

This text revisits a chapter from an essay commissioned by Tanznacht Berlin in 2023. During the festival's opening, Berlin's Culture Senator, Joe Chialo, expressed his appreciation and support for the freelance dance scene. A year and a half later, this scene is striving to regroup and reorient itself in the wake of significant cuts to cultural production. In this text, I try to examine some systemic conditions faced by dance workers, as well as related attitudes and dilemmas. It is neither exhaustive nor entirely objective, and I situate myself at the heart of these dynamics—being an artist who has both experienced successes and struggled with recurring failures and rejections.

The career models available to most artists nowadays¹ constitute what Annelies van Assche describes as 'an every-person-for-themselves environment.'² The performing arts market based on festivals, curatorial programs, open calls and project applications is a form of a very elaborate and bureaucratically virtuous race for scarce resources in which the criteria for success are as complex as they are obscure. Under the project-based paradigm, the amount of unpaid labor performed to develop a concept (for an art project, research, scholarship), to secure institutional and artistic networks for its potential realization (co-productions, collaborators, etc.), and to submit a great number of documents that prove one's value, is not balanced with transparency with respect to selection processes and criteria applied in the evaluation of the proposals. Berlin is brimming with *creatives* of all ages, genders and ethnicities and yet, in the face of the ongoing economic and political crisis, we uncover the upsettingly vast scope of projects and careers buried, burnt (out), never meant to happen. The very structures of art production and its funding remain the greatest gatekeepers in the field striving for diversity and inclusion.

DO WHAT YOU LOVE AND YOU WILL NOT WORK A DAY IN YOUR LIFE

Flexibilization of employment, imperative of self-entrepreneurship and competitiveness characterize the work environment for many artists and are attended by the general instability of having limited access to social benefits, affordable housing, or other structures of support, which in turn makes it harder to maintain steady personal relationships, or combine creative work with duties of social reproduction (care work, for instance).

(T)he most generous subsidy to the arts comes from the artists themselves, in the form of unpaid labor.³

¹ In the particular geopolitical context of the freelance dance scene Berlin I am writing about.

² Annelies van Assche, *Labor and Aesthetics in European Contemporary Dance* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020), 14.

³ Katja Praznik, *Which side are you on? On Understanding Art as Labour and the Potential of Collective Organising of Art Workers*, in: *What side are you on. Ideas for Reaching Fair Working Conditions in the Arts*

Considering the cost of dance education and the investments required, both financial and personal, access to such a career, and identity, is largely limited to those who can rely on family support, an inheritance, property ownership, or some other kind of second income to balance the budget. Art making requires time and means. In the end, who has the full-time and long-term capacity to work like this?

The choice to ‘become a dancer’ has rarely in history been motivated by economic incentives. Settling for less in terms of economic and social security is often seen to be compensated for by the actual and/or supposed benefits that come from doing what one loves to do or *playing* for a living. The bohemianism of art production manifests itself in a lack of transparency, particularly when it comes to career models and workplace dynamics. The continuous mystification of the art world’s mechanics serves the market’s interests—the act of *creation* is separated from the notion of work, reinforcing the idea that there are transcendental reasons behind an artist’s struggle endured for the sake of expressing themselves. Never mind the art universities, degrees, courses, unpaid gigs, internships⁴—art is a vocation before it is a profession. And, to be honest, I believe it is both, but we must emphasize the importance of the labor involved before we celebrate the fulfillment of artistic dreams. The blurring of workplace boundaries, and keeping the conditions for artistic success unarticulated, in my view, serves to keep many professionals in the race, even if they have little chance of earning a living in the field. The presence of aspiring and less successful individuals, along with their labor and investments in the scene(s), is essential for the success of the ‘winners’. After all, it is the artists themselves who comprise a large portion of the dance audiences, workshop participants, and followers of established choreographers. I see this as a natural occurrence within a neoliberal capitalist economic model, which relies on the socio-economic inequality of individuals in any given field—especially when visibility (and ‘coolness’ or ‘hotness’) holds the greatest value. Artists are broadly encouraged to show resilience, rather than dissent, in the face of exhausting and unsustainable modes of production, while the systemic conditions that force the majority of art workers to struggle remain unaddressed.⁵

(IETM Publication 2022), 8.

⁴ Alongside these factors, we must consider gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, class, and health as aspects of one’s social positioning when trying to understand the complexities involved in accessing the art field. For example, the likelihood of becoming an artist (and remaining in the field) can be assessed based on the socio-economic status of a person’s parents.

<https://www.wmagazine.com/story/artists-wealthy-families-background-study>

⁵ Based on my research, it is not only about an artist’s ability to secure financial resources, such as co-productions or residencies, prior to submitting their grant/project/fellowship application. It also hinges on their history of institutional support, the status of their previous artistic collaborations, awards, honors, and other tokens of cultural and class belonging. These elements collectively shape the image of a “singular,” successful, and deserving artist, capable of amplifying their achievements. This narrative of “excellence” is now sharply evident in the rhetoric surrounding Joe Chialo’s reform agenda for Berlin’s cultural sector.

THE IMPOSSIBLE FOREST⁶

*In my understanding, performance is also a micropolitical and embodied experimentation with temporality, a daily continuous process of rearrangement and redistribution of collective, collaborative, and relational desires, a continuous re-creation of the common.*⁷

If one's success is largely determined by their ability to stay present and engaged, the inability to produce—due to lack of funding, exhaustion, sickness, etc., threatens the individual with the prospect of withering away. The sadness of not being included, or invited, is entangled with the existential angst of invisibility and undesirability, of becoming surplus. Invisibility also characterizes much of the *(re)productive* labor that sustains the field, from which the fruits of artists' visions can grow. I'm referring not only to producers, dramaturges, educators, mediators, technical crews, etc., but also, and especially, to individuals and collectives engaged in practices of solidarity, grassroots organization, and peer support. Based on my personal experience in Berlin, the majority of these individuals are women⁸ who work for free or overwork for relatively modest pay. All of these interconnected relationships and interdependencies form the foundation for the performing arts to thrive, and as such, they require recognition and protection far more than individual artistic productions, festivals or venues. I believe that, in the face of profound social atomization, solidarity and mutual assistance beyond immediate personal circles or taste-based preferences has the potential to offer a more rooted sense of purpose, allowing the scene to exist outside of product-oriented and exploitation-driven economies.

*Individuals who think of themselves as independent beings, who don't need anyone, who base their existence not on relationships with others but on individualism, are precisely those who lose their freedom to a large extent, especially in employment relationships (...) and find themselves the objects of the most unbridled exploitation because, as individuals, they have the weakest position in the market.*⁹

In conclusion, I want to highlight the possibility of a more rhizomatic, horizontal growth as an alternative approach to shaping the future dance scene—one that challenges the erosion of labor solidarity and the dominance of star culture. Unionizing/collectivizing efforts, along with

⁶ The title of the choreographic gardening project developed by Jared Gradinger in the yard of Uferstudios.

⁷ Bojana Kunst, *Making temporal kinships: Beyond the project*, in: *What side are you on. Ideas for Reaching Fair Working Conditions in the Arts* (IETM Publication 2022), 18.

⁸ I opted for binary-based word to highlight the historical roots of labor division.

⁹ Sergio Bologna, *We Can't Leave the Idea of Freedom to the Far Right!*, *Angryworkers.org*, Dec 10, 2021.

both individual and collaborative rearticulation of ambitions and work paradigms, should be prioritized in the coming years to confront further austerity measures introduced by increasingly right-wing governments in Germany, the EU and worldwide. Ultimately, how can we rely on public funding when the state's agenda contradicts our declared values? How can cultural production resist censorship, control and coercion imposed through financial and legislative tools? Who can or should be an artist (and how) in a world on fire?

*The forest stood there, green, next to the ruins.*¹⁰

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tanznachtberlin.de/tanznachtberlin2023/

¹⁰ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The word for the world is forest* (Gollancz, 2022), 11.