



## (Un)Free Work

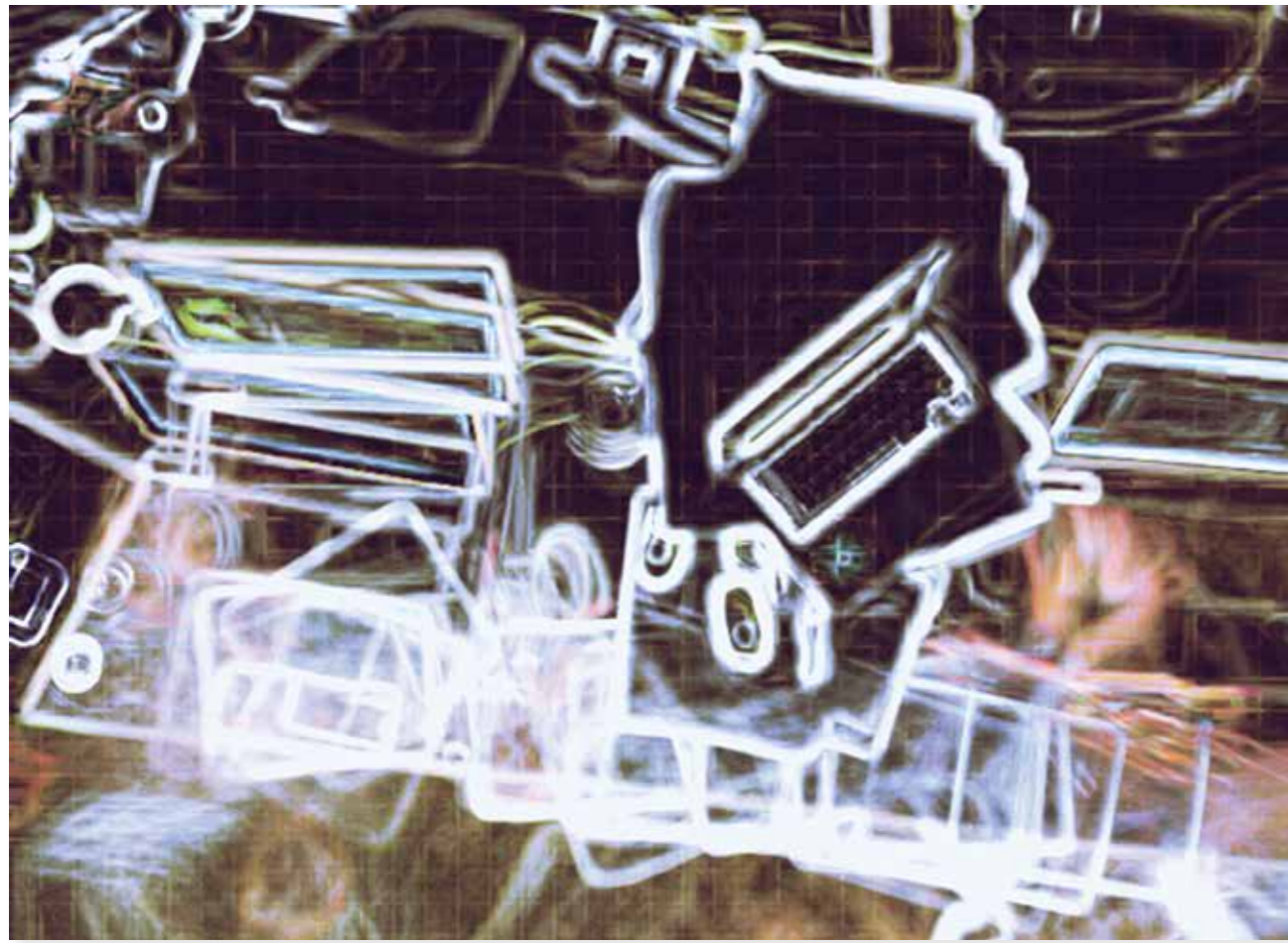
### Architecture, Labour and Self-Determination

**Peggy Deamer** Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Vestibulum erat tellus, pellentesque in elit vel, ornare suscipit justo. Suspendisse congue semper sapien, sed finibus ante accumsan nec. Vivamus quis est eu augue fringilla varius et eget lectus. Donec mi dolor, tincidunt id scelerisque a, placerat nec augue. Donec tortor ex, aliquet non lacus ut, dictum ultrices sem. Ut dolor nunc, viverra sed tincidunt eget, elementum at diam. Quisque orci justo, semper et lorem et, tempor tempus mi. Proin sem ante, laoreet id tempor a, commodo nec felis. Suspendisse congue bibendum nisl at laoreet.

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Architecture school produces professional knowledge workers who regulate themselves into performance at the extremes of productivity, mental and physical health, and susceptibility to exploitation. The Multidisciples project suggests that, in order to render that process visible, we might look at how the bodies of students are configured and ultimately inscribed into the apparatus of a complex of discipline, control and subjectivation in the service of a capitalist machine.





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The images present observations of the working conditions of students in various studio setups during the spring semester of 2015. A technique inspired by the time-motion studies of Frank and Lillian Gilbreth was developed to investigate relationships between the body of the student (considered as a worker) and the arrangement of the workspace (both on an individual level, and as constrained by the institution).

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The method for producing the images involved the fabrication of a specialised camera rig, implementation of stop-motion capture software on a camera phone, and integration and custom processing in Adobe Photoshop and After Effects. Videos and still images were then generated to provide multiple objects for consideration.

The premise is a simple one: architecture cannot produce spaces of freedom – public spaces, healthy spaces, accessible spaces, affordable spaces, sensually liberating spaces – for the society architects presume to serve if they are produced in unfree circumstances such as unpaid labour, gender inequality, generational hegemony, unsustainable work hours, non-existent work–life balance, lack of collegiality or discipline-crippling competition. This is not primarily an argument for the link between production and product, however, which would suggest that all that is being said is that there is a connection between the mode of labour and the ‘use’ or ‘exchange’ value of the product. There certainly is such a connection: Karl Marx has made the point that ‘concrete labour’ (labour that is subjectively offered) is associated with use value while ‘abstract labour’ (that which is divided and quantified) is associated with exchange value. According to Marx, the ability to abstract and quantify human labour (labour power) is linked to the historical development of economic exchange in general, and commodity trade (the trade in wares and merchandise) more specifically.<sup>1</sup> In the 19th century, John Ruskin made the point in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) that an immoral society that did not appreciate the need for labourers to be creative and self-empowered could not produce ‘moral’ buildings.<sup>2</sup> In the 20th century Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher and leading member of the Frankfurt School, claimed that functionalism in architecture – by which he meant not its practicality, but its sensuous meaning – cannot exist in an irrational society.<sup>3</sup> And Manfredo Tafuri, the Italian architecture theorist, insisted that a capitalist society could not generate architecture that does not serve capitalist aims.<sup>4</sup> The relationship between how things are produced and the true value of what is produced is therefore not worth contesting; at some level, it is obvious.

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#### Barriers to Freedom

The premise being presented here, however, is more nuanced than this, addressing the ability of a producing subject (the architect) to grasp the product (freedom) that is presumably the object(ive) of his or her labour. This itself implies two things: firstly, that it is not a question of whether the architect is capable of producing freedom, but rather whether he or she is able to identify it as a concept; and secondly, that the concern is also not primarily about the external circumstances that hinder the production of freedom, but the personal, subjective circumstances that inhibit its initial imago. Certainly there are external factors outside architects’ control that limit the possibility of producing ‘free’ spaces: private clients whose ambitions are anything but publicly oriented; government-issued zoning laws serving money-making development; a litigious society determining contractual relationships shaped around risk mitigation versus generosity and opportunity; standards of construction that privilege the hegemonic status quo; trade relationships that distribute and privilege certain goods unfairly; antitrust laws that prevent disciplinary cooperation. In short, capitalism offers innumerable barriers to both free production and free products. But again, what is being posed here is the ability of architects to conceive of freedom such that they can even initiate the task of producing it and battling the external hindrances.

Clearly the production of freedom may not be the immediate programme of the majority of our architectural work, but our liberal education, our code of ethics, and our roots in humanism make it the horizon of our disciplinary conscience. But what is freedom? Access to choice? The end of alienation? Autonomy?



Self-determination? All are debatable and all have ideological underpinnings that make not just their possibility fraught, but their allure deceptive. Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian continental philosopher, has pointed out that we actually do not want to be free; that freedom is anxiety producing and in our heart-of-hearts we seek the safety of limited options.<sup>5</sup> Critics of American Neoliberalism, including psychologists, suggest that in a country that now values autonomy above all else, freedom can become a type of tyranny imposed by an ideology of economics and rational choice, a mindset that leads to perpetual dissatisfaction with our lives.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, subjective self-determination – even incomplete or compromised – is a sine qua non for pondering the difficult path of personal, social and cultural freedom. As the French philosopher Michel Foucault has said: ‘There are times in life when the question of knowing whether one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.’<sup>7</sup> For us architects, freedom (or self-determination) is illusive not because it is ambiguous, contradictory or uncontested, but because it is an abstraction. In other words, it is not that we cannot agree on a definition of freedom or that we cannot trust in its possibility; rather, as long as it is not experienced, it is unknowable.

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Recordings were made at different times over the course of a week near the end of the semester. Each captures around one hour of mostly digital work by MArch students in different years of the graduate programme. Most of the images were processed so as to expose visually variation in body position relative to technical equipment and workspace over time, but in a mode that is neither easily quantified nor simply interpreted through normal techniques of visual inspection.



### Abstraction

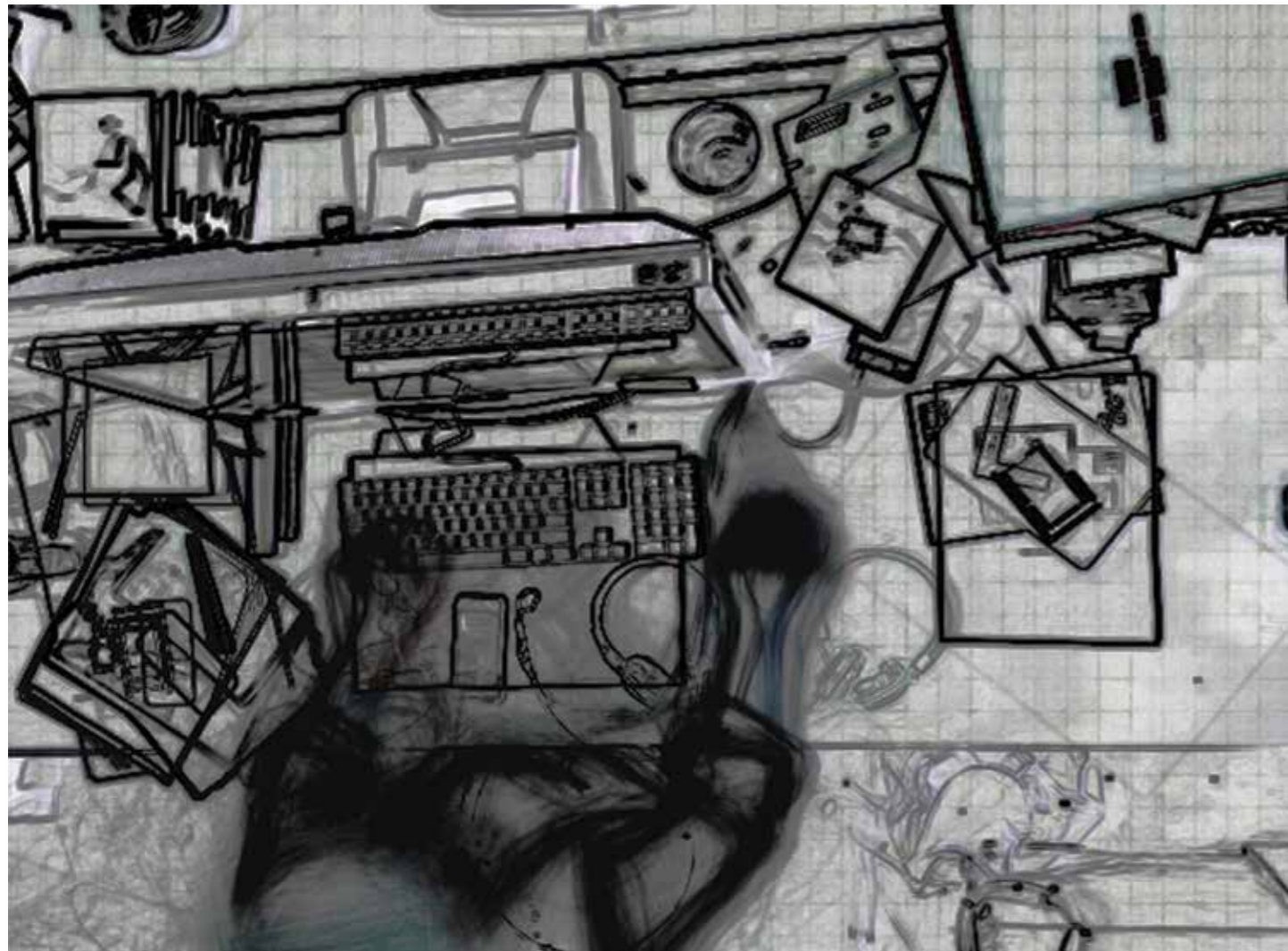
The role of abstraction in obfuscating the true meaning of a term is indicated by Marx’s distinction between abstract and concrete labour, where, as indicated above, it is associated with the transformation of experienced labour into its market value. Marx argues that the abstraction of labour is part of a process in which commercial trade in products not only alters the way labour is viewed, but also how it is practically treated. In other words, when labour becomes a commercial object traded in the marketplace, then the form and content of work in the workplace will be transformed as well. Abstraction and commodification go hand in hand. But the critique of abstract thought goes beyond Marx and labour. The Frankfurt School, the early 20th-century Neo-Marxist German think tank, described the pride of ‘reason’ that tears the individual away from a life of genuine wants and needs.<sup>8</sup> Abstraction, associated with rationality, was implicated for its distancing of the subject from felt life and allowing totalitarianism to appear acceptable. Further, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s discourse on affect in *Empire*, their influential book on contemporary power in which emotional, sensual and caring life is designated as the realm of both value and exploitation,<sup>9</sup> and Foucault’s on biopolitics, where the body becomes the locus for hegemonic colonisation, are linked in their study of ‘lived’ authority: biopower is understood to target affect as part of its controlling mechanism; at the same time, affective life may be an ‘outside’ that exceeds biopolitical mechanisms. Affect and biopolitics share a starting point: attending to affective life orientates inquiry into how new ways of living may emerge.<sup>10</sup> As the contemporary Italian media theorist Matteo Paquinelli has suggested in addressing ‘the essential problem (of) the politics of abstraction’, capitalism continues to evolve towards ever more sophisticated and abstract algorithms that allow it to maintain its control over social networks, global logistics and financial transactions.<sup>11</sup> To combat this, as Baruch Spinoza in the 17th century, Rudolph Steiner in the late 19th century, and Gilles Deleuze in the 20th century have said, one must operate in the context of ‘living work’.<sup>12</sup>

Architecture can be exposed for what it is: a profession providing the ‘unfree’ working conditions identified in the opening premise of this article that have long since been mitigated in other disciplines. It is precisely these working conditions that contrast with what we, as architects, have been trained to admire and produce: a humanitarian life. What is of interest, then, is how architects have not only failed to make the connection between our working conditions and our work, but actively deceived ourselves into believing that we are uniquely qualified to make judgements addressing social equitability and humanitarian spaces.

On the one hand, this can be explained by a uniquely architectural form of ideology. The discourses of creativity, collaboration and innovation that permeate Neoliberalism are particularly applicable to architecture; we congratulate ourselves for always having been what the rest of the knowledge economy is now extolling: a ‘lab’ culture that bypasses corporatism and office protocols. In this self-congratulation, we substitute the myth of creativity for the reality of our daily experience; capitalist ideology has convinced us that architecture serves a social purpose while hiding its actual real-estate-driven agenda.

On the other hand, we can see it as a more complex (and architecturally tilted) version of the schizophrenia that Deleuze and Félix Guattari have described as capitalism’s natural consequence.<sup>13</sup> In architecture, this schizophrenic state is our polarised identity as creator versus worker. Despite the fact that we go to an office, get

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The process stands in contrast to the Gilbreth studies, which were a development on Taylorist practices, and sought to produce quantitatively analysable objects through the ocular capture of movement over time, for the purposes of optimising productivity through organising and disciplining workers’ bodies and technical equipment.





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The images remain within a visual regime, but seek to obscure possibilities for optimisation in favour of exposing the process of subjectivisation enacted through modulation; that is, the repetitive implementation of the (micro)techniques of disciplinary power through the structural and informational regulation enacted within the institution of the university.

a pay cheque and fill out our time sheet, architects bypass these evident characteristics of ‘work’ and emphasise, instead, ‘art’. This failure of identity has many secondary schizo- consequences – aristocratic/privileged versus middle class; management versus labour – but the overall effect is a total ignorance of labour discourse and, consequently, any grasp of the reality of our daily work life. We are dutifully shocked by the unjust treatment of nail-salon workers, fashion models or graduate teaching assistants while never making the connection to our own work circumstances.

#### Architecture, Affect and Freedom

We do not want to insist that the architectural profession can operate outside capitalist structure to affectively ‘live’ freedom and thereby produce it. That would be naive. However, one can resist the models of work – the division of labour, lack of creative autonomy of all workers, disappearance of work/life balance – that are the acceptable norm and become a template of a socially organised profession. The goal of an emancipated work environment would not be measured by absolute standards of freedom (impossible, as we have indicated), but by constant work on the contingency of our affective life. On the one hand this would be, in effect, the reversal of work that organises our bodies into productive design labour (not entirely different to how Fordist factory labour shaped us through a series of repeated, cyclical steps); and on the other it would measure success in terms other than profit or aesthetic kudos. It would not be an easy organisational fix, but a commitment to respect all individuals involved – staff, consultants, firm owners, managers, clients – as they articulate their visions and angsts, their strengths and weaknesses, their self-determined value. It means everyone becoming involved in solving problems and making decisions that affect all of our lives. The fact that architecture is connected to other disciplines that conform to Neoliberalism’s competitive demands does not mean that in our own homes we cannot experiment with what freedoms we actually control. ▢

#### Notes

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2. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Dover Publications (New York) 1989.
3. Theodor Adorno, ‘Functionalism Today’, in Neil Leach (ed), *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Routledge (London), 1997, pp 5–18.
4. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans Barbara Luigia La Penta, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 1999.
5. Slavoj Žižek, ‘What is Freedom Today?’, video: [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/video/2014/dec/03/slavoj-zizek-philosopher-what-is-freedom-today-video](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/video/2014/dec/03/slavoj-zizek-philosopher-what-is-freedom-today-video).
6. Barry Schwartz, ‘Self-Determination: The Tyranny of Freedom’, *American Psychologist*, 55 (1), January 2000, pp 79–88: [www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bschwarz/self-determination.pdf](http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bschwarz/self-determination.pdf).
7. Michel Foucault, 1978 talk quoted by Gilles Deleuze in Ben Anderson, ‘Affect and Biopower: Towards a Politics of Life’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 22 November, 2010, pp 142–3: [www.scribd.com/document/305612301/Affect-and-Biopower-Ben-Anderson](http://www.scribd.com/document/305612301/Affect-and-Biopower-Ben-Anderson).
8. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press (Stanford, CA), 2002.
9. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA), 2000.
10. For the relationship between affect and biopower, see Anderson, *op cit*.
11. Matteo Pasquinelli, ‘The Politics of Abstraction: Beyond the Opposition of Knowledge and Life’, *Open!*, 14 October 2013: <http://matteopasquinelli.com/politics-of-abstraction/>.
12. Anderson, *op cit*.
13. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans Robert Hurley, University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis, MN), 1983.