

# Subsidy

**Joshua Schwebel and Catarina Pires**

The following is a description of an intervention and exhibit that took place in Berlin at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in the summer and autumn of 2015. The text is written by myself, the artist who created this work, and by Catarina Pires, one of the interns who was working at the Künstlerhaus at the time of my exhibition.

## Project Description

My name is Joshua Schwebel and I am a conceptual artist. My most recent project, *Subsidy*, exposes the labour practices in art institutional structures, particularly the pervasive absence of payment in the field of cultural labour.

The project began when, as an artist in residence at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin for the year of 2015, I recognized that the institution used (and continues to use) unpaid interns as part of its administrative structure. Having been awarded a funded residency in this institution, I was disturbed to be put in a position of benefiting from a standardized practice of structurally enforced precarity.

My artistic project within the residency was to redirect the complete funds allotted for my exhibition budget (€3,000) into honoraria to compensate the formerly unpaid interns whose time coincided with my year in residence. Through a negotiation process, I returned my budget to the institution in order to pay a total of seven interns for their work in the administrative offices.

I sent the following letter to the artistic director, Christoph Tannert, and residency director, Valeria Schulte-Fischedick:

7 July, 2015

Dear Valeria and Christoph,

I am writing to request your support and assistance to complete the project I have developed while in residence here at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien.

I aim to use my entire exhibition fee to compensate the unpaid interns who work with the administrative staff and support the artists at the KB. My fee should be divided equally amongst the interns who have worked during the year of my residency. Ideally I would like the KB to simply transfer my exhibition fee to its own accounts, and then make bank transfers directly to its interns. With your support I am open to resolving the precise movement of the funds in compliance with tax regulations, however I would prefer if possible that the payments go directly from the KB to its interns. The documentation of these transactions, inclusive of this very letter, subsequent pertinent correspondence, and proof of the bank transfers, will be included in my exhibition.

While the Künstlerhaus Bethanien is one amongst many, if not the majority, of international arts institutions benefiting from, and in many cases dependent on unpaid labour, my intention is not to single it out, but rather to draw attention to the larger practice of unpaid labour in the arts. The KB institution and artists, myself included, are benefiting from the availability and necessity of passionate self-exploitation at the entry level of cultural work. No other field so implicitly contradicts itself in declaring a culture of access, openness, and radical political critique, while ignoring and therefore obfuscating the growing gap between those who can afford to support their cultural commitments and those who cannot continue in the field due to lack of external financial means. I intend my transaction to address this crisis of access and sustainability in arts and culture today.

I am happy to meet with you both to discuss this further. Your facilitation and advice are welcome and necessary in order to complete this transaction.

Respectfully,

Joshua Schwebel

This letter provoked a radically censorious response from the director, who phoned me 10 minutes after receipt of my letter. He pronounced that the project “wasn’t art”, that it was too political for the institution, and that I was “being stupid”. He insisted that the money was intended for materials and objects for exhibition. He refused to send anything in written form, or even to document his receipt of my letter.

After a week of panic and an intense feeling of hostility and unwelcomeness at the residency, I was called in for a meeting. During the meeting the director proclaimed his disappointment, claiming to “love my work”, and implying that this piece had “nothing to do with my previous work”. He said he felt set up, and that my piece



Subsidy, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin. Photo Sandy Volz.

was making the Bethanien look bad, making it look like they were doing something illegal. I explained that there is nothing necessarily illegal about using unpaid interns, although there should be, and that my issue is not with the particular institution but with the larger artistic and institutional practice of relying on the unpaid labour of most often female, intelligent, eager young people. And that in accepting this labour, the institution fundamentally devalues the labour of all of its paid employees, by showing governmental funders (the Berlin Senate, in this case), that the institution can and will sustain its operations with inadequate administrative funding. After negotiating the validity of my project and confirming that there would be “things” in my exhibition space, the meeting was concluded with a handshake, and I made clear that I would not change my project or repeal my intention.

In proceeding with the exhibition, I asked the interns working in the office at the time of the exhibition, Livia Tarsia in Curia and Catarina Pires, to perform their assigned office duties within my exhibition space, which I transformed into a semi-private office space by installing a wall and door to divide the space from other artists’ galleries. Livia and Catarina enthusiastically accepted my proposal. The choice to position the actual working interns within the exhibition space under

my name was a delicate decision, and one not taken lightly. The decision was made in order to prioritize the interns' voices, opinions, and choices. To make this decision more emphatic, I suppressed the printed publicity card for the exhibition, and reduced the typical exhibition signage to a small name card, which normally was affixed outside my studio door. Catarina and Livia worked in the gallery during the overlap between office and gallery hours (between 14h and 18h Tuesday – Thursday, and 14h and 16h30 on Fridays), speaking with visitors should they have questions, but for the most part, performing the duties they normally would undertake in the KB's administrative offices. All furniture in the exhibition was provided from the KB's own storage, and office supplies were taken from the administrative offices. Funds to divide the exhibition space into an office were redirected from allocations for my (unused) publicity budget.

While including Livia and Catarina in the exhibition space served to make their role within the institution, and my intervention, visible to a general public, more importantly it withdrew them from the institution's offices, articulating their contribution to the institution's operations through its absence.



Subsidy, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin. Photo Sandy Volz.

*Subsidy* constituted a refusal to work in the way the institution expected, an attitude and method that has been consistent throughout my artistic practice. By resisting the institutionally streamlined process that facilitates access to money for the production of exhibition objects (and obstructs access to money for work that doesn't prioritize the exhibition outcome), I encountered and overcame several unspoken (and some quite plainly spoken) authoritative assumptions about what art is and where it belongs. The project also enacted a refusal to uphold current working conditions in contemporary art; conditions that maintain systemic precarity, ambivalent ethics, and competition amongst artists and cultural workers. In negotiating for money earmarked for 'art' to reverse its course and return to the institution, the project forced a re-examination of the values that determine what the institution prioritizes in its spending: how funding priorities pre-emptively designate what is important for art and artists. As Marina Vishmidt remarked, "Money is a flash that lights up the circuits of power in the institution, hence *Subsidy* (2015) takes money as its means of material realization. An institution is forced to recognize the labour of its unpaid staff by means of money, which means it is at the same time forced to recognize this time as labour time, and itself as an exploiter"<sup>1</sup>. By using money as money, my project made visible the structural disparity between labour and value in the artworld.

## Catarina Pires

We are dealing at the present time with the general acceptance of the internship as a main source of labour among the art institutions. These internships are either unpaid or underpaid. Art workers find themselves in a vicious circle that includes power imbalance, speculation and immaterial benefits that may never become form.

The internship is a distant relative of 11th and 12th century apprenticeships in Europe, where master craftsmen took in young learners to teach them the trade, usually for years, and after this transitional period, they would be granted full membership of the trade guild and could earn wages. During the 20th century, internships have evolved exponentially. The capitalist system, playing with people's expectations, offers instead of payment – either a "glance into a prestigious institution's way of functioning", an "experience within one of the top companies in the field", or simply "networking"; although they usually search for a qualified person who is "flexible, enthusiastic and highly motivated, with a positive attitude".

Especially in the arts sector, it is expected that people will work for free. The institutions claim most of the time that they lack the funds to pay for the labour that is being executed, while sometimes blatantly spending money on superfluous matters. The under-financing is indeed a reality but the problem lies in the prioritizing criteria used by the institution and not the lack of funding alone. The unpaid/underpaid labour is taken for granted. Art institutions do not escape contamination

by free-market ideology: there is a constant permeability between corporations, the state, and the art institutions themselves. Especially since the economic crisis of 2008 we are led to believe that this cross-contamination is inevitable. We witness the paradox of institutions that wish to be in the vanguard of new ways of thinking and exhibiting while still being based on corporate modes of production and capitalisation.

Andrea Fraser summarizes some features of the art professional: “We’re highly educated, highly motivated “self starters” who believe that learning is a continuous process. We are always ready for change and adapt to it quickly. We prefer freedom and flexibility to security. We do not want to punch a clock and tend to resist quantifying the value of our labour time. We do not know the meaning of “overtime”. We are convinced we work for ourselves and our own satisfaction even when we work for others. We tend to value non-material over material rewards, which we are willing to defer, even to posterity.”<sup>2</sup>. These characteristics make the art professionals ideal candidates for the perpetuation of this kind of exploitation-logic, and why it is so difficult to overthrow.

I was an unpaid intern at Künstlerhaus Bethanien at the time *Subsidy* took place and as for my personal experience as a part of it, I consider it was of great importance to provoke a reaction both from the institution as from the exhibition visitors about these otherwise invisible issues. Most people visiting the exhibition expressed surprise, unease, or even fright, as someone said “hello” to them, in such a context. It produced a direct contact between the visitors and the office interns, something that never occurs. While sitting in the exhibition space we realised that the explanation about the concept and what was taking place was necessary. It enabled a break from the white cube object contemplation, straight into reality – the reality of the institution’s way of functioning, labour rights, and in general, what is behind the scenes. The realisation that there is unpaid labour involved in the exhibition made most people uncomfortable; at the very least it raised awareness and at best it will instigate action. As Hans Haacke once said, when art declares its separation from everyday politics and concerns, what it does is to preserve the status quo<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, this project made the interns’ absence in the office noticeable for the institution, requiring resultant changes in the usual office organisation. Although I was performing most of my normal tasks in the exhibition space, some required the office physical space and therefore it made fully visible the necessity of the intern’s work.

Institutions – especially the largest ones – have no trouble finding interns who will work for no pay, since people feel the apparent inevitability of undergoing successive<sup>4</sup> internships. Interns embody features that make them especially vulnerable to precarity and labour exploitation: the intern stands in a state of limbo; s/he is no longer a student, but also not considered a worker; therefore s/he has no access to union protection, no equal work rights, no social security deductions, but also no



Subsidy, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin. Photo by Sandy Volz.

student benefits. This extreme precarious situation lowers considerably any potential negotiating position for better working conditions – what if unpaid interns working on galleries, art institutions, museums, etc. decided to go on strike, for instance?

Having a more affirmative and interventional attitude is in my opinion mandatory, as in the case of *Subsidy*, to shake the establishment by not playing by their rules. Priorities should be reviewed when it comes to budget allocation by the institutions, as from the funders – in many cases public ones – that support the institutions' activities without insuring that labour is fairly paid. We need more critical targeted projects and most of all that art workers can channel the non-acceptance of these situations to collective action, unionization and organization, overthrowing first differences inside the class itself, and so that art's aspirations of liberation, consciousness and progressive thinking can be materialised, and not swallowed up by the current neoliberal logic.

*Joshua Schwebel is a conceptual artist interested in the relationship between value and visibility. His work reveals the concept of value as a cultural construct borne through hidden ties to morality and privilege, by*

*exposing the cultural and social techniques employed in value construction. In his work he devises strategies to reveal the politics of exclusion, expropriation, and competition that both mandate and conceal the conditions of valuation in late Capitalism. Through strategic interventions, displacements, and withdrawals, he attempts to unbalance and open up these seemingly impartial processes.*

*Catarina Pires is a writer and curator based in Lisbon. She was a curatorial and production intern at Künstlerhaus Bethanien.*

## References

- 1 Vishmidt, Marina: Wages for Anyone is Bad For Business, Subsidy, Berlin: Archive, 2016 pg.
- 2 Fraser, Andrea. "A museum is not a business. It is run in a businesslike fashion." Möntmann, Nina. Art and its intitions . current conflicts, critique and collaborations. Black Dog Publishing, 2006, pg.94.
- 3 Glahn, Philip. Estrangement and Politicization: Bertolt Brecht and American Art, 1967-1979. Dissertation. New York, 2007.
- 4 According to a survey published by the European Union, conducted among people between 18 and 35 years old, 46% of the people have had an internship; in Germany, where *Subsidy* took place, this number reaches 76%. From the percentage of people that have had an internship, 22% already experienced doing 4 or more internships. 59% of people reported not having received any monetary compensation for their work during their most recent internship. (European Commission 2013).