

## Unpredictable Outcomes/Unpredictable Outcasts: On recent debates over creativity and the creative industries

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Let me begin with a question: how does the currently hegemonic discourse of creativity, the creative industries and the artist as a role model for the new economy correspond to or conflict with the field of cultural producers and cultural activists? To bring out the problem even more sharply, I would first of all put in question the assumption that the 'creative industries', about which we are talking and against which we are struggling, are already in existence. Are they really there before us? Or do we perhaps face a field of political visions that aim to privatize the cultural sector in general but have not yet been realized in anything like an 'industry'? I don't think we can speak yet of an industry as such, either in the UK, where the discourse of 'creative industries' is established and the where cultural production was reorganized and repositioned (Davies & Ford 2001), or in Germany, where the Social-Democratic Schröder government set in motion, with different results, a transformative shift toward a culturalization of the economy and a corresponding economization of culture (Pühl & Sauer 2003). Have we really reached a moment in which social interactions and forms of autonomous labor open possibilities for making a living in self-organized ways, ways that at the same time are exploitable by capital as immaterial resources? Or do we find ourselves within a transformation process in which outcomes are produced by diverse

interactions, some of which can be said to be industrial, within a cultural field increasingly dominated by the interests of capital? Or is there, as many critics since Adorno have held, an unbridgeable contradiction in any industrialization of cultural production, insofar as 'creativity' has nothing at all to do with the sphere of economy?

In the midst of all of this, I propose that we reflect on our discourse. Being in the midst means that there is still space to influence and change the discourse, even our own. I would therefore like to discuss creativity as a discursive term, in the genealogy of which we can see both a process of secularization and the reflected constitution of the modern form of subjectivity that plays such a central role in capitalist societies. The suggestion that the mass production of cultural goods directly contributes to a blunting or loss of capacity is not part of my argument. What interests me instead is the symbolic function of the debates about creativity and creative industries for the cultural representation of political, economic and social processes. In this light, I doubt that the so-called creative industries are already here. What there is, at least, is a discourse about them and the international will to make them a reality as soon as possible. We participate critically in this discourse and shape it too.

With regard to the term 'industry', it has been observable in recent years that a qualitative shift is taking place, that the social and cultural could be transformed by processes of partial industrialization and by technology undergoing partial industrialization processes and technologies – at least if we do not intervene to stop it. Examples of this include the current debates about cognitive skills or abilities in general, which the new subject of labor in post-Fordist societies should learn or already possesses. In these debates, social competence, creativity and intelligence are now increasingly presented and discussed as separate, abstract entities. The question, what and why and for whom something can be done with these abilities, thus appears to be of no relevance. Social and cognitive abilities are treated as values and as self-standing resources, resources that can be produced and improved by training methods, or exploited by capital. But this can only happen if these abilities are conceptualized as non-relational and segregated from each other and if they are highlighted and represented as entities within scientific and popular perspectives. Another example here is the requirement of 'lifelong learning' that is isolated as a process and emphasized as a value in itself.

The concept 'lifelong learning' no longer asks what should be learned and why; instead the process of learning itself,

whatever that should be, is simply assigned a positive value. So it is not about learning for something, but rather the learning of a readiness to learn, according to which the subject is thought of as oriented toward the market and increasingly accommodated to changes in conditions. The subject conceptualized in this way holds itself in ready dependency to every situation and is 'trained' in the sense of having its abilities rationalized in strict conformity to the moment. It is contingent and dependent on the context, and at the same time, however, it is expected to perform and make choices autonomously.

This new conception of the subject of labor, then, is made up of fragmented and abstracted cognitive processes that can be treated industrially in the future. This process of abstraction and the establishment of technologies to improve and optimize cognitive capacities can be linked to the key processes and technologies of industrialization developed in earlier periods of the industrial age. Then, the movements of laboring bodies were abstracted and fragmented, in order to synchronize the body of the worker with the actions of machines. With Taylorism, abstracted movements became the object of research and training, and the rationalization of body-machine-management relations was fully realized. This newly composed relation between body, machine, management and sciences became the international standard, opening the way to the full development of the Industrial Age and mass production. In this new era, the struggles of labor also began to be

more successful. The Marxist analysis of capital and its relation to labor-power, reflected in the experiences of the workplace and in organizations and parties, became an aspect of everyday life.

Against this background, it makes sense to think about the discourse of 'creative industries' as a technology that aims not so much at the capitalization and mobilization of the cultural sectors in particular as at the restructuring of relations between the subject of labor and processes of valorization, optimization and acceleration. For what is usually forgotten in the debates about creative industries is that this discussion about creativity and cultural labor has an impact on the understanding and conceptualizing of labor, subjectivity and society as a whole. Through the vocabulary of creativity and the references to bohemian life and work biographies, society is transformed in ways that affect policymaking as well as the general political field – and not excluding our own discourse.

#### CREATOR OF NEW IDEAS

Artist-subjects, intellectuals and bohemians are specifically European constructs. Since the sixteenth century the creative, world-making ability has been regarded not as an exclusively divine power, but a human one as well. A mode of production based on a new relation between intellectual and manual abilities emerged in distinction from activities that are purely a matter of craft. In this sense, the term 'creativity' included reflexivity, technical knowledge and an awareness of the contingency of the creative process. In

the eighteenth century, creativity was defined as the central characteristic of the artist, now thought of as an autonomous 'creator' who brings forth the world all over again. In the emerging capitalist form of society, the concepts of 'aptitude' and 'property' were combined with the traditionally male notion of genius to produce the idea of the artist as an 'exceptional subject' – the owner of an ingenious and exceptional artistic mind. From then on, notions about 'creative talent' and what it means to 'be creative' have served bourgeois individualism as a more general description of activity meant to transcend or elude economic determinants. The culturalization of labor and production has been based as well on forms of image production. These forms, which organize a specific regime of the gaze through institutional frameworks such as museums, galleries and their related cultural discourses, have been central to the constitution of national ideologies in the nineteenth century.

The figure of the artist as exceptional creator of innovations in modes of production, notions of authorship and forms of living circulates today in various discourses of social transformation. Moreover, the classical exceptional subjects of modernity – artists, musicians, non-conformists and bohemians – also function as role models in European Union debates on labor and social politics. This can be seen clearly in Germany and Switzerland – and in the UK, the frontline. As Angela McRobbie (2004) argues in her influential text 'Everyone is Creative?':

*“One way to clarify the issue is to examine the arguments presented by this self-consciously ‘modern’ government, which since 1997 has attempted to champion the new ways of working as embodying the rise of a progressive and even liberating cultural economy of autonomous individuals – the perfect social correlative of post-socialist ‘third way’ politics” (McRobbie 2004, page 194).*

*In political debates, the figure of the artist – or ‘cultural-preneur’, as Davies and Ford (2000) named it – seems to embody that successful combination of an unlimited diversity of ideas, creativity-on-call and smart self-marketing that today is demanded of everyone. Subject positions outside the mainstream labor force are presented as self-motivated sources of productivity, and those who occupy these positions are celebrated as passionately committed ‘creators of new, subversive ideas’, innovative lifestyles and ways of working. Among the reasons for this change in values is the fact that, as formerly stable institutional and organizational arrangements have been loosened by deregulation, the typical, masculine, long-term job biography has been eroded.*

*From the perspective of groups oriented toward long-term labor biographies, such as bourgeois or labor parties – it now becomes difficult to determine how and when to differentiate between ‘work’ and ‘non-work’ – or even why one should need to do so. The figure of the artist seems to be the point of reference for this new understanding of the relation between life and work, and for mediating it to broader audience.*

*Per example, in the general political debate in the UK and Germany, support for the employed or unemployed depends now on their willingness to align working time and lived time ‘productively’, as required. Activities once, experienced as private now take on economic functions. The ‘laborentrepreneur’ must simultaneously be the artist of her/his own life. It is precisely this mystification of the subject of exception, the ‘artist’ whose way of working is based on self-responsibility, creativity and spontaneity, which grounds the slogans of today’s discourse on labor. This can be seen in the rhetoric of the Hartz Commission tasked with drawing up plans for the structural adjustment of the German labor market; in this terminology, the unemployed emerge as self-motivated ‘freelancers’ and artists, journalists and other self-employed or freelance professionals are revalorized as ‘the professionals of the Nation’.*

*The classical subject of exception, with its precarious employment situation, has thus been discursively transformed into a model economic actor. In current managerial and consulting discourses, creative action and thought are no longer expected only of artists, curators and designers. The new flexible, time-based employees are the customers of the booming creativity-promotion market, provided with the appropriate advice brochures, seminars, software and so forth. These educational programs, learning techniques and tools supply applicable methods, at the same time projecting new potential forms of being. Their aim is to make ‘optimizing’ the self seem desirable. Creativity*

*training demands and supports a liberation of creative potential, without addressing existing social conditions that might pose an impediment. On the one hand, then, creativity shows itself to be the democratic variant of genius: the ability to be creative is bestowed on everyone. On the other hand, everyone is required to develop her/his creative potential. The call for self-determination and participation no longer designates only an emancipated utopia, but also a social obligation. The subjects comply with these new relations of power apparently by free will. In Nicolas Rose’s (1996, page 236) terms, they are “obliged to be free” urged to be mature, autonomous and self-responsible. Their behavior is not regulated by a disciplinary power, but by ‘governmental’ techniques grounded in the neoliberal idea of a ‘self-regulating’ market. These techniques are intended to mobilize and stimulate, rather than discipline and punish. As contingent and flexible as the ‘market’ is, the new labor subjects shall be.*

*The requirement or imperative to ‘be creative’, to fit yourself into the market, relates to the very traditional understanding of the artistic production, as an artist’s income is conditioned on the sale of products in the art market (a myth that receives vehement reinforcement today). But at this point an important difference in the field of the managerial discourse comes into play. For failure in the labor market is not comparable to failure in the field of art. The artist who fails can still fall back on other subject positions and recuperate this failure by transforming it. The unrecognized or undiscovered*

artist can be mobilized in every moment of loss, because the absence of success can still be legitimated with rationalizations such as 'the time is not yet ripe', 'quality will out', and 'recognition takes time', (it may even come after you are dead). But this myth of the unrecognized, unsuccessful but still talented, if misunderstood, artist cannot be easily integrated into the managerial discourse. We may have to wait some time for an enterprise that would become the object of scientific inquiry only years after its death-by-bankruptcy. That hyper-motivated, super-flexible and mobile person who just did not land a job in the labor market is not likely to get a retrospective in the MOMA, with a coffee table book and a place in the hall of fame... after his or her death.

Still the subjectivity of non-recognition is integrated into the self representations of immaterial laborers at large. The artist as a model for the self-representation of the new flexible labor force can be found in several recent studies of the Germany business world, and the media and IT field in particular. A study of T-Mobile Germany showed that the humiliation of a time-limited or badly paid job was interpreted by many employees as a transition, a short-term experience that would soon be overcome, once the desired job is secured. The path to that job may be difficult, but the goal is clear. Contingent subjectivities are forming here, for which failures in the free market can be reinterpreted as positive individual experiences, and privatization and structural transformations in the social, political and economical fields can be treated as personal challenges.

Moreover, the mythology of the artist continues to project the image of a particular metropolitan lifestyle, where living and working are done in the same place – in a café or on the road – with the further illusory possibility of the added enjoyment of 'leisure'. As Elisabeth Wilson has shown in her *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (2000, page 275), the notions of flexibility and mobility emerge historically from the tradition of the 'drop-out' established by generations of artists who sought to resist modernism's dictums of discipline and rationalization. The social status and cultural capital attached to the image of the 'artist' thus also points to a higher, indeed a more ethical form of work; this form of labor has discarded the coercion of disciplinary regimes and is destined for something 'better'. The artist's studio or 'loft' became a symbol for the convergence of labor and leisure in everyday life and for innovation and the diversity of ideas. In this way, neoliberal ideology acquires the aesthetic dimension it needs for full realization, as can be seen in office design and living spaces, now become 'habitats'. Subjects are placed in new environments; associated lifestyle opportunities proliferate. Shared aesthetic experience, then, becomes an instrument of initiation.

The style of living and working originally attributed to the artist promises new 'urban living experiences' throughout Europe. Today the term 'loft' no longer refers only to an artist's studio in an abandoned industrial space, but is applied to almost all attic conversions and building extension

projects fashionable in Switzerland and Germany in the late 1990s. Since then, driven by the competition for geographic advantages in the global market, European labor markets have been revamped and city districts enhanced with a culturalized vocabulary. Meanwhile, budget cuts in the social and cultural fields are legitimized under the paradigm of the 'self-reliance' of cultural producers as entrepreneurs (the core concept of the creative industries ideology) in this notion of economy based on 'talents' and self-initiative.

#### FIGURES OF RESISTANCE

These discourses have not been marginal. Moreover, they have consequences for society as a whole. Meanwhile the conditions of production are disguised in the surviving remnants of industrial production, as well as in art and design and in other precarious jobs in the service sector. Despite their economic crash, the IT and media industries, which referred constantly to the image of the 'artist', have become as influential a model of labor as the Taylorist and Fordist car industry once was. As shown in the spurious emulation of bohemian lifestyles by the IT industry, among other sectors, much remains to be learned about a discourse on labor suffused with 'cultural language' – namely, about the everyday circulation of this discourse, its effects on the formation of subjectivity and the relation between adjustment, failure and resistance. So far the erosion of the old paradigm of production, along with the new working conditions and their reference to 'artistic practice', have been analyzed almost exclusively from within the logic of 'industrial work' or

*in relation to stable labor biographies oriented toward white males, the so-called breadwinners of western societies. With only a few exceptions, there have been few attempts to address the cultural rationale and effects of these phenomena, and little attention to the motives and desires of the actors involved. The real relations of production involved in the construct of 'creative' production (self-employed artists, media workers, and multimedia, sound, and graphics designers) have been neglected or idealized in these optimistic discourses.*

*With this in mind, I initiated a series of collaborative studies or projects centered on interviews with cultural producers of different backgrounds. My investigation began in Zurich in 2002, while I was still engaged at the Institute for the Theory of Design and Art, with a focus on cultural labour in the self-organized design and multimedia sector and its agents. In its cultural and qualitative methods, the study attempted not so much to review the political discourse about the transformation of wage-labor as to approach it in a new and different way. This seemed necessary, in order to develop a theory of social constitution that is clearly distinct from the notion of 'accumulative' productivity familiar from the materialist tradition. Instead of seeking to prove how life is economized, I tried to find out how cultural actors in a specific place are attempting to develop tactics or strategies for resisting the common discourse.*

*So in the spring of 2002, I initiated discussions about contemporary*

*relations of production at 'Atelier-/ Büro-Blocks', a complex of studio and office spaces in which the norm is a hybrid cultural production combining art, graphics, journalism, photography, multimedia and music. Moreover, I myself have participated in production projects there. The building belonged to a SWISSCOM company before it was sublet at the end of the 1990s to different groups of cultural producers. Most of the discussions took place on a floor-level of the complex that was leased collectively in the late 1990s by a group of artists, journalists and electronic musicians who called themselves 'k3000', an appropriation of the name of Swiss supermarket chain that had gone out of business but had been known for low-priced goods. The k3000 collective sublet the floor to various producers including multimedia and graphic designers, sound and visual artists, and social scientists. In one office space, called 'labor k3000', media equipment was used and knowledge shared collectively. The group Labor k3000, of which I am also a member, has been active in critical artistic practices and cultural production since 1997.*

*In the late 1990s the division between the artists and the designers was still quite marked. In the last five years it has become more and more common for critical artists, together with activists and theorists, to produce web projects, mailing lists, newspapers, videos, project exhibitions, actions and events. In this case, such collaborative production is only made possible by the spatial and social fabric of the Atelier-/Büro-Blocks, which maintains openings for the participation, ideas and skills of friends*

*and colleagues from other fields of production.*

*My research led me to revise several of my earlier assumptions about transformations in the conditions of production. I had assumed that the fields of design would perfectly exemplify the culturalization of economy – even more than would critical art practices. But here I had to correct myself, because those working in the field of design had work-biographies as freelancers and self-employed 'creatives' that already revealed very different results, and very different kinds of exit. And these transformations cannot be attributed solely to the economic situation following the crash of the 'e-economy'.*

*First of all, the interviews showed that the concepts and imaginaries involved in office and studio production spaces have already undergone a high degree of mixing. In Zurich's graphic design and art scene, after twenty years of personal computer culture, it is primarily the studio, rather than the office, that survives as a model of independent production. The people I spoke with had by the mid to late 1990s all been very active in producing multimedia applications for multinational companies or in enterprise branding. It was astonishing to see that this situation had shifted a few years later into a common agreement on the 'floor', that one should try to avoid working in this field of image production in general and that clients, whoever they may be, should no longer be invited into the building, even for signing contracts and so forth.*

While multimedia producers and graphic designers shifted their orientation towards the 'studio', the artists in contrast used terms like 'laboratory' or 'office' in their attempts to describe a more collective and multimedia-oriented mode of production. As both groups shared the same building, the divergence in language seems to have been the result of strategic decisions on the part of each group. Moreover, my discussions with diverse producers showed, to my surprise, that temporary, collective networks were no longer typical among graphic and multimedia designers engaged in the production of corporate images. The production on the 'floor' did not function as a 'factory' at all, contrary to what Maurizio Lazzarato claims in his canonical text on 'immaterial labor' (Lazzarato 1996, page 280).

Lazzarato lays great stress on the links between the new conditions of production under post-Fordism and artistic-cultural work. He assumes that the characteristics of the so called post-industrial economy, with regard both to its mode of production and to the relations of living in society as a whole, are condensed in the classical forms of 'immaterial' production. Even if these appear in fully realized form in the areas of the audio-visual industries, advertising and marketing, fashion, computer software, photography, and in artistic-cultural work in general, and even if artistic cultural workers appear as agents and representatives of "the classical forms of immaterial labor", the results of my study suggest that it is important to draw out their implicit

potentials for resistance and emphasize everyday tactics in opposition to processes of economization.

The self-employed designers in the Zurich scene functioned more as an 'alternative economy' dependent on alternative cultural spaces; in these spaces they earned their small but quite adequate incomes. In discussions they presented themselves as enclosed studio monads who consciously resist cooperation with the 'branding' and 'marketing' systems. They cooperated – and this point makes it even clearer – only when in urgent need of money and doing a 'job' to pay the rent or fund a holiday trip. This group has no political strategy. They did not discuss unions or the transformation of society and the conditions of labor in general. Instead, they invented a way to make their living through self-organized, partially freelance relations.

In the interviews, almost all of them claimed that they did not reject a 9-to-5 job solely because this regimentation of time seems paternalistic to them, but also because they could not bear either business culture and its social dynamics or the idea of having to subordinate themselves to a hierarchical working relationship. Multimedia and graphics jobs – as I found out in the discussions – also made it possible for (mostly) young men to move up in class position. However, these jobs do not seem to enact noteworthy transformations in the gender dynamics, even if this is repeatedly postulated in labor market policy assumptions. This aspect could have something to do with the traditional relationships of women

and men to technology. On the other hand, it could also be influenced by anachronistic assumptions about the 'artist' as solitary male genius.

Moreover, the graphic-designer's self-image increasingly aligns with that of the artist (as single author) to this day, allowing him or her to discard the image of the designer as a success-oriented craft-worker who following the demands of the client. Such self-images are to be found in the art-scene as well, where many actors do not appropriate the image of the artist in hopes of economic gain but much more with regard to social status and a possibility of dorm of social mobility not bound solely to money exchange. In the graphic art scene, the drift toward the artist's self-image even draws from the polar opposite of economic success – from the tradition of the failed and misunderstood artistic subject and its sub-cultural variations, with scant regard for whether that subject is desirable to capital.

The motifs of bohemian life come up not only in the discourses of labor market policies and economic success, but also in the field of applied art, where it is used as a social value to distinguish oneself from business as usual. Among this specific group of 'young creatives' as well, precarious working conditions are not determined solely by business. In every case I encountered, a way of living was deliberately chosen. In other words, freelancing or working independently, rather than in a position of permanent employment, corresponds to the desire for an enjoyable way of life that is not structured by others – a life

that is precarious and will never lead to great riches or the social status of international fame but which may still lead to a comfortable living. This seems a great privilege that most of the people globally do not share, and that even some of us over-stressed theorists do not share.

This cultural 'niche economy' only exists because of a still-existing alternative cultural scene – alternative networks of institutions which it was possible to establish in the wake of riots in Zurich and other cities. It exists because unemployment money is still available in Switzerland for young people who have just finished their education, and also because a network of cultural producers relates to this alternative world of cultural spaces, bars and clubs, political initiatives, temporal teaching jobs and self-initiated projects. Within these networks, people always find ways to generate small incomes and involve other people from the 'floor' or their buildings in their small but real streams of money. Here the niche economy must be described as a key factor in cultural policy and the specifics of localities.

Even if the self-understanding and self-organization of an 'artistic subject' constituted as a kind of historical citation seem to correspond to the fantasies of labor market redevelopers and creative industries apologists, making this form of subjectivation 'productive' for economic processes, still the success of this conjunction remains questionable in both theoretical and epistemological perspectives. Artistic ways of living and working contain forces that cannot fully be controlled

because they not only engender but also always take part in the dissolution of their own conditions. Furthermore, myths of artistic ways of life are not at exclusive disposal of human resource managers. These myths can also be used by social groups that would otherwise be silenced within existing power relations. Historical quotation of the artistic subject and aesthetic ways of living cannot serve as a source of the measurable data required by economic discourses because the production of a context of equivalency between the economical and specific forms of life is a reduction of the inherent complexities and obscures this shortcoming. **m**

#### NOTES

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