

# FEMINIST SWEEPSTAKES

## MATERIALIST THOUGHTS ON (HYPER)MOBILITY AND THE WORK ETHICS

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What does it mean to speak — in varying temporalities — *of, to, and, to* a certain extent, *from* the different peripheral positions of artists who fall outside the normative criteria that define success in today's deregulated art? How and where can we — a *we* of the future, an ever-shifting group of unconstituted subjects — position an unapologetically revolutionary feminist practice of art residencies against unsustainable heteropatriarchal capitalist modes of (re)production?

The format of artist residencies — a time and space given to thinking and (net) working, often process- or research-oriented, with or without the pressure of a material outcome — offers an ideal framework for formulating theories and identifying tactics for resisting productivist logics and making ourselves, our work, and our political demands visible, thus reminding the art world that our economy does not happen in a vacuum. This process can take a long time as the poison of heteropatriarchal capitalism has been permeating our lives for centuries. At the same time, a space where we not only work but also socialize, cook, eat, fuck, sleep, and dream, by ourselves or within a community, is not a bad site for a holistic cleanse: in retreat a sense of commonality can grow, rooted in shared struggles, desire for healing, and faith in a feminist future that rejects (self-)exploitation in favor of collective growth and sustainable practices.<sup>1</sup>

### Problematizing

First, we need to take a closer look at the conditions that allow or prevent artists from participating in the economy of mobility.

This economy is built upon a presumed type of nomadic artist, obscuring social production that brings this subject into being, excluding *de facto* those in the most precarious situations: artists with jobs they cannot afford to take a break from or lose, artists caring for family members or loved ones, artists with disabilities, artists from or living in places where access to public or private funding is limited or nonexistent, etc. Extending Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists* to present day art residencies, it appears that the material terms of residencies offering 'retreat from social obligation'<sup>2</sup> are still modeled after normative assumptions on the reality of the isolated Genius, benefiting from "an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person

<sup>1</sup> While art residencies are multiplying and diversifying, in numbers but also in format and in the material conditions they offer, I have yet to come across and experience a space that embodies the desire for renewed forms of production and of social and economic relations expressed in this essay. Without dismissing the work being done by existing spaces, this text is rather an exercise in radical imagination, speculating on the potentiality of small-scale, artist-run, politically driven, non-profit initiatives.

<sup>2</sup> 'Types of Residency Programmes', Transartists. Accessed through <http://www.transartists.org/residency-typology> on 12 March 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', in: *Women, Art, and Power & Other Essays*, New York: Harper Collins, 1988, p. 153.

of the Great Artist”.<sup>3</sup> Following Nochlin, this reality can be understood as a ‘white-male-position-accepted-as-natural’ or, in intersectional terms, as a space of privilege.<sup>4</sup>

While the context and mechanisms of normalization in the arts have somewhat evolved since Nochlin’s argument, the fiction of the Genius artist has not completely dissipated from contemporary processes of historicization. In fact, I would argue that it has morphed into the equally romantic and elusive persona of the ‘nomadic artist’.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, since the advent of site-specific work some decades ago, studio-based practices have given way to more immaterial processes of creation that require artists to be mobile, following the global path of opportunities and capital. Problematizing this new hegemonic figure through a class-identification politics — critical of its own reproduction of a class system — can help us reclaim these spaces. If the timeframes produced by residencies in the context of neoliberalism present us with the traps of what I would call ‘enclosed temporality’, drawing from intersectional feminist thought allows us to fully embrace the transformative potential of residencies. This particular lens exposes the ways in which interlocking systems of oppression feed into one another, suggesting a systemic critique of current mobility models and their unsustainable production of nomadic subjects.

### Identifying

The increasing amount of speculative (unpaid) self-investment required from artists and curators — who are forced to treat grants and projects like jobs contracted by entrepreneurs rather than as parts played within a larger structure formed by solidary independent workers — speaks to the individualization of practices, and to the consequent depoliticization of artistic production and artistic communities. Since funding for the arts (in places where state funding is not yet purely a fantasy) is becoming increasingly project-based, the question of time and energy — and often personal funds — invested in professionalization cannot be dissociated from the material conditions in which we perform the invisible labour necessary to sustain our practices.

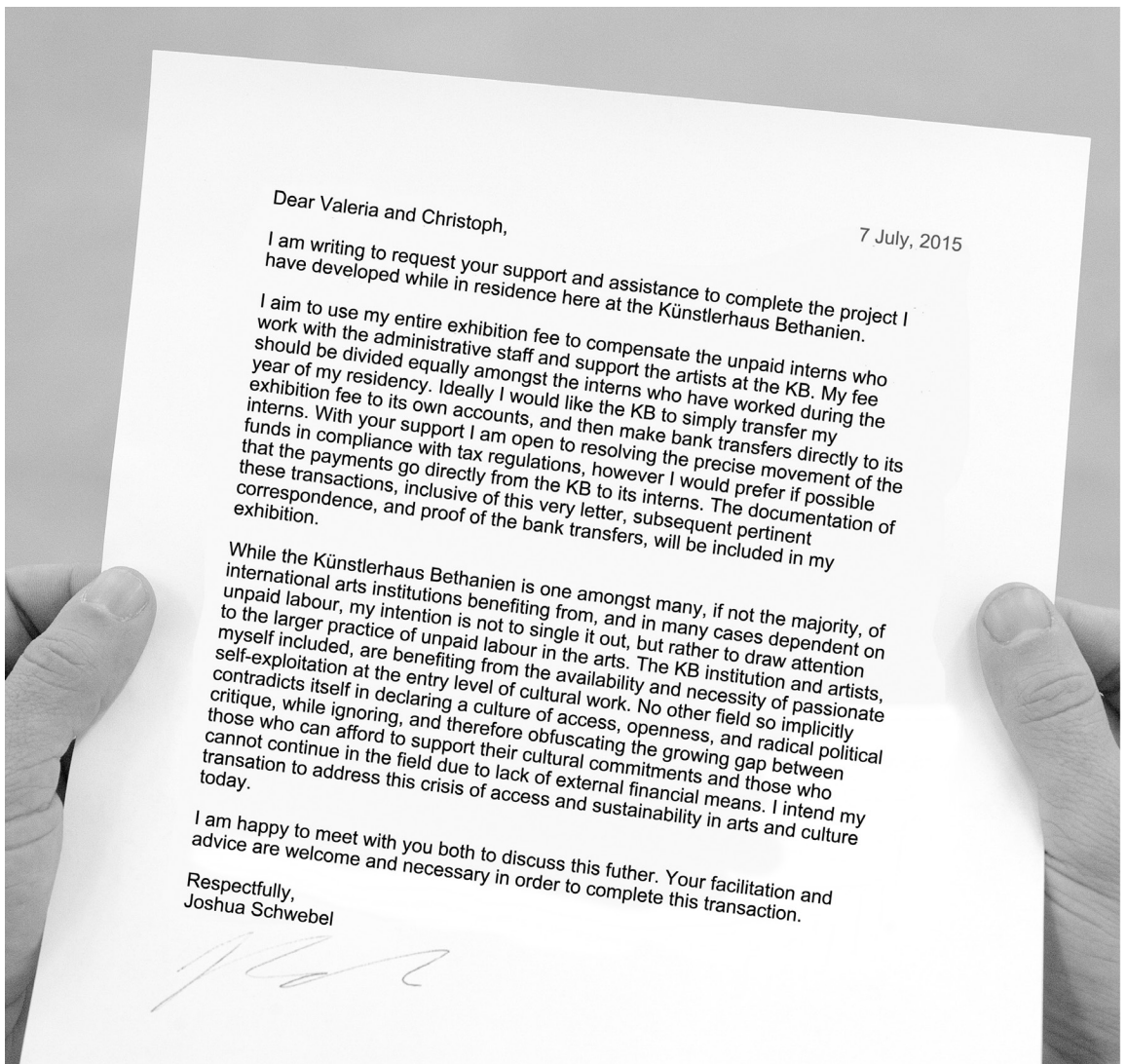
As artist Joshua Schwebel points out, addressing in his conceptual practice the problems with working conditions in the arts field, especially when it comes to self-organization, “it’s a real problem that the funders and granting agencies aren’t accountable to the staff for the working conditions in artist-run culture because no other body has the power to do anything about it”.<sup>6&7</sup> By keeping artists, cultural workers, and institutions busy worrying about and fighting for their individual survival, austerity politics have exhausted our ecosystem and discouraged its agents from organizing around

<sup>4</sup>  
Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>5</sup>  
For a feminist critique of the nomadic subject, see Rosi Braidotti, *Transposition: On Nomadic Ethics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006. On the feminization of migrant (reproductive) labour, see Saskia Sassen, “Women’s Burden: Counter-geographies of Globalization and the Feminization of Survival” in: *Journal of International Affairs* 53. (2000), pp. 503-24.

<sup>6</sup>  
David Blazer, “How Joshua Schwebel Paid Interns with His Berlin Residency”, in: *Canadian Art*, October 2015. Accessed through: <http://canadianart.ca/features/how-joshuaschwebel-paid-interns-with-his-berlin-residency/>, on 12 March 2018.

<sup>7</sup>  
Sam Cotter, “In Conversation with Joshua Schwebel”, in exhibition text for *Working Conditions*, Gallery TPW, Toronto, 2016. Accessed through <http://gallerytpw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Working-Conditions-essayfinal-web.pdf>, on 12 March 2018.



↑ fig 1. Joshua Schwebel, *Subsidy Letter*, 2015, photo. Courtesy of Sandy Volz.

social and political issues. The divestment of the state and the rise of private investment has also hindered the many ways in which artists' work connects with and contributes to the larger economy that reproduces these forms of precarious labour.

Furthermore, the contract-based economy in which residencies have flourished in the past thirty years or so offers little support between projects to cover our basic needs and sustain the unpaid labour necessary to obtain the next contract: Let us not forget that research and experimentation unfold over time, interrupted by a constant flow of personal, social, and domestic obligations. These periods of materially unproductive work are crucial for artists, and more and more residencies are shifting their focus away from production to offer research-based and exploratory work periods.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For example, Transartists lists over 120 residencies dedicated to research. See "Research", Transartists. Accessed through <http://www.transartists.org/category/discipline/research>, on 12 March 2018.

While it is crucial to remember that this tendency reflects the increasing recognition of immaterial value in today's global economy, it is something that artists, curators and cultural workers can reappropriate to obtain and maintain fair working conditions that take into account the weight of the large portion of their work which goes unnoticed (and most often unpaid!).

### Detoxifying

One way to address the problem of equal opportunity from an intersectional artists-as-workers' perspective is to look at the systemic obstacles that prevent inclusive access in the arts economy. This issue is often tackled by 'equal pay' advocates in relation to the more stable, well-paid positions within institutions, for example, but it pertains to any (paid or unpaid) work opportunity in the field, including art residencies where participation involves a fee or comes at a cost. It is the moral value of work that we must challenge here, as well as the Western, contemporary notion of time. As artists are also subjects of the neoliberal economy, we cannot easily escape the internalization of visible labour as the paved road to individual and social validation.

Indeed, given the precarious conditions in which the vast majority of us perform our labour, and the moral supremacy of productivity in capitalist societies, we are pressured to name everything we do as work, including the reproductive and emotional labour that allows us to regenerate our productive capacities. While it is strategically crucial to recognize care, emotional and invisible labour as such — especially in light of activist movements such as Wages for Housework through which women have won numerous battles towards equality — in doing so, we continue to shape and polish the romantic figure of the Artist.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the labour required to attain or maintain decent living conditions (administration, networking, etc.) happens mainly behind the scenes and remains largely under-valued. Part of the problem here is that while artists have largely identified with work, we have failed to identify as *workers*.

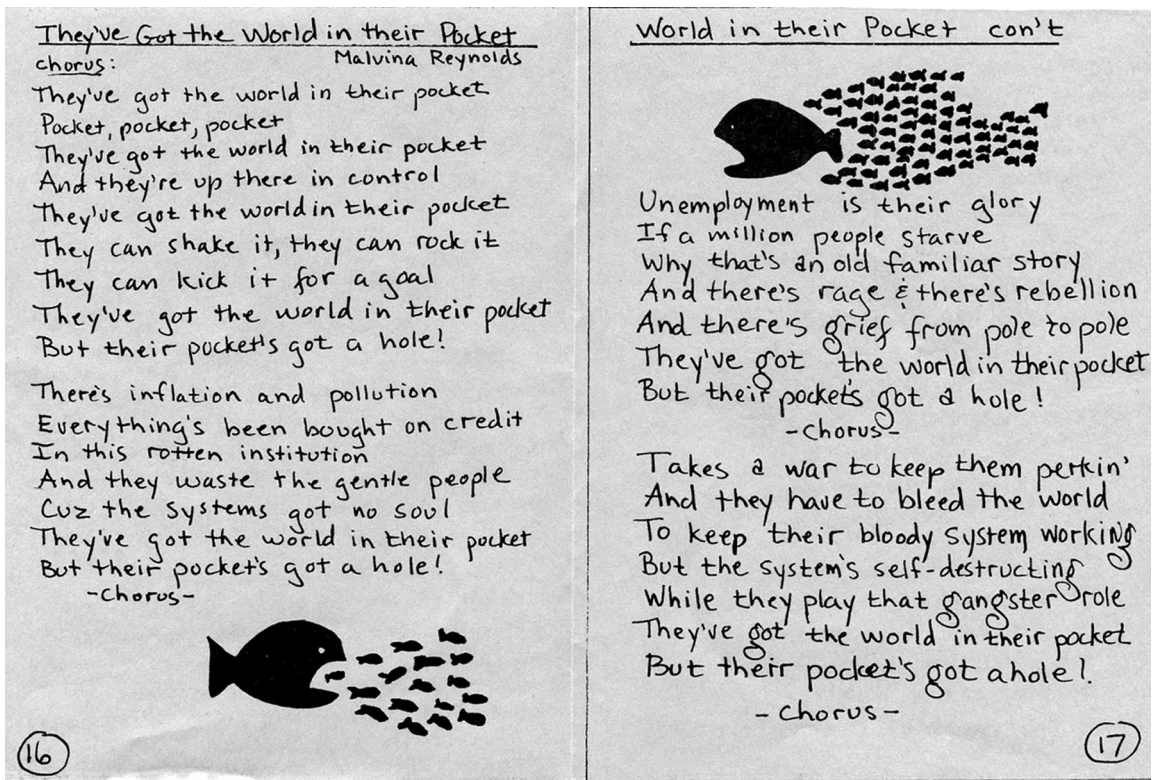
Identifying as workers within a work-based capitalist society we wish to destroy may sound counter-intuitive, but it is a necessary strategic move. In order to challenge the dominant figure of the 'nomadic artist', we must first question the figure of the proletarian worker. Let us then trade the stale image of the cisgender, straight, white, able-bodied, hard-working father figure of the 'breadwinner' — historicized hero of most communist traditions — for a more fluid one. This new figure must match the contemporary reality of the precarious cultural worker, artist, and/or curator: often neither cis-male nor white, not necessarily providing for a family in the traditional sense.<sup>10</sup> One way to approach this is to avoid internalizing our worker identity as a

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Wages for Housework was a global women's rights movement, drawing from Marxist feminist thought. Active throughout the 1970s, its mobilization was anchored in an analysis of socially constructed and performed gendered roles. Its demands included the right for women to work outside of the domestic space, unemployment benefits, and wages for reproductive labour.

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That last category of curators can be argued to be even more precarious, as its fairly new position in the art world and in the labour market has not granted it a history of collective struggle and solidarity. This was precisely brought up in the context of the working group "Fees & Conditions", organized by Platform BK and the Norwegian Association of Curators on 27 November 2017, with W.A.G.E. Forthcoming report to be published by *L'internationale*.



↑ fig 2. Songbook for Seneca Falls Wimmin's Peace Encampment, compiled by Oak & Amethyst of Wimmin In Collective Community Action, 1983, Romulus, NY.

natural category, and to rather organize around it as a *political* category.<sup>11</sup>

### Organizing

Taking inspiration from lesbian feminist author and theorist Monique Wittig and a number of other materialist feminists from the seventies, this would mean identifying — again, temporarily, as our aim is still to abolish work and transform the work-based society! — with the category of workers, much like feminists and lesbians have had to strategically identify with the category of women while being critical of that same identity being defined by and in opposition to the dominant class. I am not implying here that the social networks built in the context of artist residencies have roots in or can create a common 'identity' as was the aim of numerous feminist and lesbian communities, but simply that they are implicated in the creation of the very hierarchies we need to dismantle. These hierarchies are especially worth addressing in the frame of 'collective' artist residencies, where participants are not only selected based on 'artistic merit' but also for their potential to fit in with the other residents and the organization's staff, sharing time and space, taking part to various degrees in an ever-fluctuating 'community'.

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This shift is in line with global labour migration patterns. In 2013, for example, women represented 44% of the migrant workers, and 73% of migrant domestic workers. See "ILO Global Estimates on Migrant Workers", International Labour Organization. Accessed through: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_436330.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_436330.pdf) on 12 March 2018.

What if then, drawing from Wittig, we called for the abolition of artists as a class, rather than defending it as a natural category that reinforces the myths that secure and justify its oppression?<sup>12</sup> What if, more importantly perhaps, we called for the end of the tacit exceptionalism that differentiates artists as a category distinct from other workers participating in the same economy? Such a stance is crucial if we are to treat labour as an organizing category. Indeed, artistic work is neither natural nor exceptional, and should not be distinguished from other forms of labour.

Advocating for and practicing a better ethics in artist residencies calls for a true transformation — not a reform — and as the political theorist Kathi Weeks puts it in her plea for basic universal income, for a postwork politics: A system where work is no longer a core moral value, supported by a politics that is ‘understood in terms of collective action and fields of institutional change’ rather than an ethics based on individual change.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, what needs to be questioned here is not only how much time and space work takes up in our daily lives, but also how it has taken control of our social and political imagination.

If understanding why work holds such a highly-valued place in society and has become a moral obligation is essential in order to challenge its centrality in the social imaginary (and in our individual lives), we must also recognize how the privatization of work through neoliberal policies has prevented us from analysing it in political rather than economical terms. The question of value is relatively simple when posed in the light of waged labour in a traditional sense, but what if we were to frame residencies in a post-work culture? What can we make of the tactics developed by artists to survive in these material conditions, working independently, often invisibly, filling contract after contract while moving around constantly?

### Resisting

In this era of state-sponsored anxiety and conservative backlash, one way for artists to create the conditions for revolutionary healing practices is through the solidary occupation of land, the redefinition of ‘productive’ time and a disidentification of our political imagination with late capitalism. The desire — and often the necessity — for separation has always been a central dilemma in queer and feminist community making.

Artist residencies emerged from (and are still somewhat associated with) the idea of the retreat, where isolation from the world fosters focus and inspiration. Could we, by politicizing this temporary withdrawal from the world — publicly and specifically naming it as a withdrawal from the toxicity of the normative world instead of a ‘retreat from social obligations’ (which most of us cannot afford) — contribute to countering the patriarchal propertization of the planet?

<sup>12</sup>

Monique Wittig, ‘One is Not Born a Woman’, in: Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, pp. 9-20 (p.14).

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Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011, p.288; also José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York: New York University Press, 2009, p. 20.

A concrete utopia, where politics are enacted instead of modelled, can help us break free from the multiple identities that have been forced onto us. In doing so, we must redefine a strategic *we* from which to speak and formulate demands. Following queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, this (temporary) collective identity is perhaps a non-descriptive *we* that “speaks to a ‘we’ that is not yet conscious, the future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment.”<sup>14</sup> It is this mutable *we* whose movements in time and space we want to reimagine by questioning our position as subjects of this economy participating in the reproduction of heteropatriarchal capitalist logics through artist residencies.

Like most politically rooted separatist projects occupying the land, residencies — especially those set in extra-urban contexts — must make their presence and their political undertaking public in order to make a difference in the world as well as in their participants’ lives. Records show that lesbian separatist communities, for example, have significantly helped to increase self-reflexivity among their members and have contributed to a much-needed questioning of the very notion of identity in relation to gender.<sup>15</sup> Just as this important step of publicization has been crucial in expanding female and queer identities in these closed communities, making our claims and experiences visible can enlighten, promote, and strengthen the foundation of art residencies that seek to transform social relations and society by creating autonomous and inclusive communities of workers.

### Collectivizing

Learning from a feminist legacy of utopian successes and failures, it becomes clear that rejecting reformist politics and instead rewiring our political imagination to see beyond the irresponsible mobile work models that (re)produce precarity is vital to resist and overthrow the neoliberal project of killing hope.<sup>16</sup> Let us not forget that, today still, the combination of feminism and utopianism can be a threatening one to the neoliberal order. Let us not forget either that concrete utopia aims at systemic and political changes in the world, but also at changes within ourselves.

Queer feminist writer and theorist Sara Ahmed reminds us in her *Killjoy Manifesto* that we should refuse to “identify our hopes with inclusion within organizations predicated on violence.”<sup>17</sup> There is a tremendous amount of work to be done within state-initiated and privately-initiated institutions to foster equal access and inclusive practices. Independent and artist-run residencies may have more ethical freedom to set such practices in place, but if we chose to create spaces that seek to escape dominant models, it is urgent that we reflect on the ways in which alternative community building is not inherently safe from reproducing exclusion in material terms. Again,

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See Catriona Sandilands, “Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology” in: *Organization Environment* 15:2 (2002), pp. 131-163.

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Also see Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 70's*, New York: Routledge, 1991.

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Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 264.

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Kathi Weeks, op. cit. (note 13), p. 221.

no residency enacting utopian modes of organizing, aiming at equal access, and concerned with fair working conditions can remain sustainable without depending to some degree on the neoliberal order it simultaneously wishes to disrupt.

Following Weeks' argument for imagining a postwork society, we can address this dilemma and achieve utopia's radically democratic potential by creating and maintaining a culture of demands. Weeks argues that these demands should be "recognizable as a credible politics grounded in a plausible analysis of current trends, as opposed to a rant, an exercise in political escapism, or an expression of merely wishful thinking."<sup>18</sup> Our economy — the arts economy at large as well and the more intricate economy of mobility — is toxic. If we can address institutions, state funding bodies, and private sponsors with clear demands that allow residencies to step away from productivist logic and the work ethics to become spaces that cultivate intersectional feminist political imagination, then a collective autonomous project can take shape in solidarity with global workers' struggles.

### Enacting

Small-scale by-and-for art residencies are an excellent place to start a discussion around horizontality and postwork politics, as both staff and participants can be considered workers. Connecting artists' and curators' methodology with that of hosting organizations can greatly expand both parties' reflexive processes and result in more transparency and accountability in regards to material conditions. Self-organizing can provide inclusive spaces for artists, as long as participation remains free of charge and accessible. An intersectional feminist critique of (hyper)mobility, reproductive labour and neoliberalism is essential in formulating a proposition for a resistant practice of artist residencies. Through this lens, in solidarity with the many labourers that make our work possible — and reminding ourselves that the exceptionalism around our position as workers is a destructive myth — we can open the doors to a concrete utopian way of inhabiting time and space that operates outside of oppressive modes of (re)production.

If what we are experiencing today is an internalization of conservatism in the form of a neoliberal counterrevolution, where even hope is deemed unaffordable, let us not only start envisioning, but also *enacting* radically different ways of making our work count. Working towards a repositioning of artistic labour in relation to identity and class struggles, we can turn our unequal access to, dependence on, and appetite for (hyper)mobility into revolutionary grounds for building alliances and creating ever-shifting communities.

A subject of the neoliberal mobile economy of the arts, Larose was born in Montréal (CA), studied at the Dutch Art Institute in Arnhem (NL), and has written this essay between Paris (FR), Porto (PT), and Athens (GR). Their work aims at building tools to counter the contamination of queer imaginaries by heteronormative politics, global capitalism and imperialist pop culture.