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Critical production, or, the intelligence of collective technicity

Andrea Phillips

The intellectual attitude which makes itself felt in the name of fascism *should* disappear. The intellectual who opposes fascism by trusting to his own miraculous power *will* disappear.¹

Across a structure like a biennial, as well as in contemporary art museums and galleries, there is a range of “value sets” in operation. By value sets, I mean a conglomeration or entanglement of beliefs, aesthetic ambitions, political constraints, financial imperatives, opportunities, social networks, funding structures, gendered and racialized institutional relationships and personal desires. There will be some artists whose work is made to be shown in galleries and is object-, film- or image-based. There will be some artists whose work is highly ephemeral, based on exchanges with those present and absent, committed to a place far away, translated for us “here”. We work together, and the differences between us are often misunderstood—especially the differences founded on our relationship with financial and symbolic value. Across a structure like a biennial there are some artists who are represented by galleries, who live and make work on the percentage of sales they receive when their work is sold by their gallerist. There are artists who live and work with what is often politely termed a “portfolio career”, sometimes being commissioned, being shown, and also teaching, making and administrating the work of other artists, working in a bar, etc. There are gallerists who live in complex financial and social networks, working at all ends of the art economy, trying to support a group of artists they have contracted in order to, in turn, support themselves. They are also working in the public and/or private sector, in bars, in schools, in retail. There are curators who work independently, in and out of institutions, trying to develop complex projects with a fragile set of collaborations which fall in and out of place. There are curators who work for public institutions increasingly laboring to fundraise from the private sector. There are also people who run private museums and galleries but whose productions favor de-privatization, and vice versa.

¹Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol 2, Part 2 1931-1934* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 780.

The term “self-organization” has a currency in artistic and curatorial discourse and practice. It is used to refer to groups of cultural workers who take it upon themselves to work autonomously from preconceived institutional infrastructures (although such groups may work frequently in collaboration with them). Histories of Anglo-European artistic development in the 20th century is profoundly shaped by such alternative modalities of production—from Surrealism via the Situationists to the Art Workers Coalition and *ruangrupa*. Where, once, to work on the “outside” of an infrastructure was an act of defiance and/or desperation, now—precisely due to the conditions described above, the prevalence of portfolio, precarious working and the ambiguity of locating the “outside” itself, in a systematic reworking of public and private finance—the term “self-organization” might refer to a multitude of management processes and practices. Self-organization is thus, on the one hand, a form of utopian belief and, on the other, a compromise born of the harsh conditions of production, particularly those which do not recognise collective labor as a prerequisite. Our “value sets” are mixed—they are heterogeneous, contradictory and often politically hostile to each other in the sense that we might value organizational alterity but our governance processes and our fundraising strategies mean working with people whose value sets favor normalization. We live in, and on, often unsettling, sometimes intellectually violent but sometimes productive, compromise.

Compromise is often disguised within artistic production, even though the network of actors who bring an exhibition to its conclusion consistently work with compromise—a material is too expensive, a body is resistant, a site does not pass requisite health and safety checks, an ego is too fragile. The regimes of power that produce or exacerbate scenarios of compromise are too often blind to the scene of production. And this never mind the exacerbating compromise of funding that haunts all biennials and large-scale cultural productions; where the money comes from, and how it can be accepted in ways that mitigate the receiver from the illicit or politically antipathetic source.² Yet, before its “doors are opened to the public”,³ a biennial necessitates a complex matrix of skill-sets which are bound together under a rubric of singularity. This matrix is almost always hidden behind the affective convention of the artist’s miraculous power. The production of miracles has long served the ideology of capitalism.⁴ In Marxian terms, it can be understood as the soporific mechanism of control exercised through the oppression of collective will in the name of individualized profit, the

² Whilst not the subject of this essay, the current spread of debate and opposition to sources of funding in the cultural milieu has the potential to radically redraw the means of production as they are currently accepted and deemed acceptable. Recent protests and significant donor withdrawals and staff resignations in venues such as Tate UK, The Serpentine Gallery, London, the Whitney Biennial, NYC, aligning with historically continued disputes such as those related to the Venice and Istanbul Biennials, suggest that a future map of the arts industry and its institutions will need to be significantly redrawn.

³ The spectacular economy of such an idea—that something is closed until it is opened—is a fundamental presupposition of the artistic temporality of display. In standard biennial terms, a curator or group of curators works secretly to gather artists around a central concept that is then revealed, firstly to the press as a list of the selected, and secondly, to the public, who come in anticipation of the known and unknown aspects of that list. As will be analysed, this list-reveal has everything to do with the “miraculous” fiscal economy of contemporary art.

⁴ See Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery, Breaking the Spell* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

determinant and outcome of exchange value. In the artistic economy, the miracle is rendered spectacular. If one is committed to the decentralization and transversalization of art labor, and the recognition of the intelligence of all aspects of the labor which make up the production of the singular artwork, as I am, then it is necessary to assess the labor which makes the miracle. It is a truism to say that an artwork's fiscal, reputational and affective value is brought about through the work of many hands and, in many art-critical circles, it is recognised that compensational (fiscal and reputational) distribution is radically uneven.⁵ The intelligence of these multiple authorships is, however, either no longer or as yet unrecognised as a general paradigm in the context of art education, art institutions and funding. The structure of the contemporary artistic regime, in its current economic formulation, cannot afford to disclose such multiple authorships. Whilst a growing number of artists are generous in attributing collaborative skill sets, both intellectual and practical, many are not and thus retain the stability of the concept of the autonomy of production. This stability is also maintained through the formats of visibility within the regime and the value attributions that are attentive to and shaped by it. It is one thing to credit the help of others in the making or assemblage of an artwork with the generosity of attribution, but it is another to ensure the real distributions of value that have and are accruing (fiscal, reputational) concede to the equality of the knowledges that are bought to bear on the conceptualisation, making, placing and managing of an exhibit. Generosity does not correspond with the production of equality.

Let us look at an alternative mode of understanding cultural production that is based on *the equality of value of intelligences*.⁶ In particular, let us imagine the production of an artwork for a biennial. Although many have tried, it is difficult to extract artistic production from its normative mode of delivery within this exceptionally pressurized form which explicitly emanates from relations between colonialities of nationhood and the birth of the modern art market. But a biennial requires a large team of collaborative producers, some local, some at a distance, all with a variety of named skills. Those skills range from those which are involved in making art to those involved in administering, managing, publicizing, producing, hosting and paying for it. What would transpire if we recognized this large group of actors as equipped with equal intelligences?

In *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Michael Baxandall describes in detail the contractual and economic arrangements between commissioner and commissioned laborer through the analysis of letters such as the correspondence between Frederico Gonzaga and the Duke of Milan in 1480 (Frederico was part of the Gonzaga Marquises de Mantua who employed Mantegna from 1460 until he died in 1506). The short extract not only describes the

⁵ See Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

⁶ Through a different but related lens, Jacques Rancière calls for the recognition of the equality of intelligences in his narrative about Joseph Jacotot, the 18-19th century revolutionary-turned-pedagogue, who set up a situation in which pupils learned to read a book in a language they didn't speak alongside a teacher who did not speak their language. See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, Ca., Stanford University Press, 1991).

contractual yet comfortable servitude of the, by this point, renowned artist, but also the regular policy of contracting the skills and reputational advantage an already highly respected artisan:

I received the design you sent and urged Andrea Mantegna to turn it into a finished form. He says it is more a book illuminator's job than his, because he is not used to painting little figures. He would do much better a Madonna or something, a foot or a foot and half long, say, if you are willing.⁷

In his analysis of Quattrocento contracts, Baxandall draws attention to the ebb and flow of questions about value in the Ducal and mercantile commissioning process, with an increasing emphasis of the role of skill over the previously prominent role of material quality (such as the grade and quantity of ultramarine to be used). Describing how the “orientation of display shifted” as a result of changing religious and social mores towards the end of the 15th century, he says:

A distinction between the value of precious material on the one hand and the value of skilful working of materials on the other is now rather critical to the argument. It is a distinction that is not alien to us, is indeed fully comprehensible, though it is not usually central to our own thinking about pictures. In the early Renaissance, however, it was the centre. The dichotomy between quality of material and quality of skill was the most consistently and prominently recurring motif in everybody's discussion of painting and sculpture, and this is true whether the discussion is ascetic, deploring public enjoyment of works of art, or affirmative, as in texts of art theory.⁸

This pragmatism regarding the delivery of work is, of course, a still quotidian matter in the production of artistic work, despite the rise of the conceit of the MFA in Western art education with its attendant focus on individual studio practice connected directly to dealerships and the fiscal value of artistic production.⁹ But the adroitness of Mantegna's recorded response to a request for his labor to be hired out, whereby he tells his Master that he is not good at drawing little figures (whether this be the truth or his attempt to evade a commission he does not want—or is not wanted by his Master), affords a rationality that comes from the industry floor, as it were. Despite the regularity of leasing the skills of others for the production of artworks throughout modernity and into today's studio-factory set-ups, such pragmatism must be disavowed in contemporary art in order not to disturb the valuation processes at work. Yet this labor, this know-how, forms the set of bridges between an idea and its productive establishment, negotiation and culmination. Whilst in standardized artistic industry procedure, the workers of this labour are often made invisible in order to maintain

⁷As quoted in Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* [second edition] (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p.12.

⁸ Michael Baxandall, *ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

⁹ See Andrea Phillips, “Devaluation”, PARSE Vol 1 no 2 *The Value of Contemporary Art* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg 2015).

value-function, in other forms, other socialities and other modes of building relations between making and conceptualizing, these workers are the pivots, or what Keller Easterling might call ratchets.¹⁰ They are often called technicians, producers, administrators, managers, assistants. The process of production is machinic and involves many actors, only a few of whom are visible, despite the respect (or, conversely, despite the disrespect) given by the curators and funders. Many skills are at work.

Western thought has battled with the relationship between technical know-how and the stability of knowledge since its documented inception. The difference is usually founded on distinctions between the idea of *tekhnê* (doing, making, skill) and *epistêmê* (knowledge). Whilst the difference between these threads of practice has both founded and been founded throughout the development of labor divisions, it is interesting to note that at least Plato understood *tekhnê* as a variety of modes of crafting which have, perhaps interestingly, been more or less associated with artistic production as it has developed, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, into a multi-sited conceptual industry: “medicine, horsemanship, huntsmanship, oxherding, farming, calculation, geometry, generalship, piloting a ship, chariot-driving, political craft, prophecy, music, lyre-playing, flute-playing, painting, sculpture, housebuilding, shipbuilding, carpentry, weaving, pottery, smithing, and cookery”.¹¹ As is demonstrated by the shifting nature of relations between the quality of material and the quality of skill in Baxandall’s 15th century scholarship, the plainest iteration of the difference between the production of knowledge and practice has never been stable, especially within conceptions of practice itself. Yet, in the context of exhibition-making, the divide between modes of making (subdivisions of *tekhnê*) become apparent, just as struggles for knowledge production become emblematic.

The term technicity is loaded particularly in traditions emanating from phenomenology in the 20th and early-21st century where, in its more colloquial idiom, it is often used to refer to human-technology relations. Used by Martin Heidegger, Gilbert Simondon and Karl Schmitt to make distinctions between the religious, aesthetic and technological spheres of pre-modern life (as imagined), technology, especially for Heidegger, was not simply the tools from which things are made—for him, the hammer and anvil, for us, CAD and the algorithm—but the manner by which things are either “let be” or “called forth” in a process in which natural capital is fundamentally exploitable for human capital.¹² More recently, Bernard Stiegler has undertaken extensive analysis of the “originary technicity” founded in such humanistic philosophical trajectories as “oscillat[ing] between two poles”. In the introduction to the first volume of his *Technics and Time* book series, Stiegler says:

¹⁰ See Andrea Phillips, “In conversation with Keller Easterling” in (eds.) O’Neill, Steel, Wilson, *How do Institutions Think?* (Massachusetts: MIT, 2017);

¹¹ See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/episteme-techn/> [accessed 20 07 19]. It should be noted that even though contemporary art takes up many of the activities on this list—medicine, horsemanship, farming etc.—it is one named author or a subset of collaborators at best that produce the miracle at its moment of unmasking.

¹² See Martin Heidegger, *A Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Garland, 1977).

At the beginning of its history philosophy separates *tekhnê* from *epistêmê*, a distinction that had not yet been made in Homeric times. The separation is determined by a political context, one in which the philosopher accuses the Sophist of instrumentalizing the *logos* as rhetoric and logography, that is, as both an instrument of power and a renunciation of knowledge ... It is in the inheritance of this conflict—in which the philosophical *epistêmê* is pitched against the sophistic *tekhnê*, whereby all technical knowledge is devalued—that the essence of technical entities in general is conceived.¹³

This contrast between expert knowledge (not *doxa*; not know-how) and *tekhnê* (crafting) forms the basis of a western order of things; positions, objects, subjectivities, powers, politics. As Stiegler is at pains to stress, this division stands at the threshold of occidental modernity's cleaving of objective production and subjective, or affective, articulation.

This debate about technicity allows us to expand the bounds of the technical (which is as intended) but it also demands the reclaiming of the technical from one kind of crafting (the Heideggerian kind, based on the essentialism of the hand) to the social-collaborative. Between the philosophical reification of *tekhnê* and the pragmatics of getting things done using a variety of tools, I want to steer an alternative path, wherein the people who co-produce a work of art are neither absorbed into a romanticism of crafting nor relegated to the underbelly of the unspoken labor of production (and the labor conditions which such a relegation entails). One way of thinking about this is to return to Mantegna and the characters that are manifest in Baxandall's description of the contractual exchanges he finds in the archives. Who is in the room with the artist, his master, and the aspirant contractor? A carpenter, an architect, builders, assistants to all the above, an economist, a buyer, a theologian, etc.? How might we name the conversation or extended exchange? One way would be to name it a techno-administrative and managerial process of equivalences which is easily recognizable but not addressed as a *political* question in contemporary curatorial production. A number of actors are (virtually or physically) gathered, each with a part in the process. With the benefit of hindsight, we might read into the Mantegna scene an equanimity between actors: the artist is a hired hand who has (in his own words) limited skills; the master is negotiating, as is the contractor (although, as Baxandall points out, Mantegna's position as an artist with a regular wage from the owners and lenders of his labor makes him unusual in historical context: on the one hand with security and, on the other, indentured). Clearly, this belies the violent poverty of power relations in 15th century northern Italy, but it also asserts the idea of the artist as one individual in a nodal production.

So often in contemporary art, collaboration is fantasized, fetishized and misconstrued. Collaboration in art production takes place on a constant basis but is not named as such. How does the work of managing and organising produce unaccounted value, and how could a committed investigation of production—of organization—help to proliferate and expand the ways in which we might recognise each other, communicate, fund and work together?

¹³ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (1998: Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 2.

It is accepted doctrine that the labor mentioned—technical, administrative, managerial, supportive, economic, domestic—do not constitute direct value accrual within contemporary art; that the reputational and fiscal forms of value which establish circulations of power and hierarchy within contemporary art cannot constitutionally recognize such labor without destroying the very infrastructure which supports and perpetuates primary forms of value as they adhere and perform sub-structurally. It is also accepted doctrine that such labor is necessary to the accrual of value and that, within such a mechanism, the peaks of value formation are named as a singularity rather than a common . Yet it is the persistent (self) imposed passivity of this conglomeration which remains a political blockage.

Walter Benjamin understood and described this as a political decision on the part of the author-artist in his 1934 essay, *The Author as Producer*. In making distinct the activity of a “tendentious” (in this case) writer, and one who is “revolutionary”, Benjamin calls on Louis Aragon’s statement: “the revolutionary intellectual appears first and foremost as the betrayer of his class of origin”, to which Benjamin adds:

In the case of the writer, this betrayal consists in conduct that transforms him from a supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer who sees it as his task to adapt this apparatus to the purposes of the proletarian revolution.¹⁴

From a supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer: one might understand Mantegna, working at the height of the incipient century of modernism, an engineer but, nevertheless, on the verge of becoming a supplier (recount the shift Baxandall describes from the value of the paint to the value of the author’s signature). But nothing is so clearly dialectically arranged. Within the supplier-engineer/artist-technical manager paradigms, there is something more complex at work involving not simply questions of the recognition of collective labor, but the modes through which the assignment of subject positions within such a framework retain a social positionality *per se*. In his 2002 book, *State Work*, Stefano Harney says,

No certain subject position can obtain in the worker who works by producing subject positions and equivalences.¹⁵

In this astute sentence, written not in the context of art but in the context of the governmental administration of infrastructures for diversity (in this case at the Ontario Antiracism Secretariat where he worked), Harney describes a mechanism that could also be applied to art work: if you are working ‘for’ an artist, you support the subject position of the artist and their cultural speech, not your own; for in your very actioning of labor, you cannot have your own position. As Benjamin says,

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 780.

¹⁵ Stefano Harney, *State Work: Public Administration and Mass Intellectuality* (Durham: Duke UP 2002), p. 176.

...the more exactly [the writer] is thus informed about his position in the process of production, the less it will occur to him to lay claim to "spiritual" qualities.¹⁶

Here we might supplant the term "spiritual" with "creative", "unique" or "inspired".

What we know as the artworld is a microcosm of many modes of contemporary management and organization. It has hierarchies and power clusters, it instigates competition and self-absorption as well as crippling doubt and self-criticism. It produces deep, joyful and intellectual pleasure, it produces objects and subjects of vast financial and symbolic value, it has a trading system which is undisclosed, it gathers intelligent, sophisticated, careful and ambitious people, it produces friendships, it produces spectacular animosities, it produces loyalties and shattering betrayals. It has an international network of people and places, and this network grows. The art "world" is necessarily avaricious and predatory in its current structure: it needs to feed on new territories, images and people to survive. It is propelled forward by the camouflage of individuality—creation, expression, spirituality, miraculous becoming—suppressing the psychic and pragmatic force of production for all its might. This suppression has a long tail, demonstrated finally by another piece of evidence unearthed by Michael Baxandall, this time concerning the early renaissance painter Piero della Francesca (born Benedetto):

11 June 1445: Pietro di Luca, Prior, ... [and seven others] in the behalf and name of the Fraternity and Members of S. Maria della Misericordia have committed to Piero di Benedetto, painter, the making and painting of a panel in the oratory and church of the said Fraternity, of the same form as the panel which is there now, with all the material for it and all the costs and expenses of the complete furnishing and preparation of its painting assembly and erection in the said oratory: with those images figures and ornaments stated and agreed with the abovesaid Prior and advisor or their successors in office and with the other abovesaid officers of the Fraternity; to be gilded with fine gold and coloured with fine colours, and specially with ultramarine blue: with this condition that the said Piero shall be bound to make good any defect the said panel shall develop or show with the passing of time through failure of material or of Piero himself, up to a limit of ten years. For all this they have agreed to pay 150 florins at the rate of five lire five soldi the florin. Of which they have undertaken to give him on demand fifty florins now and the balance when the panel is finished; And the said Piero has undertaken to make paint decorate and assemble the said panel in the same breadth height and shape as the wooden panel there at present, and to deliver it complete assembled and set in place within the next three years; and that *no painter may put his hand to the brush other than Piero himself*.¹⁷

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Michael Baxandall, *op. cit.*, p. 20. Italics original.