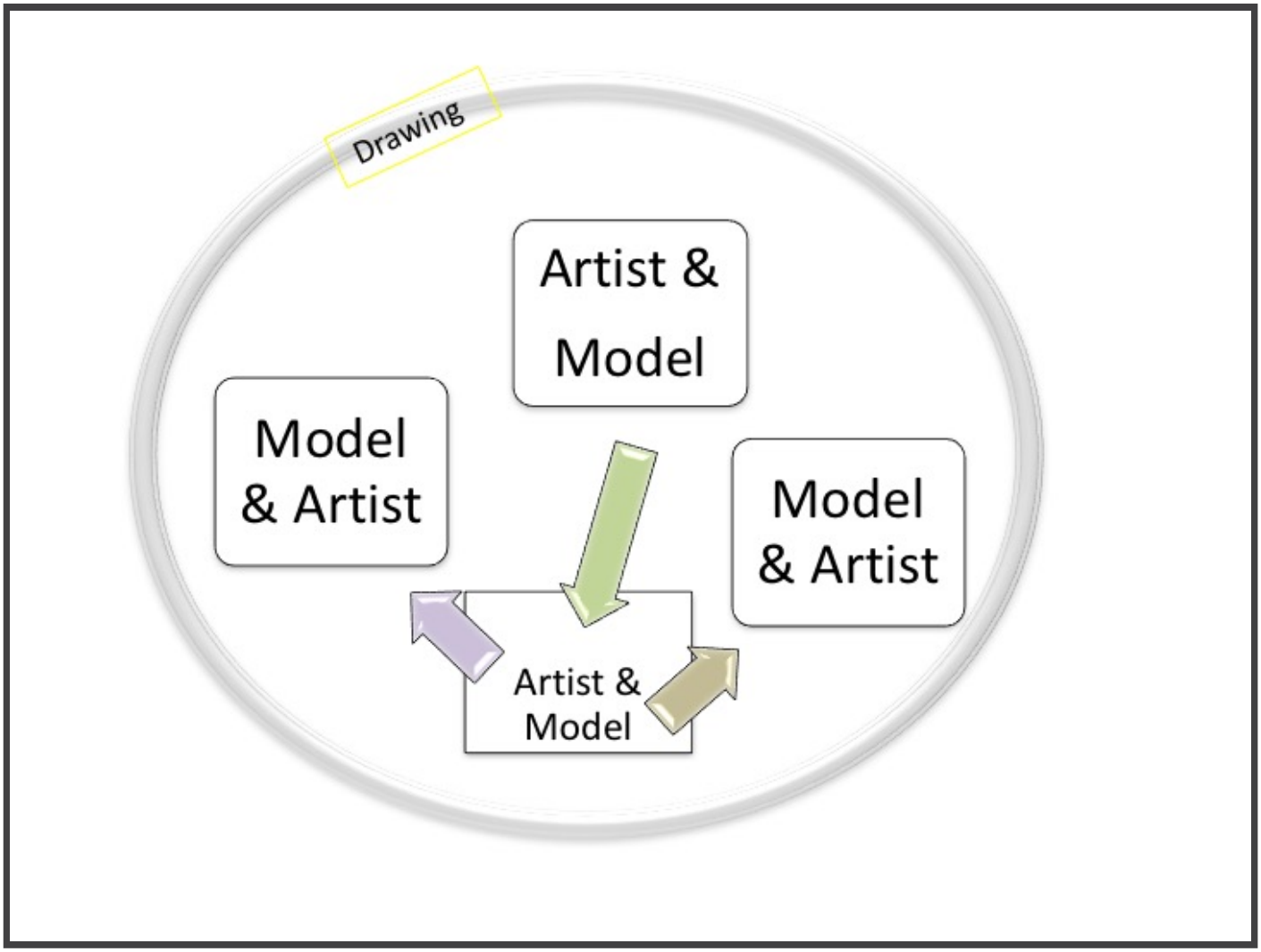
Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

Art Without Work & Work Without Art

Georgia Sagri

A script of Georgia Sagri's round table *Art Without Work & Work Without Art. Notes, Questions And Thoughts Open For Discussion* which took place on February 24 2018 at Kunsthaus Glarus as part of *Im Bau. Eine Redaktionssitzung.*



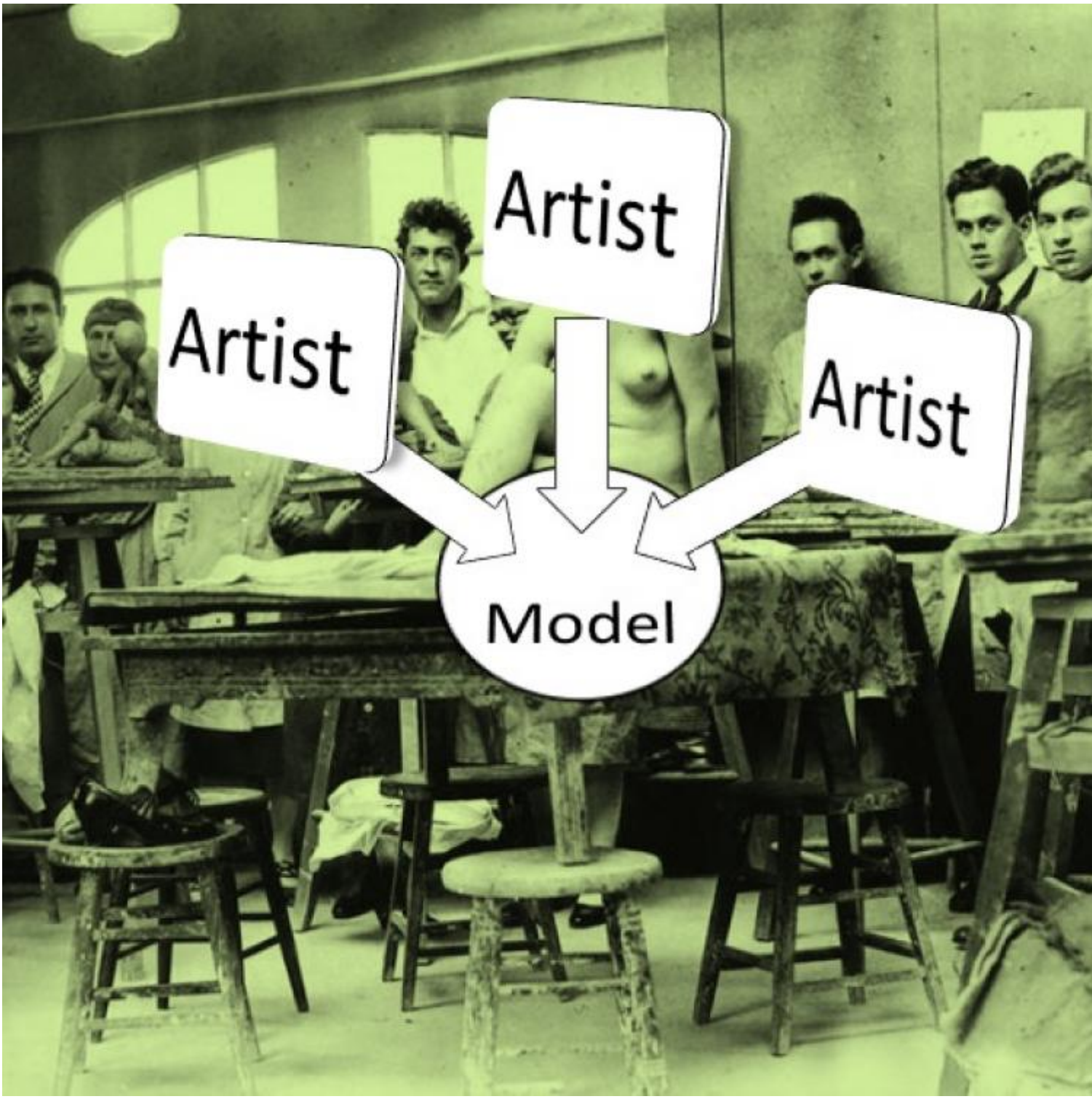
When I was invited to contribute to this meeting, one of the first things that came to mind was the time when I decided to be an artist. I was quite young, sixteen, and I had been working at a bar for a year, serving, cleaning tables, taking orders. Because of my young age, I was paid under the table; I didn't have health insurance, but at least I had some money. My father had died a few years earlier and this was the only way for me to sustain myself without depending on my mother's little income.



Georgia Sagri, *Art Without Work and Work Without Art*, 2018, PowerPoint presentation, 1- 30 slides, dimensions variable, detail

At the bar, I was changing roles constantly. Sometimes, I was at the door, sometimes I cleaned or just helped the bartender. During that period of my life, paid work meant being independent but also giving up any desire whatsoever to explore who I was; this was something left for my boss to decide, who was using my energy for his own benefit and profit.

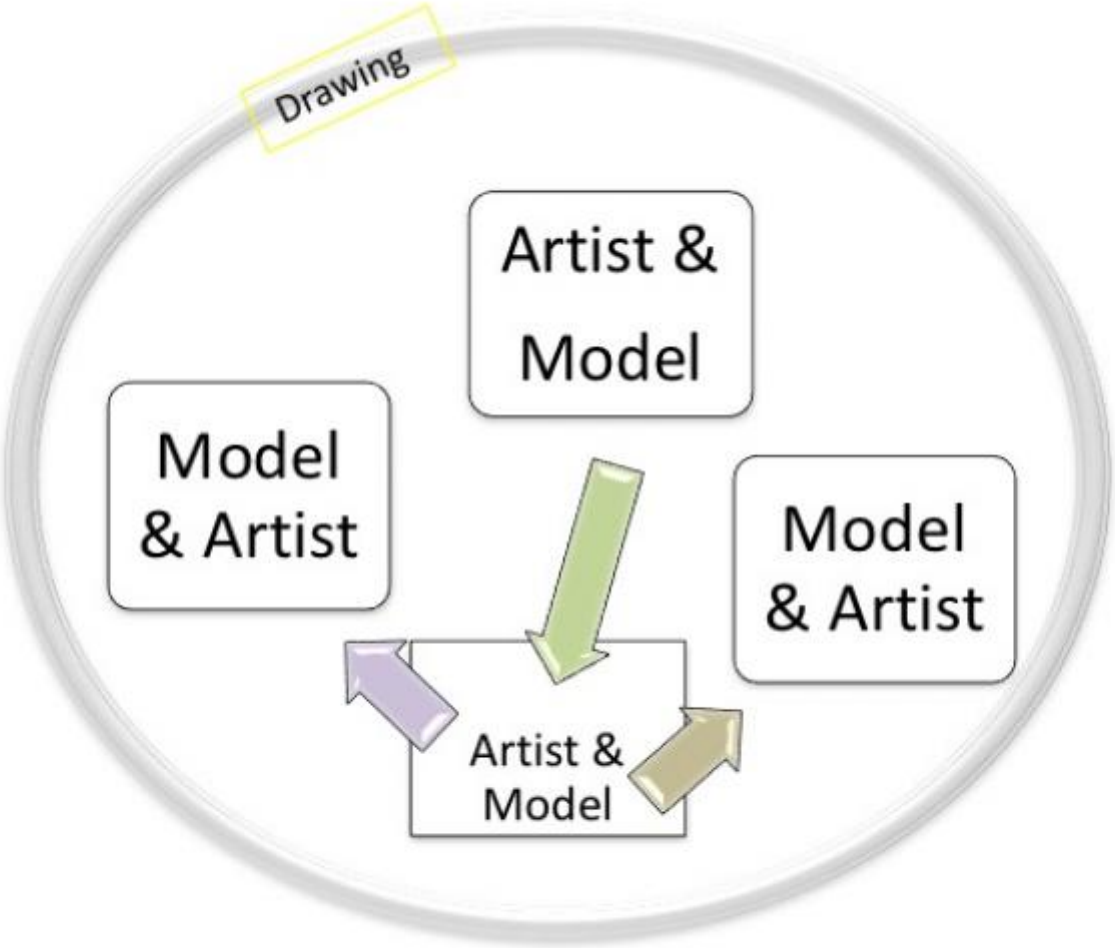
During that time, I was sporadically attending preparatory drawing lessons, to enter the school of the arts. When it got too difficult to pay for the classes, I decided that, instead of quitting drawing, I would become the model for my peers. With the modeling work I was able to continue taking drawing classes.



Georgia Sagri, *Art Without Work and Work Without Art*, 2018, PowerPoint presentation, 1- 30 slides, dimensions variable, detail

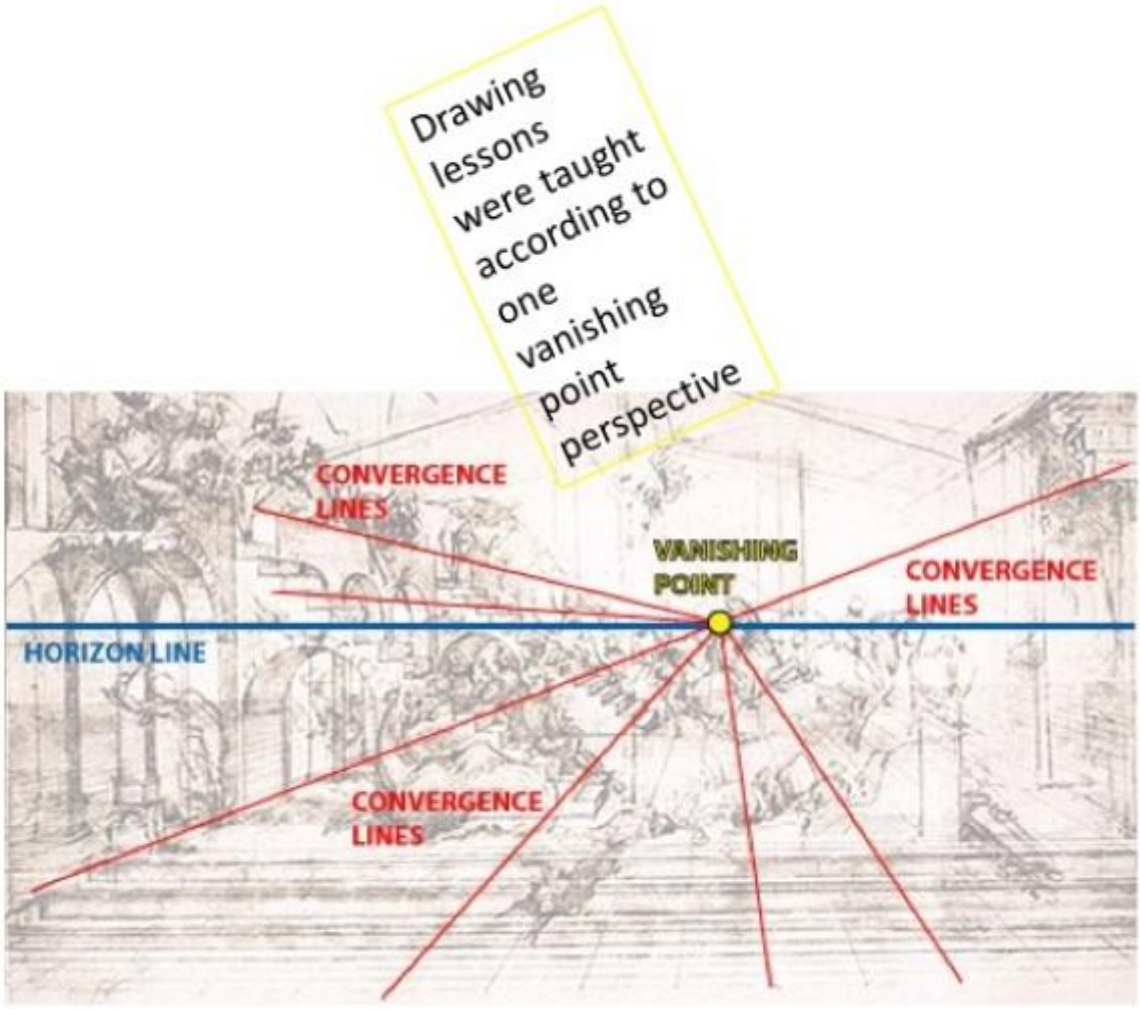
My fellow students, however, were quite vocal about how much they hated the ambiguous position that I was occupying, being both a model and taking drawing classes with them. Although posing for them and drawing with them could seem terribly embarrassing, I was convinced that they were the ones who failed to see the whole picture. For me, the point was that if I was comfortable with posing naked in front of my peers and not offended by their insults, I would continue to model in the best way possible and at the same time continue to attend the drawing classes. I refused to see the work of modeling as separate from the act of drawing, nor did I regard it as similar to working at the bar because, as I saw it, modeling was already part of the act of drawing. I hated having to choose between the roles of model and artist. I simply couldn't participate in this discourse my peers were so desperate to fit into. To

me, making a choice was equal to giving up the entire process of drawing.



Georgia Sagri, *Art Without Work and Work Without Art*, 2018, PowerPoint presentation, 1- 30 slides, dimensions variable, detail

I insisted on my decision not to choose between the two roles and to sustain my drawing process, which involved both activities of posing and drawing. Once I decided not to choose, I became much more enthusiastic about the drawing than about working at the bar. A few months later, I quit the bar job and for a year and a half I continued to attend the drawing classes. I insisted on standing still, naked in front of my peers, and drawing with them. Standing motionless required developing a different way to breathe. I invented smaller portions of inhales and exhales from the nose so that I could keep my pose for thirty, sometimes even forty minutes.



Georgia Sagri, Art Without Work and Work Without Art, 2018, PowerPoint presentation, 1- 30 slides, dimensions variable, detail

For my peers, the stable image I provided them with when modeling served to improve their sense of observation, form, light and shadow, while for me it was a time to do research into my physiology's limits, patience and breathing – in other words, observation from within. The breathing techniques allowed me to be less anxious about the power shifts involved in alternating between modeling and drawing. I gradually also looked at other bodies in a different way. I wasn't interested in having my drawings look good. I was interested in learning what it's like to stand still for so many hours in front of others' contemplation, being exposed to the gazes of others, and to then take that bodily information and use it to draw another body on paper. To me, drawing meant abandoning the very notion of the duality of passive and active. The passive, to me, contained an active element and the active contained a passive element. The sensitive state of exposing my naked body, my intimate surfaces, already implied the drawing's eventuality, it was a momentum, and this is how I understood representation.

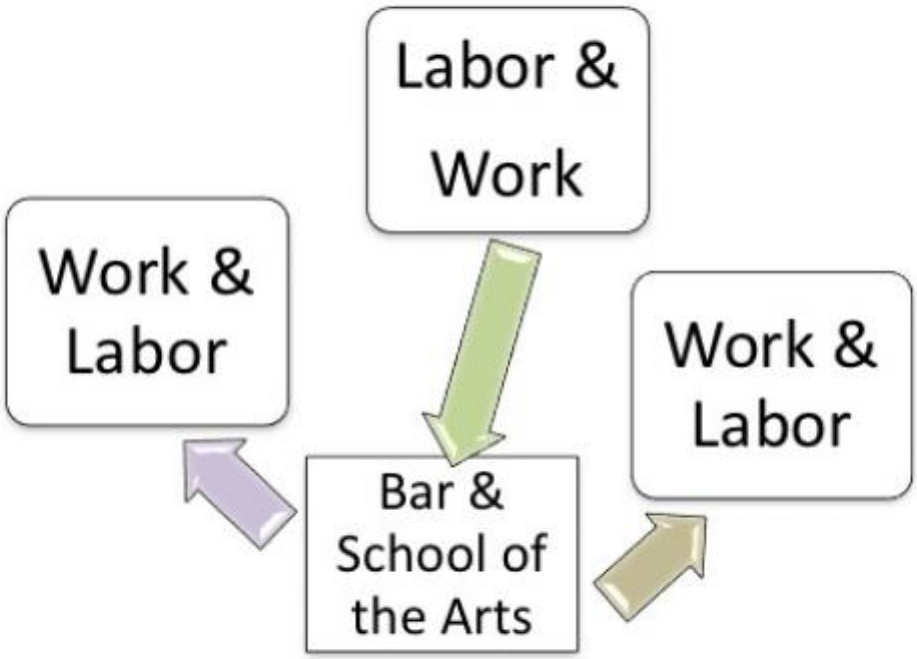
The way we were taught drawing was through creating perspective by means of a single focal point on the paper and starting from that point to build our composition and the subject matter around it. The experience of refusing to choose between model and artist led me to start building my compositions with pigments of tones and rhythms on the paper without having one starting point, building up without insisting on having a central perspective. All those bodies on paper, on canvas, photos, and images were only confirmations of the split between

object and subject, between the one being depicted and the one depicting. Representation has forever depended on this dichotomy and on building subject matter through a single focal point. So many women artists have shaped the history of art by posing endlessly and without any argument for thousands of years in front of another and to sacrifice learning how to draw – just as there were many women artists who did learn how to draw by rejecting ever being the models. For me, representation was about continuously shifting between modeling and drawing and the dispersion of the comfortable position of the fixed point on the sheet of paper, and the constant return to the act and the training, of breathing in the process of rigidly keeping a pose while, and through the learning of how to draw.

I was still young, eighteen, when I was accepted to the school of the arts and my idea of going about drawing, led me to question the approach of the art education system that suggested that making a choice was the way to build a career as an artist. This time, the dichotomy was between material and immaterial production. That was the main source of anxiety for many art students at that time, and it still is: the constant anxiety of having to choose between material and immaterial production. Our teachers back then were split between those who insisted on encouraging us to make something – I called them the artists, the material producers – and those who encouraged us to critique «work» and to reflect more on «language», «research», and «institutional critique» – back then I called them the models, the immaterial producers. Most of the teachers who forced us to make a choice between those two productive modes were male artists.

It was only in working with the artist Rena Paparpyrou, the head of the studio I was part of – and the first woman artist ever to be the head of a studio since the establishment of the Athens School of the Arts in 1836 – that I was able to uphold my decision not to choose. The only thing she was adamant about in her studio was daily presence. She insisted that, no matter what, all students had to be in the studio, otherwise they had to leave. She was there every day from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., taking attendance, walking around the studio, and talking to us. Rena Paparpyrou was without doubt the best educator the Athens School of the Arts ever had. Now that I think of it, she wanted us to be in the studio without imposing the need to make any choice. She was simply there to keep up the pace; to encourage us to pursue our artistic practice at our own tempo within the structure of the studio. If she hadn’t created this structure by insisting on our presence, then none of us would have been able to actually get anything going and create our own rhythm within it. For the same reason she required all of us to also be present during twice-monthly group meetings. The whole group would tour the studio and critique each student’s work, and even when there was no visible, material progress, this activity of touring the studio was important for all of us, as it allowed us to see, hear, and discuss about the building process and the routine each of us was establishing. And there were many things going on even in an empty space.

During my first years at the Athens School of the Arts I did public actions and created drawings and sculptures, some of which I would call *staged* objects. I had no idea that some of what I was doing was called performance. I was enthusiastic about creating space for the active to become passive and the passive to become active. I wanted to focus on the moment of shifting between artist and model and vice versa, and my basic paradigm continued to be the drawing process I had learned in my preparatory drawing classes. Performance was the medium that allowed me to sustain the decision to not choose, an empowering tool that perpetuated the limbo state of neither work nor art.



Georgia Sagri, *Art Without Work and Work Without Art*, 2018, PowerPoint presentation, 1- 30 slides, dimensions variable, detail

When I was accepted in the art school, I decided to start working again as a waitress on the weekends. This time, however, the work was no longer about gaining independence but about satisfying everyday needs, so as to be able to continue my studies and keep exploring who I am. The work at the bar seemed much easier – a walk in the park, so to say – compared to the adventures, disappointments, and satisfactions I experienced in exploring my artistic practice. This investigation under the premise of not choosing between modeling and drawing made me realize that there was also no choice between paid work and artistic work. The moment I tried to choose between the role of the waitress and that of the artist, I fell into the same pattern as my peers at the drawing classes when they wanted me to choose between modeling and drawing. I decided that if I could continue working as a waitress as an extension of my practice at art school, I would be able to continue that artistic practice, as one enabled the other. I continued to do my breathing research between the bar and art school and this is the way I continued to work since that day. It is a balance between work and art. Doing work without art and doing art without work is the way I have lived ever since. This is how I try to organize with others beyond the limits of art and through what I do, which is art.

In 2014, I decided to initiate ‘Y??[matter]HYLE with the intention of finding other people who wanted to be involved in a space of no choice with me. This process could happen within the caring of an *oikos* (home) in a typical Athenian apartment of a *polikatikia* (apartment block), a building located at a stoa (shopping arcade) surrounded by the urban chaos of

Omonoia Square in the center of Athens. The scale of the home can give the time for intimate, one-on-one meetings and small gatherings. It is a small apartment with an entry room, two living rooms and a corridor leading to one bedroom, the kitchen and the bathroom and suggests the attempt to gain time, to create distance and engagement with ideas. It is an experiment concerning the private and the public, it gives what the overestimated studio of the singular artist can offer while at the same time allowing the social character of an art space to develop and maintaining the cultivation of intimacy as its core element. The home constantly calibrates various tempos and demands the weaving of private and public. All of this happens in parallel to the most important element, which is cultivating affinities and budding friendships. The rupture of an individual artist's studio has social implications and this may also happen inside the space of a home. ???[matter]HYLE aims to call for social activities of all kinds, but often this work is not seen as work. That is a problem, because the space could offer political and artistic programs, but first there is a need of communities that are able to reproduce their lives and I don't see those communities existing right now. People seem to be too fragmented in different social bubbles to deal with loneliness as a group activity, while I try to cultivate within this space a sense of care that goes beyond the need of privacy or public address. I insist on not wanting to decide what is more important: the individual or the collective. I feel that within the spaces we build we need to recognize the existence of both the collective within the individual and the individual within the collective.

What I have noticed since initiating the space is that there are still obstacles to overcome with regard to the dichotomy and the expectations built up around the ideas we have about the public and private modes of production an art space and the home may provide. The paradigmatic example involves who is doing the art and who is doing the work. I am often confronted with people who think that simply being at the space and doing nothing, relaxing, and cleaning the dishes, is not part of the art but of the home. To do art, to them, is about exhibiting one's work, about organizing events, about discussing serious matters. Cleaning dishes is either part of work or part of leisure.

For me, an art space such as the *oikos* (home) needs to allow for the variety of ways in which individuals assume responsibilities to take care of the spaceitself. To take care of their selves and others, to be able to live. A breathing technique needs to be built for the power shifts between art space and home where a different temporality and, as a result, a different understanding of production develops. It is not the maintenance of the modern life and labor-time tempo which exists only when wage comes into play; it isn't about the duration of a project which is defined by the start and completion of an objective; and it isn't just about striving for success based on an accounting of profits and expenses.

Something else is at stake at the home and the art space. When something begins and ends is up to the subjects involved to decide. Taking responsibility comes from caring for the space in order for others to be part of it as well. Maintaining and cleaning is done not for the purpose of keeping the space to oneself, but rather in order to allow others to be passive and active, without the pressure to choose between the role of the artist and the role of the visitor. To take care of the space is to resist choosing between those who know more than others or between those who are already included and those who want to belong – to build respect for the place which is not just yours but to everyone. And this could create the eventuality, the momentu-m that would enable skills and interests to emerge, pleasure and joy to appear.

Many institutions are obviously completely fixated with dichotomy: Project versus process, public versus private, exhibition versus event, production versus management. Residency programs, art centers, project spaces, artist-run spaces, art associations, *kunsthalles*, museums – these are all places that insist on maintaining the dichotomy between the model and the artist, object and subject, the immaterial and material production, paid work and artistic work,

the work and the art, the private and the public. Perhaps within breathing techniques the binaries and the violence of having to choose may go away. We could then decide to spare some time for each other to imagine, to discuss, and to organize structures beyond existing perceptions.

GEORGIA SAGRI

Georgia Sagri is an artist based in New York and Athens. Most of her work is influenced from her on-going engagement in political movements and struggles, on issues of autonomy, empowerment, and self-organisation. Recent group exhibitions include: Public Programs Documenta 14, Manifesta 11, Zurich, Switzerland and The Eccentrics, Sculpture Center, New York. She is the initiator of ???[matter]HYLE a semi-personal/semi-public space in the heart of Athens.

This contribution is licensed under the CC-BY-NC-ND License 4.0 International (Creative Commons, Attribution, Non Commercial, No Derivatives). Images and videos integrated into the contribution are not included in the CC BY-NC-ND License. For any use not permitted by legal copyright exceptions, authorization from the respective copyright holders is required.

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930204