

THE INSTITUTE OF NETWORK  
CULTURES PRESENTS:

# MYCREATIVITY SWEATSHOP

There's  
No App  
For  
This

— A REALITY CHECK  
ON THE CREATIVE  
INDUSTRIES

NOVEMBER 20—21, 2014  
@TROUWAMSTERDAM

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# *MyCreativity Sweatshop*

## *Introduction*

In 2005, just after the creative industries policy had taken off in the Netherlands, the Institute of Network Cultures gave a critical impulse to the debate with projects such as A Decade of Webdesign and MyCreativity. At the time, discussions centered on questions such as work spaces, precarity, free labor and the (im)possibility of quantifying creativity. A decade later, the 'creative industries' have become an established economic sector, a situation that has radically reshaped the conditions of creative labor. Simultaneously, new technological trends turn creative processes increasingly into a question of big data streams, algorithms and digital scalability.

This situation raises a plethora of questions for the creative producer that the MyCreativity projects aim to address. In what way are the conditions of creative production changing? Can we see an improvement of the conditions of creative production or has the insistence on unifying the creative sector multiplied the problems and challenges for creative labor and entrepreneurship? Are there new openings and possibilities that have emerged on the ground as reaction to the creative industries approach? What are the new physical, technological and aesthetic spaces of subversion? Are there new practices in the fields of art, design and entrepreneurship that could form the basis of an effective critique of the official discourse? Is it still possible at all to hijack the creative mainstream for the purpose of real disruption?

# On the Creative Question

## – Nine Theses

By Geert Lovink,  
Sebastian Olma and  
Ned Rossiter

‘Culture attracts the worst impulses of the moneyed, it has no honor, it begs to be suburbanized and corrupted’.

– Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*

‘We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars’.

– Oscar Wilde

## 1 Goodbye to Creative Industries

A creepy discourse on creativity has captured cultural and economic policy. Creativity invokes a certain pharmacological numbness among its spruikers – a special sub-species entirely unaware of how far removed their version of creativity is from radical invention and social transformation. Their claims around the science of economy are little more than a shoddy con. While ‘creativity’ is increasingly seen as a main driver of economic development, the permanent reference to creative classes, creative cities, creative industries, creative innovations and so on has rendered the notion all but meaningless. Degraded to a commercial and political marketing tool, the semantic content of creativity has been reduced to an insipid spread

of happy homogeneity – including the right amount of TED-styled fringe misfits and subcultures – that can be bureaucratically regulated and ‘valorized’. To this rhetoric corresponds a catalogue of ‘sectors’ and ‘clusters’ labelled as creative industries: a radically disciplined and ordered subdomain of the economy, a domesticated creative commons where ‘innovators’ and ‘creatives’ harmoniously co-mingle and develop their auto-predictive ‘disruptions’ of self-quantification, sharing and gamification. Conflict is anathema to the delicate sensibilities of personas trading in creative consultancy.

## 2 Welcome to the Creative Question

The creative question has replaced the social question. In the 20th century the consequences and problems of industrial capitalism found a temporary solution in the class compromise of the welfare state. In digital capitalism we have to address the social question in terms of the creative question: what is today’s source of value and who owns it? We need to turn the pompous, meaningless chatter on creativity into a debate on how to come out on the positive side of the digital *pharmakon* (the nuanced combination of all things good and evil). To those who tell you ‘how we are going to live twenty years from now’, shout them down with ideas of how you *want* to live in twenty years!

## 3 Creativity without Abundance

We hear so much about the supposed ‘economy of abundance’ in the age of its digital reproducibility. Yet such abundance remains a phantom as long as it is a surplus for the final few. We need to talk about the redistribution of abundance. Piketty has to be updated for the internet age. We urgently need to get a better understanding of how ‘extreme inequality’ translates into digital culture. The question here is no one of ‘selling out’. The new cultures of decentralized networks have turned into an Bataillian orgy of generosity: a ‘sharing-by-default-economy’ where the gift has lost its power of social reciprocity. Today, the economy is no longer based on abundance or redistribution of (common) wealth. Instead, there is a ‘winner takes all’ logic exacerbated by the speed of implementation and scaling.

## 4 Industry without Investment

Overall, capital has withdrawn from the creative sectors. This, despite the predominance of the economy within the work of creativity. Creative industries were all set to enter an economy of indistinction: the arts were supposed to be no different from mining, agriculture or car manufacturing. Except this didn’t happen. Though the factory did, and so the cognitariat march on. With the withdrawal of public money the sector suffered from overall disinvestment. Investments were never made, and perhaps never will be due to the

prevailing Ideology of the Free. But what’s our critique beyond this banal observation of increasingly shrinking opportunities? Gentrification? We know that’s a key part of the story. Pumping bucks into infrastructure to support innovation? That still goes on in the IT sector. But artists aren’t part of that world. Instead they migrate to ‘maker culture’ – an economy entirely hooked into ‘supply chain capitalism’ (Tsing), as much as hipsters prefer the axiom of ‘authenticity’. It is the old undercover story: artists can only participate if they reinvent themselves and morph into another role.

## 5 There is no Creative Ecology

Creative industries policy started with the ambition of setting up creative ecologies where ideas and innovation can be born, mature and thrive. However, these creative ecologies rarely materialize beyond the one-off success story. The massive invention of new business models for artists and cultural producers has not yet happened. As soon as original concepts were ‘hatched’, these creative ideas took flight to the highest bidder. In the digital real-time economy, prototype practices are left naked and abandoned, without the means to develop an auto-immune system to protect against the predatory speed of vulture capitalism. How, then, to proliferate the concept so that it holds a transformative effect in ways that refuse accountability? Memes, remixes and viral culture are now so well established within the repertoire of dispersal that

they've become mainstreamed into oblivion. Shadow worlds without PRISM staring down your most radical gesture are now on the agenda. Invert the Right to Forget and we get a memory that cannot be contained. Storage without a trace is a key strategy for practices of anonymity and a commons beyond expropriation. USB libraries, blue-tooth networks, off-the-grid computing – these are just some of the options that register radical practice outside the stack.

## 6 Shadow and Time

We suggest two principles here: shadow and time. *Shadow* is an unintended consequence, an event vacuum, which remains invisible for passers-by. It does not register on the development maps of the managerial class. *Time* is needed in order for the substantially different to grow. Maturation, which is creative growth, requires time. Don't be afraid of the cycle. Who's afraid of the *longue durée*? The time of creativity is that of idleness and procrastination, indeed *otium*. This turns out to be the opposite of frantic entrepreneurship and instant valorization. This is why creative industries policy can only propose fixed formats and known concepts: template capitalism. Maker labs, with their standard 3D printers and software, can only produce more of the same. Open source is not the solution to this problem. Neither is it sufficient to place the wild, weird bohème at the helm.

## 7 Sharing without Caring

Right now there is a structural dissonance between the wonderful ideas of our creatives and their social and economic efficacy. The lack of creative ecology means that today's great idea for a better society turns into tomorrow's unemployed taxi drivers and homeless city dwellers. Welcome to platform monopoly capitalism. Groupon, AirBNB, Uber, MyWheels and countless others. Here, we do not witness so much a gross violation of the rules of appropriation as an attempt to reshape existing economic activities and drive labour to its bones: a disruption without a cause. Let's not delude ourselves: we are not sharing anything when we rate the last wretched soul who gave us a cheap lift with his Uber cab. We do not share anything when we drive a Hertz or Avis rental car (except our likes). Sharing only happens in the absence of market transactions. And it doesn't have to 'scale'. This begs the question: can we still speak of creative industries, which in Europe's policy world (and beyond) rests on the economization of culture? Everyone is keenly aware of the fact that Creative Industries as a policy meme has passed its use-by date. This is why we need to warn ourselves: changing labels will not help us much. This makes deconstruction of the term by itself into such an impotent gesture. The problem of economy, of life, of invention persist no matter what the paradigm.

## 8 Save Our Social Innovation

'Social innovation' is a great buzzword in the global consultancy class. In spite of its rhetoric, it means imposing innovation through market and semi-marketization mechanisms. Design thinking is hauled in to solve problems that the existing political class is unable to deal with. Concept maps are drawn, emptied of aesthetics. Social innovation is not so much a class war instrument to destroy rebellious militants but rather a smoke screen, a theatre play. It amounts to 'social solutionism' – a Baudrillardian performance in which the signifiers are no longer autonomous, living entities but have progressed into diligent workers exhausting themselves in fervent gymnastics of simulated salvation. We should not think of Artaud or Beckett, but rather of a bureaucratic variation of a reality TV show featuring best practice examples as positive change heroes. Instead of this performative project focus on processual management we should celebrate the mystery of the social as event.

## 9 Creative Political Recovery

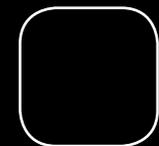
Let's conclude that the market cannot respond effectively to the challenges presented by the Creative Question. Substituting democratic politics with collaborative design solutions exacerbates the problems. Taking 'social innovation' seriously means to think about the design of non-scalable communities, creative save-havens

and post-digital makers. These are emphatically political challenges. Circumventing politics by way of social design is a dead-end. It repeats the technocratic mistakes that have led to the incapacitation of politics in the first place. To regain efficacy requires a shift into high risk politics, a politics that has the guts to take decisions about our injured future. No more matching. No more outsourcing of liabilities to third parties. We need a creative political recovery that dreams up new organizational forms able to confront the Creative Question.

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## Programme

### Thursday 20 November 2014

Why the Creative Industries do not Exist (but Need to be Invented)

*Robert Hewison*

Artistic Autonomy vs. the Creative Industries

*Josephine Berry Slater, Pascal Gielen, Klaar van der Lippe*

Documentary Film: Pitching, Digitalisation and Authorship

*Sigrid Dyekjaer, Pieter van Huystee, Maria Tarantino,  
Morgan Knibbe*

Creative Production after the Creative Industries

*Joke Hermes, Marijke Hoogenboom, Ela Kagel*

Book Launches

*The Allure of the Selfie, The Volkskrant Building*

Whatever Happens to Musicians, Happens to Everybody

*Bruce Sterling*

### Friday 21 November 2014

The Creative City as an Internet of (Bright, Young) Things

*Zach Blas, Frank Rieger, Rob van Kranenburg*

Toolkit Launches

*The Crowdfunding Toolkit, The Digital Publishing Toolkit*

Sweatshops

*Political Coworking*

*Master Class Serendipity*

*Parasitical Organising*

*First Aid for Failed Projects*

My Creativity, Your Depression

*Pek van Aniel, Mark Fisher, Sarah Sharma*

## *The conference*

### *Why the Creative Industries do not Exist (but Need to be Invented)*

#### **Session Description**

In this opening talk Robert Hewison will be reporting on the latest attempts to reboot the 'creative industries' concept in Britain with the formation of the Creative Industries Federation. He will point to the continuing failure to establish a working definition of the creative industries, arguing that this is because there is no understanding of the economic gearing between 'creativity', the 'creatives' who practice it, and the organizations that seek to capitalize on it. Hewison will challenge the Throsby 'concentric circle' model of the relationship, arguing that artists are not at the center of anything; they exist at the margins. It is exactly here that creativity takes place and thus we need to think more in terms of clusters of activity and webs of connection. The value of the creative industries concept is that it challenges older hierarchical models of power and taste, which is why it is important to develop a better approach to the concept.

Moderator: Sebastian Olma

Speaker: Robert Hewison

[photos - video](#)



***Blog post: Why the Creative Industries do not Exist (but Need to be Invented) by Robert Hewison***

***25 November 2014 - Katia Truijen***

In his opening talk Robert Hewison reported on the latest attempts to reboot the creative industries concept in Britain. “I bring you great news. They have discovered the creative industries. Again.” This Monday more than 200 arts organisations and commercial creative companies representing the UK’s cultural sector come together at the launch of the brand new Creative Industries Federation.

In fact, Hewison argues, this is the third time that Britain makes

an effort to launch the creative industries as a policy idea, in an attempt to confirm that the creative industries actually exist. Why has it proven to be so hard to establish the creative industries as a coherent idea? Hewison explains that the creative industries have been continually rebranded since 1997. He presents us a list of publications and programmes:

- 1997: Creative Industries Task Force
- 1998: Creative Industries Mapping Document
- 2001: 2nd Creative Industries Mapping Document
- 2005: Creative Economy Programme launched
- 2007: Staying Ahead
- 2008: Creative Britain
- 2010: Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition
- 2011: Creative Industries Council
- 2014: Creative Industries Federation

In the mapping document of 1998 creativity was described as a tradable property. Artists were excluded from the categories but artworks and antiques were not. 1.4 million people were said to be employed in the sector, with a value of 60 billion pounds. The sector was said to be growing twice the rate the rest of the sectors were. Hewison argues however, that the problem with figures is that you can’t use standard classification to capture the creative element. People working outside of the creative industries are creative as well. Another problem is that a lot of creative companies are too small to register and are thus not captured in

the statistical net. After the dot-com bubble in 2001, the figures had grown to 2 million people employed in the sector. Despite the fact that the field continuously changes, the publication *Staying Ahead* (2007) at no point challenged the 1998 definition of the creative industries.

A great deal of the problem lies exactly in that definition. If we can't agree on what the creative industries are, how can we say that they exist? To refresh our thinking is not a question in terms of sectoral definitions. Instead, Hewison argues we should try to discover whether we can find a distinctive pattern of organization; the confirmation of relationships that give a system its essential characteristics.

This continuing failure to establish a working definition of the creative industries, is due to the lack of understanding of the economic gearing between 'creativity,' the 'creatives' who practice it, and the organizations that seek to capitalize on it.

The Australian economist David Throsby addresses the definition of the creative industries in his book *Economics and Culture*. He presents a model of the creative industries centered around the lockers of



creative ideas, with inputs from other fields in order to produce a whole range of products.

The Throsby 'concentric circle' model is used everywhere, for example in a report for the European Commission where the arts field is the core, surrounded by the cultural industries, which is then surrounded by the creative industries and its activities. All circles have in common that the products created are protected by copyright.

Hewison argues that this is a curious misunderstanding of creative activities. The model is completely misconceived. To begin with, it conceals of operated ideological assumptions about the nature of culture and creativity. It gives a central role to the artist: this reveals itself as a profoundly romantic conception, and hierarchical as well.

The model can be compared to when you look down on a fountain. Creativity is storming in the middle, then it spills over, there are accidental benefits and economic activity. The creative has magically transformed into an entrepreneur, a risk taker that accepts permanent insecurity.

Hewison argues that artists are not at the center of anything; they exist at the margins. He admits that the image of the lonely artist at the margin is as dangerously romantic as the expressive value, there is always a danger of being captured by a visual metaphor. However, when it comes to creativity, being on the margin is not a bad place to be. It is exactly here that creativity takes place: between the academy and the avant-garde, between form and function. The artist exists at the point of exchange. At

the margins, one is actually rarely alone. It has become almost impossible to work in isolation; skills and talent emerge from creative community and a shared milieu. There always have been studios and systems. The financial success depends on the industrial scale, where one needs to work in teams and groupings. It is necessary to form and reform creative alliances. Microbusinesses are merged in creative clusters.

But if the concentric circle model does not fit the pattern of organisation, than what model does, Hewison asks. Of course the model of the network comes to mind, but it's not that simple. There is something mechanistic about networks, because they



seem to be planned. When we want to describe the complex social interactions that are not purely economic, we have to move from the mechanistic to the organic. The field might be described as a pattern of enzymes, as a network that forms itself. Different enzymes form a closed group. It is more productive to speak of biological creativity. The pattern of organization of the creative industries might be grasped as a web instead of a network. When it comes to creativity, an

element of disorganization is needed.

Hewison concludes that despite the fact that the creative industries may not exist, this doesn't mean that they should actually be invented. Creativity does exist and there is definitely an important relation to an economic system that we should address. Although digital tools have enabled more home made participative forms of culture, the gatekeeper is still commercial culture. Capitalism thus poses its own limitations to creativity. The model of the marketplace may appear democratic, but access to the market is unequal and the market always seeks to privatize public goods.

Unlike the close rings proposed by Throsby, to understand what the creative industries are and might be, they should be reconciled as open patterns of organization, Hewison argues. In nature there is not an 'above' or 'below'. The creative industries are a web of interactions, where creativity is iterative because it looks back on itself. The field is disorganized, it absorbs change and enjoys risk. We should strive for a creative industries where self-realization does not come at the price of self-exploitation.

The value of the creative industries concept is that it challenges older hierarchical models of power and taste, which is why it is so important to develop a better understanding of the concept. Let's start to take a closer look at these organic patterns of organization.

## Artistic Autonomy vs. the Creative Industries

### Session Description

The question of artistic autonomy has always been a complex and contested issue. As absolute independence from either the market or the state, artistic autonomy seems to be more an ideal than a realistic ambition. In the wake of the creative industries we increasingly understand artistic as an explicitly economic practice as well. Art as creative industry promises a plethora of new forms of artistic engagement in fields ranging from business innovation to urban development. While many artists embrace these new practices – either out of conviction or financial necessity – this raises the question of artistic autonomy with new urgency. What happens to the aesthetic and political impetus of l'art pour l'art when the creative industries increasingly subsume the artistic practice for functionalist purposes. Do the creative industries really represent a new and more sinister threat to artistic autonomy? And if so, how can/do artists fight back – if at all? What are effective strategies of resistance?

Moderator: Geert Lovink

Panelists: Josephine Berry Slater, Pascal Gielen, Klaar van der Lippe

[photos](#) - [video](#)



***Blog post: Artistic Autonomy vs. the Creative Industries - Get ready to be creativated!***

***27 November 2014 - Becky Cachia***

The panel discussion on [Artistic Autonomy vs. The Creative Industries](#) at the [MyCreativity Sweatshop](#) targeted the dilemma that subsumes the position of artists within the ideological constructs of autonomy and creativity.

On the one hand, the functionalist reality of the neoliberal policies and practices of the creative industries creates a space where creativity can almost do without the artists. On the other hand, there is still popular support for artistic autonomy and the protection of the arts and artists from the effects of society at large.

In the context of this dilemma, the panel's three speakers

addressed the questions: Do the creative industries represent a sinister threat to artistic autonomy? If so, how can/do artists fight back?

Josephine Berry Slater

**Josephine Berry Slater**, lecturer for the Culture Industry MA at Goldsmiths College, established that the crisis of creativity is intertwined with that of social reproduction. Fundamental worries, such as affordable housing or decent healthcare, must be eliminated before time and energy can be diverted towards

productive creativity.

According to Slater, in the capitalist city, art occupies a curious space determined by the funding and political agreements between institutions of culture, and governmental and corporate entities. Here, “the aesthetic, communicative and remedial qualities of art” are called upon to graft over cracks caused by capitalist society and to heal the effects of urban renewal and regeneration. Slater expanded on this position by asserting that:



1. Within the relationship between artistic/cultural entities and funding/political entities lies a paradox in which the autonomy and neutrality of art and the artist are both essential to and yet challenged by their economic functioning.

2. The democratising tendencies of autonomous art draw it into spaces of social reproduction and therefore **into the very centre of the conflict zones produced by capitalism** (for example, in housing estates and disused warehouses).

To understand the connection between art and urban renewal, Slater discussed the shift from self-defined engagements between artists and communities to “the increasingly formulaic and institutional choreography of such encounters” – **often to the ire of the communities involved**. The democratisation of art and aesthetic judgement is evident through the involvement of the communities in question:

“The dignity of those lives deemed economically worthless is restored to some degree. And, who knows? Perhaps this also lends credibility to the idea of an autonomous art that is something more than mere lubricant to the forces of accumulation.”

Pascal Gielen

**Pascal Gielen**, Associate Professor in the Sociology of Art at Groningen University, used five statements to eliminate the

confusion between artistic and social autonomy:

1. Autonomy is the foundation of modern society; it does not only belong to the arts. Spheres of society other than the arts, such as justice and politics, also depend on autonomy so as to protect democracy and avoid corruption.

2. Autonomy is necessary to function but it is no longer protected on the collective level. Focus on one's creativity diminishes because of being preoccupied with defending one's individual autonomy as a creative worker. The disappearance and

reformation of classic institutions of protection for artists have exacerbated this.

3. The fundamentalism of creativity needs the deconstruction of autonomy. The creative industries simultaneously call for the freedom of creative workers while also imposing a risk aversion mentality and processes of repressive liberalism. It is a system that leaves creative workers politically weak with no union



protection or appropriate monetary compensation.

4. All these institutional changes take focus away from one's professional skills. Creative acts are no longer instrumental in giving form to society and no longer focus on one's real skills and creativity. Rather, it is now labour that provides form to life, autonomy and then to creativity – but not the other way around.

5. We need creativism. Gielen called for a repoliticisation of the creative act. He explains that, by questioning what creative acts are for, we understand how they give form to society. Creativism shakes the dominant ideology and (re)generates autonomy by building and defending a new autonomous space in wider society.

Klaar van der Lippe

**Klaar van der Lippe**, a visual artist with a background in contemporary art and architecture, followed Gielen with the phrase, "Get ready to be creativated!!" Van der Lippe viscerally explained that the autonomous space for an artist is about finding truth rather than finding a solution. When finding a solution, you allow somebody else to define the truth first, for example 'money needs to be made' or 'time needs to be gained'.

Creativism takes you back to being the author of your own truth, and this is the capital that we all have. Conflating art or creativity with a luxury that people can only afford once their needs are met detracts from the fact that the ability to look at the world and find truth is something that is not luxury, it is part of

being human.

Over many years of working as part of a community to learn if truth finding can be done collectively, Van der Lippe has seen a distinct change. The artistic initiative now belongs to institutions and not to artists. People now take part in the activity but not in the truth finding process. "It has become normal that creative workers are not the founding fathers of reality but are the decorators... lending some truth to somebody else's business plan."

The three speakers explored "Artistic Autonomy vs. the Creative Industries" in different and yet complementary ways. This



emerged through the discussion that followed their talks, leaving the audience with a sense that, within this issue, space and place are crucial factors:

- Slater broke down the idea of sovereign space and showed that autonomy is in fact always heteronomy because of elements of power and production that are imposed on creativity.

- Gielen was preoccupied with the importance of understanding

what autonomy is, explaining that we need creativism to carve out a new autonomous space within wider society and not only through the guides of the creative industries.

- Van der Lippe finished off the entire discussion with the question, "What is a sense of place?" She called for creativism again and to break the monopolistic power over public space held by institutions by making free art in that same public space:

**"Break the power! Use crayons; use whatever low cost thing to make visible another voice and another way of looking. That's our responsibility."**

## *Documentary Film: Pitching, Digitization and Authorship*

### **Session Description**

The changing ways of financing, producing and distributing documentary films impacts both established and debuting filmmakers and producers today. Cuts in media foundations' budgets, the increasing importance of international festivals and pitch forums, the popularisation of Video on Demand, and the ever-growing number of crowdfunding platforms impact producers and filmmakers in different ways. How have online funding models, the emergence of the pitch-culture, and the digitisation of the documentary film impacted the documentary film industry in terms of the type of documentaries that are being made and the ways in which they are distributed? Who benefits, and who loses?

Moderator: Bregtje van der Haak

Panelists: Sigrid Dyekjaer, Pieter van Huystee, Maria Tarantino, Morgan Knibbe

[photos](#) - [video](#)



### ***Blog Post: Documentary Film: Pitching, Digitization and Authorship***

***1 December 2014 - Inte Gloorich***

After the more theoretical and conceptual reflections of the early morning of the first day of MyCreativity Sweatshop, the Documentary Film discussion session offered a practical insight into the consequences of a heavily changing field in the creative industries. The specifics of the case study cluster around issues of finance cuts and cultural and technological shifts in distribution and production practices.

The conference brought together two well established producer and two young makers from different parts of Europe, leading to a nuanced discussion that covered many different viewpoints. How, for instance, has the lowering of the cost of

professional technology influenced beginning filmmakers. What does this increased accessibility mean to producers? How do cuts in European film funds reflect on the projects that do get realised and how do they manage to survive the competitive pitching culture?

Sigrid Dyekjaer

To start with the most flourishing of the film cultures represented in this session, producer **Sigrid Dyekjaer** was asked to introduce the unique situation in Denmark. She surprised the audience with the



statement that funds are actually increasing in her country and that film productions are seen as a worthwhile investment in terms of international allure and cultural image. In fact, Dyekjaer explained that in order to finance a film, especially in a small language territory like Danish or Dutch, it is vital to attract international financial collaborators, indeed making the film product truly global.

What sets Danish film culture apart, Dyekjaer continued, is that especially because of the

lack of international reach of the language, filmmakers started to experiment with narrative structures and stylistic elements, focussing on how to tell the story rather than how to sell it. For a well-known example of what this means, think of what the Dogme '95 movement of Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg did for the revaluation of normalised techniques of narration in Western cinema up to the nineties.

Dyekjaer deals with the changes in the distribution of films by thinking in terms of interest groups rather than the traditional age and gender oriented delineations of target audiences. With the rise of Video On Demand platforms and other online viewing methods, the producer should take advantage of the opportunities with regards to reaching the public in an online environment. Concluding, Dyekjaer stressed the fact that in her production company the ownership of the film is always returned to the filmmaker, giving them ultimate control over their own creative vision.

Pieter van Huystee

Following the dynamic spirit of the Danish film industry, producer **Pieter van Huystee** pointed to some differences in the Dutch situation. Here, funds have drastically decreased in recent years. With the reliance on the marketplace of the creative industries, it's up to the producers and filmmakers to raise funds while trying to remain autonomous. While he thinks that ownership of the film should be divided between the two, he did acknowledge that the

jobs of the producer and filmmaker are distinctly different.

In his vision, the producer is solely responsible for the financial side of the project. This should give the filmmaker space and time to focus on his ideas. Van Huystee painted the picture of the young filmmaker that goes to the beach and looks at the sky, and, fully enveloped in their work, sees his or her ideas reflected back more clearly by the clouds. He emphasised that to make an original film, young makers need to be relieved of some of the stress brought on by the financial burdens of filmmaking.

Pieter van Huystee proceeded to show a trailer of his current project, A Gentrification Program, that was started in 2012. With



it he explores new ways to consider the economic aspects of art and heritage. The film starts by looking at sculptures made in the Congo. Van Huystee explains that the makers of these artworks can be seen as ideal artists, expressing their emotion through art. By recreating the sculptures with chocolate and displaying them in Western museums, the filmmakers critique the neocolonial implications of the process of artistic creation in different parts of the world. Re-focussing on

the discussion at hand, Van Huystee said that what he took from this experience is that filmmaking is about the network; indeed, making documentary films is not about the money, and cannot be done alone.

### Maria Tarantino

Using the metaphor of a sailing ship, Maria Tarantino explained her vision on filmmaking. Agreeing with Pieter van Huystee, she emphasised that it is never a one man/woman job; you need someone who knows how to read the water and someone else that

is specialised in the interpretation of the wind. Indeed, filmmaking is teamwork that ideally brings together talents from different parts of the process and to make a successful film is to reach a balance between everyone's values and ideas. Tarantino's newest film, *Our City*, is a portrait of Brussels which she said was a particularly hard to pitch concept.

Reflecting on the pitching culture associated with filmmaking in the creative industries, Maria Tarantino touched on some points of critique she experienced in her



practices as a filmmaker. While she doesn't think state funding is a bad thing, films that are financed this way are often critiqued as being propaganda. While it seems likely that governments that fund the production of films would work to exhibit these films as well, the two processes are often detached from one another. Tarantino has for example long fostered the dream of showing her film on French television. The broadcasters however, were not flexible with their formats and criteria, making her dream unfulfillable. Tarantino recognizes that the other side of this is that audiences that are unsatisfied with what television channels offer, increasingly find their way to Video On Demand. Like



Dyekjaer, she said it is up to the filmmaker to create more transparent connections with their audiences through these systems.

#### Morgan Knibbe

**Knibbe** graduated from the Dutch Film Academy in 2012 and subsequently won the Wildcard from the Netherlands Film Fund. The fund gave him a unique chance to make his first movie, **Those Who Feel the Fire Burning**, about illegal immigrants

in the Southern edges of Europe. The fund enables young filmmakers to create a film without restrictions or interference from investing parties and it provided Knibbe with a basic budget. However, he and his crew still had to invest a lot of time and money to make the film possible without making concessions to their original vision.

Although the film was selected for the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, Morgan Knibbe does not necessarily see his movie as a documentary. His goal was to bridge the gap between people, not to reach any kind of truth. Knibbe admits that he was lucky to be able to make his movie without the need to keep investors happy; this meant that he and his crew were completely free in expressing their creative vision. Knibbe furthermore insisted on speaking about the film as a team effort, stressing that filmmaking cannot be done alone.

## Creative Production after the Creative Industries

### Session Description

Creative industries policies ostensibly have the ambition to provide structural conditions in which artistic and creative activities can thrive economically. Yet, what is the real impact of these policies when it comes to the empirical reality of creative production? Does the creative industries paradigm indeed expand the possibilities for creative producers or simply force them into the neoliberal straight jacketed masked by vacuous creative rhetoric? This panel looks closely at the current conditions of creative production through a variety of specific angles. What does it mean to be a creative producer today for groups as diverse as digital freelancers, designers, or theatre makers? We are going to look for emerging patterns, discuss alternatives, and highlight strategies for a politics of survival and subversion.

Moderator: Miriam Rasch

Panelists: Joke Hermes, Marijke Hoogenboom, Ela Kagel

[photos](#) - [video](#)



### **Blog post: Creative Production after the Creative Industries**

**27 November 2014 - Rose Rowson**

In this session, contributors Joke Hermes, Marijke Hoogenboom and Ela Kagel each presented their unique perspectives the creative industries. Coming from positions in and outside of academia, the overarching theme they each acknowledged was a question of space for creative practitioners to work. This pondering of how structured organisations effect conditions and perspectives on creative production was also deeply concerned with the ability of those within and without the industry that were able to support themselves financially. One question during the discussion demonstrated this quite fittingly, enquiring how many

people in the audience were being paid as they were attending the conference. In this blog post I shall briefly summarise the arguments from each speaker.

#### Joke Hermes

Hermes focussed on the mythologised status of individual professionals within the creative industries, and the different labels used when describing these creative workers. Hermes was primarily interested in freelancers, or “independent professionals,” which are typically thought of in one of two ways.



The first is the Free Radical. Hermes cited Dutch entrepreneurs [Alexander Klöpping](#) and [Daan Roosegaarde](#) as embodying this label: good at acquiring project funding, and sitting on the edge between artistry and entrepreneurship, she described them as “idealist engineers for a better world.” The second image is the Precariat. A relatively new concept, members of this group are victims of the global economic crisis and practices such as the outsourcing of work.

This means that people who would otherwise aim to have full time jobs are required to work sporadically and/or from home in order to make ends meet. Referencing her quantitative research interviewing members of the independent creative community, Hermes drew our attention to at least two additional identity formations that should be recognised. The third image is the Artist. Working in editing, publishing, graphic design, PR and so on, these creative independents identify as artists, rather than as what is dictated by their job label. Hermes didn’t offer a definitive term for her fourth image, simply noting that it was based not in creativity per se but rather in a desire in people to be able to work to live, to provide both for themselves and be able to care for others around them. Hermes noted that she has seen a move from perceptions of artistic genius, back towards a more old-fashioned notions of vocation and the artisan’s guild. She argued that the problems within the current logics of policy making and state regulation of the creative industries could be countered with a return to the guild system. She cited the culture of unpaid interns as being a negative symptom of the current system, which could be adapted into a reformulated guild as a means of providing real experience and unionised support for a currently subjugated group within the creative industries. Concluding her discussion, Hermes denounced the current trend of neoliberal romanticism, and cited the guild as one of the possible ways to improve the creative industries in the future.

### Marijke Hoogenboom

Hoogenboom's experience with cultural policy and artist collaboration led her in this talk to consider the creative production not after, but before the industry, in order to better understand what is at stake now.

Hoogenboom confidently stated that theatre used to be characterised by its unproductivity; that is, that it requires a great deal of time, labour and resources to be invested in rehearsal, with no guarantee that the process will be successful. Moreover, theatre itself is intrinsically ephemeral, existing only



at the time that it is performed. As the performing arts in the Netherlands is becoming increasingly reliant on public money, they need to legitimise themselves; this means leaving a lasting impact or commodity, a requirement which goes against the nature of theatrical practice.

She highlighted a crucial problem with arts funding within the Netherlands as being concerned primarily with supply and demand, leading grant allocation to be dependent on the promises of larger audience

reach, rather than the potential quality of what is to be produced. As stated by Hoogenboom: "There simply is no demand; let there be supply".

Hoogenboom lamented the loss of sustainable conditions for the slow productions of theatre, noting that the lack of these conditions leads to the decline of complex and experimental practices. The effect of conditions on practices should not be trifled at; Hoogenboom noted that practitioners are "systematically discouraged" to engage in proper research, idea development or even time for reflection: they do not result in tangible output, and are therefore not paid for.

Further, Hoogenboom critiqued the emphasis on justifying the quality of art programmes within higher education as based upon the employability of graduates, arguing that art education should not have to reflect market needs.

She finally highlighted a growing sense of community collaboration and radical spirit in young creatives as offering hope to the future face of the performing arts. More concretely, Hoogenboom acknowledged her own position as an influential member of the academic community. Hoogenboom announced that she was in talks to create a "local school" as part of the new **Amsterdam Theatre School** campus at Groot Lab in Amsterdam Noord, not as a formal means for education, but to question what it means to work and educate artists, and also what it means to be a part of urban renewal and shifting regimes of space.

Ela Kagel

Creative industries, particularly in Berlin, are fundamental for cities to sell themselves internationally. Additionally, the creative industries have become very much associated with the start up scene, to the point where discrete elements of each have become conflated: “culture, the arts, the creative industry and the start ups... merged into one huge realm of market opportunities.”

Kagel tackled the question head on: what does it mean to be a creative practitioner in this day and age, and how can these creatives organise themselves? She points to open, unregulated

community spaces as being prime assets for a city. Further, and drawing on Hermes’ arguments, the heterogeneity of creatives should be emphasised and community diversity embraced in order to properly function outside of state and market controlled structures.

Coworking spaces encourage those within them to learn from one another, gaining habits and skills that Kagel argues cannot be taught through formal training or in education. Coworking spaces



encourage creation of new cultural practices, social innovation and politicisation; they offer small communities with their own rules to develop, from which elements can be taken up and implemented on a societal level.

Kagel emphasises the importance of these coworking spaces to collect data on those inhabiting such environments. This collection would allow them proper political representation that has not been possible thus far.

Within her own hybrid community space, **SUPERMARKT** in Berlin, Kagel has identified the importance of creating an environment of social support and exchange, of working with outside forces such as city administration as a means of increasing visibility but also of maintaining control from below rather than above. She believes that taking the steps mentioned throughout her talk are crucial to keep these vital community spaces alive.

## *Whatever Happens to Musicians, Happens to Everybody*

### **Session Description**

A lay-mendicant order of marginal conceptualists, the creative class varnishes the hand-basket to hell. Interns and oligarchs wrestle in the headlights of the juggernaut. Eternal prototypes, blown away like snow-drifts. If the ice is thin we might as well dance.

Moderator: Sabine Niederer

Speaker: Bruce Sterling

[photos](#) - [video](#)



### ***Blog Post: Whatever Happens to Musicians, Happens to Everybody by Bruce Sterling***

***3 December 2014 - Katía Truijen***

In his performative talk, Bruce Sterling uses the music industry as a lens to take a closer look at the creative industries. According to Sterling, no matter what happens, it happened to musicians first.

For instance, musicians were the first to adapt to digital realities. Sterling refers to the development of music media, from vinyl to the cd, then over to the mp3, onwards to streaming and then back to vinyl again. Despite the music industry's ability to adapt to the digital age there is still no sustainable revenue model for musicians. However, Sterling argues, the music industry was in fact never there for the bands in the first place. Those who

profited were always the record stores, the booking agencies and other representatives. Musicians have always been marginal figures, he states.

Sterling goes on to say that back in the day you could still discover new kinds of music genres, but now just a few artists dominate the top of the industry for several years making the same sort of music. The music industry, he argues, is in collapse: new microgenres emerge, but there are no new genres. Instead, we are confronted with a retro mania. Sterling compares the music industry to the Amsterdam souvenir industry: nothing new is ever added to represent the city; wooden shoes are still being

sold and have been sold for decades.

If it's true that the music industry is not really developing anymore, what would help the industry to regain its energy again? Sterling describes a couple of scenarios.

He takes the singer Cata Pirata as an example. If one would asks musicians like her what they want, there is a big chance that they would reply that they want to be a star in the first place, and sell many records. This, Sterling argues,



won't help the music industry to innovate.

In a second scenario, one may set up a union for artists to improve their working conditions. However, Sterling posits that this doesn't help to improve the image of the independent artist, as a city sponsored orchestra is simply not that interesting to the audience.

A third scenario would offer grants to talented musicians. Sterling argues however that sums of money do not make musicians more creative. Money itself simply won't help musicians make better music or become more interesting cultural figures. So this too will not amount to much.

Another tactic would be to crowdfund musicians. But according to Sterling the crowd often lacks imagination. Most projects that are rewarded simply have a good crowdfunding pitch. In yet another scenario musicians would run the music industry themselves. But Sterling argues that this would ask of them a completely different set of skills than they are equipped with.

A last option would be to give the music industry an infrastructural boost. To rebrand



the industry, facilitate cheap rents and create work spaces for creatives. Sterling argues that this is exactly what is happening now. He describes these creative hubs as 'semi-ruined gentrifiable barns' and doesn't think this will help in any way.

Maybe, he suggests, it would be a better idea to give musicians legal protection. 'Or', as he paradoxically states, 'to offer musicians a way to quit; to give musicians a modest pension if they would swear not to make music again.'

Sterling continues by giving an example of what he calls 'a great creative industry romantic story,' namely the story of Carla Bruni, singer, model and wife of Nicholas Sarkozy.

Bruni donates all her royalties to charity because she reportedly doesn't make music to make money, but because she just wants to participate as a musician. According to Sterling, Carla Bruni is the example of modern European culture. Bruni could be considered 'a warm hearted aristocrat' that would probably get more subsidy than an artist like Cata Pirata. 'Now that's the reality check on the creative industries', Sterling states.

Indeed, in the creative industries' optimistic start-ups are offered more means than critical projects. This way diversity might actually be killed. According to Sterling, the only way to turn this tide is to bring 'justice' back to the discussion. But we are simply distracted and preoccupied with discussions on new technologies such as VR goggles, Facebook and the Internet of Things.

As a futurist, Sterling is interested in the developments in the Internet of Things. How will old media and (what used to be) new

media be integrated into this? And more importantly, who will be in charge of it? Will it be similar to the internet as we know it? Who will program diversity into our homes and streets? And who will be left out? A hint of what awaits us is to be found in the music industry, because 'in the end', Sterling argues, 'everything that happens to musicians will happen to everyone'.

## The Creative City as an Internet of (Bright, Young) Things

### Session Description

As the creative city mutates into the smart city, we are promised a super-connected life where the objects that surround us organize themselves in an Internet of Things, keeping track of our needs and desires and fulfilling them in real time. While this prospect has captured the imagination of policy makers and big business, an increasing number of observers is alarmed about the potentially disastrous implications of digital wonderland. They see the danger of urban space being reengineered as a potentially endless rollout of sensor technologies to generate data for the new goldmine of data economies. Algorithmic pampering, they also warn us, will go hand in hand with intensified technologies of control that regulate our behavior down to the level of desires, emotions and affects. And what is the role of creative producers in this? Are there ways of transforming the smooth stream of data and control into truly participative infrastructures?

Moderator: Florian Cramer

Panelists: Zach Blas, Frank Rieger, Rob van Kranenburg

[photos](#) - [video](#)



### Blog Post: The Creative City as an Internet of (Bright, Young) Things

25 November 2014 - Daniela Diewock

We had the pleasure of welcoming three speakers with very different backgrounds to the first talk of the second day of [MyCreativity Sweatshop](#). Zach Blas, Rob van Kranenburg and Frank Rieger were invited to discuss the issue of “the creative city as an internet of (bright, young) things.”

As the creative city mutates into the smart city, we are promised a super-connected life where the objects that surround us organise themselves in an Internet of Things (IoT), offering advanced connectivity of devices, systems, and services that goes beyond machine-to-machine communication. Our needs and desires are constantly tracked and fulfilled in real-time.

What used to be the domain of architects is now dominated by engineers. Our core values as citizens have changed to comfort, security and sustainability. However, does this new form of interconnection go hand in hand with the regulation of our behaviour down to the level of desire, emotion and affect? Zach Blas, Rob van Kranenburg and Frank Rieger all have strong opinions on the proposed concern.

Zach Blas

Zach Blas is an artist, writer and curator engaging with technology,



queerness and politics in his work. He is currently working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art at the University at Buffalo, New York. As Buffalo experienced heavy snow storms this Friday, Blas was unfortunately unable to attend in person. He did however take part in the discussion via Skype.

Blas follows an artistic approach when dealing with the issue of smart cities. He introduced us to a variety of his artworks that consider biometric

facial recognition as an emerging form of global governance alongside aesthetico-political refusals of recognition, such as masked protests. To Blas, biometrics present a future in which humans will be reduced to an objective truth. His opinion on biometrics becomes especially apparent in “Face Cages”, a project that deals with the issue of abstraction and political violence. Biometrics are presented as a 3D-metal-object – a cage of information which does not fit very well and becomes slightly painful to wear after a while. A certain similarity between the cages and medieval torture devices can indeed be recognized.

Rob van Kranenburg

Blas’ artistic approach was followed by a rather practical understanding of smart cities presented by Rob van Kranenburg, who is the co-founder of bricolabs and the founder of Council and is currently an expert at the EU Commission (HLEG on IoT). He has also written and spoken about the IoT for the last 10 years. Moderator Florian Cramer introduced Rob van Kranenburg as possessing the interesting



characteristic of being critical while remaining positive. Generally, he is very positive about global governance, however, only when things will work out the way he wants them to. That is, Van Kranenburg does not believe in inefficient layers of governmental organisations or military apparatuses. He is aware of the potentially disastrous implications of digital wonderland: “we never had the kind of wisdom that we have today. We don’t know what is going to happen.” This is why we now need to line up to find ways to transform the smooth stream of data and control into truly participatory infrastructures. If this does not work out, Van Kranenburg envisions about 500 military zones called smart cities in the future and Mad Max somewhere in between.

Frank Rieger

The third speaker, Frank Rieger, is a German hacker, author and internet activist, as well as a prominent speaker for the **Chaos Computer Club**. To him, the idea of smart cities is closely related to optimisation goals. However, quite often those optimisation goals are of a commercial nature, which leads him to the claim that smart cities do not have much to do with ecological targets. It would basically be enough to know how much energy we are using to raise ecological awareness – everything else is just additional “smart stupidity”, which could be dispensed easily. Today, he says, we still have the wrong optimisation goals, and setting those goals right will be the next battleground within democratisations. The government and corporations are the

wrong institutions to set optimisation goals. For the government, surveillance aspects will always be the centre of attention and corporations will always follow commercial targets. We need other institutions to set up those goals in a sense that is proportional to their effect on people.



## *Political Coworking Sweatshop*

### **Workshop Description**

Coworking spaces as sources of political self-organization: a workshop for space designers, community managers, knowledge facilitators and freelance creatives. We see a trend of coworking centers, ‘fablabs’ and other collaborative spaces morphing into decentralised hubs for political movements and freelance practices. These self-organized cooperations need various spaces to meet different audiences and directly interact with local infrastructures. What is needed is an effective, mobile broking system rather than an ‘office.’ This calls to change the role of managers of collaborative spaces to that of hosts, communicators and knowledge facilitators. In what ways can we design these centers in order to make them sustainable and strong resources for creative workers and activists? This workshop aims to draw up an inventory of the vital aspects needed to design collaborative spaces, like knowledge management, facilitation of events and encounters, communication, and documentation.

By Ela Kagel

[photos](#)



### ***Blog Post: Political Coworking Sweatshop - Working Beyond the Social Norm***

***27 November 2014 - Daniela Diwock***

Coworking is a style of work that involves a shared working environment for independent activity. Coworking spaces are becoming more common in Europe, especially in startup cities such as Berlin. It's no surprise therefore, that yesterday's sweatshop on [Political Coworking](#) was held by Ela Kagel, the founder and Director of Berlin-based [SUPERMARKT](#).

SUPERMARKT is a creative resource centre housing conferences and workshops, while offering space for meetings, presentations, work, and mutual thinking. Kagel shared her experience with SUPERMARKT by providing first-hand insights in terms of how to run a coworking space, and more importantly, what

it takes to keep such a space alive. She introduced coworking as “working beyond the social norm.” It might indeed be this being beyond the norm that makes coworking so interesting.

Kagel presents coworking spaces as collaborative spaces that are self-organised and run by communities. They can therefore turn into a hotbed for self-organised movements. Indeed, a multitude of initiatives has already emerged, such as the Berlin based Internsheep. Once a coworking space is created, people come to share their knowledge, but also for the social gathering. Even though, they are working independently, they usually agree on the value of the synergy that is likely to emerge out of the collaboration with people of different profession.

“We have to redefine the traditional notions of work”

The question is: how do you design these spaces in order to make them sustainable? Kagel states, that coworking spaces should not be looked at individually – they need to be considered as networks. As people travel, they often visit a variety of spaces. This is why they should be part of a hub, which makes them and the evolving movements even more powerful. Besides their creative atmosphere, open spaces usually bring along their own cultural premises. Communities need to be aware of certain collaborative formats, such as a lingua franca ensuring that no one will get excluded. Furthermore, they need a common understanding, or maybe even internal regulations, on the question of ownership. What to do with the knowledge that emerges in coworking spaces? It often happens that an idea is the product of a loose collection of people, which makes it even

more difficult to claim ownership. Coworking spaces need to be designed in a way that allows people to collaborate under shared standards. SUPERMARKT copes with the issue of ownership by having weekly community breakfasts, where everyone can step up and provide an overview of what they are currently working on. By letting everyone know what they are doing, ownership is automatically claimed.

Kagel notes that even though SUPERMARKT is self-organised, there should still be someone that is in charge of external communication. Someone needs to make sure that there are interesting events to invite the right people come to visit the coworking spaces.

Summarizing, three keywords need to be taken into account when considering the sustainability of coworking spaces: participation, ownership and representation. We have just started to scratch the surface of what is possible in terms of interdisciplinary collaboration. It presents an area that definitely needs to be developed further in the future. Eventually, this is where innovation happens – and we all want to be part of that, right?

## *Master Class Serendipity*

### **Workshop Description**

The workshop begins with a storyteller's version of 'The Three Princes of Serendip' (1302) by Amir Khusrau, a great poet in the Persian language. Serendipity is a surprising observation followed by a correct abduction. The triggering surprise is an unanticipated, abnormal and crucial datum: an enigma, an anomaly, or a novelty. For the new, an unpredictable element is needed. Serendipity is by definition beyond intuition, imagination, fantasy or dream. There are three ways to find the new: non-serendipity (find the sought), pseudo-serendipity (find the sought by a crucial accident), and serendipity (find the unsought). Claude Bernard wrote: 'Nothing is accidental, and what seems to us accidental is only an unknown fact whose explanation may furnish the occasion for a more or less important discovery.' The behaviourist Burrhus Skinner advised: 'When you run into something interesting, drop everything else and study it.' As physicist Louis Leprince-Ringuet noted: 'The true researcher must know to give attention to signs that will unveil the existence of a phenomenon that he does not expect.'

By Pek van Andel

[photos](#)

## *Parasitical Organising*

### **Workshop Description**

If we want to put our ideas into practice we need money. That is if we adhere to the received wisdom that business is all about financial capital. However, perhaps there are other value systems which suit our ideas much better and which concentrate on social, cultural, or indeed symbolic capital. This workshop instructs practitioners how to actualize their ideas using all of these currencies. In fact it is often much easier to do so than with financial capital, because the most important things, such as passion, recognition and solidarity, cannot be bought with money. In this workshop we will detect streams of alternative assets and how they can be used to put ideas into practice.

By Mads Pankow

[photos](#)

## *First Aid for Failed Projects*

### **Workshop Description**

This workshop offers a critical reflection on the form of creativity in the creative industries. While cities compete for the hippest and most creative image, the business-friendly environments they create promote fast and disposable creativity. By introducing an element of play, and through the welcoming of failure, the participants in this workshop will go on a deeper quest, one without pre-set outcomes. By being playful and meaningful, reflections on how and why we are creative teach us to not just briefly touch, but rather fully embrace our creativity.

By Bart Stuart and Klaar van der Lippe

[photos](#)

## *My Creativity, Your Depression*

### **Session Description**

Value creation in the networked economy is increasingly characterized by flexible and ephemeral relationships. We often imagine creative workers and entrepreneurs as cheerful explorers, engaged in the day-to-day fun of building new networks and having unexpected encounters leading to a ceaseless stream of discoveries and inventions. Work is serendipitous play with financial success coming to everyone who knows to combine flexibility and 'passion'. Yet, what are the real costs - psychologically, culturally and economically – of a serendipitous mode of production that is predicated on the aleatory and ephemeral. Why is it that so much that is presented to us as innovative and creative smacks of vacuous repetition and mere simulation of novelty? This panel tries to look behind the imaginary of contemporary labor/ entrepreneurship as a game of innovation, driven by fancy-free yet passionate creatives.

Moderator: Sebastian Olma

Panelists: Pek van Andel, Mark Fisher, Sarah Sharma

[photos - video](#)



## ***Blog Post: My Creativity, Your Depression***

***27 November 2014 - Sotiris Sideris***

There is a field of tension between the notions of creativity and innovation as we encounter them today. During this session, Pek van Anandel, Mark Fisher and Sarah Sharma discussed serendipity as the eternal principle underlying what we call creativity, and looked at the ways in which it has been absorbed into the world of labor. But why is this absorption into the economy and labor not really leading to a supposed orgy of social, economic and cultural invention? To start formulating an answer to this question, it is first important to define, at least to a certain extent, serendipity.

Pek van Anandel

According to Van Anandel, serendipity is “a surprising observation followed by a correct explanation.” But looking for the unknown makes no sense; you either already know it, or you do not know what to look for. So why should you look for it? Because, he says, people who do it, have no better things to do.

Van Anandel suggested a second definition for serendipity: “it is an observation over an anticipated and crucial datum that can be an enigma, an anomaly or a novelty; it can be very trivial.” To explain the importance of researching trivial things, Van

Anandel used the observation of Albert von Szent-Györgyi on the fact that when you take off the skin of an apple, it takes little time before it gets brown. Eventually, this observation led to the discovery of vitamin C, for which Szent-Györgyi got the Nobel Prize. This shows that a surprising observation can be trivial.

For Van Anandel, intuition is to anticipate without being able to make that explicit, and serendipity is by definition unanticipated. Serendipity is intuition in the



making, and you can teach and learn it by practice and theory. In this sense, an accidental observation can lead to accidental discoveries, inventions or creations. Note that accidental does not mean random. Accident has the psychological connotation that observations fall to you normally when you are searching for something else (or nothing at all) without anticipation of the mind. Systematic research and serendipity do not exclude each other, but compliment and even reinforce each other. We must also “expect the unexpected”.

#### Mark Fisher

Fisher started his speech by delineating two principles of neoliberalism. Firstly, creativity results when we take security away from people. Security is decadent, and creativity flourishes when it has been removed. Secondly, overwork is better than underwork. In neoliberalism, if you want to make things efficient you overwork people.

Fisher then turned to the example of Andy Warhol in the book “Dead Man Working”



(2012) as a kind of precursor of the ideal post-Fordist worker: he has fun working and uses every social occasion to get more portraits. Of course, this is true not only for artists, but for everyone who lives in this neoliberal capitalism. It is the pressure to use and instrumentalise your friendships, the pressure to communicate, to show up, to perform convincingly, to look good. Simply put, to absorb all aspects of life into a project.

The population is engaged in artistic-style projects, and work is now everywhere. Alongside this, there are spaces of hustling and ubiquitous metawork, such as the internet and social media. In this constant anxiety and urgency, what is lost, is a kind of absorption. This is however not the same as concentration. There is a creative and active side to absorption. To be absorbed in a piece of music is not to passively consume it, but work with it in a certain way. The dominant tendency of contemporary technological capitalism is to stop that. Technology is carrying around a misleading way to knock us out of any state of absorption in which we might fall, and this leads to cultural depression and lower expectations. Fisher used the example of music to illustrate such low expectations. He said that we do not expect something like the Beatles anymore. The times in which such things were produced are over. Why? Because musicians are the victims.

#### Sarah Sharma

Sharma took a different angle with her speech and started with saying, “the world would be depressing without feminism.

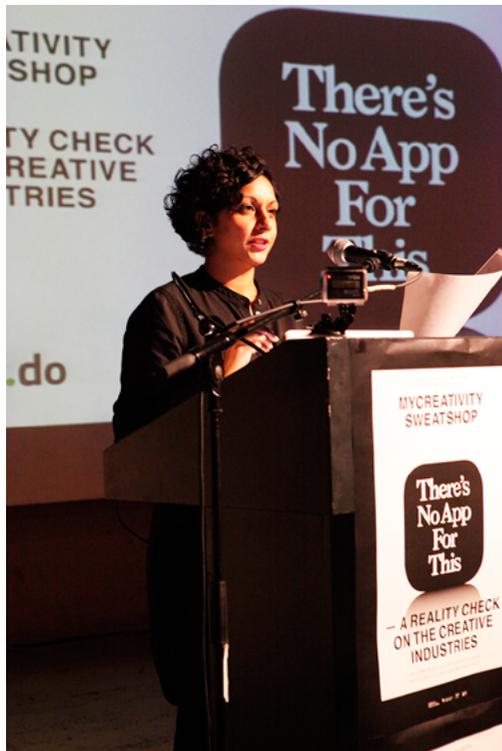
Creatives need feminism desperately.”

No movement can survive unless it is concerned with, and attuned to the reproduction of its members. It is a feminist analysis that actually illuminates the material conditions of how we labor, live, and love, because it never talks about the individual but always about the social.

Shifting to serendipity, she said that it is a romantic notion. Even if you believe in faith or randomness, everybody loves encountering a small detail that leads to a new romance or a new job, meeting a new friend, the things people actually really love. She does not have a definition for serendipity; “it has to

do with fate and fortune and is a way of seeking a new world. It is all the potential possibilities that cannot be foreseen.” What she is interested in, is the relationship between serendipity and material conditions; the cultural-economic context that gives rise to serendipity as a way of being in the world.

In her current research she is looking at how different populations understand their own lives in terms of fortune and a lacking; how they seek this kind of knowledge, rather



than expertise knowledge. As she said, there are people always waiting for someone to offer them a new job, a new life. “Their lives are structured around the potential that maybe something fair will happen. For some this is magic, for others just hope. At the same time I recognize that the desired belief in serendipity is related to surveillance and social control. It feels like a way out in a sense. Whatever it is, it should be seized”.

## *The MyCreativity Blog*

### *Serendipity: Creative Process between Accident and Sagacity*

**17 June 2014 - Sebastian Olma**

The notion of serendipity is quickly becoming an important reference for the creative industries as well as for our innovation-obsessed economy in general. This is remarkable as it was originally conceived in the middle of the 18th century within literary circles where it led its marginal existence until very recently. The term 'serendipity' was coined in 1754 by Horace Walpole, art historian and eccentric son of the first British Prime Minister. Walpole had come across the "silly fairy tale" *Peregrinaggio di tre giovani figliuoli del re di Serendippo* which was the Italian translation of the ancient Persian parable of the three princes of Serendip, the ancient name of Sri Lanka. The king had sent his sons on a punitive expedition for having refused succeeding him after their education. As Walpole writes, during their travels the smart royal kids were constantly making "discoveries by accidents and sagacity of things they were not in quest of." This became Walpole's definition of his newly coined term serendipity and as such, it spread through the world of literates and bibliophiles. Scientists, of course, were always able to relate to the term as it describes pretty much the principle of scientific discoveries and inventions. Louis Pasteur's often-cited adage about chance favoring only prepared minds is only the most famous statement as to serendipity's significance for the world of science.

Today, serendipity has left the libraries and academic circles in order to start a new life in the network economy. Within the creative industries with their coworking spaces, creative hubs and start-up centers, the notion has become a guiding reference for the new generation of creative producers for whom the principle of the valuable unexpected encounters (of new ideas for products and services, funding opportunities, contracts, business partners, etc.) is something like the foundation of economic survival. Pop-science and management theory are at equally keen on serendipity as it seems to provide a lead into understanding the social dynamics involved in the emergence of novelty. Yet, in this wonderful world of TED, PechaKucha and awesome one-liners, it should not be surprising that serendipity is quickly becoming a fad. This is unfortunate as I believe that the notion offers more than meets the google-glassed eye.

In fact, I believe that serendipity provides us with an important lead regarding the mechanics of novelty to the extent that human cognition is responsible for it. In this sense, our contemporary ideologists of innovation are not wrong in their interest for serendipity, they just miss important parts of the picture.

In Walpole's definition of serendipity, there are two important dimensions: accidents and sagacity. The first dimension, accidents, stands for the conjuncture of ideas, objects, intuitions, knowledge fragments etc. that in the usual course of things would not encounter each other. Contemporary philosophers refer to this dimension in terms of a multiplicity: relations forming the potential out of which the new may emerge. The second

dimension, sagacity, is where this potential gets embodied, where it is actualized and enters into the world. Without this second dimension, serendipity does not work, which is to say that the act of creation does not take place. Sagacity is where the depth of experience, expertise, craftsmanship etc. enters into the game initiating the creative process by which unexpected encounters acquire their novelty value. So serendipity needs both the multiplicity of encounters (accidents) and the creative act (sagacity) actualizing the encounter for and into the world.

Let's take a look at each of the dimensions separately. With regard to the first dimension, that of the accidental encounter, the diversity of elements encountering each other is crucial for the generation of novelty. It depends on the possibility of diverting from the known path; it hinges on the disturbance of the normal flow of things. French philosopher [Michel Serres](#) has recently made this point by critiquing the current model of academic discipline, which he likens to that of the Roman army. He proposes the jumbling of university departments as a way of "mobilizing the disparate against classification." While [there would be a lot to say about Serres' critique of academia's obsolete structures](#), it might be interesting as well to relate it to those emphatically creative and innovative spaces, hubs and incubators that make up a crucial part of our so-called creative cities. In terms of their populations, these places often display a homogeneity similar to that criticized by Serres with regard to the university. In Amsterdam, this has recently led to a [debate on "creative ghettos,"](#) questioning the sensibility of spatial policies where creative producers remain

largely among themselves. While this debate is an important one, it is part of a bigger problem, i.e., that of understanding creative production in terms of a unified economic sector. It is high time we accept the obvious fact that the generation and valorization of knowledge and creativity follow rules that differ from classical economic goods and resources and adjust creative industries policies accordingly. Serendipity provides a valuable lead for such readjustment.

Yet, in order for serendipity to really happen, its second dimension, sagacity, has to come into play as well. This is the dimension of serendipity where the potential formed by the accidental encounter is led towards its actualization. Sagacity describes the ability to see what others don't, namely, to recognize the potential of the encounter and act on it. As such, it is not at all a question of luck but of patiently acquired skill or expertise. While the encounter per se might indeed be a fleeting moment, sagacity is the result of individual and social learning processes or, as philosophers say, individuation. Sagacity does not mean the quick valorization of an idea; rather it might be described as the ability to do something much more interesting with it. In this sense, it is closer to craftsmanship than to the entrepreneurial principle of 'effectuation'.

While it is true, as Miriam Meckel wrote some time ago, that **serendipity has come under pressure** from the algorithmic reductionism of Amazon, Google, Foursquare and so on, its sagacious dimension suffers more from the decline of independent knowledge and maker cultures that for instance

Richard Sennett bemoans in his recent books. Yet, while his sociological romanticism is certainly heartwarming, the challenge today is to bring the crafts(wo)man's virtuosity – this kind of sovereignty over materials and processes of production – into the digital age. It is great, of course, to see the emergence of Fablabs, Makerspaces, independent design and software movements but let's be honest: what is their impact in the face of what Bernard Stiegler aptly calls the general **digital proletarianization**? As German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk argues, the human being is in its essence a **Übungswesen**, a creature that needs exercise or training to grow into and beyond itself. Übung macht den Meister goes the German proverb and it doesn't only 'make the master craftsman' it also generates sagacity as crucial prerequisite for the serendipitous disruption of current cultural and economic templates. To create the necessary Übungsräume or training spaces, we need a new wave of social innovation that liberates our educational institutions from their docility and opportunism. Today's self-acclaimed social innovators have not even begun to address this question.

If we approach serendipity from the double perspective of accidental encounters and sagacity we realize that there is more to it than the multiplicity of 'cool ideas' dancing to the tune of the west-coast investment boogie. What we have to keep in mind is that there would be no serendipity at, say, TED at all if we were to reduce our understanding of valuable knowledge and creativity to the principle of "ideas worth spreading." When infotainment replaces critical engagement with the real material world for the

sake of technological progress, it is only a matter of time before our beloved OS are going to leave us for more interesting exploits. A creative economy based on the logic of serendipity requires methods and infrastructures that make space for both, accidents and sagacity, with sagacity being something else than the wisdom of the market, the investor or the algorithm suggesting what “you might also like.” In fact, finding a timely definition of sagacity might help us answer the question of what it means to be ‘creative’ as a human (individual, collective, network, etc.) among more or less ‘intelligent’ machines.



## *Creative Industries and Singularity? I don't think so.*

**17 June 2014 - Sebastian Olma**

If you talk to someone who has been alive and conscious during the eighties and tell them about the recent popularity of [Raymond Kurzweil's](#) idea of “technological singularity,” the response you get is usually: “You must be kidding, the guy's a total nutcase!” And they have got good reason to be surprised as the man is exactly what they make him out to be. What the idea of technological singularity comes down to is that due to the acceleration of technological progress, we are approaching a point of cybernetic fusion, a point where artificial intelligence becomes so superior

to its human version that it simply takes over. After that it is not only smooth but also transcendental sailing – with VALIS being your friendly new cybernetic steersman. Despite the fact that conceptually, singularity describes a point of total kairos, i.e., a point of “pure future,” when all bets are off and we’re delivered to an absolutely open future, Kurzweil and his followers somehow ‘know’ that after this point cybernetic benevolence will rule and we’ll have things like immortality.

Kurzweil, of course, is not the first nutcase who’s been lifted into the hall of ideological fame. Ayn Rand and Milton Freedman are two important predecessors whose ideas have helped to wreak the political and economic havoc we’re dealing with at the moment under the label of “financial crisis.” Formally, Kurzweil’s comeback today has to do with a careless extrapolation of something called *Moore’s law*, which, in actuality, is not a law but the observation made in 1965 by Gordon Moore, cofounder of Intel, that the number of components in an integrated circuit is doubling roughly every two years (1.8 is the number usually quoted). As the exponential rhythm of development seems to still hold today (*or does it?*), applying to the capabilities of quite a few digital electronic devices, techno-euphorists are holding their breath for the technological singularity to be reached soon. They don’t seem to be terribly concerned about the fact that their devotion is based on a really silly conflation of computing power and intelligence.

Again, cyclical popularity of people with crazy ideas might not be such an issue. However, what worries me is the toll this kind of

techno-esoteric thinking is taking on policy debates on innovation and creative industries particularly in the Netherlands. Go onto the website of the Dutch Creative Council, the creative industries think tank of the Dutch government and you’ll be greeted by a column written by a designer who tells you that “*nothing makes me as happy as the thought of the coming singularity.*” In fact, he tells us, it’s good news twice over: while “technological development” is going to save us (water, energy, food, etc. – no problem any more) there will still be an important role for creative producers: making nice interfaces. Thank God for that!

Ok fine, this is just some guy, a random entrepreneur who’s creative “thinking” got the better of his “social analysis.” Yet, unfortunately, this is not true. In fact, this kind of techno-esoteric reductionism rules supreme among the creativity bureaucrats. There is so much digital hyperbole there that it sometimes seems as though creative industries policies have become a field of digital dreams. “It’s important,” one of the members of the Dutch ‘top team’ creative industries recently opined, “that the creative sector and the government realize that digital is growing rapidly and is expected to generate 80 percent of the jobs in the creative industries within five years” (Creatie, Dutch Digital Design, p. 11). Really? Is this our problem? We are not digital enough?! In the Dutch polytechnics there are about ten thousand front-end developers waiting for their release onto the market. Do you think that will do?

I am not saying, of course, that there is no growth in the markets for digital products and services. Of course there is. However, our

problem in the Netherlands is not that we are “not digital enough.” The challenge from a policy perspective consists much less in pumping millions into gaming, digital design or what have you, and then hoping for some singularity to bestow a Silicon Valley situation on the Netherlands. What policy should be concerned with is the integration of digital technology as well as all sorts of other “creative” contributions into the existing economic infrastructure. And this, by the way, also goes for the “big social questions.” Barbara Wolfensberger, new head of the Dutch top team creative industries, in her first public address stressed the importance of the creative industries for solving “societal problems.” I wholeheartedly agree. Yet, in order to engage with those societal problems, the sector needs to look a bit more seriously at society and also at itself to define the problems that it might want to solve. Questions such as “What design can do” should be asked in a context that is more than a therapeutic “Everyone-is-happy-and we-all-love-each-other” format like the one where Mrs. Wolfensberger delivered her speech. As long as this is not happening, the “creative class” won’t be able to make valuable “societal contributions.”

Creative industries policy should and could live up to its rhetoric of “social change” but it would have to let go of its digital superstition. The Dutch economy will be saved by “digital” no more than humanity will be by singularity. A serious policy effort with regard to the creative industries would realize the potential of design and other creative disciplines to actually lead the invention of new modes of engagement with technological possibilities

rather than simply chasing the logic of smart tech, IoT and big data as defined by some mystical “digital evolution.” How can we reap the benefits of digital technology while simultaneously breaking through the logic of surveillance and control that is way to quickly becoming the new normal? Now this, to me, sounds like a challenge worthy of those who call themselves creative. And it’s more than that: it’s a necessity! So let’s forget singularity as quickly as possible and let’s start to facilitate creative industries that deserve their name!



## *Unwrapping the Social Fabric of Time*

**25 June 2014 - Hartmut Wilkening**

Review of Sarah Sharma (2014) *In the Meantime: Time and Cultural Politics*, Duke.

Why is the assumption that we are living in fast times so easily accepted, so little discussed? How is it possible that most discourses on 24/7, accelerated society and fast capital end up confirming speedup as the reality?, author Sarah Sharma wonders. She is very critical about current discourses in speed theory. There is a need, she argues, to identify different temporalities of power relations and to investigate experiences of

time within specific political and economic contexts.

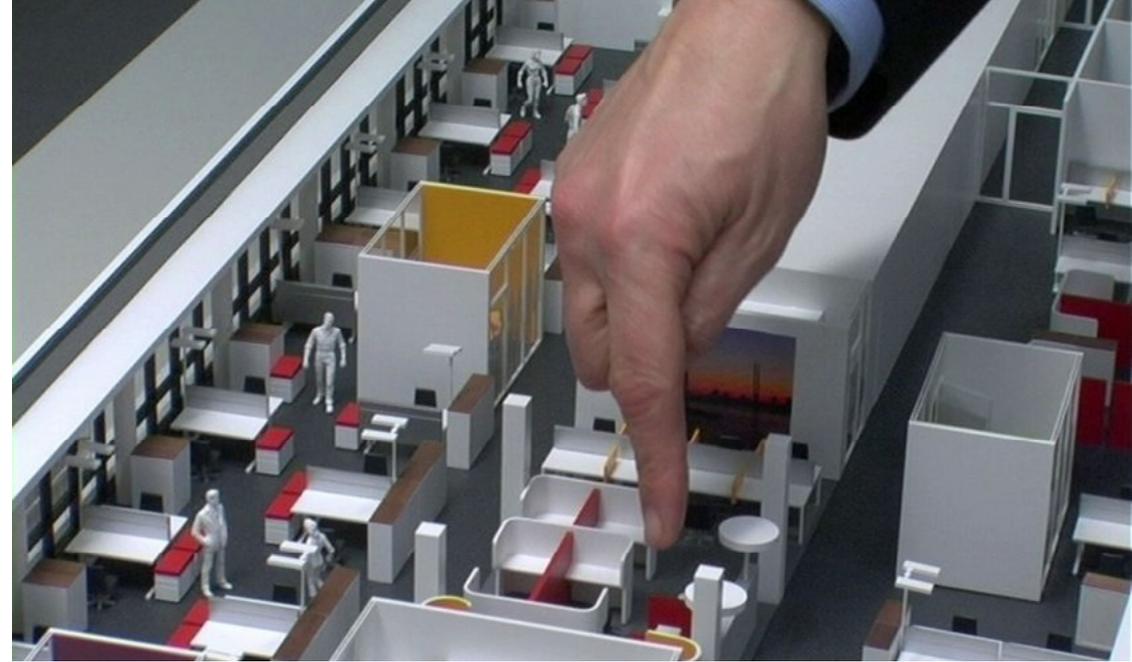
In *The Meantime* reads like a novel. Sharma's sharp attack on speedup believers is accentuated with detailed portraits of the lives at the core and at the margins of global capital. It is this vivid composite of detailed narratives that describe the social fabric of time which drives you through the pages. The four chapters of the book are organized each around three portraits of professionals: frequent-flyer business travellers, taxi drivers, corporate yoga instructors and devotees of the slow-food and slow-living movements.

Sharma describes temporal power relations with special attention to investment and disinvestment in the quality of lifetime. The productivity of her perspective comes out with particular clarity in the conjuncture of her chapters on frequent-flyer business travellers and taxi drivers. While the exhausted, jet-lagged bodies of business travellers are treated with air beds and napping pods, the taxi drivers waiting at the airport are obliged to pass more and more costly tests to be able to continue the same job. There is an obvious mutuality of investment and disinvestment of two parties in the time of the other.

The shift from clock-time control to quality-time management, Sharma illustrates with great wit in the chapter on corporate yoga instructors. Here, the author turns to the seeming contradiction of the physical repetitiveness and immobility of long hours at the office and the desire for an energetic, holistic and indeed, fulfilled life? Thanks to corporate yoga instructors this contradiction can be overcome at the office itself. At lunchtime the yoga teacher flies in

and quickly transforms the workspace into an open studio where body and mind experience the real, the instant and the now. Sharma concludes that the ideals of supposedly independent yoga teachers and corporate interests can actually merge into one mantra: ‘this is your life, it is now.’

Sharma has found a very convincing perspective in which the human body becomes the nexus of the shift from spatial to temporal power relations. Her image of the social fabric of time is great in its vividness and physicality that she derives from the insistence on detail in her analysis. At the end of her book she pleads for temporal awareness, meaning a re-imagining of time as entangled and collective. Perhaps surprisingly, the only 150 pages of *In the Meantime* can really help you to achieve that. And the world does look very different this way.



## *What Design Can Do - A Report from Weimar*

**4 July 2014 - Sebastian Olma**

Last weekend, I went to the [Digital Bauhaus Summit](#) in Weimar, organized by Berlin's [Zentrale Intelligenz Agentur](#), a network of writers, designers and consultants who over the years have significantly shaped the discussion on digital culture, creative industries and design in Germany. The purpose of the summit was to explore contemporary theory and practice of “creative collaboration” and to think about a possible new Bauhaus manifesto for the digital age. The Bauhaus with its famous vision of a new synthesis between arts, craft and industry provided a loose historico-analytical template for a discussion of contemporary theories, techniques and methods of “creative collaboration.”

The fact that this could be a slightly bigger challenge than

one might initially think was highlighted by Swiss architect and design theorist Lukas Imhof. As he reminded the audience, there was a significant hiatus between the Bauhaus visionary rhetoric, developed by its founder Walter Gropius, and the empirical reality of the design practice it engendered.

What the Bauhaus obviously accomplished was a modernist synthesis of the arts and design that gave it the iconic position it still holds today. Yet its relation to technology and industrial production remained a fairly troubled one. Perhaps one could say that the Bauhaus, while great in the production of design and architecture, failed to make the step toward industrial reproduction (exemplified by Imhof in Gropius' design of the Adler Standard 6 auto mobile and some of his social housing projects). The Bauhaus elitist ethos [e.g., ignorance for questions of usability, lack of sensitivity for the functionality of materials (steel windows, etc.)] presented a serious hindrance for the realization of its sociopolitical ambitions of good design for the masses. As one commentator put it, one great accomplishment of the Bauhaus might indeed be the **"idea of the relation"** between artistic design and industry even if it hardly ever materialized.

What interests me in this context is less the question of what the Bauhaus may or may not have achieved in terms of modernist design but rather the difference between the rhetoric and real conditions of social change. One of the reasons why we idealize Bauhaus today is that it did have such a strong vision of artist/design-led social change. Gropius and his colleagues were driven by the idea to create a new kind of human being through the

design of a revolutionary social infrastructure. Der neue Mensch the Bauhaus founders envisioned was to be shaped by the rational, functionalist and essentially democratic architecture (and commodities) that surrounded them. The emancipated, sovereign individual was supposed to emerge out of this infrastructure, leading the world towards a more collaborative, participative and generally better future.

In the **original Bauhaus manifesto of 1919**, Gropius had formulated his vision in with a great deal of pathos:

"Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith."

Nearly a century later, emphatic visions of a neue Mensch are reemerging in the world of design and its related fields. However, this time around, their basic attitude has radically shifted: from politically driven aesthetics to innovation. In spite of the nominal importance of creativity, art and culture in our post-industrial societies, these visions are characterized by a near total absence of significant artistic impulse. Programs of "social innovation," "social impact," and "change" are largely driven by implicit and explicit teleologies of technological evolution where the position of the politically engaged artist or designer has been taken over by the designer of "smart" infrastructures. While these programs

often present themselves with a quasi-religious pathos similar to that of Bauhaus' dream of a more participatory, democratic infrastructure, they tend to be devoid of any political-aesthetic impetus. Proclamations of "design as the new idealism" remain pure hubris as long as the associated practice remains at the level of reducing real social and economic challenges of our time to "wicked problems" that can be deconstructed to a series of "design challenges" and then treated in a couple of therapeutic sessions by a team of app-makers, innovators and design thinkers.

In this respect, the screening at the Digital Bauhaus Summit of [Harun Farocki's "Ein neues Produkt"](#) was a powerful illustration of the intricacies inherent in the relation between rhetoric and reality of "design for social change." For one year, Farocki followed the directors of the [Quickborner Team](#), a Hamburg consulting firm with roots in the Bauhaus tradition that today designs corporate environments for the "new way of working." With his characteristically calm and discreet concentration, Farocki filmed their strategy workshops and client meetings, capturing the semiotic dynamics at work in the development of a new product. The spatial designs the Quickborner Team wants to provide are supposed to make employees faster, smarter, more effective and so on. The goal is a flexible workspace able to induce, if not produce, more self-determined, independent employees.

"The new way of working" is a big theme for corporations. The combination of digital facilitation of work processes and the appropriation of cultural practices that independent creative

producers have experimented with over the last decade (coworking etc.) is seen as a way of updating the industrial configurations of corporate work space. Nothing wrong with this, let's make these environments less depressing, if people become more productive in the process because the new environments cater more appropriately to their professional needs, that's fine as well. Yet, what the semiotic dynamic of the meetings portrayed by Farocki reveals goes in a rather different direction. It transpires quickly that the protagonists of the film have a very limited interest in and understanding of the needs of a "modern employee." The purpose of these workshops and client meetings appears to be limited to the generation of a vocabulary able to catch a managerial Zeitgeist that is totally unencumbered by any substantial reflection on what flexibility, collaboration, or, indeed, self-determination might entail from an employee's point of view. Instead, the Quickborner space-gurus produce an uncanny combination of rhetorical hyperbole and conceptual obscurity in order to arrive at a level of pseudo-hip management gibberish that might not even be exceptional but has hardly ever been captured "in the corporate wild" like this. Their brew of design thinking fragments, systems theory sound bites and kitchen psychology is served as iconic impregnation of a discourse whose vacuity is as obvious as it is breathtaking.

Now, is this an articulation of what Boltanski and Chiapello once called the [new spirit of capitalism](#)? Are these consultants busy producing the contemporary ideology whose benevolent euphemisms are a smoke screen for intensified exploitation, redundancies, increased employee control and total social

surveillance? Perhaps. However, the clumsy recitation of poorly digested Zeitgeist mantras lends the protagonists a strange air of provincial authenticity. They are not sinister, they want to do good. They are not perpetrators but rather accomplices in the maintenance of a management practice has become so obviously outmoded that all rhetorical stops have to be pulled to save it.

Which brings us back to the question of a Bauhaus manifesto for our times. Farocki has done us the great service of exposing both the strength and the weakness of a visionary discourse that has lost touch with the reality it pretends to address. Well, that's how ideology works, one might respond and that is certainly true. However, at a time when a multitude of design thinkers and doers are busy developing timely concepts and practices of "creative collaboration" we may want to ask ourselves if it isn't possible to use our expertise to shorten the rift between the rhetoric and reality of social change rather than help extend it even further. I know that in practical terms, this can be a tall order but it is also the kind of political sensitivity design needs today in order to properly fill the exponential position that society – for better or worse – seems to have assigned to it. If there was to be a new manifesto, I think this should be part of it.



## *Of Thumbs and Heads A Comment on Michel Serres' "Petite Poucette"*

**12 July 2014 - Sebastian Olma**

Michel Serres' [Petite Poucette](#), is a strange little book. Written as a "love letter to the networked generation," it celebrates the digital savviness of his grand children and their peers. Petit Poucette is the fairly tale character known in the English speaking world as little Tom Thumb. The title is thus a pun on the agility with which the fingers of our digi-kids dash over the touch screens of their mobile devices. And while Serres embraces quite wholeheartedly the liberating potential of digital technology, he writes with great disdain about the current state of our media system and its effects

on the younger generation. “We, the grown-ups,” Serres writes in the opening pages, “have turned our society of the spectacle into a pedagogical society whose omnipotent, miserable rivalry increasingly pushes schools and universities aside.” The trope “society of the spectacle” of course is a standard French reference to the ‘classical’ media system (the situationist Guy Debord coined it). Serres thus bemoans both the seductive power of the attention-devouring media spectacle and the incapability of the institutions of (higher) education to effectively struggle against their factual deterioration and loss of social significance. The problem is, says Serres, that they seem stuck in the past; unable and unwilling to cater to the needs of the Petites Poucettes.

For Serres, Petite Poucette doesn’t just stand for a new generation but represents a new kind of human being. While the exact circumstances of her coming into being remain in the dark, whatever gave birth to her had something to do with digital technology. To illustrate what is going on, Serres refers to Jacques de Voragine’s medieval bestseller *Légende dorée*, that includes the story of St. Dionysios, the first bishop of Paris who was captured by the Roman army and sentenced to death by beheading on top of what was later to be called Montmartre. Half way to the top, the lazy soldiers decide to avoid the strenuous ascent and cut off his head on the spot. The bishop’s head drops to the ground. Miraculously, though, the decapitated Dionysius raises, grabs his head, and continues his ascent head in hands. The soldier flee in shock and horror.

The point Serre is trying to make here is that today, Petite

Poucette is holding her head in her hands as well. She is decapitated in the sense of having her intellectual, cognitive capabilities externalized into devices whose memory is thousands of times more powerful than ours. Which leads Serres to the question:

“What then is it that we keep on carrying on our shoulders after being decapitated? Renewed and living intuition. Being ‘canned’ [in the computer, SO], pedagogy releases us to the pure pleasure of invention. Great: Are we damned to become intelligent?”

And here is where Serres sees the main problem with our institution of (higher) education: in being unable or unwilling to adjust to this new empty-headed yet agile-thumped generation that doesn’t need knowledge as stock any more (as it always has it at hand anyway) but knowledge as process that feeds intuition, invention innovation.

While the reader begins to wonder if he hasn’t accidentally picked up a particularly embarrassing publication by a French “social innovator and frequent TEDx-speaker” who happens to share the name of one of France’s most eminent philosophers, Serres begins to share his ideas on what could be done to turn the university into a place that would be more accommodating to the evolutionary advances of Tom Thumb and Petite Poucette. Here comes another historical analogy, again a Parisian one yet this time closer to the present. It concerns Boucicaut, founder of one of the world’s first department stores, *Le Bon Marché*. Emile Zola made Boucicaut the template for Octave Mouret, the hero of his novel *Au Bonheur des Dames*. At one point in the novel,

Mouret, following a whim, abandons the well-ordered, classified structure of his department store, turning it into a labyrinth where the shopping-crazed dames find the latest silk-fashion (mid-19th century we are talking about) next to fresh vegetables. The resulting chaos leads to instant commercial success as sales go through the roof.

For Serres, this provides a great metaphor for what has to happen at universities. They can learn, as he puts it, from “Boucicault’s principle of serendipity,” i.e., the principle of the unsought finding. The university needs a reform that mobilizes the disparate against classification. “The disparate,” as the author puts it, “has advantages that reason cannot even dream of.” And he has got a point here. As [Robert Merton](#) and more recently [Pek van Andel](#) have beautifully shown, serendipity is indeed a pattern that underlies much of logic of scientific discovery and invention. And it is also true that our institutions of higher education are rapidly losing their influence, particularly when it comes to the analysis of contemporary culture, politics, technology and so on. The success with which the spectacle of TED, futurology and trend watching has captured our social imagination is testimony to the weakness of academic rigour in the face of pseudo-intellectual infotainment.

Yet, one wonders if Serres’ reference to Boucicaut and Au Bonheur des Dames provides the apposite metaphor for the necessary reorganization of contemporary academia. Do we really want more of the university-as-shopping-mall than we already have? It is a bit strange that Serres uses Au Bonheur

des Dames in this particular way as the guiding metaphor for his attempt to rethink the university. There is indeed, in Zola’s novel, a lesson for our times but it is one that is quite different from what Serres makes of it. By focussing on the serendipity anecdote, what seems to have escaped the philosopher is that Zola’s book in its entirety can be read as a commentary on the question of how to engage with emerging cultural and commercial infrastructures such as today’s internet/digital technology.

Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* is above all the story of Denise Baudu, a young country girl who comes to Paris with her younger brothers and ends up working as a saleswoman at the department store that lends the novel its title. Her uncle is the owner of a fashion shop across the road from Au Bonheur that, like many other traditional businesses of its kind, is dying thanks to the rapid success and expansion of the great new department store. Thus, Denise’s life in Paris unfolds, as it were, at the interface of the old and the new commercial infrastructure. As a saleswoman, she suffers the hardship of a super exploited employee but also looks at what is happening in the world of commerce with great interest and analytical appreciation. She has an unusual understanding of the contemporary processes of socio-economic change, yet she doesn’t allow herself to be overwhelmed and captured by them.

The integrity she displays amid this great transformation is also metaphorically played out in the love story that unfolds between her and Mouret, the owner of Au Bonheur. Mouret plays the role of the great seducer, not only with regard to the masses of (mostly) female clients his store attracts but also in private

life. He is the smooth operator who seduces his victims for the sake of his business as well as his pleasure. He is, in a way, the bodily extension of *Au Bonheur des Dames*, his great machine of seduction. Denise falls in love with him yet resists his advances until the very end when he has to concede that the only way to “get her” is in fact to take her as his wife. There is a romantic moralism to Zola’s story but this is not what interests me presently. The lesson, I think, that can be taken from the story of Denise is that even if one is immersed in a new and overwhelming technological infrastructure, one does not always need to submit to the logic of the new ‘machine’. The reason why Denise survives and eventually even thrives in the rapidly changing environment of 1860s Paris, is that she doesn’t allow herself to be seduced by the new cultural and economic techniques and technologies. Again, it isn’t that she doesn’t want to keep up with the times or that she rejects novelty; rather, she looks for modes of engagement that allow her to meet the emerging machine of seduction on her own terms. Sure, there is little leeway for someone like her but whenever there is, she recognizes it and makes the effort.

And this is, I believe, where the challenge lies for our contemporary educational institutions. Rather than mystifying the technological advances of “the internet” and expect the generation of “digital natives” to somehow come to grips with its challenges, we need modes of education that enable young minds to not only performatively but also critically engage with today’s rapid technological progress. Technological savviness certainly is a necessary precondition but by no means the end of

it. Our schools and universities need to become institutions where critical analytical capabilities for the digital age are cultivated. Michel Serres’ intervention is unhelpful in this respect. In fact, with his mixture of euphoria for and ignorance of current technological developments he would fit well with those academic management bodies that helplessly embrace every digital fashion for the sake of appearing modern. This, however, is not what *Petite Poucette* and *Tom Thumb* need in order to negotiate the contemporary world as independent minds. No one is simply “damned to become intelligent.” We cannot let ourselves off the hook so easily.

Perhaps, Serres is right about our kids holding their heads in their hands. Good education, then, means to help students to put their heads back onto their shoulders.



## *Erich Honecker & the Internet of Things. A Comment on Jeremy Rifkin's "The Zero Marginal Cost Society"*

**18 July 2014 - Sebastian Olma**

"The capitalist era is passing... not quickly but inevitably." Thus reads the opening sentence of Jeremy Rifkin's new book [The Zero Marginal Cost Society](#). It's not, indeed, a blockbuster title but that doesn't mean that this would be one of Rifkin's minor books. In fact, what the American Business School Academic and head of the [Foundation on Economic Trends](#) attempts here is a synthesis of the rather enormous body of work that stands to his name. From his almost prophetic book on the technology-induced decline of the global workforce ([The End of Work](#) 1995), his take on the experience economy ([The Age of Access](#) 2000) to the more recent thesis about capitalism as an operational

accident in the history of mankind ([The Emphatic Civilization](#) 2009) and the proclamation of a [Third Industrial Revolution](#) (2011) based on the convergence of smart grid energy and distributed communication networks, Rifkin has emerged as one of the most influential commentators on social and economic change who is in great demand as policy and business consultant in Europe and particularly with the German government.

In [The Zero Marginal Cost Society](#), many, if not all these themes return, organized this time around a new conceptual backbone called "The Internet of Things" (IoT). While in the popular use of the notion of IoT, what is usually meant is the spillover of digital networking into the world of physical objects based on the proliferation and interconnection of microprocessors and analytic software apps, Rifkin argues for an even more inclusive, all-encompassing understanding of the Internet of Things. His IoT features three dimensions: energy, communication and logistics. First, there is what he calls the "energy-internet," representing the trend toward smart grid technology, i.e., the distributed generation of renewable energy (every house as a micro-power plant feeding into the grid etc.). Second, we have the distributed communication network, the internet. Together, those two form what Rifkin calls the energy/communication matrix. In fact, in the first chapters of the book, he attempts a rewrite of the history of capitalism (against Marx and Smith) as one driven by the co-evolution of energy and communication technologies rather than (the organization of) labour power. The third dimension, then, is provided by a smart and distributed logistics system that is not

really here yet but according to Rifkin, trends such as ubiquitous sensors in retail automation, smart cities, big data technologies etc. clearly point in this direction and anyway, this simply is the way things will (have to) go.

Together, these three dimensions make up “the first general purpose technology platform in history that can potentially take large parts of the economy to near zero marginal cost.” Now, what does “near zero marginal cost” actually mean? In economics, marginal costs signify the investment necessary to produce one more unit of a particular good. As costs tend to decrease with increasing numbers of goods produced, over the long run, the cost of such investment becomes marginal. According to Rifkin, near zero magical cost is the result of what he refers to as the “ultimate contradiction at the heart of capitalism,” i.e., the race for technological innovations lowering production costs and prices for the sake of competitive advantage. In other words, capitalists compete for customers, ergo goods and services get cheaper, ergo profits fall over time (Marx famously expounded this argument as “*tendency of the rate of profit to fall*”). Today, Rifkin argues, the convergence of the energy, communications and logistics internets on one all-encompassing IoT will, eventually, lead to the evaporation of profit for significant parts of the economy. We see this already happening in industries dealing in digitized or digitizable goods (publishing, entertainment, etc.) but in the eyes of the futurologist, this is only the prelude to a new “great transformation.” With profits gone, capitalism will be eclipsed, i.e., if it won’t disappear entirely, it will at least move to

the margins of the economy.

A tiny little caveat is in order at this point. There is a difference between capitalism (a specific mode of production that comes with its specific mode of ownership of the means of production) and the market (a mechanism for the distribution of goods and services). Taking this difference into account, which Rifkin doesn’t, would mean to understand that the collapse of certain markets does by no means logically lead to a collapse of capitalism at all. As readers of the French historian Fernand Braudel might remember, historically, *capitalism hasn’t really been all too keen on markets* anyway.

Leaving this not so minor misunderstanding aside for the moment, the question is: where does the path beyond capitalism lead according to Jeremy Rifkin? The answer is, as one might have guessed, the “social economy” or “collaborative commons,” i.e., the laterally structured social system that co-evolves alongside the IoT. Of course, as with the IoT, the collaborative commons are still emerging but the signs, according to the author, are all over the wall: trends such as the sharing economy, free and open software initiatives or social innovation make clear which way we are going. And while “emerging” is in fact a diplomatic way of saying that something isn’t really here (yet), the prospects for the social economy are outstanding thanks to its “soul mate,” the IoT:

“The new infrastructure is configured to be distributed in nature in order to facilitate collaboration and the search for new synergies, making it an ideal technological framework for

advancing the social economy. The operating logic of the IoT is to optimize lateral peer production, universal access, and inclusion, the same sensibilities that are critical to the nurturing and and creation of social capital in the civil society. The very purpose of the new technology platform is to encourage a sharing culture, which is what the commons is all about. It is these design features of the IoT that bring the social commons out of the shadows, giving it a high tech platform to become the dominant economic paradigm of the twenty-first century.”

What *The Zero Marginal Cost Society* presents is thus a dialectic where the technological advances synthesized in the notion of IoT drive a transformation of the economy to the effect that the benevolent human tendencies toward sharing and collaboration become the operating principles of a new economic order. The teleology that Rifkin developed at length in *The Emphatic Civilization* is here put on the rails of the IoT in order to reach its final destination: socio-economic “commonism.” Whereas in the past, people believed they needed to struggle for revolution as a way of overcoming capitalism, we now know that it was simply a matter of waiting for technology lending a hand to the course of history in bringing out the internal contradictions of a social system that in the not too distant future will lead to its more or less gentle self-destruction.

One of the great problems with Rifkin’s analysis lies in his ‘method’ of lumping together a wide variety of often contradictory ‘trends’ and extrapolating them into seismic shifts toward a

radically democratic, post-capitalist economy. To give an example: Richard Stallman and [Free Software](#), Eric S. Raymond and [Open Source](#), Laurence Lessig and [Creative Commons](#) are all called into the witness stand to testify for the “democratizing culture” of the internet. Yet, these are very different initiatives with very different motivations. Turning them all into democratizers makes one wonder why Rifkin didn’t include Google’s Art Project in his list as well. Besides, for a book published about a year after Snowden, a more nuanced view on the relationship between internet and democracy would be apposite.

This is no minor quibble as the internet emphatically provides the author with the model for the other two dimensions of the IoT, i.e., the energy and logistics internet. Of course, Rifkin is not an idiot. He also sees the the obvious counter forces to his argument and he discusses them in the book as well. He talks, at some lengths, about “the new corporate giants that are colonizing large swaths of virtual space.” Yet, ostensibly discussing these empirical challenges to his argument and taking them seriously are two different things. While Rifkin brushes aside the highly problematic proprietary structure of the internet with a remark as to “some kind of regulatory restriction” that is likely to appear (really?), he simply ignores the [trend toward hyper-exploitation in his logistics internet](#) as well as the rather [undemocratic trends in the sharing economy](#).

At times, Rifkin’s book reads like the work of someone who spent a whole year traveling from one innovation conference to the next and taking all the presented arguments at face value. 3D-printing, crowdfunding, MOOCs, driverless cars, DIY, big

data, Moore's Law, singularity – you name it, it's in the book. And he mixes it all into a dialectic where the transformation of human society into a network of collaboration, sharing and so on is a function of a human-machine interaction that is fully determined by the logic of technological progress. Rifkin's socio-anthropological argument sees us as human beings cross the threshold toward our supposedly proper, i.e., fully social existence, yet, by doing so, human being is completely thingified in the internet of things. While the author presents himself as a fervently political thinker (the eclipse of capitalism, etc.), there is no space for political judgement at all in his vision of our interconnected future. Although he shares with most of today's trend watchers and futurologists a taste for techno-teleology, the stubbornness with which Rifkin massages his favorite trends into the big transformation toward the post-capitalist society is truly reminiscent of the late Erich Honecker who famously remarked (I paraphrase): **“Neither ox nor donkey is able to stop the progress of the social economy.”**

And yet, while Rifkin clearly prefers the reckless ideological construction of the dawn of commonism to intellectual rigor, he certainly is not a socialist revolutionary. At the climax of a chapter entitled “The Collaborationists Prepare for Battle,” he reveals his vision on the conflicts he sees lying ahead. After stating that it would be a “mistake to believe that a Commons model will invariably govern the next chapter of human journey,” (which, I am sorry to say, is exactly what he had argued in the previous 190 pages) Rifkin sketches the ‘political’ front lines:

“While the collaborationists are ascendant, the capitalists are split. The global energy companies, the telecommunication giants, and the entertainment industry – with a few notable exceptions – are entrenched in the Second Industrial Revolution and have the gravitas of the existing paradigm and political narrative to back them up. However, the electricity transmission companies, the construction industry, the IT, electronics, Internet, and transport sectors are all quickly creating new products and services and changing their business model to gain market share in the emerging Third Industrial Revolution hybrid of market and Commons arrangements, aided in various ways by the government.”

Let us ignore, for now, the highly problematic notion of the “collaborationist ascent” (and what that would actually mean) and focus instead on the “capitalist split.” Rifkin's statement sounds much less like the initially promised “eclipse of capitalism” and more like the adaptation of economic policy to a new regime of production. And of course, his own TIP consulting group can help to achieve this by way of “Third Industrial Revolution Master Plans for cities, regions, and countries.” The revolution Rifkin has in mind will thus be government-sponsored and preferably led by his consulting operation. This is much less hilarious a proposition than it might initially seem. The interesting fact about The Zero Marginal Cost Society is that underneath the infantile rhetoric of the futurologist trend-watcher, there lies a vision of an economic future that is indeed driven by a great sense of (geo-)political

realism. Rifkin's unconvincing regurgitation of the Californian techno-utopian nonsense can safely be filed under a great entrepreneur's lip service to the zeitgeist. What is much more important is that he moves beyond the digital cliché by embedding it in a notion of the IoT that emphatically includes the so-called 'real economy', i.e., the industrial infrastructure as well. As I said above, Rifkin is an advisor to European governments, particularly to the Germans and, more recently, **counts the Chinese premier among his admirers as well**. There is an emergent geopolitical project on the European horizon (well, it's actually a bit closer than the horizon although the current conflict in Ukraine could cause serious disruption) driven by the idea that a new economic order can be built on the back of recent technological developments that is very much in line with the more realistic core of Rifkin's argument. This vision is explicitly continental, manifested in the extension of railway lines and development corridors across the Eurasian landmass. China has just revealed its aspirations in this respect under the programmatic heading of **The New Silk Road**, a giant free-trade and logistics project that

“runs south west from Central Asia to northern Iran before swinging west through Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. From Istanbul, the Silk Road crosses the Bosphorus Strait and heads northwest through Europe, including Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Germany. Reaching Duisburg in Germany, it swings north to Rotterdam in the Netherlands. From Rotterdam, the path runs south to Venice, Italy — where it meets up with the

equally ambitious Maritime Silk Road.”

This project, if it is to be realized, is going to combine German high technology and Asian manufacturing in a more sustainable, “green” productive order catering to the enormous demand of European consumption. As Brian Holmes recently remarked in a contribution to **Nettime**, this new economic system “would cover massive Chinese infrastructure investments, with Germany replacing the US as the key banker and technological and scientific partner. [...] The aim is to use capitalist modernization to guide the largest part of the world's population through the devastating first half of the twenty-first century, as inequalities grow worse and climate change takes hold.”

This is, indeed, the geopolitical context in which Rifkin's intervention has to be placed. And he, of course, is more than aware of it. His book, I think, should be seen as a clever entrepreneurial pitch to European and Asian governments and administrative elites translating the Californian ideology into the more industrially orientated, Eurasian situation. The question is if this would have been possible with a slightly more honest effort that doesn't shamelessly substitute ideological hyperbole for intellectual integrity. How Rifkin's latest work goes down with its potential addressees remains to be seen. Do they really feel they need a self-styled Erich Honecker of the IoT as their guru or are they going to be rather discouraged by the sheer vulgarity of his techno-historical teleology?



## *Rethinking Social Innovation between Invention and Imitation*

**18 August 2014 - Sebastian Olma**

### 1. Social Innovation: In Search of a Definition

‘Social innovation’ is a bit of a puzzle. As one of the currently fashionable policy ‘trends’, it emerged out of the conviction that the great challenges our societies are facing today require new methods and strategies. Over the course of the last decade, the field of practices that understand themselves in terms of social innovation has experienced rapid growth. Increasingly, social innovation has become an important reference for national and European policy programs that address questions of

‘sustainability’ as well as challenges in the fields of, for instance, education, health care or social work.

However, there is one great problem that ‘social innovation’ has: nobody really knows what it means. This is to say that social innovation lacks a proper definition. It remains a greatly incoherent body of knowledge and practices that in one way or another relate to a fluffy concept of “improving the world, together.” Programmatic publications such as the influential [Open Book of Social Innovation](#) have not changed this situation substantially. Indeed, there seems to be a widening hiatus between the increasingly grandiose claims as to the capabilities of social innovation (e.g., solving so-called “wicked problems” like world poverty or pulling off “systemic change”) and the ability to come up with a clear explanation of what it is one is actually doing. A closer look at the growing social innovation scene, its organizations, conferences, publications and web-fora leads to the impression that it is held together mainly by a therapeutic belief in the ‘goodness’ and efficacy of one’s action. This, of course, is not a particularly strong foundation upon which a new field of practical expertise can be built, let alone a new policy field could be founded. And the more enlightened quarters of the social innovation scene are well aware of this. Geoff Mulgan, the British godfather of social innovation, [recently bemoaned the lack of a serious analytical approach to social innovation](#). The problem that Mulgan rightly highlights is that without a proper definition of what is/should be happening in this new field, it is impossible to develop assessment tools for of the various practices of social innovation.

In this analytical vacuum three German sociologists – Jürgen Howaldt, Ralf Kopp and Michael Schwarz – now intervene with a rather *inconspicuous publication* that represents the first serious academic effort to develop a theoretical foundation for the notion of social innovation. The title of the book is *Zur Theorie sozialer Innovationen*. Perhaps surprisingly, the central reference for their theoretical effort at building a theory of social innovation is Gabriel Tarde's (1843-1904) micro-sociology of invention and imitation. Until recently, Tarde's thought was almost completely eradicated from academic memory. It is only since the late 1990s, when the French philosopher Éric Alliez began to republish Tarde's books, that his work is experiencing a renaissance. As I have followed Tarde's come-back since its onset with considerable interest, I am quite excited to see how the contemporary interpretation of his thought is put to work in the increasingly influential field of social innovation. The following remarks offer a critical discussion of the current discourse and practice of social innovation, bouncing off Tarde's sociology in general and the considerations put forward in *Zur Theorie sozialer Innovationen* in particular.

## 2. Gabriel Tarde: Invention & Imitation

What makes a late nineteenth, early twentieth century renegade sociologist highly relevant today is the fact that his work is at its very core a sociology of innovation. However, rather than talking about innovation per se, Tarde approaches the issue through its conceptual 'neighbors', invention and imitation. According

to Tarde, these are the two constitutive elements of innovation (and, in fact, of society itself). Through inventions, novelty enters into the world. Inventions thus form the material and the driver of social change. Yet, inventions become innovations only by way of imitation. An invention makes, as it were, an offer of novelty to the process of imitation. This is to say that inventions have to be "picked up" by a significant part of the population in order to acquire social significance, i.e., become a "social fact." Tarde, here, speaks of "imitation-rays" criss-crossing the social fabric. However, imitation is never simply repetition but always includes the possibility of reconfiguration as well. In other words, imitation is always also variation.

Tarde's work entails a more complex and dynamic understanding of society than classical sociology: instead of the (relatively obvious) description of social macro-phenomena (Durkheim's social facts) he is interested in the explication of their constitutive micro-phenomena. "[I]t is social changes," Tarde says, "that must be caught in the act and examined in great detail in order to understand social states." Social changes are brought about by the interplay of invention and imitation. It is of great importance in the present context to emphasize that invention and imitation are not strictly separated categories. Tarde's sociology does by no means correspond to the popular belief in heroic inventors who 'disrupt' the otherwise harmonic flow of social processes. It is true that he sees in imitative repetition the basic principle of society. However, this imitative repetition is always subject to small modifications and reconfigurations. What's

more, even the inventions themselves are not conceptualized by Tarde as singular events but are the outcome of combinations or alterations of previous ideas or inventions. “With Tarde,” Howaldt et al. write, “inventive adaptation and disruption of imitation-rays is by no means a rare or eruptive phenomenon.” Rather, – and here they provide a wonderful cascade of quotes from Tarde’s *Les Lois Sociales* – it is

“petty, individual revolts against the accepted ethics, or through petty, individual additions’ (86) to the precepts of the dominant ethics, ‘minute accretions of image-laden expressions... due to some personal initiative, imitated by first one and then another’, ‘out of a seeming nothingness, – whence all reality emerges in an inexhaustible stream’. ‘Imitation, which socializes the individual, also perpetuates good ideas from every source, and in the process of perpetuating them, brings them together and makes them fertile’.”

On the basis of their engagement with Gabriel Tarde, Howaldt et al. provide an initial and emphatically “non-normative” definition of social innovation, as “an intentional reconfiguration of social practices. This does not exclude, on the empirical level, normative orientations and notions of socially desirable outcomes.”

This is, obviously, a rather cautious definition of social innovation and such caution is absolutely appropriate. Given the current conceptual confusion within the field, social innovation needs to be approached in a very careful and step-by-step

manner. Let us begin to disentangle this confusion by identifying and isolating the conceptual elements that a meaningful definition of social innovation cannot take as its point of departure.

### 3. What Social Innovation is not: 1) Technological Innovation

The first step, I think, would be to distinguish social innovation from the currently dominant technological understanding of innovation. Tarde is indeed helpful here as he shows how “the richness (and specificity) of modern societies cannot be represented by a maximized number of artefacts and technologies.” While the fact that technological artefacts are always embedded in a network of social practices is certainly a commonplace, it is not a very common one among our innovation experts, researchers and policy makers. Even in the field of social innovation itself, one finds often an illegitimate equation of technology and innovation. In many cases, the understanding of social innovation is such that the ‘social’ in social innovation is provided by a real or imaginary social problem while the ‘innovation-part’ comes from the application of a new – often digital, web- or social media based – piece of technology. A great example of such confused reasoning can be found in “*Play2Work Europe*,” Amsterdam’s current entry to the Bloomberg challenge, a social innovation award tendered by New York’s former mayor and media mogul. In order to innovatively respond to the challenge of rising unemployment among graduates of technical colleges, Amsterdam’s social innovation scene came up with an approach that targets these

kids via social media, inviting them to join a gaming platform that helps develop the skills their schools were apparently unable to convey to them. The winners of the game are then taken into an off-line coaching program and connected to great professional opportunities all over the world. Let us ignore for the moment the fact that this smacks of a social media powered variation of “The Apprentice” and the degrading effect this would have on the youngsters who have to game their way into a decent job opportunity. Let us also overlook the attempt at depoliticizing a fundamental societal issue – the care for the young generation – by turning it into a design challenge for software engineers and game designers. The fundamental problem lies in the carelessness with which an innovation-effort that would deserve the qualification ‘social’ is short-circuited here by way of a cheap digi-tech effect: “I game thus I innovate!” seems to be the motto of this project and all else becomes secondary.

Educational games have of course long become part and parcel of modern education. Learning, at its core, is creative imitation and play is known to be a particularly effective way of learning in this sense. And if gaming as the digitized form of play can contribute to more interesting and innovative learning environments, that’s great. However, this will only be possible – and this is true for this project as much as for any other social innovation effort – if technologies like gaming stop being an innovation fetish and instead, are embedded within a very clear understanding of the complexities involved in the social problem one would like to address. Only then can a role be assigned to

technology, that is, as a means of social innovation. It cannot be – and this seems to me to be the status of the current discourse – that technology serves as a token for the innovativeness of social innovation, used to play to the policy Zeitgeist in order to generate funding for ostensible “change-making.”

Tarde’s understanding of innovation is helpful here as it exposes the reductive nature of the popular belief that the innovativeness of organizations, cities, regions or nations is a function of the number of technological artefacts they are able to generate. According to Tarde, technological artefacts are merely one dimension or element in the process of (social) innovation because they are always embedded in social practices. There can be no doubt that technological artefacts give important impulses for the emergence of new social practices. Yet, they can only do so because they have themselves emerged out of social practices in the first place. “According to Tarde,” Howaldt et al. explain, “technological innovations can be described as one aspect of innovations in society that have temporarily become the centre of attention due to prevalent flows of invention and imitation. They represent a particular form of inventions/discoveries, taking on the guise of artefacts (machines, computers, cars. etc.)”

This is to say that whenever technologies and technological artefacts become part of the innovation game, we cannot take them at face value, we cannot understand them as innocent ‘things’. From a Tardean point of view, one would have to explicitly ask for the social genealogy of the particular artefact and inquire into the “beliefs and desires” that brought it into existence. In terms of

a reflexive practice of social innovation, this entails the demand for at least an awareness of the economic, cultural, ideological etc. forces that have shaped the technology one uses for one's particular purpose. In other words, the field social innovation would gain enormously both in terms of legitimacy and efficacy by making a habit of critically analysing the social contexts of the technologies it uses. In fact, I think this would be a precondition for a timely practice of social innovation deserving of its name.

#### 4. What Social Innovation is not: 2) Entrepreneurial Innovation

Another problem that a timely definition of social innovation is confronted with is the strong economic/entrepreneurial connotation that the notion of innovation entails. Today's usage of the term seems still largely determined by Joseph Schumpeter's *Theory of Economic Development* (1964) that developed the famous notion of "creative destruction." What drives the process of creative destruction according to Schumpeter are innovations as successful adaptations of "new combinations of means of production." For Schumpeter, it is the entrepreneur who is the linchpin of innovation. Today, this belief in the heroism of the entrepreneur has captured once again the imagination of the innovation scene – from the most conservative policy bureaucrats to the greatest enthusiasts of social innovation. Not least the enormous popularity of 'social entrepreneurship', ostensibly defined as doing social good by using the market as vehicle, bears witness to the strong entrepreneurial thrust in the dominant

understanding of innovation in general and social innovation in particular. There is nothing wrong with this per se except, perhaps, for the fact that **much of social entrepreneurship fails its own entrepreneurial aspirations by massively relying on sponsorship and government subsidies.**

Social entrepreneurship promises to overcome the dualism between market and social progress. That this is indeed possible has been demonstrated by Muhammad Yunus, Nobel laureate and founder of the Grameen Bank that gives micro credits to the poor in Bangladesh. People who would otherwise never receive funding for their projects get a chance to improve their lives by building a small business etc., while the bank lives off relatively small interest rates the debtors are able to pay. Yunus innovated the logic of development aid and basically single-handedly founded the practice of social entrepreneurship. The problem is that what works in the field of development does not necessarily work as easily in other fields as well. Bringing together the logic of the market and social progress turns out to be a bit more difficult in practice than the proponents of social entrepreneurship want to make us believe. The reason for this is simple: there is a fundamental logical conflict between entrepreneurial/economic innovation on the one hand and social innovation on the other. Within the economy, the necessity to innovate is a result of the logic of competition that requires – today at increasingly shorter intervals – the introduction of new products and services (for consumption) as well as the renewal of machinery and processes (for production). While for Schumpeter as well as for every self-

respecting business man or woman success in the market place is a sufficient criterion of progress, for the proponent of a meaningful notion of social innovation, it isn't. Innovation in the economic sense quite obviously is one of the major drivers of the logic of economic growth that causes many of the problems social innovation is bent on solving. It stabilizes the system rather than setting off processes leading to "systemic change."

As the example of Yunus as well as a number of others show, there are cases in which social progress and economic innovation can overlap. Yet, in order for this to happen and, more importantly, to have an understanding of when such an overlap can be defined in terms of social innovation, one first needs a robust definition of social innovation. Given that social entrepreneurship defines itself by straightforwardly invoking the Schumpeterian definition of innovation (see for instance [this definition by the Skoll Foundation](#)) it seems appropriate to assume that the practice of social innovation needs to find such a definition in the first instance by keeping its distance from entrepreneurship – be it social or otherwise.

Again, I am not at all suggesting that there is anything wrong with entrepreneurial innovation. Rather, what I am suggesting is that social innovation needs to find a way to free itself from its entrepreneurial bias if it wants to distinguish itself emphatically as social innovation. Entrepreneurship, just as technology, can only come in as a second step, only after we know what we are doing when we are innovating socially. Tarde opens an avenue for understanding social innovation that leaves the

Schumpeterian entrepreneurial hero behind, instead emphasizing the infinitesimal social forces of both, invention and imitation that generate innovations as social facts. As Tarde writes in the concluding chapter of his [Les Lois de l'imitation](#), an innovative society is characterized by the heterogeneity of its social practices. With regard to our present society, it seems very important to not equate social heterogeneity with that of the market or technology start-ups. In Amsterdam, for instance, we know very well that much cultural sector innovation of the last decades has one way or another come out of the city's lively squatting culture of the eighties and nineties (although it reaches much further back). The social innovation scene in its current, rather limited form could never generate similar impulses. This is by no means a failure of those fine individuals who are working very hard to get their social innovation projects off the ground. Rather, it is a problem based on the mentioned biases that impose limits on the diversity of the projects that come out of the social innovation scene.

##### 5. Rethinking Social Innovation with Gabriel Tarde

So far, I have mainly referred to the problems of social innovation as a still emerging yet increasingly influential social practice. These problems, I have argued, have to do with a lack of conceptual clarity regarding what social innovation can effectively entail, what its goals are and how they can be achieved. Gabriel Tarde's sociology of innovation helps us understand that a meaningful theory and practice of social innovation can neither

start from technology nor entrepreneurship. Luckily, Tarde also gives us some clues as to a timely reconceptualization of social innovation.

According to Tarde, the only path to a meaningful notion of social innovation inevitably leads, as it were, through the notion of imitation. Imitation provides the key to understanding the emergence of novelty as a social fact in society. This might seem paradoxical but the paradox is quickly resolved if we take into account Tarde's non-repetitive understanding of imitation that always already includes inventiveness by way of infinitesimal variations, additions, adaptations, and so on. For Tarde, imitation is the fundamental mode of social process, the 'mechanisms' on which the existence of every society is based. As no society is entirely static, there must also always be – in the words of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze – a difference within the repetition. What we need to take away from Tarde is the fact that it is not the great heroes – be they inventors, entrepreneurs or, indeed social innovators – who bless the repetitive rest of society with their brilliant feats. Rather, it is the multiplicity of tiny inventive imitations that at some point lead to a temporarily stabilized event to which we then denote as innovation. In the light of Tarde's own accomplishment (which, of course, is not at all his own as he inventively imitates a multiplicity of antecedent ideas, theories, fragments) we have to contradict Isaac Newton's famous proclamation: rather than "standing on the shoulders of giants," we are surfing the waves of imitation that rise and fall according to the beliefs, desires and affects that criss cross what we call

society. In other words, it is the processes of imitation themselves that go pregnant with the seeds of novelty, "like intestines in which secretly develop the types and laws of tomorrow."

Understanding the emergence of novelty in society in terms of inventive imitation implies a much more modest notion of social innovation. While it is certainly possible to give impulses for social change or try to orchestrate – within certain limits – the multitude of inventive repetitions, "this should neither be equated with the idea of creative destruction nor lead to an exaggerated notion of radical, discontinuous innovation," as Howaldt et al. caution us. Tarde's sociology suggests a more nuanced view of social innovation that recognizes the value of existing social practices and avoids any false hopes for intentional "change making," "deep impact," or even "systemic change." Changing existing social practices implies long, contingent processes that follow their own rules, i.e., with reference to Tarde, the laws of imitation. And it is not just Tarde's theoretical explorations that lead to such a conclusion. In fact, the entire project of modern sociology bears testimony to the highly problematic nature of attempts at controlling or intentionally steering processes of social change. What policy makers and practitioners will definitely have to let go if they want to come to a meaningful and practicable definition of social innovation is the misconception that social change can be instigated and 'driven' by a limited group of professional social innovators whose job is the invention and propagation of new social practices. Such an idea of intentional social change is simply nonsensical. Modeling social innovation on a process of "prompts, proposals, prototypes,

**sustaining, scaling, systemic change**” illegitimately reduces the complexity of social change to the logic of successful internet start-ups. Luckily, society does not yet function entirely according to the rules of Silicon Valley.

Social innovation in its current form also requires a shift in perspective with regard to its ethical aspirations. It is absolutely wonderful that the social innovation scene is populated by so many individuals who genuinely want to “change the world for the better.” The question is whether the notion of innovation actually lends itself to such an ethical charge. The above discussion of the technological and economic connotations of the concept of innovation has highlighted the challenges that the use of the term ‘innovation’ for ethical purposes involves. These challenges cannot be solved by simply putting ‘social’ before ‘innovation’. The simple and perhaps unfortunate fact of the matter is that the notion of innovation is absolutely inappropriate to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. We have to understand that the logical difference on which innovation operates is that of ‘old’ and ‘new’. It really is as simple as that. The normative quality that the proponents of the current practice of social innovation assume ignores the ambivalence and context dependency that applies to social innovation just as much as it does to technological or entrepreneurial innovation. There is no theoretical or practical reason why social innovations should be assumed to be ‘good’ in the sense of being socially desirable.

Social innovations per definition have no ethical direction. This is why there is politics. People have struggled over centuries to

put in place political institutions that allow for at least a minimum of (democratically legitimated) social steering. The fact that these institutions do not function as efficiently and effectively as we would like them too, that they might even have become corrupted by anti-democratic interests, motivations and so on, does not mean that it has suddenly become possible to bypass the complexities of social life by way of intentional social design processes. However, the problem with understanding social progress in terms of designing processes that lead to ethically desirable ‘change’ is not only lack of efficacy. In a way, the opposite is the case. We can currently observe the installation of policy programs, particularly at the European level, that adopt exactly the ethically overstrained notion of social innovation I am trying to criticize here. There is an acute danger that if such a practice becomes politically institutionalized, it is going to support the tendency of what Evgeny Morozov calls “**solutionism**.” Particularly given its uncritical relation to technology, social innovation could easily deteriorate into an ideological strategy on whose back the most authoritarian programs of, say, smart city technology could be implemented. Dave Eggers *The Circle*, while perhaps wanting in certain aspects of literary quality, nonetheless provides a brilliant illustration of this logic.

None of this is meant to contest the enormous importance of social innovation. I wholeheartedly agree with its basic proposition that the challenges our societies are facing today can be more effectively confronted by mobilizing what Maurizio Lazzarato once called the social “**powers of invention**.” I also agree that we are

seeing forms of social emancipation enabling citizens to more actively engage with their social environment. Beyond political opportunisms à la “big society” and the like, there is indeed an innovative potential inherent in today’s civil society that needs to be tapped for the transformation of the lingering institutions of industrial society. What is at stake here, as Jana Rückert-John rightly puts it, is “to enable citizens to take on a kind of responsibility for the future that is different from the individual responsibility perpetuated by neoliberal discourse.”

In this sense, the importance of social innovation could hardly be overstated. It would be brilliant if social innovation could grow into a practice that is modest (and honest) as to its capabilities, with less ethical hyperbole and a good portion of suspicion against the temptations of economic and technological reductionism. A promising point of departure for such a development lies in posing this important question anew: how to develop and sustain the “powers of invention” in our societies? Our discussion of Gabriel Tarde’s sociology of inventive imitation suggests that an effective response to this question should be motivated by the desire for a maximally open and diverse society. In practical terms, this would probably entail multiple forms of advocacy for social groups and initiatives that do not fit the templates of economic or technological innovation. In such a scenario, social innovation would become an institution of meta-activism that works like a guardian for endangered social practices. Subcultures come to mind but also all sorts of cultural, artistic, economic and other experiments. The focus would shift from the problematic practice

of designing ‘solutions’ for social change – which, as we have seen above is predicated on a reductive understanding of the relationship between invention and imitation – to an approach whose goal is the facilitation of a high degree of social serendipity. Instead of trying to do the impossible and establish the invention of social change as an isolated disciplinary field, social innovation could thus become an area of activism and policy that stretches throughout much of the social fabric. Paradoxically, such a non-ethical reorientation would also lead social innovation to a new, more realistic and rather exciting definition of a possible ethics: that of being a counterforce to the neoliberal and technocratic tendencies of social standardization.



## *Introducing MyCreativity Sweatshop speakers: Zach Blas*

***8 September 2014 - Inte Gloerich***

In his work, artist and writer Zach Blas reflects on modern surveillance strategies and methods of resistance such as online anonymization (e.g. through Tor) and the masks used by Anonymous protesters. He explores the different techniques used by social movements to make the self opaque as a form of political resistance in the face of ubiquitous tracking. In response to the facial recognition and data mining strategies of the NSA and their partner organizations, Blas creates 'Facial Weaponization Suites' that protect the user against facial identification surveillance and the intrusive consequences of data derivatives in counter-terrorism practices. Through his work, Blas addresses

*Introducing MyCreativity Sweatshop speakers: Zach Blas*

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issues such as the right to disappear and to be untraceable, especially in a queer context. How can anonymity be secured and subsequently used for public presence and resistance in the 'facestate,' as Metahaven calls the current state of transparency of the individual to those in power?

Blas holds a PhD in Literature at Duke University and is currently working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art at the University at Buffalo. His interests combine the technological control that is characteristic of the digital society, with the visibility politics of physical and public opacity, illegibility and escape. At the MyCreativity: Sweatshop, Blas participates in the From the Creative City to the Smart City discussion panel on Friday 21 November 2014.

## *Introducing MyCreativity Sweatshop speakers: Mark Fisher*

**19 September 2014 - Inte Gloerich**

When the Sex Pistols released their song God Save the Queen in 1977, they became an emblem of the punk movement and of contemporary political resistance. The song declares that there is “no future for you, no future for me,” and calls for the reassessment of the idea of the present and the future. Franco Berardi argues, when the future ended in 1977 utopia died with it

(only to return briefly during the cyberspace frenzy of the 90s). After punk — and again after the dot com crash — societies lost their progressive and future oriented worldviews, and instead became disillusioned. Mark Fisher, concerning himself with the historiography of a sense of temporality, extends this idea to today’s music culture. Disappointed by sounds and trends that try their best to sound like they are from the past, instead of agitating against political or societal systems



he tries to get to what he considers the root of this problem. He finds the depressed state of pop music to be a side-effect of the ubiquity of the neoliberal digital sphere. Being immersed in the internet, we find ourselves without moments of boredom; having no time free from the pressures of work in expensive cities that used to be hotbeds for creativity, puts a strain on our critical and creative reflection. In his most recent book, *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher claims that we are haunted by imaginations of futures that never came into being, leaving us depressed or melancholic. He finds hope in a maladjustment to these circumstances that ideally leads to the refusal of a present that has not (yet) been appropriated by its time.

Fisher holds a PhD in Philosophy and Literature, while his current research is more interdisciplinary in nature. He investigates contemporary music cultures with regards to their political implications and has a special interest in the manipulation of sound. Fisher is part of the ‘My Creativity, your Depression’ panel on Friday 21 November, and will be talking with Pek van Anandel and Sarah Sharma.

## Introducing MyCreativity Sweatshop speakers: Pascal Gielen

**1 October 2014 - Inte Gloorich**

Although considered irreconcilable in many respects, the sociologist Pascal Gielen points to a key feature capitalism and communism share: they are societal constructs that identify the economy as the pivot around which our world revolves. Ever since Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of cultural industries and capitalist mass produced cultures, the arts and creative production have been understood in relation to their degree of autonomy from the economic makeup of society. With the hailing of the creative industries as the solution to the preservation of creativity in precarious times, the question of autonomy gains a new level of importance. Gielen draws sociological research into the art sphere, and views the creative industries as a wet, flat environment that is focused on the "average of things" in which the "politically creative" can find no footing to build a 'sustainable self.' The creative industries rely on networked, flexible and



commercially functional creative production. In this system the creative worker is forced to be passionate about his work, while at the same time s/he should be ready to dispose of an idea when it proves not to be profitable.

In his essay "Creativiteit en andere Fundamentalismen" (Creativity and other

Fundamentalisms), Gielen talks about a new form of political engagement which he dubs 'creactivism.' First coined by Steven Nowotny, creativism is an 'ism' without any political aims, rather it emphasises the process and procedures of the search for a better society. Gielen explains that the difference between previous forms of political creativity and creativism

"lies in the way creativism does not naively join in with the idea that creativity should always be progressive or innovative. It rather asks the question what kind of creativity would lead to a better society. This means that the political dimension is not what is important, but instead continually asking the question of whether your creative product can contribute to a better world. Unfortunately though, I do not see cases of creativism in the real world yet."

Gielen views the internet as a potential space of autonomy and revolt against bureaucratic neoliberalist policies. When asked about the importance of net neutrality in this respect, he concedes that

"not even net neutrality is enough to ensure the internet as a free space. NSA-like surveillance practices need to be abolished and we need a wide front that simply exerts itself for true democracy."

Pascal Gielen presents his notion of creativism in the panel

discussion on Artistic Autonomy vs. the Creative Industries on Thursday 20 November. He will be joined by Josephine Berry Slater and Sven Lütticken.



## *Creative Industries from Gold to Lead* *A Review of Robert Hewison's* *"Cultural Capital"*

**3 October 2014 - Sebastian Olma**

### 1. Where have all the Critics gone?

Since their inception in the late 1990s by Tony Blair's New Labour government, creative industries policies have spread throughout the continent. The creative industries approach is increasingly becoming a mainstream tool for policy makers at all levels, from the funding schemes of the European Union and the various national agendas, down to the administrative capillaries of regional and local policy. One might think that the process of establishing the creative industries as a policy field would have been accompanied by a critical and constructive discussion about the approaches, instruments, and indeed, the general direction creative industries were taking over the course of the past fifteen

years. If it is true, as the pundits don't tire to tell us, that creative industries policies are a reflection of massive social, economic and cultural transformations, then surely no one expects policy makers, pioneers and first-movers to get everything right the first time around. New policies, after all, need rigorous critique in order to improve. Success or failure of the creative transformation of our economies and societies depend for a large part on learning from one's mistakes. So far, however, this is hardly happening.

True, over the past few years, we have seen a number of publications that critically engage with the rise of "creativity" to the centre stage of policy making. Books such as Gerald Raunig's *Critique of Creativity*, Andreas Reckwitz's *Erfindung der Kreativität*, or the INC's own *MyCreativity Reader* made valuable contributions challenging the cynical vacuity the discourse on creativity and its industry increasingly acquired. However, while these and similar publications often put forward important arguments against political and economic functionalizations of art and culture, they tended to remain at a level of theoretical abstraction that was incompatible with the discourses happening around the realpolitik of the creative industries. The Brits themselves proved to be active commentators on their own policy invention as well. James Heartfield's early *Creative Gap*, Guardian economists Larry Elliot and Dan Atkinson's entertaining polemic *Fantasy Island* and Owen Hatherley's *Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* are examples for a very critical engagement with different aspects of creative industries policy. And one should not, of course, forget geographer renegade *Jamie Peck's tireless*

*attacks on Richard Florida* and the urban policies his theses instigated.

Yet, those involved in the construction of the new policy field in Britain and elsewhere did not seem all too keen to engage in a critical discussion of their practice anyway. The idea of intercity or interregional competition, which is at the heart of the creative industries paradigm, did not help spread a critical ethos among public institutions. Always wary of one's brand value vis-à-vis supposed competitors, creative industries officials prefer to work with docile consultants and professional researchers who deliver the expected positive outlook. At the same time, universities have a hard time adjusting their programs to the interdisciplinary challenges that come with the new topologies of creative labour and entrepreneurship. Increasingly commercialized funding structures, often under the aegis of creative industries policies themselves, don't help to spread a critical ethos either. Which puts us in the unfortunate situation of having a newly established policy field without being able to properly assess it.

## 2. Cultural Capital

Given this regrettable state of affairs, the publication of Robert Hewison's new book *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain* is a very fortunate event. It is a comprehensive account of the complex motivations and processes that led to the invention of the creative industries out of the spirit of New Labour (which, it should be noted, took a page or two from Australia's Creative

Nation policy) and its further development under the current conservative-liberal coalition government. As the title indicates, this is a book about cultural capital, and more specifically, the changing political attitude towards culture and the arts. The author doesn't have much to say on the structural transformation of production or the changing nature of labour – themes that are often associated with the notion of the creative industries – but focuses instead on the question of how, within the new paradigm of the creative industries, cultural capital became an instrument of social and economic policy.

Hewison understands cultural capital in refreshingly non-Bourdieuian terms as a form of wealth or value that, although it can be enjoyed individually, “is a mutual creation that uses the resources of shared traditions and the collective imagination to generate a public, not a private, good.” However, creative industries policy approaches cultural capital and its articulations in the cultural and artistic sector in rather different terms. As the author shows, the emergence of the creative industries paradigm marks a transformation in the policy toward culture and the arts that “seeks to privatize this shared wealth, absorbing it into the circulation of commodities, and putting it to instrumental use.” For Hewison, this signals a shift in policy orientation toward a rigorous understanding of culture in terms of cultural capitalism. His book presents a fairly chronological analysis of this shift from the double-edged “golden age” of New Labour to the brutal reality of the current “age of lead.”

His account of events is based on what is usually called

‘grey literature’, i.e., policy documents and reports, together with academic and ‘expert’ commentaries as well as his own observations of events. It is particularly the fervour and meticulousness of the latter that give the book its extraordinary quality. Hewison has indeed spent a lot of time ploughing through the grey stuff and he doesn't hold back sharing what he's found there.

### 3. Cool Britannia's Backstage

Most of the book reads like a case study of third way modernization through the lens of the arts and culture policy. After a revealing discussion of the ideological and political force field in which New Labour's position on culture and the arts emerged, Hewison takes us, as it were, to the backstage of “Cool Britannia.” As he ushers us through the transformation of the Department of National Heritage into the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the restructuring of the Arts Council, the formation of new agencies such as NESTA, the appointment of task forces, the reallocation of budgets and so on, the mechanics of Labour's creative industries policy become palpable. It also helps that the author embeds his policy analysis in a review of the artistic and cultural phenomena that defined “Cool Britannia” such as the Young British Artists and Britpop.

Although the flood of names of relevant players, their backgrounds and positions, institutions, manifestos, committees, speeches, budget numbers etc. can be a bit overwhelming to

the uninitiated, it also gives the reader the feeling of getting an almost unfiltered account of what ‘really happened’. What did in fact happen was the introduction of the so-called “New Public Management” which meant that “the discipline and values of the market were applied to the formerly impersonal, politically and socially neutral, world of public service.” The whole of government – and with it the government of culture and the arts – would be restructured along the lines of business practice, or rather, its governmental simulation.

Fundamental for this process was the assumption that culture not only meant something to the economy but in fact should be seen as one of its drivers. The positive effect of the idea that “culture creates wealth” was that under New Labour’s rule between 1997 and 2010, government spending on the arts nearly doubled. The entry charges to all national museums and galleries were removed, raising the annual number of visits from twenty four million to forty million. Generally speaking, Britain’s cultural infrastructure was improved not least thanks to the National Lottery’s transformation into an engine of urban regeneration. The film industry was flourishing, regional theatres, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre were rejuvenated and had great visitors’ numbers.

Yet, all this came at a price. While the idea of culture driving the economy provided a great argument for increasing arts funding, it also meant that cultural policy became besieged on two fronts: on the one hand the logic of the market, that increasingly saw cultural policy as an extension of economic policy; on the other hand the

instrumentalization of arts and culture in the government’s quests for ‘diversity’ and against social exclusion. Both were articulations of New Labour’s populist third way renovation while in many ways also continuing Thatcherite ideologies (entrepreneurship, etc.) as well as anticipating Cameron’s euphemistic “Big Society.” As Hewison summarizes this highly ambivalent development: “culture became more ‘democratic’, but the democracy was the unequal democracy of the marketplace.”

#### 4. Creative (De-)Construction

One of the areas in which the creative industries approach was first put to the test was urban regeneration through culture and the arts. Cultural Capital discusses many cases of the cultural landmark approach, i.e., the erection of ‘iconic’ buildings for the purpose of strengthening local identity and attracting investment. London’s **Tate Modern**, of course, was one of the great successes of this approach, turning Southwark – previously one of the ten most deprived boroughs in the country – into a thriving district. While this seemed to display “the economic magic that cultural investment could make” it proved to be the exception rather than the rule. Particularly for Midland and Northern cities, the attempt to solve structural social and economic problems by way of cultural infrastructure investment turned out to be ambivalent at best. Not all the projects failed as spectacularly as the **West Bromwich art centre The Public** (cost: £72 million; life span: 4,5 years) but they left a trail of shameful early closures, fantastic time and cost

overruns and other embarrassments. Obviously, continental Europe too has its share of failed cultural infrastructure projects but it is very helpful to be reminded that these were not necessarily failed transmissions of an originally well-working concept but that the concept per se was dysfunctional.

The chronological start and end point of Hewison's journey through Creative Britain are two massive infrastructure projects as well. He takes off from the *Millennium Dome* – a fiasco of its own league that very early on and very clearly showed the catastrophic failure of New Labour's new public management – in order to arrive at the Olympic games. Perhaps surprisingly, it is in *Danny Boyle's opening ceremony of the Olympics* that Hewison detects the fullest articulation of Creative Britain. The projection of a creative, inclusive and dynamic 'Britain of the people' that the artistic trio around Boyle created in their great show expressed with unprecedented vividness the beauty and ambivalence of New Labour's vision on cultural capitalism. "Britannia found her Cool," as the author puts it, in the aestheticized populism of everything that is great about Britain. And although Hewison has no illusions as to the 'crimes' that have been committed in the context of the Olympics and its cultural satellite the Olympiad in terms of budget reallocation, gentrification or the privatization of public space, he shows quite a bit of affection for the moment when the spectacle conveying what creative Britain could have been took the world's centre stage. Ironically, it was also the moment when in Britain and other European countries doom was starting to descend on the cultural sector.

## 5. Lessons from Britain

There are many lessons to be taken from Robert Hewison's book. Obviously, he has done us a great favour in documenting the deep ambivalences of creative industries policies in the country that is responsible for their invention. What continental Europe can learn from the British experience is that economic and social lead objectives and targets make neither for sensible nor effective instruments in the area of cultural policy. With regard to the DCMS's perhaps most important lead objectives – social inclusion and audience diversity – the numbers of even the most celebratory reports remain underwhelming. The same applies to attempts at using cultural investment for the sake of economic development. There is, of course, a relation between culture and the economy but, at least with regard to the area of traditionally subsidized culture and the arts Hewison talks about, it is much less linear than policy makers like to assume. As the author puts it succinctly in his conclusion:

"The conversion of culture into an instrument of social and economic policy has changed what should be an offering into a requirement, and a response into an obligation. But creativity cannot be commanded, any more than its consequences can be predicted. Creativity depends on taking risks; the corollary is that the risk-taker must be trusted to understand the risk being taken. Everything that was done by New Labour to tie the arts and heritage into an instrumental agenda limited the creativity that it sought to encourage."

Hewison's work reveals a crucial mistake at the heart of creative industries policy: that the increasingly aesthetic, immaterial and cultural character of economic goods and services would make it sensible to regard culture and the arts primarily in terms of their economic value. This, of course, is not only neoliberal, it's also plain wrong. The incapability to distinguish between culture as capital (market) and culture as value (public realm) has caused a most regrettable policy confusion within the field of creative industries. And while the international cast of incompetent policy makers along with their experts and consultants carry some responsibility for the obstinacy with which this policy nonsense is perpetuated, the award for instigating this confusion goes to New Labour's ideologists. It might be interesting to note in this context, that the very same confused thinkers who are responsible for the creation of the conceptual mess 'creative industries' have since moved on to repeat their questionable magic on new policy shores. Geoff Mulgan and Charles Leadbeater, two figures who played extremely crucial roles in formulating creative industries 'thinking' in Britain have become **prominent visionaries** (and in the case of Mulgan indeed an **institutionalized leader**) of the so-called social innovation movement. **This is not, of course, the place to make a case against the absurd and ill-conceived notion of social innovation.** However, as this newly emerging policy field is now spreading throughout the continent in a fashion similar to its creative predecessor, perhaps we can also read Hewison's book as a warning against the uncritical imitation of British policy fashions.

Be that as it may. Robert Hewison has given us an empirically rich, relentlessly researched and impeccably argued critique of cultural policy under the aegis of the creative industries paradigm. Treating culture in terms of capital has failed – many of us have known this for a long time but now there is a book that proves this point with regard to the motherland of the creative industries. I am hopeful Robert Hewison's *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain* will instigate the critical debate on cultural policy and creative industries that is needed today more than ever.



## *Never Mind the Sharing Economy: Here's Platform Capitalism*

**16 October 2014 - Sebastian Olma**

### 1. A Backlash Against Sharing?

Lately, the so-called “sharing economy” has been all over the news. Under flashy headlines such as “Sharing is the New Owning” it is heralded as the solution to the current financial crisis, the path toward a more sustainable economy or even the harbinger of a post-capitalist society. And while the “sharing economy” is supposed to be all these wonderful things at once, it also generates such disruptive and fantastically profitable businesses like AirBnB, Uber or TaskRabbit. No wonder then, that policy makers are getting increasingly excited about this ‘force for good’. Just a few weeks ago, the British government announced

its intention to “make the UK the global centre for the sharing economy.” As Business and Enterprise minister Matthew Hancock rejoiced: “By backing the sharing economy... we’re making sure that Britain is at the forefront of progress and by future proofing our economy we’re helping to protect the next generation.”

Yet, while policy makers and their advisers can hardly contain their enthusiasm, over the course of the last few months there has been a veritable surge of critical comments on the “sharing economy.” Mainstream media as well as the blogosphere are brimming with furious articles, warning us to not buy into the “sharing hype” or even attacking the supposed “sharing lie.” The American business magazine Forbes even talks about a “backlash against the sharing economy.”

After years of almost unequivocal enthusiasm for the innovative wonders of the “sharing economy,” a real debate finally seems to be emerging. In this short essay, I am going to follow this debate while trying to find an answer to the question of what the “sharing economy” in fact is.

### 2. To Share or Not to Share

Not unlike other contemporary policy fashions such as the creative industries or social innovation, the “sharing economy” throws together a variety of diverse and often unrelated phenomena; from massively funded technology start-ups like Uber and AirBnB to fair trade cooperatives, borrowing shops and hippie communes. It would be wrong, however, to understand this confusion as a result

of the intellectual incompetence on the side of trend watchers and innovation consultants. While it is true that the growing army of these professional would-be clairvoyants depends on the regular construction of the “next big thing” for their own economic survival – the vaguer, the better – the confusion that comes with the “sharing economy” is the intended result of a smart marketing strategy. But I am getting ahead of myself...

The first thing we need to understand about the “sharing economy” is that it has absolutely nothing to do with sharing in the sense you and I might think about it. The essence of sharing – if it has any meaning at all – is of course that it does not involve the exchange of money. Sharing only happens in the absence of market transactions. With regard to the poster boys and girls of the “sharing economy,” the very opposite is the case. These are digital platforms that roughly do two things: either making the old practice of re- and multi-using durable goods more efficient or expanding market exchange into economically uncharted territory of society.

If we look at internet marketplaces such as Ebay, Etsy and their many variations, it is clear that what they offer are digitally modernized versions of the good old second hand shop. What's new about them is that thanks to the internet, the supply of used goods (and in the case of Etsy, also handicraft) finds its demand much more effectively and efficiently than ever before. There can be no doubt that this leads to a more efficient (re-)use of durable goods, thus contributing to a more sustainable allocation of resources. The same applies to rentals, particularly cars or

bikes but also to lots of other goods. Thanks to the internet and mobile digital technology, the centralized stockpiling of goods to be rented has become unnecessary which, again, saves resources. Their dispersion is not a problem any more but often rather adds to the convenience of the rental process – think of a car that you can pick up around the corner rather than having to travel to the nearest agent. However, none of this has anything to do with sharing! Matthew Yglesias, writing for the US business blog Slate.com, [illustrates this fact as follows](#):

“My neighbor and I share a snow shovel because we share some stairs that need to be shovelled when it snows and we share responsibility for doing the work. If I owned the stairs and charged him a small fee every time he walked in or out of the house, that would be the opposite of sharing.”

This might sound trivial but given the confused usage of the notion of sharing, it seems appropriate to remind ourselves that helping each other out by sharing our resources is one thing while commodifying these resources by charging a fee for their use is quite another. And this gets us to the more innovative dimension of the “sharing economy.” Today, the “sharing economy” entails much more than just digital updates of second-hand exchange and rentals. What companies like Uber, AirBnB, TaskRabbit or Postmates have in common is that they are platforms coordinating supply and demand of products and services that in their present form were previously unavailable on the market.

Uber is a platform where people looking for a cab quickly find their non-, semi-, and real professional taxi driver. AirBnB allows people to sublet their houses, TaskRabbit connects supply and demand for chores, Postmates for deliveries, Instacart for grocery shopping. While it might be convenient to make use of these services, they have absolutely nothing to do with sharing. They stand for a digitally enabled expansion of the market economy, which, again, is the opposite of sharing. If someone does my shopping or drops me at the airport in exchange for a financial fee, how is this sharing? This situation doesn't change if instead of money, one receives credits to be used at the issuing platform (a mistake that for the last few years has led to a rather annoying hype around "alternative currencies" based on the belief that the 'evils' of capitalism could be cured by replacing real money by a less efficient substitute).

### 3. Enter Platform Capitalism

In an attempt to overcome this confusion, Sascha Lobo, a German technology blogger for Der Spiegel, has recently suggested to **drop the obscure notion of "sharing" altogether**. "What is called sharing economy," he argues, "is merely one aspect of a more general development, i.e., a new quality of the the digital economy: platform capitalism." As Lobo emphasizes, platforms like Uber and AirBnB are more than just internet marketplaces. While marketplaces connect supply and demand between customers and companies, digital platforms connect

customers to whatever. The platform is a generic 'ecosystem' able to link potential customers to anything and anyone, from private individuals to multinational corporations. Everyone can become a supplier for all sorts of products and services at the click of a button. This is the real innovation that companies of the platform capitalism variety have introduced. Again, this is miles away from sharing but instead represents an interesting mutation of the economic system due to the application of digital technology.

It should be clear that understanding the "sharing economy" in terms of platform capitalism is by no means a matter of linguistic nitpicking. Calling this crucial development by its proper name is an important step towards a more sober assessment of the claims made by the proponents of "sharing." Take, for instance, the notion that everyone benefits from the disruptive force of the "sharing economy" because it cuts out the middleman. Sharing models, the argument goes, facilitate a more direct exchange between economic agents, thus eliminating the inefficient middle layers and making market exchange simpler and fairer. While it is absolutely true that internet marketplaces and digital platforms can reduce transaction costs, the claim that they cut out the middleman is pure fantasy. As **one blogger puts it**: "Sure, many of the old middlemen and retailers disappear but only to be replaced by much more powerful gatekeepers."

In fact, the argument is quite an obscene one, particularly if it is made by the stakeholders of platform capitalism themselves. As globally operating digital platforms, these companies have the unique ability to cut across many regional markets and reconfigure

traditionally specific markets for goods and services as generic customer-to-whatever 'ecosystems'. It seems fairly obvious that the entire purpose of the platform business model is to reach a monopoly position, as this enables the respective platform to set and control the (considerably lower) standards upon which someone (preferably anyone) could become a supplier in the respective market. Instead of cutting out the middleman, digital platforms have the inherent tendency to become veritable Uber-middlemen, i.e., monopolies with an unprecedented control over the markets they themselves create. In fact, calling these customer-to-whatever ecosystems "markets" often turns out to be a bit of a joke. For the clients of Uber & Co., price is not the result of the free play of supply and demand but of specific algorithms supposedly simulating the market mechanism. The effect of such algorithmic tampering with the market is demonstrated for instance by **Uber's surge pricing** during periods of peak demand. It is not very difficult to see where this might be leading. Taking a cab to the hospital in, say, New York City during a snow storm might become unaffordable for some under conditions of mature platform capitalism. For those who believe this to be overly pessimistic and a bit of an exaggeration, just ask your local taxi driver what percentage of her work is already coming from one of the digital platforms.

#### 4. Disruption and Regulation

This is not meant as an excuse to engage in the increasingly popular pastime of algorithm bashing. There is neither an algorithmic conspiracy here, nor are these companies selling out the 'true spirit of the sharing economy'. They simply follow the logic of platform capitalism which at the moment is the logic of a digital gold rush, unhampered by any kind of government regulation. In a way, what we are seeing here is social innovation in its purest form, i.e., the creation of something that from a business perspective is even better than the so-called "blue ocean" (a competition-free market). And it is causing the famous disruption – so much so that **cities like Amsterdam are raising the white flag** as entire streets are turning into exclusive AirBnB zones. It should be clear that this doesn't help an already overstrained housing market, let alone the local population's quality of life. While taxi drivers' protests against Uber and Lyft have been laughed away as collateral innovation damage, the transformation of our cities into tax-free, urban versions of "Center Parcs" might be more difficult to stomach.

At the moment, platform capitalism is allowed to run wild because it is simply running too fast for politicians and regulators. Nothing expresses the political impotence in the face of this new kind of digital capitalism better than the **painfully ignorant techno-gibberish** frequently emitted by Neelie Kroes, outgoing EU-Commissioner for Digital Development. There are, however, also signs of a turning tide such as the **recent exchange between**

Goolge's Eric Schmidt and the German Minister of Economic Affairs, Sigmar Gabriel in which the latter responded to the former's assertion that "all we do is follow the law" by saying: "I understand this as a request for regulation." The question is, of course, whether this will to regulate is going to persist against the enormous lobbying power of platform capitalism.

Regulation is important not only in order to prevent monopolies, fund the state and keep our cities liveable for their actual inhabitants but also to insure fair treatment of those we haven't considered yet: the suppliers and vendors who sell their products and services on the digital platforms. If we are to believe the proponents of the "sharing economy," then the opportunities are pretty amazing. As Brian Chesky, CEO and co-founder of Airbnb, puts it in *Wall Street Journal*:

"I want to live in a world where people can become entrepreneurs or micro-entrepreneurs and if we can lower the friction and inspire them to do that, especially in an economy like today, this is the promise of the sharing economy."

According to Chesky, digital platforms are simply a reflection of our contemporary entrepreneurial lifestyle and anyway, they provide people with an extra opportunity for income in these times of economic crisis. Similarly, *New York Magazine* sees the "sharing economy" as an answer to our current economic predicament as well but is *slightly less euphoric as to the potency of the sharing antidote*:

"Tools that help people trust in the kindness of strangers might be the thing pushing hesitant sharing-economy participants over the threshold to adoption. But what's getting them to the threshold in the first place is a damaged economy, and harmful public policy that has forced millions of people to look to odd jobs for sustenance."

So which one is it then: inspired micro-entrepreneurs or odd jobs for sustenance?

##### 5. Revolutionizing the World's Labour Force

At the moment, it is still difficult to reach a fair conclusion on this question as the reports from the field are only starting to come in. There is a fairly clear tendency though. Business magazine *Fast Company*, a publication known for its enthusiasm for everything innovative and digital, sent one of its writers for one month into the "sharing economy" to test the waters of entrepreneurial inspiration. The conclusion of her *very interesting and extensive report* is rather devastating:

"For one month, I became the "micro-entrepreneur" touted by companies like TaskRabbit, Postmates, and Airbnb. Instead of the labor revolution I had been promised, all I found was hard work, low pay, and a system that puts workers at a disadvantage."

In fact, Sarah Kessler (that's the name of the writer turned sharing

Guinea pig) never made enough to get by at all despite being young, flexible and urban, i.e., part of the social cohort that is supposed to fare particularly well in the “sharing economy.” Similar concerns have been raised by the New York Times’ rather **comprehensive journalistic analysis of the phenomenon**. Yes, there is freedom to be found in platform capitalism but it is the precarious freedom of what the newspaper calls the “gig economy:”

“Many gigs may seem to offer decent pay. But they may not look that great after factoring in the time spent, expenses, insurance costs and taxes on self-employment earnings. ‘If you did the calculations, many of these people would be earning less than minimum wage,’ says Dean Baker, an economist who is the co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington. ‘You are getting people to self-exploit in ways we have regulations in place to prevent.’”

If one adds **protesting Uber drivers** and the fact that on top of miserable pay and lack of safety net one also misses the the social (!) aspect of sharing one’s work experience with coworkers, there isn’t really much awesomeness left for the sharing micro-entrepreneur. TaskRabbit’s CEO Leah Busque once said that the goal of her company was to **“revolutionize the world’s labor force.”** Unfortunately, it looks as though Mrs. Busque and her investors could accomplish what they set out to do. One might not agree with CUNY Professor Stanley Aronowitz, **who refers**

**to the ‘gigs’ offered the by “sharing economy” as “wage slavery** in which all the cards are held, mediated by technology, by the employer, whether it is the intermediary company or the customer.” What does become increasingly obvious, though, is that platform capitalism is mounting an attack on the achievements of the labour movement – which for very good reasons we consider to be a pillar of modern, democratic civilization – and a very effective one at that. And here again, it is not that the “sharing economy” has gone off the the rails, it is simply the logic of platform capitalism. As **Sacha Lobo puts it succinctly:**

“By controlling their ecosystems, platforms create a stage on which every economic transaction can be turned into an auction. Nothing minimizes cost better than an auction – including the cost of labour. That’s why labour is the crucial societal aspect of platform capitalism. It is exactly here that we will have to decide whether to harness the enormous advantages of platform capitalism and the sharing economy or to create a ‘dumping market’ where the exploited amateurs only have the function to push professional prices down.”

I agree. The basis for such a decision needs to be a proper understanding of the reality of platform capitalism. The anger we have seen over the last few months directed against the “sharing economy” has a lot to do with the utterly unsubstantial claims and stories that are constantly churned out by the marketing machine of platform capitalism. Take John Zimmer, co-founder of Lyft, who

told Wired earlier this year that [the sharing economy bestows on us the gift of a revived community spirit](#). Referring to his visit to the Oglala Sioux reservation, he writes: “Their sense of community, of connection to each other and to their land, made me feel more happy and alive than I’ve ever felt. We now have the opportunity to use technology to help us get there.” No question, the pompous impertinence of this comparison is truly breathtaking. And yet, neither is this kind of rhetorical gymnastics the exception in the sharing-scene nor does it come unmotivated. Noam Scheiber of the New Republic explains the rationale behind the obscenities of Zimmer (and his kind) with great lucidity:

“For-profit “sharing” represents by far the fastest-growing source of un- and under-regulated commercial activity in the country. Calling it the modern equivalent of an ancient tribal custom is a rather ingenious rationale for keeping it that way. After all, if you’re a regulator, it’s easy to crack down on the commercial use of improperly zoned and insured property. But what kind of knuckle-dragger would crack down on making friends?”

#### 6. The Sharing Economy: A Dumb Term that Deserves to Die!

The truth of the matter, though, as Nathan Schneider [writes on Al-Jazeera America](#), is that “the sharing sector of the conventional economy built on venture capital and exploited labor is a multibillion dollar business, while the idea of a real sharing economy based on cooperatives, worker solidarity and

democratic governance remains too much of an afterthought. If the sharing movement really wants to disrupt economic injustice, these should be its first priorities.”

I hope that it has become clear over the course of this little essay that it is in no way the intention of the “sharing economy” to “disrupt economic injustice.” The “sharing economy” does not exist. Or, in the words of the business writer Matthew Yglesias: [“This is a dumb term, and it deserves to die.”](#) One of the reasons why it doesn’t is that Silicon Valley’s powerful marketing machine that drives platform capitalism is beautifully adjusted to a global network of willing volunteers; from the one size fits all TED format to more thematically specific publications and conferences. Even well-meaning activist networks such as [Shareable](#) or the [P2P-Foundation](#) play a rather questionable role in keeping the myth of the “sharing-economy” alive.

This is not to say that there are no great initiatives and indeed businesses that are trying to use the power of digital technology or simply their imagination to practice forms of exchange that could actually be called sharing. They do exist and it is wonderful that they do. However, their value in the “sharing economy” as it is currently staged by the stakeholders of platform capitalism is that of providing an illegitimate ethical charge, a fig leave for an alarming mutation of our economy. I think they deserve better! Yet, in order to even have a chance at turning this development into something that might be legitimately called “sharing economy,” we need to be absolutely clear about the fact that platform capitalism does not even remotely resemble it.

## *Introducing MyCreativity Sweatshop speakers: Ela Kagel*

**20 October 2014 - Inte Gloerich**

Ela Kagel is an independent cultural producer and curator working in the art and technology scene in Berlin. She has worked with organisations such as Upgrade! Berlin, the Free Culture Incubator and Transmediale. She's also the director of SUPERMARKT in Berlin, a coworking space for freelancers with a political agenda.

Compared to the late '90s the percentage of freelancers in The Netherlands has almost doubled. Internationally, the European Forum of Independent Professionals reports an increase of 82% of freelancers in the EU between 2000 and 2011, with Italy and Germany leading this trend. Whereas working independently used to be mainly forced upon the creative class, it has become more common across other professions too, including teachers and artisans. It is indeed safe to say that the exploding number of freelancers critically changes the full time workforce, both nationally and on an European scale. What about the political consequences and societal representation of these independent operators?

Considering issues such as union organisation, pension savings and health insurance, freelancers often slip through society's safety nets. As their numbers are increasing, so is the need to reform the traditional employer-employee structure of the economic and political system. Instead of waiting on political

or corporate initiatives, Ela Kagel and her two accomplices, Zsolt Szentirmai and David Farine, stepped up to the challenge. SUPERMARKT is a coworking space for freelancers, artists and startups housed in a former grocery store in Berlin. Ela Kagel successfully combines her curation and production experience to create a space where freelancers can meet and exchange ideas as well as forge alliances for much needed political representation. A cafe and frequent exhibitions further facilitate encounters and connections between all kinds of freelancers and the people living in the neighbourhood. Through her knowledge of the practicalities of political coworking, Ela Kagel adds a unique perspective of the opportunities and possible difficulties of creating such spaces to



*Introducing MyCreativity Sweatshop speakers: Ela Kagel*

MyCreativity Sweatshop. She will be taking part in the Creative Production after the Creative Industries panel discussion on Thursday, as well as leading the Political Coworking sweatshop on Friday.



## *Introducing MyCreativity Sweatshop speakers: Maria Tarantino*

***10 November 2014 - Inte Gloerich***

Brussels is Maria Tarantino's hometown and muse. The city is also the main character of her latest documentary film project, *Our City*. The film's style echoes the cult classic *Amsterdam Global Village* by her fellow MyCreativity Sweatshop panelist Pieter van Huystee. In this movie, director Johan van der Keuken lets his



camera drift through the narrow streets and along the canals of Amsterdam, culminating many culturally diverse storylines into a motor courier-driven ode to the city.

Perhaps even more than Amsterdam, Brussels is a city that encompasses many other places. Indeed, like any modern city, Brussels is home to communities from around the world. The specific Belgian historical context adds another layer of cultural diversity to its grid: a linguistic enclave of a French speaking community in Dutch-speaking Flanders. Its role as the capital of Europe provides an additional reason for migrants to settle in the city. Whether they have always lived there, were pragmatically attracted by its French language or have flocked to the international political infrastructures that cross paths there, new and old inhabitants fit into the patchwork that together makes up the city.

Filming Brussels, Maria Tarantino paints a picture of a city “planned by businessmen and politicians, set in motion by construction workers, and animated by office people.” In *Our City* however, she explores the in-between spaces that have organically grown out of the meeting of contrasting cultures and traditions. Being an Italian migrant to the city herself, Tarantino provides an interesting perspective on a city that more than others depends on outsiders for its identity. Watch the trailer [here](#).

Maria Tarantino joins us during the panel on Documentary Film: Digitization, Pitching, Authorship and will be discussing the current filmmaking environment with Sigrid Dyekjaer, Pieter van Huystee and Morgan Knibbe.

## *Autonomy MyCreativity Sweatshop*

**20 November 2014 - Sven Lütticken**

*(because he got ill and wasn't able to attend the event, here is Sven Lütticken 's contribution to the autonomy session during MyCreativity Sweatshop, Trouw Amsterdam, November 20, 2014)*

The introductory statement for this panel opposed l'art pour l' art, which was equated with autonomy, with the creative industries, equated with an attack on autonomy.

Instinctively, many would no doubt agree. And you could say something similar about academia – from the free research of ‘la recherche pour la recherche’ to ‘embedded research’ that has to benefit the creative industries.

Yet things are much more complicated. “Artistic autonomy” was never an unproblematic given; it was always contradictory and contested.

Andrea Fraser has argued that “artistic autonomy” has four dimensions: aesthetic (the artwork as following its own intrinsic logic, free from instrumentalization), economic (the bourgeois, modern art market), social (the art world as a relatively autonomous field with its own protocols and criteria) and political (which Fraser identifies with freedom of speech and conscience).<sup>[1]</sup> In fact, the “aesthetic autonomy” of the modern artwork is itself a very partial articulation of the aesthetic. Many avant-garde movements sought to liberate the esthetic from tehartistic, institutioanlized

framework, thereby also setting free its transformative social and political potential.

If institutional critique was highly critical of the artwork as object, it did not necessarily side with the object's familiar neo-avant-garde others: the event, the happening, the action, performance. Works by artists such as Buren, Haacke, Rosler, or Fraser are often context-specific interventions in institutional frameworks. Artistic practice became project-based. The preference for contextual and often temporary projects among practitioners of institutional critique is of course related to the critique of the object-driven art market, but in keeping with their general rejection of the neo-avant-garde's escapism, the artists of institutional critique did not grandly proclaim that their work was free from commodification and immune against recuperation. Rather, their work can be seen as an ongoing experiment with mechanisms of commodification and recuperation.

In general, the rise of project-based work itself reflects a fundamental transformation in capitalism—from Fordism to post-Fordism, from commodity-objects to “services” and “immaterial” labour.<sup>[ii]</sup> By the time Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler organized the project *Services* in 1994, in which they analysed the service industries as a possible model for artistic project work, there was more room for nuance and differentiation. One could claim that it is precisely because “immaterial” labour in its various forms is at the forefront of both commodification and precarization that it has become something of a privileged site for contemporary art.

The nature of institutions has changed along with that of

the artwork and of artistic labour. Even in the 1970s, corporate sponsorship and the influence of trustees became the focus of Hans Haacke's work; the seemingly autonomous logic of capital transformed the art field from the inside. By now, the logic of capital has in turn largely merged with that of technoscience: if we pay up, we can get real-time algorithmic advice on which artists to buy and which to dump.<sup>[iii]</sup> What fresh art hell is this? Andrea Fraser's sometime collaborator Helmut Draxler has eloquently critiqued the avant-garde logic of transgression, of abandoning one's field, of becoming another, a better, a more political subject.<sup>[iv]</sup> But what if institutions themselves become transgressive; what if subjects are being reformed? After all, as Fraser suggests, what has happened in the last decades is precisely the progressive subjugation of art and all other field to an economic logic that allows for no alterity, no other criteria. In the same process, the institution becomes networked and diffused, spreading out even as it intensifies its grasp on subjectivation and introduces ever greater numbers of cultural workers into precarity (see chapter 2).<sup>[v]</sup>

As Gerald Raunig has put it, this calls for “practices that are self-critical and yet do not cling to their own involvement, their complicity, their imprisoned existence in the art field, their fixation on institution and the institution, their own being-institution.”<sup>[vi]</sup> The aim cannot be to leave art in order to “become more political,” but to engage in forms aesthetic practice that acknowledge the impurity of the aesthetic, including its political entanglements and potential. Critique that is perfectly content with its immanence

becomes a kind of higher Biedermeier. Moments of externality, of externalization, are part of the process. It is no longer a matter of choosing between anti-institutional aesthetic practice (1960s neo-avant-garde tendencies) and embedded critical practice within institutions (1970s institutional critique). By now, the complementary nature of both approaches is clear, as aesthetic practice and theoretical practice navigate institutional as well as extra-institutional contexts and interstices. Existing institutions such as museums or universities should be engaged with and used to the extent that this is possible and productive, but they should not constitute the horizon.

Social fields are in a process of decomposition—not just art and science, but also, for instance, law—with law being bent forever more under politico-economical imperatives. Everywhere, the “relative” part of “relative autonomy” is on the increase. While think tanks are never short of academic hacks willing to extoll “liberal democracy” and its freedoms, citizens are happily signing away any right to privacy to the NSA and GCHQ for the sake of “security” and their share of unequally distributed global wealth. When artists, designers and theorists today engage with the surveillance-industrial complex, or with the world of “illegal aliens” condemned by the state to live hidden lives, this does not mean that these practitioners dabble in something that is of no concern to them, or try to impose political issues on art. On the contrary: these are aesthetic as well as political and social problems, and it is reductive and ideological notions of art that try to keep them neatly separate.

Meanwhile, both academics and students find it rather more difficult to organize and undertake collective action—if they see the need for it at all. Many have been depoliticized by the perpetual need to perform, and to compete. Both in art and academia, economic imperatives are imposed on students and young professionals ever more bluntly and nakedly. “Market laws” are presented as a completely autonomous logic in their own right, in spite of the fact that these laws are shaped by social and political frameworks. In the UK, rising tuition fees have sparked student protests, and the closure of the philosophy department of Middlesex University occasioned an occupation—with rather wonderful banners, including one reading “Adorno as an Institution Is Alive.” [That a university would close such a well-respected philosophy department, with its focus on critical theory and radical “continental” philosophy, is a sign of the times that has all the subtlety of a blinking neon sign. Sarah Amsler sees this development as a symptom of a “deep neoliberalism” that “moves beyond daily erosions of autonomy to become a hollowing out of the relationships, ideas, and subjectivities that help maintain critical spaces from neoliberal rationality and a temporal contracting of the distance between these spaces. If we can identify how and why these processes become possible, we might also get a better grip on how critical spaces can be reclaimed or created.”<sup>[vii]</sup>

Everything is done to turn academics into obedient drones. Get with the programme! In the Netherlands, the state actively pushes research on (and in the service of) “the creative industries” (which comprises fashion, video games, design, and yes, also art). Both

art and science are made more immediately productive now that they are no longer seen as relatively autonomous supplements of the ‘real’ economy; they are in fact ideologized as the new knowledge-based and creative economy for this de-industrialized country. Not fitting such an agenda, this reader is a hobby project. Pascal Gielen put his finger on it when he asserted that in today’s university, research has been relegated to the status of a private pastime.<sup>[viii]</sup> Rather than spending years on trying to get EU funding for a mega project, we have decided to enjoy the perverse advantages of hobbyism. We may be under- or un-funded, which has dire consequences especially for (former) students who get very little for their labour; but on the other hand, while academic research is increasingly and relentlessly subjugated to a regime of buzzwords (creative industries, e-humanities, sustainability) and an ideological and reductive notion of social relevance that would make Stalin blush, hobbyism can pursue tangents that don’t quite follow the decreed agenda. In particular, it has allowed us to collaborate, also with students, on problematizing today’s working conditions and the pressure to (self)perform.<sup>[ix]</sup>

Now, part of the hopelessness of the situation is precisely that in the post-War Dutch welfare state, a certain form of relative autonomy has in fact been turned into a given: you could study ‘autonome kunst’ at academies. But this was a very specific autonomy: not that of individuals or of collective action, but of differentiated social fields enabled by the welfare state. Now in these terms we are seeing a shift to heteronomy; we are moving from integration to differentiation. But this does not mean that

autonomy is now a rarer commodity that it was before. It does mean that its problematic nature, its fugitive nature, is much more visible and tangible than before, when we could delude ourselves into feeling autonomous because we happened to work within structures where economic imperatives were felt much less directly.

We can plough on under steadily worsening conditions or take a chance on “the possibility of making ‘cautious experimental modifications of our specific forms of subjectivity’—including (or especially) those we undertake as we ‘go on’ in conditions of crisis, and in which we ground our everyday practices of freedom.”<sup>[x]</sup> The Situationist-dominated “Council for Maintaining the Occupations,” which was founded at the Sorbonne in May ’68, put out a poster decreeing the “End of the University.”<sup>[xi]</sup> In the meantime, museums and universities alike have been occupied by rather different forces. In dealing with such institutions, it may be wise to consider them already gone, already plundered and ruined. Academia is part of the problem; the art world is part of the problem. Here we are. Now what?

#### Notes

<sup>[i]</sup> See Andrea Fraser, “Autonomy and Its Contradictions,” in this volume.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler’s 1994 project *Services* at the Kunstraum der Universität Lüneburg

[iii] See Natascha Sadr Haghigian's text "Dear Artfukts," excerpted in chapter 3, pp...

[iv] Helmut Draxler, lecture at "Art and Its Frames: Continuity and Change," symposium at the Kunstraum of Leuphana University Lüneburg, June 14, 2014.

[v] André Rottmann has focused on the transformation of the institution from site into network; "Networks, Techniques, Institutions: Art History in Open Circuits," in *Texte zur Kunst* no. 81 (2011), pp. 142-144; Hito Steyerl writes about the "integration into precarity" in "The Institution of Critique" in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, eds. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFly, 2009), pp. 13-19.

[vi] Gerald Raunig, "Instituent Practices" in Raunig and Ray (eds.), p. 11.

[vii] Sarah Amsler: "Beyond All Reason: Spaces of Hope in the Struggle for England's Universities," in *representations* no. 116 (Fall 2011), p. 68.

[viii] Pascal Gielen, "Repressief liberalisme. Over kunst, markt en cultuurbeleid in Nederland," in *Kunstlicht* 34 (2013), no. 1-2, p. 14.

[ix] This is particularly the case of the Autonomy Summer Schools in 2010 and 2011, and the Autonomy Symposium in 2011. These activities are of course part of the problem(s) they both enact and examine. Participating in a summer school is being part of today's economy of intensified learning and self-improvement, but the Autonomy Summer Schools sought to stimulate reflexive engagement with such conditions.

[x] Amsler p. 80. Amsler quotes James Tully.

[xi] On the Council for Maintaining the Occupation, see René Viénet's text from *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement* (1968) at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/enrages08.html>

# *Colophon*

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