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**Art and Organization in the 21st Century:
Contemporary Art's Strategic-Organizational Complex**

Inaugural-Dissertation

zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität zu Köln

im Fach Kunstgeschichte

vorgelegt von Christoph Chwatal

geb. am 5. Mai 1990 in Wien

Berlin, am 4. Januar 2024

VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

**ART AND ORGANIZATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CONTEMPORARY ART'S
STRATEGIC-ORGANIZATIONAL COMPLEX**

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Introduction

Art and Organization

Rita McBride's *Arena* (1997) is a large-scale modular work made of plywood lined with fiberglass. This tribune-like structure comprises nine stairs and resembles a section of an amphitheater (fig. 0.1). It can be transported, assembled and disassembled, and invites visitors to climb, stand, and sit on it during performances and gatherings. It also works as a sculptural piece shown together with other works by the artist. Predating the post-2011 interest in the assembly as a social and political form and, with it, sculptural and architectural solutions to accommodate such gatherings, McBride's *Arena* differs from more recent works: Not just a backdrop for the coming together of people within art institutions and those outside of them, these newer practices conceive of the assembly in a much broader sense *as* their practice. Accordingly, as a theoretical underpinning, the assembly has become a key concept in contemporary art discourses to grasp practices hitherto described in terminologies such as relational aesthetics, social practice, socially engaged art, activism, as well as installation art. Fueled by the so-called Arab Spring and Occupy movements in 2011 and 2012, such transient coming together of people expressing shared grievances and forging new assemblages and collective bodies has influenced artistic practices and, alongside a particular strand of political theory, are significantly present in art-historical and theoretical inquiry.¹

Derided for its historical amnesia and activist stance, "Occupy art" became a saying in the wake of the 7th Berlin Biennial in 2012.² More nuanced notions of assembly-based practices have since emerged. For instance, Jonas Staal's *New World Summit* (started in 2012) provides a space for those habitually excluded from democratic fora, including blacklisted political organizations summoned by the artist (fig. 0.2). Staal even termed his practice "assemblism."³

¹ See for instance Anne Davidian and Laurent Jeanpierre, eds., *What Makes an Assembly? Stories, Experiments, and Inquiries* (Antwerp/London: Evens Foundation/Sternberg Press, 2022); Regula Valérie Burri et al., eds., *Versammlung und Teilhabe: Urbane Öffentlichkeiten und performative Künste* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014).

² Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London/New York: Verso, 2016).

³ Jonas Staal, "Assemblism," *e-flux Journal*, no. 80 (March 2017).

Asking what remains after a coming together of people, political theorists have more recently started to again engage in the question of organization, a long-standing concern in debates on the Left. We can detect a similar shift within art: While Staal's work contributed to discourses around the assembly, he began to conceive of his and others' practice as "organizational art."⁴ The increasing significance of theories alongside practices of organization, and a critique of alienating and short-term "project art," are at the core of this dissertation.

Organization's Dual Horizon

This dissertation investigates the dual horizon of organization in contemporary art, both as an artistic form and a mode of orientation toward the social and political. In so doing, it starts by observing an omnipresence of physical gatherings within art practices of the past two decades. These gatherings range from artistic workshops and public programs to assemblies in visual and performing arts institutions. Importantly, this boom of presence and participation has been accompanied by a resurgent interest in social and political organizing as artistic practice. This can especially be detected in the wake of the Occupy movements, where artists played a vital role as organizers.⁵ Organizing transpires as linking to and intervening in the social and political and thus also bears witness to a renewed interest in concepts of autonomy. While contemporary manifestations of "involved autonomy" feed into a larger history of the like, there is presently an "urgency not only to reflect on and criticize social contexts but also to intervene directly in public affairs or to produce forms of the social themselves."⁶ As I argue, this can be grasped through the lens of organization—the ways in which artistic-aesthetic practices link with and "intervene" in the social and political.⁷

Artists engaging in the art of organization conceptualize, initiate, negotiate for, and sustain organizational forms as their practice. This includes artist-founded archives and nongovernmental organizations, traveling museums as artworks run by artists, artist-initiated learning organizations, artistic research agencies working across different disciplines and fields, local cooperatives co-founded by artists, or ersatz parliaments hosted by art and theater spaces.

⁴ Jonas Staal, "Organizational Art," in *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 135–41.

⁵ This is the main argument of Yates McKee, *Strike Art*.

⁶ Birgit Eusterschulte and Christian Krüger, "Einleitung," in *Involvierte Autonomie: Künstlerische Praxis zwischen Engagement und Eigenlogik*, ed. Birgit Eusterschulte and Christian Krüger (Bielefeld: transcript, 2022), 10. My translation.

⁷ See the Collaborative Research Centre Intervening Arts, <https://www.sfb-intervenierende-kuenste.de>.

Transversal at their core, practices in contemporary art's *strategic-organizational complex* maneuver between different fields, with one foot in an increasingly less peripheral part of the "mainstream art world" and the other one outside of it.⁸

The relation between art and organization calls for a terminological clarification: In lay use, the nouns organization and institution are habitually employed almost as if they were synonyms. For example, when referring to the art museum as an institution or organization, we can picture a physical building with a director and staff, a collection and an archive, and exhibitions that we can visit during opening hours. However, there is also the institution of the museum that has been the object of institutional critique. Here the term habitually refers to the institution's power structures, as well as its colonial, hegemonic, and capitalist entanglements. Art as an institution spans a wide field of actual organizations and a range of overt and covert hierarchies and conventions. Following this line of interpretation, I use the term institution whenever an abstract idea is concerned. Institutions are often not clear-cut; they are difficult to pin down to a physical site or set of actors. The institution of marriage, for example, consists of a multiplicity of legal and economic apparatuses and a wide array of historical, political, and affective workings that have molded what we understand by the term marriage—ranging as widely as a romantic bond for life to a mere legal instrument to attain tax breaks. Institutions are not stable objects but subject to constant change, they indeed have "lives of their own."⁹ To avoid the terms institution or organization appearing as a semantic slip, while I will be referring to the term institution within this more abstract sense, the term organization usually denotes a more concrete form with discernible boundaries, legal forms, and organigrams. This definition of organization as a noun will be explored throughout this dissertation using concrete examples of artist-initiated and artist-led organizations taking form as works of art. For these, I use the term artworks-as-organizations in an expansion on established ones such as para-institution, whose prefix "para" denotes both next to and near, as well as against.

To add another degree of removal, organization is also an inherently political term. Considering the surge of differently sized and shaped auxiliaries to party politics, the definition of a political organization is broad. It ranges from unions and councils to "a more or less formally

⁸ Claire Bishop, "Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media," *Artforum* 51, no. 1 (September 2012): 436. This includes "commercial galleries, the Turner Prize, national pavilions at Venice."

⁹ Robert Seyfert, *Das Leben der Institutionen: Zu einer allgemeinen Theorie der Institutionalisierung* (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2011).

structured campaign or social movement; a collective, a network, an affinity group.”¹⁰ The aftermath of the Occupy movements and, more recently, Black Lives Matter have spurred scholars to rethink political organization. In a guide for grassroots leaders, we read: “Organizing is people working together to get things done.”¹¹ Organizing adds yet another layer of meaning by defining it as how artistic practices relate to the social and political, paralleling grassroots organizing and political theory. The question of how to organize beyond the limitations of short-term assemblies, tactics, and horizontality has thus moved center stage.

The “long march through the institutions,” a saying popularized in German Marxist circles and the new social movements of the 1960s, has certainly not lost its fascination. Reformist at its core, such an idea involves transforming existing political organizations and democratic institutions from within. Considering the popular movements of the past two decades, including the alter-globalization movements of the early millennium and that of Occupy a decade later, this immanent perspective has been widely contested if not supplanted by an interest in complementary forms of organization beyond party and state. These debates echo more recent formulations of institutional critique within the art field that, rather than participating in exterior critique as in the 1970s or focusing on immanence as in the 1990s, engage instead in “instituting” and amount to what Gerald Raunig termed “instituent practices.”¹² In line with scholars of radical democratic theory who inquire into the possibilities of democratizing institutions from the military to the museum,¹³ institutions are not necessarily disciplinary, impermeable, and vertically organized, but have the potential to be democratic. In turn, through linking up with other social and political fields, artistic practices can both criticize established ones and point out complementary organizational forms—that this, following our earlier observations, modes of relating to and intervening in the social and political.

We are witnessing a paradoxical situation where there is increasing contempt for the institutions and political organizations which are withering away under neoliberalism’s grip and the scrutiny of rightwing-conservative pressure, whilst we simultaneously see an affirmation of

¹⁰ Rodrigo Nunes, *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organisation* (London/New York: Verso, 2021), 17.

¹¹ Si Kahn, *Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders* (Washington, DC: NASW Press, 1991), 5.

¹² Gerald Raunig, “Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming,” in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFly Books, 2009), 3–11.

¹³ Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (London/New York: Verso, 2016); Nora Sternfeld, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018).

their necessity and viability: Institutions and organizations are not only “steel-hard casings,”¹⁴ to use sociologist Max Weber’s well-trodden metaphor. To assume they are nothing more than *stahlhartes Gehäuse* entrapping, alienating, and depriving us of our agency neglects forms of government that increasingly cease to exert vertical pressure. They instead strive to operate through and within an “imperative of creativity,”¹⁵ appealing to individual capacities by addressing not a collective body but atomized individuals. These changing conditions provide one backdrop to our discussion on artworks-as-organizations.

Over the last two decades, political theories dubbed radical democratic have played a vital role in theorizing artistic practice. However, there is still a lack of engagement with this from the perspective of art historical and theoretical literature. To add a layer of prescription to this rather descriptive statement, art history and theory must engage in concepts such as organization to move beyond Jacques Rancière’s account of political art in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), namely a “distribution of the sensible,”¹⁶ still a prevailing model in art historical and theoretical inquiry. The political relations undergirding the material of research for this dissertation follow in the footsteps of a distinctive conception of the relation between art and politics. To recall Walter Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer” (1934), the author-artist of the progressive kind as imagined by Benjamin “directs his activity towards what will be useful to the proletariat in the class struggle,” an activity or form of engagement he terms “commitment.”¹⁷ Following Benjamin, the author-artist must actively engage and intervene in the political and thus become a producer. Benjamin took his cues from Sergei Tret’iakov, notably the Soviet Russian writer’s concept of the “operative writer,” whose “mission is not to report but to fight” and “not to assume the spectator’s role but to intervene actively.”¹⁸ In a 1931 lecture, Tret’iakov argued for an operationalization of art to “create out of reality, out of concrete struggle and labor.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Max Weber’s concept of the “steel-hard casing” or “iron cage” (two competing translations of German *stahlhartes Gehäuse*) describes the rationalization in capitalist societies, a form of entrapment through rationality and control. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [1905], ed. and trans. Stephen Kalberg (New York/Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 123.

¹⁵ Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New* [2012], trans. Steven Black (London: Polity, 2017).

¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London/New York: Continuum, 2004).

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer [1934],” in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London/New York: Verso, 1998), 86.

¹⁸ Benjamin, 88.

¹⁹ Sergei Tret’iakov, “The Writer and the Socialist Village [1931],” *October*, no. 118 (Fall 2006): 68.

Where this first point of entry has been theoretical, by contrast, the following observations are informed and guided by practice: From divergent geopolitical positions, using diverse means, and striving toward different aims, artists increasingly engage in initiating and testing longer-term organizational forms instead of conceiving short-duration projects. Looking at Boris Groys's analysis, which will be referenced in Chapter 1, I discuss whether this longing for sustainability is linked to a need to counteract the alleged "loneliness" of the project.²⁰ Akin to any other project worker across society, such (self-)imposed seclusion can cut the artist off from other social and political contexts and thus delimit their scope of action to fulfill their current project aims. This is not to claim that long-term artist organizations are free of the restrictions imposed by funding applications, deadlines, and reports. There is no outside of project-based labor, just as there is no outside of the neoliberal economy. Evolving beyond project work means not only a rebellion against temporality, but a search for longer-term and strategic forms of action with and embedded in the social and political, often with specific constituencies, civil society organizations, and a critical faction of established art institutions.

Project and Organization

The question of alternatives to time-bound projects has invariably come up over the past years in conversations held with artists and art workers, curators and directors, and fellow researchers.²¹ As "projectarians," argues Kuba Szreder, we must grapple with how we live and work in this precarious (art) world. "Individual projectarians," he urges, "have to unlearn their own habits, moving away from their current aim of staying competitive in the dense symbolic jungle of global circulation."²² Szreder's sociologically-theoretically informed concept of the projectariat is one manifestation of a larger drive toward coming to terms with precarious labor as well as collectively facing the working conditions and underlying political-economic structures we are subjected to as art workers in times of network capitalism.

Organizations are not stable entities at our disposal, they morph through distinct phases of formation, demarcate themselves toward the outside, distinguish between in-groups and

²⁰ Boris Groys, "The Loneliness of the Project [2002]," in *Going Public* (Berlin/New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 70–83.

²¹ For instance, in conversations with director Leon Hösl beginning in 2020, (whom I assisted at the first edition of Biennale für Freiburg, Germany) and continued with fellow Advisory Board members, we discussed at-length how to supersede the singular event mandated by the workings of the biennial-festival circuit.

²² Kuba Szreder, *The ABC of the Projectariat: Living and Working in a Precarious Art World*, Whitworth Manuals 1 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 221.

out-groups, and are prone to internal dispute and rupture. They can often dissolve: Here we can recall the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC), which coined the term art workers yet had ceased to exist three years later by 1972 having dispersed into numerous smaller initiatives. As radical as its initial demands were, the AWC was short-lived precisely due to its inability to adapt to a changing world and make allies across a widening field of disenfranchised workers.²³ The question of how to supersede the temporary project in favor of sustainability seems to haunt artists, and there is ample precedent to this from the 20th century. Consider Joseph Beuys who started planting oak trees during documenta 7 in 1982 with his organization *Free International University. 7000 Oaks – City Forestation Instead of City Administration* exemplifies the artist's ecological concerns in what reads twofold as a sustainable project: On the one hand, through the resistance it staged to post-war Germany's "concrete deserts"; on the other, by questioning artistic sustainability and organizational solutions that carry an impact lingering beyond the artist's lifespan.²⁴ Essentially a work of public art, this piece was only completed after Beuys's death, having since been maintained by a non-profit charged with its upkeep (fig. 0.3).

The afterlives of collectively initiated institutions or organizations sometimes span into the present. Consider grupa "a.r." (the initials translate to both "real avant-garde" and "revolutionary artists") formed in 1929 in Łódź, Poland. The group's extensive activities collecting the work of internationally renowned artists at that time laid the foundation for today's Muzeum Sztuki, the city's modern and contemporary art museum. From interwar Poland to the southwest of today's Central Eastern Europe, Slovenia's Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), founded in 1984 in Ljubljana, has cultivated the art of organization. It has done so both aesthetically and in the concrete organization and structuring of the group's activities as demonstrated by their organigram (fig. 0.4). NSK comprises different departments and groups or collectives, including the musical group Laibach and the artist collective IRWIN, arranged in a "conical principle" and each taking over distinct roles and functions. As disparate as these examples are, over the past century a wide range of artist initiatives and organizations have shared a longing to supersede the temporary, precisely by engaging in organizational solutions that should bolster a longer existence, ranging from founding registered associations, circulating formalized diagrams, to securing physical sites.

²³ Julia Bryan-Wilson, "From Artists to Art Workers," in *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2009), 12–39.

²⁴ See also Christoph Chwatal, "Can We Learn from Beuys? On Ecology and Artistic Sustainability," *Voices – Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden*, September 17, 2021.

Jumping from the late 1920s to the present: documenta fifteen in 2022 displayed an array of organizational forms, notably starring practices from the so-called Global South. In its design and curatorial model, documenta fifteen offered a condensed overview of global contemporary art's *strategic-organizational complex*, as outlined in this dissertation —albeit none of the practices discussed here featured in the show. Diagrams, maps, and organizational charts were recurring if not dominant aesthetic manifestations in documenta fifteen. They were accompanied by countless gatherings in different shapes, sizes, temporalities, and localities—or “majelis,” to use the terminology proposed by ruangrupa, the collective that directed this 15th edition of the quinquennial.²⁵ Documenta fifteen's “ekosistem” comprised variously sized and geographically diverse collectives and organizations responsible for generating their own activities. Among them were fourteen “lambung members”—artist-initiated organizations, archives, and collectively led art initiatives and spaces, leading to around 1,500 individuals featured on the extended artist list. Mi You points to the more productive questions that this documenta proffers:

Does the organizational become an end in itself, a kind of institutional self-actualization of the artists, curators, and community organizers? Are we entering an era in which artistic curatorial practices are merged into organizational development, or even entrepreneurship?²⁶

As much as any other commentator observing some sort of organizational turn collated within documenta fifteen, You conveniently glosses over the fact that documenta 14 already featured a wide range of organizational practices—from Irena Haiduk's *Yugoexport* and Maria Eichhorn's *Rose Valland Institut* to the curatorially-induced Open Form Societies, to which we will return toward the end of Chapter 3. Nonetheless, she strikes a nerve by framing documenta fifteen as the pinnacle of a broader tendency of organizational practices that have shaped the past decade. Her account is bolstered by some of the reference material that has informed the research for this dissertation.

In the wake of documenta fifteen, German critic Hanno Rauterberg asserted that “the era of individual artists is over.”²⁷ There has indeed been a surging art historical and theoretical

²⁵ Ruangrupa had received criticism connected to allegations of antisemitism, unfolding long before the opening. Ignited by Jonas Dörge's Alliance against Antisemitism (in fact a “one-man show”), the scandal was later propelled by antisemitic imagery in Taring Padi's large-scale work at Friedrichsplatz. ruangrupa, “Antisemitism Accusations against documenta: A Scandal about a Rumor,” *e-flux Notes*, May 7, 2022.

²⁶ Mi You, “What Politics? What Aesthetics?: Reflections on documenta fifteen,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 131 (November 2022).

²⁷ Hanno Rauterberg, “Wir! Wir! Wir!,” *Die Zeit*, October 20, 2021.

interest in diverting the focus from modernist artist groups towards collaborative practice and collectivity in the post-1989 contemporary art field.²⁸ A 1991 *Kunstforum* issue reflected on the question of collectivity against the backdrop of the fall of the Berlin Wall and how it had become “anachronistic” after the “collapse of socialism.”²⁹ Three decades later, according to the preface of a 2021 *Texte zur Kunst* issue, “cooperation and collaboration” are now “buzzwords in the globalized art field.”³⁰ Within the three decades that also demarcate a temporal delineation of contemporary art,³¹ the discourse on collectivity has radically changed in its premises. Like the concept of the project, it is more appropriate to understand collective and collaborative production as short-circuited to the dominant political economy (including that of contemporary art) rather than against the grain.

The focus of this dissertation deviates from a general interest in art collectives as both embodying and feeding into premature celebrations of collectivity. Instead, it investigates a specific form of practice that engages in what I describe at the beginning of this introduction as organization’s dual horizon—a form of engagement in varied forms of organization and interventions in the social and political through organization. Conceiving this edition of *documenta* as a constellation of artist organizations, the idea of “collectives as an alternative to institutions,” as one of the illustrations in the *documenta fifteen Handbook* suggests, transpired unmistakably throughout the program (fig. 0.5). If by the term institutions we are meant to understand traditional art institutions such as museums, galleries, biennials, or fairs, substituting them with collective practices is a far-reaching suggestion. Collectivity and organizational forms were the leitmotifs of *documenta fifteen*, and we could push the illustration further by positing organizations as an alternative to collectives and institutions.

This dissertation understands organization both as mode of orientation toward the social and political and through artistic practices engaging with organizational forms. The concept of form is arguably central to art history—and is, as such, disputed. There is always a relationship between artistic form and other forms, including social and political ones. As much as we can

²⁸ See for instance Rachel Mader, ed., *Kollektive Autorschaft in der Kunst: Alternatives Handeln und Denkmodell*, *Kunstgeschichten der Gegenwart* 10 (Frankfurt a.M./New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

²⁹ Florian Rötzer and Sarah Rogenhofer, “Künstlergruppen: Von der Utopie einer kollektiven Kunst,” *Kunstforum International*, no. 116 (December 1991): 71.

³⁰ Katharina Hausladen and Genevieve Lipinsky de Orlov, “Preface,” *Texte zur Kunst* 31, no. 124 (December 2021): 4.

³¹ Alexander Alberro, “Periodising Contemporary Art,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2004), 64–71; See also Peter Osborne’s periodization as post-1989 “geopolitically reflexive” practices, Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), 176.

grasp, for instance, a resurging interest in concepts of autonomy, form is a “master signifier of modern aesthetic theory” as Sven Lütticken aptly put it.³² One of the references in this expanded history of art is literary critic Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015). She recounts:

Traditional formalist analysis—close reading—meant interpreting all of the formal techniques of a text as contributing to an overarching artistic whole. A contemporary critic, informed by several decades of historical approaches, would want instead to take stock of the social and political conditions that surrounded the work’s production, and she would work to connect the novel’s forms to its social world. She would seek to show how literary techniques reinforced or undermined specific institutions and political relationships, such as imperial power, global capital, or racism. Along the way, our critic would most likely keep her formalism and her historicism analytically separate, drawing from close reading methods to understand the literary forms, while using historical research methods to analyze sociopolitical experience. These would seem to her to belong to separate realms and to call for different methods.³³

Levine casts doubt on the supposedly neat separation of the artistic-literary and the social-political. Instead, she opts for a broader understanding of form, as it “is the work of form to make order.” She continues, writing that, “this means that forms are the stuff of politics,” and “there is no politics without form.”³⁴ For Levine, who draws on Rancière’s concept of politics, form constitutes “an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping.”³⁵ Thus (organizational) forms in the context of artistic-aesthetic practice gain meaning through organizing and arranging, genuinely artistic and political in their operation. In Chapter 1, we will discover the project as a prevalent form in everyday life and work contexts, as well as in that of contemporary art. We will observe that the social and political form of the assembly is caught in-between “transience” and “formalization.”³⁶ As such, we will discuss an array of social-political forms, including the assembly, the alliance, the movement, the archive, the museum, and the university, to mention just a few.

³² Sven Lütticken, *Objections: Forms of Abstraction, Vol. 1* (London: Sternberg Press, 2023), 14. This is in pursuit of an account of a “historical formalism” with an “expanded art history” emerging from it.

³³ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1.

³⁴ Levine, 3.

³⁵ Levine, 3. Emphasis in original.

³⁶ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 7; Anne Davidian and Laurent Jeanpierre, “What Makes an Assembly?,” in *What Makes an Assembly? Stories, Experiments, and Inquiries*, ed. Anne Davidian and Laurent Jeanpierre (Antwerp/London: Evens Foundation/Sternberg Press, 2022), 29. Emphasis in original.

Toward a “Shared Worksite”

This research carves out a space in what can be understood as a “shared worksite,”³⁷ a common ground of inquiry extending across various positions and disciplines. It investigates longer-term and strategic forms of artistic work from an art-historical and theoretically informed perspective. In so doing, it builds on a complementary set of practices that operate in the shape of long-term projects or artist organizations. By analyzing said practices, this dissertation engages in a cartography of emerging practices, locating them in larger debates and discourses in contemporary art, political theory, and current societal issues.

One of this research project’s starting points was the concept of knowledge production, a common topic in discourses around the aesthetic-political capacities of contemporary art. This has become ubiquitous when considering research-based art practices and the high currency of educational and discursive formats. More so, the orientation toward knowledge and research has increasingly displaced other aesthetic and formal criteria.³⁸ A definition of knowledge production can be broadly summed up in the concept of “*epistemic activity*,”³⁹ as Tom Holert aptly put it, mentioning the use of language, thinking, learning, or archiving as examples. Although Holert’s account also comprises social organizing, there is little consideration of artistic practices which engage in organizational forms. This dissertation explores and seeks to fill this gap as, over the past two decades, we have seen the rapid growth in number of artists who devise organizational forms, of which a comparative and in-depth study is needed. During the research for this dissertation project, notably sparked by Holert’s writings, my interest in one particular type of knowledge production came to the fore—the focus on social organizing as knowledge production.

Throughout this dissertation, the implications of a temporal (from short-term to long-term), operational (from tactics to strategy), and functional shift (from project work to organization) will be made productive in locating the aesthetic-epistemic and the political role of contemporary art. My core argument is that the practices discussed here exhibit a critique

³⁷ Nunes, *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal*, 5.

³⁸ This is apparent when knowledge includes queer-feminist and decolonial epistemologies, as well as “subjugated knowledges.” Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 7.

³⁹ Tom Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art’s Epistemic Politics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020), 45. Emphasis in original; See Christoph Chwatal, “Book Review: Tom Holert, ‘Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art’s Epistemic Politics’ (Sternberg Press, 2020),” *Third Text Online*, October 12, 2020.

of short-term and tactical forms of project work. I argue that they indicate a shift toward long-term strategic collaborations involving actors from various social fields. This shift is part of a more profound rearrangement of aesthetic-artistic, curatorial, and institutional practices since the early 2000s. I am not advocating for an “organizational turn.”⁴⁰ Instead, I map an organizational undercurrent in art since the 1960s. My argument develops around the contention that this is not limited to socially engaged art, where organizing and organization have been commonplace. Instead, the *strategic-organizational complex* in contemporary art spans critical-archival art, research-based art, and institutional critique.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ditte Vilstrup Holm and Timon Beyes, “How Art Becomes Organization: Reimagining Aesthetics, Sites and Politics of Entrepreneurship,” *Organization Studies* 43, no. 2 (April 2021): 227–45.

⁴¹ These concepts vary in their nature and are stated here in a deliberately broad manner. Further elaboration on this will be provided in the following section of this introduction and the upcoming chapters.

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Summary

In the aftermath of the popular movements of the past decade, political theorists have paid renewed attention to the question of how to transform the powerful yet transient coming together of people in public assemblies into sustainable forms of organization. A similar reconfiguration has taken place within contemporary art discourses. Here we can see a shift in focus from interventionism and the tactical to a broader interest in practices driven by longer-term, strategic-organizational approaches.

Practices in the *strategic-organizational complex* of contemporary art conceptualize and initiate, negotiate for, and sustain organizational forms, habitually involving varying degrees of fiction. This complex encompasses a diversity of manifestations. We can start with practices located around archives, as exemplified by the work of Walid Raad, nongovernmental organizations as explored by Khalil Rabah, museums reimaged as artworks in the practice of Not An Alternative, artistic research agencies like Forensic Architecture, learning platforms such as *The Silent University*, local cooperatives co-initiated by Jeanne van Heeswijk, and ersatz parliaments as envisioned by Jonas Staal, among others. While situating these practices within the broader art historical discourses from the 1960s to 1990s, this dissertation takes its cues from political theories of organization as put forth by scholars such as Judith Butler, Jodi Dean, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, and Rodrigo Nunes.

Conceptualizing organization as a “shared worksite” in line with the insights of Nunes, this inquiry challenges the notion that the development of complementary organizational forms is confined to socially engaged art, where organizing and sustainability are commonly emphasized. Instead, the *strategic-organizational complex* outlined in this dissertation extends its reach to critical-archival practice, research-based art, and institutional critique. The argument in this dissertation is that the discussed practices are indicative of a critique of short-term “project work.” They instead reflect an increasingly pronounced inclination towards longer-term strategic collaborations involving actors from diverse social and political spheres. The dissertation explores the implications of a temporal shift from short-term to long-term, an operational transformation from tactics to strategy, and a functional transition from project to organization. This serves as a springboard for a discussion on aesthetic, epistemic, and political dimensions of contemporary art.