Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

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What People Do for Money / What We Do for Money / What We Do for No Money / What We Do / How We Work

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This summer Manifesta is taking place in Zürich. Titled *What People Do for Money*, the European Biennial aims to explore the subject of work. Considering the working conditions Manifesta currently perpetuates in Zürich, this motto has something irritating about it. A fundamental debate about structural working conditions in the field of art is needed.





Sophie Nys, *Sitzen ist das neue Rauchen*, 2015.

Curated by German artist Christian Jankowski, the by now eleventh edition of Manifesta presents itself at numerous institutional and non-institutional venues in Zürich. Supported by the Amsterdam-based non-profit organization International Foundation Manifesta, the biennial wants explore the psychological and geographical territory of Europe and focus attention on the social, cultural and political developments of a changing continent, as the website explains.

Titled *What People Do for Money*, this year's exhibition focuses on work. It asks what work can be, what status work has in society and in the life plan of the individual and how work changes us. Concepts abound in this subject area outlined by Manifesta 11 — and each of those concepts has very different implications. Drawing on economic, social-scientific or philosophical definitions, work can be interpreted in various ways and varyingly more or less linked to productive, reproductive or economic criteria. In this sense, work is not necessarily wage labor, can be occupation, but does not have to be vocation. Manifesta sticks to a traditional concept of work in this context and focuses exclusively, as the exhibition title implies, on those activities that are remunerated. Unpaid care or reproductive work, for instance, is disregarded.

In terms of content, the exhibition focuses attention on collaborations between artists and professionals. Artists realize their projects in cooperation with the owner of a dog parlor, an employee of the municipal water treatment plant or a clock maker. Artistic — i.e., often freelance and sometimes correspondingly precarious — work meets mostly dependent wage work. The large-scale project relies on the conceptual, coordinative and organizational work of an international team of more than fifty people working between Zürich, Berlin, London, Amsterdam and Barcelona. In addition to the team members who already worked for previous editions of the biennial, numerous new positions in PR and press relations, art education and production were filled for the Zürich edition. The gross salary offered for a full-time job with a temporary contract is about 3700 Swiss Francs (roughly $3870). People who are better at negotiating sometimes make more. Also involved are a large number of technicians as well as the custodians of the participating Zürich exhibition venues. The regular custodians of the Kunsthalle — who are quite often artists making a living doing this work — are replaced with so-called volunteers for the duration of the 100-day exhibition and, as a consequence, forced to take unpaid vacation. Accordingly, Manifesta is eagerly looking for volunteers at the moment to work not just as exhibition attendants but also in ticket sales, at information booths and in VIP service.

«What People Do for No Money» or «What People Do for Little Money» would therefore be the more fitting questions in this context. And let's also replace the impersonal «people» with an inclusive «we» and ask: «What Do We Do for Money?» A reflection on structural working conditions in the field of art is should take place especially in the context of Manifesta, which quasi provokes it with this year's theme. So let us think about a few things that, astonishingly enough, have hitherto been ignored in the context of Manifesta 11 but are by all means discussed elsewhere.

Sociological approaches describe the autonomous and creative artist as a perfect embodiment of the workers in post-Fordist work structures. These alleged paradigms of artistic work can also be applied to other activities in the field of art. Positioning themselves in an increasingly globalized context with a growing number of international art biennials, curators and other art facilitators in particular operate as independent contractors and act as managers and cunning networkers under the guise of appealing catchphrases such as self-actualization or self-determination. Term-based employment with no predictability of place, relatively low pay and the spread of employment on an internship basis tend to be the rule here. Such working conditions create a socially unsecured and unstable situation that can be described as precarious. These developments go hand in hand with a veritable push toward professionalization in the field of art. Curating and art facilitation can be studied at universities and art colleges. The booming courses produce predominantly female graduates, which leads to a gender-specific structuring of the fields of work and affects the pay level.

Working conditions in the field of art do not merely remain unreflected: their precarious forms are currently being pushed by Manifesta in Zürich. Recognizing the situation on the job

market in the field of art, low wages can be offered and unpaid work can become entrenched. «Want to help make Manifesta 11 happen? Look behind the scenes? Have fun?» the biennial's Instagram account asks. Now, volunteer work, an internship or a project-based job at the prestigious art biennial may add luster to a CV, but they can hardly cover the rent and living expenses in Zürich. In this context one must also ask about the role of the public. The City of Zürich supports ‹its› edition of Manifesta with two million Swiss Francs (approx. 2.1 million dollars). Its involvement is subsumed under ‹cultural-political activities.› The Canton of Zürich also serves as a sponsor and Manifesta's renown is decisive in this case, too. It adds to the reputation of Zürich as an international hotspot of art, bestows new splendor and prestige on the Löwenbräu-Areal — whose buildings have at least been ailing — and fuels the city's location marketing efforts. Nonetheless, or for this very reason, the public sector has a responsibility. As a member of the foundation that was established specifically for the Zürich edition of Manifesta, the City of Zürich has budget expertise. Accordingly, its obligation would also be to not be dazzled by the promise of 100,000 visitors and, instead, look closely and scrutinize the budgeted personnel costs. In failing to perform this scrutiny the city legitimates precarious working conditions, co-financed by public funds for culture.

Positioning itself as a critical eyewitness, as Manifesta director Hedwig Fijen stated in the April 5 press conference, Manifesta is currently giving misleading answers aplenty to the question *What People Do for Money*. The fact that Manifesta actively supports the exploitative tendencies of working conditions in the field of art is unsettling in light of such grandiose self-positioning and the aspiration to critical scrutinize social developments. It is all the more so up to us art and culture workers to take a stand.

Please send your comments and suggestions on this subject to office@brand-new-life.org [mailto:office@brand-new-life.org].

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Regina Pfister is a pen name we offer to all our authors who prefer not to publish under their own name. In doing so, we reference the recently discontinued art blog «Donnerstag» that had been run by Annika Bender since 2012. All «Donnerstag» authors published under pen names.

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