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## The Precarious Nature of Curatorial Work

Michael Birchall

**T**HE EXPANSION OF CURATING as a profession in the last 25 years has seen an increasing amount of literature on both curating as an organising task and its place within exhibition histories. However, the labour associated with curatorial practice and its close relationship with artistic praxis remains up for debate, especially as post-Fordist labour conditions have forced both curators and artists to re-consider their role in the system of artistic production. This essay considers the precarity associated with curating and the position the curator occupies in this economic model of creative work; as a result of advanced capitalism, curators have started to enter into a working alliance with artists, and play a major role in the creation, mediation and dissemination of ideas. Beyond the museum spectrum in cities across Europe, vast numbers of curators are working as independent producers of art, and supplementing their income with other creative work, writing, teaching and publishing.

The nature of curatorial work combines artistic research, managerial roles, delegation, and academic research. Like other artistic-related professions, the curator must assume a variety of roles in his or her job. Here, it is crucial to differentiate the role of the contemporary art curator, although other curators in other disciplines may share the same roles. The skills of the curator have links with a variety of professions: managerial responsibilities, scholars, public relations, fundraisers, crowd-sourcing experts, educators, mediators, and moderators. Kitty Scott reflects on her role as a curator at The National Gallery of Canada, as an institutional curator with a full-time contract (her typical working week, extended beyond the “9–5” regular working

time). Her tasks were extensive and could include any number of activities, such as: the research and development of an exhibition proposal, making judgements on acquisitions, devising and managing group exhibitions and solo presentations, advising patrons on acquisitions, visiting artist studios, writing texts, overseeing publications of catalogues and other related publications, delivering lectures to students, travelling to speak on panels and exhibitions, and meeting with artists, curators, critics and collectors.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Scott reflects on her time as being largely involved in collection acquisitions above the curating of exhibitions. Her focus on collecting the contemporary represents a concern with capturing the ephemeral, rather than “presenting a range of exhibitions on the contemporary”.<sup>2</sup>

However, this is not the only reflection of curatorial practice. Due to an expansion of the profession of curating, a large number of independent curators now work within art institutions as freelance contractors. This can be seen in institutions in the form of ‘guest-curated’ projects, who are reliant on the abilities of guest curators to bring in new programmes, audiences, and more importantly artists. The Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin has been ‘reaching out’ to project spaces in the form of the ‘One Night Stand’<sup>3</sup> series organised by The Network of Berlin Independent Project Spaces and Initiatives in cooperation with KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Project spaces and curators are invited to participate in this project, although they are unpaid. Independent curators are willing to work for free, as it presents an opportunity to be part of the programme at KW.

Consequently, independent curators must adopt a range of skills that are not too dissimilar from that of artists, and, crucially, networking plays a major role in this array of skills. Without affiliations in the artworld it would not be possible for curators to find exhibiting and publishing opportunities. Curators are dependent on the artworld, as much as the artworld is dependent on the labour and content that curators produce in the form of context around exhibitions, such as publications, reviews and symposia. From independent project spaces to museums, they are all reliant on the skills of the curator to produce content and to maintain international networks. Artists may curate their own exhibitions, but in reality, it is the curators who hold the power for an artist’s major international success, as this is largely driven through complex networks of power-relations. Curatorial careers can be tracked through the ‘block-buster exhibitions’ curators have developed and as such led to an increase in power. The gatekeeping function of the curator is linked to the promotion of artists through galleries, writing, and other curators.

Independent curators may possess the additional skills, which are more expansive than Kitty Scott’s understanding of the system, as she is working within an institutional framework. Although one could argue that, even for institutionally based curators, they are still working in a similar way due to the competitive nature of the profession. These skills and activities would include: applying for residencies, writing for art magazines, catalogues, and journals, writing monographs (and any other

publications that offer the chance for a published text), visiting artist studios, going to openings, travelling to exhibitions and conferences (where this is possible), constantly building new networks, updating websites, publishing independently (online via blogs or through self-printing companies), organising festivals with other independent curators, writing exhibition proposals (to solicit work from other institutions), teaching and lecturing curating students, and meeting with artists, curators, and museum directors. What becomes apparent from this list is the need to constantly remain aware of other opportunities, as an independent curator must procure their own projects. This is paramount in the field, as another curator may seize an opportunity.

The system of art utilises the network of curators and critics to write about exhibitions for international art journals as a way of sustaining their popularity and influence. This was very much the case for early independent curators in the 1970s, such as Lucy Lippard and Seth Siegelaub.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the independent curator is, more than ever, reliant on a network of contacts in order to earn a reputation to continue working in the artworld and to maintain a decent standard of living. Crucially, curators must engage in work that exists outside of producing exhibitions: writing, teaching, editing, translating, and organising symposia and public programs.<sup>5</sup> While these tasks may inherently be part of the artworld, they have become part of what are considered to be part of the curator's function; for many though, some activities have become about surviving in the artworld. Ultimately it is expected that curators are working on several projects all at once.

As a consequence of the shifts in artistic practice, the artist is not bound by a closed relationship with his or her material, or the conventions of artistic tradition. The artist has his or her own critical role within an extended vision of technical and intellectual labour.<sup>6</sup> Thus, if the artist operates as a producer in contemporary art production – acting as a 'conceptual manager' of an exhibition or concept – then where does this leave the role of the curator? As we have seen, the role of the curator has shifted considerably in the last twenty years; the curator is no longer a scholar and mediator of artists' works but an active part of the exhibition making process. The curator has become overwhelmingly a collaborator (and producer) in the process of art making.

Curators must have the opportunity to realise exhibitions at desirable major institutions in order to gain further exhibition opportunities in the future. This is only made possible via an established network of peers and influential figures in the artworld. Furthermore, this opportunistic trait is in part connected to the rules of labour in a post-Fordist economy. The 'globally operating' curator must respond to local concerns, while maintaining a certain level of 'artworld' connections for the 'international' part of their audience. Sociologist Pascal Gielen notes that, "The profusion of biennales cannot be explained without the enthusiasm with which politicians, managers and other sponsors have embraced them. And it is precisely this heterogeneous interest that makes the biennale suspect".<sup>7</sup> With specific reference to the

curator, he comments on how, “The internationally operating curator – and indeed every globally operating artistic actor – thus enjoys the pleasures afforded by today’s widespread neoliberal market economy”.<sup>8</sup>

Curatorial work is part of a system taking place in different places, and working conditions in local temporary stations. As such, curators mostly adopt flexible working hours associated with post-Fordism in order to complete their tasks. These tasks may include devising exhibition concepts, writing funding applications, delivering presentations, writing essays for catalogues, and lecturing. The variety of tasks and the dependency on short-term contracts means that curators work constantly. Curators are directly involved in art production, from deciding the conceptual basis for an exhibition (or curatorial statements), to taking care of the logistics of the exhibition. Curatorial work is a process that is inherently based on the division of labour and may reach beyond organising and implementing an exhibition.<sup>9</sup> For young curators working in the field this is widely accepted as standard practice, having undergone specialist training in one of the many degree programmes around the world, available at The Royal College of Art (London), Zürich Hochschule für Kunst (Zürich) and California College of the Arts (California). These training programmes reflect the professionalization of curating, and the managerial element of curating to control and ‘be equal’ to new forms of production.<sup>10</sup> However, I see the curator’s role in the production of art as being in part due to the conditions to which young curators are subject. They are under pressure to create new innovative concepts and to have a globally successful career. The desire to do this means they must be involved in producing new works of art – with artists whose careers they are deeply invested in – as well as their own. Curators often work with the same artists over a period of time, both in organising an exhibition and in contributing to discourse about the artist’s practices. This long-term investment leads to collaboratively authored works between both the curator and the artist; both can profit from this symbiotic collaboration.

The curator’s position as a producer affords the curator the authorial privileges that are otherwise conceded to artists. As the ideal embodiment of post-Fordist competences and procedures, the curator accumulates symbolic capital. Curators are seen as the ‘gate-keepers’ to the artworld, and seek to control certain parts of arts production and mediation. As Daniel Buren has argued, “Selection has replaced creation, and (...) curators are taking on the role of co-authors, if not sole authors, in relation to the artists becoming meta-artists”.<sup>11</sup> While Buren’s attack is targeted towards the symbolic capital attributed to curators, it confirms precisely what other artists take into account: the social dynamism inherent in the artworld. Curators have positioned themselves within the professional and institutional changes of post-Fordism in the past 20 years. This has been made possible by the abolition of pre-determined roles and the increase in the number of curators involved in a collective curatorial process.

## Operaismo

The model of post-Fordism first expanded in the 1970s when the economy was shifting from a 'Fordist' economy to a post-Fordist system, one in which workers no longer generated material goods and instead worked to supply the demand driven by consumers. Post-Fordist production has created a new life of 'open networks' and has buried linear or structured views of seeing the world, connected to industrial production".<sup>12</sup> However, it must be noted that not all forms of production have moved away into a service-based model; products are still produced in factories in the West, yet the notion of workerism and the rights of the worker have changed in these contexts. Post-Fordism acknowledges the changes in the factory system, in France and Italy, and made it difficult to maintain models of management and production. The shifts in the economy and the increase of 'immaterial labour' generate a new economy and division of labour that continues to "recompose and devalue their existing skills".<sup>13</sup> In the context of the art system, post-Fordism and immaterial labour are used interchangeably to represent the shifts in the wider economy and their impact on artistic practice. The artworld is not exempt from these conditions, but at the same time it causes problems for itself. As Hito Steyerl asserts:

Contemporary art's workforce consists largely of people who, despite working constantly, do not correspond to any image of labour. They resist settling into any entity recognizable enough to be identified as a class. While the easy way out, could be to classify this constituency as a multitude or a crowd, it might be less romantic to ask whether they are not global lumpenfreelancers, deterritorialized and ideologically free-floating.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note that the first industries to be captivated by these new working conditions would include health, welfare, and education – and not finance and insurance services, as David Harvey has argued.<sup>15</sup> From the late 1960s onwards, art production partook in a capitalisation of service. Indeed, the emerging artworld in the 1970s, or arguably in the 1980s, did not represent an alternative production system, according to the German theorist Kerstin Stakemeier, but rather "acted highly contemporaneously in relation to the development of post-war capitalism".<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the shifts in the wider economy in the 1970s were being felt in the artworld at the time, as was the use of new technologies in artistic production.

Arguably, Harald Szeemann is the first 'post-Fordist curator'; his *Agentur für Geistige Gastarbeit*/Agency for Intellectual Migrant Work (1969) allowed him to curate projects independently, yet with the institutional strength of an agency. The name 'migrant' here – in the title of his agency – is suggestive of a travelling migrant or transitory curator who is always on the lookout for the next opportunity. As the power has shifted to the curator as a cultural producer, it has come with an increased demand placed on their intellectual abilities. Cultural work has responded to advanced capitalism, and in return it has also been shaped forever by these alterations. As Paulo Virno asserts:

Only in today's world in the post-Fordist era, is the reality of labour power fully up to the task of realizing itself. Only in today's world, that is to say, can the notion of labour-power not be reduced (as it was in the time of Gramsci) to an aggregate of physical and mechanical attributes, now, instead it encompasses within itself, and rightfully so, the 'life of the mind'.<sup>17</sup>

Virno's text challenges the hierarchies associated with manual and intellectual labour, but it does not replace historical divisions of class. If we consider the post-industrial economy as being comprised of entrepreneurs, and driven by the start-up working culture, then artists and curators fit into this system of production. The value is produced by labour power, and this can be both material and immaterial. As a contemporary of Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato<sup>18</sup> recognises that immaterial labour and the commodity are reconfigured to become more adaptable to the social and economic activities of a post-Fordist economy. Immaterial labour extends beyond the factory into other forms of society, and especially into the service-driven sectors of the workforce. The historic notions of labour, worker, and workforce, which were once understood by a distinction between manual and intellectual class positions, are now rendered obsolete in a dematerialised, globalised, cybernetic, information society weighed toward cultural production, especially fashion, software, and advertising.<sup>19</sup> In this reformulated workforce, the creative work undertaken by the creative class and producers are producing knowledge and surplus value for the post-Fordist economy.

The post-Fordist worker is currently being fostered in many sectors of the economy, and especially in the creative industries where large numbers of workers are needed to perform creative tasks, such as computing, drawing, and developing creative strategies.<sup>20</sup> The exploitation of highly paid creative workers and immaterial (or knowledge) workers has opened up a set of possibilities for re-defining the petty-bourgeois category of the creative class. Therefore, unlike other immaterial workers, the aspirations of many young people who wish to work in the arts, design, fashion, music, and so on, are very high, and partly driven by the lifestyle associations that come with this. Although the immaterial workers who are 'employed' on short-term contracts at major museums may not receive large salaries, their position is elevated in society as this is seen to be an attractive working place.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that capitalism can only be reactive against the proletariat, which "actually invents the social and the productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future".<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it was the Fordist rationalisation of work, and not the mere technological innovation that forced capital to make a leap into the post-Fordist era of immaterial work. As a consequence, the new industrial working class did not replace the old industrial working class, but extended it to all those whose labour is being exploited by capital.

As a consequence of this shift, artists and curators have become experts at balancing intermittent bouts of barely profitable creative work with additional routine jobs in the creative and service industries. Gregory Sholette notes that, "Artists who are engaged in

this existence build up complex networks made up of other semi-employed artists as well as family members. These networks circulate material support, as well as a great deal of intangible, informational assistance in the form of opportunities for auctions, residencies, exhibitions, publications, and technical solutions".<sup>22</sup> Independent curators share the same level of precarity and have similar networks of support, without this, survival would be difficult. Curators are able to generate income from curating, writing, organising conferences, teaching part-time, and editing publications. Although most of this labour is connected to the artworld, it is considered acceptable for the freelance curator to assimilate a variety of roles into one. The precarity associated with being 'independent' affords the curator the possibility to have intellectual freedom when they are producing exhibitions. He or she is not tied to the institution and can take bigger risks, which institutional curators cannot. However, this does still not justify the precarious existence adopted by career-driven curators. The work of the independent curator is limited to short-term contracts on exhibitions or biennials. Although this gives a fair degree of creative autonomy, it does not provide job security. In most cases these curators are searching for full-time employment.

Cognitive workers are expected to work all the time, and must be 'creative' wherever possible. The division of time between work time and free time has now been eroded through the use of electronic machinery, which requires them to be working all the time. Indeed, this can also be said of the immaterial workers who produce content for social media, 24/7 without any payment. The shift in the labour market has seen the transformation of creative workers into 'workers' – a hybrid of employer and employee – revoking their own worker's rights, but giving them the sense they are in complete control of their own working habits. Furthermore, workers' rights and power have become 'human capital', contributing to a new cultural market.

## Curatorial Knowledge

It is important to note the rise in the so-called 'knowledge economy', or indeed what may be known as Curatorial knowledge. As creative workers, curators are required to constantly work, as they must always produce new content to be seen as being productive in the cultural field. Their work contributes to knowledge production, which is central to a contemporary society. This 'knowledge labour' is labour that "produces and distributes information, communication, social relationships, affects and information and communication technologies".<sup>23</sup> The 'knowledge labour' is an indirect aspect of the accumulation of capital and information capitalism. The knowledge curators produce may be used for future art projects, although most of this can also be outsourced to other 'knowledge workers', usually undertaken by assistant curators and artists who work on a freelance basis. As Christian Fuchs notes, this knowledge work may be sold as commodities on the market (such as consultancy, films, and music) and also exchanged by indirect knowledge workers that produce and reproduce the social conditions of the existence of capital and wage labour, such as education and common

knowledge in everyday life.<sup>24</sup> Although this labour may be necessary for the existence of society, most of this labour is performed through immaterial labour. In the arts, this can be any number of creative workers who require recognition by the artworld in order to maintain a certain level of practice.

Capital exploits unpaid labourers at the same time it is reliant on this work for a certain level of services to be performed. The production of art requires vast numbers of workers to produce knowledge and content for exhibitions and other outlets. In many ways, the curator embodies the traits of this immaterial labour, whether they are employed or not by an institution. They are required to work constantly on additional projects that may enhance their career and prosperity in the arts. This new level of immaterial labour is indeed advocated by the US urbanist Richard Florida as new 'creative labour'; he identifies the breaking down of boundaries between productive and non-productive labour as being a good thing.<sup>25</sup> For curators this makes working conditions increasingly difficult, as not enough opportunities exist for curators in the field. It is possible for one to exist as a creative worker, but often this labour must be supplemented by other sources of income.

## Creative Labour

Richard Florida's writing on the Creative Class focuses on locations around the world that try to attract creative workers to maintain their creative edge. Florida argues that, "Human beings have limitless potential, and that the key to economic growth is to enable and unleash that potential".<sup>26</sup> He defines the creative class through the following four principles:

The Creative Class is moving away from traditional corporate communities, working class centres and even sunbelt regions to a set of places I call *Creative Centres*.

The Creative Centres tend to be the economic winners of our age. Not only do they have high concentrations of Creative Class people, but they boast high concentrations of creative economic outcomes, in the form of innovations and high-tech industry growth.

The Creative Centres ... are succeeding largely because creative people want to live there. Creative people are not moving to these areas for traditional reasons.

The physical attractions that most cities focus on buildings – sports stadiums, freeways, urban malls, and tourism-and-entertainment districts that resemble them – are irrelevant, insufficient, or actually unattractive to many Creative Class people. What they look for in communities are abundant high-quality experiences, an openness to diversity of all kinds, and above all else the opportunity to validate their identities as creative people.<sup>27</sup>

Florida's observations concentrate on the high-status worker with marketable skills, without commenting on how these power relationships works in real working relationships. His hypothesis that everyone should be able to do creative work has a huge flaw, as 70% of the US would therefore be involved in creative labour. Florida's vision of the new economy concludes that the ideal non-alienated creative labour has moved into the workplace, and is no longer a utopian hope.<sup>28</sup> The neoliberal ideology present in Florida's writing is not without serious flaws, and is more in touch with the lifestyle associations of the creative and cognitive workers who work mostly in developed countries. As Marc James Léger has noted, the irony in his work is that most artists would not qualify for inclusion in his 'Creative Class' category, as members of this class earn an average above \$55,000.<sup>29</sup>

The emergence of the so-called cultural industries, creative class, and creative industries seems to obliterate the thought that there were any industrialised countries in the nineteenth century. The creative industries include a wide sector from online platforms, mobile device application developments to creative agencies; and yet, the arts are a good model for how creative industries have been conditioned to work. As the philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig notes that this shift has occurred in Europe as a way to 'de-politicize' state-funded art production, and to essentially "do away with the remainders of cultural production as dissent, as controversy, and as the creation of public spaces; to promote creative industries as a pure and affirmative function of economy and state apparatus".<sup>30</sup>

The labour of the creative worker and the precarious worker are deeply connected to one other, as creative work promotes precarious work. As Guy Standing has noted, there was a creative tension between the precariat as heroes, and the precariat as enemies of the state.<sup>31</sup> In the artworld the creative freedoms given to the worker are highly praised, even as it has become an accepted reality that working in the artworld will automatically mean low pay.

This is based on a system in which art institutions operate using a capitalistic social space, meaning that rewards of "the powerful few come at the expense of the weak; a structural fact not amenable to moral pressure".<sup>32</sup> The professionals who are at the lowest end of the system are unpaid so that institutions can balance budgets, artists rarely receive fees, to ensure that the system can manage to sustain itself and keep administrators in jobs. As Karen van den Berg and Ursula Passer have noted, one of the distinguishing features of art production is that it – by and large – it is not organised through the same structures, nor accessible to the same forms of measure, as other kinds of labour; it is then difficult to see how the political forms of labour organisation can play more than a metaphorical role in pointing out certain social injustices of this kind within the institution of art.<sup>33</sup>

Obviously, a culture-led economy needs a range of creative types to provide the relevant trends and hype, which can then be fed back in to the perceptions of the 'creative industry'.<sup>34</sup> If indeed this is a large industry, as governments might have us

believe, then art production is part of this process of cultural gentrification. As Europe recovers from the 2008 economic crisis into an advanced form of neo-liberalism, the desire to be creative and live in a creative hub is ever more present for the creative workers of Europe. Berlin has become a very attractive place to live and work, due to the low rents and office spaces, making it ideal for a 'start-up' culture to flourish. It is worth noting that any sort of investment in Berlin is encouraged, as since the fall of the wall in 1989, the city remains heavily in debt. Creative people from all of Europe (and beyond) are drawn to the creative energy of the city, to work in low-paid creative positions, that add to the hype of the city. It remains a "precipitous transition from self-exploitation as a cultural entrepreneur to extreme precarization".<sup>35</sup>

Artistic production is able to make use of new models of production to develop artworks that can be sold, but this is still separate from the industrial production of consumer goods. Gerald Raunig observes that this remains integral for the practice of art, as the rules of the "art field and especially of the art market, still circle just as resistantly around the distinct potentials of an anti-industrial imperative".<sup>36</sup> However, there is a strong association with the creative industries, which is evident in how studios (production spaces) for artists are often used in cooperation with small entrepreneurial models. The two models go hand in hand and have a symbiotic relationship.

Cultural production requires contemporary artists and curators to consider the demands that are made by neoliberal market capitalism for the creative production of new symbols. The work by most artists and curators (here there is little distinction) is sustained, according to Léger, by "the desire for social mobility, economic reward and cultural consecration".<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the labour of the curator is inherently tied to his or her career ambitions, but, I would argue it is more acute, and extending beyond the desire for 'cultural consecration'; curators have to be particularly resourceful if they are willing to survive in the artworld. More so than the artists – who are producing symbolic capital for the art market – the curator has to contextualise and produce a range of activities that interest a wider public, as well as the art-going public. Artists may indeed work under precarious labour conditions, as the Berlin based artist Anton Vidokle notes, as they have always been "independent producers, mostly without stipends, salaries, pensions, unemployment protection, or contracts".<sup>38</sup> However, now the very same conditions can be observed for all other creative workers, as well as in and around the artworld.

In the visual arts, self-determinacy is an integral part of the industry. For all creative workers, education provides an initial basis from which workers are able to build. Postgraduate degrees from well-known universities and with ample networking opportunities provide a platform, from which artists and curators can move to other opportunities. Under the difficult working conditions, curators must succeed wherever possible, and this includes the need to constantly learn and be aware of contemporary trends. As with other creative work, reputation and managing one's own critical reception must be maintained, and that is very much the case for the

curator. As independent curators must maintain a living, their labour is often exploited, as Christian Fuchs notes: "The multitude, the contemporary proletariat, as the class of who produce material or knowledge good and services directly or indirectly for capital and are deprived and expropriated of resources by capital".<sup>39</sup>

Most of this work may go on unnoticed behind the scenes via informal alliances with other curators and artists. Yet it remains an important part of the system of art, on which it is reliant. For a small minority – the artistic directors, chief curators, and biennial directors – it remains within their power to produce, as Roberts notes, "the ideational content, which is then applied and performed by others".<sup>40</sup> In this context, content is performed by the assistant curator and interns. Franco Berardi refers to this as the 'cognitariat'<sup>41</sup>, and Ursula Huws uses the term 'cybertariat'<sup>42</sup>, in reference to the amount of cyber or 'telework' that is performed in today's workplace, and inherent in the artworld. The amount of work needed to produce a range of tasks necessary for artistic production is in line with Isobell Lorey's argument on precarious work:

The precarious cannot be unified or represented, their interests are so disparate that classical forms of corporate organizing are not effective. The many precarious are dispersed both in relations of production and through diverse modes of production, which absorb and engender subjectivities, extend their economic exploitation, and multiply identities and work places. It is not only work that is precarious and dispersed, but life itself. In all their differences, the precarious tend to be isolated and individualized, because they do short-term jobs, get by from project to project, and often fall through collective social-security systems. There are no lobbies or forms of representation for the diverse precarious.<sup>43</sup>

The cognitariat workforce is now endemic in many aspects of work, especially in the creative industries where large number of workers are needed to perform creative tasks, such as computing, drawing, designing, providing technical assistance, and developing creative strategies.<sup>44</sup>

Institutional curators, who hold positions in museums, usually hold 'safe' positions and do not risk losing their job. Although increasingly museums hire curators and assistant curators on short-term contracts to ensure a high turnover of ideas; however, this is largely the case in smaller contemporary art centres. Museum curators operate under strict procedures: fixed working and opening hours; fixed appointments; a rigid differentiation between functional units (artistic staff, educational department, public relations, and management); and a strong focus on the material (the artworks).<sup>45</sup> This essentially impedes the post-Fordist requirements of flexibility within a globally operating artworld. The biennial fills this role and as such shares some of the characteristics with the new creative industries, as they both require temporary workers to generate ideas, which are then turned over quickly in the form of technological services or customer services. The biennial offers a periodic and event based model, which makes it easier to work with temporary curators – much in the same way

start-up culture uses temporary staff (or interns)<sup>46</sup> to provide short-term solutions. The contemporary artworld is thus involved in creating a circuit of temporary workers who live a nomadic existence within a system that is constantly being renewed.<sup>47</sup>

However, curatorial practice is still able to retain a degree of autonomy and critical distance in the scholarly sense, even though the working patterns of the profession may reflect some of the changes in the creative economy. Unlike other traditional practices, this economy must be constantly under renewal and change, and this is in part why the practice continues to evolve. For the independent curator who forms alliances with other curators and produces work in a semi-autonomous manner, their practice is likened to that of the artist. Both practitioners find mechanisms that allow them to exist in the art system, even if not all artists and independent curators are able to earn a living entirely in the artworld. For a new generation of independent curators who have emerged out of curatorial training programmes it is vital that they gain recognition from their artistic peers; this social mechanism has a lot to do with the academic system, where young scholars gain respect via an international peer group.<sup>48</sup>

Under post-Fordism the labour of the artist and the curator are distinctly similar. Both embody the familiar traits associated with immaterial labour: flexible working hours, being poorly paid, and little job security.

The consequences of this immaterial labour have allowed for the expansion of museums and biennials internationally, and may have contributed to the exponential growth of the artworld. As John Roberts writes, "immateriality is the highest sphere of creativity under the post-Fordist economy".<sup>49</sup> While creative work may be regarded as an attractive model for art workers, it does not automatically guarantee the possibility that one day these workers will be in full-time employment in an institution. On the contrary, what remains remarkable about the system of art is the number of workers who are willing to continue this cycle without any willingness to secure better conditions for themselves.<sup>50</sup>

In conclusion, creative work comes at a heavy cost: longer hours in pursuit of creativity, self-exploration and autonomy and dispensability always in favour of flexibility.<sup>51</sup> Yet, the precarious labour of the freelance creative worker is now seen as a good model for high-skill and high-reward employment by the service industry, in the new 'creative cities' mentioned earlier.<sup>52</sup> The young creative worker is often identified with the slogan: 'the precarious generation'. Which further extends the understanding that the precariat is the post-Fordist successor to the proletariat, both in theory and practice.<sup>53</sup> If this were indeed plausible we would need to imagine a global class-coalition comprised of the precarious workers associated with post-Fordism. Would this group be capable of developing global actions on an industrial scale? Is it possible to imagine that this has already taken place; as the global occupy movement? Many artists and curators took part in these protests, because their flexible hours meant they had free time to participate in the protests.

## Notes

- 1 Kitty Scott, *On Curatorial Intelligence, Power Talks* (Toronto: Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2011), Video recording of lecture.
- 2 Ibid.
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