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Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! Moving from European Discourses on the Precarious and Art to the Realities of Contemporary Dance

Abstract

In this article, we encapsulate several key debates in sociology, cultural and arts politics and the media industry on precarious work since its emergence at the turn of the twenty-first century. After setting out the fundamental discourses on precarity, we concentrate on contemporary dance artists as precarious workers and investigate the extent to which different levels of precarity affect them, distinguishing relevant aspects related to socio-economic, mental and physical precarity. We propose that the nature of their work is integrally connected with the 'precarious'. To close, we conclude that protest against precarity itself is of a precarious nature.

Keywords:

Precariat, contemporary dance, precarity, protest, project-based

Introduction

In this article, we look at contemporary dance through the lens of several key debates in sociology, cultural and arts politics and the media industry on precarious work. We understand contemporary dance as a strikingly multifarious, even heterogeneous artistic field with an everything-but-stable identity. From a sociological point of view, contemporary dance's contemporaneity is therefore intrinsically linked with the performative construction and reproduction of a however small collective belief that particular practices are genuine instances of contemporary dance (Laermans 2015, 60-79). Contemporary dance is thus not characterized by a specific movement style. Nevertheless, its open nature in fact presupposes

a basic feature, i.e. the expansion of the definition of *dancing*: all bodily activity can be classified as dance and can become an element of choreography.

The core idea underlying the different 'subgenres' or instances of contemporary dance is that the choreographer can have access to and use any kind of movement material on the one hand and that s/he autonomously recharges the material with artistic substance, with or without a reference to the original context, on the other. In a similar regard, Sally Banes concluded that 'the postmodern choreographers proposed that a dance was a dance not because of its content but because of its context – i.e., simply because it was framed as a dance' (2011, xix). In our view, this apt characterization not only holds for the kind of postmodern dance commonly associated with Judson but for contemporary dance as such.

In line with contemporary dance's 'under-definition', each choreographer tends to develop, often in dialogue with the performers, a particular movement language. Given the absence of a binding idiom such as classical ballet, the personal movement style of the performer is of the uttermost importance in both her/his co-definition of the movement material inspiring a work and that work's performance. In line with this, the performer's aura predominates above the performer's virtuosity (compare Burt 2016, 3 and 59). The performer's aura relates to a unique presence on stage, the capacity to attract attention, and the ability to embody the artistic intention of the choreographer in a specific way but to radiate simultaneously a very individual 'touch' as a dancer.

Hereafter we explore contemporary dance first and foremost as a mode of precarious work. Randy Martin was one of the first scholars to discuss precarity in a more general way in relation to the dance field, stating that 'precarity, ephemerality, instability are frequently voiced as lamentations by dancers, presenters, and audiences alike. Dancers too struggle to make a living; presentation venues strain against diminished support; audiences contend with escalating ticket prices' (2012, 64). In what follows, we first describe the roots of the

theoretical discourses on precarity and precarious labour before applying these insights to contemporary dance labour.

The Genesis of the Discourse on the Precariat in the German-speaking World and France around 2000

Precarious labour equals paid work performed in economically and juridical insecure conditions: no long-term contracts and career perspectives, low wages, bad work circumstances, no or only minimal social benefits, etc. Nowadays, related notions such as 'precarity' and 'precariousness' have become quite established and even function as common buzzwords among artists and creative workers. However, the semantics of precariousness is relatively new: only after the recent turn of the century did it become an established one within the media and the social sciences. In the same period a noun emerged that refers to those living in precarious conditions: the 'precariat'. By way of introduction, we have a quick look at the latter word's successful career in the German-speaking world (Germany and Austria) and France.

In 2006, the expression 'precariat', which couples the adjective 'precarious' with the noun 'proletariat', entered the list of words of the year of the Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache (the Society for German Language) at fifth place. The list consists of words shaping in a leading way the public debates in the corresponding year. It is noteworthy that the expression 'Generation Praktikum' took the second place. This expression literally means 'generation internship' and, at the time, referred to the generation of students who during and after their studies made great efforts to obtain an unpaid internship, thus deferring the perspective of paid labour.

The study *Gesellschaft im Reformprozess* ('Society in a Process of Transformation'), published in October 2006 by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, sparked further debates on the basis of 3,000 interviews conducted in February and March 2006 with people living in

Germany. In light of the questioned value preferences, the interviewees are identified according to different 'political categories'. One of these is called the 'dependent precariat' ('Abgehängte Prekariat'), which comprises a substantial part of the lower third of society and eight per cent of the total German population. The 'dependent precariat' consists of persons who are confused, lack direction, feel excluded from society and retreat in the private sphere. They are often unemployed for a long period and have no or only minimal chances to improve their social status. After the publication of the report, the then chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany Kurt Beck called the dependent precariat an underclass ('Unterschicht') lacking the will to climb the social ladder (Sturm 2006, Volkery 2006).

Expressions such as 'Unterschicht' and the related 'überflüssig' ('redundant') refer to people who are in ordinary language often called a marginal group or sub-proletariat. The Berlin theatre Volksbühne picked up on the public uses of these terms in order to stimulate reflection on aesthetic forms of resistance, while also producing and programming work by directors dealing with these themes, of which René Pollesch was the most prominent name (Pewny 2011, 221–242).

In marked contrast to an expression such as underclass or the specific notion of 'dependent precariat' (which only consists of unemployed), the generic term 'precariat' links low-schooled youngsters and third-generation social benefit-dependents to self-employed individuals in the spheres of science, the arts or the creative industries. The latter appear quite privileged compared to the 'dependent precariat' because of their higher degree of schooling and cultural capital. On the basis of interviews, Anne and Marine Rambach document the conditions of project-, art-, cultural or scientific workers living in insecure work relationships in their much discussed French book *Les Intellos précaires* ('the precarious intellectuals'), which first appeared in 2001. It particularly illustrates the sometimes-painful gap between a high level of symbolic recognition and low financial gains. Hence Anne and Marine

Rambach's ironic depiction of the way the presence of these precarious intellectuals is perceived by employees firmly appointed in institutions: 'les "classes dangereuses" sont dans les murs' ['The "dangerous classes" are between the walls'] (2001, 284).

Whereas the authors of *Les Intellos précaires* describe individual strategies to face acute poverty such as selling personally owned books, a review of the book by Günter Hefler in the Viennese magazine *Grundrisse* takes a different direction:

Encouraged to tell how we are doing, how we are living, [...] we start [...] a polyphonic choir. Together we then lament our labour reality as researchers, journalists, artists, architects, coaches. At the same time, we confide in our lament on a common certainty: that we will not leave the field that excruciates us because we love our labour. (2001)

Hefler's reaction to *Les Intellos précaires*, which can be considered exemplary for the German-speaking world, illustrates the rhetorical construction of a collective affiliation of precarious intellectuals. Here, the discourse on the precarity of intellectuals takes on a performative capacity through the identification of the reviewer, his (imaginary) interlocutors, the authors Anne and Marine Rambach and their interlocutors as a 'polyphonic choir'.

Precarious Labour as Relational Category

The notion of the precariat is not just a media hype but has meanwhile become the cornerstone of a still expanding social-scientific literature that partly joins in with the discourse on Post-Fordism (see e.g. Vallas and Kalleberg 2017 for an insightful state of the art). In the German-speaking world, Ulrich Brinkmann et al. already presented a comprehensive study of precarious labour in 2006 (indeed the very same year the word 'precariat' ended on the fifth place of the German words of the year-list). Brinkman et al. underline that precarity is 'a notion [...] whose specific content can change according to the development of remunerated labour. The category of precarious work therefore refers to those

norms that are aggregated under the notion of normal or standard work relations' (2006, 18). The latter imply full-time work, social security, or the possibilities to be represented (through unions) and to have a say in the work conditions. These standards are clearly modern ones and in fact have emerged and were institutionalised within the context of the Fordist regime of accumulation. Consequently, precarious labour deviates from a particular historical situation and economic development. Thus, precarity is a relational and historical category.

The relational character of the precarious, which comprises both precarity and precarious labour, is reflected in the fact that it is primarily conceived in terms of a series of absences: no full-time employment, no regular contract, no full package of social benefits, etc. Therefore, economist Guy Standing, to whose influential view on precariousness we return later on, contends that

the precariat consists of people who lack the seven forms of labour-related security [...] that social democrats, labour parties and trades unions pursued as their "industrial citizenship" agenda after the Second World War, for the working class or industrial proletariat. Not all those in the precariat would value all seven forms of security, but they fare badly in all respects. (2011, 10–11)

The seven forms of labour security Standing refers to are labour market security (or adequate income-earning opportunities, epitomised by a government commitment to full-time employment), employment security (guaranteed by, for instance, regulations on hiring and firing), job security (or the opportunity to retain a niche in employment), work security (safety and health regulations, etc.), skill reproduction security, income security (co-guaranteed by minimum wages and wage indexation), and representative security (having a collective voice through, for instance, trade unions).

Overall, precarious labour is a combination of defects and excesses: one falls short of the average income and exceeds the average level of insecurity. This typically aggravates the

possibilities to plan one's future: for someone working in precarious conditions, the future continually disappears into the background because one has to focus on an ever-to-reproduce present. Also, to live in precarity equals to experience one's social status as revocable, which raises the question how individuals deal with such a situation. Klaus Dörre tries to answer it by building on Robert Castel's study on 'the metamorphoses of the social question'. Castel discerns a 'zone of vulnerability' that results from a precarious work situation and is situated between a secured and a marginalised social status. According to Dörre, one of the main strategies people deploy in this zone to invoke and rely on support coming from their direct social environment. In this way, a momentary quasi-stability may be created that, however, can always and unexpectedly overturn 'downwards' (Dörre 2007b, 6 and 13).

Beyond Immaterial Labour: Work as the Creation of Relations

Like Post-Fordism, the increasing institutionalisation of precarious work and living conditions is often related to the growing predominance of 'immaterial labour', a notion that gained quite some theoretical prominence thanks to the writings of (former) autonomous Marxists Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. The concept of immaterial labour is somewhat ambiguous since it aggregates both dull and innovative work in the ICT sector, as well as the emotional labour done by hostesses, caretakers or sales personnel. In conflating predominantly cognitive and affective modes of labour respectively, not only a clear gender division and differences between jobs situated at the higher and the lower ends of the labour market risk to be overlooked. The term 'immaterial labour' also suggests that the material infrastructure and embodied character of both 'the general intellect' (Virno 2004, paraphrasing Marx) and emotional work does not count for much. Moreover, as Sergio Bologna (2006) has rightly stressed, many modes of so-called immaterial labour actually have a relational and performative nature.

According to Bologna, those working in precarious conditions, often as self-employed, are continually obliged to look for new market opportunities and to make these productive through their simultaneous participation in both local and global networks. One of the resources thus characterising precarious activities is relational labour: the initiation and cultivation of relations, since they function as the essential condition for the selling of own products or services (Bologna 2006, 13). Typical examples of activities making up relational labour are the mediation of contact persons in institutions and the production of ideas or concepts that often do not bring immediate gains in the economic sense. In Bologna's view, self-employed workers must recognise their relational labour as such in order to be able to plan, calculate and measure it in the future: the self-employed themselves should 'appropriate the surplus value produced through relational labour' (Bologna 2006, 14).

Bologna's musings on relational labour are very relevant for understanding the situation of precarious workers in the performing arts, since their job primarily consists of this type of labour. How they may appropriate the produced surplus value is illustrated by, for instance, the performance *Umherschweifende Produzentinnen* ['Wandering Producers'], which visual artist Jelka Plate and theatre director Claudia Hamm made for the Berliner Sophiensaele in 2004. As part of the project *It's really personal out here. Arbeit als Lebensstil* ['Labour as Lifestyle'], an exhibition was organised that presented teams which contacted the present audience through the offering of services. Also the 2004 performance *1000 Dienste. Eine Dienstleistungsschau* ['1000 services: a display of service efforts'] by performing artist duo Julius Deutschbauer and Gerhard Spring enacted the production of relations with the audience as an exchange process. The two performers read a list of possible service activities. An audience member liking a mentioned service could immediately order it. It was also possible to propose another service, which the performer then also executed in the presence of the audience. The services in question were activities such as lighting a cigarette, belly-

painting, pouring a glass of beer, applying make-up to a face, etc. The audience members who signed themselves up for one of the mentioned services contributed with their reaction to the realisation of the concept of the performance and received a service in exchange. The exchange relation emerged on the spot and its genesis was staged. The process of its production fits Bologna's theorem of relational work and relational work was recognised as such in the dramaturgy of the performance. In this way, both the relational status and the precarious nature of the performers' work was put into perspective as they were dependent on the reaction of the audience in order to present and execute their work.

Self-Precarisation and Artistic Work: the example of *ELEANOR!*

In a similar vein, several artists perform their own working and living conditions as their way of broaching a pressing situation. Indeed, in the new millennium, the artist as precarious worker has become a recurrent theme onstage. In the black box as well as in the white cube, artists use their work to comment on their socio-economic position through underlining their work as an artist rather than their artistic work. Brussels-based dance artist Eleanor Bauer and German visual artist Ina Wudtke both do so by drawing from Belgian philosopher Dieter Lesage's text "A Portrait of the Artist as a Worker" (originally published in 2005). In response to Wudtke's request to write an introduction for a catalogue on her work, Lesage decided to highlight all the work, be it remunerated or non-remunerated, that Wudtke continuously performs as an artist. Wudtke then chose to perform this poetic essay in a video installation with the same title (2006), emphasising the whole range of activities she executes in order to make a living as an artist, such as her work as a DJ and magazine editor.

American-born performer and choreographer Eleanor Bauer, who works at the intersection of (conceptual) dance, stand-up comedy, creative writing and music, was likewise inspired by Lesage's essay for one of her earliest productions. In 2004, she exchanged New York City for Brussels, where she created her first work. As she puts it on her website, her

first solo *ELEANOR!* (2005) gives a critical portrait of the performing artist as a 'post-Fordist art prostitute' ("*ELEANOR!*" 2005 paragraph 1). In this ever-developing performance, Eleanor Bauer wears an "I love New York" sweater and reflects on the conditions that she accepted when asked to create the performance itself. As she explains in a later performance in 2008, she was invited by Miguel Gutierrez to create a solo performance for a benefit to feed the hungry called "Young Americans", a *Food for Thought* series at Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church in January 2005. Although Bauer was asked to perform for free and pay her own plane ticket to New York, she agreed out of first-hand enthusiasm for the context of the invitation. She felt recognized by her former artistic community, yet after accepting the invitation she started to realize the irony of the situation. The context of the benefit ended up being the catalyst an 'ironic (however humorous) and self-deprecating turn towards self-disgust in being a hopeless product of this precarious and relentless art market in which recognition is constantly substituted for money' (personal communication on August 13, 2018).

Her original solo from 2005 is grounded in Dieter Lesage's text of which she recites and performs an adapted version. A twelve-minute dance phrase inspired by the behavioural patterns as documented in Lesage's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Worker" constitutes the only dance section in the performance. The dance phrase responds to the following lines by Lesage, which Bauer shares with the audience:

You are an artist and that means: you don't do it for the money. That is what some people think. It is a great excuse not to pay you for all the things you do. So what happens is that you, as an artist, put money into projects that others will show in their museum, in their Kunsthalle, in their exhibition space, in the gallery. So you are an investor. You give loans nobody will repay you (Lesage 2006, 34).

Lesage's words already reveal that the prostitute metaphor used by Bauer to describe her solo does not really apply: artists do not do it for the money. However, they are looking for other forms of currency, such as recognition or self-development. This makes artists ideal exploitable subjects and therefore also susceptible to what political theorist Isabell Lorey (2006) has termed 'self-precarisation'.

Elaborating on the idea that governments are actively involved in the regulation of precariousness, Lorey introduces the notion of governmental precariousness and a concomitant normalisation of socio-economic insecurity through neoliberal policies encouraging marketisation, competition and entrepreneurship within the context of a deliberately trimmed-down welfare state (Lorey 2006, 39). Whereas in Fordist times, flexible work formats and insecure incomes were considered undesirable exceptions to the rule of full-time employment and permanent contracts, these 'abnormalities' have increasingly become the norm in the post-Fordist work regime. However, particularly within the creative professions, the coerced precariousness induced by the neoliberal state and the market is complemented by precariousness as choice, or what Lorey (2006) describes as self-precarisation. Creative workers are willing to sacrifice material benefits for the sake of immaterial ones such as artistic pleasure, temporal autonomy, a free work environment and opportunities for self-realisation (Lorey 2006; Laermans 2015; Van Assche and Laermans 2016; McRobbie 2016). This attitude dates back to the much older, romantically inspired artistic ethos of self-expression and the related idea of 'art for art's sake', which Pierre Bourdieu (1993) has linked to the notion of a symbolic economy primarily oriented toward the accumulation of symbolic capital instead of the pursuit of material-economic gains.

Bauer's observations are in line with Bourdieu's analysis of artistic fields. Indeed, they refer to the possible accumulation of symbolic capital by accepting the invitation to perform for free at a New York benefit. Yet the presented is highly self-reflexive, as is

already indicated by its title: *ELEANOR!* The title is a self-mocking witticism revealing how the artist's identity is all too often conflated with the artwork and simultaneously emphasises that selling one's artwork often comes down to selling oneself. Bauer thus seems to be highly aware of the self-precarisation that comes with the accumulation of symbolic capital and, more generally, with the disavowal of direct economic gains in a symbolic economy. One ironic comment in the performance quite outspokenly criticises both Bauer's compliance with the predominant artistic ethos and the logic predominating in the surrounding field: 'Let's be honest, if I really wanted to feed the hungry, I could spend 600 euros more efficiently than on a plane ticket to New York'.

Bauer's reference to the piece as a critical portrait of the performing artist as a 'post-Fordist art prostitute' rather refers to the unavoidable promotion of the self and the selling of the performer's body, which is the actual material of the work (something that is often forgotten when the art world is analysed in terms of immaterial labour). Bauer not only alludes to this issue through the mockery title of her piece. She also makes her translator wear a T-shirt with her own name written on it and sells these T-shirts in the foyer.

The dance phrase itself in *ELEANOR!* is a frantic and intuitive interpretation of Lesage's words. The phrase starts with an almost incomprehensible sequence of the words "I want, I want, I want" reminiscent of phonetic Dadaist poetry. In a similar manner, Bauer chants frenetic reiterations of the word "me", which makes us wonder why she has chosen to use her own name in capital letters followed by an exclamation mark as the title of her performance. Next, she repeats the same short sequence of frantic dance moves four times, including banging her head, twerking excessively and overexaggerating arm gestures.

As Bauer explains in a 2008 performance in Montpellier, this original version of *ELEANOR!* performed at the benefit in 2005 turned out to be a great success. She was invited to re-stage the work on average each month ever since its premiere. Overall, she has been

performing *ELEANOR!* for almost a decade, with a last performance in 2014 for the time being. However, as she notes herself in the 2008 performance, after a while she did not relate with the same urgency to the issues the performance deals with, since in the meantime she was being paid to perform the solo. Moreover, the work evolved and expanded over time, ranging from 45 minutes up to an hour depending on the improvised translations and interactions with the audience. The youngest versions of *ELEANOR!* open with a long but humorous introductory monologue in which Bauer narrates the ironic story of how *ELEANOR!* came about, after which she conducts a demographic survey questioning the spectators' professional lives. Thus the first two-thirds of the solo have evolved into a stand-up comedy lecture performance saving the original dance phrase for the very end. Subtle comments in her lecture suggest that verbal communication has become a crucial part of her work and that she would never make again a dance like the original phrase. She still dances the initial phrase because it remains a bodily archive of the conditions that incited its creation, yet she seems to dance it rather with an ironic attitude, for example by not trying to hide unconcentrated moments of giggles in response to the audience's reactions.

In brief, *ELEANOR!* is about the traps of currencies such as recognition, passion, self-development and money constantly being traded off for each other. With a tone of humour as a survival tactic for dealing with the harsh realities of the art market, it is thus a work that does not try to hide the extent of exploitation and self-precarisation going hand in hand with artistic work and the accumulation of symbolic capital (partly in view of gaining economic capital in the future). This confirms Lauren Berlant's observation that precarity 'occurs not only in the debates on how to rework insecurity, but [...] is also an emerging aesthetic' (2011, 192). *ELEANOR!* indeed illustrates a wider trend: the coming into being of an aesthetic of precariousness in which the precarious nature of artistic work has been made visible on stage and in the public sphere (see also Pewny 2011; Kunst 2015; Van Assche 2017).

Precariatized Minds and Mental Precarity

According to Lauren Berlant, the root of precarity goes back to a generalised condition of dependency that neoliberal economic practices now mobilise in unprecedented ways (2001, 192). As is also underlined by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2007), the kind of project-based work carried out by artists in the context of personal networks was and, to a great extent, remains exemplary for current socio-economic changes. Hence, an adequate understanding of their labour is crucial for our knowledge of ongoing social processes and informs us about the future of work.

Since the early 2000's, precarious workers have manifested themselves on 1 May or Mayday (also known as Labour Day) as activists fighting for their rights in various cities in Italy, Spain and France. On this day, European flex-workers gather in cities like Milan and Barcelona to demonstrate, to protest, to parade in defence of their social rights as a way out of generalised precarity. In fact, May Day is a call for help: 'mayday' is an emergency call used internationally in radio communication as a signal of distress derived from the French verb 'm'aider'. In the context of these *EuroMayDayParades*, which are primarily a combination of a rally, a protest march and festive activities such as dancing, Italian activist Alex Foti formulated a rather prophetic definition of the precariat:

The Precariat is the sum of all people with non-standard job forms that have the social standard around which collective life increasingly involves. It is a condition of generalised social precarity and singularised job precariousness. It is the exclusion of a whole generation - and soon, and entire society - from social rights bearing guarantees of collective self-defence. (2005: paragraph 7)

Guy Standing discusses the contemporary precariat as an 'emerging and dangerous class structure in-the-making' situated in-between the proletariat and the unemployed (2014,

31; compare Standing 2014). Within this emerging class, Standing discerns three subgroups: precarious workers coming from the working class who were expelled from it and left their community with a sense of despair, yet remain linked to their pasts; denizens (minorities, migrants, etc.), who live without a sense of a past or a home; and those that Anne and Marine Rambach's assembled under the heading of the precarious intellectuals: the (highly) educated people who carry out their work without future perspectives. The three groups have in common that they are not in possession of all the seven already mentioned forms of labour-related security. A comparable stance towards the notion of the precariat and the subgroups it consists of can be found in Mike Savage's overview of the contemporary British class system, which is based on an e-survey launched in 2011 together with the BBC (completed by 161,000 respondents), an additional face-to-face survey with 1,026 respondents and 50 in-depth qualitative interviews conducted in 2014. According to Savage's estimates, the precariat comprises about 15% of the total British population (2015).

However, it is crucial to observe that precarity does not only surface on a purely socio-economic and socio-political level. The precarious labour regime is also dominated by work without boundaries, in a twofold sense. On the one hand, many professionals nowadays conduct their work in a mobile work environment that is becoming increasingly transnational. On the other hand, due to the project-oriented and immaterial nature of many professions, it has become less evident to delineate where work time ends and private life begins. Marked by project-based and transnational labour, the post-Fordist work regime has eroded the difference between work time and private life. Standing (2014, 22) therefore argues that one of the precariat's defining features is a lack of control over time and introduces the notion of tertiary time, which comprises all the work done outside of paid labour time and hybridises work and leisure.

Psychologists Michael Allvin et al. claim that the working lives of post-Fordist

workers therefore have the potential to destruct work as we know it. They argue that people's control in their work increases, while their control over the conditions of work decreases: it is now up to the individual to establish a distinction between work and leisure, and to maintain personal limits (2011, 5). Work without boundaries is not a new phenomenon: what changed is that it has now become ubiquitous and hegemonic. Contemporary dance artists, for instance, have been working this way ever since the term 'contemporary dance' emerged during the 1960's. Owing to the difficult to define nature of the profession, the demand for transnational mobility (for residencies, training and touring), and the predominance of project-based work and network-oriented activities, contemporary dance and performance artists are in fact the ideal guinea pigs for an economy of work that is increasingly interweaving work and life.

Overall, precarity goes hand in hand with a constant state of temporality and alertness. Standing (2011, 18–19) refers in this respect to the 'precaritised mind', characterised by short-termism, multi-tasking and, crucially, a permanent stand-by feeling: a sense one has far too much to do at all times, but taking a time-out would entail the risk of missing opportunities. In her book *Artist at Work*, Bojana Kunst links this continual time pressure to the notion of 'projective temporality'. The time dimension and the uncertainties as well as the pressures it entails is included in the notion of project work as the verb 'projecting' always refers to the realisation of potentials and thus to future action (Kunst 2015, 154–158). Yet, the projective temporality Kunst describes, is particularly marked by the combination of the fear of not having sufficient work in the future and the concomitant pressure to work too hard in the present. In other words, time is not on your side when one is a precarious worker. For example, contemporary dance artists are often temporary dance artists: between their temporary projects they take up many other jobs such as administration, accountancy, production and tour management, promotion and communication, while - among still other

things - preparing for the next project and finalising the previous. These drawbacks may at least partially explain why the notion of artistic practice has gained so much currency over the last years. In contradistinction to 'doing a project', 'having a practice' revolves around an – assumingly – durational activity that is more sustainable than a project, which is inherently connected with the temporary.

Within the arts, precarious workers are also confronted with a particular form of mental precarity, for self-promotion has caused many artists to question their own qualities as an artist. When confronted with countless unanswered emails to programmers and artistic directors, it is just normal to cast doubt upon the qualities of one's piece, or even of oneself. Art sociologist Pascal Gielen has observed that the panic after such non-response is symptomatic of today's rampant mental precarity, adding: 'the fact that you are trading your own creativity and authenticity is making it difficult to accept that you [as an artist] are replaceable' (Griffioen and Gielen 2016).ⁱⁱ In fact, project-based work in the arts is always accompanied by mental precarity, since artists invest time and work effort – and often also their own money – when applying for project-funding without the guarantee they will receive it. Thus, the projective temporality increasingly causes creative workers to let the present slip away because of the promise that their projects will succeed in the near future. More and more, artists are living in the future, yet this sharply contrasts with the fact that their socio-economic precarity prevents them from having secure future perspectives in the long run.

Physical Precarity: Flexibility, Hyperflexibility and Inflexibility

In the performing arts in general and contemporary dance in particular, artists are susceptible to yet another dimension of precarity because of their dependency on the body. Contemporary dance artists indeed have to deal with a physical precarity induced by the flexibility required in their project-based and transnational profession. Dance scholar Anusha Kedhar insightfully discusses the body's need to meet the demands of late capitalism in

illustrating the flexibility, hyperflexibility and inflexibility of South Asian dancers in the United Kingdom (2014). Although her study focuses on a particular group of immigrant dancers, many of her findings can be applied to performing arts workers in general. Kedhar argues that contemporary capitalism and the post-Fordist work regime have created not just flexible citizens but flexible bodies (2014, 24). She understands flexibility as a

broad range of practices that includes, among other corporeal tactics, a dancer's physical ability to stretch her limbs or bend her spine backward to meet the demands of a particular work or choreographer, her ability to negotiate, and her ability to pick up multiple movement vocabularies and deploy them strategically to increase her marketability and broaden her employment options (2014, 24).

In other words, the post-Fordist work regime demands from its workers to be skilful in flexibility, persistence and adaptability. Project-based workers need to prove they can quickly adapt themselves to new circumstances and teach themselves new skills and multiple competences.

On a corporeal level, contemporary dance artists need to show that they have learned a variety of techniques, that they can adjust their movement language to a choreographer's vision, and that they are ready and fit to perform at any time. In terms of flexibility, Kedhar points out that the English Arts Council has imposed particular dual demands on South Asian dancers and other ethnic minority artists: they have to be flexible in order to manoeuvre between 'diversity' and 'innovation' (2014, 33). However, this affects any performing artist applying for project-funding. Evaluators expect artists to surprise them, yet at the same time they must remain consistent within the context of their oeuvre and its parameters: too much innovation and experiment may chase the faithful audience away. Moreover, all dance artists are susceptible to physical precarity because they are never certain that their individual style – even if it proves one is knowledgeable about various techniques – will be appreciated by a

choreographer, or whether their bodies are adaptable enough to meet the specific requirements of a new dance job.

Within the neoliberal regime of flexible artistic accumulation, dancers must in fact continuously learn and unlearn. They must have well-trained bodies, but these very same bodies should be flexible enough to temporarily place on hold a particular technique in order to incorporate a new aesthetic. This comes down to the requirement of constantly de- and restructuring one's dancing habitus and subjectivity (Laermans 2015, 318–319). In the 1990's, Susan Leigh Foster already suggested that independent choreographers, whose aesthetic visions stem from the American 1960's-period in which choreographic investigation challenged the boundaries between dance and everyday movement, 'require a new kind of body, competent in many styles', which she calls a 'hired body' (Foster 1997, 253). Against the backdrop of the neoliberal economy and the post-Fordist labour market, choreographers started to experiment with eclectic vocabularies and new interdisciplinary genres of performance. Foster contends that this evolution has circumvented the distinctiveness of the dancing body: instead of developing new and unique dance techniques, independent choreographers 'encourage[d] dancers to train in several existing techniques without adopting the aesthetic vision of any' (1997, 253). Also their socio-economic position of being an independent worker leads them to be occupied with entrepreneurship rather than with developing new dance techniques. This engendered a high degree of mobility between countries, institutions, choreographers and thus also between dance techniques, styles or forms. However, this eclecticism also stems from an always individualised corporeal potential many contemporary dance artists *want* to explore through the collaborative development of movement material (Laermans 2015). Whereas Foster still takes the traditional choreographer-performer relationship as the principal point of reference, artists in the project-based contemporary dance sector today rather swap positions continuously out of the desire to

explore their physical potentials in collaborative work relationships, thus willingly abandoning notions such as technique or style. In other words, next to the somewhat imposed flexibility described by Foster, there also exists a desired flexibility of developing individualised dance potentialities through 'the collaborative' (Laermans 2015).

Besides the requirement to have an at once multicompetent and adaptable body, Kedhar points out that South Asian dancers need to be able to conform to and thrive under increasingly temporary and unpredictable work regimes in contemporary capitalism. Within the performing arts, this 'hyperflexibility' – as she calls it – implies that artists are often hired last-minute on a temporary basis, even though some might need to travel from abroad (visa arrangements, for example, usually take longer than a two-day's notice, which is an obstacle for contemporary artists who work transnationally). Contemporary performing artists can thus be defined as a 'permanently on-call' labour force (Kedhar 2014, 31), which adds yet another dimension to their precarious situation.

Last but not least, and somewhat in contrast to the discussed flexibility and hyperflexibility, Kedhar argues that transnational dancers experience a great amount of inflexibility in the post-Fordist work regime when their body is immobilised through injury or through immigration and citizenship restrictions (2014, 34). As sociologist Jennie Germann Molz (2006) points out, the flexibility and adaptability of 'cosmopolitan bodies' are, among other things, not merely a matter of cultural dispositions but embodied performances of fitness and fitting in. Not only must a body be physically fit to travel, it has to embody tolerance and openness as well towards the world: it needs to adapt itself in order to integrate in new surroundings (Molz 2006, 6).

Due to the dependency on the body in order to perform, dance artists experience precarity on a physical level when they run out of time or money to maintain their bodies. Although the latter are indeed their primary form of capital, dancers are often not able to

maintain and continually invest in it. As they are often working on several projects simultaneously, traveling from one place to another, they tend to postpone appointments with the doctor. In addition, healthcare situations are often complex for transnational workers, which again invites one not to listen to the body's signals. The long journeys on trains and airplanes, during which artists continue working on their MacBook, are also ergonomically harmful for numerous body parts. Even the mundane reality of having to sleep repeatedly in a different bed seems to disregard the constraint of maintaining a fit and healthy body. Moreover, dancers may temporarily have no money for physiotherapy or to continue training between projects to keep the body ready to perform. In other words, dance artists are generally very aware of the body's needs and have established their own routines to remain fit, yet the reality of project-based and transnational work comes to threaten their efforts.

Coda: Precarious Resistance?

As we noted before, 'precarity', 'precarious labour' or 'the precariat' rapidly transformed from social-scientific concepts into media buzzwords on the one hand and realities that are dealt with or negotiated artistically on the other. Hence the meanwhile many manifestations of political or critical art focussing on the precarious. They often have a collective nature, for example the political and activist projects of Precarias a la Deriva in Spain or the London-based Precarious Workers Brigade. Precarias a la Deriva is a Spanish feminist group that was formed during the labour union strikes in Madrid in 2002. Against this backdrop, a large number of women realized they were not in a position to participate as temporary, domestic or self-employed workers, because no one would notice if they would strike. They therefore developed their own protest method through experimenting with alternative forms of political organization outside traditional political parties and trade union structures. The Precarious Workers Brigade is a UK-based group of precarious workers in

culture and education with a shared commitment to developing research and actions to improve their socio-economic position.

There is also a considerable group of individual artists addressing precarious work in a documentary mode, of which Hans Haacke, Hito Steyerl and the late Alan Sekula are significant representatives within the fine arts. Artists and other creative workers as well try to unite with other 'fractions' of the precariat during the *EuroMayDayParades* and featured events, but the creation of somewhat durable connections with, for instance, illegal workers or those performing non-skilled short-term labour remains difficult. Precisely the internal divisions within the precariat prevent the coming into existence of a more general coalition and even of an articulated personal awareness of the shared nature of one's social position. In this sense, the precariat is a primarily virtual class made up of, to quote Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, 'those who do not identify with any class, since they are not socially or materially structured' (Berardi 2009, 105).

Beyond the difficulties to organise – in the vocabulary of autonomous Marxism – 'the multitude' (Hardt and Negri 2000; Virno 2004), yet another question arises when discussing the political potentials of the precarious in general and precarious labour in particular. As Joost de Bloois has rightly pointed out in a lecture at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 2011, 'the paradox of precarity is that claiming precarity as a rallying cry means claiming something to overcome it', adding: 'I am not convinced whether the, part involuntary, endorsement and even celebration of precarity in current aesthetic strategies is very helpful in finding this alternative (neither is the "soft" version of this: artists celebrating their status as freelance creatives and cultural entrepreneurs)' (2011). Some authors, such as Paolo Virno (2004), plead for an exit-strategy, leaving behind the state, including the arrangements by the welfare state. However, more voices – among them Standing (2014) and Hardt and Negri (2000) – can be heard pro the idea of a basic income in order to face the growing precarisation

of both work and life. Still another possible and perhaps politically most feasible 'reformist' strategy is the development of a particular flexicurity system tailored to the needs of creative flexi-workers. Such a system in fact exists in, for example, Belgium, though it is not named that way (see Van Assche and Laermans 2016 on the 'artist status' within the context of Belgian social security).

The most direct effect of the discourse on precarity within the arts is probably the codification of fair practices, starting with the demand for a just remuneration for all labour. In Flanders and the Netherlands, extensive propositions for such codes have been made (compare the Dutch fair practice code by Breure et al. 2017 with the Flemish code by artist-based organisation State Of The Arts (SOTA) et al. 2016, the latter being underwritten by a diversified coalition of organisations, ranging from artist organisations to unions). More restricted was the 2016 call of the Landesverband Freie Darstellende Künste (LAFT) in Berlin to introduce minimal full-time wages, varying between 2,300 and 2,660 euros per month (depending on one's social security status) when granting subsidies or other forms of official financial support. However, as long as these codes are only morally and not legally binding, their impact will remain rather restricted.

Overall, the protest against precarity is indeed of a precarious nature. Not unlike the contested work conditions, it is often volatile and temporary, even fugitive. This has much to do with the fact that the projective temporality typifying precarious work by artists and other creative workers structurally overburdens them: they are just 'too active to act' (BAVO 2010). Moreover, precarisation is intrinsically linked to the neoliberal regime of flexible accumulation, whose logics of marketisation and hyper-competition create a hyper-individualistic climate with 'winners' and 'losers' who do not unite because they do not observe shared interests. In sharp contrast to previous times, even the 'losers' do not easily form lasting coalitions because many of them think they may become 'winners'. We thus

stumble over the perhaps most enduring transformative effect of precarious labour, particularly in the higher ends of the labour market. Indeed, the solid link between precarisation and neoliberal policies creates an environment in which solidarity becomes less and less probable, even if everybody would benefit more from 'strong ties' than from weak ones, because they could not only create safety nets but would, first and foremost, function as resources for commonly made 'strong claims' regarding income, working conditions or social benefits.

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ⁱ Translated from the German original: "Aufgefordert, zu erzählen, wie es uns geht, wie wir leben, [...] wir beginnen [...] einen vielstimmigen, vieltrophigen Chor: gemeinsam beklagen wir dann unsere Arbeitswirklichkeit als ForscherInnen, JournalistInnen, KünstlerInnen, ArchitektInnen, TrainerInnen. Zugleich verlassen wir uns in unserer Klage auf eine gemeinsame Sicherheit: dass wir das Feld, das uns peinigt, nicht verlassen werden, weil wir unsere Arbeit lieben".

ⁱⁱ Translated from the Dutch original: 'Het feit dat je je eigen creativiteit en authenticiteit verhandelt, maakt het moeilijk te verkroppen dat je vervangbaar bent'.