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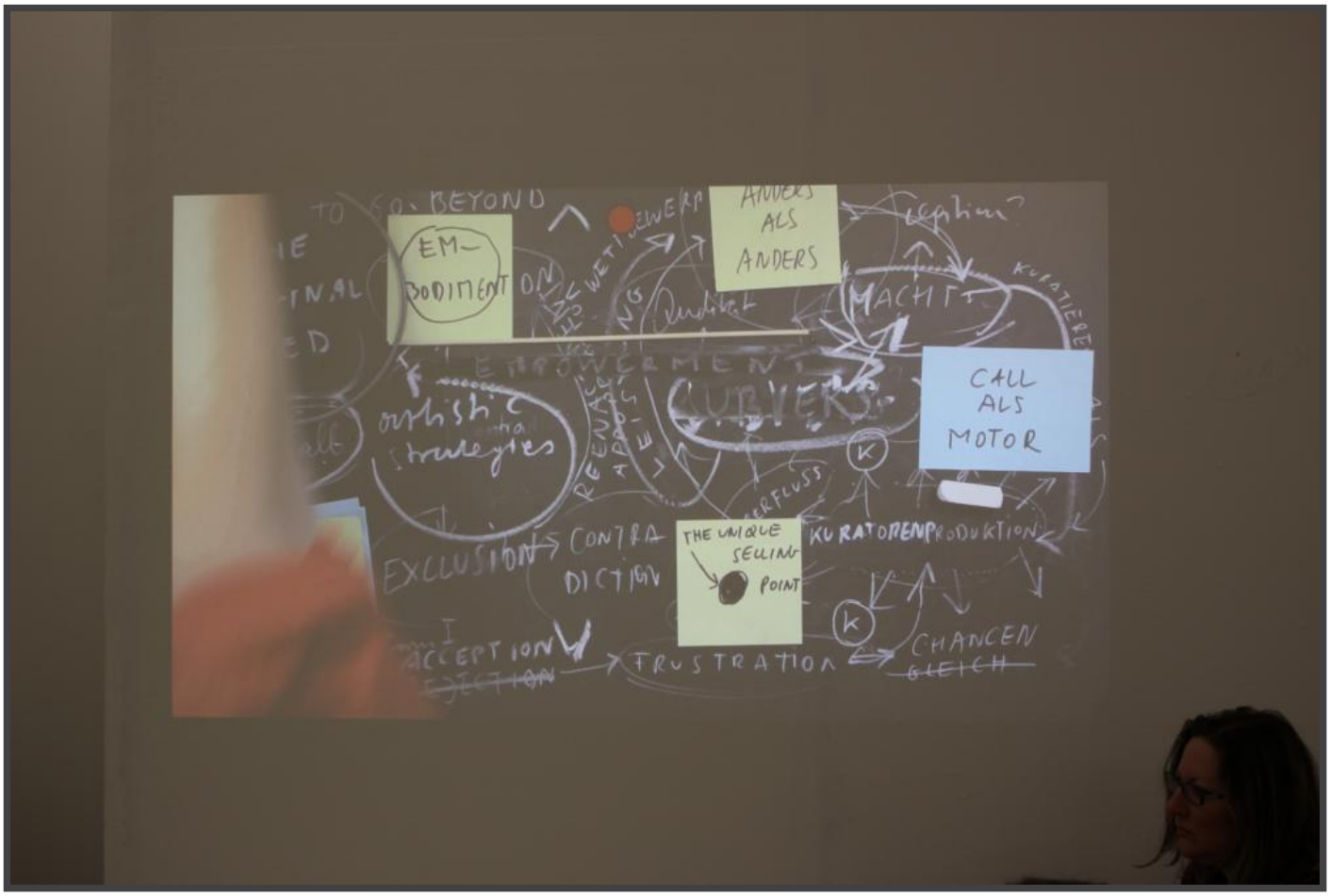
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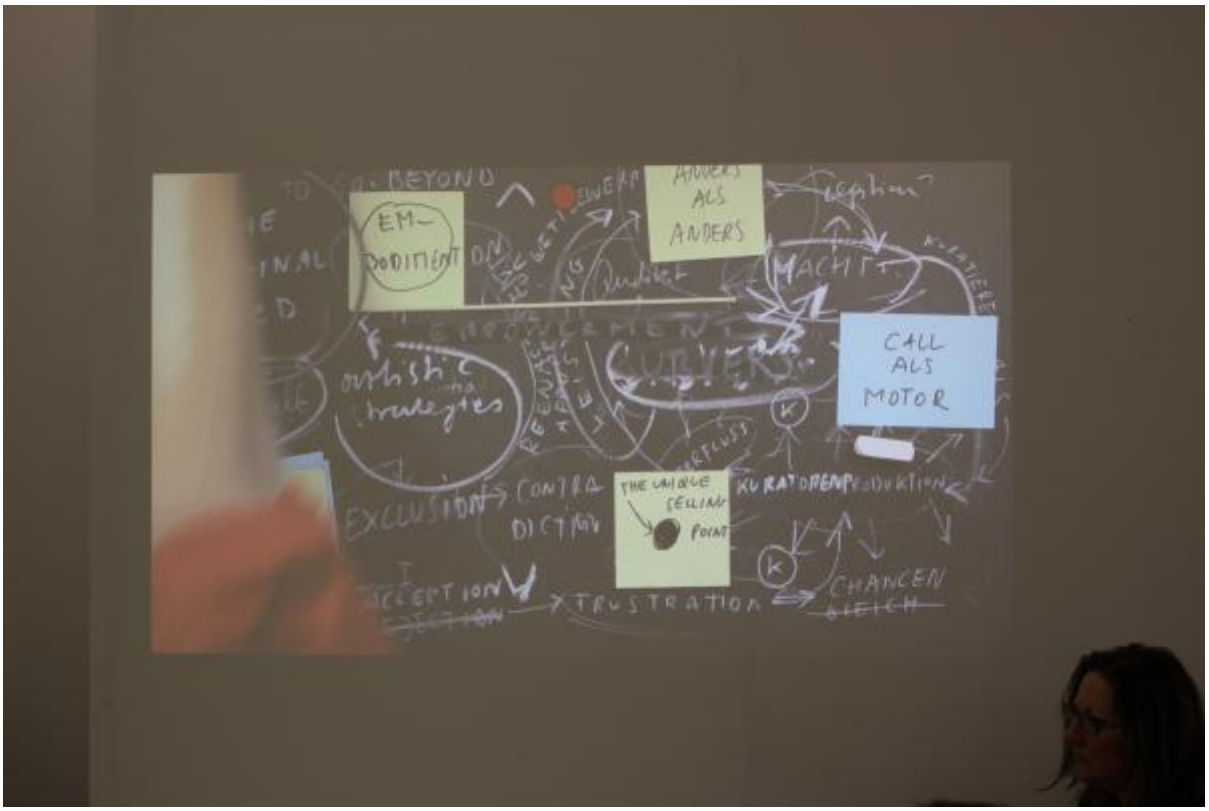
Call for Proposals

A Precarious Curatorial Model

Barbara Mahlknecht

In recent decades the competitive and selective process of the call for proposals has boomed in the context of new knowledge economies that establish precarious, mobile and flexible employment relationships. But aside from cost-effective production, outsourcing and competition, does the call for proposals have the potential to provoke other forms of artistic and curatorial action as well?





Round table discussion with a *TransLecture* by Nikolaus Gansterer in the framework of: *A Proposal to Call*, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, 2015. Photo: Barbara Mahlknecht.

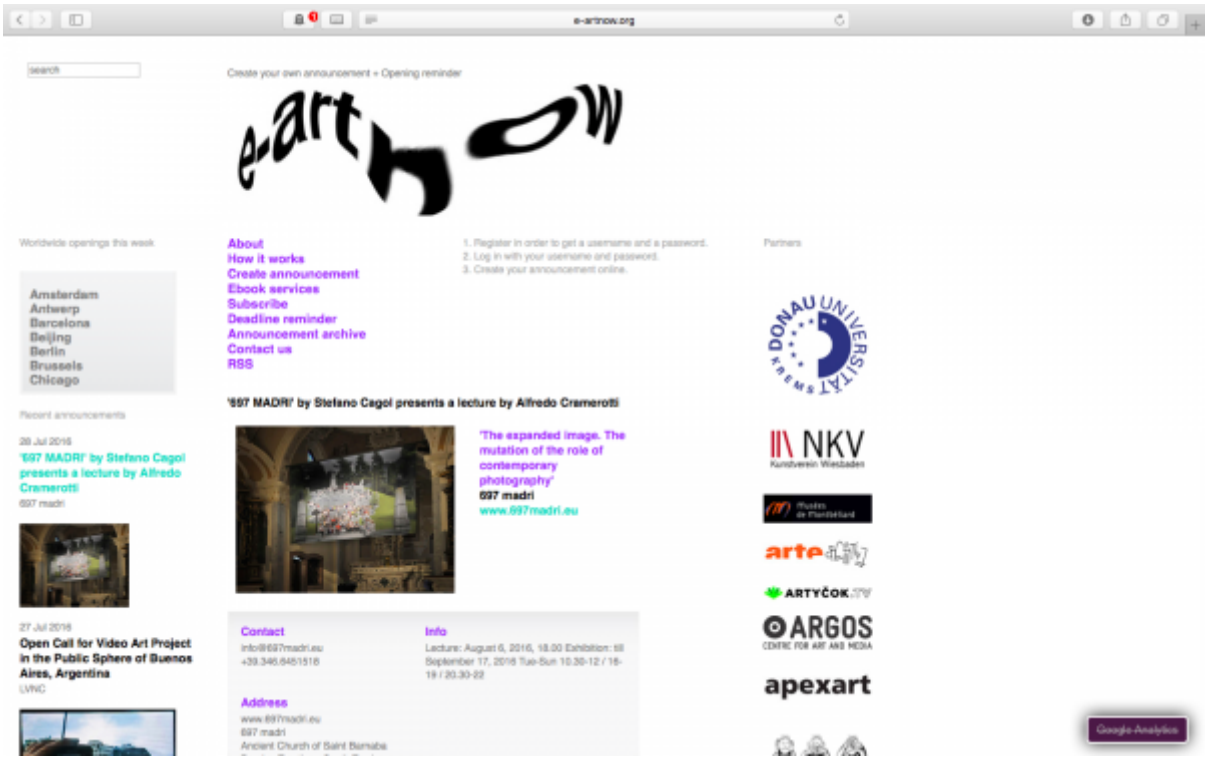
I. Economies of the Call for Proposal

Calls for proposals and open calls are modes of soliciting, submitting and selecting projects. They are mostly used by small to mid-size art institutions, but also by curators of festivals, biennials and other major events. Calls are made to international artists, cultural producers and curators. They submit their proposals for artworks, exhibition concepts or project proposals and subject themselves to a process of selection and evaluation by a jury that selects proposals and puts them on their path to realization. Hence the call for proposals is a form of curatorial program generation. Institutional, artistic and curatorial forms of practice are mutually dependent in the process of solicitation, for while artists and curators increasingly adjust their projects with the call for proposals, institutions, in turn, base their conception, planning and implementation on what the submitted and selected projects propose.

What are the demands made on artistic practices and curatorial formats by calls for proposals? In what way do calls solicit modes of artistic and curatorial production due to their specific form? One of the things that stick out when examining different calls for proposals is that submitted projects often relate to the specific site and the given temporary framework of their realization. Catchphrases frequently mentioned in calls with regard to the demanded artistic and curatorial practice are «experimental», «innovative», «unique» and «new».[1] Terms such as «expanded artistic practice», «collaboration», «new audiences», «learning», «interaction» and «knowledge transfer», moreover, describe the specific forms of connectivity, innovation and knowledge production that have become essential for post-Fordist economies in recent decades.

Today, such open calls are omnipresent on websites, blogs and in art magazines where innovative and experimental work projects are solicited. They are shared on social media and quickly disseminated. On the website Callforcurators.com, «professionals» can become members for 2.95 Euros a month and 19.95 Euros a year and look through calls for submitting exhibition concepts, for advanced training and for applications for fellowships, internships,

residencies and awards. Wooloo.org presents itself as a network of more than «35’800 art professionals» from 140 countries. E-artnow.org sends out a free «worldwide deadline reminder: jobs, scholarships, competitions, residencies, exhibitions» on a monthly basis. According to its self-description, the newsletter, which is sponsored by private companies such as travel organizations and fashion labels, is aimed at academics, curators, artists, students and critics and offers a wealth of advertisements for job and study opportunities, workshops, residencies, open calls, competitions and exhibition concepts.



Screenshot of the website E-artnow.org [http://www.e-artnow.org].

II. The Call for Proposals, Subjectivization, Precarity

The rise of calls for proposal as a process for generating exhibition and festival programs is linked to the economic and political transformations that have occurred in and outside of the art field in Europe since the Fall of the Wall in 1989 and globally since the end of the Cold War. These include the progressive privatization of public institutions, the deregulation of capital transactions, the globalization of markets and the spread of digital forms of communication and production.[2] In so-called «cognitive capitalism», particular forms of knowledge and action gain in significance that, according to Fordist logic, cannot be regarded as work, because they do not produce anything directly material. The new, immaterial forms of work are, as Antonio Negri/Michael Hardt, Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato argue, based on communication, knowledge, affect and creativity.[3]

Since the 1990s, the aforementioned creative modes of knowledge production[4] are, moreover, connected to forms of artistic practice.[5] With the development of discursive, context and project-specific artistic practices, which themselves reference the late 1960s and 1970s, the training of curators is also professionalized in the 1990s. This is evident, for example, in the increase in postgraduate curatorial course offerings since that time. For instance, in 1987, the École du Magasin in Grenoble was founded, in 1994, the one-year curatorial program of De Appel in Amsterdam was established, and in 2002 the University of Applied Arts Vienna started offering its program «educating, curating, managing». Additional

postgraduate curatorial training is reconceived and offered in other cities, including in London, Zürich, Venice, Frankfurt, Leipzig and Stockholm. As curator and theorist Paul O' Neill points out, the professionalization of curators since the late 1980s is strongly connected to the context of globalization;[6] a development that is accompanied by a radical expansion of the art field and its job market and that extends from the centers in Europe and the U.S. to the metropolises in Asia, Africa and South America.

The newly established global working conditions, the emergence of a global art field and the professionalization of the job of curator are key to the rise of the format of the call for proposal and open call-processes in cultural production. Calls are directly related to the altered conditions in the art field. They operate as an effective instrument of how to generate a cost-saving program embedded in the global art field where creative work takes place in the form of competing projects and ideas, whose assessment standards are determined by the logic of appeal, solicitation and holding out a prospect.[7] Against the backdrop of these economic and political developments the call for proposals can be considered as an instrument of subjectification[8] in the art field. For such calls are forms of individual appeal: artists and curators are addressed in and by such calls. They are invited to permanently subject themselves to processes of submittal, application and selection and to adjust their artistic and curatorial project proposals to the demands of the particular call. This means that submitters have to inhabit the specific language that is required for submissions; they must coordinate their time planning with soliciting institutions; they must be flexible and mobile, in order to work on site on realizing a project; and at the same time they have to position their project proposals within an international standard using mostly modest resources. Nowadays it is imperative to respond to calls for proposals with innovative work and project proposals, so as to bring an artistic or curatorial résumé to an international level.

III. The Call in the Context of the Current Manifesta in Zürich

A current example of the interconnectedness of calls for proposals, curatorial practices and working conditions in the art field is offered by this year’s edition of Manifesta, the nomadic European biennial for contemporary art, whose eleventh edition titled *What People Do For Money: Some Joint Ventures* is taking place in Zürich.[9] In the run-up to Manifesta a series of calls for proposals was launched to generate new audiences, communication formats and artistic contributions: in October 2015, Manifesta sent out a casting call to young people for the production of videos; in March 2016 it issued an open call to the people of Zürich to participate in an art project of the artist Leigh Ledare and in April 2016 it sent out an invitation for students to attend the Manifesta11 summer school, *Negotiating Space. Art and Dissent*; and, finally, a call was issued to volunteers for unpaid work in communication, coordination, education and supervision. Moreover, and this is of particularly interest in the context of the debatable understanding of the call for proposals as a curatorial process, Manifesta used calls for two formats. Firstly, the local Zürich cultural scene was invited to submit project proposals for the so-called Parallel Events and, secondly, the performative program of the so-called *Cabaret der Künstler – Zunfthaus Voltaire* is curated through a call for proposals.



MANIFESTA 11

Call for Proposals
Zürich, 14. März 2016

Zunfthaus Voltaire – Cabaret der Künstler
Manifesta 11: Performance Programm

Wir freuen uns den *Call for Proposals* für das Manifesta 11 Performance Programm anzukündigen. Dieses findet im *Zunfthaus Voltaire – Cabaret der Künstler* (ehem. Cabaret Voltaire) während der Kunstbiennale Manifesta 11 statt. Wir hoffen, dass du daran interessiert bist, uns eine spezielle Performance vorzuschlagen – eine sogenannte *Joint-Venture Performance*. Es ist willkommen, wenn du diesen Aufruf auch an weitere Kollegen und Freunde weitergibst. Diese «do-it-yourself events» werden exklusiv für Mitglieder am legendären Geburtsort von Dada stattfinden. Der Zutritt zum *Zunfthaus Voltaire – Cabaret der Künstler* ist nur den Zunftmitgliedern gestattet. Auch das Manifesta Ticket ist hier nicht gültig.

The call for proposals of the Manifesta-11-performance-program [http://m11.manifesta.org/sites/default/files/uploads/m11_cabaret_performance_open_call_en_0.pdf] 14.03.2016.

As part of Manifesta11, the Cabaret Voltaire has been transformed into a cabaret of artists, a guild of artists, which, according to the call for proposals, is an «experimental performance space exceeding the traditional framework of art platforms». The guild is the site of «representation of a common profession.»[10] The founding members of this newly established artist's guild—Thomas Hirschhorn, Gianni Motti, Christian Jankowski and Manon as well as «guild master» Manuel Scheiwiller—call on artists (in the original German they exclusively use the masculine noun «Künstler») to join the guild by applying for a joint performance together with a person from a different profession. The accepted proposals for these «joint-venture performances» can be seen at the Cabaret Voltaire for the 100-day duration of the Manifesta. Applicants are offered technical equipment, membership in the artists' guild and free admission to all performances. To be accepted into the «27th guild of Zürich, the first for artists and the first to be gender-neutral»[11], applicants must submit a concept on a piece of A4 paper and be willing to realize the performance for free. The call does not provide any information about whether artists will be reimbursed for travel or lodging expenses.

When examining the call for proposals more closely it seemed, for one thing, surprising to revive an association as beholden to tradition and folklore as the guild as a model for a community of artists at all, without at the same time subjecting it to a critical revision. The guild is, in fact, an exclusionary association of professional groups. The rhetoric of «gender neutrality» in the call for proposals of the *Cabaret der Künstler – Zunfthaus Voltaire*—whose use of the generic masculine noun obfuscates rather than discusses hierarchical inequalities and exclusions—is unfortunately symptomatic of Manifesta11's problematic approach to the topic of labor. Using terms such as «guild master» and other exclusively masculine nouns not only seems anachronistic, but is characteristic of a biennial that addresses the subject of wage labor and, in doing so, disregards any other, unpaid and invisible forms of feminized work. What is more, Manifesta within its own structures precarious employment relationships that

have already been publicly criticized.[12]

The connection between the call for proposals as a process of generating curatorial programs, the thematic of labor as profession and the founding of the first «gender-neutral» guild is both paradox and revealing. For as described earlier, the process of the call for proposals is itself a symptom of contemporary employment relationships, which are replacing the model of 9 to 5 wage work with a variety of precarious forms of work such as self-employment, un- or underpaid internships and temporary project work. At the same time precarization in the field of creative industries is by all means feminized, as Angela Mc Robbie most recently showed in her 2015 publication *Be Creative. Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. According to McRobbie, normative forms of precarization in the field of creative industries go along with passionate work and the romanticism of self-realization.[13] The fact that a curatorial process informed by contemporary working conditions neglects its own economic conditions and implications and, moreover, completely ignores the problematic situation of precarious feminized work in the art field by using the label «gender-neutral», points to the missed opportunity of Manifesta11 to critically reflect to the fullest extent on present conditions of work in and outside of the art field.

IV. The Call for Proposals as a Curatorial Process

In the fall/winter of 2015, the art historian and curator Vera Lauf and I jointly curated the exhibition *A Proposal to Call* for the Kunsthalle Exnergasse in Vienna. Our curatorial concept for the exhibition responded to the annual call for proposals by the Kunsthalle Exnergasse, which generates its program primarily, albeit not exclusively, by means of this process.[14] Equipped with minimal resources and modest funds, we conceived a series of formats for our exhibition—round table discussions, performances, lectures and workshops—that were intended to examine the call for proposals as a model of artistic and curatorial production for its potential as well as critically discuss its disciplining limitations. A finding of the exhibition project was that such calls pose challenges not just for their addressees, but also for the institutions that apply the call for proposals as a means of generating program. The implementation of the call and of the selection process as well as the actual realization of artistic and curatorial projects with oftentimes scarce financial, infrastructural and human resources is extremely labor-intensive and time-consuming.



The current call for proposals by the Kunsthalle Exnergasse Wien.



Exhibition view, *A Proposal to Call*, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, 2015. Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

In terms of the use and central role of calls for proposals for curating exhibition programs, the history of the Kunsthalle Exnergasse is exemplary for the transformation processes in the art field since the 1990s. Founded in 1987 as an artist-run gallery at WUK in Vienna, one of the largest grassroots, democratically run cultural centers in Europe, which comprises 150 independent initiatives and is housed in a former locomotive factory, the Kunsthalle Exnergasse has put together its program on the basis of an annual call for proposals since 1991. Each time an advisory committee selects four to six proposals out of a total of about

200 submissions, which are then realized. In the past the call was published in the form of advertisements in selected German art magazines and as a result it particularly reached a German-language art community. The range of addressees only changed in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the Kunsthalle started to use a bilingual call for proposals that was disseminated through digital newsletters and platforms. At the time, the idea to open up the exhibition program of the former artists' cooperative to artists and curators outside of WUK was indeed perceived as an innovative move and a form of emancipatory self-positioning. Today, the situation is different insofar as the number of submissions has greatly increased, with the result that the annual call for proposals has developed into a hypercompetitive process.

In conclusion it can be said that the process of the call for proposals highlights the contradictions of contemporary artistic production between competition and facilitation, scarcity of resources and high quality standards, competition and collaboration. This is not a reason to categorically reject such calls. Rather, it is imperative to take into consideration the particular material and immaterial conditions that are created by a call for proposals creates. Especially against the backdrop of the outlined transformations in the art field, which are based on competition and innovation and reproduce precarious working conditions, it would be crucial to scrutinize the way how the call for proposals are implemented with specific standards, possibilities and limitations; to question the criteria of selection[15] with regard to mechanisms of in- and exclusion; to keep the disposable resources in mind and to configure the process in such a way that it facilitates alternative forms of cooperation apart from the competitive pressure to innovate. Institutions, curators and cultural producers who want to approach contemporary forms of cultural production in critical ways have to find (invent) new forms of curatorial invitation and facilitation.

[1] See the international calls for proposals on the websites Callforcurators.com, Wooloo.org and E-artnow.org.

[2] A textbook example for the key function of online media in the field of contemporary art is E-Flux, an editorial, curatorial, artistic online platform that was founded in 1998 by the artist Anton Vidokle. E-Flux sees itself as a site and means of dissemination of critical discourses on contemporary art. E-Flux sends out up to six newsletters a day with information about exhibition openings, event announcements, awards, calls for proposals to more than 90'000 institutional and private subscribers throughout the world. On top of that, e-flux runs an office and, since 2004, an exhibition space in New York and since 2008 it also publishes a monthly online publication on specific topics. In recent years, e-flux has thus become a central, if not hegemonic institution of communication and art criticism. See also Lucie Kolb's essay on Brand-New-Life [b-n-l/supercommunity-superconversation-supernova/].

[3] See Isabel Lorey and Klaus Neundlinger, *Kognitiver Kapitalismus* (Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2012). Maurizio Lazzarato, *Immaterial Labour* (1996) http://geocities.com/immateriallabour/lazzarato-immaterial- labour.html [http://geocities.com/immateriallabour/lazzarato-immaterial-%20labour.html].

[4] The idea that artistic and creative activities are the new paradigm of post-Fordist immaterial labor was discussed in the context of the publication of Éve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1999). Chiapello and Boltanski argue that artists' criticism, meaning the demand for freedom and self-determination articulated by artists, ultimately supported capitalism in achieving its expansion.

[5] See Holger Kube Ventura, *Politische Kunst Begriffe in den 1990er Jahren im deutschsprachigen Raum* (Vienna: edition selene, 2002). In his comprehensive analysis of the political concepts of art in the 1990s Ventura describes the newly created work forms of the 1990s as self-organized, subcultural, contextualistic, transformative, institution-critical, site-specific and research-based.

[6] See Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), pp. 60 ff. Other reasons cited by O'Neill are: the emergence of a new global art market and a new field of study—the exhibition; the boom of international biennials of contemporary art, but also the emergence of curatorial anthologies.

[7] To date there's no research done on the relation between open calls and curatorial and art practices. For a critique on the subject see: Katja Stecher: *Who is Calling?* (Wien: master thesis, 2014).

[8] According to Michel Foucault and the studies on governmentality that draw on his thoughts, the subject can not be taken for granted. Being a subject is a status that is produced by a seemingly paradox active/passive process of subjectification. In it, power and subject mutually imply one another. Hence, becoming a subject means at the same time asserting oneself vis-à-vis the authorities that are directed against one's own autonomy. At the same time the subject is also exposed to the forces that affect it. Subjectification therefore implies self-empowerment and submission, self-formation and intervention into power relations in equal measure. See Ulrich Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self. Fabricating a New Type of Subject* (London: Sage Publishing, 2015). Forms of governmental self-optimization have been extensively described in the context of recent studies on the governmentality of the self. See for this, among others, Isabel Lorey, *Governmentality and Self-Precarization. On the normalization of cultural producers*, 2006. http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en [http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en] (last accessed July 16, 2016).

[9] The 7th Berlin Biennale in 2012, which was curated by Artur ?mijewski, already launched a large-scale call for proposals that invited artists to submit research material and, moreover, a political statement. Artur ?mijewski explained the latter request as follows: «There is this invisible rule for artists to produce so-called «political art» from an unidentified political position and to keep neutrality, even if it is obvious that they are not neutral. ... Our reality is structured by politics; this means that art is also structured by them. Let's present this invisible/hidden structure, this obscene background of art.» See blog.berlinbiennale.de [http://blog.berlinbiennale.de] (last accessed July 16, 2016).

[10] See m11.manifesta.org/de/kunst/cabaret-der-kuenstler-zunfthaus-voltaire [http://m11.manifesta.org/de/kunst/cabaret-der-kuenstler-zunfthaus-voltaire], (last accessed July 16 2016).

[11] See http://m11.manifesta.org/de/kunst/cabaret-der-kuenstler-zunfthaus-voltaire [http://m11.manifesta.org/de/kunst/cabaret-der-kuenstler-zunfthaus-voltaire], (last accessed July 16 2016).

[12] The «visual identity» pictographs of Manifesta11, which were on view on the website prior to the opening, are symptomatic of the neglection of reproductive work such as household, maintenance, cleaning, sex and care work as well as precarious forms of new independence and internships in favor of the 9 to 5 wage work model. Under the headings «130 artists – 250 artworks – Guild for Artists – Pavilion of Reflections» the website presented a series of pictures recalling Otto Neurath's Isotype, which show individuals next to different artworks. These individuals include a scientist, a priest, an engineer, two boxers, a physician, a woman athlete, a dog groomer and a flight attendant. This allocation of men and women to gender-typical professions seem stereotypical and affirmative. For the problematic issue of working conditions at Manifesta11, see also the May 23, 2016 essay by Regina Pfister on Brand-New-Life [b-n-l/what-people-do-for-money-en-us/]. Other critical contributions: Brigitta Bernet at http://geschichtedergegenwart.ch [http://geschichtedergegenwart.ch]; Simon Jacoby, Severin Miszkiewicz and Jonas Staehelin at http://tsri.ch/ [http://tsri.ch/] as well as Daniela Janser at www.woz.ch [http://www.woz.ch]. (last accessed July 16, 2016). Precarious working conditions are, unfortunately, not new in the context of international biennials, but they seem downright cynical from the point of view of Manifesta 11's curatorial concept, «What People do for Money».

[13] See Angela Mc Robbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016). Passionate work would above all include the work of (usually female) curatorial assistants and interns.

[14] The idea to do an exhibition on the call for proposals was essentially Vera Lauf's.

[15] The question of how to configure a call for proposals process in a way that meets «objective» criteria is a central issue for institutions and curators who develop calls. Many calls work with a two-step process. Apexart, a non-profit art institution founded in 1994 and based in Lower Manhattan, pursues an interesting model: it issues an annual call for proposals for an international exhibition program, which elicits up to 700 projects submissions. Special software was created for the selection process: an algorithm is supposed to guarantee that each project proposal is examined and evaluated to the same extent by the 150 jurors. Some of the jurors are not from the art field.

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