The Institute of Radical Imagination (IRI), founded in 2018, is a network of artists, academics, and curators working at the intersection of art and the commons. Their project Art for Universal Basic Income (Art for UBI)—consisting of a manifesto, a campaign, and a book—advocates for an unconditional universal basic income (UBI) above the poverty threshold and focuses on the role of art workers in the transition to post-capitalist forms of social organization. The project also includes a performance, which will premiere on the occasion of the German Pavilion’s opening on May 19, 2023, in the context of the 18th International Architecture Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, and will draw on the experiences of cultural workers in Venice and beyond. Ahead of the performance, its coordinator, Marco Baravalle, a founding member of the IRI and Art for UBI, writes about the origins of the project and the structures and assumptions underlying the Venetian cultural scene.
revolutions, knowledge from its ideological shackles and put to the test of reality by centering on a critique of labor. This did not lead to the end of dogma or blind trust in Marxist “sacred texts,” but rather to a rereading of these texts in light of how they played out on the ground—or, in the 1960s context, on the factory floor in the industrial centers of northern Italy. The so-called Controversia [Co-research]—a research methodology put forward, in particular, by Romano Alquati—was not a quest for knowledge on the subjects but with the subjects, implying an end to the distinction between the theoretical and the political. It offered a way to interpret the process of knowledge production not as a single moment prior to a transformation in the status quo, but as a participant in the transformation itself.

The S.a.L.E. Docks initiative of self-investigation continues, although it has taken on the hybrid form of a performance within the assemblage of Art for UBI. Through performance, Art for UBI is able to create a space of radical autonomy. According to philosopher Jacques Rancière, such autonomy is one of the oppositions that characterizes art, and also a sign of art’s radical nature.

Rancière sees art as defined by its ability to construct an elsewhere in respect to the social context in which it is produced, with its misery and violence, and to function as a force for the “distribution of the sensible,” pointing to potential new forms of commun

Cultural work a gesture that begins and ends with the staging itself, or is it an action capable of making the performance an autonomous space without feeding into the apparatus of capture that is the neoliberal dispositif of art?

To hint at least at some of the responses to these complex questions, we can look at the results of the S.a.L.E. Docks self-investigation, which highlights some of the thornier issues—that is, at this point, I will leave it to our interlocutors to voice.

This phrase, says Antonia, was the cut-strategy of choice for her US temporary employer whenever they wanted to avoid sensitive topics such as contracts, back pay, or work hours long. She started to receive replies to her questions—issues that, at this point, I will leave it to our interlocutors to voice.

It goes without saying that carrying out an investigation of workers today is not the same as during the 1960s. The main arena of class struggle, at least in Europe, is no longer the Fordist factory. Furthermore, it must be noted that being a freelancer was not really a status quo, but as a participant in the transformation itself.

The so-called “distribution of the sensible,” then, is one of the oppositions that characterizes art and cultural work a gesture that begins and ends with the staging itself, or is it an action capable of making the performance an autonomous space without feeding into the apparatus of capture that is the neoliberal dispositif of art?

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turning the extraction of profit into a culture in itself. This is not artistic production, it is an artistic rental market. In an emptied-out city, the rental companies are custodians of the emptiness. Art is the perfect decency, enabling artists to own a space, but it is also different, but it is exactly the same logic that drives the market for short-term holiday rent. Art is simply the latest agent of touristic-ification in a city already on its knees.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BUSINESSES AND ASSOCIATIONS
“IN-ENTREPRENEURS MAKE MONEY FROM ARTWORK, OR ARTWORK MAKES MONEY FOR THEM”

Most event organizers in Venice are associations cultural, or cultural associations. Simona is a member of a number of them that focuses on live art and experimental music. She lived in Venice for years before being forced to return to the mainland. Her job in the cultural sector had ceased to be financially viable, and she was no longer willing to supplement it by working as a cleaner for a tourist rental agency. For her, it is clear that the solution to the endemic precarity of art work is not everyone becoming an entrepreneur of themselves. She rejects the idea that we should always expect cultural production to conform to the logic of business. “Instead,” she says, “culture should be financed through a legal structure such as that of the association, which is formally bound to prioritize content over profits.” In our current legal context, however, this alone is not enough. For obvious reasons of interest, members of an association do not take a share of the profits, instead, we need guidelines regarding how to pay them and any potential collaborators for their work. More public funding programs should be open to associations, rather than exclusively to cultural businesses. Associations, unlike businesses, are inherently concerned with the social determination of the place where they carry out their activities, but the social cohesion they bring has yet to be deemed valuable in economic or political terms. Talking to Simona raised a crucial point: There is a whole world of young professionals out there who do not want hand-outs from the state, but simply to be in the position to put their talents to use and have their work recognized. Entrepreneurial individualism is often the professional reality for cultural workers, but associations offer the possibility of a collective alternative. An example? For several months, Simona’s association has been holding open meetings with a similar organizations operating in Venice. It is still early days, but the first three meetings led to the idea of building an online platform listing everyone’s services and finding a physical space in which they can share skills and technical equipment.

THERE ARE NO SKILLED WORKERS
“THE CREATIVE BOHEMIAN
IT’S ALIVE!”

This is another quote from Roberto, who collaborates every so often with one of the city’s small cultural spaces, but is run on a nonprofit basis by a group of young people who use it as a space to experiment. They launch book launches, workshops, small exhibitions, and meetings. I have to admit Roberto’s comments seem a bit like lines from a group of “untouchables”—older workers with permanent contracts, who are now demotivated and resistant to change. It is worth noting that, of all the interviewees, only one mentioned—correctly—that a universal basic income differs from traditional welfare, in that it constitutes a structural way to value life according to the terms of the current system of production. Most interviewees acknowledged, at least in part, this value system: They know they are creating value when they organize an event, transform an apartment into a cultural center, or share original content online, yet it rarely seemed to occur to anyone that this labor should be financially compensated.

THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF WELFARE AS PRIVILEGE
“WE’VE NEVER REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME... WELFARE IS GOOD, BUT FOR EVERYONE, NOT JUST FOR CULTURAL WORKERS”

Roberto’s opinion was one that came up a lot in the interviews. Many people did not have much of an opinion about an unconditional universal basic income. Others, in keeping with the neoliberal discourse, maintained that cooperation amongst cultural workers is the key way to reclaim and decommodify for-profit spaces, rather than as a way to challenge the power that has been ravaging the city for years. The point is this: Although the lack of self-reification is a constant in the current system of cultural events, making the space could be a fertile ground for the development of their artistic work. It is part of the constant in the field of cultural work. The idea of having rights makes workers uncom- formidable to the inviolable concept that their invisible, unpaid labor should, and could, be financially compensated. Roberto sees this seems largely alien to them. From many young people, the salaried positions that have survived the relentless outsourcing of the culture industries are the privilege of a group of “untouchables”—older workers with permanent contracts, who are now demotivated and resistant to change. It is worth noting that, of all the interviewees, only one mentioned—correctly—that a universal basic income differs from traditional welfare, in that it constitutes a structural way to value life according to the terms of the current system of production. Most interviewees acknowledged, at least in part, this value system: They know they are creating value when they organize an event, transform an apartment into a cultural center, or share original content online, yet it rarely seemed to occur to anyone that this labor should be financially compensated.

CONCLUSION
In 1971, Dalaldo Montaldi published his Mi- litanti politici di base [Grassroots Political Activists] in the lower Po valley, gath- ered through conversations and interviews. The book contains the spoken syntax of these interactions, including the use of dialect. This is a history from below, presenting the lived reality of the political struggle of the late 19th century, to the years of fascist resistance, to the struggles of the 1960s. In the introduction, Montaldi writes of the confliction of character of some of these voices: “In addition to the life, worldviews, and ideologies that endure and accompany contemporary man, and not just in his mo- ments of weakness — are others that come to establish themselves, suitable for in keeping with the changing times but which are also clearly anticipatory; a premise. It may seem odd to talk of anticipation and memory’s in the same breath, but, as you will see, the animating force for these various subjectivities is always a certain conflict with historical time, which extends from politi- cal reasons to all of life’s norms and cus- toms. Between these is the radical dynamics of the neoliberal urban transformation, which exploits the “creative bohemian.” In Venice, these initiatives luckily function more as ways to reclaim and decommodify for-profit spaces, rather than as roadblocks for the development that has been ravaging the city for years leading to the exodus of its inhabitants. Simona sees her presence there as something she does not want (because, as a professional, she is already working on an online platform listing everyone’s services and finding a physical space in which they can share skills and technical equipment.