

I.

I step off the train and into the bustle of morning commuters. People with sleep in their eyes and postures that are not quite ready to take on the day yet are hurrying about the platforms to catch the transport to wherever they need to go. A hundred years ago, this scene must have looked about the same. Apart from the fact that back then, the platforms were completely wrapped in the thick, nostril-stinging coal smoke of steam locomotives, of course. “Il Treno Regionale 10968 di Trenitalia, proveniente da Verona Porta Nuova, in diretto a Bolzano, è in arrivo al binario due. Attenzione: Allontarsi dalla linea gialla!”

Standing on the platform watching the mayhem unravel around me, I think back to what has brought me here to Rovereto: A tour of lectures related to a publication on self-organized learning that started in Berlin, continued in Eindhoven and Amsterdam now comes to end here in northern Italy with one last gig. As reimbursement is not really a strong suit in any arts-related issue, I applied for a travel grant in order to be able to follow the invitations of a handful of institutions and commence this tour. This was just one of many applications I submitted since finishing my studies about two years ago. Most of the funding I apply for I don't actually receive, but I guess that's a problem many people working in culture face.

II.

Travel grants, production grants, exhibition grants, project grants, development grants, fellowships, or stipends—the nature of funding structures in culture [and quite possibly in all other fields, too] is deeply speculative. Let's walk through the application process of a

production grant in the arts: Usually, an applicant is asked to provide information in regards to what will happen, when it will happen, who is going to be involved in the proposed production [and to which extent], what one's findings will be if there is a phase of research involved, what the final work will look like, and where this work will ultimately be presented. Essentially, the applicant is asked to convey the impression that the work has been produced already, it has only not materialized yet.

In other words: When applying for funding, what one is asked to conjure up is a box of hot steam.<sup>1</sup> The applicant's task now is to sell this speculative steam as something rocksolid to the commission, jury or individual in charge of distributing the funds. It is a game of deception that has to be played here, not dissimilar to a magic trick. The mechanic at work is the willing suspension of disbelief on behalf of the jury presented with an applicant's proposal: Everyone knows it's trickery, but if it's well delivered, then the audience gladly buys into it—quite literally, in our case.

<sup>1</sup> Here, it is irrelevant whether the funds applied for stem from public or private sources.

If the applicant does not manage to impress—or deceive—the jury well enough to receive the funds, chances are of course that the project disappears inside some drawer never to reemerge again. It is suggested that about 1 in 10 applications that individuals send off for grants, residencies or scholarships in the arts will be successful. So, apparently, 9 times out of 10 in an application for funding, nothing but hot steam is actually produced.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On a little side note: Of course, an argument could be made for it being an enormous luxury that a system of both private and public art funding exists in the first place. This is

Image: <https://i.ebayimg.com/images/g/ybQAAOSwcj5ZScue/s-l1600.jpg> (i.e. eBay)

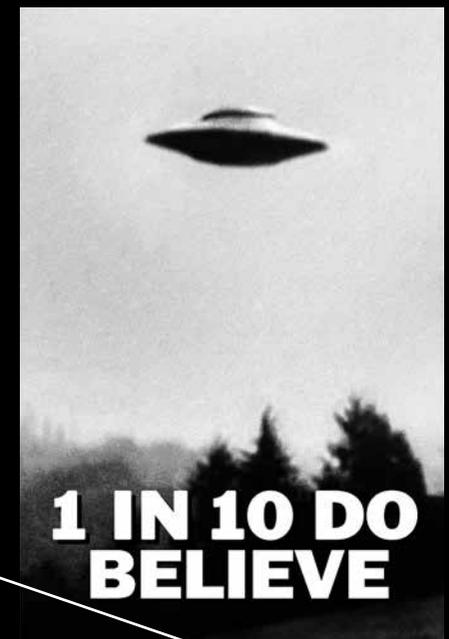


Image: Till Wittwer

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undoubtedly true and becomes very evident once one examines the many places where such systems are unheard of. However, this does not change the fact that a specific economic setup also shapes or maybe first and foremost produces specific (adapted) subjects and results. This essay is not as much lamenting the (non-) existence, shortcomings or recession of adequate funding structures in culture, but instead it is an inquiry into what kind of subjects, economies, and narrative structures are assumed and produced by this specific relation.

### III.

I think about funding in the arts as I exit the Rovereto train station leaving behind the regular income-workforce hurrying towards their jobs. I apply for funding on a regular basis. Actually, quite a bit of time in my-freelance-working week is consumed with writing applications. So, as I have a fairly regular output of steam I think it is fair to state that I am a steam machine.

The thought amuses me-it seems funny that steam still is a materiality to consider. After all, steam locomotives and puffing steam-machine powered factories seem to be relics from a distant past. Thinking about them evokes images from the Industrial Revolution, when landscapes were littered with factory buildings sporting towering chimneys which ceaselessly emitted clouds of thick smoke, cladding streets, buildings, people, and an entire period in a mysterious veil of opaque carcinogens.

### IV.

The observation of factories shooting out of the ground like mushrooms, the rapid and puzzling transformations that industrialization brought about and the rising disconnect between factory workers and the work they performed prompted Karl Marx to his famous pun: "All that is solid



Image: <http://cyberneticzoo.com/wp-content/uploads/Hornburg-Steam-Man-c1900-x640.jpg> (i.e. cyberneticzoo.com)

melts into air."<sup>3</sup>

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<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm> (11/08/2018). The German original reads: "Alles Stehende und Ständische verdampft (...)", in: Marx, Karl, Manifest Der Kommunistischen Partei, Paderborn, 2009, p. 69.

Today's postindustrial landscapes hardly play host to smoke- and steam-spitting production facilities anymore. For the most part, the "dirty work" has been outsourced and in quite a brutal way rendered invisible from a Western vantage point. That is, we are immersed in an economy in which material output has become scarce. Instead, information and communication are the "products" of abundance.

However, the circumstance of translocating the smoke puffing factory buildings and rendering the work attached to them invisible has not made the factories themselves disappear- neither from the face of the earth, nor from our immediate realm. Actually, moving the brickwork, iron frames and saw-tooth roofs as facilities of material production out of sight<sup>4</sup> was an act of not only transforming landscapes once more, but also of gradually transforming the factories themselves. Stripping the armor from around the formerly gated, formerly machine-like workers revealed them all mutated: In the shift from industrialism to postindustrialism, the workers had turned into the actual factories. The heat of furnaces, the narrative of progress deceptively sparking sprues and the brute force of tightly bolted colonial extraction had melted into and merged with soft tissue and bones and nerves and brain matter. The factories had turned human, they had turned into you and I.

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but instead turning their gutted and expertly upcycled shells into facilities of intellectual production, one could add, looking at their frequent repurposing as coworking spaces, artist studios or start-up headquarters.

In the neoliberal condition

of labor, every single one of us has become their own little powerhouse. We are so-called entrepreneurs of the self, freelancing our way from project to project- or from proposal to proposal- and thus we have not only become steam machines, but our bodies and minds have also become the factories that house this machinery.

### V.

I move away from the train station and walk towards a cinema which a friend in town has recommended to me. "You will find a lot of fellow artists and creative folk hanging out there," my friend had briefed me- or warned me, for that matter. I know that today, they will have a matinée screening of an experimental film. The film is Anthony McCall's A Line Describing a Cone from 1973. I purchase a ticket from a friendly guy in a booth and dodge the concession stand. I am a bit late, the screening has already started. As I open the heavy door to the screening room, I am instantly enveloped. The room is filled with thick white smoke- so thick, in fact, that at first I cannot make out what is going on. Slowly, I begin to recognize silhouettes of people wandering unsteadily about the space. No one seems to be worried about the smoke and so I decide that I won't be either. No seats are installed in the theater. Then I notice something else: A thin line is traversing the fogged-up space almost horizontally, with only a slight downward tilt. It emanates from the projectionist's booth and leads right to the canvas. At first, it seems to me that a luminescent piece of string has been stretched between booth and canvas, but upon closer inspection, I understand that it is actually a beam of

light that is reflected by the smoke particles. I can witness its trajectory from the movie projector to the screen. I stand and watch while people stagger around me in silent awe. All I can hear is the movie projector's soft rattling from the projectionist's booth and the sound of people unsteadily navigating the space.

Slowly, the beam begins to move—it is gradually expanding. It grows wider and after a few moments of enchanted gazing I realize that the beam of light is working its way through the fog to slowly trace a circle on the canvas. On its way from the projector to the screen and as it grows, it also creates a three-dimensional shape in the space it transgresses. Yes, as I start moving about the space I can see it quite clearly: The line is indeed describing a cone in the space and the smoke is what allows this cone to materialize. People move in and out of this cone of light as if they were hypnotized by the phantasmagoric shape which is not quite a body, but body enough to claim space. Cinema is inverted—or rather: expanded—here: The invisible light emanating from the movie projector that crosses the space to open up a window into another world has been rendered visible, here, and it has brought the objects that are usually projected onto a plane into the very space it is traversing. The widening beam of light, the smoke, the space, and the people tumbling about somehow seem virtual to me. It is like a scene unfolding realistically in front of your eyes but once you reach out to touch its constituents, your hand moves right through them, as if they—or rather you—were a ghost. I am surrounded by a hazy simulation of a world in which potential becomes almost graspable—but just not quite.

Thirty minutes have passed. The expanding line moving towards the canvas has completed the circle and the cone of light hovers majestically in the smoke-filled cinema space—its pointed tip gently touching the movie projector's lens, then immediately forking and stretching as it moves away from the projectionist's booth to fill the entire screen on the opposite side of the room. A perfect mathematical shape, tipped to its side to float effortlessly; the idea of a body, too perfect for the real world, a holographic model pointing to a mythical, flawless dimension. For a brief moment everyone in the cinema seems to be holding their collective breath and the relief of completion lingers in the space alongside the cone. Then, suddenly, the projector is turned off and for a moment we are left alone and dispersed in the darkness.

The lights come back on with a soft hum and through squinted eyes the real world can be observed seeping into the cinema space again. I feel slightly lost and I notice that the fog hasn't cleared one bit. I cannot spot smoke machines anywhere. Hoping to grasp what is going on I eavesdrop to the soft chatter that has set in and then it hits me. It is the artsy folk and “next project”-types, the noncommittal work force of immaterial labor here in the space whom the steam emanates from. As soon as the doors had been closed behind them, they began to fill up the space with thick vapor—no artificial helpers needed—and it was through them (and me, I alarmedly notice only now) that the magical environment was created in which the phantasma of the floating cone was able to occur.



Image: <http://images.furycomics.com/viewer/fdfdc7b0b447c35b026cd3c9bfa18e8eeb/0.jpg>  
(i.e. furycomics.com)

## VI.

The physical mutation from human into factory and steam machine was hardly an active decision we, the cultural work force, took one day. Instead, the promises that we perpetually deliver in tightly compressed jpegs<sup>5</sup>, pdf files<sup>6</sup> or neatly completed application sheets<sup>7</sup> are embedded in a broader environment of huffs and puffs. The cultural economy in which we are floating about is itself running on fumes. The promises, good spirits, and fruitless efforts that we perpetually spurt out are also the basic working conditions we are often subjected to. Actually, they are the very foundation on which most cultural production is built—I remember the many times when I was offered or came across “jobs,” participation in exhibitions, a contribution to a magazine, and so on, and was presented with reimbursements like: “You’ll have the opportunity to grow within the organization and expand your professional networks!”<sup>8</sup> “This is a unique chance to hone your skills in a highly visible, emerging arts environment!”<sup>9</sup> “This will be a great occasion to meet the right people in the right environment to challenge your practice and move it forward!”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “Please attach a portfolio, 2mb max.” (sic)  
<sup>6</sup> “Must be compatible with Windows XP.” (sic)  
<sup>7</sup> “Incorrect labelling will result in an automatic exclusion from the application process.” (sic)  
<sup>8</sup> From a “job offer” posted by the Marina Abramovic Institute in 2013.  
<sup>9</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>10</sup> Anyplace else.

Of course, not everyone who offers these “deals” has much of a choice. Often times—be they institution or individual—their position is not unlike your own: Floating about weightlessly in a bewildering fog made of promises and precarious existence, desperate to grab a hold of every even remotely sturdy-looking funding opportunity before being

sucked into oblivion’s outer orbit.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Maybe that wouldn’t be all that bad—after all, this might be the place where one gets paid, since right here, right now is definitely not that place?!

There is an economic principle of eternally deferred gratification at work in the culture industry that projects the payment for actually delivered work in a nebulous and more than dubious future.<sup>12</sup> It uses steam to immerse us in an impenetrable and disorienting speculative fog that will probably never manifest into something solid—as all the solids haven’t actually melted into air, but they have never been there in the first place: The air we breathe has always consisted of nothing but promises and speculation.

<sup>12</sup> or—to come back to the thought of oblivion and its potential—possibly in some obscure outer orbit.

So, even though our bodies are traversing space, set in motion by the occasionally obtained travel grant, it very much seems like the foggy cultural environment we are navigating is one of a virtual reality.

The device you can see in the image to the right is the “SEGA VR” headset, announced by the video game giant SEGA in 1991. At the time, the company created an enormous hype around the device and got a lot of people excited, but quickly let everyone down as the headset was never actually released.

In the tech world, there is a term for items like this one that are spectacularly announced but never actually hit the market. Those speculative tech-wares whose promises amount to immense amounts of vapor that both inflate the non-product and clad it in a bedazzling fog are called “vaporware.” Interestingly enough, this term is quite fitting for the status quo of the cultural environment we are suspended in

and for many forms of labor that it produces.

So, I will have to correct an earlier statement at this point: In our contemporary mode of production in which we are consistently made to create promises packaged in ornamental phrase-scaffolding and garnished with Google SketchUp renderings, we have not so much become steam machines, as we have become vapor machines. And all the speculative application texts with their accompanying sketches, mockups, 3D-simulations, and intricate trailers for Kickstarter campaigns are the Vaporware to illustrate our good intentions but meager hopes. The environment we feed our fluffed-up words and life-like renderings back into is itself a system feeding off of those fluffed-up words, rephrasing the haze of empty promises and shaping all that foggy fluff into not quite life-like renderings of future greatness—perfect phantasmas of future greatness, if you like.

This misty environment is one of virtual reality, spreading a smokescreen over us that has been thrown up in order to simultaneously install and conceal the economy we are part of. And—quite perfidiously—it is us, the art-working vapor machines, who with 9 out of 10 failed applications for funding emit the deceptive steam or vapor or smoke that creates, fuels, and conceals the exploitative nature of this economy of eternally deferred gratification.

As vapor workers, we are in service of the VR experience of eternal promise at the same time as we are struggling inside of it. We are involuntary accomplices, enforcing an environment of exploitation by being subjected to it and incessantly regurgitating its power dynamics.

We have become the architecture of the urban landscape as



Image:  
<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DcyrsWVU8AAxCz4.jpg> (i.e. pbs.com)

well as the architects of a virtual one: We are the factories littering the post-industrial metropolises, ceaselessly breathing and reproducing a virtual reality. The contrails above our heads are the vapor trails of the Easyjetset, financed by the one successful application for a travel grant and connecting all the speculative lands of eternal promise in a tightly-knit network of both exhaust and exhaustion.

## VII.

By now, my unsettling discovery at the cinema lies a week or so in the past and I am still a bit shaken. In the meantime, I have returned from Rovereto and am back at my studio desk. I did receive the travel grant after all. That is, I will receive it only after I turned in proof of my travel to the grant-giving institution. However, I ended up taking a different mode of transportation <sup>7</sup> than I had initially stated in my application papers (“failure to comply fully to your stated travel route or means of transportation will result in revocation of the grant”) and now I have to slouch over the drafting table once more—this time not to stuff yet another application with a fantasy project, but to forge travel tickets. I open up Photoshop. I’ve done this before—this type of post-production or retrofitting has become somewhat of a routine procedure. My mind wanders off as my fingers work away automatically—they have assembled those layers in the ever same routine for years. I can feel the calluses that have developed on my finger tips from all the typing, clicking, and shortcutting. Is this how I return to being a craftsman, a manual worker after all? As I lazily check my Facebook on a break I notice amongst the sporadically appearing <sup>0</sup> usual advertisements for bookkeeping

software and general clickbait an ad for work boots displayed on my feed. A friend has put up a link to a puzzling but mesmerizing music video<sup>13</sup> which I watch before I return to the Clone Stamp. I wonder whether I’ll have to reconsider: Maybe all the failed applications do serve a purpose after all. Maybe alongside the forged tickets they are the actual artwork that I create, as opposed to the “art work” that comes out of the one successful application every once in a while, which in turn is maybe nothing but a business card, necessary to legitimize the next run of (mostly rejected) applications for a grant. Maybe this is my career. Maybe I am an application artist.<sup>14</sup>

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Watch it here: [www.till-wittwer.net/promises-promises/](http://www.till-wittwer.net/promises-promises/)

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I owe this thought to Silvio Lorusso who pointed me towards this possibility.

I think I will buy the work boots and after that I’ll update my CV. I haven’t noticed that the space around me is slowly filling with an odorless vapor. I feel very light.