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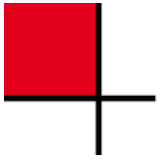
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Work experience without qualities? A documentary and critical account of an internship

Joanna Figiel

Going internal

Internships and unpaid work placements are today touted, even celebrated, as necessary steps on the path towards gaining employment. They become increasingly normalised and recommended as an essential means of boosting the contemporary art-culture-service worker's chances of accumulating the given 'experience' valued by potential 'industry' employers. In doing so, internships and placements appear to offer perhaps the best chance of securing that perceived 'dream job' for those seeking to progress in, or more usually to enter, the so-called creative sector. Unpaid labour for future prospects sounds like a great idea, or at least at first glance it does.

There has been much public discussion in recent years on internships and their place in the contemporary economy,¹ and there is always a success story to be heard, maybe rightly so, since the nature of the professions in question means they may require hands-on experience and practical, technical skills. In the creative and cultural industries in particular, however, these modern fables

¹ For example, in the UK in early 2011, there was a flurry of widely publicised political commentary regarding social mobility, much of which was concerned with the comments made by the Prime Minister, David Cameron and his deputy, Nick Clegg. As the latter criticised the idea of 'unpaid internships, which favour the wealthy and well-connected', and announced a new scheme promoting the maxim of 'what you know, not who you know', the PM candidly announced that he was fine with the idea of giving internships to friends and neighbours; in fact, he was 'quite relaxed' about the issue. See Stratton's coverage of the debate in the Guardian newspaper (2011).

frequently follow a familiar pattern. From bold proclamations to furtive whispers, such tales are regularly united in their assertion that a 'friend of a friend' has done it, loved it, invested in their future and has now reached the heady heights of their desired entry-level job. But of course, as one might suspect, often these stories ring hollow, turn out to be urban legends, producing what? Internal, experiential outcomes? Directly productive ones? The normalisation of exploitative, yet concealed forms of production?

I have a confession to make. I am an intern, or at least I was until recently. There is a slight embarrassment in the admission, but why? Do I feel of lower value as a person because I wasn't paid for my work? Do I feel exploited? Am I ashamed of this? Bitter and disaffected? What did I learn? In this text, I want to develop my own experiences of working as an intern in order to potentially cast light upon the specific conditions contained therein, to leave the noisy sphere of media commentary, where everything takes place on the surface, and, if I might be permitted to somewhat playfully adopt the celebrated phrasing, to 'enter the hidden abode of production', literally.²

What I discovered during my placement allows me to begin to sketch a tentative image of the contemporary experience of apparent non-work within the neoliberal 'creative industries' as it was contained and expressed within this internship. I will relate my own experience, an experience that along the way opened up a whole gaudy Pandora's box of theoretical trinkets inclusive of affective labour, precarity and well-rehearsed discussions on immateriality. Although internships are easily and often condemned by voices on the Left, the relative lack of empirical and experiential evidence of what it is to be an intern leaves such theoretical threads free-floating somewhat above the actual experience of such work.³

2 Marx (1990: 279). That is if we can even call the situation in which I interned 'production' in a classical economic, or indeed Marxian sense? Just what it was that was being produced here, or how my labour, or the labour in this situation in general, fitted within a complex, interconnected tapestry of production, reproduction and circulation was something that I continually attempted to assess and indeed never truly resolved during the course of my internship. However I call it loosely 'production' here, following post-workerist observations on so-called immaterial production, for example Hardt and Negri (2000: 365).

3 For more on internships and unpaid labour policies see Hope and Figiel (2012). For more information on current organising around internships, look to the activities of the following collectives: The Precarious Workers Brigade (<http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/>), The Carrotworkers' Collective (<http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/>).

What I attempt to do, in an admittedly limited, amateur-ethnographic and contingent fashion, is to provide a documentary and critical account of the three months I spent at one of many not-for-profit contemporary art and culture organisations while working as a ‘curatorial’ intern at their offices and gallery space. In what follows I develop a critical ethnographic account of the internal politics of the gallery and my experiences there, relying upon a form of insider investigation, a participant observer in the anthropological sense. I choose to articulate my experience by adopting an experimental narrative style of presentation, integrating the theoretical resources that I drew upon in order to make sense of my experience, as a critical commentary where appropriate, or by way of footnotes.

Unfortunately, due to a particularly pernicious potential threat of legal proceedings, the organisation in question must, for the purposes of this reflection at least, remain anonymous. Regrettably this can only contribute to a perpetuation of the very conditions of obfuscation that I recognised in the gallery, permitting a continuation of the situation in which ‘unremunerated and mystified work... ensure the lopsided distribution of profit and prestige.’⁴

To expand upon my position as participant-observer briefly, as a participant I was partaking in the everyday actions of the gallery’s employees, whilst qualitatively observing my surroundings, paying attention to significant visual details, listening to what was said and, at times, simply doing my job, but with a critical awareness of the specific activities I was undertaking. This method likewise involved contributing to workplace discussions, analysing relevant documents, conducting conversations and interviews, as well as recording my personal experiences of the work and social environment at the gallery. I did what I thought any intern was meant to do; I worked, I watched and I learned. Of course any commentary from a participant’s perspective will be partial, but by using this method I hope to provide descriptions of selected events and situations that took place during my placement so as to set out a descriptive account, that might also begin to point towards the place of internships within the contemporary cultural economy more broadly.

So, if it is not just tea making and photocopying, what really does go on behind closed doors, when the intern goes internal?

4 Vishmidt (2005: 39).

Entry level playing fields?

After three exhausting months of applications and interviews, I eventually managed to secure a 'curatorial assistant' intern post at a gallery space in London. It is perhaps interesting to note the relative difficulty in obtaining a placement in the first place and that on a number of occasions my applications for internships were rejected on the basis of me being seemingly overqualified. As I was to learn, internships for those not from well-connected, privileged backgrounds, perhaps unsurprisingly, remain a relatively closed game in the UK. Another problem that I faced in accessing the field was the difficulty or rather near-impossibility of doing unpaid work on top of studying full-time and additional paid work. Like many students, I found myself in the situation of seemingly 'paying' twice for the privilege of gaining experience – firstly for the course/university fees and secondly by giving up my labour time to the organisation where I interned.

However, my situation was somewhat different in that the specific placement was actually undertaken through a university course itself, as a carefully marketed dimension of a specialist MA culture industry programme, in a university careful to display its 'radical' and creative credentials. Many students, already working to support themselves through degrees, cannot count on financial help from their family in order to be able to give up work and become an intern. This was indeed the case in my own situation, and added to this, like many overseas/migrant students, I faced an additional disadvantage of having no opportunity to stay, rent-free, with parents or relatives. It struck me that even beginning an internship assumes an unrecognised and informal support network, drawing an unacknowledged foundation of wider social cooperation into this relation between intern and employer. I wasn't simply working for free; resources from elsewhere were being used to enable this to happen, which certainly appeared to place me in a very precarious position, fundamentally weakening my direct relation to, and in turn my power in relation to, my employer. In my case these resources took the form of saved up money from earlier paid work, and the indirect and emotional support of friends – but to be honest, I struggled. Ultimately, I survived on less, working elsewhere for extra hours. The result, of course, was exhaustion. The short-term thinking displayed by employers in such a failure to adequately provide for the reproduction of labour not only showed where the power lay in this arrangement – I was evidently disposable – but in the way it attempted to keep me disposable through this lack of investment, it also hinted at a certain systematic stupidity that was only to become more apparent as time went on.

The barriers to undertaking an internship that I personally struggled to overcome, it would appear, are prevalent more broadly, excluding many from gaining the experience offered through such placements. The fact that gaining and undertaking an internship is dependent upon an individual's relation to a number of support structures, both those that are and are not considered directly productive in classical political economy, is something that began to become apparent to me from the outset, through my own struggles with access. What also became clear was that the means to be able to draw upon such structures is also highly socially differentiated.

Having eventually obtained entry into the 'hidden abode', or so I thought, initially I was happy, excited and relieved to have finally secured a placement. Having been appointed, I was told that my daily duties would include assisting in assembling and executing the exhibitions programme, supporting the installation of artwork and liaising with exhibition partners, as well as working on information and promotional materials complementing the exhibitions, administration and general office support. This came with the promise of gaining 'valuable experience of working directly on projects' and 'insight' into the administration and organisation of the artistic programme. The position sounded highly promising, yet when I received an email confirming my appointment I noticed that the position of 'chief curator' had morphed overnight, into that of a 'gallery manager'; the word 'exhibitions' now substituted for 'events'. Could the change of the wording have been an insignificant slip of the tongue? During that interview, the word 'curating' was mentioned for the *very first* and the *very last* time in the three months I spent at the gallery. Such a slippage at the time seemed innocent enough. On later reflection, however, such a shift in terminology neatly encapsulated what I observed to be a highly managerial, logistical and opportunistic approach to creativity within the internal operations of the gallery and the incongruence of this with the outward facing appearance that the gallery presented in the form of its public image.

Whilst not wishing to ascribe too much significance to a simple change in wording, the observation for me was revealing, in that it potentially pointed towards a wider shift with the organisation of artistic production and the way that public perception, or even language, has often perhaps failed to keep pace with this change. I was immediately suspicious: was it a mistake? An accident? Was it even perhaps something to do with ideology? The shift from curator to manager elided by such a change in terminology might be a minor but telling indicator of a broader, and deeper, transformation in the composition of labour at play within this field.

With such apparent shifts it is no surprise that interns don't always know what they are signing up for, or that we can be tricked with promises that turn out to be less than gold. Of course I would have been naïve to expect that unpaid work would be a dream job. The romantic notion of an artistic Cinderella, gaining fame after several years working in a garret, has morphed in the 21st century by way of Endemol's *Big Brother*, celebrity culture and the tabloids; artistic 'discovery' is now arguably more 'magnus fratronage' for those without contacts, whilst a magnanimous patronage persists for the privileged and connected. Was I not following just such a path when I touted my way into the internship with three years of 'media career' experience and my newly minted Goldsmiths panache? This too is the school marketed with viral t-shirt slogans ('so fucking Goldsmiths') and an entry alongside Ray-Bans, MTV and Apple in the CoolBrands annuals.⁵

A cynical agent of precarious labour, I marketed a worker's identity, honed my brand, peddled my human capital for all it was worth. As just such a walking, talking, emailing and phone answering accumulation of experiences, I assumed that the gallery would want to nurture me, develop me, in short, invest in me.⁶ I was wrong.

Free time marketplace

Early in my internship I was asked to participate in a visitor analysis project. The task was to be carried out during Thursday late nights and other late events. Those were also days when due to longer opening hours extra invigilators were needed. Gradually I came to realise that the data was not intended to be used in any way – the purpose of the project was getting an extra night of free work out

5 Goldsmiths has been named one of the 'coolest UK brands' in 2008. See Goldsmiths' reporting of the award (<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cool-brand/>).

6 Appropriating Marx's observations in *Grundrisse* on the 'general intellect', Hardt and Negri (2000) and Virno (1996), amongst others, have contended that fixed capital is not merely locked within the machinery of production, but inherent within general social knowledge and the development of the individual; cf. 'this *fixed capital* being man himself' (Marx, 1973: 706-11). As an accumulation of my experiences, I touted myself to the gallery, which in turn, touted its 'valuable experience' to me, I invested myself in them to allow this transaction to take place: the barely acknowledged understanding was that, rather than receiving direct remuneration, I was augmenting my own experiential capital as a speculative investment. If we are to agree with this understanding, the gallery, and the cultural sector more broadly, could therefore invest in my development as both an 'immaterial' producer, but also a consumer, i.e. in this sense as 'fixed capital' – although such would require a sustained and mutually beneficial relationship that was absent from the conditions of the internship, certainly in my case.

of the interns, so that the gallery space could be covered at no extra expense. Instead of hiring an extra person to work late nights at the gallery, the institution decided to convince one of the unpaid staff (interns) to come in and do the work (invigilating the gallery space) under the pretence of conducting visitor research. This task would entail following around the gallery audience and those who purchased tickets to an event, such as a lecture, with a clipboard, hassling them to discover how they found out about the show/event, whether they had visited before, and whether they wished to become a member/patron of the gallery. However, this banal exercise was in fact totally unnecessary because those who came to see the show were actually asked these questions already, on arrival or departure, by the receptionist; those who purchase tickets were asked, as detailed in the sales script, when they made their purchase. To avoid being (further) exploited, I told my manager that due to an evening class I was unable to attend. Later, I looked on, as the other interns competed for the opportunity to volunteer to carry out the project.

My first thoughts when observing such a blatant use of interns as a source of cheap (free) labour was that it amounted simply to exploitative cost saving from the gallery. If this was the case however, by assigning us ‘non-jobs’ such as this, the gallery was short-sightedly failing to invest in its own potential productive assets, not equipping us with experiences that could be drawn upon in future. It was a triumph of short-term thinking and a failure to properly understand what was at stake in the labour at its disposal. Avital Ronell’s description of stupidity comes to mind:

Stupidity can be considered as something related to shutdown, to closure – a closure that confuses itself with an end. Closing a matter ‘once and for all’, it appears to be bound up with the compulsion of the Western logos to ‘finish with’, to terminate. [It] is best viewed as the refusal of undecidability. Stupidity, for its part, has decided, it thinks, it knows and has passed judgement; it is always ready to shoot, and shoots off its mouth readily.⁷

The questionable practice of replacing paid staff with desperate jobless graduates in order to cut costs is something that lies at the centre of the recent debates on remuneration for interns, debates that in this sense at least seem to miss the point. The way in which the made up ‘visitor analysis project’ appeared to be merely a façade for just such savings pointed to a wider misunderstanding of what was at stake in the internship and the failure of the gallery to properly take into account the nature of such labour. In this sense it also pointed to something of the systematic stupidity at the heart of the UK Government’s intern strategy, and of their so-called Big Society agenda beyond this. In general, while interns

7 Ronell (2003: 70).

(often ineffectually) cover tasks that would normally be fulfilled by actual employees (part-time, temporary or agency workers), or still worse, undertake made-up non-jobs that are a waste of everyone's time, the principle of 'mutual benefit' on which internships and work placements are allegedly fundamentally based becomes invalidated.⁸ The flexible yet precarious model of a purely functional management of logistics replaces long-term strategy – the result is a closure of possibilities, in other words stupidity.

Was my employer amongst the one in five British businesses that admit using interns as '*cheap*' labour?⁹ Where a paid position could have been created, perhaps even *cheaply*, but a free substitute is drawn upon instead? This work could be anything, but even if it's 'just making tea and photocopies', it is still *work*. And it is not '*cheap*'; it is actually '*free*'. In many cases, where there was a job position, there is now a rotating intern seat, further weakening the workers' position, making organising difficult and driving down wages in general. I began to wonder about my own position, had I replaced a paid role? I began to feel guilty, but I wasn't sure, I still hadn't quite worked out exactly what my role here even really was.

Matters were further complicated by the fact that the majority of non-tasks I was assigned produced no tangible goods – they appeared to fit into the bracket of so-called immaterial or affective work. This is often the case with internships within this sector and makes it far more difficult for interns to argue, in line with the national minimum wage legislation, that when in such a position we are in fact a *worker* and should, legally, be paid.

In the creative and cultural sectors, severe funding cuts coupled with increasing numbers of graduates mean higher than ever competition for even low-paid, entry-level jobs: for every three employees in the arts there are now two interns and one freelancer. According to recent figures from Arts Council England, its regularly funded organisations 'are increasingly turning to volunteer staff rather than paid staff', whilst potential employees are more and more willing to accept a deterioration in conditions and pay, even to the extent of becoming unpaid in the hope of future benefit.¹⁰ Meanwhile a new corporate bureaucracy has emerged to administer (and profit from) the increasingly precarious class of

8 Such an investment might, as I have speculated, be seen as a potential investment in 'fixed capital'.

9 See, for instance, Malik (2011).

10 There has also been a 30 per cent increase in volunteering in the sector and only a three per cent increase in employment between 2008-2009. See, *Arts Professional* (2011).

un(der)employed creative aspirants such as myself. In the US, there is an entire industry dedicated to catering to the unpaid work economy, described recently and in great detail by Ross Perlin in his book *InterNation* (2011). Despite Perlin's estimation that the UK's 'internship problem' remains five years behind that of the US, there are already companies soliciting unpaid, UK-based internships for a fee.¹¹

I felt robbed, and I was being. Not only was I not being paid for my labour which was bad enough in itself, but the deal that I thought I'd struck was that in return for giving up my current means of sustaining myself, relying on other precarious forms of social cooperation instead, I would be given the opportunity to obtain a better means of survival in future. I had essentially believed I would be invested in. I had not been. Rather, I was mortgaging my own present for a less than a certain future. The experience I was gaining was quickly becoming little more than disaffection.

'Active' internalising

Thinking it might shed light on the apparent stupidity I was encountering, and upon the opaque workings of the culture industry with which I was now faced, I initially reached for Adorno to help me make sense of it all. However, I could only imagine him saying that my fixation on my own experiential acquisitions and my internal responses to this would ultimately amount to little more than an empty inwardness, that the introspective self-critical reflexivity by an inmate interned in the culture industry is merely a pseudo-critical reflexivity.¹² This is the inwardness of the voluntary critic, just as ready to obey as the next assembly line worker in the new autonomous republic of art. And, all for a good cause – if we can find one! All of my introspection was perhaps, it occurred to me, mere pseudo-activity that mirrored all too readily the pseudo-activity of the tasks that I was set as an intern.

¹¹ See, for instance, Coughlan (2009).

¹² For Adorno, the inward, self-criticality that dogged me throughout my internship, that was only amplified as the placement progressed, and that indeed seemed endemic and inherent to its systematic processes, might be itself an ineffectual reaction to my position within those very relations of production that confronted and so troubled me. The result of my reflection however, would be ultimately empty:

Inwardness served to cultivate an anthropological type that would dutifully, quasi-voluntarily, perform the wage labour required by the new mode of production of the autonomous subject. (...) Inwardness thus becomes increasingly shadowy and empty, indeed contentless in itself. (Adorno, 1997: 116)

Robert Musil's *Man without qualities* came to mind, particularly the way in which he depicts how the emptiness of this kind of pseudo-activity is raised to an art form within a workplace:

Count Leinsdorf [had] ... the conviction that what he was engaged in was practical politics. The days rocked from side to side, running into weeks. The weeks did not stand still, but wreathed together into chains. There was continually something happening. And when there is continually something happening, one easily gets the impression that one is achieving something real and practical.¹³

Why Musil's text kept intruding into my thoughts as I went about my business in the gallery I wasn't sure. Perhaps it was that one of the first things that struck me upon beginning work there was the way in which this strange emotional landscape of introspection and pseudo-activity permeated the space? I had noted that even the architecture itself seemed to augment this generalised atmosphere of inwardness and emptiness.

During the first few days at the gallery I had mostly tried to find my way around its vast – over 35,000 sq. ft. – bright, concrete and pure white interiors. On the whole, it was a fitting example of an impressively pure, and yet overwhelming, type of white-cube exhibition space, of the kind so ubiquitous across the contemporary art world. It was furnished at a considerable expense, yet without being noticeably over the top. All the details, despite being custom made and of the best quality, were discreet and tasteful – I noticed made-to-order doors and door locks, designer chairs and lighting fittings, best quality liquid soaps decanted into minimalist containers and so on. All in all: suave, and sterile. 'Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial, the space is devoted to the technology of aesthetics'¹⁴ – a perfect whitewashed gallery space; a space, which despite its seeming transparency, is designed to meet the eye first, framing perception ahead of the artworks on display. It was engineered to encourage a quiet, contemplative, introspective mood that mirrored that of those employed within. It also felt cold and empty.

This introspective atmosphere was blended with one of obfuscation and uncertainty, echoing the many pseudo-activities with which workers seemed to be continually busying themselves. Again the architecture only added to such a perception, the staircases all looked the same and there were hardly any signs aiding movement through the space. I kept losing my way to the offices, situated on the first floor and separated from the rest of the space by two sets of glass security doors. I needed a swipe card to get in, but I was not given one

¹³ Musil (1979, vol. 2: 174).

¹⁴ O'Doherty (1986: 15).

straightaway. Eventually – after two weeks – I was given a temporary card, only however, a restricted access one. Each time I tried to get in I was forced to spend a considerable amount of time knocking on the door. If no one noticed me, I hung around until someone else showed up with a card. The office itself was cold, bright, and very quiet, around 1000 sq. ft. and divided into four separate (seemingly) state-of-the-art offices, with desk spaces for a dozen people. An appropriately Kafkaesque setting, one guarded by distant and inaccessible masters, where the ultimate dream (recognition? judgement? access? a paid gallery assistant role?) was debarred by a combination of bureaucratic sloth and empty, banal architecture. The architecture could not help but evoke for me both the vagueness and inwardness that I identified as strongly characterising the nature of many of the activities undertaken here. Perhaps it was the very so-called ‘immateriality’ of the activities that I was to undertake that contributed to this atmosphere of vagueness and inwardness? It was an indistinct thought that hovered somewhere in my mind, although I did not express it at the time.

In my second week of work, I was invited to the weekly staff meeting; I was looking forward to it. For days I had been trying to figure out what was it that everyone actually did. In fact, I had been pathetically following whoever seemed to be doing something of any significance, in order to get involved. Although everyone had seemed so busy and stressed all the time, all my offers of help had been politely – yet icily – declined. The fact that no one seemed to be talking to each other about what they were working on at any given time, each remaining rigidly fixed and focused on their own task, their own desk, made finding out about their duties nearly impossible. I hadn’t been given access to any of the tasks that the description of the position offered; I was rapidly losing enthusiasm and felt an obscure edge of suspicion – an eerie, unacknowledged mood.

Although the gallery manager stressed how important these staff meetings were, on the day of the meeting I was told to cover the receptionist’s desk while she went to the meeting, meaning that of course I myself could not go. While performing this job of another, paid employee at the gallery, I discovered, on the reception’s computer, the following email:

Dear all,

Although *they* [the interns] have signed Confidentiality Agreements we should be very cautious about what we discuss with them. They are support staff. Their *first priority* should be to handle the most basic tasks for us: answering calls, sending correspondence, preparing mailings, distributing fliers and covering lunch breaks. I do not want interns to be involved in our staff meetings. If the interns are

working on a project this should be *done in spare time* or, at times when we are pressed for additional assistance, as and when needed.¹⁵

Needless to say it was the very same person who stressed in conversation with me how significant it is for the interns to partake in staff meetings who had sent this email. I had indeed signed a Confidentiality Agreement; in fact, it was the very first thing done on my arrival at 'work'. It sounded like a variation on Dr. Faustus' pact with the Devil (who wears Prada). I had to promise that, neither throughout nor ever after my internship, would I make any comments on any aspect of the placement:

Save that you may inform your immediate family members (upon whom you will impose a like condition of confidentiality) of the nature of your employment you will not thereafter, whether during the course of the employment or at any time, make (for whatever reason, directly or indirectly) any derogatory statements or comments to any person, whether oral or in writing and whether directly or indirectly about the Gallery, the Company, the Employees, the Employer, or any member of her family or household or guests or any other person at or in the vicinity of the Gallery. You also agree not to compose, publish, or cause to be published any (...) book, article, novel or other written document of any kind whatsoever whether fictional or non-fictional that relates directly or indirectly to the Gallery, the Company, and the Employer.¹⁶

I still cannot tell if the document, in its entirety, would be legally binding or not. It does sound a little extreme. I think it is safe to assume that, were all companies offering internships forcing all interns to sign such documents, plans to make the internship and voluntary work sector more transparent, fair, and accessible would definitely be hindered. The message in question was not addressed to myself and it is ironic that I only came across it because I was in fact, trying to do some actual work, which of course I should not have been doing unpaid. But because an email account still had not been set up for me I had to use the reception email. The message was titled explicitly 'Guidelines *for* interns' (sic!). Of course I do not confess with too much guilt since in a competent security system such a message could have been sent to the receptionist's separate, personal account. The message was telling however, confirming my earlier assessment that I was performing nothing more than a logistical function to the gallery management, that they had no intention of investing in me, and investing me with experience that might have ultimately rewarded them and the cultural sector more broadly with increased productivity in the future. Instead I appeared

¹⁵ Internal email, my italics.

¹⁶ Internal confidentiality agreement.

to be wholly abandoned to non-productivity, even in a logistical sense. I was puzzled; just what was my purpose of being here if not to train, but not really to work either? Assigned almost entirely to pointless non-jobs as I was, what was I missing, where was the sense in this arrangement? The impression of a systematic stupidity only began to grow further.

On a Friday afternoon in the week preceding the private view of a new show, organised in conjunction with another gallery, the elusive owner's assistant showed up at the office. Everyone became immediately tense. People started cleaning up their desks and no one left early. Apparently the owner hates unhealthy things, so someone cleared out all the junk food from the fridge. When I announced that I was going out to have a cigarette break, the concerned receptionist whispered to me that I should make sure I go somewhere where I could not be seen. The owner never arrived, but everyone behaved as if he was right there in the office.

Every day, in every conceivable way, everyone seemed to be trying to do everything within their power to make sure the boss *thought* his vision was being put into practice, as if he was there, and everywhere. In fact the 'vision', never really *was*, and realistically it *could not ever* be put into practice. He had an idea of saving – not only disadvantaged groups of people in particular areas – but the whole global population through projects such as bringing the art of opera to the starving children in Africa or implementing Chinese culture in Tibet, all in the spirit of embracing cultural difference. The boss believed this could be done – in part at least – through the programming of events and exhibitions at the space. Such a vision was surely at best a delusional utopian project, but more likely it was a cultural cover for other commercial interests. Though fairly vacuous and insensitive, this vision was of course to be achieved by the grandest means possible, so that the gallery gained publicity, and its shows sold out to newly acquainted Chinese and Russian buyers.

Even an intern could tell that here we had an example of a purely commercial project, fronted by benevolent staff and those pretending to be doing a great deal for worthy causes. I could not help but be reminded again of Musil's brilliant description of the paralytically vague actions undertaken by the Collateral Campaign Joint Committee in his epic *Man without qualities*. The Campaign – a brainchild of Count Leinsdorf, a man blessed with 'a complete absence of doubts'¹⁷ – takes hold of the lives of those involved in a total way, all for a cause that can/could never come close to fruition. The absurd aim of the Campaign, though it remains undefined, is the subject of countless sessions of the

¹⁷ Musil (1979, vol. 1: 101).

‘organisation created to prepare the way for the framing of suggestions leading towards this aim’.¹⁸ The members of the Joint Committee remain entirely unable to settle on the very aim they are working towards, and ways in which to implement it; however, they seem to be constantly doing something:

Again the whole thing was gone over, with a repetition of all the proposals that had been put forward in the hope of giving the Collateral Campaign a content and a meaning [...] There was always something to do. There were, besides, innumerable little minor considerations to be borne in mind. [...] One had to take account of certain persons and social connections: in short, even on days when one did nothing in particular, there were so many things one must avoid doing that one had the feeling of being very active indeed.¹⁹

Meanwhile, at the gallery, the ‘advocates’ of culture and creativity cluelessly tried to deal with the reality of organising things, liaising with artists and gallerists, all in the harsh reality of a credit-crunch city, deprived of private jets, limos, corporate entertainment budgets, and so on, as well as the bureaucratic necessities of running a gallery space. Conversely, across the Atlantic and far removed from the (financial) reality of day-to-day activities, the owner exercised a perfectly hands-off attitude. He had no concerns for the basics, which seemed to be constantly inadequate – from the lack of credit on the franking machine (each top-up required approval from the finance director based in New York), through lack of petty cash for scissors (needed for a children’s’ workshop scheduled to take place), to the staff who were forced to pay for their stationery supplies themselves, and then patiently wait for reimbursement.

Of course, no one dared to protest – there was no discussion with the boss. We might call this a textbook of stupid behaviour, at least in light of Ronell’s description. Kant however, whom both Musil and Ronell reference with regards stupidity, saw stupidity in ‘precisely that which fails to judge’.²⁰ I wondered how, in the grand scheme of running a multi-million pound facility aiming to overshadow London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts, some of the cost-cutting initiatives could ever be justified. Could these be seen as anything other than the mangled judgements that Kant talks about? Actions such as increasing the prices of food in the café by up to thirty percent (while the café, the only decent place for food in a mile-radius, attracted a great host of local office workers whose word of mouth increased visitor numbers), or axing the entire education department that organised talks, lectures, school visits and other endeavours vital for an art

¹⁸ Musil (1979, vol. 1: 201).

¹⁹ Musil (1979, vol. 2: 357).

²⁰ Kant (in Ronell, 2003: 71).

organisation, and at the same time provided the only outreach point connecting the foundation to the local community.

Perhaps these actions could be justified, businesswise. Yet to me it seemed that short-sighted decisions of this sort only proved the boss's incompetence as a businessman, philanthropist, and as CEO. It seemed to me that he was trying to build his empire forgetting about the very foundations that were meant to support it. If things were not working on the basic level, how could the overall product be successful? It all appeared to be about the ideological façade of the gallery – all grand goals and claims, and behind it, waste. What was the product anyway? All I saw was the empty vacuum of PR-speak and unrealisable projects, a Kafkaesque Castle where non-workers come for non-job/internships, where like Count Leinsdorf, everyone is very active and indeed in a state of anxiety, doing exactly nothing. Here we had compromise on a daily basis, being out of touch with reality, a cynically constructed edifice. Those working at the gallery (including, for that time, myself) were treading a very thin line in order to keep the owner satisfied; they negotiated an extremely limited space where reality and idealism overlap, meaning that neither functioned well. The product often seemed little more than the maintenance of this façade, in the form of the gallery's brand: a pseudo-commodity within which our work was concealed, frozen and indeed, interned.

'Biens internes?'

One particular exhibition at the gallery was to be a group show organised jointly with a major West End gallery. By this point, the gallery had changed the model of organising its shows entirely. In the past, the owner would choose big-name artists himself. They were specific artists, creating art responding explicitly to particular issues from his personal agenda for the 'save the world' project. They created pieces concerned with sociological and political histories and the resulting psychological outcomes for society, or with issues such as conflicts of interest within foreign policy, or exploring new solutions for the challenges of the 21st century and other similar subject matter. This new model of working saw a partner gallery provide a curator and install the exhibits, essentially hiring out the space. The gallery was responsible for liaising with potential buyers and running of the show (shop); if pieces sold, the profits were divided between both parties. As a result the subject matter began to seem only vaguely related to the gallery's hitherto prevailing agendas.

I took part in the installation process – for two weeks I covered the reception desk, as the receptionist was on annual leave. My main task (apart from answering the phone) was to liaise between the owners of the partner gallery, some of the artists who were there to install their pieces, and the gallery and project managers. The guests seemed to be amazed at the lack of involvement of the hosts in the process, at how corporate-like and formal the ways in which they worked were, and the lack of any visibly ‘creative’ people among the employees. The host managers were clearly not used to working with artists or such a curator either – they questioned their ‘unusual’ working hours and had trouble accepting the fact that the show was not just shipped in and placed around the gallery like all previous shows according to a plan devised beforehand with the use of the floor plans and a lighting architect. Chaos and conflict swiftly ensued. The artists refused to work within the set ‘opening hours’; pieces arrived from abroad that, not having been measured properly by either of the parties, did not fit through any of the doors. It got to the point that when one of the artists wanted to borrow some black gaffer tape, and the project manager instructed me not to give it to them but to send them to the shops instead.

Stupidity is, as Ronell suggests, ‘the indelible tag of modernity, (...) our symptom. Marking an original humiliation of the subject, stupidity resolves into the low-energy, everyday life trauma with which we live. It throws us’.²¹ This sort of behaviour is rampant in the wasteful consumer circuit. Adorno would have railed against this kind of farce. Here, vacuity joins precarity at the two ends of a new class formation – the bosses with no idea, the workers with nothing to do and no access to the doing.

Meanwhile, the most energetic, and reasonable person in the team was the show’s curator, yet even she didn’t seem to get on well with the gallery staff. So I was ordered to mediate, and for the next ten days I found myself being told off, in equal measures, for everything and anything, by just about everyone. Despite trying to solve the problems (arising from both sides) myself so as not to aggravate anyone, for the next ten days the gallery workers accused me of being unprofessional, and the guest workers of being unhelpful. I was reminded of Jennifer Allen’s article comparing gallery assistant’s job to that of a hapless flight attendant.²²

My contribution was invisible, but as it turned out, not unproductive after all. Finally my apparent non-job, what I was actually doing here, began to become clear to me. I was here to intern, but I was also here to internalise. The gallery’s

²¹ (2003: 11).

²² See Allen (2009).

production, such as it was, was a collective effort; my role within this was simply to absorb and internalise everyone else's negativity. As a dumping ground for complaints, minor irritations, conflicts and contradictions, I was here to smooth things over, absorb the anger and disappointments, in short, to take the blame. I was a point around which the staff could collect, united by their willingness to lay the contradictions of the situation at my door. My contribution was it seemed negative, and yet it became increasingly apparent, integral to the productive functioning of the gallery.

In the end all of the simmering animosities came to an explicit face-off at the private view party, attended by about four hundred people. The host gallery went ahead, despite earlier arrangements, with charging guests for the drinks. The guest gallery owners were infuriated and embarrassed that their employees, friends, as well as collectors were forced to pay at the bar. The alcohol was, according to one them, of such bad quality that it should not even be served at all (earlier in the day, I had personally ordered, as instructed, the cheapest brands from a budget supermarket). In the end, the guest gallery agreed to foot the bill for all the drinks (at retail, not wholesale, price) and the party went on. I negotiated this, as a mediator in the unknown, unstable and immaterial space of affect. The affect I managed was a negotiated truce, nothing to show. In a way, the position of the intern conforms to the condition of precarious workers (of all kinds) more generally, expected to solve – for nothing – the inherent contradictions of the neoliberal labour market.²³

But of course, this was always going to be abortive and almost perfectly stupid – throughout the preparations for the big opening there were ongoing discussions

²³ Hardt and Negri, amongst others, see contemporary capitalism as increasingly characterised by what they understand as immaterial labour, particularly concerned with the production of affect (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2000). However, internalising contradictions as negative affect and the mitigation of such affects as a reproduction of labour power has long been the role of unpaid (often female) labour before notions of precarity and unpaid labour were identified as characteristic of labour within the arts. Accounts of precarity that see the generalisation of the condition of artistic work within labour practices more generally in this respect occlude the originary, persistent and everyday 'precarity' of informal, reproductive and affective labour, often on the part of women (see for example Vishmidt, 2005). However, in the apparent unproductive non-work assigned to an intern such as myself a similar productive functionality is at play. Social interaction and cooperation can be seen as productive activity, regardless of the recognised labour time expended in them (Marx, 1973: 706). Where post-workerists saw this as underpinning a universal notion of immaterial labour, dissolving the separation between labour and free time, a similar status might be ascribed to my labour as an intern. My apparently unproductive activities were in fact reproducing the very conditions of productivity through a mitigation of negative affect.

about what text was to go on the walls – not only in terms of actual labels providing the details of each exhibited piece, but mainly what ‘block quotes’ were to be placed on the two remaining, prominent wall spaces. One of them was the wall opposite the entrance, immediately next to the title of the show, the other in the main gallery space. The gallery manager found what must be the one single most incomprehensible quote by his boss, and went ahead with placing it in the main gallery space, but come the day of the opening, he clearly changed his mind. (The laminate could be removed, but a spare copy had not been ordered). He seemed to realise that perhaps the other location for the quote would be better, as it would be impossible to miss; and by that point the show’s curator was demanding a short blurb from her essay about the exhibition, as well as her name, be put up as well. At four in the afternoon, when everything else was prepared and ready to go, the courier arrived with the other laminate. The gallery manager told me to hide it and pretend that it has never been delivered. When the curator arrived, he made me tell her that it was never received and apologise on the gallery’s behalf – my job was reduced to mediation for negative affect. The curator was devastated as she realised that her input into the show was not acknowledged on any of the promotional materials, nor anywhere throughout the display. I spent the night handing out the hastily Xeroxed copies of her curatorial statement, along with the press release for the exhibition. As they walked through the door, the guests cast confused glances at the empty space in the middle of the wall.

When Henri Storch coined the term ‘immaterial labour’, it was to counter the Smithian assertion that the intellectual activity of the ‘higher social orders’ was unproductive. Storch determined ‘*biens internes*’ – ‘inner goods’ such as health and knowledge as the product of intellectual labour,²⁴ but one might argue, as Haug suggests, Storch’s ‘*biens internes ou les éléments de la civilisation*’ are in fact a primary social foundation of production in general.²⁵ Though he rejected the terminology, and saw Storch’s failure to grasp the subject historically as ideologically compromised, Marx critically developed on Storch’s work to efface the distinction between manual and intellectual work, showing that such ‘inner goods’ are in fact productive of wealth. I could imagine Marx noting that my labour here, though it had a social rather than physical output, was likewise not necessarily unproductive.

The telling etymological congruence of ‘*biens internes*’ with ‘intern’, suggests more than the fact that they share a Latin root. The internality expressed here instructively illuminates my own experience in the gallery. But it was not an

24 Storch [1823], in Haug (2009: 182).

25 Haug (2009: 180).

‘inner good’ in Storch’s sense that I was producing – that was what I had initially thought I had signed up for, and been disappointed. Rather I was productive, and to be sure in an economic sense, precisely through the internalising of negative affect, internalising the inherent contradictions of the relations of production of which I was part. My role as intern, as an appendage to the social body of the collective worker, was precisely to internalise.²⁶

What have I produced? A precarious labourer, paying for the privilege of working for free, I slowly discerned the hierarchical code of the culture industry and ended up – through a mix of deceit and chutzpah – brokering a détente of missed opportunities. Stupid. As a volunteer drone in the new precarious class, I have made my ‘immaterial’ contribution and it is negative affect.

My work was internalisation of the conflicts and uncertainties – its outcome was more or less a calming routine. My affective labour addressed the other side of positive evaluation – sure, I have averted and inverted all out art war, but I remain caught in a bind, and this means in all likelihood the gallery will stumble on as stupid as ever. If it is true that the main outcome of my productivity at the gallery was participation in their regime of inverted affect, this is because I had the choice of either being complicit in its production and distribution, or of internalising the negativity and attempting to minimise its consequences for the others involved. At the same time, I highlighted, through my own participation, the ways in which the pertinent issues of social exclusion, class composition and questionable practices on the part of employers’ affect the learning and working processes of interns in the UK’s cultural and creative sector, especially now – at a time when workplace appears to be reconfiguring and the numbers of interns is growing. I have highlighted what I believe to be a subject in urgent need of serious and sustained academic attention, as well as a continued public debate – if the current British government seeks to develop the unpaid labour (internship) model throughout all the major industries for the next generation of youth facing unparalleled debt and unemployment, then scholarship should attend to the fact that a proportion of these time-consuming positions are indeed stupid, involve little work, and generate a new middle-class boredom. A system of patronage favouring the wealthy emerges. The task of the new non-workers is to convert boredom into something entirely creative. But of course I cannot complain – I have also produced this text, and I was not exactly bored – although ironically, I certainly am disaffected.

²⁶ Marx’s concept of the ‘collective labourer’ (Marx, 1990: 643) arguably makes redundant the conceptual division of so-called immaterial and material labour, i.e. cognitive/affective and manual. The notion of collective worker describes how value emerges from an ensemble of social activity, not all of it immediately obvious as productive in a physical sense.

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