

# Managing Expectation

Joshua  
Schwebel  
on *Subsidy*

*Joshua Schwebel &  
François Lemieux*

*In 2015 Joshua Schwebel was awarded an artist-residency at Quebec's Künstlerhaus Bethanien Studio in Berlin where he developed Subsidy, an artwork that would make visible unpaid labour.*

François Lemieux Could you tell us about the circumstances around the making of *Subsidy*?

Joshua Schwebel In 2015 I was awarded a residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien (KB) in Berlin through a grant from the Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec (CALQ), which provided me with a full year in residence, from January – December 2015, inclusive of a solo exhibition, and a catalogue publication. The KB is an artist's residency that has been hosting international artists since the early 1980's, and is quite well-reputed, due to the duration of an artist's stay, the facilities, the number of international artists it hosts, and the location in Berlin, a global art capital.

The project I developed and enacted during the residency was not what I had proposed, nor what I had anticipated. On my first day in the residency I was introduced to the staff in the administrative office, which included the intern at the reception desk. When there was a moment apart, I asked her if her internship was paid. Somewhat surprised at my question, she confessed that the position was unpaid. I had never before worked in an organization that had unpaid interns. In my previous professional experience, which was predominantly with artist-run centres in Canada and Québec, the staff was paid, albeit quite poorly, and while I had been aware of the proliferation of this practice of engaging unpaid interns, this was the first time I encountered it in an organization in which I was expected to produce my own work. The contrast in priorities demonstrated by this institution, between its outward representation and its internal labour politics, and the contrast in funds and facilities available to me personally, yet withheld from others working within the same institution, really weighed on me.

For some time leading up to this residency I had been becoming more and more anxious about my own precarious status as an artist. The necessity to support myself financially does not intersect coherently with the ethical and conceptual constraints I demand of my artwork, and I found myself compromising either my own artistic standards or my income in attempting to force these conditions together. Achieving the Berlin studio was a huge accomplishment, but also felt somewhat hollow in the recognition that the institutional structure included such exploitative practices as unpaid internships. At the beginning of the residency I struggled with how to feel self-respect and to maintain an honest and critical practice in this (to me) dishonest and uncritical institutional context.

After about a month of intense frustration and unsatisfactory returns to my initial proposal, I arrived at what now seems an inevitable and obvious work: I would use my exhibition and its budget to pay the unpaid interns for the complete year, and simultaneously make this payment visible. The mandatory exhibition would make the process of payment and its exposure more relevant, more necessary, and act as a sort of public guarantee for the transaction. Redirecting my funds in this way would allow me to extract myself from this web of self-advancement on the backs of other peoples' exploitation (at least, and if only for the duration of my interaction with this particular organization). The final work was to transfer the budget allocated for my exhibition into honorary fees for the interns who worked in the offices during my year of residence. Seven interns each received €428, for which they invoiced me for the "performance of internship duties in the offices of the Künstlerhaus Bethanien." During the three-week duration of the

exhibition (October 8 – October 31, 2015), the interns currently working in the office of the KB (Livia Tarsia in Curia and Catarina Pires), performed their assigned office duties within the exhibition space, which for the purposes of the exhibition I had transformed into a semi-private office space. Livia and Catarina worked in the gallery during the overlap between office and gallery hours (between 14h and 18h Tuesday – Thursday, and 14h and 16h30 on Fridays), speaking with visitors should they have questions, but for the most part, performing the duties they normally would undertake in the KB's administrative offices. All furniture in the exhibition was provided from the KB's own storage, and office supplies were taken from the administrative offices. Funds to divide the exhibition space into an office were redirected from allocations for my (unused) publicity budget.

I felt at the time that this might be the last art work I would do, because I was probably blowing up one of the best 'career' opportunities that I would ever have, and alienating this major form of institutional support, but I just couldn't see any other option given the context.

*f1* How did you introduce this idea to the curators/directors of the Künstlerhaus Bethanien?

*JS* I decided that the best way to communicate the work was by email. In retrospect I think that this form of disclosure caused more difficulty than I anticipated, but at the time I had thought that by communicating the project in writing, I would be most able to collect my ideas and to clearly articulate my intentions. It would also ensure a form to trace the negotiation process, should I want this to become part of the exhibited work. I sent the depicted letter

by email, which ultimately did end up being exhibited in the gallery.

I received a phone call from the artistic director ten minutes after my email was sent. In this phone call I was told that he was very disappointed in the proposal I had outlined, and that what I suggested in my letter was not going to be possible at the KB. Above all, the director insisted that my intention to redirect funds was too political to be art, which when I replied that I didn't think he could tell me what was and wasn't art, he stated that this proposal categorically was not art. He continued that the administration could not apply the budget I had been granted to this purpose, it could only be accessed for artistic materials towards the exhibition. He recommended that I should join a political campaign if I wanted to deal with these issues. He refused to pursue the work any further, so when I replied that I was still going to find a way to continue the work, he stated that I would have to ask my funders' permission. He also refused to make any response in writing.

It is rare that someone in a central position of power within the art field has told me outright that my work is not art. This very statement angered me, since it took the power to determine my work away from me. Its hostility and defensiveness also revealed the conservative, unreflexive, and apolitical core of this particular contemporary art institution, a secret which is normally kept deeply hidden and concealed beneath rhetoric proclaiming the liberal and avant-garde values of contemporary art.

I did contact the CALQ, but from a different angle – to alert them to the unprofessional and potentially explosive situation that was taking place. I hoped that they would reinforce my work, and remind the director that he could not tell an

artist what was and wasn't art. To my dismay, the officer wrote back to say that the CALQ would not interfere, and that she hoped I could work it out with the institution.

After a week of deadlock, the director and I had a face-to-face meeting. We discussed the directors' feelings that my work made himself and his institution look bad, which I reminded him was not my responsibility, alongside the fact that the work pointed to a global issue in cultural work under a political system that prioritizes profit. I suggested that if he felt bad about the conditions within his institution, rather than forbid them from being made public by attacking his critics, he himself should campaign the Berlin Cultural Administration and other funding bodies to provide adequate support to properly staff his institution, or simply redraft the priorities within his operating budget to make it possible to compensate all of the people working there. I refused to negotiate the direction or content of my work.

*fj* This exchange reveals a significant disjunct in expectations. What strikes us about your gesture is that it slows things down so dramatically that the smooth flow of institutional automatism was suspended and suddenly charged with questions. Could you tell us more about how the institution's perception of itself was fundamentally challenged?

*JS* The exchange around the letter revealed an extreme disconnection in expectations, both in the disappointment of my own expectations of the artistic and curatorial authority overseeing institution, and the institutional representatives' expectations of my production as an artist, which they clearly articulated after my project failed to achieve these expectations. The director's anxiety was strongly

triggered by my project's relation to the exhibition space, and what would be shown to the public, his clear priority being that there would be "art" in the gallery (equivalent to material objects on the walls or floor, as he stated in our telephone conversation and repeated in our face-to-face meeting, "this isn't the 60's anymore, you can't pin a letter on the wall and call it art"). This anxiety was accompanied by his feelings of betrayal, which he expressed in perceiving the project as a personal attack: he identified with the institution so closely that not only could he not dissociate a critique of the institutional structure – of the broader art world practice – from a critique of himself, but he also expected loyalty from my artistic production in how it represented the institution.

I do think that the institution's perception of itself was fundamentally challenged. I can say this in part because there was a temporary, deeply uncomfortable breach created by the project, or more precisely by the email announcing the work and the director's emotionally-charged reaction. However, after our meeting things became much easier, to the extent that further requests were unchallenged, foremost among these my request to displace their interns into the gallery space, which was a separate building in the complex, from where they performed their everyday tasks such as buzzing in visitors at the front door, answering phones, receiving visitors, organizing papers, and answering emails. For an organization that had previously communicated concern about their public representation, being temporarily without their (unpaid) receptionists significantly compromised the administrative offices' efficiency, and their interface with the public. In this regard, I can say that they did find a less-

defensive, more flexible attitude to my work following the initial conflict.

I doubt, however, that my intervention will have a long-term impact within the organization. Now that I am no longer there, they have resumed business as usual, continuing to augment paid staff with unpaid, eager, young (entirely female, incidentally but not coincidentally) Masters' students. Since this organization has a high turnover – international artists pass through for durations between four months and one year, and then return to their home countries, the interns only last for three months before new interns replace them – the institutional memory is quite short. Having pushed up against the organizational structure and having witnessed both how anxious it is about its funding, and its adversity to working through the consequences of conflict, I also doubt that the organization's leadership will reflect further on the fact that it is operating in a way that perpetuates an exploitative inequality against emerging practitioners in the art field. This is most unfortunate. As I explained in my meeting with the director, when arts organizations accept unpaid interns, they are reducing the value of the labour of each paid member of staff. They are tacitly condoning government budgets that force arts organizations to operate without adequate funding.

I don't think that the disjunct in expectations revealed by my project will enact change directly within the organization, however. I think the work has a slower effect, such as to impact the interns' awareness of their rights and the direction they take in their future work. It may help spread awareness through the broader public, augmenting the growing dissatisfaction amongst artists and cultural workers with the inequality and lack of sustainability in

our field. However, this is ultimately a symbolic gesture which can only make symbolic change.

*f1* Were there concerns with where the money was coming from and how it could be used? And were there provisions built-in the contract that dealt with usage that the Bethanien did invoke?

*JS* The work did provoke concerns about the provenance and movement of the money. The contract itself made no stipulations as to the way that I could spend the allotted money. However, since it was held in trust by the KB administration, I needed to provide receipts or invoices before I could be reimbursed for any expenditures. This was an issue not only for myself, but for many of the other artists in residence. The administration did little in advance to notify us of which invoices could and couldn't be reimbursed. Books, for example, were not within the category of acceptable expenses for reimbursement. It was rumoured that money that artists didn't reimburse went back into the operational budget of the institution, and they were less-than helpful in advising us how to get the full use of our budget, and more active in refusing reimbursements. When the director refused my work one of his arguments was on the administrative front, that the organization could not be seen to receive charity, moreover, the potential for the appearance of financial mismanagement was quite high in the occasion that they would simply transfer an artist's funds directly to their own operational budget. I think the coincidence of the practice of doing just this, and the alarm at being asked to do it openly, provoked the extremity of his refusal.

It is fairly standard practice for artists to hire specialists when the delegation of labour is necessary to complete a work. This was the precedent and

model that I proposed, in place of the work being identified as a donation. While my first intention was for the money to travel directly back into the administration, I realized that this was unlikely. Asking the interns to invoice me, along with the specific wording that implied a performance, had the added symbolic advantage of transforming their actual work into a performance within the realm of my project. These invoices then became both documentation of my project, and functional financial documents, just as the interns were both compensated actors in my work, and unpaid workers in the administrative work of the KB.