A Precarious Existence
Vulnerability in the Public Domain

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With the international credit crisis there is more and more talk of the crumbling of the neoliberal hegemony. Whatever this may mean exactly, in relation to the theory and practice of art and public space this very crumbling also seems to be revealing implications and effects of neoliberalism that were previously suppressed, at least in mainstream discourse. Assuming that neoliberalism, consciously or unconsciously, is more or less internalized in the policy and programmes of art and public space, a crisis of market thinking is also affecting the core of these domains. In other words, if neoliberalism fails economically, socially and politically, what are the symptoms of this within art and public space? And how should we be dealing with this?

Two concepts resonate in this issue of *Open* – 'post-Fordism' and 'precarity' – the first being something that can be called a manifestation of neoliberalism and the second an effect. The premise is that post-Fordist society has supplanted the Fordist order: the hierarchical and bureaucratic production system as worked out by Henry Ford and Frederick Taylor is no longer dominant. This system was characterized by the mass production of homogeneous, standardized goods for a mass market. Since the 1970s, however, there has been a shift of emphasis within the organization of labour to the immaterial production of information and services and to continuous flexibility. Both systems reflect different social and economic value systems – the mainstays of post-Fordism are physical and mental mobility, creativity, labour as potential, communication, virtuosity and opportunism – and have their own forms of control

The political philosopher Paolo Virno sees a direct connection between post-Fordism and precarity, which refers to the relationship between temporary and flexible labour arrangements and a 'precarious' existence – an everyday life without predictability and security – which is determining the living conditions of ever larger groups in society (part-timers, flex workers, migrant workers, contract workers, black-economy workers, etcetera). This structural discontinuity and permanent fragility also occurs in the 'creative class': art, cultural and communication businesses in which there is talk of flexible production and outsourcing of work. Through the agency of European social movements and activists, and philosophers such as Virno, precarity has been a political issue for some years already in countries like Spain, France and Italy.

Brian Holmes writes in this issue about the video series *Entre Sueños,* in which artist Marcelo Expósito reports on this 'new social issue'. Merijn Oudenampsen deals very concretely with the response of Dutch cleaners to their precarious situation. Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter contend that the rise of precarity as an object of academic analysis coincides with its decline as a political concept capable of inciting social action. They sound out the power of precarity to bring about new forms of connection, subjectivity and political organization. Gerald Raunig poses the question as to whether the post-industrial addiction to acceleration can create strategies that give new meaning to communication and connectivity.

What can notions like post-Fordism and precarity bring to light when they are related to the current conditions of, and thinking about, urban space and about art and the art world? In the context of the city, the 'creative city' thrusts itself forward as a post-Fordist urban model par excellence, whereby creativity and culture are seen as the motor for economic development. The creative city is also an entrepreneurial city in which city marketing and processes of gentrification go hand in hand, and in which social issues are subordinated to the demands of the labour market and the production of value. Matteo Pasquinelli, in particular, directly addresses the role played by the creative scene in making (im)material infrastructures financially profitable and susceptible to speculation. The architect and activist Santiago Cirugeda has made a poster with a selection of urban interventions created in recent years by his office Recetas Urbanas, which are aimed at regaining public space for citizens within the precarity of the urban environment.

Nicolas Bourriaud argues that the essential content of contemporary art's political programme is not an indictment of the 'political' circumstances inherent to current affairs, but should consist in 'maintaining the world in a precarious situation'. Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen interviewed Paolo Virno in Rome about such matters as aesthetics and social struggle, the disproportion of art and the need to invent institutions for a new public sphere. Gielen describes in another article how the international art scene embodies and indulges the post-Fordist value system, and asks to what extent its informality and ethics of freedom can be exploited and managed biopolitically. From the heart of the art scene Jan Verwoert resists the imperative to perform creatively and socially, and calls for a different ethics, one that all of us should be able to take to heart.

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With Open!, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

Tags

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