

# ON A WALKWAY TO HELL

VANTAGES ON ART AND LIFE'S EXHAUSTION

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## ABSTRACT

In this article the widespread phenomenon of neoliberal institutions' production of architectural vantages, windows or walkways onto working artists or "creatives" is subjected to a double analysis. On the one hand, the spectacularised views are read as an outcome of art's own "corporealisation" or becoming body, and neo-avant-garde movements' development of life performances. On the other, the resources of biopolitical theory are used to critique the separation of the artist's appearance from their own powers of self-affectation fixing them as a creative yet static "form of life" within these views. This phenomenon, by which the artist's bare life is rendered *creative in itself*, is read in relation to the figure of *homo economicus* whose innate competitiveness is given a biological grounding. Finally, the article compares the fixing of creative life as spectacle to capitalist biotech's enclosure of life's innate generativity in the interest of producing speculative and commodified lifeforms and to the detriment of existing life.

## KEYWORDS

Neoliberal institutions; financialisation; creative life; biopolitics; neo-avant-garde; welfare politics; ecology.

The struggle for subjectivity presents itself, therefore, as the right to difference, variation and metamorphosis.

Gilles Deleuze<sup>1</sup>

There have been a lot of walkways of late, leading wanderers on the yellow brick road of cultural consumption high over the heads of artists, set builders, costume makers, restorers, scientists and assorted visions of creative life.<sup>2</sup> Some recent cases of the conspicuous insertion of walkways and windows are the National Theatre's 2014 Sherling Backstage Walkway over its production areas, the viewable restoration of the Ghent Altarpiece at the Museum of Fine Arts Ghent, and the public viewing window at the front of Central St Martins' 2011 relocated campus at King's Cross. The Royal Academy's 2018 expansion into the building behind seems to be a particularly paradigmatic case because it opens up what had remained obscure and separated from public view for generations. By inserting a concrete walkway between Burlington House and Burlington Gardens [Fig. 1], the visitor is now able to see the outdoor space which backs onto the Royal Academy School through a huge rectangular window. The architect, David Chipperfield, has also converted this neglected patch into a courtyard with the help of some cobbling and planting. In this way, the "unloved" space where students and staff used to congregate for a chat and a cigarette, or to stare into space, has now been optimised to *add value* to any visit. The daily lives of artists have been framed – in more ways than one – as exemplary. Visitors can now gain insight into that mysterious process of creation in all its camera-ready glory.

This trend for creating vantages onto creative production has been in development, arguably, since at least the 1960s with the introduction of the open kitchen into fashionable restaurants. We can also trace these behaviour-modifying architectural openings further back to modernist principles more generally and the utopian ambition to transform life through design. According to urban sociologist Sharon Zukin, the fashion for the open plan format of loft living that emerged in 1970s Manhattan was made palatable to the middle-class consumer not just by pioneering artists, but also the newly fluid spaces of modernism. Of the open plan kitchens in Frank Lloyd Wright's ranch style homes of the 1940s she writes that his "innovative houses opened up the kitchen to the dining room so that the 'work-space,' as Wright called it, flowed into the living area."<sup>3</sup> Abolishing these architectural divisions helped break the association between kitchens and "little women," she claims,

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Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, Minneapolis 1988, 87.

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This article was developed from a talk given at the conference End of World Trade: On the Speculative Economies of Art and Extraction, Goldsmiths, University of London, 21 June 2019.

<sup>3</sup>

Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, Baltimore, MD 1982, 70.



[\[Fig. 1\]](#)  
David Chipperfield's Weston Bridge, Royal Academy, 2018 © Simon Menges.

and participated in the blending of work and leisure time that would become the hallmark of precarious creative labour and lifestyles in the era of deindustrialisation. The early occupation of lofts by New York artists in the 1950s and '60s also helped to create a new fascination for artists' studios and lives among the art-interested public who began viewing exhibitions and performances there.<sup>4</sup> If this new practice of spectatorship was driven by the nature of the artworks – with Happenings and Fluxus pioneering the performative presentation of everyday life amidst industrial settings, experimental situations and urban detritus that could not be accommodated by conventional gallery space – today's fetish for the artist's studio seems relatively indifferent to art's specific forms.

Naturally, when you open something up to the glare of the public gaze, you change whatever you put under the lens. As the artist and Royal Academy Starr Fellow Kelly Lloyd records in her recent ethnographic study of artists' working lives across Europe,<sup>5</sup> RA students have been complaining about the intrusion of the walkway and choosing not to congregate in the yard any longer, preferring to remain in their studios. This precious communal space – through its spectacularisation – is now almost unusable, and they must be conscious that while on display they are expected to perform “like artists” at all times. The space for relaxing is replaced with the internalisation of the injunction to perform artisticness; the walkways seem to desire an appearance of the artist as paint-splashed artisan in overalls, evoking a nostalgia for a pre-digital mode of material production.<sup>6</sup> The institution's conversion of art practice into a performance of itself must also be altering the art it seeks to display, like the electron particles and waves in Niels Bohr's two-slit diffraction experiment whose behaviour changes depending on how they are observed.<sup>7</sup> Observation is never a neutral activity, this much we know, but what effects does it have today and what do they tell us about biopolitical extraction in the contemporary art system?

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“Yet in retrospect, the Happenings' locale produced a greater effect on the public than did either their art or their motivation. In this sense, Happenings are important because they lured people who were outside the art world into the unconventional performance space, which was often, also, an artist's studio. Happenings made people aware too, of the performance elements in modern artistic creation. Within several years, this aspect of Happenings influenced the presentations (or, really, the self-exhibitions) of Conceptual artists and also contributed to a growing perception of the artist as a performer and thus a celebrity.” *Ibid.*, 94.

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Kelly Lloyd played an excerpt from her study during the Private Life symposium, University of Edinburgh, 10 June 2019.

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Thank you to Howard Slater for this insight.

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“[T]he nature of the observed phenomenon changes with the corresponding changes in the apparatus.” Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC/London 2007, 106.

As Zukin's remarks make evident, we can trace such institutional framing of artists as *creative in themselves* back to art's internal development within modernity. The gradual abandonment of representation in painting led to what has been dubbed the "corporealisation" of art's forms, processes and materials which became the new focus of sensuous attention.<sup>8</sup> Deleuze and Guattari describe how, in modernist abstraction, the technical plane of materials "ascends into the aesthetic plane of composition" and art's material means gain independent expressive value.<sup>9</sup> Matisse describes the liberation of colour and form from their function as predicates of representation in his own work thus: "then I understood that one could work with expressive colours which are not necessarily descriptive colours."<sup>10</sup> This account of the emancipation of art's hitherto largely sublimated techniques and materials, and the vertiginous implications of the "expressive independence" they obtain, is different from Clement Greenberg's notion of art's medium specificity.<sup>11</sup> In 1939 the formalist American critic had claimed that if, following Aristotle, all art is imitating then the subject matter of avant-garde art had become an "imitation of imitating."<sup>12</sup> In a subsequent essay, "Towards a Newer Laocoon" from 1940, he argued that the arts had attained purity by being "hunted back to their mediums" where they could be "isolated, concentrated and defined."<sup>13</sup> In his view art's very survival depended upon its being cleansed of representationalism and attaining hermetic – though not emphatically material – self-referentiality. Let's keep his phrase "imitation of imitating," which we will return to below, but abandon the narrowly formalist destination of his reading which was so resoundingly disproved by ensuing developments in art.

By the 1940s and '50s, the emancipated materials and forms of painting began to be understood as directly indexing the life activity of the artist, to such a degree that paintings were read by the critic

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This is J. M. Bernstein's term. See J. M. Bernstein, In Praise of Pure Violence (Matisse's War), in: Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willson (eds.), *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, Ithaca, NY 2008, 37–55.

9

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Percept, Concept and Affect, in: id., *What Is Philosophy?*, London 1994, 193–194. The quote continues: "It is at this moment that the figures of art free themselves from an apparent transcendence or paradigmatic model and avow their innocent atheism, their paganism."

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Henri Matisse, *The Path of Colour* (1947), in: Jack D. Flam (ed.), *Matisse on Art*, Oxford 1990, 116.

11

This is Matisse's term developed by Todd Cronan; see his *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism*, Minneapolis, MN 2013.

12

Clement Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939), in: id., *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Boston, MA 1989, 8.

13

Clement Greenberg, cited in T. J. Clark, *Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 9, 1982, 139–156, 145.

Harold Rosenberg as biographical *acts* in themselves – indeed, the entire genre was described as “act painting” in whose interest the apples were “brushed off the table” so that nothing would “get in the way.”<sup>14</sup> By the 1960s, art’s mediums, forms and contexts were being progressively negated, deflated, expanded, frayed, mixed and dematerialised to realise, in one branch of art practice, the *performance of life* as the artwork per se. Through movements like Happenings and Fluxus, Performance, Actionism and Mail Art, artists started to position their work on the unstable threshold between life as it is lived – in streets, offices, kitchens, fields, supermarkets, parks, highways and apartment buildings – and its poetic transformation. Artist Wolf Vostell commented on the zen-vitalist quality of Fluxus: “Fluxus is life as music, all music as life. Every micro and macro noise of our life and of the world declared as music.”<sup>15</sup> Or, as Allan Kaprow had it, “Performing Life”, the title of his 1979 essay, was the only thing left. In it he details his attention to breath as a recent practice and says:

Such consciousness of what we do and feel each day, its relation to others’ experience and to nature around us becomes in a real way the performance of living. And the very process of paying attention to this continuum is poised on the threshold of art performance.<sup>16</sup>

Attention to habits and what Giorgio Agamben calls alternately “forms of life” and *bios* became a recursive space of attention, experience and action.<sup>17</sup> As the 1960s wore on, and the civil rights, decolonisation, anti-war, feminist and sexual liberation movements intensified and intersected, the ludic and lyrical quality of the early Happenings and Fluxus performances shifted into a more rigorously deconstructive register. Conscious performances of life increasingly resulted in the specification of direct experience not

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Harold Rosenberg, *The American Action Painters*, in: David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro (eds.), *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, Cambridge 1990, 77.

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Wolf Vostell in “Yoko Ono, Paik, Vostell ... Fluxus-Happening-Artists,” *Art Classic News*, 1990, <https://youtu.be/8UQFU-Nswro> (30 January 2020).

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Allan Kaprow, *Performing Life*, in: Jeff Kelley (ed.), *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA 2003, 195–198.

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Throughout his sequence of nine books grouped together as *Homo Sacer*, Agamben deploys the ancient Greeks’ double definition of life: “zoē, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and bios, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group.” Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA 1998, 1. “Form of life,” or *bios*, is what he calls “politically qualified life” whereby the way of living is determined as a supplementary to the creaturely or biological life that underpins and conditions it – such determinations are thus precisely the work of politics. It is the wholesale inclusion of zoē into the sphere of the *Polis* and its total exposure to political decision that, he argues, ushers in modernity and renders life “bare”: “bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction,” which Agamben also figures as “the camp”. *Ibid.*, 105.

as something expressive, aleatory or poetic so much as socially constructed – there is something radically and gloriously depersonalised about the scrutiny of lifestyles undertaken by artists at this time.

Artists, in taking up their own lives or those of others as direct material, articulated and set into doubt the static form of life allocated to them according to the intersecting social matrices of gender, race, sexuality and class. In Agamben's terms again, they challenged the schismatic relationship by which *zoē*, or bodily life, is simultaneously split from but also determinant of a person's form of life by exposing the power relations that produce our apparently natural social roles. Such a deconstructive attitude can be found in works like Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) in which the activities of the housewife are broken into an alphabet of codified and deadened gestures with domestic implements (chopping with a chopper, cranking an egg beater, stabbing with a fork, scraping against a grater, etc.). The disarticulation of life praxis and bodies can also be found in Adrian Piper's video performance *Mythic Being* (1973) in which she experiments with splitting her internal "historical" self from a disguised external one by dressing as a man and walking through the streets of New York reciting a single line from her diary over and over as passers-by look on perplexed.<sup>18</sup> If Kaprow proposed creating feedback between attention and experience as a way to fuse art's power to produce appearances with the existential flow of life, short circuiting the relationship between the two, Piper and Rosler's works acerbically examine the construction of the determining relationship between biological bodies and social roles. By contrast to the Abstract Expressionists, the life of artists was explored *not as something exceptional* but rather as a set of socially scripted effects. Within a wider context of declaring and contesting the personal as political, the aesthetic reflexiveness of these art/life performances opened up the prospect of reworking or reinventing the forms of life that biopolitical society regulates. Through returning to this moment, it becomes possible to grasp the scale of the transformation that these contemporary walkways and windows onto creative lives perform today.

Contemporary neoliberal art institutions are set on a governmentally defined pathway of diminishing public funding which compels them to increase revenues from sponsorship, patronage, property speculation, ticket sales and retail.<sup>19</sup> In this climate it

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Adrian Piper, *Mythic Being*, 1973, [https://youtu.be/jVcXb8En\\_Tw](https://youtu.be/jVcXb8En_Tw) (30 January 2020).

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The following summary of recent revenue streams to arts organisations in England gives a useful snapshot of the shifting balance of funded to self-generated income: "Arts Council England's 2016–17 Annual Submission Headline Statistics provides a detailed analysis based on their own 649 National Portfolio Organisations' funding, showing: – Earned Income 52.4% (up 4.4% on previous year) – ACE Subsidy 24.2% (down 1.3%) – Contributed Income 12.9% (up 3.1%) – Local Authority Subsidy 6.8% (down 9.9%) – Other public subsidy 3.8% (up 3.6%). This is helpfully organised by art form, region and organisation size and diverse-led to provide more accurate comparison between organisations." Remi Harris, *The Funding Mix for Arts Organisations*, Remi Harris Consulting 2018: <https://www.>

is only too obvious that potential supporters, patrons and revenue-bearing visitors need the inspirational eye candy of *stuff really happening* – yet this entails a near total reversal of the aesthetic politics of the 1960s and '70s which were nevertheless the necessary precursor to this mode of artistic life appreciation. A film like Chantal Akerman's 1975 *Jeanne Dielmann: 23 Commerce Quay 1080 Brussels* [Fig. 2], made in the critical conjuncture of radical feminist politics and radical aesthetics, creates the strongest possible contrast to the glib celebrations of “creative” life favoured by today's institutions. While in a certain sense her film follows an aesthetic of life performance, nevertheless through her attentiveness to what might be dismissed as the unwatchable banality of domestic existence, Ackerman's film explodes the frame of the singular or exceptional life by focusing on the endless and invisible cycle of reproductive labour that sustains *all* life, creative or otherwise. Across the film's 3-hour 45-minute duration, she exhaustively details the confined domestic existence of a Belgian widow, single mother and prostitute. The labour of depicting (and watching) devalued female life renders its familiar forms uncanny and thereby suggests not only their hollowing effect on a self that comes to exist purely as gendered *bios*, but conversely also the possibility of a total rescripting of this life.<sup>20</sup>

However, such a rescripting was considerably more than a possibility during this time which, through mass political mobilisations, produced the most impressive redistribution of social wealth in modern history and with it a shift in social roles [Fig. 3]. Melinda Cooper recounts in her book *Family Values* on the biopolitics of US welfare regimes and the social engineering of Fordist and post-Fordist populations that, “By the 1970s then, the New Deal's major social insurance program, Social Security, had expanded in quantitative terms to include both women and African Americans – Fordism's non-normative subjects – and to keep pace with rising wages.”<sup>21</sup> She also explains how a succession of legal suits “repeatedly struck down the panoply of written and unwritten rules that had served to enforce sexual normativity throughout the Fordist era” and the conditionality of its welfare regime.<sup>22</sup> This had included the age-old exclusion of unmarried (often black) and divorced

[culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Funding\\_mix\\_for\\_arts\\_organisations.pdf](http://culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Funding_mix_for_arts_organisations.pdf)  
(16 June 2020).

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While not consciously linked to political movements around reproductive labour, “the visibility given to the exhaustive nature of reproductive labour in the film appears consistent with the ways in which the Wages for Housework International Campaign intended to make visible how capital expropriates women's reproductive labour.” Patricia Sequeira Brás, Time and Reproductive Labour in Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975) and Three Sisters (2012), in: *Parse* 9, 2019, <https://parsejournal.com/article/time-and-reproductive-labour-in-jeanne-dielman-23-quai-du-commerce-1080-bruxelles-1975-and-three-sisters-2012/> (10 February 2020).

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Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, New York 2017, 122.

22

Ibid.



[Fig. 2]  
Chantal Akerman, *Jeanne Dielmann, 23 Quay de Commerce, 1080 Brussels*, 1975. © Cinéma-  
thèque Royale de Belgique/Foundation Chantal Akerman.



[Fig. 3]

The D.C. Coalition of Conscience pickets District Building (now John Wilson Building), 26 April 1965, urging participation in a federal programme and welfare rights reforms. The image is a Washington Daily News photograph courtesy of the D.C. Public Library Washington Star Collection © Washington Post.

women with a “man in the house” from welfare, as well as the red-lining of people of colour, queer households and single or divorced women from accessing credit and mortgages. This redistribution of wealth was both a reflection of changing attitudes towards what were considered legitimate forms of life (e.g. single mothers being permitted to cohabit with biologically non-paternal partners) and the means to underwrite and support new non-normative lifestyles. We therefore cannot understate the degree to which the artistic reimagination of forms of life and social identity went hand in hand with organised, mass struggles over rights, representation, wealth redistribution and the non-chauvinistic extension of welfare.

Returning to our present moment, it is now capitalism itself that conforms to Greenberg’s description of the avant-garde through its “imitation of imitating.” By imitative I am particularly thinking of economies that “pass” as productive when they are no longer based on assets but on debt, as well as the replication and enclosure of life through the speculative investment in biotech, artificial intelligence, artificial life and data-harvesting processes. Late capitalism also produces the conditions in which artists are now compelled to imitate artistic life. But the performance has become a way of pinioning the social category “artist” to the individual life that bears it as if the art was, in some strange way, embodied in and presupposed by this life itself as a distinct category. These institutional vistas are deeply invested in what Agamben calls the “scission” between *zoē* and *bios* that defines Western metaphysics and whose effect is to disable life’s reflexive potential, the *use-of-oneself* – a term he develops from Foucault’s “care of the self.”<sup>23</sup> For Agamben, it is only by restoring the potential to affect one’s embodied self, and “to be affected by one’s own receptivity,”<sup>24</sup> for thought to be felt and feeling thought, that we can become a “*form-of-life*, in which it is never possible to isolate something like a bare life.”<sup>25</sup> Instead of the mutual receptivity of thought, life, sensation and habit in a fully potentiated circuit, receptivity is interrupted by these institutional vantages through the extraction and imposition of a static concept of artistic life which is

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For Agamben, the self can only exist through its self-experience, self-sensation and self-use, which is always also in relation to others: “The subject of use must take care of itself insofar as it is in a relationship of use with things or persons: that is to say, it must put itself in relationship with the self insofar as it is in a relationship of use with another.” Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, Stanford, CA 2015, 34.

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Ibid., 210.

25

Ibid., 211. Agamben expresses as “form-of-life,” in its hyphenated variant, a truly free state of being beyond the West’s schematic splitting of *zoē* and *bios* which it uses to then impose a static form of life (without hyphens) apparently predicated by the underlying body/being. “All living beings are in a form of life, but not all are (or not all are always) a form-of-life. At the point where form-of-life is constituted, it renders destitute and inoperative all singular forms of life. It is only in living a life that it constitutes itself as a form-of-life, as the inoperativity immanent in every life. The constitution of a form-of-life fully coincides, that is to say, with the destitution of social and biological conditions into which it finds itself thrown. In this sense, form-of-life is the revocation of all factual vocations, which deposes them and brings them into an internal tension in the same gesture in which it maintains itself and dwells in them.” Ibid., 277.

thereby divested of its capacity for *self*-affection. Instead, a threshold of *indistinction* is produced between artists' *zoē* and *bios*, which, by being collapsed together, are rendered bare life. We can find parallels here in technocapitalism's stockpiling of our personal data by which it fixes us in static representations or models which are then reimposed upon us ("people who bought this book also bought these books," ad nauseum), or through the patenting of lifeforms, the production of GM seeds with terminator genes, or the patenting of genomes and seed banks. Life's generativity is cloned and separated from its defining capacity to affect and sense itself, to mutate, err and self-differ, in capitalism's pursuit of self-valorising value, or the creation of profit without recourse to labour power, and its conception of nature as a free input or magically self-replenishing resource for the economy.

The spectacularised creativity of contemporary artists is made to refer to their lives not their work and so, albeit perhaps unintentionally, essentialises and separates their embodied identities as uniquely generative. The production of such exemplary scenes of creative life are paradigmatic of what Foucault describes as biopolitical government's *positive relation to life* – as opposed to the old negating one of classical sovereignty witnessed in exiles and executions.<sup>26</sup> By "positive" he means power's use of lifelike techniques that "invest life through and through" as an *internal exteriority* working in the guise of something living.<sup>27</sup> Such biopolitical affirmations of life are always linked to the construction of norms which, in turn, establish thresholds of inclusion or exclusion depending on proximity to that norm. They are, in other words, *normalising*. The exemplary life of the artist today, therefore, is shadowed by a social hinterland of devalued life, conceived as a battleground of individualised striving, in which only the few succeed and deserve to thrive. These vantages onto exceptional life are clearly accompanied by the dismantling of communal resources and values, the welfare state, free higher education, affordable social housing, social care, the erosion of benefits and the resurgence of family inheritance as the main vector of intergenerational wealth transmission – all of which act to reassert the old biosocial mechanisms of race, gender, sexuality and class in the distribution of resources and life chances.

Artists find themselves existing on both sides of the threshold of social value and, when not making spectacular appearances, must subsist within dwindling social resources along with everyone else. Thus, neoliberal capitalism's fetishism of artists' creativity,

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In her condensation of Foucault's biopolitical theory, Maria Muhle stresses that he elaborates a twofold strategy towards life by power. On the one hand, power takes biologically conceived life as its object (as opposed to the subject of law or reason) while, on the other: "the specificity of the biopolitical techniques lies in the positive and not repressive relation to life and in the fact that such techniques are intrinsic and not exterior to its object." Maria Muhle, A Genealogy of Biopolitics: The Notion of Life in Canguilhem and Foucault, in: Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter (eds.), *The Government of Life: Foucault, Biopolitics and Neoliberalism*, New York 2014, 77–97, 79.

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Cited in *ibid.*

but disregard for the social infrastructures, community and care that potentiate all life including those of artists, shares tendencies with vitalist theory and its celebration of the mystical life force. In the 1930s Ernst Bloch described vitalism as an “aestheticism of entrepreneurial zeal” and claimed that it admitted, “no suffering, no power to change, no human depths and thus *no constituent human spirit over life either*.”<sup>28</sup> The celebration of the *élan vital*, in other words, can happily subsist with a social Darwinism that only celebrates “success” while systematically ignoring the contribution of those who “fail,” the value of inutility (e.g. artistic autonomy), the unequal social construction of life chances and the market-oriented value system by which success is measured. It naturalises politics and economises nature while dooming governmental activity to the optimisation of market conditions.<sup>29</sup> Despite pervasive injunctions to *change life*, neoliberalism’s logic of all out competition, like entrepreneurial vitalism, deprives life of the potentiating capacity to affect itself through a self-experience unconstrained by the economic grid of human capital by which only those conducts, skills and attributes deemed marketable are accorded value. Michel Feher, who claims that human capital is the defining component of the neoliberal condition, describes how experience, behaviour and activity returns to the subject in the form of appreciating or depreciating social and/or economic capital: “[The return on human capital] now refers to all that is produced by the skill set that defines me.”<sup>30</sup> Our reflexivity is thereby co-opted by an economic logic that invests us “through and through.”

It is this dominance of market logic that drives institutions to display creative lives behind glass – like animals in a zoo – without questioning the unqualified virtue of the appearances they produce. Now congealed in the bodily appearance of artists, art’s free creative principle has thus become continuous with what Sylvia Wynter has called Western bourgeois culture’s “biocentric monohumanism.” This is a universal conception of life that supplants all others, defined through modern biological “descriptive statements” – as opposed to all other origin stories which are relegated as merely superstructural – and conceived as co-extensive

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Ernst Bloch, in *Heritage of Our Times*, cited in Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Negritude, Vitalism and Modernity*, New York 2010, 10.

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Vitalism’s entrepreneurial aesthetics are, in this sense, the perfect companion to liberal and neoliberal forms of governmental reason in which, as Michel Foucault describes, through their principle of self-limitation, the locus of decision, truth making or “veridiction” passes to the market mechanism now constructed as a second nature. Governments, having imposed these limits on their own activity and transferred sovereignty to the market and its “secret hand,” are thereafter tasked with perennially preparing its conditions, supporting its functions and mopping up its social crises while claiming non-interference. An ideology that works as a genre-defying “transumptively universal” genre in Sylvia Wynter’s terms. See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, London 2008.

30

Michel Feher, Self-Appreciation; or, the Aspirations of Human Capital, in: *Public Culture* 21, 2009, 21–41, 26.

with the liberal principle of the market as the only reliable truth principle.<sup>31</sup> Here biology becomes the incontestable first ‘set of instructions’ whose propagation through natural selection provides the universal schema and justification for market competition as the ultimate expression of human nature; an accordance of first and second nature. Counter-intuitive as this might seem, by fixing art in the (generic) body of artists these institutional practices are reducing artists to the same biologised conception as that of *homo economicus*, the central self-interested protagonist of neoliberalism whose entrepreneurially vital behaviour *blindly* drives forth (market and/or artistic) innovation. The free creative principle is conceived as inherent to a few supremely gifted beings whose bodily life is imbued with genius as much as the artworks they create. Agamben sees this circularity as causing both the collapse of the artwork and the endless work of artistic life:

Not only have art and life ended up being indeterminated to such an extent that it has often become impossible to distinguish life practice from artistic practice, but starting from the twentieth-century avant-garde, this has had as a consequence a progressive dissolution of the very consistency of the work. The truth criterion of art has been displaced to such a degree into the minds and, very often, into the very bodies of the artist, into his or her physicality, that these latter have no need to exhibit a work except as ashes or as a document of their own vital praxis. The work is life and the life is only work: but in this coincidence, instead of being transformed or falling together, they continue to pursue each other in an endless fugue.<sup>32</sup>

The conversion of artistic life into work, rather than its utopian synthesis, is a perfect mirror of (neo)liberalism’s transmutation of the laws of nature into those of the market, not to mention its total subsumption of all extra-economic dimensions of life. Biology is the best capitalism and capitalism is the best biology, because both act blindly in order to produce the best “truth.”

By blind I mean spontaneous and unburdened by knowledge, complex consideration or reflection – one might say reflexivity. The extraction of life performances of artists, split from their contestational neo-avant-garde histories as well as their own reflections, are now rendered sightless, one might say visionless, within these

<sup>31</sup>

See Sylvia Wynter, *Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations*, interview by Katherine McKittrick, in: Katherine McKittrick (ed.), *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, Durham, NC 2015, 9–89. For Wynter, by contrast, the origin stories and associated value systems that structure the rules of society have directly physiological effects and affects on bodies, triggering a dopamine release or inhibition, encoding structures of meaning into deep layers of sensation not to mention the comportment and social treatment of bodies whose skin colour produces different significations.

<sup>32</sup>

Agamben, *Use of Bodies*, 245–242.

strategic institutional vistas. In their reduction to mere means of institutional valorisation they lose what Adorno called their “living purpose.” In “Novissimum Organum,” a striking section from *Minima Moralia*, Adorno forecasts our current experience of human capital and also ecological collapse: “That which determines subjects as means of production,” he wrote, “and not as living purposes, increases with the proportion of machines to variable capital.”<sup>33</sup> In order for life to reproduce itself under the prevailing conditions – by which he means the conversion of “living purpose” into commodified labour power – this process must permeate us through and through. Capitalist society’s “consummate organization demands the coordination of people that are dead. The will to live finds itself dependent on the denial of the will to life: self-preservation annuls all life in subjectivity.”<sup>34</sup> Referencing Georg Lukács, Adorno exemplifies his theory with the figure of the journalist who has converted his “knowledge, temperament and powers of expression” into commodities for sale. Through the reification of its very processes, thought becomes a stratigraphic imitation of itself, just as art does within these vistas and apertures. The irony is, of course, that while denying the freedom of living purpose to human beings, capitalist society incessantly demands its appearance, not by affirming it as a process, fostering the transitivity of the verb so to speak, but by capturing it as a noun, objectifying it in bodies. The artist is endowed with more value, more living currency, when seen through the right aperture, than any artwork they might produce which is relegated as generic substance. Thus, in a rash of new developments that frequently displace working-class communities and former industrial zones in which artists once lived fairly inconspicuously, the static cipher of the artist’s body (now frozen as a creative form of life) is inserted at the very centre of these new lifeless quarters. Such a phenomenon is epitomised in the proposed Design District in London’s new Greenwich Peninsula development whose would-be creative incumbents, the website boasts, will ensure that it is “enjoyably odd and somewhat dysfunctional in parts.”<sup>35</sup> The CAD image of the “ghosts in reverse” of the creative city sees them hap-

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Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, London 1999, 229.

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Ibid.

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The developers even have the shamelessness to cast their proposed Design District as the answer to the creative brain drain caused by unspecified “rising costs” which have “driven both the solo artist and larger scale creative enterprise into the suburbs and beyond. Even the studio spaces that evolve and grow out of unwanted or disused buildings are becoming harder to find. But now a dedicated place is rising from the ground up. The Design District on Greenwich Peninsula, opening in 2019, is London’s first purpose-built district made specifically for the creative community.” Creativity is a must for the middle-class buyer without whom the development would naturally be a failure – and so the cycle renews itself. See the developer’s website: <https://www.greenwichpeninsula.co.uk/whats-on/the-peninsulist/the-design-district-london/> (30 January 2020).

pily plying their skills while caged, like animals, behind a chain-link fence [Fig. 4].<sup>36</sup>

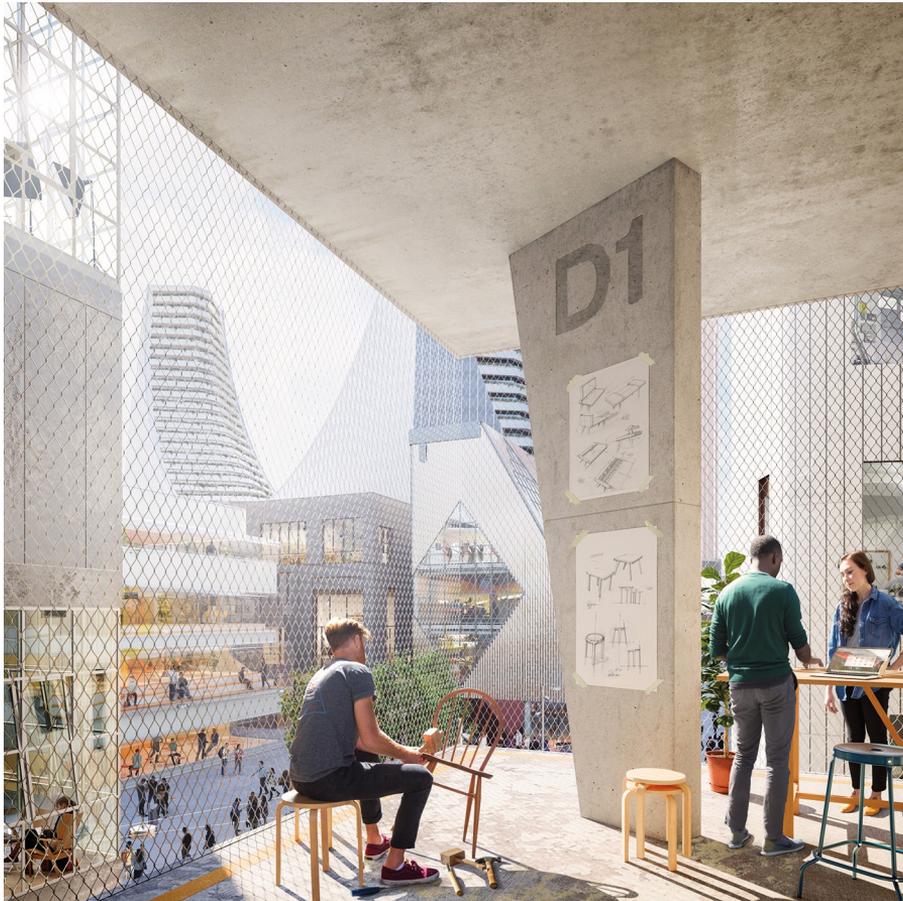
When we expand the frame of these creative walkways and vistas, they reveal themselves to be metonyms of the financialised city in which the appearance of artists becomes directly convertible with economic value. Token artist's studio complexes and maker spaces now act as the entirely predictable jewel in the Disneyfied crown of contemporary developments. This convertibility between art and economic value within speculative city making is, finally, of a piece with what Melinda Cooper in *Life as Surplus* describes as the convertibility established between economics and ecology within late capitalism. Through this convertibility of value and ecological descriptors like pollution levels and industrial waste, the destruction of the biosphere can be traded, speculated on and converted into profit. The destruction of life is inverted into the creation of economic value, thus fulfilling Adorno's formula perhaps beyond even his grim expectations. Further, and yet more worryingly, life's very capacity to produce surplus (value or more life) is enclosed and extracted in the interests of creating limitless economic growth. Strangely, this move of economics beyond "all limits" – in which the limited natural resources of industrial production and carbon-based economies are imagined to be overcome through the perpetual expansion of debt, financialisation and the biotechnological replication of life's very generativity – shares roots in complexity theory with new theories of life's self-regulating capacity. Complexity theory, according to Cooper, has informed both new economic utopias and destandardised theories of life such as Lovelock and Margulis's 1970s Gaia hypothesis, which conceives of life as intrinsically autopoietic and self-regulating rather than adaptive and entropic.<sup>37</sup> Such theories, she contends, have helped fuel the speculative investment in biotechnology that would save us from capitalism's exhaustion of nature. Yet, she reminds us, the drive to push beyond limits continuously falls into Marx's concept of the "counterproductive tendency of capitalism"; it is locked into a form of delirium, a psychotic world-breaking and world-making, beyond natural limits, which first abolishes and then reimposes them as scarcity. Yet unlike in Marx's conception, these contradictions are now played out at a biospheric scale as economic resources are redirected from actually existing lifeforms – human populations

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"Ghosts in reverse" is artist and regeneration theorist Alberto Duman's term which describes the haunting of neoliberal cities by the CAD drawn inhabitants of the city yet to come that grace myriad billboards and hoardings. See his collaborative piece, *Talking Ghosts*, 2017, [http://www.albertoduman.me.uk/past33\\_ghosts.htm?LMCL=tDRwEg](http://www.albertoduman.me.uk/past33_ghosts.htm?LMCL=tDRwEg) (30 January 2020).

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"Life, in this view [that holds it to be a biospheric unity, an ensemble of biota that are self-regulating and self-responsive], is intrinsically expansive – its field of stability is neither rigorously determined nor constant [...] Its law of evolution is one of increasing complexity rather than entropic decline, and its specific creativity is autopoietic rather than adaptive." Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*, Seattle, WA 2008, 35.



[Fig. 4]  
CAD design of the forthcoming Design District, Greenwich Peninsula, London where creatives are displayed in a cage.



[Fig. 5]

View looking out from the Weston Bridge, Royal Academy, 2018 © Simon Menges.

and the protection and nurture of existing species and their habitats – to the speculative production of life-as-scarcity. The economy writ large takes on Adorno’s maxim that “the will to live finds itself dependent on the denial of the will to life.” [Fig. 5].

Art’s speculative value is similarly mobilised by an economy that undermines its very possibility – a condition of which the proliferation of vantages onto creative life is symptomatic. Art collective Claire Fontaine’s response to this is the proposition of the *Human Strike*, which imagines refusing the labour of being a pathological self for capitalism’s non-reproductive death spiral.<sup>38</sup> The problem here being of course that this withdrawal necessarily runs the risk of undermining the possibility of artists’ continued physical survival – needing to eat is always the limit point of strike. But here we should keep in mind Agamben’s celebration of inoperativity as a “destituent” mode, proper to art, contemplation and anthropogenesis, which deposes “all factual vocations.”<sup>39</sup> Through the suspension of utility and use, writes Agamben, the living “maintain themselves in relation to a pure potential,” opening the possibility of an undetermined self-use by which the new is ushered in. Maybe this is another way to think strike, not a simple refusal but the production of the possibility of experiencing and so changing ourselves – not only *poiesis* or production, but *autopoiesis*. So many voyeuristic windows and walkways, so many possible human strikes. As a final consideration, one wonders what ruptures the parodic, exaggerated or fanatically fastidious life performances of the neo-avant-garde might effect within these new art vitrines. Would radical self-objectification prevent the naturalism demanded by an institutional reflex that creates artistic life as “only work”?

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See Claire Fontaine, *The Human Strike Has Already Begun & Other Writings*, London 2013, <http://www.metamute.org/sites/www.metamute.org/files/u1/human-strike-9781906496883-web-complete-book.pdf>.

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Agamben, *Use of Bodies*, 277.

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