

ON SOME CONDITIONS¹⁾

Given that the topic of this issue is the relationship between valorization and devaluation, participation in the economy and marginalization from it, as parameters for reckoning with gender and labor as themes and/or methods in recent art, my point of departure here will be an exploration of how forms of marginality rooted in gender and ability are re-imagined in both conceptual and embodied form in the exhibition context, with reference to two specific art practices.

— Ghislaine Leung and Carolyn Lazard each have practices in both writing and in visual art. Lazard has published a number of influential texts on the biopolitics of disability and questions of access that have a rare incisive force in their combination of research, personal reflection, and analysis; and Leung studied philosophy at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy in London, a bastion for critical aesthetics, and was an administrator, writer, and curator with LUX, the UK artists' moving image agency—this is the context in which I knew her for many years. She has recently published a book with Divided.

— In approaching the artwork of either, however, we encounter what seem to be quintessentially formal problems. Two historical truisms appear, asking to be dissolved. The first is the opposition between color and line; works by Leung such as *Browns* (2021) and *Red* (2021) both generate a space, and delineate it, through the deliberation of color. The second truism is that conceptual art is opposed to relational art because it is tautological and self-contained. What is interesting for the purposes of this essay is that Leung and Lazard infuse the vocabulary of conceptualism with the materialism of dependency. The sketching out of an atmosphere through the delegated installation of industrial or quotidian objects, as in Leung's *Fountains* (2022)—which echoes Lazard's *A Conspiracy* (2017) [fig. 1], an installation of twelve ceiling-mounted white noise generators often found in healthcare and hospitality settings, shown at Cell Projects in London in 2019—is also a production of space, or rather, of its socially enforced conditions of

¹⁾ This text is based on a lecture at Kunsthalle Steiermark, Graz, on the occasion of the exhibition *on affairs* (2023).



// Figure 1a & 1b
Carolyn Lazard, *A Conspiracy*, 2017

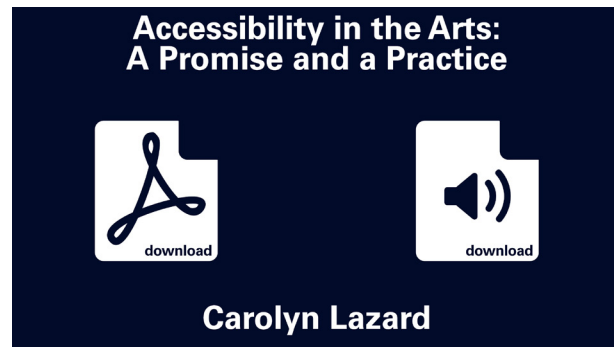
possibility. The indeterminate status of objects between conditions and décor is perhaps not so new as a post-conceptual gesture, yet what these two practices, represented here by the first three works cited, accomplish, is a patterning of an exhibition space as a space of dependency, of self-insufficiency. This patterning both performs formalism and undermines it by evoking social form at the same time. Which is to say, it shows the conditions necessary for appearance in a space of pure form, a phenomenon that depends on *non-dependence*, on the erasure of the demands of gendered, racialized, and classed living in the world, such as caring responsibilities or chronic illness. The puzzle is how to make the artwork appear in its self-sufficiency while at the same time being an index of its dependency on what cannot be present in the space.

— For Lazard, this is a praxis that unfolds through questions around access in the exhibition space, a questioning which has been evoked, for instance, by a switch from a potentially seizure-inducing flicker between black and white to red light, which pulsates more gently. Before even this can have its effects however, a text may be presented that describes the potential experience for the viewer, preparing them for it, undermining the truism that art is most radical when it disturbs the assumed complacency of the viewer: the old avant-garde shock tactic that seemingly never gets old. The reference, to Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1965), as well as to Paul Sharits' films, is sublated from shock into an empathic gesture. Minimalism no longer as theatre, as art historian Michael Fried fretted, but perhaps a braver, if still equivocal phase-shift: minimalism as therapy. Structural film literalizes the conditions of the viewing experience by bracketing everything that falls outside the phenomenological grain of the encounter between eye and moving image; Lazard unravels this by bringing the conditions for this bracketing into the picture. More than this, however, they articulate the dependency of the formal as a matter of labor: the commingled labor of the artist, the curator, the gallery staff, and the visitor. The labor is translated into access, into information and adjustment, which combine to create an 'independent' artwork, modulating the time and space of the encounter in a different way, with its polemics (dependency) and autonomy (coherent gesture) tightly imbricated.

— Lazard's work is often characterized by the proposition that access can be a formalization of artistic labor, with the relevant conditions enacting the principle of this labor rather than representing a sidelong supplement. Their engagement with disability politics is what allows them such a specific vantage on the problem

of labor conditions for not just the artist, but the situation of art. Lazard's writings, work, and advocacy over the past decade give us an insight not only into the impact of disability on a person with an art practice, but also into the ways in which chronic illness starts to undermine the parameters of time and achievement imposed on young artists. It also provides a view onto questions of access and accessibility that can be generalized to all kinds of conditions of limitation but also can move to constituting an ethics and a politics in themselves. Lazard is very clear that disability is a social condition, and one that insofar as it deviates from capitalist understandings of health, individuality, and productivity can also serve as a ground to critique those understandings and to organize differently. An example of that is *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice* [fig. 2], which adopts the perspective that inclusion is not a special adaptation to some people who are less able to navigate conventional architectures and choreographies in art spaces, but rather a shift in how the audience-institution relationship is imagined, that inclusion is inclusion for all, given an understanding of disability as an eventual horizon for all (Lazard 2019). This is a standpoint that has in many cases been integrated into policy, as in many university settings where the standard assumption is that documents and lectures should be accessible for all, not just for a minority who have specific 'needs.' This leads to the emergence of and consensus, to an extent, around the "social model of disability," which is that, as Lazard describes it, impairment may be a physical or mental loss of function, but disability is a relationship to the social and physical environment, which can be modified in such a way that it is easier for both disabled and non-disabled people to negotiate. Such a conception confronts the relegation of some bodies as not useful or appealing and thus needing to be excluded from public space as well as from employment, education, and other structures of survival in a capitalist economy.

— The question of disability justice allows us to connect the ways labor appears and is practiced in the field of contemporary art to broader issues around social reproduction, and ways in which labor is gendered, racialized, and naturalized until it is no longer visible as labor. At the same time, raising labor to visibility is not enough if the working conditions are not seen to include both exploitation and oppression, which is to say that the conditions in which such labor is performed rely on its allocation to groups



// Figure 2

Carolyn Lazard, *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice*, first edition, 2019

already deemed economically marginal and socially disposable. The social field is always already stratified. Raising the question from the standpoint of dis/ability and access means that the injustice is not located simply in the fact that social reproduction becomes the responsibility of certain groups, but also in the kind of society and social relations that are being reproduced thereby. And this is an inquiry that can unfold both on the plane of the economic and on that of the aesthetic. The link between them is a reflection on conditions.

— In Lazard’s earlier, more autobiographical text *How to be a Person in the Age of Autoimmunity*, they stake out their project of approaching disability, and the particular kind of autoimmune condition that they have and share with millions of other, predominantly feminized people, through its implications for a broader analysis whose co-ordinates are socio-economic, political, and affective. They write, “The story I’m telling here is equal parts a processing of the trauma of illness and an exploration of how the body is treated under the regime of capitalism. Stories of illness like mine should not be kept away in beds and in hospital wards. They should be written so that we can understand the body as something beyond a sheet of plain glass” (Lazard 2017). Here illness is seen as a biomedical and a social condition at the same time, and one does not exclude the other – the biologically dysfunctional individual who just wants to get well and participate in society independently, and the person produced as ill by a society because they fail to live up to its expectations, are both actual and are dialectically entangled with one another. This is described as a paradox, or might also be thought of in the psychoanalytic terms of a ‘double bind’ (the inability to not not want something): even as the ill person recognizes that health and illness are social and not natural conditions, and that these constructs can also serve to discipline the body in capitalist production (and, as a vast source of profits in privatized health care systems such as the one in the U.S., also serve as a strong engine of inequality) – at the same time, the ill person wants to be well.

— An important part of this analysis is to see the body as an indicator or barometer of social ills, rather than as a transparent window to the soul, as they suggest with the “sheet of plain glass,” a citation from Virginia Woolf, and having this conversation requires overcoming the shame and secrecy around being ill or disabled or differently abled in a society that values health, productivity, and independence above all. It is also to insist on the relationality and contingency of the body, contra the self-defensive,

military metaphors of everyday speech and medical science, the security metaphor of “immunity”; but, also, “auto.” In the text, they identify some of the ideological co-ordinates of this kind of metaphor by drawing an analogy between autoimmune disorder as the body attacking itself and capitalism as humans attacking their own conditions of survival, with the ecological consequences correlating with the enormous expansion over the last decades, especially in the West, of autoimmune illness. They put this as “[m]imicking, on a molecular level, the degrees of alienation and commodification that happen to the body on a social and economic level” (Ibid.: n.p.). A recursive view, in other words. They observe how people who otherwise identify as critical can mislay their skepticism when it comes to modern techno-medicine and neglect the questions raised by disability.

— “What happens when our bodies ‘revolt’ and the factories stop functioning so smoothly? Perhaps they are trying to tell us something about their working conditions” (Ibid.: n.p.). Lazard revisits radical sickness politics as social movements, as with the 1970s German Socialist Patients Collective, with their critique of the ‘medical-industrial complex’ and demand for autonomy from the medical establishment. This should be understood in the sense of a historical left German autonomist politics – collective self-determination – rather than the insipid, formal autonomy of the liberal subject that may also be lurking within the ‘auto’ of autoimmunity, but harder to dislodge than ideology normally is since it has taken up residence in the double bind of health.

— The accessibility guidelines Lazard develops in the *Promise and Practice* elaborate the social model of disability in the pragmatic test case of cultural venues. The notes are titled “a promise and a practice” to underline the prefigurative aspect of disability politics – that access is a horizon that both needs to be worked towards and can already start to transform practices and relations in the present. This poses disability justice as a ‘speculative practice’ emerging out of real needs and conversations organized by the affected collectively through trial, error, offense, and defense, rather than a government-imposed guideline for example, although the latter may also take on the character of a demand. Lazard writes, “Within this framework, disability is defined as an economic, cultural, and/or social exclusion based on a physical, psychological, sensory, or cognitive difference. Disability Justice movements understand disability to be unevenly distributed, primarily affecting black and indigenous communities, queer and trans communities, and low-income communities. Disability is structurally reinforced

by ableism, a system rooted in the supremacy of non-disabled people and the disenfranchisement of disabled people through the denial of access” (Lazard 2019: 6).

— There is also an emphasis on the need for infrastructure – for the need to do infrastructure differently, that is, for infrastructural critique²⁾ – that would allow disabled artists and art workers, as well as audiences, to take part, thus for arts institutions that are not just spaces of representation but that can actively support the lives and capacities of their participants: “Supporting the cultural labor of disabled artists and thinkers must happen in tandem with infrastructural changes. Additionally, arts organizations need disabled art workers in positions of leadership to create actual substantial shifts. There is often a striking discord between an institution’s desire to represent marginalized communities and a total disinvestment from the actual survival of those communities. The ideal arts space is simple: it’s one in which art and culture are not sequestered from the lived experience of artists and their communities” (Lazard 2019). Such a formulation pinpoints conditions in a sense that evokes a number of the recent decades’ debates on social engagement and usefulness in art. Specifically, it calls on the image of the “useful museum,” as trialed by e.g. MiMA in Middlesbrough, UK, where the arts institution was presented as a social infrastructure that is dedicated to supporting its communities in ways other than exhibiting and mediating art. The contradictions here come down, once again, to conditions. Access may be a preliminary to justice, just like visibility, but it remains a neutral descriptor unless the power relations of the thing or experience to be accessed are also challenged.

— In any case, the definition of access Lazard seems to be formulating is one that radically counters precisely the specter of autoimmune personhood. The latter vision of self-enclosed, bounded, and self-reliant individuals stands to be dismantled in favor of a more relational concept of people as subjects with needs and caring abilities as well as capacities and skills. Such a redefinition makes labor a relational and aesthetic activity rather than a productive and commodified activity, and once this relational element is front and center, the contradictions of a pre-determined visibility and/or useability, the unvarnished good of representation, start to diminish in importance, along with the inclusivist fantasies that form the hard barrier to this genre of radicalism.

— It might be observed at this point that the essay has wandered somewhat from its initially charted course of discussing how both Carolyn Lazard’s and Ghislaine Leung’s work deal with the

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I have set some further thoughts on infrastructural critique down in Vishmidt, Marina 2021.

question of dependency – of conditions for (the) work to be made and viewed – from a minimalist or post-conceptual starting point. The tiny red herring of color and line disappeared at some point as well. The essay instead directed itself to outlining some of the relational and political premises informing Lazard’s practice in particular, with some prospects on wider contexts and debates around access and usefulness as matters of urgency for contemporary art. It might be said that Leung works in a more reticent way in this territory, but the proximity is there. Atmosphere is a medium for her, with the barely noticed or proprioceptive serving as the range in which questions of access – to production time, to exhibition space – can be felt. Recent exhibitions such as *Balances* (Maxwell Graham, NYC, Sep–Oct 2022) [fig. 3–5] problematize access to an artistic identity, an artistic work schedule, in light of the gendered labor of parenthood. There is a chart explaining when the artist can work and when she cannot. There are baby monitors, child safety gates, and the work *Fountains* that appears in a number of shows, in combination with other works or expanded into an installation.³⁾ Leung writes in the exhibition text: “A work is contingent on its context, this vulnerability is my work’s resilience. It is a negotiation of what it means to have dependencies and be dependent. It is a negotiation of what it means to value the labour of maintenance” (Leung 2022). If dependencies featured for Leung in the past as a formal principle ‘below the radar,’ digging out the infra-thin of an exhibition situation through color, lighting, and measurement, the dependency has now ramified outside of that situation into what it takes to be present within it, and how that presence can itself be revised both into a series of work and the experience of their diagrammatic insufficiency, their non-performativity as works or, rather, their performativity as the limits to working. At the same time, Leung’s insistence that her propositions are presented not only in space but as an analysis of spatial properties as the core of what it is to make an exhibition, means that they are minimally didactic, minimally present – an organization of selected elements into a rebus or a rhyme of objects in a space which always have to do with atmosphere: a certain height of wall painted, a certain color, a certain shape of light ornament, a certain sound

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Fountains has appeared in several exhibition contexts, including the Graz exhibition *on affairs*, as a solo installation at Simian, Copenhagen (2023), and in *Balances*, a solo exhibition at her gallery Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, NYC (2022).

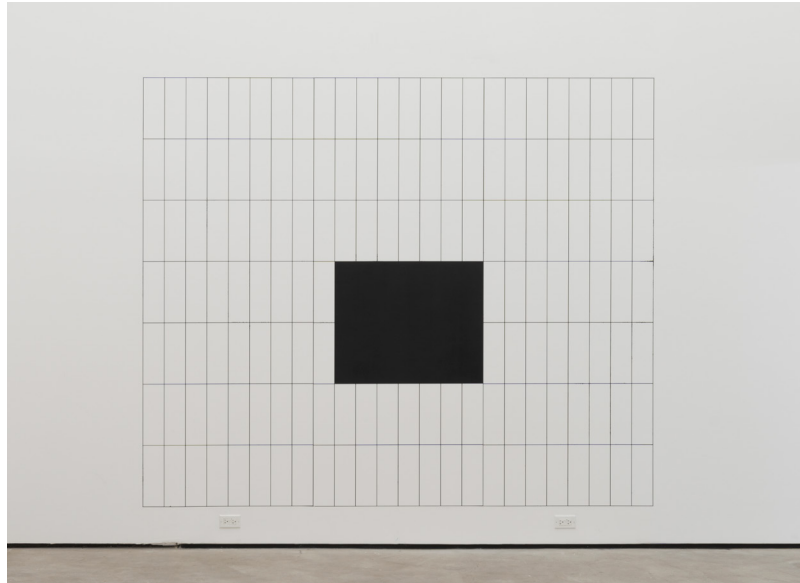


// Figure 3
Ghislaine Leung, *Monitors*, 2022



// Figure 4
Ghislaine Leung, *Gates*, 2019

coming from a certain fixture. The elements are never alone, they are always serial, the better to pattern the experience of the space. In this initially evident sense, Leung's approach is phenomenological as a tangent to the minimalist legacy, albeit less concerned with materiality or direct experience than with tweaking standard settings to tell stories and make jokes about dependency. A vanishing mediator, shedding an electric charge as it disappears around the wall at the corner of your eye.



// Figure 5
Ghislaine Leung, *Hours*, 2022

— But even if spatiality has remained the focus for the artist, keeping the affect light and allegorical, the previously noted *Balances* started to extend the analysis into time, the recursive time of being available to think about art that installs a materialized thought of dependency somewhere else, through the hands and tools of others. The delegated performance of the install becomes the delegated performance of the reproductive and the waged labor that enables the artist to maintain their life and their family on the other side of the chain (one might even say the other side of the hierarchy of idea and execution), and the query becomes whether a continuity rather than a break (be it thematized or hidden) can be visualized as evidence in the space of the absence of time. So, a space that is not just about modulating the visitor's experience as an allegory of the dependency of art on standards, but that goes further back into the artist's production process as itself dependent on standards that cannot reasonably show up in the space of exhibition as anything but absences (sleep, exhaustion, caring tasks). Such a trajectory seems to merge with Lazard's exploration of the formal properties of access, all the ways the inaesthetic adaptation to 'special conditions' can be rerouted back into aesthetic conceptualization. And this perhaps is what qualifies these two practices as an infrastructural thinking in post-conceptual artistic practice that is capable of levering slices of operational autonomy out of a teeming image world in which circulation and permutation never stop. As Peter Osborne has written recently, "The photograph's 'existential proximity to the world' – its indexicality – is thus increasingly registered less in the content of the image than

in the often rapidly image-obliterating act of its exchange” (Osborne 2022: 23). His term “distributive unity,” denoting a fragile, historically-bound way of unifying matter under a category – here, “photography” – always from a retrospectively unifying vantage, allows us to see that categories like “infrastructure,” “affairs,” or even “artwork” have no ontology to unify them except a historical one: that is, the possibility of understanding what we are referring to by agreeing on what it is and how it works. This baseline understanding of what we are looking at is in contemporary exhibitions often identified as a space of operations, of logistics and permutations. Not a showcase of systems, but of possible modes of experience mediated through materializations which may include various levels of distributive unity: be it mathematical formulas, codes of conduct; or temporality, gender, space, scent, and texture. All resonate with an interest in dependency, on- and off-site, structural and infrastructural.

—— Looking at Lazard’s and Leung’s work separately, and trying to think them in conjunction, brings up a common affinity with the project of making visible as a first step in a wider problematization of absence as socially produced: a problematization of who is not in the space, who cannot pretend that the autonomy of art is either livable or defensible, and of the fact that this ‘who’ is both determined (by gender, race, wealth, age, capacity) and contingent, for example on the levels of support a gesture of dependency can attract. The “social model of autonomy” is like the social model of disability, but enacted in the space(s) of art. Yet art, like the job market in general (Ryan 2023), does not support everyone who wants or needs to thematize their dependencies; maybe here ‘access’ should also be thought as providing routes of identification to those whose dependencies have not yet emerged, an access secured with smart works and words. Perhaps the work of these two artists announces their relation to dependency most unequivocally, even perhaps literally, but evoking the literal has often been a direct way of getting in attunement with a critic. It is a way of making a start – using their facility with art and writing to create an opening for their own vulnerability, and this vulnerability as changeability: of people, spaces, and structures.

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Fig. 1a: Carolyn Lazard, *A Conspiracy*, 2017, dohm white noise machines, dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artist, © Carolyn Lazard. Description: Twelve Dohm white noise machines mounted on the ceiling of a white room. The farthest wall features windows and a windowed entry door, through which the street and cars outside can be seen, and natural light floods the space. Each beige cylindrical device is purposefully placed, equidistant from its neighbors, with recessed light fixtures interspersed between them.

Fig. 1b: Carolyn Lazard, *A Conspiracy*, 2017, dohm white noise machines, dimensions variable, Courtesy of the artist, © Carolyn Lazard. Description: A close-up view of four Dohm white noise machines—beige, cylindrical, each resembling the structure of a smoke detector—mounted to a white ceiling. The black on/off switch of each machine faces forward.

Fig. 2: Carolyn Lazard, *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice*, first edition, 2019 (screen shot). Commissioned by Recess, written by Carolyn Lazard, edited by Kemi Adeyemi, designed by Rosen Tomov & Riley Hooker, development by Rosen Tomov, <https://promiseandpractice.art/>

Fig. 3: Ghislaine Leung, *Monitors*, 2022, Score: A baby monitor installed in one room and broadcast to another, Edition 1 of 3 + 2AP, Courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham, New York

Fig. 4: Ghislaine Leung, *Gates*, 2019, Score: Child safety gates installed on all thresholds in the exhibition space, Edition 1, 2, 3 of 3 + 2 AP, Courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham, New York

Fig. 5: Ghislaine Leung, *Hours*, 2022, Score: A wall painting the size of the artist's home studio wall divided into all the hours of the week with the portion of studio hours available to the artist marked in black. Thursday 9AM–4PM, Friday 9AM–4PM, Edition 1 of 3 + 2AP, Courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham, New York

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Marina Vishmidt is a writer and educator. She is Professor for Art Theory at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. She has also taught at Goldsmiths, University of London. In 2022 she was the Rudolph Arnheim Visiting Professor in Art History at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Her work has appeared in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Artforum*, *Afterall*, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, *e-flux journal*, *Australian Feminist Studies*, and *Radical Philosophy*, among others, as well as in a number of edited volumes. She is the editor of *Speculation* (Documents of Contemporary Art series, Whitechapel/MIT 2022), co-author of *Reproducing Autonomy*, with Kerstin Stakemeier (Mute, 2016), and the author of *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Brill 2018/Haymarket 2019). She is a member of the Marxism in Culture collective and is on the board of the New Perspectives on the *Critical Theory of Society* series (Bloomsbury Academic).

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