

Aesthetics of production. Frames of art framing lives.

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Thanks for inviting me. Thanks for organizing. Thanks for showing up in this space to think together.

This little lecture is based on my small book *Produktionsästetik*, but also based on my phd-dissertation finished in 2019 – and it is based on the life I've lived as a daughter of two actors, studying literature and cultural studies in Copenhagen, applied theatre studies in Giessen, later working in Berlin as a freelance performance artist and curator in the years 2008-2016. In that period, I also worked as a teacher at HZT – hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum für Tanz, Universität der Künste - with coming dancers and choreographers – . A period where I also became a mother.

It means a lot to me to be invited to speak in the context of the performing arts. This is the field that informs my research. You and your practices inform my thinking. In other words, before the conceptual notion of aesthetics of production, the notion I will talk about today, came the field that I now have the pleasure to give back to.

I will start with a section of theorizing the notion of production aesthetics and then continue with a handful of artistic examples of how I see practices reframing how to live in the frames of art.

For a long time, feminists, activists and artists have talked about, called for, highlighted, made visible the work that counts but is not valued in the logic of capitalism: the care work, the coordinating work, the maintaining and supporting work, the work of the

frames, the work of invisible borders, the work of feelings, the work of relationships, the delegated work, the work of parents, of grandparents, of foremothers, the work of the planet.

This work, which makes all other kinds of work possible, has been articulated from the 1970s onwards by feminist theorists.

The articulation of these supporting co-producers in the production of art has not, however, changed the solid aesthetic theoretical frame by which we understand, credit and pay for art. Therefore, I propose to spend time developing the unifying and assembling concept, production aesthetics.

Production aesthetics is the collective shaping of the frames for life in art. An analysis of production aesthetics shifts the gaze from the artwork's articulation (how it is composed, painted, written, choreographed) and away from the relationship between the artwork and the receiver (what it does to and with the viewer, reader, listener, audience) to the relationship between the artwork and its background: the supporting relationships, economies, rationales, ways of life, emotions, materials, temporalities that co-produce art.

A production aesthetic reading is a feminist tribute to the bearing and the bearers, and a kind of conspiracy for the often invisible.

Every work can be read through the lens of production aesthetics. But sometimes it is difficult for a reader, listener, or viewer to gain insight into monetary transactions, into contractual relationships, into work rhythms, into tension between institutions and artists or into feelings between parents in the division of reproductive work, into choices of not having children, into reasons for periods of sick leave. A focus on production aesthetics is an insistence that the work of art, as we encounter it, tells us a lot about

distributional logics in society (or keeps them secret), about normative ideals for life, about shared emotional structures in the global north.

To take an interest in production aesthetics is to question the promise of the isolated artist genius. Most known proof of the genius is the signature, which reiterates the artist's identity as unique; the signature repeats, and the signature isolates the artwork from people figuring around the artist. A signature puts one name before the names of others, emphasizes one person and hides the other co-creators. A signature involves a selection between ways of contributing, and a signature determines the value of different forms of contribution in the co-creation: thinking over action, concept over body, public display over preparation, care, restoration, cleaning, storage, selection, transaction of money, planning. At an exhibition, it can seem ugly with four white signs with names next to a painting, a video work, an installation. In the performing arts, you get a folder, crediting the artistic team. In the back of a book a list of names says Thank you.

The signature says: This is my work, not someone else's work. The signature performs the principle of copyright (an immaterial variation of property rights), which is the principle of separation and privatization. I have something that is not yours. And what I have comes from me alone. There is this spirit of mine which is free and separable from that of others, even from my own body. My spirit is the master of the concept and the idea 'behind' the work.

There is a line drawn in crediting. There is artistic work and there is administration. There are artists, and then there are project managers, builders, printers. There is the artist at work, and then there are the grandparents at home who look after the artist's children, there are pedagogues in the kindergarten, there are careworkers in the elderly home who look after the artist's parents.

There are children in art.

There are elders in art.

Not among the audience, but in the hours when the artwork is written, painted, rehearsed, choreographed, filmed. There are many who disturb the artist. And there is so much that disturbs the artist: There are far too many emails, there are way too many zoom calls, there are too many applications and rejection letters. And that is the proof of the work of art: that it survives all these disturbances. Let's have the artist sign with all of them and everything that disturbs.

Where does the notion of the artist genius come from? In the *Critique of Judgment* (1793), Immanuel Kant particularly highlights the relationship between work and viewer, which we know as reception aesthetics. But in a few paragraphs, he also writes about the creation of the work of art: Here it is about separating the production of art from the production of other products.

The artist becomes through Kant and readings of Kant the key figure as origin of the artwork, a kind of 2nd god. Kant writes that the artist has a talent, and that talent is the natural rule of art itself. Talent is a gift from nature. The condition for art is talent, not the artist's circumstances, not relationships to land, to bodies, to feelings, or privileges measured in time, space, money or gender, racialization, sexuality. For Kant, the condition of art is transcendental, not material.

⇒ I notice that the definition of the artist is created through *separation* rather than kinship or cohesion. Kant draws this line between artist and surroundings. In his own time, Kant himself is surrounded by what the Black feminist scholar and artist Denise Ferreira da Silva calls onto-epistemological architectures that draw borders between body and soul, between nature and culture, between sensation and subjectivation, between wild and civilized. The logic of separability is one that has been trained since European enlightenment, and it is what helps us to draw borders between nations, between the senses, between races, and between

activities. Separability is handy for clarity, but it is also the logic that supports gender-normative and colonial violence. I point to separability as a logic that is trying to order the queer, the inauthentic, the messy, and not least the shared.

Art is created under freedom as a condition, writes Kant. It is not structures, rights, rules, necessities, privileges, materials, relationships, or the compulsion of traditions that create the artwork. It is not language, institutions or other artworks that spill over either. In fact, the artist creates without understanding or being able to put into words what he is doing, writes Kant (and upon that time, the artist was a man). One could also say that the artist creates intuitively, but where intuition – or the power of imagination, *Vorstellungskraft*, as Kant has it – is understood as separated from circumstances, separated from living conditions.

With Kant, the foundation is made for understanding art as autonomous, art as original, art as unique; an understanding of art as an independent and free dimension, an understanding unfolded and discussed to this day in aesthetic theory.

When art is unique, it separates from anything else, we learn from Kant. For me, it is a way of taking art away from the common, the shared, the cultural. I think with Fred Moten and Stefanot Harney, a thinker-duo based in black studies, poetry, and critical university studies, when they talk about how separability is the logic that allows for making property:

“All property is loss because all property is the loss of sharing” (*All incomplete* 2021, s. 14) they write.

⇒ I think about how the notion of art as autonomous is value-creating: a promise of uniqueness, of freedom, of resilience, of a certain and outstanding status, something that a consumer can then consume, own, and create further value with.

Production aesthetics is a shift from idealism to materialism. (...)The work of art does not consist of what the artist thinks, but through what the artist lives in and with. The work of art, I suggest, is, a set of relations.

As a counterweight to the concept of total autonomy, the performance theorist Shannon Jackson proposes to think of art as heteronomous – determined by the surroundings, and not just independent, *selbstständig*, *selbständig*, standing on its own legs, but supported, standing on the shoulders of others. Jackson reminds us that performance as an artistic genre is an inter-dependent artform with ensembles, technologies, and audiences and therefore a stimulating point of departure for challenging strict divisions. She asks: “What if performance challenges strict divisions about where the art ends and the rest of the world begins?” (*Social Works* 2011, 15).

With heteronomy as a starting point, understanding art as *interdependent*, it becomes more difficult to isolate the talent and draw demarcating lines, separating the talent from beings and circumstances.

I suggest dwelling with the frames of artistic production.

Production aesthetics is concerned with interdependent relationships: emotional dependence, delegated work at home, sparring partners, exchange of inspiration, sharing of tools and technical equipment, the need for recognition, time frames, relationships between students and teachers, between roles of creating and performing, between jury and applicants, between activists and artists, between children and their adults, between

sellers and buyers, between institutions and clients, between those who follow each other.

To be concerned with production aesthetics is to criticize rationales within capitalism. To be interested in production aesthetics is to ask about the distribution of value behind a work of art. We need to talk about money. We must talk about immaterial value. We must talk about accumulation over time. We must talk about the value of art in relation to other goods.

I like to think about what artistic work is through this quote by farid rakun from Jakarta-based collective ruangrupa. farid rakun is looking back at documenta 15 where VISA work was a central part of inviting artists from the global south to work in Germany:

“When I in some moments became very frustrated about handling contracts, agreements, and wanted to continue to the artistic part, I was reminded that this *is* the work we do. Whether this can be called artistic work or not, is up to us as group to frame.” (in *Paletten* 2022, my translation)

Maybe it is interesting to ponder about that this example comes from fine arts, where the artist is doing what we in the performing arts would call administrative work: paperwork, contract work. That would be an easy way to underline how administration is inseparable from what we would formerly call ‘real art’. But another line of separation is worked on in this quote, namely not only between art and administration, but also farid rakun is working with concrete borders, national borders, borders between continents, between the global north and the global south, in global distribution of visibility in the art world. His statement thus works on a materialistic and decolonial agenda, thus

ART is

- Administration
- Preparation

And art is

- VISA work
- Citizenship paperwork
- Accessibility-work

Art is

- Translating what artistic work means.
- The affective work when meeting legislative discrimination or institutional racism.
- the affective and practical work of creating working conditions for more than oneself.

According to Karl Marx, it is central for capitalism to be able to control what kind of work is paid and what is not paid. The wage determines what is productive and unproductive in a society. According to Marx, an expansive economy depends on having control over a certain amount of unpaid labor. Therefore, I add, it is important to keep in mind that the art economy is based on a strange relationship between paid and unpaid work.

The question of value is at the center of production aesthetics. An artist may wonder, quite simply, why full-time artistic work is not paid like other kinds of full-time work? Production aesthetics is concerned with the moral distribution of economic privilege: what kind of work counts and what kind of work does not count, and what kind of work counts more? Why is paid work good, and artistic work (often) unpaid or under-paid?

Production aesthetics relates to the emotional economy that makes it possible to work without pay, under poor conditions or on the strands of poverty. There is the notion of

passion. There is the love for what we do. There is the gratitude for being able to continue. Capitalism's best tool for getting people into unpaid work and working overtime is the imperative to do what we love. This is how reproduction workers have always worked for free (we have given birth, washed dishes, ironed clothes, resolved conflicts). This is how artists have participated in talks, exhibitions, and events without payment. We cannot be on strike from passion. We cannot say no to what we love doing. The repetition and exhaustion becomes bearable when the child loves its parent. I think we can talk about the same kind of emotional payment when activists experience the change they've been fighting for years. The exhaustion becomes bearable. The injustice of too little payment or no payment at all can be soothed through recognition from a partner, an editor, a curator, a gatekeeper, an audience, a change in policy. The artist – and the artist's family – may wonder if emotions should be understood as a form of alternative economy: gratitude, love, passion, recognition, change.

An analysis of production aesthetics will always ask who gets what salary and which credits, and – as long as salary exists in our world – what the affective motivation might be among the unpaid in any collaboration. An analysis, or maybe self-analysis, wants to engage with the materialist aspect of the distribution of the sensible: what it means to share not just creatively, not just sharing good thoughts and ideas, but sharing time, sharing resources, sharing money, sharing attention around, before, and after the artwork.

I was invited today to present the variation of aesthetic theory, an aesthetic of production, which as you have heard is interested in how the frames of art are framing lives. My suggestion is based on feminist thinkers, and performance studies, but also to Marxist analysis. For the last part today, I am invited to point towards practices, concrete

examples of strategies, which are informing my way of thinking aesthetics of production – and which could be serving as examples for further discussion today with you.

I want to touch upon two very concrete ways of working with the aesthetics of production. I will present artists changing the production conditions within the field of art – and although I know today is also about producing new ways of practicing caring institutions, I thought of these artists as good partners to think with on a radical day of care for *the conditions for and the right to live a livable life*.

In 2017 the artist duo Goldin + Senneby won the competition of ‘decoration’ for the new Korsvägen Station in Göteborg: In accordance with the concept of “Eternal Employment”, a person is employed at Korsvägen station. Whatever the employee chooses to do constitutes the work. The only thing required is to check in and out of the station with a ticket every day. The employment contract is full time and of indefinite duration; The work is to be realized in 2026 when the new station opens.

Finally, the artist gets the long-wanted room of her own. The work questions the value of lived life in art: Can an artist really to be paid for the very activity of checking in and out of life 8 hours a day? Would that kind of chronotopian trust of the ultimate welfare state be a blessing or a curse? On the same time, “Eternal Employment” asks a fundamental question to public funding in the arts: should it be basic income with full trust in the artists, or should public art funding continue to be dosed and commissioned with specific goals and ideas about what is ‘good’ for the public?

The work humorously criticizes how life itself has become the core of artistic work – a critique voiced by many theorists and artists in the 21st century. On the same time, it performs public basic income for artists, setting artists free to work with what they find important instead of competing for commissioned work prescribed by theatre directors, managers, juries, and curators.

In relation to an art institution like Betty Nansen it is maybe relevant to ask the question: what does the asymmetry between permanent employment and temporal employment do to the sociality of an institution? Who is actually the 'ensemble'/ the togetherness of a theatre institution? And how is the installment of longevity – working together long term – a way of caring for both art and sociality? Can we measure success through our ability to continue together? And what are – on the other hand – the excluding consequences of staying ensemble?

In 2019, when the visual artist Eliyah Mesayer obtained her Danish citizenship and diploma from the art academy on the exact same day, she decided to start the Mesayer Fund which offers stipends for citizen applications to stateless young people. A citizen application costs a fee of 4000kr in Denmark.

The Mesayer Fund works in two different ways: first of all, it hosts auctions where artists donate their works and the proceeds of the auction go to stateless young people. Secondly, when Mesayer's own work is sold by a gallery, she stipulates gallerists selling her work to pay 40% of their earnings to the Mesayer Fund. Through this rule of sale of art put in relation to other kinds of support for the right to live livable lives, she nudges actors who possess economical agency in the art world to contribute to an accumulation of infrastructural support for stateless subjects.

Earlier in the talk, with reference to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, I stressed how making property is a loss of sharing. When Mesayer's art becomes property for some, those who buy her artworks, an action of reparation of the shared takes place: while some get property, stateless young people get closer to sharing: to the right to have a citizenship, a national identity, a shared land with shared rights.

I bring this subject to our assembly here today in Betty Nansen in order to think about not just who are co-creating the artworks and should have credits too – like the grandmothers, the babysitters, the close friends, the lovers, the builders of scenography, the administration –, but also to think about who has access to the continuity of artistic production and reflection. When we make artworks about war, how can we then think about how not just our minds but also our infrastructures in the arts could engage reparatively? How can we with the knowledge from performance challenge the strict divisions about where the art ends and the rest of the world begins, the strict divisions about where the reflections on care ends and the practices of care begin?

I am trying to massage our imagination, and bring the questions here, that I am occupied with myself: how much can we pass on of authorship, economy, time, of property, privilege, and positions? How can we think of sharing what was lost due to logics of separability? How can the privileged institution theatres in Denmark share with the independent performance scene and the dance field, both structurally underprioritized in cultural policy? How can the performing arts field become accessible and diverse beyond the single production – can we think diversity with longevity, make more seats at the table, and let the seats change for good? How can theatres be venues for more than reflection, venues for infrastructural change and global justice? If we agree that the frames of art are framing lives, paraphrasing Judith Butler, which lives do we then want to live? And how can we through working with the frames of art make more lives livable?