Agamben’s Aesthetic Framework and the Published Poetry of the Artist-Poet

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Abstract

The main objective of this thesis is to formulate a practical aesthetic framework from Giorgio Agamben's writings, and to use his concepts as an interpretative tool in relation to certain aspects of poetry in contemporary art. The specific category of printed poetry by artists is studied from a meta perspective, looking primarily at the gesture performed by writing poetry as an artist. A selective history of poetry in art looks at Marcel Broodthaers and the Bernadette Corporation, including the ways in which they can clarify the aesthetics of Agamben, followed by a shorter interpretations of three contemporary artist-poets – Karl Larsson, Karl Holmqvist and Hanne Lippard. These works can be defined as a hybrid third with Agamben, not art, but making the absence of art present. Works that are neither poetry nor art but with the availability and potential for both. An aesthetic terminology from Agamben is an aesthetics of privation and potential, of absence and inoperability, as well as an aesthetics of negation and resistance. A framework for looking at the tension between activity and passivity, and the resistance present there. The concept of potentiality also proves to be a fruitful opening for the interpretation of art leaning toward negation or withdrawal.

Keywords: aesthetics, Agamben, art, artist-poet, Bernadette Corporation, Broodthaers, Hanne Lippard, Karl Larsson, Karl Holmqvist, poiesis, poetry, potentiality

Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

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Introduction

Our appreciation of art begins necessarily with the forgetting of art.
Giorgio Agamben, *Man Without Content*

The opening for this work is threefold. Firstly in reading different books of Agamben I recognised the possible foundations for an aesthetic method, a way of looking at certain kinds of art that can be difficult to categorise and define. Secondly is the increased presence and interest in poetry in fine art, in all its forms and shapes – incorporated into art works, as poetry readings in galleries and poetry in place of press releases for exhibitions for example. The third reason is more abstract, resting on the recurring use of poetry as the vehicle for examining philosophical concepts in Agamben’s writing, poetry functioning as a key to philosophy. All of these taken together provided the starting point for this thesis, and an attempt at formulating an aesthetic framework from Agamben’s writing on art.

Poetry is the 'original art' going back to Plato and Aristotle, and its linguistic and symbolic meaning is traced back to and entangled with the concept of *poiesis* in a fortuitous way, at least for the purposes of this thesis. *Poiesis* is a greek term meaning “making” or “bringing forth”. Its wider meaning can also be creation, and it is the root and origin of the term poetry, which, according to William Watkin, can explain why ”poetry has come to be the archetype of all the arts.”

The subtlety and complexity that I believe can be found in the case of poetry presented by artists like Karl Larsson, Karl Holmqvist and Hanne Lippard, and the philosophical operation they perform, make this analysis and research specially suited to the subject of aesthetics, although the main theoretical works — the writings of Agamben — on which it will rely and expand are critical towards the subject as a whole, and can be more aptly described as philosophies of art. Whilst researching and writing this thesis the work of formulating an aesthetic model and tool for categorisation and analysis out of different art philosophical ideas of Agamben has been the primary focus. The works we will look more closely at and try to define, through the philosophy of Agamben, are published works of poetry, by artists. They are all contemporary artists, exhibiting in fine art galleries and institutions. Writing is part of their artistic practice, overtly or not. To narrow the scope we will be looking specifically at poetic works, or more clearly works where the published text is poetry, albeit produced by an artist. This excludes work that use text as image, rather than as something to be read or listened to, or as an object

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1 Watkin, *The Literary Agamben*, 69.
standing literally for an idea, as in the works of Conceptual artists of the 1960s and '70s, where texts tended to function either as documentation or as analogues of sculptural objects. Publishing poetry as an artist is a form of negation, and Agamben provides a terminology for reflecting on negation and absence that appears productive in engaging with this material.

While none of Sianne Ngai’s aesthetic categories appear immediately productive in relation to poetry by artists, or as companions to the aesthetics of Agamben, she does summarise an aspect of the same: “There is thus a sense in which the true opposite of interesting is not a disinterested but rather an explicitly interested judgment, as Giorgio Agamben suggests in his gloss of Hegel's view of the rise of the ironic artist as signalling the end of art's relevance for culture as a whole: 'Only because art has left the sphere of interest to become merely interesting do we welcome it so warmly.'”

The above is a useful entry point for approaching the sometimes scattered aesthetic writings of Agamben, and encapsulates a view he seems to have held since 1970. Art is no longer within our sphere of interest, but merely interesting. My somewhat opposing view on this does not preclude this thesis’s use of Agamben’s aesthetic terminology, assembled over several books and 50 years, in order to interpret the tendency of poetry in contemporary art, especially the case of published poetry by artists, the gesture of art masquerading as literature. These works, poetry by artists, fall through the cracks in several ways, and the whole category is often left out of the discourse in for example academic works or overviews. There seems to be no place for it in books on text art or word art, or books on artists’ books. A large, and seemingly ever-growing, body of academic and popular work investigates the word in visual art and conceptual art, but they very seldom, if at all, investigate the properties of the actual poetry published by artists. Perhaps these works are seen as irrelevant, a footnote in the artists practice. Such a view is blind to the energy, weight and tension in the artists poetry. Are they then a separate occurrence in these artists’ practice? Or should they be seen as works of fine art that fit neatly into the rest of their œuvre? Reading them as a form of negation and absence of art provides us with the grounds for engaging with the aesthetic theories of Agamben.

I. Topic of Research

There is a myriad of methods and philosophies for analysing art, countless different theoretical frames and points of departure, but there is a lack of research and writing regarding the analysis of the contemporary production of poetry by artists. To my knowledge the category hasn't been properly looked at, nor has any consistent theoretical framework been applied to the understanding of the same. This thesis explores whether the theories of Giorgio Agamben can be used to fill this absence.

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2 The zany, the interesting, and the cute. See Ngai, ‘Our Aesthetic Categories’.
The main work of this thesis will be to assemble and distil a general aesthetic method from the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben. More specifically a method of aesthetic philosophical inquiry, and a method for interpreting and situating specific tendencies and groupings of contemporary art. This method is something that is not defined in his writing but is instead an attempt to re-orientate his concepts, without necessarily reaching the conclusions he draws in connection to them. To this end the primary theoretical material used will be drawn from several different books of his, ranging from the 70’s to today, from the *The Man Without Content* to *Creation and Anarchy*.

At the end of the thesis the question is posed as to whether the philosophical and aesthetic theories of Giorgio Agamben can be used to understand the specific category of printed poetry in contemporary art, and his aesthetic framework will be tested against the works of three different artist-poets.

“Artist-poet” is a relatively new term, seen more often the last ten years or so – in art publications like *Frieze* and *Texte zur Kunst* for example – used to describe a certain practice among contemporary artists working in some way with poetry, often as published works and presented parallel to physical exhibitions. The specific output of published books of poetry by contemporary artists, which is the topic of this thesis, is not a grouping made on a thematic terms, nor connected through their subject matter. It is rather a grouping established through their practical and conceptual presentation. While their medium specificity (within a grouping indicating authorial specificity: poetry *per se* produced by artists) is what defines these works as a group, it is the loss and dissolution of medium specificity that makes their mode and function interesting in the contemporary sphere of fine art. They are no longer immediately recognisable as art, but are readily recognised as poetry.

As a result of this, can we better understand how the printed published works of these “artist-poets” function as art through Agamben’s philosophy of art? And what are the characteristics of an aesthetic theory derived from Agamben?

II. Objective, Method and Theory

The objective is to find, through Agamben and some of his interlocutors, a language, framework and system of thought that corresponds with certain types of art works defined by absence of art or negation, and consequently is able to face the apparent aporia of published poetry in art, which is the practical focus of this thesis. Is it possible to philosophically define and situate the poetry published by artists? These works occupy an uncertain middle ground, and while they are not a new thing historically, in the present day they can be shown to first clear and then inhabit a specific space in the contemporary art discourse. This space can be defined in relation to the philosophy of art presented in certain texts by Giorgio Agamben, such as *The Man Without Content, Potentialities* and *Stanzas*. To do so constitutes a rethinking, reformulation and foremost a reapplication of Agamben’s philosophy in
relation to art. In the book *Going Public* Boris Groys argues for a similar interpretive apparatus as the one employed by Agamben, as well as in this thesis: “In fact there is a much longer tradition of understanding art as *poiesis* or *techne* than as *aisthesis* or in terms of *hermeneutics*. The shift from a poetic, technical understanding of art to aesthetic or hermeneutical analysis was relatively recent, and it is now time to reverse this change in perspective.” This provides the beginnings of a justification for the theory and method formulated in this thesis, as well as pointing semantically towards the theory and concept of poetry, through the opposition of poetics with aesthetics.

What exactly is being produced, and where does ‘art’ make itself present in poetry by artists? Can the use of poetry in these instances of contemporary art be read as an instance of Agamben’s synthesis between poetry and philosophy, giving rise to an understanding of “critique” as a particular way of knowing? Another possible reading of these works is as a shift in the production of art from will to truth, in the terminology of Agamben restoring the truth to *poiesis*, and differentiating it from *praxis*.

This thesis will attempt to formulate a practical aesthetic thinking through the art-philosophical writings of Agamben, and then to discern where poetry by artists falls within such an aesthetic system. As the nature of this thesis is investigative, many questions are included within its scope. What is the status of the published poetry collection written by artists, as an object or art object? Is there, in Agamben’s philosophy of aesthetics, a framework for engaging with dematerialised art; art moving away from and against both the visual and the market? Through the chapters an aesthetic framework will be assembled from the writings of Agamben, and will take as its examples the works and figure of the artist-poet of today. To define Agamben’s philosophical and aesthetic framework I will trace a selective history of poetry in fine art, and apply an aesthetic model – derived from his writings – to the published works of poetry by artists. The historical background will be established primarily through Marcel Broodthaers and Bernadette Corporation. Broodthaers is especially helpful as his practice actualises the concept of potentiality in Agamben’s writing, while the work of the Bernadette Corporation points to the possible contexts of commodities and market value in relation to poetry in art. This is followed by three shorter studies where the interpretation is tested and adapted to specific cases. The method is therefore part philosophical and part art historical. The three shorter studies will look at artist-poets Karl Larsson, Karl Holmqvist and Hanne Lippard. When looking at the poetry by artists, the focus will be on how critique is formulated towards it, using examples from articles and catalogues. The three artists are examples of different approaches, of different modes of production, and a different emphasis in terms of what type of presence they engender. They can a bit bluntly be reduced to the stereotypes of: a poet making art (Karl Larsson), a pop culture spoken word artist (Karl Holmqvist) and a poetic sound and word artist (Hanne Lippard). All of the examples used, from Broodthaers to Bernadette Corporation to the three artists just mentioned, serve to further support the study and application of an aesthetic framework developed from Agamben’s writings on art.

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4 Groys, *Going Public*, 16.
The methodological approach can be described as philosophical and loosely hermeneutic, using the philosophy of Agamben as an interpretive tool, reformulating it at times in order to get closer to the material – poetry in art, poetry as art. Parts can also be characterised as critical theory, particularly where work, use-value and commodities are discussed. By necessity this thesis will also limit its engagement with Agamben's philosophy and will not include Agamben's discourse on the linguistics or semantics of poetry, and equally will not engage with the semantics, semiotics or linguistics of the works of artist-poets, but rather engage with and try to resolve philosophically the fact of them using poetry in and of itself: how that gesture can be resolved in interpretation. The approach here is a meta-perspective on the phenomenon of published poetry in art, and this thesis therefore omits many aspects of Agamben's theory, especially pertinent perhaps in the field of his writings on poetry. The semantics and semiotics of poetry, rhythm and enjambment are some of the aspects of that branch of Agamben's writing, a perspective that does not add anything in relation to the meta-perspective Agamben would look for inoperativity in the text itself, not as here in the fact and existence of printed poetry in art. This thesis will study poetry in art, not poetry and art. All things being relative, a book of poetry can always be – and always be read as – art, if found or shown in a gallery space, but the focus here is on how it is different. For example, text displayed on the walls of gallery are not included here, neither is installations containing books of poetry. The study concerns poetry printed in book form, written by artist. Much of the focus is on reception, art criticism seldom takes the poetic form into account as such. The point of departure is that these works constitute a specific category that is especially open to being read through Agamben's philosophy. The area of interest here is the conceptual and gestural implications of writing poetry instead of making and presenting visual art, which is why Agamben's writing on poetry, and philosophy of language, is not used in this thesis. In other words, the specific category represented by the primary sources of this thesis, require a specific category of philosophical tools to mirror the artist-poets’ practical and contextual disjunction. To summarise, the main objective is to formulate a practical aesthetic framework from Agamben's writings, using his concepts but not necessarily his conclusions as an interpretative tool in relation to certain aspects of poetry in contemporary art.

III. Background

While there is much written in general on text in art and textual practices, there is not much research done specifically on poetry in art. It is often instead about poetry inspired by art or vice versa, or about word/text art or artists’ books, of which there is much written, such as Johanna Drucker's The Century of Artists' Books and Michael Petry's The Word is Art. The book Art, Word and Image, and especially the chapter 'Word and Image in Art since 1945' by Michael Corris, presents a compelling overview of some of the main ways in which words have been the focus of artistic practice in the years leading up to the
present moment and the artist-poet, but it is in every way a straightforward art historical account that is lacking in usefulness in two ways in particular in relation to this thesis: firstly by not discussing poetry as a form or model in art at all, barely mentioning Broodthaers for example, and secondly by never seriously engaging with the works critically or philosophically.

There are also books written on the relationship between art and writing in artistic research practices, that clearly displays the issues and questions of that field, most notably *Art, Research, Philosophy* by Clive Cazeaux and *An Artist's Text Book* by Jan Svenungsson. The latter is concerned with the conditions for writing that an artist operates under, while the former outlines the relationship between practice and theory in artistic research writing through philosophy, mainly Immanuel Kant and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

The particular aesthetics, or critique-of-aesthetics, of Agamben is often omitted in overviews of the philosophy of art or philosophical aesthetics, perhaps because of its complexity or oppositional nature, or for simply being so specialised and therefore less widespread in studies of art and aesthetics. The specific and under-researched topic I am pursuing requires reading beyond more general sources, such as Noël Carroll’s *Philosophy of Art*. But the wider discussion of aesthetic experience and aesthetics in relation to art is simply too large a field to engage with here. Concerning Agamben and aesthetics their is very little written that is not included as reference here. Marina Vishmidt and Anthony Iles article *Plastic Givens, Hard Stops: A Short Overview of Forms and Forces of Negation in Recent and Historical Art* is an interesting look at negation that is related to the theoretical drive in this thesis, although their analysis is, as is often the case, more focused on political consequences. Arne de Boevers book *Plastic sovereignties: Agamben and the politics of aesthetics* for example, is symptomatic for writings on Agamben, where aesthetics is used as a frame for situating and developing the political side of Agamben’s thinking.6 7

From the large amount of books and articles on Broodthaers, this thesis makes particular use of the issue of *October* on his work, Rachel Haidu’s book *The Absence of Work*, as well as some recent catalogue writings. I use all of these sources and the philosophy of Agamben to form a picture of Broodthaers’ role as a precedent to the contemporary artist-poet figure and to trace the material and authorial movement from book to gallery enacted by his works.

The subject of poetry in contemporary art is an increasingly broad area of practice. The growing fields of conceptual writing as well as post-conceptual poetry, while interesting and sometimes relevant to this thesis, fall outside of its central focus. Conceptual writing can even be seen as the opposite to both the objectives and the objects of study of this thesis. Conceptual writing often takes the form of books that don’t need to be read – such as Kenneth Goldsmith’s complete transcription of an issue of the newspaper the *New York Times* – works that function much more like (procedural) conceptual art.

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6 De Boever, *Plastic Sovereignties*.
7 See also Whitehead, “Poiesis and Art-Making: A Way of Letting-Be”, as an example of the usage of *poiesis* philosophically, in order to understand artistic activity.
works than (literary, aesthetic or theoretical) written texts or poetry. The idea is what is mostly on display, the material of a conceptual artwork is the thought process in it or behind it. They are “producing improperly extra-literary acts that often can’t or aren’t seen to be poetic.”8, similar to how a prototypical conceptual art work produces ’extra-visual’ discourse. Another expanding field in relation to writing and art is the post-digital, works that engage with the digital, either overtly or implicitly, as well as works distributed digitally, as PDFs for example. The works I will focus on are once again performing an opposite gesture, one that is perhaps a symptom of these artists’ positions in a more traditional art market; the works are only published as physical books, by established, though in many cases small, publishers. And even though some of their subject matter is engaged with the “digital”, some more than others, this has little impact on the form and shape of the published works.

In summary much can be found on the field of text and poetry in art in general, but little is written on using the philosophy of Agamben practically as tool and terminological source for engaging with art, and specifically poetry in fine art. The criteria outlined above serve to show the variable directions that research into published poetry might take, but also define by a process of elimination the question that this thesis revolves around.

**IV. Outline**

This thesis is structured into four chapters. The first chapter presents and discusses theories of Agamben that can be meaningful in an aesthetic context, structured into four subheadings: *poiesis*, potentiality, poetry & philosophy and the act of creation. The second chapter begins by tracing a possible genealogy of poetry by artists, from Broodthaers to Bernadette Corporation and on to some examples and possible views on the contemporary state of affairs. The chapter goes on to discuss possible distinctions between poetry and art in our context, and how theories of economy, value and distribution, also from Agamben, may be helpful in determining the function of poetry published by artists. The third chapter performs readings of three different artist-poets using the tools provided by Agamben. The fourth and final chapter takes the interpretation and application one step further, and investigates the role of work and happiness as it relates to our subject. The thesis ends with a summary presenting the conclusions of this thesis and a reflection on its implementation.

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8 Thurston, “The Mediatization of Contemporary Writing,” 96.
Chapter 1 – Agamben’s Aesthetics

This chapter will focus on several interwoven aspects of Agamben’s philosophy of art, derived mainly from four of his books. Firstly, *The Man Without Content*, dealing with privation and doing – framed through *poiesis* – in contemporary art. My reading of this is the foundation for using Agamben’s philosophy as a model for looking at contemporary art. Secondly, the discussions approaching aesthetics in the book *Potentialities*, tracing the shift from privation and doing to faculty and actuality, and thirdly the book *Stanzas*, looking at connections between poetry and philosophy, through the lens of poetry in art. Finally the more recently published *Creation and Anarchy*, which ties together and develops some of his earlier thoughts on art and the creative act.

But I want to begin with an opening to this reading of poetry in art provided by Boris Groys in the book *Going Public*, where he juxtaposes aesthetics with poetics, and looks at contemporary art from the point of view of the producer, not the spectator. Firstly, his conception of aesthetics is, as we will see in this thesis, similar to Agamben’s, and similarly inspired by Kant. Groys argues that in today’s world the scales are beginning to shift, soon everyone is a producer, an artist of some kind, and professional art is reduced to “a means of education in notions of taste and aesthetic judgement.”\(^9\) Art seen from an aesthetic point of view becomes something to be overcome, and he argues that: “All things can be seen from an aesthetic perspective; all things can serve as sources of aesthetic experience and become objects of aesthetic judgment. From the perspective of aesthetics, art has no privileged position. Rather, art comes between the subject of the aesthetic attitude and the world.”\(^10\)

Or, as we will see through the aesthetics of Agamben, actualised art becomes an obstacle, while the unactualised, that which retains its potential, and presents the production of an absence of art, that is the type of artistic production capable of evading the disinterested spectator, as well as being a pleasurable labour for the artist. Groys’ critique is a critique of the aesthetic perspective that in part finds its corollary in Agamben’s view of art itself.

Agamben’s first book *The Man Without Content (MWC)* is in many ways a reformulation of and challenge to aesthetics as a whole, what Leland de la Durantaye calls a ‘destruction of aesthetics’.\(^11\) I will attempt to make a thorough examination of the philosophy of art he presents, ultimately attentive towards its usefulness as a framework for analysing forms of contemporary art outside of the book’s purview, art that defies simple categorisation. But also, more specifically, I will use it to approach the specific tendency in contemporary art that is poetry; where it is a core element in a visual artist’s

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11 De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 27.
practice and presented work, and published books of poetry by fine artists are produced. MWC is the starting point for formulating an aesthetics based on Agamben’s philosophy. At the centre of the book is a careful construction of what Agamben sees as the problem in contemporary art. This is a problem indicative of a larger crisis in Western culture, where the doing itself is lost. Claire Colebrook describes the basis of MWC as

[...] a need to destroy the aesthetic, to get away from an art that is seen as the product of some action or the work of an artist (MWC, 47) and instead think of art poetically as the disclosure of presence, the opening of space in general.¹²

This short quote is an effective summation of the aspects of Agamben’s work which we will investigate and attempt to define here; a disclosure that might also account for the presence of poetry in fine art; as a non-work, with ’doing’ understood negatively (when compared to the formal and visual work of producing objects, or staging installations, for example).

In Giorgio Agamben, A Critical Introduction de la Durantaye presents a reading of MWC which is complex and bombastic compared to what we’ll see in the readings of Catherine Mills and Alex Murray. He stresses both the loss of the original status of art as a force shaping our culture, and the destruction of art and aesthetics Agamben calls for. What is mostly missing from de la Durantaye’s reading is a connection to the aesthetic dimension of MWC: his writing is focused exclusively on the strictly philosophical aspects. The nihilistic view Agamben has regarding contemporary art, and the destruction of art presented in the MWC, is not necessarily a negative or pessimistic state of affairs; the foundation for his conclusions can be used constructively to achieve a different perspective on contemporary art philosophically. De la Durantaye clarifies three main goals in MWC. The first is regaining a sense of art’s ’original’ structure and status, an ontological question. The second goal is to trace how the original space offered by art has been obscured, a historical question of art’s development, and the third goal is to propose a restoration of art to its former status as a true shaper of actions and beliefs, a programmatic question.¹³

In his book Agamben Alex Murray presents a good overview of the importance of taste and criticism in Agamben’s view of contemporary art. The disinterested judgement of taste, introduced by Kant, has through its indifference opened a rift between art and its public.¹⁴ Two phenomena define contemporary art in Agamben’s view, ’aesthetic judgement’ and ’artistic subjectivity without content’, which deprive the work of art of both its ability to communicate without aesthetic judgement and of the unity between art and the world. Taste here is the opposite of an immediate and emotional response to art. “Taste becomes a collective measure of a response to art that can be ratified and regulated.”¹⁵ As a result of this the artist distances themselves from the world of the audience or viewers, responding to

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¹² Colebrook, “Agamben”, 117.
¹³ De la Durantaye, Giorgio Agamben, 30.
¹⁴ Murray, Giorgio Agamben, 81.
¹⁵ Murray, Giorgio Agamben, 81.
questions of taste and aesthetics, which Agamben describes here: “The artist, faced with a spectator who becomes more similar to an evanescent ghost the more refined his taste becomes, moves in an increasingly free and rarefied atmosphere and begins the voyage that will take him from the live tissue of society to the hyperboreal no-man’s-land of aesthetics.”16 Agamben traces the function of the artist transforming from artistic craft and creation to a process of idle emptiness: an emptiness resulting from the tendency to favour a formal and medium-specific pursuit over the content of the art work. Each new work is a response to other works, but not their content or content derived from a perceived collective, but solely the aesthetic qualities of other artworks and the criticism concerning them. As a general argument it is not a strong one, but as a frame or lens for looking at certain kinds of art and placing it in relation to its aesthetic function, it serves a purpose. Agamben writes: “His condition, then, is that of a radical split; and outside of this split, everything is a lie … The artist is the man without content, who has no other identity than a perpetual emerging out of the nothingness of expression and no other ground than this incomprehensible station on this side of himself.”17

In other words, the content is lost, it is all container: surface, technological or practical shapes, techne or praxis taking the place of poiesis. Agamben bases his definition of these terms on Martin Heidegger, who in turn transformed them from the original sources in Plato and Aristotle. “Heidegger interprets poiesis as a bringing-forth into truth (aletheia) that is also a making; poiesis is linked, rather than opposed, to techne, a making or know-how in art, craft and what we today call technology.”18 Contrasted with poiesis, “[…]praxis refers to willed practical activity.”19

Murray summarises how this is linked to the history of nihilism in MWC, and Agamben’s view of art as something no longer capable of transmitting its own history or the cultural history of the artist. To counter this, history must be used in a new way, and art “[…]must be part of a ‘poetic process’, a poetics that provides us with a broader representational form that works to undo the schisms of modernity and prepare the ground for a future community.”20

In The Philosophy of Agamben Catherine Mills describes the overarching project of MWC as an illumination of the consequences of the ”self-annihilation of art in the modern era”, and focuses her understanding and argument on the link between aesthetics and nihilism in the writings of Agamben.21

Mills reading of MWC focuses on the ”double principle” of modern aesthetics, made up of and based on the indifferent or disinterested spectator on the one hand, and the dangerous interest in the artist as creator on the other. This opposition sets the stage for Agamben’s subsequent analysis of the actual process of producing art and the complications in defining its philosophical ramifications: “[…]to the

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16 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 16.
17 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 55.
20 Murray, Giorgio Agamben, 84.
21 Mills, The Philosophy of Agamben, 53.
increasing innocence of the spectator's experience in front of the beautiful object corresponds the increasing danger inherent in the artist's experience.” Agamben traces this duality of principles through “Kant’s emphasis on disinterested aesthetic judgement and Nietzsche's subsequent critique of this and emphasis on the creative will of the artist.” These are not opposing concepts, in Agamben's view, but two points that together illuminate the “speculative centre and [...] vital contradiction” of the history of aesthetics. The “original unity of the work of art” is broken apart, and the dual figures of the disinterested spectator and the strong will of the artist creator constantly refer back to each other. Mills argues that the problem Agamben poses for himself is a search for the foundation of the principles of aesthetic judgement and artistic subjectivity, the principles for them both separately, rather than in the constant shifting movement between them. Continuing from a discussion concerning art's destiny in relation to aesthetic judgement, Agamben argues that “the key but obscured aspect of aesthetic judgement is that as much as it tries to determine the beautiful, it can do so only negatively.” There is a kind of paradox inherent in this view of aesthetic judgement, where the object is not the art itself, but its opposite – non-art, the shadow of art as Mills labels it. She writes: “[...] art is grasped only as negativity.” Art is measured by how far it is positioned away from that which is not art. We will look more closely at what this might mean philosophically, but also how it can be put to use in coaxing a position, value and meaning from poetry in fine art contexts. The work of art is obviously something other than what is simple in it. This is the Greek concept of allegory, the artwork communicates something other than the material that contains it, something beyond itself, more than the sum of its parts, something else. Agamben includes a Heidegger quote with much the same meaning:

The art work is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself is, allo agoreuei. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made.

Agamben begins with a call for destruction, the destruction of a sphere of art dominated by a disinterested viewer, with an eye more than anything towards aesthetic enjoyment. Referencing Plato, Agamben describes a time when the “power of art over the soul” was so great that it could “by itself destroy the very foundations of his city”. That is the force and connection with our life and culture that Agamben wishes we could collectively find our way back to. But we are far gone from that point, and today's art is the result of a split in this unity between the origin, our history and culture as a living unity, and art as the lived experience of a creative force. “The original unity of the work of art has

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22 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 5.
23 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 12.
24 Mills, The Philosophy of Agamben, 54.
27 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 4.
broken, leaving on the one side the aesthetic judgement and on the other artistic subjectivity without content, the pure creative principle.”

The destruction of aesthetics should clear away what is taken for granted, and “bring into question the very meaning of aesthetics as the science of the work of art.” We will not go so far in this thesis, but rather assemble out of Agamben’s theories and critique a terminology that can be put to use in relation to art today, especially art that does not conform to the expectations of the market and or public, as printed poetry in art today. A gesture of negation, no matter how slight it appears. It is often hard not to read aspects of the art philosophical writings of Agamben as reactionary, striving for an imagined state and connection to the origin and production of art in ancient Greece, and reaching his conclusions through the much used works of Heidegger and Walter Benjamin. This is perhaps partly due to the level of complexity in his writings. But the nihilism, and pessimism, of his conclusions need not restrain us from the use of his methods, and his thought may be used as a tool rather than a map with set coordinates.

1. Poiesis – Doing and Not-Doing

To capture the disjunction of contemporary art Agamben goes back to ancient Greek thought and through Kant reasons through what art is and how it has been measured historically. In Agamben’s view modern thought has always failed to properly make clear the basis for aesthetic judgement and according to Mills one of the central conflicts Agamben unveils is whether the contemporary crisis of judgement may lead to its ‘eclipse’, to irrelevancy:

This eclipse is evident in two tendencies today, the first of which is the production of art objects such as Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades for which the polarities of art/non-art are wholly inadequate as conceptual schemas. The second is the increasing aestheticization of nature, such that while it has historically been excluded from aesthetic judgement, nature is increasingly compared with its shadow and subjected to the appreciation of the “point of perfection” that characterises taste.

It used to be that art was measured against nature, against its implied shadow, a painting of a flower compared to the experience of a real flower for example. But today, art is mostly judged against other art, or escapes our aesthetic judgement altogether. This passage, written in 1970, is still valid today: “More and more frequently, contemporary art presents us with productions before which it is no longer possible to resort to the traditional mechanism of the aesthetic judgment, and for which the antagonistic polarity art/non-art appears totally inadequate.” Note that this is not an argument for or

28 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 37.
29 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 6.
30 Mills, The Philosophy of Agamben, 54.
31 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 50.
against a certain kind of art, but a reflection on how available a certain work for us is in terms of judging its worth or criticising it.

Agamben takes the ready-made as example, where he argues the “otherness of the formal-creative principle” has been replaced by what he calls an alienating non-artistic object, displayed within the sphere of art, and consequently the critical judgment is confronted with itself: “what it is supposed to trace back to non-art is already non-art on its own, and the critic’s operation is limited to an ID check.” 32 Contemporary art is for Agamben, writing in 1970, something object-centered, that identifies the work of art with non-artistic products, and thus becomes aware of its own shadow, becomes the logos of art, a critical reflection on art in itself. Our example in this thesis is the presentation of poetry, as poetry, in exhibitions, where the same conflict is apparent. How do we judge the worth of these works and how do we criticise them when we can't even be sure to which category they or the artist (or poet?) belong?

In the *MWC* chapter 'Privation Is Like A Face' Agamben attempts to redefine the status of the work of art and its significance in the modern era of alienated labor and technical reproducibility, one of the central issues of aesthetics. In his view Kantian aesthetics are concerned with and rooted in judgments of taste, which leads it to assume a subject which is separated and alienated from the artistic process. The historical beginning of aesthetics marks a division between technical production and artistic production followed by a detached relationship between intellectual and manual labor.

The “death of art” is its inability to take shape as art works, to attain the concrete dimension of the work. Agamben describes what he sees as a crisis in western culture, a crisis of production, doing, *poiesis*. “[…] the crisis of art in our time is, in reality, a crisis of poetry, of *poiesis*.” 33 Art used to be that which through *poiesis*, the artistic doing, brought forth the presence of art in the art work. In a quote central to this thesis, Agamben writes:

> The question of art’s destiny here comes into contact with an area in which the entire sphere of human *poiesis*, productive action in its entirety, is put into question in an original way. Contemporary art is understood negatively, as the type of art that does not make art present. It is a privation of art, a withholding of the presence of art, which makes the absence of art present. Contemporary art is the lack of art itself, a negative presence of art and the essence of art. Alienated from the art work; it’s a ”priviation of a potentiality that cannot find its reality anywhere. […]” (except in) the form in which privation itself comes into presence. 34

In the above quote contemporary art is understood as art that does not make art present, but rather makes the absence of art present. The presence of privation. The absence of art itself. The example of the poetry by artists can exemplify this. The 'escape' or 'refuge' by artists into publishing poetry can be understood in two ways: either as a logical next step, as a privation without even the pretense of looking

34 Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 64.
and behaving as art. Or, as a more original doing, a process that is less praxis and techne than anything else in the contemporary, and thus closer to poiesis and the presence of art.

What is poiesis, as Agamben uses and defines the term? For Aristotle the poetic act is the act of creation. Plato writes in the Symposium: “any cause that brings into existence something that was not there before is poiesis.” Every time something is brought from nonbeing and concealment “into the light of presence”, there is poetry, pro-duction, poiesis. This is a definition of art as pure doing, “the very name of man’s doing”. It brings something new into existence, creates presence – a new shape. Every art is poetry, production into presence. William Watkin clarifies that all three of the terms poiesis, praxis, and techne make up part of our modern sense of creation: “poiesis as production of presence, praxis as simply doing, and techne as skilled knowing through doing.” For the Greeks, these were all parts of the process of bringing something into presence, aletheia, the unveiling of truth. Watkin continues:

Poiesis is the experience of the production or facilitation of the coming into the light of a truth. Praxis is the physical activity and will necessary to bring this about, although alone making cannot simply will truth. Finally techne is an intermediary state dependent on real skill in pursuit of the truth.

Poiesis then is the moment of revelation, the experience of the light of a truth. But it is not something that happens on its own, it is a form of work, a production. Agamben references Aristotle’s concept of poiesis, pro-duction – it is always an installation into a shape. Taking the step from non-being to being means taking on a form, a shape – because it is from a shape that whatever is produced enters into presence.

Agamben sees a change in the mode of presence of the things produced by man, a change starting with the industrial revolution. He separates between things that come into being by way of aesthetics (poiesis) and things that come into being through techne, products and materials, the craft of art, produced to fulfil bodily desires etc. Art defined as doing is an enunciation of three categories, shape or idea, process or doing and the resulting art or art work. Agamben enunciates these three parts, the idea, the process and the resulting work in way which according to him constitutes the originality of art. “Originality means proximity to the origin.” The work of art remains in a relationship of permanent proximity to its origin, maintaining a particular relationship to it.

35 Aristotle, Poetics, 3-7.
37 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 60.
38 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 68.
39 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 74.
40 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 74.
41 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 74.
42 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 61.
De la Durantaye is helpful in elucidating the meaning of the origin that Agamben wants art to return to. Agamben asks, “What does originality mean?” and answers this question first negatively, arguing that the originality of the work of art is not limited to its being authentic, unique or “different from all others.” The origin in question is not a reference to a point of creation in the past or any past event at all, ”[…] following the conceptions of both Heidegger and Benjamin, origin is not that which is dead and monumentalized in the past, but that which is dynamic and alive in the present.” But the contemporary artist is, in striving for originality, removing him/herself from the common space, and the artist becomes separated from “the common body of cultural material to be transmitted through the work of art.” A living unity between the artist and the public has been lost, the artist and the art works no longer transmit content comprised of a common cultural material. Or, as clarified by de la Durantaye here, according to Agamben art today is no longer tied to human history: “The new status of the artist brought about by the rise of aesthetics and the spread of a conception of art in which common content and common creation are devalued is for Agamben one of the key steps toward our contemporary blindness to “the original structure of the work of art.”

The work of art produced through poiesis, comes into presence with a shape, and also from a shape, what I take to refer to an idea, and it maintains a close proximity to its “formal principle”. In other words, it can only be this very thing, and cannot be easily reproduced, because it is the result of an unrepeatable act of aesthetic creation. The separation then is between things that come into being through techne, things that in their essence and purpose are reproducible. Put another way: only that which is essentially not reproducible in a work of art comprises the actual art. The idea is the art work in a sense. Contemporary art is a privation of art, the movement from shape to process to art work is missing, because the external forces of production are too blatant.

The link to conceptual art is easily made, but also not very rewarding. It becomes a comparison only, linking it to similar gestures. More interesting is to look at how the act – or non-activity – and idea of poetry can be slotted into this discourse, as a practical (and perhaps lazy) way of reclaiming originality in art. The poetic language, the act of producing poetry, contains its own arche in a way, it is its own origin, because the idea itself is not reproducible. The split is also one concerning the commonplace, essentially making anything and everything commonplace something negative for the artist, and artists suddenly striving to be as original as possible, seeking shapes and expressions beyond the common space. No longer bound in the same way to schools and trends. And no longer expressing something that is shared at a basic level by the public in a community. This statement seems naive, both from a contemporary standpoint in 1970 and looking back at art and cultural expressions from today.

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44 De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 35.
45 De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 35.
46 De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 35.
47 De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 36.
While there is always a degree to which artists seek to distinguish themselves through new shapes, and forms and methods, we can nevertheless clearly see trends and groupings, and even the absence of a connection or transmission of common culture in an artwork points towards its contemporary qualities, if negatively. The fact that the content or form does not correspond to a contemporary conflict or question becomes a transmissible message in and of itself. The split in poietic activity is not necessarily as negative an event that Agamben implies. Marina Vishmidt describes this first by asserting that in artistic subjectivity, or rather aesthetic subjectivity, “the subject of labour is transformed into the subject of judgement.” She also provides us with a succinct summation of the question of taste and judgement in art as it is expressed by Agamben, as “collapsing the distinction between the making and the appreciation of art.” We will return to this sentence and its implications in the final chapter.

Artistic production was associated with artistic genius, and defined through the concepts of authenticity and originality, as opposed to technical production identified as something reproducible based on a mold or template. Pop art and the readymade are caught in an uncertain dialectic between artistic and technical production. The readymade is a manufactured object that is fleetingly recast as a creative artistic gesture; pop art is original art, that is made to look like reproducible objects, reproducibility aimed at the sphere of fine art. Duchamp, pop art and the readymade are examples of a muddling of the poietic activity of the artist. These are hybrid forms, a “creative play on the existence of a double status in man's creative activity,” objects transferred from a “technically reproducible and fungible state to one of aesthetic authenticity and uniqueness …”. The readymade is an object from the sphere of technical production, existing according to technics, techne, that is then imbued with the potential of aesthetic authenticity, while a pop art object is a work of art stripped of its aesthetic potential, which paradoxically enters into the sphere and status of an industrial product. This movement and transition from one mode to another is actually impossible according to Agamben, the object never attains presence and “remains enveloped in shadow”, suspended between being and nonbeing. One of the functions of the published poetry by artist-poets, books that are neither artist books nor poetry collections circulated in the literary world, is enacting this suspension. A suspension that also extends to their distribution and function in the art market. These are objects/works created by artists, yet they never attain presence as art works, neither are they freely circulated and distributed online for example, thus suspended between being and non-being art. Crucially, Agamben states that this inability to attain presence is what endows these art works with their enigmatic meaning. The same argument can be made for the use of poetry in art; it is precisely the impossibility for poetry of actually fully becoming

49 Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, 155.
50 Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, 155.
52 Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 63.
54 Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 64.
present, or attaining presence in art, that gives the works of the artist-poets their contemporary attraction and meaning. The poem is without form in the white cube, it takes up little or no space in the gallery, and is not subject to the same judgement of taste as visual art, it flies under the radar of the usual easy categorisations or definitions. It has form in a literary sense, but in an exhibition it is simply the shape of a book, and not one that should be read as an installation or visual work. It is autonomous from these categories, a nothingness rather than a defined thing. Here the concept of privation in relation to these works becomes more clear, described as “an extreme gift of poetry, the most accomplished and charged with meaning, because in it nothingness itself is called into presence”.

Nothingness can be read as both nothing except communicability, and as a withholding of presence, an implicit resistance in and towards art.

In both of Agamben’s examples, the poietic substance of man is brought to a crisis point: “nothing comes into presence if not the privation of a potentiality that cannot find its reality anywhere”. This type of art, art that withholds presence, or rather brings privation into presence, constitute the most extreme form of poiesis. The calling of nothingness into presence can perhaps be clarified as a resistance to the expected presentation or representation, a nothingness in relation to the certain constraints of the intended sphere of the work. To speak about the meaning of this kind of poiesis, to come closer to it, we need to interrogate the work itself, as it is in the work that poiesis actualises its power.

Aristotle gives the character of energeia to the production into presence when it is effected through poiesis. Energeia is usually translated as actual reality, as actuality, in contrast to potentiality. Energeia means being-at-work. Aristotle uses his own term entelechy to indicate the same concept. Entelechy – that which enters into presence and remains in presence, gathering itself, “possesses itself in its own end”.

Energeia is opposed by dynamis, the mode of presence that is not yet at work, that is simply availability and potential, that which “does not yet possess itself in its own shape as its own end”. This can be read as an open work, a work in process, retaining it’s potential for art close to an idea of truth. More pessimistically it can also be read as aimlessness, an aesthetic shape corresponding to the current tastes and judgements, but lacking a connection to truth and the original act of creation. The work that results from poiesis is never simply potential, it is always the production into a self contained shape. The industrial product is not a “work” but precisely a product. Its reproducibility causes it to never fully possess itself in its own end, it is a mould rather than an idea, and remains in a state of potentiality.

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55 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 64.
56 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 64.
57 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 65.
58 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 65.
59 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 65.
But, Agamben asks, is the energetic status of the work of art in aesthetics actually an energetic status? According to him our relationship with art has been reduced to “mere” aesthetic enjoyment (it’s clear that he expects more from art), and that meanwhile the work of art has been changing, imperceptibly. The work of art is deprived of its energetic aspect to make room for it to function as a stimulant of aesthetic sentiment, a support for aesthetic enjoyment. The effort to produce work that is only aesthetically pleasing obscures the work and results in art that is not at-work, not actualised, not present as art in a definitive shape. Here we can point to the poetry published by artists as a possible antidote – the opposite to work made to fit into current ideas of what is visually pleasing, with a focus on text and not image. The paradox is that this work is more non work than work in terms of fine art.

William Watkin approaches the aspects of the literary in Agamben as “a procedure of thinking through making”. The idea of thinking through making seems an apt image for certain kinds of art, and poetry, and is helpful in when linking poetry and philosophy, in a way that goes beyond a gesture through content. The publishing of books of poetry as an artist can certainly be seen as an artistic gesture, a conceptual move. But it can also be read as a poetic gesture after Agamben’s model. Poetic gesture is defined as something inhabiting the space between action (praxis) and production (poiesis):

What characterizes gesture is that in it there is neither production nor enactment, but undertaking and supporting. In other words, gesture opens the sphere of ethos as the most fitting sphere of the human. But in what way is an action undertaken and supported? In what way does a res become res gesta, a simple fact become an event? Varro’s distinction between facere and agere derives, in the final analysis, from Aristotle. In a famous passage from the Nicomachean Ethics, he contrasts them thus: ‘Action [praxis] and production [poiesis] are generically different. For production aims at an end other than itself; but this is impossible in the case of action, because the end is merely to do what is right.’

Catherine Mills defines Agamben’s use of gesture as the sheer communicability of language, “or speech that has nothing to say or express other than the taking place of language itself. And criticism is the mode of knowing that seeks this experience of gesture as pure communicability. As Agamben writes, ‘criticism is the reduction of works to the sphere of pure gesture’” This space of the poetic gesture, between praxis and poiesis, is the same space as that of the hybrid third, defined in the later work Creation and Anarchy by Agamben, and discussed in part 4 of this chapter.

After laying out roughly the same references to originality and shared values as de la Durantaye above, Watkin points to the difficulty of defining value in art today, and defining what is art at all. The value of a work of art today is not how it conforms to a specific model, but rather how it “[…]’
confounds modelling as a cultural process of imposed convention and cliché.”66 There is today a material problem of delineating a work of art, because any marginalia, frame, object or situation that in any way surround the art object can constitute the art object. Watkin describes it as non-purposiveness and lack of finitude: “The frame may become the work or its framing in the museum its poiesis. It would be true to say that the modern art work lacks finitude in almost direct proportion to its attainment of ever new levels of non-purposiveness.”67 Referencing Agamben Watkin points out how reproduction cancels out poiesis as production. An original work of art, here taken in its most basic meaning, is “produced into the light from a proximate and preceding source”68, and as soon as it is reproduced it is situated at an extra remove from the source representing only techne, removed from originality. Which for Agamben is damning critique indeed, since for him closeness to the source to the origin, and to shared values is the essence of meaningful art. We can take a more nuanced view, where an art of nihilistic values, and art inoperable in relation to traditional values, can still be of great interest as carry a different sort of value. This can be a conceptual operation in and of itself, one level above the concerns of Agamben regarding the present crisis in art. Indeed, this has long been a strategy for many artists, a strategy of breaking with tradition is a recurring movement in art history. Watkin argues that this is now the definition of an artist, some kind of breaking with the traditional, and that this can be defined as a different kind of poiesis, artistic desubjectivization.

While in the past traditional values and lack of originality determined greatness as being proximate to the source of poiesis, Ideas held in common, now the artist is defined as the person who makes things that don’t fit the mould but which break with moulding. Thus the artist brings to being the very end of the lasting concept of the artist as subject and this, in a sense, is modern art’s first and most lasting poiesis: artistic desubjectivization or creative self-alienation.69

Today there is no general consensus regarding what constitutes a work of art, and we value art that does not conform to ideas or models for what art should be. Watkin continues describing the unlimited nature of art with precision and as a state requiring specific tools of analysis and definition to grasp: “Finally, material innovations in the performativity, virtuality, and conceptuality of art works mean it is now often impossible to determine the actual, objective, or material (even temporal) limits of a work of art.”70 Through the lens of Agamben’s poiesis, and with poiesis as a tool, Watkin approaches the question used here to clarify the usefulness of an aesthetic framework derived from Agamben’s writing – are these printed works of poetry art, and how do we define that? Watkin uses the poem Warrant by Charles Bernstein as an example of this state of uncertainty surrounding the art object, stating: “I would argue first that the poem is art and second that its art status comes from its poiesis, the process of a coming into being of an idea about art as object within the market place, law, aesthetic convention, and

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66 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 78.
67 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 78.
68 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 84.
69 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 85.
70 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 78.
ontology. ” Watkin, through Agamben’s use of poiesis, comes to the conclusion that poetry – the poem – is art and that it is so because of its place within the art market, as an object that conforms to the market place and ontology. In fact the very opposite conclusion can be reached here concerning the poetry of the artist-poet, namely that it is art because of its resistance to the art market, aesthetic convention and ontology, but it status as art comes from its poiesis still. Poiesis, a concept which we need according to Watkin to grasp art and what makes it art: “If modern and future art criticism and creation is based on a process of aesthetic judgement on non-purposive non-objectal, illimited art things such as “Warrant,” then we need poiesis if only to keep hold of art.” Reformulated for this thesis we need poieis as a concept connecting us to the act of creation in order to make statements on art where the presence of both the work and the content are hard to define at first glance. I would argue that this poetry is purely content in a sense, the shape of an idea, perhaps more so in the hands of artists, since they are not primarily (or at all) concerned with exploring the medium, but with expressing their artistic ideas. But simultaneously it is simply the creation of communication, an enactment of language as sheer communicability, unweighted by action or the interactions of taste. As Agamben states in The Man without Content: “The central experience of poiesis, pro-duction into presence, is replaced by the question of the “how,” that is, of the process through which the object is produced.” This is reversed in the act of presenting printed poetry as the art work or artistic work. Nobody asks how it was produced, it is often not really an object in the sense of an art work, but simply a book. What is interesting in it is its content, the presence it presents. Or rather the presence of an absence that is evoked by it. Catherine Mills performs a slightly different reading of MWC, offering a perspective that ultimately focuses on a more extreme form of negativity, the self-annihilating nothing. In her reading, what Agamben stresses is how the immediate unity of artist and material has been broken, mostly owning to the rise of aesthetic judgement. In her discussion on this Mills underscores how the artist as the man without out content leads to a radical split in the consciousness of the artist as discussed previously, but also how that split corresponds to a split within the spectator. The artist is trying to find “content in what is mere form”, and this is why art appears as a “self-annihilating nothing”, a negation that negates itself, but, Mills writes, “[…] this does not mean that art ends or dies as such; rather, art endlessly ‘survives beyond itself’, but only in a nihilistic terra aesthetica of empty forms and contents.” In light of this nihilistic essence of contemporary art, Mills sees Agamben trying to bring forth a more basic understanding of art. Which brings Mills to the concept of poiesis. Mills reading omits the importance of privation, thus closing the way to the development of the term into the realm of potentiality in Agamben’s later writing. This self-annihilating nothing is Agamben’s rather harsh judgment of contemporary art (in

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71 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 79.
72 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 79.
73 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 70.
74 Mills, The Philosophy of Agamben, 55.
75 Mills, The Philosophy of Agamben, 55.
1970, with much the same views in the 2017 book *Creation and Anarchy*, but it is also the playing field of art, available as a tool put to use as a privation of art; an art that does nothing. This non-being is evolved into actualising in some of Agamben’s subsequent writing, into potential-for, and potential for non-doing.

2. Potentiality

Defining the centrality of the term potentiality in Agamben’s writings on art and aesthetics, Catherine Mills observes:

> Its destruction offers something of the greatest importance for constructions to come: it renders visible the “fundamental architectural problem” of aesthetics, and reveals for a luminous instant what Agamben sees as art’s “original project” a project whose name, in his books and essays to come, becomes “potentiality.”

In the book *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, the idea of privation in art evolves and is less about non-being and more about materiality and actualising. The question is no longer asked in terms of doing, but defined as having the faculty and knowledge to do. The potential doing. What is it to be able to do art, to have the faculty to do art.

In *Potentialities*, Agamben defines the artist in relation to potentiality, “in this sense, we say of the architect that he or she has the potential to build, of the poet that he or she has the potential to write poems,” a passage Watkin describes as meaning that the actual definition of a poetic being is someone in possession of a faculty and not using it. “Thus the architect is potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build, the poet the potential to not-write poems” The true definition of potentiality is the presence of an absence, potential inaction, non-invention, a refusal to perform. In relation to this, the publishing of poems as an artist can be read as a documentation of this refusal, this absence; or perhaps a presentation of the presence of a potential to make art, the artist documenting their potential to not-make art. This can be seen in light of the question of fulfilling potential and desubjectivisation broadly summarised by William Watkin, which also connects to the bygone measure of art against nature, and arts being through negation, i.e. judged against other art: “The poet here, as indeed all makers are, is defined in terms of being through negation or desubjectivization. Akhmatova is a poet at the moment of her not-yet-having-written and, in an odd way she is less of a poet when she is fulfilling her potential and writing poems.” Thus the artist publishing poems is not a poet, but rather even more an artist, present as an artist, but not fulfilling the presence of actual artworks. For our

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76 De la Durantaye, Giorgio Agamben, 52.
77 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 179.
78 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 64.
80 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 64.
purposes we might further say that Broodthaers, whom we will discuss more in depth in the next chapter, defines himself as the poet he always wanted to be, and in many ways remained, through making art instead and most importantly through his potential to not write poems. He is more of a poet when he is a producing artist. He carries the potential for writing poetry, but never actualises it, an act of resistance towards the poietic act.

In the article ‘Agamben: Aesthetics, Potentiality, and Life’ Claire Colebrook offers a reading of Agamben’s aesthetics that corresponds well with our interests here. Summing up Agamben’s views on potentiality, which to her is the key concept in his work, she argues that the work of art is for Agamben the one thing that should disclose a pure potentiality, the potentiality of possible other worlds and modes of the human. For Colebrook any approach to art in Agamben’s philosophy is political, art releases us from a politics and an ontology of substance, to “a politics of potentiality: a future of open, unimpeded becoming.” Her reading of Agamben stretches towards the utopian at times: “Art should be the revelation of pure potentiality, not an object for consumption and certainly not a “product” detached from the revelation of the open.” Its hard to picture what this would look like as a realised art work. Perhaps poetry, in this sense, is closer to the historically previous experience of art Agamben refers to, an experience where the artist or maker of art wasn’t forced to impose form on a specific material, where instead art “unfolded from a common ‘dwelling’ in the world.” Agamben describes how historically the art work held no value in itself: In these epochs, the subjectivity of the artist was identified so immediately with his material – which constituted, not only for him but also for his fellow men, the innermost truth of consciousness – that it would have appeared inconceivable to speak about art as having value in itself. At this point it’s useful to link the concept of potentiality with the idea of inactivity in Agamben’s thinking. The act of producing poetry as an artist is a way of making art inoperable at the same time as reinforcing the poetic act of creation: “What in fact is a poem if not a linguistic operation which renders language inoperative by de-activating its communicative and informative functions in order to open it to a new possible use?” Using the same process and taking it a step further, producing poetry as an artist is a way of making art inoperable and opening it up to new possible use, focusing the potential of art, through inactivity in the actual making of visual art.

In the short text ‘Art, Inactivity, Politics’ Agamben reformulates Aristotle’s idea that inactivity is a component part of humanity. Aristotle suggests that inactivity is man’s possible goal:

As for the flute-player, the sculptor and every craftsman, and, in general, for all those who have work (ergon) and an activity (praxis), good seems to reside in this work, so it should also be for man as such, given that for him it would be like work. Or should one say that for the carpenter and the

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81 Colebrook, ‘Agamben,’ 108.
82 Colebrook, ‘Agamben,’ 110.
83 Colebrook, ‘Agamben,’ 110.
84 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 33.
85 Agamben, ‘Art, Inactivity, Politics,’ 140.
Stripped of our professional roles, man is born without work. Speaking with Agamben then, these works can be seen as potentialities, potentially fine art, not yet actualised, their value in their potential and expression of *poiesis*. The ‘artist-poet’ embodies a specific type of inactivity, where they are inactive as artists, (and so more artists), but actualise their creative impulse through poetry, which they then render inoperable as poetry by presenting it in a visual art context. In a lecture from 2014 Agamben reiterates his point from ‘Art, Inactivity, Politics’, and names poetry the foremost operation in making human work inoperative, poetry as an instrument for undoing the usual functions of language and communication: “And perhaps the most appropriate paradigm for this operation, this activity which consists in making inoperative all human work, is poetry itself. Because what is poetry if not an operation in language and on language that deactivates and renders inoperative the usual communication and information functions of language, in order to open it to a new possible use?”

The important part here is how making work inoperative opens it up to new use, a thought which can be transposed to ‘hybrid’ art, art that evades categorisation and eschews the production of objects for the market. They can not be used as aesthetic objects in and of themselves, as with our main example in this thesis, the poetry written by artists. Tracing the importance of activity and inactivity for the concept of potential, Alex Murray helps us by situating inoperativity in terms of action and inaction:

> The proliferation of meanings all point to a tension between activity and passivity, one that is key for Agamben. It would seem that in aligning desoeuvrement with inoperativity he is pointing to the term’s ambiguity, that it has the potential for both action and inaction.

Viewing the writing of poetry as a form of inaction in the context of working as an artist, and also, as we will see in the case of Broodthaers for example, a resistance to the desire to function in the art market. I would argue that this is precisely the space occupied by the works under investigation in this thesis. They are undoubtedly the result of actual work, but they are also evidence of a certain withdrawal, they are examples of creation and production that could have been rendered into visual work, or versions of visual works that are rendered (mostly) inactive visually, instead functioning “only” as poetry. But as a literary commodity, and perhaps partly as poetry as well, they are for the most part inactive, inoperable, since they are not circulated among other poetry, not part of a literary context, but rather only accessible to people who seek them out.

A last point on potentiality and writing. Elisabeth Balskus, writing on potentiality in the writings of Agamben, states that the idea of “impotentiality giving itself up to a realised action is a theme frequented in Agamben’s writing. For example, Agamben believes that perfect writing does not come from the desire to write any thing in particular, but ”from an impotence that turns back on itself

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and in this way comes to itself as a pure act."\textsuperscript{89,90} I would like to apply this to the case of artist-poetry at hand in this thesis. The impotence, staged or actual, in relation to the production of contemporary art, can turn back on itself and result in a different expression, closer to a pure act, perhaps reduced to the act of creation as we will see in part 4 of this chapter. From a meta-perspective it is also interesting to note the recurring closeness of the themes of potentiality and writing, as it can be used analogous to the movement performed by artists, from fine art to poetry, or taking poetry into the sphere of art:

Thanks to this potentiality to not-think, thought can turn back to itself (to its pure potentiality) and be, at its apex, the thought of thought. What it thinks here, however, is not an object, a being-in-act, but that layer of wax, that \textit{rassum tabulae} that is nothing but its own passivity, its own pure potentiality (to not-think): In the potentiality that thinks itself, action and passion coincide and the writing tablet writes by itself or, rather, writes its own passivity.\textsuperscript{91}

3. Interlude: Poetry & Philosophy

The philosophy of Agamben is especially well suited to an investigation in the intersection between poetry and art (and philosophy), mainly because poetry is one of his recurring themes, often used to exemplify and clarify his theories. Summing up Agamben's views on poetry and philosophy Catherine Mills states that Agamben rejects any simple opposition between the two, never valuing one over the other, and ultimately arguing for synthesis of poetry and philosophy, a synthesis which gives rise to an understanding of “critique” as a particular way of knowing.\textsuperscript{92} Both poetry and philosophy are strategies then for understanding the world, that compliment one-another. William Watkin sees the poetry and philosophy in Agamben as two disciplines with a common goal, seeking an indifferent experience of language, language as such before its separation into voice and language. According to Watkin they are neither on their own able to reach such an experience, “[…] resorting always to negative constructions of language as unattainability, nothingness, unspeakability, and so on.”\textsuperscript{93}

Reaching back to the moment when language was language as such, undivided between voice and language, there is a split between poetry and philosophy, where poetry is the voice and philosophy the language. In an argument similar to the one regarding art in \textit{MWC}, Agamben traces the parallel split between poetry and philosophy in the book \textit{Stanzas}. In what is at its core a continuation of the concept of potentiality, the book investigates the ramifications if this split. Compared to his argument concerning art, the split or scission here has inverted cause and effect. It is caused by a forgetfulness, ultimately stemming from the origin of our culture, and leads in extension to the practice of criticism. The inverse then of the split in art, caused by criticism/judgements of taste. Nevertheless, poetry and

\textsuperscript{89} Agamben, \textit{The Coming Community}, 36.
\textsuperscript{90} Balskus, ‘Examining Potentiality in the Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben,’ 164.
\textsuperscript{91} Agamben, \textit{The Coming Community}, 36.
\textsuperscript{92} Mills, \textit{The Philosophy of Agamben}, 35.
\textsuperscript{93} Watkin, \textit{The Literary Agamben}, 46.
philosophy remain intrinsically linked. They fulfil the absent conditions of the other. For Agamben philosophy and poetry must confront their negative symbiosis:

[…] the scission of the word is construed to mean that poetry possesses its object without knowing it, while philosophy knows its object without possessing it. In the West, the word is thus divided between a word that is unaware, as if fallen from the sky, and enjoys the object of knowledge by representing it in beautiful form, and a word that has all seriousness and consciousness for itself but does not enjoy its object because it does not know how to represent it.94

The use of poetry, whether sincerely or as a gesture – or both – can be seen as a hybrid position between poetry and philosophy. The poetry collection in the gallery at least conceptually offers the possession of the object of knowledge, which is the central problem as Agamben points out:

The split between poetry and philosophy testifies to the impossibility, for Western culture, of fully possessing the object of knowledge (for the problem of knowledge is a problem of possession, and every problem of possession is a problem of enjoyment, that is, of language).95

Seen through this lens and in this immediate context, the operation that poetry as art performs is one of merging philosophy with poetry, object with language, through and within contemporary art. The object is the language. Watkin points to a problem shared by poetic and philosophical thinking. They seem to share an irresolvable internal contradiction between potentiality and actuality, between universal truth and communicability: “Poetry is the impossible economy between philosophy as dianoia or as universal truth irrespective of its mode of communication, and poetry as poiesis or material singularity that communicates nothing but communicability as such.”96 The poem and the philosophical text both come to being at the moment of a productive negation. Presenting poetry as an artist places the work precisely in this impossible economy, a productive negation of visual art, with the conceptual gesture of communicating communicability become the leading tendency.

4. The Act of Creation

In the book Anarchy and Creation, published in Italian in 2017, aspects of the thoughts outlined through this theory chapter, some of which are almost 50 years old, are re-summarised by Agamben, and given a slight reworking. The question of what exactly constitutes a work of art is the focus of the first chapter. In Agamben’s view contemporary art is in a decisive state of crisis, still, leading it to stray from the artistic production of artworks, a crisis “[…] in which ‘performance’ and the creative or conceptual activity of the artist tend more and more to take the place of what we were accustomed to consider as a ‘work’.”97 I differ in my view on this, but his terminology is useful. What he terms crisis

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94 Agamben, Stanzas, xvii.
95 Agamben, Stanzas, xvii.
96 Watkin, ‘Agamben and the Poetics of Indifference,’ 355.
97 Agamben, Creation and Anarchy, 3.
can be seen equally as opportunity, and a way of breaking with the stagnation of an increasingly market and museum-driven art world. He goes on to describe how art today often presents itself as an activity without a work, albeit still one with a price, a state possible only because “the being-work of the work of art has remained unthought.”

This is the art as lived life as described by Boris Groys, where the artist lives the life of the poet, and the resulting poetry collection functions as documentation.

In the chapter ‘What is the Act of Creation?’ Agamben develops the thoughts contained in a lecture by Deleuze with the same title, where the act of creation is defined as an act of resistance. Here it is useful to look firstly at Agamben’s use of the word creation, which he claims a certain uneasiness for, preferring the term the poetic act, which lacks any connection and connotations to theology and godlike creation, and instead derives from *poiesis* and *poiein*, “to produce”. It is doubly important in the context of this thesis to be attentive to the meaning of these words, as we can see a clear connection between poiein, to produce, and *poiesis*, poetry, what can be read as the pure creative act of poetry. Thus the resistance in the act of creation – the presence of an absence of art with the earlier words of Agamben – is the resistance to *praxis*, a resistance to the emptiness of contemporary art through the written word, *poiesis* through and in poetry. Ekin Erkan, in an article on the book *Creation and Anarchy*, defines this as a development of “the categorical dialectic between “creation,” a marker of potential, and resistance, or impotential.” Erkan interprets the text as one where art can function as ”the nexus of liberation”, supported by this quote from Agamben: “In each act of creation there is something that resists and opposes expression.”

In the lecture to which Agamben responds, Deleuze specifies that the act of creation is at its core a liberation of potential. To which Agamben adds that a potential liberated by the act of creation must be a potential internal to the act itself, in the same way as the resistance must be internal to the act itself. To elucidate this thought he returns to the concepts and terminology of MWC: potential (*dynamis*), act (*energeia*) and privation, all from Aristotle. Referring again to Aristotle’s distinction between making (*poiesis*), which aims at an external end —the production of work, and acting (*praxis*), which has its own end in itself, Agamben situates large parts of contemporary art in-between these two. A hybrid third, “in which the action itself claims to present itself as a work.” This is partly true for the poetry written by artist, if not for the fact that these work actually are poetry. They take place as a hybrid third, at the same time as they are pure *poiesis*, a creation of a work of art outside of the artist. This third space read as the same “third” as the one pointed out by de la Durantaye in this quote, defining it as a space shared by poetry and philosophy, an elusive common space:

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98 Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 3.
100 Erkan, ‘Technology as the God-Command,’ 202.
102 Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 5.
Attempts to chart this *terra incognita* of the space common to word and image, the space of poetic phantasm and philosophical thought, are attempts to map a common space, a space that Agamben calls "third" in one of the essays because it does not simply correspond to subject or object, does not simply align itself with potentiality or actuality, and is thereby the truly common space of poetry and philosophy.¹⁰³

The above describes inoperativity in relation to potential and the act of creation, not idleness or inertia but a *praxis* or a potential of a special kind, maintaining itself in relation to its own inoperativity. The artist-poet displays what Agamben calls the specific ambivalence of every human potential, which in its original structure always maintains a relationship with its own privation, and is always the potential to be and not to be, to do and not to do. This is the essence of potential, and this is what is on display in poetry presented as art, the potential to do art and not to do art, expressed through the original medium of man’s poetic creation – poetry. Paradoxically it is by not doing or making art, but staying, passively, within the process of art’s doing that these works attain presence and make Art present. In the final chapter we will return to this reticence towards expression and potential, the resistance it exemplifies and how this can point to the fulfilment of personal happiness for the artist, through the absence of work.

¹⁰³ De la Durantaye, Giorgio Agamben, 78.
Chapter 2 – Poetry in Art

1. Broodthaers or Poet Turned Artist

Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1976) was a Belgian artist, poet and filmmaker. At age forty he announced that his career as a poet was over and began working as an artist. He is often mentioned as a founder of institutional critique, and created a large amount of objects, installations, books, films and exhibitions, and as Rachel Haidu describes it: “[…] a ‘fictive’ museum of modern art that evolved from an installation in his own home to a massive exhibition of over three hundred works representing eagles.”

Much of his work investigates language and the uses of words. In the first part of this chapter I will look at some of the ways in which Marcel Broodthaers functions as a predecessor to the contemporary “artist-poet”, and how his work can be looked at and read. The choice of Broodthaers will be clear in the following pages: many of his gestures are now commonplace, to the point of being reversed instead, but this section could have included different artists and writers. Etel Adnan for example brings together many of the qualities that are present in the artist-poet, but ultimately she is a painter and poet, her paintings circulate on the art market and her poetry in the literary world. Although they inform and strengthen each other they are functionally separate practices.

Kurt Schwitters is in a spiritual sense a precedent also, but is like Etel Adnan more of an artist and a poet, not an artist-poet; and the combinations of the two in his works never actually reach farther across the categories than they did for some of his contemporaries. What he does show is the propensity for wordplay that is today often seen in the practice of the artist-poets we will be looking more closely at.

Broodthaers is a common reference point in discussions of text and poetry today in the art world. In an article on sincerity in poetry and art, written for the poetry themed issue 164 of Frieze magazine, Matthew Rana begins with a quote from Broodthaers:

'I, too, wondered whether I couldn’t sell something and succeed in life,’ he declared in the invitation to his first exhibition. 'I had, for quite a little while, been good for nothing. I am nearly 40 years old […] The idea of inventing something insincere finally crossed my mind and I set to work at once.’ Broodthaers’s rhetoric doesn’t just suggest visual art’s compromised status, sold as a commodity or an instrument of the culture industry or institutions of state. It also implicitly elevates poetry as neither false nor hypocritical – an invention of the utmost integrity. Unlike artists, poets don’t (or can’t) sell out.

104 Haidu, The Absence of Work, Cover text.
105 Rana, ’In the Company of Flesh and Blood’.
This idea is part of the importance of Broodthaers, the image of him in resistance to both the art world and the literary world of poetry, and presents a possible reading of the poetry written by artists today – a way of not selling out, or perhaps even keeping the work and the creative act intimate and personal, a way of keeping their integrity and perhaps as a result keeping the joy in artistic practice.

The most obvious common denominator in Broodthaers work is language, which is something he shares with the more contemporary artists whose work is investigated later in this thesis. Broodthaers works form a solid historical starting point, and can act as a testing ground for engaging philosophically with the artist-poet through Agamben. From Broodthaers we can also sketch the shape of an expressive circular motion in the types of art we will be reading and looking at. From books of poetry buried in plaster, unreadable and reduced to visual gesture, to artists using exhibitions to produce and publish books of poetry. Due to limitations of space and scope, I will restrict this thesis engagement with Broodthaers to his first and last work as an artist, as illustrative examples.

In 1964 Broodthaers abandoned his career as a poet, and symbolically incorporated the remaining copies of his book *Pense-Bête* into a sculpture shown at the Galerie Saint-Laurentin in Brussels. The books are partially still wrapped in paper, and inserted into a base of plaster that cover part of the lower half of the books. By setting the books in plaster he remained a poet through his artistic career. In a text for the catalogue of Broodthaers most recent large scale retrospective, Sam Sackeroff describes Broodthaers practice: “[…] he framed his early career in the visual arts not as a turning away from poetry but as an effort to reinvent its parameters and extend its reach.”

This view of the work as an extension of the reach of poetry is attractive. Rachel Haidu offers an opposing view: “Unreadable, the books are both sullied and fixed forever in this alien situation. A memory of poetry’s signified by a reminder that is constitutively something other than – or after – poetry.” In other words, rather than something dynamic and active, this is a work that approaches art and poetry as something irreconcilably different. In view of Broodthaers lifelong artistic practice constantly involving and evolving language and poetry in visual art this can be hard to reconcile, but it shows us how the mere inclusion of poetry in visual art can be an act of resistance and of making art inoperable.

Sam Sackeroff writes: “These ‘literary exhibitions’ marked a fundamental breakthrough in which Broodthaers transformed poetic text into something that could be pushed past the page into the physical space of the gallery and beyond.” As we will see, this is no longer an interest for the artist-poets of today. The poetic text no longer needs to be pushed into the physical gallery itself, but rather removed from it, or even used to as a promotional and or financial tool; to bring a larger audience to your shows. Or more optimistically, it is now a model for art, rather than a medium in art. Perhaps because Broodthaers was so successful, or perhaps because the art sphere and art market is more receptive today to simultaneously more subtle and more concrete gestures.

Taking a more encompassing view of this practice of using poetic text as a physical element, Sven Lütticken writes in the book *Secret Publicity*:

Broodthaers oeuvre implies that the answer for art and art criticism to the erosion of traditional codes and skills does not lie in frenetic attempts at defining areas of competence, but in reflexive consumerism, in the use of contemporary art as that part of spectacle in which anything may be imported and held up to scrutiny.\(^{109}\)

In this view the use of poetry as such is inconsequential, it is simply reflective of a creative practice where anything in the world can be used as content and or form. But taking into account Broodthaers own statements about his works, it seems more productive to look at them through Agamben. They can then be expressed as a privation of art, or inoperative art works, while also demonstrating Broodthaers' exemplifying function in relation to the theoretical framework of Agamben, and the applicability of the same. Exploring the limit between object and image, in 1968 Broodthaers produced plastic plaques entitled 'Industrial Poems'. Birgit Pelzer quotes Broodthaers's own description of them: “[…][A]ccording to their mechanical production they seem to deny their status as art objects, or rather I should say, they tend to prove art and its reality by means of 'negativity'.”\(^{110}\) Here Broodthaers himself situate his works in the sphere of art that enacts the privation of art, where 'nothingness itself is called into presence'. Artworks that function as resistance to art. This is also emphasised in an article by art historian Sven Beckstette, who stresses how one of the central gestures of the work 'Pense-bête' is its rendering unreadable and inaccessible the individual books included in it.\(^{111}\) He quotes Petra Metz who points out that a sculpture as an obstruction to reading is a paradoxical constellation, expressing a visible withdrawal that gives new meaning to the book:

Displaying it in a gallery offers the opportunity to place the book, as a traditional medium, in a different context. By fixing the book, Broodthaers withdraws the text from view, while on the other hand attracting renewed attention to it by presenting it on a plinth. At the same time, the viewer still has the possibility to gain access to the book – but to do so, he or she would have to destroy the work of art.\(^{112}\)

Firstly this quote points to the possibility of reading Broodthaers work as a subtle call for the destruction of art, a call that is echoed by Agamben, if not straightforwardly so at least implicitly. This destruction is a destruction that can be simply a resistance, a making the art inoperative in relation to the existing art market. The withdrawal of the text from view is also interesting, because in comparison to the artist-poets we will turn to as examples in later chapters, this is the opposite gesture. Today the artist engaged with poetry sees no reason to withdraw the text, but rather separates the poetry spatially and sometimes temporally from the objects and form, from the visual content. Beckstette views the move from poetry to art, like the one made by Broodthaers, as almost a typical one, and lists several

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\(^{109}\) Lütticken, *Secret Publicity*, 12.

\(^{110}\) Pelzer, 'Marcel Broodthaers: The Place of the Subject,' 193.

\(^{111}\) Beckstette, 'Exit from the Book,' 124.

\(^{112}\) Beckstette, 'Exit from the Book,' 124.
artists with roots in experimental poetry; Ian Hamilton Finlay, Öyvind Fahlström, Dan Graham, Carl Andre, Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman for example. What they have in common are influences from Concrete Poetry which are then applied to space, abandoning the book and transposing the poetry to the white walls of the gallery space. Once again this is tracing a movement from the poetry to visual work, from the book to the gallery space, a movement that is reversed in the practice of the ‘artist-poet’.

In an essay from 2016 Isabelle Graw presents six theses on Broodthaers contemporary relevance, framing and emphasising his identity switch from poet to artist, and the significance of a staging of subjectivity in his work. Graw also poses a question that connects Broodthaers with the present day and shows his relevance to this thesis:

[...] what has made the “artist poet” model so attractive in recent years, and what are its downsides? [...] the poetic procedure can be a form of resistance to the instrumentalist yearning for disambiguation, especially since it opposes the general tendency to press art into the service of communicating certain messages and meanings.

In this view, as this thesis also examines though the use of Agamben’s terminology, the content of the poetic work in visual art is of less importance than the mere fact of it being poetry in the gallery space, its very existence is the point. She goes on to connect his work to contemporary artists working with poetry today:

Further, “poetry” is still associated with a purer form of art, one less compromised by market circumstances – even if, as Broodthaers never tired of highlighting, the opposite is actually true. On the one hand, his œuvre points how there was no money in volumes of poetry, which is why he demonstratively embedded his published poems in plaster (“Pense-Bête”, 1964), making them largely illegible. On the other hand, “Pense-Bête” was a way of transforming his poetical writing into a sculptural object, a unique object with obvious market potential. We encounter similar efforts today, as in the works of artist-poets who, like Karl Holmqvist or Anne Imhof, translate their poems or handwritten notes into marketable singular pictures.

The intentional and ironic blurring of the line between work and publicity that Broodthaers performed is in a way mirrored and updated in the works of many post-conceptual poets, as well as in the poetry of artists. The presence of poetry in an art exhibition many times means a conspicuous absence of art, the viewer is deprived of the ‘show’, the visual promise. In an 1987 issue of the magazine October, devoted wholly to Broodthaers, Dieter Schwarz writes about Broodthaers early work. In the article Schwarz effectively describes Broodthaers practice as one that does not come into being, in the terminology of Agamben we could describe it as a potential turned towards nothingness; a negative presence, a shadow of being-at-work:

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113 Beckstette, ‘Exit from the Book,’ 124.
114 Graw, ‘The Poet’s Seduction’.
115 Graw, ‘The Poet’s Seduction,’ 68.
117 Agamben, The Man Without Content, 67.
The medium that Broodthaers seems to develop for this first stage is, then, that of a rhetoric that will deprive us of our certainty of being able to verify a statement's truth. If traditional rhetoric, the rhetoric of presence, has always been the art of convincing, Broodthaers's rhetoric is that of an implosive absence.\(^{118}\)

This is a powerful image, but one that can be mediated by Graw, who points out how the commercial aspect was always present, and toyed with, in Broodthaers work. He was always conscious of the poem as a commodity:

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\ldots \text{the poem, in Broodthaers' work, has usually broken free from the book's pages in order to metamorphose into a product and, by extension, a commodity. For Broodthaers, poetry is no longer an art form exempt from the structures of commercial exploitation -- if it ever was.}\(^{119}\)
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In the works that exemplify our examination of Agamben's aesthetics, and which we test its usefulness against -- published books of poetry by Karl Holmqvist, Karl Larsson and Hanne Lippard being the primary examples -- the poetic as abstraction and essential, the idea as an act of creation, but more importantly poetry as such, is returned from the exhibition space, from the white cube, to the printed book. The praxis is reduced to a minimum, and the poiesis of the work reinforced, underlined, an absence of art, whilst performing a gesture that puts the work into the category of the hybrid third in Agamben's terminology -- pure poiesis, a work of art outside of the artist. Some possible interpretations of this in relation to the commodification of art and poetry will be presented in the third part of this chapter.

In “Salle Blanche” (1975), Broodthaers final work, he recreated his own room to scale, as a monolithic sculpture, decorating the stark walls with terms from art and theory, and thus reversing his earlier claim to displace poetry from the ivory tower. Felix Bernstein describes this as placing the poetic directly within the museum, within this perfectly petit bourgeois ground floor where words float.\(^{120}\) In her book on Broodthaers, The Absence of Work, Rachel Haidu describes this as language re-represented as its own absence:

Instead of providing us with the objects, concepts and agents of the art world, Broodthaers provides us with their names, which we can do no more than read off. …[[Salle Blanche]] … anchors itself in absence – the absence of referents for each substantive […]\(^{121}\)

In the terminology of Agamben this is potentiality: the presence of an absence, potential inaction, as well as an example of the privation of art, calling nothingness into presence through poetry. It carries the potential for being both art and poetry, but in the end withholds both, leaving us with the presence of an absence. Language re-represented as its own absence is a precursor, a first step towards the gesture

\(^{118}\) Schwartz, “'Look! Books in Plaster!': On the First Phase of the Work of Marcel Broodthaers,' 66.
\(^{119}\) Graw, 'The Poet's Seduction,' 64.
\(^{120}\) Bernstein, 'The Irreproachable Essay'.
\(^{121}\) Haidu, The Absence of Work, 233.
of poetry presented as art, showing the relevancy of Broodthaers in the context of interpreting these works through Agamben’s aesthetics.

I would argue that this is art bringing the poetry, as it is, into the exhibition space, not illegible, but still as a work of art. This gesture brings us to *The Complete Poem* by The Bernadette Corporation.

2. Bernadette Corporation

Bernadette Corporation is a New York-and Paris based collective founded in 1994, “with the premise that a corporation was ‘the perfect alibi for not having to fix an identity.’” They work on the borders between fashion and art, often inspired by the situationists, producing films, performances, exhibitions and books. If Broodthaers final gesture was to bring poetry into the exhibition space and present it as a work of art, Bernadette Corporation took the next logical step, at least in the sense of market economy, and presented the poetry in the gallery space, as objects for sale, priced accordingly. The shift in visual arts relationship with poetry can be seen clearly through the lens of The Bernadette Corporation and their work *The Complete Poem* from 2009, originally shown at the Gallery Greene Naftali and later published as a book. *The Complete Poem* stages the sometime antagonism between art and writing. Described in the press release as an “original, good-looking epic poem for New York” installed with photographic images from a fashion shoot. The press release continues with a ready interpretation of the exhibition as a display of two modes of production; the work of writing and the work of modeling:

The models labor over a young look for our times. The writing manufactures language in poetic form. Together they engage the traditional relationship of conceptual surfaces that hold photo series as sociological evidence and sheets of paper as evidence of intellectual expenditure. The poem-as-art object proposes a realistic relationship to its commodity status. It is less concerned with offering dematerialized relief for market-driven culture than with learning how to stand in the space of the commodity as a poem.

This bears a close resemblance to the operation performed by Broodthaers, but in a more contemporary setting, fashion models instead of word image play. In some ways it is the exact same gesture as Broodthaers performed many times, but perhaps enough time had passed for it to become interesting again.

Chris Kraus remarks how the exhibition *The Complete Poem* insists on poetry as art, a laudable gesture and belief. Reading her review/analysis of the exhibition provides a stark contrast to the reception of poetry in art contexts today and in the last years or so: “and they have exhibited photographs of androgynous models – with their interchangeable faces – alongside a long lyric poem, arguably the essential art form of undiluted subjectivity (*The Complete Poem*, 2009).” According to

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Kraus, the role of the writer in the art world today is to define and ascribe value to works of art, while the value of the writers own work is very low. As Tracy Rosenthal writes, “writing produces value, but is devalued itself.” Kraus herself is more crass: “It offers a badly paid livelihood.” Apart from the aspects of writing, art and commodities, *The Complete Poem* is open to the terminology of Agamben’s aesthetics. In an interview with Jim Fletcher, a member of Bernadette Corporation, we see reflections and illuminations of the role of *poiesis*, here simply as doing poetry and poetry’s potential (in art):

**What about The Complete Poem?**
The Complete Poem is at a later point in the timeline. The text benefited from a focused energy of composition that was a kind of modeled warfare of defined elements.

**There were only 4 people working on that one, right? That’s a lot less than Reena Spaulings. You could get into an argument.**
You could argue in the writing. Some of the writing forms we devised were rather exigent—it was hard work. Plus you could cut or add…it was complex. I love that because it gets you out of a lot of the problems of being “the poet.” In the gallery, people would sometimes ask “is this a real poem?” Which is good! It’s good if something can have the possibility of not being real. Often when searching for the author(s), I naturally resort to the photographs. This poem is something that in its finished form exists in space, and includes images.

**What were the goals when writing The Complete Poem?**
Everybody had their own goals. The poem itself had its own goal. One of the goals that we may have sort of shared was… you know, poetry can be so great, but it can also be really awful. We had gotten to a point in our life where it’s like, we have to go to war. When it comes to poetry or something like that you’ve got to ask yourself: what’s good about it? What’s the problem with it? Go for what’s great. I think a big problem with poetry now is the poet. It wasn’t always, but now, it’s a problem, man, one of the things that ruins the thing is the poet. ‘Cause his name is always gonna be there either at the top or at the bottom or in the table of contents, but why? For his benefit? I mean, who’s it for at this point? And so, here was a way, it’s not like you’re not taking responsibility for it, but honestly the author is someone else. The author is not dead, but the author is someone else. The poem has its own reasons. The reader, too, has their own reasons for being there.

**So it’s like part of it is like breaking down what defines poetry?**
Well, it wasn’t about deconstruction. It was trying to do the best. It’s important. It’s important to us. It’s like music, it’s kick-ass! It’s the best thing. So do it.

“The poem itself had its own goal”, which through Agamben reads as the poem was first and foremost the idea in and of itself, not shaped by either *techne* or *praxis*, but by the *poiesis*. The writing of a poem was not an act of including poetry into the craft and creation of art, but an act of resistance to art, through creation. The resistance inherent in the privation of art, and the resistance inherent in the creation itself, as discussed in Chapter 1 Part 4. The gesture of the author being someone else, or not readily identified, is a breaking with the artists as subject, especially since they are performing a gesture as poets. This movement can be identified as the one described by William Watkin, as he in turn describes the possibilities springing from the crisis in art Agamben assumes:

While in the past traditional values and lack of originality determined greatness as being proximate to the source of *poiesis*, Ideas held in common, now the artist is defined as the person who makes things that don’t fit the mould but which break with moulding. Thus the artist brings to being the

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127 Fletcher, Jim Fletcher.
very end of the lasting concept of the artist as subject and this, in a sense, is modern art’s first and most lasting poiesis: artistic desubjectivization or creative self-alienation.\textsuperscript{128}

In her review of the anthology the \textit{Animated Reader}, which accompanied the Surround Audience triennial Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal criticises Kraus writing on \textit{The Complete Poem}, pointing to a lack of insight into the actual function and elements of the exhibition. Rosenthal also suggests that:

\begin{quote}
 [...] the real gesture of \textit{The Complete Poem} wasn’t the importation of poetry into art’s price range, but rather a comment on the relationship between art and writing, which functions just as well on the white walls of a gallery as in the white space of a page. What \textit{The Complete Poem} actually provides is a picture of value as an ouroboros. [...] Poetry is as shallow as advertising copy; art is as bankrupt as an editorial spread.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

In this view poetry is simply the latest version of art springing from a struggle against and play with the form of the spectacle – albeit in a much more subtle shape – the latest version of pop art or the ready-made. In a movement similar to Broodthaers, this work is less visual art, and more the privation of art, showing fashion photography and poetry instead, or as the absence of art that presents as art. The poetry is used to show the presence of this absence through an act of creation, and a work of pure \textit{poiesis} simultaneously. The absence of art is underlined, and the work places itself in the hybrid third, the common space of philosophy and poetry. Read through Agamben’s model from \textit{MWC}, this a symptom of a closure, a movement without a way forward. But read through his more recent writings on art in \textit{Creation and Anarchy}, it can also be seen as a productive act of creation, with an implicit resistance to the order of things. Both views are available to us, fittingly so as availability is one of the keys to the aesthetic philosophy of Agamben.

\section*{3. The Artist-Poet}

\subsection*{3.1 The Present Trend}

One clear measure of a trend or tendency in contemporary art is its sudden visibility in art magazines, publications and exhibitions. In 2014 \textit{Frieze Magazine} published an issue dedicated to “Artist’s Poetry”, and \textit{Mousse Magazine} published an issue comprised only of artists writings of various kinds. The same year 89plus and the LUMA foundation published 1000 books of poetry by 1000 young poets to accompany Hans Ulrich Obrist’s exhibition \textit{Poetry Will Be Made By All!}

The September 2016 issue of \textit{Texte zur Kunst} is dedicated to poetry, in capital letters. The editors seem to equate poetry or the poetical with a personal voice. But on the whole the subject matter is actual written poetry. In the preface, the editors propose that the turn toward “affect and personal experience” stems from a fundamental desire to “engage the political from a place of individual

\textsuperscript{128} Watkin, \textit{The Literary Agamben}, 85.

\textsuperscript{129} Rosenthal, ‘Let’s Take a Very Fucking Poetry Lesson: Art’s Crush on Poetry,’ 23.
immediacy”

and pose the question of why this is so? “Why is the poet subject (once a somewhat embarrassing, marginal identity) now seen as a viable path to social recognition and success?”. The question is well put, and no simple answer presents itself, but a few conflicting viewpoints emerge in the field of art criticism.

Not only has there been marked increase in poetry events in art contexts, and poetry as art, the use of actual poems as/in place of press releases is more and more common, something noticeable to any regular visitor to art galleries in the recent years. This prompts the need for theories and concepts that can interpret poetry as art, and vice versa. In the previously mentioned review, Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal endeavours to explain the art worlds most recent interest in poetry:

A presumption of the use of poetry as press releases for exhibitions of contemporary art is that poetry needs no justification, no press release of its own to explain its value. […] Perhaps visual artists are tired of their own uselessness; perhaps poetry seems like a strange, immediate, handy field of action: more easily disseminated through contemporary channels, more honestly reckoned with its limitations as a form. The fantasy of poetry as a refuge, the impression that poetry circumvents the demands of art, is condescending at best, and facile deception at worst. Like most exoticism, art’s crush on poetry is founded on a fascination, not with an escape from but rather a return to the real.

A return to the real would be the real act of creation, the poiesis undiluted by praxis or techne, poetry, especially as it relates to a visual art practice, as more originary, closer to the inception of the idea, poetry as a pure act of creation and thus resistance. I read the above as the unreflected response to poetry in art, a gut feeling. It adopts the same meta perspective as ours in looking at the the gesture of poetry in general, not mentioning the content, only its form as poetry. Unfortunately she also, rather sarcastically, dismisses any force or meaning this gesture might carry with it.

In a review of the Surround Audience triennial Alan Gilbert offers a list of possible reasons for the rising interest in poetry:

[…] an awareness that the flattening of surfaces and quick associational leaps ubiquitous in a screen-centric, digital world are some of the primary formal and structural modes of poetry—and increasingly, of visual art; that poets themselves (such as the Museum of Modern Art’s inaugural Poet Laureate, Kenneth Goldsmith) have increasingly embraced art-world discourse; that the breakdown of mediums and genres in contemporary art promotes more fluid interaction with a variety of artistic disciplines, including poetry.

This is a rather sweeping explanation, referencing the ‘breakdown of mediums and genres’ and ‘fluid interaction’, The idea that Quinn Latimer, in the article Art Hearts Poetry in Frieze Magazine is even more sceptical towards the phenomenon of poetry in art:

Like capitalism, contemporary art is hungry and omnivorous; it devours and assimilates everything. […] Poetry embodies the need to use language in a way that is not useful, in the conventional sense.

130 Busta and Dyes, ‘Preface,’ 7.


132 Gilbert, “Skinscreen: Art and Poetry at the New Museum’s Surround Audience Triennial.”
Perhaps artists are tired of use value. Or perhaps, conversely, art’s turn toward poetry is about poetry anxiously attempting to join the market.

The most interesting part for this thesis is the idea of poetry embodying the need to use language in a way that is not conventionally useful, in other words language that makes the work inoperable, and language that is useful as a placeholder for art, but brings into presence the absence of art. This idea of usefulness also shows how Latimer takes for granted the usefulness and use value of visual art objects, we can only assume as commodities, an aspect which will be examined more closely later in this chapter. A more decisively critical view can be found in Mónica de la Torre’s article published by the Poetry Foundation, in which she sees the use of poetry as a pose, as playacting:

The way I see it, what we’re witnessing is [...] an appropriation of poetry’s discourse by practitioners in the field of art. The playacting of artists as poets is at the expense of poets, and involves their displacement. The epitome of artifice: poetry conferring authenticity, street cred, the stamp of the ‘real deal’.

Art capitalises on the aura of authenticity that poetry seems to present today. What none of these writers looks at is the relation between the work of visual art and poetry, what meaning the shift in labour can carry.

In the book Cultural Revolution, Aesthetic Practice after Autonomy (2017) art historian and critic Sven Lütticken presents a perspective on the rise of the published book that ties in directly with our discussion here, that touch upon and can be transposed to the more abstract subject of poetry also. In his view art tends to privilege obsolescent media, which is why the new status of the book as a privileged object in contemporary art is not surprising. But this is perhaps not only a nostalgic investment, some practices are actively involved with the reinvention of the book, where Lütticken almost exclusively uses Paul Chan’s practice as an example. The book today might carry the nostalgia of modernism, but can take a many forms and shapes: "Whereas modernism attempted to reduce media or mediums to their physical or technical supports, the book as medium is now an aggregate that can take the form of e-books as well as paper volumes.” Lütticken describes the book as a medium in a deep crisis caused by digitisation, the crisis making it a natural area of interest in contemporary artistic practice. This is a purely instrumental explanation, that like the ones above omits the difference in actual practice and work, and any type of resistance or negation it engenders.

In the pamphlet "The Social Life of the Book,” the artist Oscar Tuazon compares the status of the paper book to that of painting after the invention of photography, declaring that the book “finally has to stand on its own, autonomous and abject, just a thing. Those volumes of poetry, unread and beautiful, flagrantly, offensively useless, narcissistic and perverse, onanistic, queer – that’s what a book

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133 de la Torre, “Art & Poetry Now.”
134 Lütticken, Cultural Revolution, chap. 3.
135 Lütticken, Cultural Revolution, 89.
136 Lütticken, Cultural Revolution, 90.
wants to be. Autonomous and indifferent, an abstract book.”137 Lütticken argues that this marks the
rebirth of the book as a neo-modernist object. “However, in more interesting art practices, the book not
so much becomes an abject object; rather, the artwork becomes an exploded book, a scattered
volume”138 Although Lütticken is ultimately only interested in the book as a medium and object, he
shows how the medium of the book itself might be a part of the explanation for the rise of poetry in art
in general. The one thing that more than anything determines where a poem circulates is its origin.
Poetry written by artists is circulated in exhibitions, institutions, art book stores. Online poetry is an
example of poetry that puts itself outside of the art context, but inserts presence instead into the
different and in some ways wider arena of the internet. But paradoxically, artists, especially those in
some way connected or entwined with internet art and post-internet art, can publish poetry online in
different shapes, and still be said to operate in an art context, still within the white cube or relating to it
in a basic way.

The published books of Karl Larsson, Karl Holmqvist and Hanne Lippard all exist in a
paradoxical mode of representing the artist and the art. On the one hand they are undoubtedly a form
of promotion, of making visible, But they are simultaneously freed from the restraints – in time and
space – of the objects or performances that they originate from or relate to. The written or transcribed
work published in book form isn’t part of the exhibition itself, poetry isn’t a medium in their visual art
practice. But they can be understood as gesture in relation to the rest of their practice, where the gesture
itself can be read as the artwork. A gesture in Agamben’s sense of the poetic gesture, a hybrid third
between poiesis and praxis, between creation and production.

3.2 "Artist-Poet"

For the artists discussed here, “[…] writing is key and the line delimiting literary from visual art
virtually nonexistent.”139 That covers writing for performance, writing and reading, etc, but writing that
somehow also ends up in the form of a book, closely resembling poetry. Daniel Kunitz points out in the
article ‘Texting – the artist as writer as artist’, most if not all artists working in this or similar ways
where born after 1964, thus growing up in a climate of blurred lines. I would suggest it is not so much
blurred lines, but a very clear idea of the lines, and an ease of crossing between them.

What then constitutes the the figure of the artist-poet? There is no all encompassing study
written on the subject, and little to none academic works published with this particular focus. There are
instead some illuminating texts and articles written by art critics on the subject the last couple of years,
which will be drawn upon as descriptive reference material.

137 Tuazon, Making Books.
138 Lütticken, Cultural Revolution, 90.
139 Kunitz, ‘Texting: The Artist as Writer as Artist’.
In her review of *The Animated Reader*, an anthology of contemporary poetry published by the New Museum in conjunction with the Surround Audience triennial, Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal gives a succinct overview of the rise of poetry in art in recent years, as well as some critical receptions of the trend itself. According to her the economy is the force drawing art and poetry together as disciplines, stressing how solidarity between poetry and art makes strategic sense in a climate where entrepreneurial labor everywhere is promoted as art and craft and creativity is co-opted. In a climate of co-opted “creativity,” in which entrepreneurial labor of all kinds is promoted as passion, art, and craft at once, solidarity between poetry and art makes strategic sense. Of course, the Internet has played a vital role in shaping the alliance. “Perhaps,” Quinn Latimer writes in her introduction to the artists’ poetry issue of *Frieze*, “art’s turn towards poetry […] is about the new linguistic currency of the Internet: advertorial, adolescent, content-driven, anxiety-ridden, always appeasing, liking, performing, sharing, driving the shares up.”

This view is echoed by Rosenthal: “Poets may turn to artists for a share of their expanding social capital, but language has a privileged relationship to current forms of social media, and artists might look to poets to better ride the tide.” Poetry is viewed here almost derisively, as a gesture without content. The quality or effect of the poetry is not of interest, rather the gesture performed by writing poetry. While this is the perspective employed in this thesis also, that does not preclude me from criticising the narrowness of this view, as actual art criticism. It also points to an actual force in the gesture, to provoke such a response. It negates something these writers expect from art. In an introductory text to the online exhibition *Poetry as practice*, presented by the New Museum in conjunction with the Surround Audience triennial, the curator Harry Burke places poetry in the same sphere as the writers above, but with a more nuanced outlook:

Poetry cannot stand outside of the conditions of its production and circulation. Instead, poetry as practice speaks within them: embodied, performative, incomplete, often collaborative, and in a constant state of coalescence, always negotiating with the worlds, forms, and subjects that surround it.

While this statement nuances the view of poetry as strictly a market driven gesture, it is also a very optimistic statement, and the opposite can just as easily be argued, that poetry is insular and isolated, ignoring the subjects that surround it. In fact poetry most definitely can stand outside of the conditions of its production and circulation, we know poetry when we see it, whether it is within the distribution sphere of poetry or not. I would argue that in a sense poetry can very well stand outside of the conditions of its production, at least in the sense of not requiring neither a studio nor a gallery to function, as art in this case.

The above quote seems mostly aimed at justifying the hype for poetry within the art world, written by a curator whose chosen theme is poetry. Latimer seems sceptical of the trend. She writes:

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140 Latimer, ‘Art Hearts Poetry’.
142 Burke, *Poetry as Practice*. 

Like capitalism, contemporary art is hungry and omnivorous; it devours and assimilates everything. [...] Poetry embodies the need to use language in a way that is not useful, in the conventional sense. [...] Perhaps artists are tired of use value. [...] Or perhaps, conversely, art’s turn toward poetry is about poetry anxiously attempting to join the market.\(^{143}\)

Taken a step further this can be formulated as the artists trying to not produce useful art, producing poetry instead, which is useless both as commodity and aesthetic object within the present art market. As Agamben points out, the splitting of value of the material object between something that is useful within the context of some purposive activity, and a commodity whose value is only realised in exchange, transforms the object. It becomes “an essentially immaterial and abstract piece of goods, whose concrete enjoyment is impossible except through accumulation and exchange.”\(^{144}\) This means an object that is not enjoyed intrinsically, that does not provide aesthetic enjoyment of any immediate kind, the way visual art does.

This relation to the commodity is relevant to the question of the artist-poet as the figure can be defined today, not least because of the conflict between transparency and opacity (it is simply and only poetry vs what is its meaning) and between distribution and site specific locality – the poetry collection in a contemporary art sphere as a tool for distribution and hence a marketing tool produced by the artist, or the poetry collection as the central locality, the primary material to which distribution and visual works are secondary, or at least equal. In *Stanzas* Agamben faces the intricacies of the commodity in relation to poetry and uses Baudelaire as an example of the conflict of value and use. Enjoyment of use is already an alienated relation to the object, essentially no different from commodification. The lesson Baudelaire gives to modern poetry is “that the only way to go beyond the commodity was to press its contradictions to the limit, to the point at which the commodity as such would be abolished and the object would be restored to its own truth.”\(^{145}\) Here Agamben echoes the ideas from *The Man Without Content*. Through ‘poetic transfiguration’ the object is separated from the enjoyment of use and from its value as accumulation and restored to its original status. The joy in the act of creation and its function as resistance is more important. This means that poetry can do to the commodity what art is unable to do to itself, if compared to Agamben’s reasoning in *Privation is like a face*. Baudelaire called this process a sacrifice, or used the idea of a sacrifice, planning a ‘theory of sacrifice’.\(^{146}\) Sacrifice is consecrated through destruction, as it is through “the estrangement that makes it unattainable, and through the dissolution of traditional intelligibility and authority, that the falsehood of the commodity is changed into truth. This is the sense of “art for art’s sake” which means not the enjoyment of art for

\(^{143}\) Latimer, ‘Art Hearts Poetry’.

\(^{144}\) Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben*, 51.

\(^{145}\) Agamben, *Stanzas*, 49.

\(^{146}\) Agamben, *Stanzas*, 49.
its own sake, but the destruction of art worked by art.”

Reflecting on artists writing today in an article in *Modern Painters* Daniel Kunitz gives yet another perspective: “Price and Magid are just two among a host of artists who employ writing in a way that, whether they intend it or not, acts as a solvent eating into established notions of what visual art is.” Here Kunitz assigns an almost revolutionary power to the simple act of writing (as an artist). He goes on to provide a list of artists who similarly include writing in their practice, naming Simon Fujiwara, Mai-Thu Perret, Liam Gillick, Doug Fishbone, Matthew Brannon, the International Necronautical Society, Bernadette Corporation, and Slavs and Tatars, stressing how writing is part of their artistic practice. They’re not writers and artists, they’re artists who use writing. Interestingly it is the writing that is stressed here, not the text itself. It is the act of writing that is part of their practice as artists, not the texts themselves. Writing is an “imponderable act in which the aesthetic epiphany is realized,” the act of creation cut off from the production of art, *praxis*, and also a privation of art, making it ever more imponderable, the potential for art to bloom in the hybrid space between *poiesis* and *praxis*.

In an interview in the Poetry issue of *Texte zur Kunst*, Daniela Seel sees the artist-poet from an ambivalent and critical standpoint. She writes: “In terms of the art context, poetry cannot simply be decor nor can it really be abbreviated – and this may be good for the appeal of poetic language in the art sphere right now.” Seel misses an exceedingly important point, the indeterminacy of the poetic text in the art sphere is where its force, albeit a negative one, lies. By not being obviously either literature or art the works never possess themselves, and become availability and potentiality. They can be described exactly with Agamben’s words:

Yet precisely because they escape both the aesthetic enjoyment of the work of art and the consumption of the technical product, they actualize at least for an instant a suspension of these two statuses, push the consciousness of laceration much further than does the open work, and present themselves as a true availability-toward-nothingness.

As a privation of art that they achieve nothing and so have the potential for everything. They are a negativity of art, uninformative in that the text has no visual impact as such on a printed page, and the language that takes place in the text has the communicability of poetry, i.e. a certain absence of making sense, that opens it up to be potentially anything. Non-work that puts the mind to work. Writing is also a way of remaining inactive as artist while still being present as an artist, pro-ducting without producing.

Writing in *Modern Painters* Daniel Kunitz states:

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147 Agamben, *Stanzas*, 49.
149 Kunitz, ’Texting: The Artist as Writer as Artist,’ 49.
150 Agamben, *Stanzas*, 49.
I see the emergence of artists’ writing, displaying books, and aggressively adopting literary modes as an effort to protect or recapture originality both from the maelstrom of postproduction that has remade the aesthetic landscape and from the attack on it launched ironically enough by the text-based Conceptualism of the 1960s. In contrast to other modes of asserting originality, authoring has the advantage of being novel, if you can excuse the pun, in a visual art context.\(^{153}\)

This echoes Agamben’s search for originality, and the meaning of originality specifically, in *MWC*. The origin for Agamben is not something archetypal or prehistorical, but rather something alive and dynamic in the present.\(^{154}\)

This shift towards the written word is clearly parallel to the rise of art documentation, a rise the consequences of which are described by Boris Groys in his book *Art Power*:

> In recent decades, it has become increasingly evident that the art world has shifted its interest away from the artwork and toward art documentation. [...] Art documentation is by definition not art; it merely refers to art, and in precisely this way it makes it clear that art, in this case, is no longer present and immediately visible but rather absent and hidden.”\(^{155}\)

He goes on to judge these works pretty harshly: “[…] these activities do not serve to produce an artwork in which art as such could manifest itself.”\(^{156}\). In relation to art documentation exhibited as artwork, the poem or poetry in an exhibition space and more convincingly the collection of poetry as primary material in relation to an exhibition or as an exhibition seems both more functionally an artwork, the poem doesn’t refer to the art, it is the art in these cases, but it also puts into play the same operation described by Groys, making art more absent in the immediate sense, but creating a space for more potential through this privation. This can also be seen as a sort of sincerity. In an article written for *Frieze* in 2014 Matthew Rana argues that the leading idea in confronting and sorting through the implications of poetry in contemporary art should be sincerity, writing: “In order to address an outside, artists and poets alike have to break with our identities and speak beyond ourselves; we need spaces and occasions for it.”\(^{157}\) What is clear from this view is that the ‘space’ provided in published poetry is not sufficient for this. He goes on to describe the false promise of poetry in contemporary art:

> It’s advantageous to imagine that the reading and writing of poetry can constitute a kind of linguistic rupture in the central nervous system of contemporary capital. Indeed, this emergent politics likely gives a partial account for the enthusiasm with which artists have rediscovered poetry in recent years.\(^{158}\)

Although as Rana goes on to point, this is a rather naive hope; rather, as a subversive tool it becomes almost ironic or overtly ironic, as an actual model for marketing in a capitalist art market sphere, it is most probably effective. There is also a parallel increase of interest and activity in the fields of publishing

\(^{153}\) Kunitz, ‘Texting: The Artist as Writer as Artist,’ 52.

\(^{154}\) De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 35.

\(^{155}\) Groys, *Art Power*, 53.

\(^{156}\) Groys, *Art Power*, 54.

\(^{157}\) Rana, ‘In the Company of Flesh and Blood’.

\(^{158}\) Rana, ‘In the Company of Flesh and Blood’.
itself as artistic practice, with more and more artist books published, and books and exhibitions produced dealing with the subject.\textsuperscript{159} In the preface to \textit{Publishing as Artistic Practice}, Annette Gilbert argues that the focal point in many discussions and aesthetic concerns has moved away from emphasising the medium, the artefact, to focusing on the practice itself.\textsuperscript{160} A similar view to that of Boris Groys in \textit{Art Power}, where he argues that the focus of many contemporary artists using and displaying documentation is not the work itself, but the lived life as art in and of itself.\textsuperscript{161} This is the same category of art defined by Agamben as a hybrid third, not this and not that, never achieving the presence of art, rather the potential for it.

While this falls somewhat outside of the scope of this thesis it is important to be aware of; poetry published by artists is not an isolated trend, nor is it something necessarily new. In attempting to tie this emergence of poetry published by artists, and writing in general, to Agamben’s philosophy of art, I think the concept of the origin is useful. As well as marking the connections between philosophy and poetry in Agamben’s writing, it is a possible destination in the creation of knowledge related to these practices. Daniel Kunitz remarks as quoted earlier that the emergence of artists writing, both publishing and displaying books, is a defensive gesture, striving to recapture originality.\textsuperscript{162} Using the terminology of Agamben the origin and originality mentioned above can be reformulated as \textit{poiesis}, the artistic creative act that, although Kunitz in his examples stresses the forms of presentation, eschews the visual \textit{praxis} of contemporary art and can be placed within our framework of aesthetics and philosophy of negation and potential after Agamben.

\section*{3.3 Poetry and/or Art}

The fact of these printed objects of poetry is that they are in every way part of the art sphere and market. Although they are in shape and form identical to poetry in a literary context, they circulate very little in that sphere, and are rather tied to distribution channels that are specific to art. They are all written in English, even though that is not the mother tongue/first language of any of the artists. But let’s first look at definitions of poetry. The most basic definition of the word poetry can be found in the Oxford Dictionary: “Literary work in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm.”\textsuperscript{163} Without delving too deeply into the part of Agamben’s writing focused on the formal properties of poetry and the philosophical conclusions he draws from this, we can look at how he variously attempts to capture the essence of written poetry. According to researcher David Ben-Merre, Agamben’s definition of poetry is based on the formal properties of verse – “we know

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\textsuperscript{159} See for example Gilbert and Bajohr, \textit{Publishing as Artistic Practice}, and the exhibition Publishing as an artistic toolbox: 1989–2017 at Kunsthalle Wien

\textsuperscript{160} Gilbert and Bajohr, \textit{Publishing as Artistic Practice}, 7.

\textsuperscript{161} Groys, \textit{Art Power}, 58.

\textsuperscript{162} Kunitz, ‘Texting: The Artist as Writer as Artist,’ 53.

\textsuperscript{163} Oxford English Dictionary, “‘poetry, n.’”
\end{flushright}
a poem when we see one or when we hear one, provided the hesitation is retained.”

Ben-Merre specifies further:

Agamben focuses on disproportion, difference, tension. Poetry is a negative system or potentiality where harmony is possible but never achieved. As Agamben writes, “the poem is an organism grounded in the perception of the limits and endings that define—without ever fully coinciding with, and almost in intermittent dispute with—sonorous (or graphic) units and semantic units” (End 110).

Described this way, poetry is most definitely an instance of poiesis that does not possess itself in its own shape, that is a work that withholds the pleasure, a privation of aesthetic enjoyment ie harmony in language. Unsurprisingly this is a more radical definition compared to the Oxford Dictionary, 'intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm' yes, but distinctive here in the sense that it unsettles us, appears distinctly unresolved in some sense.

Back then to the question of how to define the poetry of artists: taken out of context their books are finely produced books of poetry, in many ways indistinguishable from other poetry, if not for the context they are produced in and function within. They embody the poetic gesture of Agamben, where gesture in the words of William Watkin “[…] is another name for the communicability of language as pure medium: 'gesture is the communication of a potential to be communicated. In itself it has nothing to say, because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as a pure potential for mediation' (IH, 156)” Arguably they are then by their very existence as poetry masking themselves as art, a stand in for the communicability of language in relation to visual art. This is a fact of their existence as poetry collections, they don’t need to be read to take their place as a ‘hybrid third’ of the art world. Once again, occupying a space between poiesis and praxis. In this way they are hybrids: not quite art, because they are not an exhibition or installation, but neither can they decisively be categorised as books of poetry, because they are written by artists, and not circulated or distributed as poetry in literary circles and/or markets. But, as Daniel Kunitz points out, for the artists themselves, and indeed in their reception, everything they produce is art. They “take as axiomatic that context creates art.” Seth Price describes this mode of working in his widely read essay/distributed art work Dispersion: “It does not necessarily stand against objects or painting, or for language as art; it does not need to stand against retinal art; it does not stand for anything certain, instead privileging framing and context, and constantly renegotiating its relationship to its audience.”

Another way of defining these works is by way of comparison. They don’t fall into the category of editions or multiple, neither are they original artworks. Neither are they immaterial works, but rather they take what is immaterial and poetic in each of the artists practice, which is often central to their

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164 Ben-Merre, ‘Falling into Silence: Giorgio Agamben at the End of the Poem,’ 91.
166 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 59.
167 Price, Dispersion, 5.
work, and makes it available in a portable format, that potentially frees the work altogether from the art world, although that seems unlikely. They are art, because they are part of an artists practice, but they are also poetry because that is the form in which they are presented. Perhaps it is important here to note that they are not reducible to poetry as a concept, not a case of conceptual art using the medium of poetry or print, but are contemporary poetry to all intents and purposes, excepting their origin and sphere of circulation. Locality is the differing factor.

Engaging with the function and production of meaning within this specific type of work, it’s important to note that this is text whose function is not primarily literary. It resembles literary work, but is not made in relation to a literary sphere or climate, and neither is it distributed through to or within the library world. Neither is it not a case of text functioning the way in which it – broadly speaking – does usually in the art world, ie as valorisation of the object, a support structure for the visual work. Nor is it produced or used as a fetish, as is the case in relation to much theory used and referenced in artistic production. These works occupy a very specific place of in-between, in the shadow of art as Agamben would describe it. They can rather be described as soft acts of resistance to the mentioned positions of text and poetry in relation to art, an attempt at autonomy for the artistic text, autonomous in relation to both literature and visual art.

Working through the implications of Agamben’s use of potential, poiesis and inoperativity in their book Agamben, Colebrook and Maxwell define poiesis and praxis in terms of a break with systems and relations of power. Art and aesthetic creativity (poiesis) as opposed to traditional work or production (praxis). Their emphasis is on the political aspects of the argument, as resistance, describing praxis as “an activity that remains close to and enables the bodily life from which it emerges, and poiesis as “[...] an activity that yielded a separate object that could not be reduced to use: art provided the possibility for thinking a life and creativity not oriented to survival, self-maintenance, or the sovereign claims of identity”168 This is an interpretation of Agamben’s central conflict in aesthetics that sees the flip side of Agamben’s condemnation of a nihilistic present, that reads it positively as an empowering shift, a more autonomous art. They go on to write:

Working against notions of established community and recognition, art is celebrated as a force of refusal and pure difference: not subjected to any ideal other than its own force, pure art is not the making of anything. The avant-garde artwork would neither present nor disclose anything other than its own empty form; art nullifies or destroys the practices and conventions of constituted definitions (including what counts as art). An example would be Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain, in which the act of placing a urinal in a gallery is not a gesture of meaning or reference - not the presentation or disclosure of the world - so much as a self-reflexive gesture that draws attention to itself. Art becomes an act of the artist separating himself, constituting himself as nothing more than pure act, and an act that negates what is currently accepted as art. Art is presented solely as a counter-convention, and not as a means for disclosing anything other than itself. One can imagine a page of writing, text, or script that did not say anything, presenting text as text.169

168 Colebrook and Maxwell, Agamben, 135.
169 Colebrook and Maxwell, Agamben, 147.
This opens up the possibility of using Agamben’s aesthetics practically and situate a specific field of production and expression according to his terminology. The poetry published by artists in the context of fine art interpreted and held solely as a ‘counter-convention, and not as a means for disclosing anything other than itself.’ This is in itself an actualisation of the privation of art, ‘presenting text as text’ - as an artist we might add. Making the conventions of production and conceptualism inoperable. The primary operation is that of making the absence of art present, the content and language becomes secondary.

Ed Atkins is another contemporary artist that publishes books of what I would define as poetry. *A Tumor* was published in 2011 in conjunction with an exhibition at Tate Britain and *A Primer For Cadavers* published in 2016. In Atkins case the publishing of books is both more self-evident and more out of place. Self-evident since he is one of the most celebrated and successful artists of his generation, which effectively makes more exposure less surprising. But out of place with the rest of his practice, the majority of which is computer animated videos, where Atkins does all the designing and animating on his own. The poems themselves are almost gothic in style, a blatant contrast to the sleek rendering of his videos.

How might the artist-poet themselves describe the practice of publishing poetry, how would they situate it in relation to their visual work? Ed Atkins answers some of those questions in an interview:

> Giving people a free text—giving people a chunk of the work that they could have and engage with in their own time, felt both generous and demanding. People would hopefully get closer to the work, would allow it up against them in ways that an installation cannot sustain. The texts are certainly not explanatory. If anything, I think of them as extending the condition of the work as something resistant to the explanatory in general. I suppose they have directly engaged with the idea of something explanatory—particularly pieces like “An Introduction to the Work”—though they pointedly refuse to mean in pretty much any coherent way. I suppose I think of the videos and the writings as entirely equivalent to one another.\(^{170}\)

The text stands completely on its own then, in Atkins’ estimation, and is in no way explanatory. But seems to exist within the framework of his artistic output. All of the texts in *A Primer For Cadavers* were originally published or presented in conjunction with an exhibition of his, functioning then as a support and as Atkins writes above, ‘a chunk of the work that they can engage with in their own time’, to get closer to the work. So for Atkins himself the texts are part of or a continuation of the art work, a part that functions as an art work in its own right. Although the texts themselves are hard to distinguish from contemporary poetry, and would be read as such if distributed in a different context. This is the state regarding most poetry written by artists and their reception and reviews, the poetry books are seldom reviewed, sometimes not even in longer/in-depth reviews of their related exhibitions, and simultaneously these books are never reviewed by literary critics. So as much as the question of whether they are poetry is valid, the question of whether they constitute artworks is equally so. Speaking on his

\(^{170}\) Atkins, Stephanie LaCava in Conversation with Ed Atkins.
work and relation to books and catalogues in the late 60s, artist Seth Siegelaub describes how art without physical presence, immaterial art, is not changed by its inclusion in a book: “It becomes primary information, while the reproduction of conventional art in books or catalogues is necessarily secondary information. When information is primary, the catalogue can become the exhibition and a catalogue auxiliary to it, whereas in the January, 1969, show the catalogue was primary and the physical exhibition was auxiliary to it.” This is a historical example of the book, the catalogue in this case, being the centre of the work, and the visual art secondary. The passive act of reading the catalogue is favoured over the active viewing of the exhibition. In their discussion on passivity in contemporary art, Jonatan Habib Engqvist and Lars-Erik Hjertström Lappalainen use Agamben’s thoughts in *MWC* to formulate a critique and an alternative interpretation of contemporary art with a basis in its passive qualities, both in the artist, artwork and spectator. They explain *poiesis* as a doing, a doing with two characteristics to begin with: it brings something new into existence, passes from non-being into being, creating presence: a presence that can only be a new shape. To come into being is to take shape, to do something, to design. Arts task should be to create the unique presence of a form, something art has failed in doing according to Agamben. Engqvist and Hjertström Lappalainen add to this by arguing that contemporary art isn’t trying to do or doing anything except form itself.

This reading of Agamben opens a line of thought in relation to the printed poetry in question in this thesis. It can be read and placed within the system of art simply as a form, the form of writing, the form of poetry, the form of the book. Which also entails the form of the reader, the mostly solitary activity enabled by the book. It enacts, and activates the image of, the form of the solitary writer. In a text with the title Empire Poetry, published in *Texte zur Kunst* 2016, artist Dena Yago writes and reflects on immaterial and reproductive work, as well as means of production in relation to poetry and the poets labour. Working as a technician at a corporate law firm, she:

[…] began using my own work-issued BlackBerry for writing poetry in fragmentary stanzas and isolated phrases. This writing was neither anthropological observation of corporate life, nor was it diaristic account of my working days. I identify this writing as poetry (and myself as poet) as its is the collection and synthesis of a kind of excess language that, to my mind, was nevertheless potent and worth retaining as an artefact and by-product of a specific site, time, and form of immaterial labour.

The opposite to this labour of poetry can be found in the book *Poems* by Seth Price, which also very neatly encompasses the art world gesture of publishing something as poetry. When asked about it in an interview in 2016 he answered: “The Poems book was another art gesture, though: taking hastily written, random, notebook pages and calling them poems. They might now stand as poems, but I don’t think I’ve written poems.” A couple of lines further down he continues: “Art is a place where you can

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172 Engqvist and Lappalainen, *BIG DIG*, 84 and 98.
173 Yago, ‘Empire Poetry,’ 150.
174 Price, Stephanie LaCava in Conversation with Seth Price.
experiment with a position to see if you believe it, to see if it’s tenable, or even interesting. Poetry, too.” I read this as circumventing *praxis*, making it inoperable as art, but also as poetry, an example of the space of the hybrid third, but one which lack any resistance, perhaps because the gesture is so conscious. Leigh Claire La Berge writes about the economy of artworks and de-commodification in her book *Wages against artwork: decommodified labor and the claims of socially engaged art*, in which we find the following passage: “According to philosophical aesthetics, in a world in which we are compelled to make ourselves useful to others by selling our labor, the artwork distinguishes itself by being useless. Here we see art’s relation to ‘the aesthetic’, a site divorced from *praxis* and that can be used to critique *praxis*.” In financial terms then, art is perhaps always useless, inoperable as an economic object since it has no logical trajectory. In the next section, as well as in the final section of this thesis, we will look at some ways in which actual poetry in art can be read through an economical lens, and how it relates to work and labour.

### 3.4 Value and Distribution

*I’m talking about poetry here as excess of language, a hidden resource which enables us to shift from one paradigm to another.*

Franco ’Bifo’ Berardi - *The Uprising*

Another possible explanation for the rising presence and prevalence of poetry in fine art spheres can be found in the writings of Franco Berardi, who places this tendency as a symptom and counterforce to the present economic situation, in terms of the problematics of capitalism, the emancipation of the sign in general and specifically in financial matters. The world of finance mirrors that of cultural work, immaterial currencies and values on the one hand, and immaterial labour on the other. In the quote above Berardi speaks of poetry as excess language rather than poetry as opaque and of pure potential, but it still carries echoes of Agamben’s sense of a thing with the potential for destruction, an availability for work. Berardi sees poetry as a critical tool and language in relation to the crises of capitalism, finance, art and academic institutions, while remaining unengaged with actual poetic activities and practices in the art world for example. Poet and theorist Felix Bernstein also engages with the poetical in an academic cultural setting, but claims that the affective-critical subject (which he sees as the heart of the poetical) is now all but mandated by the very institutions, both academic and commercial, known for insisting on high theoretical standards.176

The interpretation of poetry in art through a financial lens, often as a critical view on capitalism can in turn be read through Agamben, in particular his writings in *Stanzas* on Marx and commodities.

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175 La Berge, *Wages against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*, 11.

176 Bernstein, ‘The Irreproachable Essay’. 
The “use-value” of an object is the backbone to the more intangible “exchange-value” according to Marx. Agamben points out that the division of the object into two different categories of value, one where the value is determined by usefulness and one whose value is actualised in exchange, transforms the object into “an essentially immaterial and abstract piece of goods, whose concrete enjoyment is impossible except through accumulation and exchange.” Catherine Mills analyses this statement further:

At this point, then, the splitting of the value of the object and its consequent production as immaterial in commodification reach their extreme point and pass into the possibility of a new relation to things. This new relation no longer entails the possession of the object as a material thing, but allows for the completion and appropriation of the unreal, that is, the making present of that which is absent specifically through the negation of its absence.

This is not exactly the absence of the presence of art as defined by Agamben, but the absence of one aspect of the art commodity. With this relation the printed book of poetry has very little value at all, since it is not useful, and certainly has very little exchange value; it does have a price of course, but the editions are printed in limited numbers, and as they are mostly circulated in art specialty circles, they don’t sell very much. Perhaps this is the point where their implicit resistance becomes most obvious and practical? They have very little value as commodities in the art market.

In her article Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal emphasises the double relationship to value and economics, calling it on the one hand “[…] writing’s highest achievement, language exercised for its own sake, the literary corollary to Art with a capital ‘A.’ On the other, poetry is an unpaid embarrassment, without purpose or social power.” The value of poetry is hard to pin down, and is a refuge when discussing the value of visual art. The way she argues shows how she differentiates poetry and visual art – poetry is language for its own sake, while visual art is images for the sake of the market. In this context Agamben’s terminology of the privation of art, the absence of art and hybrid art becomes more explicitly meaningful, as the give us the means to define and categorise the poetry in question in relation to visual art, which is the sphere it operates within here. Use value and value in contemporary art in general is the subject of Diedrich Diederichsen’s essay On (surplus) value in art: “One might say that the use value of a certain kind of commodity – which includes art objects – lies in its promise to appear as a pure exchange value, its ability to turn into money.” In this sense the artist book of poetry defies and cancels this promise, these are not rare or limited works necessarily. According to Diederichsen the artistic commodity is no longer required to be an original in the strict sense, it can be a multiple, a printed work or a readymade. The artists singularity is not transferred to the object.

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177 Mills, The Philosophy of Agamben, 51.
178 Agamben, Stanzas, 37.
179 Mills, The Philosophy of Agamben, 52.
181 Diederichsen, On (Surplus) Value in Art, 39.
physically, but spiritually: “The artist conceives the readymade, plans the project”\textsuperscript{182}, and, we could add, writes the poetry. This value system can also be described and evaluated through the aesthetics of Agamben. What gives the object value is the poiesis of the artist, the bringing-forth or leading into being performed by the artist is implicit in the object and defines its value. Poetry is a way of enacting a negative presence, resisting the reproducibility of visual art with its formal and material trends, while simultaneously presenting a commodity object, in the form of the book of poetry.

Seth Price writes in \textit{Dispersion}:

The radical nature of this work stems in part from the fact that it is a direct expression of the process of production. Market mechanisms of circulation, distribution, and dissemination become a crucial part of the work, distinguishing such a practice from the liberal-bourgeois model of production, which operates under the notion that cultural doings somehow take place above the marketplace. However, whether assuming the form of ad or article, much of this work was primarily concerned with finding exhibition alternatives to the gallery wall, and in any case often used these sites to demonstrate dryly theoretical propositions rather than address issues of, say, desire.\textsuperscript{183}

These works are in part the opposite of poetry in the gallery space, or poetry published by artists. While I believe Price’s assessment of these works to be correct, they do move beyond the contexts of regular exhibitions spaces, but there is a tension in the way they do so, which is the already stated fact that they act as distributed markers for the artist, marketing in effect, that by extension makes the artist more visible, and thus hypothetically offered more shows at galleries and institutions. The relation between distribution and the internet is also a notable factor in the discussion of these works. In most cases they are not readily, or at all, available online. The artists seem to cling to the idea that the value is created through exclusivity, through medium specificity, in this case the medium of the book. Why is this? Or rather what does it mean for their perceived function? There seems to be two prevailing modes for artists when it comes to making works available online today. Either as Seth Price for example, making everything available in multiple formats, or the opposite, limiting the distribution online to make the physical objects more valuable, or more exclusive, catering to a collectors mentality perhaps, or perhaps as a way of simply surviving in a market driven economy, as an artist. Regardless, these are issues that have a bearing on how these works are received and understood.

In the same text, Price posits that art grounded in distributed media “can be seen as a political art and an art of communicative action, not least because it is a reaction to the fact that the merging of art and life has been effected most successfully by the ‘consciousness industry’.”\textsuperscript{184} First we must perhaps determine whether the published artists books that are the focus of this thesis qualify as distributed media in the sense that Price uses it. They are not distributed in multiple forms or on multiple platforms. Thus in this sense also performing Agamben’s split, placing the work neither in production nor in action, but in a hybrid space in between.

\textsuperscript{182} Diederichsen, \textit{On (Surplus) Value in Art}, 42.
\textsuperscript{183} Price, \textit{Dispersion}, 9.
\textsuperscript{184} Price, \textit{Dispersion}, 12.
The question of value, both artistic and financial, both use-value and exchange-value, is connected to the autonomy of art. But, I believe any explanation overly dependent on the workings of the market should be tempered, as Groys does in this quote:

There is no doubt that in the context of a contemporary civilization more or less completely dominated by the market, everything can be interpreted as an effect of market forces in one way or another. For this reason, the value of such an interpretation is null, for an explanation of everything remains unable to explain anything in particular.\textsuperscript{185}

The market can always be used as an explanatory tool, is always present, but here we will use Agamben’s aesthetic framework instead, to look at art where the actual art is nearly not present at all. In the next chapter we will test how the aesthetic framework of Agamben can be applied to the published poetry of Larsson, Holmqvist and Lippard.

\textsuperscript{185} Groys, \textit{Going Public}, 17.
Chapter 3 – Three Poets?

1. Karl Larsson

This close reading will focus on one published work by Swedish artist Karl Larsson, the book Parrot. Parrot was produced and presented in parallel to an exhibition at Index – The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation.

Karl Larsson’s practice is one closely tied to text in general and poetry specifically. The same can be said for all the artists in this chapter. Larsson has published several books of poetry, in both Swedish and English. In an interview from 2012 he describes his studio work as primarily reading and writing, his everyday routine that of the poet. He goes on to describe the passivity of the body as a problem with reading, one can’t act while reading: “And I think that the poetic experience – the memory of a clear and pervasive change – can have a value outside of literature as well.”

The book Parrot was presented as part of the exhibition Parrot, where three works by Broodthaers where incorporated and commented on. Larsson showed a series of “interventions in terms of spatial constructions and sculptural objects.” The exhibition text goes on to describe the book:

As a part of the project Karl Larsson is presenting a newly written collection of poetry with the same title as the exhibition. A book can be seen as a form that can harbour, generate, and repeat poetic statements. The perspective of the parrot that Larsson has chosen to take in his work with the exhibition is based on the idea of how the parrot’s body is inhabited by others: the bird mimics their language and creates comical and uncanny resemblances. The choice to work with the specific animal figure refers exceedingly to some of Marcel Broodthaers’s artistic and literary strategies, such as the fascination for animals or for the tautological repetition. It becomes Karl Larsson’s method of approaching Broodthaers activities as a poet and visual artist. The parrot is an echo, or a mediator of nonsense.

According to the exhibition text the book is merely a vessel for poetic statements, while referring to the “artistic and literary strategies” of Broodthaers. In my view this is a much too narrow description of its function. As Larsson himself states, the starting point of his practice is the work of the poet, the writing is the act of creation in this context. In the text on the back of the book is the statement: “Parrot investigates the conditions for producing, disseminating (sharing), and thinking poetry today.” While this is true it is important to note that it does so not in a literary context, but in the context of contemporary art. The book is disseminated and distributed in art contexts, and not part of a

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186 Lydén, ‘Tio frågor.’
188 Index – The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation, ‘Marcel Broodthaers and Karl Larsson: Parrot’.
conversation on poetry in a literary sense. Effectively it is about thinking poetry in art, about thinking poetry for artists. In a review of the exhibition Parrot in Kunstkritikk Lars-Erik Hjertström Lappalainen sees it as a portrait of the artist as the one who writes without necessarily producing text. Art appears as writing, and writing for Broodthaers is equal to poetry. The poetry collection Parrot, Hjertström-Lappalainen writes, “[..] deals among other things with how to think poetry. It is close at hand to think that it is the errand of the exhibition to replace the exhibition model for art with a poetic model.”

It is valuable to our purposes to look at two aspects of the book Parrot, both the fact of its medium and presentation, the fact that it is a book of poetry produced by an artist, but also the poetic statements it contains, many of which point to the same philosophical and aesthetic conclusions.

In a text for the catalogue Strange, the poet Lisa Robertson stresses and interrogates the links and connections to Broodthaers in Parrot. It is a work in dialogue with Broodthaers, addressed to Broodthaers, a work that closes the circle whose beginning is sketched when Broodthaers encases his books in plaster and transforms them into visual art. Larsson moves the focus back to the poetic form, to the written word, and presenting to the viewer the absence of the presence of art, the privation of art. A privation of art much more fundamental than the one performed by the ready-made and pop art of Agamben’s examples. This is not visual contemporary art at all, but poetry speaking parallel to art. In the Notes section at the very end of Parrot, Larsson writes: “Isn’t it strange how wealth is such an important part of life, when we all seem to be so unfamiliar with it?” This points to poetry, the act of creation separated from praxis, as a resistance and alternative to economic growth, the privation of (visual) art and hence the privation of a product to either judge or sell.

One stanza in Parrot reads: “and by becoming an artist / an artisan in the craft / of symbolic value, / you made them aware.” The writing of poetry (as an artist) means to still have a praxis, tentatively, but not a praxis of reproducibility, but a praxis more closely linked to poiesis. Exposing the play between visual art production and symbolic value, and through the poetic form breaking out of that mould, making the result of artistic creation, poiesis, inoperable as a commodity in the market, while retaining the potential of art. A statement to the presence of the absence of art. The artist is present, but he’s writing poetry. The fact of publishing a book of poetry is on its own a privation of art, situated both in and outside of the art sphere, something which the poetic text of Parrot shows a clear awareness of as well: “can it be this simple, / poetry is the enemy / of capitalism”.

In Strange, the catalogue accompanying the exhibition North Western Prose at Kunstverein Hamburg Kim West writes:

In Parrot: the image of the poet who pretends to be an artist in order to “succeed in life”, who mimics how value is created in the art world, and as if inadvertently becomes the scrutinizer of its

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189 Lappalainen, ‘Larsson papegoja – Broodthaers örn’.
190 Lappalainen, ‘Larsson papegoja – Broodthaers örn’.
191 Larsson, Parrot, 44.
192 Larsson, Parrot, 57.
operations, all the while transporting, smuggling the inertia of poetry into the transfers of the exhibition space.\(^{193}\)

Instead of a conceptual activity presented as an artwork in the museum space, the book presents the basic work of writing poetry, showing it to be not just an act of smuggling in poetry as West suggests, but an act of resistance through creation, poetry as resistance to art, and the market forces that shape art. This also places the work, Parrot, in the hybrid third Agamben describes in *Anarchy and Creation* – a place between *praxis* and *poiesis*, where the action of writing poetry presents itself as the principal gesture of the work, as the work itself. The importance of the creative act of writing poetry is underlined by publishing and presenting the text in the form of a book of poetry.

In another stanza Larsson writes: “silence, and then / nothing again / production shatters / containers of creativity / points out and executes / geometry of reason / this is wealth / and that which was / never written”. This is a quite literal summation of the philosophical standpoints previously discussed here. Production, *praxis*, action, works against the force of *poiesis* inherent in the act of creation, the privation of art is a resistance to the detrimental effects of the art market. Poetry as resistance to capitalism.

In an article on sincerity as a trend in contemporary art Matthew Rana comments on the following lines from *Parrot*: “To be a poet is to be literal / unaffected by allegory and metaphor / just like a beast / myopic and bad”, saying that:

[...] while undermining the poet’s visionary status and claims to moral authority, also suggest that, as a way of doing and making, poetry is not always transcendent, but very much implicated in the present – however mundane, messy or impure that may be.\(^{194}\)

It is bringing a concrete experience to life, but not through the marketable systems of art already in place, but through the resistance and privation inherent in poetry in the context of contemporary art.

*Parrot* is a work that partly contains the energetic status of art, resisting aesthetic enjoyment, the corrupting force in contemporary art according to Agamben. Instead it passively places the work of the artist in the act of writing, the poem is the absence of art. It has content, it is not empty, but by its very form, in relation to the production of physical visual works, is a vessel for the privation of art. The activity of the poet is performed, the work is both a collection of poetry and the activity of writing itself. There is also the fact of the physical book itself. Now, years after the exhibition, the book is all that really remains save for images and descriptions of the show. Furthermore the book is unchanged, the printed words stay the same.

While the book *Parrot* can be categorised and explained through Agamben’s aesthetics, it is not a given that the whole of Karl Larsson’s artistic practice fits into this frame. It seems to be closely related to the philosophy of Agamben, and the work is more dynamic when read this way, but Larsson’s other

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\(^{193}\) West, ‘Prose of the World,’ 143.

\(^{194}\) Rana, 'In the Company of Flesh and Blood'.
work, his exhibitions containing sculptural work for example, seems at a glance to resist this categorisation as work that embodies the privation of art, and more grounded in the realm of *praxis*, technical production of physical works. If what is visible in the book *Parrot* is the moment of *poiesis*, a moment of joy and pure doing, what is also visible is the moment of action, executing the poetic idea. Communicating communicability as such.

Larssons work connects well generally with the philosophy of Agamben, but it does so as much thematically as philosophically, making those aspects a cul-de-sac for our purposes here: interesting in terms of analysing Karl Larssons work, but not for testing the usefulness of an aesthetic terminology derived from Agamben. More productive here to look at what kind of presence Larsson enacts as an artist, which is decidedly that of the writer, the poet. This is also what distinguishes him from Holmqvist and Lippard, his presence is that of a writer, and his unactualised, or barely actualised potential is the potential for making art. His work is writing while his labour is art.

### 2. Karl Holmqvist

Next we’ll look at an example of the work of Swedish artist Karl Holmqvist and what possible consequences the model of Agamben’s aesthetic can have on it. Holmqvist and Larsson share several gestures and themes in their writing. The lines: “Poetry is anti-money / since it is for free / even for rich people”\(^{195}\) can be read as an answer to the previously quoted lines from Larssons *Parrot*: “can it be this simple, / poetry is the enemy / of capitalism”.\(^{196}\) Both Holmqvist and Larsson use references to Broodthaers explicitly in their writing, as well as lot of other artists and artistic references. But here the similarities end, apart from the apparent occupation with poetry. Holmqvist creates poetry from repetition of recognisable popular cultural sentences and expressions, while Larsson investigates the model of the poet philosophically, through poetry in art. Visually Larsson is more constrained while Holmqvist can be described as exuberant, or at least playful.

The book *K* was published in conjunction with THE SUN SHINES FOR EVERYONE, two readings at Kunsthalle Zurich, on December 21 2011 and June 21, 2012, as well as THE VISIT, an installation at Bergen Kunsthall in spring 2012. The book consists of poems, regularly interspersed by cheeky informational texts, as well as two posters. It looks and reads as a poetry collection, The posters corresponds to the works at Kunsthalle Zurich and Bergen Kunsthall respectively. The one from Bergen Kunsthall is simply a photographic documentation of the installation.

Karl Holmqvist is in many ways a quintessential ‘artist-poet’, working consistently with text and words as the basis of his practice, the creative production of his work is mainly writing. When asked in an interview about the distinction for him between poetry and visual art he replied: “In terms of the

\(^{195}\) Holmqvist et al., *Karl Holmqvist: K*, 53.

\(^{196}\) Larsson, *Parrot*, 57.
work process there is none, poetry is an invisible visual art.” In an article in Frieze Magazine in 2012 he is described as a poet, but of a different kind, “[…] in that most of his work is received in the art world, where he performs his poems in a witty, trance-like drone. […] both the art and literary worlds are directly implicated in Holmqvist’s practice.” So for himself he sees no difference between poetry and visual art – it’s all visual art, and from the outside he can be seen both as poet and artist, but always operating within the art world. This, according to the model of Agamben’s philosophy, is a common failure, because it would seem to be art made for the art world, art made solely as a response to a critical idea of what art presently is. This is where the apparent absence of art in his published books can act as an outlet for potential and resistance to the current state of art and art markets.

It can be argued that the whole of Karl Holmqvist’s book ‘K’ is documentation. The poems are almost exclusively scripts from his readings, or transposed from visual works. In an article on the works of Karl Holmqvist, Melissa Gronlund defines the essence of his works through a comparison to Vito Acconci: “Acconci understood text and performance to be equal arenas of play rather than being hierarchical to one another: he termed the page ‘a field for action’, for example, or ‘a performance area in miniature’.” This is important, she argues, because Acconci’s work is a precursor to the “investigations into traded meanings and the deployment of text in both printed and performed formats” that Holmqvist work evidences.

Looking critically at Holmqvist’s work, we might return to the question posed by Acconci of how we are meant to understand text on and of the page, in performance, and what these changes in register do to the ‘I’ who is speaking, writing or borrowing. One answer to that question is that the writing is a privation of art, the absence of what makes the work an art work, but filled with the most potential for art. The speaking is the actualisation of the creation as an art work, the praxis. Isabelle Graw sees the work of Holmqvist as a translation of his “poems or handwritten notes into marketable singular pictures.” The goal then is a marketable picture, and the poetry part of a method or process for creating that picture. The poiesis of writing merely the prefabrication work, the sketching for the mould of the finished product. Reading his practice in this way, any resistance inherent in the work – the resistance of the act of creation limited to poetry and never transformed into image, poetry as privation of art and before or without praxis – is cancelled, and we must instead define the writing of poetry as a prefabrication process, the sketching of the mould for the final work, be it an image on a wall or a performance. Jan Verwoert on the other hand sees Holmqvist’s work as made to be read, with the layout of visual poetry, and a typography which “foregrounds the materiality of

197 Holmqvist, Interview with Karl Holmqvist by Berlin Art Link — abc – art berlin contemporary.
198 Latimer, ‘Books’.
199 Kotz, Words to Be Looked At, 170.
200 Gronlund, ‘Karl Holmqvist,’ 91.
201 Graw, ‘The Poet’s Seduction,’ 68.
language.” This description makes the work on the one hand indistinguishable from concrete poetry, a common reference in relation to his work, and reduces its meaning to a play on an older form using contemporary popular references. But work made to be read, is that not the definition of poetry or literature?

Any focus on the visual aspect overlooks the importance of his actual work and practice, which is mainly poetry, and is most available as printed works, whether they are viewed as documentation or works in their own right. Fittingly the title of Holmqvist’s exhibition at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm was “Give poetry a try”. The work of the concrete poets is often referenced in relation to Holmqvist’s work. If Karl Larsson brings the method of the poet to visual art, Karl Holmqvist brings concrete poetry into the same space. Not the poet as a figure, but the words and formal layout. Many of his works can be said to be successors to Broodthaers final work “Salle Blanche”, mentioned in Chapter 2, both in terms of content and execution. His practice can be read in the same way as that of Karl Larsson, as a resistance to activity, to the producing aspects of visual art, praxis. A privation of art through a bigger focus on the poiesis, the joyful moment of writing or assembling ideas simply as words on paper. In Holmqvist’s case they are performed, and their potential is half actualised by moving the words into the gallery, in grids or shapes with the layout of visual poetry. It is simultaneously a resistance and a concession to the actualised i.e. sellable aspects of art.

Using the terminology of Agamben to read Holmqvist shifts the focus of the work, making the creative process – the artist doing the work of the poet – the key to unlocking its potential. If our focus is on the creative act, which in this case is not the performing of the text, which is essentially a reading of the text, but the act of writing, then its privation of art is much clearer, as well as its inherent inoperativity and potential. In fact Holmqvist’s work as a whole can be read as poetry or a poem, in the sense of it making language inoperative. His work makes language inoperative through repetition, through distortion of recognisable sentences, through emphasis on the materiality of language in favour of its content. This is all the more clear cut in the published books of his, while in the performances it is more muddied. Muddied by the presence of an embodied voice, muddied by the fact that the performance is the mold to which the script is poiesis. Even if the performance can be explicated as the hybrid third that Agamben defines in Creation and Anarchy, it is also an example of praxis, the presentation and actualisation of a product that in before that was a vessel for potential. In the moment of writing – and in the published work which is a documentation of that moment – it is an open potential, poiesis without techne, the creative act as an act of resistance, resistance anything that is not the idea itself. In the article ‘Art, Inactivity, Politics’ Agamben asks: “What in fact is a poem if not a linguistic operation which renders language inoperative by de-activating its communicative and informative functions in order to open it to a new possible use?” In relation to Holmqvist’s work this can be applied to Holmqvist’s appropriation of recognisable phrases from pop culture, and the

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202 Verwoert, ‘Vox Pop’.
203 Agamben, ‘Art, Inactivity, Politics,’ 140.
operation he performs is very much one of rendering them inoperative, de-activating their communicative and informative functions. The repeated phrases serve only to remind us of the context they come from, not to communicate themselves. His writings and performance are by this definition definitely poems. Taking a meta perspective, the most crucial point is the type of presence he enacts as an artist, which is the performer of poetry, the live poet. The books can be seen as potential, the unactualised work, the absence of the real presence. But it can be read in the reverse also, the live reading as the *poësis*, the potential for poetry, not actualised as in the books. Both are inoperative as pure expressions, neither art nor poetry.

### 3. Hanne Lippard

Hanne Lippard is a Norwegian artist living in Berlin. Her practice is very much about the voice, and the poetry in language. In a text for an exhibition at KunstWerke Berlin in 2017 she is described as follows: “Over the past years, Lippard has focused herself on the production of language solely through the usage of the voice. Her practice stems from design by which she utilizes the voice as a way to convey the discrepancy between *content* and *form.*” Her practice explores the voice as a medium. Her work takes the shape of vocal performances, sound installations, printed objects and sculpture, where text seems to be the material, or the script/sketch for the finished work. Compared with Karl Larsson and Karl Holmqvist her work, both the printed books and the exhibitions/performances, are more closely related to the practice of the latter.

Her exhibition Flesh at KunstWerke in Berlin 2017 was a very pared-down show visually, where her voice is present more than anything else. Her books can in this sense be seen as controlled documentation, sometimes documented before the fact. The resulting publications bring together material from readings and exhibitions, and presents an end result that, as with the published works of Larsson and Holmqvist, reads like poetry. In its final poetic form it presents itself with the pure communicability of poetry, while making art present, carrying with it the potentialities of its previous forms, but no longer *representing* anything.

Lippard herself sees the books not as poetry but as “a post-script work”, compilations of texts that have been used in performances and sound installations. This doesn’t make the books documentations of her work, because transposed from their original exhibition or event context, they are repurposed, by the artist, as poetry. In an earlier interview she mentions how *Nuances of*...

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204 “Hanne Lippard.” KW Institute for Contemporary Art.
205 “How do you approach translating work from performances and exhibitions into a book format? I see both this book and the former one published with Broken Dimanche Press, *Nuances of No*, as a post-script work. Unlike some authors or poets who write towards the end point of a book, the book is compiled from texts which I have used over the years for performances and sound-installations, a kind of retrospective insight to my own practice.” Lippard, ‘Interview: Hanne Lippard’ Kunsthall Stavanger.
No “almost became like a script for my future readings and performances.” This is similar to the way in which Karl Holmqvist’s work appears as scripts after the fact in his published books. A more effective version of the art work, untainted so to speak by the demands of the art market. The definition and use of the work is somewhat left to the viewer/reader, free to meet the work either as poetry or documentation of performance work, or as vessels containing the ideas of the artists, vessels harbouring the act of creation unmediated by judgements of taste or criticism as well as the pressures of the art market.

Reading her books as the poiesis to the praxis of her visual and aural art so to speak, open them up to a potential far wider than the specific performances, and also distributes that experience, unfetters it from the specific moment of its actualisation. Because of the nature of their distribution, through specialised bookstores and in connection to exhibitions etc, I would argue that almost every reader of one of Hanne Lippard’s books knows that she is an artist, and know that she uses her voice as medium and vehicle for her artworks. The potential for the voice is therefore present in the printed book, but wholly absent. The voice is rendered inoperative, reduced to potential, potential-not-to. The privation of the voice is a privation of the art in her work, which makes this non-work, not actualised work. The act of creation here is not a shift from potential to act, but a suspension of the production of art between potential-to-do and not-to-do. The voice itself, the original medium of the work is made inoperative, opening it to other possible uses, in this case to a different voice, a different tone or an inactive voice altogether – words on paper – poiesis – the production of work external from the artist, but a work and words that are not actualised, which does not have their own end in itself, not performing an act, not quite praxis.

Where for Larsson the work – the pleasure? – is the writing of poetry, for Lippard it can be read as a documentation of the joy of reading, a documentation of the voice. The actualised work is the reading, the recorded voice – the printed poetry is then the potential for art, the work without the labour, without the presence of art.

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206 Lippard, An interview with Hanne Lippard.
In this final chapter, through the example of poetry in art, we’ll be looking closer at the relationship between art and work as well as its relation to happiness, using the aesthetics of Agamben as an interpretive lens. We can now look at an earlier quote by Isabelle Graw on Broodthaers with more precision: “[…] the poem, in Broodthaers’ work, has usually broken free from the book’s pages in order to metamorphose into a product and, by extension, a commodity. For Broodthaers, poetry is no longer an art form exempt from the structures of commercial exploitation – if it ever was.”\textsuperscript{207} For the works of the contemporary artist-poet this is perhaps less valid. In the art market the published poetry books are rather less of a commodity. The example of Broodthaers allows us to see how the process and underlying conditions for working with poetry as an artist has shifted and evolved, and become more of a an act of resistance as the art world becomes more insular and self-referential. The gesture performed by Broodthaers was radical in its time. Being radical today means performing gestures of negation instead, distancing oneself from commodities, from \textit{techne}. This can also be read as a distancing from work, towards lived life as art as Boris Groys puts it,\textsuperscript{208} where only a documentation of this life as art is presented to audiences.

In an article on forms of negation in art, Marina Vishmidt and Anthony Iles interprets Agamben’s view on art as a critique towards utilitarianism, writing: “Agamben seeks an exit from the thorough penetration of utilitarianism and work as ‘the destiny of mankind’ by emphasising the division of potential and act in language, but maintaining a trace of their potential unity. In this sense any naturalisation of reproduction or production is negated in favour of an inoperative potential open to new uses and possibilities.”\textsuperscript{209} An inoperative potential open to new uses – as a counter to the mindless reproduction of aesthetically pleasing forms – which can also be formulated as making \textit{(poiesis)} without reproduction \textit{(techne)}. Work open to absence and non work. A possible way of reading the artist-poets work through Agamben is through this idea of the open work, which gives us an opening for \textit{poiesis} without \textit{techne}, or work that is only \textit{praxis}, acting potential life:

\begin{quote}
The rise of the poetics of the open work and of the work-in progress, founded not on an energetic but on a dynamic status of the work of art, signifies precisely this extreme moment of the exile of the work of art from its essence, the moment in which-having become pure potentiality, mere
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{207} Graw, ‘The Poet’s Seduction,’ 64.
\textsuperscript{208} Groys, \textit{Art Power}, 58.
\textsuperscript{209} Vishmidt and Iles, ‘Plastic Givens, Hard Stops: A Short Overview of Forms and Forces of Negation in Recent and Historical Art,’ 25.
being-available in itself and for itself—it consciously takes on its own inability to possess itself in its end.  

How can these works be situated as open works? As documented art labour? The quintessential work of the artist-poet – the published work of poetry circulated in art contexts – is open and in progress precisely because of its split status, because of its privation of art, and because of its place in the grey area between *poiesis* and *praxis*. They embody “the specific ambivalence of every human potential, which in its original structure always maintains a relationship with its own privation[…].” Could this be formulated not only as the privation of art but also the privation of work, the privation of labour, and consequently a step towards a happier life? Let’s revisit some of the aesthetic terms discussed in Chapter one, to see what interpretations can support this. Catherine Mills writes: “[…]the idea of art as the expression of the creative impulse and genius of the artist is condemned to repeat the metaphysics of will and, in doing so, ensure the nihilistic power – as a ‘self-annihilating nothing’ – of art in the modern era.” By displacing the art work, away from the gallery, the visual and the exhibition itself, these practices take at least one step away from the genius of the artist and closer to the original meaning of *poiesis*. Which is not to say that the work then in turn does not deal with and stage the very self-annihilating nothing that it has just escaped. Hanne Lippard is concerned with the voice, with the performance, and in her readings it is very present as an artistic will. In the published works, this shifts, and by its closeness to internet culture for example, and what reads as an inclusion of many voices, is less a willed activity, and more the unveiling of an idea. The same is true for Karl Holmqvist, whose hand and voice is extremely present in his visual work and performances, but reads much differently on the printed page. There it is rather an unveiling of the different connections already in place in popular culture and art, clever wordplay that relies on the recognisable source material. For both it is true that publishing their writings/scripts/transcripts, as poetry, functions as a display of their potential to be poets, actualised only in this instance, disguised as the absence of art.

In their apparent separation from the fixed localities of contemporary art – galleries, institutions etc – they carry the potential of the visual, potential exhibitions or works, that are, in keeping with Agamben, *more* art than when they have been actualised in exhibitions or forms that more readily function and operate in the contemporary art world and market. I would argue that the published poetry by artists functions productively within the mode of potential in Agamben’s model: in relation to a visual arts practice they are non work, reduced but with a more subtle function aimed towards availability and potentiality. The pure communicability of poetry inserted into the production of art, an implicit resistance through the act of creation. They escape both the aesthetic enjoyment of the work of art, and the consumption of the technical product. In their opposition towards being consumable

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211 Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 17.
technical products they carry a second resistance, that between the opacity inherent in a poetry collection and published books as a commercial and networking tool of dispersion, in effect folding one split within the other.

What Agamben's aesthetic framework gives us is a perspective on art not concerned primarily with content or form, but its taking place as such. In his investigations of the aesthetic possibilities in the philosophy of Agamben, William Watkin opens up a space in which the privation of art – in our argument through non art, poetry – can function as a productive category. A way to both understand the temptation for moving away from visual art, and a way of interpreting and placing it in a larger context. Referencing Agamben's nihilistic view of art, and the end of art as art, Watkin argues that it results in a double desubjectivization. The critic has knowledge of the art object but never any experience, and the artist has the experience of the process and the work but no knowledge. “Either art is pure content without form, thoughts about art, or all form without content, are as pure subjective inessence.” Watkin goes on to argue:

Modern aesthetic double desubjectivization provides us with a prototype for the following three propositions in Agamben's overall system. First as an example of poeticized desubjectivization. Second in revealing the structural interdependence of philosophy and poetry in this process: formless thought or contentless form. And finally third, how negation as such, and certainly there is no greater negation than self-annihilating nothingness, can result in a productive category hinted at in the terms of such a double negative: modern nonart as the potential for an exit from art into a futural and sustainable poiesis.

I would like to place the emphasis here on ‘an exit from art’, a way to escape or subvert the aspects of art that are locked into systems of value or use, tied to the market or visibility, into a poiesis that is sustainable, not dependent on the art world or a spectator to function. Poetry can be described as formless thought, especially in relation to fine art, where form hold such a high position. Thus poetry can become nonart, a negation with the potential for sustainable poiesis. The ‘work’ of the work of art situated outside of the artist, in the printed object, but also situated and produced outside of the immediate confines of the art market. As a specific category of art the printed poetry collection can be placed somewhere between the traditional physical object produced for the white cube, and art as lived life, displayed only as documentation, as characterised by Groys:

Art documentation thus signals the use of artistic media within art spaces to make direct reference to life itself, to a form of pure activity or pure praxis – indeed, to life-in-the-art-project – yet without wishing to represent that life directly. Art is here transformed into a way of life, whereby the work of art is turned into non-art, to mere documentation of this way of life.

The poetry collection then not exactly a mere documentation of a way of life, but a documentation of the actual act of creation, or closer to one. I don't want to categorise this as a refusal to produce visual

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214 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 114.
215 Watkin, The Literary Agamben, 114.
216 Groys, Going Public, 79.
art, not then an active will opposing creative act, but rather a disinterested or perhaps more accurately indifferent bringing forth, an inactive process of meaning that does away with the productive will of the artists in relation to the commodity of art. The printed poem becomes the unactualised potential for content and form, split between distribution and locality. Its status as art comes from its poiesis, the process of a coming into being of an idea about art as object within the market place, aesthetic convention, and ontology. It is produced as an art object, escaping the problematics of content and form. Content since it is within the model of poetry, opacity is “acceptable”. The book of poetry as a work of art carries with it an infinite potential for form. Art that withholds the presence of art as it is usually presented.

The rise of poetry is, when seen through the lens of a split origin – a crisis in art as described by Agamben – an organic reaction to the same and a way towards an art where issues of reproducibility are not destructive to its value. The poetry collection, through its intrinsic opacity, becomes an open work of an order above visual art or the visual art produced by the artist-poet. I’d like to argue that the works in question are expressions of a creative idea, produced in a way that cuts the visual material and the art object out to a degree, that excepts the work. Or as Agamben writes, “[…] a hybrid third, in which the action itself claims to present itself as a work.” We should also stop here and consider the phrase work, as in work of the artist, as Agamben studies the phrase ‘work of art’ in the chapter ‘Archaeology of the work of art’, Agamben argues, as in Man with our content, that the work is going through a crisis, wherein it is removed from “the sphere of artistic production”, pointing to how performance and the conceptual or creative activities of the artists themselves take the place of the physical art object, “what we are accustomed to consider as a ’work’.” He references ‘The Eclipse of the Work of Art’ by Robert Klein, an article published in 1967, which argues that ”[…] the attacks of the artistic avant-garde of the twentieth century were not directed at art, but exclusively against its incarnation in a work[…].” The argument Agamben makes is that the work of art must be thought of as work, that ”the being-work of the work of art” has not been investigated and thought through.

In several of his books Agamben calls for art that functions as a catalyst for philosophy, art that perhaps only reaches its full potential in relation to or in exchange with philosophy. Something similar is described in the short book The Nine Talismans by Lucie Fontaine: “To borrow the infamous phrase coined by Aristotle, these works are in potency, meaning they possess the capacity for – or the idea of – an act, though they do not carry it out into reality. And speaking of the Greek ideologue, it is worth underscoring how the following works, like Aristotle’s notion of potency, share a kind of vagueness allowing for many possible interpretations.” Here is perhaps a key to the potentialities supplied to us

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217 Agamben, Creation and Anarchy, 11.
218 Agamben, Creation and Anarchy, 3.
219 Agamben, Creation and Anarchy, 3.
220 Agamben, Creation and Anarchy, 3.
221 Fontaine, The Nine Talismans, 17.
by Agamben – potentialities as the capacity for many possible interpretations. Specifically, in the case of poetry as art, meaning the possible interpretation of art as possessing the idea of philosophy through poetry. The idea of philosophy, and the capacity for a meaning beyond the one actualised, beyond the praxis.

In his more recent writings on aesthetics, Agamben offers a slight reformulation of his critique of modern art, where the potential for resistance is more pronounced, a resistance inherent in the act of creation, and active through it. Agamben formulates this by way of Deleuze’s idea of the relation between creation and resistance.

In each act of creation there is something that resists and opposes expression. “To resist,” which comes from the Latin sisto, etymologically means “to stop, to hold down” or “to stop oneself.” This power that withholds or stops potential in its movement toward the act is impotential, the potential-not-to. That is, potential is an ambiguous being that not only is capable both of something and of its opposite, but contains in itself an intimate and irreducible resistance.222

This view of potential and creation provides a specific way of reading and looking at certain types of art that seems to withdraw visually or narratively, or art that provides an absence of what we expect in the category of art. Writing and publishing poetry and presenting it as art, instead of art or alongside art, plays on this resistance, taking the place of a hybrid third, firmly placed between potential and impotential. Agamben places all of creation in this field, between potential and impotential, “being-able-to and being-able-not-to,”223 between acting and resistance:

Human beings are capable of having mastery of their potential and having access to it only through their impotential; but precisely for this reason, there is in the end no mastery over potential, and being a poet means being at the mercy of one’s own impotential. Only a potential that is capable of both potential and impotential, then, is the supreme potential.224

Transferring one’s potential-not-to into action is another way of describing the pure act of creation, presenting the absence of art: “[…] plays, as it were, with his potential not to play.”225 Expanding on resistance and creation in relation to potential, Agamben describes the act of creation as a complicated dialectic, a dialectic:

[…] between an impersonal element that precedes and oversteps the individual subject and a personal element that obstinately resists it. The impersonal is the potential-to, the genius that drives toward work and expression; the potential-not-to is the reticence that the individual opposes to the impersonal, the characteristic that tenaciously resists expression and imprints it with its mark. The style of a work depends not only on the impersonal element, that is, the creative potential, but also on what resists and almost enters into conflict with it.226

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222 Agamben, Creation and Anarchy, 18.
223 Agamben, Creation and Anarchy, 18.
224 Agamben, Creation and Anarchy, 18.
225 Agamben, Creation and Anarchy, 18.
226 Agamben, Creation and Anarchy, 21.
Taking the creative potential and its implications one step further, we can look at the process of publishing poetry as an artist in a different light, from the point of view of the artist and the joy or happiness of making. In the book *Aesthetic Imperative* Peter Sloterdijk explores similar territory to Agamben, and identifies the same problem in modern art, albeit defined slightly different, through the metaphor of folding, arguing that art is folding into itself, in the sense that its “stepping back from the exhibition front.” Rethinking the type of visibility that is otherwise taken both for granted and seen as a measure of success. Sloterdijk sketches how this is also a reconsideration of the alliance between the artist and “the publicity machines of museums, galleries and publications.” This leads Sloterdijk to the more abstract question of whether success as an exhibiting artist can ever be the same as proof of happiness, if the two can be equated. Sloterdijk concludes this argument in a line of thought very similar to Agamben’s critique of contemporary art, ending with an interesting question:

> In all this it indicates how it shares the historical self-doubt of the creative powers. By folding in on itself it becomes complicit in the crisis of things made by human beings. What should it mean to present works on the exhibition front now, when it is actually the time for production to question itself? How should one simulate the happiness of competent craftsmanship when it has long been clear that the freedom to do creative work has been trampled down by the compulsion to put energies into the work and exploit values?

The answer to his final question is perhaps the use of poetry in art, or replacing visual art with poetry. Sloterdijk describes an art world where the creative happiness, the joy of making has been removed or is missing from art. In *Creation and Anarchy* Agamben also describes the joy of creation, and ascribes it to *poiesis*. Quoting first Spinoza’s *Ethics*: “’a joy born of the fact that a human being contemplates himself and his potential to act’ (IV, Proposition 52, Demonstration)”, Agamben goes on to describe what constitutes “an inoperativity that consists of contemplating one’s own potential to act?” This idea is mirrored in Sloterdijk’s discussion on the presence and presentation of contemporary art, where Sloterdijk seems to describe a state where the privation of art is the one state capable of bringing joy to the artist: “Is it possible for artists to resign from art without presenting their departure as a work of art? First of all – why should they leave art? When happiness can no longer be found in art but rather beside it, before it and after it, the time has come to resign from the forms of the work, of value and of the white cube.” Sloterdijk is describing the same gesture we’ve been investigating in this thesis, albeit in a more straightforward way. What he does do is clearly connecting it philosophically to happiness. Happiness as the ultimate goal and question is what Agamben describes in the end of the chapter ‘Archeology of the Work of Art’. He argues that the motions of contemporary art has become liturgy: the actions of the artist separated from the productive or reproductive and becoming an absolute

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227 Sloterdijk, *The Aesthetic Imperative*, chap. VII.
228 Sloterdijk, *The Aesthetic Imperative*, chap. VII.
229 Sloterdijk, *The Aesthetic Imperative*, chap. VII.
230 Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 27.
231 Sloterdijk, *The Aesthetic Imperative*, chap. VII.
performance, “a pure ‘liturgy’ that coincides with its own celebration and is effective *ex opere operato* and not through the intellectual or moral qualities of the artist.”\(^{232}\) He describes the practice of the artist as a performative liturgy, in which the creative activity takes the form of a true ritual, “released from every social signification and effective through the simple fact of being celebrated.”\(^{233}\) Presenting poetry instead of art shifts the work from liturgy, presenting itself as an absence of art, a hybrid third, non-liturgy. The description of artistic practice as performative liturgy void of social signification is a bleak one, a joyless state of mindless production.

Here I find it productive to completely adopt the point of view suggested by Groys in *Going Public*, that of the artist and not the spectator, interested or not. The act of writing poetry as an artist can thus be seen as a move away from the work of the artist, towards happiness, the joy of creation and the joy of ideas. *Poiesis* as an expression of creative joy, and the privation not a privation only of art itself, but a privation of the dull production and presenting ideas visually, a privation of work on the part of the artist. Rather than the lived life becoming the work of art, the liturgy if you will, the work makes the art inoperable, and the poetry shows the way towards happiness in life. Poetry as negation of work, as happiness. This view is complicated by the facts of the market discussed in Chapter 3.4, but I believe both things can be true. Publishing and distributing poetry as an artist can be a way of pleasing the market and a way of branding yourself as an artist, but it can also be a way of escaping the dullness of producing art that satisfies the disinterested spectator of the art market.

In the ending paragraph of ‘Archeology of the Work of Art’, Agamben describes art as the way in which artists attempt to constitute their life as a form of life. The potential or faculty for a type of work is not, Agamben argues, something which is suddenly bestowed on a person, or suddenly activated, but rather something accumulated through experience and the will to constitute a specific form of life:

Art is only the way in which the anonymous ones we call artists, by maintaining themselves constantly in relation with a practice, seek to constitute their life as a form of life: the life of the painter, of the carpenter, of the architect, of the contrabassist, in which, as in every form-of-life, what is in question is nothing less than their happiness.\(^{234}\)

So, artists might use forms of negation like publishing poetry, as a way of seeking the happiness in the creative act, being present as an artist through the privation of art, an art that is without actualisation, that isn't present in itself. We have reason here to return to Marina Vishmidt’s summation of Agamben’s position, as “collapsing the distinction between the making and the appreciation of art.”\(^{235}\) Taking the perspective of classical philosophy, conflating the experience of the viewer and the artist, the artist as the one appreciating the art can be read as an artist content with privation, content with keeping the art

\(^{232}\) Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 11.
\(^{233}\) Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 11.
\(^{234}\) Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 13.
\(^{235}\) Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, 155.
inoperative as visual art, potential without actualisation. More plainly, writing poetry puts the idea on display, but frees the artist from the messy task of actualising it, and it is offered instead as the hybrid third, as a privation of art, *poiesis* on display. Art without the work usually associated with art, striving towards a kind of productive inactivity. This would be a temporary inactivity, an inactivity in relation to the labour not of creating art, but producing it and give it form. The refuge of poetry for an artist, can consequently be described as an urge towards a work that is open towards the viewer, ‘available in itself’, pure potentiality but also not folded within itself in layers of meaning or marketable commodification. Not an absence of art but the privation of art to make that absence visible, and a visible absence that can be filled without the pressures of success or logic. Lived life transferred to paper. In this interpretation poetry also offers that most elusive thing, whether in art or in life, which is happiness. Pure *poiesis*, the joy of making, expressed through *praxis*, the act of simply writing, circumventing the demands of use- or market value.
Summary

The first chapter of this thesis traced Agamben's different engagements with aesthetic concepts – *poiesis*, potentiality and the act of creation. Through the thesis these concepts are tentatively connected and applied to readings of the specific category of poetry published by artists, formulating interpretations that give them meaning beyond that of a documentation of the work or a marketing gesture.

The second chapter gave a selective historical expose, tracing some particularities of poetry in art, from Broodthaers to Bernadette Corporation to today. Here the study works both ways in exemplifying the theoretical formulations of Agamben from the previous chapter and clarifying them.

In the third chapter printed poetry publications by three different artists were interpreted, in terms of what the medium and act of writing and publishing poetry means, and what kind of presence they bring forth in these works. This chapter looks more closely at the possibilities of interpreting artists poetry within the aesthetic framework of Agamben.

The final chapter ends with a formulation of the possible interpretive frame for the poetry by artists, where this poetry activates a specific type of inactivity and absence of art, which in turn can be read as an expression of *poiesis*, and as a resistance to and refuge from labour in the art market, towards happiness in the act of creation.

One of the objectives of this thesis was to formulate and apply a practical aesthetic model based on Giorgio Agamben's writing on aesthetics and related subjects. The examination and enunciation of the aesthetic aspects of Agamben's writing show the potential for their use in interpreting and contextualising poetry published in the context of contemporary art. An aesthetic terminology from Agamben is an aesthetics of privation and potential, of absence and inoperability, as well as an aesthetics of negation and resistance. A framework for looking at the tension between activity and passivity, and the resistance present there. The concept of potentiality and actualisation has also proved to be a fruitful opening for the interpretation of art leaning toward negation or withdrawal.

Another objective of this thesis was to develop an understanding of poetry collections written by artists, the works of ‘artist-poets’. Through this study we can conclude that they engender a specific understanding of 'works'. Seen from our metaperspective they are art works that bring forth the presence of the absence of art, art as negation of the workings of art. The printed poem becomes the unactualised potential for content and form, split between distribution and locality. These works occupy a very specific place of in-between, in the shadow of art as Agamben would describe it. They can rather be described as soft acts of resistance to the mentioned positions of text and poetry in relation to art, an attempt at autonomy for the artistic text, autonomous in relation to both literature and visual art. The artist-poet makes the absence of art present, and makes visible how art has ceased being art and become
a response to art criticism instead. Poetry is viewed almost derisively in art, as a gesture without content. The quality or effect of the poetry is not of interest, rather the gesture performed by writing poetry. Writing and publishing poetry and presenting it as art, instead of art or alongside art, plays on the resistance Agamben describes as inherent in creation, taking the place of a hybrid third, firmly placed between potential and impotentail. With Agamben we can see that being radical in art today means performing gestures of negation, distancing oneself and the work from commodities, from *techne*.

The exemplifying category of published poetry by artists has been examined as a conceptual gesture in itself more than the content of the poetry. The writing of poetry can be situated as a form of inaction in the context of working as an artist, and a resistance to the desire to function in the art market. They are undoubtedly the result of actual work, but they are also evidence of a certain withdrawal.

In the final chapter a specific critique is formulated from the later aesthetically leaning writings of Agamben, with support from Peter Sloterdijk and Boris Groys, in order to situate these works from the perspective of the one producing them, the artists themselves. In this way they can be interpreted as a negation of and refuge from the disinterested spectator of contemporary art, and the art market’s pressure to produce visual works that only reproduce accepted forms and exercise the viewers taste. A refuge toward happiness as an action, the writing of poetry instead of making art. The act of writing poetry as an artist as a move away from the work of the artist, towards happiness, the joy of creation and the joy of ideas. *Poiesis* as a an expression of creative joy, and the privation not a privation only of art itself, but a privation of production and presenting ideas visually, a privation of work on the part of the artist.

The strength of using Agamben’s aesthetics as a terminology and interpretive method lies in its ability to show the resistance and potential force within creative work that at first glance seem inactive or expressionless. What Agamben’s aesthetic framework gives us is a perspective on art not concerned primarily with content or form, but their taking place as such.

An aesthetic theory and terminology formulated and modelled after Agamben as examined in this thesis is not a general all-encompassing tool, but rather a specific instrument for looking at art that is difficult to define and categorise, both in terms of medium and market value, but also in terms of where the actual art of the art work takes place. This is in no way the finished version of a working model of Agamben’s aesthetics, but rather an opening for further research and definitions.
Bibliography


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