

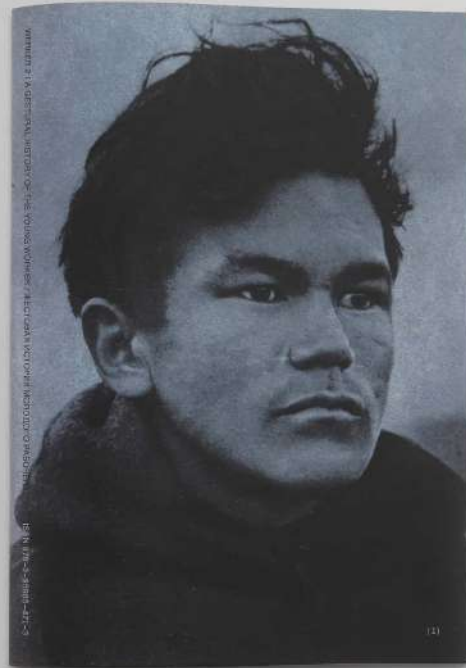
Werker Collective: Art, Labour, Publishing, and Archives for Social Change

Interview: Jhen Chen | text: Laura Kell | translate: Jhen Chen

Werker Collective is an art collective initiated by Marc Roig Blesa and Rogier Delfos in Amsterdam in 2009. Since then, they have released ten issues of a publication called *WERKER MAGAZINE* and explored a variety of media, including installation, performance, video, sound, textile, digital publishing, as well as developed community projects, reading groups, cine-clubs, radio podcasts, and publishing workshops. In their own words, Werker “**operates at the intersection of labour, ecofeminism, and the LGBTQ+ movements, advocating for an image critique of daily life to analyse what becomes visible and what remains hidden or silenced in different political contexts**”. They take inspiration from several self-organised radical documentary practises that were initiated by various associations of worker photographers in Europe in the 1920s, following the first experiences of collectivist photojournalism in the USSR.

These are the main foundations of the art collective’s activity. Aiming to create an intersectional and transnational network of allies, they produce media in collaboration with students, cultural workers, self-organized unions of domestic workers, undocumented migrants, in support of anti-eviction activists, feminist groups, LGBTQ+ communities, and people with neurological or functional diversities, in addition to working with researchers, museums, and archives. Putting self-organised radical documentary practices at the centre of their work, the basis of their work is an archive physically located in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood of Amsterdam which comprises over 3000 historical and contemporary documents, such as (photo-)books, posters, pamphlets, movies, textiles,

and paraphernalia, collected from a variety of sources from flea markets to friends to the collective's activist collaborations. This archive is activated by Werker's artistic practice: through workshops, installations, and publications.





The goal of Werker is to study what it means to create a collective, socially engaged, non-authorship based radical documentary practice in the present day. The core of their work lies in that same archive that they've constructed and has been there since the beginning: when Marc and Rogier started working together in 2009, the former from a background of photography and the latter of graphic design, Marc had already gathered a few hundred pieces of media that has from since grown into a collection of over 3000 pieces of historical and contemporary documents, found from bookshops, flea markets, or their wide network of collaborators. The archive for them functions as a space for community action and creating one's own history by analysing the politics of in/visibility, what is shown under different political regimes and social systems and what is not. Werker is "the idea of materials" and putting content together which illustrates a point where their archiving practices converge conceptually with their publishing practices. In terms of their publications, they see them more as problematics or question marks that the reader has to finish themselves as opposed to being a clear postulation of a certain idea.

In working with the format of visual essays, publishing is a way for Werker to study how to write with images - how image functions as text and vice versa. In the spirit of creating and sharing knowledge as a principle of action, engagement with their materials is also something Marc and Rogier are putting a lot of thought into. This is illustrated by their inclination towards print publication as opposed to digital because the former creates a distinct space of socialisation of the message: seeing printed matter as localised and community-based, their publications are made to spread out, read and discussed together. This explains the irregularly large formatting of many of their publications, for example *Werker 2 - A Gestural History of the Young Worker* (2023) that measures 22 cm in width and 32 cm in length. The bodily engagement with a material differs when it's bigger versus smaller - opening it up plays out almost like a performance and invites the readers to look at it together - and looking at how the body deals with or looks at archival images is one of the core questions for Werker. When this specific work is set up in exhibition form, as it was for example done for the 5th Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art in Yekaterinburg, Russia, it's set up in a maze-like design to emphasise the prospect of seeing an image from different angles and direction visually as well as ideologically.



↑ A Gestural History of the Young Worker, Installation view. In the framework of General Idea: Retrospective. Gropius Bau. Berlin, 2023.

If publishing is one of the primary ways their archive is activated, others include reading groups, workgroups, teaching, and use of their archive by outsiders, all with the intention of creating a community space and spurring people into action. Marc and Rogier are currently teaching collaborative design practice at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, guiding students in how to self-organise as a group, deal with tensions between the individual and the group, how to position one's own voice as an artist, and how to recognise mainstream narratives as well as how to create counter-ones which are all principles of artistic research. They've engaged with students in other projects as well: for example *The Young Worker's Camera* (2015) during which they sent out analogue cameras to student communities in multiple different countries with a label taped on the back of the cameras which instructed them to take photos of their daily relationship to work. Afterwards they conducted a workshop to caption the photos and create visual categories of them, therefore generating an alternative space for self-representation, belonging, and an analyses of contemporary processes of work. Workshops and reading groups are a common facet of Werker's practice - during a presentation of the installation *Amator Archives: On Queer Reproduction* at the Rijksakademie Open Studios in 2022, the archive was activated through reading groups where people were invited to read out and perform the materials or the archive however they wanted. The beauty of these projects lies in the simplicity of method and organising which enables it to be carried out similarly elsewhere. Werker sees creating methods to be shared transnationally to be an integral part of their work - what they do is "create study materials to question knowledge".



This links back to a larger idea of sharing and producing knowledge. Werker states that the distribution of language and knowledge is intimately linked to systems of power and who has a say in what. It is because of this that they see art as not an ornament but “a renegotiation of which forms of the sensible are valued and how those create reality”. In answering why they’ve chosen publishing as a vessel for social action, they believe that changing the way you produce images and words changes the world, which is why their ultimate goal is to “share methods of non-oppressive forms of creating language together”.

A good example of this is Werker’s current project, a community magazine called *Nieuwe Nieuwmarkt*, focused on the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood in Amsterdam, which deals with the local struggle amidst the housing crisis. It is based the *Nieuwmarkt*, a bulletin issued between 1971 and 1972 by the Action Group Nieuwmarkt in protest against the municipality’s plans to demolish the Nieuwmarkt and Lastage neighbourhoods to build a highway and metro line.



The archival influences are palpable: it is visually inspired by Camerawork magazine, a London-based bi-monthly photography magazine in the 1970s-'80s promoting humanist, socialist and activist photography. The magazine very strongly aims to relate historical moments to contemporary ones, creating intergenerational solidarity as well - for example, the first edition includes, among other things, a fold-out poster by Experimental Jetset (EJ) featuring 8 contact sheets by Ex-Provo Rob Stolk who was an active member of the Nieuwmarkt Action Group, and one of the people responsible for the press, and the printing of the original Nieuwmarkt bulletins in the 1970s. It also includes a squatting manual by Spookstad and housing crisis testimonies from Amsterdammers.



In believing that the people who control the distribution of language in the city controls how people use the city, a language brought to life by printing and self-organising was what helped people in the 1970s and '80s in Amsterdam to create a new language for the city, advocating for housing as a right not a privilege which forced policymakers to initiate

and maintain social housing projects. One article in the first issue focuses on the concept of copyleft as opposed to copyright to reflect on how we distribute and share content. Werker's anti-capitalist views are manifested among other things through their relationship to authorship which they see as a privatised and over-sacralized capitalist concept that follows a 'fencing for what's your own' logic - thus they believe that in the (re)production of counter-media and community movements it is secondary, if of any importance at all, to reshape the culture. Drawing from past community movements, such as the labour movement, the focus is on communicating the message not mystifying or glorifying the author behind it. Print matter and mass publication were momentous catalyzers for the squatters' movement 50 years ago, and this is what Werker's new bi-annual magazine (the second and third editions are planned to reflect on body politics and ecology correspondingly) is striving to do again.

Everyone immanently creates an energy of mutual support. In creating a community magazine that will have "an activist price tag", meaning that the magazine will be charged at a low cost just to cover the printing costs in addition to being sent out to local libraries and community centres to be accessed for free with the purpose of organising community engagement, is a clear case of sharing resources to further social justice. The only reason that the magazine won't be given away for free is because of Werker's ethical qualms around distributing paper as a material for free which creates a different engagement with it where the user feels less responsibility towards it as a valuable resource and it is therefore more likely to get thrown away.

It is also important to note that a part of the funding for the magazine (which is largely gathered through community support, for example a subsidy from the Anarcha Feminist Group of Amsterdam) is dedicated towards paying everyone who contributed to the magazine. This comes down to a moral ethos - in dealing heavily with the concept of labour in their artistic practice, Werker sees un- or underpaid labour as erasure of it, and therefore almost as an act of violence. Belonging themselves to several vocationally precarious groups, such as artists or teachers, Werker is intent on valorising cultural work, believing that if you will not

find forms of remunerating everyone's engagement in a project, you should not further endeavour in the project itself. At the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten residency in Amsterdam in 2020 they created a platform called Art Workers' Rights "as a result of a series of conversations between resident artists and academy workers on issues related to the impact of artistic work on the emotional and physical health of artists and cultural workers" (ART WORKER RIGHTS ONLINE, n. d). Twelve testimonies were received through an open call and combined with thirty documents on the topic of art workers' self-organisation from the Werker archive. As a result, four banners were designed and collectively printed using iron oxide ink and onion skins collected by the participants to colour the textile banners yellow. AWR functions as an online archive in collecting digital testimonials anyone can make on the website as well as a self-publishing tool for any cultural worker who wants to use the materials in a local campaign or further networks of shared struggle.



These ideals are also expressed in Werker's de facto manifesto *Yes With Us, Never About Us: Art/Workers, Solidarity And Privilege* (2021). In asserting that the artist should be professionally valorised in the eyes of the economy, they state that relegating the artist to a separate

category from the worker is dangerous and counter-productive. What's on the frontline of importance, is commonality. According to them, solidarity against oppressive hegemonies manifests through collaborative educational practices and political actions which therefore create a common language of revolution. Similarly, social change is achieved through the collaboration of intellectual and manual workers wherein solidarity trumps difference and difference becomes a source for collective struggle - the multiplicity of positions, selves, vulnerabilities is where solidarities can be built.

This is how Werker also works on creating spaces of solidarity and building "discourse from the space of intersectionality with other bodies in pain", like women, racialised bodies, migrant workers, domestic workers, etc. One of the central concepts that emerges in their artistic practice is reproduction. One facet of this is valorising care and maintenance before growth and production on a conceptual level, another part of this a deeply anti-capitalist understanding of the notion. Their goal is to move towards "a society that respects life rather exploits it". This is also rooted in the positionality of the artists - Werker identifies as a queer collective, and therefore thinks about forms of queer reproduction that create care and belonging - "the the goal of the queer reproduction project is also to change the understanding of reproduction in society in an anti-capitalist way". The reproduction of the archive and the conversations around it are also a form of caring for them because they understand the archive as a space for social reproduction that transcends neoliberal hyperindividualist values in striving for community and solidarity. There is also the question of the physical archive itself - everything that holds the materials, the shelves, boxes, ceramic book holders are made by Marc and Rogier at Rijksakademie in the spirit of sustainable materials.

Of course, carrying such a politically charged ethos has its challenges - in their own words, working politically is placing yourself in a fragile position. The main obstacle they face is censorship in different forms, either visually or symbolically. Censorship is not only an issue of communist or authoritarian countries, such as Russia where during their participation in the Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art in

Yekaterinburg they were asked to remove images that depicted male frontal nudity (which they instead chose to cover up with vinyl). It also happens in Western democracies in a more latent form - after working for an exhibition for the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam, they were severely underpaid for three months of hard work which they also see as a form of censorship through erasing a worker's labour. In the beginning of 2024 they displayed their series of double-sided screen prints, *A Gestural History of the Young Worker*, Print Punch (2023) at Ellen de Bruijne Projects in Amsterdam which also included an audio work called *A Gestural History of the Young Worker*, Condition report that was based on transcribed conversations surrounding experiences of the artists as queer workers under challenging conditions of labour and censorship, since the first conception of the artwork in Yekaterinburg in 2019 until its most recent presentation at Gropius Bau in Germany in 2023 where the censorship was targeted towards their support for Palestine.

In a way, this is an inherent part of practicing radical socially engaged art. Werker is using art as a means to generate, mobilise and reproduce knowledge that would open up new social realities of a world that cares. Often, the subject in Werker's practice is the individual that the capitalist society has neglected to care for which is why they are striving to create a "counterculture of non-conforming bodies that reject the capitalist, white patriarchy". One layer is the parallel between domestic workers, health care and education professionals and freelance cultural workers who all suffer either from irregular income, privatisation of the sector, no right to pension, high rent, unpaid internships or working extra hours; another is the historical erasure of marginalised bodies which they combat in their counter-archival work to bring these bodies to the foreground. Through the mobilising and cultivating a radical conviviality as well as critical image study of our daily life, Werker is re-articulating our neoliberal cultural narratives and creating new networks of caring for each other.

The project is supported by National Culture and Art Foundation



財團法人
國家文化藝術基金會
National Culture and Arts Foundation