

ESSCS – Winter Seminar

Underwriting Culture/Cultures of Under-Writing

Universidade Católica Portuguesa
Lisbon, January 25-26, 2017



Bill Selak, *Writing on the Wall*



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Underwriting Culture/Cultures of Under-Writing

Underwriting generally refers to an act of guaranteeing, sponsoring, backing, enshrined in insurance practices. By literally writing under the signature of the owner of the insured cargo, by countersigning, the insurer confirmed the acceptance of the risk of the endeavor and guaranteed the insured's right to claim compensation for eventual hazard. Underwriting then provides legitimacy to an activity (shipping) and its object (cargo) and grants it institutional recognition by a regulatory body. The practice legalizes as well, by placing under the control of a body of legal practices, activities that could even eventually have been situated at its very limits (e.g. slave trading, contraband, *et alia*). Underwriting provides a promise of stability to a risky endeavor, while acting as a contract that expects to hold on the avowal of the risks it aims to back.

In literal terms however, underwriting connotes the prefix under as a resistance to the very act of writing, marrying under with counter (as in countersigning). As Jacques Derrida famously claimed, writing always connotes an element of fracture, of removal from 'the real' context. Writing bears the signature of a physical absence – of the subject and of the context – and articulates a moment of rupture, enacted as a counter act or as a mode of dissent under the very act of writing. In fact, "If a certain 'break' is always possible, that with which it breaks must necessarily bear the mark of this possibility inscribed in its structure." (Derrida, 1988:64).

The workshop aims to discuss underwriting as a conceptual tool for the analysis of culture from a threefold perspective: as an institutional act of legitimation of emerging artistic practices; as a strategy of artistic dissent; as a practice of criticality, conflating authority and critique, affirmation and denial.

Reading list:

Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context", *Limited Inc.*, Chicago: Northwestern U. Press, 1988.

Maurizio Ferraris, "The Signature", *Documentality*, New York: Fordham U. Press, 2012.

PROGRAM

Wednesday, January 25

Ernst & Young Auditorium
(Católica-Lisbon School of Business and Economics, 3rd Floor)

9:30	Introduction Isabel Capelo Gil (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon Consortium) Frederik Tygstrup (University of Copenhagen)
9:45	Alexandra Balona (Lisbon Consortium) Choreographing beyond the Self as Under-Writing practice. Speculations on hybridity, animality and animism in the work of Marlene Monteiro Freiras and Antonia Baehr
10:30	Sara Magno (Lisbon Consortium) Documentary and the Art of Underwriting
11:15	Coffee Break
11:30	Ilios Willemars (Lisbon Consortium) Underwriting and the performative effects of witnessing a marriage
12:15	Amani Maihoub (Lisbon Consortium) Autoethnography as Research: <i>Infinite Jest</i> for the Virtual Age
13:00	Lunch
14:00	Alexandra Effe (Justus Liebig University Giessen) Autobiography as authentication and denial
16:00	Visit to MAAT – Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology
20:00	Dinner (Steering Committee)

Thursday, January 26

Ernst & Young Auditorium

(Católica-Lisbon School of Business and Economics, 3rd Floor)

09:30	Underwriting the Blackbox Frederik Tygstrup (University of Copenhagen) Nanna Thylstrup (University of Copenhagen) Daniela Agostinho (CECC - University of Copenhagen)
11:00	Coffee Break
11:15	Reading Group Jacques Derrida , “Signature, Event, Context”. Maurizio Ferraris “The Signature”.
12:45	Lunch (Meeting - Steering Committee)
14:00	Vera Herold (Lisbon Consortium) Underwriting Ideology – underwriting security?
14:45	Scott William Raby (Goldsmiths, University of London) Advancing Underwriting in Art - Repurposing Contracts as a Political Strategy
15:30	Sofia Pinto (Lisbon Consortium) Under-Writing Anonymity in ‘L’Origine du Monde’

UNDERWRITING THE BLACKBOX

Frederik Tygstrup (University of Copenhagen)

Nanna Thylstrup (University of Copenhagen)

Daniela Agostinho (CECC - University of Copenhagen)

Our social infrastructures are currently being digitized on a hitherto unseen scale by a range of public, private and public-private institutions. While deeply ingrained in everyday life and open to all on interface level, the digitization processes nevertheless on a deeper level rely on complex blackboxing procedures of the protocols that govern social flows and relations.

This has given rise to a discourse on the “black box society” (see e.g. Pasquale 2016) which pits the opacities brought on by digitization at odds with values of enlightenment and transparency. The blackbox has thus today come to stand for a new and powerful component in the technological wiring of the social.

As Wendy Chun notes the discourse on black box, which is often saturated with metaphors of sorcery, easily slips into a new form of obfuscation of the material function of computers that fetishizes software to the detriment of more complicated forms of understanding computational relationships. This panel seeks to bring the analysis of the black box back into the complicated relationship between human relationship and material mechanisms by juxtaposing today’s techno-social infrastructures and a set of Derrida’s writings on Freud. We wish to explore how Derrida’s adaptation of a psychoanalytical vocabulary might give a new understanding of topology, temporality and mediality in a way that might be applied to more general analysis of blackboxed structures.

It asks: What happens when techno-social infrastructures are no longer *politically* underwritten, i.e. accountable in terms of authority, authenticity, responsibility? And how can we conceptually account for the logic of the blackbox as a locus of cultural agency? Together, these questions aim at developing a critical language about the deferral of underwriting in blackboxed systems.

Our joint presentation will focus on “Fors” and the topological architecture of the crypt and the question of the signature, “Freud et la scène de l’écriture” and the mediality of imagination, and “Le puits et la pyramide” and the temporality of inscription and the problem of repetition. The presentation will consist of three short presentations of relevant concepts and theoretical models from these texts, followed by a conversation on their import for understanding the agency and topology of blackbox-based infrastructures in contemporary culture.

ABSTRACTS

Alexandra Balona (Lisbon Consortium)

Choreographing beyond the Self as Under-Writing practice. Speculations on hybridity, animality and animism in the work of Marlene Monteiro Freitas and Antonia Baehr

This paper wishes to address some singular works of the Cape-Verdean Portuguese choreographer Marlene Monteiro Freitas and the German choreographer Antonia Baehr which, in the 21st century, are opening the choreographic realm into expanded speculations beyond the Self (as human subject), towards hybridity, animality, thingness and animism.

Considering the potentiality of contemporary choreography for criticality and political dissent— which under- and counter-writes culture, even if in the realm of the theatrical context—the present communication wishes to raise several questions through a situated hermeneutical relation with the referred choreographic works, such as: what does it mean to perform not the Self—as human, as author, as stable and autonomous subject, or even as a post-identity deconstructed subject—but instead, to bring into the theatrical context worlds that are more-than-human, that make evidence of human’s hybridity and multiplicity in relation to itself, to nonhuman animality, to thingness and nature? How does it place the artistic work in regard to the humanist modern dichotomy nature-culture, subject-object?

In this sense, we propose to analyse, on the one hand, works that convoke the (counter-) writing of man as the caesura between humanity and animality, or what Giorgio Agamben has named as the “anthropological machine” of Western thought (Agamben, 2004: 33-38). On the other hand, we wish to analyse how the choreographic speculations of subjectivities beyond the Self—hybrids, nonhuman animals, animal-human, things-human, puppet-human, or nameless materiality—in a more-than-human-world, appear as provisional (artistic) answers to the complexity of our current global situation. We are referring, firstly, to global advanced and neoliberal capitalism with the consequential increasing of social and economic inequalities, but also, secondly, to the pernicious capitalization of everything that lives, from seeds, to water, to affects and social relations, to individual performances, creativity, subjectivity and experiences. Thirdly, acknowledging what has been defended by a large scientific commission—that we have entered another geologic epoch entitled The Anthropocene, where human action is already the most influential one in our entire ecosystem—the referred choreographic propositions by addressing subjectivities beyond the human, and non-human materiality also point to the referred problematics.

Bibliographic reference:

Agamben, Giorgio (2004), *The Open. Man and Animal*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Sara Magno (Lisbon Consortium)

Documentary and the Art of Underwriting

My current research explores how documentary strategies have emerged as being among the most prominent aspects of contemporary art practice today, something that can be traced back to the early nineties, particularly with the curatorial approach of Documenta X and 11 where documentary practice featured heavily. In order to study documentary form within the contemporary art field, particularly the use of video and video installation as a primary object of study, the notion of *documentality* emerges as a conceptual tool inscribing this artistic practice in the social and political field.

Contemporary documentary practice generally reflects on the organization of documents and reorganizes the subjectivities subsequently produced by the documents themselves. Thus, the recent study of Maurizio Ferraris on *documentality*, as a theory that provides documents with a dominant position within the ontology of social reality, can give us an important insight on artworks that use documentary strategies to secure their social and political relevance. However, in his book, Ferraris does not specifically discuss documentary strategies used in artworks, he mentions documents as something that always precede the artwork. He refers to artworks as a kind of documental inscriptions (*work = inscribed act*), which he considers as part of the world of entertainment and projects them to the “futile peak of the documental pyramid. (...) They are inscriptions of acts that have no practical propose and, at the same time, they are material objects that have no instrumental value.” (Ferraris, 2013: 272) On the other hand, he considers documents as the “key to unlock the phenomenon of artworks” and as such he questions how can a theory of documents underwrite an artwork.

In addition, I would like to recall the filmmaker and writer Hito Steyerl’s text *Politics of Truth* where she intersects Foucault’s notion of *governmentality* with documentary. Here, Steyerl enunciates the possibility of the documentary form to pertain in the production of truth as “documentality”, i.e. a line that crosses *governmentality* and the production of truth through documentary forms.

Documentality as Steyerl defines it is the “pivotal point, where forms of documentary truth production turn into government – or vice versa (...) here scientific, journalistic, juridical or *authentistic* power/knowledge formations conjoin with documentary articulations” (Steyerl: 2003). Ferraris briefly mentions Foucault’s “governmentality” to draw the conclusion that citizens today feel more affected by the power of state control than when under totalitarian regimes because of the state’s embrace of technology, surveillance and systems of registration. Yet, what Ferraris seems to dismiss is the fact that also the production of documentary films has historically underwritten technologies of control, surveillance, normalization and other police techniques. The acknowledgement of a relation between documentary and *governmentality* allows me to contribute a discussion of documentary images and documentary filmmaking together with Ferraris’ theory. My aim for this presentation is to articulate the notion of *documentality*, and to question how can this articulation provide theoretical/institutional recognition of contemporary documentary practice.

Ilios Willemars (Lisbon Consortium)

Underwriting and the performative effects of witnessing a marriage

In a 2012 ruling by the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights, it was decided that a woman who had been living together with her partner for over eighteen years and had had two children with him, was in violation of a court order when she refused to testify against her partner in a court of law. This violation resulted in her immediate confinement. In her defense, the woman had argued that she was unduly forced to testify against her partner and should have been exempted from the general rule that one has to testify before a court when one is called to do so because of the similarity of her situation to that of a married couple. According to Dutch law both married couples and registered partners are exempted from testifying against their partners. All others are not.

Unfortunately for the couple in case, the European judges decided to reinforce the Dutch law reaffirming that *only* those who are legally married or in a registered partnership are exempt from testifying against their partners. In order to become married or to register as partners, one needs to have witnesses present at the legal event at which the partnership is formalized.

In this short presentation I intend to consider the concept of *underwriting* in the context of being a witness to a marriage. It seems to me that a witness, or the witnesses, to a marriage perform a similar act to that of an insurer when he signs a document stating that he will insure those who pay him, that their risks are covered.

I thus propose to consider the act of witnessing and signing a marriage certificate as an act of underwriting; an act both reliant on convention and reproducing conventional ways of constituting a marriage. An act, therefore, that draws on the authority of a tradition and the institutional and infrastructural means of Law and State- or Church authority, and in doing so is able to confer this legitimacy onto the marriage at hand at.

To say that a witness performs an act of underwriting means to say that this witness guarantees that something was indeed agreed upon and signs a document confirming this. In the case of the witness at a marriage, the witnessing and the signing coincide to produce the subject that we then call the witness. In other words, a witness is someone who signs in order to confirm an observation made by the signing subject.

I argue that the act of underwriting as witnessing can thus be understood as a performative act. If witnessing a marriage and signing the required documents to formalize the marriage is indeed performative in its nature, we may wonder what event is brought about through this act of seeing and signing besides the appearance of the subject we call the witness.

Focusing on the Dutch context, one of the effects of being married is that one is legally exempted from testifying against one's spouse should this spouse be charged with a crime in a court of law.

As a necessary precondition to a valid marriage, the witnesses thus perform an act that allows for those who are thereby rendered married to be silent in the face of accusations and questioning. This condition of being exempted, that is partly produced by the act of underwriting performed by the witnesses, sets those who are married apart from the rest of society by granting them the specific right *not* to testify against one another.

Considering the above, it seems to me that the concept of underwriting as witnessing opens onto a rather peculiar understanding of the performative. If to underwrite the vows of a marriage, relying on the authority that was granted to the figure of the witness in the past, is to sign and lend support to an event that might occur in the future, what does it mean that this event itself takes place in a peculiar form – which is indeed exceptional because it appears as the exception to the rule that one has to testify – of *not-speaking* or refusing to turn oneself into a witness against one's partner? Or again, what does it mean to suggest that the performative witnessing produces, in part, the necessary preconditions for refusing to become a witness at a later point in time and for another subject?

What happens when underwriting, understood as witnessing a marriage, is thus not only the institutional guarantee that the marriage is valid, but also performs the guarantee that one does not have to speak when asked to do so. More specifically, the guarantee that one is in an exceptional position, a position which is refused to others and is always already above the general rule of law. The position, namely, of never having to turn oneself into a witness or never having to be turned into a witness by others. A position from which one can refuse to sign a statement.

I wonder if underwriting in this form can be seen to overwrite the traditional understanding of performativity that suggests that support is necessary for the continuation of speech or action, by suggesting that institutional support is also the precondition for a failure to testify or witness. If this last point is granted, I propose that we need to wonder if the power of the performative is not all too readily extended in all directions, turning performativity into an all-encompassing notion that allows for both speech and silence, action and passivity.

Perhaps this last claim can be most productively reread through Derrida's notion of the *L'avenir* as the impossible transcendent concept that allows for an event to come about without the necessary preconditioning produced by performativity. If this is the case, the act of underwriting, the act of signing a marriage certificate, does not allow for the event of silence to come about but rather renders it harmless by incorporating it into the immanent structure of law and authority. Incidentally, this understanding of underwriting can thus also be read as a critique of the notion of marriage itself.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the performative act of witnessing-a-marriage in the first instance, is turned back upon itself in the second instance, when a spouse is asked to testify, because at this point the witnessing has already taken place, and that from hereon no further witnessing is necessary. This understanding of underwriting suggests that to underwrite is to witness so that others do not have to. It is perhaps at this juncture that we approach most closely the similarities between the insurance and the marriage. In both cases, the underwriter notes so that others will not have to take note any longer. Or, in the words of a newlywed spouse: 'they witnessed our blindness in love now, so that we can be blind in court in the future'.

Amani Maihoub (Lisbon Consortium)

Autoethnography as Research: Underwriting *Infinite Jest* for the Virtual Age

David Foster Wallace's (1962–2008) encyclopedic novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) is 1,079 pages long and includes 338 endnotes. Artist Corrie Baldauf journeys through this massive text, tagging more than 2,600 references to color. In the second phase of the project, Baldauf carries on for subsequent second and third copies and turns to Twitter to share live updates on her progress through the book. This paper probes Baldauf's artistic practice as an experiment in visual ethnography (Hall Foster, 1996). It examines her approach to reading as an exercise in visualizing obsession, filtering dystopia (*Optimism Filters*), and digital intimacy. Wallace voiced concern over the troubled future for fiction in the information age. As an ethnographer, Baldauf transfigures *Infinite Jest* for a virtual audience. I argue that her project (re)produces *Infinite Jest* as an auratic-interactive work of art in a playful investigation of the verbal, the visual, and the tactile (Walter Benjamin, 1936). It is an autoethnography that conflates the archival and the idiosyncratic and confuses authorship (Deborah Reed-Danahay, 1997). Understood as such, this paper highlights the redemptive power of autoethnography as a mode of artistic production.

Alexandra Effe (Justus Liebig University Giessen)

Autobiography as authentication and denial

My paper will explore the two senses of underwriting delineated in the call for papers: 1. legitimization, promising stability; 2. fracturing, removal from “the real” context, rupturing, creating instability/uncertainty. I will show how autobiographical writing functions in both ways, namely to affirm truth and authenticity but also to create a gap between world and storyworld, to signal fictionality, to destabilize truth. I will relate these literary issues to what has been labelled the post-factual or post-truth age.

Vera Herold (Lisbon Consortium)

Underwriting ideology – underwriting security?

When underwriting an insurance policy, a mortgage contract or securities, financial institutions take upon themselves the risk of these guarantees, becoming liable in the event of financial losses thus soothing their clients' worries and anxieties about the future. While this liability-shifting mechanism conveys a sense of security, it does not avoid loss *per se*, as it merely offers compensation for loss, revealing its inadequacy in a world that seeks absolute security (Wertheimer, 2006). Can underwriting an ideology during times of political unrest or under dictatorships make the future seem less fearsome and convey a similar illusion of a risk-free future? The Nazi ideology and its concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* contained such a social promise – if one was part of that community. Many Germans underwrote Nazi ideology without (entirely) subscribing to it. Can this type of underwriting be interpreted as a liability-shifting mechanism? Were the reluctant underwriters of Nazi ideology insuring themselves against the very ideology they were underwriting?

If writing outlives the writer and can remove itself from context, as Derrida claims, and if contracts and promises are social objects, which Ferraris defines as inscribed social acts, is it possible to retrace such underwritings and reread them as a liability-shifting mechanism?

Keywords: *underwriting, ideology, Volksgemeinschaft, social object, inscribed social acts*

References

WERTHEIMER, Eric (2006), *Underwriting: the Poetics of Insurance in America, 1722-1872*, Stanford University Press

Scott William Raby (Goldsmiths, University of London)

Advancing Underwriting in Art - Repurposing Contracts as a Political Strategy

In western democracies, underwriting exists in a number of ways in contemporary art practice, but mostly (and historically) as funding in the form of grants, initiatives, and art funds. In the past, these were largely, although not entirely, publicly funded, and hence free from most marketplace pressure until neoliberal regimes began to take over local and national funding bodies and either gutted or privatized these traditional forms of public funding for art. These previously robust forms of public funding acted as the main form of stable and consistent underwriting in art for most of the developed world.

Given these austerity conditions, which seemingly continue in perpetuity, how can artists respond to the current lack of underwriting within the societies in which they live and work? I will argue that by taking up the artist authored contract as a site of production artists could explore potentially emancipatory outcomes that can make public various political, philosophical, and socio-economic claims in a realizable format that simultaneously offers aesthetically intriguing propositions.

Stated differently, new versions of artist contracts could act as a form of articulating the need to expand underwriting in art. In conjunction with the conference theme, this could play out as a strategy of artistic dissent, as a practice of criticality conflating authority/critique & affirmation/denial, as well as setting up the framework for institutional acts of legitimization of emerging artistic practices.

Hence, by further articulating the specific elements of contracts, how they have operated in the past in art production by examining radical models from the late 60's early 70's, (Daniel Buren, Seth Sigelaub, et. al) and tying this into contemporary politics of protest within the framework of left-accelerationism, I seek to further discuss (in my proposed presentation) potential pathways in which new contracts could be created to perpetuate further underwriting.

Sofia Pinto (Lisbon Consortium)

Under-Writing Anonymity In *L'Origine Du Monde*

In my previous work (master thesis), I was interested in uncommissioned and spontaneous artworks and thus became involved in the notion of graffiti and street art as the transgression of property, ownership, and authorship in public space.

Interestingly, anonymous graffiti and street art are particularly perceived as dangerous and vandalistic, as if the absence of a recognized author would further delegitimize the practice. Notwithstanding, anonymity can be used as a strategy of countering hegemony or authority, eluding retaliations.

Presently working on contemporary counter practices of self-representation as a form of empowerment, would I have to consider “anonymity”, beforehand, as an undesirable condition? What is it in stake when one reclaims an identity or recognition? To particularize this discussion, I propose to focus on Deborah De Robertis performance (2014), which consisted in exposing her genitals under Gustave Courbet’s *L'Origine Du Monde*. The famous painting, portraying a disembodied female genitalia, is signed by Courbet, but commissioned, and thus firstly owned, by art patron Khalil Bey. De Robertis performance not only contests the anonymity of the woman’s body in painting, it also consists in an uncommissioned and illegal event in the museum.

The concept of underwriting, in this context, could be discussed as a form of: art commissioning; authoring (signing and validating) the artwork; re-appropriating someone else’s artwork; contestation; and/or finally, rejecting anonymity.