

How to talk with birds, trees, fish,  
shells, snakes, bulls and lions

Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin / Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Invalidenstr. 50–51 / 10557 Berlin



16.11.18–12.5.19

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## Social Media: Practices of (In)Visibility in Contemporary Art

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Tags: [Contexts](#), [Journal](#)

Contexts / 23.09.2015

[Print](#)



*Reverse graffiti action organised by Ask! (Actie Schone Kunsten) at Nijverheidsweg, Utrecht, 2011. Photograph: Annette Krauss. Courtesy the artists and Casco, Utrecht*

Contemporary ‘social art practice’ aims to recompose art’s relationship to its social basis and organisational structures. In this it can be regarded as an expanded form of institutional critique, but something crucial changes in this process of expansion. In recent years, many artists have created organisations that are (at least partly) based in the art world and its institutional structures, but that are not *art organisations* or *art institutions* — not even alternative ones, in the sense of artist-run spaces. The result is a kind of generalised aesthetic practice that thrives on a pragmatic stretching of boundaries or on the exploitation of the increasing permeability of both institutions and social fields. Such aesthetic practice refuses to fit into the time-honoured opposition between, on the one hand, the avant-garde’s transgression of the boundaries of art and its attempts to merge art with life and, on the other, institutional critique’s insistence on operating immanently and critically within the institutional structures of art. Neither immanence nor transgression is quite its old self any more.

Another antinomy also needs to be questioned: that between social art practice and digital art or post-internet art.<sup>1</sup> To some extent this is a real divide — one of many in an increasingly fragmented artistic field — but it becomes problematic when both sides are turned into reified categories, with social art’s humanist and humanitarian focus being the polar opposite of digital art’s post-human visions. In its more cogent manifestations, ‘social’ art is rarely marked by a phobic rejection of technology, the hybrid, the cyborg. If its focus on meetings, seminars and all sorts of collective manifestations can be seen as a radicalisation of 1990s relational aesthetics, it is worth remembering that in his more lucid moments Nicolas Bourriaud rightly stressed that relational art’s models of sociability were profoundly informed by technological developments and involved ‘appropriating perceptual and behavioural habits brought on by the technical-industrial complex to turn them into *life possibilities*, to borrow Nietzsche’s term’.<sup>2</sup> Most of the practices under discussion here not only appropriate habits but also actual technologies, both old and new. Deploying various technologies of time and visibility, they attempt to (re)construct the social by taking aim at its concrete, sensate manifestations as well as its structural obscurities and obfuscations.

## 1. The Long March Through and Beyond Institutions

Ahmet Ögüt's *Bakunin's Barricade* (2014) is an installation made for the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven that realises and updates a proposal put forward by Mikhail Bakunin during the 1849 revolution in Dresden: take old masters' paintings from the museum and put them on the barricades to see if the Prussian commanders subscribe to the Romantic *Kunstreligion* to such an extent that artworks will prevent them from firing. In 1963, Guy Debord invoked Bakunin's proposal on the occasion of a fracas in Caracas, during which armed students took five paintings from an exhibition of French art to attempt an exchange for political prisoners; after the authorities recovered the paintings, the students tried to blow up the police van that stored them.<sup>3</sup> For Debord, they took a laudable step beyond Bakunin's scheme, pushing it in the direction of an all-out avant-garde attack on art. By contrast, Ögüt constructed a barricade inside the museum, with a few well-chosen works placed carefully on the wreckage. A contract stipulates that an institution that purchases *Bakunin's Barricade* has to be willing to lend the work to protesters who want to use it as an actual barricade outside the museum. This wilfully unrealistic provision hypothetically reverses the 'museification' of Bakunin's barricade, and foregrounds the problematic relation between different forms of practice — artistic and activist — while suggesting that the aesthetic crux of the matter may be in their uneasy conjunction.

Radicalising Ludwig Feuerbach's half-hearted critique of idealism and his 'practical turn', Karl Marx famously defined *praxis* as 'human sensuous activity', maintaining that '[all] social life is essentially practical. [...] The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.'<sup>4</sup> The first Young Hegelian who had given pride of place to this notion had been August von Cieszkowski, in 1838. Greatly admired by Debord, Cieszkowski argued that classical art and modern philosophy privilege being and thought, respectively; they were now to be followed by a higher synthesis that would subsume both being and thought under the *act*. As a synthesis of art and theory, the new culture of praxis would also be the realisation of both. Taking issue with Friedrich Schiller's *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), Cieszkowski maintained that classical antiquity could no longer serve as a model; Schiller's beauty was *factum*, not *actum*.<sup>5</sup> However, Schiller had in fact already claimed that the Greeks' mistake was that what they had pictured on Mount Olympus should have been realised on earth, thus at least hinting at the programme for an active realisation of aesthetics as practice.<sup>6</sup> It was left to Romantic socialists such as Charles Fourier — whom Cieszkowski considered to be a harbinger of the new era of the act, albeit in a still-utopian guise — and subsequently Marx to progressively politicise and 'activate' this form of aesthetic theory, transmuting it into a theory of praxis.<sup>7</sup>

Insofar as praxis or practice is 'human sensuous activity', the notion of *aesthetic* practice might strike one as a pleonasm. Marx's anti-idealist definition aimed to define human activity as transformative rather than reflective — not to fetishise the material and the sensuous along the lines of older materialisms. While aesthetic practice is distinct in that it *does* place a premium on sensate form, it ultimately sides with potentiality over actualisation. Aesthetic forms are openings, not enclosures; suggestions for possible forms of life. Jacques Rancière has encapsulated this in the dictum 'Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity'.<sup>8</sup> Sounds melancholy — but is it really? What if the aesthetic is precisely the domain where a 'politics of the sensible' can unfold that is not to be judged exclusively or even primarily by its degree of immediate social efficacy? Art is aesthetic to the extent that it questions and challenges the relative autonomy of art; aesthetic practice aspires to be both less and more than either art or activism. Movements that attempted to be both political and artistic avant-gardes have been inherently unstable; the Situationist International disintegrated into 'artistic' and 'political' factions. But the aesthetic is this oscillation between integration and disintegration. Aesthetic practice enacts and re-enacts the asymptotic rapprochement of art and activism, pointing towards a synthesis that will remain (partly) potential.

Debord was increasingly convinced that art in its institutional forms had to be destroyed in order to create a liberated and aesthetic life. This Debordian 'maximum programme' of total revolution and deinstitutionalisation was not even a failure, since it never came close to succeeding in the first place. How, then, to act within the tenacious social realities of specialisation and institutionalisation? In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), Jean-Paul Sartre famously placed institutions on the side of the *practico-inert*: they are the result of previous being and previous praxis, now congealed into reified structures and ossified protocols.<sup>9</sup> In 1967, when the Situationist-inspired German student leader Rudi Dutschke coined the phrase 'the long march through institutions', he was thinking of a process in which



Ahmet Öğüt, *Bakunin's Barricade*, 2014, mixed-media installation, including paintings by Marlene Dumas, El Lissitzky and Pablo Picasso. Installation view, 'Ahmet Öğüt: Forward!', Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2015. Photograph: Peter Cox. Courtesy the artist and Van Abbemuseum

revolutionaries undermine one institution after another from within.<sup>10</sup> As the revolutionary impetus of the late 1960s petered out, sociological accounts of practice as *immanent* to fields and institutions became dominant, and the concept of *habitus* became a mediator in the dialectic of practice and institution.<sup>11</sup> In institutional critique, avant-garde transgression was replaced by an equally problematic fetishisation of immanence, of critical loyalty to the institution.

In the early twenty-first century, the financialised art institution is less inert than ever. In many cases, an 'activist' managerial caste imposes 'market imperatives' on those who are told to 'get on with the programme'. This is the neoliberal version of the march through institutions. Rather than attempting to maintain an immanent critical practice in these 'liquefied' institutions, many today engage in the creation of *alter-institutional* and *para-institutional* organisations. Alter-institutional models range from 'transinstitutional organisations' — for instance, the confederation of European museums L'Internationale or the European institutional network Cluster — to what Marion von Osten has termed 'translocal organisations', which are locally embedded but networked internationally.<sup>12</sup> In her words, these entities defy 'the known boundaries between art practices as well as those between art practices and between institutions', creating 'relational work/life models that insist on other ways of doing culture'. Significantly, von Osten's examples of such organisations — *ruangrupa* in Jakarta and CAMP in Mumbai among them — come from regions outside the mainstream of art-world capital flows and institutional hypertrophy. Some spaces in the US and Europe can be assimilated to this model, or have knowingly and actively assimilated it: 16 Beaver in New York; MayDay Rooms in London; and Casco — Office for Art, Design and Theory in Utrecht (which is also a member of Cluster).<sup>13</sup> Again, these are not 'alternative art spaces' along traditional lines. They create social assemblages that can encompass artists, intellectuals and activists as well as groups that art institutions rarely consider 'target audiences', such as cleaners or refugees. These organisations also place a strong emphasis on pedagogic and alter-academic forms, from workshops, lectures and seminars to dinner conversations.

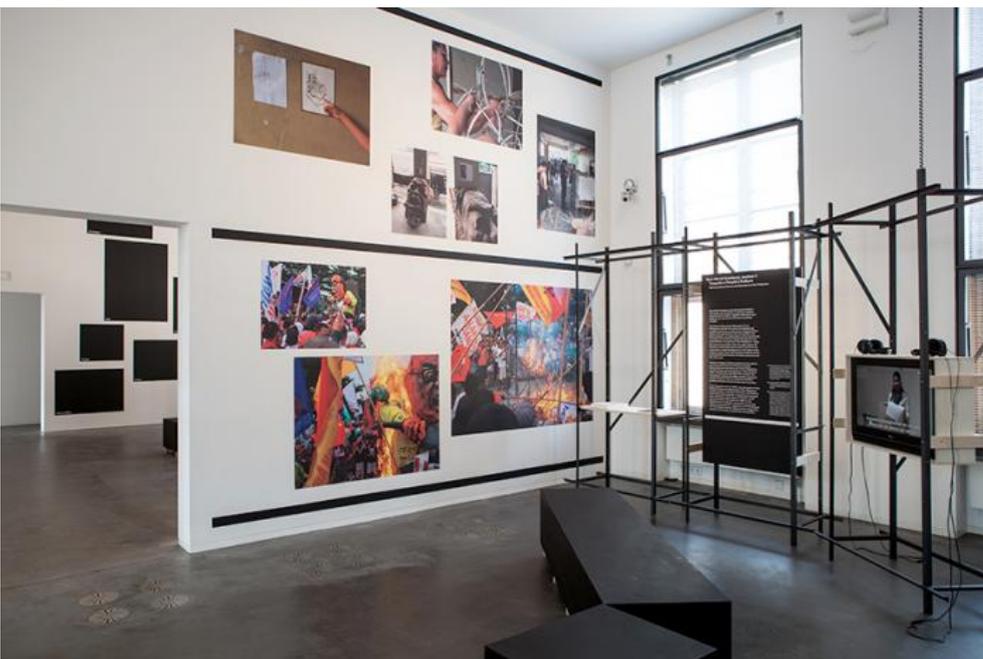
The organisations in question don't necessarily all have the same legal status. Some are foundations and may look like 'regular' art institutions on paper, yet are run differently, with more collective decision-making and input from various networks and communities. Para-institutional organisations such as Jonas Staal's New World Summit (NWS), Renzo Martens's Institute for Human Activities, Ahmet Öğüt's The Silent University, Tania Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International and Fernando García-Dory's Inland don't all share the same status either — some are informal organisations while others are (also) legal entities.<sup>14</sup> As the possessive form that I just used suggests, these organisations are often initiated by or identified with a single artist, though this is not always the case.<sup>15</sup> They are para-institutions in so far as they usually work in collaboration with more traditionally established institutions, even though these may



*Common cleaning exercise as part of 'Site for Unlearning (Art Organization)', a project by Annette Krauss and Casco staff, 2014–ongoing. Photograph: Annette Krauss. Courtesy the artists and Casco, Utrecht*

themselves be pursuing an alter-institutional practice. Still, in entering into alliances with art institutions, they run the risk of relapsing into a purely strategic and pragmatic approach to the frameworks in which they operate.

Alter- and para-institutional practices are not so much two clearly opposed models as a fractured continuum of approaches. Throughout, pedagogy plays a crucial role — from the seminars at 16 Beaver and MayDay Rooms to Annette Krauss's 'unlearning' exercises with the Casco team, whose deconstruction of work and behavioural habits blends a feminist critique of the division of labour with a postcolonial project of 'unlearning privilege'.<sup>16</sup> Among the artist-run para-institutional academies and universities, Ögüt's The Silent University presents itself as 'an autonomous knowledge exchange platform by refugees, asylum seekers and migrants'.<sup>17</sup> It operates in different locales, where it is hosted by various institutions — mostly art spaces. By contrast, the We Are Here Academy, which is run by artists, academics and activists such as Elke Uitenhuis and Ernst van den Hemel in Amsterdam, holds its courses for the harassed 'illegal' immigrants of the We Are Here group in university lecture halls, thus underlining the right to have access to education.



*Installation view, 'New World Academy', 2015, Centraal Museum Utrecht. Pictured in the foreground is documentation*

*of effigy-making workshops organised by the UGATLahi Artist Collective in Manila as part of the cultural work of the National Democratic Movement of the Philippines. Photograph: Ernie Buts. Courtesy Studio Jonas Staal; BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht; and Centraal Museum Utrecht*

One of the instalments of the New World Academy (NWA) has also been dedicated to We Are Here.<sup>18</sup> Organised by Staal's NWS with BAK in Utrecht, the NWA collaborates with a variety of national or trans-/post-national emancipation and liberation movements, such as the Tuareg of Azawad or the Kurdish Women's Movement in Syria. Following Upton Sinclair's pro-Soviet exhortation to the revolutionary artist to 'make a world', Staal inscribes his practice in an avant-garde lineage marked by attempts to fully actualise the political potential of the aesthetic by fusing art and activism — from Soviet Productivism to Joseph Beuys.<sup>19</sup> However, in Staal's neo-neo-neo-avant-gardism, attempted synthesis has given way to assemblage not just on the level of ideology (with the NWS and NWA hosting all kinds of groups that are 'united' mostly in their negation of the neoliberal empire) but also on the level of form.

When Staal institutionally frames and highlights practices such as the use of effigies by the National Democratic Movement of the Philippines or the role of murals and monuments in the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, he fills in a somewhat schematic and procedural 'expanded notion of art' with content that appears to substantiate it, but that does not always harmonise perfectly with the Staal script. Unfortunately, this did not really shine through in the 'New World Academy' exhibition at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, which presented the NWA's five sessions to date in carefully edited versions that obscured any clashes between the conceptual grid and productive logic of Staal's practice and some of the participants' agendas. The show glossed over the vagaries of exchange and co-production in favour of a clarity of presentation that shaded into quasi-corporate branding.<sup>20</sup>

This educational turn in art occurs at a time when higher education is clearly in a profound and systemic crisis.<sup>21</sup> The closure of the philosophy department at Middlesex University and the ramping up of tuition fees in 2010 marked the beginning of a new age in the UK, and across Europe. The ensuing prospect of life-long student debt was an impetus behind the Occupy movement that would gain momentum in 2011. The symptoms of such institutional turmoil have repeatedly burst to the surface in the years since — very recently at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), for instance, with concurrent actions at universities elsewhere. After an earlier occupation at VU University in Amsterdam, the headquarters of the UvA, the Maagdenhuis, were occupied, or 're-appropriated', in March and April 2015 in protest against extreme cutbacks in the humanities and the transformation of the university into a corporate entity that sells off locations that happen to be desirable real estate.<sup>22</sup> The occupiers in fact turned the location into a far more public forum than it usually is — organising a daily programme that featured guest speakers such as Rancière and David Graeber, discussions on the financialisation of the university, calls for the UvA to divest its Shell stock and appearances by Staal and the We Are Here group.<sup>23</sup>

*While there is no guarantee that film or radio or the internet 'desire' a certain post-capitalist reappropriation, neither is their current use 'natural' and devoid of contradictions to be explored — and perhaps exploded.* On the night of 10 April, some of the occupiers contacted the Van Abbemuseum to request that Ögüt's barricade be loaned out to them, but the storming of the Maagdenhuis by riot police the next morning let the museum off the hook. Beyond this missed encounter between the museum and the occupied university, the occupation itself was a form of aesthetic practice. Whether in an artistic or academic context, the new pedagogy is a response to the separation between education and the residually common world of sensate life.<sup>24</sup> As Staal has put it, 'the students and teachers are *performing* the university they always desired. And they created a structure of direct-democracy and self-governance that creates a space, an *imaginary*, that allows them to articulate and enact these desires.'<sup>25</sup> It could be argued that the Maagdenhuis occupation was successful mostly in the here and now, rather than as a significant step towards achieving a political goal. As the immediate but ephemeral realisation of the goal, it revealed a potential that would soon be curtailed.

## 2. Dealing with Aliens

In an age in which more and more universities are offering online courses and degrees, many of these practices evince a tendency towards seemingly 'unmediated' gatherings during which people share a physical space and a certain amount of time. Triggered by very specific needs — and, in some cases, emergencies — projects such as The Silent University, the We Are Here Academy and the Maagdenhuis occupiers' programme insist that gathering people and creating groups and processes of co-creation and



*The refugee collective We Are Here in 'The Church of Refugees', a squatted church in Amsterdam, 2012. Photograph: Manette van Ingenereen. Courtesy Studio Jonas Staal; BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht; and Centraal Museum Utrecht*

co-individuation is essential if education is to be emancipatory — an education that could lay claim to being an aesthetic education in the most profound sense. When the participants are homeless or 'illegal', spending a few hours in a safe and warm space obviously becomes all the more important.

However, it would be a serious mistake to regard the endeavours under discussion here as so many primitivist refusals of mediation. It is clear that the senses and the activity in Marx's 'human sensuous activity' can never be *purely* human; to be human is to be always already mediated and alienated. As the media theory collective Bilwet (aka ADILKNO, the Foundation for the Advancement of Illegal Knowledge) put it in the 1990s: 'media = the human + the alien'.<sup>26</sup> Media alienate; it's what they do. They exteriorise. But in doing so, they also humanise; they propel individuation.<sup>27</sup> Marxist theory has long had a complex relationship with this alienation device: traditionally, overcoming alienation has been its core business, and it has often failed to differentiate between alienation as a fundamental factor in any form of individuation and socialisation, on the one hand, and undesirable social structures and institutions, on the other. Marx has of course been lambasted by postmodern and post-humanist sophisticates for positing a 'human essence' that needs to be regained by overcoming alienation, but one does not have to believe in a timeless human essence to differentiate between degrees and kinds of alienation, and to reject torture or slavery.

Suggesting the outline of a possible media materialism, Marx ascribed enormous agency to the printing press, as well as to gunpowder and the compass, but such remarks were brief moments in the enormous breadth of his work.<sup>28</sup> It was not until the 1930s that things started to change, with Bertolt Brecht's essay on radio (which, he explained, should go from capitalist one-way communication to two-way communication) and Walter Benjamin's argument that media was being used 'improperly' by capitalism (Hollywood) and just waiting to be liberated and used in a socially radical and democratic manner (Dziga Vertov, Soviet newspapers allowing readers to write, etc.).<sup>29</sup> In opposing technological determinism, Brecht and Benjamin introduced a different kind of teleology: new media seemingly desired and demanded to be used in an anti-capitalist manner.<sup>30</sup>

'Media', in Marxist theory from the 1930s to the 1960s, went under names like 'cultural apparatus', 'culture industry' and 'communications'. This had started to change by the time that Hans Magnus Enzensberger updated Brecht and Benjamin with his 'Constituents for a Theory of the Media' (1970); he argues that television really demanded a multidirectional approach, which the capitalist distinction between corporate sender and receiver-consumer could not deliver.<sup>31</sup> Outside the realm of orthodox-ish Marxism, even Félix Guattari's writings on radio and on 'post-media' from the 1970s and 80s largely follow the same logic: technological development would lead beyond capitalist media curtailment and inaugurate 'a post-media era of collective-individual reappropriation and an interactive use of machines of



complex.



*Gulf Labor / Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) action at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 29 March 2014. Courtesy Gulf Labor*

As alienation devices, *media* and *institutions* are different faces of the same logic. In the case of media, the alienation device is identified first and foremost with a certain material or technological basis; for institutions, it is identified with social and legal structures and conventions. However, media clearly have an institutional basis, as the tussles over net neutrality and internet surveillance and censorship remind us; on the other hand, classical art institutions have become nodes in a global communications network.<sup>34</sup> Most of the projects and activities under discussion here acknowledge and exploit the fact that we are necessarily dealing with a dialectic of embodiment and disembodiment, of subjectivation and alienation, of old space and new media — and that such oppositions are far from stable, as physical space is transformed through new media, as speakers are being beamed in, and as conversations take place simultaneously in the room and on social media. At Occupy Wall Street, a seemingly primitivist tactic like the use of the ‘human microphone’ in lieu of megaphones or sound systems only makes mediation more tangible, more profoundly embodied. If the original use of this device by Occupy New York was occasioned by the fact that a police permit is needed to use amplified sound in New York, such legal factors did not appear to play any role at the Maagdenhuis in Amsterdam. Why, then, use it? Was it merely a matter of ‘playing Occupy’? The clue is in the phrase *human microphone* itself: the subject becomes the medium and becomes part of an emancipatory movement through quasi-mechanical repetition.

That the Maagdenhuis occupiers used online television to live-stream certain debates complements rather than contradicts the human microphone. The aim, ultimately, is to ‘socialise’ media in different ways — acknowledging that the social is always mediated to begin with, but recalibrating our machinic entanglements. This is not a matter of voluntarist decrees that things be done differently; rather, it is the development of socio-technological practices with effects and uses that are subject to ongoing debate and feedback. A good example is Staal’s *Ideological Guide to the Venice Biennale* (2013), an app developed in collaboration with a number of researchers and designers, which added layers of contextual information and critique to the event’s various pavilions.<sup>35</sup> The MayDay Rooms in London have appeared more classical in their focus on the nexus of radical practice and print culture, and in particular on material archives and communal gatherings; however, digitisation of archival materials is very much part of their project, which aspires ‘to activate and socialise this material in a number of linked processes — primarily collaborative education, digitisation and online distribution’.<sup>36</sup> The physical ‘rooms’, then, are overlaid with a different kind of networked space and (potential) sociability.



Hito Steyerl, *How Not To Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013, HD video, colour, sound, 14min, stills. Courtesy the artist

To be sure, the contradictions under which we all labour can never be fully mastered; it is a matter of treating the contradictions themselves as working materials. Using ‘actually existing’ social media such as Facebook can come in rather handy when protests or meetings have to be organised at short notice, but at the same time we are pragmatically accepting the ways in which Facebook mines its users for data and uses them as unpaid workers producing value.<sup>37</sup> Sometimes the contradictions become overbearing. In 2012, the Institute for Human Activities (IHA) — also supported by the Van Abbemuseum — beamed in Richard Florida via Skype to speak on gentrification during its first conference in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, still using a fatal strategy of over-identification with dominant ideology in a way that seems designed to be an art-world talking point. Let’s pretend that we can gentrify the DRC through one artist’s project, dressed up as an ‘institute’; let’s criticise Unilever’s palm oil business while having our project sponsored by Barry Callebaut, a chocolate company that isn’t exactly known for its ethical stance. In lieu of translocal exchange, the Congolese plantation workers with whom Martens collaborates disappear behind rather vague narratives and the presence of chocolate techno-fetishes, with little or no insight being given into their actual lives or the viability of the IHA for their practice rather than Martens’s. The stated goal of improving their lives by exhibiting and selling 3D-printed chocolate replicas of their sculptures, redirecting profits back to the artists, seems like a plot twist in a discursive strategy. Like some randy meme, Martens will infiltrate conversations at art-world openings. This isn’t working with contradictions (between the political and the aesthetic, between art and activism, between ironic affirmation and genuine social engagement); this is glossing over them with alarming insouciance.

With printing technology playing a central role, the project at least acknowledges — without truly addressing — that labour is increasingly non-human. Marx’s notion of technology as ‘dead labour’ seems inadequate now that work is a complex human-machine assemblage and 3D printers spew out chocolate sculptures designed half a world away. Putting a new spin on the Marxian ‘media as practice’ motif, Alexander Galloway has argued that the computer ‘instantiates a practice, not a presence’, and should not be defined as an object but as a process, or ‘a set of executions or actions in relation to a world’.<sup>38</sup> Here, then, practice is no longer human sensuous activity but the practice of the technology, of the medium. But what about human labour in this situation, in which the value of work is up for grabs (and is usually being grabbed not by the worker but by others)? Workers may produce value less through their ‘official’ jobs and more through the debts they amass (their mortgages can be repackaged and resold). The extraction of value has become intensified and dispersed to such an extent that nobody keeps count.

If time is the ultimate medium of contemporary art, it is because of this. Temporal constraints keep apart but also potentially bring together apparently disparate contingents: students, precarious artists, academics turned flex workers, domestic workers making long hours in the ‘shadow economy’ without any fixed minimum wage, illegals who have to keep walking all day long because ‘loitering’ on the street will immediately make them uncomfortably visible to the law. Articulating shared time as a *social medium* is both highly necessary and fiendishly difficult. Temporal synchronisation will often be a moment in what overall amounts to syncopation. The regular social media may pull the participants in different directions,



Hito Steyerl, *How Not To Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013, HD video, colour, sound, 14min, stills. Courtesy the artist

and there may be institutional pressure to produce something quickly rather than to spend a lot of precious time on invisible processes of co-individuation that cannot be converted instantly into publicity.

### 3. Invisible Information

Perhaps the key problem of the IHA is that the exhibition of chocolate sculptures and the relegation of their makers to an intriguing state of semi-obscure ultimately seems designed to boost Martens's visibility to ever greater heights. If being visible is an socioeconomic imperative that all individuals and institutions have to contend with in the Facebook economy, visual tropes also dominate contemporary discourse on human rights and exploitation. *Invisible: Britain's Migrant Sex Workers* (2013) is a characteristic recent book title, while in Germany this summer the Zentrum für Politische Schönheit (Center for Political Beauty) used its shock tactics to 'restore visibility' to the people who have died trying to cross Europe's borders.<sup>39</sup> Many of the practices referred to here employ this discourse and develop strategies to increase the visibility of those that are invisible because they are 'illegal' or at least have no political representation: migrants, rejected but 'undeportable' asylum seekers, cleaners and domestic workers. They exist outside of what remains of the public realm.

As opposed to the *visual*, which comes with connotations of richness and depth, the *visible* appears to be a brute state of facticity: it is *visual art*, not *visible art*. As Georges Didi-Huberman has stressed, *le visible* is always halfway towards *le lisible*.<sup>40</sup> The visible is legible, or proto-legible. It is the world of the cliché, of iconology, of semiotics, of the code. Visibility is degraded visibility. However, in rejecting modernist notions of visibility (the abstract image as pure form, as opticality), institutional critique has in fact refocused on visibility: making visible the activities of sponsors, the institution's implication in the wider political economy and the ruling ideology and so on. With an artist such as Hans Haacke, visibility becomes the new visibility; that is, the articulation of hidden structures and networks in forms that merge the starkness and bluntness of visibility with the complexity of the visual. Today, projects such as Gulf Labor and its campaign to pressure the Guggenheim into improving the working conditions of the migrant workers building its franchise in Abu Dhabi, Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International and numerous other coalitions of artists, intellectuals and immigrants are refocussing the issue of visibility onto those that exist below the threshold of legality.

In a lecture titled 'How to Be Seen' (2015), Saskia Sassen addressed just this kind of social and political invisibility, stressing how in the US the long-term unemployed disappear off the grid. But while decent, hard-working citizens may feel free to ignore the 'spaces of the expelled', their own status as citizens is less secure than ever; to be a citizen now is first and foremost to be a suspect<sup>41</sup> — guilty until proven innocent. Civil rights and human rights are now like e-book licenses: they can be revoked. Your rights can disappear like a text from your Kindle. The citizen, then, is permanently seen, though not necessarily by human eyes. Hence, 'more visibility' is not always the solution. The very name of The Invisible Committee, the anonymous collective that authored the influential pamphlet *The Coming Insurrection* (2007), suggests that radical praxis involves opaque operations, and it is telling that the title of Sassen's lecture was the

(unwitting) negation of the negation in the title of Hito Steyerl's video *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), itself an imaginative exploration of ways of becoming invisible.

Staal's 2015 'New World Academy' exhibition articulated this contradiction beautifully. Although the administrative-corporate design employed by Staal perhaps fell short of his practice's vaunted historical models, it allowed for some incisive gestures. The section of the exhibition dedicated to We Are Here combined quotations by its members and supporters stressing the importance of creating visibility with a grid of photographs showing their public actions; the similar wall grid in the space dedicated to the Pirate Party consisted of nothing but black squares and rectangles inscribed with the names of different algorithms used to encrypt digital image files as well as all other data.

There are different but related 'invisibilities' at play here: technological, economic, social and political. At one point, Steyerl's *How Not To Be Seen* presents a scenario in which 'happy pixels hop off into low resolution'. For all their incompatibilities, what unites these various organisations and alter-institutional structures is that they bring together people who cannot or will not become such happy pixels. Invisible algorithmic operations discriminate those who are socially invisible from those who are full citizens and subjects. But the latter are made suspect in turn, seen not just by those who click on their Facebook profiles and YouTube videos, but also by unseeing eyes: by bots and programmes looking for patterns, converting their data and metadata into valuable information. Data has no form; it is raw material that needs to be *in-formed*.<sup>42</sup> This presents the National Security Agencies (NSA) of this world with challenges just as much as artists or activists. Artists such as Trevor Paglen or James Bridle attempt to lift the politically ordained invisibility of NSA sites or detention centres through high-end photography or digital renderings, while the various organisations and alter-institutional structures under discussion here often push mediation to the point of social embodiment and enactment.

If data needs to be informed, information in turn only becomes really meaningful when it is performed. When an artist-activist group uses Andreas Siekmann's schematic renderings of domestic workers to spray-clean 'negative graffiti' onto public walls, the action is about making visible the invisible, but also about the group's self-constitution — however faltering and halting it may be.<sup>43</sup> In general, when the various alter-academies and universities convene, the aim is of course to provide 'access to information', but more particularly to materialise and enact information through the participants' embodied experience and skills. When the protesting students in Amsterdam insisted on conjoining their struggle with that of rejected asylum seekers, against protest from those who thought it unwise to 'cloud the issue', they created a living, social diagram. Socialising media so as to produce diagrams of movement, of flight — these practices link up disparate forms of life without glossing over the contradictions that enable and undermine them.

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## Footnotes

## Comments

1. See <http://thesilentuniversity.org> (last accessed on 20 May 2015).<sup>↑</sup>
2. See <https://www.facebook.com/wearehereacademy> (last accessed on 20 May 2015).<sup>↑</sup>
3. In Bernard Stiegler's parlance, they are 'pharmaka'. See, for instance, B. Stiegler, 'Relational Ecology and the Digital *Pharmakon*', *Culture Machine*, no.13, 2012, pp.1–19, available at <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/464>, (last accessed on 20 May 2015).<sup>↑</sup>
4. K. Marx, 'Division of Labour and Mechanical Workshop. Tool and Machinery', *Economic Manuscripts of 1861–63, (Part 3) Relative Surplus Value*, available at <https://marxists.anu.edu.au/archive/marx/works/1861/economic/ch35.htm> (last accessed on 20 May 2015).<sup>↑</sup>
5. See Bertolt Brecht, 'The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication' (1932), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (ed. and trans. John Willet), New York: Hill & Wang, 1964, pp.51–52; and Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), *Illuminations* (ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn), London: Pimlico, 1999,

pp.211–44.↑

6. See Jean Baudrillard's critique of Benjamin, Brecht and Enzensberger in J. Baudrillard, 'Requiem for the Media' (1971), *Utopia Deferred: Writings for Utopie (1967–1978)* (trans. Stuart Kendall), New York: Semiotext(e), 2006, pp.70–93.↑
7. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media', *New Left Review*, no.64, 1970, pp.13–36.↑
8. Félix Guattari, 'Towards a Post-Media Era' (1990, trans. Alya Sebtî and Clemens Apprich), *Mute* [online journal], 1 February 2012, available at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/lab/towards-post-media-era> (last accessed on 20 May 2015). See also F. Guattari, 'Popular Free Radio' (1978, trans. David Sweet), in Neil Strauss and Dave Mandl (ed.), *Radiotext(e)*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1993, pp.85–86.↑
9. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp.163–64.↑
10. The latter point is made in André Rottmann, 'Displacing the Site: John Knight and the Museum as Modulation', in *John Knight* (exh. cat.), New York: Greene Naftali, 2011, p.20.↑
11. See Sven Lütticken, 'Earth Art and World History', *e-flux journal* [online journal], no.49, November 2013, available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/world-history-and-earth-art/> (last accessed on 20 May 2015).↑
12. See <http://maydayrooms.org/about/> (last accessed on 20 May 2015).↑
13. See, for instance, <http://wagesforfacebook.com> (last accessed on 20 May 2015). Jonas Staal et al., *Ideological Guide to the Venice Biennale, 2013*. Courtesy Studio Jonas Staal↑
14. Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, London and Malden, MA: Polity, 2012, pp.22–23.↑
15. See Hsiao-Hung Pai, *Invisible: Britain's Migrant Sex Workers*, London: Westbourne Press, 2013.↑
16. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (1990, trans. John Goodman), University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, pp.11–17.↑
17. Up to this point in this paragraph, I quote and paraphrase from Saskia Sassen, 'How to Become Visible', lecture at Tivoli Vredenburg, Utrecht in the context of the project 'Hacking Habitat — Art of Control', 9 April 2015.↑
18. See A.R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, *op. cit.*, pp.81–83. See also Vilém Flusser, 'Form and Material', *The Shape of Things: A History of Design*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, pp.22–29.↑
19. I refer here to Actie Schone Kunsten, or ASK!, a group formed in the context of Casco's *Grand Domestic Revolution* project. See <http://actiesk.tumblr.com> (last accessed on 20 May 2015). ASK! proved unsustainable without this institutional context and backing, effectively making it an institutional project.↑