

Art as Occupation

Claims for an Autonomy of Life

Hito Steyerl

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Nowadays work, like art, has become an ‘occupation’, with autonomy having turned into a dominant ideology of flexibility and personal initiative. Now that art has ‘occupied’ life, according to the filmmaker and theoretician Hito Steyerl, she wonders how life can recapture its autonomy from art. Just as the white cube was once employed to criticize the narcissistic spectacle of artistic autonomy, she makes a case for using the black box as a zone in which to consider how the autonomy of life can be reinstated with respect to art as an occupation.

Let’s start with a simple proposition: what used to be work has increasingly been turned into occupation.¹

This change in terminology may seem trivial. But it reveals massive differences between two very different paradigms of activity. In fact, almost everything changes on the way from work to occupation: the economic framework, but also its implications for space and temporality. If we think of work in the sense of labour, it implies a beginning, a producer and eventually a result. Work is primarily seen as a means to an end: a product, a reward or a wage. It is an instrumental relation. It also produces a subject by means of alienation.

An occupation is the opposite to all of this. An occupation keeps people busy instead of giving them paid labour.² An occupation is not hinged on any result, it has no necessary conclusion. As such it knows no traditional alienation, nor any corresponding idea of subjectivity. An occupation doesn’t necessarily assume remuneration either, since the process is thought to contain its own gratification. It has no temporal framework except the passing of time itself. It is not centred on a producer/worker, but includes consumers, reproducers, even destroyers, time-wasters and bystanders and in essence anybody seeking distraction or engagement.

The shift from work to occupation applies in the most different areas of contemporary daily activity. It marks a transition that goes way beyond the often described shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy. Rather than in terms of earning it is seen as a way of spending time and resources. Thus it clearly accents the passage from an economy based on production to an economy fuelled by waste, from progressing time to time spent or even idled away, from a space defined by clear divisions to an entangled and complex territory.

Perhaps most importantly: occupation is not a means to something, as traditional labour is. Occupation is in many cases an end in itself.

Captive, concept, receipt: these are just three notions related to the term of occupation. Others include catch, purchase and accept. The term occupation is derived from the Latin *occupare* (to take possession of, seize, occupy, take up, employ). The various meanings of

the word occupation relate to activity, service, distraction, therapy and engagement; that is to many of the meanings of the thing formerly called work. But also to conquest, invasion and seizure. In its military meaning, occupation refers to extreme power relations, spatial complication and 3D sovereignty. It is imposed by the occupier to the occupied, who may or may not resist it. The objective is often expansion but also neutralization, stranglehold, the quelling of autonomy. Occupation also makes one think of the countless occupational programmes, which are meant to cushion the full impact of unemployment in rich countries. Programmes that are not designed to create waged labour, but rather involvement, pastimes or activity schemes.

Occupation often means endless mediation, eternal process, indeterminate negotiation and the blurring of spatial divisions. It has no inbuilt outcome or resolution. It also refers to appropriation, colonization and extraction. Occupation is permanent, processual, uneven. From the occupied to the occupier it means completely different things.

But occupation can also be turned around and used in protest, as we have witnessed in the hundreds of occupations of schools, factories, banks, streets and other spaces, which took place over the past years globally.³

Of course these occupations – in all the different senses of the word – are not the same. But the mimetic force of the term operates in all of the diverse meanings and draws them towards each other. If the term occupation refers to all of these situations, then they resonate with each other. There is a magic affinity in the name itself: if it sounds the same, the force of similarity works within it.⁴

Occupation as Art

In the context of art, the transition from work to occupation has additional implications. Because what happens to the work of art, then? Does it too transform into an occupation? Partly, yes. What used to materialize exclusively as object or product – as (art) work – now tends to appear as activity or performance.⁵ By now, the traditional work of art has been largely supplemented by art as a process – as an occupation.

Art is an occupation in the sense of keeping people busy, spectators and anyone else alike. In many rich countries, it is a quite popular occupational scheme. The idea that it contains its own gratification and needs no remuneration is quite accepted in the cultural workplace. The paradigm of Cultural Industries is an example of an economy that was supposed to function by producing even more occupations (and distractions) by people who were in many cases working for free. Additionally, there are occupational schemes in the guise of art education. More and more post- and post-postgraduate programmes shield prospective artists from the pressure of (public or private) art markets. Art education tends to take longer and longer, and creates zones of occupation, which yield fewer 'works' but more processes, 'knowledge', engagement or relationality. It also tends to produce more and more educators, mediators, guides or even guards, whose occupation is again processual (and ill- or unpaid).

In poorer areas, the immediate grip of art seems to be lessening. But art-as-occupation in these places can be part of ideological deflection, or even very concretely profit from labour stripped of rights.⁶ In turn this or any other squalor can be exploited by artists who use misery as raw material. Art 'upgrades' poorer neighbourhoods by aestheticizing their status as urban ruins and drives out the inhabitants after the area becomes fashionable.⁷ In many cases it is interesting to note that the ruined character of these places itself derives from a status of occupation. Buildings need to be at least marginally occupied in order to retain some functionality. So janitors or security firms are brought in to 'occupy' the space – that is, to keep it empty in order to safeguard its function as private property. This allows in turn for the development of artistically viable ruin architecture – referred to as a 'photo opportunity'⁸ on a Detroit street sign; material for countless coffee table books.

Generally, art is part of an uneven global system, that underdevelops some parts of the world, while overdeveloping others⁹ – and the boundaries between both areas interlock and overlap. Some parts are forcefully immobilized, their autonomy is denied and quelled – in order to keep other parts mobile and autonomous.

But, you may ask, apart from occasional exposure, I have nothing to do with art whatsoever. How can my life be occupied by it?

Here is a checklist: Does art possess you in the form of endless self-performance?¹⁰ Have you found yourself curating your Facebook friends? Or wondered how you got caught up in the endless production of productivity and the subjection of subjectivity? Do you wake feeling like a multiple? Are you on constant auto-display?

Have you been beautified, improved, upgraded or attempted to do this to anyone/thing else? Has your rent doubled because a few kids with brushes were relocated into that dilapidated building next door? Have your feelings been designed, or do you feel designed by your iPhone?

Or is access to art (and its production) on the contrary being withdrawn, slashed, cut off, impoverished and hidden behind insurmountable barriers? Is labour in this field unpaid? Do you live in a city that redirects a huge chunk of its cultural budget to fund a one-off art show? Is conceptual art from your region privatized by predatory banks?

All of these are symptoms of artistic occupation. While on the one hand artistic occupation completely invades life, it also cuts off some of its parts from circulation. Occupation means both: forcefully seizing and keeping out, inclusion and exclusion, managing access and flow. It may not come as a surprise that this pattern often follows fault lines of class and political economy.

Life and Autonomy

But beyond all this, art doesn't stop at occupying people, space or time. It also occupies life as such.

Why should that be the case? Let's start with a small detour on artistic autonomy.¹¹ Artistic autonomy was traditionally predicated not on occupation, but on separation. More precisely: on art's separation from life.¹² As artistic production became more specialized in an industrial world marked by an increasing division of labour, it was also more and more divorced from obvious functionality.¹³ While it became seemingly independent from instrumentalization, it simultaneously also lost social relevance. As reaction, different avant-gardes set out to break the barriers of art and to recreate its relation to life.

According to their hopes, art was supposed to dissolve within life and to infuse it with a revolutionary jolt. What happened was rather the contrary. To push the point: life has been occupied by art. Because gradually, art's initial forays into life and daily practice turned into routine incursions and then into constant occupation. Nowadays, the invasion of life

by art is not the exception, but the rule. The autonomy of art was the idea to separate art from the zone of daily practice, as well as from mundanity, intentionality, utility, production and instrumental reason: in order to distance itself from all social coercion and the rule of efficiency. But this incompletely segregated area then ended up incorporating everything it seceded from in the first place; but this time within its own aesthetic paradigms. The incorporation of art within life was a political project (both from the left and the right). The incorporation of life within art is an aesthetical project, which coincides with an overall aestheticization of politics.

A similar process of over-inclusion of life also characterizes the museum, as art's default institution. By first including more and more mundane objects as well as non-objects and then transgressing its own borders, the museum has wound up expanding way beyond its initial boundaries. It has proliferated in places where society has been abandoned (or never existed), replacing former public spheres and factories with sites of occupation. Many of these art spaces emphasize education and engagement of audiences and tend to downgrade the production of content (which is often assumed to be for free). Spectatorial attitudes are closely managed to turn from reflection to engagement, from contemplation to immersion, from passing aesthetic judgement to being entangled in social networking and competing economies of attention. An art institution becomes a way of life, instead of a site separated from everyday life. And it turns its focus away from traditional works of art to emphasize overall occupation.

It has often been described how artistic activity has become an occupational role model.¹⁴ Networking, endless meetings and greetings, all-out affective and performative labour: all of these have entered the repertoire of the former work force.

On all of these levels art has not only invaded life, but occupies it. This doesn't mean that it's omnipresent. It just means, that it has established a complex topology of both overbearing presence and gaping absence – both of which impact on daily lives. The uneven occupation of life by art is not exactly what avant-gardes had in mind. Yet nobody would doubt that it is quite effective. A fractured map is created which features varying degrees of occupational intensity. These zones are very much shut off from one another, yet interlocked and interdependent. It is a check-pointed system, complete with gate keepers, access levels and close management of movement and information. Its architecture is astonishingly complex.

One example of this complicated topology is the figure of the intern (in a museum, a gallery or most likely a project). The intern is a prime figure of contemporary occupation. The term intern is linked to internment, confinement and a detention which may be involuntary or voluntary. She is supposed to be on the inside of the system, yet she is excluded from payment. She is inside labour but outside remuneration: stuck in a space that includes the outside and excludes the inside simultaneously.¹⁵ As a result she works to sustain her own occupation.

Division of Labour

Of course, the avant-gardes – even if they had wanted – could never have brought about this change on their own. One of the reasons is rather a paradoxical development at the root of artistic autonomy. According to Peter Bürger, art acquired a special status within a bourgeois capitalist system because artists somehow refused to follow the specialization required for almost any other profession in the context of an ever more radical division of labour. Thus, the division of labour in the realm of arts remained not only incomplete but was again and again openly defied by artists. This contributed to art's claims for autonomy. But with the development of neoliberal modes of production the division of labour started to be reversed in many other occupational fields too. The artist-as-dilettante and biopolitical designer was overtaken by the clerk-as-innovator, the technician-as-entrepreneur, the labourer-as-engineer, the manager-as-genius and (worst of all) the administrator-as-revolutionary. Multitasking, as a template for many forms of contemporary occupation, marks the reversal of the division of labour – the fusion of professions, or rather their confusion. The assumed role of the artist as creative polymath serves as a role-model (or excuse) to legitimate the universalization of professional dilettantism and overextension in order to save money on specialized labour.

If the origin of artistic autonomy lies in the refusal of the division of labour (and the alienation and subjection going along with it), this refusal has now been integrated into neoliberal modes of production to set free dormant potentials. Thus autonomy has spread to the point where it tipped into a new dominant ideology¹⁶ of flexibility and self-entrepreneurship. During this transition, autonomy started acquiring new political meanings, too. Workers, feminist and youth movements of the 1970s started claiming autonomy from labour and the regime of the factory. Capital reacted to this flight by designing its own version of autonomy: the autonomy of capital from workers. This transition has been described in detail by many different theorists in the case of Italy¹⁷ departing from the movements of the Autonomia Operaia. The rebellious, autonomous force of those struggles was turned into a catalyst for the capitalist reinvention of labour relations as such. The desire for self-determination was rearticulated as a self-entrepreneurial business model, the hope to overcome alienation was transformed into serial narcissism and over-identification with one's occupation. Only in this context does it become clear why contemporary occupations that promise an unalienated lifestyle are somehow believed to contain their own gratification. But the relief from alienation they suggest takes on the form of self-oppression, which arguably could be much worse than traditional alienation, which at least exposed subjects to something other than themselves.
¹⁸

The struggles around autonomy and above all Capital's response to them are thus deeply ingrained into the transition from work to occupation. As we have seen, this transition is based on the role model of the artist as someone who refuses the division of labour and leads an unalienated lifestyle. This is one of the templates for new occupational forms of life that are all-encompassing, passionate, self-oppressive and narcissistic to the bone.

Black Box (Unplugged)

'To strike is to attack the function of a space and to suspend the rhythm of its time in a determination location.'¹⁹

How then can we salvage life from art as occupation? How can life regain its autonomy from art?

The problem is obvious: if art is occupation; then there is hardly any place to hide from it. There is no way to escape being incessantly linked to the production, consumption or

discussion of art, to reproduce or mirror it as life or style, of being forced into the relentless performance of art, self, value, education, life or to prevent the collapse of all these categories into each other. No escape from being drafted into an incessant, stultifying and inflationary circle of reproducing life as art and vice versa. As Robert Smithson once soberly stated: life in a gallery is like fucking in a cemetery. We could add that spreading the gallery into life is even worse: like not fucking anywhere else.

This might be the time to start exploring the third meaning of occupation: the meaning it has taken on in countless squats and takeovers historically. As the occupiers of the New School in 2008 emphasize, this type of occupation tries to intervene in the form of occupational time and space itself, instead of simply blocking and immobilizing a specific area.

‘Occupation mandates the inversion of the standard dimensions of space. Space in an occupation is not merely the container of our bodies, it is a plane of potentiality that has been frozen by the logic of the commodity. In an occupation, one must engage with space topologically, as a strategist, asking: What are its holes, entrances, exits? How can one disalienate it, disidentify it, make it inoperative, communize it?’²⁰

To unfreeze the forces that lie dormant in the petrified spaces of occupation means to rearticulate its uses, to make it non-efficient, non-instrumental, non-intentional, to disable its utility, capacity of being efficient, utilitarian and a tool for social coercion. In short: it means to reclaim its autonomy along the lines of what used to be thought of as artistic autonomy. Now: to free an art space from art as occupation seems a paradoxical task, especially as art spaces have spread way beyond the traditional gallery. But on the other hand it is not too difficult either to imagine how any of these spaces might operate in a non-efficient, non-instrumental and non-productive way either.

One example: an unexplored potential for autonomy unexpectedly lies in the cinematic Black Box in or outside an art space. As artists emptied out the White Cube to reveal its framing and its power, exposing the horror and narcissist spectacle of artistic autonomy running empty – so can we partially oppose its results by using the Black Box. If the White Cube was about highlighting and producing art as sacralised commodity – perhaps the Black Box can help achieve the autonomy of life from art-as-occupation. Because, if we unplug the Black Box and stop any projection, constant visibility and performance cease. The Black Cube becomes a zone of respite. Turn off the lights. No WIFI, no context, no show, education, iPhone, discourse, network, distraction. Go there to disengage, uninvolve, deproduce or simply breathe. Nobody can see you: there’s no point in producing yourself as subject/spectacle. A place to sleep, to whisper, sleep again. Play hide and seek. Have sex or prefer not to. Swap files or kisses. Close your eyes. Unperform. Enjoy the autonomy of life from art and its countless derivatives. Of course, this is not going to solve the problem. But at least it provides some quiet to think it through. The result may be quite simple: if art is occupation of life – why don’t we turn around the tables and go occupy its spaces, too? ²¹

Hito Steyerl works as a filmmaker and author in the area of essayist documentary films and videos, media art and video installations. Her works are located on the interface between cinema and fine arts, and between theory and practice. They centre on the question of media within globalization and the migration of sounds and images.

Footnotes

1. I am ripping these ideas from a brilliant observation by the Carrotworkers' Collective, found here: carrotworkers.wordpress.com.
2. Carrotworkers' Collective, 'On Free Labour' carrotworkers.wordpress.com: 'The European Union language promoting "occupation" rather than "employment", marking a subtle but interesting semantic shift towards keeping the active population "busy" rather than trying to create jobs.'
3. For a detailed description of just one, very influential example: The Occupation Cookbook or the Model of the Occupation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb; accessible at: slobodnifilozofski.org. For a list of occupied universities in the UK as of November 2010 see: anticuts.com, I have to leave out many of the most innovative and inspiring examples worldwide.
4. Walter Benjamin, 'Doctrine of the Similar', in: *Selected Writings*, eds. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith. Vol. 2, part 2, 1931-1934 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 694-711.
5. One could even say: the work of art is tied to the idea of a product (tied up in a complex system of valorization). Art-as-occupation bypasses the result of production by immediately turning the making-of into a commodity.
6. See Nicolai Ouroussoff, 'Abu Dhabi Guggenheim Faces Protest', *The New York Times*, 16 March 2011. Available online at: www.nytimes.com.
7. Central here is Martha Rosler's three-part essay, 'Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism', *e-flux journal* 21 (December 2010); 23 (March 2011); and 25 (May 2011).
8. This blog entry shows the sign and emphasizes that it too is an artistic intervention: www.detroitfunk.com. Interestingly, the Detroit ruin scenery (often referred to as set for 'ruin porn' by locals) became the backdrop for a fiction film about the communist occupation of the USA by China. (*Red Dawn 2*; www.quernicamag.com).
9. At this point it is beneficial to reconsider and recontextualize Gayatri Spivak's well known but nevertheless pertinent reminder that there is indeed an 'other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text.' Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 269. This list could be made to include contemporary art next to imperialist law, the redistribution of wealth from poor to rich, and an institutionalized system of maintaining hegemonial knowledge as well as defining aesthetic value; and it could be made more precise by emphasizing that the 'other side' is in many cases next door.
10. See: Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 16ff: 'Producing oneself is about to become the dominant occupation in a society where production has become aimless: like a carpenter who's been kicked out of his workshop and who out of desperation starts to plane himself down. That's where we get the spectacle of all these young people training themselves to smile for their employment interviews, who whiten their teeth to make a better impression, who go out to nightclubs to stimulate their team spirit, who learn English to boost their careers, who get divorced or married to bounce back again, who go take theater classes to become leaders or "personal development" classes to "manage conflicts" better – the most intimate "personal development," claims some guru or another, "will lead you to better emotional stability, a more well directed intellectual acuity, and so to better economic performance".'
11. These paragraphs are entirely due to the pervasive influence of Sven Lütticken's excellent text 'Acting on the Onmipresent Frontiers of Autonomy', in: *To The Arts, Citizens!* (Porto: Serralves, 2010), 146-167.
12. Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 49-73.
13. The emphasis here is on the word obvious, since art evidently retained a major function in developing a particular division of senses,

class distinction and bourgeois subjectivity. It became more divorced from religious or representational function. Its autonomy presented itself as disinterested and dispassionate, while at the same time mimetically adapting the form and structure of capitalist commodity. This is somehow an unsystematic rip of Adorno's ideas in *Aesthetic Theory* and Bürger's conclusions.

14. For example Brian Holmes: 'The Flexible Personality': eipcp.net.

15. 'The figure of the intern appears in this context paradigmatic as it negotiates the collapse of the boundaries between Education, Work and Life.' Carrotworkers' Collective: carrotworkers.wordpress.com.

16. It is interesting to make a link at this point to classical key texts of autonomist thought as collected in Sylvere Lotringer and Christian Marazzi (eds.), *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007).

17. Toni Negri has detailed the restructuring of the North Italian labour force after the 1970s, while Paolo Virno and Bifo Berardi both emphasize that the autonomous tendencies expressed by the refusal of labour and the rebellious feminist, youth and workers' movements in the 1970s was recaptured into new, flexibilized and entrepreneurial forms of coercion. More recently Berardi has emphasized the new conditions of subjective identification with labour and its self-perpetuating narcissistic components. See inter alia Toni Negri, 'Reti produttive e territori: il caso del Nord-Est italiano', in: Giovanni Caccia (ed.), *L'inverno è finito. Scritti sulla trasformazione negata (1989-1995)* (Rome: Castelvecchi, 1996), 66-80; Paolo Virno, 'Do you remember counterrevolution?', in: Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2010).

18. I have repeatedly argued that one should not seek to escape alienation but on the contrary embrace it as well as the status of objectivity that goes along with it.

19. Inoperative Committee, *Preoccupied: The Logic of Occupation* (Somewhere: Somebody, 2009), 7.

20. Ibid., 11.

21. Ibid. 'The problem with this practice of spatial inversion is that it requires a particular mode of temporality which makes such actions more or less conducive. What blocks the physical reinterpretation of spatial function is the time of "emergency," when everyone is in a perpetual crisis due to the encroaching police or some force of repression. When this state of exception structures the time of the event, everyone becomes smothered with fear, and meetings dominate the use of the territory. To escape this downfall, buffer zones are necessary, multiple rooms, hallways, and passages to defuse the incoming threats. Reconfigurations of space are useful for not only mediating the barrage of internal and external policing operations, but also for providing a release from the pathetic injunction to "mobilize".'

Tags

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