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Giving It Away

**Constantina Zavitsanos on Disability, Debt, Dependency
Interview / Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez**

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Rebecca Sanchez and Mara Mills interviewed Constantina Zavitsanos on January 9, 2019, in the New Museum café, with the assistance of Voice Memos on an iPhone and an ASL interpreter. They had already communicated over email, postponing the meeting several times as a result of hospitalization, depression, lack of childcare, precarious employment and work overload, adverse side effects of medications, heartbreak, common illness, and difficulties with interpreter scheduling. Their full conversation, edited here for clarity, superimposed two states: the convivial and the formal.

MARA MILLS & REBECCA SANCHEZ: *So much of your art is concerned with the impossible work requirements of late capitalism. How does disability relate to labor and debt in the uninhabitable social spaces where you have managed to find fugitive intimacy and the means for re/assembly?*¹ *In your 2017 article “The Guild of the Brave Poor Things,” we love the way you and Park McArthur figure disabled people as “extra,” in all the senses of that word: excessive, abundant, common, extraordinary, left over, surplus.*

CONSTANTINA ZAVITSANOS: I think one of the things art does best is to deal with and in the impossible. And capitalism is always late to catch up to this work. Dependency and labor are often conceived in opposition to one another, but of course are more a slurry or shifting set. Okay, first, of course disabled people can and do work—both in the classically recognized sense and also because, you know, it’s hard work to be disabled, even if you’ve been barred from work, or are behind bars and working, or laid up in bed not working, which is to say resisting work, working resistance, or maybe some would say exercising the right not to work. Like we could easily say need-and-care or desire-and-in/value in place of dependency-and-labor. Marta Russell and Ravi Malhotra might get at this through their writing on disability and capitalism.²

... Disability and labor aren’t separate entities, which makes me think, okay, why are we being told they are? Why are we accepting these posits as positions? Like, what is separating this obviously already-enmeshed mess into these neat categories as antagonistic subjects? What is the seam of work?

MM: *Sarah Rose’s book No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s–1930s is all about how disabled people have always worked, and how at a certain moment in industrial capitalism in the US, around World War I, only certain kinds of work got fairly compensated and other kinds of labor no longer counted as work.*

CZ: This is a question for Marxism as well. We are told how capital depends on labor, how the dependency of the boss or landlord is parasitic on labor, a powerful host. But the obvious problem here is that dependency is not what's wrong with the boss. We're all dependent. The reason that the boss is bad is the opposite: the disavowal of that common dependency, and the cost at which that disavowal is extracted.

One problem is the construction of need as lack, when need is better understood as wealth, and simultaneously the construction of care as labor which has to find its recognition in exchange of some kind. I'm interested less in reciprocal give and take, than in something like a give-and-give, or take-and-take. What I mean is conveyed by the sexual senses of those terms, the way that to *take it* or to *give it* share meanings. The moment you enter a process of exchange, you're inevitably surrounded by its excess or remainder, which always clouds or enriches it. This is especially true of "care work." Until we start to see life as labor we will never really see work. We'll stay like Wages for Housework, insisting, "We work!"—I'd like to include them in a crip understanding of life and labor, but I don't think they are necessarily thinking with disability per se, so I'm just trying to help them out, because dependency and need are ground states for the question of reproduction in and beyond birthing and working.

Work is for one thing only, and that's to provide for the needs or conditions of life, to *condition* life. All work is care work. Until we see all life-and-death as invaluable, which is to say until we work with and beyond the notion of the production of value by labor, and into the reproduction or transduction of invalue in the nonopposition of life and death, we won't really recognize labor—precisely because we will have failed to recognize the dependency we share. This is debt.

And yes, need is a form of wealth. We are surplus, we are common, we are extra. We are a site of accumulation that is marked as disposable. But rather than figuring us as extra, I'm more interested in the disfiguring that disabled life offers to consensus-based reality, what it gives as waste and/or as abundance, which is to say what's being given away or given a way or taking a way, making no way, again—that impossible life of dreams, art, you know, living in all those space-times deemed "extra."

MM: *I like what you're saying about "giving it away." Is this a motto for you as someone who works on debt? What does "giving it away" mean to you in terms of disability? Because earlier in our conversation you were, like, "I don't want to define it, I want to give it away."*

CZ: I have a broad indefininition of disability—I haven't defined it. I want to keep it indefinite and put it at the level of life. Disability is seen as akin to death, even deemed "a fate worse than death." Whereas it's quite obviously the ground state of life. Or, to put it more precisely, disability is one site of the nonopposition of life and death. I'm grateful to J. Kameron Carter for using that phrase in a conversation with my partner, Amalle—we have been thinking about it since.

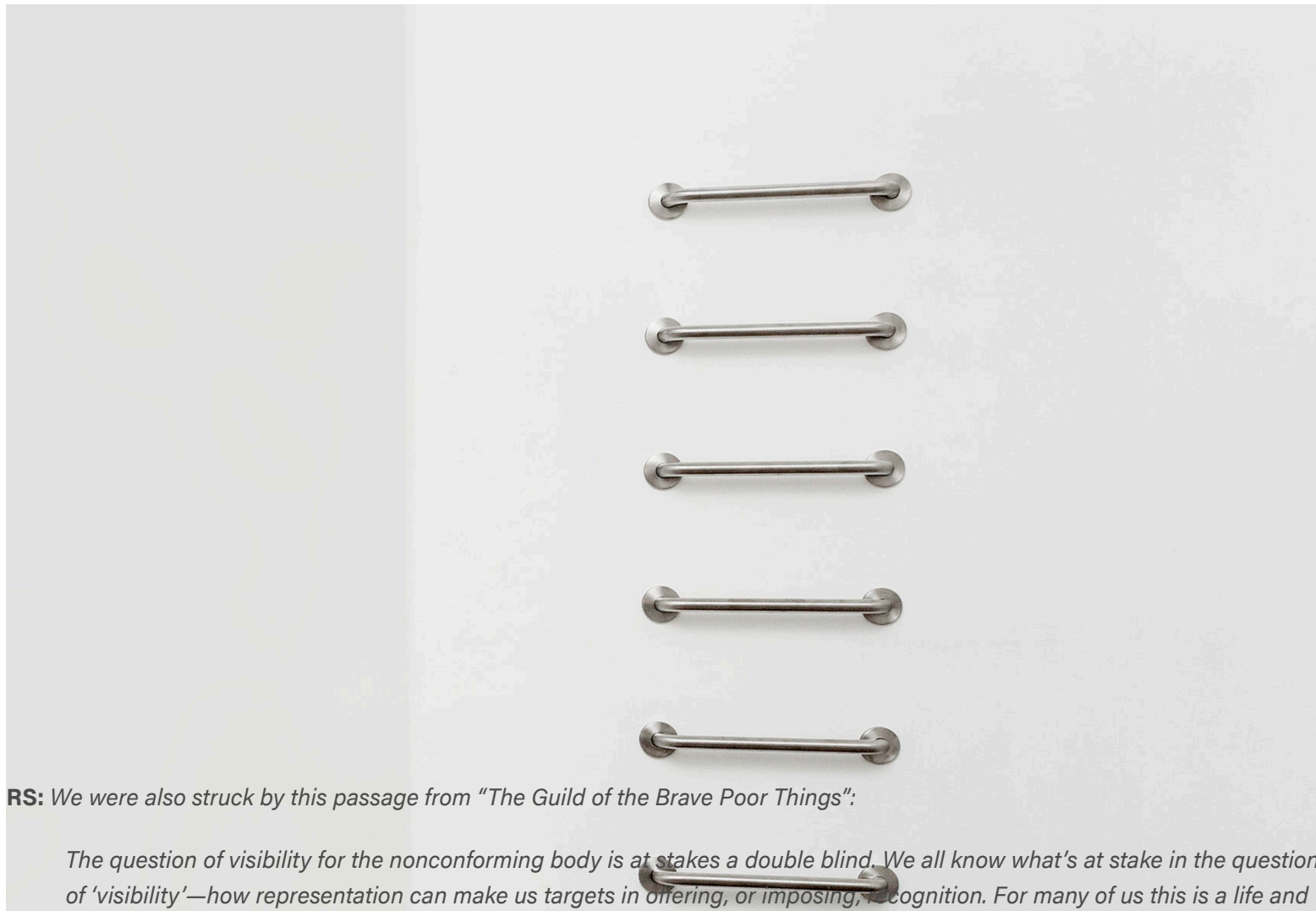
MM: *Do audiences recognize the role that disability plays in your work? Or rather, when do they? Where do you think disability exists in your work?*

CZ: Disability runs through all my work. I usually say dependency because it gathers notions of debt and disability, which are also questions of labor and distribution. I think my works are often read through labor *or* through disability, rarely both. But my work isn't organized by representations of labor *or* disability. A stack of debt has everything to do with disability because it's about dependency. A bed is all bound up with labor because sleep, in whatever sense—restorative, recreative—reproduces the working body. I do some of my best work asleep. And my access bars piece [*Specific Objects (stack)*, 2016] points to distribution—the standardized spacing of the bars on the wall draws on the history of access codes derived from disabled veterans' body metrics and applied to disabled people at large under what's deemed "universal design." It's also a readymade, which directly invokes questions of labor.

RS: *The pressure to define disability in particular ways can't be untethered from the violence of capitalism—there's often a sense that we need to draw a circle around who counts and who doesn't in order to make rights-based claims in ways that are legible within that system.*

MM: *Like how, in the academic system, only certain things count as learning disabilities, and those somehow matter in a way that other disabilities don't, even though the whole environment—infrastructural, social, economic—impacts one's ability to learn.*

CZ: I mean, yeah, disability has a privileged relationship to form, deformity, and deforming. It has this cool *incapacity* to deform the very categories of disabled and nondisabled, as well as all the subcategories imposed on disability itself—physical, cognitive, sensory, et cetera—which can't be disentangled in our bodymind.



RS: *We were also struck by this passage from “The Guild of the Brave Poor Things”:*

The question of visibility for the nonconforming body is at stake a double blind. We all know what’s at stake in the question of ‘visibility’—how representation can make us targets in offering, or imposing, recognition. For many of us this is a life and

death situation—a bond entered as a double bind, and all bound up with one another. For many of us, it is a life or death situation—a gamble we ante with a blind. And so we ask, how can we live? And we think one response to this call (among so many) is the love below—the stakes of which are double blind.³

Given this issue's theme ("Disability and the Politics of Visibility"), we were wondering if you could elaborate on this "double blind" of visibility and the ways your work makes present subject positions, experiences, knowledges that are often absent from mainstream public discourse and how these praxes differ from the forms of representation whose dangers you register above. Are there words other than visibility that you use to describe these practices?

CZ: The notion of visibility is related to knowledge. It's into seeing in the sense more of feeling than of representation. In that essay, we were thinking about gambling—of probability, thresholds and doors—that is, access in the sense of traversing a threshold, but also access in the sense of knowledge of what is on the other side. For example, the three doors on the game show *Let's Make a Deal*, where the threshold represents a question of probability and a question of knowledge that is suspended. When people talk about going in blind, or other variants on that, it's a slur conflating blindness with the position of a compromised observer. We're into the slur—it slides toward something that interests us—but we reject the ableist insult.

In poker, the blind is a forced bet that rotates from one player to the next. The blind goes first and others must choose to call (match), raise, or fold. The blind puts in the minimum bet for everyone, the entry price of that hand. They're the only player who can't decline to play, because they initiate the game. They can win or lose that hand, but they have to play at least one round, because their money goes in the pot, no matter what.

A double *bind* is an apparent but false choice, a lose-lose. Two determinants, two ways of losing, are held in a state of indeterminacy. It's double because it looks like "or," but it's actually "and." It's not life or death, it's life *and* death. Ride *and* die.

We were thinking about what it is to superimpose these two states, the "and" of the double bind and the "or" of the blind. Imagine it as an eclipse—one body moving in front of and occluding another—such that playing (the blind) is superimposed

over being bound (the double bind). That's what we meant by "double blind."

The double blind describes the stakes of dependency, or love. Something you are bound to do that you still play at anyway. The stakes are so low—like, the lowest; they're common, basal, banal, deep. It's the hardest easy thing, the falling in and through of love.

For disability, some things will need to be held in superposition precisely because there are two or more co-extant states here; it's a both/and, not an either/or—a no-state dissolution. This is what I mean by deforming: dissolving boundaries and still being bound, bonding in this way that nonlocality conditions, the informality of animateriality and anamaterial presence. My bodymindsoul is already touching yours despite the juridical notion of consent and in the actual haptics of "feeling with" that the word *consent* is meant to attend to, which is to say care for.

Okay, so, hmm, superposition, interference, hapticality, contiguous and noncontiguous touch, telephonics, tectonics, plating—as in serving dinner, service, digestive discursion, inertial force, immobility, movement, dark fluid, blackness, fatness, flow, thickness, scale, frame, slip, feel, I don't know, maybe just love—these are some other words I'd like to put on beyond visibility.

MM & RS: *Have you always included visual descriptions in the captions for artworks you exhibit (or the images you include in your publications)? Your captions are works of art themselves. Sometimes minimal, sometimes maximal—especially when you are describing the accessibility of spaces or live events—your captions are never "neutral." They offer juxtaposition, anachronism, expansion, contortion, invitation, and searching critique of the images they refer to. They are occasions for foregrounding disability, race, and gender; for reckoning with bodily, cultural, and affective differences—and their social inequalities. What is the role of description in your work? The relation between text and image?*

CZ: It's only been in recent years that I've made attempts to provide image descriptions for exhibited work or publication, and I'll just say that working with people and venues that are actually already doing this, or at the very least are open to allowing it, is everything.

The role of visual description in my work is twofold: to provide access, and to do what I do with any other material as a sculptor, which is to use it as a material, maybe even let it use me, too. These two roles are held in superposition, the way a wheel may have two motions at the same time: spinning on its axis and moving forward on a plane. They're not in conflict.

Image description has long been thought of as translation, with translation's loss and gain. While often I make the work and then describe it after, I've recently rethought what it might be to use access as a primary material for works in sculpture, sound, video, and text, such that description or vibration or captioning might tend to the thickness of text and come first, even to the point of determining a work's form.

In some video collaborations I have made (some with Park McArthur, and one with Amalle Dublon), we let open captioning be a kind of score for the sound and spoken components, rather than functioning as description. Park uses access as a primary material as well in her piece *PARA-SITES* (2018), where visual description, both audio and text, functions as description, as access, *and* as the work "itself." Jordan Lord and Carolyn Lazard are working with captioning in really amazing ways, and I have learned a lot from and with them.

To start with access as a primary material of the work is not only to completely rethink basic ideas about aesthetics and taste as they relate to sensation, but also to dislocate the artwork from itself. It's not to say that the text, sound, and description are equivalent, but that the artwork can't be located in any one of these sensory modes as a primary site. There's a question of nonlocality there that comes out of an opening up of the position of the observer, which is kind of a quantum physics question that Amalle and I were working on.

Descriptions often emphasize clarity or neutrality, which for me is a problem—and as an artist I love a decent formal problem. Right now I'm trying to work with the grain of crossed purpose that produces richness, fullness, texture. Sometimes occlusion reveals via concealment. Some things typically lost in translation are gained in the static of an undifferentiated noise. I'm thinking here of the ever capacious hold of nothing to render anything or something, like snow on a TV that awaits the image

and is every possible image. I just want the immaterial to come through, too. I'm more into the oracular than the ocular at the moment—this incapacity to know that necessitates having to feel your way through.

This exchange has been edited and amplified for publication.

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BUY "DISABILITY + VISIBILITY" 2018/2019

Constantina Zavitsanos is an artist who works in sculpture, performance, text, and sound; Zavitsanos lives in New York City and teaches at The New School. **Mara Mills** is associate professor of Media, Culture, and Communication and co-director of the Center for Disability Studies at New York University. **Rebecca Sanchez** is an associate professor of English and co-director of the Disability Studies program at Fordham University.

#Interview

#42.04

#Winter 2018/2019

#Constantina Zavitsanos

#Mara Mills

#Rebecca Sanchez

Source: Winter 2018/2019

Credit: Interview / Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez

References

- 1 "Constantina Zavitsanos: Speculative Planning Session with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney," New Museum Events, <https://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/472/constantina-zavitsanos-speculative-planning-session-with-fred-moten-and-stefano-harney>; New Museum staff uses the phrase "intimate economies and fugitive relations" in relation to Zavitsanos' work.
- 2 Marta Russell and Ravi Malhotra, "Capitalism and Disability," in *Socialist Register 2002: A World of Contradictions*, ed. Colin Leys and Leo Panitch (London: Merlin Press, 2002), 211-228.
- 3 Constantina Zavitsanos and Park McArthur, "The Guild of the Brave Poor Things," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, eds. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 236-254.

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