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de-, dis-, ex- on Immaterial Labour

Marina Vishmidt / Marion von Osten

Atelier Europa Team: What were the theoretical and political reasons to edit the magazine *de-, dis-, ex-*[1] on immaterial labour in a cultural context?

Marina Vishmidt: The most compelling reasons for the project are probably already stated in your question: immaterial labour was a concept developed in the writings of contemporary French and Italian theorists working principally in the Marxist and post-autonomia critique of labour and social organisation which had yet not really been carried over to critical practices in the "art world". We saw this critique as especially salient because it posits the real subsumption (at least in Antonio Negri's writing) of all forms of sociality, subjectivity, into capitalist production, and immaterial labour is described as a kind of production that trades precisely in affect, knowledge, arguing a very notable extension of the individual's productive capacity-life itself, in fact, with no more room even for alienation to occur. If the ideal worker is an information worker, then the ideal worker is an artist. There likewise seemed to be productive analogies to be drawn between, on the one hand, the adoption of classically artistic traits like creativity and spontaneity into the management dogma of a flexibilised economy, and on the other, the artist's emerging, or

ongoing, identification as a cultural worker (or sometimes as cultural entrepreneur), not to mention the cultural workers who mediate and perpetuate the art economy, from curators to retail and maintenance staff. The convergence of these discourses, which had probably never been that separate but are now less distinct than ever, seemed to bespeak a common form of subjectivation that was profiling recognisably "artistic" modes of being as the desireable, if not necessary, attributes of the contemporary producer/consumer, and that was able to absorb resistant practices more fluidly than ever. However, the optimal sides of artistic being are invariably the ones that show adaptability and opportunism, rather than more erratic or obstinate characteristics of the "creative" type, so it only goes so far as capital is able to mobilise them.
Concomitantly, there's the attraction of art as investment for the biggest architects of transnational capital-art has always been a prestigious alibi for big business, but when the social provisions of the state are as drastically attenuated as they are now, the role of corporate benevolence becomes increasingly decisive, even for sustaining an arena for critical positions to develop.

Atelier Europa Team: In the invitation of the edition on immaterial labour you were proposing that the erosion of boundaries between artist and worker is a social rather than an ontological fact. Why and how do you think this boundary dissolved?

Marina Vishmidt: It's not so straightforward for us to distinguish between social and ontological fact in this instance, especially as I am not quite sure what is meant by an 'ontological' fact that would define these two concepts in isolation from the social relation that produces them as distinct concepts – surely an ontological fact would be recursive as it would only allude to a culturally mediated

system of signification to give it legitimacy as an ontological fact. It seems that the articulations working to erode the boundaries between artist and worker have originated with the art "world" as much as being influenced by epiphenomena that would probably not be recognised by that world as being extrinsic to it – Russian Constructivism during and after the Revolution as one instance. The matter of the boundary, as well as the erosion of the boundary, seems to have always had a highly tactical, performative or polemical function and it has served a formidable battery of art-immanent but also political ends in all different kinds of situations. If we wanted to make a schematic analysis of where the division began, the Industrial Revolution would be an easy place to start – mass production vs. individual sensibility, unfree labour and free inspiration, capital and culture, fungibility and singularity, bourgeois and bohemian, organisation man and beatnik, corporate drone and dotcom whiz kid, and all the modes of existing within or exploiting those contradictions.

Atelier Europa Team: One of your theses is that conceptual artists are "the blueprints for today's "affective labourer". Why do you focus explicitly on the conceptual artists?

Marina Vishmidt: To be quite concise and general, conceptual art heralded the de-materialisation of the art object, focusing instead on the symbolic mediations that instantiate art as an event and mode of communication. The object has also been displaced from contemporary capitalist production as it concentrates on branding, differentiation, lifestyle marketing, attention management and so forth. Both share the feature of valorising information, and some conceptual artists practices were in many ways prototypes of today's standard IP regulations. In fact, it could be argued that the de-materialised object is actually information, as it is subject to the same forms of proprietary relations. Perhaps that was

conceptualism's (as a retroactive totalising gesture) gravest fault, that it did not sustain its interrogation of the art object up to and including the power relations that obtained on the definition of art object, but also on the definition of artist. Of course, this indictment does not pretend to encompass every single practitioner ever described as a conceptual artist – it is already a specious kind of Modernist orthodoxy to cast conceptual art as a movement, and paradoxical to make it into an object.

Atelier Europa Team: To make my question clearer: if you focus on conceptual art as intellectual form of artistic production and as a paradigm of immaterial labour you are also interpreting the concept of this new form of labour as an intellectual/artistic capacity. It would mean that immaterial labor is only to be understood out of this form of labor and a specific understanding of information/ knowledge, as formulated in the 60s/70s by the conceptual artist. As I understand the concept of immaterial labor is involved in the industrial complex and in the growing sector of the care economy as well and not shared only in the fields of knowledge production or communication technologies. Wasn't it, before this background, a strategic descision to focus on conceptual art?

Marina Vishmidt: I absolutely agree with all the above. Our positioning of conceptual art was specifically to draw a somewhat polemical drawbridge between certain kinds of politicised practices in one area and one era and their reconfiguration in another, a bridge we think has not been adequately formulated yet, nor the faultlines it elides. Conceptual art is one strand of the investigation and is not meant to be a totalising metaphor in the least, it just seemed emblematic of one way a radicalised response in art to shifts in cultural or societal conditions can have prefigured as well as failed, but of course failure is always prefiguring something else and the narrative of art is a narrative of failure, otherwise no one

would be interested in either doing it or thinking about it, and Benjamin's point about failure being redeemed in the now of messianic time, etc... It was a strategic decision in this sense, that we felt there was something missing, or only marginally addressed, in current attempts to theorise the functioning of the artworld within the informationised global economy, and it seemed like there was a place for sketching out how certain phenomena can be found clustering together. Also, with the role of "research", and this is especially lucid in the Critical Art Ensemble piece, we are curious about the culture of expertise and the permutations of that within the prevailing power structures which take administration as their brand of post-political operations manual, whereas the information society is ostensibly all about leveling and making experts of everyone – but as with the "creative" model, only up to a point.

Atelier Europa Team: In your proposal you are questioning some general assumptions on critical and conceptual art practices today, on the one hand because of the crucial interpenetration of art practice in the knowledge economy, on the other of their symbolic politics. And your questioning from this position: "How can contemporary art be tenable as neither utterly complicit nor illusorily autonomous, but as a set of tactics that displaces, and helps to create real conditions for another kind of existence?

Marina Vishmidt: Well, not really any unequivocal conclusions and the only tentative ones are quite general, i.e. the expanding opportunities for complicity must be countered by opportunities for refusal, or at least a considered and sustained engagement where it matters. If there are any conclusions, we are probably more interested in the directions taken by the authors and projects contained in the book, and the responses of those that encounter them.

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[1] The *de-, dis-, ex-* book series is co-edited by Marina Vishmidt and Melanie Gilligan. It is published by Black Dog Publishing, a small independent publisher based in London specializing in art, architecture, culture and theory. The mentioned issue reflects on the topic "Immaterial Labour".