

Art Struggles: Confronting Internships and Unpaid Labour in Contemporary Art

Panos Kompatsiaris

National Research University, Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia,
panoskomp@gmail.com

Abstract: This article explores the practices of recently formed and mainly UK-based art workers' collectives against unpaid internships and abusive work. The modes through which these collectives perform resistance involve activist tactics of boycotting, site-specific protests, counter-guides, and whistleblowing and name and shame approaches mixed with performance art and playful interventions. Grappling with the predicaments of work in contemporary art, a labouring practice that does not follow typical processes of valorization and has a contingent object and an extremely loose territorial unity, this article argues that while the identity of the contemporary artist is systemically and conceptually moving towards fluidity and open-endedness, these groups work to re-affirm a collective in whose name it is possible to advance certain claims, assumptions, and demands. The contradictions and dynamics of art workers organizing against internships and voluntary work within a highly individualized, self-exploitative, and often privileged field are useful for informing labour organizing in the framework of ongoing capitalist restructuring.

Keywords: art labour, contemporary art, internships, art activism, the labour turn

Acknowledgement: I am grateful to the editors of this issue as well as to the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments and suggestions.

Art Monthly's September 2012 issue appeared with an unusual front cover. The widely-read and well-established contemporary art magazine in Britain, not exactly famous for an explicitly activist orientation, encouraged workers in the art world to "bust" their bosses with questions such as the following: "When shall we agree [to] the terms of the contract? What is the compensation fee if the work gets cancelled? What is the maternity/paternity pension provision?" What *Art Monthly* termed "the Occupy effect" on contemporary art, citing an article by Maja and Reuben Fowkes in the same issue, was the cause of this unusual urging. The Occupy effect triggered the formation of an array of groups and artist-activist collectives emerging in relation to and from within recent social movements. Groups such as OWS Arts & Labor, a working group "dedicated to exposing and rectifying economic inequalities and exploitative working conditions" (2011), or Occupy Museums, wishing to free up "a space of dialogue and fearlessness for the 99%" (2011), were key for popularizing an anti-neoliberal structure of feeling across the art world. Following the Occupy movement, these groups demarcate a dividing line between the 'privileged'—the few high profile artists, collectors, gallerists, and curators—and the 'exploited,' the invisible mass of art workers on whose labour the art system depends (what Gregory Sholette terms "creative dark matter" [2010]).

A critical aspect of this revolting tendency taking place in the field of contemporary art is protest against unpaid and abusive internships.¹ Departing from this assumption, the aim of

¹ An internship in contemporary art refers to a broad spectrum of training positions offered in museums, galleries and biennials where art workers, usually employed full-time and for an prearranged period of time, perform diverse duties (from guarding the artworks and handling social media to writing reports and funding applications) in order to develop their professional careers. In contrast to volunteering positions that tend to emphasize the volunteer's contribution to a "higher cause" (e.g., the social role of the host organization in the case of an NGO), internships put more emphasis, at least in theory, on coaching the practitioner in exchange of the latter's commitment to regular work for free or very low payment. While in this sense internships are closer to apprenticeships, they differ from the latter in that they do not offer official qualifications or professional licenses (as apprenticeships often do), while they usually last for a shorter period of time than apprenticeships (e.g., some months). This article seeks

this article is threefold. First, I argue that the movement against internships is key not only for launching a rights-based campaign, but also for shaping a renewed class awareness in the art world within a neo-Marxist theoretical framework. The anti-volunteering rhetoric, unravelled through campaigns, protests, and the spread of counter-information, expands art resistance beyond the ways that artworks represent political questions, topics and concerns. According to the collectives that I will discuss, whose origins can be tracked back to artists' experimentation with unionizing in the 1960s and '70s (Art Workers Coalition, for example), artworks disclose themselves in museums, galleries, fairs and biennials by concealing often abusive relations of production. In the recent anti-internship mobilizations there is thus an apparent combination of Marxist ideology critique, gesturing at "revealing" the hidden relations of production that lie beneath the spectacular display of objects, and the deployment of an anarchist ethos based on self-organization, self-management, and horizontality in decision-making.

Second, I argue that the movement against abusive internships, as a demands-based movement, temporarily crystallizes a worker identity in relation to the contemporary artist. The classic idea of union activism implies a group of people sharing a labour identity that is invoked in order to foreground collective demands. Traditionally, this identity could be either affirmed through a medium-specific application of a skill, some sort of territorial unity or a combination of both. This technical or territorial unity is what regularly affirms a group of professionals as a collective of workers, a collective having the capacity to advance its demands to a higher form of authority that controls or benefits from their labour—the employer. In contrast to this unity, as I describe in the second section of this article, the qualities of artistic work thwart what we commonly accept as worker identity. Work in contemporary art does not follow standard measures of valorization, has a contingent object, has an extremely loose spatial aggregation, and the distinction between workers and employers is less clear-cut than in other professional sectors (Moore 2014).

I should note that not all interns working in galleries and other art institutions describe themselves as "artists," and that there is an obvious disconnection between what is considered as artistic work "proper"—namely creative, improvisational, and experimental doings—and intern work, which usually involves more standardized activities, related to administration, guard duties, or guided tours. Rather than seeing how these different types of labour inhabit the figure of the artist today, what interests me in this article is how the artistic-activist ethos that the anti-volunteering campaigns nurture momentarily fixes an art worker identity (and indeed a militant one), an identity that is otherwise difficult to conceptualize and theoretically support (Bryan-Wilson 2012, 46).

Finally, in the last section of the article, I discuss identitarian claims in relation to larger processes and conceptions of social transformation. From a certain perspective, the movement against internships can be seen as regressive as it threatens to reify the capitalist division of labour by reinstating a worker's identity, rather than abolishing it altogether (i.e., from the perspective of the theory of communization) or accelerating its dissolution. I would argue, however, that in the anti-volunteering struggles there is neither a straightforward and unproblematic affirmation nor negation of artistic identity. By deploying a blend of performative, ethical, affective, and legalistic language, moving in and across disciplines and orientations, the artistic-activist groups tend to both affirm and negate dominant conceptions of what it means to be an artist today (a conception determined to a large extent by market forces, or through the system of authorship and ownership rights). Anti-volunteering activists affirm an artistic identity insofar as they make demands as art workers and negate it by remaining anonymous and seeking to connect with larger social struggles that exceed the capitalist division of labour. In this regard, the aim of this article is neither to advocate a programmatic affirmation of artistic identity nor its abolishment, but rather to illustrate how a structurally challenged notion of artistic identity comes to be reinstated by anti-internship campaigns as a militant one, un-

less to compare internships in opposition to other similar placements than to explore how the anti-internship rhetoric, growing during this period and emerging from within wider social movements, underscores the structural affinities of internships with new forms of capital accumulation as well as reactivates the ambivalent category of the art worker (or of the artist as worker) as a militant-left wing one.

derscoring the value of strategic organizing and tactics in developing forms of anti-capitalist constituent power (Toscano 2011).

The debate on the unfairness of unpaid internships has in recent years reached mainstream European institutions. When asked whether an unpaid internship is a form of exploitation, the Social Democrat politician Martin Schultz, candidate for president of the EU in the recent European elections, replied that “unpaid internships are one of the biggest problems that we have,” admitting that, indeed, “this is a modern style of exploitation.”² In the UK, the MPs in the House of Commons recently voted with a remarkable 181 to 19 for a proposal to ban unpaid internships. The Labour Party declared that if it won the general election in 2015 it would ban unpaid internships lasting more than four weeks, while even the Conservative MP Alec Shelbrooke stated that unpaid internships are socially harmful, an “impediment to social mobility” (BBC 2014). Among other organizations, Intern Aware was founded in 2010 in the UK to address internships from a wide range of professions, assisting interns in understanding their rights and claiming wages owed by appealing to the law and undertaking legal procedures. A similar legal framework as a means to combat free internships is invoked by ArtQuest, an arts organization whose paper *Intern Culture* (2012) reviews policy documents and reports providing practical guidelines to current and future interns on their rights and responsibilities.

The activities of the art worker groups I focus on differ from the above-mentioned, more mainstream organizations in certain respects. Groups such as the UK-based Precarious Workers Brigade and Future Interns, the US-based Occupy Museums and W.A.G.E., and the international ArtLeaks employ a language that is not primarily legalistic, but a hybrid, blending vocabularies related to law, ethics, irony, and performance art.³ Their vocabularies transcend the critique of internships, moving towards a wider critique of current social, political, and economic relations. The modes in which they perform this form of institutional critique involve classic activist tactics of boycotting, site-specific protests, pressure groups counter-guides, whistleblowing, and name and shame approaches mixed with performance art and playful interventions. By articulating the multifaceted state of art work as a state of exploitation, these groups perform a sense of unity and renewed class awareness, hailing a temporary worker identity in a field where work is imbued with the promise of emotional fulfilment and desiring investments.

Over the past four years I developed a sustained engagement with discourses around contemporary art and labour and with the sites where resistance against internships manifest. I treat the material I present—mainly collected through face-to-face discussions, social media, blog posts, and scholarly publications—as indicative of the ways that the labour turn is performed in the past decade (Dimitrakaki 2011), and especially since the eruption of the 2008 global crisis, in and around contemporary art. In this way, I attempt to map the rise of contemporary art labour activism as a “discursive field” (Foucault 2012), which although heterogeneous and diverse, suggests alternative ways to think and talk about the subject and, as such, can potentially be mobilized in the context of general social antagonism. The political articulations within this field possess a hybrid character in the sense that they incorporate a language derived from Marxist theory, law, and legality as well as performance art. I emphasize how in the recent artistic-activist performances the ethical is performed alongside the affective, seeking to activate discourses concerning what should be the “moral,” the “right,” or the “responsible” in addressing internships and unpaid labour. The mobilization of ethical frameworks as a means to advance political articulations is often regarded as a problematic, if not a post-political way of practicing politics (e.g., Swyngedouw 2010). Without losing sight of this critique, I argue here that the strategic use of ethics and morality fused together with

² The phrase can be heard after 09:05 at the following link <http://www.debatingeurope.eu/2014/04/28/big-crunch-presidential-debate/#.U2NxN1fn2z5>.

³ This emerging militancy is manifested in the formation of an array of collectives emphasizing larger structural relations between contemporary art and exploitative labour. An example is the group Gulf Labor Coalition, based in the US, whose focus is on the exploitative labour conditions in the construction of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, and the Sheikh Zayed National Museum (which is built in collaboration with the British Museum).

affective utterances and larger ideas on power and resistance can be employed as vehicles towards a more profound class consciousness amongst the oppressed and the exploited. The contradictions and dynamics of art workers organizing against internships and voluntary work within a highly individualized, self-exploitative, and often privileged field are thus helpful for thinking through general constellations of labour organizing in the framework of recent capitalist restructuring.

1. Contemporary Art Labour and the Art Worker

Contemporary art has a paradoxical character: It is a specific creative discipline that arrogates itself to the status of representing creativity in general [...] contemporary art as opposed to every other type of creative labour (music, film, acting, graphic design, cake decoration) has no specific medium—that is to say no specific form of labour—attached to it [...]

Ben Davis, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (2013, 32)

Internships and similar short-term placements are considered to be a stage in an artist's development and, increasingly, an inevitable one, representing opportunities for network-building and hands-on experience within art institutions. In such placements, artists normally perform mostly standardized and repetitive work, ranging from administration and planning to guarding and installing artworks. This kind of work, in its many variations and forms, seems indispensable for raising the exposure and value of artistic objects and careers. Besides, it is now commonplace in discussions around contemporary art and its economies to regard the value of the artworks less as the outcome of a particular technique applied to certain palpable media (say, the canvas of a painter or the marble of a sculptor) and more as having to do with processes of social interaction taking place around and about objects, performances, or events (Roberts 2007; Shukaitis 2012; Gielen 2009; Helguera 2013). So, while the production of art objects still constitutes the primary target area of the art market and the academy, the valuation of these objects is mainly enacted in and through processes of socialization such as networking, self-branding, public relations, or even idle chatting (Gielen 2009). In the past decade, contemporary artists and theorists mobilized Marxist and neo-Marxist vocabularies to underscore this complex nature of artistic labour, its deep interrelation with neoliberal work models, but also its latent subversive potential (Gielen 2009; Shukaitis 2012; Noys 2013; see Graeber 2008).⁴ As the ideal “cognitariat” that puts its “soul at work” (Berardi 2009), arranging signs amidst labyrinths of information, contemporary art workers both embody the dominant labouring practices of current economic regimes and possess increased subversive potential due to their strategic position in the current division of labour (Beech 2013). Elevating the contemporary artist to a worker who performs and exemplifies the contradictions of contemporary capitalism, however, discloses tensions having to do with privilege as well as raises wider questions on the effectiveness of the art struggles at hand. If, as Julia Bryan-Wilson provocatively claims, art work is not really work, in the sense that it constitutes itself as the opposite of the custom conception of work and its repetitive rhythms (2012, 46), how and to what extent do anti-internship struggles challenge and reconfigure the current division of labour?

Before tackling such questions, let us first take a brief look at the ways that art has been recently conceptualized in relation to labour. One of the most explicit attempts to read artistic practice as a form of labour in relation to larger social and economic developments comes from recent writings by art theorist John Roberts (2007). Roberts argues that visual art since Marcel Duchamp and his industrial “readymades” tends to generate value by increasingly incorporating “non-artistic” hands in artistic production processes. Since then, artistic skill

⁴ Given the general politicization of the field at least since *documenta X* (1997), which announced the art institution as capable of instigating social interventions, and *Documenta 11* (2002), which engaged with Hardt's and Negri's *Empire* (2001), questions of art and labour have gradually occupied a central place in critical debates about contemporary art.

means less crafting artisanal objects destined for aesthetic appreciation in the salon or the academy and more the exercise of intellectual, managerial, and executive abilities. Against voices that lament the loss of artistic skills in contemporary art, Roberts argues that rather than loss, there is a displacement of the nature of artistic skill: such skills find their legitimization not through the application of handcraft techniques but in the demonstration of some sort of conceptual sharpness (Roberts 2007, 3). Thus, the abandonment of painterly skills by Duchamp and later by minimalist and conceptual artists is, for Roberts, “a productive process ... which represents a technical and social readjustment on the part of the artist to the increasing socialization of labour” (ibid., 23). Under this lens, as part of a broader “reskilling” process, an internship in a museum or a gallery offers to the artist the opportunity to cultivate such managerial, administrative, and communicative skills in an official and recognized institutional structure. There is, then, a certain correlation between the current need for occupying such short-term, multi-skilling training placements in order to develop professional artistic careers and the increased tendency to replace handcraft with administrative skills in art practice and education.

The shift from the “hand” to the “intellect” was already identified implicitly or explicitly by art critics of the 1960s and 1970s writing about post-war artistic movements, such as minimalism and conceptualism, that reinvented the Duchampian readymade and its legacy. For instance, writing in 1967, Michael Fried (1998 [1967]) uses—albeit in a derogatory sense—the notion of “theatricality” to describe minimalist art, that is to say, an art form that displays an extreme self-consciousness and seeks to activate effects of self-reflective and intellectual qualities in the viewer, instead of pictorially absorbing them. Lucy Lippard, a champion of conceptual art practices, writes in 1973 that conceptual art “means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or ‘dematerialized’” (1973: vii). More recently, the conception of artist as enabler of socialities achieved canonical status in the context of a globalizing art field. The rise and popularization of the movement of “relational aesthetics” at the end of the 1990s, although criticized for ignoring antagonism (Bishop 2004), sidelining questions of political economy (Martin 2007), and uncritically praising the figure of the artist as nomad (Hatherley 2009), has moved to the mainstream an univocal grasping of the artist as a “generator” of social relations. Relational art, propagated by the French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud (2002), conceives of the artist-as-administrator, or recycler, re-programmer, ideas-manager, bricoleur, monteur and so on, who rearranges, reorders, reshuffles, and ultimately ‘glues’ together certain signs to produce new meanings that are contextual or can be contextualized by a curator at a later stage. Again, here the condition of the artist as an enabler of meaning comes about not through the application of manual skills to a certain material object but through the exercise of administrative and communicational abilities associated with the thought and intellect. An important consequence of such historico-theoretical developments for theorizing the figure of the contemporary art worker is that any object can rightfully become an artwork insofar as it is appropriately framed. In other words, the object upon which the artwork is performed is “contingent” (Buskirk 2003, 16) insofar as it envelops a limitless range of materials and processes, varying, indicatively, from film and readymade objects to lecture-performances.

Thus, we can assume that the idea of the contemporary art worker challenges what is commonly meant by a worker identity. Rather than constituted through a shared engagement with a specific labouring practice, subject to formal rules, objectives, and regulations, the identity of the artist embraces a certain open-endedness, valorized through processes that are not subject to formal criteria. Apart from the absence of a shared technique that could function as a measure of value, however, there is not equally a certain spatial arrangement that engulfs and enables this formal heterogeneity, a workplace in which artists can be hailed together as “workers” in the long-term. While galleries, museums, or biennial exhibitions are the privileged global spaces of art showcasing, they function more as short-term outlets rather than customary conceived workplaces, and in this sense they cannot interpellate traditional, territorially-bound workers’ subjectivities. Actual artistic workplaces, generally artists’ studios, are mostly dispersed and, given the mobility that characterizes the field, these spac-

es are less likely to develop a clear-cut antagonistic collective of workers pushing forward a set of common interests. In this sense, labour-wise, the contemporary art worker essentially performs an open-ended identity, insofar as the multiplicity of different kinds of labour, materials, and spaces with which they engage prevents a straightforward mobilization of collective interests and demands against a territorially or conceptually bound authority.

The special status of work in contemporary art has given rise to a dual representation of its character by theorists, understood as a site of tension upon which struggles against internships and unpaid work unfold.⁵ Art work is potentially liberating and also inherently exploitative. In the first case, the emotional nature of artistic work has prompted scholars to associate it with a potentially utopian practice bound to the Marxian conception of labour in communist society as a self-fulfilling and self-realizing activity (Bishop 2012). The activity of labour in communism, Marx believed, does not function as an external constraint, as wage labour does; it will not be “a means of life but itself life’s prime want” (1938, 11). Yet, at the other extreme of the spectrum, contemporary art is the ideal site of exploitation. The “pleasure in work” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010), or work as the site where one is most capable of realizing ideas and desires (Smith 2013, 37), coincides with creative modes of capital accumulation (Vishmidt 2013). Life becomes work and work becomes life, although neither in Marx’s sense nor in the sense of the early avant-gardes, which hoped for the dissolution of art into life. In this highly abstract mode of analysis, it is capitalism that has colonized the very fabric of human desire and emotion.

The terms “biopolitics” or “real subsumption” are key for providing a contextual theoretical backdrop against which artistic labour as a desiring and emotional working practice can be conceived as exploitative.⁶ In the context of biopolitics, as articulated by Foucault (2008) and later commentators (e.g., Read 2009), ideas of self-fulfilment and self-realization become a technology of subjectivation through which the lives of the population are put to reproduce capitalist relations. In this sense, the biopolitical mode of production concerns not only the production of commodities as objects but also as relations, lifestyles, and subjectivities through which control and systemic preservation is achieved (Read 2009, 26). By believing that they realize themselves in the objects and relations they produce, artists have been regularly seen as the tipping point of such biopolitical arrangements and configurations. The prospect of a creative fulfilment that an internship promises then becomes, as the group Carrotworkers Collective puts it, the “carrot,” a “disciplinary device” signifying “the hope that we might organise our work around ‘creativity’ rather than drudgery [...] used to prompt, cajole and sometimes blackmail workers into long-term and recurring periods of free and precarious labour” (2011, 3). The term real subsumption, deriving directly from Marxian analysis, produces similar effects to those of biopolitics when applied to discussions of contemporary art. Since the 1970s, there has been a gradual transition to societies of real subsumption, or a stage in capitalist development wherein all production is tainted by the capitalist value-form, as the capitalist now organizes the totality of social relations in a distinctly capitalist way.⁷ This transition hails “virtuosic” subjectivities (Virno 2004), that is to say labouring subjectivities that put their soul to work, embracing performative and artistic skills.⁸ Virtuosity typifies “the totality of contemporary social production” (52), and thus characterizes not only artists, but increasingly all labouring subjects. Along these lines, contemporary art seems to be one of the sites spearheading this process. Alexei Penzin (2010) notes that contemporary art “provides the quintessence of virtuosic practices” since the contemporary artist is probably “the brightest expression of the flexible, mobile, non-specialized substance of contempo-

⁵ For some of the routine predicaments among workers in contemporary art stemming from representations of artistic work as inherently autonomous see also my own past ethnographic research on the subject (Kompatsiaris 2014).

⁶ One could add here terms such as governmentality, immaterial labour, and cognitive capitalism.

⁷ Real subsumption is counterpoised to the ‘formal subsumption’ of the earlier years of capitalism, where the capitalist captured an existing labour process (i.e. the labour of independent artisans) turning it to a value-producing activity.

⁸ Virno, however, is one of the few post-*operaismo* philosophers characterising the current moment as a mixture of formal and real subsumption. See for example Virno 2009 and Penzin 2010.

rary ‘living labor’” (81). Internships in contemporary art not only serve to reskill and thus re-draw the qualities of the professional artist, but operate as a technique of interpellation within a dominant economic paradigm.

I should note here that the conclusions that the above theorizations induce appear as somehow totalizing, relying too much on ambiguous periodizations, or even self-referential.⁹ When they attribute “special status” to the arts sector, they usually diminish the importance of other kinds of labour upon which the development of this sector is based, including the massive amounts of factory labour in the global South or elsewhere, exploited by the same forces that raise the symbolic and economic capital of art. As soon as the figure of the art worker is put at the forefront of contemporary struggles due to its alleged critical position in the capitalist division of labour, the struggles of less prestigious workers (or even groups that do not identify themselves as workers, such as residents or debtors) can easily be overlooked. The idea of the artist as the ‘model worker’ of neoliberalism, though, has gained significant currency in debates at conferences and in the blogosphere, journals, and publications. One can thus draw a certain link between its popularity and the recent articulation of art as a site of exploitation by groups mobilizing against internships. The tensions emerging as soon as the terms “art” and “work” are put side by side (or, inversely, the “gap” between art and work, in Bryan-Wilson’s terms [2012]), are, as we shall see, always already present threatening to undermine the rationale of artist-activist struggles.

2. Resistance Against Internships and the Labour Turn in Contemporary Art

The above framework, which conceptualizes the figure of the contemporary artist as a bearer and potential destabilizer of the complexities of current labour landscapes, came emphatically to the forefront shortly before as well as during the recent economic crisis. One of the most visible consequences of Occupy for theory, journalism, criticism, and practice around contemporary art is an intensified questioning of artists’ working conditions (Sholette 2010; Cox and Bazzichelli 2013). When, for instance, the New York-based art critic Ben Davis began his *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* with the phrase “class is an issue of fundamental importance for arts” (2013, 27), he eloquently performed the widespread desire across visual art landscapes in the years following the 2008 recession in the U.S. and the Eurozone to expand, modify, or challenge an understanding of art principally as an aesthetic practice. Here, the political nature of an art exhibition is sought not only in the affects, emotions, and discourses it mobilizes, but also in the ways it relates with issues such as class, labour, and the commons. By assuming the position of the “exploited,” art worker groups founded in the past five years, such as OWS Arts and Labour, Occupy Museums, Carrotworkers Collective (a predecessor to Precarious Workers Brigade), Future Interns, ArtLeaks, and Raggickers, expand not only on how art is an activity of representational, affective, or critical engagement, but an activity that generates economic value; or, as again Bryan-Wilson puts it in respect to the movements of art unionizing of the 1960s, how art *works* (2009, 3). Despite limitations, the tactics art worker movements undertake and the ways they deploy them can prove illuminating for wider struggles in the context of labour flexibilization (de Peuter 2014, 267). In this section, I selectively focus on how some of these groups, mainly those in the UK, attempt to combat and delegitimize dominant narratives of internship culture.

A main tactic anti-internship groups employ is whistleblowing, involving the name and shame approach (i.e., calling out and making public the wrong-doings of an organization on social media) as well as boycotts, which usually takes the form of circulating advertisements released from galleries and museums that promote unpaid internships or other unremunerated positions in blogs and social media accounts. As these campaigns rely on publicity for accomplishing their aims, the number of visitors to blogs, newspaper coverage, or Facebook “likes” are an important factor for their realization. For instance, one such successful action took place in December 13, 2013, when Precarious Workers Brigade issued a letter to the established London-based Serpentine Gallery. The letter complained about a non-paid placement and warned that “over the coming months we will be engaging in a series of tar-

⁹ For a useful critique of the idea of the artist as “model worker” see Greig de Peuter (2014).

geted actions at yours and other institutions to encourage the creation of such a policy [one that involves a fair pay]" (2013a). The letter was followed a day later by a public action against the gallery organized by Future Interns in which protesters dressed as Santa Claus entered the gallery holding a banner that said "All that we want for Christmas is pay" while handing out leaflets denouncing the gallery's unfair internship listings. The protest can be thought of as performance art piece in itself, bringing together, playfully and bitterly, the issue of unpaid work, the custom of Christmas gift giving, and a humorous masquerade. After the protest, which attracted media attention, including a supportive article in *Guardian*,¹⁰ circulated online through various artistic and activist channels, Serpentine drafted a second response to the initial letter of the group. This second response, unlike the first, was apologetic for the decision to post the advert and admitted that "the points you make in your letter to us are valid and we have listened to your protest" (Precarious Workers Brigade 2013b). It is telling of the noise created around the incident that it managed to reach art institutional routes as in its February 2014 issue *Art Monthly* noted how the "Serpentine Gallery managed a spectacular PR own goal in December when it advertised for unpaid interns, causing a backlash that forced it to withdraw the positions" (2014: 16). The withdrawal of the advert demonstrates the success of the action, which proved useful in exposing the gallery's abusive work tactics through a hybrid discourse of legal references, moral questioning, performative elements, and effective publicizing.

The action brings to mind the first wave of "institutional critique" of the 1960s and 1970s, in which artists such as Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke wished to expose the workings of art institutions, rather than its post-2000s version where curators or even the art institutions themselves took on the role of social critique.¹¹ In contrast to this first wave, however, the artists of anti-internship critique are largely anonymous and not commissioned by a curator or museum, and, thus, more cautious of the possible capitalization of their struggles by the market (and in this sense seem closer to artist-activist groups such as Guerrilla Girls that consciously choose to act anonymously). Moreover, following the interdisciplinary lineage of institutional critique, the anti-internship protests involve co-operation entailing a decisively intersectional character. For instance, a more recent action came out as a co-operation of three London-based groups, Future Interns, the Precarious Workers Brigade, and Ragpickers, which targeted the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO), an institution not linked to contemporary art but to the world of opera. LSO was interrogated for "advertising for and currently using unpaid interns" as well as "exploiting the desperation of young people and undermining the responsibility of organisations to pay for labour" (Future Interns et al. 2014). Similar to the Serpentine Gallery case, the initial letter was posted to the groups' blogs and social media accounts. The institution here was questioned on even stricter moral grounds with questions such as: "we wonder how you expect that person [the unpaid intern] to survive in London?" or "are you only expecting to receive applications from those who are from a very wealthy background, or someone whose parents live in London?" or "do you think it is responsible to be further widening the gap between those who can and can't pursue a job within the arts?" (ibid.). This class-based ethical questioning is again followed by accusations of law-abiding ("putting aside the moral and ethical issues of asking someone to work for you for free, you are breaking the law..."), attempting to delegitimize and discredit the institution, and suggesting an alternative constituent ethical, legal, and normative framework to rationalize art work.¹² Here, too, the letter was followed by an action from Future Interns during a concert at the LSO, in which members of the group wore masks of famous composers and held placards reading: "Your Policies are Out of Tune: Pay your Interns." Following some

¹⁰ The *Guardian* coverage of this protest can be found at <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/dec/16/unpaid-internship-christmas-protest-serpentine-gallery>.

¹¹ For an overview of the different waves of institutional critique see Raunig and Ray (2009).

¹² The invocation of "ethics" and "morality" as a means to address the unjust practices of galleries and art institutions of this kind are very usual. In another letter Precarious Workers Brigade asked the gallery FACT in Liverpool to "consider the ethics of offering volunteer positions that used to be paid in your organisation." The full letter can be found at <http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/post/81277448894/open-letter-to-fact-liverpool>.

wider public fury, the LSO introduced a paid internship scheme to replace the unpaid one. The cooperating groups, coming together on the basis of a common cause of challenging unpaid internships, enact here a guerrilla-style, cross-sectional solidarity that re-animates the energies of the institutional critique of the 1960s by addressing the failings of the institutions in which the artists are called upon to work and showcase.

Another aspect of internship cultures that these groups wish to address refers to the discursive/ideological one. The overall consensus in job adverts circulated by galleries, museums, biennials, and other mainstream art institutions is to portray internships and volunteer placements as exciting opportunities for exercising skills and meeting high-profile artists. While the promise for self-realization in the domain of work takes here a mythical status implying some sort of future autonomous working life (Ross 2000), these groups produce counter-information in order to deconstruct this narrative. The spread of counter-information concerning aspects of social and political life is an established activist practice mobilized to discredit official and dominant narratives (Coyer, Downmunt and Fountain 2011). Counter-information in this context enables an alternative or oppositional discursive field that enables antagonistic ways of speaking about a subject, and here acts as a means of potentially transforming common conceptions about what internships are as well as setting in motion wider cultures of dissent. The forms of counter-information vary from the release of counter-guides to publicizing “leaks” concerning abusive work relations. For example, one of the most widely circulated manuals concerning internships, *Surviving Internships: A Counter-Guide to Internships in the Arts*, which was published in 2011 by the Carrotworkers’ Collective, aims, in the tradition of ideology critique, to “explore and debunk some commonly held myths” concerning internships and creative careers (2). The document was released in PDF format and has been distributed through an array of sources, from self-managed ventures to more institutional actors such as the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies and large-scale art projects such as *Truth is Concrete*, which took place in Graz, Austria in September 2012. Carrotworkers’ 66-page leaflet, similarly to the protests above, not only describes how unfair and unethical internships are, but also employs affective and playful ways to communicate the “irresponsibility” of art institutions by recounting personal internship stories. Again, here, the ethical language targeting the exploitative side of institutions is performed alongside references to larger systemic deficiencies as well as calls for solidarity with other professional sectors: “[n]ow, more than ever is the time for cultural workers to resist and work in solidarity with other social struggles” (3).

An ongoing platform of counter-information mainly operating online is the group ArtLeaks, whose members are not only artists but also international curators and critics. Employing Wikileaks’ method of leaking undisclosed information and the rhetoric of the Occupy movement in distinguishing between the ‘exploited’ and the ‘exploiters,’ ArtLeaks wishes to serve as a tool for disempowered art workers, formed “in response to the abuse of their professional integrity and the open infraction of their labor rights” (2011). ArtLeaks maintains a webpage where artists and cultural workers who have been mistreated by institutions are invited to report their story. Similarly to Carrotworkers, ArtLeaks employ a language that moves emphatically beyond a demands-based campaign to connect internships and unpaid labour to wider structures of exploitation. The division between workers and the employers, or the 99% and the 1%, becomes here a discursive trope for articulating inequality, fixing a militant artistic identity, and furthering critique against the capitalist system as a whole. Expressed as such, artistic labour is reclaimed as a site of conflict against dominant neoliberal discourses of optimization, productivity, and standardization (Bishop 2012; Roberts 2007).

If between art and work rests a wide gap holding these two categories in permanent tension, then efforts to re-draw this tension by anti-internship groups in oppositional terms tend to challenge how such placements are presented as creative or artistic opportunities by official art institutions. The recounting of actual experiences by those hired as interns in art institutions re-articulates this tension and endows such campaigns with some evidential force. Ragpickers, for example, aims to generate a kind of an “archive of the oppressed,” comprised of personal stories from ex-interns who designate abusive experiences and the unfulfilled promises they have encountered during intern work (Ragpickers 2013). Art workers

who are or have been interns in the past are invited to send objects or photographs of objects that convey such traces of abuse. By means of narrating an ‘oppressed history,’ the artist here becomes the ‘exploited,’ someone who has been treated unfairly, and thus a potential subversive agent subject against structures of ill-treatment. As the collective wishes to “blur the difference between the artistic and forensic” (ibid.) issues of inequality and exploitation are voiced through storylines interweaving the personal, the affective, and the legalistic in humorous and absurd ways. Here, institutional critique as a form of denaturalizing the discourse of official structures comes through the performing of an archive crafted by work experiences that challenge the self-attributed naturalness of intern adverts, or experiences that, as the collective remarks, are “unfair, absurd, or abusive, but were originally disguised with the initial promise of ‘valuable insight’ and ‘exciting opportunity’” (ibid.). Likewise, here, ethical judgements (“unfair,” “absurd,” and “abusive”) are interwoven with affective forms that transcend cognition and moral coding.

3. Artistic Identity and the Social Dynamics of Struggles Against Internships

The above actions of anti-internship groups inhabit a curious paradox in relation to the qualities of artistic work: while the identity of the contemporary artist is systemically and conceptually moving towards an impossibility, or a “non-identity,” a fluid and open-ended labouring practice that gets valorized indeterminately, these groups aim to re-affirm a collective in whose name it is possible to progress certain claims, assumptions, and demands. It is obvious that especially in post-object art practices, it is hard to measure and thus evaluate artistic labour in terms of units of time, as there is an inherent difficulty, if not absolute impossibility, to measure the amount of time put to generating an idea or somehow trace its valorization. In this sense, and especially when artistic labour is understood within the framework of biopolitics and real subsumption, there can be no reliable normative criteria against which to put a set of wage demands for art workers. This enigmatic condition generates tensions and complications, able on the one hand of informing contemporary workers’ struggles in the context of the neoliberal restructuring, and, on the other, of manifesting the limits of struggles organized around concrete workers’ identities.

The “zealotry” that these groups display seeks to “redefine the ‘common sense’ of society and to reshape what we regard as ‘normal’ or ‘moral,’ ‘legitimate’ or ‘moderate’” (Olson 2014). This happens, as we saw, not through only through calculated strategies seeking hegemonic alliances, but through performances with an open-ended character that often blur the boundaries of art and activism or of the ethical and the affective. In this sense, the re-assertion of the artistic identity as an oppositional and antagonistic one occurs through the appropriation of aesthetic and artistic vocabularies that invoke affective and not just cognitive responses. As demonstrated by the relative success of such initiatives in mobilizing and enabling a “discursive field,” the blending of the ethical and legal address with forms of expression that incite playfulness can provoke powerful mediated actions capable of influencing policy decisions. The tension, however, generated by the privileged position of artists as workers who strive to reach self-fulfilment through work within a climate of general social disaffection is ever present in such discussions. It is not a coincidence, in this sense, that the Carrotworkers in its guidebook sense the need to respond to the widespread objection that “organising cultural labour reinforces the privilege of a ‘creative class’” (2011, 56). Again, here, the gist of this questioning lies on the socially prevalent disjunction between the terms art and work.

Benjamin Noys (2013) offers a way to think about the predicaments of conceptualizing an artistic identity in relation to larger struggles. Noys reads certain artistic practices, including those of Warhol, the Situationists, and Duchamp, as efforts to abolish the identity of the artist by blurring it with processes of mass production and the commodity form (2013). Drawing from the perspective of communization,¹³ Noys explores the idea that the overthrowing of capitalist relations can only take place, as Jaleh Mansoor et al. put it, through a “continuous

¹³ For a better perspective on the communization thesis see Noys’ edited book *Communization and its Discontents* (2011), as well as the International Journal of Communization at <http://sicjournal.org/>.

process of instituting communist relations,” that is to say of relations unmediated by the capitalist value-form, the state, and wage labour (2012, 48). The institution of communizing practices needs to pass through the abolition of the division of labour and the overthrowing of all worker identities. A break with the capitalist mode of production is impossible, the communizing current believes, by clinging to a certain kind of worker identity as in that case the struggle will always tend to lapse to a demands struggle that divides rather than communizes. In this sense, struggles can only negatively prefigure, rather than affirm, a freer futurity. In contrast to Roberts, Noys (2013) sees the process of pushing artistic identity to its limits less as an affirmative response to socio-technical processes that could re-instate artistic autonomy, and more as an artistic gesture that negatively prefigures some future abandonment of artistic identity in the process of revolutionary transformation.

Extrapolating from Noys’ position, the affirmation of artistic identity that activists perform through their struggles against unpaid internships can be seen as a reactionary path, threatening to re-institute a unionistic and self-enclosed worker identity. However, insofar as these actions remain anonymous, beyond, against, and within institutional channels, tactical, irregular and aiming at instigating alternative ethical and legal ‘regimes of truth’ rather than merely re-affirm a bonding relationship between identity and practice, they seem to hail an artistic subjectivity that involves fluidity, open-endedness and thus potential to transform. In other words, insofar as the anti-internship actions favour the qualities of practice rather than an exclusive identity formation, they have the capacity to thwart and transverse the rigidity of artists’ unions, or worker unions in general, while opening the ground for future struggles that could involve workers (or even more promisingly, non-workers) from all strata of life.

In general, the social division suggested by the artist-activist groups between on the one hand politically engaged and underpaid artists and on the other the art system that capitalizes on and exploits critical practices, is characteristic of the class-based discourse in contemporary art. While post-Marxist art and cultural theory finds the division between the “dominant” and the “dominated” simplistic, favouring participation and social engagement, anti-internship artistic activism, drawing on the spirit of Occupy, works to re-activate this division through boycotts, whistleblowing, and withdrawals.¹⁴ Invisibility and anonymity are also fundamental in these mobilizations. All groups, apart perhaps from ArtLeaks, which has certain eponymous members (although ArtLeaks as well states that it “counts among its greatest supporters the invisible army of cultural workers worldwide... striving to make invisibility a great strength” [2011]), hide participants’ identity in their actions. This practice both protects participants from exposure as well as “protects” their actions from the gaining of some possible future symbolic capital in the art market. Through these multivalent tactics, these groups enable a certain “discursive field” that envelops moral and legal ways to speak about internships and unpaid labour. This field is oppositional, in the sense that it counters the official narratives of high profile actors in the art world, such as museums, galleries, and biennials. It can also be thought of as a constituent power insofar as it carries the potential of instituting counter-logics in the treatment of the phenomenon. The struggles against internships and unpaid work are, then, not only reflective, but also constitutive of the emergence of a new artistic activism that re-instates the category of the art worker against the odds and the complexities of its increasingly abstract character.

References

- Art Monthly. 2014. News-Art Notes. Accessed May 24, 2015. <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-359130509/serpentine-slips-up>.
- ArtLeaks. 2011. About. Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://art-leaks.org/about/>.

¹⁴ This can be seen as part of a larger recent tendency among contemporary artists wishing to make political statements who prefer to withdraw from art exhibitions rather than participate in them and enable counter discourses through their work. Examples of this kind include the withdrawal of several artists from the 19th Sydney Biennial as a form of protest against its main sponsor, the corporation *Transfield*, which is the main stakeholder of an off-shore notorious detention camp in Papua New Guinea, or the withdrawal from the current Manifesta, scheduled to open in June 2014 in St. Petersburg, as a protest against the current political situation in Russia that includes the violation of LGBT rights and the waging of war against Ukraine.

- ArtQuest. 2012. *Intern Culture*. Accessed May 24, 2015. http://www.artquest.org.uk/articles/view/intern_culture.
- BBC. 2014. MPs Vote to Back Call For End to Unpaid Internships. Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-27389272>.
- Beech, David. 2013. Art and the Cognitariat. Accessed May 24, 2015. <https://dbfreee.wordpress.com/2013/09/19/art-and-the-cognitariat/>.
- Berardi, Franco. 2009. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Bishop, Claire. 2004. Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics. *October* 110: 51–79.
- Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les presses du reel.
- Bryan-Wilson, Julia. 2009. *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*. CA: University of California Press.
- Bryan-Wilson, Julia. 2012. Occupational Realism. *The Drama Review* 56 (4): 32–48.
- Buskirk, Martha. 2003. *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Carrotworkers' Collective. 2011. *Surviving Internships: A Counter-Guide About Surviving Free Labour in the Arts*. London: CW Collective.
- Cox, Geoff, and Tatiana Bazzichelli. 2013. *Disrupting Business: Art and Activism in Times of Financial Crisis*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Coyer, Kate, Tony Dowmunt, and Alan Fountain. 2011. *The Alternative Media Handbook*. London: Routledge.
- Davis, Ben. 2013. *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- de Peuter, Greig. 2014. Beyond the Model Worker: Surveying a Creative Precariat. *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 6: 263-284.
- Dimitrakaki, Angela. 2011. The Spectacle and Its Others: Labor, Conflict, and Art in the Age of Global Capital. In *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, edited by Jonathan Harris, J., 191-211. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, Michel. 2012. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Random House.
- Fried, Michael. 1998 (orig. 1967). *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Future Interns, Precarious Workers Brigade, and Ragpickers. 2014. Letter to The London Symphony Orchestra. Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://thefutureinterns.tumblr.com/post/80514683281/letter-to-the-london-symphony-orchestra>.
- Gielen, Pascal. 2009. *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*. Amsterdam: Valiz.
- Graeber, David. 2008. The Sadness of Post-Workerism: or 'Art and Immaterial Labour' Conference: A Sort of Review. *The Commoner*. <http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=33>.
- Hatherley, Owen. 2009. Post-Postmodernism. *New Left Review* 59: 153-60.
- Helguera, Pablo. 2013. *Art Scenes: The Social Scripts of the Art World*. New York: George Pinto Books.
- Hesmondhalgh, David and Sarah Baker. 2010. A Very Complicated Version of Freedom: Conditions and Experiences of Creative Labour in Three Cultural Industries. *Poetics* 38: 4-20.
- Kompatsiaris, Panos. 2014. "To See and be Seen": Ethnographic Notes on Cultural Work in Contemporary Art in Greece. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 7 (5): 507-524.
- Lippard, Lucy. 1973. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Mansoor, Jaleh, Daniel Marcus and Daniel Spaulding. 2012. Occupy Response. *October* 142: 48–51.
- Martin Schultz. 2014. Debating Europe. Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://www.debatingeurope.eu/2014/04/28/big-crunch-presidential-debate/- .U2NxN1fn2z5>.
- Martin, Stewart. 2007. Critique of Relational Aesthetics. *Third Text* 21 (4): 369–386.
- Marx, Karl. 1938. *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. New York: International Publications.
- Moore, Alan W. 2014. Art Workers Want to Know. *Ephemera* 14 (3): 465–473.
- Noys, Benjamin. 2013. Communization and the End of Art. In *TIME AND (IN)COMPLETION: Images And Performances Of Time In Late Capitalism*, edited by Tomislav Medak, Goran Sergej and Pristaš Bezimeno, 59–71. Zagreb: BADco.
- Occupy Museums. 2011. About. Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://occupymuseums.org/index.php/about>.
- Olson, Joel. 2014. Rethinking the Unreasonable Act. *Theory & Event* 17 (2).

- OWS Arts & Labour. 2011. About. Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://artsandlabor.org/about-al/>.
- Page, Libby. 2013. Intern protest: 'All I want for Christmas is pay.' *Guardian*. Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/dec/16/unpaid-internship-christmas-protest-serpentine-gallery>.
- Penzin, Alexei. 2010. The Soviets of the Multitude: On Collectivity and Collective Work, an interview with Paolo Virno. *Mediations* 25: 81–92.
- Precarious Workers Brigade. 2013a. Dear Serpentine Management, we have recently been made aware that you are advertising 3 month volunteer placements. Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/post/69877673667/dear-serpentine-management-we-have-recently-been>.
- Precarious Workers Brigade. 2013b. Serpentine Gallery's response to PWB letter and FI action (before and after). Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/post/70204946178/serpentine-gallery-s-response-to-pwb-letter-and-fi>.
- Ragpickers. 2013. UNHAPPY WITH YOUR INTERNSHIP? SPEAK OUT! Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://ragpickers.tumblr.com/opencall>.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London: Continuum.
- Raunig, Gerald and Gene Ray, eds. 2009. *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*. London: MayFly.
- Read, Jason. 2009. A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity. *Foucault Studies* 6: 25–36. Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/foucault-studies/article/viewFile/2465/2463>.
- Roberts, John. 2007. *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*. London: Verso.
- Ross, Andrew. 2000. The Mental Labor Problem. *Social Text* 18 (2): 1–31.
- Sholette, Gregory. 2010. *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. London: Pluto.
- Shukaitis, Stephen. 2012. Symphony of the Surplus/Value: Notes on Labour, Valorization, and Sabotage in the Metropolitan Factory. *Performance Research* 17 (6): 48–55.
- Smith, Jason. 2013. Soul on Strike. In *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism: Part One*, edited by Arne de Boever and Warren Neidich, 33–45. Berlin: Archive Books.
- Swyngedouw, Erik. 2010. Impossible/Undesirable Sustainability and the Post-Political Condition. In *Strategic Spatial Planning: Urban and Landscape Perspectives*, edited by Maria Cerreta, Grazia Concilio and Valeria Monno. London: Springer.
- Toscano, Alberto. 2011. Now and Never. In *Communization and its Discontents*, edited by Benjamin Noys, 85–104. London: Minor Compositions.
- Virno, Paolo. 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Virno, Paolo. 2009. The Dismeasure of Art: An Interview with Paolo Virno (Interviewed by Pascal Gielen and Sonja Lavaert). In *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, edited by Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne, 17–44. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers.
- Vishmidt, Marina. 2013. "Mimesis of the Hardened and Alienated": Social Practice as a Business Model. *E-flux* 43. [http://www.e-flux.com/journal/"mimesis-of-the-hardened-and-alienated"-social-practice-as-business-model/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/).

About the Author

Panos Kompatsiaris

Panos Kompatsiaris has received a Ph.D. in art theory from the University of Edinburgh. His thesis, *Curating Resistances: Crisis and the Limits of the Political turn in Contemporary Art Biennials*, explores the ways in which the current economic crisis and the rise of anti-capitalist activism affected contemporary art and its institutions. He has published articles in edited volumes and academic journals on art theory, social media, creative economies, and visual ethnography. He works as an academic consultant at the MACAT project and was recently appointed an Assistant Professor of Media and Communication at the National Research University, Higher School of Economics in Moscow.