

From Self-Exploitation to Collective Accountability

Dominique Sirois-Rouleau

A confirmed infiltrator, artist Joshua Schwebel approaches art as a tool for critical dialogue. His works challenge artistic impunity, creating spaces that are at odds with existing realities, in which sensitive questions can be openly addressed. By actively intervening in the *habitus* of the art field, Schwebel sheds light not only on the belief system that shapes it but also on its disconcerting precarity. Challenging the definitions and uses of art to reveal their ethical and moral paradoxes, he does more than simply raise awareness; he calls for cultural workers to have greater accountability and responsibility with a view to restructuring the system in which they work. In this spirit, in *Médiation culturelle*, presented in 2017 in the exhibition *Ressources humaines*,¹ he undertakes a comprehensive analysis of power structures within the art field in view of their reform. The valorization of cultural work that he envisions highlights both the duty of stakeholders in the field to participate in the restructuring of these business models and their power to revolutionize the system.

Following an invitation by curator Virginie Jourdain, Schwebel familiarized himself with the terms of governance specific to the Fonds régional d'art contemporain de Lorraine (FRAC), the host of the exhibition. At the time, the organization had been without leadership for a year. This administrative shortfall, as well as the FRAC's feminist leanings, led him to examine the working conditions of its personnel. He discovered that, to save money, the reception staff members were employed as casual workers hired through an employment agency for general hospitality staff. Engaged on the same terms as airport or hotel receptionists and hostesses, they were recognized neither for their mediation work nor as an integral part of the FRAC team. Even though no specific skill or artistic knowledge was required for their positions, they nevertheless worked at the forefront of exhibition mediation. They were the ones who interacted with visitors, answered questions, explained artists' practices, and contextualized the artworks.

Hence, Schwebel submitted a document to the future management, demanding a change in the status and working conditions of these frontline workers. In his view, the *Médiation culturelle* project aimed at confronting the establishment with its paradoxes to highlight the inequity inherent in its operations and at proposing solutions. *Médiation culturelle* suggested changing the title of these employees to that of "mediators" to enhance the value of their work with the public, and, for the duration of the exhibition, to move their reception desk outside into the FRAC's courtyard. This rather defiant second proposal emphasized the marginalization of the agents, who had no access to the permanent staff's rest areas or coffee machine.

Médiation culturelle faced fierce resistance from both the interim director and the reception staff themselves. All parties were concerned about the consequences that the revelation of inequalities at FRAC might have on their jobs. Following long and heated negotiations via email that cited various questions of security and feasibility as excuses, on the day of the opening, the reception desk was returned to the foyer, and Schwebel's letter to the future management was exhibited on a plinth in the garden.

It is relatively common for art projects to evolve according to the dictates of technical or political constraints in the course of their development. In the case of *Médiation culturelle*, however, the work demanded a dramatic reversal of the establishment's values. The vigorous opposition from the interim director and reception staff to Schwebel's proposal underlined a certain crisis in leadership. The main concern was that the work accentuated their precarious situation, which put them in a delicate, if not untenable, position with the new management. Although the internal debate generated by *Médiation culturelle* may have centred on excessive workload and cumbersome administrative procedures in the absence of management, above all it affirmed that institutional consensus took precedence over artistic autonomy.

Beyond the ethical contradictions of the FRAC, Schwebel's proposal and the arbitration that ensued illustrate the insensitivity of the establishment, which had fewer scruples about obstructing the work of an artist than about questioning its own authority. Even without official management in place, FRAC's personnel seemed little inclined to break up existing hierarchies or to attempt a more equitable distribution of power. On the contrary, the stability of the system was defended, even embodied, by the institution's employees, to the extent that they preferred to perpetuate rather than challenge existing inequalities. In this sense, *Médiation culturelle* condemns the values underpinning the art field.

In response to *Subsidy* (2015), a work developed during a residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, in which Schwebel had used his honorarium to pay the volunteers working for the organization, Amber Landgraff adopts the term "self-exploitation"² to explain a significant ethical paradox in the art field. Landgraff associates working conditions in the field with the vocational myth that justifies freedom as a pretext for not being paid. Although financial self-sacrifice is regarded as a legitimate counterpart to passionate work, volunteering—fundamental to the functioning of the art field—is considered an obligatory right of passage toward a remunerated position. In other words, within the milieu, whereas self-exploitation is perceived as a stepping-stone to success, refusing to play the game is a guarantee for failure.

Landgraff is particularly interested in the system of internships and volunteering, yet the panel discussions during the *Journée sans culture*³ revealed several other forms of self-exploitation sustained by existing patterns of work. Underpaid and unstable, employment in the arts frequently demands incredible flexibility, without necessarily recognizing the value of the skills required.⁴ In this regard, Landgraff stresses the strange disparity between the politicization of the field and its poor working conditions. Referring to Jan Verwoert,⁵ she explains this discrepancy by suggesting that burnout makes workers in the art community more likely to accept an inequitable system than to invest their energies in changing it. This causal relationship is certainly plausible and convincing, but it reiterates the preconceived distinction between survival and revolution as an excuse for apathy.

Schwebel's art is an act of defiance that would be difficult to accept were he not a recognized artist. His privileged position affords him significant visibility, which he directs toward structures of exploitation. Even though *Médiation culturelle* addresses the imbalances within a specific organization, it also highlights the widespread uncertainty and abuses that characterize the art field. The culture of competition among workers and institutions favours these conditions and, over time, polarizes administrative and creative positions to the point of jeopardizing solidarity in the field. *Médiation culturelle* transforms the downfall of

Fwd: following up

Fanny Gonella <fanny.gonella@frac.lorraine.fr> Wed, Mar 7, 2018 at 5:27 PM
To: Josh Schwebel <joshschwebel@frac.lorraine.fr>
Cc: virginie jourdain <virginie.jourdain@frac.lorraine.fr>, Tiphane Chauvin <tiphane.chauvin@frac.lorraine.fr>

Dear Josh Schwebel,

I read your initial letter with attention and realized that this answer would in any case be more a formal reply, an acknowledgment of the questions you are raising, than really the start of a discussion - both because the show is over and because the situation you pointed has changed.

The issues you're raising are very wide and the relation to work a problematic one in the current state of society - the artist in a situation of self-exploitation being one of them. The funding of exhibitions is also a very tricky area in quite few countries. This discussion could be spread in different directions and it's good Virginie Jourdain decided to address them in this show. Quite few other ones could be done around that topic!

Today her show has been completed and your projet too, the name of the agent d'accueil being changed to médiateurs.trices. I don't know if this has happened because of the questions you raised or because the people working here entered in a dialogue with each other. Your work probably played a role, the situation did the rest. I'm not sure this is the core of the issue. This change seems more of a symbolic one, the activity of the people working here remains the same, the perception of art, of their function and their perception of themselves too most likely. But who knows. But since it isn't only about you, I thought you might like to know.

I hope this finds you well.

All best,

Fanny Gonella

Début du message réexpédié :

De : Josh Schwebel <joshschwebel@frac.lorraine.fr>
Date : lundi 5 février 2018 11:17
À : Tiphane Chauvin <tiphane.chauvin@frac.lorraine.fr>, virginie jourdain <virginie.jourdain@frac.lorraine.fr>
Objet : following up

dear Tiphane,
happy 2018.
I am writing to ask if the new director has taken her position at the FRAC yet?
Could you ask her if she will make any reply to my letter?
thank you, and best,
Josh

Fanny Gonella
Directrice

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this privilege-based model into reality. Given that the imbalance between costs of creation and the corresponding revenue means that half of all artists struggle to make any financial gain, and that reduced subsidies often lead to fewer salaried positions in the field, it seems that only those who are already financially stable can afford an art career.⁶ This suggests that the financial success or failure of artists is, in the end, attributable less to their art than to the nature of their remunerated activities on the fringes of their practice.⁷

As Michelle Lacombe and Yves Sheriff also underline, it's important to neither idealize nor oppose the existing conditions between art and administration.⁸ However, the strategies used by Schwebel suggest that the status quo can be overturned. In fact, in March 2018, several months after the *Ressources humaines* exhibition, the new director of the FRAC wrote to Schwebel confirming the change in status of their reception workers. Her email specified the strictly symbolic nature of the mediator title, while acknowledging the role of Schwebel's work in this exceptional context and the overall quality of the dialogue it generated. Nevertheless, *Médiation culturelle* discoursed less on this particular art institution, art, or the artist than it did on the necessity to invest the art field with solidarity-based ethics. In other words, the artist's goal is to instil the values of fairness at the very core of institutional operations. The feigned

naïveté of this approach evokes the less formal, more humane structures pursued by Lacombe and Sheriff,⁹ with one important difference: the extension of responsibility for it to everyone working in the arts.

By taking on the guise of a symbolic strike, the *Journée sans culture* set in motion the monitoring of working conditions and interpersonal policies in the local arts milieu. The various grievances and demands expressed revealed the brutal force of the system of self-exploitation that cultural workers are subjected to. The implicit acceptance of this model as a testimony to a candidate's dedication suggests that the only way to break this ethical deadlock would be to bring the debate into the open and place it at the forefront of art practice, as Schwebel did. The powerful radicalism of *Médiation culturelle* rests on its public expression, which ensures accountability among decision makers in the field. The redistribution of the privileges and spheres of power¹⁰ demanded at the end of the *Journée sans culture* begins with shifting the duty to report abuses from the individual to the community. As long as accepting unfair conditions in the short term is perceived as a potential source of long-term success, no single individual can carry the weight of the revolution alone.

Schwebel's proposal in this regard suggests the powerful potential of transparency and solidarity, factors that also motivated the organization of the *Journée sans culture*. The participants

put forward numerous possible solutions, including reviewing standards of productivity, efficiency, and flexibility by mutualizing and harmonizing contractual terms and conditions. Although these collaborative efforts and the identification of local issues appear to be advancing, steps still need to be taken to facilitate the exposure and elimination of abuses. Establishing an equitable system is incumbent upon everyone engaged in the arts, especially those in positions of power. It's time to overturn the unconscionable valorization of sacrifice by according concrete and financial recognition to cultural workers for their education, work, and careers. Colossal as this task may seem, it is only through collective action that change can be achieved.

Translated from the French by Louise Ashcroft

1 — Curated by Virginie Jourdain and presented from June 23 to November 5, 2017 at the Fonds régional d'art contemporain de Lorraine in Metz.

2 — Amber Landgraff, "Paying Interns as an Act of Counterfeit, or Everyone Deserves to Get Paid," in Joshua Schwebel, *Subsidy* (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien GmbH and Archive Books, 2016), 11.

3 — The discussions held during the *Journée sans culture* (October 21, 2015, at Théâtre Aux Écuries) were published in *Journée sans culture: Troubler la fête, rallumer notre joie* (Montréal: *Journée sans culture*, 2016).

4 — Caroline Blais, Virginie Jourdain, and Mercedes Pacheco, "Entre don, résilience et épuisement: jusqu'où et comment travailler," in *Journée sans culture*, 18.

5 — Jan Verwoert, "All the Wrong Examples," in *Self-Organised*, ed. Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer (London: Open Editions, 2013), 126.

6 — Landgraff, "Paying Interns," 10.

7 — Christine Routhier, *Les artistes en arts visuels: Portrait statistique des conditions de pratique au Québec, 2010* (Québec City: Institut de la statistique du Québec, Observatoire de la culture et des communications du Québec, 2013), 85, www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/culture/arts-visuels/mono-arts-visuels.pdf.

8 — Michèle Lacombe and Yves Sheriff, "Penser de nouveaux modèles d'organisation," in *Journée sans culture*, 107.

9 — Ibid., 108.

10 — Ibid., 111.

Joshua Schwebel

↳ *Médiation culturelle*, correspondance avec la directrice du FRAC Lorraine | correspondance with the director of FRAC Lorraine, 2018.

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