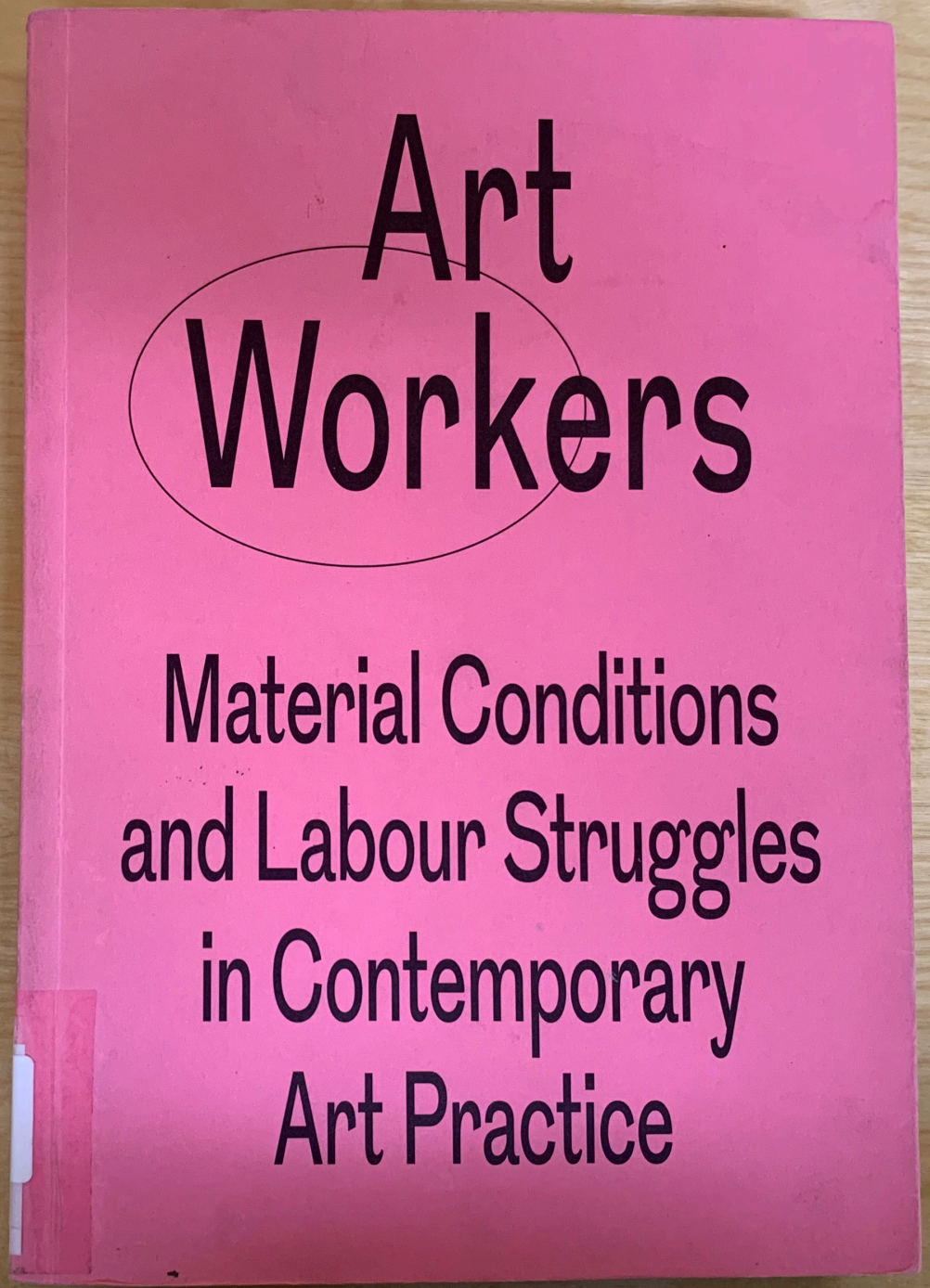
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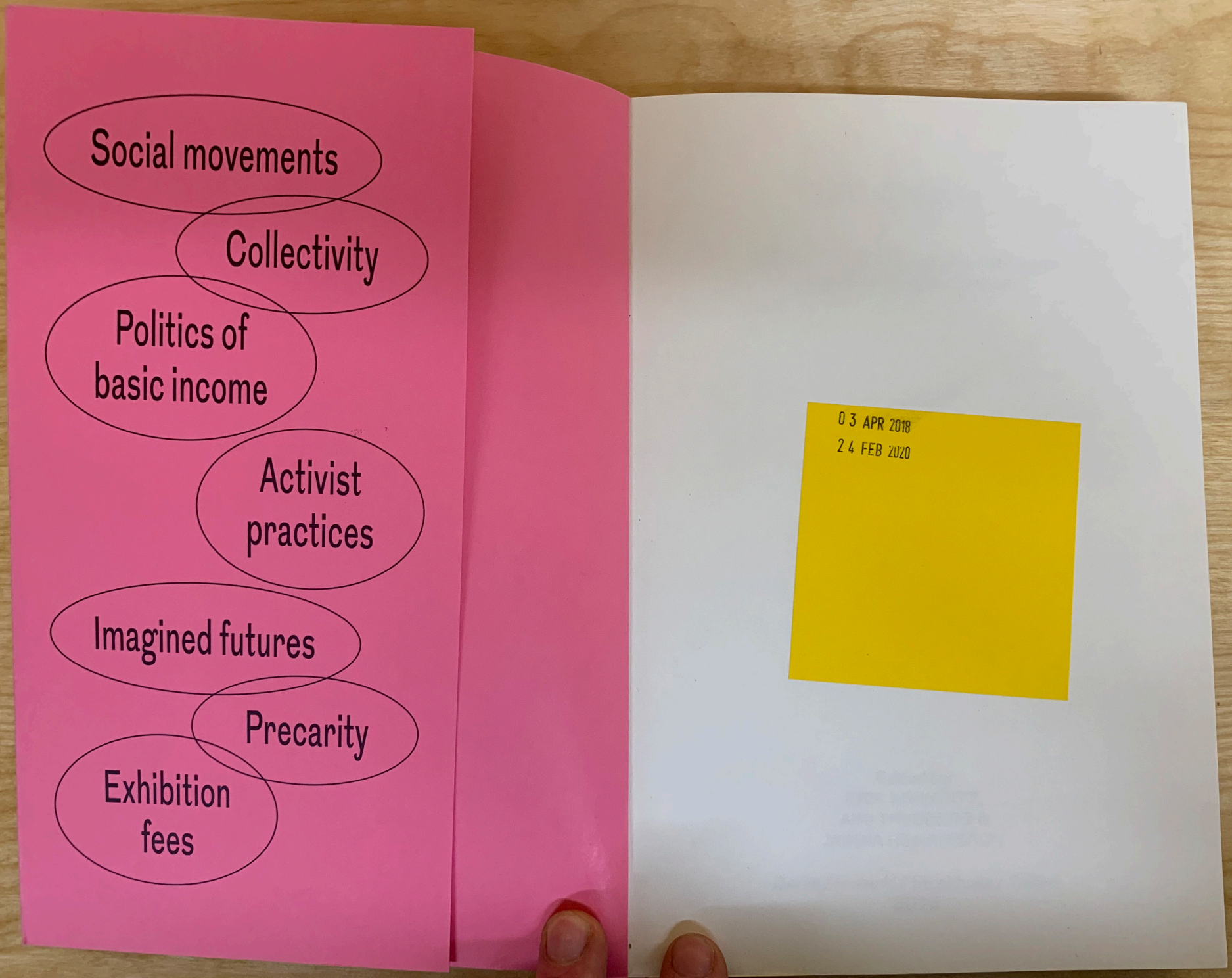
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Collectivity
Politics of basic income
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Imagined futures
Precarity
Exhibition fees
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Art Workers

Material Conditions and Labour Struggles
in Contemporary Art Practice

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Introduction

This publication is the outcome of a networking process initiated by a group of art workers from Helsinki, Stockholm and Tallinn in 2012. The network was born out of the need to establish a political and intellectual framework for supporting and sustaining local initiatives which are advocating for change in the precarious work realities that dominate the visual art sector. The idea to form an exchange platform for sharing useful knowledges, practices and resistive strategies grew out of two self-organised initiatives in particular – the Reko collective in Stockholm and the art workers' movement in Tallinn. The Reko initiative was formed in 2007, anticipating the introduction of the Swedish MU Agreement that obligates state-run art institutions to pay fees for artists who are participating in exhibition projects. In 2010 and 2011, Reko published annual reports that were monitoring the implementation of the MU Agreement. By collecting and analysing hard data from individual artists and art institutions, Reko produced comprehensive information about the material conditions within exhibition practice in Sweden. The art workers' movement in Tallinn sparked off in 2010, and was initially also mobilised on dissent against the exploitation of unpaid labour in exhibition practice. However, throughout its one and a half years of existence, the movement developed a discourse that addressed the issue of precarious labour in the cultural field of Estonia from a broader perspective, also problematising questions related to social security, cultural funding and cultural policies. Organised in a somewhat chaotic manner, the art workers' movement in Tallinn was essentially a militant research platform where the process of mapping precarious working conditions was accompanied by a collective politicisation that the analysis of these conditions brought along. In January 2012, when the idea to form a regional art workers' network first emerged, both initiatives were somewhat hibernating. Due to lack of funding, Reko had not been able to publish a successive survey in 2012, whereas the art workers' movement in Tallinn had seemingly run out of collective energy. Initially, the idea to establish a translocal network emerged as a potential way out from this impasse, aimed at re-energising the local practices by creating new connections, stimulating new impulses and, not

least importantly, providing some financial resources that would sustain these initiatives.

Almost two years later, by the time when the founding group of this network reached the end of a lengthy fund-raising process in the autumn of 2013, the local situation had substantially changed both in Stockholm and Tallinn. Or perhaps it would be more precise to say that, from our perspective, it hadn't changed at all – Reko still had no funding for continuing their practice and the art workers' movement in Tallinn had not caught fire again. It was slowly becoming obvious that these initiatives were not just in a sleep mode, but had most probably arrived at the finish line of their activities. Nevertheless, while these particular cycles of debate and struggle were fading out in Stockholm and Tallinn, a new one was emerging in Helsinki, the third location where our network had established a foothold. In the context of Helsinki, the issue of gallery rent has recently become an entrance point upon which broader discussions about art economy and cultural policy are accumulating. When witnessing and observing these processes of appearance and disappearance, we learned the lesson that the rhythms of politicisation in the art field are no different from the temporalities of cognitive labour – most of all, they are precarious and cyclic.

In response to the developments in our local contexts, we revised our activity plans in 2013, shifting our focus from extensive networking towards knowledge production. In the situation where some of our initial strongholds were falling, it seemed that there would be little sense in the experiment of rooting a translocal network in contexts where a cycle of struggle had just come to an end. Instead of prioritising local interventions in respective languages, we decided to publish a book in English. To some extent, this book is a retrospection of recent art workers' struggles, aiming to document, contextualise and revisit them from a critical perspective. At the same time, this book is also an attempt to capture the present situation of material conditions and organising practices in the art field together with related challenges and potentialities. Last but not least, this book is motivated by an aspiration to imagine desirable futures that are constructed from the subject position of precarious (art) workers.

The first chapter of this book, titled *Mapping Material Conditions in the Art Field*, presents research results that have been collected in our local contexts. Rather than aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of the economic and social situation of art workers in the national contexts of Estonia, Finland and Sweden, the writings in this chapter articulate issues that are frequently addressed as the most problematic aspects of art economy. By taking the local particularities of questions such as the remuneration of artistic labour, gallery rent and social security as departure point, the contributions in this chapter outline a composition of problems that occupy a dominant role in maintaining precarious working and living conditions in the contemporary art field. In many contexts, precisely these most urgent problems have served as entry points into public debates and collective

practices that define the focal point in the second part of the book, captured under the title *Forms of Organising and Labour Struggles*.

Corresponding with the theme of unpaid labour that forms a red thread in this publication, the course of mapping material conditions in contemporary art practice unfolds with a contribution by Erik Krikortz, who discusses the effects of the notorious MU Agreement in Sweden. In the Nordic and Baltic region, the MU Agreement is often celebrated as a progressive ideal that deserves to be strived for. Indeed, in many ways, the MU Agreement represents an exemplary model for regulating work relations between artists and art institutions – not only because it establishes parameters according to which artistic labour should be remunerated, but perhaps even more importantly, because it sets a paradigm in which the abolishment of unpaid labour within exhibition practice is linked to a political decision rather than delegated into the realm of informal agreements among collegial peers in the art field. However, as much as the MU Agreement serves as an exemplary case of "best practice" – to use the managerial vocabulary that is favoured by cultural policy makers – a prototype legislation that has stimulated fruitful discussions about the remuneration of artistic labour widely beyond the national borders of Sweden, its actual effects are far from being supreme. As Erik Krikortz demonstrates in his contribution, the limited ramifications of the MU Agreement are not only a result of its narrow scope which applies to a handful of state-run institutions, but also the lacking control mechanisms that would monitor and, if needed, sanction art institutions that do not comply to the standards established in the agreement. In fact, during the first years after the introduction of the MU Agreement, it was the artists' initiative Reko that observed and evaluated its effects. Writing from the perspective of this independent "public watchdog," Erik Krikortz revisits the MU Agreement from a critical perspective, reflecting on the developments that have followed its introduction during the last six years.

The contribution by Minna Henriksson addresses an issue that is perhaps less prevalent in the international art contexts, but not in the least exceptional: the practice of charging rent from artists who exhibit in non-profit galleries. While writing in the high tide of public critique against the gallery rent model in Helsinki and Finland, Minna Henriksson contextualises this problem in its local dimensions. The gallery rent model in Helsinki originally emerged in connection with the democratisation of the art scene which was manifested in the foundation of artist-run spaces in 1980s and 1990s. Operating according to the principles of self-organisation, these spaces were often maintained in collective effort together with affiliated artists. However, in the following decades, the rising rent prices in the increasingly gentrified central area of Helsinki have been accompanied with the gradual institutionalisation of the formerly counter-institutional art spaces. The majority of non-profit galleries in Helsinki today operate both on public funding and by charging rent from artists, whereas the public funding model that sustains gallery rent practice is still being defended with the

argument of democracy. From this perspective, it is claimed that the model of channelling exhibition funding through the hands of artists balances the power position of art institutions. In contrast to this argument, Minna Henriksson demonstrates how the current situation in Finland is actually out of balance, resulting in a situation where the funding institutions have substantially more power over exhibition practice than artists or galleries. From the interviews that Minna Henriksson has conducted with practising artists Elina Juopperi, Jussi Kivi, Raakel Kuukka and Marge Monko, it also becomes evident that the widespread practice of charging gallery rent is an essential component in maintaining the status quo of unpaid labour: as long as artists are made responsible for covering the exhibition costs, with or without the support of public funding, there is virtually no place where the demand for fair pay can be anchored. In addition to texts and interviews, Minna Henriksson's contribution also includes a drawing that envisions possibilities how the problematic situation could be changed. This drawing has been produced in collaboration with art practitioners Minna Heikinaho and Jussi Koitela who have been actively engaged in discussions about cultural policies and artists' working conditions in Finland. Whereas the contribution by Minna Henriksson is primarily aimed at making an intervention into the local context, it also relates to neighbouring discussions in Estonia where the gallery rent issue was heatedly debated a few years earlier, stimulating gradual changes in the current situation.

Placing the issue of unpaid labour into a broader context, Airi Triisberg analyses the relationship between unwaged labour and social security. Her account originates from the collective process of knowledge production that took place in the framework of the art workers' movement in Tallinn. By mapping out the income modalities in the art field, Airi Triisberg exemplifies how art workers occupy an ambiguous position within wage-labour relations. She then continues to discuss the consequences of such ambiguity in relation to the widespread practice of modelling social security on waged employment. Using the health insurance system in Estonia as a case study, she demonstrates how art workers fall between two chairs in the system that defines wage as the dividing line between work and non-work. Furthermore, in reference to feminist Marxist conceptualisations of unpaid reproductive labour as a key resource of capitalist accumulation, Airi Triisberg draws parallels between the precarious social situation of art and care workers. Aiming to articulate proximities between radical feminist politics of the 1970s and current struggles against precarious work relations in the art field and beyond, she concludes her analysis by invoking feminist Marxist imaginaries of social change.

The precarious work reality in the art field will not change unless art workers organise and struggle against it. Mapping material conditions in the contemporary art sector remains ineffective without an accompanying politicisation. Corresponding with that battle call, the second chapter of this book puts a focus on practices of organising in the realm of art and

social movements. In recent years, there has been a wave of art workers' collectives emerging in various localities of the international art world. This wave of mobilisation has brought along an intensified interest for the historical legacy of labour organising within the art field. A great deal of such research has been collected and published in the *ArtLeaks Gazette*. Corina L. Apostol, co-founder of the ArtLeaks platform, summarises this research in her contribution which sketches a genealogy from Paris Commune to contemporary activist groups. Reflecting on historical moments when art practitioners have sought affinities and alliances with workers' movements and revolutionary struggles, she builds a ground for a comparative study that articulates both continuity and change. Her analysis is complemented with a visual contribution by artist collective Fokus Grupa. The imagery used in the drawings by Fokus Grupa is derived from historical photographs and documents, re-articulating moments of politicisation in art history. In this publication, a selection from the series *I Sing to Pass the Time* is presented, displaying images that emphasise links between art and workers' struggles in particular. Insofar as the work of Fokus Grupa relies on historical documents, it also exemplifies the fact that the legacy of art workers' struggles in USA has been very well documented and publicised whereas there is only little visual material available from other geographical contexts.

Art workers' initiatives often use their visual skills in order to develop activist strategies. Thus, the visual imagery presented in this publication has largely been produced in connection with activist practices, such as the *Bust Your Boss Card* developed by Precarious Workers Brigade. The card borrows the format of the "bust card" that is handed out at protests, giving legal information to activists and demonstrators. The *Bust Your Boss Card* is conceived as a visual awareness raising tool that encourages art and cultural workers to confront their "bosses" by demanding transparency for the material conditions of cultural work. In a corresponding manner, the graphic image by artists Taaniel Raudsepp and Sigrid Viir visualises the budget outline of their joint exhibition *Corridor* from 2010. This graph was produced in connection with the art workers' movement in Tallinn, articulating the problem of unpaid labour within exhibition practice. It was originally made for *Art Workers' Voice*, a newspaper insert that the art workers' movement in Tallinn published in the Estonian cultural weekly *Sirp* in 2011. It is one of the few examples of activist imagery originating from the politicisation process in Tallinn. In contrast to this, this publication includes several examples of the rich and distinct visual language that has been developed by the ArtLeaks platform. In addition to activist imagery, some visual contributions in this book operate at the border zone between individual artistic practice and collective struggles. For example, Marge Monko's work *I Don't Eat Flowers* originates from the period when the art workers' movement was active in Tallinn, indicating confluences between her activist engagements and artistic practice. Zoran Popović's *Answer to International Strike of Artists* is a visual response to a call for collective struggle that was

initiated by Goran Đorđević in 1979, whereas Krisdy Shindler's work *Can Art Manipulate Money?* is a remake of one of the most widely publicised images in the history of art workers' organising, paraphrasing the poster *Does Money Manipulate Art?* by Art Workers' Coalition from 1969.

Three contributions in this book are focused on contextualising recent or current examples of art workers' labour organising. In that framework, Airi Triisberg revisits the short cycle of mobilisation that politicised art practitioners in Tallinn and Estonia during 2010–2011. Writing from the position of an activist who took part in that process, she looks back at its development with a taint of self-criticism. In particular, she reflects on the significance that the adoption of the neologism "art workers" held in the context of Estonia. She analyses the self-identification of art workers as a dialectical process which is based on the negotiation of two distinct class positions – the subjectivity as workers, on the one hand, and the subjectivity as "professional art practitioners," who occupy a unique position in the social stratification, on the other hand. Conceptualising this process of self-identification as a strategy of "disidentification" – defined by José Esteban Muñoz as a political position located between identification and counter-identification – she discusses how the art workers' movement in Tallinn was working both "on and against the dominant ideology."[1] To elaborate, while demanding that artistic labour must be recognised as such, the art workers in Tallinn simultaneously suggested that artistic labour should be recognised as a particular type of labour that holds a unique role in society. To some extent, the art workers' movement in Tallinn is further contextualised in the conversation between Airi Triisberg and Tereza Stejskalová, the co-founder of the campaign Call Against Zero Wage in Prague. By juxtaposing these two cycles of struggle, Tereza Stejskalová and Airi Triisberg discuss their commonalities which are partly linked to the socio-political realities in post-socialist contexts. However, whereas the editorial choice to highlight these two examples from Eastern Europe aims to create visibility for art workers' initiatives that operate in the peripheries of the Western art world, and are perhaps less well-known, the focus on these examples is by no means intended to reinforce the conceptual East-West divide. Quite the contrary, the conversation between Tereza Stejskalová and Airi Triisberg also emphasises the transnational dimensions of art workers' self-organisation, acknowledging activist routes along which concepts, tools and resistive practices travel. From that perspective, one of the most influential activist collectives in the international art world is perhaps the London-based Precarious Workers Brigade whose practice is quite explicitly focused on developing tools that can be easily shared and applied outside their immediate context of origin. Moreover, the practice of Precarious Workers Brigade is marked by an aspiration to create transversal alliances with other precarious social groups, representing a political practice that is strongly rooted in radical social movements, and not exclusively in the art field. In order to

acknowledge these important political efforts to expand the struggle against precarious labour beyond the narrow occupational sectors of art, culture or education, we have re-published an interview with Precarious Workers Brigade that was initially produced for the Czech journal *A2*, initiated by Tereza Stejskalová and Barbora Kleinhamplová.

One of the dominant challenges that emerge in relation to the strategies of labour organising in the art field is connected to the apparent impossibility of forming trade unions. In many contexts, this challenge is first perceived as a spatial one, exemplifying the modalities of dispersion that are not only characteristic to artistic labour, but to the production mode in post-fordist capitalism in general. Secondly, trade unionist politics also seem to be founded on temporalities that are substantially different from the ruptured and intermittent modes of precarious labour. These two dimensions are frequently addressed in post-operaist strands of political thinking that recall the historical model of fordist factory as an exemplary site of condensation – not only condensing the time and space of production, but also of resistance.[2] The new reality where fordist organisation of labour is losing its centrality in capitalist production thus also poses political challenges to trade unionist method, pointing toward the urgency of reinventing forms and spaces of workers' struggles. From that perspective, the attempts to mobilise art workers' struggles around the politics of trade unionism seems anachronistic if not futile. As Silvia Federici stresses, struggle against precarious labour is not about demanding access to conventional wage-labour relations; it is more about demanding good life while acknowledging that capitalism is dependent on forms of work that are unpaid and precarious.[3] In Federici's thinking, the struggle for autonomy from capital and the state should also include the unwaged workers who cannot be organised in the orthodox trade unionist manner. Historically, the appeal for rethinking class struggle beyond its classical subject of industrial proletariat was first articulated within the feminist strands of operaist struggles in the 1970s. In the present-day social movements, this autonomist feminist Marxist appeal is reminiscent in demands for universal basic income. Referring to the current practices developed in the context of radical social movements, Lotta Tenhunen discusses the politics of basic income from the perspective of precarious workers, framing it as a political horizon for the mobilisation of transversal struggles in the social factory of contemporary capitalist production.

The last contribution in this publication is an outcome of collective discussions between artist Michael Baers and the editors of this book. It was originally intended as a visual essay experimenting with radical imagination and suggesting desirable futures for art workers' struggles which would perhaps be a little more ambitious than what is usually considered feasible within the common sense of pragmatically oriented labour organising. However, in the dialogical process of developing those scenarios together, the accent of this contribution changed a bit, placing the discussion itself

on the central position. Moreover, as it often happens when the futures are at stake, what gets genuinely addressed is the present or the past. In many ways, the unresolved contradictions that are articulated in this conversation also epitomise one of the most important dilemmas that forms a re-occurring question in this publication – how to construct labour struggles and political imaginaries from the precarious subject position of art workers, without isolating these struggles into the occupational sector of visual art?

We hope that this book can provide some useful knowledge and stimulating impulses for our comrades in struggles against precarious labour!

In solidarity,
Airi Triisberg, Minna Henriksson, Erik Krikortz

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.11.
2. Gerald Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity* (London, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), p.17.
3. Silvia Federici, *Precarious Labour: A Feminist Viewpoint* (2006), http://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/precarious-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/ (accessed 6 February 2014).

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