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The Spaces of A Cultural Question

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Atelier Europa Team: You are editing the next issue of Multitudes on cultural and creative labour. Can you explain why and from what perspective you view cultural labour and creative work, i.e. do you think it is possible to explain the inner dynamics of post-Fordist production modes due to this specific form of work and its conditions?

Brian Holmes: Actually we have prepared what is called the "minor" of Multitudes 15 on the theme of "creativity at work." The basic notion of immaterial labour is that the manipulation of information, but also the interplay of affects, have become central in the contemporary working process – even in the factories, but much more so in the many forms of language-, image- and ambiance-production. Workers can no longer be treated like Taylorist gorillas, exploited for their purely physical force; the "spirit of the worker" has to come down onto the factory floor, and from there it can gain further autonomy by escaping into the flexible work situations developing in the urban territory. These notions have made it through to mainstream sociology, and several authors have taken artistic production as the model for the new managerial techniques and ideologies of contemporary capitalism, with all its inequality, self-exploitation and exclusion. The most recent example is Pierre Menger's Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur (Portrait of the Artist as a Worker).
We don't see it that way. Of course the individualization of innovative work practices exposes people to flexible management; and linguistic and affective labour is vital to the capitalist economy in terms of shaping the mind-set in which a commodity can become desirable. But we also focus on the real autonomy that people have gained. This is why we have devoted the "major" of the issue to activist art practices, and the theme of "research for the outside." We're also very interested in the ongoing struggle of the part-time cinema and theater workers in France, concerning the special unemployment status which they have won since 1969, which provides a supplemental income making it possible to live an artist's life in an efficiency-oriented capitalist society. The right-wing, neoliberal government of Raffarin wants to dismantle this unemployment regime, because they know that those who benefit are actively producing another ideal of society.

Atelier Europa Team: Do you think that the production conditions of cultural labour and creative work are different nowadays than in the past, and when they differ, how would you describe the changes?

Brian Holmes: Well, not only is there far more invention and spontaneity involved in relatively ordinary work today than as little as thirty years ago, but also, creative work has moved away from the genius model of the individual artist and towards collaborative process, often mediated by sophisticated communications machines. Many people trace the roots of these developments back to the Hollywood film project, which is always unique and requires a specially assembled production crew. But Hollywood neither invented co-operative production, nor has any patent on it! A journal like Multitudes can be made almost entirely through unpaid cooperation. It's a kind of gift economy. The creative aspect is what makes these kind of volunteer initiatives desirable to people, who often do not feel they can really trust or enjoy personal relations that obey the bottom line of making a wage or a profit. Businesses may try to imitate this way of functioning – which would be great for them, because it's so cheap – but they usually don't succeed. The great Internet crash is a kind of homage to the fact that you can't make a profit out of interpersonal exchanges. That's why you now see the communications technologies being reorganized around the notion of intellectual property, where there is still the hope of extorting some money.
Of course, you could explain all this cooperative creation as a search for prestige and publicity, which brings monetary rewards later on. That kind of demystifying critique is necessary, but insufficient. It's vital to

understand the preconditions which make the "gift-economies" possible, such as education, access to information, access to tools and distribution and even to lodging and work space which does not require full-time employment to pay for it. Artists in the Western societies tend to look at these things individualistically: if they have the preconditions – what Virginia Woolf summed up as "a room of one's own" – they do their art. But the individual solutions leave us all very vulnerable to the more powerfully organized groups in society, don't you think? It might be useful to imagine how these basic conditions for creative work could be provided for more and more people, and defended when they come under attack, as they are now (think of the massive attacks on free education, or on the political freedoms of the Internet). I think you'd find that in our time, the huge problem of how to make democracy actually deliver on its promise of emancipation comes down to this question: How to achieve greater access to knowledge and culture, to their transformation and transmission? Because regaining democratic control from the media oligarchies requires achieving exactly that.

Atelier Europa Team: In Germany and Britain, with different political papers like the Schröder/Blair Paper, but as well in managerial literature, artists' working life and diverse methods of creating meaning have been quoted for the model of an entrepreneurial self, a subject which synchronizes life and work time under the banner of economic success. I think that this quotation of the artist as a role model was very harmful for collective and critical cultural practices in the 90s. The French situation seems to me a bit different. I see that the cultural producer and the notion of immaterial labour is much more set in an understanding of subversion or even resistance.

Brian Holmes: France is a country which traditionally values all kinds of sophisticated cultural production, and it has a relatively strong institutional left which has been partially articulated around the idea of cultural democratization since the Popular Front of '36. So you have a lot of institutionalized space for creative practices; and although the socialist culture minister Jack Lang tried to make these cultural activities "profitable" in the 1980s, that has always been a kind of fiction, because the cultural sphere has mainly expanded with the backing of the state. From the cynical viewpoint, you can say that when the socialists came to power they bought off an important constituency, the artists, and surrounded them with an incredible amount of bureaucratic control so they wouldn't make any more trouble. This means you have much less of an "underground" in France, and consequently, less of that typically Anglo-American dynamic where the pop-culture and advertising industries constantly prey on the underground, to siphon off talent and market subcultural desire. So despite the situationist echoes that still linger, and despite all the Italian exiles who have produced such interesting theory in France, until recently the resistance was mainly from the professions, the theater and cinema people in particular – always with the unions as a model of collective action, deeply entrenched in representational politics. Only recently has this resistance become actively subversive in the strong sense of really questioning contemporary social roles and positions. With any luck, the right's attempt to force a complacent cultural class out of their state sinecures will produce even more of the new and virulent activist critique that we're seeing from the part-time cinema and theater workers.

Atelier Europa Team: Do you think that when artists or cultural producers are addressed as a new role model in society, it is a sign that they should start to organize themselves politically and/or collaborate with other political movements which resist and fight against neo-liberalism?

Brian Holmes: Clearly I do! Now we can see that the privileged position which cultural production held in the European social democracies of the eighties and nineties is always expendable, from the managerial viewpoint. You can be cut like any other client of the obsolete welfare state. If artists want to go on developing experimentation outside the narrow frames of elite patronage and state-backed cultural tourism, they have to develop critical discourses that provide other foundations of judgment for the distribution of resources, beyond "taste" and box-office measurements. But those discourses won't spontaneously emerge from within the cultural establishment. Other people have to be brought into the game, who have "normally"

been excluded. I'm talking both about directly oppressed groups, and about people who are somehow interested in social equality, both of whom would formerly have had no time for the art world with its elite games of prestige and posing. But why is there any space for such people at all? Because elements of the existing art discourses consider aesthetic experimentation as a starting point for the transformation of what in French is called "le partage du sensible": the division and sharing of the sensible world. This is why describing how artistic practices work within protest contexts can be useful for opening up the cultural spaces. I've argued that it suggests the need for at least a partial change of museums into something more like resource centers for transversal communicational practices, where artists and social movements come together, where identities and disciplines blur. We can now envision some attempts to network these kinds of attempts across the national borders. Gerald Raunig and his collaborators are trying explicitly to do that, with their multilingual Republicart website. The urgency is to begin developing frame discourses, shared positions that can exert a more coherent pressure on decision-making within the cultural infrastructures. I'm not talking about a point-by-point program. I'm talking about building up a recognizable, coherent and compelling discussion about the desirability and viability of a democratic, socially transversal, politically oriented cultural/artistic sphere – an open, dissolving sphere in which the material and legal preconditions of multiplicity become a matter of collective concern. This kind of discussion (what you might also call a "problematic") becomes a resource for specific arguments, gestures, judgments, actions. Maybe this is how you change the world from a basis in cultural production.

Atelier Europa Team: I find it interesting that immaterial labour or its notion has come out of the understanding that the industrial complex has been transformed. The car industry is still a role model for "new labour" discourses, as one can see in the Italian operaist movement around the Fiat strikes, as well as the Hartz commission in Germany, on new forms of labour organization, monetarization and the idea of Ich-AG, or self-organized one-person firm, based on ideas developed before the background of transforming the VW Factory. Even the word post-Fordism relates to the concept of Henry Ford and his model of car production and consumption. Gramsci said that Fordism, or the car industry as a meta role model for modern economy, would be an ideological turn, to make us believe that there is only one understanding of production and capital accumulation. This was a critique put forth by feminism as well, which claimed other forms of labour to be relevant in the industrial age, as well as nowadays. Would you say that the term immaterial labour is epistemologically rooted in the industrial concept of labour, of controlling bodies, optimizing time and production flows, organizing efficiency, and pushing everything towards commodification? And how, if so, can we free this term from that classical concept and develop a term that reflects non-work, care-work, the production of the social, etc., not only out of a perspective of capitalist accumulation?

Brian Holmes: This is a key question for the Multitudes group. The answer might consider the term "immaterial labour" and the arguments behind it as a kind of transitional moment. Those arguments were first elaborated from an observation of the "refusal of work" in the wake of the big strikes at Fiat and so forth; but also from the realization that the bosses had deliberately changed the very conditions of labour, to make traditional strike techniques ineffective. Work was increasingly automated, factories became smaller with electronic co-ordination between distant production sites, the remaining workers were implicated ever more deeply by giving them higher levels of training and responsibility. But many people had left the factories quite voluntarily, in advance of the bosses' strategies, setting themselves up within the smaller, self-organized production chains of the new "industrial districts" of Northern Italy.
The great strikes and the innovative pioneers of the new labour patterns could be seen as the driving forces of a change overtaking the entire industrial system. A fresh reading of the Grundrisse of Marx – and particularly of the so-called "fragment on machines," which points toward the potential for labour itself to become obsolete through technological progress, freeing up time for the cultural and intellectual development of workers, and in the same blow, dissolving the possibility of exploitation on which capital accumulation is founded – became a way to chart a future for the class beyond the wage-bargaining which had become the major function of unions, and indeed, beyond the condition of salaried labour itself. This is Toni Negri's

analysis in Marx Beyond Marx. But from that point forth, two still-unresolved challenges open up for the relation between theory and practice. One is finding new epistemological grounds for describing co-operative production. You can look for clues in Maurizio Lazzarato's recent book Puissances de l'invention (Powers of Invention), which develops an understanding of production on the basis of what the late-nineteenth-century sociologist Gabriel Tarde called invention and imitation – or what Deleuze called difference and repetition. The idea is to show that production has always been based, not on the directive capacity of capital, but on the human faculty of innovation – something like what Marx called the "general intellect" – which is at the origin both of the forms of products, and of the very machines which produce them. But Lazzarato is also willing to consider the invention and imitation of all kinds of affective and imaginary production – forms of care-giving, social forms, artistic forms – and he understands "machines" in the Deleuzo-Guattarian way, as social assemblages.

Feminist and culturalist perspectives, which re-examine our very motives for production, could add a lot to what is still an overly economic and semiotic discourse. We need new and persuasive explanations for what is worth doing together in society, and why certain activities should be granted the resources for further development, without always invoking the current excuse: "Because they make money".

But at this point another major problem must be confronted, which is that the technical conditions which provided a justification for the existence and exploitation of salaried labour in the Fordist period have changed entirely – without any change in basic social relations. Paolo Virno says that three functions which have traditionally been separated in the self-understanding of the Western societies, from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt, are now impossible to distinguish. These three functions are labour, conceived as the suffering expenditure of body energy; intellectual activity, which is silent and solitary; and political action, which takes place through speech in public. With our intellectual and communicational forms of labour in the capitalist economy, Virno says we live in a condition of infinite publicity without a public sphere. And the impossibility to make public meaning out of our virtuoso performances – that is, the impossibility to make concrete changes in society – is a humiliation of that which is at once the highest and most common of our capacities, namely the capacity of speech itself. This humiliation is a political affect, which calls for a response. I think that cultural producers, today, are humiliated by the conditions under which we work, by what you might call the institutional market. Can we respond to that? Can we use a more-or-less natural resistance to the contemporary forms of exploitation as a starting-point in the attempt to make a world out of our new understandings of what might be worth doing together in society? The question would probably have seemed exaggerated just a few years ago. Almost no one would have asked it. I find that life gets a little more interesting as the spaces of this question gradually open up today.

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