

## CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: MARIA EICHHORN

**Maria Eichhorn**

*5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*

**23 April – 29 May 2016**

*Katie Guggenheim: Perhaps we could start with the title of your exhibition, 5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours? What does this refer to?*

**Maria Eichhorn:** The title refers to the duration of the exhibition – to the number of weeks, days and hours, to the time, therefore, in which the full time, permanently employed Chisenhale Gallery staff members will not work for the gallery during my exhibition.

The amount of time becomes concrete in the title from unit to unit of time, moving from the general to the specific. It is not a matter of equivalents (because 5 weeks consist of 35 days and 840 hours), but of differentiations. *5 weeks* represent the total duration of the exhibition. This time representation refers to and includes both working time and free time. Weekends, evenings, night-time, etc., are accounted for. The time representation *25 days* encompasses the working days affected by my exhibition. Because the staff do not work on the weekend, the Saturdays and Sundays – 10 days in total – are excluded here. The representation *175 hours* ultimately indicates the pure working time, wage labour. This amount of time refers concretely to the working time that has been transformed with the exhibition into non-work inside of work. The title therefore contains the thematically and formally relevant time representations involved in the exhibition.

*KG: You proposed this project in September 2015 following a site visit to Chisenhale Gallery, in which you convened a meeting with the staff to discuss their working lives. Do you find the situation of the employees at Chisenhale representative of working conditions in the arts, or of society more generally?*

**ME:** Of course, the specific working conditions in each place should always be considered, and these depend on many factors: political, social, cultural, legal, geographical, sociological, economic, programmatic, individual, etc. Where is an institution? Who runs it? How is it financed?

The general working conditions in a society are also influenced by many factors, in particular by the tension between work and unemployment. In what country? In which working area? In a factory, a university, an office, a household, paid and unpaid work? etc. The situation in the case of Chisenhale is both representative and non-representative with respect to the working conditions in the field of art in the United Kingdom and beyond. It appears that Chisenhale is in a financially precarious situation. As with all organisations of its scale in

London, Chisenhale is vulnerable to Arts Council cuts and is also highly dependent on fundraising from individual benefactors.

If we think of society as a whole, there are overlaps that must be closely examined and investigated. Isabell Lorey depicted this very clearly in her text. She writes that '[i]n contemporary capitalism, we are experiencing a diffusion of work into life and at the same time an increasing de-waging of work.'<sup>1</sup>

**KG:** *How does your impression of the working conditions in London compare with your impression of those in Berlin, where you live?*

**ME:** Working conditions in London are rougher than in Berlin. To stay on the subject of working conditions in the art field and in particular at Chisenhale: from the interview with the staff, which I held for research purposes and is included in the publication, it became clear that almost everyone works on fundraising. Art institutions in Berlin generally enjoy better financial support from the state and are financially more independent from private sponsors and the art market. A number of mutually dependent fundamental questions take shape in the discussion. To only name a few: Operations and Development Coordinator Ioanna Nitsou assists Deputy Director Laura Parker with office management but now spends most of her time on fundraising through the benefactors' programme and editions: management of sales and production. A large part of the Director Polly Staple's job is fundraising; she probably spends about 75% of her time fundraising. Only 27% of Chisenhale's funding is public money.

Working time flows into fundraising, leaving less time for important things like artistic research and time to reflect, as you mentioned in our discussion. Furthermore, this kind of activity absorbs the whole person. Ioanna, for example, mentions in the discussion: '[Polly and I] work on [fundraising] together. It takes up a lot of my working day, as well as *personal time*. For example, when you go to an opening and you're still representing the gallery. You can't clock out and say, "I'm just going to chat". You're always conscious of the *fact that you're working*.'<sup>2</sup> Work does not stop. Later in the discussion, Polly names a further problem: 'There is a broader conversation here about the state of the public sector in the UK. Within a neo-liberal context entrepreneurial activity is regarded as a strength. At institutions like Chisenhale we become our own worst enemy. We show that we can raise money, through individual giving or editions for example, we show that we can be less dependent

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1 See Isabell Lorey, 'Precarisation, Indebtedness, Giving Time -Interlacing Lines across Maria Eichhorn's 5 Weeks, 25 Days, 175 Hours', in *Maria Eichhorn: 5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, eds. Katie Guggenheim and Polly Staple (London: Chisenhale Gallery, 2016), p.61.

2 Ioanna Nitsou quoted in 'Working at Chisenhale Gallery - A discussion between Maria Eichhorn and Chisenhale Gallery staff: Joel Furness, Katie Guggenheim, Tommie Introna, Emma Moore, Ioanna Nitsou, Laura Parker and Polly Staple, 8 July 2015', *Maria Eichhorn: 5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, eds. Katie Guggenheim and Polly Staple (London: Chisenhale Gallery, 2016), p. 33 Italicisations, for emphasis, are Maria Eichhorn's own.

on public funding, and as less of that money is available it is seen as less necessary to us. Although it is.' Without the fundraising work you all do, this institution wouldn't exist.

**KG:** *Why did you propose this artwork for your exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery? Would you have proposed the work for an exhibition at a larger institution?*

**ME:** This work can be rendered in any institution. It is mostly diverse experiences, research endeavours, and considerations that lead to an idea. In this case it was my engagement with *time* in connection with current labour relations in society and in the cultural field.

My artistic work for Chisenhale Gallery consists in giving time to the staff. Once the staff accept the time, once work is suspended while staff members continue to receive pay, the artistic work can emerge. 'To give time, the day, or life', writes Jacques Derrida in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (1991), 'is to give nothing, nothing determinate, even if it is to give the giving of any possible giving, even if it gives the condition of giving.' Departing from Derrida's thought experiment, I am interested in the fundamental possibility of suspending the capitalist logic of exchange by giving time and making a life without wage labour imaginable.

**KG:** *Are there any rules about what staff can or cannot do while they are not working? How have you defined work and free time for the purposes of this project?*

**ME:** The only specification is that there is no specification.

**KG:** *The exhibition proposes a situation that brings to mind a labour strike, but it differs from a strike because a strike reinforces the value of work and production through its absence, and in this situation you have created an absence or lack as the artwork itself. How do you think this exhibition relates to the current conditions of austerity and contemporary labour relations in the UK and across Europe?*

**ME:** Work is suspended [*ausgesetzt*], temporarily interrupted, thus becoming the focus of attention. It becomes exposed [*ausgesetzt*] to the gaze, to attentiveness. The term *aussetzen* [to suspend, to expose, to abandon, to find fault with, or to strike] becomes active, operative and effective in its multiple meanings. Work is abandoned [*ausgesetzt*]: given away, brought to a different place and left to itself there, surrendered to the influence of somebody or something. To find fault with [*aussetzen*] work under these conditions means to question, or to critique it. *Aussetzen* can also mean 'to strike'. When a passer-by comes by the closed door of Chisenhale Gallery and reads the sign on the fence, it could occur to them that a strike is taking place here. But this strike is not chosen, rather, I have imposed it.

Strikes are mostly held for higher wages and better working conditions. Why is there a strike here? The Chisenhale staff have every reason to strike; maybe not due to low wages, but due to the lacking support of the public authorities. This is how art is privatised and disappears into the arsenals of the sponsors and the rich.

The tax money paid by the community flows instead into areas that the majority of citizens don't want to support: armaments, wars, nuclear energy. The rich receive tax benefits, while the budget for social expenditures is cut more and more.

Armaments expenditures are increasing globally. As has been widely reported in the news recently, while almost 600 billion dollars were racked up for the arms industry in 2015 in the United States, the US Republicans have simultaneously blocked Barack Obama's proposal to increase the minimum hourly wage to over 10 dollars; a policy that would have protected the weakest on the labour market.

With respect to austerity, the UK and the countries of Europe are certainly not to be lumped together. Austerity politics and working conditions differ from country to country. What is obvious, however, is that the gulf between the poor and rich continues to grow in Europe and around the world. Why is it still not possible to distribute resources in such a manner that all people can live well? Why is it not possible to let those work who want to work - and not make those work who cannot or do not want to work - and secure a sufficient basic income that is the same for all?

***KG:** There are some interesting parallels between 5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours and the exhibition that you made in 2001 at Kunsthalle Bern, where you used the production budget to pay for much-needed renovations to the building, leaving the galleries empty for the duration of the show. For the audience, your own artistic labour was manifested through the labour of the builders and other contractors who undertook the work and these tangible and permanent improvements to the fabric of the Kunsthalle's building took the place of a formal artwork. What was the motivation behind this gesture and do you see a relationship to your exhibition at Chisenhale?*

**ME:** After conversations with the employees, managers, etc. of the Kunsthalle and the Kunsthalle association as well as archival research, I discovered revealing links between the historical development of the Kunsthalle and the association, the condition of the Kunsthalle building, the property on which the Kunsthalle stands, and a non-amortised loan, and I realised how these links mutually condition one another. These insights – in the sense of an investigative approach – were what I wanted to convey to the public with my exhibition.

The exhibition, *Das Geld der Kunsthalle Bern / Money at Kunsthalle Bern*, consisted of three parts: an historical analysis of the economic context of Kunsthalle Bern, and two applications deriving from this which referred to the Kunsthalle's property relations. Materially, it consisted of a series of renovation projects, a talk followed by a discussion, and the production of various printed works that I designed: invitation card, poster, catalogue, and share certificates.

The Kunsthalle was mostly empty, because the renovations were to take place, insofar as possible, outside of opening hours (it was not a display or 'performance' of workers). Nevertheless, it did happen that certain zones were closed off when dangerous tasks needed to be carried out during opening hours: when equipment or materials remained standing around; or when noises from the areas not open to the public (attic, storage rooms, etc.) indicated that activities were taking place there.

The third part of the exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern, the new issue of share certificates, tended towards a fundraising action. The yield from this action goes completely to the Kunsthalle association. It serves to increase the equity capital.

**KG:** *Where do you think the work is located in your exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery? Is it in the empty gallery and the sign on the gate outside explaining the reason for the closure, the symposium and the conversations that develop around the work, or in the free time that you have given to the Chisenhale staff?*

**ME:** In all these places. The exhibition consists of the staff members not working; that I give the employees time, and that they accept the time. That is, they suspend [*aussetzen*] their work while continuing to be paid.

That the exhibition space and the office are closed is a spatial consequence of the fact that these are the places where the staff primarily attend to their work. The institution itself and the actual exhibition are not closed, but spread into the public sphere and into society. So, a sign will be fixed to the gate in front of the gallery with information about the exhibition. In addition, further messages are available, on the website, in social media, etc. The automatic email response, written especially for my exhibition, includes information about the exhibition as well as a notification that incoming emails will be automatically deleted and it will not be possible to reach recipients again until 29 May 2016. When the staff return, they will not have an excessive amount of emails to attend.

**KG:** *We could have employed temporary staff to keep the gallery open for your exhibition while the regular staff are not working. Why did you decide not to do this and for the gallery to be closed during your exhibition?*

**ME:** Nobody should be in the gallery spaces or working there during my exhibition. In a certain way the building should also calm down and have time off, not work. These spaces should also not be used or made available in other ways. Not rented for profit or otherwise capitalised.

My exhibition is also taking place in the Chisenhale Gallery spaces.

**KG:** *For documenta 11 in 2002 you established Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft, a public limited company in which the company itself is the sole shareholder, and you stipulated that, contrary to the very purpose of the structure of the company, the capital that was initially invested could not accrue value and did not belong to anyone. What interests you about this model, which inverts many of the most basic facts about our contemporary neoliberal situation? Do you see a relationship between this work and your exhibition at Chisenhale?*

**ME:** The *Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft* owns its own shares and belongs to no one – or, that is to say, to everyone. *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* is similarly conceived so that the time itself does not belong to anybody. That is, time cannot be economised, it does not allow itself to be exchanged and it breaks with the law of equivalence.

**KG:** *This work has a very real impact on the lives of the employees of Chisenhale and some of its implications are very personal. Will you ask the staff about what they did with their free time and the impact that this had when they return to work?*

**ME:** The employees are not assigned any tasks by me. They should do nothing other than not work for Chisenhale Gallery. That is my only specification.

In conclusion, a personal note: this has been an extraordinarily involved project to work on together. We met each other multiple times, talked on the phone, and spoke intensively about the project. You, Katie, and Polly, you two formulated many questions that I answered, added new points on my end, which in turn raised new questions that we discussed back and forth for so long until we had thought through all aspects for the realisation of the work. I am very thankful to you two for making this project possible. I also would like to wholeheartedly thank the entire team.

**KG:** *We have really enjoyed working with you, Maria. Thank you very much.*

*Maria Eichhorn interviewed via email by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery. Eichhorn's answers are translated from the German by Kelly Mulvaney.*