

Subversion as a Resistance Strategy in Artistic Activism¹

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Abstract. The contemporary art world is characterized by precarious and intermittent forms of employment such as subcontracting and freelancing. Non-paid work is also common in the arts sector either in the form of internships or uncompensated exhibiting, writing and curating. In this article we analyse subversion in the context of artistic activism as a resistance strategy against labour relations within contemporary capitalism. As a case study, we present a critical analysis of two works by artist Joshua Schwebel, *Subsidy* (2015) and *Médiation Culturelle* (2017-2018), which aimed to take advantage of the institutional exhibition context to not only raise awareness about hidden aspects of labour practices common among art institutions but also to create real change and empower workers. Taking into account capitalism's adaptability and its undermining of traditional forms of resistance, we argue that artistic activism plays a crucial role in pursuing counter-hegemonic struggle. By analysing and comparing both projects we have concluded that subversion is used as the broader strategy, whereas disruption, dialogue and displacement are used as tactics. This research also establishes context as a fundamental element for artistic activism works and the necessity to adapt strategies to maximize possibilities of achieving social transformation.

Keywords: artistic activism, resistance, labour, institutional critique, subversion.

[es] la subversión como estrategia de resistencia en el activismo artístico

resumen. El mundo del arte contemporáneo se caracteriza por formas de empleo precarias e intermitentes, como la subcontratación y el trabajo independiente. El trabajo no remunerado también es común en el sector de las artes, ya sea en forma de pasantías o exhibición, escrita y curaduría no remuneradas. En este artículo analizamos la subversión en el contexto del activismo artístico como estrategia de resistencia a las relaciones laborales en el capitalismo contemporáneo. Como estudio de caso, presentamos un análisis crítico de dos obras del artista Joshua Schwebel, *Subsidy* (2015) y *Médiation Culturelle* (2017-2018), que pretendían aprovechar el contexto expositivo institucional para no solo sensibilizar sobre aspectos ocultos de las prácticas laborales comunes entre las instituciones de arte, sino también para crear un cambio real y empoderar a los trabajadores. Teniendo en cuenta la adaptabilidad del capitalismo y su socavación de las formas tradicionales de resistencia, argumentamos que el activismo artístico juega un papel crucial en la lucha contrahegemónica. Al analizar y comparar ambos proyectos hemos concluido que la subversión se utiliza como estrategia más amplia, mientras que la disrupción, el diálogo y el desplazamiento se utilizan como tácticas. Esta investigación también establece el contexto como un elemento fundamental para los trabajos de activismo artístico y la necesidad de adaptar estrategias para maximizar las posibilidades de lograr la transformación social.

Palabras clave: activismo artístico, resistencia, trabajo, crítica institucional, subversión.

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1. Introduction

The contemporary art world is characterized by precarity and low or no pay, although demanding high productivity and full availability (Gielen & Diaz, 2018; Steyerl, 2011), and a disparity between the wages of arts administrators and those of artists and other art workers (Abbing, 2014; Rädle & Jeremic, 2017). By art workers we mean not only artists but also gallery and museum staff, assistants, technicians, curators, art writers and all workers whose labour keeps the art world functioning normally. Sholette introduces the concept of *dark matter* (2011) to refer to this majority of art workers that produce and consume, keeping the economy of the art market going, although remaining invisible and precarious.

Non-paid work is common in the arts sector either in the form of internships or uncompensated writing, curating and exhibiting. A study conducted in the UK concluded that earning fees was the least important reason for exhibiting work (in most cases no fee was offered) and that the income deriving from art was very low³. In fact, 51% of surveyed artists earned only up to 25% directly from their art practice and had to take on a second job to have sufficient means of subsistence (a-n/AIR, DHA, Cox, Mass, & Hallam, 2013). According to another study, 70% of internships in the UK are unpaid, while in the arts sector this number rises to 86% (Cullinane & Montacute, 2018).

Although the large majority of artists and art workers struggle financially, hegemonic discourse uses them as an example, encouraging informal and precarious labour as if it was liberating and fostering individual responsibility, thereby making these workers the “poster boys and girls” (Gill & Pratt, 2013, p. 26) of the so-called “precariat”.

From the supposed exceptionality of artwork derives an increased susceptibility to exploitation. Considering that art is in most cases seen as more than a job, deriving from the love for art and becoming a form of identity with little distinction between work and life, art workers are perceived as the blueprint for the “ideal worker”. Several studies about art workers point to a deep and affective connection to their work and the idealization of self-expression and personal improvement through labour (Gill & Pratt, 2013, p. 33). Other studies mention society’s expectation of artists working long hours because of an almost instinctual desire to create, rather than any monetary incentive (Bain, 2005). Since the art world relies on an illusion of a future reward, either in the form of paid employment or the exhibition in the well-renowned institution, the *dark matter*’s present is rarely accounted for.

In light of this, in this article we propose a reflection about ways in which artists are struggling in the present time. This study analyses subversion as a resistance strat-

³ Only 10,000£ yearly, way below the minimum living wage.

egy against the working conditions in the contemporary art sector, taking two works by artist Joshua Schwebel, *Subsidy* (2015) and *Médiation Culturelle* (2017-2018), as case studies. We have chosen to write about this artist for two main reasons. Firstly, because we have participated in the work *Subsidy*, while being a non-paid intern at the art institution where it took place, therefore gathering important data and input that helped shape this study and that would benefit from further analysis. Secondly, Joshua Schwebel is an artist that has consistently worked the issues of labour within the arts system, often with a very site specific and interventionist approach, making his work a great medium to explore the issues of subversion in artistic activism.

Joshua Schwebel has an extensive body of work dealing with the issues of art institutions, administration and labour (Schwebel, n.d.-b). The artist plays often with the idea of counterfeit and deceit and goes in depth into the administrative dimension of institutions, often utilizing some form of subversion. From all of Schwebel's projects, we have decided to choose *Subsidy* (2015) and *Médiation Culturelle* (2017-2018) as case studies since they more directly and accurately explore the topics of labour in contemporary art institutions.

Methodologically, in the case of *Subsidy*, as mentioned, we were a direct participant in the artwork, having accompanied the whole development of the project at the institution where it was exhibited. During and after the project we have been in regular contact with the artist by email, having also conducted two interviews, in August 2020 and July 2021, in Berlin. For the analysis of *Médiation Culturelle* we have relied on documentation and on direct statements from the artist gathered through interviews, both conducted by me and also previously published interviews. We have also conducted interviews with participants in both projects.

The subversion strategy, as we have framed it, consists of artists working deliberately inside the institutional system in order to subvert it from within and use it to achieve tangible changes as well as to trigger awareness and collective discussion.

Within the scope of this study, we consider that resistance takes place in the context of power relations, which are by definition asymmetric, and that it refers to an oppositional and intentional action taken by an individual or a group of individuals against one or more aspects of that power relation. Foucault mentions that "where there is power, there is resistance" (1978, p. 95). However, resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Power relations depend on a multiplicity of resistance points with different participations and it is possible to destabilize them.

From a hegemonic perspective, social critique must occur in the existing institutions to influence their discourses and practices, otherwise they will further establish and reproduce the current hegemony. The resistance challenges the "natural order" that is accepted as "common sense". This order is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices and these can be contested by counter-hegemonic practices that attempt to weaken it and install another form of hegemony (Mouffe, 2008).

Capitalism has steadily adapted itself to new and diverse settings (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018; Mandel, 1976; Neidich, 2013) and resistance against capitalism should necessarily be aware of these processes and be able to consider different contexts where social change can take place. We claim that practices of artistic activism can contribute to a counter-hegemonic struggle by challenging hegemonic institutions artistically and politically. We draw from Mouffe's (2000, 2007) concept of agonistic struggle and Rancière's (2010) concept of dissensus to propose that antagonism and opposition are crucial to the production of democracy and to social

change. We suggest that, through activist artworks, artists can directly confront art institutions and introduce tears in the fabric of the social order.

2. Subversion in Artistic Activism

Artistic activism can be understood as “activism that doesn’t look like activism and art that doesn’t look like art” (The Center for Artistic Activism, 2018). Activism defies power relations and seeks social change, whereas art stimulates thought, feelings and changes of perspective. This association between art and activism makes it possible, in the same project, for the intention of provoking social transformation to coexist with the formulation of communication circuits that facilitate its dissemination and acceptance.

Expósito defines artistic activism as a historical reservoir not only constituted by aesthetical representations *stricto sensu* but also by tools, techniques or material, conceptual and symbolic strategies (2012, p. 45). The contents of this reservoir can be utilized to produce antagonism and confrontation or to broaden the spectre of possibilities (questioning definitions of art, expanding the use of creative tools, building political sociability, etc.).

Artistic activism can take place inside or outside the art institution. When talking about subversive practices we are targeting the ones that take place inside the institution. Mouffe considers that “museums and art institutions can contribute to subverting the ideological framework of consumer society. Indeed, they could be transformed into agonistic public spaces where this hegemony is openly contested.” (2013, 101). Artistic activism is process-oriented, which means that it should consider the formal mechanisms of art as well as take into account how and why it will reach its context and audience (Lippard, 1984, p. 2).

Marchant argues that museums, exhibition spaces and biennials are “powerful hegemonic machines”, which means they also have the capacity to be *counter-hegemonic* machines (2019, p. 26). If large and powerful institutions are at the core of the neo-liberal hegemonic discourse it is important to work from within in order to influence their politics. As Marchant points out, hegemonic shifts can be achieved more effectively by institutions and exhibitions “in and of the centre” (2019, p. 25). Therefore, we consider it is crucial to pursue this struggle inside the institutions (without also disrupting their existence on the outside) so that their counter-hegemonic potentialities can be taken advantage of, preventing dominant ideology from continuing to reproduce and expand itself undisturbed.

As mentioned, we define the subversion strategy as artists working deliberately inside the institutional system in order to subvert it from within and use it to achieve tangible changes as well as to trigger awareness and collective discussion. We can highlight Lippard’s seminal text *Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power* as the core of subversion as a resistance strategy. Here, the author refers to the trojan horse as probably the first activist artwork (Lippard, 1984, p. 1). Artistic activism is based on subversion and empowerment and operates “both within and beyond the beleaguered fortress that is high culture or the “art world”” (Lippard, 1984, p. 1). Taking the trojan horse as a metaphor, we propose that a subversive artwork enters the art institution in order to create dissensus and spread its counter-hegemonic potential.

Dissensus is also a key concept to understand this process. According to Rancière (2010), consensus is defined by the idea of proper and improper in the social order, a distribution that implies a hierarchy and therefore inequality. Dissensus comes to disrupt consensus. The underprivileged assume a place of speech and action that is different from the one that was assigned to them in the context of the consensual social order, bringing them closer to equality. Dissensus allows for making visible what was invisible and hearing what was inaudible (Rancière, 2010). We suggest that subversive artworks can create dissensus: a fracture in the status quo happening at the centre of the art institution.

Mouffe also advocates the necessity of confrontation as a key part of a vibrant democracy (2007, p. 3). According to her agonistic approach (Mouffe, 2000, 2007), different projects are confronted without any possibility of final reconciliation. This theory has several similarities with Rancière's understanding of dissensus. For Mouffe, "political" is the expression of a particular structure of power relations. Things could always be otherwise and therefore every order (the social and the political) is based on the exclusion of other possibilities (2007, p. 2). Mouffe opposes the theory from Habermas in which he presents the public sphere as a place where deliberation aiming at a rational consensus takes part, concluding that it is impossible to reach a consensus without exclusion (2007). Therefore, although dialogue and consensus are valuable tools, they are based upon exclusion, and so confrontation and antagonism are critical in a democratic setting.

In the context of artistic practices, subversion as a resistance strategy embodies the agonistic approach, challenging art institutions and questioning the dominant hegemony. These practices of artistic activism foment dissensus, allowing the position from the excluded within the framework of the existing hegemony to become visible.

Subversion has been defined as a "means of contesting the existing status quo and eroding predominant cultural forces" (Cieslak & Rasmus, 2012, p. 1) and it is often associated with the realm of politics. The word is originated from the Latin *subvertere*, meaning "to overthrow" and "often refers to processes by which the values, principles and/or rules of an existing government system or political regime are undermined." (Olsson, 2016, p. 39). In addition to this, it is usually pointed out that subversive actors operate from within and that their actions are taken in a relatively secretive manner (Olsson, 2016, p. 40). Being political in nature, subversion questions values and norms. It does not focus on personal interest but rather on collective social and political problems. Subversive action is often interpreted in different ways, either as exceptional by some people or as a betrayal by others (Olsson, 2016, p. 41).

The artists engaging in this strategy are in fact working from within the institution and using their visibility as artists to intervene in specific issues. In some cases, their project cannot be fully disclosed to the institution at an early stage because there is the risk that the institution will interfere and even attempt to suppress the projects. Since subversive artistic interventions are often somehow unexpected or uncomfortable to the institution, they are sometimes perceived negatively by the institutional hierarchies, as it was the case with both projects analysed in this paper.

Several artists explore the issues of art labour in art institutions in their work. Alongside Schwebel we can mention Alina Lupu, a Romanian artist based in Amsterdam, and her work *Minimum Wage Dress Code* where she reflects about neoliberal working conditions, specifically the need for people in the creative field to take

on side-jobs, not being able to afford to be an artist full time or *Small Fee* where she brought a flag she had produced while being an unpaid intern at a performance festival as a symbol, asking the audience at the exhibition to share their experience as art labourers and if they were ever in the position of being offered “a small fee” for their work. We can also make reference to Ahmet Ögüt’s *Fair wage for a made-up job* or *Intern VIP Lounge*. In the first work, Ögüt paid three performers to hold monitors at the exhibition site with one of his films, paying them per hour as much as the art fair’s director was receiving. Additionally, the three performers had equal access to the director’s amenities (including lunch, VIP area access, car service, etc.) during the art fair. The artist has since made several versions of this work, but the original *Intern VIP Lounge* took place in 2013 at the Dubai Art Fair. Ögüt created an exclusive space for all the unpaid interns working at the art fair and at the galleries in Dubai. Only these volunteers, after registering at the Intern VIP Lounge’s information desk, were able to access the lounge. This space served as a quiet and relaxing space for the interns but was also the stage for exclusive events programmed by Ögüt, like presentations and film screenings. This served as a disruptive element, reversing the power dynamics of the art fair and its’ hierarchies.

Joshua Schwebel is an artist from Canada based in Berlin. Schwebel’s work “takes the form of tactical interventions that show the symbolic and political contradictions of contemporary art” (Schwebel, n.d.-a). He often blurs the boundaries between the artistic and the administrative dimensions at the art institution and creates situations of doubt and uncertainty, potentializing self-reflection. These processes bring visibility to the disparity between the discourse of arts institutions and the actual practices manifested by those institutions. His work is often developed in direct response to the context of the institution where he is working or exhibiting.

3. *Subsidy* (2015)

Subsidy took place at Künstlerhaus Bethanien (KB), in Berlin, from 9 October 2015 to 1 November 2015. Künstlerhaus Bethanien is an international cultural centre which hosts artistic residencies usually with a duration of 6-12 months for artists from all around the world, and is one of the most renowned art institutions in Berlin. *Subsidy* displayed art institutions’ widespread labour practices, namely the large amount of non-paid positions such as internships.

This concept emerged from the artist’s own concerns when he realised that the interns working at KB did not receive any payment. Previously to being a resident at the KB, he did not know what the working conditions at the institution were nor that he would encounter and work with unpaid interns. Joshua Schwebel was in residence at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien for 12 months and had a scholarship from KB’s partner institution in Canada. Since interns at KB work directly with the artists and are the main point of contact between them and the institution, Schwebel realised that as an artist-in-residence he and the other resident artists would also benefit from the interns’ unpaid labour, which indirectly implicated them in this issue. Schwebel declared that he felt uncomfortable with this and decided to develop a project addressing the situation. It’s important to point out that interns at the KB did not receive any payment, transport or meal allowance.

Joshua Schwebel decided to redirect his exhibition budget (3000€) to pay the seven interns that worked in the institution during his residency period.⁴ The artist sent a letter to KB's artistic director, Christoph Tannert, and to the residency programme manager, Valeria Schulte-Fischedick, explaining the project's concept. The director's reaction was in the beginning extremely negative, claiming that such a project "was not art", that it was too political for the institution and that the exhibition budget was aimed for buying materials and objects for the exhibition (Balzer, 2015).

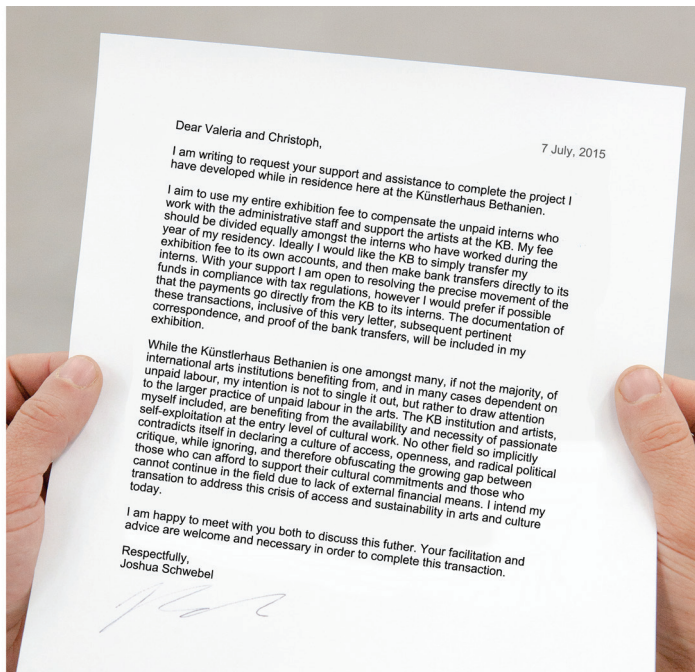


Fig. 1. Subsidy (2015), Joshua Schwebel. Letter to the Künstlerhaus Bethanien. Photo: Sandy Volz. Courtesy of the artist.

One week later, a meeting was scheduled with the director, where he demonstrated disappointment at the artist's project choice, considering that it would harm the image of the institution, as if they were doing something illegal. The issue at stake in this project was, however, not related to whether non-paid labour was legal, but whether it was an ethical practice. Art institutions profit from non-paid labour performed by interns and it is rooted and normalized in their activity. Although in some cases non-payment takes place within the limits of the law, the artist wanted to address the importance of both civil society and art institutions reflecting on whether it is a legitimate and fair conduct.

During the Subsidy exhibition there were two interns at KB, me, Catarina Pires, and Livia Curia. Schwebel explained to us his ideas about the installation and his motivations and questioned us if we would be available to participate in the project. It was proposed that we would move to the gallery during the time frame that coincided with our work schedule and the gallery opening hours and execute our normal

⁴ 01.01.2015 to 31.12.2015.

tasks there instead of in the office. We both accepted and showed our willingness to be part of the project.



Fig.2. *Subsidy* (2015), Joshua Schwebel. Photo: Sandy Volz. Courtesy of the artist.

After a turbulent time between the artist and the institution (Balzer, 2015), and after Schwebel voicing his idea to exhibit only the photocopies of the bank transfers made from Künstlerhaus Bethanien to the interns and this being rejected by KB's direction, an agreement was reached. The installation would mimic the original office where the interns worked and it consisted then of a desk, a computer, a printer, a paper shredder, the artists' mail shelf and other everyday use office objects. The interns would work in the gallery space when it was open, during their normal working hours. The installation also included a copy of the letter that the artist sent to KB's management explaining the project contents and its grounds, as well as the payment slips from the bank transfers made to the interns.

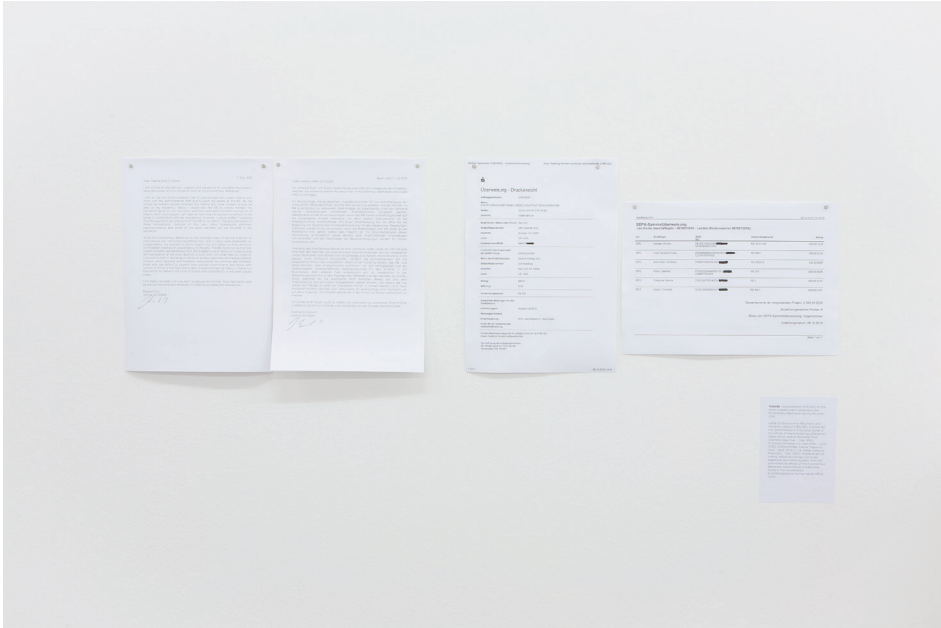


Fig. 3. *Subsidy* (2015), Joshua Schwebel. Installation detail.
Photo: Sandy Volz. Courtesy of the artist.

The artists' residencies at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien are funded by the national partners, in the case of Schwebel the *Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec* and the *Ministère des Relations internationales et de la Francophonie*. As the interns' payment was in fact the main aspect of the exhibition, Schwebel required that KB would transfer directly the 3000€ from the exhibition budget to the interns. The budget was divided in several items and with the amount dedicated to publication, a catalogue for the exhibition was published, where the interns were invited to write about their experiences during the project.

Moving to the gallery space was important in terms of visibility to everybody outside the office environment, as it enabled interaction between interns, gallery staff and exhibition visitors and allowed the work to materialize an otherwise abstract issue. KB has regular visitors, that usually come to the openings and several events. This project allowed the public to see a reality they were unaware of, in one of the main art spots in Berlin that they frequented. The public's reactions varied but the vast majority that visited the exhibition ended up interacting with the interns, producing important and meaningful dialogue. *Subsidy* at the time was often talked about among other resident artists and exhibition visitors, due to its unusual approach and the significant issues it presented.

The opposite process, the displacement from the original office pointing towards the intern's absence, was also meaningful. It disrupted the usual functioning of the institution, both for other KB workers that relied on the interns' labour as well as for the artists-in-residence, since some of the interns' tasks could not be carried out in the gallery. This functioned as a reminder of the need for the interns' labour and how their presence had been taken for granted and undervalued.

4. *Médiation Culturelle* (2017-2018)

Médiation Culturelle was presented at the exhibition *Ressources humaines* [Human Resources] at the FRAC Lorraine from 23 June 2017 to 28 January 2018. A FRAC is a *Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain* (Regional Contemporary Art Fund), an initiative between the State and the Regional Councils implemented in 1982 in each of France's regions. FRAC Lorraine was founded in 1984 as a nomadic contemporary art fund and since 2014 it has had a permanent location on the historic centre of Metz, at the Saint-Livier *Hôtel*. *Since then, it has functioned as a contemporary art museum with regular exhibitions and activities and has hosted art writing residencies.*

The exhibition *Ressources humaines* [Human Resources] asks what does it mean to work today and “addresses the specificities of artists' work from the point of view of artists themselves. There is no hierarchy among the works or contributions, whether issued from collaborative, horizontal, or solidarity-based practices or inspired by feminist activism and struggle.” (Jourdain, 2017). *Human Resources* was also accompanied by several performances, workshops and debates. Besides Joshua Schwebel, other exhibiting artists were Martine Viale, Miele Laderman Ukeles and Pilvi Takala, among others. This exhibition already invited artists to rethink labour and its invisibility and ethical challenges, so it apparently presented itself as a great opportunity for Schwebel to develop his critical art practice.

At the time of the exhibition, the FRAC momentarily did not have a director and Schwebel hoped that without the established hierarchy present the staff could achieve more autonomy and a more horizontal organization structure. The project was conceived to take advantage of this situation in order to reflect upon employment conditions at the institution, alongside the broader context of labour in the contemporary art sector.

By talking to the workers and with the head of education and documentation, the artist became aware that, as in many other art institutions in France, the FRAC Lorraine subcontracts its mediators, outsourcing these placements to employment agencies that provide generic hosting services. The FRAC has no responsibility for these workers, since legally they are not FRAC's employees, even though in practice they work for them and on their premises every day.

There are several differences between being an actual FRAC employee and a subcontracted worker that are noticeable on a daily basis. The latter have a different designation: instead of *médiatrice* they are called *agent d'accueil*, although they perform the same tasks, and cannot use the kitchen of the FRAC's workers. Schwebel first suggested that, as part of his work, a coffee machine would be installed at the lobby, just for the subcontracted workers usage. Later the coffee machine plan was dropped due to the absence of budget for exhibition production offered by the FRAC and the artist fee being only 250€, disclosed only a few weeks before the exhibition opening⁵. He also suggested changing the official designation to *médiatrice*, since after discussing it with the workers they expressed the will to be recognized equally as *médiatrices*.

The negotiations with the administration to reach these transformations would be part of the artist's work. Schwebel sent these requests to the curator, who showed

⁵ Joshua Schwebel, email to author, September 11, 2019.

support, and later to the exhibition coordinator, who replied that these changes would not be possible since there was no director to make that decision. This reflects the paradox of this project: it relied on taking advantage of the hiatus of leadership but at the same time the transformations could not be reached without someone in a position of power to approve them.

For the exhibition, the artist requested the desk where the *médiatrices* worked to be placed on the outside of the building, symbolically alluding to their exteriority in relation to the institution. On the desk's original location, the artist proposed to place a vitrine containing a letter sent to the future director (Bechetoille, 2018). In this letter, Schwebel challenged the future director to change the official designation of these workers' job title from *agent d'accueil* to *médiatrices* and to contract them directly, instead of using the subcontracting agencies.



Fig 4. Original desk. Courtesy of the artist.

In response to the request to move the desk, many obstacles were raised such as security, the comfort of the *médiatrices*, and mainly the objection that the table at which they worked was a commission by an artist and therefore had to be protected. Schwebel states that the negotiations were difficult and there was a stronger concern about protecting the furniture than the co-workers' working conditions (Bechetoille, 2018). As a compromise solution, garden furniture was installed in the courtyard instead of the real desk at which the *médiatrices* worked.

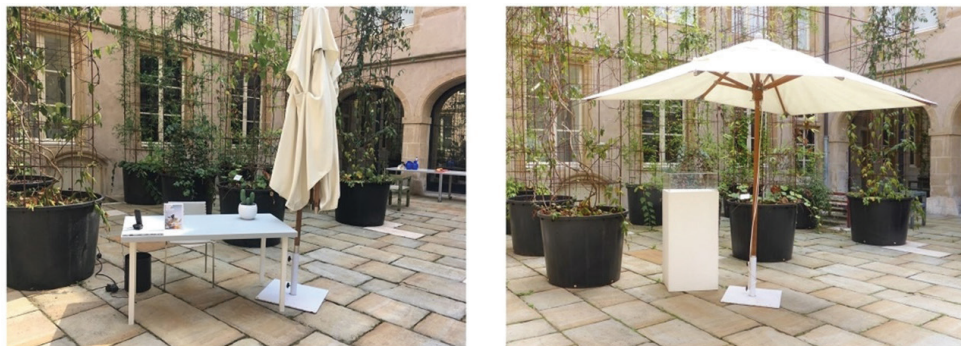


Fig 5. Left: Second proposal. Right: Final installation. Courtesy of the artist.

The three *médiatrices* were engaged in the project up to this point. However, on the exhibition's opening day, one *médiatrice* told the artist that she did not understand why she had to be “visible in such a way” and that despite being subcontracted she felt relatively secure and did not want to risk her job (Bechetoille, 2018). In view of this, Schwebel decided not to move the desk outside and instead placed there his letter to the future director, proposing the implementation of the changes mentioned above.

5. Contemporary art and working conditions

In both interventions, Schwebel targeted labour issues common in contemporary art institutions, namely non-paid work (*Subsidy*) and subcontracting (*Médiation Culturelle*). Although focusing on the institution where the project took place, these two exhibitions sought to target the exploitation that takes place in the arts sector as a whole.

Hito Steyerl describes post-Fordist labour as “all-you-can-work” and mentions that, excluding domestic and care work, art is the sector where more labour is unpaid. It can only sustain itself due to non-paid internships and the work of people that practice self-exploitation (Steyerl, 2011, p. 34). Alongside Steyerl, Lorey also mentions this topic, developing the concept of *self-precarization* and linking the post-Fordist worker with the entrepreneurial self, responsible for controlling and managing their time, taking risks and at the same time having to provide their means of production and reproduction (2015).

These issues are particularly visible in the arts sector since it heavily relies on visibility and connections to upgrade one's cultural capital and therefore be able to progress professionally. In terms of working conditions, art institutions do not seem to be substantially different from any other employer and they take advantage of aspiring artists, curators, assistants, etc (Brook, O'Brien, & Taylor, 2020; Siebert & Wilson, 2013). Hegemonic discourse utilizes these workers' passion for the arts to normalize and excuse non-paid or extremely underpaid work (Gill & Pratt, 2013; Ross, 2013; Steyerl, 2011).

Contemporary art institutions often embody hypocrisy when claiming to be progressive, favouring equality and wanting to critically address the pressing issues of

contemporary society. In reality, they still rely on the daily exploitation of a vulnerable and precarious work force. Although political art raises awareness of various situations and contexts, it rarely analyses art's own conditions of production (Steyerl, 2011, p. 35).

Schwebel, however, directly targeted these issues in both works. As an artist, he had the chance to expose the working conditions that are invisible to the average gallery or museum visitor. He used his visibility, redirecting it to the workers.

It's important to underline that the workers in the two presented projects are not props. They were performing their daily tasks and were not instructed to act any differently during the exhibition than they normally would. Given the context of the exhibition, the communication with the gallery/museum visitors sometimes shifted towards discussions about their working conditions via the artwork – something that would unlikely occur in normal circumstances. It also functioned internally, making the interns more aware of their own precarity and exploitation and empowering them to be able to speak out in the context of the project. The decision lies with the interns or the subcontracted workers to participate in the struggle encouraged by the artist or not. In the case of *Médiation Culturelle*, one *médiatrice* did not want to be visible because she was concerned about being subject to reprisals by the institution's new management. Although the other two were in favour of the project, it was altered since the *médiatrices*, as a work group, are the ones at the centre of the project and would be impacted by any positive or negative outcomes. Therefore, it had to be a collective decision of all the workers in that particular situation.

These workers are in an extremely vulnerable position due to their precarity. The fact that it was the artist's idea to disclose and criticise their status in the institution, in the context of an exhibition, can actually contribute to preventing them from suffering negative consequences for taking part in an action that has the aspiration of changing their labour conditions.

On the other hand, the artist takes credit for the workers' exposure since this aspect is essential to the artwork itself. Although the artist is not requesting anything to be done specifically *for* the artwork, as the interns and *médiatrices* work as they normally would, with the exception of the dislocation element, this labour is part of an installation created by the artist and from which artistic authorship emerges.

Art institutions tend to value objects that they can own and display substantially more than they value the labour that allows the institution to function every day. The first response from the gallery's artistic director to the *Subsidy* proposal was that the budget was intended for materials and objects for the exhibition. The idea of using this money to compensate unpaid workers was perceived as nonsensical by the Künstlerhaus' management, even considering that such a project "was not art" (Schwebel & Pires, 2017, p. 22).

In the case of *Médiation Culturelle*, this is illustrated by the strong opposition and ultimately by FRAC's management denial of the request concerning the displacement of the *médiatrices*' work desk. The desk was valuable and had been a commission by an artist, therefore it had to remain safe in its usual place and could not be moved.

The devaluing of labour is not only noticeable when we analyse the one that is performed by employees of these institutions. The *Human Resources* exhibition at the FRAC Lorraine was intended as a reflection about hidden or undervalued work, with a focus on artistic labour, through the gathering of points of view of artists, cul-

tural workers and/or activists. It proposed as well “to question the social and moral value of labor” and “blend the question of work and artistic labor with essential reflections on well-being, strategies of survival, ethical modes of production and inclusive perspectives conducive to rethinking labour” (FRAC Lorraine, 2017). Although the proposed curation and discussion seem to be extremely pertinent, the museum continued to perpetuate the cycle of devaluing artistic labour. The *médiatrices* continued to be precarious workers and Schwebel himself was offered no production budget for this exhibition. The absence of a budget resulted in the withdrawal of his proposal that we have previously mentioned, regarding the installation of a coffee machine for the exclusive usage of the *médiatrices*.

Steyerl (2006) mentions the shift from a critique of the institution to a critique of representation. The latter encompassed the representation of people, issues or situations that were not often visible within the art institution. This institutional turn focused, however, on the *symbolic* representation and not on *material* representation. Steyerl observes that institutions have adopted a more diversified position in terms of representation but without undertaking much structural change (Steyerl, 2006).

In this case, the institutional discourse and symbolic representation of the labour issues is present in the FRAC’s exhibition but it fails to go beyond it, into an actual material effect, resulting in a sense of misplacement of *Human Resources*.

6. Strategies and Tactics

In our analysis methodology we differentiate between “strategy” and “tactic” and between “objectives” and “goals”. The tactic lies within the strategy and is a particular moment of it, so we can define “tactic” as the means to reach an objective. Strategy, on the other hand, is the general plan created taking into account the goals that one wants to achieve, and can encompass different fields (The Center for Artistic Activism, 2018). The strategy is created necessarily taking context into account, since two different strategies may be needed in two different contexts, even when a project shares the same goals. Strategies are created in order to direct tactics and achieve objectives. Goals are the ultimate ends of the project, whereas objectives are parts of the goals — small, attainable and measurable milestones. An artistic activism project requires a structure aiming at the goals that one wants to reach but establishing smaller-scale objectives that can be accomplished in the short term.

Subversion, as a strategy, allows the artist to use their and the institution’s visibility to direct focus to the labour issues they have encountered in these situations. Schwebel criticises the institutions as an *insider*, placing himself temporarily in their midst, securing a position of visibility – first as an artist-in-residence and second as an invited artist on a collective exhibition – before developing his ideas for the exhibitions. By doing so, he has access to more information and has a privileged position to negotiate with the institution and create change. Also, it is possible to get to know several details that would never be disclosed by the institutions, as well as to communicate with the workers on a daily basis and understand their concerns.

To further characterize the *insider* artist, we can refer again to the trojan horse metaphor that Lucy Lippard (1984) mentions, when suggesting it may have been the first work of artistic activism. It is possible to place a counter-hegemonic seed in

the midst of the hegemonic institution, in the form of an artwork. As with the trojan horse, there is an element of secrecy in Schwebel's work. In *Subsidy's* case, Schwebel did not disclose at first what his plan was and the final project did not coincide with his proposal for the residency. However, after realising he would be working closely with non-paid interns, he made a decision based on the necessity to target this situation. Having already predicted that the institution's management reaction would not be favourable, he read his contract and realised that KB could only nullify it with 6 months' notice. Since his residence period was one year, he waited until the first half had passed to present his final proposal through the letter sent to the administration (Balzer, 2015).

The idea of betrayal is also present. For Schwebel, that's exactly what it feels like to the institutions, since he is invited. There is an assumption of loyalty because they've chosen him, so he is expected to be grateful (J. Schwebel, personal communication, August 19, 2020). At the time of *Subsidy*, Künstlerhaus Bethanien was in part caught by surprise, because although Schwebel had previously worked with the concepts of deceit and counterfeit, *Subsidy* explored more directly the administrative and labour elements of the institution. As for the subsequent projects, although institutions were aware of Schwebel's previous work, it didn't prevent that they felt betrayed and uncomfortable.

Regarding tactics, we suggest that both in *Subsidy* and *Médiation Culturelle*, Joshua Schwebel has used displacement, dialogue and disruption. Still drawing from Lippard's essay (1984) we can recognize some more similarities with Schwebel's work, namely in the tactics of displacement and disruption, as the artist is "invading" spaces that were either not typical exhibition spaces or that were used to more conventional artistic proposals, thus creating challenges and confusion for the institutions and its visitors.

Displacement in *Subsidy* can be manifested in the creation of the office space at the gallery and the actual relocation of the interns' labour to this space. This allowed the public and private spaces at the institution to be mixed, making the usually invisible and undervalued labour visible in the public space, at the same time making it disappear from the original office. Since not all tasks could be performed in the gallery and communication with the interns was harder because of the physical separation, it was demonstrated that the interns' labour was indeed important and needed every day. On the other hand, it permitted "outsiders" to the office environment to be aware of the reality of the institution's day-to-day functioning, beyond the public institutional façade.

In *Médiation Culturelle*, the displacement of the *médiatrices'* work desk to the outside of the building would point to their already existing exteriority in relation to the FRAC. Although this proposal ended up not being executed, for the previously discussed reasons, Schwebel decided to place the letter to the future management on the outside of the museum. It was important to establish a connection between its symbolic placement on the outside and the actual material exteriority of the workers in relation to the institution, due to their subcontracted status.

Dialogue is manifested, in both projects, in the communication with the workers and with the institutions' management. By talking with the workers, the artist can be aware of some specific situations that can be acted upon. In addition, it is also essential to discuss the workers' sensibilities, as they are the central piece of the projects. The negotiations with the institutions are crucial for the accomplishment

of some objectives. They themselves already disturb the institution's functioning by questioning the status quo and aspects that institutions do not want to discuss. Further, through the negotiations, the institutions are compelled to take action themselves, as those actions will become part of the artist's artwork, namely transferring the budget money to the interns in *Subsidy* and changing the official denomination to *médiatrice* in *Médiation*.

The disruption tactic works by disturbing the usual way of operating in the institution. The artist's requests are an immense challenge for the institutions since they suggest something that never took place there before, uncovering the prominent position of hierarchy and bureaucracy in their activity. Also, it creates a feeling of misplacement among the exhibition visitors. In *Subsidy*, visitors experienced uneasiness when they saw the intern face to face, not only because their physical presence at the gallery with the intern was uncomfortable, especially after having become aware of their working conditions, but also due to the feeling of having entered a private space where the gallery visitor was not allowed.⁶ One does expect the human presence in a gallery to be limited to gallery staff, security personnel and other visitors. The sight of someone answering the telephone, shredding paper and people coming to collect their mail provokes confusion and doubt (Pires, 2016). Disruption also worked by removing the interns from their usual workplace, making it harder for the management to make use of their labour. In *Médiation*, the initial idea in which the reception workers would be outside the building would make people question themselves. The strangeness of the situation draws the public's attention, who might try to figure out why they were there and not in the usual place, later getting to know more about their working conditions. The placement of the letter partially had the same effect, but not with the same strength as the presence of the workers themselves.

The goals are the ultimate ends of the project. They are the main concern why the project was developed but they do not need to be realistically attainable by it. The goals of both projects ultimately concern bigger issues than those at stake in each particular institution. The indiscriminate usage of non-paid labour performed by interns is not exclusive to the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, nor is the subcontracting happening only at the FRAC. We suggest that suppressing non-paid labour in art institutions was a goal for *Subsidy* and suppressing subcontracting, ensuring that all workers have equal rights inside the same institution, was a goal for *Médiation Culturelle*.

Taking into account all the data we have collected about the artworks, through direct participation, interviews with the participants in the projects and with the artist, publications, exhibition leaflets and informal communication with Schwebel, we have analysed both projects and propose a set of objectives we consider to be central to each of them. In *Subsidy* we have identified as objectives: (1) Raising awareness about the interns' working conditions and non-paid and undervalued labour in the arts sector. (2) Enabling discussion about the position of non-paid internships in contemporary art institutions. (3) Disrupting the institution's usual day-to-day functioning and exposing to visitors and other artists-in-residence a part of it that is usually hidden. (4) Symbolically paying the interns for their labour. (5) Exposing institutional hypocrisy between discourse and action.

⁶ See Pires, Catarina. "Is there no Art in here?" in *Subsidy*. Edited by Joshua Schwebel and Valeria Schulte-Fischedick. Archive Books, 2016.

Médiation Culturelle took place in a different context, as the collective exhibition *Human Resources* had already proposed to reflect about labour in its different dimensions. We single out as its objectives: (1) Proposing that the reflexion be not restricted to distant situations and that the institution's own processes be questioned, especially in the context of an exhibition problematizing labour. (2) Exposing institutional hypocrisy between discourse and action. (3) Promoting a greater power balance inside the institution during the leadership hiatus. (4) Giving visibility to the *médiatrices* and the conditions of their employment. (5) Changing the job title from *agent d'accueil* to *médiatrice*.

We can conclude that *Subsidy* achieved the proposed objectives: it was a disruptive project that caused an effect in both the interns and the institution. The discussions it allowed cannot be accurately measured but the feedback that we have received during and after the installation indicates that it enabled reflection and debate. The payment of the interns was intended as a symbolic gesture, a sharing of the exhibition budget by all of the seven interns that worked at Künstlerhaus during Schwebel's residence and not an actual salary. Although small, it made a difference to the interns, who otherwise would have received nothing. It also contributed as a temporary reminder to the management about the importance of their labour, which was transmitted to the interns. At the time of writing, non-paid internships are still a practice at Künstlerhaus Bethanien⁷ but *Subsidy* achieved concrete improvements for the interns, even if only temporary, and started a debate that can be further developed.

Médiation Culturelle encountered a different context and several obstacles. It certainly achieved internal reflection about the institution's way of operating but this was not enough to secure the desired power balance. It showed that, even though there was no director, all the workers were aware that there was going to be one in the future and this fact most likely conditioned their reaction. Instead of embracing a more political project there was a fear-driven response. The middle management presented several obstacles (giving suggestions on how to change the work, denying the desk relocation and stating that the changes in the official title would not be possible). Ultimately, one of the *médiatrices* expressed her concerns about being visible in the exhibition and openly criticizing the institution, a decision which culminated in the alteration of the whole project into a less radical one. The visibility that was intended to be given to the reception workers and their working conditions was therefore toned down. Nevertheless, the project has achieved one of its key objectives that was presented in the letter to the future director. In March 2018, two months after the end of the exhibition, the new director wrote to Schwebel and informed him that they have indeed changed the official title of the subcontracted workers from *agent d'accueil* to *médiatrice*. The work has also allowed for several long conversations and debates with the public to happen, making visible an aspect of the institutionalization of contemporary art that normally remains unrepresented to the exhibition public (Bechetoille, 2018).

⁷ <https://www.bethanien.de/bewerbung/>.

8. Conclusion

Artistic activist practices can take place inside or outside the art institution. Subversion, as a resistance strategy, operates inside the art institution. Our research has pointed out the possibility of achieving concrete transformations through subversive projects. By utilizing their privileged position of visibility in the context of exhibitions, artists can direct attention to several issues but, more than that, they can effectively bring about change.

In the case of Schwebel's work, by asserting that he will need the institution to take particular actions, the artist pressures it to perform those changes. If they decide otherwise, that would threaten the exhibitions' outcome and the institutions would be actually sabotaging themselves.

As Cieslak and Rasmus (2012, p. 1) point out, subversion is a way of contesting the existing status quo and eroding predominant cultural forces. Both projects highlight the discrepancy between the institutional discourse and actual practice. Hegemonic art institutions capitalize on having a progressive stance, although in reality most of them are still rooted in neo-liberal and corporate values. Exposing these inconsistencies debilitates the institutions, making them more open to transformation and becoming an arena where hegemony can be contested. The creation of dissensus is a key part of critical art (Mouffe, 2007) and it allows for the excluded to counter the position of invisibility that they occupy in the social order by confronting the dominant consensus. In the case of the presented projects, they enabled labour relations within these art institutions to become public, exposing aspects that institutions would prefer to have remained hidden.

Context plays a crucial role in artistic activism projects, especially in subversive ones, since the artist "infiltrates" the institution and responds to the situations that they encounter. Subversive action is often interpreted in different ways, either as exceptional or as a betrayal (Olsson, 2016, p. 41). In these projects, the institutions' management felt "betrayed" by the artist, although for the most part the workers thought they were relevant and meaningful, which points to a successful disruption of the otherwise peaceful institutional status quo. Künstlerhaus Bethanien's director Christoph Tannert showed disappointment for the artist's choice, claiming that such a project would tarnish the image of the institution, as if they were doing something illegal, and FRAC's exhibition coordinator expressed to the artist that the project caused breakdowns within the organization and that she could not see any political or emancipatory benefit in it. Workers in both projects were extremely precarious and resistance is usually especially difficult for them, as they are easily expendable. Initiating an artwork with the workers' participation allows for a collective resistance to take place without them being negatively perceived by the institution and possibly suffering a whole scope of negative consequences for criticizing the institution's labour practices.

This research points out the importance of artists starting subversive projects within artistic activism and using them as a resistance strategy. Thus, it is possible to challenge the institutions and bring counter-hegemony to the cultural arena (Foster, 1985). By being the initiators of these actions, artists can contribute to a true critique of capitalism that is not based only on representation but also reflects on art's conditions of production. This study also emphasizes the importance of adapting strategies and tactics to the specific contexts where these artworks are developed and exhibited to enhance the possibilities of social change.

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