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Inside and Outside the Art Institution: Self-Valorisation and Montage in Contemporary Art

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This text was written on October 1st 2006 as a broad and immediate response (hence, its "informal" style) to a short questionnaire posed by a Spanish digital magazine on contemporary art and critical theory. It was not published; it is reproduced here almost unaltered. The original questions have been replaced by epigraphs describing the subject matter that the different sections dealt with.

The title of this text paraphrases an important essay by the German-American art historian Benjamin H.D. Buchloh: "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art". Written in 1982, Buchloh's influential essay sought to provide an explicitly political and historically grounded approach (going back to particular instances of politicisation in the classic avant-garde movements, such as John Heartfield's photomontage) to specific practices that, beginning in the late seventies but more emphatically during the eighties, opposed the hegemony of the market within the arts institution —with its emphasis on strong notions of "work" and "artist"—through

methodologies like the appropriation of images and the reinvention of montage. The (not quite fully-developed) hypothesis underlying my text is that the procedures analysed by Buchloh were neutralized by the new hegemonies at the heart of the arts institution, which were, however, integrated into (or are in a sense the starting point for) the new forms of "unbounded" politicisation of artistic practice that have been taking place in synchrony with the laborious production of a new cycle of struggles, which originated in the late eighties and has filled the past decade with a series of explosions.

Another aspect of my hypothesis, which also needs to be developed, suggests that the certain exhaustion of those same critical practices of appropriation and montage that Buchloh's essay tried to endow with critical and political meaning was precisely due to their "confinement" within the margins of the arts institution, and the central importance they continued to give the very institution that they criticised because of its role as virtually the only space of legitimisation and valorisation. Some new forms of politicisation of artistic practices based themselves on the assumptions established by these earlier critical practices, putting into practice various kinds of "going beyond", as well as going "in and out" of the institution and using other processes that deny, displace or relativise the arts institution's centrality as a space for valorisation and legitimisation. As explained below, it seems appropriate to apply the Operaist notion of "self-valorisation" of labour to these processes.

A critique of the traditional division of artistic labour

I don't know whether I can say anything new on this subject, because to me, the situation seems quite clear: this division was breached a long time ago and we've moved beyond it, although it probably continues to hold a contradictory symbolic and political hegemony in the art field. Part of my training took place in Spain's

independent video movement of the eighties and nineties, in which traditional role hierarchies were almost totally broken down. It was perfectly normal for activities like writing, criticism, the organising of activities, editing and publishing, the creation and distribution of works and so on to be carried out by those who made up the network. This shouldn't necessarily be attributed to an unusually high level of political awareness. It can probably be partly explained by the fact that, at the time, video was developing on the fringes of the art institution, and we know that there have been similar experiences of hierarchies being dismantled and roles shared or interchanged on the "periphery" of the institution at various times and places in history, not just in the recent past. It could be said that the breakdown of this "traditional" division of labour is deeply rooted in the tradition of the avant-garde movements, and it is therefore, from certain points of view, quite "traditional" itself.

So I'm not really sure that practices which avoid falling into this particular division of labour can *automatically* be considered, as is sometimes tritely claimed, a "negation" of a traditional model or a search for "new" or "other" paradigms. Rather, I think that at their best, they show their own strength, they enjoy their own ontological consistency when they are rooted in history, so they can't always be interpreted in terms of their "alternative nature" in relation to the "traditional" model. It was a long time ago now that I stopped seeing my own work in terms of putting forth an "alternative" to a "central" model, and started seeing it instead as a form of positivity, an exploration of independently consistent ways of working.

I began by describing the symbolic and political hegemony of a particular division of labour in the art field as *contradictory* because the vague "artist-entrepreneur" model has become so widespread that it has burst its banks. In the cultural and the art field, labour

now perfectly matches the "communicative" labour paradigm that is at the centre of the post-fordist mode of production, *but* division of labour still has a symbolic hegemony *and* is upheld by economic and
institutional interests. Today, the work of cultural producers is *de facto* essentially communicative, linguistic and semiotic. It fundamentally involves the production, through language, of processes that are usually exploited by institutions when they valorise them *exclusively* at the moment that they materialise as objects or events that are profitable in economic, political and/or symbolic terms. The way I see it, the key to the contradiction lies in the fact that upholding one particular division of labour is no longer "natural" – it isn't an inherent aspect of today's most highly developed forms of cultural production or most of its major trends: all it does is support *that* particular way of valorising artistic labour – the moment of crystallisation into marketable objects or certain kinds of events.

When the decision is taken to valorise artistic labour under different forms, in different places and times, through other processes, and, above all, to *self-valorise* artistic labour, this doesn't really mean negating or criticising a certain model of the division of labour: it means that the instituted model simply loses its relevance.

That said, it is important to add that although within the art institution there is a growing acceptance of a particular, vague "artist-manager" model (a slippery term, right? We could also add the ideas of the artist-entrepreneur, curator-artist and artist-"businessman", just as Lazzarato speaks somewhat provocatively of the post-Fordist worker as an entrepreneur or "businessman"...), this doesn't *necessarily* entail a critical or alternative practice, nor one that moves towards self-valorisation. It

did, to a large extent, thirty years ago, during the 68-cycle with its mood of widespread criticism of social institutions, just as it did with the explosive meeting of politics and the avant-garde in the period between the wars. Today it is an ambiguous model (just look at how different "relational" artists and curators work). The way in which a "traditional" function of artistic labour is currently being blurred corresponds, almost blow by blow, to the forms of the "flexibilisation" of labour in the context of production in more general terms. Just as in renewed capitalism overall, the "flexibility" of artistic or cultural labour is profoundly ambivalent from the start. But the process is irreversible: we have no choice but to work within this contemporary condition.

Artistic "work" and "non-artistic" work: on the "artisticness" of art labour

The distinction that is sometimes made in the work of certain artists (I count myself among them) between labour that is "not strictly" "artistic", and that which "explicitly" is, corresponds to a hierarchical taxonomy based on the primacy of a somewhat old-fashioned idea of what an "art work" is. Near the end of his life, Lissitzky claimed that he considered the pavilions he had designed for the Bolshevik government in the early stages of the Soviet Union to be his most important art work. The historiographic distinctions that are usually made between "artistic work", "design" and "works for the State apparatus" in order to taxonomize Lissitzky's career, are clearly an aggression against the nature of his practice. I think it would be much more useful to take his own statement seriously and ask ourselves: but where the hell is the "art work" in his pavilions?

In historical terms, for many years I have considered names like Lissitzky, Klucis, Heartfield, Renau or the Benjamin of the "reproducible work of art" and the author as producer to be *the* foundational paradigm (precisely because they are neither "unique" nor isolated) of a particular way of surpassing a pre-existing traditional model. They marked an opening up to a type of practices that didn't start from scratch in any sense, but marked the start of forms that no longer "negate" other, predominant models, but organise their own coherence, their own positivity. A pavilion designed by Lissitzky is a collective project that includes multidisciplinary dynamics, and contains "art works" and other things that don't strictly qualify as such, as well as an infinite number of "in-between" elements. It's a work based on co-operative principles and the sharing of many different kinds of skills. And it radically assumes two characteristics that strongly challenged the then-traditional model in order to leave it behind: its *useful* nature and its *communicative* dimension. When almost a century ago avant-garde art had to openly question its political function and face its communicative dimension, no longer questioning them in terms of content but rather incorporating them *structurally*, I think it marked the start of what we are now, or what we may still become.

(Incidentally, one of the artists whom I've most admired, Ulises Carrión, worked without rest and didn't produce much legible "art work". His practice largely consisted of interventions in the dominant communicative processes, or in producing *others*, constantly shifting the form and the moment of (self-) valorisation, always changing. Interrupting communication channels, producing alternative communication and weaving together organisation and networks – this was his labour.)

I think that in historical terms, certain avant-garde movements can teach us two things: firstly, that there can be "art" without "art works" (Godard used to say that cinema is one thing and films are another, and films often don't have anything to do with cinema: thus the history of cinema should be rigorously differentiated from the more usual history of films and directors. For some time now I've wondered: How can you write a history of art "without art works", or where the usual notion of an art work is radically de-centred?); secondly, that it is possible to make a kind of art "that doesn't appear to be so" (as soon as one looks outside the European scene and the "classic" avant-garde movements, the examples increase exponentially). I don't think that the first lesson leads us necessarily to hackneyed academic chattering on the dematerialisation of the object. Rather, it leads to the radical change of mentality that occurs at specific moments in history in which the *valorisation* of artistic labour comes into focus as a relevant political problem, together with the definition of what "new" forms, as a result, this labour has to take on in order to achieve self-valorisation. The second lesson refers us to the contingency statute that characterises artistic labour, which doesn't always have to give primary importance to being recognised as such in accordance with the primacy of current legibility criteria sanctioned by the corresponding institutional fields (the legibility criteria that determine an "art work's" artistic status, which we now know to be contingent and which are themselves historical, in no way absolute and essential; in no way disinterested. In this sense, it's advisable to always keep in mind, for example, the lessons of feminist readings of the history of art and feminist film theory), in particular when the formalisation of the work or its processes *shift outside a particular institutional field, or flow in and out of it.* In this latter case, it's particularly important to be aware that the "artisticness" of work is not an identity or an essential or pre-

existing condition: it is a contingency that can correspond to tactical or political functions, and its sanctioning as an "art work" has to be disputed and challenged in discursive and material terms against the institution's "common sense" through conflict and negotiation. This is why I think it is essential to practice writing and criticism, which shouldn't be understood as the occupation of those who emit inspired opinions, but as the field in which legitimacy criteria and the valorisation of practices are negotiated through conflict. (http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en)

Montage

In my opinion, the most momentous innovation that the artistic avant-garde movements contributed to 20th Century culture *and* politics simultaneously, is montage. I'm not referring to montage as a stylistic exercise that folds in on itself, but the kind that, whether in Tucumán Arde, Heiner Müller or Alexander Kluge, constitutes a tool for thinking – for critical thinking. In this sense, montage brings heterogeneous things together into a fragmented whole that *highlights its structural discontinuity*, shattering the illusion of self-consistency and unity of both form and discourse, *without relinquishing the production of meaning as a result.* This convergence of a diversity of things deserves to be *conceived* as a part of a whole that in itself *points elsewhere.* I marvel at how much this invention can continue to contribute to the construction of forms *and* discursive practice at the same time.

I've always considered my incursions into editorial activities, for example, to be either fully or partly artistic projects. At least to some extent, the publishing projects I've participated in usually consist of taking elements that are at different stages of

materialisation and diffusion within larger networks or flows — which we consider ourselves part of— , catalysing through reorganising. In very simple terms, the editorial process becomes a montage technique that discontinuously articulates a discourse that then enters into circulation once more. Inversely, I'm increasingly less likely to describe the "artistic" research, teaching or curatorial projects that I've generally worked on as hybrids or interdisciplinary projects. Instead, I see them as *suspended* between the categories of art, criticism and editing; technically, they almost always consist of small exercises in construction and montage.

In short, I think that the usual distinctions that separate what some of us do into actual "art works" and "secondary" work (criticism, editing, writing...) is inappropriate when it comes to considering what needs to be done, because I believe, above all, in the labour of construction and montage that occasionally produces "things" that can't necessarily be read as "art works". I've always felt suspicious of the ongoing presence of the surrealist object in certain kinds of contemporary art, as well as the way in which dominant conceptualism and its effects managed to reintroduce the fetishism of "form" through the back door. I only have a little faith left in Dada now, whereas I'm still a believer in constructivism and productivism, modern political documentary and montage cinema. Almost all of the art that I still continue to learn from consists in constructing, (re)structuring, combining and putting together, in order to produce artefacts whose legibility is *ambivalent*, always site- and time-specific.

The artist as "multifaceted" worker.
Contradiction, adaptation and complicity with the institutional medium

It may be interesting to pause for a moment and consider this strange adjective, “multifaceted”. The history of modern Western art needed to create a narrative that would include, and thus “normalise”, the ruptures caused by some of the avant-garde movements, so it captured Soviet art, for example, articulated its (re)presentation by organising it into a narrative that separated biographical lines into pieces that made up a “plural” movement, and created a narrative for each of those separate and more or less isolated lines in turn, based on an organisation that classified their “art works” into different styles and formats. This taxonomy and juxtaposition produced the effect of *simultaneity* in the way artists used techniques, languages and media. At moments like this, the history of 20th century art constructs the myth of the modern, “multifaceted” artist. Rodchenko and Stepanova never set out to be multifaceted artists. Their “multifacetedness” is an effect of the way in which the history of modern art recovers the ruptures that these artists represent by incorporating them into a normalised narrative in which conflict has been tamed. Their work isn’t multifaceted: if anything, it is *conflictive*.

In terms of work in general, today’s workers aren’t “multifaceted”: they are multi-exploited, or rather, subject to a regime of *flexible exploitation* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precarity). It would be amusing to switch the concepts and consider how the illusion of the “multifacetedness” that is now being required of workers in order to make the new form of capitalist control of the workforce more bearable is similar to the kind of flexible exploitation that Tatlin or Popova are subjected to by the history of modern art in order to extract some kind of cultural added value that fuels its existence and in return distorts the nature of the original, simultaneously artistic and political, experience.

The other term that I find curious is “complicity”. I appreciate the clarity with which it is stated, but it is based on a way of framing the issue that I find inoperative: What should one declare oneself, sitting on the bench of the accused? Guilty, innocent of acting in collusion or complicity with an institutional system? (I can’t speak for anyone else, but I’m not in this in order to submit myself to a political trial or to earn myself a place in heaven). If the idea is to question whether “critical” positions “genuinely” question the state of things or, on the contrary, help to reproduce it, I think a very simplified answer would be: both. But this does not go far enough.

In this order of things, labour in art is no different to the way in which post-Fordist labour in general oscillates between self-valorisation and control (subjugation), and it’s often paradoxical because it operates under the conditions of autonomy and subjection *simultaneously*. For much of last century, artistic and cultural labour was an “extraordinary” social activity – outside of the ordinary, exceptional. Today, the characteristics that have traditionally defined it (deregulated activity not subject to the same discipline as “industrial work”, with an emphasis on the value of self expression, giving maximum importance to subjectivity...) are increasingly becoming the paradigm for the core forms of labour in renewed capitalism.

In my generation, those of us who started off doing artistic work before political work, only gradually became aware of how our activities functioned within the arts. At the beginning, we didn’t have the slightest idea that the flexible exploitation system we were subject to was *intensive* but *discontinuous*. Its discontinuous nature is precisely the key that makes sustainable exploitation possible. If your work is “at the disposal” of an institution in a continuous, regulated way, you immediately consider entering a standard “labour for wages” relationship. If your work is at the institution’s

"disposal" in a discontinuous, deregulated way, then the relationship will be based on casual "labour for income (honorarium)" terms. Discontinuous income, rather than a continuous wage, is what you get paid circumstantially for "rendering services" on a casual basis; in this case, the rest of the time is "yours". But the work of self-education, training or testing, preparation, production and so on that is carried out in the periods when your relationship to the institution is "inactive" is time that you use for producing, for the rendering "of services", *without remuneration.* Thus the exploitation of artistic labour is *intensive*, because it is exercised in the overall time that you commit to your work, but the key to its economical sustainability for the institution resides in the fact that it is formalised *discontinuously*: you only get paid for the specific project, exhibition or investigation or the number of hours "you work". The extent to which this kind of exploitation is widely accepted in the arts is because, obviously, your activity is presumably "gratifying" in terms of vocational self-expression and freedom. Also because your subjection to the institution is irregular in terms of labour-income, but *constant* in symbolic terms and *in its forms of subjectivisation*: the artist is taught to *always* turn to the institution as a guarantee of legitimacy and, above all, the "relevance" of his or her own activity.

There was an inescapable structural contradiction for those of us who started to think about the politicisation of our art practice *without breaking out of* the vicious circle of its *valorisation* predominantly *within* the institution. The currents of thought based on a critique of institutions and certain forms of public and critical art, and some critical theory of the visual representations that fuelled us from the eighties until part of the nineties were like manna from heaven in the middle of the desert of the postmodern cultural counterrevolution (as Virno calls it). Nonetheless, it was

becoming increasingly clear that critical practice would only be able to put forth its own consistent and powerful forms of creation (and self-creation!) through the same solution that some avant-garde movements adopted when they reached the same crossroads: a critique trapped within its own field. What they did was to look to *other* times, places and forms of the valorisation of artistic labour *apart from* or *as well as* those that involved a relationship with the institutional apparatus. In terms of my own experience, I think this didn't start to take place until the nineties, when the possibility arose for the self-valorisation of artistic labour *linked* to new forms of protest and new social autonomy dynamics. I believe that this is behind the enormous importance of the new collaborative experiences of what where originally (mostly) artists groups such as La Fiambrera in Spain, Ne pas plier in France, Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) and Etcétera in Argentina, and probably many others that have either faded, or were less consistent, or we have yet to discover: they *reinvented* a way of valorising artistic labour, at a time when art practice was already clearly paradigmatic of post-Fordist production overall. They brought it out of its state of subjection (even if it was a critical subjection) to flexible exploitation, and allowed this self-valorisation to help strengthen the new social opposition dynamics that had emerged precisely from the post-Fordist neoliberal hegemony.

This way of breaking out of the circle in which critical practices were imprisoned certainly didn't "solve" all the problems involved in the ways in which critical work in the arts is subject to the institution – a complex relationship that includes aspects ranging from the symbolic to the economic. But it did favour conditions that allowed it to come to light and be approached from other material and political positions.

This condensed account seems to culminate in the idea that it would, therefore, be necessary to take this dynamic to the limit and bring about a pure and simple *escape* from the art institution or to relate to it *from the outside* in a merely cynical or instrumental way. I've never considered this to be the only possible conclusion; in fact, it doesn't seem to me to be necessarily a productive *political* position. For many reasons. One of these reasons is patently obvious: the production of artistic or cultural artefacts is *not* equivalent to the production of cars or weapons. The results of our kind of production have a complex function in semiotic capitalism. Regardless of the attractiveness of the post-situationist perspective, there is no rule stating that cultural artefacts are not, or cannot be, anything other than (or as well as) goods or tools for the ideological control of consciousness. In empirical terms, it's not sustainable for all "forms" of labour in the industry of the spectacle to be objectified, and I can't stand the hypothesis of the system's omnipotent capacity to recuperate or co-opt. I'm not saying I believe in the intrinsic goodness of culture or its essential legitimacy as a means of emancipation! But in the face of so much (both cynical and erudite) scepticism *within* our institutional field, I have no choice but to declare myself a believer (that is, of liberation theology!) in the *potential* of critical labour within art, cultural and educational institutions – not only to enlighten some mindsbut, above all, to influence the established modes of the production of knowledge and *subjectivation*. Nevertheless, I think that the operations carried out within the institutional field should seek to *go beyond* it, and above all *valorise* that which is produced, at least partly outside of it. To me, this is not just a political necessity but more importantly one of life's lessons. Because in this way, many of us found a way to break out of the desperate circle of critical theories that seems unable to do anything other than wait to be recuperated for the umpteenth time.

Whether a particular critical theory is recuperated or not isn't as important as what it was able to generate *in addition* to being put into practice. What counts is the direction in which your work contributes to mobilising individual and collective energies, which it can do in many diverse ways and on a bigger or smaller scale. I don't think declaring each of us an "accomplice" to a situation leads anywhere, except to widespread cynicism. Likewise, it disturbs me to hear people whose work I admire state that "we're all on the inside", "we're all institution" or "we're all prostitutes" in the arts and leave it at that. These declarations are not only inaccurate, they also stop short, and I think that they provoke the responsibility to immediately respond: Then, what's to be done?

For quite a few years now, there has been an ongoing stream of projects that approach the relationship to institutions in ways that are neither cynical nor instrumental. They aim to generate critical practices within the institutions with the idea that they should be valorised there and *at the same time* at some other time and place, in other ways. The idea would be to move from the "inside" to the "outside" of the institution in a continuum that doesn't avoid the institutional mode of formalisation, and even examines it, without making it the central or unique objective (http://transform.eipcp.net/calendar/1153261452, http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0406/crs/en, http://www.fridericianum-kassel.de/ausst/ausst-kollektiv.html#interfunktionen_english, http://www.exargentina.org/lamuestra.html, http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/1177371677). The production of networks and flows that don't heed pre-existing boundaries and instead *establish* their own kinds of public sphere – a concept that we're probably starting to find a bit static – is surely one of the most important

inventions to have emerged from political creativity in this new cycle of protest.

But to understand the extent to which we are obviously dealing with difficult and problematic dynamics, we don't have to look any further than *Desacuerdos* (http://www.desacuerdos.org). In terms of what I am proposing here, I see *Desacuerdos* as a clear example of how extremely difficult it is to negotiate the simultaneity of different times and forms of evaluating art labour, especially when most of the labour comes from the outside or fringes of the field. That may have been the principal failure of those of us who were involved in co-ordination in different ways and with varying responsibilities: to have made it impossible for there to be compatibility, *at the core of the project* and in a complex way, between the different dynamics and interests in relation to valorising the work put into it. It was important to try, and we can only hope there will be many more attempts. And I don't think that this negates the project's other, equally important accomplishments (you only have to look at the publications edited). But the fact that this particular failure took place amongst individuals and institutions that had spent a long time fighting in favour of precisely those kinds of principles, makes us take a much more cautious approach and exercise a greater degree of reflection and modesty. I think that the outcome of *Desacuerdos* inevitably demands that we consider the problems of scale, rhythms, the division of labour and the way decision-making processes are managed in critical production projects linked to institutions. In addition (to continue with the question of the relationship between criticism, art practice and art institutions), I think it demonstrates the need to turn the cliché that "behind the institutions, in the end, are the people" upside down. Because in the end, there in the background, behind the people, are the

institutions (that through inertia have many different ways of applying the microphysics of power), and all the other power relationships that play a part in the arts, outside of the institutions. In theory, this isn't a problem. Foucault would insist that his critique of institutions should not have a paralysing effect, and that it didn't refer to an idea of *essential* freedom, because attempts at constructing freedom and the enjoyment of freedom itself could only take place *inside* given power relations. I think that the kinds of contradictory and complex ways of proceeding that I am dealing with here (and which I certainly don't claim will exclude others!) are essential in today's world, with all its difficulties. But I also think that future attempts through trial and error, conflict and negotiation, will need more politics, not better intentions.

Additional links:
http://www.arteleku.net/4.0/pdfs/1969intro.pdf
http://www.arteleku.net/4.0/pdfs/1969-1.pdf
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