The Dismeasure of Art
An interview with Paolo Virno

Sonja Lavaert, Pascal Gielen

Interview – November 1, 2009

In his home town Rome, Italian philosopher Paolo Virno talks with philosopher Sonja Lavaert and sociologist Pascal Gielen about the relation between creativity and today's economics, and about exploitation and possible forms of resistance. Virno is known for his analysis of post-Fordism; his view that the disproportion of artistic standards runs parallel to communism, however, is new to the philosophy of art. He believes aesthetics and social resistance meet in a quest for new forms. Political art or not, the contents hardly matter.

The art world has displayed an avid interest in your work over the past few years; we ourselves are here to interview you for an art magazine. Yet you've hardly written anything explicitly about art. Where do you think this interest in your work comes from?

It's true. I sometimes get invited to talk about art at conferences or seminars organized by art academies and that always embarrasses me a little, as if there has been some mistake, because my knowledge of modern art is actually very limited. I think that people involved in art being interested in my work has something to do with a concept I use, namely 'virtuosity'. In my opinion, this concept is the common ground between my political and philosophical reflection and the field of art. Virtuosity happens to the artist or performer who, after performing, does not leave a work of art behind. I have used the experience of the performing, virtuoso artist not so much to make statements about art, but rather to indicate what is typical of political action in general. Political action does not produce objects. It is an activity that does not result in an autonomous object. What strikes me is that today work, and not just work for a publishing company, for television or for a newspaper, but all present-day work, including the work done in the Volkswagen factory, or at Fiat or Renault, tends to be an activity that does not result in an autonomous 'work', in a produced object. Of course the Volkswagen factory cranks out cars, but this is entirely subject to a system of automatic mechanized labour, while the duties of the individual Volkswagen factory workers consist of communication that leaves no objects behind: of this type of virtuoso activity. I see virtuosity as a model for post-Fordist work in general. And there is more: what strikes me is that the earliest type of virtuosity, the one that precedes all others, precedes the dance, the concert, the actor's performance and so on, is typically the activity of our human kind, namely the use of language. Using human language is an activity that does not result in any autonomous and remaining 'work'; it does not end in a material result, and this is the lesson De Saussure, Chomsky and Wittgenstein taught. Post-Fordist work is virtuoso and it became virtuoso when it became linguistic and communicative.

What do I think about art? The only art of which I have a more than superficial knowledge is modern and contemporary poetry. I think that the experience of avant-garde art including poetry in the 20th century is one of disproportion and of 'excess', of lack of moderation. Great 20th-century avant-garde art – and poetry in particular – from Celan to Brecht and Montale, has demonstrated the crisis of experiential units of measure. It is as if the platinum metre bar kept in Paris to define the standard length of a metre suddenly measured 90 or 110 centimetres. This emphasis on immoderation, disproportion and the crisis in units of measure is to be credited greatly to avant-garde art and this is also where it edges up to communism. With regard to the crisis of measure, art is a lot like communism.

Only poetry, or other art as well?

Art in general, I expect, but I know poetry best. It is about disproportion. In addition to explaining the crisis, poetry wants to find new standards of measure and proportion. Along the same lines the major Italian poet and critic Franco Fortini has said that there is an objective common ground between avant-garde art and poetry and the communist movement – and I do not use the term 'communist' in the sense of actual socialism. What's more, I consider actual socialism as interpreted within the communist party and the Soviet Union as communism's worst enemy.

This emphasis on the disproportion or crisis of units of measure is present in the communist movement and they are looking for new criteria, too. The experience of the artist-performer can provide us with a general post-Fordist model.

What do you mean by 'crisis of the unit of measure'?

It is as if the metre, the standard set to measure cognitive and affective experience, no longer works. We see the same crisis in the fields of politics and history: social prosperity is no longer produced by labour time, but by knowledge, by a general knowing, by 'general intellect', and as a result social prosperity and labour time are no longer directly connected. The new standard to measure prosperity is within the domain of intelligence, language and collaboration. The problem is that social prosperity is still measured by the old standard of labour time, while realities have changed and it is actually determined by 'general intellect'. We can see the same thing happening in 20th-century art. It demonstrates the inadequacy of the old standards and suggests, in the formal sphere and through the formal work of poetry, new standards for the appraisal of our cognitive and affective experience. This is a point that brought the artistic avant-garde close to the radical social movement and in this sense there is a kind of brotherhood between the two: they would like to explain that the old standards are no longer valid and to look for what might be new standards. Another way to put the problem is: how can you locate a new public sphere, which has nothing to do with the state? Avant-garde art proved the impotence, the inadequacy, the disproportion of the old standards through a formal investigation. The common ground of art and social movements is never about content. Art that relates to social resistance is beside the point, or rather art expressing views on social resistance is not relevant. The radical movement and avant-garde poetry touch on the formal investigation that yields an index of new forms denoting new ways of living and feeling, which results in new standards. All this is far removed from a substantive relation.

So you see only a formal parallel? Do you think there is a historic evolution in this formal parallelism and can there be any interaction between form and content?

No. When it comes to content, there is no common ground. There is only contact with regard to form and the quest for forms. To me, it is purely a matter of a formal investigation. The form of the poem is like the form of a new public sphere, like the

structure of a new idea. Looking for forms in the arts is like looking for new standards of what we may regard as society, power, and so on.

As new rules?

Yes, exactly, it's about new rules. This collapse of the old rules and anticipating new rules, even if only formal, is where aesthetics and social resistance meet: this is the common ground where a new society is anticipated that is based on 'general intellect' and not on the sovereignty of the state anymore.

Do you mean: rules to organize the standard?

It is a matter of defining concepts: the concept of power, of work, of activity and so on. In connection with art I would like to add, and this perhaps goes without saying, that after Benjamin we cannot but wonder what the fate of technical ability to reproduce is going to be. In our present context we need, aesthetically and politically, a concept of 'unicity without the aura'. You both know Benjamin's concept of the unicity of a work of art involving the 'aura', a kind of religious cult surrounding the artwork as is for instance evident in the case of the *Mona Lisa*. Benjamin points out that the aura is destroyed by reproduction techniques: think about film and photography.

The problem we face today is the problem of the singularity of experience, which has nothing to do with aura or cult. To grasp the particularity of the experience we need a concept of unicity without aura, for that particularity or unicity no longer has the character of an aura. Nowadays it is all about finding the relation between the highest possible degree of communality or generality and the highest possible degree of singularity. In art forms, too, what matters is finding the relation between the most general and the most particular. Art is a quest for unicity without any aura.

Art and philosophy face the same problem?

Absolutely. Philosophy is supposed to formulate a critique against the universal on behalf of the general. [1] The concepts of 'universal' and 'general' are constantly being mixed up, while they are in fact opposites. The '*comune*' or 'general' is not that which we encounter in you, in him, in me but that which occurs, passes, between us. My brain is general yet simultaneously particular because it is not like yours or his: only the universal aspects are. Aspects that are equally present in us all are universal. 'General' refers to what exists or occurs in the borderland, between you and me, in the relation between you, him and me, and in that sense there is a constant movement between the particular and the general. Marx's concept of 'general intellect' is general, just as the English language is general and not universal. Language serves as a model for the general that only exists within a community and that cannot exist apart from the community. Our mother tongue, the language we speak, does not exist apart from the relation with a community each of us has individually, whereas our bifocal eye sight does exist in each of us individually, apart from the community. There are things that only exist inside relationships. When Marx speaks of 'general intellect', he refers to collaboration and so to something like that, which only exists in the in between. This concept of Marx's refers to the general good. Now I think that in modernity, the general in both art and philosophy is involved in a complex emancipatory struggle to get away from the universal. This is also how I interpret 'other globalization' or 'new global' movements: they represent the dimension of the general that criticizes the universal. Sovereignty, on the other hand, is a form of the universal. So the question we now face is: What aesthetic and political experiences can we develop to transfer from the universal to the general without consequently destroying the particular?

Or take what philosophers call the 'individuation principle', meaning the valuation of everything that is unique and unrepeatable in our lives. Speaking of individuation implies

that you consider the individual a result, not a starting point. The individual is a result of a movement that is rooted in the 'communal' and yet is, or is becoming, particular. It is Marx who, for 'general intellect', uses the term 'social individual'. We can postulate that the general is something pre-individual, a kind of general consciousness that exists before individuals form, and from which they form. This general pre-individual is a 'we' that exists before the different I's develop, so is *not* the sum of all I's. This is also in perfect agreement with the view on human development of the Russian psychologist and linguist Vygotsky, who was actually heavily influenced by Marx: prior to anything else there exists a collective social context and only beyond and from that context does the child develop into a separate individual subject. Or remember the formidable discovery of the 'mirror neurons' by the neurosciences, which tells us there is a kind of general sensing, an empathy that precedes the constitution of the separate subject. The Italian scientist Gallese, who contributed to this discovery, speaks of a space in which the 'we' is central. I think all these expressions by Vygotsky, Marx and Gallese are different ways to grasp the concept of the general as opposed to the concept of the universal. I would like to highlight this contrast, which is a hard nut that both political movements and artistic research will have to crack. The alliance between the general and the singular opposes the state and its machinery. Today, movements that side with the multitudes carefully anticipate this alliance: the multitudes are individuals who nevertheless maintain strong ties with the general. On the other hand, the state and post-Fordist society transform the general into the universal; they transform the general intellect into a source of financial gain and social collaboration, and virtuosity into patterns and structures of post-Fordist production.

Returning to the connection between art and politics: how do you feel about engaged art, for instance about what Brian Holmes does or Michelangelo Pistoletto and his Cittadelarte – Fondazione Pistoletto? How do you feel about art that takes up a substantive political standpoint as well? Is it relevant?

In this context I would like to talk about the Situationists and Debord, for they provide an example of an artistic movement, Debord and *Situationiste Internationale*, turning into a political avant-garde. To me, engaged art is an integral part of political movements, one of its components. Political movements use a lot of tools, including means of communication like the Internet, and politically engaged art is one of those tools. It is a component of movements' political capital.

Yet I would once again like to underline that the most important effect of art is set in the formal sphere. In that sense, even art that is remote from political engagement touches upon the social and political reality. The two are not conflicting matters. They operate on different levels. The formal investigation produces criteria, units of measure, whereas the directly political engagement of the artist is a specific form of political mobilization.

Do you mean to say that even politically engaged art is still part of a formal investigation? Engagement is closely connected to a successful formal investigation?

Yes, what I mean is that even artists who are remote from the political movement may, through their search for new forms and expressions and in spite of themselves, get in touch with the needs of such a political movement, and may be used by it. Brecht as well as poets much more remote from social realities, like Montale, realized a similar relation. The Situationists were very important when they became a political movement, but from that moment on they were no longer avant-garde art: it's about two modes of existence. They clearly illustrate this double take. Before 1960 they were an artistic movement rooted in Dadaism and Surrealism, afterwards they participated in social resistance, making the same mistakes or gaining the same merits as other political activists. Another problem is that when language becomes the main principle according to which social reality is organized, social reality as a whole becomes aesthetic.

So where would you situate art within society from a sociological perspective? Or put the other way around: What would happen if art was cut away from society? What social role do you ascribe to fiction in society?

Well, I think that Enzensberger's quip is appropriate here. He said poetry is no longer found in volumes of poetry but scattered over society like an effervescent tablet dissolved in a glass of water. You will find art everywhere, even in commercials. There is no longer a monopolistic location for the production of art; the artistic experience is molecularly disseminated. We also live in a time, the post-Fordist era, in which human nature has become an economic stake. Every aspect of human nature (that we are linguistic beings, the effect of environment on the human species) constitutes raw material for production. The debate about human nature that took place between Foucault and Chomsky in Eindhoven in 1971 was very important to me. This debate was at the heart of the social movements' deliberations from the moment its translation was published in Italy. You could say both parties were wrong. Foucault denied there was any such thing as innate human nature, whereas Chomsky's concept of this innate human nature was so rigid and deterministic that he thought he could deduce a political programme from it. I believe this discussion ought to become the subject of renewed study and that we need to have it again, to find new answers to contemporary questions about the relation between human nature and politics. You see, today aspects of human nature have become sociological categories. One example is flexibility. Anthropologists like Gehlen teach that the hallmark of human nature is the absence of specialized instincts: we are the species without a specific milieu. Anthropology uses notions such as 'natural, unchanging truth' but, particularly in our day and age, such natural truths have become *sociological* truths and the phenomenon of flexibility and sub-phenomena, like migration, along with them. Another example: we human beings always remain children, we hold on to certain childlike aspects our entire lives, we are chronically childlike. This, too, has always been true but only now has lifelong learning become an issue. Yet another example: the metahistorical aspect that we are highly potential creatures. In the present context, this potential has become labour power. From this perspective we can speak of bio-politics, because biological features have become a sociological category – that is to say, a sociological category of capitalism. In no way do I mean to say that flexibility and capitalism are sociological laws of nature. Nothing stipulates that society has got to be organized in this way, on the contrary. There is an aesthetic base component in human nature which, in the present context, has become an aspect of economic production. That is why matters have to be dealt with on a fundamental level. The concept of labour power also includes an aesthetic component, beside a communicative and a linguistic aspect. The problem of and for art, both intrinsically and formally, is to show this aesthetic component of the production process. Does contemporary art indeed represent this widespread aesthetic dimension of present-day production? I cannot answer this question, but I do think it needs to be asked. Human nature, aesthetic component, post-Fordism, labour power: the discussion about art needs to be held in this conceptual constellation. What is left of aesthetics in present-day production in the collaboration and in the communication that have become production power? Something transformed the extraordinary position of the aesthetic experience within society, for it is no longer extraordinary, singular and separate but has, conversely, become an integral part of production.

Let's go back a little, to Enzensberger's quip and the place where art is produced, does something like artistic autonomy exist anymore? Do artistically autonomous places exist?

I think so, but not as many as there used to be.

So is it still possible for art to remain disengaged? Can art be resistance and exodus?

I think it can. Linking the terms I used before to this question: the land of the pharaoh, from which the exodus takes place, is the universal. The exodus is away from the universal towards the general, however this occurs among the phenomena of the present context. The exodus involves the transformation of those very present phenomena. Nothing is external, there is no outside. The exodus occurs within post-Fordist production where linguistic production and collaboration, as labour and production power, create a public dimension that is not identical to the dimension of the state. It is an exodus away from the state and its machinery and towards a new public space that makes use of general intellect and general knowledge. During the exodus the general intellect no longer has the power to produce profit and surplus values but becomes a political institution. What comes to mind is the space in which a central 'we' is a realistic basis for a new political institution. I think the pre-individual dimension and the features of human nature that post-Fordism put to work and converted to cash (flexibility, chronically childlike, no instinctive orientation or specific milieu) also give us the opportunity to create new forms, but in a manner opposite to what happens in today's institutions – an exodus that provides what we can see happening in post-Fordism with a new form. Flexibility therefore, but interpreted as freedom. The chronically childlike understood as prosperity, on condition that it stops transforming into the necessity to learn lifelong as described by Richard Sennett. An exodus within the present landscape.

It is generally understood that post-Fordism's breakthrough as a global production principle took place in the 1960s and 1970s together with the student revolts and the Fiat strikes. Do you think that prior to that time there were areas that ranked as kinds of social laboratories for this production process? You could say that immaterial labour commenced when Duchamp entered his urinal in the New York exhibition. Would you support the hypothesis that the laboratories of the present post-Fordism are to be found in artistic production itself, particularly in early modern readymade art? Max Weber showed that the spirit of capitalism is deeply rooted in Protestantism. Can you indicate locations (of an artistic, religious or subcultural nature) in society, in this Weberian or historical sense, where preparations are being made for post-Fordism as a mental structure?

You mean a genealogy of post-Fordism? I would be very interested in a genealogical perspective dating back further than the 1960s and 1970s. I think we could regard the culture industry of the 1930s and 1940s and onwards as the laboratory for post-Fordist production that anticipated that which was embodied in industry in general in the 1980s.

What would you consider examples of the 1930s culture industry?

Radio, film . . . to me, they anticipate post-Fordism for technical reasons: at that time, the unexpected becomes an indispensable element in the culture industry. The unexpected, which later becomes the pivot of post-Fordist production in the form of the *just-in-time* inventory strategy. There is no culture industry without an outside-of-the-programme factor. And that reminds me of what the two great philosopher-sociologists Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in their chapter on culture industry of their *Dialektik der Aufklärung*: culture, too, became an industrial sector and a capitalist assembly line but one with a handicap, for it was not fully rational yet. It is this handicap, not being able to foresee and organize everything, which turns the culture industry into a post-Fordist laboratory. The culture industry is the antechamber of present-day production techniques. For what escapes programmes is, indeed, that element of flexibility. And of course I also see that anticipation because the culture industry's base materials are language and imagination.

Today, we see artistic expressions and activities simply being situated at the centre of post-Fordist economy. Think about, for instance, artistic expressions in commercials or advertising but also about the incredible growth of the cultural and creative industries. Art, or at least creativity, has not been socially marginal, which was how Michel de Certeau saw

them for a long time. Yet even Wittgenstein and you yourself place creative space in the margin or as you call it, on a sidetrack. Might the discrepancy between margin and centre not be obsolete?

I see creativity as diffuse, without a privileged centre. As a no-matter-what creativity, under weak leadership if you can call it that, having no specific location, connected to the fact that we humans are linguistic beings: art is anybody's.

Does creativity transform when it is at the centre of the post-Fordist production system? Or, more concrete: is there a difference between a creative thinker or artist and a web designer or a publicity expert at the centre of the economic process? Are these two kinds of creativity, or is it about the same kind of creativity?

This is a complex dialectic. First, it is important to post-Fordist capitalism that creativity develops autonomously, so it can subsequently catch it and appropriate it. Capitalism cannot organize reflection and creativity, for then it would no longer be creativity. The form applied here is that of the ghetto: 'You go on and make new music, and then we will go and commercialize that new music.' It is important for creativity to have autonomy, because it forms in the collaboration that is general and consequently the opposite of universal. Creativity feeds off the general. I would like to elucidate this through the distinction Marx made between formal and real subsumption or subjection. In the case of formal subsumption, the capitalist appropriates a production cycle that already exists. In the case of real subsumption, the capitalist organizes the production cycle moment by moment. Now it seems to me that the existent post-Fordism in many cases implies that we have returned to formal subsumption. It is important for social collaboration to produce its intelligence and create its forms. Afterwards, that intelligence and those forms are captured and incorporated by the capitalist, who has no choice but to do so if he wants to acquire that which can only grow outside of him or outside his organization. So the capitalists want to seize autonomously and freely produced intelligence and forms: to realize a surplus value of course, not to realize greater freedom for the people.

A certain degree of autonomy or freedom is necessary and therefore permissible. Social collaboration has to be something with a certain degree of self-organization in order to be productive in a capitalist manner. If the work was organized directly by the capitalist, it would be unprofitable. To yield a profit and be useful from the perspective of the capitalist, the work needs to some extent to be established through self-organization. It is difficult to grasp this complex dialectic by using theoretical categories. That which is really productive from an economic point of view is not the sum of the individual labourers' output, but the context of collaboration and interaction – provided that it follows its own logic of growth, investigation and invention to some extent. In other words, the process is subject to our own initiative. It is a condition for my exploitation that I produce intelligence and collaboration, and I can only do so when I am, to some degree, free. So I need to be granted a certain degree of autonomy in order to be exploited.

Can the myth of the autonomous artist be seen as a capitalist construction?

First and foremost I think about the autonomy that is functional in creating surplus value, the autonomy that is essential to innovation and to the optimization and development of collaboration. This is a patented and therefore a regulated autonomy, which is absolutely vital when labour has become linguistic and communicative. At that time, speaker-workers must be permitted autonomy. In Wittgensteinian terms it is a matter of 'language games' being used as a source of production. Language games do not just exist, they need to be developed and that is impossible within a rigid structure with all sentences and dialogues pre-recorded and scripted. Language games presume some degree of freedom or autonomy. However, I do not share the view that the present context includes more

freedom and prosperity. A grinding poverty reigns in post-Fordism. The worst poverty you can imagine, for it is communication skills themselves that are claimed, exploited, and as capital, too.

Now that we are talking about exploitation perhaps we might address the question of how to fight it. Today in Rome we saw posters displayed by the opposition featuring the slogan 'Il lavoro nobilita. Il precariato no'. Whether or not there is nobility in labour remains to be seen, but we all agree that the precariat *is a condition to avoid, a grinding exploitation. We urgently need forms of resistance, developed by and for 'precarious workers' or* precari*. What is your take on such forms of resistance? Are they, in keeping with what you said earlier, forms of life? Can they be artistic expressions as well? Can you concretize this?*

Let's take the example of someone who works for Italian television and radio: thousands of people with an unclear and insecure status . . . are being exploited. They form a so-called *precariat*. They have to work a lot, work hard, be inventive and focused all the time. They do not make a lot of money, are employed for three months and then unemployed for six more. How can these people organize? Not in the workplace: now you see them there, now you don't. As a rule, TV and radio's *precari* are well-educated creative people with a lot of cultural baggage, a rich cultural and social life: typical post-Fordist workers. However, what applies to them also applies to any example of a *precariat*, including Alitalia's. Developing forms of resistance from, for and by the *precari* means doing so within the very broad context in which they live their lives. It means involving every aspect of their lives, their place of residence, the places they spend their leisure, their communication networks. You cannot organize television people without involving the districts they live in. You cannot abstract from the theatres they visit. In short, the whole problem concerns so many aspects and vital dimensions that developing a form of resistance means inventing new institutions.

How should I concretize this? How do we invent new institutions? What can the forms of resistance of the *precari* look like? This is of course the big X on the European political scene. Politics in Europe means finding the *precariat* forms of resistance. There is a precedent, an example perhaps for this problem, in the IWW, Industrial Workers of the World. At the beginning of the 20th century no-one knew how to organize the mobile migrant labourers in the USA, either. They were highly scattered, very mobile and their resistance did not look as if it could be organized. Yet for about ten years the IWW managed to put up their seemingly impossible struggle with some success. Their importance therefore should not be underrated, even if they did lose in the end and get massacred. Perhaps today, we ought to look in the same direction, to a new kind of union that will find a new form of resistance. The strike no longer works. We need new forms that are much more linguistic and creative, much more collaborative. The *precari* are the extreme product of the big city experience and of post-Fordist capitalism. That is why they are a foothold for the onset of reflection. Organizing them means organizing lives and there is no model for that. It cannot be done without investigating the districts they move around in, their circuits of cultural consumption, their collective habits. The *precari* are actually the social individual, therefore they are always more than one, they are the counterpart of the 'general intellect'. But organizing the social individual is very hard for, as I said, they are more than one, scattered, a brittle faction. We need research. Philosophy, including the philosophy of language, has to concern itself with the issue of what resistance forms may be developed starting from the *precari*. This is not a technical problem, on the contrary, it is an ethical matter and also an artistic matter. It is an institutional problem. Organizing the *precari* will mean finding new institutions in the broad sense of the word and the opposite of state sovereignty. The measure of resistance today depends precisely on dedication to this major objective.

Sonja Lavaert is professor of philosophy at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She has published on early modern philosophy (Machiavelli, Spinoza), radical contemporary philosophy (Agamben, Negri, Virno), critical theory, Italian studies and philosophy of art. She is the author of *Het perspectief van de multitude* (2011) and she co-edited *The Dutch Legacy. Radical Thinkers of the 17th Century and the Enlightenment* (2017) and *Aufklärungs-Kritik und Aufklärungs-Mythen. Horkheimer und Adorno in philosophiehistorischer Perspektive* (2018). Her research focuses on the philosophical representations of history, and on the genealogy of political and ethical concepts in the interdisciplinary area of philosophy, language, literature, and translation.

Pascal Gielen is full Professor of Sociology of Art and Politics at the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts, University of Antwerp where he leads the Culture Commons Quest Office (CCQO). Gielen is editor-in-chief of the international book series *Arts in Society*. In 2016, he became laureate of the Odysseus grant for excellent international scientific research of the Fund for Scientific Research Flanders in Belgium. His research focuses on creative labour, the institutional context of the arts and cultural politics. Gielen has published many books translated in English, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish.

Footnotes

1. We have in most cases translated the Italian ‘comune’ by ‘general’ because of Virno’s moves in the field of logic, his wordplay on a principal level, his translational referrals to Marx’s notion of ‘general intellect’. However, the Italian ‘comune’ also means ‘common’, ‘communal’, ‘collective’. So please keep in mind that in each case, the logical ‘general’ also echoes the English ‘common’.

Tags

Activism, Aesthetics, Autonomy, Capitalism, Communism, Labour, Philosophy, Commons

This text was downloaded on November 19, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/the-dismeasure-of-art