STUDY, NOT CRITIQUE

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BUNDESKANZLERAMT ÖSTERREICH

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DEMATERIALIZATION, POLITICIZATION, INTELLECTUALIZATION

In an essay published in the February 1968 issue of the journal *Art International*, Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler analyze the development of conceptual art. Titled "The Dematerialization of Art," the essay describes a tendency that had been apparent for years: the core of contemporary art was no longer made up of material objects, but of ideas. This development, in turn, implied potentially far reaching consequences for the way the art field was organized: "the dematerialization of the object might eventually lead to the disintegration of criticism as it is known today. [...] Sometime in the near future it may be necessary for the writer to be an artist as well for the artist to be a writer."[1]

In reality, a domain practice between art and critique emerged with the "dematerialization" described in Lippard and Chandler's text, which would lend the art field an increasingly discursive character in the following decades. In growing numbers, artists would expand their working areas and join research endeavors and theoretical discussions, instead of producing artworks as understood in a narrower sense. This development was accompanied by a collaborative and project-based mode of work – a process aimed at undoing boundaries, which simultaneously brought forth new forms of discipline and valorization.[2]

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1 See Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* no. 2 (February 1968): 35.

2 Whereas Lippard and Chandler link dematerialization to a critique of the commodity form of art and to the development of political

The removal of the boundary around artistic production – which as such must always also be understood as a process of value creation – corresponded to a new economic paradigm known as "cognitive capitalism."[3] The foundations of this new form of capitalist accumulation rest not only on questions about the control of increasingly ephemeral products, but rather, and much more generally, new organizational forms of work. Isabell Lorey and Klaus Neundlinger have written that under the regime of cognitive capitalism, the possibility of generating economic value depends "more and more on the capacity of workers to subjectively engage with work, to constantly reorient themselves, to learn to express experience in acts of reflective communication; in short, to steer an unforeseeable happening."[4] The discourse around the concept of cognitive capitalism should be understood as a counter-discourse to the liberal theory of the "knowledge economy," a concept

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alternatives, Alexander Alberro understands conceptual art as the moment in which new forms of art marketing were developed. Dematerialization, as I discuss it here, takes place in a field of tension between a politicization of art and the creation of new markets. See Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 3-4.

3 Many publications in the 2000s elaborated the concept of cognitive capitalism, which was formed in the context of postoperaist theory. See Yann Moulier Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negro, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Michael A. Peters and Ergin Bulut, *Cognitive Capitalism. Education and Digital Labor* (New York et al: Peter Lang 2011).

4 Isabell Lorey and Klaus Neundingler, "Kognitiver Kapitalismus. Von der Ökonomie zur Ökonomik des Wissens," in *Kognitiver Kapitalismus*, eds. Lorey and Neundingler. (Vienna: Turia + Kant 2012), 11. [*Translator's note: Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the German are my own.* –KM]

that entered the OECD in 1994 to describe the rise of a "knowledge-based economy" in advanced capitalist societies. This description is based on the analytical insight that economic value today is created by knowledge, but as an approach the knowledge economy concept fails to consider conflicts around knowledge and power. For theorists of cognitive capitalism, in contrast, the conflict between knowledge and power – and between work and capital – is key. They understand the contemporary capitalist transformation to be a result of this conflict.[5] Such considerations are foundational for my discussion. I too am looking for strategies that do not critique the existing apparatus of knowledge production with the objective of renewing it, and which work against economic motivations that enclose knowledge and make it scarce.

A conflictual relationship between the production of the common and its appropriation is typical of this paradigmatic economic transformation. Gigi Roggero has illustrated this relationship by drawing on the example of the telecommunications firm 3.[6] In a forum linked to the firm's website, customers answer questions about

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5 See Carlo Vercellone, *The Hypothesis of Cognitive Capitalism* (London: Birbeck College and SOAS, 2005), 2. The paradigmatic change indicated by the term cognitive capitalism, however, only presents one part of capitalist development (even if it is a decisive part). Other forms of accumulation continue to exist. Industrial capitalism, for example, moved to countries where an unqualified labor force can still be found at a cheap cost and exploited. For a critical account, see George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, "Notes on the edu-factory and Cognitive Capitalism," *transversal*, 05 2007, https://transversal.at/transversal/0809/caffentzisfederici/en.

6 See Gigi Roggero, "The Power of Living Knowledge. Crises of the Global University, Class Struggle and Institutions of the Common," https://transversal.at/transversal/0809/roggero/en.

the devices and services on offer. Each month the firm publishes a ranking in which the performance of the customers cooperating in the forum is recognized and made public. According to Roggero, precisely this unpaid work of subjects is what allows labor costs to be decreased. No technical staff needs to be employed to answer consumers' questions. Instead, the telecommunications company pays new guards and agents whose sole function is to control the social cooperation of the productive consumers in the forums. In this way, the dynamics of individualized competition are reproduced, preventing subjects from appropriating that which they collectively produce.[7]

In its turn to knowledge, capitalism effectuates a double move. On the one hand, knowledge must constantly grow in order to drive valorization; on the other hand, in the course of its valorization knowledge gets controlled, privatized, and commodified – and thereby made scarce.[8] Under the premises of cognitive capitalism, however, it is less the case that value adheres to a finished product and more that consumers create it.[9] One result is that communicative practices play an increasingly important role with regard to economic action. The undoing of limits around production that tends to accompany dematerialization has not only resulted in new forms of work, but also new ways of organizing work. Under the conditions of cognitive capitalism work is increasingly performed outside the scope of a permanent employment relation –

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7 Roggero, "The Power of Living Knowledge."

8 See Enzo Rullani, "Wie wird durch Wissen Wert geschaffen?," in *Kognitiver Kapitalismus*, eds. Isabell Lorey and Klaus Neundlinger (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2012), 143.

9 Roggero, "The Power of Living Knowledge."

as was characteristic of the phase of industrial capitalism – and is rather distinguished by project-based forms of organization and precarity.

According to Yann Moulier-Boutang, knowledge and art lie "at the heart of the system of cognitive capitalism [...] and not because of entrepreneurs' love for art and knowledge, but because the kernel of economic value, in the past as today, lies in these areas."[10] Art is named in this context not least because it is connected with a specific form of subjectivation that gives shape to cognitive capitalism. In the activities of actors in the art field, the previous distinction between work and free time, between employment, domestic work and voluntary engagement has become blurred. They are seen as creative, intuition driven actors who move from one project to the next, from one world to another. These are defining characteristics of the entrepreneurial subject of cognitive capitalism.

Parallel to this, art and knowledge have been drawn closer together since the 1990s, as can be observed in large discursive exhibitions such as *documenta X* under Catherine David's curation. The tendency towards the dematerialization of art, however, is not only linked to a discursive turn. It is also connected to a process in which the boundaries of works can no longer be clearly determined. They re-adapt and re-contextualize themselves in every process of circulation and production.[11]

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10 See Yann Moulier-Boutang: "Die Hochzeitsnacht des kognitiven Kaptialismus und der Kunst. Kunst in der Ökonomie der Innovation," in *Kritik der Kreativität*, eds. Gerald Raunig and Ulf Wuggenig (Vienna et al: transversal texts, 2016), 465.

11 See Lucie Kolb, Barbara Preisig and Judith Welter, eds.: *Paratexte. Zwischen Produktion, Vermittlung und Rezeption*, (Zurich: Diaphanes 2017).

Journals as Paradigmatic Sites of "Dematerialized" Art Production

As conceptual art quickly gained distinction in the 1960s and 70s, many artists founded journals.[12] Artists used these journals not only to assertively position their artistic works in art discourse, but also to try out new forms involving art and critique, and art and theory. Furthermore, the environment of 1968 saw the development of the first transversal lines through which artistic practices sought connections to social movements via their journals.

At the intersection of various social functions and as agents of transformation of artistic production and reception, journals played an important role in the renewal of art. With respect to the development of cognitive capitalism, the artist-produced journal is a site where discourse and valorization are short-circuited, and it is also a decisive participant in the broad dissolution of the boundaries between the (artistic) work and its frame.

Dan Graham, who appeared in the 1960s with a series of conceptual artistic works in journals, links this practice to his experiences as a founder of a short-lived gallery.[13] It was here that he learned that an artwork

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12 See among others Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), as well as Marie Boivent and Stephen Perkens, "Introduction" in *The Territories of Artists' Periodicals*, eds. Boivent and Perkens (Rennes, De Pere: Éditions Provisoires, Plagiarist Press, 2015), 5–11. Here I use the term "journal" as an umbrella term for newspapers, periodicals and magazines.

13 See Dan Graham, "my works for magazine pages: 'a history of conceptual art,'" in *conceptual art: a critical anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1999), 418–422. [First published in Gary Dufour, *Dan Graham*, exh. cat. (Perth: The Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1985), 8-13.]

has a hard time gaining recognition as art if it is not written about or featured in a journal. The relation between the journal and the artwork, according to Graham, is decidedly economic: the art journal is financed by advertisements that for the most part are run by galleries announcing their exhibitions. This leads to a certain coercion to cultivate favor with advertisers by reviewing or otherwise mentioning their exhibitions in the journal. And this is how market value is generated.[14] Graham argues that artists' acknowledgement of this relationship between journals and art institutions in the 1960s and 70s animated them to start using journals in a strategic way.[15] It was not rare for artists to use self-produced journals to react to texts about their works by critics in the established press. They joined the existing conversation and worked simultaneously to establish an autonomous counter-discourse.

David Rosand, an art historian who taught at Columbia University in New York in the 1960s and 70s, has written that journals during this time were also important because it was in journals that the "dematerialized" art of the time materialized. "It told you what was going on partly because so much of what was going on was not to be seen in the galleries."[16] The exhibition space for "dematerialized" conceptual art practices had been displaced into the publication – as Seth Siegelaub paradigmatically acted out in the exhibition *Xerox Book* in 1968, in which he placed the cheaply produced exhibition catalog at the center of

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14 Graham, "my works for magazine pages," 421.

15 Graham, "my works for magazine pages," 422.

16 David Rosand, interview by Amy Newman, in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–1974* (New York: SoHo Press, 2000), 140.

the exhibit.[17] The role of publications changed in this context, too. Having been a site for the *reproduction* of texts and images, it became a site of *production*.

The alternative space for art that emerged with this shift was not limited to the expansion of artistic goods and new possibilities for exhibitions. It also opened new space for thought and action. Beyond publications, this manifested in independent exhibition spaces and bookshops that challenged the established institutions of the art world, supporting experimental art outside of the commercial gallery system, promoting artists' rights and calling attention to gender, 'race' and class inequalities. In this regard, journals were in a position to create and support new relations in thought, but also in the social field, and they were able to have a sustained influence on relationships in the art field and beyond. Thus, these journals never only made space for alternative contents, but also for a different sociality and public space.

In the 1990s the "dematerialization" of art advanced in another form. In various ways, connections were drawn in the early 1990s to the conceptual practices of the 1970s. Communicative and aesthetic practices dealing with articulation and information were at the center of this development.[18] In this context, a new self-understanding of artists emerged. The subject position "artist" became unbound and artistic work started to be understood as the traversing of various skills and fields, as an intervention

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17 See Seth Siegelaub and John Wendler (eds.): *[Xerox Book]* (New York: self-published, 1968).

18 See Sabeth Buchmann, "Regeln des (Un-)Möglichen. Zur Kunstpraxis der späten 1980er und frühen 1990er," in *to expose, to show, to demonstrate, to inform, to offer, Künstlerische Praktiken um 1990*, ed. Matthias Michalka (Cologne: Walther König, 2015), 30.

into dominant systems of knowledge and representation. Journals published in limited numbers often provided an important stage for this practice and its reflection. As in the 1970s, it was once again in the 1990s the journals that provided the crossover space for art practice and theoretical-political analysis that would later be considered typical of the time.[19]

The growing turn to discursive practices – some of which were explicitly political in nature – in the art field of the 1990s occurred alongside new forms of valorization.[20] Following Marius Babias, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a "discourse market" that acts through political-theoretical media.[21] This market, Babias argues, forms a parallel to the "proper" art market and aims at removing artistic production from the valorization of the commercial market and emancipating erstwhile passive observers to become participants who can be included in processes of exchange.[22] While

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19 See Buchmann, 31.

20 In addition to the valorization of discursive art practices, the commercial art business increasingly includes theorists. Journals and exhibition catalogs are no longer sold simply via the symbolic capital of the artists, but also with that of the authors. See Isabell Graw, *Der große Preis* (Cologne: DuMont, 2008), 130. Ulf Wuggenig and Sophia Prinz underscore the applicability of "theory sells" with an empirical study about actors and institutions in contemporary art in Paris, Vienna, Zurich and Hamburg between 1990 and 2010. They discovered a broad familiarity with the names of theorists, including amongst gallerists. See Ulf Wuggenig and Sophia Prinz, "Charismatische Disposition und Intellektualisierung," in *Das Kunstfeld. Eine Studie über Akteure und Institutionen der zeitgenössischen Kunst am Beispiel von Zürich, Wien Hamburg und Paris*, eds. Ulf Wuggenig and Heike Munder (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2012), 205–228.

21 See Marius Babias, "Vorwort," in *Ute Meta Bauer. Kuratorische Praxis: Interviews und Gespräche*, ed. Babias. (Cologne: Walther König, 2012), 7–12.

22 Babias, "Vorwort."

the "discourse market" enjoys an emancipatory connotation according to Babias, Andrea Fraser has observed the emergence of valorization processes in this market that are informed by the same principle of competition that shapes the commercial market.[23] Against this, the political art practices of the 1990s suggest that the art field was interpreted as a place bearing resources to use, re-purpose and steal.

Study

"The studio is again becoming a study," Lippard and Chandler wrote in reference to the conceptual art of the 1960s.[24] In their book *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning and Black Study* Stefano Harney and Fred Moten discuss a strategy for dealing with the increasingly economically-driven university by drawing on their concept of "black study" (which over the course of the book loses its adjective and is simply called "study"),[25] which I would like to take up here. Harney and Moten describe a form of autonomous knowledge production that is simultaneously work on the conditions of production. It bears the potential to remove itself from measurability and discipline through incalculable excesses. As regards the knowledge institution of the university Harney and Moten are interested in an unmapped and unmappable non-place surrounded by the concepts of "study" and

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23 See Andrea Fraser et al., "Roundtable: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," October, no. 100 (2002): 204.

24 Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," in *Art International*, no. 2 (February 1968): 31.

25 See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe et al: Minor Compositions, 2013).

the "undercommons."[26] Their text provides tools for dealing with the dilemma of critique in the conditions of cognitive capitalism. Drawing on the example of the figure of the academic, they illustrate the problematic function of critique. To practice critique as an academic in the university means to recognize the university and to be recognized by it.[27] The resistance of academics is constitutive of the institution. It serves the obligatory improvement of teaching, curriculum and the university that undergirds the institution's continued legitimacy. Critique always optimizes the mechanisms that exclude precisely those practices from which the institution constitutively distinguishes itself. Critical and academic education, in the eyes of Harney and Moten, are one and the same.

Against critique and its optimizing function, they posit their concept of study as a common intellectual practice. Semantically the term indicates a space (the working area, the study room), but also an activity (learning, studying), an event (test, investigation, study), and a context (course or program of study). Harney and Moten play with these layers of meaning in their book. The adjective "black" draws a connection to the radical traditions of African-American history, to approaches dedicated to the construction and reconstitution of the history of black dispossession, dislocation, incapacitation and slavery. Thus, the undercommons are placed in a context with the maroon communities of escaped slaves. Despite or precisely because of this

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26 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "Interview with Stevphen Shukaitis," in *The Undercommons*, 109–110.

27 Harney and Moten, "Interview," 109–110.

explicit contextualization, the concept of study is made useful in more general ways, including for resistance in contexts of knowledge production within and beyond the university, which is my interest here. Study is an intellectual practice that Harney and Moten do not primarily locate in academic modes of subjectivation. It is something that runs athwart to the institutions, traversing them.

> When I think about the way we use the term 'study,' I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present.[28]

As Fred Moten elaborates here, studying is not clearly distinguishable from other activities, as all these doings are part of a common intellectual practice. Study is a certain form of placing oneself in relation to capitalist attempts at appropriation. It is often preceded by a misunderstanding or an unwillingness to understand, such as, for example, a refusal to understand a certain term in the way it is commonly used. Study can also be understood as a counter concept to "learning." This is because

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28 Moten in Harney and Moten, "Interview," 110.

learning in cognitive capitalism stands for something that touches all aspects of life – in addition to education, it reaches into the workplace, free time and everyday life – and it only ends with death. Contrary to study, learning obeys education strategies in which issues of certifiability and comparability play a significant role. Whereas learning is thus measured and the goals, content and progress of learning can be tested, study escapes both measurability and the image of progress. Study is neither fully developed nor totally thought-through. As a principle it misses the right moment. The subject's skill areas are not expanded in targeted ways as in the case of extended learning; they are instead exceeded, overshot.[29]

I see a form of study, too, in Harney and Moten's handling of their own text. Their writing style challenges the sheltered emotions of anyone who feels at home in a language. With rhythm, poeticization, repetition and alienation, their texts continually produce new openings, cracks and crevices wanting to incite the reader to step in and perceive reading as a shared intellectual practice. This invitation does not follow a participation imperative, but instead expresses what Jack Halberstam identifies as the book's core in his preface: "reaching out to find connection."[30] In Moten's words, "I believe in the world and want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world in the world and I want to be in *that*."[31]

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29 See Stefano Harney in Marc Bousquet et al., "On Study," *Polygraph*, no. 21 (2008), 160.

30 Jack Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons," in Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 5.

31 Moten in Harney and Moten, "Interview with Stevphen Shukaitis," 118.