

Project work accelerates time and intensifies exhaustion because nobody is the author of their project anymore despite their considerable investment into it.^{vii}

- 'The Project at Work',
Bojana Kunst

Long before this crisis they were living with little hope of institutional or structural support contending with perilous futures, untenable debt, fear [...] I have to remind myself to remember this: their style is all they have.^{viii}

- *Intimations*, Zadie Smith.

A 'project' within cultural production can be understood as a scheme, draft or plan which requires an infinite string of proposals, revisions, and appraisals. The use of the term can be traced back to the foundations of modernism in which interdisciplinary processes were becoming central to artistic production. It became integrated within the landscape of visual culture during the 1960s in which highly collaborative works were standing in opposition to hierarchies, alienated labour, and the exclusion of art practice from life. Cultural processes

were drifting towards more 'performative, situational and sustainable' ways of working which ultimately modified the temporality of artistic practice. The ultimate goal of the historical avant-garde movement and the central utopian project of the twentieth century was to 'change the present'.^{ix}

German author Bojana Kunst states that the project has the structural capacity to take time away from the present and alter the way in which we work and live today. Kunst defines the contemporary working artist as someone who pursues work on a project basis. Workers move between an 'endless string of projects' from the implementation of one to the beginning of another. Kunst states that work in the creative profession has never placed so much importance on future projects and the ability to perceive 'what is yet to happen.' The repetitive use of the term in the creative field is associated with a particular element of time in relation to work and creation. This idea is what Kunst has termed 'projective temporality' in which she situates the project as an entity which consists of multiple individual works that continually develop and alter because the 'the ultimate horizon of creation' cannot be reached. Young artists often escape 'projective temporality' as their interests are frequently rooted in the 'work-in-progress', therefore, they pursue residencies, research programmes and demonstrations.

However, the emerging artist is expected to expose 'potential values' deemed useful by the market which often subjects young artists to a state of 'experimental precariousness' as they find themselves assuming the role of a 'low-class labour force.'^x

Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant states that the present moment is sullied by a 'cruel optimism'. This term can be understood as desiring something that is unachievable or an obstacle to your flourishing.^{xi} It can feel like your bodily responses will always be a step behind the object desired – driven by a sort of precariousness which pushes people to work harder in order to reach an unattainable aspiration. For example, the act of pursuing a project often encourages a worker to invest their time and energy into a cluster of promises which are ultimately frozen in the future, thus, ensuing a state of deflation. Similarly, Kunst's theory of 'projective temporality' steals time from the present in order to fortify work in the future. The daily mantra of 'I do not have time' is bound to the logic that 'the more it is possible to project, the less time we have for duration and persistence' in relation to systemic change. The contemporary worker is expected to sustain 'realised' and 'unrealised' work while also proposing new projects to open up new possibilities for the future. The process of projecting simultaneously

consists of the unrelenting practice of competitive enthusiasm and self-realisation in which behavioural tests, performance evaluations and critical reviews lead to habitual burnout.

The actual word 'project' belongs to a landfill of umbrella terms which identify as empty signifiers that neglect to maintain any solid meaning. This abstraction of terminology highlights the disappearance of specificity in contemporary labour which essentially subjects a worker to a state of permanent impermanence. Kunst states that the project can be perceived as an oath to the future while also being realised as a 'catastrophe' as the worker needs to reach the deadline, or, in Kunst words, the line of death. However, the target is undermined by the fact that life goes on regardless of its completion. Therefore, the desired conclusion of implementing a project is controlled by a 'cruel optimism' which has incessantly taken time away from the present and contributed to the exhaustion of life. The catastrophe instilled within the project is the future dimension in which we invest all of our time.

According to French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, only when a conclusion has been realised does it become clear that it's not a conclusion at all. Lefebvre resides with the belief that each totalizing effort is undercut by an

overwhelming feeling of dissatisfaction and anxiety as the horizon of completion is always one step ahead.^{xii} The more the project attempts to change the present, the more control it has on the current living and working conditions. Kunst states that we work dutifully for the future while the present evaporates right before us. Similarly, art critic Boris Groys describes project work as “socially sanctioned loneliness” in which life and work is out of sync with the general flow of time experienced by society. The project separates itself from the over-all run of things as it is based on the aspiration that it will improve circumstances in the future. According to Groys, this exclusion ‘entails a feeling of sickness’ which causes symptoms of solipsism, isolation and the sense of a general lack of time.^{xiii} Kunst articulates a similar sense of estrangement in which she states that the validity of the project is no longer controlled by the implementor but by nameless ‘bureaucratic and managerial’ structures. This shift of authorship is fuelled by the subordination of the project to various administrative and organisational procedures. Subsequently, the production of project work intensifies while exhaustion ensues as ‘nobody is the author of their project anymore despite their considerable investment into it.’^{xiv}

If project work is the prevailing form of creative labour and precarity is the result – how will the artist survive at work?