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# Precarious Straits

By Marina Vishmidt

What is obscured by the identification of the cultural worker as exemplary flexibilised worker or 'precarian'? Marina Vishmidt interrogates the recent fashion for equating artists with other forms of insecure (service) workers who lack their accompanying cachet

In recent years, there have been myriad attempts in curatorial, critical and media sectors to index the characteristics of their fields to the wider structural transformations in the landscape of work. These have mainly been enunciated along the axes of 'creativity' and 'flexibility' once deemed endemic to the artist as constitutive exception to the law of value and now valorised as universally desirable attributes in neoliberal policy statements and their bio-economic implementations. Many of the current tendencies to formulate analyses through the prism of culture as labour have begun to discuss the generality of conditions across fields of social production under the rubric of 'precariousness'. 'Precariousness' as a term strives to evoke all the downsides of the institutional embrace of informality. This embrace occludes the gleeful despatch of Keynesian social contracts or other state mediations of capital's risk, the etiolation of organised labour, and the 'personalised domination' of the deregulated workplace that Paolo Virno discusses in his writing.[1] 'Precariousness' signals a common thread of instability and exposure in the new landscape of work, shadowing the otherwise disparate life prospects of everyone from illegal service workers to academics and web designers. The real subsumption of social life in 'cognitive' capitalism is granted, and this subsumption has a paradoxical face: the more life is work, the less is work guaranteed to assure the propagation of life. Therefore 'precariousness' marks the real and ideological poverty of capital's subjectification, and, hopefully, the site for a broadly-based contestation of its effects.

[IMAGE] Angelo Rindone, *Maternita*, poster from the Chainworkers' campaign, which promotes the cult of San Precario > .....

As a diagnosis, 'precariousness' seems, well, remarkably flexible, mobile and adaptable. 'Precariousness' has surfaced in a number of recent interventions: at workshops in flagship institutions and in self-organised spaces, exhibitions, screenings and investigative, textual and audio-visual practices emanating from social centres.[2] It has scaled the agenda of European public art research initiative *Republicart*, which devoted a special issue of its web journal to the 'Precariat' in August 2004.[3] There have also been high profile national campaigns resisting the evisceration of legal statutes which recognise the tenuous economic bases of cultural work (*Intermittents du Spectacle*).[4] Some of these projects, particularly the Unionising Workshop at London's Flaxman Lodge held in June 2004, have moved the debate on from the production of an abstract parity between the reproduction of subjects in the 'social factory' or the threadbare equation of wildly dissimilar types of communication work as 'immaterial labour'. Those discussions also thematised the connection between the production of subjectivity in 'creative work', the refusal of work, and the recomposition of workers as a class autonomous from, if always immanent to, the capitalist social relation, inspired by readings from the 'Italian laboratory' of Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno. There have been some developments in a media activist milieu also, with Italy's Chainworkers [5] setting out to mobilise the plurality of the casualised workforce abandoned by traditional unions by providing legal advice and material facilities, coordinating actions and even the ordaining of a new saint who intercedes for the 'precariat'.

The account which would have cultural production as exemplary is valid insofar as cultural economies spawn the prototypes emulated in most labour regimes that rely on unremunerated and mystified work to ensure the lopsided distribution of profit and prestige, as well as the deployment of 'creativity' to soft-pedal submission to these regimes. In that light, the artist or information worker is a model

precarian, traversed as she is by intangible demands to commodify the very routines of her survival and the very idiom of her critique. However, what may also be instructive in the uses of 'precariousness', especially those that try to critically appropriate the figure of the artist as the ideal pliant and omni-creative subject of capital, is the omission of the ordinary invisibility that always sustained the free movement of capital, Keynesian or networked: the flexible, informal, spontaneously value-adding sites of housework, personal care, seasonal and surreptitious labour the disposable labour that was always at the core of the process if not the narrative of accumulation. The discernible eclipse of housework, care work, etc. in the cultural turn to 'precariousness', not only misses a whole swathe of the substance of 'relational' or 'affective' capitalism, but risks embedding itself precisely in the terms that it is interrogating the dogma of 'creativity'. Whereas at one time domestic work was excluded from Marxian theory on the basis of its exclusion from the exchange of abstract labour power, as mere 'reproduction', nowadays it is excluded from critiques of emergent forms of labour not just because it is not considered 'creative', not just because it is unpaid, but because 'creativity' supplies an alibi to an ossification of social and productive relations which cannot admit, let alone imagine, the challenge posed by the destruction of housework as a discrete activity.

Certainly, there have been sociological forays into the resurgence of (under)paid domestic work,[6] and Precarias a la Deriva have allocated much of their research to the ongoing invisibility of care work as the motor of restructured and informationalised capital, with a focus on the preponderance of women in 'precarious' sectors such as housework, such as call centres. Nonetheless, the discursive emergence of the term 'precariousness' to denote a shift away from 'immaterial labour' as both too precise and too constraining a descriptor, has often entailed an emphasis of the cultural worker as the salient of precariousness. Yet we do not need to strain to see that 'precariousness' has more to do with a generalised seepage into the working world of the kind of informal and mundane degradation formerly confined to the corridors of labour without value, labour without sociality, labour without end domestic labour.

*We pose, then, as foremost, the need to break this role of housewife the chrysalis in the cocoon that imprisons itself by its own work, to die and leave silk for capital.* Mariarosa Dalla Costa

In her 1971 text *Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Mariarosa Dalla Costa proposes that the marginalisation of women's labour in housework presupposes the division and organisation of labour in capitalism as a whole. The housewife is the archetypal privatised industry, providing services that could and should be socialised. If capital relies on the family to compensate for the psychic, social and economic antagonisms of paid work, if the family is the locus of reproduction of labour power and its discipline, then the refusal of capitalist family structures amounts to refusal of work tout court. Women are thus uniquely situated to contaminate the whole of society with their struggle for self-determination a struggle that is irreducible to securing 'fulfilling' work outside the home. While it would be slightly tendentious to transplant this analysis unmodified into a present at least marginally inflected by the capillary action of 30-odd years of feminism, the articulation of invisible and naturalised exploitation inseparable from the production of surplus value still holds, in a social field both stratified and homogenised by such production. Housewives, yes, but also children, migrants, prisoners, welfare recipients, the elderly, the demented, the drivers and the passengers of buses. It is crucial to note here that production of value does not automatically translate into the site of conflict, otherwise Dalla Costa would be fêted as one of the pioneers of cultural studies. It is housework and childcare that, as neglected site of production of value, is also a neglected site of conflict, as it is pivotal to accumulation. In staunch biopolitical terms, the family as control centre of life is thereby the control centre of productive potential.

Dalla Costa's analysis may also be leveraged to expose another dissymmetry in the adequation of cultural life forms with precariousness: the function of discipline in the production of subjectivity specific to the social arena in question. The disciplinary function of the family is well-rehearsed; the disciplinary function of culture is perhaps a bit more esoteric, bracketing as it does the image of culture as emancipatory. But this is precisely what calls for scrutiny in the formulation of the artist as precarious worker. Culture/art is a tremendous disciplinary idiom in Western societies, and this is instantiated around us in ways as imperceptible as they are ubiquitous. The prominence of community art and cultural regeneration in rural and urban responses to deindustrialisation is relevant here. Community or socially engaged art tends to showcase the same defusion of antagonisms that the family once played host to, a safe space to be creative without reimbursement or real-world consequences of any kind (except for the art professionals of course). What discourses of precariousness in art worlds can alert us to, if at other times dissemble, is art's status as a commodity relation, and that its relative autonomy is underwritten by extreme dependence. In this sense any radicalisation of the art relation in the discourse of precariousness and becoming-precarious needs to concede its disutility as a paradigmatic case; at best it reflects or shares some of the earmarks of working life isolation, anxiety, opportunism. The formula of the artist as a model precarian dissembles what is most at stake in the production of precariousness: the stratification of social production and the imposition of work. A more suggestive formula might be the artist or art worker as vanishing mediator of capital, vanishing precisely in their imaginary negation of its laws. Perhaps what is more interesting, and potentially challenging, than the projection of similarities between the insecurity of cultural work and the insecurity of shitwork is a complex awareness of incongruities between these. It is one thing to note that the reconfiguration of work has traumatic repercussions across social fields; but these repercussions are not haphazard. The problematic nature of much activist-inspired or 'engaged' art is that it wants to generalise the conditions of art-making to the social without realising that it is as inescapably caught in the social logic it wants to disrupt.

Perhaps a way around this would be to focus on the singularity of arts structures, stable and shifting, and the kind of critique this specificity engenders. What kind of singularity can impair functionality? The experimental features of art as an activity are always mitigating against its economic overdetermination as social field. The unrepresentability of contemporary configurations of work and politics, the readiness to spurn existing subjective dispositions in favour of not-yet existing or as-yet malformed techniques of thinking and becoming, may evoke this singularity. A purposeful engagement with uselessness characterises art *in principle*, and this also marks the potential of constituting other forms of life on the basis of the loss of measure theorised by some as the innovation of post-Fordist work. What a loss of measure could imply for cultural production is that culture can no longer be relied upon to supply an alibi to other forms of work. But since disparate kinds of work produce different kinds of value, all work cannot be subsumed into culture.

Like everything else nowadays, art doesn't produce anything. This uselessness can be mobilised constitutively; there is still a great schism between uselessness and irrelevance to be exploited. Against the instrumentalisation of art and the instrumentalisation of its critique in the discourse of creativity, how far can we go with grasping a specificity that can be resistant to this, the specificity of the already existing and not-yet at once? This might be what is really precarious about art; the oscillation between what it can do as social production and how it is deployed as 'social engagement'. Without this recognition, the appropriation of precariousness in art worlds risks becoming another bad-faith eulogy to the lost dream of bohemia, rendered in the muted palette of the service industries.

## FOOTNOTES

- [1] Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Semiotext(e) / Foreign Agents, MIT, 2004
- [2] Atelier EUROPA, a symposium and exhibition for the Munich Kunstverein, March 2004, <http://www.ateliereuropa.com/>; Unionising Workshop at Flaxman Lodge, a week of research, screenings, discussion and production, London, June 2004, [http://flaxmanlodge.omweb.org/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic\\_id=23&forum=11](http://flaxmanlodge.omweb.org/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic_id=23&forum=11); Precarias a la Deriva, an initiative between research and activism arising from the feminist social center La Eskalera Karakola in Madrid <http://www.sindominio.net/karakola/precarias.htm>; Producta, a series of events in Barcelona April 2003, [http://www.yproductions.org/producta1\\_e.html](http://www.yproductions.org/producta1_e.html) and [http://www.yproductions.org/proyectos/Producta1\\_sinopsis\\_ingles.pdf](http://www.yproductions.org/proyectos/Producta1_sinopsis_ingles.pdf)
- [3] <http://www.republicart.net>
- [4] <http://www.intermittents-danger.fr.fm/> The literature of the Intermittents' campaign is full of references to the indispensability of healthy culture industries for European tourism and profitability in general. While this indicates a perhaps judicious pragmatism in their campaign, it does detract from the potential expansion of the campaign beyond cultural workers, and it also swerves from critiquing the whole concept of a 'cultural exception' and how such an exception is maintained
- [5] <http://www.chainworkers.org>
- [6] Publications include *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migrants and Domestic Work* by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Doing the Dirty Work: The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* by Bridget Anderson, and *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, eds. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild

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