



A S S I S T I N G (A S A N A E S T H E T I C E X P E R I E N C E)
a s p e c u l a t i v e p l a y a n d a p e r f o r m a t i v e
e s s a y

Tamara Antonijević

Don't be relaxed. When you're relaxed, it makes me nervous.

One director to me

Generell ist es also kein Beruf für jemanden, dem sehr an ausreichend Freizeit gelegen ist, mir macht es aber nichts, da ich es sehr genieße gebraucht zu werden.

Sarah Emirir, Regieassistentin

This interdisciplinary writing project investigates the work of assisting in theaters and art institutions. My intention is to analyse the position of the assistant in the context of the feminist critique of reproductive labour and through it, the system of art production which relies on the endless supply of cheap, professional and flexible work force. At the same time, I'll focus on the history of autotheoretical and autofictional writing in order to place my writing in the context of interdisciplinary feminist art and criticism.

Contemporary theater and art institutions rely on poorly paid assistants and usually unpaid interns in order to function smoothly; many of us have accepted those positions because we hoped that they will be 'repaid' in the form of a short or long term employment. By doing this work, we usually don't have time to ask what exactly are we maintaining when we assist? Many assistants get stuck in these positions and keep working as maintainers of the work of others - a feminized position, poorly paid and precarious. In this sense, to paraphrase Moten and Harney, training becomes the discipline. Regardless of the type of the production and conditions in which she's working, the assistant is supposed to love her work: the chance to be at a place where great works of art happen should be enough. The assistant is not supposed to complain about the salary or the working conditions, because the assistant is learning, observing, preparing to take on a bigger role - she has to be an accomplice to the system - the theater factory - in which she finds herself. The assistant is always available, flexible, ready to jump in for the sick performer, prompter, stage manager or dramaturge. The assistant brings coffee and cake, wine and snacks, forgotten keys, notebooks and drags bags of props. It's a running joke that she never sleeps and never eats - if the assistant is not stressed, it means something is wrong. It could be said that the professional assistant is the one who's in the constant training of the art of service. Her work is sometimes more managerial, while other times, she cleans, makes coffees, brings snacks and even - rarely though - advises on the aesthetical choices. Very often, she's expected to perfectly do both types of work at the same time.

On the other hand, contemporary state theaters usually cultivate the idea of artists as male geniuses as Johanna Hedva pins it down: "The German word Malerschwein literally means "painter pig," but it is figuratively used to describe an archetypal male artist: chauvinistic; lauded; insecure and emotionally irresponsible; egomaniacal but allowed, even urged, to be that way; misogynistic in his art and life, despite that both of those things could not have happened without the wives, mothers, sisters, and girlfriends who serve him in the capacity of collaborators, advocates, patrons, managers, curators, editors, critics, teachers, therapists, caregivers, mentors, librarians, accountants, assistants, cooks, maids, muses, typists, secretaries, publicists, laundresses, and nurses. No matter his medium, the Malerschwein is a genius of a singular kind, a trailblazer who, in a divinely directed quest à la Moses, ventures to the wild frontier of his craft, spelunks depths that he presumes—and which the world substantiates back to him—have never before been excavated,



or if they have, not sufficiently so, not yet by a Genius, for we need a Genius who will show us revolutionary, seminal (from “semen”), ways to understand ourselves and how to live and be.”¹

In the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, Mierle Laderman Ukeles makes a clear distinction between development and maintenance: “development systems are about individual creation; about the new; about change; progress; excitement; while maintenance systems function as procedures with little or no room for change: keeping the dust off pure individual creation; preserving the new; maintaining change; protecting progress; renewing excitement; showing the work - showing it again, keeping the contemporary art museum going; keeping the home fires burning”. Marina Vishmidt calls for the elimination of the opposition between novelty and maintenance and asks for a reconfiguration of the way we see the work of maintenance — not as a reproduction of what is already there, but as a tool for building a feminist politics of creativity. In this way, maintenance work becomes resistance to the structures we are asked to maintain as they are. To examine the work of assistance as an aesthetic experience would mean to understand what kind of subjectivity is produced by the emotional, physical and cognitive work it requires from those who do it. Can this type of autotheory be written without the neoliberal imperatives surrounding the “self”?² To examine the work of maintenance in such a way, means dwelling in the contradiction that we work against the institutions in which we operate. If assisting was supposed to turn us into artists, how did it do so?

¹ Johanna Hedva, *Soft Blues*, in *Intertitles*, prototype publishing 2021

² Lauren Fournier. “Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism, MIT Press 2021

Supervisor: Gerhild Steinbuch[:de]**Tamara Antonijević**

Assisting (as an aesthetic experience)

a speculative play and a performative essay

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