

THE PRE-MATERIAL: POTENTIALS OF THE INFRASTRUCTURAL AS APPLIED
FORM

MPhil by practice

Submitted by Johanna Klingler to the Royal College of Art, department of Arts and
Humanities, 2022

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Munich, January 9, 2022

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Johanna Klingler', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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THE PRE-MATERIAL: POTENTIALS OF THE INFRASTRUCTURAL AS APPLIED FORM

This thesis will develop the concept of the pre-material as a structure constitutive of meaning and furthermore investigate its potential within the material and immaterial relations of society. The ‘critique of infrastructure’ (Marina Vishmidt, 2016) as a theoretical concept that tackles the relationality of material and social conditions will serve as the framework within which the pre-material will be situated.

Subsequently, an introduction to the theoretical concepts that I will draw upon in the course of my argumentative structure will be followed by an application of the subject matter.

Thus, chapter 1 will use examples to articulate the pre-material, while exploring the image as a concept that is representative as well as constitutive of meaning. These characteristics will be illustrated through theories and practical examples within the realm of photography. Ultimately, I will introduce the pre-material as form, that is, as both activity and category.

The second chapter will introduce the work of the photographers, activists, historians and educators Jo Spence (1934-1992) and Terry Dennett (1938-2018) as an example of applied infrastructural, or pre-material practice. I focus on them due to their targeting of ideological conventions as constructs within which they actively intervene in order to change socially coded meaning and secondly. Another reason for their relevance is the nature of their practice which equates material products and the activities that stand behind them. Furthermore, I will lay out an elaboration of archival material, through which I will illustrate the different fields of action within their work.

The last chapter consists of an introduction to my own practice and an artistic realisation of the pre-material as form. I developed this form in tandem with my theoretical research, which passes through different systems creative of meaning, in order to articulate the pre-material as a self-sufficient producer of meaning. Through my practice I will furthermore articulate my findings regarding the nature of the pre-material as (*a*) active as opposed to representative and (*b*) a relation between material conditions and ideological projections deriving from them.

0. INTRODUCTION

Throughout this thesis, I will use the concept of the ‘social whole’ as a theoretical framework. The notion of reproduction, which builds upon Marxist feminist thought as well as on recent scholarship around ‘infrastructure’, two discourses which will be introduced subsequently, will be crucial for my argument.

The Marxist concept of the ‘social whole’ (Louis Althusser) follows an understanding of production whereby the infrastructure or economic base of society as manifested in the relations of production is maintained by a superstructure consisting of a politico-legal (law and state) and an ideological instance (i.e. different ideologies, whether religious, ethical, legal or political, etc.).¹ In this context, Marx interprets the norms manifested by the state or capitalist ideology as ‘unitary fiction’² and therefore artificially constructed. Thus, categories like class, gender or race, which perpetuate a system based on social differences, are socialised through institutions that seem naturally given, such as the family, education, religion or art.³ If we understand this construction and furthermore naturalisation of social norms as an active mechanism, I argue, a functionalisation of its processes becomes possible.

Social reproduction feminists since the 1970s have applied a similar logic in relation to housework, maternal work, care-work and the reproduction and maintenance of the body and the family and thus, the workforce. Their demand for the acknowledgment of this work as labour was famously elaborated by Silvia Federici⁴ and followed up by reproduction feminists taking up her thoughts.⁵ Here, the reproduction of social ideals (which favour the state and capital) through domestic education as well as the biological reproduction of new members of society is being interpreted as a creative factor of capital’s value. On a structural level, dominant norms and repressive mechanisms (Althusser) are manifest in every level of material and immaterial reality. Thus, the adaption and reproduction of reality demands mental as well as

¹ Cf. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*.

² Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 48-49.

³ C.f. Vishmidt, *The Two Reproductions in (Feminist) Art and Theory since the 1970s*, 57-58.

⁴ Cf. Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*.

⁵ For an overview of the different arguments in reproduction feminism see: Vishmidt, *The Two Reproductions in (Feminist) Art and Theory since the 1970s*.

physical efforts from members of society. Within this relation, the maintenance of the self in the face of the subject's participation in society also has to be understood as a productive act.⁶

Recent scholarship has focused on infrastructure as constructive and reproductive of social norms on a material and immaterial level. Its social, political and economic effects on the subject can e.g. be observed through its physical, representative and ideological implications.

The interrelation between infrastructure and the social reality of the subject becomes evident when we take a look at the fantasies and embodiments of power that infrastructure introduces to a place. For example the day-to-day reality of a city's inhabitants may sometimes fail to match the ideals set out in these processes.⁷ These power relations also bear the potential of producing social prioritisation or exclusion, as e.g. in the case of Detroit and Flint in 2014, when water supply was cut off for inhabitants of racially segregated parts of the cities, in order to put them under pressure in regards to economic contentions.⁸ However, while there has been considerable attention dedicated to infrastructure as 'material things as well as towards the relation between those things'⁹, this thesis will not emphasise an analysis of its materiality, even though its physical appearance does indicate and execute structural ideological concepts.

Focusing on the logic of the construction of progress, Irit Rogoff points towards the rendering of norms through infrastructure and identifies parameters of quality, often used synonymously with infrastructure, particularly in the global West and its 'superior capacity for infrastructural thought, by which is meant that how things come about is as central as what they are, who is involved, what energies, vitalities and desires they bring into the arena, why this

⁶ Michel Hardt points towards possibilities of social conditioning:

'The production of affects, subjectivities, and forms of life present an enormous potential for autonomous circuits of valorisation, and perhaps for liberation.' (Hardt, *Affective Labor*, 100.)

'Affective Labor' is used by Hardt as part of biopolitical production, responsible for the production of subjectivity and thus, the reproduction of culture and ideology. He builds on Foucault's concept of biopower, in which women and nature are dominated, but referring to this concept as viewing the situation only from above, he points towards feminist theorists in order to grasp it from below:

'Biopolitical production here (in the feminist discourse around care work and reproductive labour) consists primarily in the labor involved in the creation of life—not the activities of procreation but the creation of life precisely in the production and reproduction of affects. Here we can recognise clearly how the distinction between production and reproduction breaks down, as does that between economy and culture. Labor works directly on the affects: it produces subjectivity, it produces society, it produces life.' (Cf. *ibid.*, 99.)

⁷ Larkin, *The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure*, 334.

⁸ Cf. Anand, Gupta, and Appel, *The Promise of Infrastructure*, 2.

⁹ Larkin, *The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure*, 329.

might be urgent or important etc.’¹⁰ Rogoff not only points towards that logic as being that of the market, seamlessly also moving into cultural institutions, but also recognises the character of its parameters and tools, which reproduces certain standards, expectations and outputs over and over again.¹¹ Furthermore, she explains the exclusions produced by infrastructures: ‘Whether in the form of impoverishment, expulsion, lack of legal status, or lack of access to education, housing, or medicine.’^{12,13}

Following an understanding of infrastructure as a norm-constituting mechanism, Joanna Hedva introduces the ‘sick woman’ as a subject that is excluded due to physically, mentally or materially not fitting these norms. The adaption and maintenance (e.g. by shifting the view towards reality) of the self within these mechanisms is part of her understanding of infrastructural mechanisms.¹⁴ Hedva approaches categories of visibility and functionality within society and public (visible) space. She elaborates how humans take on the roles of outcasts either due to bodily or mental differences or social disadvantages, when they are not able to take part in social/visible space. Hedva questions the concepts and possibilities of (spatial) visibility per se, referring to Hannah Arendt’s theory of the political body as being one that is publicly visible. She criticises this understanding on a contemporary level as often being linked to a privileging of able bodies and politically/socially accepted individuals. That is, social or physical spaces/conventions do not allow individuals, which lack a normative set of physical, mental or socially required abilities, to participate.

However, while the concept of infrastructure as it appears in recent scholarship aims to capture reality by revealing its material and immaterial social, economic and political relations, ‘infrastructural critique’ functions as a means to comprehensively analyse their dynamics.

¹⁰ Rogoff, *Infrastructure Keynote Lecture*, <https://formwest.org/DocumentsConstellationsProspects/Contributions/Infrastructure>.

¹¹ Cf. Ibid.

¹² Rogoff, *Who Do We Face?*, 620.

¹³ See also: Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*.

¹⁴ ‘The Sick Woman is a white woman with chronic illness rooted in sexual trauma who must take painkillers in order to get out of bed.

The Sick Woman is a straight man with depression who’s been medicated (managed) since early adolescence and now struggles to work the 60 hours per week that his job demands.

The Sick Woman is someone diagnosed with a chronic illness, whose family and friends continually tell them they should exercise more.

The Sick Woman is a queer woman of color whose activism, intellect, rage, and depression are seen by white society as unlikeable attributes of her personality.

The Sick Woman is a black man killed in police custody, and officially said to have severed his own spine. His name is Freddie Gray. [...]’ (Hedva, *sick woman theory*, <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>.)

Regarding the possibility to critically apply the analytic potential of infrastructure, Marina Vishmidt stresses its ‘pervasive tendency to prioritize the “real” (the irreducible, the traumatic, the chaotic) over the delimited, instrumental impact over symbolic action, agency over indexicality. [...] its critique unfolds in a productive register, maybe even *as* production.’¹⁵ Within the course of this thesis, this notion of activity or production will be elaborated as a potential for the production of specific and sufficient content in relation to given conditions (as opposed to merely commenting on or reproducing them). Both my artistic practice and an analysis of radical archival material in chapter 2 will suggest methods or rather an elaboration of qualities this specific production would involve.

Furthermore, Vishmidt’s definition of ‘infrastructural critique’ implies a particular focus on mechanisms of subjectivation within the dynamics of infrastructure. Thus, infrastructural critique expands on mere ‘institutional critique’¹⁶ and aims at an extended understanding and framing of the interplay between different reality-constituting apparatuses by taking all material and ideological relations of the institution into consideration. Following Marx’s understanding of property relations within the social whole, social change has to be unfolded through the relations of production within the base or infrastructure. As mentioned before, the socialisation and (re-)production of ideology and subjective consciousness as a mechanism of perpetuating the material relations of capital and has to be understood as particularly important and is being tackled by infrastructural critique.

As a structure, infrastructural critique can be approached as a proposal for shifting the focus towards the interrelatedness of subjects, objects, or institutions. It presents the opportunity to find new forms of framing problematic infrastructural mechanisms and constellations, rather than affirming their structural location within a fixed system of binary positions – for instance as production, to repeat Vishmidt’s idea.

In comparison to institutional critique, the effects of infrastructural critique do not remain within a linear, demonstrative gesture – ‘a circular or, at best, enervatingly mimetic relation with the phantom antagonist/enabler (or enabling constraint) of the institution that is also “in you.”’¹⁷ Vishmidt admits, that past examples of institutional critique do already incorporate

¹⁵ Vishmidt, *Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts towards Infrastructural Critique*, 266.

¹⁶ ‘Institutional critique’ describes a practice within the field of art that developed through the 1960s and ‘70s. Important representatives include, e.g. Michael Asher or Andrea Fraser. For further information, see e.g.: Fraser, *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique*.

¹⁷ Vishmidt, *Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts towards Infrastructural Critique*, 266.

infrastructural critique in the active sense, although as a concept it remains in the position of deixis.¹⁸

The critique of institutions as well as the critique of infrastructures have to be understood as two different filters on the relations and components of a structural whole, or rather, how to tackle them. Within the critique of infrastructures, institutions (such as the art institution or art itself) also count as structural components, rather than as neutral ground for demonstrating content. They can be understood as executors or mechanisms constitutive of what is perceived as social norm. Vishmidt stresses the fact that both forms of critique – institutional critique, which is ‘preoccupied with defining and tracing the boundaries of that which is legitimately subject to critique in terms of the implicated subject of knowledge’, and infrastructural critique, which focusses on a ‘highlighting of the structural conditions for the possibility of critique and for its objects alike, with more activist dispositions involved here as well,’ encounter an ‘immanent limitation to their emancipatory agendas so long as they defend the horizon of disclosure or deixis as the normative one for art. In this schema, art can point, but it can’t grab.’¹⁹ Vishmidt does not give a fixed definition of what the critique of infrastructures is or what it looks like. What is important though, is that infrastructural critique opens up a perspective on conditions in a certain way by taking into consideration the relations of production and furthermore, what they produce as active mechanisms. What Vishmidt does with her introduction of the critique of infrastructure is creating a space within the conventions of critical analysis, that can be activated in different ways. The urgency lies in the fact that this space is being activated, because in its way infrastructural critique as an active force cannot but visualise or react to the given relations of production in a productive way.

Furthermore, as a relative mechanism, infrastructural critique addresses broader structural interrelations, such as the situatedness of the institution within its economic and ideological structures: the ‘objective (historical, socio-economic) and subjective (including affect and artistic subjectivation) conditions necessary for the institution and its critique to exist, reproduce themselves, and posit themselves as an immanent horizon as well as transcendental condition.’²⁰ As such, the institution possesses the ability to socialise and naturalise its conventions, e.g. social differences, through both its economic logic as well as through its ideological contents. By addressing this phenomenon, infrastructural critique not only speaks

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

about the means and conditions of productions or ideological conventions, but about a preliminary stage of their interrelation – which is their naturalisation as common sense. As such it presents the possibility to lay bare the very constitution of norms or social codes/conventions as meaning and thus, to functionalise its mechanisms. Its position between an ideological and material reality marks precisely the sphere where I will subsequently also position the pre-material as an active preliminary stage of meaning.

Furthermore, the naturalisation of meaning necessarily implies all mechanisms that shape social and subjective consciousness. These dynamics of subjectivation thus appear as fluid processes that manifest through the (re-)production of ideological conventions. As such, they have to be understood as a fixed component of the social whole, albeit a processual or immaterial one. The rationale for the name ‘pre-material’ is due to the subject matter’s manifestation through categories which are producing material impact, while the (common) sense through which they are being legitimised is yet being constituted within this sphere. Within the framework of the social whole, the pre-material is located in-between its components, base and superstructure – as an interrelation.

The concept of the image, which I will subsequently introduce as simultaneously reflective of material and historical relations as a culturally coded object as well as constructive of meaning through affecting active processes of perception, will function as an example of this interrelation. As I will elaborate in the third chapter, my artistic work is expanding on this quality by articulating its processes through an applied practice. This practice does not only help to visualise the sphere of the pre-material in general, but also to represent (this) invisible matter artistically. Here, my artistic realisation functions as a real enactment of the subject matter rather than as a referential system. This characteristic is an important aspect of the pre-material, because it is supposed to qualify as both a materialised category (such as an object, a procedure a method or a medium) as well as an active force.

Due to this constitution the subsequent chapter will furthermore introduce the pre-material as form. Therefore, I will exemplarily articulate this form and its potential to produce social change within the concept of the social whole. As an applied example I will discuss the potentials of the image as a producer of meaning. I will start with an examination of the image as a semantically referential constellation, but ultimately dissolve the logic of the referential. The pre-material as the active relation between the ideological and the material sphere will eventually replace the logic of the referential, which will be identified as a division within these very spheres. Thus, the pre-material as an approximation of the material and the immaterial

sphere will ultimately dissolve this division. That is, both spheres are simultaneously present within the pre-material. Expanding on this structure of interrelated instances, my thesis follows the aim of analysing the political potential of the pre-material. My arguments are based on the assumption that the pre-material in fact represents the naturalisation of social norms as constructed meaning. Given the fact that this construction is actively being (re-)produced within the structures of the social whole, the mechanisms of its naturalisation as a narration can be actively functionalised.

1. THE PRE-MATERIAL AS PRODUCTIVE FORM

This chapter functions as an example for the visualisation of the pre-material sphere, which equals its constitutive processes. For this reason, I will use the image as a cultural product manifested through an interplay of ideological and material processes and as such indicating a capacity for the production of meaning/reality. Within this framework, the subsequent thought-experiment seeks to articulate pre-material processes as the interrelation between the ideological and the material sphere and thus, as an active instance or ‘form’. Form, as I am using the term in this argument, is not intended to generate questions about the artistic medium as a category. While the concept of form will not be applied to indicate procedures within art as an autonomous sphere, it much rather understands institutions (like art) as a procedure: a dealing with a formed materiality of the social.²¹ Due to its constitution as simultaneously activity (or function) and manifested category, this concept of form corresponds to my definition of the pre-material as an active relation: a fixed component of the social whole as well as its processes. The potential of this constellation has to be understood within the realm of its ability to create meaning while structurally manifesting it at the same time.

Furthermore, I will execute my undertaking within the systematic framework of infrastructural critique as a structure that draws on the relationality of material and ideological contents. As mentioned in the introduction, the concept of infrastructural critique has to be understood in relation to the Marxist concept of the ‘social whole’ (Althusser). That is, it builds on a Marxist/Althusserian (and furthermore a Marxist feminist) understanding of production whereby the infrastructure or economic base of society as manifested in the forces and relations of production determines and is maintained by a superstructure consisting of a politico-legal and an ideological instance.²² Following Marx’s premise that the norms manifested by the state

²¹ Cf. Stakemeier, *Entgrenzter Formalismus*, 20.

²² Cf. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 237.

or capitalist ideology are to be understood as artificially constructed,²³ I am focusing on the relation between the ideological sphere and its manifestations as a ground constructive of meaning. Hence, I will compare the effects and potentials of two different concepts of meaning: as a system that is directly referential to material conditions as well as semantically socialised versus a construction which is not referential to common sense insofar, as it exists as ostensibly autonomous processes or form without demonstrating a causal relationship. The latter is self-sufficiently producing meaning within its own structure or rather, as a self-sufficient structure. This concept (as pre-material) will then be investigated in terms of its agency within the social whole.

For the purposes of my thesis, the premise that social norms are constructed and that therefore an ideological reality can never be objective is particularly important. I build my argument on the fact that this construction can be manipulated or functionalised. For Marx and Engels, ideology as constitutive of reality is of subordinate importance as it necessarily derives from the processes of production or rather from labour. In 1859, in his preface to *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (English: *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*), a preliminary work to *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (English: *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*), Marx writes: ‘It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.’²⁴ Hence, ideology as a superior or autonomous instance is being defined as false consciousness. With this, he dissociates himself from idealism. ‘In direct contrast to German philosophy’ – philosophy here has to be understood as metaphysical ideology – ‘which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven’²⁵. In the same text, Marx draws the structure of a material basis and a political and juridical superstructure, where he localises ideology and consciousness:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.²⁶

²³ Cf. Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 48-49.

²⁴ Marx, Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, 263.

²⁵ Engels, Marx, *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to The Critique of Political Economy*, 42.

²⁶ Marx, Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, 263.

Therefore, the superstructure and consciousness are separate phenomena, but on the same level. In *Die deutsche Ideologie* (English: *German Ideology*), ‘moral, religion, metaphysics and other ideology as well as according consciousness’²⁷ are being mentioned as possessing no history or development. Thus, these phenomena (belonging to idealism) cannot represent reality, nor can they change it. Political change can only happen through the material base.²⁸ Individuals embedded in the relations of production are using these phenomena to change their reality and their thinking, which is also due to their material conditions.²⁹

However, in order to grasp Marx and Engels’s definition of ideology it is fair to say that since consciousness or norms can be seen as the ‘ruling ideas’ of society and as such, as a construct of interests. They are therefore a derivation of class division and attributed to the superstructure, although they come to existence through real conditions of production:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.³⁰

In contrast to Engels and Marx, Althusser assigns the contribution of ideological mechanisms with more agenda regarding their potential to create objective reality, although he does not go back to a metaphysical understanding of ideology. He assigns state apparatuses to the ideologies just mentioned. He develops a concept of ideology able to produce reality due to its material interrelatedness. He calls the ideological state apparatuses ‘a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions.’³¹ His list consists of the following:

- the religious ISA (the system of the different churches),
- the educational ISA (the system of the different public and private ‘schools’),
- the family ISA
- the legal ISA,
- the political ISA (the political system, including the different parties),

²⁷ Engels, Marx, *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to The Critique of Political Economy*, 42.

²⁸ Cf. 8th thesis on Feuerbach (Cf. Engels, Marx, *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to The Critique of Political Economy*, 571.)

²⁹ Cf. Engels, Marx, *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to The Critique of Political Economy*, 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

³¹ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 243.

the trade-union ISA,
the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.),
the cultural ISA (literature, the arts, sports, etc.).³²

For Althusser, 'Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.'³³

[...] all ideology represents in its necessarily imaginary distortion not the existing relations of production (and the other relations that derive from them), but above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them. What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live.³⁴

Furthermore, Althusser states that 'ideology has a material existence.'³⁵

'an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material' [...]

Having said this, let me move straight on and see what happens to the 'individuals' who live in ideology, i.e. in a determinate (religious, ethical, etc.) representation of the world whose imaginary distortion depends on their imaginary relation to their conditions of existence, in other words, in the last instance, to the relations of production and to class relations (ideology = an imaginary relation to real relations). I shall say that this imaginary relation is itself endowed with a material existence.³⁶

Thus, he sees ideology not as false consciousness but as an actively productive apparatus. While that does not mean that ideology alone is able to change social reality, this understanding will subsequently help me to articulate a productive interrelation or form as a mechanism between the ideological and the material sphere.

1.1. THE MATERIALITY OF MEANING

In a lecture given by Boris Groys on the 20th century philosopher Alexandre Kojève in 2012,³⁷ he introduces Kojève's practice of producing and collecting visual images. His collection consisted of more than 10,000 postcards primarily depicting medieval and early modern architecture, while he also produced a body of about 5000 photographs portraying similar

³² Ibid., 243.

³³ Ibid., 256.

³⁴ Ibid., 258.

³⁵ Ibid., 258.

³⁶ Ibid., 259.

³⁷ Cf. Groys, *After History: Alexandre Kojève as a Photographer*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTPOgabcPbM&ab_channel=BAKbasisvooractuelekunst.

motifs. Groys asks whether Kojève's activities can be understood as critical and if so, in what sense.

Even though his photographic practice remained private, Kojève's philosophical position suggests an authentic reading of them, with the inherent fact that the material was never meant to be publicly displayed. Following Groys's analysis of Kojève's concept of the post-historical,³⁸ his photographic practice can be read as 'self-training against the post-historical wave of oblivion'³⁹ – an active practicing of the ability to keep a form, to repeat and to reproduce within a system focused on future and processes of change. As such, the activity of creating a space between oneself and the structure one is surrounded by in order to keep a form, constitutes a necessity within this constellation. While, in Kojève's case, this activity appears as the collection of depictions of a certain material culture, his 'self-training' realises through active practicing rather than through the material representation of his aim. As such, the form which is meant to be kept by the actor can be interpreted as the practice itself. In this sense, the activity and its material representation would equal each other.

When Groys asks 'what does it mean to be critical?', he stresses the problematic of criticality being understood as merely taking sides while remaining in a position that is present within the period of time one lives in – a position that is already embedded in the conventions of this certain period. Instead, his idea of criticality would mean a suspension of belief in our time altogether. An awareness of history and the ability to separate oneself from time as opposed to being (immersed) in time is what, in Groys's opinion, constitutes the possibility of criticality: to reflect on the time one is living in. The ability to judge one's time from an outside, to take distance to it – to be con-temporary as opposed to being immersed in a moment is what Kojève's images, for Groys, communicate to their spectator. The subject's situatedness in their social, economic and political structures condition every activity of maintaining the self within these as political. Kojève's practice represents active emancipation from his immersion in the effects of his material and ideological environment.

While it was already argued that the configuration of the self in relation to norms set by a dominating authority has to be categorised as a productive contribution to the social whole (and as such even as reproductive labour), the conscious functionalisation of this mechanism holds further potential. Following Kojève through Groys, the maintenance of a conscious self

³⁸ The end of history does not mean an end of historical processes and events but assumes a final goal of history: the achievement of wisdom, which is already achievable within the current state of knowledge. (Cf. Groys, *Romantic bureaucracy Alexander Kojève's post-historical wisdom*, 1.)

³⁹ Groys, *After History: Alexandre Kojève as a Photographer*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTPOgabcPbM&ab_channel=BAKbasisvooractuelekunst.

as a practice of being, or even as a space of self-expansion, produces a constant and active relation with the structural whole rather than punctually analysing its shortcomings within the logic of its own mechanisms. I will expand on this practice of active self-reflection with my practical *work working on a particular condition* (appendix: pp. 81-85). The repeated process of portraying a plant is to be understood as a conscious process of contemplation, but also of consciously experiencing myself in midst of the infrastructural demands that affect the structure of my life on a daily basis. I will further introduce the specifics of this practice as active form over the course and developments of this chapter.

Considering the active potential of criticism, Marina Vishmidt also points out the importance of a critique that does not fall into the trap of simply affirming a system by reproducing its intrinsic logic. Her writing on infrastructural critique as an expansion of institutional critique focuses on the link between the material and ideological conditions of the institution of art in a way that de-centers rather than affirms it.⁴⁰ Therefore, she stresses the status of ostensibly autonomous institutions which perpetuate the system they are inherent to. That is, not by directly reproducing it, but in the case of capital, by socialising precisely these social relations like class, race, gender etc. which contribute to its existence. By seemingly standing ‘beyond or above’ these relations, institutions like art, education, religion or the state itself possess the ability to claim an allegedly neutral position which, as a component or consequence of them, functions as an ideological capacity.⁴¹ Vishmidt emphasises the consideration of the conditions and relations which manifest structural violence materially and ideologically, in order to prevent a ‘totalization’ of critique through a position of either ‘rejection or complicity’.⁴² By considering the (re)production of the means of production, the ideological sphere is not only addressed by infrastructural critique, but the very relations or rather mechanisms which produce and reproduce its different mechanisms are stressed. However, expanding on the impulses of Groys and Vishmidt, the practice of active self-configuration is to be understood not only as critical practice, but also as a process as well as occurrence of the pre-material. To this end, my practical work (as explained in detail in chapter 3) will furthermore illustrate a development from functioning as a mere commentary to its constitution as an active and self-sufficient form. As such, it is able to react within the territory

⁴⁰ Vishmidt, *Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural*.

⁴¹ Cf. Vishmidt, *The Two Reproductions in (Feminist) Art and Theory since the 1970s*, 57-58.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 268.

of rejection and complicity through functioning itself as a structure that introduces its own logic and agency.

In the following, I will use the field of photography as the subject matter within which I will analyse different example strategies that aim at producing political impact regarding their critical potential, through a structural application of infrastructural critique. In its mutual function as autonomous (artistic) as well as actual political tool, the scope of photography allows a comprehensive elaboration of both a referential and a non-referential production of meaning. As an argumentative structure, I will stress and approximate the binary opposition between ‘the political’ image as productive of social change situated within the relations of production and ‘the aesthetic’ as a merely ideological and non-political condition (Walter Benjamin). Finally, I will demonstrate that both qualities can appear and operate at the same time: as an occurrence of the pre-material which relates both the material and the ideological. That is, as a preliminary stage of culturally coded meaning, the image as simultaneously a materialised illustration of cultural conditions and as an active producer of meaning will function as a representative of the pre-material. This twofold character of the pre-material as well as its processual nature will subsequently be elaborated as its main quality, which will be furthermore reflected within the logics of *working on a particular condition*.

1.2. THE UNFAITHFUL IMAGE

At a conference in 2013, Groys again, talks about what was back then the most recent crisis of visual artistic representation in relation to politics. He recalls, that while subversive European and American artists and film-makers of the 1960s and 1970s (especially Viennese Actionism and Pasolini) were still using visual media to challenge societies’ perceptions of reality, that is, representing the cruelties and messiness of human nature, their function as taboo breakers and initiators of shocking imagery was taken away from them in the previous decades when actual terror not only became visible via the same media, but also when terrorists started using mass media as a platform.⁴³ Historical working-class photography (German: Arbeiterfotografie) and agitprop are interesting in this context, because they too use constructed images not as artistic media but as political tools.⁴⁴ The overlap of political intention and medial implementation in both fields interests me here.

⁴³ Groys, *The Politics of Equal Aesthetic Rights*, 144-45.

⁴⁴ In fact, it was originally used because a large part of the Russian population was not able to read. (Cf. Bütte, *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf: Dokumente u. Beitr. zur Arbeiterfotografie 1926-1932. Kulturpolitische Dokumente der revolutionären Arbeiterbewegung*, 10.)

The strategic representation of political content or, more specifically, of capitalism's class-dividing nature shown through photography was the aim of different socialist photographers within the genre of working class photography in the early 20th century. The specific function of representing class differences and working class struggles would serve not only as a strategy for convincing the masses by talking to their experiences, but also as an educational medium. These images were intentionally put in a certain context. It would be naïve to regard the occurrence of imagery within a political realm as faithful, as opposed to a mere aesthetic function within the autonomous sphere of art.⁴⁵ However, as part of their public appearance, 'these images are the icons of the contemporary political theology that dominates our collective imagination',⁴⁶ as Groys notes in regard to images of terror distributed by political extremists, which can be expanded onto the majority of images occurring in media and common sense language. Since a document can never be separated from its context, it is difficult to define how the documentary as an objective witness of reality would have to operate. Thus, the context, display and presentation of an image are crucial to its political status. While it is possible to historically trace a certain style that is used predominantly within politically engaged imagery, it could be argued that the constellation in which this imagery is becoming politically relevant is through its semantic and epistemological network. Its relevance there relies on the interplay with the structural disposition of its recipients. Only after being politically contextualised or established semantic codes can be read within a set of meaning or through experiential knowledge, which was assigned to them.

However, producers of early political imagery such as Dziga Vertov and others working in his tradition (e. g. Jo Spence and Terry Dennett as discussed in chapter 2) have consciously chosen to organise reality rather than merely offering a visual representation of real life.⁴⁷ Instead of depicting social and historical conditions, they re-arrange a socially coded reference system in order to communicate their intentions, even if they have to manipulate facts or invent and socialise new meaning. This presents us with a range of possibilities as to how political intentions can be communicated. While the image as a culturally coded symbol is able to refer

⁴⁵ The sphere of art as an autonomous sphere has been criticized since '[...] modernity is haunted by the problematical promises and compromised realities of autonomy. The constitutive contradiction here is between the autonomy of the *subject* and that of *social spheres*, such as art, science or the law. If the functional differentiation between different »value spheres« (Weber) holds the promise of various fields of knowledge becoming each firmly entrenched in their unique »area of competence«, as Clement Greenberg famously put it for modernist art, then this reflects a social division of labour that can (and has) been seen as stunting the subject's organic development into a fully rounded being.' (Lütticken, *Autonomy*, 29.)

⁴⁶ Groys, *The Politics of Equal Aesthetic Rights*, 31.

⁴⁷ Cf. Chapter 2: Vertov 'factography.'

to reality in an effective didactic manner, it also possesses the ability to actively construct new meaning through its perception. Subsequently, I will introduce different approaches of acting within the range of visual or aesthetic representation of content.

In *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning* (1975), Allan Sekula criticises Alfred Stieglitz for displaying the photograph *The Steerage* (published 1917 in *Camera Work*, a magazine for photography and art, edited by Stieglitz himself) in a manner that fetishises the photograph as such, without putting it onto a discursive context.⁴⁸ *The Steerage* displays European migrants on their way from the US back to Europe accommodated on the lowest priced area of the ship.⁴⁹ The photograph was published without caption and printed on expensive paper. Sekula interprets this presentation as an attempt to reassign photography the status of a unique object and accuses Stieglitz of producing an entirely aesthetic, autonomous artwork.⁵⁰ He criticises *Camera Work* for neglecting its own context as text as well as concealing its discursive situating of the image and thus, contributing to the myth of the semantic autonomy of the image.⁵¹ 1942, Stieglitz released a text on *How the Steerage Happened*, recalling his memory of the scene. Here, he describes the situation subjectively, following formal modernist criteria, such as composition of bodies and objects, form and material.⁵² For Sekula, this formal treatment of the image deprives it of its specific conditions, negates the necessity of a metalanguage and turns it into mere abstraction:⁵³ ‘The invention of

⁴⁸ Cf. Sekula, *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning*.
<https://www.artforum.com/print/197501/on-the-invention-of-photographic-meaning-37302>.

⁴⁹ Cf. Stieglitz, *The Steerage*, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/5139>.

⁵⁰ Cf. Geimer, *Theorien der Photographie*, 94.

Cf. Sekula, *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning*.
<https://www.artforum.com/print/197501/on-the-invention-of-photographic-meaning-37302>.

⁵¹ Cf. Stieglitz, *The Steerage*, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/5139>.

⁵² ‘Early in June 1907, my small family and I sailed for Europe. My wife insisted upon going on the Kaiser Wilhelm II – the fashionable ship of the North German Lloyd at the time. Our first destination was Paris. How I hated the atmosphere of the first class on that ship. One could not escape the nouveaux riches. [...] On the third day out I finally couldn’t stand it any longer. I tried to get away from that company. [...] As I came to the end of the deck I stood alone, looking down. There were men and women and children on the lower deck of the steerage. [...] The whole scene fascinated me. I longed to escape from my surroundings and join those people. [...] A round straw hat, the funnel leaning left, the stairway leaning right, the white draw-bridge with its railings made of circular chains-white suspenders crossing on the back of a man in the steerage below, round shapes of iron machinery, a mast cutting into the sky, making a triangular shape. I stood spellbound for a while, looking and looking. Could I photograph what I felt, looking and looking, and still looking. I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life. And as I was deciding, should I try to put down this seemingly new vision that held me – the common people, the feeling of a ship and ocean and sky and the feeling of release that I was away from the mob called the rich – Rembrandt came into my mind and I wondered would he have felt as I was feeling.’ (Alfred Stieglitz, “How The Steerage Happened,” in: *Stieglitz on Photography: His Selected Essays and Notes*, Richard Whelan (ed.), New York: Aperture, 2004, 194–195.)

⁵³ Cf. Geimer, *Theorien der Photographie*, 94.

the photograph as high art was only possible through its transformation into an abstract fetish, into “significant form.”⁵⁴ From this follows that for Sekula the discursive context of *The Steerage* is of an aesthetic nature. In contrast, he introduces Lewis Hine’s photograph *Immigrants Going Down Gangplank* (depicting exactly what the title suggests), which was published in *Charity and the Commons*, a weekly journal concerning philanthropy, in 1905. Due to the political situatedness, Sekula regards the discursive context of this image as of political nature.⁵⁶ However, reviewing Sekula’s critique, Peter Geimer stresses the fact that Sekula validates both images exclusively by their contextualisation. While there is no objectivity in either of them, he prioritises the political discourse over the aesthetic, although both only come into existence through a biased rhetoric.⁵⁷

In order to elaborate further the concept of the political as opposed to the aesthetic, it makes sense to introduce Walter Benjamin’s historically important distinction between both. In his famous essay *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (English: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*),⁵⁸ he discusses the political capacity of an image within itself. Thus, he regards the image without further context or descriptive text, but in its capacity to take effect in the world. For him, a transparency of the technical means of production available to the production of an image is crucial in order to embody and affirm a political mindset which demonstrates structural relations comprehensibly and thus, to produce educational and empowering effects.

The different approaches of political image production, which are outlined here, correspond to the stages I went through within my own artistic practice. While the installation *12 we do lunch* (appendix pp. 69-78) appears as a construct of references that merely points towards social conditions (although I am arranging my own narration), my series of flower portraits *working on a particular condition* (appendix p. 81-85) presents itself as an self-sufficient and active form that produces its own logical system. Its application of form can be read as equivalent to Benjamin’s functionalisation of the image, which will be expanded on by my concept of the ‘pre-material image’ (1.4.) and Krauss’ notion of the index. Later on, I will specify the political potential as well as the characteristics of such form. In the following, the

⁵⁴ ‘Significant form’: Allan Sekula after Clive Bell (Cf. Sekula, *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning*. <https://www.artforum.com/print/197501/on-the-invention-of-photographic-meaning-37302>.)

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Cf. Geimer, *Theorien der Photographie*, 95.

⁵⁷ Cf. Ibid. 95.

⁵⁸ Cf. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*.

image can be understood as form, however its twofold character as image and activity will become much more apparent than within the just mentioned image as predominately a social or aesthetic referential system.

1.3. THE ACTIVE IMAGE

Benjamin criticises the aestheticisation of political life by fascism as an instance that compresses the facts of reality into an illusion. The notion of surface is important in the reading of Benjamin's elaborations. One could argue that his understanding of 'aestheticisation' is being used almost synonymously to a notion of surface. This becomes apparent in his elaborations on the political use of photography and technology as opposed to a merely illusionistic one.⁵⁹ In order to politicise art, Benjamin argues that the technical means of photography are supposed to be integrally apparent in the photographic or cinematic image. That way, he draws the possibility of creating an image or world, in which the masses can relate to an active production and use of available means in order to structurally understand and shape their environment.⁶⁰ As opposed to this active engagement with the material conditions of reality, he stresses fascism's use of visual means which gives expression to the needs of the masses by preserving them and thus, culminates in an aestheticisation of political life.⁶¹ The notion of surface, however, becomes more explicit when Benjamin compares aspects of political film making to surgery and architecture, where he points out possibilities of penetrating the inner structure of a body or object as a procedure which reduces the mystical distance and thus, renders the object matter as an opaque entity. Esther Leslie refers to Benjamin's approach to surface and depth as follows: 'The image of reality that Benjamin's film and photography brings back may be an image, but it is an image with depth, not a surface. It can be cut into.'⁶²

In his afterword to the essay, Benjamin draws on the example of war, in order to elaborate how the aestheticisation of material reality is being alienated by ideology and – when transformed into aesthetic form – becomes experienceable on a manipulated perceptive level. Here, he refers to Filippo Marinetti's *Manifesto del Futurismo*, which praises the evils of war

⁵⁹ Cf. Ibid., 35.

⁶⁰ Cf. Ibid., 35-37.

⁶¹ Cf. Ibid., 41.

⁶² Leslie, *Walter Benjamin, Politics, Aesthetics*, <http://spektakel.blogspot.de/broschur/broschur-1/esther-leslie-walter-benjamin-politik-und-aesthetik/>.

as aesthetic instances of the new technological era.⁶³ Thus, the focusing on an aesthetic surface not only dislocates material life from its perception of reality:

The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. *The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life.*⁶⁴

– it even becomes a mode of living and experiencing and thus, of reality:

Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. *Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.*⁶⁵

However, while Benjamin's notion of the 'political' focusses on the depiction or disclosure of historical relations, he neglects the reciprocity that results from ideological mechanisms within this practice.

Within the realm of the political, or communist image production, Benjamin claims for the visibility of deconstruction and implementation of the possibilities of new technology, for a penetration of the structure and relations of a system, in order to produce an awareness of agency in the masses. This corresponds to a Leninist understanding of agitation and propaganda, in which a political mindset of the masses is supposed to be produced through the didactic illustration of systemic relations.⁶⁶ However, he expands on this logic by demanding not only to visually illustrate social injustice and its causes, but to visualise the process of image creation itself. In regard to his own political acting, Benjamin, who was distrustful of all organised political movements, stressed the importance of practicing it in a way that allowed him 'not to decide once and for all, but rather at every moment.'⁶⁷ In this respect, his concept of structural transparency in the political image makes sense as it should provide the recipient with a clear orientation of what they perceive. However, if we understand Benjamin's stance towards communism 'as an obligatory mode of conduct'⁶⁸ rather than the pursuit of a final

⁶³ Cf. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, 41.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 42

⁶⁶ Cf. Chapter 2.

⁶⁷ Wolin, *From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin*, 88-89.

⁶⁸ Letter Walter Benjamin to Gersthom Scholem, cited in: Wolin, *From Messianism to Materialism: The Later Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin*, 88.

political goal it becomes even clearer that the image he promotes approximates an activity rather than a product.

In her analysis of institutional and infrastructural critique, Vishmidt recognises the limited agendas, which ‘defend the horizon of disclosure or deixis as the normative one for art. In this schema, art can point, but it can’t grab.’⁶⁹ As mentioned before, she stresses the role of art as an institution with the ability to naturalise or problematise social norms by seemingly standing above or beyond the productive components of the state or capital. It is within this relation that Benjamin positions his image as a political mechanism. Elaborating on this logic, I will subsequently concentrate on the image not in its effect as a manifestation of cultural codes, but as an act of active imagination.

If we return to Marx’s concept of the social whole, every society is to be understood as constructed, whereas the economic base or infrastructure of society (‘the *unity* of the productive forces and the relations of production’⁷⁰) is bound to the superstructure, formed by the politico-legal and the ideological instance. As introduced earlier, an infrastructural approach towards the relationality of the ideological and economic sphere would imply a functionalisation of the image as a relation between the two. While Benjamin’s concept of political image production can be interpreted infrastructurally – the image depicts these relations and functions as an actor within them – he appears to omit both the occurrence of any aesthetic opacity within the political image as well as the possibility of any political potential within the realm of aesthetic autonomy. Meanwhile, Benjamin’s notion of political image production appears to be exclusively bound to communism (which represents his political stance). Thus, his usage of the term ‘political’ has to be read as the ‘good’ or ‘right’ political mode, while fascism seems to be separated from his realm of the political. Thus, the ‘aesthetical’ as a mechanism which affirms preserved versions of reality as reality is excluded from his concept of politics and distinguished as a feature of fascism. As a supporter of communism, Benjamin clearly locates the operating principle of social change within the economic base as the territory of property structure. In analogy to the social whole, Benjamin’s political image as a dynamic depiction of material relations is supposed to produce political change by laying them bare and emancipating the masses through the active perception of reality (as material relations). However, it could be argued, that in his concept the image as a self-sufficient cosmos simultaneously takes over the role of the superstructure (ideology: education, communication, culture) – that is, to exercise

Vishmidt, *Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts towards Infrastructural Critique*, 267.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 267-268.

⁷⁰ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 237.

influence on the mind and reason of the masses – while operating on a material level. Within this thought, ideology as a representation of structural relations can be approached as an objective instance. While I do not disagree with Benjamin's belief in the possibility of organising reality through material relations and the image as a method (or form) which mediates between the different apparatuses, I would like to expand on his notion by illustrating political potential not only within material relations. Thus, how the image creates a distance between the subject and their surrounding apparatuses will be investigated as an activity rather than as a depiction of relations. For this reason, the image has to be understood as an active product of its construction – an activity as well as an object. Though the image, the perception and construction of meaning occur simultaneously. Relating back to my concept of the pre-material, this process of creation resembles its product (the image), and as such qualifies as form.

1.4. THE PRE-MATERIAL IMAGE

As a transition towards an understanding of the image as activity, it makes sense to look at Rosalind Krauss' concept of the index in relation to photography. What interests me here is her introduction of abstraction in this context. As illustrated before, Sekula criticises abstraction as the specificity of form, whereas 'all specificity except the specificity of form is pared away from the photograph until it stands transformed into an abstraction. But all theories of abstraction are denials of the necessity of metalanguage, of the embeddedness of the artwork in a discourse'.⁷¹ This understanding stands quite close with Benjamin's notion of an opaque surface, though both of them situate their analysis alongside a political agenda of the image and its embeddedness within a relational or referential context. Krauss on the other hand discusses abstraction as the degree of relations between an object and the world. Thus, she draws her line from symbolic analogy between the two, through a relational correspondence of meaning within the specific logic of particular fields, towards a merely physical relation between the work of art and the material world. The latter allows her to establish an understanding of meaning way more peripheral than the one inscribed to a symbolic reference system.

In the first part of *Notes on the Index*, Krauss expands on the notion of representation through the symbolic, that is, through implying meaning by using signifiers. In order to identify what is common within 'Post-Movement Art in America' of the '70s she elaborates on the 'index', a type of sign that equals a direct physical trace between a referent (a material object – what a sign stands for, or represents) and the physical traces it may cause (e.g. footprints,

⁷¹ Sekula, *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning*.

medical symptoms, cast shadows etc.).⁷² Part one of *Notes on the Index* implies the problematics of signifying systems as the dominant mode of the creation of meaning. That is, by elaborating on Duchamp's practice as a traumatic result caused by both the abstract (or abstracting) pictorial language of the 1910s and the rise of photography.⁷³ By acknowledging this issue as well as by analysing photography as physical imprint transferred by light onto a sensitive surface, Krauss is able to understand art made of different media as photographic in this sense and to move away from talking about meaning only through what is symbolically represented.

If we are to ask what the art of the '70s has to do with all of this, we could summarize it very briefly by pointing to the pervasiveness of the photograph as a means of representation. It is not only there in the obvious case of photo-realism, but in all those forms which depend on documentation-earthworks, particularly as they have evolved in the last several years, body art, story art-and of course in video. But it is not just the heightened presence of the photograph itself that is significant. Rather it is the photograph combined with the explicit terms of the index.⁷⁴

However, in the second part of *Notes on the Index*, Krauss discusses the quality of signs in artworks that do not have a symbolic meaning through external relations, e. g. coded conventions of a medium. She introduces the 'message without a code'⁷⁵, a concept she adopts from Roland Barthes, who appoints photography the status of 'indices': a category of signs that visually equal another object, without transforming their appearance in any way, that could be read symbolically. The photographic message displaces the original scene and leaves the sphere of symbolic transformation within the relation of signified and signifier. As such, the sign of this message has no code.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Krauss elaborates on her understanding of the photographic quality in abstract art (of the '70s) by distinguishing two instances: works which unfold their own logic within the conventions of, e. g. a genre or medium and thus, function in itself without the need of an outer world and works which function as shifters; signs which only unfold meaning through physical placement within their physical environment.⁷⁷ She introduces this argument by comparing works of Ellsworth Kelly and Lucio Pozzi. The first establishes an internal message within the logic of its medial conventions (painting), while latter uses a photographic or indexical logic, which situates itself within its environment through

⁷² Cf. Krauss, *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America*, 70.

⁷³ Ibid. 78.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 78.

⁷⁵ Krauss, *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2*, 59.

⁷⁶ Cf. Ibid., 59.

⁷⁷ Cf. Ibid., 63-64.

directly integrating physical aspects and imprints of the space. Thus, this work can be understood as uncoded – an indicator of something that is or was present in the world without transforming its visual presence into a symbolic equivalent of the world.⁷⁸

Krauss then goes back to an example she presented in the beginning of her text. In order to introduce the concept of the uncoded message, she initially points out a performance by dancer Deborah Hay, who in a performance in 1976 refuses to dance. Instead, she explains to her audience that her goal for the performance would be to talk to them and ultimately, the ‘fantasy of total self-presence: to be in touch with the movement of every cell in one's body.’⁷⁹ Instead of using a repertoire of movements coded within the cultural convention of dance and hence, encodable within a specific cultural field, here, ‘[...] movement is understood as something the body does not produce and is, instead, a circumstance that is registered on it (or, invisibly, within it), there is a fundamental alteration in the nature of the sign. Movement ceases to function symbolically and takes on the character of an index’.⁸⁰ In her line of thought, Krauss’ concept of the indexical allows her to understand movement within dance as an instance registered on or present in the body and, in Hay’s case, as a vehicle for total self-presence. Self-presence, as presented here, does not appear as an inner state completely shut off or irrelevant to an outside, but even worthy of public witnessing. What is there in Hay’s performance is text (spoken by the artist) which functions as the supplemented repeating the otherwise uncoded message of pure presence in an articulated language.⁸¹ However, in this constellation the event happening in the body and perceivable by the artist alone has to be understood as the main one – a practice articulated as active form inside the artist.

Krauss’s concept of the indexical ultimately qualifies as an impulse felt within the body, or even the process of conscious awareness of the self. Without appearing as a referential transformation of the cultural or social world, it contributes to understanding activities related to a constitution or maintenance of the self (as in the social or economic subject) as critical production. As introduced earlier, the ‘non-referential’ as an expansion of material value relations and symbolically coded meaning is being stressed here, in order to articulate mechanisms of subjectivation as productive pre-material form.

⁷⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 59.

Even though I do not aim to bind the concept of the pre-material exclusively to the realm of photography, this context makes sense here, because it illustrates a process from a referential construction of productive meaning to a non-referential one. The image that is produced by it is of key importance, although, in regard to the pre-material, the image is to be understood in a broader sense: that is, as indicative as well as constructive of meaning and as such, neither exclusively connected to the visual image. In that sense, the connection between Krauss and Benjamin lies in an access to the sphere of meaning-construction through material triggers, although Krauss's more opaque example illustrates the pre-material as a self-sufficient potential that can be deployed without using a socially coded system. Krauss furthermore describes a concrete activity or form through which this access is happening. While in Benjamin's case this would be the visual image, Krauss introduces the practice of active self-mediation and contemplation in order to produce a space between the inner sphere of the artist and the outer world. Within this space, the pre-material is inhabited or rather happening because meaning is being constituted there. Thus, she presents us with another appearance of the image as well as of the pre-material. While the image constitutes pre-material form as the conscious activity of perception – an active receiving and constructing of codes, Hay's form of choice appears as an inducement of self-awareness.

My series of paintings *working on a particular condition* (appendix, pp. 81-85) relates to this notion of the pre-material as form. While the paintings do show a motif (a plant), the core of the work lies in its development of an activity that enables me to transform a mental state (concentration) into another form that articulates the process visually. Both processes, the actual contemplation as well as the depiction of the plant qualify as pre-material form, that is, as a state which transcends my own social and material relations to my awareness of myself. As form or practice both activities provide me with a distance or space between myself and the outer world, or rather towards my own immersion in the tightly entangled instances of material conditions and ideological projections and defaults. Through both forms I can enter the pre-material and reflect on or even functionalise my own consciousness. While both forms – contemplation as well as its transformation into the painting process – qualify to enact the aforementioned process, the series *working on a particular condition* enables me to articulate and communicate this process to an outside as well as to manifest it as practice and thus, to visualise this form. This articulation appears as an ever-failing accuracy to really depict my mental connection with the plant, which becomes apparent through the deviations within the series, but at the same time through its continuity as a practice. Furthermore, this form is not reliant on a semantically coded reference system in order to interpret it. Instead of

communicating meaning by being read and interpreted, *working on a particular condition* develops and enacts its own logic. It actually exists and reacts, and, as a form outside of the conventions of already manufactured meaning, it produces its own reality instead of new abstract relations. I could argue here, that this characteristic qualifies it as enacting the potential of the infrastructural by quoting Marina Vishmidt once more:

Finally, it is infrastructure's transitive character—between the material and the possible, between machines and working drawings, between cognitive maps and what is pictured on them—that enables it to ask political questions that can no longer be replied to in the abstract, with the false totalizations of rejection or complicity.⁸²

Here, Vishmidt defines the infrastructural as a relation that derives from a material condition and the possibilities of ideological projections that come into existence through these. As such, like the pre-material, it marks the productive space between the base and the superstructure and corresponds to the active or pre-material image as an active instance that integrates both of the other instances. In this relation, the quality of the pre-material as productive of specific content rather than of abstract references, as I have just articulated alongside *working on a particular condition*, becomes particularly apparent. As another applied example in this regard, I will introduce the work of Jo Spence and Terry Dennett as representative of a type of radical praxis that does not produce static objects but manifests through activity and produces visual content as a mediation between material conditions and social projections.

2. WORKING INFRASTRUCTURALLY: THE COLLABORATIVE PRAXIS OF JO SPENCE AND TERRY DENNETT

This chapter will trace the collaborative work of Terry Dennett (1938–2018) and Jo Spence (1934–1992). It will give an overview of their practices, focusing particularly on their political dimensions: collaboration, archiving, education & self-organisation, research and fantasy. The entanglement of political activity and visual objects as well as their involving of ideology as approached via fiction in their staged photographic work will eventually be interpreted as infrastructural methods.

As Terry Dennett's work is only marginally known, I will furthermore detail his activities as a social historian, photographer, activist, radical pedagogue, and significant figure in the reception of working class history. Dennett is most often mentioned only as the curator of the Jo Spence Memorial Archive, or as one of her collaborators. While Jo Spence's work received

⁸² Vishmidt, *Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique*, 268.

public attention and, in time, became relatively established, it is rarely explicitly understood that from early on, their practices and methods evolved in a collaborative process. Exchange, solidarity and collective processes lay at the heart of their practice. In taking these social processes into consideration, their artistic work must be understood as necessarily stemming from politically engaged activities. In this way, their practice differed from much self-proclaimed “political art”, which acts solely to produce political effects within the exclusive, self-referential artworld. This perspective is crucial to understanding their photographs, collages, and publications in terms of their underlying relations of production, distribution and perception. Furthermore, in relation to Terry Dennett this is the first time that much of the subsequently discussed archival material is reviewed and analysed, which contributes to a more comprehensive insight to the collaborative practice of Spence and Dennett.

Terry Dennett and Jo Spence developed many of their methods and political statements together. They considered the ‘study of specific apparatuses and the economic point of production as central to any understanding of history.’⁸³ Under this shared rubric, Dennett’s work focused on urban crisis and social exclusion,⁸⁴ while Spence produced work about women in class society in relation to reproduction and domestic labour as well as the (ill) body as a political site of struggle. Together they helped to found the Half Moon Photography Workshop Collective, which produced *Camerawork* magazine. But due to political disagreements they did not remain in the collective for long. Spence and Dennett repeatedly tried to introduce a discussion of class issues into the magazine and the projects of the Half Moon Photography Workshop. When this was rejected, they split from Half Moon acrimoniously. In the editorial to *Photography/Politics: 1*, published a number of years later, they explicitly state their political aims, which can be understood as an emancipation from the policy at Half Moon.

⁸³ Cf. Jo Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, 76.

⁸⁴ Cf. Dennett and Merris, *ECONOMICS 101*, <https://spacestudios.org.uk/exhibition-programme/terry-dennett-and-jimmy-merris-economics-101/>.

PHOTOGRAPHY
WORKSHOP

A STATEMENT FROM PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP

This annual, the first of a number of publications planned by Photography Workshop, is essentially a continuation of the work we originally attempted to initiate through Half Moon Photography Workshop. As co-founders of the Workshop and its magazine *Camerawork* we felt it crucial for us, as socialists, to call into question various institutional photographic practices, and to do everything possible to engage in the widest possible debate of the politics of visual imagery. Important also we felt was the urgent task of attempting to raise from obscurity, and re-examine, the earlier traditions of left wing photography, before they became elevated and rarified as part of the bourgeois 'documentary tradition' within various art establishments.

In the event, these attempts proved to be premature, for members of HMPW's other co-founding group, Half Moon Gallery Limited, looked upon such activities as "time-wasting", "obscure", or "too theoretical". This rejection of our theoretical and political practice eventually led to Photography Workshop's total exclusion from HMPW and from *Camerawork*, and to the artificial closure of the debates which were just beginning to emerge in embryonic form in that journal.

Traumatic though these events have been for us personally they have, nonetheless, had a positive outcome in that our present programme is now more broadly based and is entirely self-supporting. Our thanks to those people who helped us in various ways during this difficult period.

The production of this annual has presented us with many difficulties, not least of which has been the fact that all editorial and production work has been carried out entirely in people's spare time, in addition to their normal work. Finance has come from a variety of sources; from our wages, from donations, and from the proceeds of an out-of-court settlement of £2,000 made to Photography Workshop following Industrial Tribunal proceedings for 'unfair dismissal' against Half Moon Gallery Limited.

We would like to extend our thanks to all those who have worked in various stages of production, especially to our fellow editors David Evans and Sylvia Gohl, and to John Myers, our production person.

Terry Dennett/Jo Spence
September 1979

II

Fig. 1, 'A Statement from Photography Workshop'. Source: Dennett, Terry, Spence, Jo (eds.). *Photography/Politics: One*, London: Photography Workshop, 1979.

From this point onwards, they produced work together under the name *Photography Workshop Ltd.* Photography Workshop was an independent educational, research, publishing and resource project, founded in 1974.⁸⁵ Based in their home at 152 Upper Street, London, it was the initiative under which most of their activities and productions were distributed, and later, under which almost all of their archival material was held (and stamped.) From here Spence and Dennett published various teaching kits, posters, the broadsheet *The Worker*

⁸⁵ Cf. Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, 89.

Photographer (three issues) and edited the books *Photography/Politics: One and Two*, which they considered to be the ‘first serious collections of essays on photography, history and politics in this country.’⁸⁶

The photographic projects Spence and Dennett started together – such as *Remodelling Photo History* and *The Crisis Project* – produced visual content, including photographs and collages, which were put on display in several art institutions. Yet they were only interested in the category fine art peripherally, since they did not primarily identify as artists. They both worked ‘9–5 jobs’: Dennett as a photographer at the London Zoo and Spence a high-street photographer, with their political and artistic activities taking place around that. Spence described her struggles in defining an identity for her activities and came up with the terms ‘cultural worker’ and ‘educational photographer,’ which emphasise processes of active cultural production rather than the ‘fetishized products of my labour, cut off from its own history, elevated to object status.’⁸⁷ Neither of these terms seemed to work as well as the ‘magical word *artist*.’⁸⁸

While Spence and Dennett used the opportunities provided by the establishment artworld to gain visibility for their work, they were more interested in projects that undermined the separation of artistic and cultural work from the rest of life. Dennett not only collected magazines and information material by radical artist groups such as *The League of Socialist Artists* but was also a member of *The Provisional Committee for Progressive Realist Art and Culture*. In a socialist tradition, they promoted ‘a realist art and culture expressing the life conditions, aspirations and struggles of the working class and all working people for a better life,’ which had been brought to collapse and extinction under a monopoly-capitalist society. Thus, they believed that ‘all forms of artistic expression and awareness, together with a heightened cultural sensibility in general, amongst all sections of the working class and working people of our land’ ought to be strengthened. Alongside this, they asserted that art and culture is not a sole purview of ‘the educated and enlightened,’ citing the example of the Ashington miners, a group of mine workers from Ashington that started painting in the 1930s without any formal artistic training.

Spence and Dennett referred to their artistic work as standing in line with the ‘language and methodology of dialectical and historical materialism,’ which should lead to an

⁸⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 89.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 216.

understanding of photographic work within the language of ‘an Eisenstein, a Brecht or Benjamin’⁸⁹. Meanwhile, they were strongly influenced by John Heartfield and the tradition of his political photomontages. Heartfield was an employee of the German anti-fascist newspaper *AIZ* (*Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* / English: *Workers’-Illustrated-Newspaper*, run by Willi Münzenberg, and published weekly between 1921–33 in Berlin and between 1933-38 from his exile in Prague]. His works should not be mistaken for the products of an individualist artist. As an artist, activist and a journalistic agitator, Heartfield used and invented photographic methods in order that his images could be wielded as weapons in the political struggle against fascism, in order to act quickly in the face of changing political circumstances. This immediate political engagement through the distribution of his works in the *AIZ* is reminiscent in Spence’s and Dennett’s efforts; they too did not limit themselves to an autonomous field of art, but used the publication and distribution of their work to intervene strategically in a reality that they understood to be constructed socially.⁹⁰ As Spence wrote:

One of the most important aspects of Heartfield’s work is his dialectical method of representation. By this I mean not only his technique of reassembling photos and texts in order to communicate new political understandings, but also the way in which his work was embedded in certain specific modes of information dissemination very different from those typical in the Fine Arts.⁹¹

Spence and Dennett refer very specifically to methods of political agitation and propaganda, predominantly in relation to working class photography in the Soviet Union and Weimar Germany. They engaged with this through their comprehensive study of another German magazine, *Der Arbeiterfotograf* (*Worker Photographer*, 1926–1932), which Dennett collected. *Der Arbeiterfotograf* aimed to represent political content – and more specifically class division – within capitalism. Here, the specific function of representing class differences and working class struggles served not only as a strategy for convincing the masses by speaking to their experiences, but also as an educational medium. Instead of working solely through aestheticization, the photograph functioned as a tool intended to make passive perception impossible.

In the practice of agitation, Vladimir Lenin advocated the representation of a certain pressing idea: agitation should demonstrate or represent the most impressive example of a

⁸⁹ Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, 41–42.

⁹⁰ For more information on Heartfield and the *AIZ* see: John Heartfield, *Photomontages of the Nazi Period* (1977) or Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, *The Worker Photography Movement: (1926 –1939). Essays and Documents* (2011).

⁹¹ Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, 52.

complex situation, which should then unfold itself within further information and thus educate the recipient. This kind of photography also arose due to widespread illiteracy in Russia during the late-19th and early-20th Century. As the pedagogical aspect of Lenin's conception was not often acknowledged when using representation as a political strategy, other working class magazines in Germany simply illustrated the conditions of working class life, but failed to provide information about structural problems. In this way, they simply competed with the illustrations of bourgeois magazines but failed to educate workers.⁹² While agit-prop photography emerged primarily as a political tool, it soon piqued the interests of radical artists. One such group arose around the *LEF* journal (*Levy Front Iskusstv*) [Left Front of the Arts] in Soviet Russia and another around John Heartfield in Germany.

The Russian and Soviet protagonists often go even further in their aims, wanting not only to educate people to become critical of capitalism and fascism, but also to change humanity in the spirit of the new socialist technologies, to become bodies of a 'new world'. Meanwhile, the early worker photography movement directly challenged the bourgeois class through the taking and reproduction of photographs. In the 1920s (and to this day) many capitalists did not want the insides of their factories to be seen by the public, nor the conditions of work to be widely known. The propaganda of the AIZ brought these conditions to light, leveraging class struggle on the hiddenness of collective suffering within private enterprises. Photographs of the inside of a factory, depicting production, could be set in contrast to new mass media advertisements, that limited their depiction to the outside, or semblance, of the commodity for the sake of consumption. This presented an immediate challenge to a capitalist class whose profits rely on the hiddenness of labour – and the entirety of the production process – within the commodity.

Spence and Dennett both refer to their work as social realism, or socialist realism (and later, especially in Spence's case also to psychic realism). Realism, here, is understood as the method of representing a political problem by bringing its underlying dynamics to light, as opposed to realism considered as an aesthetic style of precise depiction. Meanwhile, the term 'socialist realism',⁹³ invokes a distinct period of artistic production under the Stalinist regime. This included art produced explicitly in the interest of the regime, as well as socialist

⁹² Cf. Joachim Bütte, *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, introduction.

⁹³ Cf. Spence, *Cultural Sniping*, 203.

The subsequent will introduce the different aspects of Spence's and Dennett's praxis: collaboration, archiving, education & self-organisation, research and fantasy. As mentioned before, their visual products develop as necessary results from their political engagement, which is why their active background can not be separated from these objects. Particularly the case of the social archive shows the significance of ongoing process and active engagement within their praxis, which manifests not only in Spence's and Dennett's own archives, but also in the continuous actualisations and re-arrangements of their collages. The sub-chapter 'Fantasy' will furthermore draw on Spence's and Dennett's aim of integrating ideological tools into their photographic work, which manifests as fictive staging. This approach treats social norms or rather social fictions as a component within the means of production, which follows up on my introduction the pre-material.

2.1. COLLABORATION – *THE CRISIS PROJECT*

The *Crisis Project* provides a good illustration of a collective project that Dennett and Spence worked on together. It also offers an impression of what Dennett's photographic practice looks like. The *Crisis Project* brings together two different themes: Dennett's focus on the urban space as an indicator of economic crisis; and Spence's on physical and mental health – and especially her experiences as a cancer patient, which work through medicine as an exemplary field of social, political and economic inequality.⁹⁶ Their ways of working together on different aspects, in order to visualise crisis as a consequence of capitalism's antisocial nature, provides a productive mode for collaboration; individual concerns could be linked together towards an expansion of evidence. These respective concerns grew into two separate *Crisis Archives*. This method allowed them to accumulate content through connecting individuals in a solidary manner, in which responsibilities could be shared and individual work could be built into a broader context.

The way they put their archives on display⁹⁷ derives from a re-reading of Dziga Vertov's principle of 'factography': a way of montaging together different views of everyday reality into agitative sequences.⁹⁸ Factography, as used in the Soviet Union, followed – or rather constructed – an ideology that aimed to transform the human and human labour by following the examples of machines. For Vertov this was developed in relation to film, by imagining how

⁹⁶ Bright, Lundström, (eds.), *Real Stories: Revisions in Documentary and Narrative Photography*, 50.

⁹⁷ Cf. Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, 219.

⁹⁸ Cf. Bright, Lundström (eds.), *Real Stories: Revisions in Documentary and Narrative Photography*, 50.

the ‘kino eye’, the lens, could function as a role model for the human eye. But the aspects of his work that were of special interest for Dennett and Spence were his montage and archival practice, in which facts from the everyday were collected together and produced into and through the work. The concept of factography must be differentiated from documentary in terms of its realist representation: its construction of facts touches reality; as opposed to merely offering a visual representation real life.⁹⁹ As Vertov states:

Alongside the unified film-factory of grimaces (the union of every type of theatrical film work, from Sabinsky to Eisenstein) we must form a

FILM-FACTORY OF FACTS

the union of all types of kino-eye work, from current flash-news-reels to scientific films, from thematic *Kinopravdas* to stirring revolutionary film marathon runs.

Once again.

Not FEKS, not Eisenstein’s “factory of attractions,” not the factory of doves and kisses (directors of this sort have not yet died out), and not the factory of death, either (*The Minaret of Death, Death Bay, Tripoli Tragedy*, etc.)

Simply:

the FACTORY OF FACTS.

Filming facts. Sorting facts. Disseminating facts. Agitating with facts. Propaganda with facts. Fists made of facts.

- Lighting flashes of facts.
- Mountains of facts.¹⁰⁰

Interpreting Dennett’s and Spence’s work as factography suggests treating their visual productions not as individual and separate static objects, but instead as different constellations or frozen moments of a larger, ongoing practice. In Dennett’s archive, in particular, this view becomes necessary because while there are few finished works, there are many different experiments, rearrangements, drafts and reproduced material. Much of the content appears in different contexts and combinations. As such, their visual practice has to be understood more as manifested through the traces, productions, and constructions of ongoing processes, than through completed works.

In the process of putting the collages together, they often used images that derived from *Photo Theatre*. This was as method of staging photographic representation of social conditions. Influenced by the work of the dramatists Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, Dennett and Spence

⁹⁹ ‘The term “documentary” was coined in 1926 by filmmaker John Grierson to designate the depiction of reality at its most objective, passive and impartial. Factography, in contrast, does not claim to reflect reality veridically, but to actively transform it. Factography is praxis, the outcome of a process of production. As a method, truth is an effort not to reflect human experience but to organise it. [...] In sum, the difference between factography and documentary lies in recording facts as opposed to producing and inscribing facts.’ (Emmelhainz, *Jean-Luc Godard’s Political Filmmaking*, 98–100.)

¹⁰⁰ Michelson (Ed.), O’Brien (Trans.), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, 59.

had already used this method in a preliminary collaborative project called *Re-modelling Photo History*. The images were then supplemented with text, aimed at challenging the viewer's assumptions: a method familiar from the work of John Heartfield or Victor Burgin.¹⁰¹ Both the collages and the final displays consisted of juxtapositions of related material from their archives, such as newspaper cuttings; historical illustrations, cartoons and postcards; slogans; and plain photographs. The assemblages were then laminated as serial panels to ensure qualities such as robustness, reusability and transportability.



Fig. 4-6, Terry Dennett, collage panels, *The Crisis Project*. Source: MayDay Rooms Archive.

Dennett's ongoing work, *Scenes of the Crimes*, was his contribution to the *Crisis Project*.¹⁰² This project recollects and depicts scenes in the urban sphere, emphasising the antisocial consequences of liberal capitalist politics and economics. His own photographs (street shots as well as staged shots) and his collected material (historical documents, advertisements, newspaper articles etc.) form the basis for his collages. His crime scenes represent, for example, luxury goods, expensive restaurant menus, and sale offers, juxtaposed with scenes of homelessness, shut down shops, and abandoned buildings. (figures 3–5).

Within this work, the exclusion and marginalisation of those exploited and oppressed by economic processes is treated as a symptom of structural crisis. In this way, records of individual living conditions become valid historical witnesses. Often, Dennett put his own work into dialogue with works of the past. Some of the materials exhibited under the *Crisis Project*

¹⁰¹ Cf. Bright, Lundström (eds.), *Real Stories: Revisions in Documentary and Narrative Photography*, 49-50.

¹⁰² Walter Benjamin uses the same description when talking about the photographs of Eugène Atget in *A Short History of Photography*.

were juxtapositions of his own photographs with those of Charles Parks, who had documented urban crisis and social exclusion nearly a century earlier in his photographs for Jack London's *The People of The Abyss*. (figures 7–10).¹⁰³

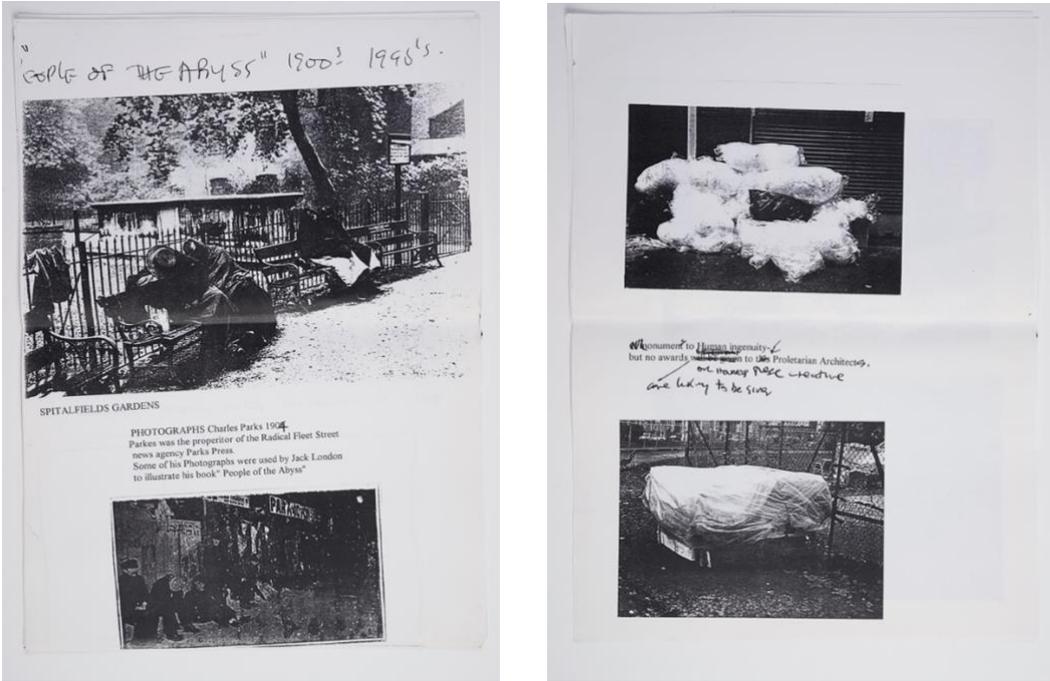


Fig. 7–8, Terry Dennett, photocopy, collage/draft, *People of the Abyss 1900-1998*. Source: MayDay Rooms Archive.



Fig. 9–10, Terry Dennett, photographs, *Scenes of the Crimes/Eating Rough Sleeping Rough* series. Source: MayDay Rooms Archive.

¹⁰³ Cf. Dennett and Merris, *ECONOMICS 101*, <https://spacestudios.org.uk/exhibition-programme/terry-dennett-and-jimmy-merris-economics-101/>.

Figure 11 marks a staged setting Terry composed. It shows a menu from Ritzy Restaurant and a bottle of Champagne in a setting that represents the everyday conditions of rough sleepers. Figure 12 shows another example of Terry using the method of confrontation through juxtaposition.¹⁰⁴

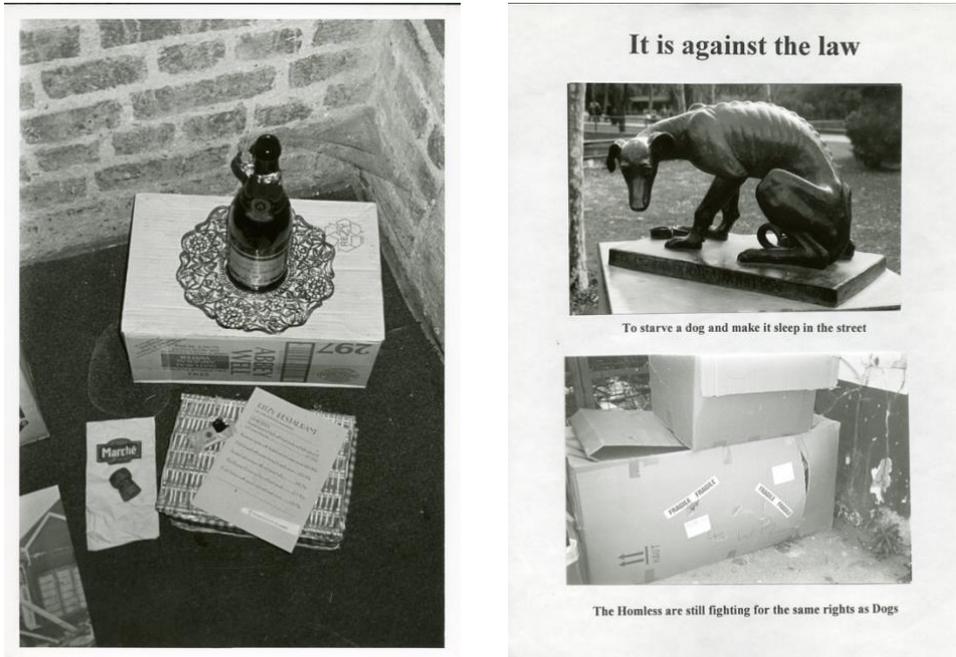


Fig. 11–12, Terry Dennett, photograph and photocopy (collage), *The Crisis Project*. Source: The Bishopsgate Institute, Terry Dennett Archive.

Spence’s and Dennett’s collaboration created processes through which material and knowledge could be collected and expanded; objects were seen in new ways, outside of the disciplinary contexts in which they had been produced. These processes not only formed new types of knowledge, but also challenged the traditional concept of authorship and the canon. Not every step of their processes was enacted jointly: they worked on their own archives, but collected and worked through the material together; they organised workshops together while focussing on different topics. The division and combination of duties in their collaborative processes is best understood as pushing against a liberal, individualist working morale, while also allowing the collaborators to take their respective living conditions and interests into account. After Jo Spence passed away, Dennett continued to develop his work on the *Crisis*

¹⁰⁴ ‘In planning and undertaking *The Crisis Project* we have proceeded as if we had been given a “historical commission” for a future government to produce visual material for a criminal trial against those who have presided over the despoliation and pollution of today’s society. Technically of course this is fantasy but in fact the archives we are building up using this “historical imagination” approach will, if they survive, be truly transported forward to the future and the project will then almost certainly become a reality. “Scenes of the Crime” uses two genres: legal record photography (documentation of the scenes of the crime) and staged photography.’ (Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, 219.)

Project/Scenes of the Crimes. In particular, his work continued to engage with homelessness. He entered into a collaboration with the biologist Shaheed Macgregor. Together they worked on a project called *Eating Rough, Sleeping Rough*. This provided a broad context to the subject matter through research and photographic depiction, as well as providing facts around questions of nutrition at a bio-chemical level, and manuals for DIY medical care.¹⁰⁵

2.2. EDUCATION AND SELF-ORGANISATION

While Dennett aimed to document evidence of social injustices, and to confront his audience with their presentation, his intention was not just to shock. Two cornerstones of Dennett's practice were education and self-organisation. His work with children attempted to teach them from a young age to free themselves from ideological stereotypes and dependencies.¹⁰⁶ In fact, it was through their work at *The Children's Rights Workshop* in 1973 that Jo Spence and Terry Dennett first met,¹⁰⁷ as they both started to engage in such workshops alongside their day-jobs as photographers. They especially helped children to question social roles and gender stereotypes. Spence concentrated on methods that would reveal types of identity as social constructs. By critically analysing magazines with them, and letting them imagine and practice their own ways of representation, she taught children how it was possible to reconstruct themselves. Meanwhile, Dennett was concerned with the demystification of capitalist products, and his workshops involved teaching children about the technologies behind photography. By dismantling the logics and technologies of photographic equipment, he taught the children how to build cameras themselves. He wrote comprehensive guides on how to produce photographic chemicals in order to stay independent from capitalist suppliers such as Kodak and their "mystification" of technique and product¹⁰⁸ (figures 13–14).

¹⁰⁵ Dennett's *Scenes of the Crimes* were shown at Space Studios London in 2011 in the exhibition *Economics:101*. This exhibition also displayed material from the project *Eating Rough, Sleeping Rough*, originally on display in 1994 at The Crypt Gallery, St. Martin-in-the-fields, London. The *Crisis Project* – including works from both Jo's and Terry's crisis archives – was shown in the group exhibition *Real Stories: Revisions in Documentary and Narrative Photography* in Odense, Denmark in 1992. This exhibition later toured Europe. In 2019, parts of Terry's *Scenes of the Crimes* were also shown at Georg Kargl Gallery Vienna as part of a group show project.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, 68.

¹⁰⁷ Tina Takemoto, 'Remembering Jo Spence A Conversation with Terry Dennett' *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*, Vol.36 No.5, (March/April 2009), Pp. 13-18.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, 91.

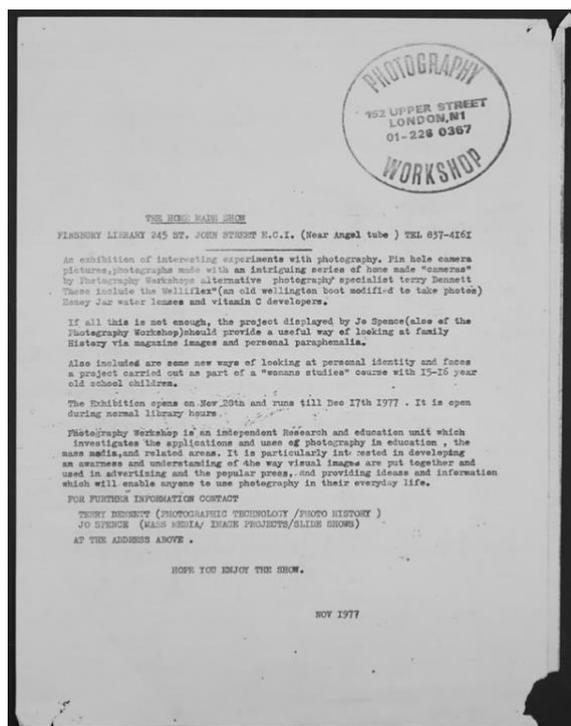
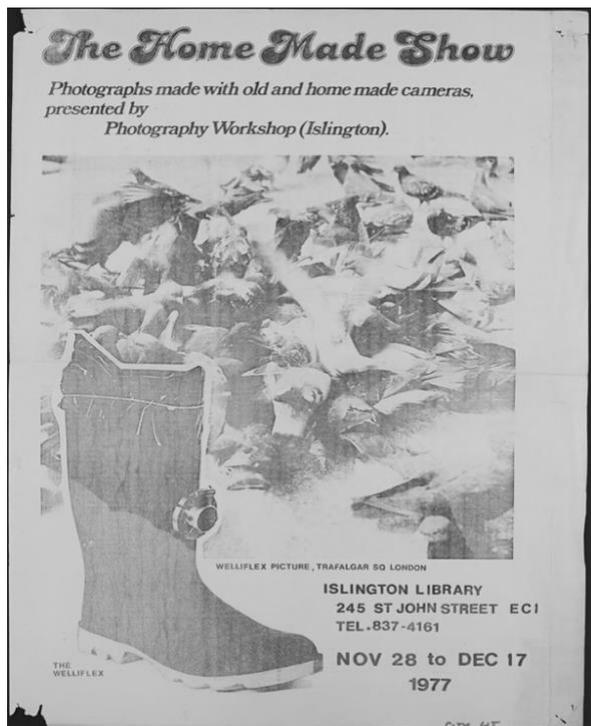


Fig. 13–14, Photography Workshop, Invitation Posters. Source: MayDay Rooms Archive.



Fig. 15–17, Child experimenting with photographic chemicals, hole camera and photograph taken with hole camera. Source: MayDay Rooms Archive.

A similar logic appears in Spence's research and work in which empowerment occurs through the demystification of given knowledge and stereotypes, and the development of experiential and alternative knowledge regarding one's own body. This was displayed particularly clearly in her work on alternative medicine: one of her main critiques of the capitalist medical sector was its allocation of stereotypical roles to patients, and especially to women. As a cancer patient she chose alternative treatments as well as a role/representation of herself as an ill woman she felt comfortable with. Critical responses to such stereotypes, through transformed self-representation, also ran through her work remodelling stereotypes in photographic history (in a

collaboration with Terry Dennett called *Remodelling Photo History*) and her extensive work on the family album.¹⁰⁹¹¹⁰

The publishing activities of Photography Workshop must be interpreted in general both as gestures of structural education and of the emancipatory (re-)organisation of knowledge production and distribution. Their broadsheet, *The Worker Photographer*, which took inspiration from the left German newspaper *Der Arbeiter Fotograf*, aimed to educate readers in radical photographic practices. The first issue introduced the workers' struggles at Ford Dagenham through the workers' agit-prop photographs. Alongside reproducing part of a slideshow created as part of a campaign against continual layoffs, the broadsheet also contains a guide for producing similar slideshows. It gives information about necessary equipment, and tries to motivate readers to follow the workers' example.

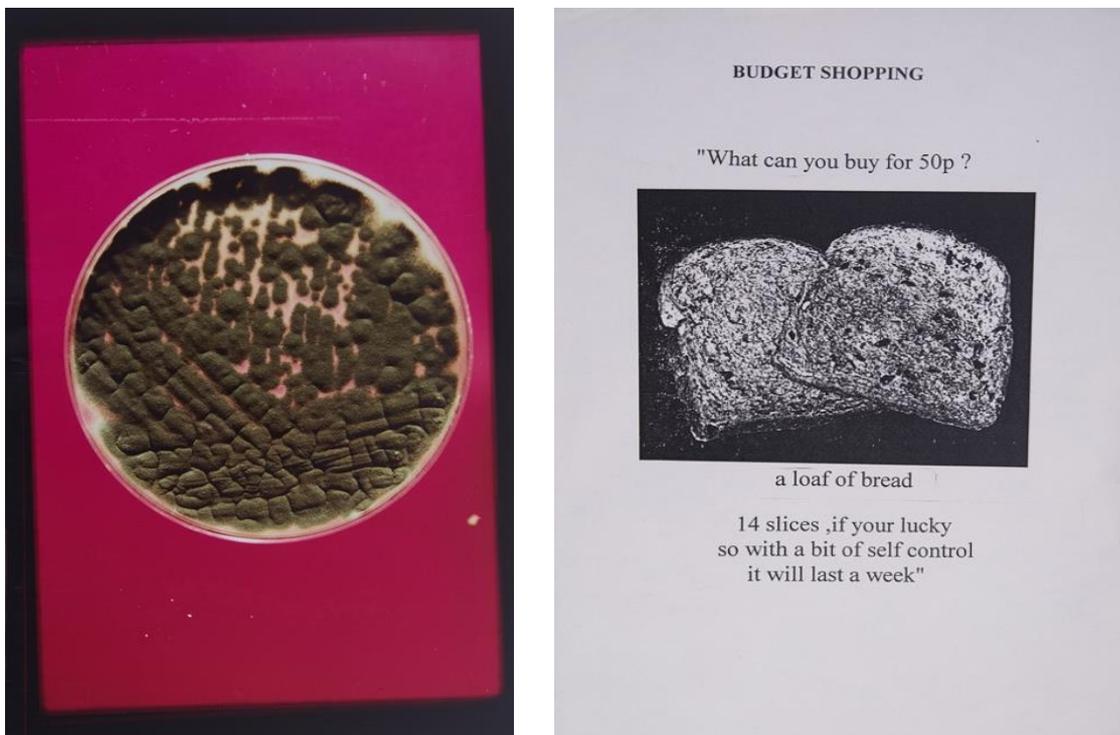


Fig. 18–19, photograph and collage (photocopy), *Eating Rough Sleeping Rough* project. Source: MayDay Rooms Archive.

¹⁰⁹ As mentioned previously, Terry expanded his research on homelessness in collaboration with Shaheed Macgregor in *Eating Rough Sleeping Rough*. Besides Terry's photos and collages around homelessness and collected material regarding the topic, a display of the work at the Crypt Gallery in 1994 contained lists of bacteria and salmonella development in different foods in relation to storage and age, and manuals of how to use herbs in the case of food poisoning (material located at MayDay Rooms and by Bishopsgate Institute: DENNET/2, DENNETT/10). This marks another example how the very urge for emancipation through self-sufficient knowledge runs through the body of work. While figures 17 and 18 show single aspects of the project – depictions of bacteria as well as agit-prop style elaborations of facts – figures 19 and 20 show how actual panels made of material from the *Sleeping Rough/Crisis* archive look.

¹¹⁰ See also 'Summary of Photography Workshop Aims,' in: Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal, and Photographic Autobiography*, 65.

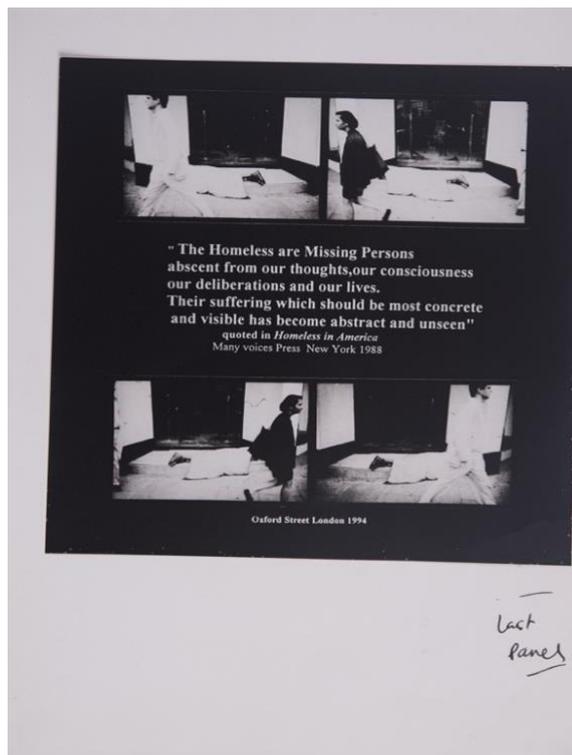
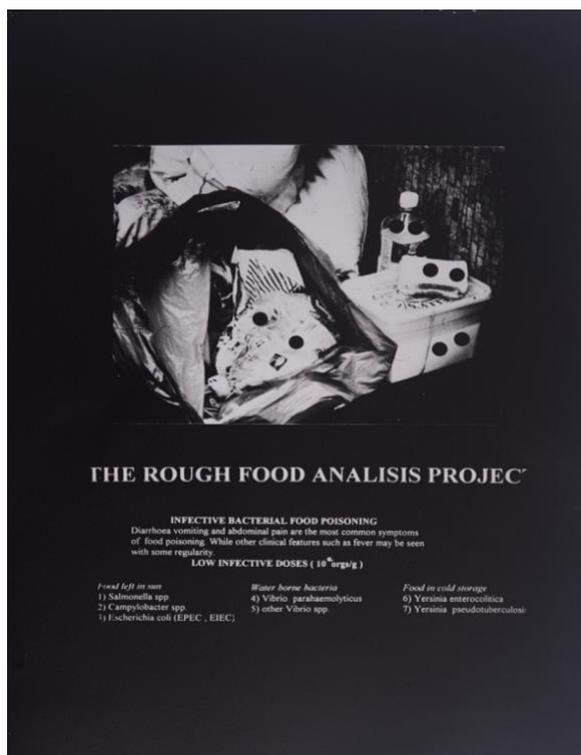


Fig. 20–21, Terry Dennett, Collages, *Eating Rough Sleeping Rough* project. Source: MayDay Rooms Archive.

2.3. THE LABOUR ALBUM/SOCIAL ARCHIVE

Dennett's research on working class history included work on 'labour albums', which developed into social archives. These albums, created by clubs, organisations, and fraternities, were modelled after family albums or diaries. As club albums, they became collections of political ephemera, notes, newspaper cuttings, leaflets, documentation of group activities, and photos of important socialist personalities. The albums also became the representative sources, used to pass on knowledge within activist groups, and to share stories of successes and failures with other groups. While little knowledge has survived about the development of these albums, there is evidence of the Clarion Camera Club's social albums. These had a dual function: both as educational means and as agitational and propaganda materials to be used in struggles against bad working and living conditions. Socialist groups created displays of this material, with photographs presented in vitrines at public places by were aimed at educating people on a political level. The development of lantern slideshows, cheaply printed pamphlets and zines, and picture postcards developed through this practice of collecting and presenting knowledge and experiences. In the 1890s the Clarion Group produced the *Merrie England Show*: a lantern show consisting of two hundred slides, comic songs and piano accompaniment, which toured Britain. The show focused on 'slum conditions' or 'political fraud;' and aimed at unmasking the 'evils of capitalism' while revealing the 'advantages of socialism.' Crwys Richards, a

member of The Clarion Camera Club, also initiated the *Sweated Trades Exhibition* in 1904, using agit-prop and working class photography in ways that would later be adopted in the Soviet Union and Weimar Germany.¹¹¹ Private libraries and collections evolved in order to provide other activists with access to socialist literature and collected political material.¹¹² These albums and archives did not function as containers for dead matter, but rather as sources for active communication and exchange, allowing viewers to grow from each encounter. The labour albums and archives did not exist just as spaces for storing and displaying physical objects, but produced new social spaces within the relations of solidarity and collectivity.

Dennett's and Spence's own collection should be approached as just such a space; not only with regard to the materials especially Dennett collected, the sources he referenced and the aims he pursued, but also in the way he managed not only his archive, and Jo's archive after her death. For the two of them, it was very important to make their work publicly approachable, especially to other activists and young researchers. The archives have to be considered not only as the foundations for numerous texts, photo collages, exhibitions, workshops, and collaborative projects, but also as a result of the social processes that were engendered in their production. Dennett's work was not only a development of earlier politically engaged practices, in collecting and actualising the methods – he also aimed to create a basis for future activists to build on his own work.

As a social historian, Dennett was trying to develop a counter story to the canonical history in relation to historical materialism.¹¹³ His methods of collecting material and producing knowledge were often calls for collective exchange; at points he actively appeals to future generations, or suggests how to apply his methods to other fields.¹¹⁴

'Photographs are documents we can make ourselves, documents we can have some control over with regard to distribution. Also important in this respect are the ephemeral materials of everyday life, the redundancy notices and tax demands etc. Such material constitutes a vivid historical counter-archive, for it often contains photographic images made outside the sanction of officialdom and of events censored from the press, and, perhaps more importantly, shows things so ordinary and everyday, or so unique, that no one else has recorded them. Such material if it can be made to survive will give those who follow us the

¹¹¹ Cf. Dennett, 'Popular Photography and Labour Albums', 75.

¹¹² Cf. Ibid. 73,74. In Britain, Ruth and Eddie Frow's private collection, which is still open to the public as the Working class Movement Library in Manchester, provides an example of such a collection.

¹¹³ Cf. Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, 76 or 221.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Dennett, *Popular Photography and Labour Albums*, 83.

possibility of seeing other images and hearing other voices than those of governments and “official” artists of our day.’¹¹⁵¹¹⁶

2.4. RESEARCH

As a social historian (a term with which he referred to himself), Dennett gathered a lot of information that had not been previously brought together. This included a massive collection of political cartoons from the late 19th century onwards,¹¹⁷ international working class history ephemera, material about British working class movements, and documents of the *British Workers’ Film And Photo League* (WFPL).¹¹⁸

In total he created four exhibitions in the course of his research. Each of these exhibitions consisted of series of laminated agit-prop collage panels. They were produced following the

¹¹⁵ Dennett and Merris, *ECONOMICS 101*, <https://spacestudios.org.uk/exhibition-programme/terry-dennett-and-jimmy-merris-economics-101/>.

¹¹⁶ In his postscript to the article *Popular Photography and Labour Albums* Dennett proposed a perspective for the contemporary or future use of labour albums and social archives:

‘[...] in summing up these developments within labour photography we can see that today many of these ideas may still be relevant to groups far removed from the labour movement – for example, in the politics of the “green movement”. Given that popular photography and the family album are still so important in people’s lives, in a time of rapid economic change we should still continue, as family and social archivists and historians (working in the tradition of the labour movement), to produce albums about our everyday lives and all kinds of political struggles – even if we are not sure what to do with them at the moment. In the age of Thatcherism, we are certainly in a dilemma as an increasingly restrictive regime limits the means whereby ordinary people can communicate through their cultural work to a wider audience, as in the early days, or for instance during the CND period. [...] In a society which is becoming increasingly individualistic and self-centred, we are in danger of forgetting the importance of these treasured little albums as social documents for the future, when there *will* again be a variety of means of mass distribution. To this end, a number of newly developed ideas are offered below:

The illustrated public letter [...]

Photo theatre [...]’ (Dennett, *Popular Photography and Labour Albums*, 83.)

¹¹⁷ Terry’s cartoon collection can be found at the Bishopsgate Institute: Dennett/11, Dennett/12. A note in Dennett/11 states that Terry planned to publish a book on political cartoons.

¹¹⁸ ‘Part of the research carried out by our Photography Workshop Ltd at that time was focused on the forgotten social and cultural history of art activism within the labour and trade union movement especially in the interwar period between the first and second world wars. Part of this research was used in these shows but the WFLP project came into being when Metropolis Films Ltd researching left wing film of the 1930s found The Rev Cuthbertson the last secretary of the then unknown British WFPL. I obtained a photocopy of the league’s minute book and address lists and subsequently tracked down and interviewed a number of surviving members We also recovered a WFPL film thought to have been lost and a number of photographs and documents in the possession of League member John Maltby. The film Liverpool: Gateway to Empire is now in the collection of the British Film Institute London.’ (Terry Dennett, private correspondence with Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2010.)

demands of practicality, so that the exhibitions could easily be transported and exhibited repeatedly.¹¹⁹

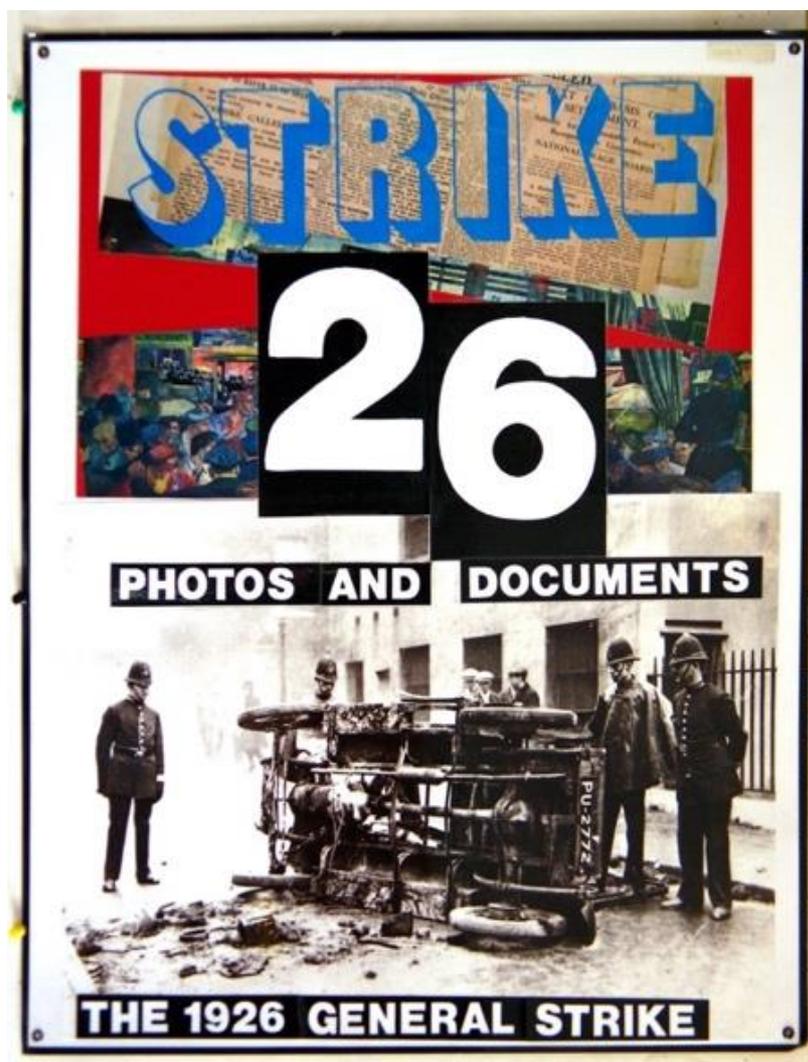


Fig. 22, Terry Dennett, exhibition panel, *The 1926 General Strike*. Source: reproduction held by Werker Collective Amsterdam.

¹¹⁹ In 1976, an exhibition and research on the 1926 General Strike (figure 21 – photographs of the panels to be found at the Jo Spence Memorial Archive, Birkbeck University and also in the collection of Werker Collective) was shown at the Half Moon Photography Workshop Gallery, while Terry and Jo were among the directors of the gallery (See letter Terry Dennett Bishopgate Institute: DENNETT/24 Box 8 and correspondence Dennett with Reina Sofia (not public). Parts of those panels were shown again at Space Studios London 2011 and juxtaposed with material from other projects). *The British Workers' Film and Photo League* and *The Thirties and Today* are now held by the Reina Sofia Gallery in Madrid. The panels were used by various artist and activist groups in the 1970s, and were subsequently lent to German colleagues and toured within then Eastern Bloc countries. Unfortunately, another exhibition called *Photography and the Labour Movement: Past and Present* (German: *Proletarische Fotografie in Grossbritannien*, poster at the Jo Spence Memorial Archive Birkbeck College), shown in 1984 in the course of the documentary and short film week in Leipzig, GDR (*Internationale Dokumentar und Kurzfilm Woche*), was lost after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This exhibition gave an overview of different protagonists and important events in the working class movement. The plan for the exhibition as well as information material is kept at the Bishopsgate Institute. The exhibition apparently consisted of 39 stations (fig. 22–23), each dedicated to a particular aspect in the history of the labour movement (examples: fig. 24–26). (Bishopsgate Institute: Dennett/24/ Box 7).

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT: PAST AND PRESENT LCP 219 NOV.

1 INTRO	2 EARLY EXPLORING	2 EARLY EXPLORING II THE BEGINNING OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT PHOTOGRAPHY	3 SOCIALISM ON THE SCREEN THE EDGE OF THE LABOUR CLASS SHOW + 3rd LIST OF SUBJECTS	4 THE CANONICAL CANONICAL CLUB
5 THE STRIKE FOR A PHOTOGRAPHIC UNION	6 THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COOP SOC.	7 H. T. HADLEY PROPAGANDA FOR THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION	8 THE SUGGESTED TITANIC EXHIBITION 1907	9 THE NEW PHOTO ACTIVATION PAGES FROM ARMY
10 JACK HENSON CLAUDE MATHIAS	11 KENNETH CO THE EXHIBITIONING SOC. REVIEW	12 LIFE AND MATHIAS	13 MORAN SMYTH	14 GEORGE DAVIDSON
15 USSR	16 WIR	17 1920 SENSUAL STRIKE	18 THE NEW PICTORIAL JOURNALISM LUDWIG WOLKE	19 THE NEW PICTORIAL JOURNALISM W. E. H.
20 DAILY WORKER 20th CP AFFILIATES	21 W.F.P.L. TEXT + KITE SINGING PHOTO	21 W.F.P.L. IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS	22 W.F.P.L. JUBILEE PROSPECT	23 W.F.P.L. JOHN HARTLEY
24 WITH JOHN TUDOR HART	25 CLAUDE GREEN	26 JOHN WOLKE	27 MORRIS KING	28 LEFT BOOK CLUB

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29 PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT TODAY + FUTURE PETER COLE	30 STEVE SHANKS DOCUMENTARY 1960	31 ST ANNES PUBS 1967	32 N-E PHOTO COOP	33 CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHERS
34 RouteMap	35 FIVE PHOTO COLLECTIVE	36 SOME MODERN INNOVATIONS AND IDEAS	37 C.R.P.	38 W.F.P.
39 ED BRUCE PENCE ONUP				

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Fig. 23-24, Terry Dennett, exhibition plan: *Photography and the Labour Movement: Past and Present*. Source: The Bishopsgate Institute, Terry Dennett Archive.

1894 **6**

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COOPERATIVE SOCIETY (1894)

Contemporary with the attempts to establish the Artists' and Assistants' Union, Arthur Field's sister Eleanor, also a Socialist, brought to fruition a project of her own a cooperative society for photographers, designed to service the needs of the cooperative and labour movements. This society was extremely successful and eventually employed 33 workers on a cooperative basis. Three establishments were opened which carried on a wide range of work including printing. The Photo Coop worked for all the main cooperative organisations, wholesale and retail, and was also the official photographers to the Independent Labour Party and the Social Democratic Federation and as its literature stated "other advanced Socialist organisations"

Text only **1**

INTRODUCTION

The history of photography as it has evolved within the labour movement is one of the elements which is almost entirely missing from all bourgeois texts on photography. This project seeks to make a start to correct this, by examining the literature and photographic sources from within the labour movement itself.

From the very early period, very few primary sources are available and are often only discovered by accident (for example see colour picture of the Chartists' meeting). The photographs and documents presented here are a small part of the materials which are being gathered during research for a forthcoming book (PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT, PAST AND PRESENT) to be published by Lawrence and Wishart, London. The materials have been gathered together especially for this festival and represents the first public showing of the work. As the research is still in progress we would be happy to receive any comments or information on the evolution and development of Socialist photography in Britain, ~~and~~ Relative information from other countries will also be helpful.

We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

Researched and presented by Terry Dennett
Photography Workshop
122 Upper Street,
Islington, N1 1JQ,
England
London, England.

Our thanks to the many people too numerous to mention who have provided access to materials and given help and advice.

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THE WORKERS' FILM AND PHOTO LEAGUE, (1935 - 39) ~~(1935 - 39)~~

The WFPL was founded in 1935 as a result of a merger between the Workers' Camera Club and the Kino Production Group. It was seen during its early period principally as an agitprop organisation which would help provide photos of life, seen from the workers' own point of view, a sentiment elegantly expressed in the organization's Manifesto.

They were formed to help combat the visual propaganda of the established photographic and journalistic traditions of the bourgeoisie by making photography a weapon of struggle, rather than an entertainment. It aimed to combat the notion that photography was an unbiased reflection of real life, and to give an indication that photographs were actually produced by people and didn't fall out of the sky! Workers could understand how press photographs functioned by critically taking their own.

Politically the League was part of the cultural movement organized by the Communist International (Comintern) and its affiliated parties during the inter-war period (approximately 1921 to 1939). The League's first Secretary Jean Ross was particularly aware of the importance of internationalism, having lived in Germany from 1932-33 and being deeply influenced by the work of the revolutionary German worker photographer movement which had carried such criticism and activities of the bourgeois mass media to a high level. Of particular importance during this ~~early~~ early period was the League's emphasis on still photography, ~~both~~ in conjunction with film-making and for a press work and agitational exhibitions.

Text only
+ Wine Snapshots
panel

Fig. 25, Terry Dennett, *Photography and the Labour Movement: Past and Present* information material: station 1/introduction. Source: The Bishopsgate Institute, Terry Dennett Archive.

Fig. 26, Terry Dennett, *Photography and the Labour Movement: Past and Present* information material: WFPL (station 21). Source: The Bishopsgate Institute, Terry Dennett Archive.

Fig. 27, Terry Dennett, *Photography and the Labour Movement: Past and Present* information material: The Photographic Cooperative Society, 1894 (station 6). Source: The Bishopsgate Institute, Terry Dennett Archive.

In 1986, the article *Proletarische Fotografie in Großbritannien 1848–1984. Zusammengestellt von Terry Dennett (London)* [English: *Proletarian photography in Great Britain 1848–1984. Collected by Terry Dennett (London)*] was published in the German magazine *Arbeiterfotografie*. This text presumably follows a similar structure to the exhibition, only less comprehensive.¹²⁰ ¹²¹ Furthermore, Dennett’s archive shows advanced plans and materials for another book: *The Labour Encyclopaedia: A Sourcebook for the Historian and Activist*. He was working on this together with Ruth and Edmund Frow, and planned to publish it with Pluto Press.¹²² This Encyclopaedia also shows a similar structure to the exhibition in Leipzig, however it is extremely rich in further exploring diverse aspects and material.

Dennett’s research on the British WFPL can be seen as one of his main achievements. It is mainly due to his work that the movement is known about today. His research resulted in the aforementioned exhibition as well as the essay *The (Workers’) Film and Photo League* published in *Photography/Politics: 1*.¹²³ In his essay *The Worker Photography Movement in Britain, 1934–1939*, Duncan Forbes notes that Terry’s research ‘deserves extended consideration as historical struggles fuelled the rising class consciousness of activists within the bitterly fractured present,’ resulting even in an attempt to refound the movement itself.¹²⁴ However, the original initiative was soon drained of its radical agenda in favour of a more popular cross-class, social-democratic policy. It therefore has to be considered less productive than Dennett’s interpretation and narration of it suggested.¹²⁵ Yet the enthusiasm, which spread

¹²⁰ Cf. Terry Dennett, ‘Proletarische Fotografie in Großbritannien 1848–1984. Zusammengestellt von Terry Dennett (London),’ *Arbeiterfotografie* No. 52, *Proletarische Fotografie in Großbritannien*, (Juli/August 1986), Pp. 4–11.

¹²¹ ‘The history of photography as it has evolved within the labour movement is one of the elements which is almost entirely missing from all bourgeois texts on photography. This project seeks to make a start to correct this, by examining the literature and photographic sources from within the labour movement itself. From the very early period, very few primary sources are available and are often only discovered by accident (for example see colour picture of the Chartists’ meeting). The photographs and documents presented here are a small part of the materials which are being gathered during research for a forthcoming book (*PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT, PAST AND PRESENT*) to be published by Lawrence and Wishart, London. The material has been brought together especially for this festival and represents the first public showing of the work. As the research is still in progress we would be happy to receive any comments or information on the evolution and development of Socialist photography in Britain. Relative information from other countries will also be helpful.’ (Excerpt from the introduction for the exhibition in Leipzig by Terry Dennett, The Bishopsgate Institute: Dennett/24/ Box 7. The book mentioned was never published).

¹²² Letter to the publisher, The Bishopsgate Institute: Dennett/24 Box 10; extensive material for the book: The Bishopsgate Institute: DENNETT/10, further material: DENNETT/18 and DENNETT/28 Box 1.

¹²³ The Bishopsgate Institute: Dennett/24/ Box 3 contains collected original correspondences of the WFPL, extensive further material: Dennett/7 and Dennett/8.

¹²⁴ Cf. Forbes, *The British Worker’s Film and Photo*, 206.

¹²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 208.

Exhibiting such private material in a public space allows our images and text to connect with other people's transitory memories, fantasies and lived experiences. In short, we try to offer our images as motivational (and contradictory) starting points, as working tools and methods, for others to produce similar documents of their own lives-in-context. In this respect our exhibitions are much more of a pedagogical exercise than consumerist fine art. Such interventions from below are politically essential at this time for it is our belief that global economic crisis cannot be separated from so-called personal crisis.¹²⁷

They were inspired by the methods of the worker photography movement, especially with regards to their emancipatory methods: documenting sites of struggles, organising community teaching, and documenting antagonisms such as police interventions.¹²⁸ While acts of autonomy – through the production and recording of one's own visual representation – were important to them, they did not believe any simple visual testimony of reality would have enough power to change people's behaviours and overcome ideology. The methods of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal therefore became crucial for their educational works: these aimed at making people understand a world beyond ideology by turning the passive spectator into a protagonist, transforming feeling into thinking and acting.¹²⁹

Photo Theatre became their 'totally non-realistic' method.¹³⁰ It was used in almost all of their photographic projects, including *Remodelling Photo History* (also called *The History Lesson*), *The Crisis Project*, and *Photo Therapy* (Jo Spence's collaboration with Rosy Martin). Their strategy was to visualise and activate historically rejected or underrepresented constellations of social and political struggle through fictive theatrical staging. In this way, Spence and Dennett produced visual objects, which, through the use of fantasy, transformed a political message into a narrative. Viewers were then able to be affected by entering into these unfolding situations. Yet the fantasies their works offered were not only addressed towards an outside; they also developed as experiential processes in the work of their production. This was especially the case for Spence, as she remodelled situations she had lived through as part of a life defined by gender, class, and other social roles and conventions. In confronting reality/normality, either by unveiling the constitutive conditions of economics and politics, or by dismantling established social principles, Spence and Dennett's fantasies demonstrated the possibility of an alternative narrative of reality. This alternative vision could, at the same time, become a part of a new, transformed reality. Thus, their use of fiction opens up a space in which

¹²⁷ Ibid., 219.

¹²⁸ Cf. Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture*, 211.

¹²⁹ Cf. Spence, *Cultural Sniping*, 86.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 78.

it is possible to encounter and change the very sphere where subjectivity and society are produced as concepts – or even as myths – within an ideologically coded system. Such an investment in fantasy could rewrite a world that otherwise uses narratives to reproduce itself as a repressive apparatus.¹³¹

In this way, Spence and Dennett did not only address conditions or structures within society, but attacked the construction of visual representation as an ideological tool: ‘We are not trying to show familiar objects in unfamiliar ways, but rather to denaturalise the genre of photography which already consists of fully coded visual signs.’¹³² In order to not parrot the dominant modes of visual reproduction they tried to ‘call such practices into question, so that it begins to be easier to understand that the camera is not a window on the world, nor are meanings of pictures fixed, but that visual signs (in this case photographs) are in themselves sites of struggles.’¹³³ Here it becomes clear, that Spence and Dennett understand ideology as well as its tools and effects as components within the means of production insofar as they build the ground of material everyday life and can be actively used in order to re-arrange social constructions and eventually, material reality. Thus, they are activating the sphere between the economic base and the superstructure in a reciprocal dynamic and politically productive way, which illustrates the potential of the pre-material.

The collective project *Remodelling Photo History* offers a good example of how Spence and Dennett not only deconstructed social stereotypes, but reclaimed the ground on which they were created. As an act of empowerment, Spence’s body appeared in ways that broke habits of representation. The images not only look at the nature of stereotypical social depiction (i.e. regarding gender roles, race, class etc.), but also what these stereotypes leave out. While Spence and Dennett built on culturally familiar motives and situations in *Remodelling Photo History*, Spence also developed projects individually (as well as with Rosy Martin), in which she elaborated on common social formats. In this other work, she concentrated on the fairy tale as social narrative,¹³⁴ as well as on the family album, which exists predominantly as a fantasy of social bias.

¹³¹ See e.g. Michel Hardt (following Michel Foucault) on the reproduction of subjectivity: *Affective Labor*, 100, or Althusser on Ideology: *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*.

¹³² Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture*, 118.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹³⁴ See e.g. Spence, *Cultural Sniping*, chapter 7. Also, Jo Spence Memorial Archive: (UP) – Uncategorised Photography: Box 8 and (WWC) – Work with Women’s Collectives: Box 19.



Fig. 29, Jo Spence/Terry Dennett, *The History Lesson* (also called *Remodeling Photo History*): *Madonna and Child*. Source: Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture*.

Fig. 30, Jo Spence, *The family album 1939 to 1979*. Source: Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture*.

Hence, she notices the stereotypical shape of the life these albums include: happiness, births, a wedding etc. Here, the events are integrated in the narrative of the happy nuclear family, which the individual, however unhappily, must reproduce both in reality and in image. Spence then traced those aspects and experiences excluded or rendered unacceptable within the common representation of life (sadness, dissatisfaction, loneliness, confusion etc.) The traumas resulting from this systematic repression became the subject of her re-modelling.¹³⁵

Fantasy was furthermore used as a method to make individual experiences shareable. As fantasies offered a means to visualise the political and economic conditions of life, and to approach how these relate to (often painful) experiences. Making content and contexts visible, which otherwise might feel private, insignificant, shameful, inappropriate, or off-limits due to hierarchical power structures, means claiming a space for the development of emancipation and solidarity between individuals, who would otherwise be separated in their struggles by these very structures.

¹³⁵ See e.g. Spence, *Cultural Sniping*, chapter 21.

2.6. WORKING INFRASTRUCTURALLY

Spence and Dennett's work was never just an oppositional reaction to social conditions, but rather an active confrontation or even a manipulation of their mechanisms. They attempted to understand how institutions, such as the family or photography, produce a political, ideological, social and economic system. In doing so, they engaged in different fields of action while targeting different aspects of perception. This work produced spaces, that allowed for learning, interaction and organisation. They attempted to demystify the institutional inventory of capital and the state, and to affect dynamics and structures by creating their own spaces (as far as this is possible). While their political work has to be understood within the complexity of its different processes, the great achievement of their method was to incorporate these multilayered aspects into visual works.

Nevertheless, it is wrong to limit their work to its visual appearance or the field of art. While the sphere of art can provide methods, space and possibilities for radical and creative voices, it also threatens to become just another institution, within which politics are limited to self-referential systems of ideology. While there are radical practitioners fighting from within the art world, the way that political subjects are addressed often takes place solely within the autonomous sphere of art. Confrontation is therefore contained. The bitter aftertaste of what this 'bubble' really does – or could do – has been criticised by many artists, commentators, and activists. Often, the appearance of political questions in this sphere seems like merely a reproduction, or even an appropriation, of political forms rather than active engagement in politics. Urgent struggles are often taken over in order to be exhausted and consumed in transient trends, which in the end serve only private financial and social capital.

The specific way in which capitalist structures transform and subsume even their critique into categories, which can be profitably put to use, while bolstering the systems, remains a problem. In his text for *Photography/Politics:1*, Allan Sekula asks 'How do we produce an art that elicits dialogue rather than uncritical, pseudo-political affirmation?'¹³⁶ Even though such questions have been productively addressed and dismantled by generations of artists, it remains no less relevant today than it was in the 1970s or 1980s. Here, it makes sense to look at Spence and Dennett's work as an example of a practice that does not produce content from inside of an autonomous or self-referential sphere or for the sake of capital. Instead, their work produced both content and visual appearance through engaging in their social and material relations. In this way it was able to challenge the boundaries of limited disciplines and fields.

¹³⁶ Sekula, *Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary*, 173.

They emphasised the creation of spaces that subvert the reproduction of institutional categories, by pointing the weapon of their work at the very relations of production in which they were enmeshed. While their visual objects could be interpreted as output that accompanied, supported and manifested their applied activities, it is indeed their whole mode of conduct which has to be understood as their practice. As such this practice can be described as a process or form of being rather than as a linear task aiming at a final materialised goal.

3. PRACTICE

This chapter will introduce two multimedia installations I presented in the year 2021: *12 we do lunch* and *working on a particular condition*. Both installations deal with questions of possibilities to articulate invisible activities that occur alongside the mechanisms of the subject's participation in society.

While *12 we do lunch* visualises the labour of maintenance and the reproduction of the self in relation to social norms (represented as time), *working on a particular condition* tries to elaborate a form that not only depicts these mechanisms but also embodies them.

In the following I will introduce both works and give a short descriptive overview of their components. A final analysis of the role of my artistic practice in relation to the overall subject matter of this thesis will be drawn in the subsequent conclusion.

3.1. *12 WE DO LUNCH*

Exhibition: *12 we do lunch*
Jakob Forster, Rotterdam, 2021
Multimedia Installation, dimension variable
Installation view, appendix pages: 68

12 we do lunch explores time as a depoliticized commodity. It combines symbols that aim to naturalise time as a biological system with personal information that reveals individual efforts that contribute to the maintenance of this system. While using a strongly coded symbolic language it furthermore challenges this socially coded ground of knowledge/meaning in comparison to individual and intuitive knowledge. Furthermore, the installation opposes characteristics of the historical agit-prop movement, which function in a strong symbolic or even didactic way, with conventions of autonomous Western art as a system that produces meaning in a more self-referential way.

The title *12 we do lunch* implies an aspect of time as a structure that manages social life through categories and events that become common sense. The generalised convention of

having lunch at 12 o'clock seems like an almost natural expression due to which it hides efforts and adjustments that have to be managed by the subject in order to cope with events like that. The common sense symbols which appear in the exhibition stand in contrast to these efforts, which occur as personal traces of the body as well as of the process production.

While this installation illustrates processes of maintenance and the reproduction of the self that often remain unseen, it does not integrate its production as practice or activity. As such, it does not overcome the state of deixis within an infrastructural logic.

2 bronze sculptures, appendix page: 77-78

Untitled (pointer), bronze cast, 35 × 2,5 × 2,5 cm, 2021

Untitled (pointer), bronze cast, 30 × 2.5 × 2.5 cm, 2021

The index finger and the pencil function as the hand of a sundial by being placed in an angle that is adapted to its location (Rotterdam). Due to the lack of natural light the gallery space they lose their function and become mere symbols.

5 wall objects, appendix pages: 71-76

Ghost (sun dial), frottage, bold print and drawing (watercolour and crayon) on stone paper, 45 × 30 cm, 2021

Ghost (sun dial), frottage, bold print and drawing (watercolour and crayon) on stone paper, 35 × 20 cm, 2021

Untitled (sun dial), notes and material samples on stone paper, 35 × 20 cm, 2021

Untitled (sun dial), frottage (crayon and acrylic paint) on tracing paper, 45 × 30 cm, 2021

Untitled (sun dial), bold print, potato print, acrylic paint, felt-tip pen and crayon on stone paper, 45 × 30 cm, 2021

The dials correspond to a sundial in their angle and scale.

The ghosts are frottaged through the paper by using my hair; their background consists of handprints (grease prints) and drawings, often replica of older paintings of mine.

The white dial was made from the pad of my studio table in the studio and exposes notes of everyday obligations as relics of the omnipresent labour of self-maintenance.

The pink dial shows frottages of personal documents that can be understood as creative of identity in an economic and social sense (e.g. passport, institutional logos, daily medication).

The last dial was made from a painting already finished but never exhibited, depicting an exhibition in a contemporary gallery.

Aluminum group, appendix page: 69-70

Untitled (ears of corn), aluminum cast and aluminum foil, dimension variable, 2021

The symbolism of the Soviet emblem refers to labour. The sculptures' very strong didactic character questions the acceptance of illustrative material in Western art production or self-referentiality as a privilege.

3.2. *WORKING ON A PARTICULAR CONDITION*

Exhibition: *working on a particular condition*

Kunstraum ¾, Berne, 2021

Multimedia installation, dimension variable

Exhibition view, appendix page: 80

The concept of the exhibition *working on a particular condition* explores repetition as a form of maintenance labour. Displaying the reproduction of body and mind, the work articulates the invisible efforts of everyday survival. The aim is to depict these efforts not through visual illustration (represented by the symbolically coded objects) but by demonstrating the impossibility of this aim, which remains material through the relics of its repeated attempts.

The series *working on a particular condition* accompanies and embodies the process of concentration and self-reflexion in the face of everyday challenges. With every painting I portray the same plant in my home. With this act I try to organise my thoughts and duties by creating a moment of contemplation and in-depth connection with my material environment. The attempt to depict or explain this act or rather my inner state cannot succeed as there are no semantic tools that can represent it. Because there is no material equation, the process itself has to be documented. As such this process or activity would equal its materialisation, which corresponds with my understanding of form as outlined earlier.

However, the process of depicting the plant offers a space within which this act can consciously happen and expand. The act of drawing and its repetition thus become a substitute for the moment of concentration itself. While this moment of concentration indicates an important aspect in encompassing my relation to myself; a process of psychic individuation, the repetitive act of drawing cultivates this process as form.

working on a particular condition

Series of painting on stone paper, various formats, 2021 – continuous

Appendix page: 81-85

The series denotes an ever-failing process of depicting everyday occurrences as processes of self-preservation through repeated attempts to depict a specific motif.

sequence

Eight-part series, frottage, acrylic paint and coloured pencil on transparent paper, 29 cm x 45 cm, 2021

Appendix pages: 86-91

I use frottage to reproduce and modify one of my paintings by integrating an extended symbolic layer. This series features *eight frottages of the same painting* (from the series *working on a particular condition*). In place of the traditional signature are various codes that imply socially constructed concepts of identity, authorship, or value: logos of my educational institutions, my ID card, my signature, parts of my body (hair), the medications I take daily, a currency (euro), etc. Furthermore, I am stressing methods that derive from realism: the documentary between didactics, representation and bias (in the sense of objective reality). Here, I am interested in exploring abstraction in contrast to the propagandistic illustration of political image culture.

3.3. CONCLUSION

While *12 we do lunch* appears as a reference of social codes, the activity of reproducing objects via frottage (as in *sequence*) allowed me to notice that this method furthermore incorporates the practice of general repetition and thus, re-experiencing a situation over and over again. In *sequence*, this practice is being used in order to visualise an ideological construction of subjectivity through various differently coded attributes assigned to the subject by institutions. I realized that the process of repetition as practice itself appeared much more productive in order to not only visualize but enact processes of the invisible work on my own subjectivity. In regard to repetition Vishmidt notes that:

‘Time is an infrastructure because it is a condition of possibility for conscious perception and action; infrastructure is made out of time insofar as infrastructure is that which repeats. The repetition is normalized into everyday routine, and when it stops functioning, an aperture is cut into its artifice—through which history and power relations can be seen.’¹³⁷

While Vishmidt goes on to articulate this notion of repetition as a routine that constitutes the normalisation of material processes, she also recalls ‘the Kantian argument that space and time are the intuitions that make cognition in general possible, it seems that time could be defined both as an infrastructure and as something made of infrastructure.’¹³⁸ Here she points towards the twofold character of infrastructure. Thus, she explains infrastructure as something that constitutes its own manifestation as a category. While *working on a particular condition* does not visualise material routines of the everyday as in Vishmidt’s first example, her logic elucidates the immaterial processes of self-maintenance that is being articulated in this work.

¹³⁷ Vishmidt, *Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique*, 265.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 265.

Rather than making processes visible due to an infrastructure that stops functioning, the installation creates its own infrastructure; this is, a form or visualization of its own existence through repetition.

4. SYNTHESIS

As analysed in the introduction, the production and re-production of subjectivity, the subject's relation to themselves as a process of psychic individuation, has to be understood as influential within the maintenance of state and capital due to its role as a component of the social whole. That is, every subject as part of society has to reproduce the material and immaterial mechanisms of the system in order to maintain its functioning. A modification of the subject's relation to these mechanisms thus contains the potential to manipulate its perpetuated logic.

However, as explained in chapter 1, the totality of structural relations can only be captured, if the material and immaterial components of the social whole as well as their relations are being addressed. The pre-material as both an instance of the social whole and the active relation of base and superstructure can be understood as a possibility to illustrate the sphere in which 'transindividual'¹³⁹ meaning is being produced. I introduce this sphere as productive of social norms (which I understand as artificially constructed narrations), but also propose to functionalise it due to its constitution as an active mechanism.

My series *working on a particular condition* represents one example of how to translate the pre-material as a form via a practical method. This materially visible articulation of it, first of all, gives space to a product which does not possess value (as a ground capital can grow upon) in a sense that can be extracted and reproduced through an existing referentially coded system. However, as a relative mechanism, the pre-material is able to reflect on the material and immaterial conditions and demands of reality; it thereby provides the subject with the ability to actively form its stance towards reality's structure. Thus, the articulation of the pre-material as form provides an actual space for itself, through which it can evolve as productive potential. As I have shown, its particular characteristics are firstly, its twofold nature as activity

¹³⁹ Read, *The Production of Subjectivity: From Transindividuality to the Commons*, 116-19.

Etienne Balibar derives the transindividual from Marx's 'Gattungswesen', in which the individual is neither completely shaped by society, nor completely free.

'Labour constitutes and is constituted by habits, practices, and operational schema that traverse individuals, making up a social relation and a shared reservoir of knowledge. [...] Transindividuality is not the relation between two constituted terms, between the individual and society, but is a relation of relations, encompassing the individual's relation to itself, the process of its psychic individuation, as well as the relation amongst individuals, and the relation between different collectivities.'

and material category. Its positioning as an active instance or interrelation between the material and ideological sphere are descriptive of this. Only due to this nature, the pre-material can function as a space, in which it simultaneously functions as an activity. Secondly, as an effect of this nature, the pre-material constitutes itself through an active process, which develops its own logic rather than corresponding to an existing system of coded references. Only as such can the pre-material arise as a specific relation to structural conditions rather than remaining as an abstract commentary that affirms the existing constellation of relations.

By returning to Benjamin and his understanding of education through the perception of the active image once more, the question arises how the pre-material affects the viewer through processes or forms of visualisation that abandon a commonly shared repertoire of references or knowledge. Dennett and Spence are still working with common visual codes in order to speak to the ideologically constituted knowledge of the viewer but then re-constitute and transform common meaning within the given structures of ideological education. Krauss' example and also my work does not necessarily function within this realm of shared experience. The series *working on a particular condition* provides access to the process that is happening alongside its making through visual continuity and the apparent failure of mediating the specificity of the depicted moment. However, the potential of the pre-material does not so much lay in an accessibility for an outside, it rather has to be understood as an immaterial space for active contemplation and confrontation and has to be seen as part of production in everyday life. Like infrastructural critique, it provides the subject with different views onto reality and its articulation as a complex structure makes present the very mechanisms of subjectivity as effortful processes rather than as happening naturally. As such I argue that we can approach these processes as labour, reproducing a system that produces surplus. Thus, the notion of pre-material processes as legitimate and even valuable (as opposed to understanding them as personal flaws excluded from the totality of social processes) might change the subject's approach towards its ways of functioning, labouring and producing in the world; possibly in a way that frames its politics within a thoughtful view onto the conventions that determine how they evolve.

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Archives & Collections

The Bishopsgate archive London

MayDay Rooms London

Reina Sofia Museum Madrid

The Wellcome Collection London

The Jo Spence Memorial Archive (Birkbeck College London)

Werker Collective (Amsterdam)

Whitney Museum of American Art

6. APPENDIX

6.1. Exhibition: *12 we do lunch*

pp. 69-78

6.2. Exhibition: *working on a particular condition*

pp. 80-91

6.1.

Exhibition: *12 we do lunch*
Jakob Forster, Rotterdam, 2021
Multimedia Installation,
dimension variable

This was a solo exhibition in an artist run space in Rotterdam, 2021

Installation view p. 68

Aluminum group:
Untitled (Ears of corn: Soviet symbol for harvest and yield.),
aluminum cast and aluminum foil,
dimension variable,
2021 pp. 69-70

5 wall objects: pp. 71-76
Group: p. 71

Untitled (Sun dial: each indicator of the display is marked by a frottage that shows different symbols that stand for my identity and my private live: my ID card, logos of the institutions I studied with, packaging of my daily medication, etc.),
frottage (crayon and acrylic paint) on transparent paper,
45 × 30 cm,
2021 p. 72

Untitled (Sun dial: this clock face consists of cuttings from my working-desk's pad. Notes of everyday duties, drafts of my artworks etc. are visible.),
notes and material samples on stone paper,
35 × 20 cm,
2021 p. 73

Ghost (Sun dial: the face of the ghost consists of a frottage of my hair. I use the ghost as a symbol for sleeplessness as well as in relation to the German saying "das Gespenst des Kapitals"/English: "The ghost of capital".),
frottage, bold print and drawing (watercolour and crayon) on stone paper,
45 × 30 cm,
2021 p. 74

Ghost (Sun dial: the face of the ghost consists of a frottage of my hair. I use the ghost as a symbol for sleeplessness as well as in relation to the German saying "das Gespenst des Kapitals"/English: "The ghost of capital".),
frottage, bold print and drawing (watercolour and crayon) on stone paper,
35 × 20 cm,
2021 p. 75

Untitled (sun dial: this clock face consists of an older painting of mine, which has never been shown in an exhibition. I considered it not good enough.),
potato print, acrylic paint, felt-tip pen and crayon on stone paper,
45 × 30 cm,
2021 p. 76

2 bronze sculptures:

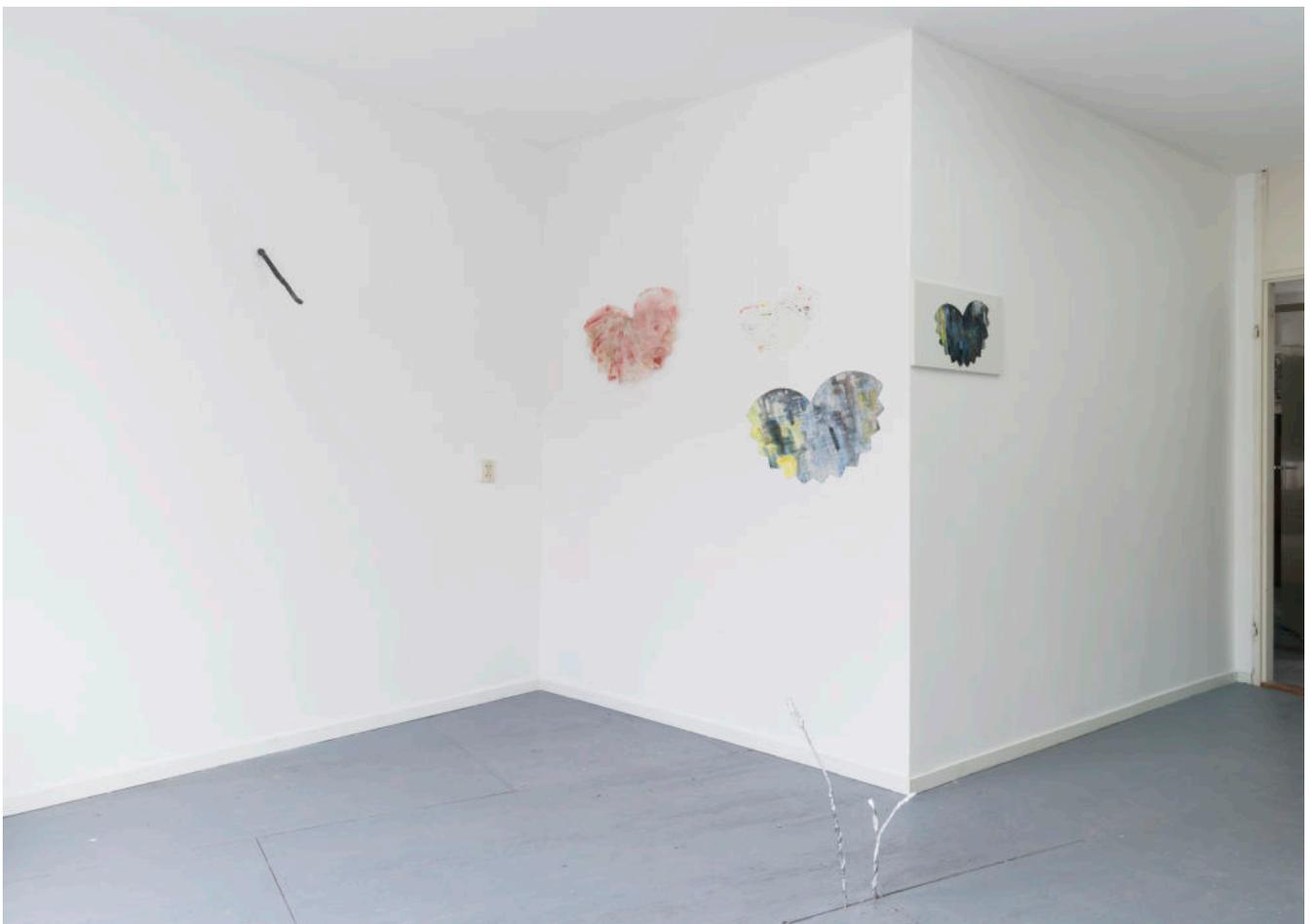
pp. 77-78

Untitled (pointer: this pointer has the shape of a finger, which references discipline),
bronze cast,
approx. 35 × 2,5 × 2,5 cm,
2021

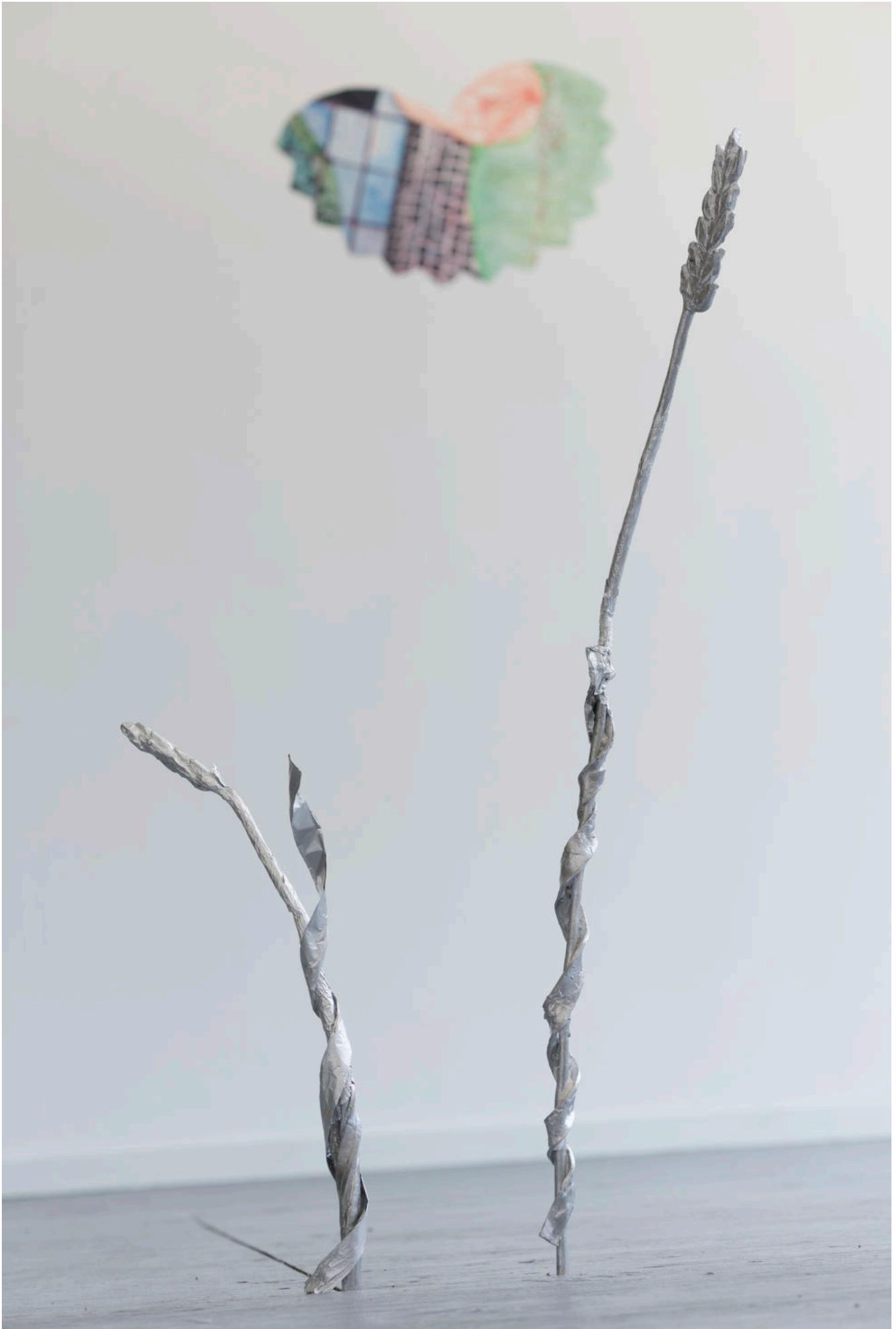
p. 77

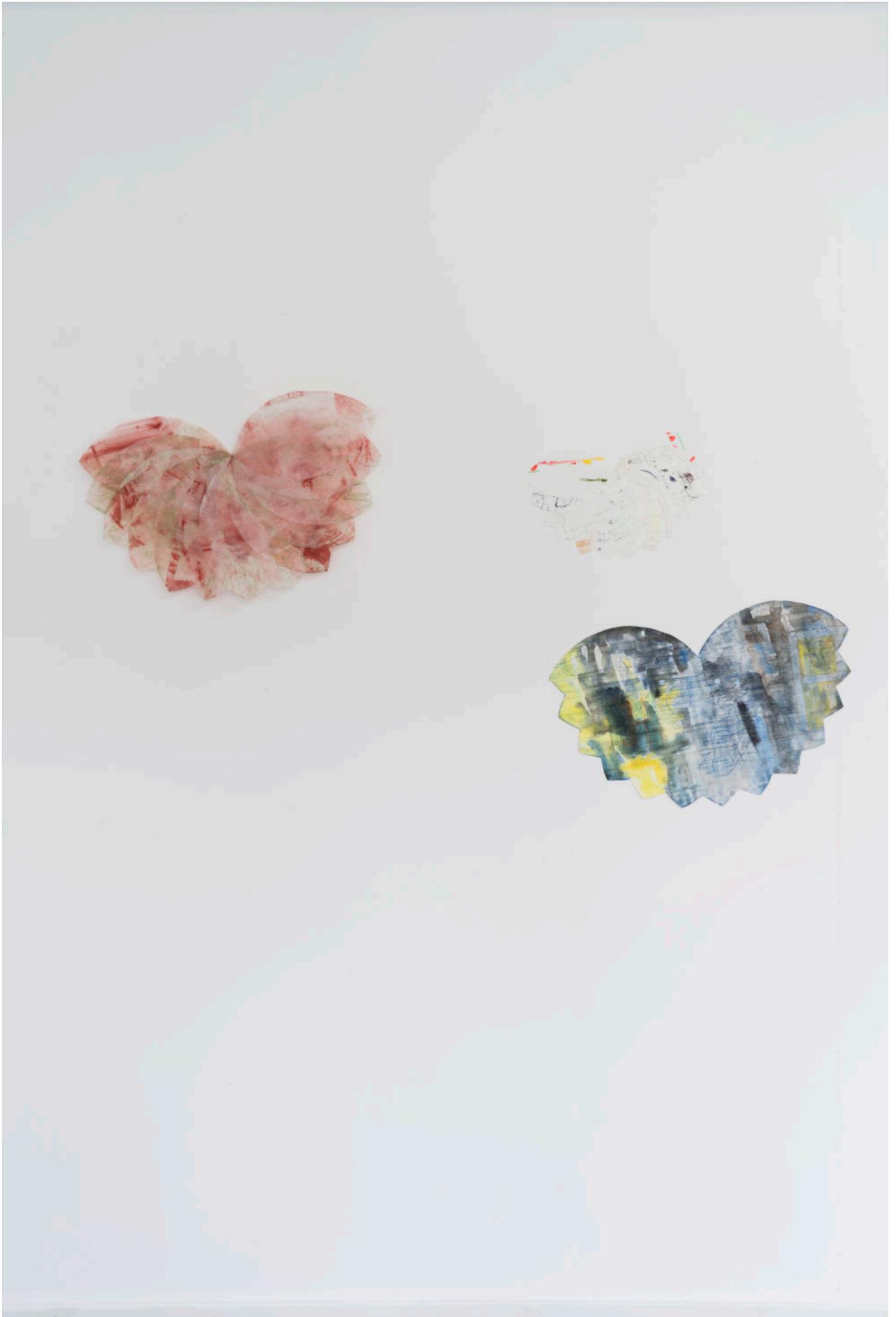
Untitled (pointer: this pointer has the shape of a pencil, which references duty),
bronze cast,
approx. 30 × 2.5 × 2.5 cm,
2021

p. 78

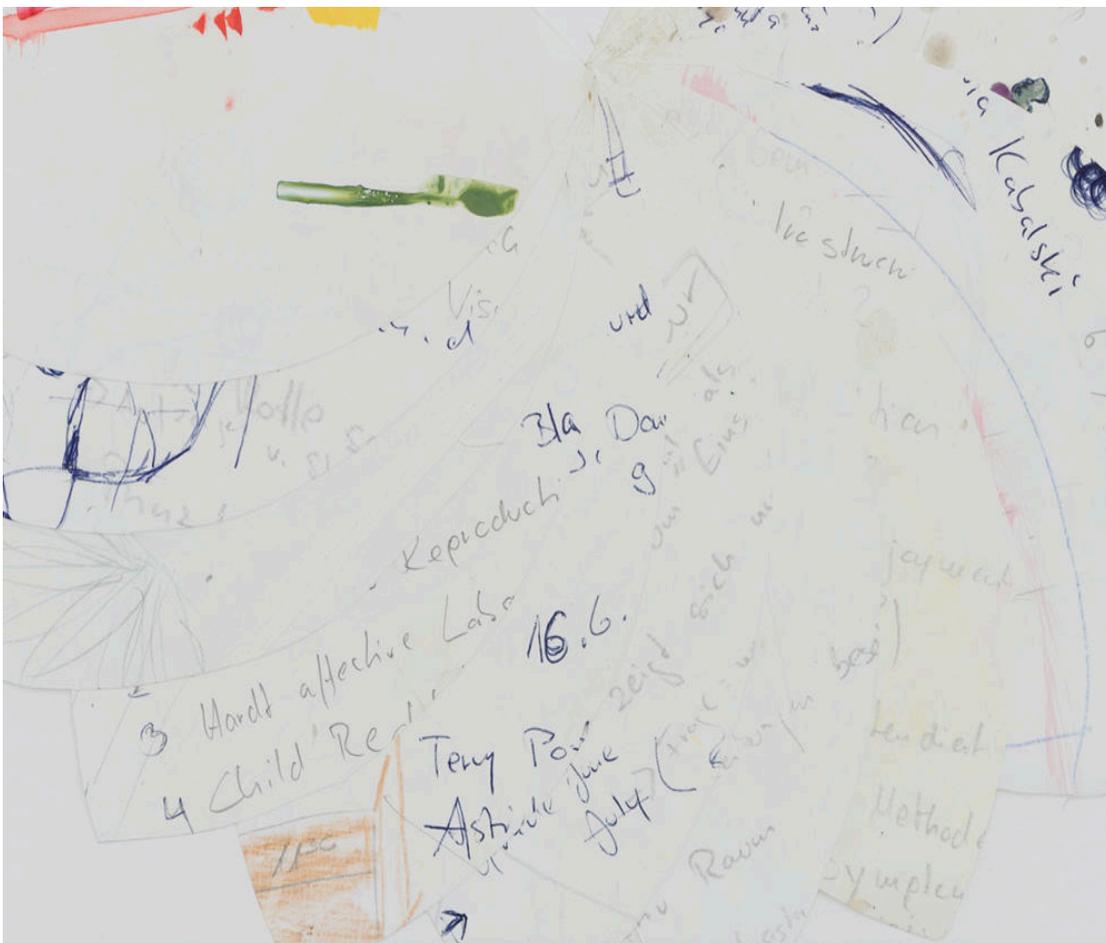
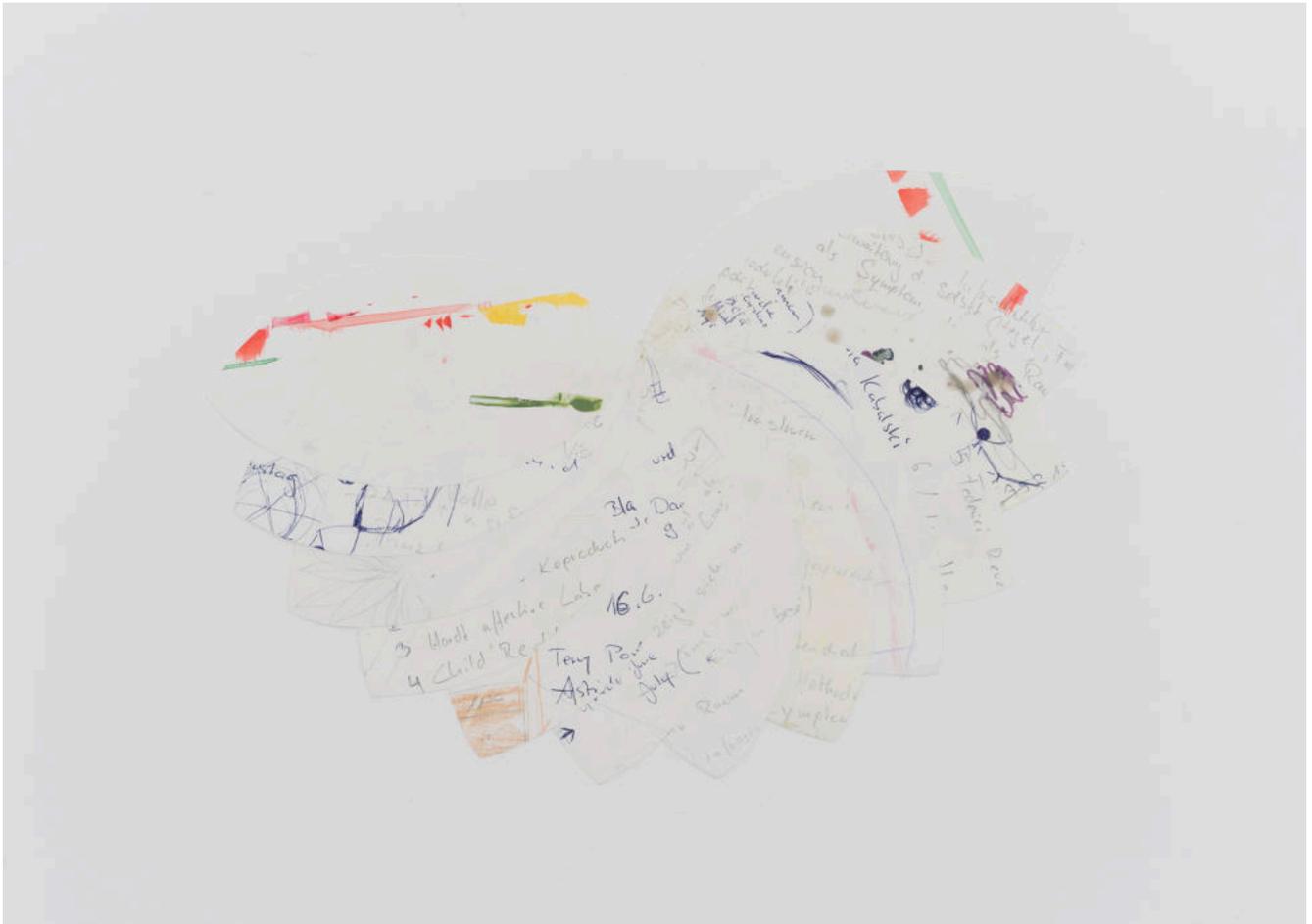




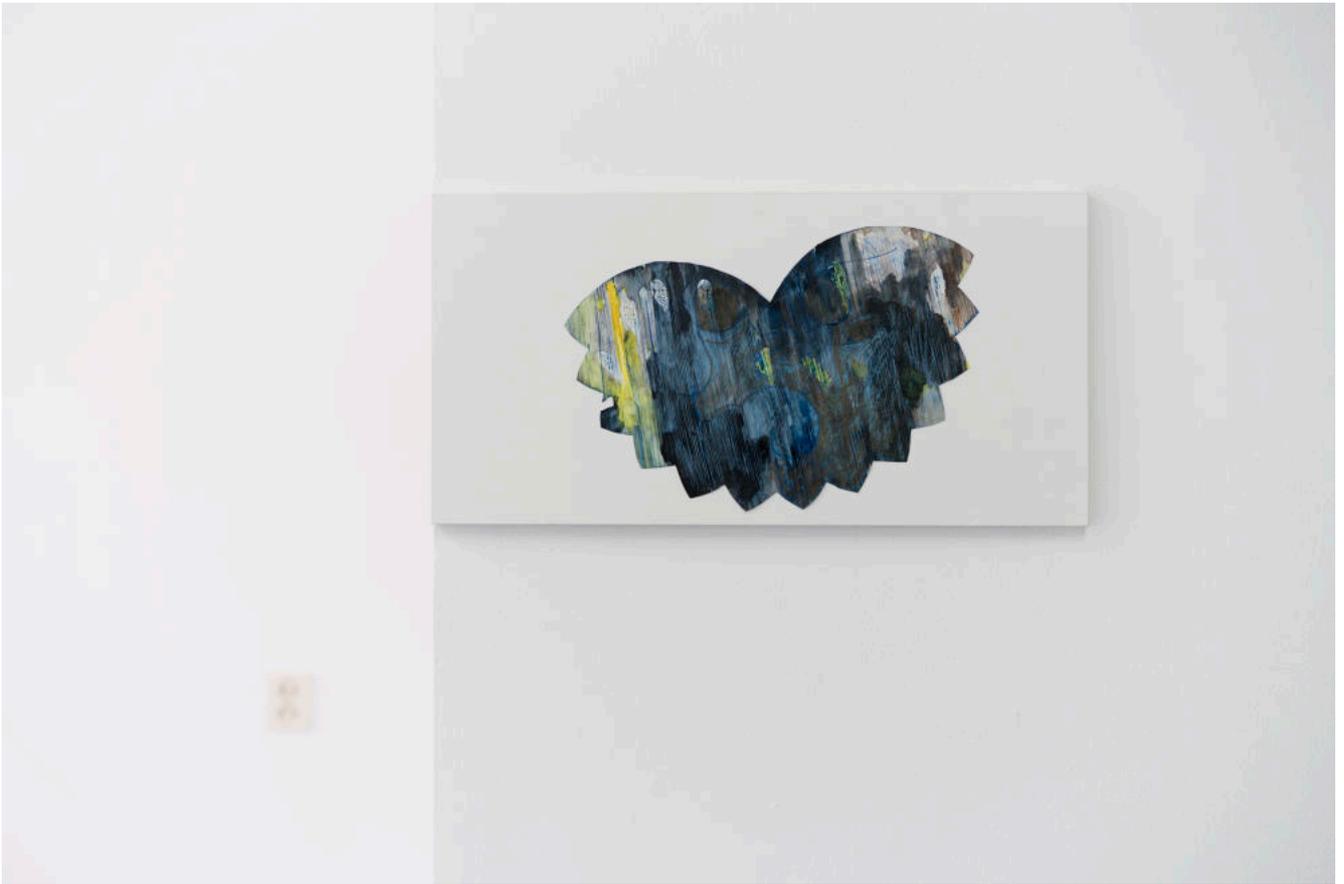


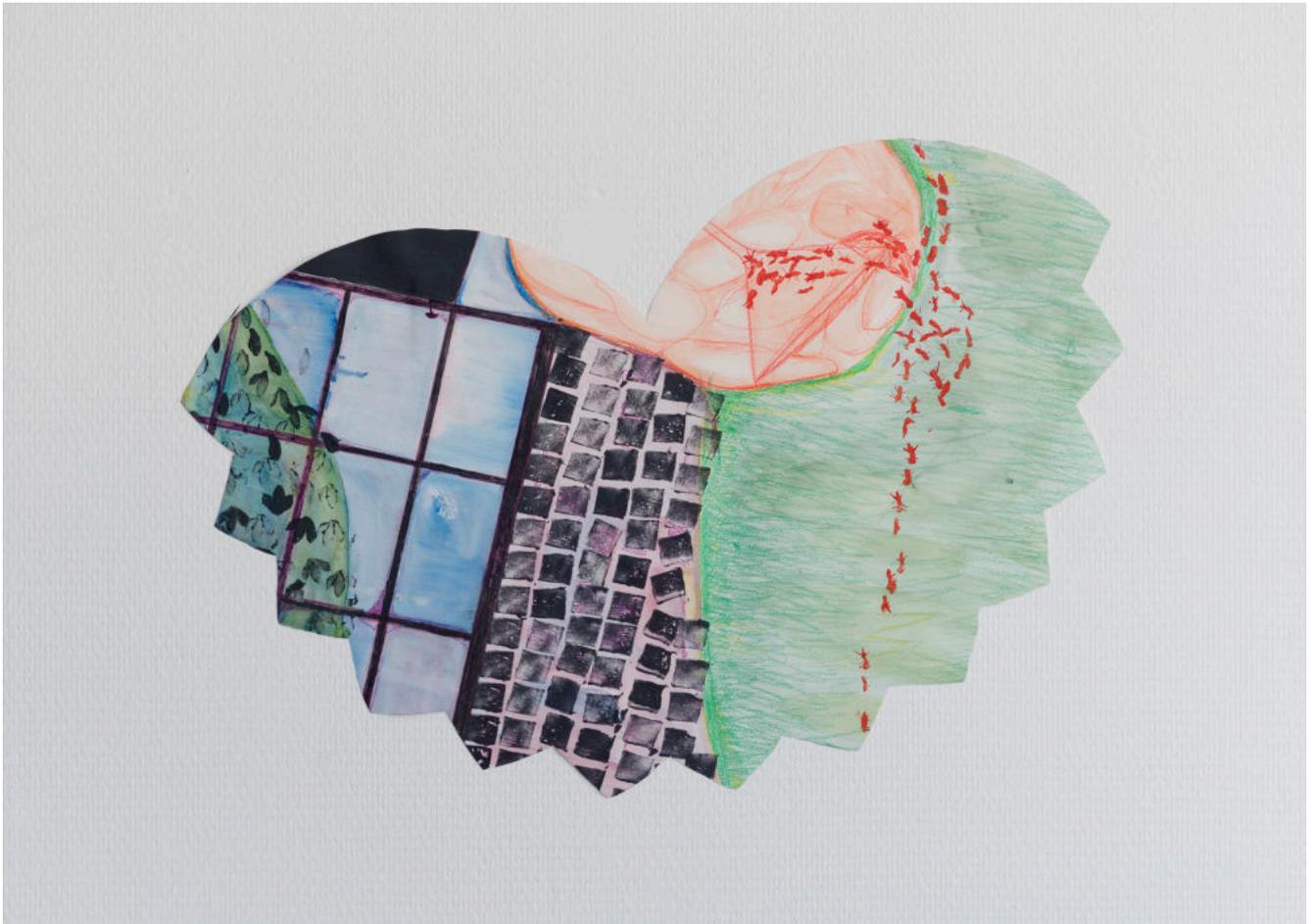
















6.2.

**Exhibition: *working on a particular condition*
Kunstraum $\frac{3}{4}$, Berne, 2021
Multimedia installation,
dimension variable**

This was a solo exhibition in a city run art space in Berne, 2021

Exhibition view

p. 80

working on a particular condition (This series consists of 4 portraits of a Venus flytrap, that stands on my kitchen table, which is also my working table. The series is still being continued, because I use the portraying as a start into my working routine and as a means against depression and panic attacks.),
series of painting on stone paper,
various formats,
2021 – continuous

pp. 81-85

sequence (The background of each work consists of a frottage of the last painting from the series *working on a particular condition*, shown on page 81. In the right downside corner, the location where paintings are traditionally signed, there is a different frottage in each of the eight works. Each frottage shows a different symbol, which stands for an aspect in my identity or my private life: my ID card, the logo of the institution I worked for, a logo of the institution I studied with, the packaging of my daily medication, my hair, a Euro coin, a dried blossom of my Venus flytrap and my signature. Pages 90-91 contain documentation on these symbols.),
eight-part series,
frottage, acrylic paint and coloured pencil on transparent paper,
29 cm x 45 cm,
2021

pp. 86-91

This poem, written by me, was printed in the flyer for the exhibition:

*a sequence
a status
an image
an asset
a document
a drug
a part of my body
a routine
something
a currency
a signature*























