The Art Scene

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In sociology, the 'scene' is barely taken seriously as a form of social organization, but sociologist Pascal Gielen sees the scene as a highly functional part of our contemporary networking society and thus worthy of serious research. Were the current success of the creative industry to result in the exploitation of the creative scene, however, the level of freedom enjoyed could quickly become a lack of freedom.

An Ideal Production Unit for Economic Exploitation?

When a *Kunsthalle*, an experimental theatre, an international dance school, an alternative cinema, a couple of fusion restaurants and lounge bars – not to mention a sufficient number of gays – are concentrated in a place marked by high social density and mobility, the result is an art scene. 'What's there? Who's there? And what's going on?' are what American social geographer Richard Florida calls the three 'W questions' (Florida is a fan of management jargon).These questions have to be answered if we want to know if ours is a 'place to be'. [1] A creative scene like the one described is good for the economy, the image of a city and intercultural tolerance, it would seem.

Although the art scene has become an important economic variable and a popular subject of study, the term is not exactly thriving in the sociological context. The classic sociologist does know how to cope with concepts like 'the group', 'the category', 'the network' and 'the subculture', but 'the social scene' is relatively unexplored as an area of research. Obviously, there are exceptions, such as work done by Alan Blum. [2] Yet the lack of scholarly interest is surprising, since the scene is perhaps the format best suited to social intercourse. Within the prevailing post-Fordist economy – with its fluid working hours; high levels of mobility, hyper-communication and flexibility; and special interest in creativity and performance – the scene is a highly functional social-organizational form. Moreover, it is a popular temporary haven for hordes of enthusiastic globetrotters. Why is the scene such a good social binding agent nowadays? To find a satisfactory answer, we should start by taking a good look at the curious mode of production known as 'post-Fordism'.

Paolo Virno-Style Post-Fordism

The transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist (that is, Toyota-ist) manufacturing process is marked primarily by the transition from material to immaterial labour and production, and from material to immaterial goods. In the case of the latter, the symbolic value is greater than the practical value. Design and aesthetics – in other words, external signs and symbols – are major driving forces in today's economy, because they constantly heighten consumer interest. We are all too familiar with this point of view, which has been propagated by countless postmodern psychologists, sociologists and philosophers since the 1970s.

But how does an industry based on signs and symbols affect the workplace and the manufacturing process? What characterizes immaterial labour? According to Italian

philosopher Paolo Virno, current focal points are mobility, flexible working hours, communication and language (knowledge-sharing), interplay, detachment (the ability to disengage and to delegate) and adaptability. [3] Consequently, the person performing immaterial labour can be 'plugged in' at all times and in all places. Yet Virno's conception of immaterial labour is surprisingly refreshing when he links it to such notions as power, subjectivity (including informality and affection), curiosity, virtuosity, the personification of the product, opportunism, cynicism and endless chatter. Admittedly, his conception initially appears to relate to a string of seemingly heterogeneous characteristics applicable to immaterial labour. Presumably, the idea is to select with care a few key aspects from the list. Virno starts with the better-known aspects of the social phenomenon before adding his personal adaptation.

Physical and Mental Mobility

A brief summary – as found in the paragraph above – makes us forget what immaterial labour actually requires from people and, accordingly, what drastic consequences the new form of production has for contemporary society. For instance, mobility is often defined as increasing physical mobility, the negative aspects of which we encounter frequently: traffic jams, overcrowded trains and pollution caused by, among other things, a vast number of planes in the skies. The employee no longer lives his entire life near the factory or office where he works but moves regularly – as a result of promotion or relocation – not only from one workplace to another but also from one house to another.

Apart from the growth of physical mobility, mental mobility is becoming an increasingly essential part of our present-day working conditions. After all, the immaterial worker works primarily with her head, a head that can – and must – accompany her everywhere. Immaterial labour does not cease when the employee shuts the office door behind her. It is easy for the worker who performs immaterial labour to take work-related problems home, to bed and, in the worst-case scenario, on holiday. The worker can always be reached, by mobile phone or email, and summoned back to the workplace within the moment or two it takes to log on. Mental mobility makes working hours not only flexible but fluid, blurring the boundary between private and working domains. The burden of responsibility for drawing the boundary rests almost entirely on the shoulders of the employee.

The foregoing outline makes rather a depressing impression, but many a person who does immaterial work experiences it as such, as evidenced by the increase in work-related stress and depressions. One cause of depression is an ongoing sense of having too much on one's mind and of being constantly reminded of this fact by the working environment. Perhaps a creative idea is still nestling somewhere in the brain: a conclusion based more on a socially conditioned criterion than on anything psychological. The knowledge that you can go on looking, that you may be failing to utilize a possibility still lodged in your brain, can lead to psychosis. Burnout is not necessarily the result of a person feeling that his ideas have not been fully exploited. On the contrary, it is rooted in the frustration that an unused, passive zone exists within the cranium that can still be activated. The worker who can no longer stop the introspective quest for inventiveness may find himself falling into an abyss or looking for escape routes, such as intoxication, to momentarily halt the thinking process. He deliberately switches off his creative potential.

However, contrasting with this very one-sided and sombre picture of the effects of immaterial labour, it must be said that it can also liberate a form of mental labour. After all, no-one can look inside the head of the designer, artist, engineer, ICT programmer or manager to check whether he is actually thinking productively – that is, in the interests of the business. It's difficult to measure the development of ideas. A good idea or an attractive design may escape from the brilliant mind of the immaterial worker in a matter of seconds, or it might take months. What's more, the same employee may be saving his best ideas until he's accumulated sufficient capital to set up his own business. Anyone

possessing immaterial capital can participate unseen, and in this case invisibility can be taken literally.

Power and Biopolitics

Clearly, the employer of immaterial labour no longer invests in effective labour but more in working power, in potential or promise, because the person who performs immaterial work comes with a supply of as-yet-untapped and unforeseen capabilities. Perhaps the brilliant designer, engineer, manager or programmer, who had been acquired for a great deal of money, is burnt out. Or perhaps he's in love and focused on something other than work. Maybe his latest brilliant idea was the last, or it will take another ten years before another follows. Who can say?

The paradoxical characteristics of that working power – that potential which is bought and sold as if it were a material commodity – presuppose 'biopolitical' practices, according to Virno. The employer, preferably aided by the government, has to develop ingenious mechanisms for optimizing, or at least guaranteeing, immaterial labour. Since physical and intellectual powers are inseparable, these mechanisms should focus on the life of the immaterial worker: hence the term '*bio*politics'. 'When something is sold that exists merely as a *possibility*, it cannot be separated from the *living person* of the seller. The worker's living body is the substrate of the working power, which in isolation has no independent existence. "Life", pure and simple "*bios*", acquires special importance since it is the tabernacle of *dynamis*, of the more-or-less possible. Capitalists are only interested for an indirect reason in the worker's life: that life, that body, contains the talent, the possibility, the *dynamis*. The living body becomes an object to be managed. . . . Life is situated at the centre of politics as the prize to be won and is the immaterial (and not present in itself) working force.' [4]

Communication, Linguistic Virtuosity and Informality

Virno comments, somewhat ironically, that on the good old Fordist shop floor there would often be a sign saying: 'Silence, people at work'. He believes it could be replaced today with: 'People at work. Speak!' In the post-Fordist setting, communication has become all important. This conclusion would seem fairly obvious, as immaterial labour relies heavily on sharing know-how and ideas. Communication is productive within the contemporary working environment, whereas it was once considered counterproductive for the 'traditional' worker. The latter is a 'doer', working manually, even if his job is only a matter of pressing a button at regular intervals. Chatter, therefore, is a form of distraction or entertainment.

When communication is the key focus in the workplace, the bottom line is negotiation and persuasion. Thus rhetorical powers play a special role in the workplace. Someone with virtuoso linguistic skills invariably gets more done. Virtuosity has shifted from making – as evident in the work of the artisan – to speaking. Linguistic virtuosity, says Virno, has two characteristics: it finds satisfaction in itself, without attaining any objectified goal; and it presupposes the presence of others, of an audience. In other words, the immaterial worker is a good performer. If he is to convince colleagues that he has a good idea, he must take a verbal, or at least a linguistically logical, course. Even if no idea exists, the immaterial worker counts on his linguistic skills to keep on implying that he's thinking hard or ruminating in a positive way. Others either confirm or contradict him during the process.

Communication, in Virno's opinion, assumes something in addition to virtuosity. Or rather, communication has a specific effect on relationships among immaterial workers. If nothing else, it requires relational skills that have little to do with production. Workers must get on with one another in a workplace in which the human aspect plays an increasingly greater role. Virno refers to 'the inclusion of anthropogenesis in the existing mode of production'.

When the human aspect enters the office or factory, it carries with it an air of informality. The ability to get on well with others – and daring to try out ideas on colleagues – involves a degree of trust.

Although that idea goes beyond Virno, it's one worth analysing. After all, one can question whether informality plays a productive role in the immaterial workplace, which extends further than achieving good communication and a useful exchange of information. Informal association with others also means knowing more about one another. About family life, children and, in some cases, 'extracurricular' relationships. Private information can be a good way of checking whether an employee is still 'on the ball' and, consequently, whether he's working productively and in the interests of the business. In fact, and more speculatively, isn't a more informal working environment the ultimate tool of biopolitics? An informal conversation is a way of evaluating an employee's brainpower without her being aware of it. 'A good work climate' – which can mean, for example, that it's possible to have a pleasant conversation in the corridor or to go out for lunch or have a beer after work with a colleague – has a dual purpose. It can increase productivity, because employees enjoy being at work (even if the work is not necessarily interesting, good colleagues are a compensation); but it can also be a highly ingenious means of control: the control of life itself. Informalization can mean, therefore, that the immaterial worker in all his subjectivity is biopolitically 'nabbed' or 'caught out' in his situational inability to develop productive ideas. This is genuine biopower: not power set down in formalized rules but power present in a vetting process that can steal round corners, any time and any place, to encroach upon the body in a subjective fashion. The following section substantiates the argument that biopower can develop within the scene extremely well as a form of social organization.

Scene to Be Seen

In everyday usage, the word 'scene' invariably prevails in alternative discursive settings. For example, 'scene' is rarely used to indicate socially appropriate professions or groups. We do not refer to 'the scene' in relation to civil servants, bankers, the police or heterosexuals; but we do refer to the art scene, the theatre scene, the gay scene and, not to be forgotten, the drug or criminal scene. Creativity and criminality seem to occur to a notable extent in the same semantic circles. They have at least one characteristic in common within society: both creative and criminal networks stand for innovation. Regardless of whether it's a network involving innovative cultural practices, alternative lifestyles or illegal financial transactions, it serves as an alternative to what is socially acceptable or commonsensical. Until now, the word 'scene' has always been available to accommodate heterodox forms in the discursive sense. Yet recent decades have seen a remarkable advance of the discursive fringe towards the centre, making the 'alternative scene' a quality label at the heart of society. Today, labels like 'alternative', 'independent' and 'avant-garde' rank as welcome brands in the economic epicentre. Hence the word 'scene' cannot lag behind, as Richard Florida clearly understands.

The scene as a form of social organization meets a number of criteria that fit relatively recent social developments. In a world in which individuality and authenticity are highly prized, in leisure activities as well as in the workplace, the scene constitutes a comfortable setting. The scene is a form of social organization that generates the freedom of temporary and flexible relations unavailable in a group (with relatively closed membership), for instance. The scene produces social cohesion and a shared identity unknown in a social category like an age-related or professional group. Relations within the scene are relatively free of obligations, but not without rules. Someone wishing to enter the art scene, for example, must comply with certain rules or social codes, but these are far less specific than the admission codes of a football club, youth movement or lodge. What's more, one scene can easily be exchanged for another. This is where it differs from a subculture, which requires a specific, almost rigid identity.

These are the very characteristics that make the scene an ideal form of social organization in the present network society. Local scenes are proving to be familiar focal points within a worldwide network. They generate just enough, but not too much, intimacy for global nomads. Whether you enter the art scene in Shanghai, Tokyo, New York, London, Berlin or Brussels, you find a familiar frame of reference despite what may be a totally different cultural context. If, six months ago, you had mentioned the name Damien Hirst in any of these art scenes, you would have instantly created a common ground for socializing, whether participating in an intellectual debate or chatting in a pub. The scene provides a safe, familiar, yet admittedly temporary home in a globalized world. Or, as Alan Blum puts it: it offers a kind of urban intimacy that enables a person to survive in a chilly urban environment and anonymous global time. The reason, to some extent, is that professional and public activities within a scene affect the domestic domain. Professional and private activities, work and personal relationships, often merge seamlessly. Although it may sound facetious, the hotel lounge, vernissage and fusion restaurant are settings for both informal chatter and professional deals. But professional deals may well depend on gossip, and informal chatter may prompt professional deals. Thus the scene is the place where formality and informality effortlessly intersect. And, proceeding in that vein, the scene is the ultimate place for biopolitical control.

The foregoing inventory of public and semi-public spaces that fit comfortably into the scene uncovers another aspect of this form of social organization. It creates a Foucaultian panoptical décor for the visual control of seeing and being seen. If anything: whoever is not seen 'on the scene' does not belong to the scene, and the scene which is not seen is a non-scene. And so the notion remains very close to its original etymological meaning. The Greek *skènè* was actually a tent: the hut or wooden structure from which actors emerged. Theatricality plays an important constituent part in 'the scene'. In other words, the scene always implies a *mise en scène*. And, by extension, it ties in seamlessly with the demands made of the present-day post-Fordist worker. As we have seen, he depends largely on the performance of his creative ideas. In so doing, he has much to gain from these ideas being communicated to the widest (and most international) audience possible. Foreign is chic on the scene. But he gains only if the audience is reliable. After all, an idea can be easily ridiculed but easily stolen, too. The public – international yet intimate – environment is the perfect place for promoting the social conditions that enable the relatively safe exchange of ideas. Anyone stealing ideas within the scene receives at least a verbal sanction. A claim that an original thought has been copied elsewhere is an option only if witnesses exist and the thought has been aired in public. The originality or authenticity of an idea can be measured recursively, therefore, if that idea was ever 'put on the stage'.

Freiheit macht Arbeit: Freedom Creates Work

Events like biennials and buildings like a *Kunsthalle* or museum are ideal semi-public venues for the art scene and for the circulation of creative ideas. You could say they form the concrete infrastructure of the scene or make the scene more visible: the non-seen scene becomes the seen scene. This applies primarily to artists whose work is displayed by the organizations in question or is on display in the buildings. The concrete infrastructure literally scenarizes the art scene, thus making it a more or less permanent creative scene. This displaying of the scene, incidentally, takes place in complete accordance with the rules of post-Fordist art. As a result, a person works under a temporary contract or, in the art world itself, often without a contract in what is always a vitalist, project-based setting; the work – flexible and invariably at night – is done with irrepressible creative enthusiasm. In short, it involves a work ethic in which work is always enjoyable, or should be; in which dynamism is boosted unconditionally by young talent; and in which commitment outstrips money. These factors determine the spirit of the art scene. If you try to rationalize this great, spontaneous desire and freedom to work (by means of rigid contracts or labour

agreements, for instance) or to bureaucratize or routinize it, you are in danger of letting the metaphorical creative genie out of the bottle. However, we should not forget that creative work as described here is always a form of cheap, unstable work, which makes the art scene of great interest to outsiders like company managers and politicians. Not only does it boost the local economy and introduce the city to the world market; it also, and especially, reveals a biopolitical ethic that benefits today's economy. Rather than believing that *Arbeit macht frei*, as announced on gates to Nazi concentration camps, protagonists of the creative scene seem to think that *Freiheit macht Arbeit* (freedom creates work). The type of accepted flexible work that marks artistic projects would make gratifying advertising for a temp agency. Considering the rhetorical reversal, it is better to offer no opinion as to whether or not the concentration camp has become the central social structure of all society, as Giorgio Agamben claims. [5] If the crossover involving professional, public and domestic activities – and particularly the interplay between formality and informality, on the one hand, and seeing and being seen, on the other – is exploited on a rationally economic basis, the cultivated freedom of the art scene edges uncomfortably close to the inhuman lack of freedom of the camp. Making a link between scene and camp is undoubtedly going a step too far. The point, however, is that the freedom of the art scene within the capitalist *mise en scène* can be no more than a false freedom, because it inevitably stems from a well-defined (or un-free) finality, primarily the pursuit of profit.

The fact that Richard Florida and his ilk are perfectly happy with this scene, as viewed from their neoliberal perspective, is suspect, to say the least. Of course, an interest in the art scene from politicians and managers need not lead to paranoia. Their focus does demonstrate to some extent, after all, that artistic phenomena have considerable social support. If and when this focus causes the exploitation of the creative scene, owing to its informality and ethic of freedom – a shift that would restructure biopolitics, bringing about a real lack of freedom – the art scene will have good reason for concern.

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Footnotes

1. Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
2. See, for example, Alan Blum, 'Scenes', in: Janine Marchessault and Will Straw (eds.), 'Scenes and the City', *Public* (2001), nos. 22/23.
3. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).
4. Virno, A Grammer of the Multitude, op. cit (note 1), 83.
5. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Tags

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