Artistic Labour: Seeking a Utopian Dimension

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This article investigates the notion of artistic labour by elucidating how artists can create ethical social relations to perform "a new, possible world" by reinserting labour and advocacy into their practice. An examination of contemporary works by Ahmet Öğüt and Cevdet Erek who attempt to create micro-utopias by situating artistic labour at their core or by emphasising the power of networks and the "commons" to foster social integration are juxtaposed with the discussion of a possible genealogy of such utopian artistic attempts from the late 1960s and 1970s. The historical trajectory delineates the common denominators of artistic practices that proceed from utopian ideals such as anti-isolation, anti social division, anti self-reflexivity, process instead of object-based work, and investment in human value rather than materialistic value.

Keywords: artistic labour, art workers, 1970s, utopia, commons, advocacy

Imagine it is March 2013. You have travelled all the way from New York, Zurich or London to the hot, humid and ostentatious Dubai for the Art Dubai Fair, to see its mélange of art from the Middle East, Europe, Africa and Latin America. You enter the heavily air-conditioned Madinat Jumeirah, walk around the booths, only stopping to ask the young and eager gallery representative for the price of a Gabriel Orozco work, to realise that it is above the quarter million pounds mark. Thinking about how much that particular gallery representative is being paid (if anything, besides lunch) for her efforts, you keep on meandering through the corridors to reach what looks like a lounge. Relieved, you gesture towards your VIP fair pass that you had pinned to your jeans, only to realise that despite being an asset at the fair entrance, the VIP fair pass does not get you through the doors to what you learn is in fact a lounge for the countless unpaid art-workers and interns, one of which you just conversed with.

Created by Ahmet Öğüt, "Intern VIP Lounge" was an exclusive space for the unpaid interns working at the art fair and at the galleries in Dubai during the Art Dubai Fair in 2013. The lounge was a self-referential artwork parodying the disproportionate economic structures of the art world. By subverting the hierarchical structure of the art world, Öğüt was acting

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as a catalyst for change. As such, his call was among the "small reforms which make up great transformations" referred to by Félix Guattari (Guattari and Lotringer 2009: 153). Taking cues from Guattari and Roger Sansi-Roca, who both take Lévi-Strauss's idea of the artist's work as a "small-scale model" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 23) in their discussions of "micro-utopias", I propose that art practice that directly (or concomitantly) serves a function—other than being art or about art—challenges its own ontological conditions in turn for pragmatic outcomes. Sansi-Roca posits that although they may still be "imprecise and unstable" or "subject to revision", such prototypes, experiments, small-scale models or "utopian projections" created by artists carry with them "the promise of a different future" (Sansi-Roca 2015: 157). As such, this article investigates the notion of artistic labour by elucidating how artists can create ethical social relations to perform "a new, possible world" by reinserting labour and advocacy into their practice. An examination of contemporary works that attempt to create micro-utopias by situating artistic labour at their core or by emphasising the power of networks and the "commons" to foster social integration will be juxtaposed with the discussion of a possible genealogy of such utopian artistic attempts from the late 1960s and 1970s. The historical trajectory will delineate the common denominators of artistic practices that proceed from utopian ideals such as anti-isolation, anti social division, anti self-reflexivity, process instead of object-based work, and investment in human value rather than materialistic value.
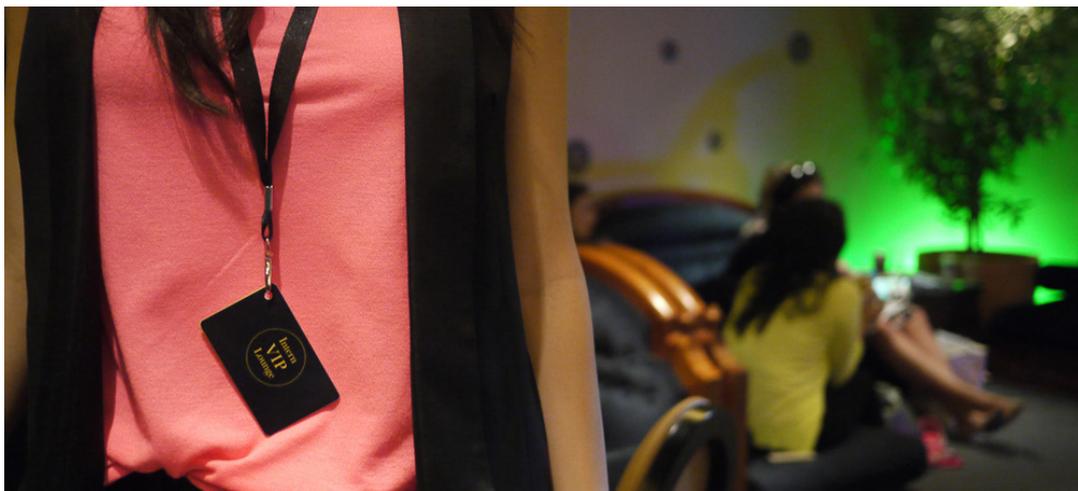
Ahmet Öğüt, "Intern VIP Lounge", Art Dubai, 2013. Courtesy of artist.

Another shared aspect of these microscopic attempts is that they operate on the level of individual groups. By challenging the logic of capitalist markets, which promote individualism, these art works seek to create communities (albeit temporally) and platforms for solidarity and resistance that can essentially be replicated. Case in point, Öğüt's "Intern VIP Lounge" provided such a temporal platform for the art interns as a micro-community. Subverting the concept of an art fair lounge, Öğüt's work offered an "exclusive" space that provided "a relaxed and entertaining ambience, [that also operated] as a knowledge exchange space, with a special programme of events, including meetings, presentations and film screenings".[2] Essentially, Öğüt's "Intern VIP Lounge" was a parody of that which has now become a sine qua non of art fairs: the lounge, where the quarter-million-pound-a-piece-paying art-lovers go to sip champagne while mingling with other members of the so-called art world. Although art-workers, which

2 "Intern VIP Lounge", commissioned by Art Dubai Projects and initiated by Ahmet Öğüt, at the 2013 Art Dubai Fair. Retrieved October 8, 2014 (http://www.ahmetogut.com/ahmetwebinternvip.html).

include unpaid gallery interns, artists' assistants, art handlers, transportation teams, insurers and other administrative staff are indispensable for the sustainability of the art world, they are conveniently kept outside the lounges, just as they are kept out of the museum galas, exhibition openings and auctions. David Graeber argues that:

> the art world has become largely an appendage to finance capital. This is not to say that it takes on the nature of finance capital (in many ways, in its forms, values, and practices, it is almost exactly the opposite) – but it is to say it follows it around, its galleries and studios clustering and proliferating around the fringes of the neighborhoods where financiers live and work in global cities everywhere, from New York and London to Basel and Miami (Graeber 2008).

Dubai is one such city that is central to the oil-rich Persian Gulf, which the art world has been pursuing with plans for overseas outposts of museums such as the Guggenheim and the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, Mathaf Museum in Doha or the DMOCA in Dubai. Yet, projects such as the Guggenheim and Louvre in Abu Dhabi which won't materialise for some time to come have raised issues regarding labour abuse in their construction sites, instigating protests world-wide. Such cultural investments have become the focus of scrutiny because they fail to abide by ethical labour conditions. This is not far off from the asymmetrical financial structures that Öğüt critiques with his "Intern VIP Lounge". Writing in *ArtReview*, J. J. Charlesworth referred to Öğüt's lounge as a spoof of "the current anxiety over 'slave labour' in the cultural industries" (Charlesworth 2013), which questioned the hierarchical structures of the art world. Free coffee, a chocolate fountain, massages, a table tennis tournament and free mocktails were offered at the lounge. As these art fair interns are rarely paid, and have to spend entire days—usually in 12-hour shifts—they have no other option than to pay for things from their pockets.

Notwithstanding its seductive façade, the art market depends upon the unwaged labour force of the interns. While, for instance the white-collar work force of the financial market is welcomed at first instance with at least an entry-level salary, entry into the art market, to a great extent, is through several months (up to a year in many organisations) of unpaid internship positions. Interns are the bread and butter of the art world market. Marx stated that "capitalist production can by no means content itself with the quantity of disposable labour power, which the natural increase of population yields. It requires for its free play an industrial reserve army independent of these natural limits" (Marx 1867). Hence, in Marxist terms, interns are the "reserve army" of labour. In effect, the reserve army of interns allows the market to keep wages low, consequently increasing profits for owners. The fortunes of the wealthy grow at the expense of the wage-earners. This is the perfect reflection of the perpetual character of the neoliberal system (See David 2005). Accordingly, as the number of interns increase, the precariousness of their position and their torment of labour is intensified. Öğüt's "Intern VIP Lounge" is a direct response to the plight of this "precarious generation" (Bourdieu 1999) of twenty to thirty-something people who have very low work security and irregular and often harsh working periods, which have detrimental impacts on their health and social life (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2006; Perrons 2002, 2007; Pratt, 2000). Gill and Pratt list the results of qualitative and ethnographic studies, which emphasise the common conditions and features of work for these people: "long hours and bulimic patterns of working", blending of work and play, "high levels of mobility', "informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality", "profound experiences of in-security and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and keeping up in rapidly changing fields" (Gill and Pratt 2013: 33). The major problem with internships then, (as well as for part-time or freelance work) is how it benefits the employers in their profit making schemes by exonerating them from providing certain benefits and conditions that they provide to full-

time employees.

Like art-workers (or cultural and creative workers according to Gill and Pratt 2008), and regardless of their meagre or non-existent wages, these art interns are "social workers" of what Negri refers to as the "factory without walls", in which labour is "deterritorialised, dispersed and decentralised" (Negri 1989: 79). Since, these art interns are made to work long hours, starting before the opening of the fair and staying long after it closes, they endure hours of solitary work. There is no trade-union for interns, nor is there a specific upside to interning at a fair since most of these interns are local, whereas the galleries they intermittently work for are not. Hence, by offering a space where these otherwise dispersed interns can socialise, Öğüt's "Intern VIP Lounge" attacks the art world's factory without walls. By reversing the conventional understanding of the VIP lounge and recompensing the interns—ethically doing what the employers should have been doing—Öğüt is disrupting the art market system. Instead of rejecting the invitation from the art fair to produce a site-specific work—a route many artists might have taken as a form of remonstrance—Öğüt is acting as a catalyst for change by subverting the hierarchical structure of the art world, where interns generally inhabit the very bottom of the ladder. In other words, Öğüt's work initiates "the release of a social potential for transformation, largely attributable to [the work's] affective dimensions and the opportunities for human contact and interaction" (Gill and Pratt 2013: 29). By creating an opportunity for socialising and networking, which is "less about 'schmoozing' the powerful than 'chilling' with friends, co-workers and people who share similar interests and enthusiasm" (Gill and Pratt 2013: 35) in the creative fields, Öğüt's "Intern VIP Lounge" is also providing a platform for "compulsory sociality" (Gregg 2008), which as Melissa Gregg's research contends may be a vital element of survival, and not solely "tarrying of time" as referred to by some autonomist writing (Papadopoulos 2008).

While low-paid or unpaid, intermittent and irregular patterns of work—such as the work undertaken by the interns at the Art Dubai Fair—translates to precarious work, one might argue that these interns already come from middle class backgrounds, stellar educational achievements, and are thus by no means part of the precarious labour force. However, such an approach would be discriminative and elitist. Art interns are not precarious because their work is intermittent or irregular, but because they are exploited financially and socially within the art world. In a 2011 European Youth Forum research study on internship quality, one intern admits that, although one learns a lot, an unpaid internship "does not support the idea of social equality, as those who cannot afford to do an unpaid internship do not have the same job opportunities".[3] Furthermore, the statistics from the same indicates that nearly half of all interns surveyed (49%) had not been paid at all.[4] Furthermore, for 41% of those who were compensated, the remuneration level was inadequate to cover their daily expenses, and only 25% of the interns surveyed were able to "make ends meet" with the compensation, whereas the vast majority (65%) had to rely on financial assistance from their parents.[5] In a similar vein, in their template letter directed

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3 European Youth Forum, *Interns Revealed: A Survey on Internship Quality in Europe,* Giuseppe Porcaro, Inger Dyrnes, Santa Ozolina and Sara Ulfhielm, Brussels, 2011. Retrieved 9 October 2015 (http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@europe/@ro-geneva/@ilo-brussels/documents/genericdocument/wcms_175791.pdf), p. 25
4 European Youth Forum, *Interns Revealed*, p. 15
5 Ibid.

to art institutions, the Precarious Workers' Brigade stated:

> […] we are concerned that by not paying people, only those who can afford to work for free will be able to benefit from your internship scheme. As internships are becoming more prevalent than graduate jobs, those who are unable to take up these unpaid "opportunities" are less likely to enter the sector. This seems unfair and exclusionary.[6]

Öğüt's "Intern VIP Lounge" challenged the exclusionary structures of the art world by way of the insufficiently (or not at all) compensated interns. Otherwise confronted with "unfair and exclusionary" social and economic conditions, the "Intern VIP Lounge" was where their social status as interns gained them entry to a world of Very Important People. By subverting these exclusionary socio-economic conditions that define the art world, Öğüt created a "micro-topia" in the Bourriaudian sense, and hence in pursuit of Félix Guattari's call for social change through "microscopic attempts at creating communities, setting up analytic groups among militants, organizing a day-care center at a university" (Guattari 1977: 29). Throughout the five days of the fair, exclusive screenings of "Dream Factory" by Aily Nash & Andrew Norman Wilson, "A New Product" by Harun Farocki, "Workers Leaving the Googleplex" by Andrew Norman Wilson, "People's passion, lifestyle beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water" by Neil Beloufa, "The Trainee" by Pilvi Takala, "Strategies" by Harm van den Dorpel, "De-employed" by Michael-Bell Smith, "Green Screen Refrigerator" by Mark Leckey, "Strike" by Hito Steyerl and "Fired" by Marianne Flotron were shown in addition to talks given by artists Basim Magdy, Pilvi Takala and Dina Danish as well as curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist and Başak Şenova. In addition to reinforcing the Lounge's status as a microtopia—and not solely a space for socialisation—these events deemed it "a-place-to-be", and one where a person's status as a HNWI was inconsequential.

Öğüt's subsequent "Day After Debt: A Call for Student Loan Relief" was a collective project dubbed as "a long-term counter-finance strategy"[7] with artists Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Dan Perjovschi, Martha Rosler, Superflex and Krzysztof Wodiczko; art lawyer Sergio Muñoz Sarmiento, and The Debt Collective, a student-debt cancelling initiative launched by Strike Debt's Rolling Jubilee. Located in the Eli and Edyth Broad Art Museum in Michigan State University, the project was jointly commissioned by the Broad MSU and the Istanbul-based art organisation Protocinema. The sculptures included in "Day After Debt" functioned as public collection points for raising funds for Strike Debt, who would then buy back Student Loans. A letter of agreement was created by Öğüt in collaboration with the New York-based art lawyer Sergio Muñoz Sarmiento for the artists and potential future owners of the sculpture-based fundraising machines, who would be raising funds for the collective.[8] As of December 2015, with just over 700,000 dollars, Strike Debt's Rolling Jubilee had abolished nearly 32 million dollars of student debt[9], yet the vital importance of this initiative and Öğüt's "Day After Debt" was the fact that they offered students a platform for solidarity, advocacy and resistance. This resistance is a Foucauldian one that functions micro-politically and operates on the level of

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6 Precarious Workers' Brigade, "Template for a letter to art institutions that advertise unpaid internships". Retrieved 10 October 2015 (http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/Toolbox).
7 Ahmet Öğüt, "Day After Debt" video. Retrieved 27 November 2015 (http://www.ahmetogut.com/ahmetweb-dayafterdebt.html).
8 This was reminiscent of Seth Seigelaub's The Artist's Reserved Rights, Transfer and Sale Agreement, 1971. While Siegelaub's agreement which was also drafted with the aid of a New York lawyer was intended to protect the artist, Öğüt's Agreement was created to protect the students in debt that the work primarily intended to benefit.
9 Rolling Jubilee Statistics. Retrieved 27 November 2015 (http://rollingjubilee.org/).

individuals and groups, rather than seeking to change things in totality. Both of Öğüt's projects are geared to creating micro-utopias that carry the potentiality to resurface, multiply and/or expand.

Ahmet Öğüt, "Anti-Debt Monolith", 2014. Courtesy of the artist and photographer Aaron Word.

This potentiality is a recurring aspect of Öğüt's artistic practice. Perhaps the best example of this is the autonomous knowledge exchange platform called The Silent University (TSU), which was initiated by Öğüt, together with Synthia Griffin and Nora Razian from the Learning and Community Partnerships teams at the Tate in 2012.[10] Established as a response to the "silencing process" faced by migrants, asylum seekers and refugees with academic and/or professional backgrounds who are unable to practice because of their status, TSU seeks "to challenge the idea of silence as a passive state, and explore its powerful potential through performance, writing, and group reflection".[11] Now operating in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany and Jordan, TSU offers these people an opportunity to become lecturers, academic consultants and research fellows again. With its motto "Towards A Transversal Pedagogy", TSU offers a variety of courses such as "Didactics for Learning New Languages", "Herodotus and The Civilisation of Medes" and "The History of Food Preparation through the Visual Arts", and as such presents a perfect example of what Guattari deems a successful microscopic attempt. In addition to lectures, TSU also organizes events and workshops such as the two-day, free-of-charge Anti-Bias Workshop, last April, which was in line with its objectives, which include: acting in solidarity with other collectives and refugee struggles around the world, "Acting knowledge without language and legal limitations" or "Adhocracy without bureaucracy".[12]

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10 Ahmet Öğüt in collaboration with Sythia Griffin and Nora Razian, The Silent University. Retrieved 27 November 2015 (http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/30087).

11 The Silent University Website. Retrieved 27 November 2015 (http://thesilentuniversity.org/).

12 "The Silent University Principles and Demands". Retrieved 27 November 2015 (http://thesilentuniversity.org/).

"The Silent University", 2012 - onwards. Courtesy of The Silent University.

So far, TSU has fostered the making of alliances with nearly hundred groups and projects such as The Chickpea Sisters, Open Education Resources (OER) Movement, The Magdas Hotel—whose staff members are mostly refugees—and the Autonomous Center for and by Migrant Women among others. Instead of money or free voluntary service, the university utilises alternative currencies of exchange—made possible by the variety of its alliances and members—for the transnational reactivation of knowledge, and not just its dissemination. As opposed to the usual suspects of cultural sponsorship, which include BP, Deutsche Bank or BMW, TSU is self-supported, in addition to the support offered by the collaborating institutions such as the Delfina Foundation, Tensta Konsthall, Ringlokschuppen Ruhr and the University of Oxford among others. Essentially a self-organising and self-supporting network, TSU works as a catalyst for the social integration of displaced academics and professionals (an ever-increasing necessity in today's political climate) as well as those they reach out to. What "The Silent University" and "Day After Debt" share is their initial—and perhaps practical—alignment with institutions as "responsible actors" rather than mere "facilitators" (Lind 2005). Neither of these works are bound to a particular institution, hence they are not at risk of becoming (possibly neoliberal) ideological façades for the entertainment industry.

Another contemporary artist who recently created a work that follows similar micro-utopian ideals is Cevdet Erek. The Turkish artist's "Re-illumination" (2013) was conceived for the MAK exhibition, "Signs Taken in Wonder: Searching for Contemporary Istanbul". Erek created the site-specific installation by initiating a cleaning operation that involved the ceiling of the main exhibition hall. Erek realised that the ceiling had been covered with carpets years ago, accumulating heaps of dirt. The hall was similar to the one in Kunsthalle Basel with a skylight that illuminated the space. Erek felt that MAK could also benefit from natural daylight. He convinced the museum's management and the exhibition curators, Simon Rees and Bärbel

Vischer to remove the carpets and eliminate any dirt. After the ceiling was cleaned, daylight could finally enter and illuminate the space. As a result, Erek titled the work "Re-illumination". The entry of daylight meant that the work was the day itself, and as such, it was an illuminated volume rather than an object. Molleton (100% cotton material woven from plain canvas) fabric was suspended from a temporary aluminium structure attached to the ceiling in order to absorb the sounds that would otherwise reverberate from the walls. During the course of the exhibition, Erek, who is also a professional musician (he is the drummer of Nekropsi, an experimental, progressive rock band founded in İstanbul in 1989) made three sound performances open to the public, which effectively allowed him to activate the space.
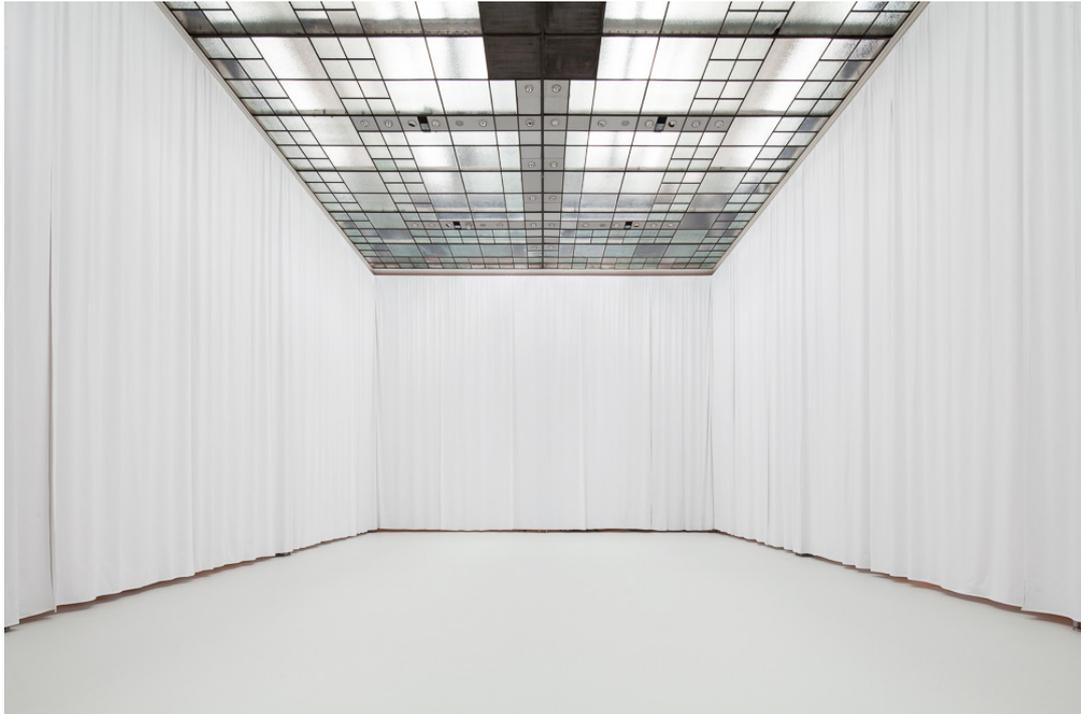
Cevdet Erek, "Re-illumination", 2013. Image courtesy of the artist and MAK. Photo: Katrin Wißkirchen.

In essence, this site-specific work eliminated the need for additional artificial lighting in the space. Furthermore, it provided the visitors of the museum with "free" light, even after the end of this exhibition. Instead of placing a loudspeaker and guiding visitors towards an object (three-dimensional or auditory) or a direction (as in churches), the work was formed by the actual volume of the space along with the light that filled it, its internal glass wall and the movement of visitors. At the same time, the glass ceiling with all the elements that had been added over the years, such as air conditioning, light fixtures and speakers, created a stained-glass window of sorts. This stained-glass effect was emphasised by the natural light that was filtered through the ceiling. Since, this site-specific work was created for a group exhibition, it in turn became a common gathering area for visitors, as well as an area for recuperation (from all the art). Since "Re-illumination" was part of a group exhibition—and because it was situated in the middle of the museum (hence the other artworks)—it also served as an impromptu meeting space for visitors.

One of the four demands stated by the Precarious Workers Brigade is "shared ownership of space, ideas and resources", which they refer to as "the commons".[13] By creating "commons", both Öğüt and Erek's works defy the capitalist market's logic that negates and/or eliminates integration. All three works by Öğüt and Erek's "Re-illumination" provide a shared ownership to the participants. The screenings and talks are for the interns, money collected in the sculpture-based fundraising machines benefit the students with debts, by way of the Debt Collective, the TSU lectures and workshops are open to all and do not belong to any particular institution, and finally "Re-illumination" benefits visitors to the MAK even long after the end of the exhibition for which the work was intended for. All of these works can be viewed as interventions per se. While the former three works intervene by making additions, the latter intervenes by means of subtraction. However what deems them utopian is the way that they question management and the status quo. Öğüt's "Intern VIP Lounge" reverses the social hierarchical positions of an art fair. The so-called lowest rank of the intern is upgraded to the highest rank, namely the "Very Important Person". Öğüt takes over the role of fair organiser and thereby blurs the line between defined social roles both of his position as artist turned organiser and of the interns turned VIPs. Similarly, Erek is also shifting his position from artist to that of a manager. His "Re-illumination" has a social agenda at its core. First and foremost, he improves the condition of the "commons" - the main exhibition hall of MAK. He creates an area for recuperation and social engagement. In the meantime, he also reduces the museum's electricity bill, thereby rendering the museum space more sustainable. Even though "Re-illumination" is primarily a site-specific work made for a particular exhibition, it is not solely a space-based work but also a time-based work, as it will exist even after this exhibition is completed. Erek's intervention is both a reduction and a remediation. In contrast to additive and/or reflexive works, these types of interventions do not run as great a risk of being subsumed by the system of our consumer society. Moreover, Re-illumination" enables a shift in the value system for art, from material value to human value as the basis for human interaction. In essence, both Erek and Öğüt are taking over "work" that would ordinarily be part of the salaried employee's responsibility, therefore elevating it from what may seem *labour*ious to meaningful and affective.

Taking his cues from Max Weber, Brian Holmes expounds on an ideal type, namely, the "flexible personality" that reveals "the intersection of social power with intimate moral dispositions and erotic drives" (Holmes 2002). Intrinsically the notion is an artistic revolt against authoritarianism and standardisation. This idea of flexibility also has an affinity to Michael Piore and Charles Sabel's idea of "flexible specialisation" in reference to the new production regime characterised by a strategy of permanent innovation to accommodate change (Piore and Sabel 1983: 261-263). Piore and Sabel's research is based on the production approaches of Northern Italian companies in the early 1980s which relied on small, independent units and spontaneous cooperation in response to the regulation crisis and recession of the earlier decade (Holmes 2002). Although this notion of flexibility when adopted en masse turns out to tolerate opportunism fostered by the neoliberal system, it also showed the imminent need for socio-cultural critique. Inherently, these flexible production strategies refuse systems of mass-production and co-optation. As Negri suggests, this revival of decentralised labour is based on the "refusal of work" rather than nostalgia for former types of work (Lazzarato, Moulier-Boutang, Negri and Santilli 1993: 46). However, it also indicates an unfulfilled need for the ethical dimension of work.

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13 Precarious Workers Brigade, "Four Demands". Retrieved 12 September 2014 (http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/).

Art practice that directly (or concomitantly) serves a function—other than being art or about art—challenges its own ontological conditions in turn for pragmatic outcomes. What this article proposes is that when art practice goes beyond the interests of the art world (i.e. making art about art itself) in order to challenge ways of working and/or terms of labour it is in turn redefining art as something that can have tangible consequences, and hence a socio-political function. While artists have increasingly embraced labour at the core of their practice since the end of the nineteenth century, they have also strived to situate themselves at the core of life. Their investigation of the ambiguous relation between artistic labour and material labour has in turn reinserted an ethical dimension to work itself. By utilising their own artistic labour as a tool, these artists have essentially shown that there can be a common ground between artists and non-artists outside of the synthetic public of the neoliberal system. However, the situation is anything but triumphant. The predominantly classless strike workers, that Arendt describes as the "refuse of all classes", constitute the ambivalent and precarious artistic labour force of today. What has been denoted as the end of internationalism and hence the beginning of globalisation has shown that inequality is even more pronounced. In fact it is now disguised as multiplicity and/or hybridity (Stallabrass 2010; Zizek 1997). Not too long ago, with rhetoric similar to that of Rancière in "The Ignorant Schoolmaster", Jeffrey Kipnis, stated:

> We should never confuse the fact that cultural practices affect us, change us, stimulate us to think and see and hear and feel differently with the supposition that they teach us anything. Once something teaches you something, it thinks for you. This is a point that eludes even the promising young mess specialists and punk whippersnappers à la Obrist, who, for all of their bravado, continue obediently to inscribe their work in the service of the Big Idea. Rotton once said, 'I may not know much about music, but I know it ain't got nuffin' to do with chords?' Worth remembering. (Kipnis 2006: 97-98).

Thus, if there is a road to salvation, it is through artists working as what Jean-Jacques Lebel describes as "moral transgressors" who voice and contest what is repressed in society through artistic labour, since, as he posits, "there is no frontier between art and life".[14] Art production is affective precisely because it is part of life and its crude reality. For decades now, artistic labour has been part of the production, distribution and consumption cycle. Yet, it increasingly has also become part of the valuation, accumulation and speculation cycle strengthening its ties with finance capital as Graeber proposes. What all of this suggests is that, artistic labour is powerful only when it transcends representation to configure and produce ethical social relations. Otherwise, art production cannot escape being subsumed and valorised by the system that it longingly and arduously reprimands.

Perhaps this is not at all a surprising scenario. During the 1960s and 1970s, the so-called "dematerialisation of art" was artists way of opposing the systematic commodification of art. According to Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, by eliminating the need for objects altogether, art practice became dematerialised (Lippard and Chandler 1968: 218). Increasingly opting for conceptual works, language as art, ephemeral performance pieces, happenings and/or live art, artists sought to avoid becoming entangled in the commodification of art works; essentially opposing the socio-economic system of the art world. While these tendencies during the 1960s and onwards were in fact motivated by a multitude of social and political reasons, they all shared an agenda of anti-commodification. This might have been a Utopian agenda, and indeed, it more or less failed, as the art world found ways of commodifying the uncommodifiable.

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14 Jean-Jacques Lebel interview with Claire Bishop, Paris 22 July 2010 quoted in *Artificial Hells,* pp. 97-98.

This radical rupture was also a reaction to the Greenbergian formalist Modernism. One, perhaps notably obvious, critique of such formalism was John Latham's 1965 conceptual work, "Still and Chew" for which he along with his students from Saint Martin's School of Art in London chewed (and spat out) Greenberg's book "Art and Culture", which he had borrowed from the school library. The chewed pages were then dissolved in acid. When Latham was called to return the book to the library, he returned the dissolved book in a labelled vial, and was subsequently sacked from his teaching post. Utopian and reactionary as this act was in 1965, the spit-riddled pages of Greenberg's book dissolved in acid, namely, "Still and Chew" is now part of the permanent collection of MoMA in New York. The work, now titled Art and Culture" (1966-69) was bought by the museum with funds endowed by the Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund, and includes a leather case containing the book, letters and labelled vials filled with powders and liquids. So much for anti-commodification…

While artists' attempts during the 1960s and 1970s to fight the commodification of art through the proliferation of conceptual and/or dematerialised art practice were ultimately unsuccessful (becoming co-opted within cycles of legitimisation just like institutional critique), these artists have nevertheless managed to challenge capitalism, as "a social system based on the imposition of work with the commodity form" (Cleaver 2000: 82). Albeit indirectly, these subversions have forced art institutions and the art market to reform themselves, and adopt new practices of display and distribution. On the other hand, taking his cues from Marcuse, Negri posits that to challenge capitalism is to refuse work, since "the refusal of work does not negate one nexus of capitalist society, one aspect of capital's process of production or reproduction. Rather with all its radicality, it negates the whole of capitalist society" (Negri 1979: 124). However, in terms of art practice, refusal of work *tout court* is not enough. For instance, Gustav Metzger who declared an "art strike" between 1977 and 1980, terminated his strike because his call was not adopted by or elicited the interest of others. During his "Years Without Art", Metzger "delved into academic research, partook of revolutionary activities, wrote treatises and continued to investigate artistic methods"[15] according to Jeannie Rosenfeld. Essentially, what Metzger did was take a sabbatical to do what the majority of other artists were already doing to support their art practices.

A more resonant attempt with a wider reach than that of Metzger was the "New York Artists Strike Against War, Racism, Repression, and War" proposed by the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) in 1970. Founded on 3 January 1969 in New York City, and active until Spring 1971, AWC was a loose group of nearly 300 artists, writers, curators and other members of the art community. The conception of the group was instigated when Takis (Vassilakis, a kinetic artist) removed his work from the "Machine" exhibition at MoMA, claiming a right of control for the exhibition of an artist's work regardless of that work's sale to another entity or institution. Julia Bryan-Wilson's "Art Workers: Radical Art Practice in the Vietnam War Era" offers an excellent account of the AWC, whose members called on "all museums, galleries, art schools, and institutions in New York to close in a general strike on this day, Friday, May 22, 1970, in response to objectionable policies made by the U.S. government following the atrocious events at Kent State".[16] This call was in-line with the AWC's objective to re-align artists and other art community members with workers, and redefine art as labour. As Bryan-Wilson

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15 Jeannie Rosenfeld. 2011. "Agitator, In Absentia: This Time, Gustav Metzger Lets His Art Do the Talking", *New York Observer*, June 21. Retrieved 28 November 2015 (www.observer.com/2011/06/agitator-in-absentia-this-time-gustav-metzger-lets-his-art-do-the-talking/).
16 Art strike, ca. 1970. Michael Goldberg papers, 1942-1981. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

posits, this redefinition was "pivotal to the minimal art that preceded and informed the AWC, the process art that relied upon literally laboring bodies, the feminist politics that understood work as gendered, and the conceptual strategies that emerged through and from notions of art as work" (Bryan-Wilson 2009: 2-3). The AWC's goal was perhaps a utopian call, and as Bryan-Wilson's account demonstrates, a re-alignment of artists with workers was problematic. Though characteristically and structurally different from the AWC, the Artists Placement Group (APG) also attempted to redefine art practice—one that situated artists side-by-side with workers—during the 1960s and 1970s in Britain.

An artist is "someone who gains access through an art idiom to the omnipresent universe in a sense that is otherwise occluded" claimed John Latham, the late artist and co-founder of the Artists Placement Group (APG, 1966-1979) (Latham 1984). His definition was reminiscent of the Modernist notion of the solitary artist, a genius at work creating an autonomous object. However, Latham's definition actually was aimed at taking the role of the artist one step further, to someone that can affect social change through active engagement. Together with Barbara Steveni, Latham sought to follow upon a policy of placing artists in industrial establishments, such as factories, corporations and government organisations, in order to resituate the artist as an integral part of society. At the turn of the nineteenth century—an earlier period that marked a similar socio-political shift to that of the 1970s—William Morris had suggested that "the valorisation of individual artists and the sphere in which they work is a new and temporary phenomenon produced by the rise of capitalist social relations" (Esche and Bradley 2007: 12). Morris's dream for art was for it to be "a part of the daily life of all members of society, […] inseparable from the creation of an egalitarian social order" (Esche and Bradley 2007: 12). In fact, Morris's non-hierarchical and inclusive framework for art production and working through which he spearheaded the Arts and Crafts Movement were revisited during the late 1960s and 1970s, when artists in Britain became increasingly involved in projects geared towards social reconstruction. Be it in response to individualism fostered by the industrial revolution as in the late nineteenth century or to the object-based regime of art; the late 1960s paved the way for the post-studio art world of utopian participatory practices and contemporary "microscopic attempts".

As founders of the APG, Latham and Steveni invested in the "universal legitimacy of the creative capacities of the artist" (Corris 2012: 6). They proposed that "the future must involve a more integrated and comprehensive approach to political and social organisation in which the insight of artists could have a significant role".[17] Over the course of 14 years, the APG made 20 artist placements in a range of industrial as well as governmental organisations such as Department of Health and Social Security, National Coal Board and the Scottish Office. By enabling artists to engage actively in non-art environments, the APG shifted the function of art towards "decision-making".[18] On the other hand, the APG's agenda also involved the insertion of artists into completely foreign terrains, regardless of their particular skills. In fact, most of the selected artists did not possess the necessary practical skills to function within these industrial enterprises, except as consultants, which indubitably situated them closer to management rather than the shop floor. As such, the APG's attempts, much like similar attempts portrayed in Bryan-Wilson's "Art Workers" to politicise art labour and identify artists as labourers were on an ideological level rather than being founded on the labour process itself.

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17 APG, Statements, *Inno '70 at the Hayward Gallery (c.1968-1971),* Tate Gallery Archives, 20042/2/1/2
18 ibid.

Nevertheless, the innovative structure proposed by the APG was concomitant with the ethos of the period and the idealist intentions of the artists working in Britain. As Michael Corris delineated in his article "The Un-artist", during the late 1960s and most of the 1970s, the art world witnessed a tendency for a vast portion of artists to "reclaim art as an instrument of social and cultural transformation [and align themselves with] a broad social base in positive opposition to the ideological content and social relations reproduced by 'official' culture" (Corris 2012: 7). The APG emerged at a time when discourse began to be considered as an art form, and aimed to pair artists with industrial enterprises, pushing artists out into society. Albeit with shortcomings and impracticalities, the APG's theoretical system paved the way for the consideration of social processes as art, especially because they were instigated by the presence of the artist. By actually entering the space of the labour force—a workspace they were not familiar with—the artists were voluntarily becoming deskilled. As such, they were demystifying their social standing as autonomous creators while maintaining their definitions as artists. After all, if anything, the APG's success was to provide the framework for a process through which artists could influence decision-making within organisations.

Marxist-turned-right-wing critic Peter Fuller commended the APG for succeeding in getting companies (e.g. Hille Furniture Company, British European Airways and the shipping company Ocean Fleets) to accept placement of artists who would, in essence, work against the profit motive. On the other hand, Fuller was highly critical of the members of the APG for their naïveté in believing that artists could sustain their independent and in a sense, disinterested standpoints. Fuller claimed that the open brief system proposed a disadvantage for the artist, as it mandated that the artist would promise not to harm the host organisation. In other words, the artists were not to find fault (Bishop 2012: 171). In effect, this brought an end to the group's operation as the APG, not because they failed to affect social change, but because they relied on state funding and governmental regulation to a great extent. For instance, between 1974-76, artist Ian Breakwell was given a placement by the Department of Health and Social Security to work at the high-security hospital in Rampton and the Broadmoor Special Hospital. With a crew of interdisciplinary experts, Breakwell prepared the "Broadmoor Community Study", a critique of the status quo at Broadmoor, delineating problem areas and offering possible solutions. Angered by the radical outlook of the report, the Broadmoor administration terminated the project and restricted the report under the Official Secrets Act even though it was never intended for public circulation.[19] In that sense, the Broadmoor project was unsuccessful in instigating any direct effect. However, Breakwell's documentation from Rampton was shown at several events, including Documenta 6 in Kassel and the APG's seminars at the Whitechapel Gallery in London during 1977-78. After one of these presentations, a Yorkshire Television documentary team working on a project about high-security mental hospitals approached Breakwell seeking further information. Following Breakwell's advice, the team went to Rampton, however they were denied entrance to the premises. In the end, the Yorkshire team exposed the situation, which resulted in a public outcry and a police investigation.[20] Although Breakwell's artistic practice with regards to this particular placement failed to produce a direct experience, it was effective in setting a particular social relation in motion. Furthermore, the recent screening of Breakwell's experimental documentary, which he co-directed with Kevin Coyne, entitled "The

19 Ian Breakwell, "A personal account of work on the placement with the Department of Health, and Related Work, 1976-1980", in *APG – Correspondence with Artists: Ian Breakwell* (c.1978-1982), Tate Gallery Archives, TGA20042/1/1/1/1-18

20 Breakwell, *APG – Correspondence with Artists: Ian Breakwell* (c.1978-1982), Tate Gallery Archives, TGA20042/1/1/1/1-18

Institution" (1978) at the Nottingham Contemporary shows that his critique is still valid, and even though his placement ceased before his proposed reforms were introduced, the impact of his forced exile were critical.

What set the APG apart from other existing public art institutions was its socialist aspiration. The APG was established by artists for the good of society and not the other way around. The APG's overarching agenda was to develop relationships between disparate social entities (i.e. artists and workers, artists and industry, artists and society) and make a dynamic contribution over a broad social context. Although the APG aimed to use artistic labour by inserting artists into organisations that relied on material and/or productive labour, its members strived to establish social relations that relied on an ethical dimension of work, and succeeded in most if not all placements. Post-1960s avant-garde artists' quest for collaboration with other disciplines (e.g. architects, engineers, scientists) brought artistic labour closer to material labour. The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s objected to the division of labour and hierarchy in industry, just as they opposed social inequality. They demanded autonomy, self-management and room for creativity. Lazzarato suggests that it was actually capitalism which created the conditions for these needs: while the lines between workers, consumers and owners were gradually blurred, the public collapsed into the private (Lazzarato 2007; Holmes 2002). However, since the system of capitalism essentially relies on the expropriation of labour in order to create surplus value, more often than not, it lacks an ethical dimension. With this in mind, the APG strived to foster the conditions for harmonious and ethical labour. Its utopian ideal was to create, what in twenty-first century terms would be called the "commons". At its best, this would have been a common ground where artistic labour instigated horizontal social relations rather than solely creating objects or experiences.

Deeming an activity, a proposal and/or a process utopian tends to carry with it an inevitable negative connotation. The concept is understood to be unattainable, impossible, naïve or quixotic. However, it also comes with a level of expectancy, a form of wide-eyed optimism. Although Thomas More's "Utopia" (1516) marks a milestone, creative thinkers have been drawn to utopias since the time of Plato's "Republic" (around 380 BC). Centuries later, Adorno deemed that an absolute society and utopia was unattainable, unless it encompasses "the notion of an unfettered life freed from death" (Bloch, 1987, 10). Indeed, the understanding of utopia shifted throughout these eras, and the symptoms of each era manifested themselves in different ways artistically. For instance, Nicholas Poussin's "Et in Arcadia Ego" (1636-37), Louis-Sébastien Mercier's novel "The Year 2440" (1770) or "A Modern Utopia" (1905) by H.G. Wells all express desires or fears by depicting specific utopias that "resist being classified as either good or bad" (Carey 1999: xi). Up until the Industrial Revolution, thinkers, writers and artists had contemplated utopia in a passive and perhaps isolated manner, producing paintings, sculptures, poems and books. Theirs was an investigation rather than an attempt to conquer this seemingly unattainable goal. However, a shift took place—a shifting of gears, as it were—to relocate artistic practice amongst the people through active societal engagement. More often than not, so-called utopian attempts by artists have occurred in times of social unrest or in response to them. The Arts and Crafts movement was conceived as a remedy for the labourer who was pressured by malicious industry.[21] Similarly, the late 1960s experimental art practices indicated a watershed moment in the trajectory of utopia which concurred with the rising anti-war

21 Although distinct in his approach, Gustave Courbet was an equally subversive contemporary of William Morris. See Timothy J Clark. 1999. *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

protests, trade-union strikes, and civil rights movements. The decade marked a shift from the autonomous art object to post-studio practice that harboured a process-based approach that exalted agitation: inciting people to think and act, with or without a promise or a requisite for a concrete end. As Alberto López Cuenca asserts, "the exceptional character of art does not lie in the object or experience it produces but in the sort of social relations artistic practice can put into motion" (Cuenca 2012: 12). And since capitalism is a social relation of production in Marxist terms, art production appears to be an anomaly.

In a similar vein, Hannah Arendt—who sees the modern experience of labour as repetitive, tedious and alienating, thus, congruent to slavery—considers the artist as the only real worker that has survived in consumer society (Arendt 1958). Arendt posits that artistic labour is the only form of true work, which she defines as the ability to produce a totality without being reduced to slaves, namely, works that are completely useless to the capitalist system. This is of course a reverberation of the idea that art and art works are fundamentally non-utilitarian. Yet, as the contemporary works referred to in this article illustrate, the power of this logic has not been able to withstand the test of time. Ultimately, what is now referred to—and what is elucidated above—as artistic labour is the action that is elevated to what Holloway defines as "doing" as opposed to labour. What Arendt refers to as art's durability can be considered as its reluctance to enter the capitalist cycle of production-consumption-waste. However, artists are not *homo fabers* (Arendt 1958) or "doers" solely because they produce outside the world of the assembly line and away from the rows of cubicles inside skyscrapers. The salience of art works and artists is their future affective power, in contrast to that which is proffered by the capitalist and neo-liberal economies. Only with the benefit of hindsight can we truly comprehend the affective power of art works. Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" (1917) and Pablo Picasso's "Guernica" (1937) are the most celebrated examples of this (Clark 1994). While both works generated debate and were provocative at the time of their presentation, it is their resonance and further debates that they continue to instigate that deem them affective. Although "affect", like "precarity", is a loaded word, it is the only one that depicts the perennial but anomalous (within capitalism) power of art.

After all, while both artistic tendencies (contemporary and the 1970s) strive to mend and/or correct social problems, they still run the risk of being more powerful on a discursive level as opposed to bringing forth concrete changes or tangible outcomes. On that account, Sansi-Roca posits, "The aesthetic utopia contains a promise of liberation, a form of life that is not based on work but on play, social relations rather than the material production of commodities" (Sansi-Roca 2015: 157). Perhaps a promise of liberation is all that is needed or all that art practice can offer. Yet as is clear from the artistic attempts for creating micro-utopias referred to above—contemporary efforts more so than their precursors—the aim is to change society in the here and now. Although both based on small-scale endeavours, the microscopic attempts by contemporary artists emphasise the vitality of the "commons": these artists seek to create platforms, prefiguring what kind of a society they (and presumably we) want to live in—a society based on equality and social integration—and organising accordingly rather than adopting reformist strategies. Works like "Day after Debt", "Intern VIP Lounge" and "Re-Illumination", and platforms like "The Silent University" all go to show that microscopic attempts can in fact generate practical achievements, and restore our conviction in utopia. Be it micro or macro.

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