

Kuba Szreder

Productive Withdrawals: Art Strikes, Art Worlds, and Art as a Practice of Freedom

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A wave of art strikes, boycotts, and occupations has engulfed global artistic circulation. These protests have directly or indirectly targeted artistic infrastructures like museums, biennials, and art fairs. Organizing an art strike, partaking in a boycott, or occupying art infrastructure are best understood as acts of productive withdrawal. These instances of social and political creativity reinvigorate ways of practicing and thinking about art by revamping existing infrastructures and giving shape to new institutional assemblages. These new assemblages sustain art as a practice of freedom.¹

Productive withdrawals are messy affairs. Actions called “art strikes” frequently resemble protests or pickets and do not necessarily involve any direct refusal of labor by the artists involved, a traditional precondition for calling something a “strike.” The Polish Day Without Art, organized by a group of art-activists in 2012,² identified itself as an art strike, though technically it was more like a lockout. A few dozen art institutions across Poland closed their doors for a day in solidarity with artists protesting against appalling working conditions. A press conference was held at Zachęta, a key art institution based in Warsaw, but otherwise the day was fairly unassuming, even though it had many repercussions.³ One was the emergence of a union of art workers, which later initiated a new cycle of struggles by organizing around the slogan “We, precariat.”⁴ These tactical shifts between occupation, protest, and strike repeat across a spectrum of other strikes, boycotts, and occupations. J20, an art strike that took place in the US on January 20, 2017 to protest the inauguration of President Donald Trump, also involved a closure of institutions, a media campaign, protests, and direct actions, forming a hybrid protest situation that could hardly be categorized as a withdrawal of labor, narrowly understood. Instead, it had more in common with the occupations of 2011.

Art boycotts, such as the 2014 boycotts of Manifesta in St. Petersburg, the São Paulo Biennial, and the Biennale of Sydney, also depart from what is traditionally understood by the term “boycott.” Instead of being organized by groups of art consumers, they are typically organized by art producers, who refuse to take part in the event being boycotted. Despite being identified as boycotts, they more closely resemble traditional strikes, due to the central role played by the refusal of production. All the aforementioned 2014 boycotts targeted art infrastructures, which were denounced by the protesting producers as complicit in the unacceptable political or corporate agendas of their sponsors.⁵

Unlike art strikes and art boycotts, art



A series of actions took place at Isola Art Centre after it was evicted from its premises in a former industrial building in Milan. Courtesy of Isola Art Center.



Occupation of the Guggenheim Museum's premises during the opening of the Biennale by GULF Labor Artist Coalition. Photo: Gulf Labor

occupations do not radically depart from the received understanding of occupation actions.⁶ Occupying existing art spaces or creating new spaces in association with occupations testifies to the possibility of better institutions, even as it loudly proclaims that the current infrastructure is hopelessly insufficient, compromised, or simply in ruins. When artists occupied the not-for-profit Artists Space in 2011,⁷ the premises of the Berlin Biennale (2011),⁸ the Guggenheim Museum during the opening of the Venice Biennale (2015), the Teatro Valle in Rome (2011), S.a.L.E. Docks in Venice (2007), and the Embros Theater in Athens (2011), they were drawing attention to the gap between artists organizing public protests and artists organizing where they work or will work. When activists occupied Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013, it led to a curatorial implosion at the Istanbul Biennial. Institutional experimentation emerged later, as noted by Vasif Kortun, a director of SALT Istanbul:

I consider myself a good institutional person. I know how institutions work and can push them into the next century, probably, but what really woke me up was the intelligence of the outside and the intelligence at Gezi – left to their own devices they were re-making the world. In light of these developments, our role as producers had to be completely rethought. SALT opened in 2011 and I was hoping that by 2016 or 2017 we would be in a position where we could find new effective tools to transform the institution into a commons: a new kind of commons that would take on the running of the institution in a different way.⁹

If art strikes aren't exactly strikes, and art boycotts aren't exactly boycotts, but art occupations are definitely occupations, what connects them? All are examples of what I call "productive withdrawals," and this notion is what links them on a theoretical level. Productive withdrawal is a way of practicing and instituting the commons and is often organized by people who identify as art workers. In boycotts, this identification is frequently left implicit, while in art strikes it is frequently explicit.¹⁰ According to Julia Bryan-Wilson, "art worker" is both a theoretical concept and a political identification; it critically riffs on the division of labor embedded in classical bourgeoisie societies, which imagined artists as free spirits rather than working individuals (for good reasons, one might say, but that is a different story).¹¹ The concept of art worker emphasizes a dialectical relationship between artists and art institutions, in which artists are embedded while contesting

their current shape, comparable to how "regular" workers are engaged in constant resistance against the institutions of the Fordist factory and the assembly line, reformatting them in a political process. Striking art workers refuse the personalized trajectories offered by the structures criticized. They target contested aspects of their industry that cannot be resolved by individual advancement, but only by collective struggle. Détourning Foucault, when art workers strike, they definitely do not want to be "governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them."¹²

Agents of artistic circulation mistake the decision to withdraw one's labor or participation for idle disengagement. The illusion of political agency granted by global artistic circulation underpins this ideology. In contrast to these false accusations, striking art workers engage in artistic self-organization, the highest form of social creativity, which produces new social assemblages that sustain artistic creativity beyond its ossified forms. When strikes, boycotts, and occupations reclaim or reshape artistic infrastructures, institutions of the commons emerge and provide ground for art as a practice of freedom. Far from destroying circulation, the refusal of art workers in moments of productive withdrawal might even accelerate social flows, while emancipating them, allowing for their redirection under better terms. Without moments of collective refusal, there would be nothing to circulate under the name of art but luxurious objects, markers of oligarchic distinction emptied of sense and any value other than exchange value.

The Agents of Circulation

The decision to boycott a large event or occupy artistic infrastructures seems futile, unproductive, and silly to many of the artists or curators who have struggled so hard to gain access to the events and institutions contested. The ideological foundations of global artistic circulation are sustained by charms of networked life, driven by promises of individual freedom and circulated agency. From this vantage point, an international art event represents the peak of productivity and an opportunity not to be missed. For people who continuously circulate, circulation is an end in itself. They are not wrong insofar as international artistic circulation secures global visibility, resources, and audiences, and provides access to powers otherwise unattainable by individuals.

Viewed from the center of circulation, art strikes and boycotts can be seen as mere disengagement. Joanna Warsza, reflecting upon



The Polish Day Without Art (2012), an art strike.



A Gulf Labor action projects slogans onto the Guggenheim Museum, New York.

her personal experiences as a curator of public programs at Manifesta in St. Petersburg in 2013, which was boycotted by many in relation to the war in Ukraine, argues that everyone is faced with a dilemma between “engagement and disengagement.” Her own decision to stay inside contested structures is presented as a form of “engagement,” while people who decided to boycott Manifesta, like the Russian collective Chto Delat?, were presented as disengaging from this responsibility. Warsza’s position is symptomatic insofar as striking (art) workers are reiteratively presented as idle, lazy, or – in this instance – disengaged. Such “idling” art workers are contrasted with those sectors of the artistic workforce who “engage”, in the most progressive scenario by attempting to revamp institutional routines from the “inside”. The problem is that such transformations are prompted by collective pressure rather than good intentions or curatorial concepts, easily nullified by the very mechanisms contested.

Partaking in artistic circulation offers a semblance of agency and encourages a political illusion. One can do projects, create a stir, make things happen. However, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello stress, the world constituted by networks and flows “can win over forces hostile to capitalism by proposing a grammar that transcends it.” In this “connexionist” world, “anything can attain the status of a project, including ventures hostile to capitalism,” creating a situation in which “capitalism and anti-capitalist critique alike are masked.”¹³ A biennial can offer a platform for uttering critical slogans, precisely because the organizational grammar of global circulation neutralizes their meaning. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, one can say that these organizational apparatuses can be fed anything, because it is the circulation that matters and not the contents that are circulated.¹⁴ The critical tendency of functionaries who work within these apparatuses is a mark of their baroque elitism, not their political activity. Sociologist Pascal Gielen criticizes “catalogue activists,” curators whose politically correct views do not suffice, despite all their good intentions, to recompose the apparatuses at play.¹⁵ One needs another, transversal means of doing this, like joining striking multitudes, which collectively amplify political messages, validating claims for criticality and recomposing the basic tenets of global artistic circulation.¹⁶

Artistic circulation turns people who circulate into structural opportunists. Italian post-Marxist philosopher Paulo Virno writes, in *A Grammar of the Multitude*:

The roots of opportunism lie in an outside-

of-the-workplace socialization marked by unexpected turns, perceptible shocks, permanent innovation, chronic instability. Opportunists are those who confront a flow of ever-interchangeable possibilities, making themselves available to the greater number of these, yielding to the nearest one, and then quickly swerving from one to another.¹⁷

Virno insists that such opportunism should not be morally condemned, but rather understood in materialist terms, as a dialectic relationship between a networked (art) worker and the means of production. Confronting a flow of interchangeable opportunities is both an alienated mode of transforming reality, an apparatus of exploitation, and a way of surviving. Securing access to opportunities does not differ so much from the situation of an industrial worker, who secures his survival by selling his/her labor. But in the context of artistic circulation this exploitation does not need to be mediated by contractual employment; in fact, it rarely is. Instead, artistic circulation is sustained by throngs of networkers feverishly competing for opportunities, who agree to circulate at any cost. One Polish artist, responding to a survey by the Free/Slow University of Warsaw, a research cluster specializing in the political economy of artistic labor, said: “Artists circulate in order to stay in circulation.”¹⁸ Such opportunism results from cynicism, individualism unrestrained by any normative systems, and fear for one’s own survival.

Recognizing atomization, opportunism, cynicism, and fear should not encourage us to underestimate the collective agency of art workers, the vast majority of whom will never become well-networked, global art celebrities. For the masses of art workers, safe and sufficient work will remain just a dream, or rather a pre-failed ambition, the function of which is to justify present precarity. For Gregory Sholette, this “dark matter” of global art circulation will never get connected enough to enjoy life in the limelight.¹⁹ Instead, they will merely circle around it like moths around a flame. In this “bare art world,” peddling aspiration is business as usual, a good selling point for art degrees, which secures a steady supply of surplus art workers, whose social energy maintains the very economy that exploits them.²⁰

And yet, this reserve army from time to time goes on strike, boycotts, and occupies, unmaking the fixations of their own desires. The aspirational machines stutter, and it becomes clear that circulating for circulation’s sake is not a particularly sustainable mode of living.

Actually, it is rather unpleasantly precarious to make one (unpaid/underpaid) project after another (unpaid/underpaid) project in order to make yet another (unpaid/underpaid) project, just to keep making (unpaid/underpaid) projects – without time to rest, think, create, do anything sensible, or even ask what the sense of it all is. When the promises fail to pan out, people might either drop out or go on strike – withdraw as individuals, with a sense of failure, or withdraw collectively, with a bang.

Industrious Withdrawals

Art strikes should be seen not as disengagements but as eruptions of social energy. “Productive withdrawal” names precisely this double movement, and it will be familiar to anyone who has ever organized a strike, an occupation, or a boycott.²¹ Every organizer knows that such actions are not idle affairs. They are deeply engaging. When activists from G.U.L.F. (Global Ultra Luxury Faction) temporarily occupied the Guggenheim in New York to protest against the appalling labor conditions of workers constructing the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, the museum responded by closing the premises to visitors and emptying the exhibition halls, while the activists engaged in fervent discussions and ad-hoc assemblies. When Chto Delat? decided to boycott Manifesta in St. Petersburg, they organized parallel political and educational events, published statements, and engaged in conversations. During the Day Without Art, Polish art workers not only convinced sympathetic institutions to close their doors to protest against artistic precarity, but also published newspapers, distributed flyers, and organized a professional media campaign, prompting a vigorous discussion that has reverberated since.

In light of such practices, it is clear that deviations from institutional routines should not be mistaken for a lack of productivity. The emptied space means time freed. And time freed is quickly filled with activity of a different sort: political actions, discussions, and media campaigns that aim to ensure that business as usual will not continue. Furthermore, art strikes, boycotts, occupations, and protests are moments of collective creativity, influencing the ways in which art is practiced, produced, and theorized. If artistic circulation is in itself an interruption of the steady flow of time that is characteristic of the Fordist assembly line, striking art workers interrupt the interruption with festivals of orgiastic, self-directed creativity. The interruption of the interruption creates conditions for an industrious filling of interrupted time. This industriousness harks back to the genealogical core of the word “*industria*,” understood as an inventive

reappropriation of time, a molding of the excesses of collective energy to shape new social universes.²² Yates McKee discusses how the term “art strike” signifies both withdrawing and striking against the current art system, liberating artistic creativity from institutionally induced alienation. He discusses parallel processes of negation and affirmation, unmaking and reinvention:

this renaissance [of occupations] involves the unmaking of art as it exists within the discourses, economies, and institutions of the contemporary art system – including its progressive sectors nominally concerned with public participation and civic dialogue. At the same time, it involves the reinvention of art as direct action, collective affect, and political subjectivization embedded in radical movements working to reconstruct the commons in the face of both localized injustices and systemic crises that characterize the contemporary capitalist order.²³

Social energy is released in the process of unmaking old social patterns, such as market-dominated forms of global artistic circulation. These patterns are reinvented and molded into new forms, such as international networks of art-activists assembled around ecological movements or ephemeral alliances of art workers.

Productive withdrawals realign institutional and personalized trajectories alike. In 2011, during Occupy in New York, a studio artist could decide to bring their work to an ongoing occupation, organize assemblies, discuss issues of art and labor, or start new inquiries into artists’ debt. Artists made use of artistic and organizational competences alike. When a similar path is taken by others, a new social assemblage emerges; it is at first ephemeral, but if it is compelling and persistent enough, it becomes a new center of social gravity, twisting social trajectories and forging new patterns of social flows. Art systems are unmade and reinvented together with their inherent aesthetical concepts, modes of justification, and institutional infrastructures.

Instituting Exodus

Art strikes, boycotts, and occupations are examples of what Virno theorizes as exodus.²⁴ In contrast to idle escapism, exodus is a productive act of contestation that unmakes structural ossifications in order to emancipate social energy. Exodus is an expression of constituent power, a form of collective potency fundamental for establishing new institutional forms.²⁵ New



The performance *Non è mica la luna* (2012), by Macao Milan, during the occupation of Torre Galfa, a skyscraper in Milan.



"The standing man": Erdem Gündüz on Taksim Square in Istanbul during occupations of 2013.

institutions of the commons emerge beyond the tired opposition of the public sphere and the private sphere (a division based on the bourgeoisie concept of individual ownership). As a form of exodus, productive withdrawal aims to build such new common institutions. In the context of rising fascism, reinstituting the commons constitutes an institutional bulwark against micro-fascism and articulates new left politics.²⁶

The concept of productive withdrawal intervenes directly in debates about artistic self-organization. Discussing constituent power, the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (EIPCP) has proposed the term “institutions of exodus,” underlining the radical productivity that emerges along lines of flights transversal to corrupted institutional territories. Universidad Nomada in Spain has talked about “monster institutions” – hybrid formations that are a cross between an institution and a movement.²⁷ Gregory Sholette points to a plethora of mock institutions that are native to artistic dark matter – research institutes, informal universities, collectives of urban gardeners, tribes of survivalists, temporary service points – each of which tends to operate in an institutional landscape ravaged by hostile

forces of late capitalism, filling the vacuum left after crises of public institutions, and which “superimpose two different states of being in the world – one deeply suspicious of institutional authority ... and therefore informally organized, and one mimicking ... the actual function of institutions.”²⁸

The Free/Slow University of Warsaw proposed the term “patainstitutionalism,” a neologism patterned after pataphysics,²⁹ the fictional discipline outlined in the nineteenth century by French proto-surrealist writer Alfred Jarry. According to Jarry, pataphysics is a way of thinking and acting motivated by the belief that “the virtual or imaginary nature of things as glimpsed by the heightened vision of poetry or science or love can be seized and lived as real.” It is much the same with patainstitutionalism, whose organizational potential is a product of the imagination. A similar concept was coined by Goldex Poldex, an anarcho-artistic cooperative functioning since the late 2000s in Kraków and Warsaw, who have talked about a mode of instituting called “Sector Pi,” which would exist in a transversal relation to policed conventions of the bourgeoisie public sphere. Using the irrational immeasurability of pi, whose digits stretch out infinitely (3.14159265358979...), to

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"The Polish Day Without Art, organized by a group of art-activists in 2012, identified itself as an art strike, though technically it was more like a lockout." Courtesy of Citizens Forum for Contemporary Art.

signify a surplus sociality has allowed Sector Pi to distinguish itself from the so-called Third Sector composed of nongovernmental organizations, which, according to Janek Sowa, a social theoretician and member of Goldex Poldex, are frequently subdued by market logic or governmental agendas.³⁰

The recent wave of art strikes, occupations, and boycotts shifts the focus away from a singular institution to the larger landscape of their interlocking configuration. There is always more than one patainstitution, and monster institutions come in swarms, networks, assemblies. That's what makes them monstrous. During strikes, boycotts, and occupations, artistic dark matter glows. Its molecular motion accelerates until the moment of fusion, when a creative surplus ruptures art circulation, and an immeasurable element of social energy is released that begins the work of constituting new institutional configurations and revamping existing institutions in the spirit of the commons. If one were to trace back far enough the history of progressive public institutions, associations, and institutes, one would eventually locate their origins in a similar set of events. Social movements, striking collectives, and political groupings are always the catalyst behind the progressive revamping of institutions, spurring the birth of new formats. It is not the charity of the upper classes but rather sustained pressure from below that democratized universities, museums, and hospitals.

In the context of the art world, exodus represents less an escape from institutionality than suspension of its politically compromised forms: a performative attempt at rehearsing the constitution of new institutional frameworks, alternative to the ones linking corporate museums, large artistic events, and international art fairs. Such emergent assemblages might include both informal collectives and public institutions, who transform themselves in a process of transversal exchange and friction, creating new ways of practicing, thinking about, and sustaining art. An alliance of collectives, NGOs, progressive institutions, media outlets, and channels of formal and informal communication created the conditions of possibility for Occupy Wall Street in New York, and these networks reflected the ripples left after Occupy was done. Movements like Occupy have their well-documented legacies, institutional structures, value systems, and aesthetic conventions, which are transversal to the dominant order – neither totally external (unwaveringly oppositional) nor subsumed (pathetically peripheral). Collectives and institutions like Not an Alternative, 16 Beaver, and Creative Time are not located totally outside

the art system – however defined – but nor are they subsumed by an inherently corrupted mainstream. When analyzing such situations, one has to maneuver between a Scylla of totalized critique and a Charybdis of a romanticized vision of an institutional outside, a pristine territory of unspoiled righteousness and human spontaneity. Strikes, occupations, and boycotts are organized from inside contested territory, frequently making use of resources, institutions, and agents specific to it, slightly yet significantly transforming the orderings of these assemblages.

The Polish Day Without Art would not have happened if organizers were unsuccessful in their attempts to harness the support of both rank-and-file of art workers and more celebrated artists and public institutions. The significant recomposition of the local art scene that followed in the wake of the art strike would not have been possible without this engagement. Politicized art workers reinvigorated institutional infrastructures, sustaining politicized modes of practicing art and thinking about art, such as art-workers trade unions and other art-activist groups.³¹ Since the art strike, they have partaken in many political actions, making use of their artistic competences beyond the narrow confines of the gallery-exhibition nexus. It was a significant outcome, especially if one compares it to the means involved, as the strike was organized on a shoestring, the only investment being the energy and enthusiasm of the organizers.

In any case, forging such new assemblages is a messy affair, as it is not an easy task to rupture existing connections and sustain new ones. Art workers are ravaged by the forces of capitalism, which make their lives harder, resources scarce, and time precarious. The elites of the art sector are able to maintain their domination precisely because they ride on the same global flows of speculative capital that threaten the existence of everybody else. After movements subside, occupations dissipate, and boycotts runs their course, there is a tendency to return to business as usual. But from time to time the new social habitats prove quite resilient, surviving beyond the dispersal of the occupying multitudes. Strikes, boycotts, occupations can be quite potent in reverse engineering connections, even the ones constitutive of the dominant system, weakening or even unpicking the internal ties between their core elements.

The Pataphysical Cosmology of the Art World: From Productive Withdrawals to Art-Sustaining Environments

This social recomposition sustains art in multiple

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different shapes and tastes, operating according to varied economic principles – market logic being just one system among many – and aesthetic idioms. Art thus produced rarely resembles what is called and peddled as art in the blue-chip gallery nexus. Since it does not need to be an authored object of aesthetical contemplation, such art actually might be put to collective use. Steven Wright describes this process as one that creates “art-sustaining environments.”³² For a radical pragmatist, these social worlds are cooperative networks that link together art-related people, enabling them to get their art done.³³

Some of these art-sustaining environments are small, others large, some ephemeral, others stable, some informal, others quite institutionalized, some operating on a local scale, others spanning the globe. Some of them emerge as a result of long, evolutionary processes, and dissolve as silently as they were born, without making too much fuss. Others resurface under a protest banner, during an art strike, occupation, or boycott. In this sense, Occupy Wall Street was an art-sustaining environment, a transversal recomposition of existing art systems, a new artistic habitat, sustaining collective ways of practicing and thinking about art that ventured beyond the market-gallery vortex.

To sketch a cartography of cooperative networks currently emerging worldwide, the Philadelphia-based collective Basecamp created an atlas of *Plausible Art Worlds*, a collection depicting a plethora of art collectives shifting the rules of art from below.³⁴ Together with Sebastian Cichocki, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, I contributed to this pataphysical cosmology through a curatorial research project and an exhibition entitled “Making Use: Life in Postartistic Times” (2016), which examined the organizational ecologies of over a hundred practices from all over the world, locating them firmly in their respective institutional habitats.³⁵ The research concluded by confirming a thesis outlined above: artistic dark matter is indeed getting brighter, as new forms of artistic practice are sustained by new social formations and actually existing artistic habitats.

Precisely due to the existence of alternative support structures, the decision of Chto Delat? to boycott Manifesta was not a mere withdrawal, but an eruption of social creativity. As Dmitry Vilensky, a member of the group, stated:

We made our work *as local artists* who have the resources to continue and make a public program completely outside of the Manifesta framework. We realized a mobile

platform for communication between Russian and Ukrainian artists, and it was our priority. We did a big-scale performance with our school in public space, without any authorization, and all this stuff was quite visible.³⁶

It is important to underline that Chto Delat? is explicitly against boycotts, as they are committed to liberating the means of production for the sake of art workers and their radical politics. Neither can they be dismissed as marginal outsiders. They are well-reputed internationally, and connected to various global networks (art-activist movements, academic networks, biennial circulation). Their decision to boycott was informed by the statements of Kasper König, chief curator of Manifesta, after he expressed his admiration for artistic autonomy and a reluctance to sustain a more politicized platform – a statement that was especially striking in the context of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its war in Ukraine. Chto Delat? quite sensibly took the situation for what it actually was, and deemed the links between Manifesta, the Russian government, and global art circulation too firmly knotted to engage with in the terms dictated by the event itself. But they did not withdraw idly. Instead, they organized alternative programs and events for both local and international audiences. They were able to do this precisely because their access was not dependent on Manifesta; they had their own distributed means of gathering resources, mobilizing fellow art workers, and broadcasting their message in a way that would not distort its meaning beyond recognition.

Striking Art as a Practice of Freedom

An emphasis on sustainable social forms does not preempt the question of art and aesthetics – on the contrary. As members of the radical New York-based collective MTL suggest, artistic practices are connected to materialist perspective on daily reproduction – people “strike art as a training in the practice of freedom.”³⁷ The art strike unmakes the art system in order to liberate art from institutional ossification. The art of the strike recalls the words of Antonio Negri in *Art and Multitude*, his collection of letters:

To conclude, let us return to the “republican” definition of the beautiful, which I oppose to its “angelic” definition. By republican I mean the tradition which sees the collective as the basis of the free production of being. And by “the beautiful” I understand an *excedence*, an innovation. A freedom which is liberated, a liberty which

is ever-increasingly free, ever-increasingly potent. Whereas the angel is the symbol of a deficit, of a relationship which will never be resolved. An unexpected illustration of the confusion of being, which is opposed to the construction of being and to its collective clarification. What a bad taste the angel has in his mouth. What impotence he expresses. At bottom, the angel remains the demonstration of a power which is disillusioned and malign.³⁸

Currently, this angelic being of art, with its pretense to autonomy, circulates restlessly, chasing interchangeable opportunities, losing even its capacity to think beauty. It runs in circles, chasing its own angelic tail. The dominant market-biennial nexus – based on the financial subsumption of aura and an accelerated peddling of content – erases the artistic qualities of the idioms thus circulated. As Neil Cummings has put it, markets mark the things that circulate through them.³⁹ The forms of stabilizing values inherent to the market-biennial nexus depend on the circulation of emptied commodities (the faster they move, more valuable they become).

Strikes, boycotts, and occupations identify these self-referential operations for what they are: empty usurpations. When art-sustaining environments emerge, dark matter gets brighter, and new institutions of the commons sustain not only artistic practices, but also artistic values. They form what John Roberts calls the “secondary economy” of art – an institutional habitat where art regains its function as a collective practice of freedom and exercises its powers of negation, infinite ideation, and existential playfulness.⁴⁰ Hito Steyerl, looking for a refuge from endless circulation and subsumption, envisions such an economy as an alternative system of artistic currency – a current of social and artistic energies redirected from propelling exploitative circulation and towards the welfare of art workers and their cooperative networks and gift economies.⁴¹

Art workers working on boycotts, strikes, and occupations, are actually able to make more interesting, conceptually charged, and imaginative art – qualities that are erased in the circulatory pace of the blue-chip gallery vortex. This statement only *seems* grandiose. It is an article of faith shared by art theory and avant-garde practice that artistic qualities are stupefied by the institutional systems tasked with their sustenance. In this context, one usually refers to Marcel Duchamp and his ironic forms of dematerialization, to the self-destructive art of Gustav Metzger, or to the artistic laziness of Mladen Stilinović. However,

productive withdrawal as discussed here should not be mistaken for an individualized artistic gesture (as conceptually enticing as this would be); rather, they should be associated with Walter Benjamin’s notions of repurposing the apparatuses of cultural production. In this sense, productive withdrawal is more aligned with figures like Gustave Courbet, Bertolt Brecht, the Russian constructivists, and the Situationist International, which all refused to sustain art systems, revamping them in the process. In fact, art regains its capacity for republican potency and creative excess only in the context of what Benjamin described, following Brecht, as “functional transformation” (*Umfunktionierung*), i.e., the liberation of the forms and instruments of production by a progressive intelligentsia, who instead of simply “transmitting the apparatus of production, change it to the maximum extent possible in the direction of socialism.”⁴²

In 1972, Jerzy Ludwiński, a Polish theoretician of conceptual art and herald of a postartistic age, described the process of the dissolution of art into general social praxis: “Perhaps, even today, we do not deal with art. We might have overlooked the moment when it transformed itself into something else, something which we cannot yet name. It is certain, however, that what we deal with offers greater possibilities.”⁴³

It is interesting that this idea of art venturing beyond its current systemic ossifications – an idea similarly expressed by many of Ludwiński’s contemporaries, like Lucy Lippard, Allan Kaprow, George Maciunas, and Rasheed Araeen, just to name a few – is so often associated with productive withdrawals. As the strikes, boycotts, and occupations described above demonstrate, restoring art’s capacity to be a practice of freedom keeps art workers too busy to be bothered with the trappings of artistic circulation.

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Basecamp Group & Friends,
Plausible Artworlds
(Philadelphia: Lulu.com, 2013).

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The results of this survey are collected on the web page of the project
<http://www.makinguse.artmuseum.pl/>.

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Dmitry Vilensky, "Withdrawal as Institutional Critique: Chto Delat and Manifesta 10," in *I Can't Work like This*.

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Quoted in McKee, *Strike Art*, 35.

38

Antonio Negri, *Art and Multitude* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 52.

39

Neil Cummings, "A Joy Forever," *Joy Forever*.

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John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015).

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Hito Steyerl, "If You Don't Have Bread, Eat Art!: Contemporary Art and Derivative Fascisms," *e-flux journal* 76 (October 2016)
<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/69732/if-you-don-t-have-bread-eat-art-contemporary-art-and-derivative-fascisms/>.

42

Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 3.

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Jerzy Ludwiński, *Notes from the Future of Art: Selected Writings of Jerzy Ludwiński* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum; Rotterdam: Veenman Publishers, 2007), 26.