

character of art in capitalism, “less meaningful” activities. Once personal and professional investments have been made, it becomes increasingly difficult to disinvest.

For this reason, a figure of a disidentified,⁵ resentful assistant can articulate and teach us something about the structures that support the bourgeois notion of artmaking as acts of autonomous authorship. It points to the places of rupture, where the fantasy of a liveable artistic and intellectual life is no longer available. It also makes evident that art’s claim to autonomy comes with hidden costs, and so, to paraphrase Max Haiven,⁶ resentment and disidentification break the spell that paints artistic life and artistic subjectivity as desirable and even attainable possessions. Once disidentified from their position, the assistant’s presence in the process of artistic production becomes highly suspicious and negative. It reveals a gap in which doing the job (of support, maintenance, upkeep) becomes a social practice and, as such, gains political meaning. The shift allows us (as cultural producers and more) to formulate different responses to material conditions we are actively maintaining; this negativity could be framed as resilience or as a potential for sabotage and full disinvestment, organised beyond individual interests. Assistants’ proximity to the source of “pure individual creation”,⁷ as well as to the immediate material conditions of the production, can serve as

⁵ Here, and further on, I’m using the term “disidentification” to imply the process in which one refuses identification with the labour relation, which, in the case of an assistant, has a double bind, which I will expand on in the section on Deproduction.

⁶ Haiven, Max. “No Artist Left Alive: Speculations on the Post-Pandemic Struggles of Cultural Workers Within, Against and Beyond Capitalis.” *Arts of the Working Class* (April 23, 2020) quoted in: Petrossiants, Andreas, and Vishmidt, Marina. “Spaces of Speculation: Movement Politics in the Infrastructure.” *Historical Materialism*, 14. November 2020. <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/spaces-of-speculation-movement-politics-in-the-infrastructure/>.

⁷ Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. “Manifesto! Maintenance Art – Proposal for an Exhibition “Care,” 1969.” 1969. Ronald Feldman Gallery. Web. 9 April 2026. <https://feldmangallery.com/exhibition/manifesto-for-maintenance-art-1969>

a location from which the conditions of artmaking could be misused and reformulated. From this perspective, deproduction is introduced as a method for working through institutional constraints by making the usually concealed conditions and dependencies of artistic production explicit.

Chapter overview

The projects gathered and contextualised in this reflective documentation investigate the position and the work of assistants through the lens of feminist politics of reproductive labour and infrastructural critique.⁸ The analytical tools employed were developed through collaborative research with Christopher Weickenmeier and the project "Assistances," as documented in Chapter II. The structural problems and hierarchies encountered in the institutions of art are evident in the university as well. "Assistances" addressed this problem structurally from the position of working at public institutions of education, as both Weickenmeier and I are artistic and research associates at a university and an art academy. In the context of this dissertation, collaborative editing and research operated as

⁸ I'm using the notion of infrastructural critique in Vishmidt's understanding of it as a proposal to reconfigure how institutional resources could be repurposed and processes of valorisation intercepted and misused. From this perspective, I'm also interested in the positions that become infrastructure through their role and function. As Matthew Poole writes: "A lorry or truck may be considered a product when produced in the factory or when sitting on the dealership forecourt, but it may also be considered to be infrastructure when in use as a part of a network of logistics."

Poole, Matthew. *Infrastructure, Ideology, Hegemony*. El Baroni, Bassam, Edt. *Between the material and the possible: infrastructural re-examination and speculation in art*. Sternberg Press ; Edith-Russ-Haus, 2022., pg. 51.

See further:

Beck, Martin, Beatrice von Bismarck, Sabeth Buchmann, und Ilse Lafer, Hrsg. *Broken Relations: Infrastructure, Aesthetics, and Critique*. Spector Books OHG, 2022.

Vishmidt, Marina. *Infrastructural Critique: Contemporary Art Between Reproduction and Abolition*. Editors: Hayward, Danny, Stakemeier, Kerstin, and Abse Gogarty, Larne. Verso, 2026.

counter-practices to the traditional academic frameworks that singularise and individualise scientific and artistic processes. The neologism “assistances” was coined during our process and derives from the historical specificity of the activity of assisting artists, as it continues to support, maintain, and conceal the economic, social, and cultural organisation of artistic production. The frameworks applied in Chapter I come from the sustained engagement with Marina Vishmidt’s writing on management and maintenance, and the aesthetics of resentment, providing the main analytical foundation for formulating assisting as a type of labour that not only conceals the dependencies inherent in the artmaking, but that can be used as a mode of artistic deproduction.

The (im)potentialities of assistantship positions are analysed in Chapter I, titled “Nobody’s Small, Tedious Work,” which examines figures and cases of real and abstract assistants as they are narrated and operate as projection surfaces for the unfulfilled fantasies of artistic resistance and resilience. This segment of the reflective documentation outlines how the assistant’s position can be instrumentalised to represent both absolute, abstract flexibility and a form of invisible resistance within reproductive labour. This is illustrated with examples from the writing of theatre artists René Pollesch and Sivan Ben Yishai. In their essay and play, respectively, the fictional assistants appear as almost grotesque stand-ins for the lack of self-actualisation, as a resistance to neoliberal promises (when the job is done by a man) and as invisible caretakers of the institution (when the same position is occupied by a woman). In both cases, the assistants are the ones who remain, even when their worlds come to an end. The gendered nature of reproductive labour is evident in how the lack of subjectivity in the case of Pollesch’s assistant is understood and conceptualised as a

refusal, whereas Ben Yishai's assistant embodies all negative, unproductive aspects of reproduction (she's uninteresting, invisible, microscopic). These two figures are examined as representations of reproductive labour through a framework proposed by Kathrin Busch, who theorises Pollesch's method of working within the tradition of the aesthetics of depotentialisation. Busch proposes the aesthetics of incapacity as a way of conceptualising the realm in which artistic practice can still perform refusal within capitalist modes of production. Drawing on Marina Vishmidt's materialist critique of the uses of the term of alienation, I'm arguing that the aesthetics of depotentialisation and incapacity are based on the alienated labour of the assistants, who perfectly substitute the (in)capacity of the artist, as the two examples by Pollesch and Ben Yishai illustrate. As Kirchenbauer writes, the gap between what most artistic practices aim to perform (social justice, gender and race equality, refusal of capitalism, etc.) and the labour conditions that sustain them (which they reproduce as a consequence) is revealed as the aesthetics of exploitation. Further on, these abstractions are confronted with accounts from former assistants, now artists in their own right, beyond the romanticisation and metaphorisation of precarious labour. I analyse the writing and cases by Mathilde Supe, Hannah Helbig, Annika Krump, and Miriam Stoney through Marina Vishmidt's proposed frameworks of fixed capital (as she derives it from Marx) and the aesthetics of resentment. I'm interested in tracking how assistantship is narrated and integrated into one's own work and practice, and retrospectively narrativised and theorised as a personal and subjective rite of passage. At the same time, this analysis aims to highlight the limits of personalised narratives and interiorities when writing from unaccounted or subordinate positions (my approach to this will be further established and elaborated on in Chapter III in the context of "Zero Slack", a

novel that is at the same time a work of creative fiction and a contract). In the case of Mathilde Supe's "one-sided account," her assistantship report has been fully integrated into the work of her former boss, video and visual artist Keren Cytter. Hannah Helbig's and Annika Krump's internship diaries trace the genealogy of exploitation in German state theatres over more than twenty years. The two cases show how transgression gets employed as a primary method of artistic production, under the assumption that great art must come from suffering and pain, thereby naturalising brutality and institutional violence. Further on, through Miriam Stoney's account of her time as a contracted assistant in an artist studio, I'm questioning whether "reciprocal shelter" as a base for a relation between the artists and the assistant is structurally possible. Since the assistants are structurally conditioned to aspire, they are alienated from their own incapacity in the same way Busch describes, only without the option to claim that experience as artistic. Rather than thinking through power relations and their negotiation, I bring in a proposal by Jason Hirata, who suggests thinking through needs and dependencies and producing even more of them. Hirata conceptualises the artist not as a figure of resistance or refusal, but as an expert in abundantly creating needs, without assuming they will be fulfilled. This form of expertise (of dependency) acknowledges intersubjectivity and violence without pacifying them. As a framework proposed by Hirata, dependency doesn't centre artistic subjectivity but shows how it can be used to create and meet needs, and points to different ways of navigating these processes materially. These different flexible fantasies reveal what is structurally conditioned and expected: the position of assistantship requires a person to suspend their own subjectivity to a significant degree. It is in this gap, in which the assistant displays their capacity to completely go into the work of

another person (and in this process, stabilise the artistic subjectivity), that the potentials of deproduction as a mode of working can be explored. My intention was to approach it in two experiments in deproduction: "Zero Slack", a novel in three performance scores; and the "Assistances," a collaboratively led research project and a two-part seminar workshop.

In Chapter II, I will contextualise and elaborate on my collaborative work developed with Christopher Weickenmeier, a research candidate at the University of Leuphana. Since 2022, Weickenmeier and I have been working together on a series of projects that I will refer to in this dissertation as "Assistances". We organised a series of lectures and workshops, which are about to be brought together with newly commissioned writing in a volume titled *Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts*, and published by the b_books. This volume, together with the ongoing discussions initiated before, during, and after workshop-seminars at Kunstraum Lüneburg and the Academy of Fine Arts Nuremberg (AdBK Nuremberg) in 2023 and 2024, presents the first publication that analyses the labour of assisting in the art field from different artistic, historical, and theoretical perspectives. As such, the publication extends beyond the scope of this dissertation. In Chapter II, I will therefore focus on the collaborative writing and research as counter-practices which have provided the main theoretical frameworks of this dissertation. The research and the workshop seminars were initiated to counter the frameworks and methodologies implied by the structure of the university and the curriculum of the artistic research PhD, which emphasise individualising methodologies, where the collaborative aspects are eclipsed in favour of stabilising the singular authorship of the artist/researcher. As Chapter I elaborates in detail,

individualised accounts and perspectives are insufficient for structurally examining the problems and questions related to assisting and reproductive labour in the arts, and these had to be approached horizontally and from as many perspectives as possible. From these needs, "Assistances" were developed as a counter-practice and context for collaborative work and study. The aim was to expand on the research questions and address them not only to artists who have experiences of working as theatre and studio assistants, but to art historians, educators, producers, dancers, curators, writers and philosophers, and most importantly, to students of cultural studies, art education, and art and performance. Since students from these fields are often trained by their education to think of themselves as future, singular artists and intellectuals in their own right, addressing these questions precisely at the site of their affirmation and production was a curricular intervention proposed by "Assistances." Further on, these students are the ones who are first in line to take over internships and assistantships as a formal beginning of their careers. This is rarely reflected upon during the studies of theatre and art, although these are precisely the programs that, in many cases, have an obligatory internship as a part of their curriculum. The horizontal approach of the workshop seminars implied the possibility of discussing on more equal terms the conditions of labour in the art field from the perspectives of cultural producers and institutionalised artists and students who might find themselves in the positions of their assistants.

The first workshop's participants at Kunstraum Lüneburg included Valentina Desideri, Stefano Harney, Jason Hirata, Will Holder, Annick Kleizen, Cally Spooner, Eric Golo Stone, Mathilde Supe, Terre Thaemlitz, and Marina Vishmidt. The second workshop at the AdBK Nuremberg included Ghislaine Leung, Miriam Stoney, Simon Asencio, and Vika Kirchenbauer,

along with the students and faculty of the MA Live Art Forms and the AdBK Nuremberg, Johannes Paul Raether and Kerstin Stakemeier. The term "assistances" tangentially refers to the *Services Working Group*, a 1993 project by Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler, that traced the emergence of project labour in the art field. This ongoing, collaborative context was the basis for the main theoretical framework of my research, which I will analyse, contextualise, and theorise further in this reflective documentation. Without expanding my research interests to create these formats, my theoretical base and approach to writing the novel and this reflective documentation wouldn't have taken shape in this form or at this scope. Further, the process of commissioning texts, some of which became primary sources in my analysis, implicates me in the production of knowledge rather than positioning me as an outside observer. "Assistances" demonstrated how a counter-practice to the individuating formats and hierarchical structures that actively suppress and erase collaborative work and research could be sustained, albeit in a limited, institutionally bound scope. As Moten and Harney write, the university is not a place of study, but a site of extraction⁹, recognisable in its bureaucratic and individualising demands. "Assistances" was a structural response to the conditions as I encountered them; the need for an in-depth research context and long-term study had to be organised around, rather than against, institutional boundaries. As such, this is not a practice that pretends to surpass the university as an institution, but it was established as a mode of addressing the structural problems while being deeply implicated in them, as the submission of this dissertation further demonstrates.

⁹ Harney and Moten, "the university: last words."
https://blogs.ubc.ca/virtualkoorners/files/2020/09/moten-harney_university-last-words.pdf.

In Chapter III, I will contextualise and analyse "Zero Slack" as a method of creative fiction which enacts its creative and legal dependencies through three performance scores and operates as a contract with the assistant, Jessica (Simon Asencio), and financial consultant, SwissBanking666 (Joshua Wicke). The form of the novel is a direct response to the demand that my written work should be publicly accessible three days before my defence, which is scheduled for June 10, 2026. The analysis of this institutional bind, or bondage, prompted me to find a way to address it within the main artistic submission, and to establish the position of PhD Candidate as both a point of institutional convergence and a fictionalised figure. Since I have already performed the novel at internal and public colloquia between 2021 and 2025, this presentation can only be framed as a reenactment of these performances. The role of this performance, to make my "research findings" transparent and fully legible, also requires a different approach than that of performing my own authorship. Following the findings, as elaborated in this dissertation, the labour of the public presentation of my artistic achievement cannot be performed by me, but only by someone hired as my assistant. I employed Jessica, an already existing practice by dancer, choreographer, and artist Simon Asencio, which, in his words, "involves real-life background acting and being hired by other artists."¹⁰ She is also hired as a character in "Zero Slack", where she serves as one of several figures, with the specific task of filling in the gaps between each character's appearance. This implies that she will be performing as her hired self, but also as a character version of herself, which she didn't write. Due to the lack of funding necessary for the rehearsal, production, and performance, all collaborators agreed to a deferred system of

¹⁰ Asencio, Simón. Biography. Institute, Dutch Art. Dai. Zugriffen 5. März 2026. <http://dutchartinstitute.eu/page/9902/simon-ascencio>

payment, based on the promise of the future success of this work; any further publication or performance based on my work has to be negotiated with Jessica. This way, Jessica's labour enables the PhD Candidate to complete her studies and acquire the title, while the promise of future compensation may never materialise. To calculate the PhD Candidate's overall investment into the title, and the budget required for the production mandated by the PhD in Artistic Research Curriculum, SwissBanking666 was hired as a financial consultant for the work. The novel's financial score makes the extractive economic agreements explicit and literal, rather than metaphorical artistic promises. On another level, one of my main interests in writing this text was to find a form which accounts for the disidentified relation to labour. In order to work around the trap of confessional, diaristic writing, which reinstates and centres the unaccounted inner lives and their personal injuries as their private property. The scores, as well as the contract, were devised in order to deproduce the structure of my authorship on a formal, legal and material level.

Deproduction

In addition to these two methods and Jessica's planned performative readings, this reflective documentation analyses and builds upon the collaborations, contexts, theoretical frameworks, and methods developed during the research period. As briefly introduced, assisting as a mode of deproduction is to be understood as a way of working through rather than against institutional conditions. It also takes a soft cue and orientation from the brief but astute conclusion by Stakemeier

and Vishmidt in the introduction to *Unlearning Exercises*,¹¹ which diagnoses the necessity of unlearning to become a site of our own deproduction, which could become a “source of our commoning.” The three scores of the novel respond to this by addressing processes of institutionalisation, overinvestment, and the extraction of knowledge and experience as private property, while “Assistances” sets the theoretical and conceptual framing necessary for the submitted artistic work. The proposal of this dissertation is to formulate deproduction through several shifts simultaneously: the dispersal of authorship as well as the redistribution and misuse of resources (the artist as an institution being one of them).

Rather than standing outside of the processes as critique, deproduction derives from what Kerstin Stakemeier has theorised under the term *Entkunstung*.¹² Drawing on Adorno, for whom *Entkunstung* described the process of art merging with and into other forms of cultural production in the 20th century, Stakemeier has traced various attempts art has made across its history at its own dissolution, from Russian Productivism to the dematerialising practices of Conceptual art, among others, in order to reformulate the problem as a path worth examining. She shows how different attempts at *Entkunstung* failed in relation to, and together with, the processes of revolutionising general labour and became distinct art genres. In relation to these histories, deproduction proposes working through the conditions and the dependencies that are structurally concealed. It operates through corrosive

¹¹ Stakemeier, Kerstin and Vishmidt, Marina. “Foreword: Unlearning to Unlearn” in Choi, Binna, Annette Krauss, Yolande Zola Zoli van der Heide, and Liz Allan, eds. *Unlearning Exercises: Art Organizations as Sites for Unlearning*. London/New York: Minor Compositions, 2025. pg. 10.

¹² Stakemeier, Kerstin. “Entkunstung. Artistic Models for the End of Art.” PhD diss. University College London, 2014.
https://www.academia.edu/76920057/Artistic_Models_for_the_End_of_Art.

complicity, as a process in which one can't be entirely at a safe distance, and proposes disidentification. The intention is to demonstrate how disidentification from artistic promises and subjectivities opens up possibilities for organising beyond individual career trajectories and the accumulation of personal capital and recognition. As Andreas Petrossiants proposed by his term of destituent art, artistic and cultural production should be examined and approached in relation to the lived struggles¹³. His theorising goes beyond institutional critique and the reformist agenda, focusing on identifying sites of common struggle across different registers of social (re)production. Drawing on Tronti, Petrossiants proposes the destituent art as a form that wouldn't separate cultural production from the lived struggles and material conditions of living, employing the notion of disidentification in its workerist meaning.¹⁴ By refusing identification with the labour relation in the context of artistic and cultural production, art would need to take into account its conditions of production, and its role in "disidentifying labour from capital."¹⁵ For an aspiring assistant, this implies coming to terms with their structural position in the process of artistic production, and doesn't exclude recognition that what they are trained to do is to identify upward, where the labour they are performing should cease to exist. Framed through this lens, deproduction is not busy with the question of whether something is art and under which conditions, but materialises the conditions themselves. This mode of working aligns with what can be learned from the

¹³ Petrossiants, Andreas. "Preliminary Notes toward a Destituent Art." *Social Text* 42, Nr. 2 (159) (2024): 35–52. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-11084496>.

¹⁴ Tronti, Mario, "New Type of Political Experiment," 209–10. in Petrossiants, "Preliminary Notes toward a Destituent Art.", pg. 37.

¹⁵ Stakemeier, Kerstin. "Annotations of 'Spaces of Speculation: Movement Politics in the Infrastructure: An Interview with Marina Vishmidt' by Andreas Petrossiants." In *Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts*, edited by Tamara Antonijevic and Christopher Weickenmeier. Berlin: b_books, forthcoming.

assistant, since being in proximity to something you wish to leave behind doesn't necessarily mean the conditions for leaving are met (or even that you know where to go). As Petrossiants states, leaving the institutions can't free us from rethinking the social relations that created those enclosures, and calling for the dismantling of an institution's framework doesn't imply the destruction of the tasks it fails to perform.¹⁶ Drawing on Terre Thaemlitz's understanding of deproduction as "a measure of flexibility to survive disownership,"¹⁷ I don't think it should have to mean merely surviving or surviving in isolation. In practice, I approached these problems by dispersing "my" artistic subjectivity and treating the constraints as frameworks rather than as obstacles. The aim of these (at the time of writing, still ongoing and in many respects forming) projects was to focus on assisting as a site where the most necessary and devalued labour is delegated and taken over – at the source of "pure individual creation." Rendered through these lenses, artistic "genius" becomes nothing more than an overflow of material and work that the assistant must manage and maintain. From this perspective, deproduction can be understood as a disidentified mode of artistic making in the wake of its demystification; there's no artistic subjectivity to salvage, and the horizon of artistic production bound to institutionally recognised singular authorship is no longer a maintainable position. Stevphen Shukaitis and Joanna Figiel suggest¹⁸ that the promise of personal fulfilment, and following one's dream of doing work that doesn't feel like

¹⁶ Rakowitz, Michael, Shellyne Rodriguez, Stevphen Shukaitis, et al. *Diversity of Aesthetics: Volumes 1-3*. Ed. Petrossiants, Andreas, Rosales, José, Walcott, Rinaldo, and Vishmidt, Marina, Common Notions, 2025. pg 30.

¹⁷ Thaemlitz, Terre. "Deproduction". comatonse (October 17, 2017). Accessed 8. February 2026. https://www.comatonse.com/writings/2017_deproduction.html

¹⁸ Shukaitis, Stevphen and Figiel, Joanna. *The Wages of Dreamwork: Class Composition & the Social Reproduction of Cultural Labor*. Minor Compositions, 2024.

labour, leads to the "death of sociality," implying that the drive for self-actualisation creates conditions for the exploitation of one's capacities through the privatisation of desires and their linking to the promise of an individual career. If an artistic career is framed as one's "dreamwork," then to be dreamless might be a better option for the expert dependent, that is, an artist and an assistant at the same time. This approach reframes the model of assistantship established in the first chapter; the assistant's resentment, when mobilised through methods of deproduction, holds the promise not of running artistic subjectivity into the ground, but of reconfiguring its capacities and access to build and maintain social relations beyond the horizons of the institutions of art and the artist, and beyond the pretences of institutional critique and the moralism of criticality.

From this framework, the core questions to be examined in this reflective documentation are: How does the position of the assistant in the process of artistic production stabilise the bourgeois subjectivity of the artist, and how could it be used as a point of departure to dismantle this subjectivity? How can reproductive labour be studied within the structures that operate by concealing it, such as universities and art academies alike, and can this research context be sustained within the same structures that invisibilise it? If so, on what conditions? What happens to authorship once its constitutive dependencies are turned into its main co-conspirators, in a literal and structural way and not metaphorically?

Chapter I: Nobody's Small, Tedious Work¹⁹

Enter Assistant.

The two following appearances of fictionalised assistants map the problems, desires, and potentials contained within these forms of employment and labour perhaps too well. They are at least a decade, and possibly centuries, apart; one is a feminised, microscopic form of life, while the other is contained within the ageing body of a man enwrapped in a long, grey cloak. They both signify resilience and perseverance for their employers, although they speak from two very different positions.

In the final act of Sivan Ben Yishai's 2022 play, *Offending the Stage*²⁰, the theatre as an institution finally comes to its bitter end, develops a voice of its own and speaks out on the conditions of its downfall, transformation, and possible new beginnings. The old institution is in the process of becoming, self-aware and present as a body, and as a multi-species ecosystem in which more-than-human life is flourishing. Humanity seems to be over, except for one last specimen – a 20-year-old female assistant still surviving in its ruins. Ben Yishai's theatre speaks:

From all the forms of life – it's her, from all the actors, the writers, the directors – it's her, who was always there, part of me, she was there before them, she was there after them, she witnessed everyone, everything, yet was never asked, was never seen, was never heard, never mattered, never considered – an assistant in a

¹⁹ The theoretical framing of Vishmidt's fixed capital concept and the analyses of Supe, Hirata, and Helbig draw on collaborative writing with Christopher Weickenmeier for the introduction to *Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts* (b_books, forthcoming). The sections on Kirchenbauer's aesthetics of exploitation and on the practices of Krump, Stoney, and Hirata have been further developed for this dissertation.

²⁰ Ben Yishai, Sivan. *Offending the Stage*. Suhrkamp Verlag AG Berlin 2022.

theatre, a 20-year-old assistant in an old, panting theatre world, an assistant, a bacteria in a dying body, whom everyone is trained to ignore, whose opinion no one wants to hear, not the director, not the actors, not you, no one, not me either, I never wanted to hear her, never had time, never had patience, I mean, who would have ever imagined that she and none other than her was the one to know what to do after this body decays, was the one to know how to live after death, how to rebuild after everything is done. She knew, but as she was never asked, she never spoke, sat on the side and never spoke, unnoticeable, undetectable, she saw generations of shooting stars flying and diminishing, burning and getting burned, and never spoke, watched rehearsals and shows and didn't say a thing, an assistant who doesn't count, the assistant who no one counts, who no one remembers. But she was there and waited, she did her job, followed from the side and waited, and not like a spectator waiting for another show to end finally, but like the bacterium awaits a body to die so it can finally start to break down the cells, and break the capillaries open, and release the trapped gases within the cavities of the corpse, let the bodily fluids leak out, let the blood flow, let it harden, let it crust, so much life was filling my body after I died, as though the death was always in me waiting, rehearsing, preparing, as though the nests and the eggs were always there, hidden, waiting for their grand entrance, their big monologue, for their final break through, as though the fungi, the snakes, the grass-covered carpets were all part of the genetic constitution of this institution, waiting to flourish in the magnitude of their endless forms.²¹

²¹ Ben Yishai, *Offending the Stage*, pg. 64.

Echoing the post-pandemic vision of a future in which whole cities are under lockdown, and theatres are shut, defunded, and completely deserted, the ending scene indulges in apocalyptic imagery, almost romantically clinging to the uprooted but still soft, velvet audience seats. The building has become nothing more than a ruin, finally and completely consumed by uncontrollable fires fuelled by the escalating climate crisis. Initially introduced as someone who knows about resilience and survival, the assistant disappears. We can assume she has ascended to another form of life, since there are no further mentions of her surviving the fire that consumes the theatre. For Ben Yishai, the matter of this character's survival may be beyond the point – she plays her metaphorical role quite well. There's something too alive, even vitalist, about her, something distrusting and disturbing about her presence in the desolate landscape of the institution's body. She promises and announces life and transformation, but this promise is taken back by the all-consuming fire in the next and final paragraph of the play. What could explain her radical patience, resilience, lack of subjectivity, and the wisdom of her sphinxian silence that Ben Yishai brings up as her most formidable qualities? Maybe the playwright wanted to insinuate that if you're capable of surviving as a 20-year-old woman in German state theatre, you might as well make it through the apocalypse.

Our second figure, her colleague, is her exact opposite. In René Pollesch's "Lob des alten litauischen Regieassistenten im grauen Kittel" ("Praise for the old Lithuanian assistant director in the grey robe"), the old assistant contrasts with young, hip interns who aspire to heroically overcome their current position. The Lithuanian assistant doesn't want or expect anything from himself or anyone else; he doesn't lie to himself because he lacks subjectivity. He seems to be doing

his job precisely because there is no future in it, as a sort of shelter from the neoliberal world. Pollesch writes:

But how much more could the hip intern gain from alienation. From precisely that—not being himself, and at least earning money. Someone must have told him that being himself feeds him. In a language that doesn't belong to him, but in which things are readable for him. (...)

Self-realisation knows nothing yet of him, the old assistant in the grey coat. (...)

The old assistant doesn't complain either. Complaining always neutralises everything. He doesn't get indignant like the artists. Indignation is always heroic. It's always supposed to be bigger than life.²²

From the perspective of today, Pollesch's assistant can be read as quite literally the last man standing, a dinosaur of theatre. The assistants should either burn out or ascend, but not stick around. Their position is supposed to be transient, regardless of their success. In these terms, the young woman and the old man are both exceptions to the rule and strangely aligned in their seemingly accidental longevity – they have developed a codependent, perverse relationship with their motherboard, the theatre.

As the landscape of the contemporary state theatre production has significantly changed in the last 15 years, a

²² Original text, English translations are mine: “Wie viel mehr aber könnte der Hippe Praktikant aus Entfremdung gewinnen. Daraus eben, nicht selbst zu sein, und wenigstens Geld verdienen. Irgendwer muss dem erzählt haben, dass es ihn ernährt, er selbst zu sein. In einer Sprache, die ihm nicht gehört, in der aber die Dinge lesbar sind für ihn. (...) Die Selbstverwirklichung weiß noch nichts von dem, dem alten Assistenten im grauen Kittel. (...) Der alte alte Assistent jammert auch nicht. Jammern neutralisiert immer alles. Der empört sich nicht wie die Künstler. Empörung ist immer heroisch. Die soll immer größer sein als das Leben.” in Pollesch, René. “Lob des alten litauischen Regieassistenten im grauen Kittel.” In Menke, Christoph, und Juliane Rebentisch, Hrsg. *Kreation und Depression: Freiheit im gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus*. 4. Auflage. Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2019. pg. 243 - 248.

higher level of education, flexibility, resilience and competence and competition is necessary to reach even a precarious position as a director's assistant. It would simply not be a good look for the house to have an old man occupying a position reserved for the young, ambitious future directors. Even for Pollesch at the time of writing, the Lithuanian assistant represents something lost to the neoliberal demand for self-fulfilment and actualisation; the old assistant is where he is because he never had to send in an application. Through this ascetic figure, Pollesch demonstrates the ethos which sets the lack of desire to move forward, to become an artist in his own right, as his most special quality, of being Nobody. The more recent example, Ben Yishai's assistant, is simply nobody, not interesting for her lack of self, fully embodying the gendered and abject aspects of reproductive labour. Pollesch's assistant seems like he has made a choice – why would a man stay in such a subservient position if not by his own free will? His age and dedication to the *small, tedious work* of his craft are seen as an act of radical refusal in the capitalist world. His younger female counterpart also does her work, if on a smaller, microbiotic level. Their common denominators are a lack of personal qualities, desires, demands, resilience, and patience, but it's their longevity that makes them special. These two seem to have achieved the impossible by putting the needs of others first for an extremely long time – they have not survived only until the end of the season, but until the end of their worlds.

In "Rehearsing Failure,"²³ Kathrin Busch analyses Pollesch's approach to rehearsals in his movie *Portrait for a Lack of*

²³ Busch, Kathrin. "Rehearsing Failure", in Lafer, Ilse. *Putting Rehearsals to the Test: Practices of Rehearsal in Fine Arts, Film, Theater, Theory, and Politics*. Ed. Ruhm, Constanze and Buchmann, Sabeth. Publication Series of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna 19. Sternberg Press, 2016. pg. 131 - 137.

Anything Better to Do as an inversion, a deliberate repurposing of the concept and the method that is conventionally applied in order to bracket reality and suspend the usual operations of life to gain new possibilities. Pollesch doesn't consider that art can lead us towards a possibility that would otherwise remain unfulfilled and argues that rehearsal can only be a suspension of life, which can seep in and destabilise it. Life and its possibilities can only be a disturbance to the artistic process, and this is, at least in his work, a disturbance wanted and needed. Busch writes:

Pollesch thus rejects the idea that rehearsals serve to perfect something, and formulates a denial of the false promises of self-transcendence: "We miss ourselves and our lives, if we aim for something that goes beyond us." The rehearsal, conversely, provides an experience of insistence, of the finite, and of embodiment, and it refers to what can specifically not be revised.²⁴

In *Portrait for a Lack of Anything Better to Do*, rehearsal is recorded over and over again; Busch calls this pure repetition, not betterment or a site of productive work that changes over time, but rather a place of what could be framed as de-creation and unworking:

Art creates no possibilities; it scraps them, thus, pointing out the instance of the impossible and the not-to-be-made-possible in lived life. From a perspective of refusal like this, art serves to counter the phantasm of feasibility and self-empowerment. The deactivating procedure of strict repetition and limitation are thus to be understood as forms of resistance for Pollesch.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid, pg. 132.

²⁵ Ibid, pg. 132.

She goes on to situate his work within the aesthetics of de-potentialisation, in the line of thinking about impossibilities she links to Antonin Artaud, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, and Giorgio Agamben. Busch traces this aesthetic tradition back to the beginning of the 20th century and to Artaud's claim that an artwork's imperfection expresses the gravity the artist experiences during the process. Backed up by Blanchot, the incapacity of the artist to fully translate into language or form becomes the basis on which he grounds his art theory around the reduction of possibilities, erasure, indeterminacy, and unworking. In the society that glorifies continuous betterment, and never-ending competition and competence, art becomes, for these thinkers and philosophers, a place where something could be undone, or at least, unfinished:

Artistic production includes the experience of non-mastery, which cannot be compensated with creative technique. It follows a different logic of activity in which the partial non-mastery of the realisation of an idea, the possibility of deviation and being driven away from the original intention, makes up an essential momentum of the activity itself. Incapacity inscribes itself in this distance between the intention and its realisation. It is not genius or talent, not practice and improvement, but rather *a rejection of the possibility of mastering artistic activity*, as these theories suggest, which makes up the essence of art. This is what gives the *aesthetics of incapacity* their potential for resistance.²⁶

The aesthetics of incapacity, by rejecting optimisation, propose art as a place where refusal of demands for productivity can be rehearsed and performed – a strategy that

²⁶ Ibid. pg. 134.

reaffirms artistic practice as the realm of autonomous labour; these have a long history and have found their forms further in different practices using methods such as repetition until exhaustion, erasure, and creating and representing failure²⁷, including the long history of art of the institutional critique. In most of these cases, the political horizon proposed by art is limited to refusal, critique through the showcasing of contradictions, or the performance of sabotage.

Similarly, for Pollesch, the rehearsal becomes a space where life and its events can be incorporated, and where continuous improvement and the demand for mastery are refused. Busch analyses his work further in connection with the early writing of Agamben, who states that "the phantasm of ability predominates."²⁸ What is implied is that the separation of our own inability and impotentiality robs us of the experience of what we can and can't do. The consequence of this estrangement is that we are "less free," without the possibility of the aforementioned resistance to the demand for mastery, improvement, and self-actualisation – in short, we're alienated from our own (in)capacities. "Phantasm of ability" implies, in that sense, a double alienation – from the labour conditions and from our own incapacity, since we're always "free" to aspire for more. It may be important here to distinguish some uses of alienation as a term, as Marina Vishmidt has theorised and pointed out in her essay "Relatable Alienation," demarcating the uses along their materialist or idealist aspirations. Understood in materialist terms,

²⁷ These tendencies can be traced from Beckett, Kafka, and Celan in literature to Bas Jan Ader's disappearance at sea, to Anne Imhof's and Tino Sehgal's insistence on endurance and stasis, and to parasocial choreographic encounters that capitalise on performers' subjectivities and leave no traces behind.

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, "Nudities", trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, pg. 44 in: Busch, Kathrin. "Rehearsing Failure", in Lafer, Ilse. *Putting Rehearsals to the Test: Practices of Rehearsal in Fine Arts, Film, Theater, Theory, and Politics*. Ed. Ruhm, Constanze and Buchmann, Sabeth. Publication Series of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna 19. Sternberg Press, 2016. pg. 135.

alienation is not a "human condition" that changes according to the government, standards of living, or even access to, application and development of technology:

Alienation is ... about distance, and it is about constraint. Distance from one's own desires, constrained to follow the desires of another or constrained to fit into structures established by others of which you are not the prime beneficiary of, if you benefit from them at all. Alienation means you don't get to decide. You are held at a distance, you are blocked, you cannot begin to even know what it might mean to have control over your life as a consistent form of life, not as a personal issue.²⁹

She notices a tendency in art and theory to deploy alienation not as a condition of forced passivity or distance, but as an empowering (for example as a new critical theory commodity, as in the case of the recently coined term "xenofeminism," which she critiques at length) or even necessary process for the creation of resistance (such as in the case of "Wages for Housework").³⁰ This is quite obvious in Pollesch's framing of the Lithuanian assistant as the one who can teach us the benefits of leaning into our alienation, not striving for anything, but having a job that pays, because art can't offer much solace anyway. Although Pollesch employs a materialist approach and aesthetics in his works, the figure of the assistant is constructed in idealist terms: the structural constraints of a person's position are framed as personal and even aesthetic choices. The invisible labourer in Ben Yishai's fantasy of the end of the institution (and, by implication,

²⁹ Vishmidt, Marina. *Relatable Alienation*, in Divided Publishing, ed. *What the Fire Sees: A Divided Reader*. Divided Publishing Ltd, 2020, pg. 86.

³⁰ Federici, Silvia. *Wages Against Housework*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press and Power of Women Collective, 1975.

the world) is fully immersed in reproductive labour, which is framed as absolutely necessary – she literally transforms the conditions of life within the institution with her own body.

In both instances, these flexible fantasies of assistants serve as negative representations of the artist. If the artist, meanwhile, is capable of and susceptible to becoming everyone and everything, it's only in the assistant that the promises of not-becoming can live on or haunt. On the other hand, if we relate the artist's incapacity to a lost, sublime experience necessary for the creation of art as a site of resistance, the question shifts to the conditions and ground upon which this incapacity can be rehearsed or enacted. In both cases, the assistants embody the potential to become artists, and, with it, their incapacity is contained. Because of this status, they also embody the expertise of capacity, as expressed in the expectations implicit in their job description: flexibility and openness to all forms of labour. They are radically capable and incapable at the same time; and their labour is most necessary and most devalued, the "small, tedious work" of navigating, mediating, and making space for the artist's incapacities to arise, deviate, and shift. The aesthetic framework proposed by Pollesch, Ben Yishai, and Busch requires assistants' work to lay the ground for the artist to perform the refusal. This can be traced in how assistants' positions are structurally alienated by strategically ignoring the material conditions of their position, and idealised as those who "carry the production." I'm interested in understanding how this labour can be examined on-site and, from that position, theorised and conceptualised as a possible place of resistance within the mentioned conditions, as they are inhabited and sustained.

The framing of the assistant's (in)capacity gains material clarity when we consider Marina Vishmidt's definition of the assistant as "fixed capital – the condition for production but never the site or author of the creative act into which the production is transubstantiated."³¹ Vishmidt turns to the assistant as an "instrument of labour" (Marx otherwise mentions industrial buildings, machinery, raw materials, even animals), whose value is determined by the function it serves in the production process and steadily diminishes as it is gradually used up. She looks to intra-class conflicts and to racialised and gender-based violence of devalued labour, and proposes an inquiry into the aesthetics of resentment. Desolidarisation and resentment are the flip sides of the impossibility of organising across class divides and resistance to completely identifying with the commodity relation. The assistant as fixed capital can be articulated through an "aesthetics of exploitation," which Vika Kirchenbauer has theorised and elaborated at length on the situation in Berlin's art scene, noting that it's common to overlook the artist as an institution. She examines job postings by artists, who, in their self-understanding and image as critical and dedicated to social justice, readily disregard their own position as employers who underpay and exploit their freelance, precarious employees. This gap between what the work claims to (un)do and the conditions of labour it directly reproduces results from the shortcomings of institutional critique, as Kirchenbauer puts it, in failing to address artists as institutions that create precarious labour conditions in the same way entrepreneurs do. Kirchenbauer asks:

³¹ Vishmidt, Marina. *The Replacements: Waitress in the Sky*, in *Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts*, Ed. Antonićećević Tamara, Weickenmeier, Christopher, b_books, forthcoming.

Is it, for instance, worth producing a film about in/visible un(der)paid labour and communist utopias in conditions of production where none of those involved earns a living wage, including the producers? Is that which is being expressed more valuable than the material reality created as part of the endeavour? Will its artistic contribution to political debate naturally outlive and outweigh the pains inflicted for its becoming?³²

Citing a German film director and professor who claimed that unionised film workers would end the entire independent film scene in Europe, Kirchenbauer proposes considering alternative aesthetics. Her proposal could be theorised as a materialist leaning towards the aesthetics of incapacity, taking into account the structural and labour conditions that produce the work of artistic refusal. Acknowledging such complexities, including artists' struggles to produce their works and align their productions with a frame of reference they can't replicate (i.e., reproducing the aesthetics of exploitation) and their simultaneous exploitation of other art workers, could lead to different uses of material resources and aesthetics. The following examples of works by Mathilde Supe, Hannah Helbig, Annika Krump, Miriam Stoney and Jason Hirata address this problem in equally complex and ambiguous ways.

The novel *Keren Cytter Does Not Like to Share: A one-sided account by Mathilde Supe*³³ describes Supe's time as the artist Keren Cytter's assistant in 2013. The book, developed from Supe's assistantship report gone rogue, includes various instances in which Cytter appears as an exploitative and volatile employer, yet Cytter supported the book's publication ten years later, rightly trusting that such a move could only

³² Kirchenbauer, "Aesthetics of Exploitation."
https://www.vk0ms.com/aesthetics_of_exploitation.html.

³³ Supe, Mathilde. *Keren Cytter Does Not like to Share: A One-Sided Account by Mathilde Supe*. Sternberg Press, 2022.

reinforce her artistic chutzpah, rendering social contradiction as material. Published on the occasion of Cytter's retrospective at the Ludwig Forum Aachen, instead of a catalogue, the book is announced as an "incredible adventure" by the show's curator, Eva Birkenstock. What the blurb does not mention is that this journey was also driven by miscommunication, unclear promises, and massive amounts of unpaid labour. Written with humour and sharpness, Supe's analysis of her employer and the situation she's in (barely speaking English, in New York for the first time, unpaid, managing a set with 50 people) circles around the desire to approximate both the work and the person, her employer, Keren Cytter. At the end of her report, Supe can't connect the work she produced to the conditions and situations on the set as she remembers them. The educational aspect of her assistantship lies in the realisation that Cytter needs chaos in order to produce, and that she, as a stressed-out and unskilled assistant, became one of the work's main catalysts without realising it. The bad assistant is, in the end and always, the perfect assistant. There is little to suggest that the book's intent is to address the conditions it describes; rather, it suggests that Cytter and Birkenstock are willing to showcase their disregard for the detrimental, unsustainable conditions that underpin their claim to independence. It becomes clear how difficult it is for artists to disclose their work's relationship to (wage) labour when it does not simultaneously address the other kind of labour, all the relations of production that allow for its initial appearance as separate or independent from it. Supe's assistantship returns to its source: now, as one of the elements of a work of art, a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* by Cytter. Subsumed by the larger fish of the established artistic subjectivity of her former employer, Supe's "one-sided account" proposes an unstable, weak authorship that manages to both disclose its

conditions of production and approximate them. This dependency is the main building material of her text. The reproductive labour performed by Supe perfectly enters the "self-image" of art; however, it remains in the service of the institution of artistic subjectivity of her former employer, even ten years later. In this gesture, we can recognise what Kerstin Stakemeier notes as the "cannibalisation of neighbouring arts" by the visual arts, in which "other" forms of art are held to the standard of the visual arts and formalised as such.³⁴

Hannah Helbig's lecture performance and script, "Structures and People,"³⁵ is a telling account from the "neighbouring" institution, the German state theatre, and reflects on the lack of solidarity and the abuse that are both common there. Where Supe's writing has been absorbed into her boss's work, Helbig explicitly stages her report against the artistic director and current general manager of the Berliner Ensemble, Oliver Reese. Drawing on her experience as his intern and then director's assistant, her lecture performance responds to the mistreatment and abuse silently enabled by the institution's management and the artists it employs. Rather than speaking truth to power, Helbig's account is about organising and structuring her experience in relation to what is usually framed as a rough beginning to one's career, a rite of passage. It can be read as an elaborate scene of resentment. Helbig tries to exit the 19th-century time capsule of German state theatre by taking all her work and labour – artistic and organisational work, thinking, reading, cutting apples and peeling celery – and reconstructing it, only to emerge back on the same stage, as an artist herself. Her resistance to becoming fixed capital is futile – the process has already

³⁴ Stakemeier, "Annotations of 'Spaces of Speculation', forthcoming.

³⁵ Helbig, Hannah. "Structures and People." in *Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts*, ed. Antonijevic, Tamara and Weickenmeier, Christopher, b_books, forthcoming

taken place. As Marx writes, „instruments of labour can never leave the sphere of production once they have entered it; their function holds them there:

Similarly in agriculture the substances added for the improvement of the soil pass partly into the plants raised and help to form the product. (...) A portion of them therefore passes bodily into the product and thus transfers its value to the product while the other portion remains fixed in its old use-form and retains its value. It persists as a means of production and consequently keeps the form of fixed capital. As a beast of toil an ox is fixed capital. If he is eaten, he no longer functions as an instrument of labour, nor as fixed capital either.³⁶“

By staging the process and the rehearsal space from her point of view, Helbig keeps the form of fixed capital unchanged. She is aware that her gesture is individual and insufficient to meet her desire for change; what this transformation would actually mean (materially and structurally) and how it could be imagined remain unanswered, implying that the dysfunctional structure works precisely as it's meant to.

The conditions described by Helbig have a documented genealogy, which inspired her to start keeping a diary of her own internship. Annika Krump chronicles³⁷ her time as an intern and dramaturgy assistant at the Volksbühne, also in Berlin, during Frank Castorf's tenure as managing director. Published in 2014, Krump's diary provides a historical snapshot of transition and change in Berlin and at the theatre. It offers insight into how these structures naturalised exploitation and violence through aesthetic justification. Krump is a young

³⁶ Marx, Karl: “Economic Manuscripts: Capital: Volume Two”. Accessed 5. February 2026. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1885-c2/ch08.htm>.

³⁷ Krump, Annika. Tagebuch einer Hospitantin: Berlin, Volksbühne 1992/93. Alexander Verlag, 2015

student at the time, and her enthusiasm is evident from the get-go; she says:

I'm working like crazy. In my head, it's just buzzing: Volksbühne. Fassbinder. Volksbühne. Fassbinder. As if that were all! I have a real work obsession (like Fassbinder... yes, yes.) I put too many demands on myself. I want to make everything original! I'm an old perfectionist.³⁸

From today's perspective, the beginning of her career sounds like a 90s Berlin fairy tale: after only one production as an intern, she lands a contract for an assistant position in dramaturgy, moves to a cheap apartment in Prenzlauer Berg, and takes an author photo at the top of the Volksbühne. During her time as an intern and assistant, she's present as Castorf deliberately destabilises and unsettles the actors during rehearsals, telling her that this is part of his method. As Dirk Pilz diagnoses in his review of Krump's account, the pain is necessary for the real, intense work to emerge. Castorf says: "Art is not concerned with the livable, but with the impossible, which blows the mind and the heart. Theatre is a space for irresponsibility."³⁹ In the typical manner of a romanticised self-image as a tortured genius, he admits that somewhere in this method, there's self-hatred too: "Whoever can't endure this is simply wrong for theatre!"⁴⁰

³⁸ Translations are by me. Original text: "Ich arbeite wie verrückt." In meinem Kopf schwirrt es nur noch: Volksbühne. Fassbinder. Volksbühne. Fassbinder. Als ob das alles wäre! Ich habe eine richtige Arbeitswut (wie Fassbinder... ja, ja.) Ich stelle zu viele Anforderungen an mich. Alles will ich originell machen! Ich bin eine alte Perfektionistin. "

Krump, Tagebuch einer Hospitantin, pg. 11.

³⁹ Translation by me, original: "Kunst ist nicht zuständig fürs Lebbare, sondern fürs Unmögliche, das Hirn- und Herzkammern sprengt. Theater ist ein Raum für Verantwortungslosigkeit."

in Pilz, Dirk. "Tagebuch einer Hospitantin – Annika Krump erzählt von den berühmten ersten Jahren der Castorf-Intendanz an der Volksbühne", Nachtkritik, February 2015. Accessed April 10 2026. <https://nachtkritik.de/buecher/2015-02-02-21-22-13>.

⁴⁰ Krump, Tagebuch einer Hospitantin, pg. 11.

Dramaturg Carl Hegemann writes in the afterword that Krump was ambitious and "maybe even one of the first interns who was already secretly infected by the approaching neoliberal lifestyle," although just a sentence earlier, he said he thought she would be the next Rosa Luxemburg.⁴¹ The young intern necessarily serves as a projection surface for both the past and the present; this time, perhaps because it also mirrors ongoing institutional transformation. Hegemann states that those were years of living in "self-contradiction"; living simultaneously in success and failure, propagating extreme dedication to work ("There's no love in theatre, only love of theatre!"),⁴² democracy and dictatorship. The administrative director tells her: "If you don't go under here (...), then you know every trick in the book."⁴³ Krump responds to all of this in her text without romanticisation: "the wear and tear on people is immense."⁴⁴

What makes this account intriguing is the way it reveals the aesthetic ideology that continuously legitimises structural abuse. Castorf's method is transgression, and irresponsibility the main strategy, very much in line with what Johanna Hedva finds fitting the term *Malerschwein*. They write:

The German word *Malerschwein* literally means "painter pig," but it is figuratively used to describe an archetypal male artist: chauvinistic; lauded; insecure and emotionally irresponsible; egomaniacal but allowed, even urged, to be that way; misogynistic in his art and life. The *Malerschwein* is a genius of a singular kind, a trailblazer who, in a divinely directed quest à la Moses,

⁴¹ Krump, *Tagebuch einer Hospitantin*, pg. 131.

⁴² Translation is mine. Original: "Theater ist nicht für die Liebe gemacht. Außer für die Liebe zum Theater. Man kann gar nichts planen, weiß nie, wie lange man arbeitet. Keine Chance, sich verbindlich zu verabreden." in Pilz, *"Tagebuch einer Hospitantin."*

⁴³ Translation is mine. Original: "Wenn du hier nicht untergehst (...), dann bist du mit allen Wassern gewaschen." in Pilz, *"Tagebuch einer Hospitantin."*

⁴⁴ Krump, *Tagebuch einer Hospitantin*, pg. 45.

ventures to the wild frontier of his craft, spelunks depths that he presumes—and which the world substantiates back to him—have never before been excavated, or if they have, not sufficiently so, not yet by a Genius, for we need a Genius who will show us revolutionary, seminal (from “semen”), ways to understand ourselves and how to live and be.⁴⁵

In opposition to Pollesch, who refuses to delineate art and life forcefully and to force the artistic process into something beyond the conditions of the rehearsal, Castorf insists on deliberately pushing everyone around him to extract “greatness” and escape the impossibility with brutality – his own aesthetic expectations and ideas of authorship and theatre demand him to do so. We can see how aesthetic demands serve as justification for brutality and become institutionalised as necessary, accompanying aspects of theatre work and life – something that persists across generations without change, even though those working in these conditions perceive them as damaging. On the contrary, we can see how radical aesthetic practices lay the groundwork for the institutional extraction that Helbig experiences. Whether the work thematises and treats aesthetic incapacity, impossibility, self-optimisation, precarisation, or any other form of critique, it still requires the “small, tedious” work to be done by someone other than the artist himself.

It’s often said in theatres that “the assistant carries the production,” meaning the malleability and flexibility of their position are used to buffer the surplus dysfunction of the institution. Few are as in tune with the different departments and the personnel as they are, to the point that one could assume the institutional continuity, the very

⁴⁵ *Hedva, Johanna. Soft Blues*. Chandler, Jess, Aimee Selby, Hana Noorali, und Lynton Talbot, Hrsg. *Intertitles: An Anthology at the Intersection of Writing & Visual Art*. Prototype Publishing, 2021. pg 153.

process of institutionalisation itself, is maintained by them. Bound in the cruel optimism that there's only one way out – becoming a director – theatre assistants are ready to accept the crumbs they get on the way up, or at least, out. As referenced in Helbig's script, Thomas Schmidt's research and analysis of working conditions and abuse of power in state, city, and regional theatres, based on interviews with 1966 theatre workers, yield very bleak results. His interviews show that "[...] more than half of all participants work up to ten or more hours daily, 14.5% even work more than 10 hours daily, which is prohibited by law but obviously takes place regularly. The higher the daily workload, the greater the proportion of women: 65% for over 10 hours of work. The real hourly wage of about 40% of performers and artistic staff at German city theatres—all with completed university education—is less than 9€."⁴⁶ These conditions are not aberrations but structural necessities, produced by the patriarchal, hierarchical structure in which power is disproportionately concentrated around the artistic director (in 75% of cases, a cis man) and, as such, bound to facilitate abuses of power. Young artists working as assistants are often not even aware that they're being exploited, since the exclusion of any study of economics is an integral part of the curriculum of most BA and MA programmes in theatre education. Unpaid labour by interns is built into the infrastructure of German state, city, and municipal theatres, which wouldn't be able to pay their interns a minimum wage, even though they rely heavily on "the little helpers."⁴⁷ It seems that paying interns would

⁴⁶ Schmidt, Thomas. *Power and Structure in Theater: Asymmetries of Power*. 1st ed. Springer Vieweg. in Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-42280-6>

⁴⁷ Under the German Minimum Wage Act (Mindestlohngesetz/MiLoG) from 2015, internships should be paid the minimum wage (13,90 EUR in Germany in 2026) if the intern is employed by the house. There are exemptions to this, such as voluntary internships not required by the degree and internships under 3 months. Voluntary internships are those that are not officially required by the degree and the curriculum. If the intership has no

actually stop the (re)production of the state theatre repertoire.

In recent years, several networks and associations of theatre workers representing heteronomous status groups have emerged.⁴⁸ They have addressed problems in both institutional theatre and freelance production, ranging from abuses of power to negotiating better labour conditions and reforming the notoriously inflexible NV-Bühne contract. One of them is the Assistants' Network, which offers an FAQ for directors' assistants to help them understand and identify with their role.⁴⁹ It acknowledges the labour of assisting as the crux of

connection to the studies or vocational training, regardless of duration, the fee should be paid. The same applies to the case in which the studies or training have been completed before the start of the internship. Interns are not entitled to the minimum wage if they are under 18 years old and are studying in parallel with an internship that lasts less than 3 months.

Sources: 'Praktikum Mindestlohn: Gesetzliche Regelungen 2026'. Accessed 10 April 2026. <https://www.meinpraktikum.de/ratgeber/mindestlohn/praktikum/faq>.

The German Minimum Wage Act - Exceptions for Interns - Raue Law Firm. Labour and Employment Law. 25 January 2016. <https://raue.com/en/practices/labour-and-employment-law/the-german-minimum-wage-act-exceptions-for-interns/>.

For a more recent account on unpaid internship labour: Cortellini, Laura. "We Need to Talk about ... Unbezahlte Arbeit (Im Kulturbereich)". Bohema Magazin Wien. Accessed 10 April 2026. <https://www.bohema-wien.com/artikel/we-need-to-talk-about-unbezahlte-arbeit>.

⁴⁸ To name a few: art but fair, Bund der Szenografen, Bundesverband Freie Darstellende Künste, Dachverband Tanz Deutschland, Dramaturgische Gesellschaft, dramaturgie-netzwerk, ensemble-netzwerk, junges ensemble-netzwerk, regie-netzwerk, theaterautor*innen-netzwerk, GDBA, Netzwerk flausen+, Pro Quote Bühne, Ständige Konferenz Schauspielausbildung (SKS), Freie Ensembles und Orchester in Deutschland e.V., Verband für Theaterautor*innen und dem Inspizienten-Netzwerk e.V. etc.

⁴⁹ Translation by me: "Take yourself and your work seriously and consider it important. Recognise yourself in your position and function. Far too often in our profession, we still have to delegate 'from the bottom up,' which is a contradiction. See yourself as a communicator and organiser of a project by guest artists. You are helping them to realise their artistic concept. Treat the annoyed technical crew with respect, but firmly. It is not 'your' production that is postponing rehearsals for the tenth time, changing props, or wanting to try on the original costumes, but the theatre's." in FAQ vom Assistierenden-netzwerk, in collaboration with regie-netzwerk, ensemble-netzwerk, n.d. Accessed 10 April 2026. <https://ensemble-netzwerk.de/assistentnw/about/faq-regieassistenz-in-zusammenarbeit-mit-dem-regie-netzwerk/>

See further: Assistierenden-netzwerk

production. It advises colleagues to embrace the managerial aspects of their work, such as communicating decisions and delegating, while remaining firm with those below their status group. The problem of 12-to-15-hour workdays during the final rehearsals before the premiere is justified and framed as end-phase enthusiasm that requires management through effective scheduling. At the same time, it remains a contractual obligation under the NV Bühne contract.⁵⁰ There is no mention of labour law,⁵¹ which, anyway, is treated and interpreted differently by each institution, depending on the capacities and effectiveness of the respective Staff Committee (German term: Personalrat). While sharing resources and information among assistants is undoubtedly worthwhile, the FAQ adopts official managerial language, positioning itself clearly within the hierarchy as middle management. In such a system, showing any form of weakness or scepticism is usually not met with solidarity but is instead singled out as a sign of unresilience and lack of fitness for work in theatre. The valorisation of “resilience” and availability “around the clock” is not incidental but structural ableism, since the theatre system is tailored around the fantasy of the inexhaustible genius director. This figure derives legitimacy

“10x1-Positionen des Assistierenden-Netzwerks“. Accessed 10 April 2026. <https://ensemble-netzwerk.de/content/uploads/ensemble-netzwerk-10x1-assistierenden-netzwerk.pdf>.

⁵⁰ End-phase rehearsals are four rehearsals before the premiere, which have no official working hours, but can take as long as the director finds necessary. This is also the case with the rehearsal before the *Wiederaufnahme* (literally „revival,“ when the show is brought back into the repertoire or continued from the previous season).

⁵¹ Translation by me: „Daily working hours of the employees on workdays may not exceed eight hours. They may be extended to up to ten hours only if, on average, eight hours per workday are not surpassed within a period of six calendar months or 24 weeks.“ Original: „Die werktägliche Arbeitszeit der Arbeitnehmer darf acht Stunden nicht überschreiten. Sie kann auf bis zu zehn Stunden nur verlängert werden, wenn innerhalb von sechs Kalendermonaten oder innerhalb von 24 Wochen im Durchschnitt acht Stunden werktäglich nicht überschritten werden

Source: Arbeitszeitgesetz (ArbZG) of June 6, 1994. Bundesgesetzblatt I, p. 1170. Last amended by Article 52 of the Law of October 23, 2024. Bundesgesetzblatt 2024 I, no. 323. Accessed 10 April 2026. <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/arbzg/BJNR117100994.html>

from the exceptional task of maintaining and embodying German “classical” and contemporary national culture, a mission rooted in the idealism of aesthetic education. Seen from that self-image and self-importance of the German state theatre complex, interns and assistants have very little leverage – Hannah Helbig’s work is about claiming and conjuring that leverage by becoming an art maker.

Cytter, Reese, and Castorf (and Pollesch, at least during his own years as artistic director of the Volksbühne) could produce their work by mobilising an excessively large field of collaborators, technicians, statisticians, actors, and assistants, yet their authorships are coded as autonomous and stable; dependencies multiply, but they are systematically disavowed. The subsumption of Supe’s and Helbig’s work into the same structure reveals that the problem is not simply their bad working conditions, but the structure of artistic subjectivity, which actively conceals its constitutive dependency. If Supe’s authorship emerges from the dependency on Cytter, and Helbig’s from her desire to resist the institution that exploited her, what would it mean to reformulate the dependency not as a problem to overcome, but as a horizon to move towards, artistically, aesthetically, and politically?

Even in small-scale structures, such as an artist’s studio, where the conditions and demands of work might be easier to organise, the structural contradictions identified by Vishmidt and Kirchenbauer persist in different forms. Usually held together under the image, brand, and practice of an individual artist, collaboration and employment in an artist’s studio raise different kinds of questions that are not as easy to untangle in terms of exploitation and abuse as in a hierarchically structured state theatre. Miriam Stoney’s text

"Good Assistants"⁵² explores assistance as a site of occupation that blurs the dichotomy between artist and assistant. In contrast to Mathilde Supe's account, Stoney's job was clearly defined and, in many respects, more similar to a desk job. Through contractual proximity and shared time, the assistant and the artist collaborate to produce the "thirdness": the artistic subjectivity, not the artist as an individual. Her account doesn't flatten into victimisation or romanticise the relation. Drawing on Jessica Benjamin's concept of intersubjectivity, Stoney positions the assistant as a translator who manages not only the material ground of the artist's practice but also its context and content. Financial stability is exchanged for what could otherwise be a collaboration, since the assistant accepts the terms of the agreement and, with them, the hierarchy that comes with the contract and the position. Stoney fully inhabits the complexity of the interdependence of her job and theorises it further through interviews with anonymous studio assistants. As one of them claims, "flexibility, insecurity, and fluidity are great qualities to have in the process, if one has enough assistance to cover the ground for these conditions to emerge." As someone contracted to do so, Stoney recognises that a certain amount of self-effacement is necessary – the assistant's subjectivity has to withdraw, to literally make space for the "thirdness" to emerge, not only from the assistant's translation of the material and immaterial conditions of labour, but also from those between the artist and the institution. However, the ability to withdraw is not solely on the side of the assistant; the artist needs to be able to do the same, not by becoming something less, but rather withdrawing from the limelight, while the artist-

⁵² Stoney, Miriam. "Good Assistants." *Dis/Claim*. Accessed 16 February 2026.
<https://disclaim-magazine.com/1-Good-Assistants>.

subject steps into view.”⁵³ Following Hito Steyerl’s definition of occupation, which “implies endless mediation, eternal process, indeterminate negotiation, and the blurring of spatial divisions,” without a clear immediate outcome or solution,⁵⁴ Stoney proposes to think of this relation as a possible shelter, where neither party is an occupier nor the occupied. Her account points to the places and modes of production in which there’s closeness, intimacy, knowledge and ambivalent dependencies at play (for example, some of the assistants will not work only for financial gain, but also out of the desire to be acknowledged by the artist, hoping for another, better job to arrive through their position, etc.). As she concludes, her desire to write and speak from experience for many who have done the same job remains unresolved (and should remain so), and her ambivalence could be framed as a form of solidarity in contingency – with the artist she worked for, rather than with other assistants. Through her assistantship, Stoney got her first writing commission – a success story, and as she writes, “it formed the passage from one career to the next. I carried everything with me, I left nothing behind.”⁵⁵

She proposes considering power and how it’s continuously negotiated and shared, suggesting that the relationship between her and her former employer, although contractually concluded, may still be ongoing. While dependencies and influences definitely continue to inform one’s process of working way beyond the expiration of the contract (as Supe’s complex attachment to Cytter also mirrors), at least from a materialist perspective, I would still think it’s important to differentiate the registers of dependency and influence at

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ ”Hito Steyerl, “Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life” in e-flux (Issue 30, December 2011) in Stoney, Miriam: Good-Assistants — Dis/Claim”. Accessed 16. February 2026. <https://disclaim-magazine.com/1-Good-Assistants>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

play. In terms of labour conditions, the ending to her assistantship contract marks the moment of exiting the relationship and being able to “carry everything” out of it. The fact that she was able to gain insights into the conditions of labour and artmaking, and emancipate herself from them, demonstrates that Stoney was able to approximate the power enough so that her exit could become a point where her own artistic subjectivity could begin to take shape. As her account elaborates, artistic subjectivity is not a given, and especially for the artist-entrepreneur, it requires collaborators who want more than just a temporary, somewhat stable contract – a dream of their own, or some money. If self-effacement can serve both the artist and the assistant as a reciprocal shelter, then, ideally, the labour that weaves through their relation can operate beyond the demand for self-improvement. Stoney writes:

If the conditions exist in which an assistant can move freely back and forth over the threshold of this 'shelter' for oneself, the occupation of the assistant might no longer be marred by self-effacement but sustained by its possibility⁵⁶.

These conditions, if they exist, which they often do not, are limited; unlike the fictional workers written by Pollesch and Ben Yishai, the real assistants are structurally conditioned to aspire, regardless of how they might feel about their position. The movement implied is rarely possible because, as practices of former-assistants-now-artists continue to reveal, assistants are positioned as fixed capital and alienated from their own incapacity in the exact same way Kathrin Busch describes: they are hired to be capable, even when that capacity requires their self-effacement. Once disentangled from their boss, within their own practice, they

⁵⁶ Ibid.

may encounter their own incapacity, only to find that it must be borne by someone or something else. The “reciprocal shelter” seems hard to inhabit within the hierarchical and power dynamics that structure the assistant-artist relation, which doesn’t mean that the capacities for mutual receptivity are completely determined by these structures. With the risk of flattening the previously outlined complexity, it seems that one of the structures that stands in the way of this shelter is exactly the artist as an institution. This shifts the problem from individual ambitions, grievances, or aspirations to one that questions the structures that reproduce artistic autonomy, with the material and aesthetic apparatuses simultaneously. Certainly, individual working conditions in the existing institutions, theatres, and art studios matter, but they engage with the problem of dependencies that are constitutive but disavowed, in order to present the work of the artist as autonomous. For this reason, the desire for reciprocal shelter must be approached materially, without idealising the relation.

An alternative framework that offers greater structural clarity is dependency, as discussed and theorised by Jason Hirata.⁵⁷ In his framing, dependence operates within the realm of the impossible and the intersubjective, without upholding artistic subjectivity as an object of value. Hirata doesn’t reject the notion of authorship; he accepts that he does author *something*, even when he exhibits works by artists he assisted:

...when a show of mine contains zero works authored by me, this is not an evacuation of my authorship. I think critical practice is mostly self-critique. So, a goal of this work is to find the authorship in what I am doing and to propose finding the authorship in what your

⁵⁷ Hirata, Jason. “Theory of Needs” in “Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts” ed. Antonijevic, Tamara and Weickenmeier, Christopher, b_books, forthcoming.

assistant is doing, or what the registrar is doing, or the make-up artist, or the staff.⁵⁸

Called a slacker by *The New York Times* for this approach,⁵⁹ Hirata defines artwork as a structure emerging from intertwined networks of personal and professional relationships, dependencies, and references, rather than an object. As the influence of the creative, expressive subject persists in shaping artistic work, subjective needs effortlessly blend personal and professional aspects, often hiding the significance of social and financial resources for their development, while at the same time, artists with “special needs” – a formulation that handily privatises and prioritises needs – such as a disabled artist's need for personal assistance, are principally viewed as an economic liability. This asymmetry shows that, although artists depend on structural support, only one form of dependency is naturalised within the structures of artistic labour. Needs, then, may serve to motivate and legitimise crass excesses of power and abuse, while also, to varying degrees, addressing the fundamental vulnerability and precarity of those working in the ultimately uninhabitable and unsustainable system. Any attempt to discern real and legitimate from fake and illegitimate needs proves a critical dead-end, as it inevitably risks the re-naturalisation of needs, and hence enacts gendered and racialised protocols of capitalist production and exploitation. The question, therefore, is not which needs are “real” but how capitalism weaponises dependency itself. In close dialogue with Theodor W. Adorno's

⁵⁸ Hirata, Jason. “Art As Negotiation: Jason Hirata Interviewed” by Lubitz, Zoe, BOMB Magazine. Accessed 25 February 2026. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2020/02/18/art-as-negotiation-jason-hirata-interviewed/>.

See further: Hirata, Jason. *Supporting Role*, Jason Hirata. Reliable Copy & Press Works, 2024.

⁵⁹ Farago, Jason. “Artists Space Re-Emerges as an Enduring Downtown Alternative”. Arts. *The New York Times*, 12. Dezember 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/12/arts/design/artists-space-gallery-new-location.html>.

"Theses on Need," Hirata proposes decoupling an individuated notion of need from capitalist production and argues that the systematic "underdevelopment" of needs is an effect of their subjugation to capital. Rendered as "demand," only those needs are met that can be addressed by "supply" churned out through large-scale industrial production, with a profit.⁶⁰ Needs become an expression of social control, and Hirata writes: "In capitalist society, the compulsion to produce in view of needs that are mediated and fixed by the market is one of the chief means of keeping people in check." In response, he posits the artist as an "expert dependent:"

They afford themselves dependencies to match their supplies: if bedsheets are readily available when canvas or linen is not, then it's bedsheets that are stretched and painted on. To continue further, they have a knack for expanding their dependencies, and they do so in such a way that their supply also expands, via substitute, invention, and grit. I speak of artists but could as easily be talking about so many other figures who are seen as dependents (of their families, of the state, on substances, on support, etc.). The particular form of expansion that the expert dependent engenders defies the rationale of supply. This is their specialty. They ask for more in a way that is irrefutable and often insignificant.⁶¹

As such, the artist is part of a community of expert dependents that know how "to ask for something they know they won't get", resisting the criminalisation and brutalisation of

⁶⁰ This mirrors Kathi Weeks' argument that the production is not directly linked to consumption, as the relationship forged by wage labour articulates: "the goal of neither party in the work relationship is consumption; one seeks surplus value, and the other income."

See: Weeks, Kathi. *The problem with work: feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics, and postwork imaginaries*. Duke University Press, 2011. pg. 8.

⁶¹ Hirata, "Theory of Needs."

dependency in racial capitalism. Through a series of works,⁶² Hirata proposes a form of authorship that refuses to pretend it creates in a vacuum, on formal, conceptual, or ideological grounds – these registers continuously bleed into and support or disrupt one another. In relation to artistic incapacity as a possible space of rejection of capitalist modes of production, Hirata's practice includes his own and other's constitutive, material dependencies and operates with and within them, fully dropping and decentering the question of artistic potency, not even as a failure, refusal or compromise. Hirata's expert dependent, both as an artist and an assistant, is not interested in maintaining the exceptional status of their practice.⁶³ The small, tedious work of navigating others' incapacities becomes, in this light, the knowledge and capacity capitalism most urgently seeks to conceal: artwork doesn't arise from isolation but depends on numerous mediators, shelters, and experts of need and incapacity. Recognising these dependencies and their inherently social nature calls for an inquiry into the social role of art and the conditions of its production, with a focus on understanding the different kinds of labour that constitute it.⁶⁴ "Assistances," the project which will be analysed in the following chapter, was a way of creating a context in which these questions could be studied from the perspectives of education, cultural production, art-making, and academic research.

⁶² See further: *Supporting Role*, Jason Hirata. Reliable Copy & Press Works, 2024.

⁶³ As Vishmidt has argued, the exceptional character of art can be observed by examining the strategies with in the cultural and artistic production which displace "labour into 'art' and art into 'labour'... allow the question to be posed of what it is about the current organisation of society that impels some to work for no money whatsoever because the alternatives are less appealing. In other words, what it is about artistic labour or labour in the cultural field that rewards its protagonists not through the wage but by its seeming transcendence of labour as such."

Vishmidt, Marina. *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital*. Historical Materialism Book Series. Haymarket Books, 2019. Pg. 142.

⁶⁴ Vishmidt, *Infrastructural Critique*.

Chapter II: Assistances. On the Conditions of Study

The question is this: How much of the academy's libidinal political economy is predicated on the fantasy of a liveable (individual) intellectual life? Such predication is both normal and normative. How could it be otherwise? That's the training; that's the discipline; that's the fucking model that administration and/in/of the professors and their apprentices give, not that we live it, because it's a fantasy for us even in our subversive criticality.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "the university: last words,"

2020

As discussed in Chapter I, the blur inhabited by the assistant has a structural role, precisely because the fulfilment of personal desires promised by artistic careers is tied to the bourgeois subjectivity of the artist and the institutions that support and perpetuate it. The elaborated examples raise the question of whether negotiating the personal and power dynamics between artists and assistants would significantly alter these conditions. In this segment, I will focus on "Assistances" and on how the collaborative teaching, research, and study of reproductive labour in the arts, as well as the commissioning and editing process with Christopher Weickenmeier, served as a method for structurally answering the problems from the previous chapter. The question of individuation and subjectivity maintenance, previously addressed in the framework of artistic production, needs to be reframed within the context that supported and financed this research, the university and the academy.

As Moten and Harney suggest, the fantasy of a liveable individual (which, in my understanding, implies both financial

security, as well as the idea of independent academic work), intellectual life rests on the same premises that structure the bourgeois subjectivity of the artist and has to take into account both waged and unwaged intellectual labour. In this context, working as an apprentice at the university touches on an important juncture, where large amounts of unaccounted labour are concealed under contractual agreements specific to the part-time qualification positions. Part-time positions operate under the same diffuse promise of a livable future, just like assistantship positions in the field of cultural production. The framework of “qualification” and training for acquiring further intellectual, bureaucratic, and management skills maintains and contains this promise. The reality of such positions is that the assistants work way more than they are paid for, as documented and discussed in recent years in German academia.⁶⁵ The act on fixed-term employment in academia allows a maximum of 12 years of employment for the assistants, with a maximum of six years before the completion of a PhD.⁶⁶ In this regard, the PhD title operates as a promise of future employment. As employees of the University of Leuphana and Academy of Fine Arts Nuremberg, as research and artistic collaborators and both PhD candidates, Weickenmeier and I are directly involved in the production and reproduction of knowledge; we’re materially living off a promise of individual

⁶⁵ For more information on the conditions and recent debates on this topic, see further: Temur, Dolunay. “Die Situation ist so nicht aushaltbar“. Interview with Nicole Gohlke. Mitmischen, 13 May 2020. <https://www.mitmischen.de/archiv/die-situation-ist-so-nicht-aushaltbar>.

AG Arbeitsbedingungen Kunstwissenschaft Im Ulmer Verein – Verband Für Kunst- Und Kulturwissenschaften. *Ergebnisse Der Umfrage Zu Den Arbeitsbedingungen in Den Kunstwissenschaften (2022) - [Präsentation Und Grafiken]*. Heidelberg University Library, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.11588/ARTDOK.00009363>.

Ambrasat, Jens. Beahlt oder unbezahlt? Überstunden im akademischen Mittelbau. *Forschung & Lehre*, no. 2 (February 2019). <https://doi.org/10.37307/j.0945-5604.2019.02.13>

⁶⁶ See further: Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz (WissZeitVG) of April 12, 2007, Bundesgesetzblatt I, p. 506, last amended by Article 1 of the Law of May 25, 2020, Bundesgesetzblatt I, p. 1073. Accessed April 10 2026: <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/wisszeitvg/BJNR050610007.html>

intellectual and artistic life that is yet to come. The workshops and publication were funded by these institutions; without access to the resources provided by our contracted positions and additional financing support from these institutions, this project wouldn't have happened in this form or scope.

As the political economist George Caffentzis wrote, "the University has two forms of unwaged labour that are appropriated by capital," the first being the development of discourse and scientific research, and the second, the reproduction of labour power and its hierarchies.⁶⁷ As Caffentzis argues, the main task of waged labour is the concealment of the unwaged work, and he identifies "schoolwork" as one of the unwaged positions, generally understood as a personal choice, where the refusal of such labour becomes "an equally personal, even psychological symptom."⁶⁸ This structural observation is further developed and demonstrated by Annette Krauss, in the context of lifelong learning, which reorganises the relationship between further education and labour in such a manner that education becomes an investment, and "employability" becomes a personal quality rather than a social relation of employment. Krauss draws on Katarina Popovic's argument that modern education insists on acquiring further skills: "Originally associated with manual work, skills are now also linked to cognitive and intellectual work. Skills are the personal capacity to carry out specific tasks with predetermined results or according to certain procedures."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Caffentzis, George. "Throwing Away The Ladder: The Universities In The Crisis." Zerowork. Accessed March 2026. <https://zerowork.org/CaffentzisThrowingAway.html>.

⁶⁸ Caffentzis, "Throwing Away the Ladder."

⁶⁹ Krauss, Annette. "Lifelong Learning and the Professionalized Learner," in Choi, Binna, Annette Krauss, and Yolande van der Heide, eds. 2018. *Unlearning Exercises : Art Organizations as a Site for Unlearning*. Utrecht, The Netherlands, Amsterdam: Casco Art Institute : Working for the Commons. pg. 79.

Further following on Marina Vishmidt's analysis of human capital, Krauss concludes that subjects' education and social relations, as well as intellectual interests and capacities, are framed as future, speculative investments. As one of the symptoms of neoliberalism, the university becomes another site where both extraction and responsabilisation of students and adjunct teaching staff take place. Further on, Krauss draws on Vishmidt who writes that the debt acquired in these processes becomes a way of "disguising the capital relation of exploitation as self-investment."⁷⁰ In the case of artistic research and the PhD title for which this dissertation labours, the promise functions both as a deferred system of payment and the reproduction of hierarchies. Practically, it means that once the unaccounted "schoolwork" finally results in the title, the future can arrive as a continuation of the status quo. The liveable intellectual life, then, could materialise, while knowledge is extracted through the qualifying position. The credential itself allows the research associate to pursue a higher-level position. At the same time, the transmutation of the qualification into the doctoral title further legitimises and affirms the hierarchies and invisibilises the unaccounted labour. "Assistances" didn't aim to resolve this infrastructural bind, but to address it, as a method, counter-practice, and collective study within the limitations of the university and academia. That this process is now contextualised as "evidence" of findings for a doctoral title awarded to an individual is a demonstration of these limitations, and the kind of operation this reflective documentation understands as deproduction. It is in such a

⁷⁰ Marina Vishmidt, "The Politics of Speculative Labour," Transformative Art Production, 2012. Online: <http://transformativeartproduction.net/the-politics-of-speculative-labour/> (Accessed November 12, 2016), 4., in Krauss, Annette. "Lifelong Learning and the Professionalized Learner," in Choi, Binna, Annette Krauss, and Yolande van der Heide, eds. 2018. *Unlearning Exercises : Art Organizations as a Site for Unlearning*. Utrecht, The Netherlands, Amsterdam: Casco Art Institute : Working for the Commons., pg 81.

system, as Krauss points out, following Moten and Harney, that students become professionalised learners and a problem: Always inadequate, and "obstacles to society, (...) with lifelong learning, students will return having successfully diagnosed themselves as the problem."

Since the problem is structural and not a personal or interpersonal issue, then clearly, the individual artistic research method would be insufficient in addressing it in its full scope. "Assistances" was developed from this intention, not as a formal choice in collective research, but as a methodology. As such, "Assistances" directly address the problem of "study," following the thinking developed in Stefano Harney's and Fred Moten's essay, "university: last words."⁷¹ The logic and the logistics of extraction, individuation and bureaucracy serve as a strategy for keeping unsuitable subjects out of the system, so the university, like any institution, has a regulatory function. Only certain forms of study are allowed and accepted, and they are performed by imposing individualisation and regulation as protection:

to provide them refuge within a general politico-economic structure/idea that neglects and abandons these things, while desiring and consuming the fruit of their owned instrumentalization. These dispositions are themselves effects of metaphysics, separability or the metaphysics of separability. An abolition(ist) university would be kinda like an abolition(ist) prison or an abolitionist plantation.⁷²

Further, Moten and Harney propose "non-cooperation" rather than petitioning for "shared governance", which assumes institutions can be reformed through equitable power and resource distribution. Non-cooperation, on the other hand, suggests working from the inside of the institution, while

⁷¹ Harney and Moten, "the university: last words."

⁷² Ibid.

refusing the terms of recognition, without the moral alibi of being critically “outside,” and without the desperation inherent in the many times overstated notion that “the institution is within us.”⁷³ For this reason, much institutional critique is still organised around “self-questioning,” as an outcome of the failure of different strategies for ending art and integrating it into the praxis of life; according to Fraser, this remains the potential, as well as the horizon, of artistic practices and positions. In relation to these questions, “Assistances” was about organising the conditions of study and research, and dealing with opposing forces, as they inevitably formed – as Harney mentioned during his contribution at the first workshop, the study must and will be interrupted by the institution. There’s no format or methodology that will surpass the limitations of time, space, and infrastructure in contemporary academia, just as paying someone doesn’t solve the problem of labour and institutional organising, or do anything but further legitimise the concept of wage labour. From this perspective, the collaborative method was necessary to counterbalance the artist-centred methodologies and individuating formats that are structurally embedded into the PhD in Art Curriculum.⁷⁴ The intention behind “Assistances” and “Zero Slack” was to work with these limitations and, accordingly, develop different

⁷³ This immanent understanding of art institutions comes from the genre of institutional critique, as famously formulated by Andrea Fraser: “So if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a “totally administered society,” or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is within us, and we can’t get outside ourselves.”

Fraser, Andrea. “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique“. *Artforum International*, 44(1), 278-283

⁷⁴ These revolved around devising methods for the development of an individual practice, “translating” one’s interests and methods of research from theory to artistic practice, and vice versa, illustrating one’s artistic practice with theoretical concepts in the form of short presentations and Q&As. Taken as the conditions of study, these methods imply treating the research (and in this case, the set of questions around the politics of reproductive labour in the arts) abstractly; and, in general, they eclipse the role of the process-based collaboration.

modes of collaboration that challenge the individuating mechanisms of intellectual and artistic production. As such, they are operative as "problems" within the structure of this dissertation.

Assistances as a counter-practice

In order to contextualise our interest and research, I will return to the history of feminist politics of reproductive labour and to Vishmidt's writing on what she calls the "materialist feminist troubling of the political-economic division between production and reproduction."⁷⁵ In "Management and Maintenance,"⁷⁶ Vishmidt establishes a framework in which the opposition between the two registers of reproduction is questioned by focusing on their structural indistinguishability and interdependence. Although they are hierarchically organised, with management representing the higher valued register of reproductive labour, both management and maintenance share a derivative quality in relation to production, since neither seems to create "ex nihilo" but rather to organise, improve, arrange, and maintain what already exists. This relation replicates the social division of labour, which positions management within organisational and cognitive labour and maintenance as manual, the more

⁷⁵ Vishmidt draws on the history of feminist materialist analysis of reproductive labour in relation to waged and unwaged labour, reproduction as a hidden domain of labour, which was theorised by Silvia Federici, Kathi Weeks, and Leopoldina Fortunati, among others. See further:

Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, trans. Hilary Creek. New York: Autonomedia, 1995.

Silvia Federici, "Feminism and the Politics of the Commons," *The Commoner*, 2011.

Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

⁷⁶ Hayward, Danny, Anthony Iles, Lisa Jeschke, und Grupa za konceptualnu politiku. *Look at Hazards, Look at Losses*. New Media Center_kuda.org, 2017, pg. 11-28

devalued register of reproductive labour. Management appears to be outside of labour, "rooted in the capitalist labour process but also radiating outwards from it...appears in a sequence punctuated by abstractions of skill: appropriation, standardisation, and domination... This process of learning from and power over is the role of the manager, and management is simply a description of a specific location in the production apparatus."⁷⁷ Its role is to minimise risk or stop change or intervention, even though the modern manager embodies the qualities of flexibility and creativity in chaos, qualities often linked to artistic genius and the precarious freelance artist. However, the separations are unstable (on the level of wages, and more specifically, the immaterial upkeep of the self as a "portfolio of assets") and prone to collapse entirely. Vishmidt ties this to Marx's early ideas about labour as a form of metabolism with nature, in which all production simultaneously reproduces capital, encompassing both accumulation and the social aspects of relationships. The essay explores this indistinguishability by analysing the production and reproduction divide through feminist materialist perspectives, such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 1969 "Maintenance Art Now!" manifesto, in which she pits the two modes of production, "pure individual creation" and maintenance work, against one another, and proposes turning the space of the museum into a waste management site, as an exhibition. It has remained a proposal and a testament to her intention to connect the personal with the municipal, something she would successfully do later as an artist-in-residence at the Department of New York Sanitation. Ukeles addressed the devaluation of reproductive labour across different scales: at home as a mother of three children, within the museum's corporate workplace, and within the

⁷⁷ Ibid. pg. 16

municipal structure of public sanitation. She did this through a series of works in which she used her own position as an artist to intervene within the processes of valuation. In her 1973 work, "Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object," Ukeles cleaned a glass vitrine containing a mummy on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Firstly, Ukeles observed the cleaner, then copied their movements, subsequently adding the stamp "Maintenance Art." All further maintenance labour would now be carried out by a conservator, and the maintenance worker was deemed unqualified for the work he had been doing. Ukeles observed how "the notion of value had floated through me from the worker to the conservator."⁷⁸ By learning from the expert, Ukeles adopted a managerial position and used her role as an artist working in the institution to shift and reorganise the movement of value. Once performed by the artist, the value was embedded in the act of cleaning the glass, and the qualified conservator must take over, being the only person in the room responsible for maintaining the artwork, not the space. Ukeles showed the absurdity of this, but she didn't work against it; she retooled the valorisation already in the room and at the place of work. Vishmidt argues for revaluation of management and maintenance, as a process of "larger transvaluation of abjected forms of labour," rather than for claiming the inherent importance or morality behind the care work.⁷⁹ The question becomes about what is being maintained, at what scale and towards which ends, and what are the organisational forms of such labour. Another example analysed by Vishmidt is "Trainee" by Pilvi Takala, in which

⁷⁸ Ukeles, in conversation with Alexandra Schwartz, "Mierle Laderman Ukeles in conversation with Alexandra Schwartz," in *From Conceptualism to Feminism*, 286; in: Petrossians, Andreas. 'Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Maintenance and/as (Art) Work'. Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture. Accessed 3 February 2026. <https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2018/21-invisible-labor/mierle-laderman-ukeles-maintenance-and-as-art-work>.

⁷⁹ Vishmidt, Marina. "Pure Maintenance," *South as a State of Mind*, n.d., accessed March 3, 2026, <https://southasastateofmind.com/article/pure-maintenance/>.

Takala performed the labour of thinking while working as a marketing intern.⁸⁰ She spent hours sitting at her desk, writing her thesis in her mind, or driving up and down in an elevator all day to see how it changed her thoughts, to the irritation of all other employees, who complained to management about the lost and strange intern, unaware that she was there as an artist – and that the management was complicit. Ukeles' practice engaged with the dynamics of value and access simultaneously; as an artist, she was able to mediate and redirect value. Takala's work operates within similar registers; as an artist, she gained access to the marketing company and focused on the invisible and entropic aspects of immaterial labour. Her work produced nothing that could be redirected or mediated further, nothing that could enter the registers of representation by performance. Both gestures – cleaning the glass in order to turn it into an act that has to be performed by a qualified staff, and spending all day thinking – work with the pre-established and fixed notions of how artmaking, maintenance work, and immaterial labour are performed, and question what happens when these performances are broken down. Vishmidt writes:

It is to the negativity, waste and uselessness of reproductive labour that we might turn in order to see the vulnerability of the social whole in relation to which this work is both abjected and moralised. Specific feminist art practices materialise this turn by emptying out the 'value' of reproductive labour, highlighting the affective features of the kind of conceptual turn advocated here.⁸¹

Today's care discourses often suppress the inherent antagonism in reproductive labour in favour of mediating and

⁸⁰ Vishmidt, Marina. "The Two Reproductions in (Feminist) Art and Theory since the 1970s", Third Text, DOI: 10.1080/09528822.2017.1364331

⁸¹ Ibid. pg 3.

managing the negative emotions produced by structural issues, thereby serving institutional stability and naturalising the gendered division of labour. The examples given here, by Ukeles and Takala, work with that negativity instead of suppressing it, demanding repetition and failure, and as such don't quite manifest within the register of production. The works themselves are "consumed" in the process of their creation. The gap produced manifests the invisibilised labour, allowing it to exist in its pathology – as Vishmidt writes, the performance coincides with its negation. Unlike Hirata, they are not "slackers,"⁸² since they don't operate within the register that would recognise their performance as (art)work. The negativity of reproductive labour is methodologically used in the mentioned works without claiming that there's an inherent value or authenticity behind the reproduction, since the "unfree nature" of *all* work is revealed.

The question, therefore, is not who cares or feels more deeply, or "naturally," but what is being maintained, at what scale, toward what ends, and through what kinds of organisational forms. Precisely because it operates across multiple scales, management can change its operating register, especially when conditions don't allow further optimisation (as in the case of climate disasters or other catastrophes where resources are becoming scarce). In this situation, when conditions drastically shift, and the invisible structures start crumbling, it becomes obvious that "things are not maintained: they do not work."⁸³ The moment like this, when the collapse of the social fabric is suddenly inevitable and not

⁸² As Vishmidt and Melissa Gordon have also discussed in another essay, "Drop Outs: Slackers, Sociopaths and Social Workers," to be perceived as a slacker, you have to first register as someone who belongs in the art world.

See: Gordon, Melissa, and Marina Vishmidt, eds. *Persona*. 2013. Accessed February 23, 2026. https://monoskop.org/images/7/70/Persona_2013.pdf.
https://monoskop.org/images/7/70/Persona_2013.pdf.

⁸³ Vishmidt, "Pure Maintenance."

maintainable anymore, is the moment when the transformative potential of maintenance can be recognised – not as a labour of maintenance, but as maintenance as praxis:

If reproductive labour under capitalist conditions is a “fate worse than death” because it reinforces the brutalities and instrumentalities of gender, race and accumulation in simply keeping things going and people alive, maintenance can be the logic of resistance on the way to a non-capitalist form of social organisation. Such an organisation would see that maintenance and creativity, reproduction and production, can and should no longer be distinct.⁸⁴

The impossibility of reproduction becomes legible only when the conditions are exposed and worked with from within; “Assistances” became a site for approximating these problems. Since the beginning of our collaboration in 2022, Christopher Weickenmeier and I have been interested in the described collapse of the different registers of reproductive labour, which served as a theoretical starting point for thinking about assisting as an enabling condition of artistic production and artistic subjectivity. Since the indistinguishability of registers of reproductive labour isn’t a personal experience or individual predicament but the structural function of the position itself, studying it required redirecting the research process from individual to a collaborative one.

The term “assistances” alludes to Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler's 1993 “Services Working Group,” at the same Kunstraum Lüneburg that would host our first workshop thirty years later. Unlike “Services,” which limited participation to

⁸⁴ Ibid.

invited artists and curators in a closed working group,⁸⁵ "Assistances" was open to students, offering online attendance and financial compensation for all invited participants. Fraser and Draxler traced how institutions demanded project-based work from artists in the 1990s, such as site-specific work, third-party funding applications, and project temporality; since then, project work has become the only kind of work we know. In a 2021 postscript, they reflected on how much of the work they discussed at the time is now delegated to assistants under even more precarious conditions. Fraser noted: "I think we're going to see a revolt of the studio assistant."⁸⁶ "Assistances" aimed at creating the context in which the reasons for revolt's absence could be collectively discussed and theorised in anticipation, shifting the management of research toward maintaining different collaborative relations, in which degrees of agreement and solidarity could vary, shift, and change. Only from multiple perspectives could the structural patterns be addressed in their full scope, rather than remain confined to isolated individual accounts, as analysed in the previous chapter.

The first workshop, "Assistances (Working Title)," held at Kunstraum Lüneburg in April 2023, focused on organisation and labour politics through the figure of the assistant as "a bringer of horrible mood." Negative emotions assistants bring into "pure individual creation" highlight that artistic

⁸⁵ This is also due to the fact that none of the participants was paid, and the working group wanted to have a closed discussion among the professionals who were affected by the raised issues. See: Barry, Judith, and Ute Meta Bauer. *Services Working Group: January 22-23, 1994*. Edited by Eric Golo Stone. Mit Kunstraum der Leuphana Universität Lüneburg. Folio Series, F. Fillip, 2021.

⁸⁶ Barry, Judith, and Ute Meta Bauer. *Services Working Group: January 22-23, 1994*. Edited by Eric Golo Stone. Mit Kunstraum der Leuphana Universität Lüneburg. Folio Series, F. Fillip, 2021. pg 408.

subjectivity beyond their current role remains unfulfilled or impossible to imagine.⁸⁷

Stefano Harney and Valentina Desideri opened the first workshop with their ongoing discussion of study and affordances. As defined by Harney with Moten in *The Undercommons*,⁸⁸ study is a mode of thinking with others, occurring regardless of and beyond institutional demands. In opposition to pursuing a university degree, their understanding of study doesn't individualise and doesn't require leaving family and community behind. Addressing the university's barriers to studying, such as seminar tables, graduation requirements, and tuition fees, Desideri and Harney introduced William J Gibson's notion of affordances, a term that shifts focus from individual needs to what others provide, reorganising interdependencies to dismantle hierarchies. Affordance is presented as a state of sensuousness, a movement of perception(s) not bound to a single point of view, flowing freely between subjects and objects. In their contribution to the publication, they further develop the critical stakes of this notion. Affordances directly undermine an Enlightenment notion of individuated and self-possessed interiority, challenging the boundary of what constitutes a body and an "inter-personal idea of the social." For them, the studio becomes a place of unmediated proximity to material conditions and bodies, where affordances can be sensed and the process of sensing and tuning into them rehearsed.

Mathilde Supe, whose account with Keren Cytter was analysed in the previous chapter, read excerpts from her book. Cally Spooner presented her work and practice, with the

⁸⁷ Antonijevic, Tamara, and Weickenmeier, Christopher. "Assistances (Working Title)". Accessed March 3 2026 <https://kunstraum.leuphana.de/en/projects/assistances-working-title>.

⁸⁸ Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Minor Compositions, 2013.

assistance of editor and publisher Will Holder. Spooner was spontaneously joined online by a choreographer and a performer in one of her works ("Maggie's Solo"), Maggie Segale. The appearance of Spooner's dancer opened up an ensuing conversation around financial compensation, credits, and whether collaboration can eliminate hierarchical structures. Terre Thaemlitz focused on explaining the practical aspects of artistic work, such as contracts, payment, and rights. While some languages of aesthetics and transcendence often mask poor conditions, Thaemlitz emphasised that fair payment fosters solidarity and insisted that cultural workers should have multiple streams of income. She talked about her own strategies and ways of working that have enabled her to maintain full control over how and where her work is distributed and presented. Annick Kleizen introduced the idea of a descriptive hierarchy and opened up the conversation to the students, who shared their experiences with their assistantships and internships. Marina Vishmidt presented her proposal to think of and through the aesthetics of resentment, which has already been discussed in Chapter 1.

Jason Hirata, whose "Theory of Need" was discussed in the previous Chapter, closed the second day with a conversation and gathered all the inputs from the previous two days. Ending the workshop with his contribution led to a closing discussion that focused on "how assistance takes place in a continuum of different needs, not all of which can be condensed into a single figure or form of labour."⁸⁹ The programme put the emphasis on a pedagogical framework and set out to establish conditions for in-depth study "of the hierarchies and interdependencies within which not only artists and curators must operate but also the whole gamut of cultural workers,

⁸⁹ Stoney, Miriam. "Support/Systems: 'Assistances (Working Title)," e-flux, accessed February 26, 2026, <https://www.e-flux.com/education/features/536806/support-systems-assistances-working-title>.

whose roles do much more to problematize artistic autonomy and authorship than a multiplication of the artist-author into a collective ever could or would.”⁹⁰ The workshop raised questions about solidarity, libidinal attachments to the institutions of art and the artist, and the persistent ableism within contemporary institutions.

The second workshop, “Assistances (Ongoing Title),”⁹¹ convened in April 2024 at the Academy of Fine Arts Nuremberg, took place within the framework of the dramaturgy seminar I’m teaching within the performative practices master’s program Live Art Forms. For this edition of the workshop, we decided to allocate more space in the program for the discussions. The contributors were invited to present their work in depth and prepare inputs for two-hour slots. The focus of the second workshop was on the infrastructures of artmaking and on the maintenance of institutions that proved to be more than simply dysfunctional. By spring 2024, cultural and educational institutions in Germany had failed within their assumed democratic roles, becoming places of censorship, disinvitations, cancellation, and exclusion of Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices; these pressures and censorship as the current baseline conditions of work and research cannot be abstracted from or relativised. This shift in how institutions operate within their imagined democratic roles inevitably reframed the question of, and conversations around, the maintenance of institutions compared to the previous year. As Nahed Samour and Pary El-Qalqili note in their text “Das Scheitern von Kunst – und Kulturbetrieb – Die Straße als Ort

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Antonićećević, Tamara, and Weickenmeier, Christopher. “Assistances (Working Title)” Accessed March 6 2026. <https://adbk-nuernberg.de/termine/archiv/2024/4/assistances-ongoing-title/>.

für Dissens,"⁹² ("The Failure of the Art and Cultural Sectors - The Street as a Space for Dissent") spaces in which free expression of artistic, cultural, or other forms of dissent, contradiction, or remembrance could happen that were not aligned with Staatsräson, have meanwhile shifted from public cultural institutions to privately funded ones and to the streets, with high personal and safety costs for those organising them. This is directly related to the questions of maintenance of the institutions; by censoring, disinviting, and shutting down any form of dissent, institutions reproduce what they need to keep their legitimacy and stay aligned with the state. The reproduction precisely exposes how inextricable the alignment with the state is for the institutions. The self-image of the institution demands that this invisibilisation is done in the name of its own maintenance. As Henrike Kohpeiss and Christopher Weickenmeier have recently pointed out in the announcement of a series of discussions around the relationship between the state and the arts in Germany, the renegotiation that has taken place in the last two years raises the questions of what kind of spaces and cultural institutions are available to artists today.⁹³ With shrinking funding opportunities and the normalisation of censorship under the guise of fighting antisemitism (the historical legacies and state efforts to eradicate antisemitism in Germany have shifted into "philosemitic Mccarthyism," to use Susan Neiman's phrase⁹⁴), the question is

⁹² El-Qalqili, Pary and Samour, Nahed. "Das Scheitern von Kunst- und Kulturbetrieb – Die Straße als Ort für Dissens," *The Words of the Arty Class*, accessed March 3, 2026, <https://thewordsofheartyclass.com/Pary-El-Qalqili-Nahed-Samour>.

⁹³ Kohpeiss, Henrike and Weickenmeier, Christopher. "Staatskunst & Staatsräson - Art about the State", Kunstraum Lüneburg. Accessed 3. April 2026. <https://kunstraum.leuphana.de/de>.

⁹⁴ Neiman, Susan. "Historical Reckoning Gone Haywire | The New York Review." 25. Oktober 2023. <https://archive.is/ibUDe>.

For further contextual information on the silencing of Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices and positions in Germany, see further:

not even what kind of state-supported structures artists and cultural workers can rely on, but under which conditions it is even possible to continue working within them, and at what cost.⁹⁵

Against this backdrop, the second workshop focused on histories of exploitation, marginalisation, and gender-based and racialised wage labour and exclusion, as well as debt and institutional participation and visibility. Since the workshop took place at the Academy of Fine Arts, the question of education that reaffirms singular, individualised artistic practice and authorship has also become a recurring point of discussion.

“Archive of Silence | home”. Zugegriffen 3. April 2026. <https://archiveofsilence.org/>.

“Index of Repression: A Database on the Systematic Repression of Palestinian Solidarity in Germany”. Zugegriffen 3. April 2026. <https://index-of-repression.org/>.

⁹⁵ This question should be elaborated in the scope that is way beyond this section and dissertation. Only in March 2026, state censorship continues with unchanged vigour; some of the most recent cases include the Hauptstadtkulturfond (HKF) withdrawing funding from the project by Miriam Rainer, who intended to translate works by Palestinian authors from the 20th century.

See: Philipp, Elena. "Politische Einmischung beim Hauptstadtkulturfonds?" Nachtkritik. Accessed April 3, 2026. <https://nachtkritik.de/meldungen/politische-einmischung-beim-hauptstadtkulturfonds>.

Der Spiegel. "Wolfram Weimer: Kritik an Eingriff in Jury-Entscheidung zum Hauptstadtkulturfonds." March 27, 2026. <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/wolfram-weimer-eingriff-in-jury-entscheidung-zum-hauptstadtkulturfonds-a-b69391fa-a02a-4651-a692-35afb52e8e67>.

The same German state commissioner for culture and media, Wolfram Weimer, also involved the domestic intelligence agency in order to remove three bookstores from the list of those eligible for state funding. See further: ““Why independent bookshops strike fear in the heart of Germany’s culture tsar | Fatma Aydemir | The Guardian”. Zugegriffen 3. April 2026. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/mar/10/why-independent-bookshops-strike-fear-in-the-heart-of-germanys-culture-tsar>

In December 2025, mass media outrage followed the conference “Der grosse Kanton: Rise & Fall of the BRD”, which took place at ETH Zurich, confirming the accuracy of the critique and the positions taken during the symposium. See further: <https://dergrossekanton.ethz.ch>

Vika Kirchenbauer presented her video work "Compassion and Inconvenience", which questions the histories of artmaking by staging and reciting historical texts from different speaking positions. These are performed by a cast whose gender and race identities are non-representative of the authors of texts. The performers are mid-career artists mostly based in Berlin, and Kirchenbauer's work also questions their own artistic self-institutionalisations. The work relies on extensive archival research and explores how ideas of art are linked to ideological and material connections with Liberalism, the Scottish Enlightenment, and British colonialism. Based on this research and work, we have commissioned Kirchenbauer to write an extensive essay as a contribution to the publication. This text will be discussed in the following section.

Miriam Stoney presented a script titled "Assistance: A Working Transcript," which depicted debt relations discussed in the content; the workshop participants, who agreed to lend their voices to Stoney's presentation, read the text aloud, thereby simultaneously questioning and revising its content through themes of credit and assistance. Stoney framed social relations at play, including those present in the room, through debt, which served as a structuring condition of her own artistic becoming, as it accumulated and enabled her elocution lessons aimed at erasing her Northern English accent, and financed her education at Oxford. Formally, and by education, she does not speak with her own accent or voice – her artistic subjectivity is based on a certain, necessary degree of her self-effacement. The participants reading the script became the executors of her voice, while her authorship remained intact; as such, their relation was not exploitative nor collaborative, but instead enacted a dynamic based on mutual agreement of giving and withdrawal, much like the one discussed in the previous chapter.

Simon Asencio introduced Jessica, a practice he developed over more than ten years, in which he serves as a background presence for various tasks within the art world as a hired assistant. Jessica was hired to perform as a runner, a tree in a dance performance, to substitute for a curator, as guest list manager, a light technician, and even to sign divorce papers on someone's behalf. Jessica exists only when the contract is signed, filling gaps created by the lack of institutional resources. Her practice explores pure availability – once you show up as available, the tasks will inevitably come to you. During the discussion, questions arose about his position and relation to alienated labour, and whether Jessica represents “the spirit of labour,” defined as a pure labour force animated through the contract.

Ghislaine Leung proposed answering questions rather than presenting her work, allowing her to work within imposed limitations and generate material for conversation. She described various strategies for working deliberately with constraints in her practice, such as not having a studio for economic and performance reasons; she also described forcing herself to spend time in her studio and getting stressed to the point of being unable to work at all. She never had an assistant due to unstable income and working conditions. After a ten-year gap in making art post-graduation, she changed her approach and started working with resources such as exhibition budgets, time, and space, rather than ideas that required materials she couldn't afford. Her primary materials were her personal and social conditions, such as her jobs as a technician, gallery attendant, and assistant curator, as well as motherhood (see image 2). In *Bosses*,⁹⁶ she writes about decompartmentalising her life by exposing and mobilising the limits that would usually disqualify her from making art. This

⁹⁶ Leung, Ghislaine. *Bosses*. Divided Publishing, 2023.

made her practice sustainable over the years; she extensively researched institutional conditions, budgets, floor plans, and wages to create a score for them to execute the exhibition without her presence, often not attending openings. Leung's approach turns material conditions into artworks produced by the circumstances and by the workers employed and provided by the institution.

What started in my proposal as an inquiry into the conditions and experiences of assistants in the German state theatre shifted into the development of questions about artistic subjectivity, dependency, and material conditions across different areas of cultural production. This widening of the research question was largely informed and structured by the workshops, both their content and form, as well as the process of organising them in collaboration with Weickenmeier and the contexts in which they took place. The workshops problematised the ways in which many of us still engage in artmaking, by assuming that the separations between creative and maintenance work, bosses and apprentices, collaborators and employees can be defined on purely contractual and labour terms. They opened up questions around fantasies and libidinal attachment, as well as the role of assisting technologies in creating not only content, but arousal, desire and dependencies. For the publication, we decided to extend invitations to the artists and writers Kerstin Stakemeier, Annika Haas, Reba Maybury, JP Raether, Alice Creischer, Susanne Huber, Hannah Helbig, Ima Abasi Okon, Sidsel Meineche Hansen, and Louis Chude Sokei, whose contributions to the publication expand and elaborate on the research questions posed by the workshops and developed in their aftermath.

The following two sections excerpt the co-written introduction for the publication, which establishes the theoretical framing for the volume, to demonstrate the collaborative writing and thinking relevant to this

dissertation. The version included here reflects our work as of March 2026.⁹⁷ Where necessary, I have paraphrased and contextualised for the purposes of this reflective documentation.

History, or In the Cave of the Hand

Our argument could be summarised as threefold: the continued exploitation of assistants is rooted in the racist and gendered division of labour and the systematic devaluation of reproductive labour in the field of art. Secondly, a serious consideration of assistants' work reveals the ultimate indistinguishability of productive and reproductive labour, as well as the porous distinction between skilled and unskilled labour in contemporary artistic production. Importantly, it is this inherent messiness and indistinguishability that offer critical cues for permanently dismantling the idea of artistic labour as disalienated. We are disinterested in resurrecting the idea of artistic labour as holistic and disalienated, and we are similarly wary of any tendency to overemphasise the innocent and "existential" use value of reproductive labour. Thirdly, despite various artistic practices that suggest critical alternatives, the endurance of the aforementioned divisions may best be explained in terms of a set of historically determined attachments to a sovereign, self-owning bourgeois subjectivity, that is, the artist-genius. We hope to demonstrate that the systematic devaluation of reproductive labour in artmaking can only be sufficiently addressed when taking into account all material and affective operations that constitute the dispositive of the 'pure individual creation'.

⁹⁷ Antonijević, Tamara, and Christopher Weickenmeier, eds. *Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts*. Berlin: b_books, forthcoming.

The following section will outline how today's assistant emerged historically from the position of the apprentice in the early Renaissance workshop system. The assistant's development, both in terms of function and class position, mirrors the gradual transformation of the master into the genius artist and their specific social and economic role in capitalist, bourgeois society. The pedagogical value of assisting, a trope that persists in the institutions of art and education to this day, practically fades by the end of the Renaissance, when the genius artist is relieved of the necessity and obligation to educate new craftsmen. This section then seeks to sketch how the modern division of labour and the concealment of reproductive labour in the arts became structural conditions for the enduring claims to art's formal autonomy.

As extensive research on the system of medieval and early Renaissance studio workshops notes,⁹⁸ the training of skilled craftsmen was one of their main functions, no less important than the production of artworks. Marking the beginning of modern capitalism, "the great economic depression of the Middle Ages" was followed by a period in which class differences increased significantly, and the cost of labour dropped, creating the conditions for most of the canonical works of the Renaissance. Apprentices were usually born into trade, taking on and continuing family businesses, which gave them an immediate economic advantage (masters could avoid the limited number of apprentices if they were family members; their sons benefited from not paying the entrance fee into the guild; women could work alongside men in the family workshops

⁹⁸ See: Roberts, John. *The Intangibilities of Form, Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*. London: Verso, 2007.

Reilley, Patricia. "Artists' workshops." in Wyatt, Michael, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance*. 1st edn. Cambridge University Press, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139034067>.

Shiner, L. E. *The invention of art: a cultural history*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

and often belonged to the guilds alone or through their husbands, etc.). They would come as young as 13, often with some skills already acquired.⁹⁹ The apprenticeship could last from a few months to several years. In addition to a small wage, they were fed, clothed and housed by the masters, and it was common for them to take the master's last name as their own. Slave labour was part of this economy as well, as Patricia Reilly has demonstrated, offering the example of a Venetian stone-carver who was freed by his owner's testament, after which he became a stonemason himself.

Apprentices learned from and even mimicked their masters' styles, but they were not considered their surrogates, at least not until the 16th century, when the rise of the notion of *disegno*, alongside the proliferation of natural philosophy, began to contribute to the cult of individual artistic creation and genius. Prior to this development, the term *artista* was reserved for those who studied the liberal arts, and a person engaged in the production or performance of one of the many mechanical arts was often called an *artifex*. *Disegno*, rendered drawing – previously a mere technical skill – became a model of artistic creation, conveying information from life through line, bridging “perception to intellection, from sensors particular to concept.”¹⁰⁰ Mastering this task became an important prerequisite before apprentices would progress to the level of salaried assistants. The assistant could submit a masterwork to a board of guild masters, who

⁹⁹ “...drawing on paper with charcoal, making brushes, painting beards and hair in fresco, painting trees, plants, and foliage in fresco, painting faces, dead bodies, and wounds in tempera on panels, making goat's glue, making cement for mending stones, making gesso, gilding a panel, grinding pigments for colours, grinding gold and silver for use in colour, tinting papers in indigo and peach, working delicately on silk and velvet, modeling crests and helmets, constructing caskets and chests, and casting medals.” In: Roberts, John. *The Intangibilities of Form, Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*. London: Verso, 2007. pg 139.

¹⁰⁰ Roberts, John. *The Intangibilities of Form, Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*. London: Verso, 2007. pg. 141

would vouch for him and pass him as a master. From that point on, he would have to pay an expensive entry fee into the guild and, if enough capital was at hand, open a workshop of his own. As new masters, they would often collaborate and share the costs of opening and running a workshop, or they would continue working as assistants. The social context in which artists operated began to change with the process of intellectual ennobilisation and the proliferation of the so-called liberal arts. Patrons' interest and support for individual artistic authorship began to take precedence over concerns about the quality of the materials. Some Renaissance artists began to write theoretical treatises about their works to move painting into the category of the liberal arts. Oration and poetry proved particularly popular for entertaining and educating these patrons. The foundation of the first academy of art in Europe, the Accademie del Disegno in Florence, in 1563, exacerbated this process. Often directly opposite the street from the traditional workshops, these academies rendered the artist a master of a different order, his authorship a singular effect of his intellectual and sensible capacities: "Workshops became studios in which the master-artist employed apprentices according to a given set of requirements (...) When hired hands were employed, they were thoroughly subordinate to the authorship of the master (...) for the greater glory of the artist."¹⁰¹ This process marks a development towards the intellectualisation of artistic labour, in which the educational and pedagogical aspects of apprenticeship are becoming increasingly deregulated and subjected to the sensibilities of the artist. By the 18th century, art was no longer conceptualised as any human activity performed with skill (regardless of whether it was a craft like painting or shoemaking), and the terms artist and

¹⁰¹ Ibid, pg. 141.

artisan couldn't be used interchangeably; they became opposites.

In the increasingly commercialised sphere of artistic production, set in motion during the Renaissance and continued throughout the 19th century, artists needed assistants to produce and complete their works. Rembrandt, as well as Auguste Rodin, the executive producer of no less than six studios, are well known for pioneering this commercial studio system. Rembrandt had more than fifty assistants working for him throughout his career, not only completing works in his name but also signing his name. Importantly, the assistants of the 19th century worked as wage-labourers, not as pupils, which further established the figure of the autonomous modernist artist, free from teaching responsibilities.¹⁰²

The history of assistantship in Western art can be recuperated as an increasingly elaborate absence, the flipside of the emergence of the artist-genius. A striking example of such an attempt is the artist Alice Creischer's contribution to the edited "Assistances" collection, in which she meanders between fictional accounts, drawing on Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name is Red*, and historical ones, via John Ruskin's 19th-century treatise 'Stones of Venice'. Creischer traces parallels between the division of labour in the workshop system and in the emerging factories, in order to understand the erasure of assistants from tourist guides, and therefore, ironically, the history of art, as both texts deal with moments when the process of collective production was visible. The anonymity of Pamuk's fictional characters and the unknown carvers of Ruskin, who worked with variation within collective enterprises, was replaced by systems based on individuation, such as European portraiture and industrial capitalism. By threading between fiction and history, Creischer shows that

¹⁰² Ibid. pg. 143

the erasure of these histories occurred differently across times and places, yet served the same naturalising function in relation to the division of labour by rendering "genius" an individual quality rather than a social relation.

The notion of "pure individual creation" is a fantasy built on financial surplus, elaborately uncoupled from labour. In 18th-century Britain, whose economy was based on the looting and plunder of colonised countries, artists participated in a similar process of ennobilisation, this time of the commercial class. In her contribution, Vika Kirchenbauer analyses the conditions from which a new culture of taste and nobility emerged, focusing on the first public exhibition of contemporary art at the Foundling Hospital, a children's home in London, and subsequently the foundation of the Royal Academy of Art. Kirchenbauer begins by observing that much of "institutional critique" has been aligned with hegemonic interests, while assuming the emancipatory and democratising principles assigned to art. In this constellation, the artist is reliably positioned as a figure of subversion. As Kirchenbauer shows, in mid-18th-century London, artists sought a central role in the advancement and moral legitimisation of a new nobility, enthusiastically establishing "methods of exclusion to lasting effect" that would safeguard this role. In doing so, artists legitimised the dispossession, enslavement and exploitation of colonial trade as the driver behind the accumulation of surplus wealth necessary for members of the middle class to rise to the level of nobility. These processes constituted a new paradigm of the artist, not as a skilled craftsman, but "...as someone whose complex cultural contributions served as discursive references in various fields of knowledge production." With forms of production seemingly untouched by the division of labour, and no longer seen as a craftsman but as a figure of complexity, the artist was placed alongside the intellectuals. The

upgraded status of its maker enabled art's autonomy, as the autonomy of individual, subjective expression. During the rapid industrialisation of the 18th and 19th centuries, art was codified as intellectual property and its autonomy as a bourgeois category of legal self-determination.

As already stated in the previous chapter, the working conditions of assistants can't be dismissed under the precarisation of all work in neoliberalism, as we have experienced it for the most of our lives. This genealogy retrospectively frames and confirms the analysis carried out in Chapter I not only as a current structural problem, but one that has a history much longer than that of the German state theatre (a system which can be traced at the earliest to 18th Century). The history of this problem has a historical predecessor in the apprentice's social, educational, and economic position; in regard to this, what we're actually discussing is a 250-year legacy rooted in the division of labour. Different case studies and individual artistic practices analysed so far demonstrated the attempts at negotiating the conditions of their capture (such as the absorption of Supe's work into Cytter's exhibition), making the conditions of their capture consensual, or antagonising and opposing the institution, or looking for autonomy where it's denied and claiming it. These different strategies point to the necessity of examining the conditions at the workplace, where art's claim to autonomy is guarded and reaffirmed.

While Guarding the Work

Slowly turning the first page of a book stolen from the museum gift shop, I read this quotation from Marina Vishmidt set in italics in the centre of the page: Anything that is not work can be art. The opportunity to fully consider the devastatingly appropriate nature of the short sentence is immediately withdrawn by my manager rumbling to me sharply through my walkie-talkie earphone that reading is not permitted while guarding the work.
 Frank Wasser, SPLIT (Zero-Hour Fragments), 2023

The modernist paradigm grounded art's autonomy in the displacement of its relationship to labour and capital; simply put, the work that goes into production has no bearing on the value it produces. This formal autonomy from wage labour is what gives art its exceptional character;¹⁰³ within capitalist relations of production, art appears to operate as 'pure' exchange value. According to Theodor W. Adorno, the exceptional position of artistic production could be repurposed to "sever the potentialities of autonomy from the capitalist implications", as he considered the realm of intellectual labour still open and suitable for such interventions.¹⁰⁴ Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt have argued that with art's relationship to capital on full display today (as an object of financial speculation, etc.), the autonomy of art has come to formally resemble the autonomy of capital, that is, a subject capable of facilitating the conditions necessary for its own reproduction. This means that if art were to recuperate a "problematic negativity in relation to capital", it needs to "confront its character as

¹⁰³ Vishmidt, Marina. *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital*. Historical Materialism Book Series. Haymarket Books, 2019, pg. 142

¹⁰⁴ Stakemeier, Kerstin, and Marina Vishmidt. *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art*. London: Mute Publishing, 2016. pg. 15.

an institution of reproduction", an institution that reproduces itself despite itself. This relies on art's capacity to approximate and absorb all spheres of life and work, while maintaining its exceptional status, resources, and privileges. Under what seems to be an all-encompassing subsumption under capital, art may still claim its means as its own, a serious possibility when considering the all-pervasive, entropic character of art today (as it has been solidified since the 60s, through dematerialisation, non-specialisation, de-skilling and re-skilling, etc.). Precisely by relating artistic modes of production to 'the other' sphere of unwaged and 'unproductive' labour, the one of reproduction, the social autonomy of art may be glimpsed (in the opposition to the formal autonomy of art). The 'exceptional' characteristics of reproductive labour appear as 'pure' use value and necessity, and as naturalised, endlessly repeating cycles of material and immaterial work. Approximated by their negativities, reproductive and artistic labour resonate with Adorno's 'mimetic ideal', that is, "an understanding of work as an activity which is measureless, or which can be measured only in terms of its merging of production and reproduction, of maintenance and creation, and which thus produces an overarching subject."¹⁰⁵ This corrosive alliance becomes a possible site of solidarity between seemingly distinct activities such as care work and artmaking. From this process, the "weak autonomy" of the artistic subject can be empirically formulated from a set of complex material relations, and not abstractions ("an autonomy of materialisations, instead of autonomy from materialisations," as Stakemeier and Vishmidt write).¹⁰⁶ Such a subject may still be definitionally distinct from other subjects in the sphere of artistic production, with

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. pg. 81.

¹⁰⁶ Stakemeier, Kerstin and Vishmidt, Marina. *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art*. Mute Publishing, 2016. London. pg. 60.

its negative, antisocial relation to autonomy. Hirata and Leung, as demonstrated in the previous sections, don't recede before the labour of maintenance; we could say that Leung approaches it from a managerial position, applying her knowledge of the institution and giving it back a score to perform. The institution takes on the reproductive labour in relation to the artist (following orders, seeking and organising the right objects, interpreting the score, taking care of its production), which, once executed, becomes art. The rather unglamorous part of its reproduction is automated, and the antisocial negativity towards autonomy is evident in Leung's refusal to perform artistic subjectivity for the institution. She recognises that it can produce itself; her job is to set it in motion. For Hirata, the antisocial inclination is readable through his insistence on finding autonomy where there officially should be none; by collecting piss bottles of workers whose contracts don't allow them to leave their post, and presenting them as ready-mades, only to return them to the streets afterwards, or by borrowing objects and titles from his bosses and friends he has worked for and with. In relation to the position of assistant, the question becomes: how can this negative relation towards autonomy serve not the maintenance of the institution of art, but as a means of refusing the terms of its reproduction entirely?

Locating the assistant at their post opens up a wide range of compromises, negotiations, and conditions that, in turn, produce, devalue, and depend on their labour. In that vast landscape of never-ending work, organising and solidarity often seem beyond one's interest, as Nizan Shaked notes¹⁰⁷,

¹⁰⁷ Annika Haas, Dana Kopel, Olivia Leiter, Simon Leung, Nizan Shaked: "The Assistant," or Maintaining Crumbling Fantasies. in "Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts" ed. Antonijevic, Tamara and Weickenmeier, Christopher, Berlin: b_books, forthcoming.

since doing so requires challenging the autonomy assistants, artists, and other cultural workers have been trained to desire. Dana Kopel's account¹⁰⁸ of meeting Hans Haacke during the New Museum workers' strike illustrates this structural bind. Invited to join their strike and pressure the museum to meet the workers' demands, Haacke said he would do so, but only after the opening of his show, making his support a purely performative gesture. This can serve as a reminder that solidarities in the art field are temporary and easily broken, and that they are symptoms of structural rather than personal failings. As a way of cultivating our engagement with structural non-solidarity, Kerstin Stakemeier proposes shifting our focus to organising through disidentification, which would require:

to disidentify from the moralism of imagining ourselves in the legitimate position of criticality, while being in the economic position of the employer, and instead let our own negativity be a form within the struggle against the relations we partake in.

to understand and practically realize that accountability is not a personal character trait, but that accountability, like abolition, like disalienation, like all figures of radical unmaking of our systemic implication within the system that kills us (at different speeds and with different force), is a social practice. One that is, as long as we live within colonising capital, affirmatively inconsistent because none of us can unmake their negativity.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Kopel, Dana. "Against Artsploitation." *The Baffler*, September 6, 2021. <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/against-artsploitation-kopel>.

¹⁰⁹ Stakemeier, "Annotations of 'Spaces of Speculation,'"

Disidentification allows negativity to form within relations, revealing what seemed personal (earned, fought for, learned or transitory) as structural. Within the art field, the question of identification is crucial, since artistic forms have been used in various ways as tools of disidentifying labour from capital. Marina Vishmidt approached the value-form of artistic subjectivity, that is, the main site of production of this form of criticism and disidentification, through the lens of infrastructural critique, which she understood as a continuous movement and shifting of strategies in examining the material conditions of the institution's reproduction, within and beyond the art field. This translates as an intention to intercept and disrupt the processes of valorisation by drawing attention to the conditions (and impossibilities) of reproduction across different scales. The aim is to dismantle the institution's frame as a place that must be continuously reinvented, reformed, and salvaged, and to see it rather as a placeholder for material and social resources that can be put to use in numerous ways. These shifts are inseparable from developing a materialist theory of conditions of possibility ('whether those conditions are considered formal, social, economic, historical, or ontological'),¹¹⁰ with abolition as horizon. This resonates with our intention to approach the job of assisting beyond the contingencies of singular artistic projects, designated roles and departments.

The aesthetics of resentment, as already discussed in relation to Helbig, Krump, and Supe, can serve as a framework that captures both the questions of disidentification and desolidarisation. Resentment is an expression of incapacity lived and realised, not as an aesthetic potential, but as a

¹¹⁰ Vishmidt, Marina. "Infrastructural Critique: Between Reproduction and Abolition." *e-flux journal*, no. 155 (2024). Accessed April 8, 2026. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/155/675808/infrastructural-critique-between-reproduction-and-abolition>.

real, material impossibility of artistic subjectivity – a moment when identification breaks. The invisibilisation of reproductive labour, which is the invisibilisation and erasure of the labour of assistants throughout the history of art that stabilises artistic autonomy, finds expression in assistants' resentment. Not disidentification yet, but it might turn into one. As an injury repeated over time, resentment marks the realisation that the promise of artistic life might never arrive. For this reason, the negativity expressed and lived by an angry assistant holds the potential for organising, although maybe not in art. To disidentify from the structures that turned them into fixed capital would mean to accept that the reason one arrived there in the first place was the belief that art is exceptional and a meaningful and desirable form of work. As Vishmidt states, autonomy is not a personal belief but an infrastructural condition,¹¹¹ which is why calling out its invisibility changes nothing on its own. Disidentification does not set the ground for revolt in the sense that it will inspire negativity; rather, the negativity and the impossibility of reproduction that are continuously negotiated in the assistant's position and subjectivity show that artistic subjectivity and autonomy stand in the way of that revolt. The resentment has the potential to orient from personal to structural disidentification. This resonates with the notions of the human strike as formulated by Claire Fontaine, as a strategy or tactic, but as an entrance into a "new, less defined, and more uncertain state, freed of the weights that burdened the previous identity and allowed the perpetuation of the status quo."¹¹² For them, this is a programme of communism as seizing the means of production and

¹¹¹ Vishmidt, *Infrastructural Critique*,

¹¹² Claire Fontaine, "Existential Metonymy and Imperceptible Abstractions," in *Human Strike Has Already Begun and Other Writings* (London: Metamute, 2013), Accessed April 10 2026, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/claire-fontaine-human-strike-has-already-begun-and-other-writings>.

reproduction of subjectivities, inasmuch as all bits and pieces of our subjectivities are put to work and "being a workforce at the service of a collective or private project."¹¹³ Disidentified from the future in which there's a profitable artistic subjectivity and a position to occupy, the assistant and artist would find themselves attending to the field of dependencies, needs and wants, in and out of the institution, and finding other uses for them. As previously elaborated, in order to claim and retool its autonomy, art needs to take into account the conditions of its reproduction, and the subjectivity of the assistant is one of those places and conditions. The assistant's resentment is more than a bad mood, as it has the potential to escalate into a full strike or sabotage until artistic subjectivity ceases to be a profitable and desirable possession. This doesn't imply that the forms of labour and work done by assistants and artists will disappear; on the contrary, the broken orientation leaves them with the measureless work, and the question shifts to their place, organisation, and role in the infrastructure. Framed in this way, the question turns away from the dichotomies of inside and outside of the institution, or artistic self-reflection-expression and activism. As Petrossiants notes, leaving an institution can't free us from rethinking the social relations that have created those enclosures, and calling for the dismantling of an institution's framework doesn't imply the destruction of the tasks it fails to perform.¹¹⁴ By offering the example of protesters entering the museum during the Whitney protests, because it was a safer space than the street, he suggests that the autonomy of art can be used as an advantage - in this

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Rakowitz, Michael, Shellyne Rodriguez, Stephen Shukaitis, u. a. *Diversity of Aesthetics: Volumes 1-3*. Herausgegeben von Andreas Petrossiants, José Rosales, Rinaldo Walcott, und Marina Vishmidt. Common Notions, 2025., pg 30.

instance, as a way of keeping demonstrators safer from the police. In short, this is a proposal to instrumentalise autonomy for means other than the maintenance of individual, artistic subjectivity – Haacke himself couldn't do it, but a mass of people entering a building could make use of it.

From this perspective, the question of the assistant's agency, organisation, and solidarity can be turned upside down. It's not about revamping their status into subjects within the institution that turned them into fixed capital, but how that instrumentalisation can be put to (mis)use. As a proposal, that's exactly the process of deproduction.

As the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon developed it, technical objects are subject to hierarchies of command, in which creativity and instrumentality are polarised, and instrumentality becomes the fate of objects, as well as of subjects not considered fully human.¹¹⁵ Simondon saw technical alienation (understood as a utilitarian relationship between humans and nonhumans) as prior to social alienation, as it must take hold before exploitation and dispossession are established and normalised as patterns in human-to-human interaction. The position of the assistant "within the machine" suggests a kind of subjectivity that is, in the words of Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi, "constructed from the hard labour of alienation."¹¹⁶ They attest this position with an overt familiarity with "instrumentality", such that they might "politicise it, and transcend it through usage itself."¹¹⁷ As such, it is a position that may assist in denaturalising the kind of artistic subjectivity that finds

¹¹⁵ See: Simondon, Gilbert. *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove, Minneapolis, Univocal, 2016.

¹¹⁶ Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi, "The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility," *e-flux journal*, no. 77 (2016), 8, cited in Marina Vishmidt, "Pure Maintenance," *South as a State of Mind*, n.d., accessed March 3, 2026, <https://southasastateofmind.com/article/pure-maintenance/>

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

itself historically inclined to overstate its creative potential. Rather than proposing an escape by becoming an artist (and thereby reproducing the structure they aim to exit), disidentification suggests a move towards politicising their position. The following examples of artistic practices of Reba Maybury and JP Raether use strategies of decentering, fragmenting, multiplying, and reappropriating artistic subjectivity as means of social practice. They treat artistic subjectivity not as an endpoint or a structure to be altered, but as material to be broken down and dissolved. The automation processes in these works approach Simondon's idea of technological autonomy, allowing objects to serve less functional ends. What if instrumentalisation is viewed not as a problem to solve, but as a perspective?

As a political dominatrix Maybury has to work "faster than her submissive's erection"¹¹⁸ in order to shape and transform their desire. Her method of dominating intervenes with the division of labour, by redistributing the work to her submissives, who have the pleasure of being those creating her work, and so reversing and corrupting the service relation in which she would be the service provider. For Mistress Rebecca there's potential in rearranging the power dynamics contained in the nature of the commodified and transactional relation between her and the submissives, who may remain anonymous, but not completely invisible. By working on and maintaining these relationships, Maybury's authorship is entangled with the shifting dynamics of desire and arousal and depends on the submissives' openness, skill, and capacity to serve her.¹¹⁹ In

¹¹⁸ Maybury Reba. *Faster Than an Erection*. Wet Satin Press, 2022.

¹¹⁹ "The sex I create is about production. Rather than this sex creating a child, I instead flourish in using these men for My artworks and for life's growth. As I have stated and will state many more times, the submissive man cannot take more from Me and I use this sexual engagement to produce for My own benefit." in Maybury Reba. *Faster Than an Erection*. Wet Satin Press, 2022.

"From Paris with Love,"¹²⁰ Maybury breaks her paintings into a paint-by-number pattern, meant to give the consumer "the experience of art without being an artist," and assigns her subordinates the task of painting it. The two commodified "labours of love" are performed by Maybury's users/consumers and formalised as her art. Maybury and her submissives are creating the artistic subjectivity of Mistress Rebecca, whose expressions are serialised instances of the multiplicity of relationships that have to be maintained and transformed. Sometimes, that transformation feels cathartic for all involved; other times, it feels like never-ending, unproductive labour.

JP Raether's practice treats authorship as carriership, in assistance to alifveforms (an umbrella term for multiple entities that inhabit and emerge from capitalist infrastructures and that appear in sites like IKEA stores, Apple Stores, spas, ski resorts, malls, mines, and tourist destinations) and the entities that operate through them. The appearances of alifveforms confront the participants and accidental passersby with the explosion of overwhelming otherness, disrupting the "consensual reality" to bring out the other, psychoreality, from beneath the current of "the normal, everyday life." The scale, the expansion and development of numerous "forks" (when one entity splits into two) completely override the capacity demarcated by the concept of authorship, which simply can't keep up (physically nor psychologically) with the automated system in which fragments of the real (identities, objects, and data) are "recombined and bundled." There's a complex system of support on which the infrastructures of alifveforms run – those who encounter, participate in, and witness its appearances. This process of "forking" reaches beyond art's enclosures; not as

¹²⁰ Maybury, Reba. *From Paris With Love*. Wet Satin Press, 2024

despecialization of practice (Kerstin Stakemeier), but as a gradual shedding of the framework of authorship.¹²¹ This process aims to turn the "solid self" obsolete, and approach the identity beyond the framework of capitalogenic reality: "In the afterglow, afterimage and the reverberation of the solid self's artmaking there is plenty to do."¹²²

From another angle, the art historian Susanne Huber's essay "Critique's supporting structures to the test: Anti-formalism revisited" shows that the power dynamics at play in the service relation of the assistant are not merely psychic or metaphorical but materially inscribed into aesthetic objects themselves, literally held in place by support structures.¹²³ Following Silvia Wynter's claim that aesthetics as a sociopolitical practice is constitutive of the conditions under which an artwork may affectively or symbolically resonate, Huber questions how specific interpretations find their epistemological support and invites us to consider the "assisting structures" in the formation of aesthetic judgement. Usually caught in a "dualistic dynamic of dependence and opportunity," Huber is interested in how these structures may "instigate transvaluations of their sensual and epistemological foundations."¹²⁴ Using the example of the US-American artist Martine Syms' installation *Belief Strategy XVI* (2023), Huber shows how this work may be said to support the deconstruction of the specific "hegemonic signifying

¹²¹ Stakemeier, Kerstin. *Entgrenzter Formalismus. Verfahren einer antimodernen Ästhetik*. Berlin: b_books, 2017., in Raether, JP. "Vocabulary of Alifveforms." In *Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts*, edited by Tamara Antonijević and Christopher Weickenmeier. Berlin: b_books, forthcoming.

¹²² Raether, JP. "Vocabulary of Alifveforms." In *Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts*, edited by Tamara Antonijević and Christopher Weickenmeier. Berlin: b_books, forthcoming.

¹²³ Huber, Susanne. "Critique's supporting structures to the test. Anti-formalism revisited." in *Assistances: On Reproductive Labour in the Arts*, edited by Tamara Antonijević and Christopher Weickenmeier. Berlin: b_books, forthcoming.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

practices" of white supremacy. A purely antiformalist reading of the work, however, risks ignoring the inherent dynamism of the work's formal and referential composition that ultimately acts like "a kinetic set of positions," where the question of dependency and power literally and figuratively rests on "the support structure's terms" (this includes, for example, the formal composition of the work that sees a large scale painting balancing precariously on the thin neck of a glass jar).¹²⁵ Huber connects this discussion with an analysis of the reception history of Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), paying extra attention to recent attempts to reevaluate the meaning of the other feminine figure present in the painting, usually understood as instrumental in consolidating Olympia's femininity and whiteness. Drawing on Denise Murrell's argument that the depiction of the attendant presents a plausible attempt at renouncing racist and orientalist depictions in lieu of the "new racial reality within French society," Huber concludes: "Within the historical framework of representation, the protagonists' extra-pictorial equivalence is inconceivable. Yet a corresponding hierarchy on the picture plane is complicated only after the acknowledgement of such violent conditions."¹²⁶ According to Huber, this apparent double-bind necessitates an "anti-antiformalist approach" where "moments of [...] latency in the very object of inquiry" are no longer denied: "Form and structure are inseparably intertwined just as a deciphering practice relies on the very terms of articulation."¹²⁷ Huber's final question of "Who's serving who?" could be understood as a much-needed reminder that the ever latent question of power within the service relation of assisting is as much an aesthetic problem as it is a political one.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Assistances: Endnotes.

"Assistances", as both a project and as a method, practically and organisationally meant everything from navigating institutional recourses and frameworks, managing multiple schedules, hosting, preparing food, editing, transcribing, translating, and coordinating with students, professors, student assistants, technical support, and administrative staff; in short, the labour that went into it is as incalculable as what it aimed to theorise and analyse.

As Stakemeier and Vishmidt suggested, in order to organise the conditions of study differently, we firstly have to deproduce the modes and ways of working, which are learned, habitualised, and rehearsed through the institutions of education.¹²⁸ Studying assistantship as labour, social relation of service, and social practice reveals that the attachments to bourgeois subjectivity are the strongest precisely where their successful resolution is systemically made impossible. In response to these attachments and their structural importance in maintaining the institutions of art and the artist, "Assistances" proposed to theorise and work through some of the operating modes of deproduction: disidentification, mobilised resentment, and the intentional dissolution of artistic subjectivity. The incalculability and impossibility of reproduction are legible only as a gap between what is possible to be articulated with theory and the fact that the mentioned forms of organising and collaborating have participated in creating more of the never-ending, institutionalised flows of work. The gap is not resolved, but further addressed and examined through the novel as a contract and research method.

¹²⁸ Stakemeier and Vishmidt, "Foreword: Unlearning to Unlearn," pg. 8.

"Assistances" focused on collaboration and approached it as horizontally as possible. The artistic element of this dissertation, the novel "Zero Slack," takes a different, but complementary, approach: it explores dispersed authorship in the process of its (de)production, through its dependencies on its employees, Jessica and SwissBanking666. The following chapter contextualises and reflects upon how these theoretical proposals materialised into a novel that is at the same time a contract, an investment plan, and an extracted Bildungsroman.

Chapter III: Zero-slack,¹²⁹ Godspeed!

*Reading, like writing, is fundamentally shaped by the
material conditions of living.*
Vicky Sparrow, *A Poem of Objects That Live by Magic: The
Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn*

The excess of unfulfillment is a power.
Danny Hayward, *The Wound Building*, 2021

*Within the scope of the possibilities of the Doctoral
Centre, financial support for the final presentation is not
possible. In this context, the equal treatment of candidates
is essential.*
[REDACTED], 2026

"Zero Slack", a novel in three performance scores, follows one German state theatre assistant's "incredible adventure" from working as a sales girl, catering server, intern, state theatre assistant, PhD candidate, and assistant professor. The novel fictionalises the accounts of the candidate's past and present working experiences, as well as the process of its own institutionalisation. By making the conditions, such as the unpaid labour of the writer and their hired assistants, explicit in the form of the deferred contract, the novel mirrors and problematises the candidate's reliance on the future doctoral title for employment. The novel's authorship is shredded and made legally and structurally dependent.

¹²⁹ Zero-slack is a stage rigging technique that keeps the lifting rope under constant tension, preventing it from going limp. This is done by adding a counterweight equal to the weight of the object being lifted.

Drawing on Susanne Huber's analysis, based on her reading of Sylvia Wynter's proposal of deciphering practice,¹³⁰ that agents of support are both materially and aesthetically inscribed in the objects they background, serve and condition, this chapter will focus on the multiple dynamics that operate in "Zero Slack", at the levels of language, narration, and performance. I'm using the term "performance" firstly to imply embodiment through the figures established in the narrative text, as both fictional and real assistants, including Jessica (as a performer, but also as a hired practice with her own genealogy). Secondly, performativity refers to creative fiction as a research method, which allows me to, at the same time, fictionalise and enact relations with collaborators via the novel. By fictionalising these relations and positions, authorship is examined as a site of subjectivity production, where multiple influences and dependencies are present. The term "score", with its lineage from the 1960s on in the visual and performance art, denotes a set of instructions that could be openly interpreted and performed, rather than a fully authored and fixed work. In relation to gendered and racialised exploitative labour conditions, assistantship could be defined as a site of hermeneutical, epistemic injustice¹³¹, in which the subjects' knowledge of the exploitative conditions of their work is not recognisable or readable as such, even to themselves. However, as I briefly outlined in the Introduction, I was interested in finding a form that would decentre the diaristic, confessional accounts of

¹³⁰ Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice," in *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, edited by Mbye B. Cham (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World press, 1992): 238–279, 259. in Huber, "Critique's Supporting Structures to the Test."

¹³¹ Hermeneutical injustice is a term formulated by Miranda Fricker, who uses it to denote the systemic in which an individual or a group are incapacitated in making their knowledge of the injustice legible.

See: Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford university press, 2007.

invisible labour, since these are so often framed in terms of the subjective experience of injury as personal ownership.

From this perspective, I became invested in “figurations” of the contracted positions (both fictional and real) as a way of constructing interchangeable and overlapping short-term identities rather than a narrative arc that would approximate the institutional conditions through the formation of stable subjectivity. The novel’s performance unfolds in relation to the university, as the context for which it’s produced, as well as in relation to the employees of the novel, to whom the figure of the PhD candidate gradually accumulates debt. As such, the novel becomes a site of production and, explicitly, a social space. As already developed in Chapter II, the PhD Candidate undertakes unpaid labour in return for the promise that it will materialise in the doctoral title. This dynamic is mirrored in the deferred payment agreement between the PhD Candidate and the employees of the novel. Rather than aiming for representational forms of these dynamics, the novel is operative both as an institutionally produced artwork and a contract. This way, the curricular requirement for legibility and transparency is addressed both in content and in the forms of presentations of the work (which include readings by the PhD Candidate, the novel itself, and Jessica’s scheduled performances). In the spirit of deciphering practices, the text both analyses its conditions of production and operates through them as explicitly as possible. “Zero Slack” works with signifying practices, and makes them legible, and therefore, counterable, or as Wynter would say, “consciously and consensually alterable.”¹³²

¹³² Sylvia Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice,” in *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, edited by Mbye B. Cham (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World press, 1992): 238–279, 259. in Huber, “Critique's Supporting Structures to the Test.”

The three performance scores, the figures, and the hired positions are constantly reframed, as contexts and points of view shift. The three scores (German state theatre, University and Finance) build the architecture of the novel and perform a progressive timeline of the process of institutionalisation, both of the PhD Candidate and the novel. The financial score reveals the investments, budget gaps, and accrued debts that have made the first two scores possible and serve as the underlying basis for the completion of the thesis. Since only one person can be awarded the title, the authorship is contractually dispersed as a leverage for the lack of financial means. While the artistic practices of Hirata, Leung, Raether, and Maybury that I have examined in previous chapters employ different strategies to make their dependencies visible as constitutive elements of their works, their artworks still operate as derivatives of their artistic subjectivities and are their legal property as individual artists. Practically, the status of these authorships remains untouched. As I will expand on at the end of this chapter, "Zero Slack" responds to this question by treating the legal status of authorship and its modes of performance as a site of (de)production. I'm less interested in making a conceptual claim against authorship's self-possession, and more invested in the fact that it seems like I simply (materially) can't afford it. The work's constitutive dependencies are problematised and further elaborated, sabotaging "my own" process of instituting. With these intentions in mind, this chapter will unpack the process and thinking behind the novel and open up different ways of interpreting the text. My intention is not to build a single thread of analysis or to illustrate the method, but to approach deproduction as a style. In the case of "Zero Slack", deproduction meant approximating disownership as a condition without centring it

around personal injury and singularising exploitation, but by showing how it is structurally conditioned.

Self at Work

Prior to formalising the three scores as architecture of the novel, the main strategy for writing was to always take into consideration *how* and *when* it was possible, and under which conditions the presentation of the process was requested. This meant strategically approximating the limits as outlines of the work – writing could try to transgress them, respond reactively, or refuse transparency. One such example was the format of the internal and public colloquia required as part of my progress to degree, which demanded precisely timed 15-to-25-minute presentations, which I treated as very strict, literary readings. I'd put on an alarm to interrupt me in the middle of the reading, and the next presentation would continue where the previous one left off. During the last feedback session, an external advisor commented that it was "touching" to observe how I perform against the demands I imposed on myself: writing in a language that is not "mine," maintaining a tempo, reading on different devices, struggling with the pronunciation of certain words, etc. She experienced my performance as a sequence of self-imposed and institutional demands, and the work became about how I, personally, respond, become affected, and am affectable. This resonates with what Hayward notices in his recent collection of essays, the fact that:

many of us have been playing roles in an elite-class game. the system of elite-class writing in its current phase makes a virtue of injury: the speaking subject should be injured. the

injury should come from a marginal position, whether of race or class or gender or migration.¹³³

Reading one's own writing necessarily affirms it as a performance of injury and "as personal property." Hayward argues against this "representation-game," which inevitably reaffirms the "elite class of representation" and proposes thinking about style to counteract these processes. For him, the style becomes a way of building communist resilience, and allows us to "go after the resources without feeling like ... everything had to change before our condition did, or could or might."¹³⁴ Style is an expression of conviction and commitment, rather than a personal trait, and remains present and palpable in the way one writes or speaks. I understand this proposal as a way of tuning into and finding resonances with works and practices that, in Terre Thaemlitz's terms, help us in working through our communal disownership, without having to continuously reaffirm where we stand in relation to the institutions and their conditions. These questions have to do with the ways "self" is literally put to work in the institutions of art and knowledge production by individuating "group injuries" (as Hayward writes) as personal experience. If these are personal problems, then how resistance and antagonism are formulated also becomes an individual choice, which is something I elaborated in Chapter 1 in relation to assistants' diaries and testimonies, and Chapter 2 in relation to education's framing as lifelong learning. These are all instances of the "self" at work, whose systemic function is to conceal the exploitation that is happening and frame it instead as self-investment.

"Zero Slack" works with these structures of the self on different levels: in the content of the novel through

¹³³ Hayward, Danny. *Training Exercises. Both Are Worse*, 2024. pg. 75

¹³⁴ Ibid. pg. 77

different figurations, rather than characters, by hiring an assistant to perform the text and hold the gaps between the emergence of each figure within it, and on the level of structure of the novel, which further gives some of the authorial control to the assistant. Responding to institutional formats (such as the precisely timed presentations) as constitutive of the work made the process receptive to its environment. What kind of writing and style could be formed from the time and space restricted by multiple projects, jobs, and, in general, limited resources? In her study and attempt to approximate Herve Guibert's life and writing while knowing he's dying,¹³⁵ Kate Zambreno examines how the practice of writing shapes and is shaped by the conditions of life and death.¹³⁶ Via Bhanu Kapil and César Aira, she questions if it's really the case that "you cannot write a novel the night before dying."¹³⁷ She asks:

But isn't that what Guibert was doing? Writing novels the night before dying?... Then what does he mean when he writes in *Compassion Protocol*, a classic aphoristic flourish closing a section, "It is when what I am writing takes the form of a journal that I most strongly feel that I am writing fiction."¹³⁸

This is the distance that "Zero Slack" also aims to approach and zoom into as a site of subjectivity production, where "self" is constructed through fiction, narrated, shaped, and remodelled. The writing becomes the question of the affordances, as formulated by Desideri and Harey, rather than of individual qualities or possessions. The process of working

¹³⁵ See: Guibert, Hervé. *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*. Translated by Linda Coverdale. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2020.

¹³⁶ Zambreno, Kate. *To write as if already dead*. Columbia University Press, 2021. pg. 74

¹³⁷ César Aira, "Novels Defeat the Law of Diminishing Returns," *The Paris Review* (February 22, 2019). Published originally in *Birthday*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2019). in Zambreno, *To Write as If Already Dead*, pg. 74.

¹³⁸ Zambreno, *To Write as If Already Dead*, pg. 74.

on this text was continuously interrupted with multiple projects and working obligations, and the structure reflects and refers to these conditions both in its form and content, as well as in the fragmentation of different roles which appear to "do the job" of subjectivity maintenance of the assistant. Each performance score is based on a point of view and a system of references that emerge and come along with it. Writing, as a practice, was maintained against, but also mediated through everything else that "gets in the way." At a distance, while doing the work for someone else, the narrativised self is constructed – as Hervé Guibert transmits via Zambreno, the fiction unavoidably inhabits self-narration. In "Zero Slack", this is constructed through multiple figures (Jessica (November 2025 – indefinitely); Sales Girl (January – February 2017); Intern (November 2017 – January 2018); Assistant (June 2018 – July 2020); Phd Candidate (August 2021 – June 2026); Assistant professor (August 2021 – July 2027); Writer (undefinable)). They are formed through labour relations, and they disappear, or are freed, as soon as their contracts end. There is no coherent subjectivity to be assembled or accessed by collecting a sum of the experiences, emotions, or representations of these figures' presences in the world. They could be read as different modulations of the assistant, and simultaneously as gamified avatars, designed to exist in parallel, with occasional interactions.

The difference between these two very different strategies of building interiority is reflected in the way the language of German state theatre differentiates between *Character*, *Rolle*, and *Figur*. Jonas Tinius, in his analysis of the German theatre and migration, contextualised by and based on his experience of working in Theater an der Ruhr, defines the use of *Character* in German "to denote recognisable moral traits that make up and render distinct, sometimes even quirky, someone's personality (Persönlichkeit) or the identity of a

thing or experience... In theatre, however, the notion that prevails is that of Rolle (role) and Figur (figure), both of which are used to describe nuances of abstraction and meaning with which actors (Darsteller, Schauspieler) engage, and which are intertwined with their capacity for understanding the complex character of a play's dramatis personae."¹³⁹ As he elaborates, this is part of a historical legacy of German state theatre and its Enlightenment role in building and cultivating the character of its citizens through aesthetic forms. The experience of aesthetic form is of a fundamental value here, and is designated to instruct, teach, and release negative or conflicting emotions through catharsis. In "Zero Slack", in contrast, the way different labouring figures are constructed is closer to the terms figure, extra, and *figurant*, as elaborated by George Didi-Huberman,¹⁴⁰ as the background presence established throughout the history of cinema as a representation of people. As such, they constitute the scene and are also constituted by it, rather than having a role in the narrative or interiority.

In relation to this, there's no stable character in "Zero Slack" ; its figures are socially and contractually constructed, and stand in labour relations to the novel. If there's a sense of a personality or individuality that they build together, then it's based on their assembly and succession. They are not fragments of a broken-down-to-bits Self; it's rather the opposite. In her analysis and critique of the uses of experience by historians, philosophers, and writers as an essentialising tool, Joan W. Scott elaborates on the ways the unaccounted, non-normative subjects enter the history of difference by becoming visible, only to reaffirm

¹³⁹ Tinius, Jonas. *State of the Arts: An Ethnography of German Theatre and Migration*. 1. Aufl. Cambridge University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009321150>, pg 106.

¹⁴⁰ Didi-Huberman, Georges. "People Exposed, People as Extras". *Radical Philosophy*, Nr. 156 (2009): 16–22.

the system that suppresses and excludes them.¹⁴¹ "Subjects are constructed discursively," Scott writes, and continues:

They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. Being a subject means being "subject to definite conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise." These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited. Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning.¹⁴²

The experience of difference is always collective and social, as it doesn't happen in isolation or outside of the system whose existence is based on the premise of its exclusion, and it is enacted and transformed through language. Scott's writing is in dialogue with Samuel Delany, who accounts for the necessity of speaking about what is uncomfortable, excluded, perverse, or rejected. For Delany, to write of what is unspeakable, to "inflate personal into subjective" so that the separation of the legitimate and illegitimate knowledge and ways of living becomes apparent — this "split" demands to be bridged by language.¹⁴³ Scott's reading of this passage concludes her essay by positioning experience as "a subject's history." In continuation, she

¹⁴¹ It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as incontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation — as a foundation on which analysis is based — that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place. They take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalise their difference. See

Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience". *Critical Inquiry* 17, Nr. 4 (1991): 773–97.

¹⁴² Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," pg. 793

¹⁴³ Delany, Samuel R. *The motion of light in water: sex and science fiction writing in the East Village*. 1st University of Minnesota Press ed, 2004. e-book.

writes: "Language is the site of history's enactment. Historical explanation cannot, therefore, separate the two."¹⁴⁴ Positioned and analysed in this way, experience is not the subject's truth, essence or means of identification, but an intersection of multiple conditions, choices, and histories, which are all embodied and social at the same time. From this perspective, "Zero Slack"'s figures operate as an embodiment of different conditions at play, while the personal experience of working in the German state theatre system is reframed as the different instances of their appearance. It is in the gap, to paraphrase Delany's words,¹⁴⁵ in the split between the legitimate knowledge of the institution and its management, and the impossible, useless knowledge of the assistant, that different figures appear as necessary to bridge it.

Jessica was hired as a character (not only as a performer) as one way of addressing the aforementioned gap, since the figures appear under the conditions of labour, and someone has to hold the space for the next subjectivity to "come to work". As the apparatus of representation builds and fails, over and over again, maintaining the thread of subjectivities in the novel becomes one of Jessica's main tasks. Compensation is negotiated and based on the commissioner's level of indebtedness, not on a wage system. All these conditions and frameworks Jessica employs resonated with my own research interests, as discussed in the following section. Ideally, "Zero Slack" would be read and performed as an embodied hallucination produced by institutional demands meeting institutional conditions – hiring Jessica is as close as I can

¹⁴⁴ Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," pg. 793

¹⁴⁵ "But if it is the split—the spaces between the columns (one resplendent and lucid with the writings of legitimacy, the other dark and hollow with the voices of the illegitimate, and even a third aglitter with ironic alterities)—that constitutes the subject, it is only after the Romantic inflation of the private into the subjective that such a split can even be located. That locus, that margin, that split itself first allows, then demands the appropriation of language—now spoken, now written—in both directions, over the gap."

Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*.

get to that ideal. Practising a form of voluntary self-exploitation through performing as „a mind of Jessica’s body and body of Jessica’s work”,¹⁴⁶ Asencio positions himself in close proximity to institutional conditions and offers a study in how work shapes subjectivity. Beyond the context of the novel, and as a practice, Jessica could be embodied by someone else, too. Her work emphasises the plasticity and flexibility expected of cultural workers and assistants in general, and serves as a point of disidentification from labour relations. During the presentation in the second workshop of “Assistances”, Asencio shared Jessica’s claim that she desires no creativity and that the limit itself is her material. Similarly, I was interested in finding ways to use the limit not as a boundary or a defining shape of the work, but as a score.

Following Scott’s analysis,¹⁴⁷ that subjects are constructed by the situations and conditions that they have to navigate and respond to, the figures that assemble the subjectivity of the assistant in the novel could be inhabited and performed by a hired assistant as well. Formulated through this process, authorship has little to do with interiority or personal experience, instead becoming operative in its legal relation to the institution for which it’s performed, the university. It’s revealed as operational, based on demands and needs, and in the incapacity to fulfil them. The contract between the PhD Candidate (both as a figure and a position) and Jessica is a literal extension of that dynamic. Further examples of “assisting” structures of the self in the narrative can be

¹⁴⁶ Asencio, Simon. The Book of Rumours - a residence and site specific project. May 2017. Web. Artforum. April 2026.

https://artguide.artforum.com/uploads/guide.004/id06412/press_release.pdf

¹⁴⁷ In the same line of argumentation is Elin Diamond’s proposal, through Teresa de Lauretis, to link experience and subjectivity “exoterically”, as a socially conditioned process, rejecting its behaviourist and individualistic meanings. See:

Diamond, Elin. *Unmaking mimesis: essays on feminism and theater*. Routledge, 1997., pg. 149.

tracked in the figures named Whore, Maid, and Village Girl, which appear in "Performance Score I: Staatstheater" and function as modulations of the background characters from the history of playwriting that perform typical gendered roles and often "drive" the plot of the play. The shows that are being witnessed and maintained are simply "places of work" for the figures, who appear in them as employees of the theatre, and as motivated artists with personal desires and fears. However, their knowledge and experiences of the institution remain contingent and situational, without destabilising its modes of operation. Such is the example of the scene "The Broken Jug," in which the assistant can articulate precisely the situation from the outside (give the reason behind the laughter of the audience), but her knowledge is useless, and she transmits it only when it's too late, without being able to do anything about. As Scott argues, the illegitimate experiences of the assistant and the knowledge they produce have no place to land. The diaries and assistantship reports described in Chapter I were all, as my analysis demonstrated, fully integrated into the structures that they testified against in the end. "Zero Slack" aims to perform and hold the impossibility of representing such knowledge, and aims to do so as a form of anti-testimonial and anti-confessional writing.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ With this term, I'm specifically referring to the essay on Anna Mendelssohn's poetry and her disdain for transparency and mistrust of the reader. It relates to my project, not because my readers are policemen, but because I'm submitting my writing to a commission for artistic and academic approval. See: Savage, Jordan Kay. "I Don't Talk to the Police Except Never': Anna Mendelssohn, Tom Raworth, and Anti-Confessional Life Writing". *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 10, Nr. 1 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.30>.

Knowledge at Work

In relation to the figures established in the Performance Score I, the PhD Candidate, Assistant Professor, and Writer further reframe the narrative of state theatre, and serve as a way of disidentifying from the assumed neutrality of the university and the production of knowledge. In this case, disidentification operates as a mode of distancing from the institutional position, while still remaining in it. While "Performance Score I: Staatstheater" could operate on its own as a novel about the adventures of a state theatre assistant, the second score frames it as an extraction of artistic value for the purpose of a dissertation, and makes this segment of self-investment explicit. The newly established figures, PhD Candidate, Writer, and Assistant Professor, appear as further modulations of subjectivity at work, now with a new task of demonstrating the insights from the previous place of work for the university. Past experiences accrue value by being contextualised and shaped as worthy of academic and artistic research; as Scott's analysis shows, this procedure is in danger of individualising and exceptionalising the experience by bringing it into the realm of the legitimate and visible on the terms of the very institution that's responsible for its structural illegitimacy. However, the university seems to offer a discursive, neutral space in which these occurrences can be studied from a safe distance.

As discussed in Chapter Two in relation to Moten and Harney's writing, the university is an institution which has a "regulatory lure", and "Performance Score II: The University" walks directly into its jaws. "Performance Score I: Staatstheater" can become legible knowledge only by accepting the terms of its extraction. These neutralising procedures, as well as investments and debts incurred during their

performance, are the main focus of inquiry in "Performance Score II: University." The established narrative can be examined from a different angle, supported by theory, which it supports in reverse, giving it a lived, "real" experience, and as such, it becomes legible and presentable within the framework of artistic and academic research. The extractive mechanisms flow both ways, as implied in the documentation of the final presentation, which states that the previously written and presented "50 Theses on Assisting" have been successfully subsumed into a novel as fiction. The theatre and the university score, two modes of research, artistic and academic, bleed into one another and respond to each other.

The gaps in knowledge and experience, and their untransferability, are formalised in the section "Note on Gaps." As 99.9% of the labour that the novel addresses remains undocumented, unexplained, undescribed, and unnarrativised before the novel even begins, what follows can be taken as a representation of the conditions and fictionalisation of the small portion of "captured" experience. Although it addresses the material of the novel directly, the section "Note on Gaps" directly questions what it is possible to describe and write about while still having a job to do. In other words, if the conditions of labour and university were different (for example, financially supportive, less time-consuming, etc.), the gaps might be smaller. The gap directly addresses what it was possible to write in the given structure, which is abstracted as 0.1% of the overall possible scope of the novel's first score. Resonating with Kate Zambreno's reading of Guibert's writing, Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart address in *The Hundreds*, under the heading "Writing, Life," a similar insight – that a writing practice can be shaped around the absence of distance.

Some people have long, lean writing muscles; mine are shortened and taut like a repetitive stress injury turned into a personal tendency. I can write anywhere now but not for long, and it's only in the morning that I have that kind of energy and interest. (...) Making money, making dinner, taking care of people and stupid shit, getting sick or getting well, getting into and out of what presented, I ended up with a writer's life. I learned to write in thirty-minute episodes on my frail mother's dining room table with a three-year-old playing with old plastic toys underfoot. I took notes on my phone at a doctor's office. I started the day writing in bed even though I had only ten minutes. Over time, I became allergic to the long-winded and roundabout, cutting words down to size. But then I'd become attached to a word fern shooting up in the space between words or I'd be surprised by something energetic already somehow taking off.¹⁴⁹

Instead of progressively building strength, writing is maintained through cycles of incapacity that don't resolve as resistance, refusal, or resilience. It doesn't aspire to leave these conditions, but dwells in them, and observes what is allowed to "take off." The practice is not an expression of the injury, but takes shape in how the response to the impossibility is formed. *The Hundreds*, a collection of 100-word segments from which this excerpt is drawn, was also scored and limited in its word count, as a way of formally addressing writing as a practice of reduction. Both the scoring in "Zero Slack", and the introduction of gaps as what remains structurally invisible and impossible to recuperate, take their formal roots in resonance with these thoughts. Looking into some of the writing that expands on that space, at the place of work, reveals something about the way labour and the way it's structured shapes and forms the subjectivity of work and of writing. One example is Karen Brodine's poem "Woman sitting at the machine, thinking," whose central figure

¹⁴⁹ Berlant, Lauren Gail, and Kathleen Stewart. *The Hundreds*. Duke University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478003335>. pg 10

is able to think "about everything at once without making a mistake."¹⁵⁰ Brodine continues: "no one has figured out how to keep her from doing this thinking // while her hands and nerves also perform every delicate complex // function of the work." A poet, typesetter, and co-founder of the Women Writers Union in San Francisco in the 1970s, Brodine approaches writing as work that is not uncoupled from its conditions. If anything, it exists only by fully taking in and inhabiting the conditions, and not by trying to find a respite from them. The poem doesn't allow for the gap, but is able to bridge it, via a woman's capacity to think it all together, as a form of refusal of the conditions under which she must labour:

"when she sits at the machine, rays from the cathode stream directly into her chest. when she worked as a clerk, the rays

from the xerox angled upward, striking her under the chin.
when she waited tables the micro oven sat at stomach level.
when she typeset for Safeway, dipping her hands in processor chemicals, her hands burned and peeled and her chest ached from the fumes."¹⁵¹

There's desperation and exhaustion, but the woman at the machine moves along with it, and the poem resists her status as "fixed capital," and her thinking and writing act as a form of resistance against the deadening labour conditions. On the other hand, the figure of the assistant in "Zero Slack" is tortured by her trained and rehearsed capacity to think about everything at once, and what appears as a relief or resistance in Brodine's case turns against the assistant. Theatre invades her brain, splits her sense of her body, occupies her eyes

¹⁵⁰ Brodine, Karen. *Woman sitting at the machine, thinking: poems*. 1st ed. Red Letter Press, 1990.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

with images and cues – because seeing and thinking about everything at once is part of her job. The knowledge of how much each action and appearance cost, when and why the audience laughs, overwhelms her. The constant influx of information and tasks overwhelms her capacity to maintain any boundaries and spills into the very loose, weak interiority established by her position. The assistant herself becomes a gap during one of the nights at her job in “The Broken Jug”, as she disappears without explanation, leaving her body to sit in the show while her mind “goes offline.” During this brief “logging off,” Jessica, as a figure in the novel, is tasked with holding the narrative together. This strategy is in deliberate, productive friction with what Busch formulates as the aesthetics of incapacity, as mechanisms of representation are repeatedly sabotaged. The incapacity is deliberate and formally claimed, as the “Staatstheater” and “University” scores affirm the (im)potentiality of figures to perform interiority; with each (re)presentation, the terms and the conditions of their appearance shift. What is gathered and extracted are the gaps – a summary of the opaque knowledge of multiple figures, extras, and *figurants*.

Form Follows Finance

Clearly, “Performance Score II: University” and “Performance Score III: Form Follows Finance” bleed into one another, just like the financial data, contracts, preamble, and lists of investments acquired leak throughout the entire body of text. The performativity of the financial score is set in its speculative framing of the present debt as investments. Prior to that, the debt had to be identified by tracking the hours of unpaid labour. By treating the university and art academy as companies, the finance section positions the unpaid labour

as the PhD Candidate's investment. As discussed in previous sections, the position of the PhD Candidate is used as leverage and an asset; the claim that her novel will be awarded a doctoral title and recognised as a work of academic and artistic merit makes the contract with unpaid employees possible. The contract guarantees the employees the authorship rights for their current and future contributions, and the deferred payment system continues even after the initial debt has been paid off, promising further return on investment. These ideas find resonance in what Marina Vishmidt has developed in depth in her writing on speculation as a mode of production.¹⁵² Speculation, she writes, and not critique, has the capacity to go "beyond the conditions that sustain the division between art and labour, which is the dominance of the form of value that operates through totalisation on the one hand, and exclusion on the other."¹⁵³ The contract of "Zero Slack" evokes what Lisa Adkins has written on in the context of securitised debt, referring to the changes and transformations of how debt can be paid in a more flexible and adjustable manner. "The present is," she writes, "remediated by futures which have not yet – and may never – arrive."¹⁵⁴ As she further analyses, rather than creating profit through the collection of interest rates and payments, under

¹⁵² See further: Vishmidt, Marina. *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital*. Historical Materialism Book Series. Haymarket Books, 2019; Adkins, Lisa, Ramon Amaro, und Jasper Bernes. *Speculation*. Herausgegeben von Marina Vishmidt. Mit Whitechapel Art Gallery. Documents of Contemporary Art. Whitechapel Gallery, 2022;

Board, Editorial. "Spaces of Speculation: Movement Politics in the Infrastructure". *Historical Materialism*, 14. November 2020. <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/spaces-of-speculation-movement-politics-in-the-infrastructure/>.

¹⁵³ Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, pg 119.

¹⁵⁴ Adkins, Lisa. "Speculative Time and the Debt Society//2017", in Vishmidt, Marina. *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital*. Historical Materialism Book Series. Haymarket Books, 2019.

See further:

Adkins, Lisa. "Speculative Futures in the Time of Debt". *The Sociological Review* 65, Nr. 3 (2017): 448–62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12442>.

securitisation, the creditor trades on the promise of future payment, therefore extracting it from the future, as if the payment has already happened. According to Adkins, the "security" of the debt is what is being sold further, without the debtor having any influence over it – it actually creates more profit for the creditor if the debt never gets paid back. Securitised debt has an entirely different temporality and dynamic in comparison to the "classical time of debt," as Adkins argues, and operates within the speculative time, in which past, present and future events are continuously shifting, changing, transforming – it is non-chronological in its nature, and in a constant state of revision. Under securitisation, the promise to pay in "Zero Slack" becomes a tradable asset on its own, and creates three contracted "income streams": the PhD title, Jessica's fee, and SwissBanking666's fee. This process closely resembles the dynamics of the promises of artistic or academic careers; each new assistant subsidises the career of the artist and the institution they are working for, without any real security for their own future. "Employability" becomes an unattainable personal quality, and never-ending training becomes self-investment.

The second hired position, the financial consultant SwissBanking666, has no artistic claim to the novel, but operates as an advisor to and auditor of the project, reviewing the previous calculations and budget proposals made by the PhD Candidate. His position makes the structure legible from "the outside" of the institutions of art and knowledge production. At the level of content, this is developed in the scene "Enter Maid 3," which is "financialised" and written from the perspective of contracts and the technical, lighting and rigging infrastructure of the theatre. In this segment, the Assistant, after trying not to think of everything at once, is calculating the value of each moment, each drop of

the hammer, each smoking break, and tries to establish a formula for the Maid's total value, according to the concept of human capital. Vishmidt uses the term after Gary S. Backer, when she discusses the shifts in the subjectivity of the workers: "With 'human capital' everyone owns the means of production, since each individual is in fact her own means of production."¹⁵⁵ The Assistant, on the other hand, is not able to estimate her own value, or to approach it speculatively, as she can with each segment of the theatrical apparatus. Her value is established in the financial score, retrospectively, and it underscores the necessity of overtime, and of the unpaid labour of all the assistantships in the novel (in the state theatre, university, and place of work), which, in the end, are immeasurable, but formally claimed as investments. To this calculation, the final presentation prior to the defence generates additional budget, which takes into account the actual costs of hiring a practice.

Part of Jessica's practice is to respond to the conditions in which payment is not possible, making her exceptionally suitable for this context. A recent example of a hiring practice in which labour was delegated to the assistant is Joshua Schwebel's work "The Employee."¹⁵⁶ Schwebel hired a gallery assistant to write emails and project applications, as a response to the understaffing of the Forest City Gallery artist-run centre in London, Ontario. In the final presentation of his work, he made the full email archive¹⁵⁷ from the beginning of his project until its end accessible. Both the absurdity and the overwhelm of such a mindless, unstoppable flow of work, which yields no results, can be experienced while scrolling through it. The representational

¹⁵⁵ Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, pg 60.

¹⁵⁶ Joshua Schwebel, "The Employee," Joshua Schwebel, accessed April 10 2026, <https://joshuaschwebel.com/work/the-employee>.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

register assumes that reproduction for the sake of making the conditions visible as content is justified. Vishmidt has addressed this problem as “reproductive realism,”¹⁵⁸ denoting contemporary artistic practices that use the language and the aesthetics of social reproduction feminism, but only as a means of reproducing exactly the same conditions that are already present. The critique is affirmed only on the level of discourse and within the representational register. In relation to this problem, “Zero Slack’s” orientation was to become operative by refusing any solace that might come from a representational distance.

In addition to being hired to perform and interpret the scores, Jessica is hired as a condition for the future reproduction of the work. As such, Jessica, as a practice of background support, responds to what Leigh Claire La Berge has developed within the framework of decommodified labour.¹⁵⁹ La Berge identifies it within both categories of political economy and aesthetics, and positions it as a form of professional work, which operates according to the rules and expectations of wage labour, only that the wage has been withdrawn. La Berge identifies decommodified labour as the missing framework for approaching the conditions of contemporary art production and critique. One of the examples from her study is the practice and work of Cassie Thornton, who worked with debt as her artistic medium, using performance and visualisation to represent and enact it. In a series of works, Thornton’s critical approach focused on the financial organisation of the school that accepted her. In the work titled “Fedora Archive,” she hired a performance artist, Lara Gold, to play “a fictional student” and stage “dramatic and

¹⁵⁸ Vishmidt, *Infrastructural Critique*.

¹⁵⁹ La Berge, Leigh Claire. *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*. Duke University Press, 2019.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478005278>.

precise breakdowns about the financial and emotional precarity of pursuing an MFA.”¹⁶⁰ At one instance, Gold, as Fedora, collected discarded material leftovers of other students and exhibited them as her work, used her biography and press kit as her artwork and pitched herself for gallery representation, and was even awarded a prize from a jury unaware that she wasn’t actually a student in the MFA program. Thornton was able to pay the performer for the work she did for her, thereby transforming her student loan into a wage and reframing its use. In another instance, she also hired a financial planner to advise her on how to deal with her accumulated debt. The planner estimated that over a period of 33 years of her future career, she would earn approximately \$600,000 more than without the MFA, making her debt “productive.”

While Thornton’s works addressed debt and content and gained her artistic recognition, they couldn’t, obviously, alter the structure of her debt or anyone else’s. In relation to questions raised by her work and practice, “Zero Slack” is built to operate as a permanent, long-term, structural, financial instrument, not as its representation. Jessica’s work constitutes “Zero Slack”, and the novel can’t be abstracted and invisibilise her as one of the conditions of future reproduction of the artwork. Similarly, the role of SwissBanking666 is not to provide an assessment, but to propose a structure that implicates the distribution of his own fee, and become a creditor, too. No one is able to stay at a distance, although no “self” is implied, and personal debts are revealed as structural conditions, both in the institutions of art and education. The three scores of the

¹⁶⁰ Cassie Thornton, Fedora Archive, <http://feministeconomicsdepartment.com/fedora-archive/> in La Berge, Leigh Claire. *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*. Duke University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478005278>, pg. 44.

novel do not perform a critique of the conditions, but how they are constituted; the unwaged labour of assistantship is turned into an actual asset, not a metaphor.



Still from Anselm Kiefer: Remembering the Future (2014), by Alan Yentob

Image description: Still from a documentary movie on Anselm Kiefer, in which he describes how his sculptural representations of books should appear light, as if moved by the wind, while two assistants struggle to move them.

Conclusion: Notes on Collaboration and Scheming

As an instance of the conditions it analyses, the work of this thesis was formulated from the impulse and dedication to being a problem as a student, worker, employee, and employer. By treating these positions not as sites of problem-solving but as sites of further compounding of problems, I was interested in following the logic and logistics of institutionalisations with a counter-practice. While we (my collaborators and I, and you) might not be able to refuse the conditions as we encounter them within our different, contracted and beyond-contracted roles, the works theorised in this thesis form and materialise their conditions. In this sense, the fact that we work at the institutions whose disappearance we desire is not a problem, but rather the best possible position for addressing the tension and the conflict of our sites of complicity and scheming. As such, these collaborative works don't find an easy way out by claiming solidarity, but turn to their lack and withdrawal. In short, assistantship is not a formal or labour-based identity that could bring us together, but a place from which the structural observations are made, before we have figured out what to do with them. If successfully divorced from the promise of an individual, artistic future, assistantship can shift the uses of resources and processes of valorisation. In this regard, the main task of disidentified assistantship is not to demonstrate solidarity or perform institutional critique back to the source but to work toward what Andreas Petrossiants has defined as "a fugitivity from the role of the artist, and of the worker, for that matter."¹⁶¹ While institutional critique operates on the same terms of recognition and subjectivity production, deproduction as a methodology orients toward non-

¹⁶¹ Petrossiants, Andreas. 'Preliminary Notes toward a Destituent Art'. *Social Text* 42, no. 2 (159) (2024): 35–52. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-11084496>.

cooperation and doesn't presuppose the subject. Since assistantship is vacated of artistic subjectivity by its place in the system, which it largely sustains, it can serve as a point from which a different kind of socialised horizon could be figured, given its high proximity to the conditions of production. The results of these processes, which have been contextualised and discussed in the previous chapters, represent instances of ongoing, moving collaborations and schemings. As such, "Zero Slack" and "Assistances" are not solutions but demonstrations of the problems they compound, expand, and make undeniable.

From the perspective of research questions posed in the introduction, the assistant's disavowed knowledge is based on the recognition that the works can only take the form of many different kinds of support given and received, and not in a reciprocal manner. If artistic subjectivity is a point of departure for understanding current mechanisms and conditions of sociality, then its dependencies are revealed as conditions for the work, rather than as obstacles. The labour that sustains, corrodes and inherently shapes the processes of artistic production is not simply incidental to the work. The constitutive dependencies are also not fixed points, as works discussed in this dissertation have shown, but are constantly in the process of being assembled and reconfigured. It's in these shifts that the individual authorship is revealed as unstable, and not as a boundary to be protected, but as a set of conditions and enclosures to be misused, passed on, and let go of.

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