Are You Working Too Much?
Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art

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Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle (eds.) *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art*, New York / Berlin, e-flux journal / Sternberg Press, 2011, ISBN 9781934105313, 216 pages

The notion that artists are often perfectly capable of functioning simultaneously in at least two or three professions, for which they moreover, in contrast to art, are well-paid and socially respected, is infuriating, is it not? And why would talented artists willingly limit themselves to one sector (art) in which so little compensation is offered for so much unpaid work? These questions form the introduction to e-flux's new volume, *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art* The book comprises a collection of essays that from various perspectives examine the current position of art professionals, one that is dominated by neo-capitalistic values and arguments. Dissatisfaction with the often precarious working relations determines the tone of the book. The professionals themselves are also to blame for this, according to e-flux editors Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle. For after all, art professionals exploit themselves. The editors go on to ironically note that art is not a religion, however, or a charity where voluntary work provides added value. Nowadays, the only way in which you can maintain yourself financially in a world where you are held responsible for more and more costs is to work even longer in the field (not art) in which you meanwhile have been functioning as an expert.

Through the juxtapositon of the terms 'focus' and 'intensity', Diedrich Diederichsen describes the mentality and life-attitude of today's art professionals and the sphere in which they move. What is intense is today's 'networking economy', which is based on freedom and potential. In order to be able to profit from all of the possibilities within it, maximum dedication and an almost ecstatic enthusiasm are necessary. Whereas formerly a certain focus and purpose were required and work was geared to precise observations, in the present economy leisure prevails. Even wastefulness is currently ascribed value. You could translate the difference between focus and intensity as the difference between Fordism and post-Fordism. But this opposition is too theoretical for Diederichsen. In reality, he claims, one can indicate situations in which a bridge is erected between artificially separated worlds. He refers to the mixing of mentalities in a Berlin customs office where unidentifiable goods can be picked up. There you find people up to their ears in micro-cultural awareness, in a searching investigation of the economy, in self-marketing and speculation. Since the appearanc of novels like Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), adds Diederichsen, we are familiar with the type of person who combines liberty and focus, purpose and wasteful extravagance. Doesn't the entrepreneurial attitude displayed by Patrick Bateman, the main character in *American Psycho*, combine a leftist, Nietzsian animosity towards the state and a vitalistic animosity towards bureaucracy? The fictitious pathological monster (Bateman overindulges in drink, sex, drugs and commits multiple murders) has become reality. In today's casino capitalism, the beast, in its

baseless madness, returns and forms the heart of a well organized economic routine, says Diederichsen. Aren't characters like Bateman, who prefer to intensify their lives with work in which they develop themselves, in fact the ones who are in power?

Hito Steyerl also has doubts about all-too-artificially segregated expositions. Art and neoliberal post-Fordist speculation are inseparably connected with one another, after all. All over the world, biennials, museums and galleries are introduced in order to stimulate slow economies. Post-democratic oligarchies like 'Global Guggenheim' reign supreme. The actual work, however, is done by the 'nouveaux poor', according to Steyerl. These are the 'jpeg virtuosos' (the ones who polish up visual files in the wink of an eye) and the 'gallerinas' (who keep the galleries going), producing work for a pittance in an incredible tempo and with boundless enthusiasm. This loose-knit team of 'propertyless adventurers' is hardly capable of revolting against the system, however, seeing as they are part of it. Political art must not forget its function, exhorts Steyerl. Contemporary political art is a site of condensation of the contradictions of capital and of the sometimes devastating misunderstandings between global and local forces. Politics are present in the production, distribution and reception of art.

In *Are You Working Too Much?*, a diligent search is made for all sorts of images – musicological, literary (Diederichsen) and historical (Steyerl) – through which the present situation in art can be understood, described, compared and, as it turns out, possibly undermined. In his sociological analysis, Lars Bang Larsen uses the literary metaphor of the zombie, which stands for abjection and alienation. According to Larsen, 'zombification' can easily be applied to the Marxist notion that capital devours the body and soul of the worker, and that the living are exploited by 'dead work'. The current post-democratic society, which rests on immaterial work and which colonizes the brain and the nervous system, can be characterized as 'zombie-like'. The zombie can also function as an allegory to dramatize the oddity of what has become reality in the present 'experience economy', which is based on affect. After all, claims Larsen: 'The zombie isn't just any monster, but one with a pedigree of social critique.' Moreove, alienation, for which the zombie stands, can also be productive. Why don't we consider the zombie as a 'pre-being' (a child), instead of as a 'post-being, a no-longer-human', he suggests. For the zombie is a 'strange, tragicomic monster that displaces evil and its concept: the zombie isn't evil, nor has it been begot by evil; it is a monstrosity that deflects itself in order to show that our imagination cannot stop at the monster'. Thus, he concludes, through the figure of the zombie we can imagine the future anew.

Central to Franco Berardi Bifo's essay, 'Cognitarian Subjectivation', is the question of whether the process of making an autonomous, collective definition of the self is still possible in this day and age. Bifo's 'cognitarians' embody the concept of the 'general intellect'. Associated with the Italian post-operaismo of theorists like Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato, this concept emphasizes the interaction between work and language: social work is the endless recombination of fragments producing, distributing and decoding signs and symbols and other bearers of information. The network economy exploits the emotional energy of the cognitive class by supplying an overabundance of goods that demand attention. Today's cognitarians lack a body, a social and physical body, a social economic body, according to Bifo. Our political task thus consists of handing the conceptual instruments of psychotherapy and the language of poetry to the cognitarians. These can be used to undermine the universal language of the economy. Such assistance moreover restores a social body to the cognitarians, and thus the feeling of solidarity.

Their discomfort over the terms and conditions that determine today's cultural and aesthetic practice forces the authors in *Are You Working Too Much?* to base their argumentations by starting from the postcapitalist domain and at the same time going beyond it. Are there holes in the system? Are there stories that show the downside of

postcapitalist tendencies which are now presented as a *fait accompli* (Marion von Osten, Keti Chukhrov)? Can possibilities be discerned and perhaps created in the present situation by tackling it from an interdisciplinary perspective (Tom Holert)? Frequent references are made to thinking in terms of coincidence, difference and nuance such as elaborated by the duo J.K. Gibson-Graham, first in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* (1996), later in *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006) (Antke Engel bases her article on their 'politics of possibilities'). No ready-made answers to the inescapable neoliberal views that have made their entrance in the world of art are provided in *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art*. The anthology reads as an evaluation, as a call to not let oneself be rendered powerless or lapse into an all-too-familiar pattern. Above all, the book presents a search for points of departure for radical change or for continuing a practice along other lines.

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Tags

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