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Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural

There has always been a resonant paradox at the heart of institutional critique, which can be framed in Kantian terms: exposing the transcendental conditions of institutional critique amplifies rather than undermines its claims. If western art institutions can be seen as plenipotentaries of a contested—or embattled—Enlightenment legacy (depending how you look at it), then the artistic strategy of institutional critique was fated from the start to slot into the master's toolbox, however fervently it has been avowed to be the most serious, if not the only, political implement that artists have at their disposal.¹ As with philosopher Immanuel Kant's project, it has aimed to clarify the legitimate bounds of critique, but in this case, the bounds have been drawn around the type of critique artists could, in good faith, level at the institution of art, while also embodying it professionally, socially, psychically, and economically. This soldered artists and institutions together in an increasingly half-hearted *tableau vivant* of autonomy, a reconciled *realpolitik* not all that different from the kind that anointed liberal democracy as the least-worst form of government still standing after everything else had ostensibly been tried.

If this schema appears somewhat on the reductive side, this may be because the libidinal economy of institutional critique has had a number of other facets to show. Author Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" evokes that aspect of institutional critique that entails dressing up in the master's clothes as an affront to the master's society.² The mode here would owe less to constructive criticism and more to the apotropaic vaudeville of director Jean Rouch's short film *Les maîtres fous* (The Mad Masters) (1995), with its plebeian cultists possessed by the

¹ Andrea Fraser, "From the Critical Institutions to the Institution of Critique," *Artforum*, vol. 44, no. 1 (September 2005), pp. 278–283.

² Franz Kafka, "A Report to an Academy," in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glazer (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), pp. 250–263.

spirits of the French colonial administration and trade. Here we could think about the address of such modes of critique to institutions that have traversed but could not be contained within the institution of art—institutions such as white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism—and how the art institution could be repurposed to put these institutionalized exclusions on view, if not redress them. Such an expanded notion of “institution” would reflect the expansive, sociologically and psychoanalytically inflected sense of “institution” deployed by, for example, performance artist Andrea Fraser—a complex of social relations and practices acting to reproduce itself and its conditions of existence in a hierarchically structured society.³ It is then such a widened definition of institutional critique we can employ retrospectively to analyze the relationships between activist practices in and out of the “art world” in the restless period the term usually encompasses: from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. Troubling the historical parameters of “first-” and “second-generation” institutional critique, with the solidified division into an era that emphasized fixed (artist Michael Asher) or variable capital (Fraser), we find collective and individual practices sometimes in alliance with campaigns led by organizations like the Women’s Liberation Art Group, the Art Workers’ Coalition, or the American Indian Movement—artists Jimmie Durham, David Hammons, Adrian Piper, the Guerrilla Girls, VALIE EXPORT, William Pope.L. . . The radicalizations and individuations enacted in these historical instances may surface in the work of more recent generations of artists, if often manneristically. But their key significance was in laying a track

³ Apposite here could also be philosopher Louis Althusser’s concept of the “institutional state apparatus” as one that operates to reproduce a society’s conditions of production, in line with his reading of social reproduction as the reproduction of the conditions of production that can be situated

with “relative autonomy” from the direct sites of economic production. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127–186.

between the critique of institutions and critique of infrastructures; that is, not simply the formal but the material conditions that located the institution in an expanded field of structural violence. The extra-murality of this tendency was taken up in later iterations as a call to build or at least model institutions, whether in the temporary sociality of the project, the erratic durability of the project space, or the ambient resource economies of the research cluster. The question of what would thereby constitute the “formal” and the “material” could perhaps be displaced to consider it rather more a matter of whether these institution-critical practices situated themselves principally in an immanent or a transversal relation to the spaces of artistic exhibition and discourse. The materiality of the art institution would, for example, form the center of Asher’s excavation projects,⁴ and the disturbance of its architectural layers would be a means of exposing other social and symbolic parameters of its existence, yet it would be the physical fabric that stayed at the core of these implications. A similar framing would apply to Fraser, for whom the protocols and economies of the mainstream field of art would be the substance and subject of critique, with the wider social conditions for its existence as a backdrop to be disclosed by implication. The Art Workers’ Coalition⁵ could be considered as mediating the immanent and the transversal with its campaigns addressing systemic social inequality in the representational spaces of art. The

⁴ One of the oft-cited examples would be the intervention at Galleria Toselli in Milan in 1973, where Asher sandblasted many years of layers of white paint off the wall, reuniting the brick with the concrete of the floor. Asher wrote, “the withdrawal of the white paint, in this case, became the objectification of the work.” See Anne Rorimer, “Michael Asher: Context as Content,” *InterReview* (2004), online at: <http://www.mit.edu/~allanmc/asher1.pdf>.

⁵ The Art Workers’ Coalition formed in New York in 1969 with a list of demands presented to the Museum of Modern Art. See Lucy Lippard, “The Art Workers’ Coalition: Not a History,” in *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), pp. 10–20.

contemporary group We Are Here,⁶ on the other hand, could be seen as more transversal insofar as the institution of art is but a subset, as well as an occasional platform for a systemic critique of border regimes and white supremacy as functional institutions reproducing European society via a normalized coercion of exclusion. However, the formal/material, immanent/transversal style of analysis should not signify a desire to perpetuate dualities that divide trained artists from activist groups, especially if both are viewed as “users” of art institutions. Rather, the question is where the institution of art is situated in the different approaches to institutional critique—is it exemplary but contingent, or is it a principal focus often hypertrophied into the only valid site of dissidence for those who would inscribe their activities in the space of art? Here I argue that the difference is not always clear, but that it is the former tendency (or focus) that allows us to more clearly track a shift—perhaps rather a *drift*, since the shift is not historical but one that can be observed as temporally concentrated in the wake of the exhaustion of other strategies—from an institutional to an infrastructural critique. “Infrastructure,” like “institution,” is used here in a moderately flexible way but chiefly to signal a view of the art institution as a site of resources—material and symbolic—and that calls for an opportunist deployment for the sake of furthering all sorts of projects rather than the loyal criticism attendant on “institutional critique” in its established version. In this light, the construction of institutions may be, at the same time, a practice of institutional and infrastructural critique, depending on whether the institution is mainly intended to critically reassess or renew working conditions and visibility in the space of art or has other ambitions.

⁶ We Are Here is an organization of refugees who have united in Amsterdam to bring their collective struggle in the Netherlands into public discussion. Consisting of some 200 immigrants from

approximately fifteen countries, their search for asylum has failed, and yet for a variety of reasons they cannot be sent back to their countries of origin. See <http://wijzijnhier.org>.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the development of critical discourses in sociology and politics around the “project” and “precarity” as cardinal terms of the deregulated work patterns and cultural habitus of an educated, self-motivated stratum in the interstices between artistic, service, and skilled labor. Endowed with a readymade unity by neo-Marxian argot such as “creative class,” the “cognitariat,” or, more dystopically, the “precariat,” this was in reality a de-classed group with eclectic skill sets and whose forms of life often reflected a historically novel (at least in Western Europe and North America) middle-class experience of the poorly waged and unstable conditions that had usually been the preserve of the working classes, especially the feminized and racialized segments. Diagnosed by sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello as the children of a bohemian dissidence more interested in individual rebellion than social transformation (which the authors called “artistic critique”)⁷ and apostrophized by art critic and activist Brian Holmes as bearers of the “flexible personality,”⁸ this was a community that sustained the contradictions of a “double freedom”⁹ rendered poignant by the horizon of creative self-expression and independent cultural dynamics that drove it forward. Everywhere could be observed the formation of

⁷ See Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005).

⁸ Brian Holmes, “The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique,” *transversal* (2002), online at: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en>.

⁹ Marx defined double freedom as the historically unprecedented condition of the waged worker in capitalism—the freedom from customary ties (i.e., free to sell his or her labor) and free of means of production (i.e., free to starve). In terms of “creative labor,” we can locate a proposition in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) that seems to point to a notion of double freedom for the “free artist”: free from wage labor but, akin to

the free laborer, also free from the means of production, of having anything to sell more than a personal capacity: “Fine art must be free art in a double sense: it must be free in the sense of not being a mercenary occupation and hence a kind of labor, whose magnitude can be judged, exacted, or paid for according to a determinate standard; but fine art must also be free in the sense that, though the mind is occupying itself, yet it feels satisfied and aroused (independently of any pay) without looking to some other purpose.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IL: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p. 190.

bohemians attendant on still relatively affordable property prices and still relatively functional social safety nets, not to mention significantly lower personal debt burdens than today. Berlin was still Berlin then (if already steeped in Wall-era nostalgia), but so were Munich, Cologne, Zurich. . . just to name the sites where our narrative unfolds. These were all sites where the early 1990s had seen institutional critique folded into the “non-productive attitude” (artist Josef Strau),¹⁰ the cultivation of persona and community over professional ambition. Approximately a decade later, however, small-time entrepreneurship was overtly on the agenda, and the contradictions of autonomy were emerging with ruthless clarity. The maintenance of free-form community space and centers of autonomous social life as moments of infrastructural critique was vying with the more mimetic forms native to institutional critique, which adapted but also reproduced models of enterprise closer to market and state, such as the gallery, club, boutique, and nuclear family. Nonetheless, compared to the austere strictures of the present, the field still seemed relatively open both for experiment and indictment, a phase when the occupation of institutional platforms still seemed to have critical traction. Or it did for transversal art-activist projects that had a looser commitment to finding or making critical space in the institution of art, identifying more with the pedagogy and conviviality of subcultures. This allowed them to avoid the always-incipient academicism of an institutional critique that had, by the late 1990s (or, to listen to its critical supporters, from the very beginning), threatened to become a mode of regulation for the institution.¹¹

¹⁰ See Josef Strau, “The Non-productive Attitude,” in *Make Your Own Life: Artists In & Out of Cologne*, ed. Bennett Simpson (Philadelphia, PA: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2006), online at: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/>

contemporaryartgroup/files/documents_file_401.pdf.

¹¹ Isabelle Graw, “Field Work,” *Flash Art*, vol. 23, no. 155 (November–December 1990), pp. 136–137.

Of the modes canvassed above, such a critique-by-doing seems like the most apposite to Marion von Osten’s itinerary as artist, educator, writer, curator, and researcher. A perennial engagement with, as well as a tactical emulation of the tropes of contingency and flexibility as the hallmarks of present-day labor forms one magnetic pole, while the other pole applies these same categories to national borders and coloniality-laden historicisms such as “modernity.” From the workers’-inquiry-without-a-workplace scenarios of the group *kleines postfordistisches Drama* (kpD) (2003–2006) or *Atelier Europa* (2003–2004), to the inquiries into human and financial fluxes in *MoneyNations* (1997–2001) and with *Transit Migration* (2002–2006), or the border-eroding radical journals of colonial modernism showcased in *Action! Painting/Publishing* (2011–2012), von Osten’s gamut of activity both puts into play and thematizes a vocational blurring significant for what is here being developed as “infrastructural critique.”

The phenomenon of transversally-minded art-activist practices, which take art institutions as a contingent if motivated site of materialization, started to gain ascendancy from the mid-1990s onwards, coincident with a new rollout of institutional critique pursued from within and on behalf of institutions themselves—the “New Institutionalism,” which sought to index and respond to the diversification and global expansion of the discursive space and markets for art. This now seems like an ephemeral as well as equivocal moment, whose “turns” retrospectively seem as driven by imperial as by democratizing ambitions, but which also posed one of the last gambits of the bourgeois art institution to refashion itself as a condenser rather than a container of do-it-yourself aspirations and subcultural alliances.¹²

¹² See Nina Möntmann, “The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism: Perspectives on a Possible Future,” in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, eds.

(London: MayFlyBooks, 2009), pp. 155–159, and Nina Möntmann, ed., *Art and Its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006).

Albeit an unsatisfactory sketch of the broader context for projects like *MoneyNations* or the similarly processual and complex *Ex Argentina* (2004) organized by the artists, curators, and theorists Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann,¹³ it is enough of a background to highlight what concrete intervention practices like von Osten's were able to be realized here, in the vein of feminist and left-sociological critiques of and from labor.

The domestication of the "critique of institutions" to the "institution of critique" has been memorably portrayed by Fraser as a misreading of the original target of institutional critique as anything less than the total social field—with the vital caveat that this is the total social field as it is encapsulated by art.¹⁴ This analysis recast a purported break between an "objective" (architectural or sociological) institutional critique and the more "subjective" one of the 1990s (focusing on the gendered and racialized margins of the field and the "psychic life" of the institutional ego) into a continuity whose watchword was "total institution."¹⁵ The suggestion that this critique could "ossify" or itself be institutionalized—in other words, become a de-fanged "institution of critique"—was thus deeply misled, according to

¹³ The project *Ex Argentina* began as an "economy-critical examination of the economic crisis in Argentina and the international lobbies profiting from it." See Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann, "Sovereignty of Presence: Real Public Space as Situation," *republicart* (September 2003), online at: http://www.republicart.net/disc/realpublicspaces/creischersiekmann01_en.pdf. These prefigured, equally massive, and multi-site projects like *The Potosi Principle: How Can We Sing the Song of the Lord in an Alien Land?* (2010–2011) take advantage of emancipatory or critical desires within large, national cultural institutions in the European Union and South America.

¹⁴ Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique,"

Artforum, vol. 44, no. 1 (September 2005), pp. 278–286.

¹⁵ Compare to the "total policing" motto of the London Metropolitan Police: "A total war on crime, total care for victims, and total professionalism from our staff. Our objectives are; to cut crime, cut costs, and continue to develop the culture of the organisation. We will achieve this with; humility, integrity and transparency. We will develop making the Met the best police service in the world." See "Total Policing," Metropolitan Police, online at: <http://content.met.police.uk/Site/totalpolicing>. The aims and questionable punctuation seem hardly dissimilar to those held by all kinds of institutions that do not have crime-fighting as one of their missions, such as art institutions.

Fraser, if it suggested that critique could ever be conducted otherwise or elsewhere than fully inside this field.¹⁶ Yet if we consider art as an institution that is far from self-sufficient, relying both on the separation of waged and unwaged "uncreative" labor and on its constant incorporation materially and symbolically, the imperviousness to an outside seems less than an (enabling) closure for critique and more an alibi for what theorist and activist Denise Ferreira da Silva calls the "onto-epistemological" closure preserving the art field as distinct and autonomous, whatever its representational porosity to practices originating far beyond its channels.¹⁷ When the institution of critique simply (or flatly) becomes coextensive with the institution of art, a Kantian echo chamber of world-historical proportions has truly opened up, possibly designed by architect Frank Gehry. A move to infrastructural critique represents an attempt to mediate some of the closures of this position both discursively and pragmatically, with infrastructure focusing the link between the material and ideological conditions of the institution of art in a way that de-centers rather than affirms it.

Further, if the institution is reproduced in microcosm in every act of artistic authorship, the entanglement in the collective that von Osten has maintained in each of her projects has been a riposte to this irrefragable condition of registering an art practice, helped by the institutional insecurities and robust

¹⁶ An interesting contribution to this debate would be writer Suhail Malik's idea of "anarcho-realism." This is his rubric for the ruling idea in contemporary art that there is a more authentic and critical art somewhere "out there," inasmuch as it functions homeostatically within the field, grounding its idealist and pluralist ideologies. Malik can thus be seen as taking a step beyond Fraser's mid-1990s assessment in that he does pinpoint the institutionality of "escape,"

but then goes on to call for "institutions of negation." See Malik's series titled "On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art," Artists Space, May–June 2013, online at: <http://artistspace.org/programs/on-the-necessity-of-arts-exit-from-contemporary-art>.

¹⁷ Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Notes for a Critique of the 'Metaphysics of Race,'" *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 28, no. 1 (January 2011), pp. 138–148.

subcultures of the mid-1990s to early 2000s. The challenge to the sovereignty of the artist, even when activists or collectives take that role, transpires ultimately as a challenge to authorship. This perhaps yields some indication of the limited recognition of the multivalence of von Osten's practice as curator, organizer, writer, and artist, as these are often not separated in time or by project but unfold simultaneously in a practical flouting of the division of labor that allows such "border-crossing" gestures to be authored and thus to register. This is a strategy that amounts to not simply displacing a theoretical or social commodity into an art space but re-performing the social relations of non-sovereign art contexts in the institution without claiming authorship in the performance. The art institution rather becomes a contingent locale for infrastructural critique that stages or recruits—that siphons capital—from this site of materialization but does not address it directly, thus stemming a reverse flow of capital back into the institution. Another "onto-epistemological" frame should interest us here, one that supervenes the originary exclusion of labor from the site of creative authorship: the politics of aesthetics wherein the political aspect of art derives from its capacity to disorder the senses—which aligns philosopher Jacques Rancière, perhaps unwittingly, with the classic avant-garde precept of the "derangement of the senses"—albeit senses that are grounded somewhat in the social relations that sanction a certain "distribution of the sensible"¹⁸ in the first place. The contingent occupation of the institution of art—in all its infra-thin dimensions—signals a sidestepping of this political claim, one whose valorization of derangement cannot be sustained outside of the normative container of the aesthetic. Like artist Pilvi Takala's 2008 work *The Trainee*, in which the artist spent an internship at

a financial services company visibly doing "brain work," a.k.a. nothing. Von Osten's projects, such as the knowingly titled group kpD or *Atelier Europa*, have made labor visible where it should be invisible (in the space of art) by displacing the protocols of its inclusion in that space (as found object, as scandal) and to the conditions of production of the artwork as the immediately social ones of co-operative (if fragmented) labor. As projects dwelling in the then not-yet customary zone of indistinction between the curatorial, the artistic, and academic research, they were proleptically *indisciplinary* in a way that could be interpreted as either "too" elusive or "too" fitting in the era of "New Institutionalism"; their clarity of purpose and complexity of orchestration could only have come into focus through the rearview. In other words, it is the retrospection afforded by the stabilization of "social engagement" as a genre and the spectacular staging of the social in the social media-fed works of, for example, artist Ryan Trecartin, that lend the projects described above precision and tentativeness at the same time, which the current horizon may have become too congested and cynical to support. The connection to the "outside" that the projects have, to the sociality and work routines that traverse and exceed the exhibition space—however it is configured or displaced—steps back from making political claims as appended to this act of appearance and thus drains the institution of critique of its heady fragrance. At the same time, the precarity, porosity, and opportunism of this near-beyond can also be seen in sharp relief, a bohemianism of evasion instead of a solidarity of condition. Something rather loose, disparate, pedantic, and effortful can be detected instead, a form of self-directed obstinacy we can recognize from philosopher Oskar Negt and author and filmmaker Alexander Kluge:

A daring hypothesis emerges that partially flies in the face of the bulk of historical empiricism: all this points to the core

¹⁸ See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*,

trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004).

of labor power's self-will. The need for the confederation and association of producers (as a subjective labor capacity and labor power) does not objectify itself because of the obstinacy of those needs.¹⁹

What also seems salient in this paradigm is the visibility of a community of practice. The argument that small, dialogic, and reflexive communities could pursue an antagonistic praxis in relation to an ever more autonomized and bureaucratized art world was already being advanced in the mid-1970s as a counter to the gesturality of "institutional critique," a term first coined in 1975 by artist Mel Ramsden in his incisive essay "On Practice" in the first issue of *The Fox*, the journal put out by the New York-based faction of the conceptual artist collaboration Art & Language:

To dwell perennially on an institutional critique without addressing specific problems within the institutions is to generalize and sloganize. It may also have the unfortunate consequence of affirming that which you set out to criticize. It may even act as a barrier to eventually setting up a community practice (language. . . sociality. . .) which does not just embody a commodity mode of existence.²⁰

¹⁹ Stewart Martin, "Political Economy of Life: Negt and Kluge's *History and Obstinacy*," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 190 (March–April 2015), p. 32.

²⁰ Mel Ramsden, "On Practice," *The Fox*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1975), p. 69. Notable here is that the introduction of the term is usually attributed to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's 1990 essay "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,

1999), p. 528: "In fact an institutional critique became the central focus of all three artists' assaults on the false neutrality of vision that provides the underlying rationale for those institutions." Fraser proposes an alternative provenance in "From a Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum*, vol. 44, no. 1 (September 2005), pp. 278–285, in which she claims to have "accidentally" coined it along with her peers in seminar discussions at the Whitney Independent Study Program (ISP) in the 1980s.

While we would need a different lens to analyze the stakes of more recent projects concerned with the dispersal of occidental modernism, the era of production that unfolded for von Osten and her collaborators from roughly the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s can be cognized under the heading of infrastructural critique—infrastructural not because the platform won over the content but because such borders were subject to an inquiry with no terminus in principle. From a present-day vantage, the reflexivity of the research method is fascinatingly tentative as well as obstinate, mobilizing theoretical templates and social scenes as "little dramas" that could eventually travel outwards as refrains and quotidian gestures, never coalescing into a critical legacy or trying to transcend "the creative imperative" (*Be Creative! The Creative Imperative*, 2002–2003) with the pathos of distance or artistic aura—the aura itself built into that imperative as a mystification of the "double freedom" of the cultural worker as a special kind of individual closer to the limitless potential of capital than the hemmed-in dependencies of labor.

Even the notion of tracing an arc that can be articulated in such definitive terms falters when considering the friability of the oeuvre that von Osten enacts as an artist, a confidence in leaving unframed or unauthored, appearing in functions and relations—more akin to an equation than a discrete, accumulative subject. In working to enable certain forms of visibility and collectivity to find themselves in a transversal paradigm, von Osten thereby also actively worked against the exceptionality and romanticism that the watchword "precarity," no less than "creativity," often affirmed, just as did "immaterial labor" slightly later in the sequence of art world political feelings. In this sense, we can rather appreciate von Osten's patient, multiple, and stubborn trajectory in terms of reproductive labor, as she explores in "Irene ist Viele! Or What We Call 'Productive'

Forces" (Irene Is Many!) (2009),²¹ wherein a discussion of director Helke Sander's 1978 film *Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit—Redupers* (All-Around Reduced Personality—Redupers) allows von Osten to outline the institution of art as a site of collective struggle, alongside the distributed (self-) workplace and the family, for labor both idealized and rendered disposable by the gender system, no less than by the small air holes opened up by class belonging and education. Subjectivity is the product and process for a disposable workforce of female freelancers, though nowadays the writing seems to be on the wall for ever-growing segments of the working-age population, condemned to a freedom rapidly moving from double to triple (free of tradition, free of means of re/production, free of a market for one's labor-power).

This situation then opens up a discussion of how the charting of an itinerary from the critique of institutions to critical institutions and infrastructures of critique—in this case, through the prism of two decades of von Osten's exhibition, collaborative, and moving image projects—can account for the drastic shifts precipitated by the global socioeconomic crisis that began unfolding in 2008. If it seems that we don't hear as much about "precarity" in critical discourse, especially in the field of art, it might say as much about the normalization of the circumstances that the term identifies and the widespread adaptation to them as it does about the attenuated shelf life of theory fashions in this field. A poignant example, though not exactly a successful one (perhaps fittingly), is the 2010 film *Eine flexible Frau* by director Tatjana Turanskyj. Fast forward from the era of the chamber tragedies of post-Fordism: here is a survivor of the era of the companionable (if struggling) Berlin bohemian, an

unemployed architect and lone parent condemned by her gender, obstinacy, and fondness for drink to "drifting" (as the English-language title *The Drifter* has it) outside the bounds of the bourgeois security that has absorbed the majority of her peers. The timeline here could be charted like so: *Redupers* — kleines postfordistisches Drama — *Eine flexible Frau*. From a politicized feminist community to a more atomized but genial collective of "cultural producers," to, finally, a woman left in the cold by a gentrified, heteronormative milieu. (An outlier here would be filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger's *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* [Ticket of No Return] [1979], whose view of West Berlin as a lush allegorical landscape to be drunk through is eons away from the more recent film's clipped neurotic realism.) The film's downcast tone is occasionally leavened by the appearance of a male, Marxist feminist tour guide on the fringes of the scene, spouting social reproduction theory on the devaluation of feminized labor while leading bemused groups through parks and waste grounds.

Here we could evoke perhaps theorist Stefano Harney and poet Fred Moten's recent writing on the "logistical," which tracks how the colonial logic of racially coded expropriation is gradually being expanded across space and class to route around subjectivity and accumulate via the exploitation of quantified units in a social space modulated by financial algorithms, securitized environments, and social graphs.²² The replacement of atomized "creative" individuals by quantified selves perhaps adds another twist to literary theorist Walter Benjamin's 1930s assessment of fascism as masses encouraged to express themselves in lieu of exercising their rights.²³ It also adds a complication to

²¹ Marion von Osten, "Irene ist Viele! Or What We Call 'Productive' Forces," *e-flux journal*, no. 8 (September 2009), online at:

<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/08/61381/irene-ist-viele-or-what-we-call-productive-forces/>.

²² See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2013).

²³ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in *The Work of Art in the*

Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media, Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, eds., Edmund Jephcott, et al., trans., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 41.

the “obstinacy” of labor that refuses imperatives of work as well as expression mentioned before. It is difficult to counterpoise “obstinacy” to creativity as a mode of refusal of work when an agential term such as refusal, apart from the often individualized and romanticized valence carried by the term, has less critical purchase in a phase when subjectivity no longer plays an important role in the regulation of labor.²⁴ The turn to a colonial architecture of power in the “first world” as it transitions to being governed by brutal austerity regimes and financialized population management internally and externally highlights the important turn von Osten herself made in the mid- and late 2000s to examining the scope of built and published modernity in the colonial space, as if making a parallel turn to an elsewhere in time and space wherein subjectivity could still (collectively) act as a radical basis or a counterpower and provide a less frequented global archive for today.

It is now evident that von Osten was all along pursuing a specific type of infrastructural critique—kaleidoscopic, sophisticated, transversal, yet also provisional and delaminated from the subjective and critical authority wielded by most artist-as-curator practices. This is not to argue that the early 2000s projects on which I am focusing were isolated—art historian Helmut Draxler and Fraser’s project *Services* (1994–1997) could likewise be noted as an approach to a worker’s inquiry without a workplace, albeit with a passion for the institution von Osten and her cohort could never muster. I call this a “specific type” because of course there were and are so many—the radically open-ended nature of von Osten’s methodology is what makes it distinctive, a paradoxically fierce commitment to research as permanent

²⁴ This is also a conviction gaining ground in contemporary debates that are shifting away from the focus on subjectivity central to the post-operaist discourse in order to

analyze infrastructures such as logistics, finance, and management, as well as “non-human” ecological dimensions.

incompletion, without exemptions, up to and including authorship and institutional positioning, which, most avowedly, radical practices moving between modes and subjects of enunciation are a bar hard put to reach. This is perhaps then the point at which institutional critique has been jettisoned in the span of work under examination, and we return to where we began. If the project of critique always ends up affirming its subject—the institution of art—in its valorization of both the affective subject and its critical capacity, this can inflate the artist as critical subject beyond all reason, much like how philosopher Theodor W. Adorno deems art a grotesque, inflated “absolute commodity” with no use value in place to stop it from expanding to whatever the market will bear.²⁵ Only labor can check the infinite expansion of the “automatic subject”²⁶ of capitalist value in art as elsewhere. Such acts of emancipatory, feminist deflation occur repeatedly in the von Osten archive, and they can be models if we recognize them.

²⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 28.

²⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 255.

Lotte Arndt, Mihaela Gherghescu, Fanny Gillet-Ouhenia, Olivier Hadouchi, Marion von Osten, Pascale Ratovonony, and Cedric Vincent, *Action! Painting/Publishing*, 2011–2012, research and exhibition project, research room, Les Laboratoires des Aubervilliers, Aubervilliers, photo: © Ouidade Soussi-Chiadmi

