

**“The practice
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A Tank to Think Through Contemporary Art

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Service

November 21st, 2018, I received a newsletter by Longtang announcing a show and concert by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster scheduled to begin three days later in their recently opened space in Zürich-Nord. No save-the-date, no yearly programme.

Gonzalez-Foerster's *From Avenue George V to 542 W 22nd St back to Via Borgognona* fills two rooms with a video installation drawing from photographs of the stores of the fashion house Balenciaga. As part of the group Poste 9, Gonzalez-Foerster did the design for these stores. Poste 9 started the collaboration with former Balenciaga head designer Nicolas Ghesquière in 2002 and had designed over 100 stores until 2012. It is interesting to revisit Poste 9 with respect to Balenciaga's new head designer Demna Gvasalia, founder of the brand Vetements, who is appreciated for his institutional critique of fashion. For Balenciaga, he designed a hoodie with the logo of the international luxury group Kering which owns the brand. However, as Hans-Christian Dany aptly notes, this criticism is not more than feedback pointing to the monopolisation of the market. It does not change the power balance and modes of production in fashion, on the contrary, it stabilises them as the market feeds on criticism.¹ While Gvasalia also embraces the art world, he involves artists in clearly defined tasks such as shooting a campaign, doing interior design or modeling. Poste 9 on the other hand, was not limited to one task but involved in the overall rebranding strategy of Ghesquière by

¹ Dany, H.C. (2018). *MA-1: Mode und Uniform*. Hamburg: Nautilus, p.135.



From Avenue George V to 542 W 22nd St back to Via Borgognona, 2018. Exhibition view, 15 channel video installation with photographs by Grégoire Vieille of all Poste 9 (Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Martial Vieille / Galfone & Benoit Lalloz) Balenciaga stores. Photo credit: Longtang. Courtesy: Longtang

“developing a full language” for the stores.² For Gonzalez-Foerster it was about “learning and collaboration” which necessitates constant discussion on the terms and conditions of the work. This work on the conditions of production in a highly commercial field such as fashion, in a world-wide operating company such as Balenciaga that integrates artistic approaches, might bear the potential to escape what Dany describes as “system preserving criticism”.

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster’s show seems programmatic for Longtang’s approach in general. Longtang was founded as “a tank to think through contemporary art” in early 2018 by Ludovica Parenti, Anne Gruber, Emil Michael Klein, and Tobias Kaspar. From the very beginning, they started to establish relationships with artists for their website, fonts, and architecture. Thomas Sauter is responsible for the website; it is a piece in itself. For their first press release, they use Bea Schlingelhoff’s font *LisaFittkoBold* which is part of a series of fonts dedicated to women fighting fascism in Germany.

² Gonzalez-Foerster, D. and Pilekjaer, P. (2018). Landscapes for Balenciaga. *PROVENCE*, 9, pp.12-27, p.15.

The facade of the pavilion has a printed drawing by Nora Berman titled *Tell The Truth*. These elements responsible for the representation of the space in the public sphere and media are not conceptualised through and through by Longtang, but have a life of their own. Not only does this question the nature of an institution, its coherence, and representation, it also negotiates the relationship between art and service. Who is of service to whom and when? Which types of services get paid?

The new issue of *PROVENCE*, a magazine Tobias Kaspar run together with Hannes Loichinger, revisits art practices in service of someone or something. It lays out how the question of service is related to notions of the autonomy of art, how art is embedded in society and culture, and the wages of artists. The magazine does not argue to leave art altogether or to insist that art is not of service to anything or anyone. It furthermore proposes to shift the question to an investigation of capitalism formulated by Craig Owens who asked why “capitalism promotes this [cultural activity] and what it gains from it, and how its interests are vested in it.”³

Planning

Longtang is located in a pavilion in Zürich-Seebach between the recycling facility Hagenholz and the Hunziker Areal, a new neighbourhood planned by the cooperative Mehr als Wohnen. The pavilion is a leftover structure from the planning process of the facility in the 1960s and was later used for the planning of the Hunziker Areal. It is in the middle of a massive development zone on the outskirts of Zurich. With rent prices rising drastically over the last twenty years, people have moved away from the city center to suburbs and urbanised former industrial areas. Artists have been playing an active role in this process of urbanisation by temporarily using former industrial buildings for studios and project spaces, giving value to the areas as desirable places to live. Until recently, the artist's spaces Taylor Macklin and Plymouth Rock rented a former car paint facility in the vicinity of Longtang. However, the drift to the periphery is not only connected to constraints or displacement, but also to a model often used in order to talk about newness, or change. In their first exhibition, Longtang reflects the role of economically-driven urbanisation and the role of art in this process. It shows historical photographs by Theo Frey of the location of today's art

3 Preface, *PROVENCE*, 9, pp.7-9 and Owens, C. (2018). In: L. Blumenthal and K. Horsfield. *Craig Owens: Portrait of a Young Critic*. New York: Badlands Unlimited, p.101.

school, the Zurich University of the Arts at the Toni-Areal on the western edge of Zurich. In the 1940s the waste depot Herdern, where people would look for coal and build temporary housing structures around it, occupied the same site. The Toni-Areal was built later, in 1977, as a factory by the Toni dairy company. While the art school is the latest step on the ladder of replacements in the process of urbanisation, inventing itself as a factory-university of creative industry anew and attracting students to rent apartments in the adjacent areas, I cannot help but think of what will become of Hagenholz in the future.

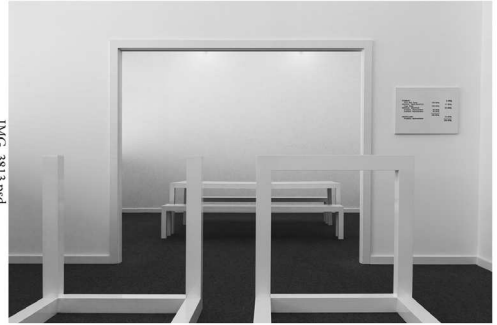
However, Longtang not only points to where art has moved, and to which industries it has replaced, but also to the desire for art to be more embedded in life; to be of relevance to a neighbourhood and to enable the possibility to engage with art, without the threshold of the white cube. Longtang uses the Hunziker Areal with all of its idealism for new forms of living and togetherness as a backdrop for the question of art's relationship to life. While Longtang exhibited Theo Frey in their space, the laundry room of one of the residential buildings displayed a piece inspired by Louise Lawler. Lawler is known for her photographs showing art in living rooms, hotel lobbies and art fairs. She is interested in what these different rooms, atmospheres, and neighbourhoods do with the art. By photographing art-in-context, she adds yet another context, with herself as the author.

Longtang commissioned Isaac Contreras to take a photo of collector Ghislain Mollet-Viéville's apartment, which Lawler documented in 1985. The MAMCO (Musée d'art moderne et contemporain) in Geneva reconstructed the apartment and that is precisely where Contreras took the photo. Is Lawler's hint at the importance of context in art proven correct by the fact that the museum reconstructed the apartment? Or is it Lawler's depiction of the apartment that made it become a museum item? Either way, standing in the laundry room of Hunziker Areal we are no longer looking at the context the collector's apartment provides, but at the context of relationships of dependence and power. However, such a reenactment also stresses the notion of commodification of art. It triggers questions but does not necessarily deliver answers.

The Longtang pavilion recalls a temporary school, the type of school that is set up while the "real" school is under construction or when there are more kids than a school can handle. Let us think of it as a school for planning: "planning" in Stefano Harney's and Fred Moten's understanding as a form that "invents the means in a common experiment". Planning here is not an activity such as exhibiting,



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Contact Sheet for *Paris New York Shanghai Geneva*, 2018. Photo credit: Isaac Contreras. Courtesy: Longtang and Isaac Contreras

teaching or producing art, but rather, planning with forms of life that make such activities possible.⁴

Think Tank

Longtang calls itself “a tank to think through contemporary art” alluding to the model of the “think tank”. A think tank usually comments on political, social or economic concepts and advises political or economic actors on how to deal with them. This subtitle names the role experimental art spaces have played for bigger institutions. The 11th Gwangju Biennale 2016, for example, described self-organised spaces, micro-organisations, and para-institutions that have emerged worldwide as the “research and development departments of the art

⁴ Harney, S. and Moten, F. (2013). *The Undercommons*. New York: Minor Compositions, pp. 74-75.

world, generating new ideas and shaping new curatorial and educational methods”.⁵ This biennial put forth the belief that these types of organisations could give concrete indications for a possible change in institutional policy, in which large institutions learn from small self-organised ones, instead of as usually presented and assumed the other way around. They were interested in the unexpected movements on the part of the institutions, curators and artists generated by these new forms of self-organisation.

Longtang commits to being an institution that critically questions self-institutionalisation and the instrumentalisation of art as a think tank, respectively “art in the service of”.⁶ Its programme is formed around the activities of its founders as curators, researchers, and artists. This mode of working helps to evade self-institutionalisation. Its programme and tempo are very much based on the need and desires of those involved. That can include solo shows by artists such as Valentina Triet and Chantal Kaufmann, the hosting of study groups, seminars, and semester shows by classes of the art school. It is not only a place to show art but also maybe foremost a place for the production of art. Klein and Kaspar have their respective studios there, and Longtang provides additional studio space for short- and long-term residencies that turn into exhibitions as in the case of Pedro Wirz, Mathis Collins, and as of March 2019, Ceylan Öztrük. Longtang is also shaped by other projects such as *PROVENCE*, which launched the issue REPORT AW 18/19 there and was formative for several shows. A selection of photographs of Balenciaga stores was first published in the magazine, along with an interview by Philip Pilekjaer with Gonzalez-Foerster. Later Pilekjaer was invited for a solo show at Longtang where he would show an advertisement for a nightclub in Brittany which was published in the same issue of *PROVENCE*. Traversing editorial work, residencies, and study groups there seems to be permeability between formats and roles that is characteristic of Longtang. One does “not just have a show there” but is involved in other ways before and after.

Since their launch in early 2018, Longtang has experimented with the different levels of service art spaces are expected to deliver for their public. Their communication in the form of newsletters and social media posts vary in tone and form: from lengthy descriptive

5 The8thclimate.org (2016). The 8th Climate: Forum and Fellows. [online] Available at: http://www.the8thclimate.org/en/forum_and_fellows/ [Accessed 30 Jan. 2019].

6 Longtang.life (2018). Welcome to Longtang. [online] Available at: <http://longtang.life> [Accessed 30 Jan. 2019].



Philippe Pilekjær, 2018. Exhibition view. Photo credit: Stefan Burger. Courtesy: Longtang and Philippe Pilekjær

press releases, poetic texts to no text, except for the content in the subject line of the email with ever-changing background colors in the email body; all programmatically sent at short notice. It is a process of working through different tones and institutional modes of framing art. Similarly, their shows are documented in different manners: from placement on the website Contemporary Art Daily, which posts installations shots and press releases of international exhibitions, to artefacts representing the shows and events. While web placement is an effective way to put something on the map, it fails to provide a protected space for a way of thinking through art that is not immediately framed through media communication.

The framework defining Longtang as an institution, what kind of questions it asks and what kind of answers it can give, is not only experimented with on the level of the representation of the space but also on the level of its infrastructure: architecture, maintenance and funding. The pavilion is not a white cube; it has different wooden walls, radiators, and windows on two sides. Longtang made only one architectural intervention by installing a blue carpet. There is no predefined approach regarding budget and installation of the shows.

It is based on the respective process of each artist. The practice makes the institution and not the other way around. This relative openness renders visible the frameworks we carry with us, the expectations we have towards an art space concerning architecture, budget and service.

The reduction of “standards” is a way to ask questions about internalised notions of professionalism – a process connected to the rise of efficiency, improvement of quality through standardisation. As we all work in different settings governed by these principles, the potential of a self-organised space might not be to reproduce these terms but to exceed and possibly escape them along the way. By moving away from existing subjectivities, we might be able to rethink our relationships with artists, researchers, curators and gallerists. By exceeding professionalism, one might open up an experimental field for new forms of a shared culture, collaboration, collectivity, care and maintenance that go beyond the art field.

This approach has been possible because of Longtang’s funding structure. So far, the cooperative Mehr als Wohnen has sponsored the space and its programme. There is some traditional public funding for specific projects, along with donations from private companies, such as the Swiss textile manufacturer Ruckstuhl who sponsored the blue carpet. As of 2019, Longtang has a partnership with the Fondation Nestlé pour l’Art, a company surrounded by controversy in the cultural field.⁷ Many public small- and medium-scale art institutions mirror the normalisation of funding structures. Therefore it is necessary for a space that is also about the possibility of an art space today to rethink these structures.

Through Contemporary Art

In Tom McCarthy’s novel *Satin Island* the main protagonist, U, a former anthropologist, is employed by a think tank. He reworks post-structuralist theory in a way that makes it applicable to his employer’s customers. It is a story of researchers and artists being involved in tomorrow’s advertising agency. U’s often seemingly goalless individual movement produces a knowledge that might be the key to success for multinational companies. However, U also dreams of destroying the entire system from the inside out, of art breaking up

7 Kaufmann, C., Dal Molin, G., Massard, J., Hunziker, M., Müller, P. (2017). Is Nestlé money evil? *Brand-New-Life* [online]. Available at: <http://brand-new-life.org/b-n-l/is-nestle-money-evil/> [Accessed 30 Jan. 2019].

the ruling powers and revealing new forms and possibilities. What interests me about *Satin Island* is that it also is a book on the crisis of the novel. U is traveling, sitting in airport lobbies, watching YouTube; he is restless and unpredictable in all directions. The novel has no coherent narration. It is an open system. It is not an explication of an idea but provides the possibility to generate one. It is an invitation to the reader, to navigate through the book, orient oneself, make something of it.

In art theory, there is much criticism toward the art institution for creating an increasingly opaque, conservative, bureaucratic, litigious, technocratic and irresponsible context that contradictorily demands that we be open, transparent, informal, radical, experimental, expressive and personally responsible. At the same time, the art institution is more and more insecure about what it ought to impart, energise, teach and protect. The institution wrestling with the contradictions of its conditions, prepared to change the mode of production has become rare. Nevertheless, over the last twenty years there have been attempts to change the working conditions and framework of the institution, and also to implement an institutional understanding that corresponds to art practices that have shifted to design, theory and social engagement. Some asked for the institution to become more of a research institute, and others wanted an academy, a laboratory or a community center. What they share is the conviction that production, presentation and theory/criticism are not to be understood as successive activities that are separated from each other, but are interwoven with each other. In other words, their practices involved programming, as much as infrastructural work, distribution, and maintenance work. Laurence Rassel took this up when she pointed to the notion of the “good enough institution” regarding her work as the director of the art school *École de recherche graphique* in Brussels: a type of institution able to recognise its mistakes, analyse and correct them; an institution recognising its limits and accepting them; an institution where its actors speak and decide.⁸

In today’s art school, it seems as though the activities “presentation”, “production” and “criticism” have become ever more separated. While the university is characterised by equality in teaching and research, they are somewhat separate in art schools. Teachers do their art practice elsewhere individually. It feels like we are in

8 Rassel, L. (2018). Rethinking the Art School. [video]. Available at: <http://vimeo.com/269943587> [Accessed 30 Jan. 2019].



Longtang, Hunziker Areal, Zürich Oerlikon, 2018. Photo credit: Thomas Hinder. Courtesy: Longtang

need of a “tank to think through contemporary art”. I work in artistic research, where “research through art” is also advocated. Nevertheless, the formats are for the most part separate from contemporary art. Perhaps precisely because artistic research is thought of independent of art institutions such as museums, galleries and experimental spaces? In the 1990s Marius Babias observed a new discursive/educational market which was entirely independent of the art market – a claim challenged by what Stephan Geene described as the money value of theory.⁹ In the field of artistic research, a prevalent image of educational institutions outlines them as counter positions to the art market that provide a free space for independent thinking. I am skeptical of such a dualist view, especially when it comes to art, an activity that cannot be separated from the whole that surrounds and yields it. *Actually existing public institutions* play an essential role, but they are not an alternative. If we want a way out,

⁹ Geene, S. (1991). The gift of critical insight. *A.N.Y.P. Die Zeitung für 10 Jahre*, 3, p.14.

we need to leave the logic of “for and against” behind. To paraphrase Jack Halberstam, we should instead be enjoying the ride and want it to be faster and wilder, since change can not come from a form we already know, but a form we cannot yet imagine.¹⁰

It is helpful to think about a phenomenon from the fringes, from the places where art dissolves into design, market, or the academy. Maybe Longtang provides a model for “retreating into the external world”¹¹ as Adrian Piper has put it: research in the art field that does not please itself in an imagined independency from contemporary art, or research within the art field that does not want a room of its own, but occupies the space in between. Research *through* art. We have learned from *Satin Island* that this is by no means a way out of the capitalisation of practices. Through the development of new infrastructures and distribution strategies, art opens up new areas ready to be capitalised. The question cannot be how to stay out of it, but how art plays a different role than the door opener for solvent customers who move into its newly created spaces.

¹⁰ Halberstam, J. (2013). In: Harney and Moten. *The Undercommons*, p.10.

¹¹ Piper, A. (2013). In: *Ibid.*, p.38.