

Since the 1960s and 1970s, art in the Global North has increasingly focused on expanded conceptualisations of the artwork and its production process.¹ Artistic modes of production have been made visible since then, in contrast to the traditional focus in art history on the finished work, which understands production as an ahistorical, individual process or conceives of it in terms of art philosophy as an ontological, invariably premature genesis.² In response to this shift, art history has undergone a significant expansion to focus on production. This has led to the development of new, often interdisciplinary methods for studying artistic processes, requiring of necessity a broader view beyond the classical analysis of artworks.³ The analysis of artistic practice now encompasses materials and materiality, techniques, practices, tools, infrastructures and artistic labour as active participants in artistic processes. However, production and production relations were only rarely employed as concrete categories of analysis, although they could bundle all these approaches and thus take up the perspective of a Marxist-materialist art history. In this latest issue of *kritische berichte*, we aim to demonstrate the continued relevance of production and the relations of production in the present day.

The objective is therefore to examine how a materialist art history of the 1970s can be further developed with updated concepts of production, how a left critical art history of the present can incorporate these developments into its investigation, and consequently, what such an analysis can achieve for a left critical art history and for the concrete analysis of art works.

The central tenet of the materialist art history that emerged in the 1970s, as espoused by scholars associated with the Ulmer Verein and the journal *kritische berichte*, was that the character and impact of art are contingent upon the prevailing social modes of production. The majority of studies that can be considered as being aligned with this approach to art history were initially focused on historical works of art, with the aim of elucidating the interdependencies between art and the relations of production, as well as the functions that art assumed within its context. In his examination of National Socialist painting, for instance, Berthold Hinz drew attention to the discrepancy between the peasant motifs of manual fieldwork in art and the high-tech industrialised machinery of war.⁴ In general, the emphasis was not on production as a technical or technological process, as evidenced by the critiques offered by art historians and literary scholars. According to O. K. Werckmeister, Marxist aesthetics failed to take sufficient account of the «material labour process».⁵ He emphasised the absence of «quality criteria derived from the concrete techniques of art production and the specific aesthetic effects resulting from them».⁶ The literary

scholar Gisela Dischner finally concluded in 1974 in her draft of an «alternative materialist aesthetics», whose focus on the means of production is based on the Marxist critique of capitalism, that «materialist aesthetics cannot start from art as a finished product and its effect (consumption), but from the artistic mode of production, the artistic means of production and the form of the product.»⁷

Materialist art history thus posits that artistic production, given its inherent situatedness within production relations, cannot be conceived of as neutral. We contend that this assertion extends to the modes of production, and consequently, to the techniques and technologies that have come to the fore in contemporary art since the 1960s. Artists for example employ (post-)industrial production engineering and working methods in order to reflect on them in their art, thereby raising questions about the entanglements and dependencies within their own production conditions. It is therefore particularly surprising when research on the making of art, as it has emerged more frequently in recent years, conceptualises artistic techniques as ahistorical and abstract, and examines them in terms of action-oriented systematisations without considering the interdependencies with social, political and economic production conditions as other perspectives in our discipline have demonstrated.⁸ For instance, since the late 1960s, (queer) feminist art history has incorporated the techniques and working conditions of female artists as care workers into its analytical framework. As Jutta Held posits, it has identified the «economy of the reproductive sector» – just like artists, as we would add – and has thus been able to expand and refine the «traditional Marxist analysis of capitalism, which is based exclusively on production, in which it sees all value formation».⁹

From our perspective, a similar critical approach to production is evident in other critical theories, including postcolonial and anti-racist art historiography. These disciplines engage in a critical reflection on artistic production, its conditions, and their own (post-)colonial and racialised relations of production. In his analysis of modes of production, specifically in terms of techniques and technologies, the writer and literary scholar Louis Chude-Sokei posits that there is «now somewhat of a tradition of black theorists and critics for whom the primary technologies of modernity are in fact racialized ones that depend on what Negritude poet Aimé Césaire once referred to as colonial «thingification»».¹⁰

«First, the slave ship, which on the one hand denatured black slaves while expanding the material bounds and needs of modernity, as well as its conceptual and social possibilities; second, the plantation, what Caribbean thinkers from C.L.R. James to Antonio Benítez Rojo and Sylvia Wynter have proclaimed central to the construction of regimented, modern subjectivities in advance of industrial processes; and, thirdly in America, the cotton gin, which helped engineer the industrial revolution while entrenching slavery via those very industrial processes.»¹¹

«[T]hinking about technology is indeed incomplete without appending the long tradition of thinking about racism, colonialism and the common problems of bodies and power», asserts Chude-Sokei.¹² Nevertheless, he argues that it is crucial not to «reduce» the concept of «race and technology to a correlation between *racism* and technology».¹³ Instead, he suggests that it is pivotal to explore the multifaceted entanglements between these concepts and to consider the extent to which «race», as a category of difference and inequality, «can contribute to our understanding of technology» – alongside other social categories such as class and gender.¹⁴ We aim to build on this political perspective on modes of production in order to gain

«instrument[s] of political [art history]» in line with Walter Benjamin's endeavour to sharpen the «instrument of political literary criticism».¹⁵

«Instead of asking, «What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time? Does it accept them, is it reactionary? Or does it aim at overthrowing them, is it revolutionary?» – instead of this question, or at any rate before it, I would like to propose another. Rather than asking, «What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?» I would like to ask, «What is its position in them?» This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, directly with the literary *technique* of works. In bringing up technique, I have named the concept that makes literary products accessible to an immediately social, and therefore materialist, analysis.»¹⁶

Our interest therefore lies in questions that locate and analyse artworks in and with the field of tension with their relations of production – that is, in the very process of evaporation, when «[a]ll that is solid melts into air».¹⁷ This involves examining modes of production in the midst of a globalised production that reinforces global and post-colonial inequalities and in which artists act as producers, in the face of a neoliberal capitalism that has long since taken over art and universities, and in an art field that oscillates between speculative values and precarious labour relations. We are interested in approaches that emphasise the heterogeneous interdependencies, rather than ignoring them. The precise position of artistic practices within these production relations can only be elucidated when the latter are rendered visible, be they social, economic, political, personal, domestic, private, curatorial or artistic. The approaches and perspectives of the contributions in this issue diverge according to these differentiations, which define production in varying ways across historical, social, gendered and political contexts. They explore the diverse working methods, practices, theories, materials, infrastructures, industrial or post-industrial techniques, the media industry, gender coding and the self-image of artists as producers. However, this does not encompass a synthesis of all perspectives and criteria for analysing production.

Notes

1 See Lucy Lippard: *Six Years. The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1997 (1973); Peter Bürger: *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Göttingen 2017 (1974), p. 77; Sabeth Buchmann: *Denken gegen das Denken. Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer und Hélio Oiticica*, Berlin 2007.

2 See Wolfgang Thierse: «Das Ganze aber ist das, was Anfang, Mitte und Ende hat.» *Problemgeschichtliche Beobachtungen zur Geschichte des Werkbegriffs*, in: idem./Karlheinz Barck/Martin Fontius (eds.): *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Studien zu einem historischen Wörterbuch*, Berlin 1990, pp. 378–414, here p. 383; Sebastian Egenhofer: *Produktionsästhetik*, Zürich 2010.

3 See Caroline A. Jones: *Machine in the Studio. Constructing the Postwar American Artist*, Chicago/London 1996; Monika Wagner: *Das*

Material der Kunst. Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne, München 2001; *Work Ethic*, ed. by Helen Molesworth, exhib. cat., Baltimore, The Baltimore Museum of Art, University Park 2003; Christina Kiaer: *Imagine No Possessions. The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, Cambridge 2005; *Julia Bryan-Wilson: Art Workers. Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2009; Petra Lange-Berndt (ed.): *Materiality. Documents of Contemporary Art*, London/Cambridge 2015; Glenn Adamson/Julia Bryan-Wilson: *Art in the Making. Artist and Their Materials from the Studio to Crowdsourcing*, London 2016; Friederike Sigler (ed.): *Work. Documents of Contemporary Art*, London/Cambridge 2017; Marina Vishmidt: *Beneath the Atelier, the Desert. Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural*, in: Marion von Osten. *Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice*, ed. by Maria

- Hlavajova/Tom Holert, Utrecht 2017, pp. 218–235; Danielle Child: *Working Aesthetics. Labour, Art and Capitalism*, London 2019; Magdalena Bushardt/Henrike Haug (eds.): *Geteilte Arbeit. Praktiken künstlerischer Kooperation*, Wien 2020; Friederike Sigler: *Arbeit sichtbar machen. Strategien und Ziele in der Kunst seit 1970*, München 2021; Dominic Rahtz: *Metaphorical Materialism. Art in New York in the Late 1960s*, Leiden/Boston 2021.
- 4 See Berthold Hinz: *Die Malerei im deutschen Faschismus. Kunst und Konterrevolution (= Kunstwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen des Ulmer Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft)*, Munich 1974.
- 5 O. K. Werckmeister: *Ideologie und Kunst bei Marx u. a. Essays*, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 32.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 30
- 7 Gisela Dischner: *Sozialisationstheorie und materialistische Ästhetik*, in: chris bezzel et al. (eds.): *Das Unvermögen der Realität. Beiträge zu einer anderen materialistischen Ästhetik*, Berlin 1974, pp. 69–128, here p. 69.
- 8 See Adamson/Bryan-Wilson (as note 3); *The Everywhere Studio*, exhib. cat., Miami, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Munich 2017; Michael Petry: *The Art of Not Making. The New Artist/Artisan Relationship*, London 2011.
- 9 See Jutta Held: *Paradigmen einer feministischen Kunstgeschichte*, in: Wolfgang Kersten (ed.): *Radical Art History. Internationale Anthologie*. Subject: O. K. Werckmeister, Zürich 1997, pp. 178–192, here p. 181; *Cooking Cleaning Caring. Care Work in the Arts since 1960*, ed. by Friederike Sigler/Linda Walther, exhib. cat., Bottrop, Josef Albers Museum Quadrat, Ostfildern-Ruit 2024.
- 10 Louis Chude-Sokei: *Race and Robotics*, in: Teresa Heffernan et al. (eds.): *Cyborg Futures. Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence and Robotics*, London 2019, pp. 159–171, here p. 166.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 166–167.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 13 Louis Chude-Sokei: *Technologie und Race. Essays der Migration*, Berlin 2023, p. 8 (our translation).
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 9 (our translation).
- 15 Walter Benjamin: *The Author as Producer. Address at the Institute for the Study of Fascism*, Paris, April 27, 1934, in: *idem: Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings/Howard Eiland/Gary Smith, translated by Rodney Livingston et al., Cambridge/London 1999, vol. 2, part 2, pp. 768–782, here p. 769.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 770.
- 17 Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels: *The Communist Manifesto (1848)*, ed. by Joseph Katz, translated by Samuel Moore, New York 1967, p. 63.