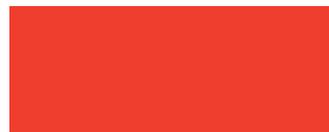


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Editorial Coordination: Danai Giannoglou
Graphic Design: Bend

A
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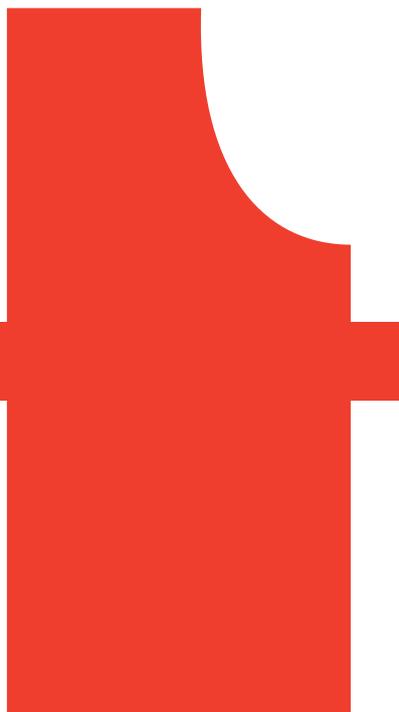


Evita Tsokanta
Athens, January 2019

LUXURY
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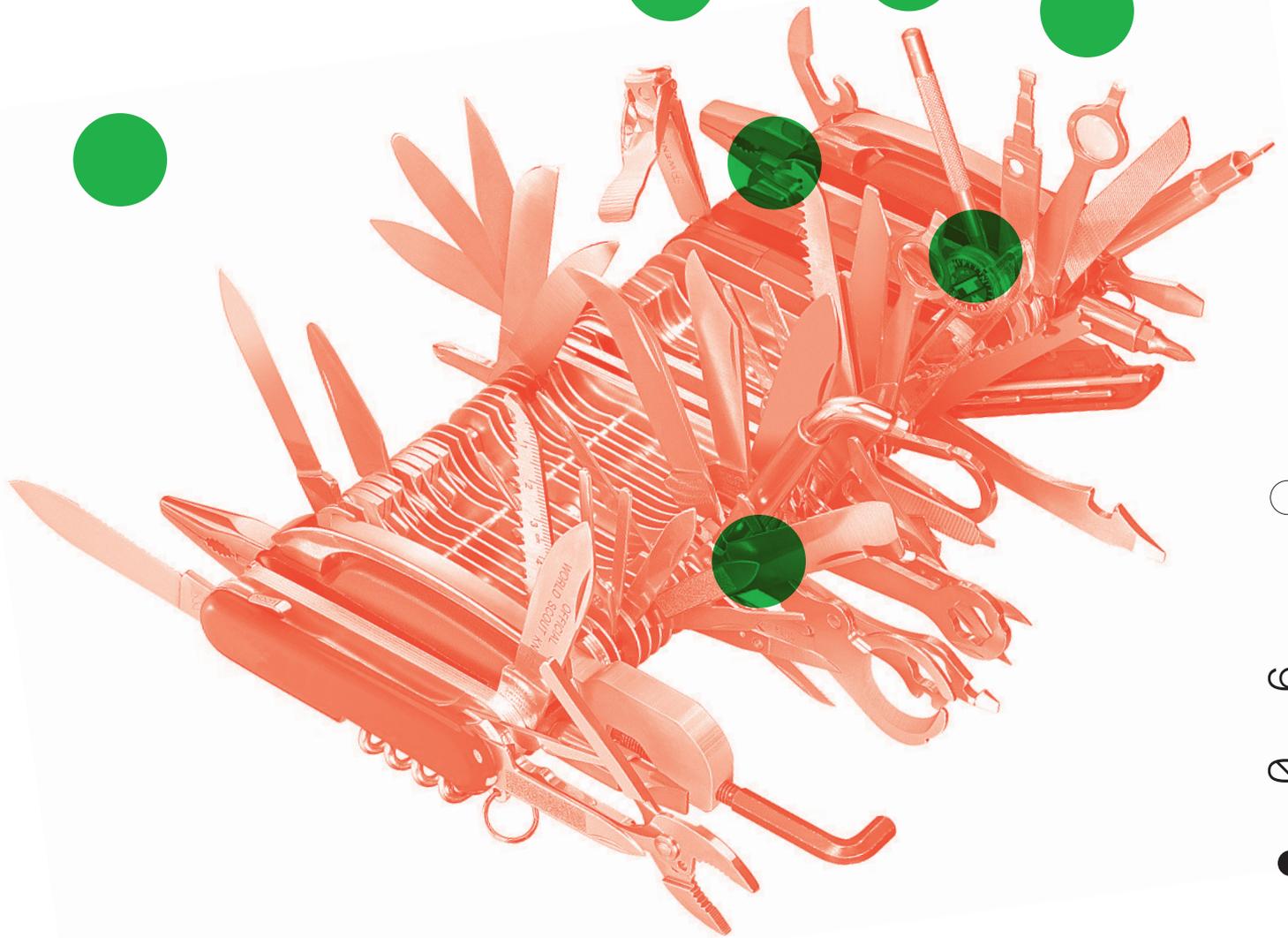


Where I come from, the term independent curator is traditionally used as a euphemism for the unemployed art professional. Rightfully so. Landing a full-time cultural industry job in a country that is plagued by a 20.8%² unemployment rate is not an easy feat. Not to say that those in the comfort of institutional positions have it easy. Kudos to those that achieve a simulation of professional normalcy in the city that inspired Documenta-caliber, and budget, institutional critique. For the rest of us, independence has been a heavy burden to bare. To the point of seeking livelihood elsewhere, ideally in related, mostly educational, positions in order to preserve our nomi-



nally paid curatorial practices on the side. The combination of financial stability and career aspiration comes at a high price nowadays. It is quite clear that those of us who power through these conditions and continue to pursue a healthy ecology in the local art system can afford the extravagance of such a noble cause. In the age of advanced capitalism's consequent austerity, luxury has been reappraised and redefined. "Recent events globally have made it impossible to ignore a radical precariousness of the basic material conditions necessary for the kinds of consciousness and reflexivity articulated in art during the past century and more".³

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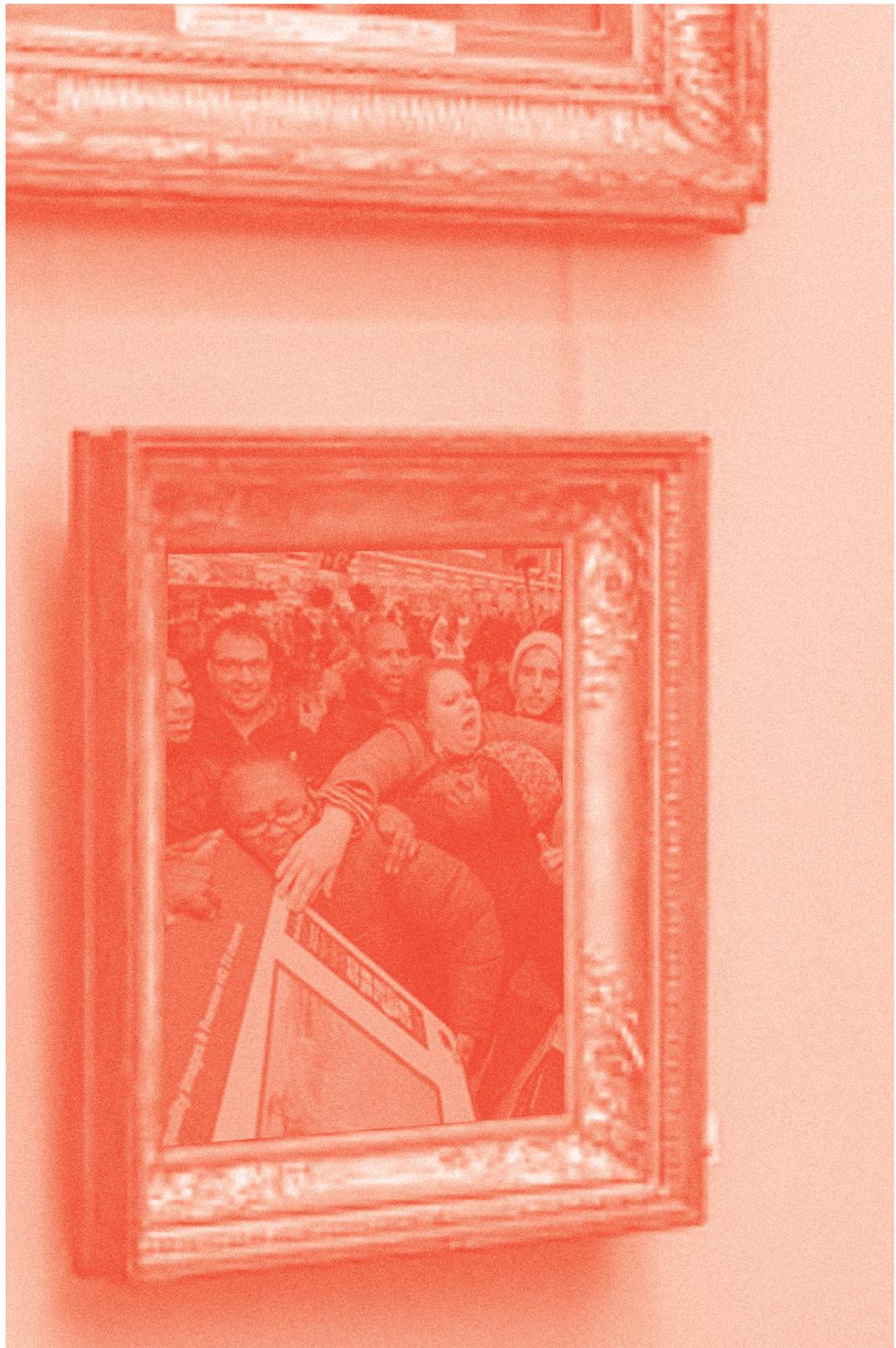


An independent curator is first and foremost a multitasker and as such, must demonstrate mastery in a diverse skill set. Historical knowledge, artistic insight, creative flair, critical theory training, research aptitude, a knack for architectural and setting design, writing and editing talent, translating proficiency in at least two languages, managerial dexterity, marketing and press communication know-how, promoting ability, life-coaching inclination, networking skills that transcend social, educational, financial and national strata, fundraising capacity, technical expertise and a heightened partying tolerance. An attempt to assign price to the sum of the job duties of this modern-day homo universalis, completed inside and out normal business hours, is a challenging pursuit.

MULTITASKER

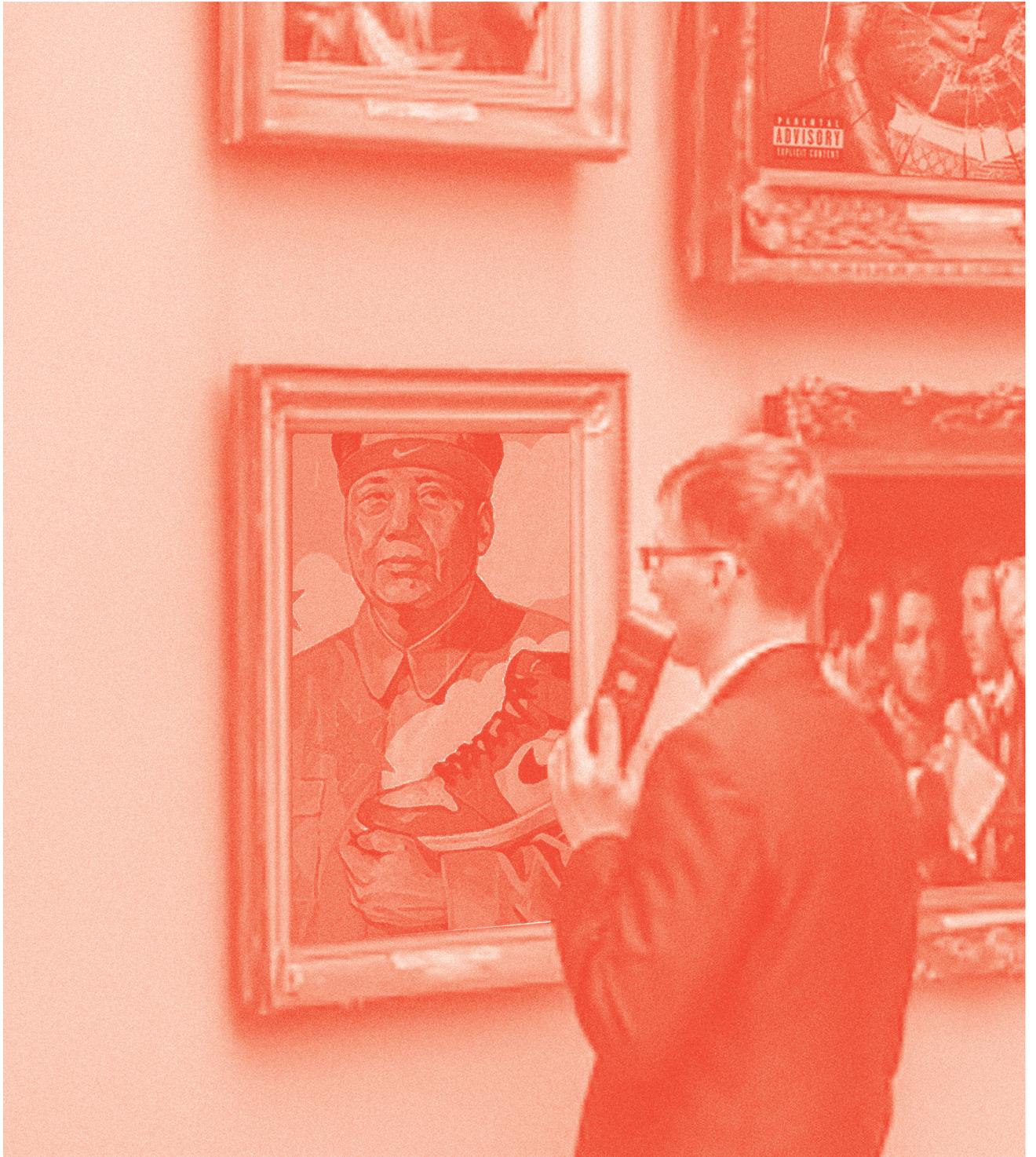
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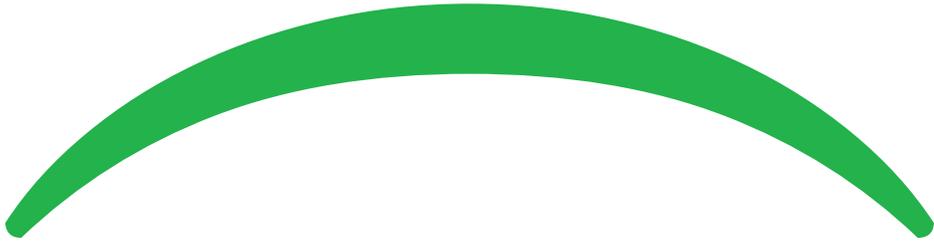
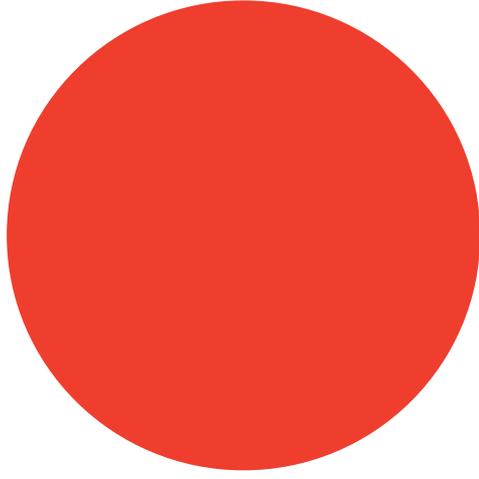
The unregulated market of independent curatorial jobs, a familiar notion to the art world, is indicative of a wider shift in the way employment is approached and implemented internationally. The free market leads to cut-throat competition. Thus, hustling your way to success is no longer considered a rags-to-riches story, but a legitimate career strategy.



HUSTLING

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The appearance of graduate study curatorial programs internationally, mostly in the Western world, that has been observed since the 1990s, suggests that there is increased interest in academic research of the practice as well as career pursuits in the field. This provides a much-needed advancement of the curatorial craft, both theoretically and practically. However, most of these curatorial study courses come with hefty price tags and leave graduates in increased debt. Alarming-ly similar to the fine art school issue, one can't help but paraphrase BFAM-FAPhD's⁴ infamous quote "What is a work of art in the age of \$120,000 art degrees?", to question such a definition of a curatorial. In a country like Greece, where higher education remains free, one needs to protest the lack of curatorial studies in state academia, which forces Greek students to pursue such an education in a metropolis of the West, hence entering the economic struggle of paid education abroad. Apart from the way that these degrees socioeconomically determine visual culture producers, by means of exclusion, I worry about how these colleagues will pay off their debts and financially survive in the current state of the curatorial job market.

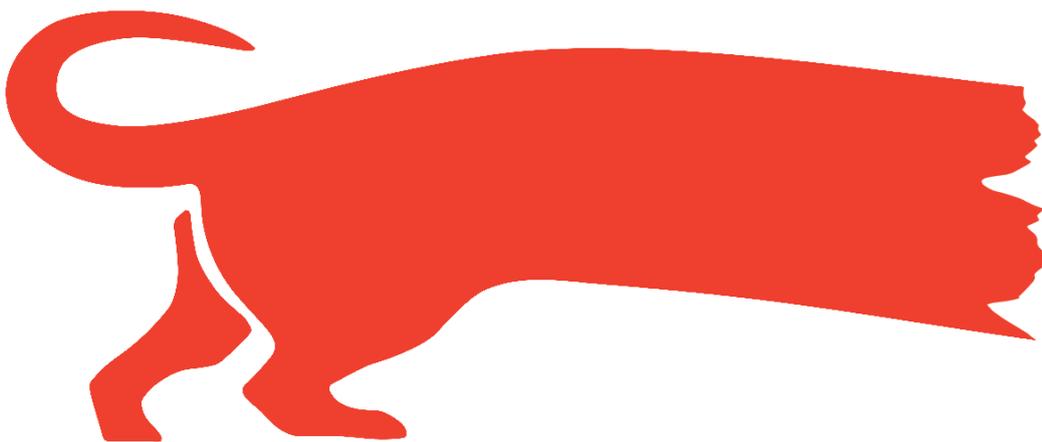
“WHAT IS A WORK OF
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\$120,000 ART DEGREES?”

The controversial question of authorship and the narrative of battling auteurs between artist and curator, particularly the independent one, seems to be a non-issue when comprehending the reach of the average, local curator. “The vast majority of curators remain unseen and relatively unknown in the apparently-neutral and all-encompassing façade of the institution”⁵. In theoretical terms, this can be further attested when one acknowledges the art exhibition as a time and space-specific counter-proposal⁶. Exhibitions are ephemeral. Included artworks and their respective autonomous meanings, continue to exist past and beyond the conclusion of the show. Therefore, any projected contextualization and interpretation that occurs within and during the



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friendship →

exhibition is geographically limited and fleeting. Curators and artists work in different mediums and as such are not in competition.

In my experience, artist and curator engage in an adversarially productive artistic discourse that includes moral support, theoretical furthering and even managerial guidance. Due to the inherent character of the final outcome, creative production, art professionals and artists are linked in an extremely complicated and interdependent workplace friendship-collaboration, rarely seen in other industries. The invaluable asset of building lifelong peer connections complicates the monetization of this profession even further.

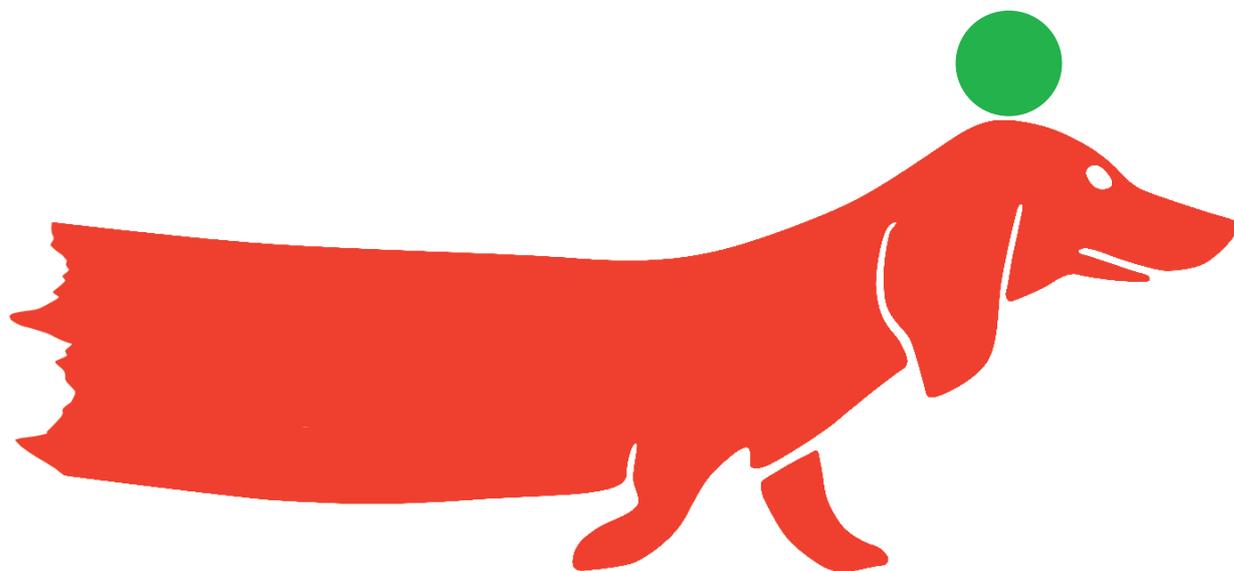
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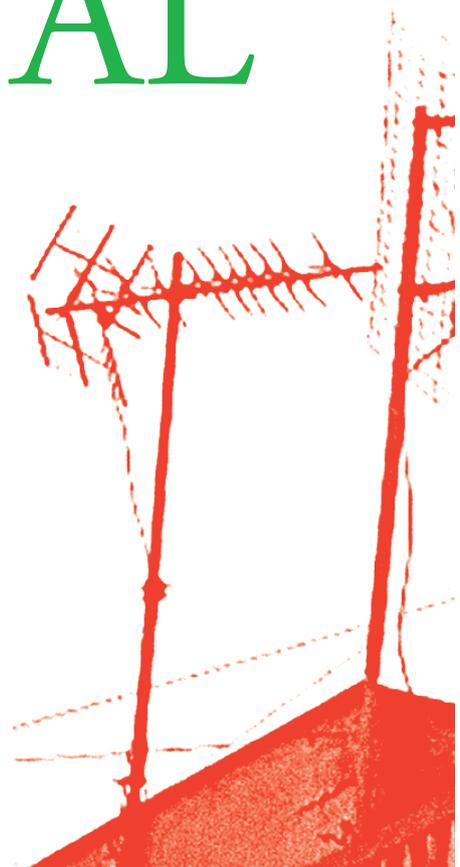
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← collaboration

So why keep doing it? Why not cut your losses short, throw your hands up in the air, admit personal defeat and go get a real job? Because pursuing curatorial experimentation liberated of institutional policies, facilitating artistic practices that have not yet found their way to, or defy, the institutional canon, challenging the academic discourse surrounding visual language and proposing undesignated meta-narratives of cultural histories is the way to achieve the authorship pluralism that permits subjectivity. The perpetuation of the independent curator profession allows us to “multiply the ways we look at the world, read it, interpret it, write it and represent it”⁷. Curatorial multiplicity acts as a catalyst for the democratization of cultural production. One wonders if such a mission sequentially affects the democratization of cultural consumption as well, validating us all as viewers and active members of the ongoing discourse and indirectly promoting in-depth audience engagement. The causal relationship between modes of production, distribution and consumption has been analyzed by far more distinguished writers. But in the words of Édouard Manet: “to exhibit is to find allies for the struggle”.⁸

CURATORIAL



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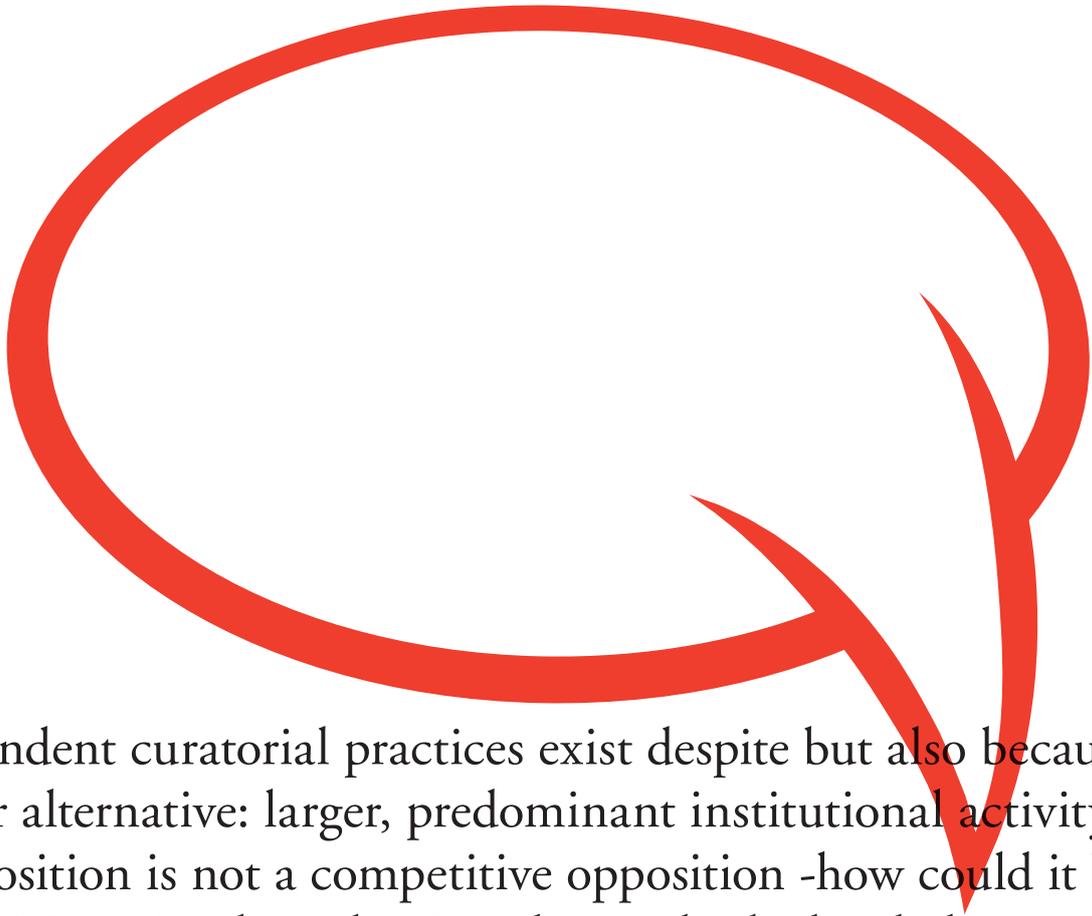
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Large cultural institutions, due to the complexity of their organizational structures, lack programming flexibility. Museums and large-scale galleries need to plan their exhibition schedules years in advance to accommodate the necessary bureaucratic stages of production. Because of the precarious working conditions, the independent curator is afforded the reflexes to stage exhibitions responding more swiftly and directly to artistic evolution and changing social conditions. This of course, does not undermine the value of institutional curating. In fact, it compliments it. Counter manifestations in any industry both feed off and stimulate the establishment. However, centralist hierarchies, agendas, economics and micropolitics of large-scale institutions set limitations to their, notoriously understaffed, curatorial teams. Within these limitations, institutional curators are expected to document and care for artifacts, safekeep national or private collections, educate the public, accommodate fundraising strategies and finally further their curatorial craft. Internationally, the diminishing budgets of museums are enforcing a decrease of permanent staff, in favor of one-off outsourcing of independent curators with a particular specialization-acquired on their personal time- to bring in fresh perspectives, without the financial commitment of full-time employment⁹. The gig economy has hit the fan.





Independent curatorial practices exist despite but also because of their alternative: larger, predominant institutional activity. This position is not a competitive opposition -how could it be anyway? It is simply and quite adequately the borderline space in which ideas are born, art is experimented, labor is redefined and production is proven possible outside the sphere of any logical economic reality. These outcomes are not creatively inferior nor ethically superior to the other. They merely co-exist. Independent curatorial practices must however claim the space that they deserve and the authority that they need to be held accountable for. Not in the hope of them becoming institutionalized-thus entering a pre-existing art world hierarchy of symbolic and economic value, but to ensure they maintain a conscious state of the liminality which gave birth to them and ultimately defines them.

In terms of hard finance, an independent curator's practices utilize grassroot methodologies as his/her working conditions force him/her to execute with the lowest, if any, possible budget. A typical example of such methodologies is the activation of disused locations and spaces, commonly in





deprived and depressed urban neighborhoods. It is no secret that art goes where minimal rents get you maximum square footage. Through showcasing artistic content and raising awareness of local cultural practice in neglected places, the independent curator assigns cultural capital where financial investment risk is high. In the socially stratified art world, cultural capital acts as a stabilizer. And as such it should be acknowledged and compensated if the diversity of art production remains a priority. In the harsh reality of business, and contrary to Bourdieu's wish, cultural capital is converted into surplus value, thus investment opportunity. Independent cultural production opens up roads to property development thus eventual neighborhood regeneration, and depending on the conditions, even occasional gentrification. The real estate bubble needs to be fed in order to be perpetuated. In the financially stricken Greek reality, a particularly fertile ground for such economic models, it seems to have succeeded only when working from bottom-up. This side-effect of the independent curator, although not an inherent trait of the profession, is a strong negotiation tool in the time where moral economy seems to have lost momentum.

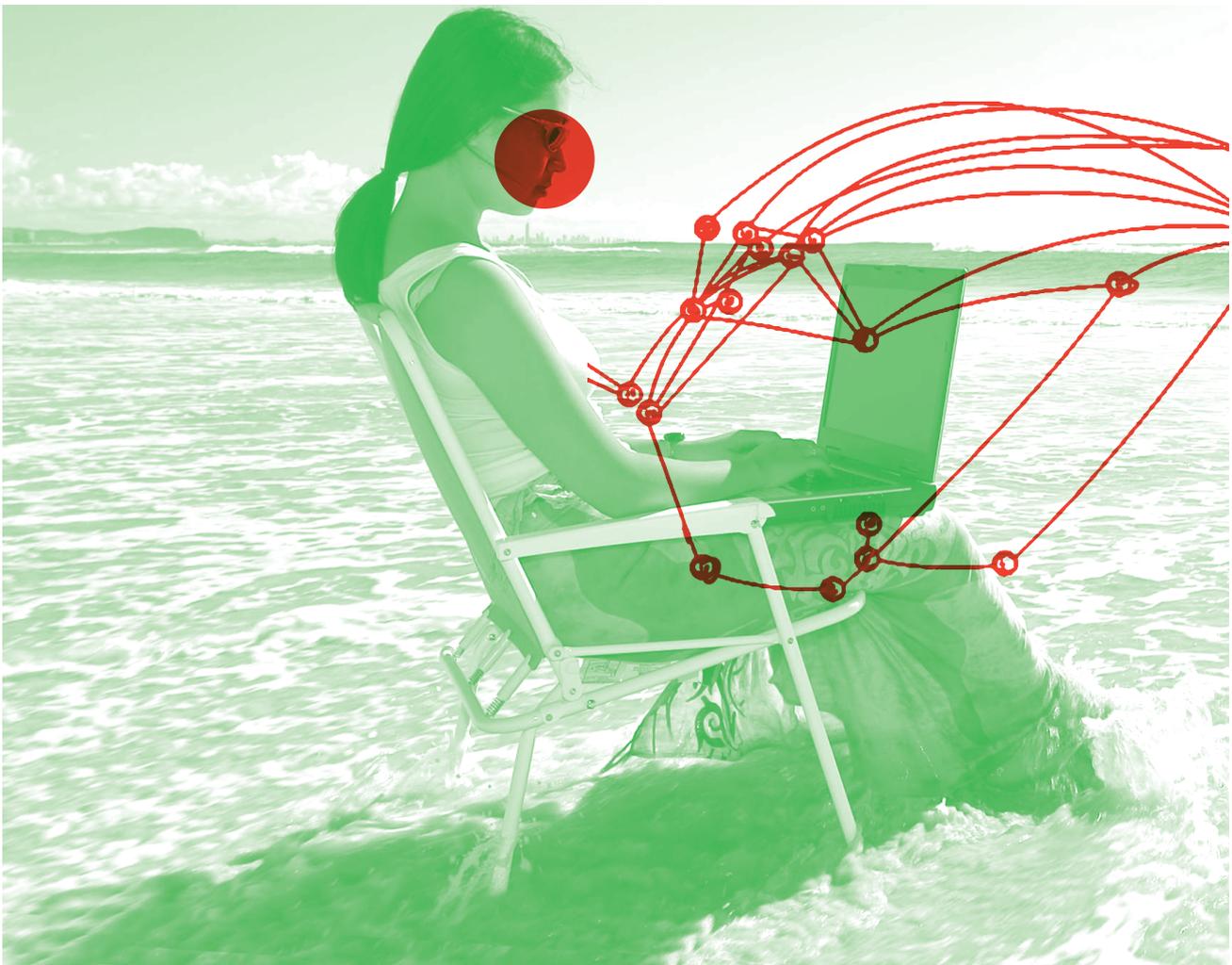


At the end of it all, the independent curator has one inalienable power: independence. As freedom of expression is increasingly persecuted worldwide, it is essential to protect those rare occasions left in the world where the individual's transmission of ideas urges us to question presented realities, undeniable truths and predetermined routes of thought. In the era of post-truth populism, fake news and social media feed debriefings, demystification and clarification tools need to be sharpened. In short, independence both allows and fosters critical thinking. "Criticism is essential to the public sphere, [...]. In some ways criticism is this sphere in operation"¹⁰.

post—heroic arrangements

Independent curators, like all career paths that have been redefined in the conditions of a new world order, are affected by global economic shifts. That is clearly not because the world's working conditions have been evened out, but because issues of employment and financing are defined less and less by national governments. The global structures of power behind neoliberal politics that have pushed towards deregulations, free trade and privatizations are evident internationally in varying levels. The challenges of the independent curator therefore traverse borders. Unsurprisingly, the success barometer of the profession is determined by an international address. Paradoxically, the so-called failure of an independent curator, his/her local limitation, seems to be the most effective way to tackle these extraneous obstacles.

One of the main tasks of the independent curator is to build and share social networks. These personal networks are in fact the surplus value that is gained everytime a freelance curator is assigned a project. Such networks in the art world have proven time and time again to be the fertile ground for cooperative collaborations “that may be characterized as post-heroic arrangements”¹¹. This model has been successfully initiated and activated by artists, the only group in the art world whose working conditions so closely resemble those of the local, independent curator. It is a model from which to learn and one that could be emulated. The strongest driving force in community building is a common geography, a sense of locality. Battling international issues with local means assigns culture the type of geopolitical relevance that it should have.



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Building a united front of solidarity amongst local colleagues is not a groundbreaking proposal. It does however require commitment to long-term shared goals to create and build upon the necessary infrastructure for the sustainability of the profession. A professional union of local independent curators should include the sharing of information, standards and claims. This entails the loss of ego and the competitive dynamic that has been harbored by current economic models. More importantly though, it presupposes a common desire to not participate in a mechanism that exploits creative labor on the pretense that it is a charitable cause. The essential denominator is the agency of assertion towards, initially, official acknowledgement of the profession and its value. The ultimate aim should be the setting of professional standards, financial and otherwise, for the processes of this labor.

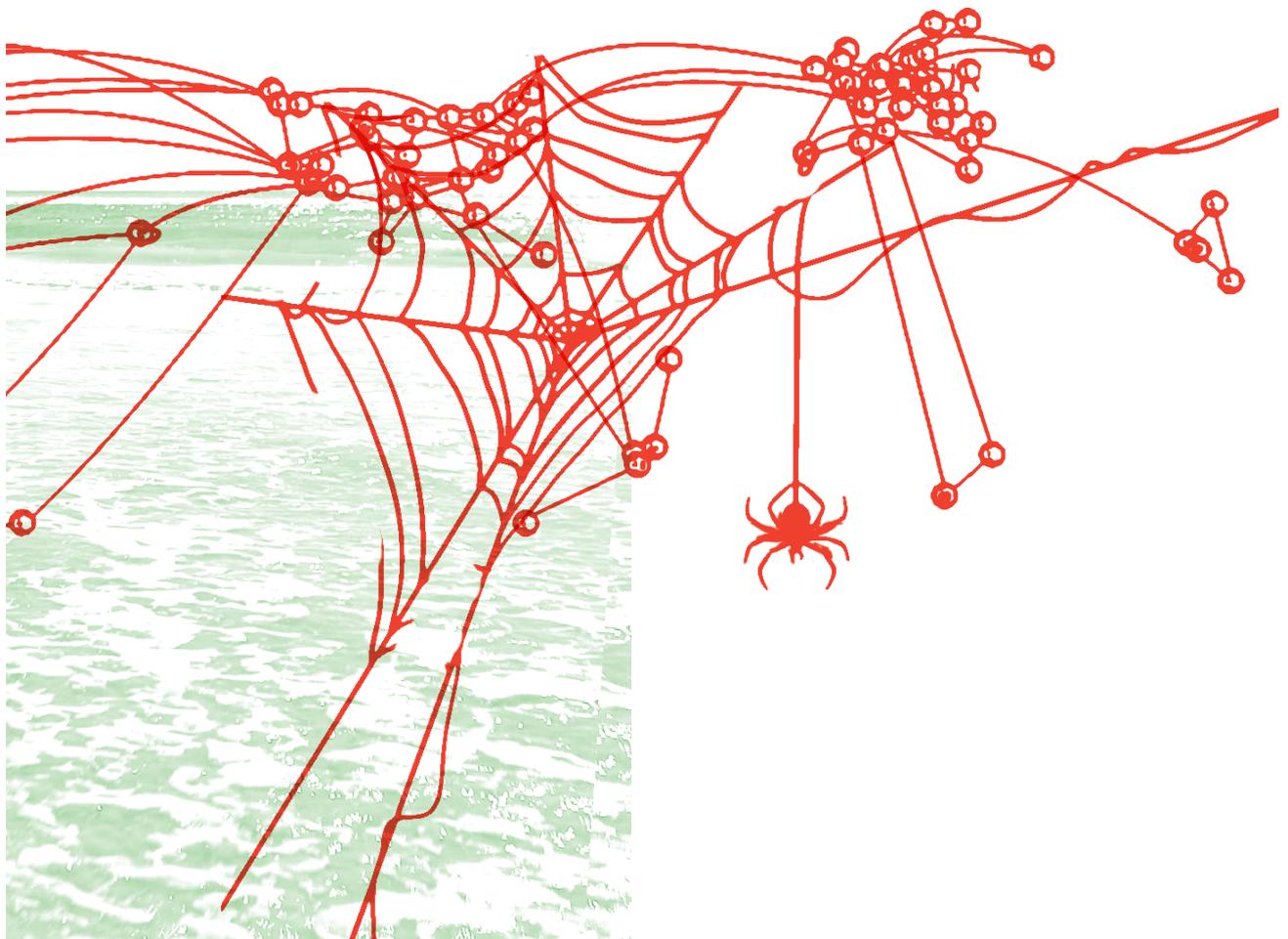
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A common understanding of the expenses of the exhibition making process is a logical and easy starting point. The production of commissioned artworks depending on medium and dimensions, fees for artist's participation of existing works, writing tariffs based on word count, lecture stipends, travel and accommodation for research and exhibition planning, insurance value coverage, transport, architectural studies, installation, lights and audiovisual equipment, catalogue production, design of promotional material, invigilating and guiding needs, curatorial man-hours are all quantifiable expenses that allow the setting of a minimum cost price bracket. The cut-in-sales payment when commissioned by and for a commercial gallery, should be avoided in order to ensure curatorial autonomy. Budget levels, along with labor division, is defined by the size of the organization that acts as producer, therefore fees can potentially be determined by a percentage of the respective production budget.



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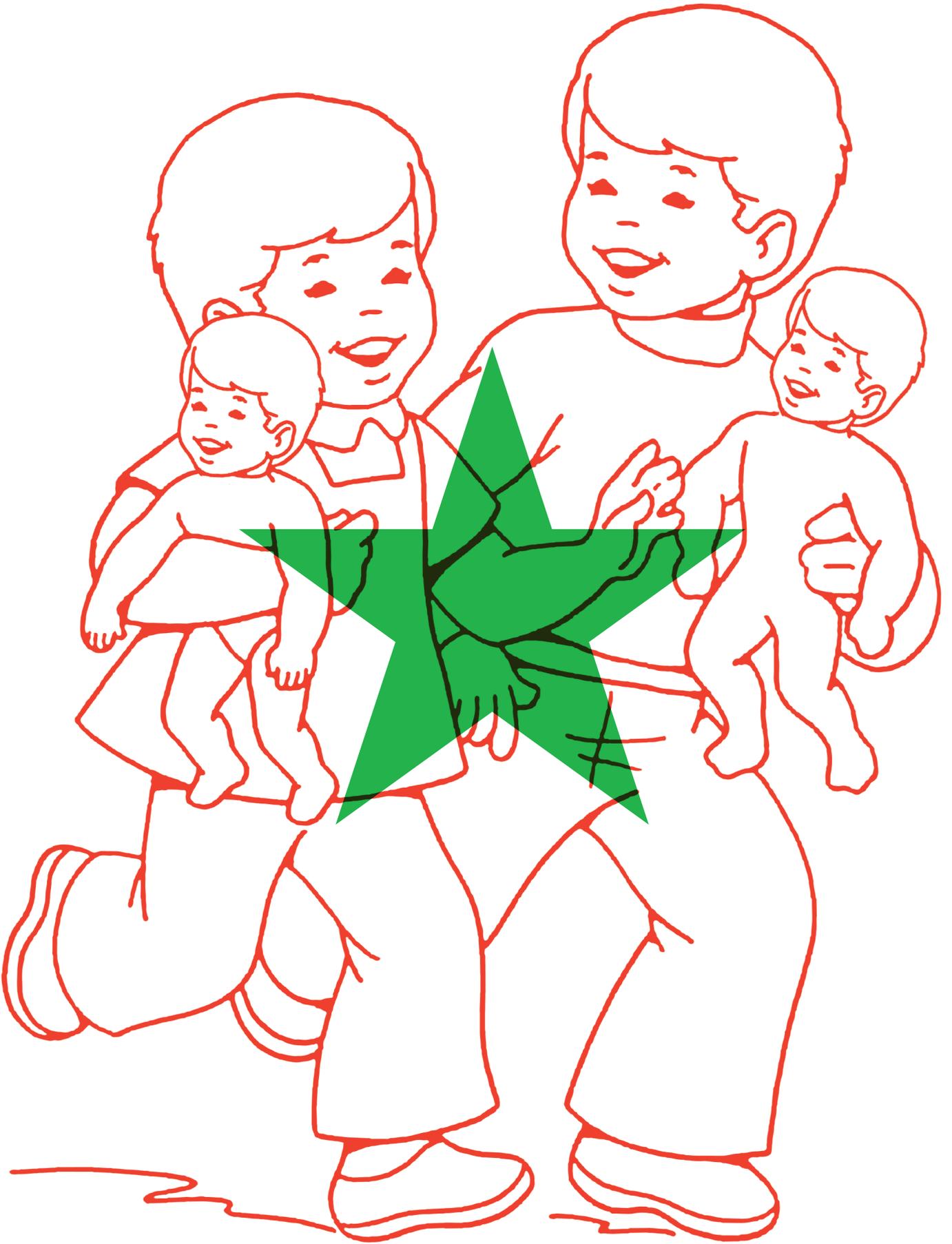
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Communicating these standards to potential funders as a single, united, professional entity is more effective than pursued on a case-to-case basis. Defining a balanced relationship between freelance curators and the organizations, state or private, that fund and support cultural production is imperative. Collective refusal to participate in production unless these prices are met is the cornerstone of such a communal endeavor. Funding bodies need to be aware of the realistic specifications of cultural production.

Independent art practitioners have traditionally been fueled by personal ambition and passion for the arts. This narrative is to be held accountable for the stretching and squeezing of the professional that has accepted exposure as a vague form of immaterial payment in return for getting to do the work he/she loves. If love of the profession has the power to allow us to work in such conditions indefinitely, it most certainly can overcome personal drive in order to create the collective mechanisms necessary for sustainability. “This is to say that love is both the problem and the solution to an emerging form of hyperactive, super-committed self-application that surpasses logics of exploitation and labor extraction because no one is really benefitting from the added value when it evaporates under the auspices of love or dedication”¹². Capitalizing the professional’s passion for the arts for the benefit of cultural production continuity is the way to preserve culture’s role in contemporary society.







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Athenian

The liminal space of Athenian, independent artistic production is a precious threshold in which the goal of continued existence and the responsibility for consistency must be maintained independent of international attention and political agendas. Not in a self-indulgent, naval-gazing manner, but with the sole address of the specific historical, financial, political and most importantly social circumstances that created it. It is exactly those circumstances that it is attempting to illustrate, critique, and eventually structurally affect. Not the other way around.



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N O T E S

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E T S V O K A N T A I A T A

Evita Tsokanta is an Athens-based independent curator, writer and educator. She received her BA in Art History and English from Rutgers University and her MA on Cultural and Creative Industries from King's College London. She lectures on curatorial practices and contemporary Greek art at the Columbia University Hellenic Studies Summer Program and Arcadia University College of Global Studies. She has contributed to several exhibition catalogues (including Songs for Sabotage, New Museum Triennial, 2018) and publications (including South, as a State of Mind). Previously she has curated Keep on Keeping on: a visual meta-collection at the American College of Greece Gallery and has been appointed co-curator of Reverb: New Art from Greece at School of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the 4th Athens Biennial, AGORA among others. She has collaborated extensively with independent art spaces in Athens, such as 3 137, State of Concept and Snehta while in 2018 she co-founded the curatorial initiative Miss Dialectic.



ENTERPRISE PROJECTS JOURNAL

EP Journal is a publishing initiative by Enterprise Projects in the form of a bimonthly online publication of newly commissioned theoretical and research essays, in both Greek and English. The reader can browse online, download and print each issue, with a design that reflects the needs and responds to the ideas presented in every text.



ENTERPRISE PROJECTS

Enterprise Projects is an Athens based project by Danai Giannoglou and Vasilis Papageorgiou. Created out of our need to express and share our point of view concerning contemporary artistic creation, this venture aims at experimenting and conversing, experimenting with the curatorial proposal, artistic creation, self-organized function, and conversing with the artistic scene, the Athenian audience and the place itself, which houses the project. As a structure Enterprise Projects has been functioning independently and periodically since September 2015 in Ampelokipoi, Athens.



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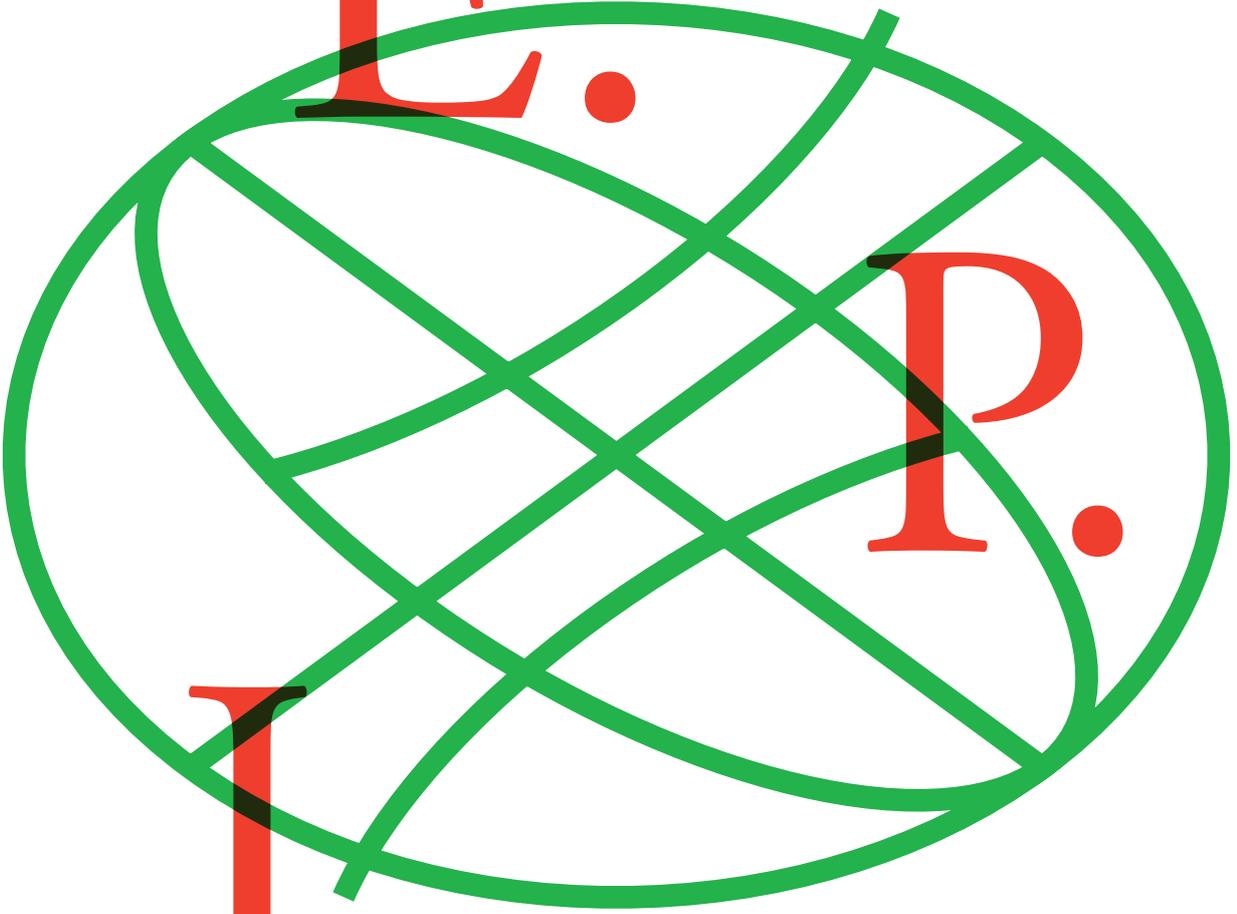
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