

NOTES FROM A PERFOR- MATIVE INVESTI- GATION

Text:
Marco Baravalle

The Institute of Radical Imagination (IRI), founded in 2018, is a network of artists, academics, and curators working at the intersection of art and the commons. Their project Art for Universal Basic Income (Art for UBI)—consisting of a manifesto, a campaign, and a book—advocates for an unconditional universal basic income (UBI) above the poverty threshold and focuses on the role of art worker struggles in the transition to post-capitalist forms of social organization. The project also includes a performance, which will premiere on the occasion of the German Pavilion's opening on May 19, 2023, in the context of the 18th International Architecture Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, and will draw on the experiences of cultural workers in Venice and beyond. Ahead of the performance, its coordinator, Marco Baravalle, a founding member of the IRI and Art for UBI, writes about the origins of the project and the structures and assumptions underlying the Venetian cultural scene.

ART FOR UBI

The driving force behind our campaign is *Art for UBI (manifesto)*, a collectively written text developed in online public assemblies convened alongside art worker protests during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ Published in 2021, the manifesto consists of 14 articles on the benefits of an unconditional universal basic income for art workers, as well as for workers more generally. It highlights the benefits not only in the realm of pay and artistic production, but also in the battle for transfeminism, decolonialism, and climate justice. Its drafting started from the premise that a systemic solution is needed to address the fragmentation of artistic labor and the by now normalized idea that everyone should be an “entrepreneur of himself.”² Such a solution should be firmly opposed to the micro-corporatism and competition typical of the neoliberal model, which blocks the formation of united battle fronts.

In Italy, the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 were tough times for workers in the cultural and entertainment sectors, who had to fight for professional recognition in the form of the so-called quarantine pay. But if the halt imposed by the pandemic dramatically highlighted the importance of having access to reliable forms of income, it did so by exacerbating a structural feature of artistic work: that of discontinuity. In

the realm of cultural production, discontinuity is the byproduct of the necessary preparation, bureaucracy, autodidactics, and constant filling out of funding applications, but also of sexism, the erosion of rights, and blackmail directed at these professionals for whom precarity is so often an unavoidable part of the job. *Art for UBI (manifesto)* makes the case for a publicly granted income as a means to pay art workers for their enormous amounts of invisible labor and to give them the option of saying no to shit jobs and abuse.

In 2021, Art for UBI helped organize a protest in Venice against the neoliberalization of museums and the city's cultural policies, a process which hinges on the precarization of labor. The protest was initiated by the S.a.L.E. Docks collective—which I am part of—along with the cultural sector workers network Mi Riconosci? [Do You Recognize Me?]. In Rome, Art for UBI joined performing arts workers in the temporary occupation of the Globe Theater. That same year, in Madrid, Art for UBI was turned into a performance titled *Una Renta Muchos Mundos / One Income Many Worlds*, which was shown in the Museo Reina Sofía and various community spaces around the city. In October 2022, a new Art for UBI performance was shown at the *Le Alleanze dei Corpi* festival in Milan, this time with the title *Incondizionalmente* [Unconditionally]. In this way, Art for UBI has transformed from a platform into a

fundamentally hybrid assemblage challenging the separation between art and politics.

A PERFORMATIVE INVESTIGATION

The following notes are taken from a “self-investigation” carried out by S.a.L.E. Docks in 2017. The goal was to cast light on the working conditions of those laboring in the giant culture factory of Venice. I refer to it as a “self-investigation” not only because of its relatively small scale (16 interviewees and around 50 questionnaires), but also because the sample of interviewees was structurally very similar to the composition of S.a.L.E. Docks: aged between 25 and 40, white, majority women, many with a university degree. This is the typical profile of the cultural precariat that sustains the Biennale and its many spin-off businesses.

When I say “investigation,” I do not mean it in the traditional journalistic or sociological sense. I am thinking instead of the militant political tradition of the Italian workerists in the 1960s—those of the *Quaderni Rossi* journal, which was followed by *Classe Operaia*. The workerists broke away from traditional Marxism and, in part, from the Italian workers' movement more generally. This was due, first and foremost, to an epistemological shift, intended to free

revolutionary knowledge from its ideological shackles and put it to the test of reality by centering on a critique of labor. This did not lead to the end of dogma or blind trust in Marxist “sacred texts,” but rather to a rereading of these texts in light of how they played out on the ground—or, in the 1960s context, on the factory floor in the industrial centers of northern Italy. The so-called *Conricerca* [Co-research]—a research methodology put forward, in particular, by Romano Alquati³—was not a quest for knowledge *on* the subjects but *with* the subjects, implying an end to the distinction between the theoretical and the political. It offered a way to interpret the process of knowledge production not as a single moment prior to a transformation in the status quo, but as a participant in the transformation itself.

The S.a.L.E. Docks initiative of self-investigation continues, although it has taken on the hybrid form of a performance within the assemblage of Art for UBI. Through performance, Art for UBI is able to create a space of radical autonomy. According to philosopher Jacques Rancière, such autonomy is one of the oppositions that characterizes art, and also a sign of art’s radical nature.⁴ Rancière sees art as defined by its ability to construct an elsewhere in respect to the social context in which it is produced, with its miseries and violence, and to function as a force for the “distribution of the sensible,” pointing to potential new forms of communal living.⁵ In today’s era of neoliberal art, however, the condition of this autonomy is not—as classical aesthetics and common sense would have it—the astronomical distance between art and life, but rather the distance, yet to be created, between art and capital: an inherently social issue which Art for UBI needs to tackle head-on.

It goes without saying that carrying out an investigation of workers today is not the same as during the 1960s. The main arena of class struggle, at least in Europe, is no longer the Fordist factory. Furthermore, it must be said that while the workerists correctly identified the points at which the broadest class ruptures would occur—the *mass worker* (*operaio massa*) first and the *social worker* (*operaio sociale*) later⁶—our goal here is much less ambitious; realistically, perhaps our investigation/performance can make a little headway in an analysis of the subjectivity of the artistic precariat. As such, certain questions have come to form the basis for our work: Is it possible to do an investigation through a performance? Is it possible to do so in a way that does not result both in a subpar investigation and a subpar performance? What even is a performative investigation? Is it simply a study with a performance as its output? What type of knowledge does it generate? Is staging

an investigation into a particular segment of cultural work a gesture that begins and ends with the staging itself, or is it an action capable of forging alliances, further actions, and routes to community building and collective action? Can a performance help us advance the struggle for rights and fair pay? Is it possible to make the performance an autonomous space without feeding into the apparatus of capture that is the neoliberal dispositive of art?

To hint at least at some of the responses to these complex questions, we can look to the results of the S.a.L.E. Docks self-investigation, which highlights some of the thornier issues—issues that, at this point, I will leave it to our interlocutors to voice.

THE CULTURE INDUSTRY’S GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAIN

“MAY I SWITCH TO ENGLISH?”

This phrase, says Antonia, was the exit strategy of choice for her US temporary employer whenever they wanted to avoid sensitive topics such as contracts, back pay, or work trips. Antonia is a university student in Venice and she attends a few training courses run by nonprofit cultural organizations. As a first job, she worked off the books for one of the big Venetian events companies with strong ties to the Biennale. For five months, she regularly worked over eight hours a day, having been left in charge of running ten exhibitions—alone, and in spite of her lack of experience. Her duties included handling press, hooking up internet in the exhibition spaces, managing staff, writing daily reports on the condition of displayed works, and everything in between. All of this for two or three hundred euros a month, paid in cash. We are not talking about a start-up here, but about companies managing dozens of properties in Venice; during the Biennale, the rent for these places runs to hundreds of thousands of euros, ensuring healthy profit margins. Understandably dissatisfied with this situation, Antonia decided to leave. She wanted to strike out on her own and set up a business with friends and classmates. She registered for a VAT number but soon realized that being a freelancer was not really a suitable option, the fiscal regime being too rigid for someone with a low and inconsistent income like hers. In the absence of any financial safety net, she quit. But now that she had cut her teeth in the field, she was contacted by the head of another small company working in cultural events. It was an international company based in a European capital, with links to Venice on account of the Biennale and its international showcasing opportunities. Antonia’s first conversation with them

was brief: “Hi Antonia, I need a personal assistant.”—“When?”—“Can you move here by Monday?” She accepted the role, but it was the same tune. Her boss was late in providing her with a work contract, the pay was insufficient, the hours long. She started to receive requests from the company manager unrelated to work. Nobody helped her make professional connections. In fact, Antonia found herself systematically excluded from social events and, eventually, decided to move back to Venice and re-enroll in university. She says she needed to remind herself why she had chosen the artistic field in the first place. So much of her experience is typical of work in the cultural sector, in which the chain of exploitation, defined by informality and working off the books, begins at university and then extends to a global scale.

LABOR MARKET DISTORTIONS

“THERE HAS TO BE A THIRD WAY IN BETWEEN ALL THE YOUNG PEOPLE WORKING FOR REDUCED RATES AND THE BIG COMPANIES FORMING OLIGOPOLIES TO INFLATE PRICES”

Giorgio has been running a nonprofit contemporary art space through a cultural association in Venice since 2010. He did not take his first salary until 2016 and he is still waiting to earn back the 20,000 euros he put down as an initial investment. His comment—reported above—touches on two issues that kept coming up during our conversations with art workers. The first is the difficulty of operating as a legal enterprise in a market where newcomers work for next to nothing in exchange for building a portfolio, thereby undercutting those small businesses that demand larger investments in hopes of securing fair pay for themselves and their collaborators. It must be emphasized, however, that newcomers are certainly not the biggest culprits in this regard. On the contrary, the worst offenders come when we move up the chain from self-employment and small businesses to the multi-million-dollar business of contracting out cultural services—so-called “outsourcing.” Big firms that share the market for these services at a national level are undoubtedly the ones profiting most from underpaid workers. At the other end of the spectrum is the second issue, which is very specific to Venice and its prosperous industry cultural events. Here, a handful of wealthy companies are in charge of an enormous quantity of real estate, including palazzi and other prime locations. They rent these out to the highest bidder, paying little or no attention to the nature of the project at hand. These companies have come to function as the “landlords” of culture,



FIGS. 1–3
Art for UBI: *Incondizionatamente. Vita Reddito Amore*, performance, Milan, September 2022



turning the extraction of profit into a culture in itself. This is not artistic production; it is an artistic rental market. In an emptied-out city, the rental companies are custodians of the emptiness. Art is the perfect decoy, enabling them to spin profit from a void. It may seem different, but it is exactly the same logic that drives the market for short-term holiday rentals. Art is simply the latest agent of touristification in a city already on its knees.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BUSINESSES AND ASSOCIATIONS

“ENTREPRENEURS MAKE MONEY FROM PRODUCTS. ASSOCIATIONS, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAVE TO FIND MONEY TO MAKE A PRODUCT THAT DOESN'T GENERATE ANY PROFIT OF ITSELF”

Most event organizers in Venice are *associazioni culturali*, or cultural associations. Simona is a member of one that focuses on live art and experimental music. She lived in Venice for 17 years before being forced to return to the mainland. Her job in the cultural sector had ceased to be financially viable, and she was no longer willing to supplement it by working as a cleaner for a tourist rental agency. For her, it is clear that the solution to the endemic pre-

carity of art work is not everyone becoming an entrepreneur of themselves. She rejects the idea that we should always expect cultural production to conform to the logic of business. “Instead,” she says, “culture should be financed through a legal structure such as that of the association, which is formally bound to prioritize content over profits.” In our current legal context, however, this alone is often not enough. For obvious reasons of conflict of interest, members of an association do not take a share of the profits; instead, we need guidelines regarding how to pay them and any potential collaborators for their work. More public funding programs should be open to associations, rather than exclusively to cultural businesses. Associations, unlike businesses, are inherently concerned with the social development of the place where they carry out their activities, but the social cohesion they bring has yet to be deemed valuable in economic or political terms. Talking to Simona raised a crucial point: There is a whole world of young professionals out there who do not want hand-outs from the state, but simply to be in the position to put their talents to use and have their work recognized. Entrepreneurial individualism is often the professional reality for cultural workers, but associations offer the possibility of a collective alternative. An example? For several months, Simona’s association has been holding open meetings with

similar organizations operating in Venice. It is still early days, but the first three meetings led to the idea of building an online platform listing everyone’s services and finding a physical space in which they can share skills and technical equipment.

THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF WELFARE AS PRIVILEGE

“I’VE NEVER REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME ... WELFARE IS GOOD, BUT FOR EVERYONE, NOT JUST FOR CULTURAL WORKERS”

Roberto’s opinion was one that came up a lot in the interviews. Many people did not have much of an opinion about an unconditional universal basic income. Others, in keeping with the neoliberal discourse, maintained that competition is the only route to professional validation, as well as an incentive to make high-quality content. Regardless, almost everyone was pro-social welfare, so long as “it’s for all jobs, not just a few.” The different rationales for this radically anti-corporate position—a position shared by Art for UBI—are interesting. While a minority of cases had political motives, the vast majority of interviewees seemed to have a general feeling of guilt and embarrassment

at being paid in a form other than wages or invoices. There was a widely shared perception that welfare is a privilege, not a right. This ambiguity around rights and privileges is a constant in the field of cultural work. The idea of having rights makes workers uncomfortable. The concept that their invisible, unpaid labor should, and could, be financially compensated seems largely alien to them. For many young people, the few salaried positions that have survived the relentless outsourcing of the culture industries are the privilege of a group of “untouchables”—older workers with permanent contracts, who are now demotivated and resistant to change. It is worth noting that, of all the interviewees, only one mentioned—correctly—that a universal basic income differs from traditional welfare, in that it constitutes a structural way to value life according to the terms of the current system of production. Most interviewees acknowledged, at least in part, this value system: They know they are creating value when they organize an event, transform an apartment into a cultural center, or share original content online, yet it rarely seemed to occur to anyone that this labor should be financially compensated.

THE CREATIVE BOHEMIAN

“I’VE REALIZED THAT, IN THIS CITY, VOLUNTEERING IS IMPORTANT”

This is another quote from Roberto, who collaborates every so often with one of the city’s small cultural spaces. The space is run on a nonprofit basis by a group of young people who use it to host events such as concerts, book launches, workshops, small exhibitions, and meetings. I have to admit Roberto’s comment surprised me. It echoes those of several other interviewees who have found ways

to integrate informal cultural projects into their lives. Roberto had never considered that the space could be a fertile ground for developing his own artistic work. This is partly because it does not have all the technical equipment he needs, but mainly because he sees his presence there as something he does to volunteer and show support to his friends who run it. In this sense, there seems to be a clear division between the independent cultural scene, where one volunteers, and formalized working arrangements, where one makes serious art.

Nicoletta expressed a largely similar view, commenting on the phenomenon of turning private apartments into temporary spaces for small-scale cultural activities. She told me, “It’s not so much about the specifics of the show or the concert. It’s more that, in a city that’s so completely overrun, it’s truly fulfilling to have somewhere just to be with friends, to share a drink ... no one’s there talking about careers.” No career talk, thankfully. But what we could call Venice’s “independent scene” is clearly perceived as a refuge, as an interruption to the stretched-out time dedicated to performing labor. It is not that conviviality and building relationships cannot themselves serve the function of aesthetic variables, but this is not the point. The point is that this apparent pause in the cycle of value production, characterized by informality, is in reality one of the classic tools of neoliberal urban transformation, which exploits “the creative bohemian.” In Venice these initiatives luckily function more as ways to reclaim and decommodify for-profit spaces, rather than as bridgeheads for the gentrification that has been ravaging the city for years leading to the exodus of its inhabitants. Still, the lack of self-reflection within the independent scene, and its reduction to a space of

conviviality, serves to keep it subaltern to the city’s institutional landscape and the dominance of the industry of cultural events.

CONCLUSION

In 1971, Danilo Montaldi published his *Militanti politici di base* [Grassroots Political Activists], a collection of testimonials from activists based in the lower Po valley, gathered through conversations and interviews.⁷ The book retains the spoken syntax of these interactions, including the use of dialect. This is a history from below, presenting the lived reality of the political struggle of the late 19th century, to the years of antifascist resistance, to the struggles of the 1960s. In the introduction, Montaldi writes of the conflicting character of some of these voices: “In addition to the life forms, worldviews, and ideologies that endure and accompany contemporary man, and not just in his moments of weakness ... are others that come to establish themselves, suitable for and in keeping with the changing times but which are also clearly anticipatory; a premise. It may seem odd to talk of anticipation and ‘memories’ in the same breath, but, as you will see, the animating force for these various subjectivities is always a certain conflict with historical time, which extends from political reasonings to all of life’s norms and customs.”⁸ Times have changed, along with contexts and methods, but it is worth taking note and keeping this passage in mind as we set forth on our Venetian campaign—because art and militant investigations have at least one thing in common: When they insist on having the last word, they end up becoming a gravestone for the possible; but when they succeed in embracing what is yet to come, they retain the radical character of a premise.

¹ See Institute of Radical Imagination, *Art for UBI (manifesto)*, eds. Marco Baravalle et al. (Venice: Bruno, 2022), accessed March 14, 2023, instituteofradicalimagination.org/the-school-of-mutation-2020/som-iterations/art-for-ubi/.

² Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2004), 226.

³ See Romano Alquati, *Per fare conricerca* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2012).

⁴ See Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Stephen Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009) 43–44.

⁵ “What we must therefore recognize both in the linear scenario of modernity and postmodernity, and in

the academic opposition between art for art’s sake and engaged art, is an originary and persistent tension between the two great politics of aesthetics: the politics of the becoming-life of art and the politics of the resistant form. The first identifies the forms of aesthetic experience with the forms of another life. The finality it ascribes to art is to construct new forms of life in common, and hence to eliminate itself as a separate reality. The second, by contrast, encloses the political promise of aesthetic experience in art’s very separation, in the resistance of its form to every transformation into a form of life.” Ibid.

⁶ *Operaio massa* and *operaio sociale* are two different subjectivities formulated by the Italian workerists. *Operaio massa* is understood as the typical assembly

line worker who is only responsible for a very small task within an automated process of production and, as a result, becomes disqualified as an “unskilled” worker. *Operaio sociale* is a worker who identifies with the working class, although they are not necessarily subjected to the classic Fordist relationships of production which traditionally take place inside the factory, but more generally to capitalist relations of production that extend into all economic sectors. See Antonio Negri, “Proletari e Stato: Per una discussione su autonomia operaia e compromesso storico” in *Libri del rogo* (1976, reprint, Rome: Derive Approdi, 2006), 144–45.

⁷ See Danilo Montaldi, *Militanti politici di base* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971).

⁸ Ibid., XI.