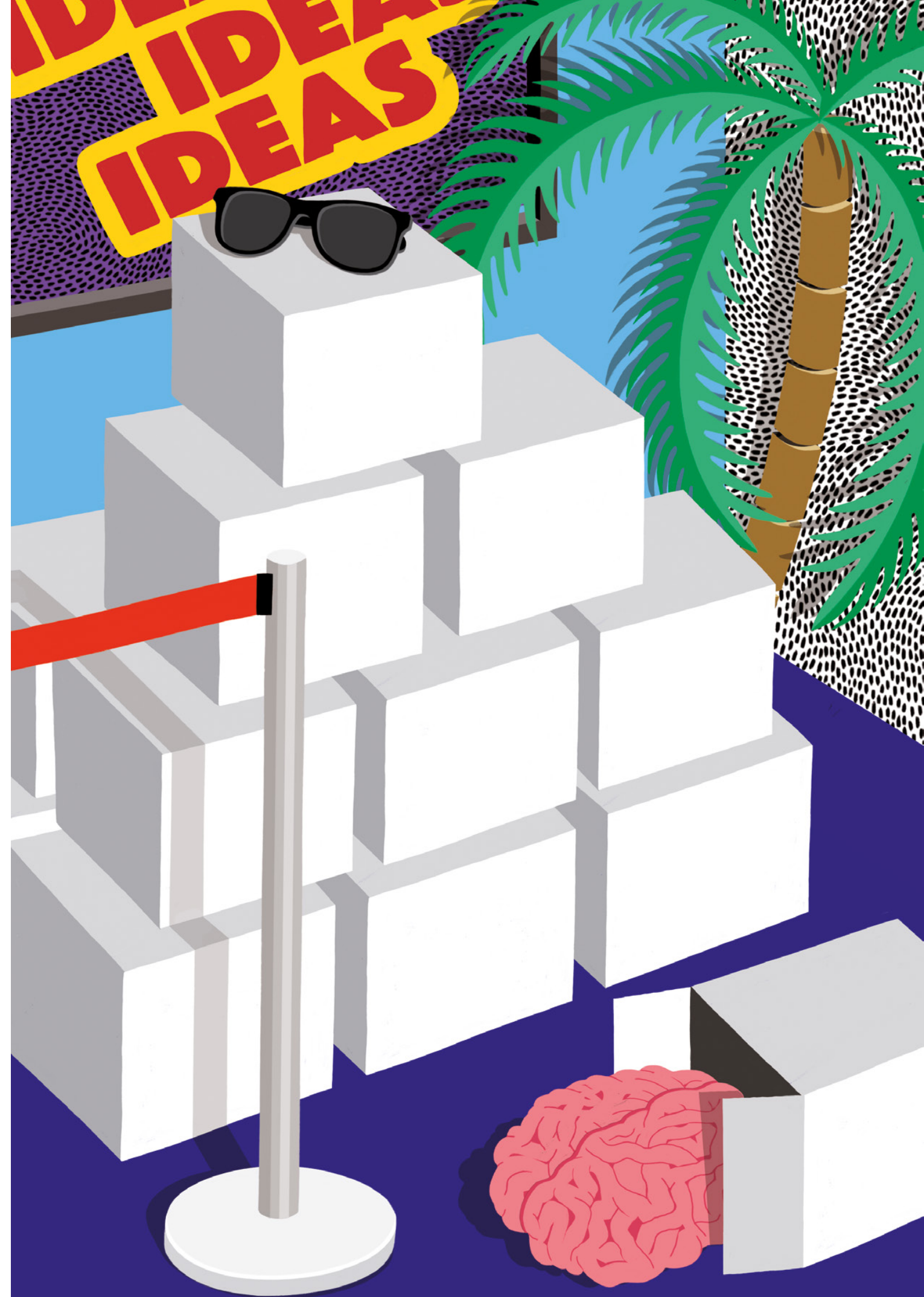


California dreaming

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San Francisco – the spirit of 68 might long be gone, but still adheres to the city's image, which not only my nostalgic mother points out. Selfexpression, a constant anything-goes and different waves of civil rights movements shape the city's best side. Once it felt pretty relieving to let behind old structures and rules. But what used to happen a long time ago as mental and political coup from regulative forces, now seems to force regulations among a free market that operates itself with concepts around individuality, the success of a striking idea and creative thinking – terms that are exploitable as any other story of self-realization and social change on the premise of the DIY metaphor. Disruption might be the keyword here: Coming from Silicon Valley and its young entrepreneurs of the high-tech industry, the »techies« serve as both role model and hate figure of San Francisco's actual change by pursuing a specific sort of »disruptive« thinking. But what is going to be disrupted here after all? And what created? What means freedom, when entrepreneurs like Justin Keller, who just became famous by calling homeless people »riff-raff« in his open letter to San Francisco's mayor Ed Lee, consider nothing but a free life as cause for both privileges and an efficient performance among the principles of the market?



Hippies are not necessarily the only useful reference in California's social history of freedom and its implications on creativity and work. The protestant ethic, formulated in 1904 by German sociologist Max Weber and diagnosed as guiding principle of the US society, might have caused a mode of productivity that not only rules the public understanding of work, but the private feeling for life: An ascetic, rational lifestyle with the aim to have direct impact on both professional and actual private life indicates true religious belief. Real-life success symbolizes transcendental glory. Confession no longer needed, it's all about your mere activity! You can do it – you just have to be busy.

When the social thus becomes almost indistinguishable from the individual, there emerge not only common grounds, but tensions and contradictions, especially when social boundaries or privileges can be blamed on individual choice and freedom. An increasing number of homeless in this logic rather points out individual failure than the unbearable exclusivity of the housing market. It's up to you, companies like Uber and Airbnb suggest – everyone has a private life to profit of. That privacy is regulated and even owned by economy and its most assertive actors, seems to be a contradiction only to those who don't consider individual belief and commitment to work as a reciprocal relationship. Sharing thus can't aim for common ground, but personal benefit. It seems just natural that accessibility in this context means an app, not a social concept.

When discipline characterizes spiritual dedication though, it not only becomes clear why Yoga is such a powerful tool to show a hard working and selfdedicated body. Individuality and belief are the cornerstones for something that finally highlights the myth of godlike genius: the idea. It shows the maximum of productivity as it is produced out of nothing but a stormed brain, it cannot even be exploited, as it just exists as intangible act. Creativity stands for disruption: with »new« ideas we disrupt what we already knew. That imagination, dreams, and visions also cause (salable) products might be the consequence of the just described interrelation of private and public life. But it also leads to another

thought: The artist must be a brilliant entrepreneur – and vice versa. So-called categories of creative thinking like an open-ended process, a constant workflow, an experimental approach, and flexible, mobile, and global fields of application thus not only feed one's individual imagination of virtual possibilities, but also create the virtual potential of a public reality. It leads to a free floating idea of value and creation.

So what does it mean to create, show or sell art in a context like this? It sounds generic, but, of course, the value of all work behind an artwork becomes more symbolic than ever – and less material, at least for the majority of artists, curators and artworkers. The social standing and concept of art spaces of all kinds or sizes can therefore at least be considered as crucial: They highlight again the big issues of inclusion, value and their impact on gentrification.

Most of all, creativity itself becomes the crux of the matter for social change – my Berlin-perspective still considers »the creatives« as reason for evictions, whereas in San Francisco all the less entrepreneurial ones among them are pushed out themselves. In Berlin, the creative class is still seeking for dreams to be realized; which mostly means for a real life that can be afforded. The consequence are rising rents, neighborhoods of project-based tourists and an artworld discussing the exact date of Berlin's death, which of course already happened in the past. But has to be seen now.

What remains, are activity and presence – if there is neither much time nor money, value can be created out of experienced events and a symbolic, ideally fashionable status. So where does the money come from? What is, besides an army of think-outside-the-box-individuals, facilitating creative work? And what is it, that Silicon Valley's gold digger spirit is actually producing apart from the hotly debated term and most used tool »tech«?

Maybe context plays a key role in this, yes, context. When standardization is taking over under the imperative of (consumable) disruption, contexts can provide niches and spaces for the arts and other cultural initiatives. In that sense, the entrepreneur is not only the bad guy, but also the role model; or the coworker, partner, counterpart. How networks and

communities evolve under paradigms of a shared and immaterial reality of work and housing (in process, of course) is the question – and what solidarity, experimentation, critique, and creativity can actually cause, when it's mostly our friends' both symbolic and material capital (thinking about attended events on facebook and kickstarter campaigns) that we need to realize our projects and to accuse capitalism for the terrible conditions under which it was realized.

Start-ups and cultural initiatives are both obviously an economic engine for the Bay Area, but artists and cultural workers miss an institutional understanding that the arts are more than a cynical comment to upgrade a neighborhood and make it easier to consume for investors and tourists. So what is the role of the arts and creativity as such, when the creative individual becomes a stylized feature on Social Media and entrepreneur hero likewise? What sort of politics can be articulated by space and visibility in terms of representation of class, race, and gender? And, most of all, how can we still dream about freedom?

Spending as much time in the Bay Area as my tourist visa allows me to, I visited numerous places by purpose and coincidence likewise, and met people who talked with me about their understanding of a socioeconomic situation in relation to their artwork and projects. Of which some of them are presented here.

1. Disrupt! Experiment and deviation @ THE LAB, San Francisco

When Dena Beard, Executive Director of THE LAB took over the project space of the same name in 2014, it was bankrupt. Not an easy situation for a space that had not been started as virtual business in the tech boom of the recent years, that is neither to be consumed nor to be bought. It instead existed since 1984, founded by students of San Francisco State University and lived up to its name. THE LAB considers itself as a place for artistic experimentation, in which no result is predictable, no product is created as output and the gained experience is not necessarily »user friendly«. How does a space like this manage to persist in a place like San Francisco,

which artists and cultural producers leave epidemically because rents rise even faster than the colonies of tents in the streets grow? What is the politics of an institution that incorporates amateurism and weirdness as conceptual approach – and yet exists alongside institutions like the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art and Kadist Art Foundation as an established refuge of the art community in the Bay Area? And how does it approach the present social situation of the city in an institutional way?

It is a »subcultural ethos« that underlies THE LAB, so Beard. The young director learned to appreciate this after having worked at renowned places like the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. THE LAB feeds from a know-how that has, unlike many younger project spaces, an institutional and professional history. Art world celebrities like Nan Goldin, Lyn Hershman Leeson, Mike Kelley or Trevor Paglen were shown here. Experiments can be possible on this rather established level as well, so the argument. But under which conditions?

First we have the location: San Francisco's Mission District is Berlin's Neukölln, Mexico City's Colonia Roma, London's Hackney, and New York's Brooklyn. We can discuss the finesse of these attributions gradually, but in fact it is particularly these neighborhoods where luxury condominiums, all sorts of spatial distinction, and healthy lifestyle – Bikram Yoga studios, organic ice cream shops or concept stores for environmentally friendly design furniture – cause exclusion and eviction by exploiting a neighborhood's »local authenticity« as edgy urban setting. Talking about »diversity« here means less a mélange of class and culture than the coexistence of parallel societies. Whereas the first wave of gentrifiers like students or artists had equally low financial conditions and thus at least caused some interfering consumption habits, their symbolic capital attracted people with actual money. Yet, it is not the constantly claimed story of gentrification that shall be told here, but its extraordinary logic with what it is taking place in the Mission District. The gentrifiers – mostly tech entrepreneurs – appeal their products to core principles like open access, sharing and sustainability.





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With its red brickstone building, THE LAB stands amidst this complex social process like a bastion since it moved here in 1994. Between Burger King, Walgreens and various Taquerias, it is not a mere metaphoric goal to provide the arts with space – as this is the hub for the privatization process of housing. Airbnb and private investors bring concepts like »non-for-profit« to their knees as soon as it comes to monthly bills. Unlike the German system of public funding (however a shrinking domain), money is not acquired by endless proposals for cultural councils and foundations, but private donations. This privacy reached the level of personal communities and friends: The kickstarter campaign turned out to be fundamentally important. Which is actually good for THE LAB, itself being a red rag to many funders regardless the many years of successful and sustainable cultural engagement. In contrast to New York, there is no patron model in San Francisco – the world of tech didn't bear another Peggy Guggenheim yet.

Besides a program that includes aspects of class, gender, and race as integral parts, THE LAB is, on the one hand, mostly seeking to unlock (artistic) boxes, on the other hand it focuses on institutional distribution and supply of resources in a non-hierarchical, realistic way. What means: Work with, in and for THE LAB is not supposed to cover only symbolic status needs, but in fact to afford a daily life. Invited artists and team members are equally paid 25\$ per hour, production materials are paid separately. The space thus follows W.A.G.E. standards: It is certified by the New York-based activist organization »Working Artists and the Greater Economy« that focuses on artists' labor conditions among non-profit art institutions as voluntarily paying artist fees that meet a minimum payment standard. »Still, we remain precarious and strange«, so Beard, what could be rooted in this every entrepreneurial rule of profit maximization opposed operational logic. Instead, there is a critical attitude situated amidst the capitalist system itself. Invited artists shall deal with exactly this situation – and therefore with the institutional system of the LAB as well.

So what means artistic amateur freedom at this place? Under a formal perspective, it means focusing

on life-events like performances, screenings, and concerts. There is no set show, rather a constantly changing, ephemeral space. The shown pieces are mostly commissioned works and are developed in collaboration with THE LAB. This does not mean to realize a curatorial order though, but to change the roles: the artists dictate the curatorial team what to do and fill the space with ideas, which rather elude expectations, also the ones coming from the institution itself. With this in mind, Ellen Fullman considered THE LAB as an instrument throughout whole January, made it resonate like a cathedral and filled it with stretched strings similar to a fully cabled room.

The founding year of 1984 furthermore does not point out to George Orwell's dystopic vision with no reason. There is a camera installed in the space that transmits by an interval switching life photographs on the background of the website. It thus becomes clear that in digital space, insight is given in quasi everything – and with it the missing visibility of the gazing eye itself.

A weirdo spirit is something also start-up entrepreneurs like to practice – there has to be at least one crazy action or nerdy attitude in every product pitch. But this happens with different consequences, especially of financial character. Should the cultural and the entrepreneurial community merge more, to straighten inequalities and set aside enmities? Regardless of ethic obstacles, there is the earthly wage that should be equalized at least in terms of a shared dimension to speak about shared values and visions.

Experiments don't necessarily mean to loose ground, take big risks or exploit all resources. They can point out to social standards and norms, claim them and consider the own history as foundation. To understand this attitude as a value per se that has to be supported and sustained over the level of precariousness might seem unrealistic in the age of the idea – too much is the realization of ideas bound to the according industries that obey different financial markets. To engage consciously in the level of the ideal can thus be an important expression to bring dubious, strange, and mostly intangible developments into focus and to articulate social standards. To realize this in a space that is no White Cube, but

opens and closes itself over and over again, changes its sounds and appearance is, of course, an idealistic endeavor. But: one working for over 20 years.

2. Share! Collective curating and diversity @ CTRL+SHFT, Oakland

Among the arts, the ego plays a big role we all know. There is this meandering image of the narcissistic superstar, an eccentric creature who emphasizes nothing but individuality and, even though we are annoyed of course, genius. Every enlightened art world citizen takes equally for granted that it is the western gaze, which eventually constructs this ego figure. We, the art world, know about the fictional phantasy of the so called »Self«. So we present it rather as a rational, standardized catalogue of works, statements and views to approach institutions and show work in »empty« spaces to call the atmosphere neutral. In this bare bubble of social pressure, he can emerge again, soberly: the artist.

Still, the western white, male, heterosexual middle- or upper-class artist can be seen as the unspoken standard from which all »other« artistic identities deviate – in most cases clearly labeled as such – by being female, colored, arab, or just punky. Especially the studio becomes a decisive site for the representation of just this identity or figure: It is stage and showroom for a creative Self, gives direct insight into the very individual artistic process, just as much as visitors – besides friends mostly curators, collectors and press – are invited to. In this context, (art) communities are a crucial factor. Basically referring to democracy and liberal values, they more likely turn out to be exclusive circles or mere anonymous audiences with stars in their center than egalitarian groups. Maybe there are just small moments of shift that could both highlight and dismantle this representational structure. One attempt to do this is undertaken by the Oakland based collective CTRL+ SHFT.

The acronyms of the computer language already imply the usage of certain code-combinations that are supposed to trigger something that is not visible on the surfaces we all use. It is, furthermore, a link to a screen that we stare on, observing other people's stories as well as manipulating our own realities

or simply working on our duties. It points out the reality we all face, which is itself a scripted performance of programmed orders, possible combinations and moments of shared user-experience. CTRL+SHFT might work on just this performative order of shared experiences by shifting the shown »Self« from an ego to a collective. The group consists of fourteen women with mixed ethnical background. Another gesture of exclusion? No, so the group's statement, but a way to articulate underserved identities among the arts: artists of color as well as women or queer artists.

The concept of CTRL + SHFT seeks to embrace the identity of space, work, artists and audience likewise. It is an »improvisational curatorial experiment«, as they say, that transforms a warehouse not only into a gallery and studio space, but into a collective artwork of both showing artists and their audiences. For the opening in January, the collective thus presented with SOFT SERVE not only the first group show, but also introduced themselves as artists (CTRL+SHFT collective members include: Megan Reed, Addy Rabinovitch, Beryl Bevilacqua, Channing Morgan, Danielle Genzel, Erica Molesworth, Katy Crocker, Jessica Hubbard, Maria Guzmán Capron, Andrea Fritsch, Eden Redmond, Sofie Ramos, C.A. Greenlee and Yerin Kim). The renovated warehouse gallery is part of this artistic survey: Some of the shown works are re-arranged, displaced and re-installed objects of the warehouse's architectural interior. The showroom merges with a construction site, aiming to constantly interfere each gesture of individual completion. To bring this thought to its maximum of consequence, the audience itself was invited to step in; the opening night consisted of an undefined, open-ended series of ongoing interventions and shifts among the exhibition display by the audience. Besides having had a packed space, CTRL+SHFT thus created an environment of participation and disruption.

To start with an empty space, fill it with ideas, realize them under a democratic regime of evaluation and self-organization to finally share them with a community might sound like the leitmotiv of social media. Nevertheless, the conditions and consequences of sharing are different. They don't highlight a successfully promoted Self or original

idea, but a process, among which the individual act is blurred, revised and covered. The individual does not symbolize the unique and centered position, but the collective and marginalized.

CRTL+SHIFT finally raises the question, how the identity, space and work of artists can be viable in an environment that privatizes space and individualizes identity. To repeat by all means neoliberal terms of participation and sharing among this endeavor can be a risk, is certainly inevitable and, above all, necessary to first show patterns of control and power and then try to – at least slightly or temporarily – shift them.

3. Move! Creative environments and transgression @ CITY LIMITS, Oakland

What is the notorious »creative environment« that California and especially San Francisco's tech-suburbia Silicon Valley stand for? What do people mean by talking about it as fertile ground for both creative economies and the arts? Creativity, one might think, emerges best when not being pushed back into any boundaries or regulations, when it can freely unfold, be playful, maybe useless. We remember childhood and yet wish to profit from this silliness for something... productive. Why not use the useless?

An environment does not only have to be unbound to pass as creative. It uses childlike connotations to create colorful clouds of post-its, smart ways to manage daily tasks on to-do-lists, and to »help« communicating faster or with a growing multitude of followers. It creates imaginative, rhizomatic structures of social interactions – which still have an impact on our physical existence, on how and where we live. Creative environments achieve high performance, they aim to maximize values, optimize products and are, as a consequence, highly prized.

It is therefore not just somewhere »out-of-the-box«, where artists, curators, art and cultural workers find their ideas realized, but rather, unless they enjoy fame and funding, outside the center. Not only boundless thinking and imaginative power characterize creativity, but also the thus arising real-life extremes. A rapid (and absurd) growth of income for just a few economic sectors – rooted in Silicon Valley – causes an equally growing gap in society; and in con-

sequence evictions plus exclusiveness. San Francisco, the bedroom and weekend community for more and more entrepreneurs working with tech and Social Media, seems to be pushed to its limits of affordable space and living for the broad population. Can art, the engine and epitome for the imaginative and creative, be shown under these extreme conditions? Does it become invisible, marginal, or will it be adapted to entrepreneurial strategies of appearance? What is it, if not only precarious?

There cannot be made an absolute point about this of course. Showing art follows certainly more general rules than we want to believe it does, but it depends on financial conditions and market goals in the first place. The space CITY LIMITS started off under just these conditions of displacement on the margins of the city. Founded by artist Evan Reiser in 2012, the gallery started off in the Outer Mission neighborhood, just north of the actual city limits. Hosting art and friends likewise, the living room became a private showcase.

This intersection of home zone and White Cube is certainly not only characteristic for the art community in the Bay area, thinking of other spaces like Ben Quinn's QUALITY, to mention just one, and it is symptomatic for a creative economy that uses private resources in the first and last place. Thinking of businesses like Airbnb and Task Rabbit, or platforms like Instagram, it becomes clear, how much the private needs to be managed, utilized, activated, and staged among the public.

CITY LIMITS made its way out of the domestic living room into Oakland's more industrial, edgy area. In 2013, it opened its location in Jefferson Street, the team grew and changed, now Reiser runs the space together with artists Lindsay Tully and Kristine Eudy. To create a space for contemporary art while stretching one's own capacities to the limits of possibility yet became the galleries leading principle. CITY LIMITS invites artists to show work, which is not only new, but gives space to the deviant, maybe under articulated aspects of artists' work. Each exhibition thus symbolizes an act of disruption among a certain practice. Again, we could feel reminded of the basics of entrepreneurial strategic thinking:

to disrupt existing production cycles to guarantee flexibility and the need for the eternal new. Yet the gallery's mission is not rooted in a maximization of public attention, but, having the living room in mind, to provide space for something that might be underrepresented or just never tested. It thus stands for a community oriented artistic practice that faces the challenges that creative economies have caused already; it maintains its location among a drastic housing situation and stays active, when predominantly financial goals seem to keep people busy. CITY LIMITS operates on the edge of urban cultural policy, self-exploitation, and rental market likewise, and it opens up for what needs to be articulated just because of this.

San Francisco potentially becomes more and more the artist ghost town it already is, according to an artist I met briefly. It could end up as its own quote or aftermath, having become a non-place in Marc Augé's sense, a place that refers to historical and anthropological places just as scenery for global transait of financial power and consumption. In this context of transience and functionality, the ability to »create« becomes crucial, as it suggests authenticity and autonomy while undermining just these.

The natural character people often attest to developments like gentrification thus might be comprehensible in a sense of superior structures that seem to be sheer unavoidable. But justifying power relationships – in this case capitalism – with biological facts is a grim reference to a racist or sexist argumentation. Thinking of the agency of established speaker positions, it is substantial to have venues like the CCA WATTIS Institute for Contemporary Art or KADIST Art Foundation in town. Putting up shows like »Wang Bing: Three Portraits« (February 23 – April 9, 2016) and »Adelita Husni-Bey: Movement Break« (December 2, 2015 – January 30, 2016), they take a crucial stand with articulating work conditions among economics of unbound growth and self optimization. In his documentary films, Chinese artist Wang Bing features individuals who are all part of a (Chinese) market machinery, which overtakes the individual subject due to its

excessive speed. Showing each protagonist in seemingly endless duration and without a linear way of narration, the films evolve as sensitive surveys of micro-situations and the persons related to them, they merge to detail oriented tableaux of the very banal among a system of mere financial strength and macro-functionality. At KADIST, New York based artist Adelita Husni-Bey is represented by a film as well, showing teenage athletes who all experienced pain and injury by their competitive sporting activities. On top of that, Husni-Bey hosts public group therapy sessions in the exhibition space, aiming to relate physical with social or political pressure. Both places circulate around global tendencies and can yet subtly reflect on San Francisco's paradigmatic situation.

A Californian dream might have confused freedom and flexibility. It is certainly not only rising rents and a dramatic housing situation resulting from that, but an idea of participation and citizenship based on economic investment. The arts and the creative sector have a key position in this conflict situation. Using a partly similar rhetoric and referring to liberal core values, they have to pay particular attention to the exploitation of immaterial ideals due to profit maximization. Dreams are nothing you get for free. Work B**ch [explicit].

