

Nothing Happening Here (Kelsey Brod, Katia Schwerzmann, Jordan Sjol, Alexander Strecker, Kristen Tapson)

NOTHING RE-FUSED: PERFORMING THE NEO-INSTITUTION

Abstract

In this paper, we outline the shape of a new institutional structure born of neo-liberal precariousness that we call the neo-institution. The neo-institution is immune to refusal, while at the same time an expert in extracting labor, time, knowledge, and attention. Because there is no way out of the aporia that is the neo-institution — no practical way to re-shape or refuse it — we propose to partly subtract ourselves from it by instigating another way to assemble. We advance the theoretical practice of stitching as a form of assembling that does not erase traces of labor and fight and that eludes any totalizing tendency. Understood as a way of assembling and writing, stitching is a practice of repairing, repurposing, and holding together. Finally, while fatigue, exhaustion, burn-out, and depression are the inescapable result of neo-liberal precariousness, we praise the entropic ability of the body to refuse to be treated like refuse.

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“Do you mind if I write you? [...] Please be honest if you’d like me to dam or redirect this flow; my implicit desire to volley should not be burdensome.”

— *Lite Year*, Tess Brown-Lavoie

“what traces of strain deserve to remain in that which we show others” — *Nothing Happening Here*, 23XI20, 23IV21

“Oops we stitched it again” — *Nothing Happening Here*, based on Donna Haraway and Britney Spears

Academia, these days, can be pretty bleak. This is known all too well. What’s sometimes called ‘precarity’ is experienced widely, and ‘precarity,’ as a concept, is widely-deployed. Over at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), for instance, they’ve founded a new sub-unit, the Precarious Labor Organization (PLO), run mostly on the volunteer labor of (you guessed it) precarious academic laborers. In August of 2019, Dr. Caetlin Benson-Allott, the editor of SCMS’s flagship journal, approached the laborers of the PLO, offering them the opportunity to explain their mission by publishing a manifesto in the journal. As they later wrote:

The offer was a welcome one. It represented an opportunity to announce the mission of the new organization and a chance to further the conversation about how to transform the field of film and media studies to acknowledge and include precarious faculty. (Brasell et al. 2)

So they started emailing each other, trying to coordinate, to find time amid the churn and crush of semesters and quarters. Excitement about the project was widespread. The opportunity was appreciated! In the end, though,

they did not produce the requested essay. As time wore on, one by one they had to gracefully bow out. Instead of the essay, they decided to publish their email correspondence, appended by their three-point mission statement and preceded by a two-paragraph explainer and this message: “Contingent laborers cannot afford to perform the unpaid labor demanded of academics for work such as this.” (1) Why did they do this?

In theory, academics contribute to journals, academic organizations, conferences, etc., because they are being compensated for it by their institutions. Now that the majority of scholars are not in TT positions, we are expected to contribute in the same ways without any compensation at all. I think it would be great if our essay (manifesto? statement of principles?) somehow addressed the inherent irony that even this well-meaning offer (presented by the editors in the spirit of allyship) is in itself an invitation to participate in our own labor exploitation. (Brasell et al. 4)

There’s an obvious act of refusal, here. The laborers of the PLO did not produce the essay. But there is another act that caught our attention, and that’s an act of *salvage*. When the ‘opportunity’ became overwhelming, the PLO looked around, and decided they’d already produced something of value. The email chain, usually considered (if considered at all) as the para-textual detritus of producing a collective essay, became the project itself. Normally, so much effort goes into *concealing* the effort that goes into an essay: as we ‘polish’ our writing, we strip away scaffolding, delete hesitations, root out digressions. We project cool authorial authority, the effortlessness of the finished thing, all evidence of strain and struggle buffed

out. But the PLO upended this expectation. Exceedingly appropriate to their stated mission, what they put out into the world was *precisely* the imprint of their labor.

Even more, they salvaged the opportunity itself. For rather than withdrawing in defeat, they did publish, and each listed author will gain at least whatever currency another article will get you. Subversive as the gesture of refusal may be here, it is a refusal *and*. Refusal of the prompt *and* claiming the opportunity.

What about us?

We're tired too.

We are PhD candidates, PhD students, postdocs, lecturers. But who amongst us — us on this side of the page and you on that side — couldn't say "we're tired"? If you're reading this, you probably already know plenty about the precarization of academic labor, the paucity of tenure-track jobs and the attack on existing tenure lines, the adjunctification of the academic workforce, the growing administrative and institutional burdens put on even those lucky enough to have tenured or tenure-track jobs, the ever-more imperious demands put on graduate students to professionalize, professionalize, professionalize, the apocalyptic (and frankly demoralizing) tones in which the horrors of the current state of 'the job market' are explained to academic aspirants, always pitched as a reason to work harder, longer, and more strategically. Give yourself — your whole self — to the vocation. Build an online brand, create a website, preferably with the URL yourfullname.com. Network on LinkedIn and Twitter. You know, you know, you know. We know, we know... So, why go on about it? Why go on at all?

This is what we wondered; this is what led our ragtag band of variously precarious researchers to start working on "nothing" a

few years ago. It was what led us to transmediale and its theme of "refusal." We all agreed we could use some good refusal these days, so we got together and did some work, submitted a proposal, and then we were in. Yes! Excitement was widespread. We looked forward to working with each other, to working with the other groups, even if we wouldn't get to go meet them in Berlin, as in years past. Sure, we wouldn't get to pick up thick-glassed brown beer bottles at the Späti and take them on meandering walks with new friends, talking about Agamben or Haraway or whomever, then forgetting about theory and the rat race and LinkedIn until at least the next morning. But at least we'd have Zoom conversations, intellectual community, co-conspirators in refusal.

Then we were given our duties:

- *"Post 2 or 3 short essays/statements/provocations [on the aprja listserv] per group to open up discussion with all participants (up to 1000 words)";[1]*
- *Moderate the ensuing discussion, or respond to the texts of the other groups on the listserv;*
- *Present your progress in a 20-minute Zoom presentation;*
- *Contribute a short text (ca. 500 words) to the transmediale newspaper;*
- *Make a podcast;*
- *Write this paper.*

We're tired.

It's time to submit an article to the scrutiny of peer review, the contours of which, in this situation, we know very little about, since we're not even sure if there's an open call or if it's only the transmediale research participants who are invited. We're not being *forced* to submit, of course. We're not *expected* to. It's all an *opportunity*. We wonder, will our

names finally be acknowledged on the trans-mediale website if we oblige?

Why are we doing all this free labor? We were interested in the comments of our peer reviewer on this issue:

In general, I quite like this paper... Speaking from my own experience there are vast amounts of editorial labor that are never accounted for or rewarded by the university. For instance at this point I've spent at least 16 years working in critical / autonomous publishing (including 12 years editing an open access book series with 40+ titles in it) — but this has never appeared in a single university workload allocation model or been rewarded by my university at all. So why continue doing it? Well, because I do have the privilege of having a relatively stable and secure job and thus I try to spend as much time as I can making space for others to inhabit and do things with as well, precisely because of how difficult conditions are. Does it always work? Definitely not, but I keep working at it. So there's also a logic of unpaid labor where that unpaid nature of the labor is a potential (insofar as it's less regulated, tracked or managed), particularly when the unpaid labor is oriented to the social reproduction of other forms of being and thinking together.[2]

We agree. We are not asking to be paid cent-for-cent, to have each and every act of work or care or play brought onto the ledger, to live and think transactionally. We don't want every debt balanced out — we like bad debt! But we want enough. Enough time, enough money. Unpaid work grants us irreplaceable freedom, but the condition for this freedom is a job stable enough to give

us enough time and security and cash to do this work for free without driving ourselves to exhaustion. We don't have this security. But we do like the work.

So we get on Zoom in our small group and see if anyone has the energy. We start looking through our old materials. We exchanged emails about the project early in the — god, how long has it been? — process of transmediale. We collected those emails in a Google doc. Later we dutifully sent our list-serv 'provocations.' Then we wrote a series of letters to each other. We never did anything with those. And then there's the newspaper, with its phantom audience and far-away material existence, so we're told. We wrote a piece for the newspaper that included a little gnashing of our teeth. No one seemed particularly bothered — there was no evidence of anyone feeling indicted — certainly no one decided to talk to us about it.

One of us brought up something we'd talked about, one of the many things we'd talked about. We liked the connection between the verb refuse and the noun refuse. At several moments, we had considered submitting as our contribution to transmediale the para-texts of our emails, our letters, etc. One of us wrote that they were happy with "an email thread potentially as a product coterminous with its production,"[3] wishing to abnegate the labor of revision and the imperative to polish. We liked the idea, but we always ended up not doing that, instead writing more, working harder, buffing out the evidence of labor. Now, we figured, we could do a little recycling. The article was only meant to be four or five-thousand words, after all. We had plenty of material. So we sat on Zoom once more and highlighted passages from our collectively-generated archive as they struck our fancy. The story about the PLO, for instance, we had used for a forum post. The epigraphs came from our letters.

This is what we've decided to submit to the scrutiny of peer review. Another collective rehashing of the refuse of our collective thought and labor over the course of this — how long has it been? — session of transmediale. Quotes, sparks, thoughts, and ideas from emails, letters, forum posts, and a newspaper article, yanked and stitched, cyborg-like, into new writing. Why would we do that? Not just because we're tired, not just because we've worked, but as a direct response to our institutional context. Here, let us tell you what we mean...

Welcome to the neo-institution

At this point, you probably don't need another generalized description of the destabilizing impact of COVID on our lives. Though it should be noted, once more, that this impact was both global and, at the same time, completely differential and localized. An antinomy that complicates any efforts at producing a too easy 'we' from one of the most truly planetary-scale events in recent decades. But what we — the five of us — can speak about is our experience, over the past several months, of something we've taken to calling 'the neo-institution.' The neo-institution, to be clear, is not wholly new.[4] And yet over the past year of forced disaggregation, disciplinary solitude, and remarkable social obedience, the neo-institution has become more commonplace and our fluid, ever-more digital daily lives more amenable to its slippery, invisible nets.

We use many of these words advisedly. To begin, even our own internal 'we' remains protean. Our five positions have shifted, open and fluid, over discussions in email, Whatsapp, Zoom these past months. We continue to turn over and over where we each

stand: with each other, with the other transmediale research groups, and with/against institutions. But to offer you something from these ongoing struggles—what about a collective definition of the word 'institution' and whether this word, in new forms, could be applied to transmediale?

We cite ourselves:

If we think of an institution as a material-discursive structure that articulates knowledge and power in a way that affords or prevents certain actions and discourses... institutions can be more or less conservative or neoliberal, more or less extractive, more or less repressive and so on — not good or bad per se. In fact, I am more interested in analyzing what kind of institution transmediale (hereafter abbreviated TM) is compared to Duke. I am interested in the way a lot of current research and art institutions manage to put their participants in the affective state of feeling like they owe the institution, that they are indebted, in a way they can never repay, while at the same time extracting the labor of the participants, often for almost no compensation.[5]

How does this apply to transmediale? In our initial exchange with the organizers (November 2020), we first received confirmation that our research proposal had been accepted, and the organizers conveyed to us how excited they were to share ideas and enter into a collaboration. The heart of our hasty reply: "we're clearly thrilled to take part :)" — yet during our first meeting together, just a week later, our group's excitement began to wane. From an early stage, we felt the disjunction of watching our fellow refusers express gratefulness towards TM for mere inclusion in the proceedings. TM, for its part,

organized very little on our behalf, leaving us with the bulk of the work. Such horizontality bears one mark of the neo-institution: a vague structure is given to the participants with the promise of freedom of decision-making and self-organization. This empowered autonomy sounds great — except that TM hardly offered any structure at all that might support the refusal of research. We complied.

We complied because TM provided the conditions for our assembly — meeting times, deadlines, a plethora of ‘opportunities’ to share our work. As a result, we cannot do what we want to do, say what we want to say, assemble how we want to assemble without reinforcing conditions we assemble against. As Judith Butler writes in *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*:

None of us acts without the conditions to act, even though sometimes we must act to install and preserve those very conditions. The paradox is obvious, and yet what we can see when the precarious assemble is a form of action that demands the conditions for action and living.(16)

How to refuse something that invisibilizes its power either by its own ignorance or by its refusal to take the responsibility that comes with it?

Over time, as obligations multiplied, our irritation mounted. As the PLO email writers recognized, we are not paid one cent to produce cutting-edge discourse in the progressive framework of ‘refusal.’ Long-running inter-institutional arrangements between academic institutions, conferences, book publishers, and journal editors have broken down, replaced by a landscape of incompatible neo-institutions and precarious individuals seeking some small measure of stability for themselves. This makes the use of the theme ‘refusal’ all the more troublesome. In

the name of refusal, TM can profile itself as a leading site of discourse, which in turn allows it to obtain funding from yet other institutions. But, then, at what stage, in what instances, and by whom was refusal meaningfully enacted?

Early on, one of us wrote:

What we are onto is the embodied and affective practice of producing institutional contradictions that we refuse to resolve, and that, instead, we want to bring into the realm of perception through diverse theoretical and practical means. I see it as a philosophical, scientific, and artistic experiment all at once.

Another of us elaborated,

Concretizing things to refuse via embodiment seems crucial, which brings me back to the call for an “embodied and affective practice of producing institutional contradictions that we refuse to resolve.” I think that’s brilliant. There’s pleasure in pleasing and refusing to please and accidentally refusing to refuse to please.[7]

In other words, we proliferated potential experiential models for noticing (and not noticing) our individual and collective acts of refusal. Refusing the neo-institution, as we were beginning to implicitly theorize, is not a straightforward assignment. When there are always more participants willing to produce, refusal to contribute has little impact. The cycle repeats, and fresh opportunities to try new, failure-bound strategies for refusal present themselves. The question is: have we come to a point where the only ones who can effectively refuse are the ones who are not risking anything serious by refusing? And if this is right, is refusal still an effective

ethico-political strategy? No one cares if I refuse to play this neo-institutional game. There are legions who will replace me. You/me are most likely refuse already.

A text we circled around in our thinking, talking, messaging, writing was Athena Athanasiou's essay, "Performing the Institution 'As If It Were Possible.'" As Athanasiou asserted, years before COVID-19, "The conditions of possibility for being-in-common are being destroyed by the institutional forces of dispossession that underlie the contemporary regime of neoliberal rationality. And yet, induced precarity can serve as an ethico-political resource for effecting responsive modes of being-in-common, whereby a certain impossibility of being-in-common might also be shared" (680). These institutional forces of dispossession come in many forms: racism, sexism, neoliberalism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy being some of the most visible and destructive. But dispossession also makes itself felt in more insidious ways, especially among purported equals. Sharing a 'here' with someone is hard when there are unspoken hierarchies, unchallenged norms, and unreflected positionalities — in other words, when you don't actually share a here at all. But among those who are dispossessed, whether in ways large or small, Athanasiou promises a potential 'being-in-common,' even as she recognizes its very impossibility.

™ brings to light a form of institution distinct from the public institution Athanasiou sees as imperiled by its neoliberal privatization (even though ™ is publicly-funded). The question for us is how to take on Athanasiou's call to perform the institution "as if it were possible" (682), how to 'resist,' 'reinvent,' 'reform,' 're-institute' something that does not offer any grip. The neo-institution cannot break: it is made of a silicone-like material; very smooth to the touch like a cake mold. It can be baked at high temperature and won't

melt. You can deform it; it will take back its shape as soon as you release the pressure.

A symptom: organizing the unpaid labor often falls back on the unpaid participants of the neo-institution. For instance, one of us organized a meeting with ™ — which had been demanded by ™ itself. ™ didn't show up nor did it write back. The neo-institution relies on the organisational labor of those not responsible for its organisation. This labor is the condition for *something* to happen. We, the group Nothing Happening Here, have arrived at the neo-institution of ™ to find nothing already here — except for the responsibility to make something out of it. This is the hallmark of the neo-institution: it is a hollow structure for social power that churns the intellectual and cultural capital of its organizers and participants into meager financial capital that barely keeps it churning. The neo-institution does not rely only on the production of knowledge or content but also on the unpaid labor of organizing the institution itself, of giving or maintaining its shape. Its professed openness to participant input is presented as a virtue.

In her essay "Situated Knowledges," Donna Haraway describes the self as "partial in all its guises... always stitched together imperfectly" (586). We may think of our non-institutional body—the body of our assembly, here — as an always partial, non-totalizing, cyborg-like body, made of parts stitched together. Stitches are useful here to think about a process of assemblage that keeps the traces of the work that goes into making it hold together. Stitches also help us think about repairing what may have been broken, a repair that may give this body the ability to resist a bit longer. This pieced-together body is very unlike the neo-institution that has no asperity, nothing to hold onto. And it works quite well.

Could stitching together be a non-totalizing way of "being-in-common"? We enjoy

thinking of the stitches on the forehead of a fighter as the unerasable rem(a)inder of past fights. This also reminds us of the Japanese art of kintsukuroi or “golden repair.” Our assembled body is full of stitches, and they are golden, they shine joyfully. This assembled body eludes its totalization. It is spread between heres and theres, straining its stitches. Still, it holds. As one of us wrote: “I’m interested in ecologies of refusal and producing abundances in scarcity and exhausting myself, but I know that if I refuse to clean up then I live with the consequences in a nearly closed system with my entropy-tending creations.”[8] We do non-stop clean-up work when we stitch our texts together. We hope our peers will see the gold in these stitches and even, who knows, add their own.

Coda: Re-fusal

But what about the neo-institution? We can stitch together our writing, we can make space for interpersonal repair — but the smooth, unbreakable cake mold still springs back into shape. We turn, one last time, to Athanasiou’s thinking, where the figure of aporia plays a central role. An aporia is a state of puzzlement, but also an irresolvable contradiction. Example: a group of enterprising young researchers is invited to an institution in order to think about refusal, yet every time they try to put these ideas into practice, their efforts slide right off the hosting neo-institution’s non-stick surface. Aporia comes from *a-poros*, “lacking passage,” or, no way out. In the case of the neo-institution, the way *in* is always inviting, strewn with promises of opportunity and collaboration, a beguiling horizontality. But once inside, the contradictions make themselves painfully clear. Where’s the door? Oh, it has already melted back into the seamless walls.

While presenting to the gathered research groups in January, we asked everyone what it might look like to enact refusal, not just talk about it: “Could we, for example, organize a strike: a strike against the working conditions under which we are laboring for each other and for transmediale? Or could we instead organize a riot, a disordering disruption to the circulation and extraction of our ideas?”[9] But our provocation didn’t get much further than that. We didn’t know each other well enough to properly organize; we didn’t know where we each stood. So we agreed, amongst ourselves, that we did not want to employ the rhetoric of labor organizing without its accompanying praxis. Instead, we explored how acknowledging our debts — to each other and, yes, to TM — might prove to be a more effective re-fusal. That is, a coming-together, a re-assembling, in a different way.

“Re-fusal,” that word rent apart and hyphen-stitched back together, echoes in more confrontational valences, too. You might find a fuse attached to an explosive: a fuse you light to blow it all up. Another kind can be found in a fuse box; that fuse is “an automatic means of removing power from a faulty system” (“Circuit breaker”). What we have really been talking about this whole time are faulty systems: overloaded, underfunded, indebted, breaking down, sucking dry. Yet, though we have speculated about how to “remove power” from them, the interlocking systems we take part in run on. While COVID, for example, was briefly seen as a chance to reset many of these faulty systems, we now count the days until we can return to ‘normal.’ The breaker was not flipped, the fuse not blown. Power wasn’t cut off, just briefly diminished, ready in a moment to ratchet back to full capacity. Neo-institutions, as we’ve been saying all along, have a way of resisting change and, especially, disarming refusal. They never refuse, but rather diffuse. Diffuse

responsibility, for example, precisely such that the burden never becomes singularly unbearable on any one point. It is shared, and carried, unequally, by all.

Electric-powered machines are brittle — if pushed too far, they blow their fuse and shut down. The fuse is binary: on or off. Human-powered machines, however, are adaptable. They can be encouraged, enticed, or forced to push themselves further. And further. And further. But flexibility has its limits. We may not have fuses, but we can certainly burn out.

Returning to where we started, we're still tired. On Zoom, we talk to each other about our depression. Tentatively, at first. Less tentatively, recently. In this stitching, something came into being. *Our* depression. We want to end the text hopefully, and we think depression might be the way to do that. There is strength and beauty in depression, in burnout. It is the strength and beauty of the body that says stop, not one more day like that. *I* pull the plug. Fuse blown. When the mind cannot decide to refuse, the body will take care of it. We quote ourselves:

How can we praise this ability of the body to refuse? That's what I would like to end this text with. Of course, depression is bad. We are not going to tell people: great that you are depressed. Depression is bad but at the same time, if we could make visible that depression is not (only) about the personal story of an individual, but about a society in which every sidestep can lead someone to lose their spot and become refuse.[10]

You can catch us on the trash heap, but we are not refuse. We refuse to be treated like shit. This isn't a dump, it's a salvage yard. Join us, if you want. We're talking about Haraway and whatever. We're forgetting

about theory. We're listening to Rihanna: "Let me cover your shit in glitter, I can make it gold" (1:01).

... mounds of disposal rise (for if you dug

something up to make room for something to put in, what about the something dug up, as with graves:)

the garbage trucks crawl as if in obeisance, as if up ziggurats toward the high places gulls

and keep garbage alive, offerings to the gods of garbage, of retribution, of realistic

expectation, the deities of unpleasant necessities: refined young earthworms,

drowned up in macadam pools by spring rains...

— Garbage, A.R. Ammons

Notes

[1] Correspondence from TM to the authors, November 2021.

[2] Comment by the peer reviewer, May 2021.

[3] Personal correspondence between the authors, January 2021.

[4] In the 1970 text, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” feminist activist and author Jo Freeman wrote, “Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a ‘structureless’ group...‘structurelessness’ becomes a way of masking power.”(1)

[5] Personal correspondence between the authors, January 2021.

[6] Personal correspondence between the authors, November 2020.

[7] Personal correspondence between the authors, November 2020.

[8] Personal correspondence between the authors, November 2020.

[9] Personal correspondence between the authors, January 2021.

[10] Personal correspondence between the authors, April 2021.

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