Beyond the Model Worker:
Surveying a Creative Precariat

By Greig de Peuter

Abstract

The figure of the self-reliant, risk-bearing, non-unionised, self-exploiting, always-on flexibly employed worker in the creative industries has been positioned as a role model of contemporary capitalism. Although the notion of the model-worker is a compelling critical diagnostic of the self-management of precarity in post-Fordist times, I argue that it provides an insufficient perspective on labour and the so-called creative economy to the extent that it occludes the capacity to contest among the workforces it represents. Informed by a larger research project, this article thematises salient features of select collective responses to precarity that are emerging from workers in nonstandard employment in the arts, the media, and cultural industries. The discussion is structured in three main parts: the first, *aggregation*, identifies initiatives in which employment status – rather than a specific profession or sector – is the basis of assembly and advocacy; the second, *compensation*, highlights unpaid work as a growing point of contention across sectors; and the third, *occupation*, describes cases in which precarious cultural workers are voicing their grievances and engaging in direct action in the context of wider social movements. These dimensions of the contemporary response to precarisation in the creative industries are at risk of being overlooked if the research optic on workers' strategies is focused upon a single sector or a particular profession. In conclusion, I emphasise that the organisations, campaigns, and proposals that are surveyed in this article are marked by tensions between and among accommodative adaption, incremental improvements, and radical reformism vis-à-vis precarity.

Keywords: Labour, precarity, creative industries, cultural workers, resistance.

Role Model Worker

Cultural, media, and 'creative' workers – especially those outside the fraying 'standard employment relationship' – are role model subjects of contemporary capitalism.[1] Variations on this claim frequently arise in the literature on labour that has surged in recent years within and beyond cultural studies. Freelance, contract, self-employed, and intermittent workers in the arts, the media, and cultural industries are invoked as paradigmatic figures of 21st century capitalism, specifically, of a political-economic order putting a premium on risk-taking, flexible employment, valorisation of immaterial labour, entrepreneurial forms of subjectivity, and a mode of governmentality expecting individuals to shoulder responsibilities otherwise borne by an employer or the state (Ross 2000; McRobbie 2001; Boltanski & Chiapello 2005; Neff et al. 2005; Fraser 2006; von Osten 2007a, 2007b; Sholette 2011; Bryan-Wilson 2012; Steyerl 2012; Raunig 2013).

The thrust of the role model proposition is that priorities of post-Fordist, neoliberal capitalism are exemplified by the conditions and propensities of those in nonstandard employment navigating the liquid labour markets of the vaunted 'creative economy': habituated to self-reliance; accepting a high level of risk; allergic to bureaucracy; juggling multiple short-term 'projects'; blurring the boundaries of work and non-work time; preternaturally adaptable; striving to be innovative and unique; producing monetary value from knowledge, symbols, or otherwise intangible resources; carefully branding the self; personally funding perpetual education upgrades; vigorously managing social networks within highly informal labour markets; performing work without a guarantee of compensation; assuming responsibility for maintaining a steady flow of paid work and, hence, on a job search without end; and willingness to put the passion for the work ahead of the size of the pay.

Such portraiture is intended to critically diagnose self-exploitation and the pragmatic adjustment of behaviour to the rigours of flexibility. There is a dominant analog to the role model idea, however, in early 21st century celebratory discourses surrounding labour flexibility and the creative economy: for example, the business writer Daniel Pink (2002) declared 'the MFA the new MBA' and mused enthusiastically on 'free agency'; the academic-consultant Richard Florida (2012) nominated the 'creative class' a key to post-industrial prosperity and a paragon of rewarding job opportunity; and the New Labour Party, under the leadership of Tony Blair, refined the now globalising creative industries policy framework, which sought to join together the value-adding promise of symbolic production, the intellectual property imperative, and the enterprise culture of Thatcherism. It is tempting to conclude that these official perspectives and their critical counterparts make basically the same point – that workers animating the creative economy have contemporary capitalism's preferred labour profile.

The critical role model idea is, however, distinguished by normative concerns, namely, that the risk-bearing, benefit-bereft, non-unionised, self-sacrificing, meritocratic-minded, always-on independent creative worker is hardly a template for spreading economic and social justice, let alone emotional well-being (Ross 2000; McRobbie 2002; Neff et al. 2005). Indeed, the turn to labour in cultural studies was itself accelerated in response to turn-of-the-century government discourses about the creative industries, which scholars roundly criticised for neglecting the flipside of often glamourised occupations in the arts, the media, and cultural industries (McRobbie 2002; Rossiter 2007; Banks & Hesmondhalgh 2009; Ross 2009), a flipside that many activists and academics would come to know by the shorthand, 'precarity'.

It is at this point worth recalling that the liberating tone of official tales of 'free agents' and the 'creative class' is an echo of dissident genealogies. As several theorists have argued with reference to 20th century capitalist transformations, one-time oppositional impulses – to escape the routines of standard employment, to avert the Taylorized rhythms of the factory, to access expanded opportunities to be creative – came to be accommodated by and increasingly generic to capitalism (Hardt & Negri 2000; Berardi 2003; Boltanski & Chiapello 2005; Fraser 2006; Lorey 2006; von Osten 2007a, 2007b). The spread of nonstandard, creative work under post-Fordism demonstrates capital's remarkable capacity to absorb, adapt to, and thrive off desires opposing it. Rather than reinforce capitalist triumphalism, however, a reading along these lines derives its perspective from below, affirming labour's ability to collectively withdraw from and seek alternatives to the prevailing organisation of work.

In contrast, the role-model portrait conjures up a figure so thoroughly formatted to the exigencies of flexible exploitation that it runs the risk of adding to the sense that there is no way out (c.f. Gillick 2010; Rosler 2011). So although the notion of the model-worker is a compelling critical diagnostic of the self-management of precarity in post-Fordist times, it provides an insufficient perspective on labour and the so-called creative economy to the extent that it occludes the capacity to contest among the workforces it represents. Glossing over countervailing possibilities is potentially debilitating politically. Raising this concern does not imply a rejection of the role model proposition, however. On the contrary, if the cultural worker in nonstandard employment exemplifies tendencies in contemporary capitalism that promote precarity, by the same token, such workers may be a strategic locus of resistance against these tendencies.

Creative Precariat

Barely a decade ago, labour issues were rightly characterised as a 'blind spot' in such fields as communication studies (McKercher & Mosco 2006: 493). Since then, labour research has proliferated in media and cultural studies. Much of this

research carefully documents conditions and experiences of work in individual sectors of the creative industries, including, among others, television, fashion, journalism, new media, video games, and the arts (e.g., Ursell 2000; Neff et al. 2005; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2006; Deuze 2007; Gill 2007; Arvidsson et al. 2010; Lloyd 2010). While this literature is heterogeneous, a couple of general observations can be made about this welcome wave of labour scholarship. Firstly, it illuminates the prevalence, across sectors of the creative industries, of precarity, that is, of financial, social, and existential insecurity exacerbated by the flexibilisation of labour under post-Fordism, a process exemplified by freelancing, short-term contracts, internships, solo self-employment, and other unstable work arrangements that are familiar in creative industries. A second general observation about the research on labour in creative industries is that greater attention has tended to be given to manifestations of precarity as compared to collective efforts to confront precarious conditions of labour and life.

Gathering momentum, however, is a current of inquiry where the primary focus is on efforts to counteract precarity in the arts, the media, and knowledge and cultural industries (Bodnar 2006; Corsani & Lazzarato 2008; Mosco & McKercher 2008; Ross 2008; Brophy 2010; Cohen 2011; Murgia & Selmi 2012; Murray & Golmitzer 2012; Raunig 2013). Working in this stream, this article is informed by a larger, collaborative research project, Cultural Workers Organize (see www.culturalworkersorganize.org). This ongoing project is rooted in a memory of 'precarity' as a conceptual tool forged in the context of activism (Papadopulous et al. 2008; Mattoni 2012). Cultural Workers Organize sets out to survey emerging collective responses to precarity by contract workers, interns, self-employed, free-lancers, part-timers and other flexworkers in creative economy milieus. At the core of the research are organisations, campaigns, and policy proposals that variously seek to expose, resist, and mitigate precarity. Between 2010 and 2013, fieldwork was carried out mostly in London, Milan, New York City, and Toronto, where interviews were conducted with sixty people, spanning professional associations, trade unions, activist groups, coworking spaces, and cooperatives. Spotlighting collective initiatives and listening to activist voices, this research underscores that flexibilisation, individualisation, and precarisation may be leading mechanisms of post-Fordist exploitation, but these processes have not exhausted labour's capacity to act collectively.

In their wide-ranging review of recent literature on nonstandard work, Dennis Arnold and Joseph Bongiovi (2013: 304) conclude: '… there is a need to better understand the ambitions, desires and strategies of precarious workers' efforts in organizing and the broader implications of social struggle for alternatives to the dominant development paradigms'. A modest contribution to this task, in what follows I identify three broad ways in which precarious workers are responding – or might respond – to the challenges they face, responses that are, to varying degrees, accommodative of or antagonistic toward the creative economy paradigm

of contemporary capitalism. The first section of the paper addresses emerging flexworker organisations in which a (quasi-)employment status, rather than a particular occupation or sector, is the basis of aggregation and advocacy. The second section zeroes in on unpaid work as a point of contention in a variety of creative economy quarters, a grievance dovetailing with diverse compensation proposals. And the third section considers precarious cultural workers' involvement in wider social movement politics, in particular, the politics of occupation. In conclusion, I highlight the tension between incremental improvements and more radical reforms in the 'ambitions, desires, and strategies' catalogued herein.

The responses to precarity focused upon in this paper require a final framing comment. How precarity manifests, and the means by which workers might confront it, will be shaped by sector-specific dimensions, ranging from industrial structure to professional culture, work organisation, and access to and forms of collective representation – dimensions with, moreover, distinct national and regional contours. This is why, in the research project informing this article, an effort has been made to share sector-specific accounts of precarity and strategies for mitigating it (e.g., Ziff 2012; Condé & Beveridge forthcoming) and to provide case studies addressing particular national and metropolitan contexts (Cohen & de Peuter 2013; de Peuter 2014). In this article, however, I take an intentionally generalist perspective, arguing that if the research optic on workers' strategies in creative industries is limited to a single sector or a particular profession then important features of the contemporary response to precarity may be overlooked. Of interest here are organisations that reach across sectors or occupations; policy proposals with potential effects beyond one professional group – and beyond cultural workers per se; and moments where cultural, media, and creative workers air their grievances via participation in wider counter-capitalist social movements. In these and other ways, the initiatives surveyed below have significance for thinking through the possibilities and the limitations of a 'creative precariat' (Arvidsson et al. 2010: 296).

Aggregation

Densely concentrating labour power at a single production site not only enabled mass-scale extraction of surplus value, but also deepened the consciousness of common cause that fueled industrial trade unionism. Such conditions of counter-power are short-circuited by the spatial and temporal disaggregation of workforces. Short-term stints and off-site working, characteristic features of many creative industries, complicate workplace-based labour organising and the objective of employment continuity. 'The organizing template of long-term stability and security in a single workplace', writes Andrew Ross (2009: 211), 'is not well-suited to industries where a majority of workers shift their employers on a regular basis, whether voluntarily or involuntarily'. Workers in low-wage service sectors and

their allies were the first to collectively address flexible and precarious employment through campaigns such as Justice for Janitors and new organisations such as worker centres. Novel responses are emerging from flexworkers in creative-economy sectors, too, as precarity trickles up the value chain. Discussed below is a subset of these collective responses for which the aggregating factor is not necessarily craft, occupation, or industry – conventional sources of labour solidarity – but (quasi-)employment status.

Organised labour has had difficulty adapting to the sort of transformations in occupational structures and employment relationships that converge in the creative industries. Emerging at the margins of the union movement, however, are atypical workers' associations exploring strategies for bringing together workers in nonstandard employment, including the self-employed, across a variety of occupations, at the higher end of the value chain in the creative economy. Along these lines, the most established collective organisation in the cities covered by our research is New York's Freelancers Union (see Abrahamian 2012). Boasting some 229,000 members, the Freelancers Union has been developing – outside the scope of collective bargaining – infrastructure for protecting and supporting 'independent workers' excluded from entitlements available to their counterparts in standard employment. Its strategic gambit for bringing its dispersed constituency together is to service independent workers' unmet need for medical insurance. Recognising that mobile workers require benefits that are not fixed to one employer, the Freelancers Union pools members' financial resources so as to provide access to healthcare coverage at a discount rate as compared to purchasing insurance individually. Based on this foundation, the Freelancers Union has evolved a model that combines fee-based services, free resources (e.g. its Online Contract Creator), legislative advocacy to improve freelancers' socio-economic conditions, and, more recently, it has opened a medical clinic for members in New York City. The Freelancers Union – and likeminded groups such as Milan-based *Associazione Consulenti Terziario Avanzato* – is an actor in what Joel Dullroy and Anna Cashman (2013) describe as the fledgling 'freelancers' rights movement' – integral to which are strategies, beyond the bargaining table, for expanding social protections for flexworkers.

Those in nonstandard work arrangements are also coming together via coworking, the practice of freelancers and other self-employed operating out of a shared workspace (de Peuter, Cohen, & Saraco 2013). Mostly populated by communication, design, and business services professionals, coworking spaces respond to two manifestations of precarity for solo operators: the isolation of working alone at home, and a lack of access to affordable commercial property. Virtually unheard of a decade ago, coworking spaces are mushrooming, with an estimated 2,500 globally (Foertsch 2013). Charging membership fees based on usage, coworking spaces are typically for-profit entities. There are, however, contending models, including free, ad hoc coworking events, a.k.a. 'jellies'; municipally sup-

ported spaces, such as the Hive at 55 in Manhattan; social enterprises, such as the Impact Hub, an international network of coworking spaces; and co-operatives, such as Montréal's Ecto. There are glimpses of the potential for these spaces to help their constituencies confront aspects of precarity beyond social isolation: for instance, the Hub Islington in London has hosted workshops raising the subject of freelancers' rights; members of the Toronto Writers' Centre informally support one another in conversations about negotiating decent publishing contracts; and coworking spaces in the Canadian province of Ontario have collaborated on an extended benefits program for their members. Coworking is one of the sites where common cause might be recomposed among otherwise dispersed workers.

Anti-precarity aggregations are also forming around the quasi-employment arrangement known as the internship (de Peuter, Cohen & Brophy 2012). High youth unemployment, socially glamorous sectors, and careers promising self-expression are among the factors bulking up the youthful reserve army under competitive pressure to accept low- or no-wage internships, in the hope of securing stable, paid work in creative industries. Misclassification of entry-level staff as interns, diminished social protections, and the cordoning off of professions from those insufficiently privileged to be able to work for free are just some of the grievances expressed by intern activist groups that have proliferated internationally in recent years – including, in the cities of our research, Intern Labor Rights in New York; Intern Aware, Precarious Workers Brigade, and Ragpickers in London; and the Toronto-based Canadian Intern Association. While some unions have begun to advocate for interns, most intern initiatives are cropping up at the margins of organised labour. Rather than in bargaining units, interns are converging in nimble collectives, participating in direct actions targeting dubious internship schemes; in class-action suits, challenging employers on the legality of their internships; on social media networks, naming-and-shaming companies recruiting unpaid interns; and on campuses, where past, present, and prospective interns congregate for longer than the average placement. Interns' oppositional initiative has made wageless young workers a high-profile subject, prompting some politicians to press for more stringent regulations (see Cohen & de Peuter 2013). Most significantly, intern activists have broached the taboo topics of labour exploitation and workers' rights among the children of neoliberalism.

Atypical workers' associations, coworking spaces, and intern initiatives are aggregators of workers differentially detached from a single, stable employer. Vincent Mosco and Catherine McKercher (2008: 13) remark, 'it is uncertain whether the stories of … new forms of organizing in unlikely places … represent a new dawn for the labor movement or its last defensive gasps'. 'Last gasps' are within earshot, when, for example, atypical workers' associations sell benefits to independents, the latter shouldering the financial burden of outsourcing; when coworking members buy access to the workplace community that has been eroded by flexibilisation, and, in the process, activate a site for 'network sociality' (Wittel

2001); or when campaigns against exploitative internships stop short of troubling the inherently exploitative character of waged labour. Still, the above-discussed efforts are exposing real challenges faced by precarious workers in creative industries – and are mitigating some of those challenges in significant, if not always systemic, ways. These nonstandard aggregations demonstrate that the spatio-temporal fragmentation of the workforce is incomplete. It is important, however, to avoid making a virtue of a necessity; in particular, collective bargaining unit certification surely is not the only legitimate mechanism of labour politics, but, absent that, it is difficult to confront one of the most basic indices of precarity – pay.

Compensation

One way to widen the lens on labour politics in the creative industries is to search out common concerns among precarious workers in different sectors. The previous section, for example, identified social isolation and weak social protections as manifestations of precarity around which media and cultural workers in nonstandard employment are aggregating. This section turns to another point of contention among flexworkers in the arts, the media, and cultural industries – compensation, specifically, unpaid work. As the activism surrounding internships indicates, discontent is rumbling at the zero-wage margins of the creative economy. This section flags some of the forms of unpaid work that individual workers and their organisations are problematising, the strategies characterising their efforts, and the proposals being forwarded for redressing this grievance. Identifying shared sources of agitation is a preliminary step toward exploring possibilities for pansectoral labour campaigns and solidarities across, and perhaps beyond, creative industries.

Lacking union representation, the primary strategies used by nonstandard workers and their organisations to respond to the problem of unpaid work have involved litigation and legislation. Take, for example, the Freelancer Payment Protection Act, currently awaiting a Senate vote in New York State, which was initiated by the Freelancers Union (2013) in an effort to better protect freelancers when clients do not pay; the class-action suits forwarded by unpaid media interns, perhaps most notoriously, the *Black Swan* case (Perlin 2013), in which it was persuasively argued that interns performed work that merited statutory minimum wage; and the successful wage-theft cases pushed by the labour group Retail Action Project (2012) through the New York State Office of the Attorney General to win unpaid wages for part-time workers in the fashion retail sector from employers that failed to comply with minimum wage regulations. While costly and timely, litigation and legislation are often the only options for nonunionised precarious workers to confront unpaid work.

For the creative-economy paradigm, the figure of the artist is especially worthy of emulation, due partly to the dubious yet enduring notion that self-expressive work offers 'nonmonetary rewards' (Ross 2000: 22) which counteract the sting of low earnings, a characteristic feature of artistic labour markets (see, for example, Miranda 2009). In lieu of payment, visual and performing artists are frequently invited to provide work in exchange for a very particular nonmonetary reward, that of exposure, says New York City artists' group, W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy). Contesting the legitimacy, and doubting the convertibility, of the 'promise of exposure' (W.A.G.E. n.d. a), W.A.G.E. formed in 2008 in response to what the group describes as the 'common practice' (W.A.G.E. n.d. b), among New York's non-profit galleries, of not paying artists for their contributions to shows. Operating in a non-unionised sector, W.A.G.E. began by leveraging art-world communication platforms for 'consciousness-raising' (W.A.G.E. n.d. b); went on to research the scope of non-payment via an online survey (58.4% of respondents reported cases of non-payment) (W.A.G.E. n.d. c); and, currently, is designing a regulatory framework, 'W.A.G.E. Certification', for recognising those cultural institutions that transparently budget for, and consistently pay, artist fees.

Advocating for minimum standard rates, W.A.G.E. is inspired by organisations such as Canadian Artists' Representation / *Le Front des artistes canadiens* (CARFAC). Since 1968, CARFAC has published updated base-fee schedules that are more or less adhered to by galleries in Canada. Presently, CARFAC is lobbying for a policy response to another variety of unpaid labour; the association is pushing for national legislation – the Artist's Resale Right – that would redistribute a five percent royalty to an artist when their work is flipped on the art market (CARFAC 2013). Unpaid cultural work is an issue gaining attention well beyond the visual arts. For example, the UK's 30,000-strong Musicians' Union initiated the campaign 'Work Not Play' after members reported being asked to perform for free at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. W.A.G.E., CARFAC, and the Musicians' Union are on a growing roster of organisations engaged in struggle over the meaning of cultural work as such, from refusing the cliché of the labour-of-love to debunking the half-truth that working unpaid is a commercial opportunity. For its part, W.A.G.E. (n.d. b) is straightforward about the stakes: the promise of exposure 'denies the value of our labor'. Fighting this devaluation, these organisations' efforts underscore the need for blended labour/cultural policies to counteract a model whereby cultural production is subsidised by those economically equipped – by debt, inheritance, or precarious secondary jobs – to perform cultural work on spec.

'[G]etting the multitude to work for free', writes Yann Moulier Boutang (2011: 133), 'is the general line of cognitive capitalism, wherever it has the possibility'. Nowhere in the creative economy does unpaid work find more favourable conditions than online. Prospects are particularly bountiful in the byline business: 'The

easier it is to get published, the harder it is to get paid for it', says the President of the US National Writers' Union (Goldbetter 2011). Writers, their allies, and organisations are, however, pursuing multiple strategies against the normalisation of the provision of content for nothing, or nearly so, to profit-seeking media outlets, including, among others: class-action suits, such as that filed against *The Huffington Post* in which unpaid bloggers sought (unsuccessfully) a cut of the $315 million that AOL paid in 2011 for the news website whose valuable online traffic, plaintiffs argued, was partly their collective product; contributor boycotts, including one called by the National Writers' Union – against *Huffington Post* again – as part of its 'Pay the Writer!' campaign, and, another, informally called in 2013, targeting the *Daily Review*, an Australian arts and culture site; online pay 'walls' – such as 'Who Pays Writers?' and 'Pay Me Please' – which use the same Internet infrastructures that enlist unpaid or low-paid media work to instead expose it; and research efforts, with the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, for example, surveying the extent of unpaid work as part its campaign, launched in 2013, 'Free Is Not An Option'.

The plight of freelance writers is, however, a specific case of a more general trend: network communication technologies are multiplying the options available to capital for accessing creative labour power without entering standard employment relationships, a process of ongoing destandardisation ultimately arriving at the online continuum of productivity, and hence of exploitability, now widely theorised as 'free labour' (Terranova 2004).

Imposing minimum rates via collective agreements is a necessary element of a response to the problem of unpaid work in the creative economy. A more sweeping additional possibility is basic income, that is, the proposal for the introduction of a universal and unconditional annual guaranteed income, set at a rate sufficient for meeting basic human needs (see Raventós 2007; Weeks 2011). Rather than seek a specified wage for a given contribution, basic income would delink compensation from employment. Across our research sites, the basic income proposal is most prominent among activists in Italy, and, in the early 2000s, the EuroMayDay parade, which incubated in Milan, was a vehicle for the transnational circulation of the proposal (Negri 2008: 215). Understood as a radically expanded version of what has been termed 'precarity pay' (Vosko 2000: 226), basic income potentially provides a threefold response to the problems of unpaid work and income insecurity generally, across and beyond creative economy sectors.

First, access to an incrementally dispensed annual basic income could bridge the payless gap between contracts that affects intermittently engaged workers (Gill 2007: 7; Horowitz et al. 2005: 5). Pointing in this direction is the unique indemnity available in France to media and cultural workers on short-term contracts, *l'intermittent du spectacle*, which brings some stability to erratic incomes (see Corsani & Lazzarato 2008). By compensating the interval between gigs, this income security measure, writes Antonella Corsani (2007), begins to recognise

there is 'a wealth created outside of time spent in employment'; between paid jobs, a cultural worker could be rehearsing, conducting research, acquiring skills, developing ideas, or otherwise replenishing the creativity coextensive with future productions. This dovetails with a second case for basic income: it would offer some compensation for contributions to the creative economy – from maintaining the social networks that undergird flexible labour pools, to feeding content to so-cial-media firms, to lending cachet to gentrifying neighbourhoods – that generate financial value but are currently unremunerated. 'We are', to borrow the words of anti-precarity activist Alex Foti (2004), '100% of the time part of the (re)production of capital'. From this point of view, basic income is not conceived as welfare support for those excluded from production but rather as a 'social sala-ry' (Vercellone 2007) for those always already a participant in it. Basic income is, then, a policy correlate to the claim that cognitive and affective labour are not restricted to specific occupations but instead are diffuse social capacities and ex-ceed activity performed in the context of paid employment.

A third case for basic income vis-à-vis unpaid activity is also the most urgent case: basic income could be a policy strategy for swiftly 'eradicating poverty' (Raventós 2007: 107). Distribution of earnings in creative industries are character-istically lopsided, between, as Gillian Ursell (2000: 817) remarks in a study of television labour, 'a well-placed minority … and the rest'. 'The rest', even if un-employed, are productive for capital: the standing reserve army can be expected to exert downward pressure on the wage that a creative-economy employer is likely to bear, and, thus, raise their return. Additionally, basic income could lower the class barrier to labour market entry to the arts, the media, and cultural production. Although it could be a mechanism for mitigating cultural worker precarity, basic income's promise of greater economic justice has, of course, vast relevance for impoverished populations beyond those selling their labour in creative industries.

In addition to bridging the pay gap between gigs, recognising the value contri-bution of activity performed outside employment, and insulating against immiser-ation, basic income has further potential to transform the conditions of media and cultural production. Jim Shorthose and Gerard Strange (2004: 58) suggest basic income could be a policy component of 'governance for autonomy' in the sphere of cultural work. Not only would access to basic income enable cultural producers to experiment with content and forms that do not abide by dominant criteria of commercial viability, but also, by providing a base level of material security, basic income would enable cultural workers – among a range of other groups – to pursue their work in the context of alternative economic experiments, including, for instance, worker cooperatives, with the basic income providing some protec-tion for counter-capitalist experiments from the competitive pressures of the mar-ket. In these and other ways, basic income begins to show its promise as a 'tool of counterpower' (Fumagalli & Lucarelli 2008). Ultimately, however, the basic in-come proposal broaches issues of class inequality, the privatisation of socially

produced wealth, and a desire for autonomy – systemic issues that are more fully confronted by precarious cultural workers when they spread out and contribute to social movements.

Occupation

Representing the figure of the artist as a model for contemporary capitalism flattens out the 'heterogeneity of art practice', including the persistence of what Alberto López Cuenca (2012) refers to as 'autonomous projects seeking to produce non-hegemonic social practices' (see also Gillick 2010; Rosler 2011). Artists and other cultural workers are, moreover, among the protagonists of struggles against exploitation and inequality in the neoliberal era. Spatial disaggregation of the workforce, exclusion from union representation, and the apparent difficulty of stemming income inequality through collective bargaining are some of the reasons why the problem of precarity has been posed beyond the confines of workplaces, in public spaces, via social movements. Indeed, the circulation of the concept of 'precarity' was itself propelled by autonomous organising and street-level protest in Europe in the early 2000s (see Cosse 2008). And, more recently, the dissident wave of occupations, cycling from North Africa to New York, has been read by labour researchers as, in part, a response to conditions of precarity (Lee & Kofman 2012; Schram 2013). Highlighted below are two cultural worker organisations that are voicing grievances and staking claims within the context of contemporary counter-capitalist movements for which occupation has been a decisive strategy.

As public squares were squatted in the Arab World, anti-austerity protest raged in Greece, and *indignados* camped in Spanish cities, the politics of occupation – and its US prospects – were up for discussion at 16Beaver, an artist-run space in New York City. 16Beaver, which for over a decade has hosted conversations with international activists, was one of various seedbeds of the Occupy Wall Street movement (Kroll 2011; McKee 2012). In New York, Occupy spawned numerous working groups, several of them comprised of artists – frequently distant from the representational structures of unionism; one such group is Arts & Labor. A transoccupational alliance, Arts & Labor (n.d.) defines its membership inclusively: 'We are artists and interns, writers and educators, art handlers and designers, administrators, curators, assistants, and students. We are all art workers and members of the 99%'.

One of the enduring offshoots of Occupy Wall Street, Arts & Labor sets out to raise awareness about and fight against 'exploitative working conditions' in the arts (ibid.), through, among other means, teach-ins and direct actions. Its members shedding light on the often-invisible precarious labour sustaining the art world (Kasper 2011), Arts & Labor has been pressing for higher labour standards throughout the art economy. In an intervention in 2013, for example, the group

joined unions in a counter-publicity campaign, challenging the Frieze Art Fair for not hiring local union labour, at a living wage, to set up the lucrative art show, on a site made available to Frieze by the City at a bargain rate. Notably, Arts & Labor has also – through the activities of its Alternative Economies subgroup – foregrounded the need to move beyond prevailing structures of work and wealth altogether. The radical promise of artists' labour activism, to borrow the words of Julia Bryan-Wilson (2012: 46), does not necessarily lie in a focus on 'getting a bigger piece of the art-market pie', but furthering 'analysis of economic conditions attuned to larger struggles against inequality'.

This attunement is clear in what has been called the 'Italian Occupy movement' (Mattei 2013: 366), in which oppositional cultural workers are mixing direct action and legal strategies. A glimpse of this movement is provided by an occupation that took place in Milan on May 5, 2012. In a bold rejection of austerity-imposed restraint, a group of cultural workers and their allies took over a 31-storey skyscraper that had been sitting empty since the late 1990s. The tower's new tenants announced themselves as 'the multitude of workers of the creative industries…' (Macao 2012). The early days of this occupation, named 'Macao', were marked by 'magmatic creativity' (Foti 2012a): performances, workshops, and parties; drafting communiqués, preparing gardens, and developing working groups; and deliberating over the occupation in general assemblies. Envisaged as a centre for arts and research, unfurled from atop the massive building was a banner – 'You could even imagine flying'. A steady stream of visitors, endorsements by prominent artists, and social media exposure were not enough to protect the occupation, however: ten days in, police evicted Macao. About a month later, the group installed itself in a more modestly sized space, Ex Borsa del Macello, where it remains at time of writing.

Macao arises from familiar material conditions. One of the themes in the discussions leading up to the occupation was, said one of Macao's organisers, 'the way in which creative work is increasingly precarious' (Braga cited in Cultural Workers Organize 2013: 180). The significance of art, design, and events to Milan's urban economy is manifest, but, reflecting a classic creative-economy cleave, the rewards are skewed to 'major names', leaving little, says Foti (2012b), for 'bottom-up creative classes'. Doubtless aggravating discontent, Milan's 'so-called creatives', remarks another Macao organiser, face 'gentrification' (cited in Tozzi 2012), which makes it difficult to work and live affordably in a city dotted with unused spaces, preserved as bets on a 'rent gap' (Smith 1987). Occupation, in this setting, can be understood as a kind of refusal of rent, or an act of 'autoreduction' (see Cherki & Wieviorka 2007).

In using the lexicon of precariousness to diagnose working conditions, Macao could be connected to the activism in Milan which, a decade earlier, helped to disseminate 'precarity' as a keyword in an 'alternative system of meaning … about labor market flexibility' (Mattoni 2008: 108). Likewise, the audacity to

seize a skyscraper cannot be separated from a well-established tradition of squatting in Italy, in particular, the model of the *centri sociali*, social centres occupied and self-managed by activist communities (Ruggiero 2000). Macao, however, was the product of a desire for far-reaching transformations: to 'create alternative models able to threaten the current mode of production' (Braga cited in Cultural Workers Organize 2013: 186). In this Macao is not alone: it is one node on a fledgling network of cultural spaces – *Lavoratori dell'arte* – in which cultural production is linked to an emerging 'commons' movement in Italy (see Mattei 2013).

Organisers presented Macao as an 'occasion for the construction of a common good' (Vecchio 2012). The background of this vision includes a national referendum in 2011 – forced upon government by activists and critical legal experts – that prevented Italian parliament from authorising the privatisation of water management (see Fattori 2013). The movement opposing the enclosure of water used the category of 'common goods' to subvert the public-private binary, arguing that the institutional domain designated 'public' increasingly functions as conduit for 'private' interests to access new zones of accumulation. Harnessing the momentum of a sweeping referendum victory, a group of cultural workers, on the heels of the vote, occupied Teatro Valle, an 18th century theatre in Rome. They did so out of concern for the 'uncertain future' of this venerated facility: after a national theatre association was shuttered, ownership of Teatro Valle was transferred to the city of Rome, raising fears about privatisation, which could jeopardise the theatre's cultural project (Bailey & Marcucci 2013: 397). Straddling 'legality and illegality', the occupiers and their legal allies appealed to a constitutional article legitimating expropriation in situations where a case can be made that a vital public need is served (ibid: 399). Insisting 'culture was as essential for human development as water, air, and other common goods' (ibid: 398), Teatro Valle's occupiers leveraged the official institutional form of a 'foundation', writing a statute for the cultural space rooted in the principle 'that culture and art are a collective process of wealth creation and cultural goods like the Valle should not be treated as commodities and owed privately' (ibid: 402).

In terms of precarious labour politics generally in the creative industries, one of the challenges is to go beyond opposing precarity, and, indeed, beyond developing policy mechanisms enabling workers to better cope with flexible labour markets – to go a step further to propose and experiment with political-economic infrastructures of cultural creativity that provide an alternative to the dominant social relations of production. Such possibilities are most actively explored by precarious workers' initiatives that do not arise from a specific concern with, for instance, employment stability or income security, but, rather, initiatives that arise from broader social movements anchored in a structural critique of inequality and enclosure in neoliberal capitalism. So although the desire that animates Macao – to 'take ownership "from below"…' – may not necessarily lead to a resolution of

labour precarity for its protagonists, the participation of cultural workers in occupation politics points to ways in which capacities and desires radically exceed the portrayal of cultural workers as post-Fordism's role model (Braga cited in Cultural Workers Organize 2013: 184). After all, at the core of many of the new institutions emerging from occupation are not enterprising selves, but the general assembly, and attendant processes of horizontal, consensus-based decision-making. At a broader level, these interventions confirm that occupation is not merely about the voicing of grievances; occupation is a constituent practice signaling 'a post-capitalist politics' (Gibson-Graham 2006). In this respect, these interventions could be linked to traditions of workers' control in general (see Azzellini & Ness 2011) and 'self-organisation' among artists in particular (Davies et al. 2006; see also Robertson 2006), domains where it is expected that 'autonomy' in cultural work (see Banks 2010) mean something more than having wiggle room within commercial confines.

Within, Against, Beyond

This article surveyed some of the varied ways in which the nonstandard worker in the celebrated creative economy defies its reputation for being a role model in contemporary capitalism – by, for example, exploring strategies for combating workforce fragmentation, mutually confronting rather than privately managing precarity, and turning capacities susceptible to flexible labour control against it. The organisations, campaigns, and proposals touched upon above confirm that, as Isabell Lorey (2010) remarks, 'In insecure, flexibilized, and discontinuous working and living conditions, subjectifications arise that do not wholly correspond to a neoliberal logic of exploitation…' Informed by a larger project on precarious labour activism, for which fieldwork has been carried out primarily in London, Milan, New York City, and Toronto, this article set out to thematise salient features of select collective responses to precarity among workers in nonstandard employment in the arts, the media, and cultural industries. It identified, first, atypical worker aggregations, in which (quasi-)employment status, rather than a specific profession or sector, serves as a basis for assembly and advocacy; second, it revealed a mounting concern about unpaid work across sectors of the creative industries, and flagged compensation proposals for redressing wageless labour; and, third, it offered examples of the participation of precarious cultural workers in wider social movements, namely the politics of occupation, which have provided a context, outside the bounds of a circumscribed workplace, for voicing grievances and asserting demands. These sorts of responses to precarisation are likely to be overlooked by research in which the lens is restricted to how cultural workers negotiate precarity within a delimited sector, a particular profession, or an individual collective bargaining unit.

The survey approach taken in this article is not without limitations. Assessing the efficacy of the initiatives documented here requires extended case study research. Nonetheless, a cataloging of different initiatives, campaigns, and proposals has the advantage of illuminating tensions between and among responses to precarity in the creative economy. Self-employed workers pooling financial resources via a social enterprise so as to access more affordable healthcare or workspace, for example, is a significant instance of mutual aid, which lessens independent worker precarity in meaningful ways; however, such efforts are not on the same plane, politically, as a collective of precarious, self-identified art workers squatting a skyscraper and declaring it a 'common good', in the context of social movements opposing privatisation and seeking greater autonomy over cultural production. The cases introduced above – while far from adding up to a comprehensive portrait – begin to reveal a continuum of responses, ranging from those that accommodate to flexible labour control, to those that achieve incremental improvements within it, through to those that seek more radical reforms against, and potentially beyond, capitalist imperatives and relations. Going forward, an evaluation of the contribution of these efforts vis-à-vis political recomposition must grapple with a fundamental tension between accommodative and antagonistic responses; doing so, however, does not necessarily call for hard-and-fast distinctions, for reasons that can be gestured at by way of conclusion.

Maurizio Lazzarato (2013) recently lamented '… our incapacity to invent modes of collective subjectivation that break from contemporary capitalism.' His chosen historic benchmark, the First International, is humbling, yet Lazzarato's point was neither defeatist nor nostalgic. Instead, he invoked this workers' movement to insist it is 'entirely possible and desirable to repeat their active invention'. The strategies inventoried in this article would not appear to hold a candle to such a tall order; at the same time, it would be unwise to dismiss the potential of these strategies in the context of contemporary capitalism, where the flexibilisation of labour and the immaterialisation of production are twin tendencies. Still, to stand on ground firmer than hope, Lazzarato's claim must be supplemented by practical experiments taking up a research question posed by Franco Berardi (2011): 'How can [we] create solidarity in … conditions of precariousness?' The atypical worker aggregations, compensation proposals, and occupation politics overviewed here can be read as partial replies to Berardi's question – a question that is at the crux of the idea of 'the precariat' (Standing 2011; see also Frase 2013).

Rather than label an ascendant, unified, vanguard subject, the precariat is a concept, which, firstly, presumes the historical malleability and multiplicity of agents, forms, and sites of workers' responses to exploitation, and, secondly, designates a laboratory of labour activity driven by populations differentially excluded from – but not necessarily motivated to restore – the standard employment relationship. Approaching flexible workforces in the arts, the media, and cultural industries as participants in a politics of the precariat opens a counter-narrative to

that of self-exploitation, a prominent theme of critical research on labour and creative industries. The organisations, campaigns, proposals, and direct actions described in these pages are, ultimately, helping to define, spatialise, and generate common ground – a condition of possibility for solidarity. What transpires from this common ground is contingent, unpredictable, and without guarantees – in short, precarious. It is, however, a small leap of 'radical imagination' (Haiven & Khasnabish 2010) to picture the emergence, from these crucibles, of, say, transnational assemblies of interns strategising against youth exploitation, globalising 'common goods' policy initiatives, and networks of coworking spaces providing a social base for organising the unorganised. After all, a role model always carries within it the potential to become a bad example – therein lies the promise of a properly *creative* precariat.

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Notes

[1] Leah Vosko (2008: 132) defines the standard employment relationship as an ideal-type employment arrangement encompassing a 'full-time continuous employment relationship where the worker has one employer, works on his or her employer's premises under the employer's direct supervision, normally in a unionized sector, and has access to social benefits and entitlements that complete the social wage'.

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