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From precarious labor to precarious economy? Planning for precarity in Singapore's creative economy

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ABSTRACT

The important place of the oftentimes "hidden" independent worker, or freelancer, has been acknowledged in developed countries where the creative economy has grown. These creative workers do not belong to the traditional employment set-up organized around firms. Instead, they move from portfolio to portfolio, assignment to assignment, interspersing corporation-based jobs with periods of self employment. Their work offers freedom, independence and creative space, but has also been characterized as precarious, because the securities of old working patterns no longer hold. While governments in many countries and cities have become attracted to the potential of the creative economy, those that have a strong tradition of economic planning, such as Singapore, will also have to come to grips with a new creative economy in which there exists a great deal more amorphousness and a hidden ecology. In this paper, I examine how the growth of "precarious labor" entails three shifts that the Singapore government is attempting to make in the face of a more "precarious economy": new methods in mapping and measurement, new directions in education and training, and new experiments in labor organization and management.

Introduction

The creative economy has grown significantly in many developed economies in the last two decades, and along with it has emerged a large literature on its genesis and characteristics, its promises and problems. One considerable body of literature focuses on the labor market in this 'new' economy (see, for example, Christopherson, 2004; Pratt, 2002) because of the fundamental social and economic shifts that creative workers represent. The rise of a 'portfolio' career (Ball, 2003, p. 8) exemplifies one of the most significant shifts, in which many perform different work roles simultaneously, often for different clients at the same time. Many work as 'independents', variously known as the 'self-employed', 'consultants', or 'freelancers'. German sociologists Voß and Pongratz coined the term '*arbeitskraftunternehmer*' to capture the simultaneous nuance of entrepreneur and employee that this group represents, translated into English as the 'entreployee' (Haunschild & Eikhof, 2005, p. 3).

In this creative economy, increasing numbers of creative workers do not belong to the traditional employment set-up organized around a firm or corporation. Instead, in moving from portfolio to portfolio, assignment to assignment, they replace a job for life with one corporation with frequent changes of employment and periods of self employment. Working lives, for this group, are organized around projects and not careers in firms, which have hitherto represented a core institution of industrial civilization (Castells, 1996, 2000; Grabher, 2002). Many independents also work formally in other sectors of the economy, or could be unemployed at the time of formal employment surveys. They thus represent a hidden and amorphous ecology, hidden because they often escape conventional statistics on employment and investment, and amorphous because they join projects, leave them, join with one group for one assignment, and then regroup with others for yet other assignments (Shorthose, 2004, pp. 153–4).

Despite the difficulties of tracking and measurement due to the hidden nature of this ecology, numerous studies have nevertheless attempted to quantify the numbers involved in the creative economy as freelancers. A 2002 survey shows that 28% of New York's creative industries workforce was thus self-employed (Keegan, Kleiman, Siegel, & Kane, 2005, p. 6). In 2004, London's equivalent figure was 20%, while the overall for UK was about 30% (London's Creative Sector Update Report, 2004, p. 20). A 2001 report of the European Commission indicated that,

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for the EU-15, there were 1.3 freelancers for every regular employee in the TIMES sector (telecommunication, internet, multimedia, e-commerce, software, and security) (MKW, 2001, p. 37–8). This figure is almost 50% higher than for the US, attributed to the fact that the US market is already consolidating while there is still dynamic growth in the EU. Topping it all is a 2004 study of Cornwall in the UK where the freelance population is said to constitute 79% of the creative workforce.

This focus of energies on measuring the absolute and relative size of the freelancing population in the creative economy is driven by national and/or municipal governments' felt need to manage a range of issues associated with this group of creative workers. Among the concerns are appropriate training and education for this new workforce development, new forms of labor organization for workforce support, and innovative strategies for industry growth. Together, they reflect an overarching concern, which is about the capacity to deal with precarity – particularly, the capacity of state agencies to deal with systemic precarity, as opposed to individual cultural workers' capacity to deal with individual precarity, which has hitherto dominated research attention.

In this paper, my aim is to turn the gaze from the precarity of the individual cultural worker to the precarity that governments face as traditional firm-based work is now joined by a different kind of labor organization, one in which the core social institutions are unfamiliar. The paper examines these issues in the context of Singapore, which seeks to increase the contribution of the creative industries to GDP from 3% in 2004 to 6% by 2012, and which has introduced a range of policy initiatives in the last 5 years to help effect this (Kong, Gibson, Khoo, & Semple, 2006). The choice of Singapore is deliberate, because of the high degree of planning that the city–state is well-known for. The injection of quite a different industrial model presents to the planning agencies in Singapore a challenge, and offers an excellent context in which to examine how governments deal with the precarity of the new creative economies.

Following this introduction, the paper will be divided into four sections. The first will review existing wisdom about precarity in the creative economy, the focus being on the precarity faced by creative workers. The second will paint in the background of Singapore's highly planned approach to various dimensions of its economy and society, and its recent imperative to build a creative economy as part of a larger shift to a new knowledge-based economy. The third section comprises three subsections, each focused on one dimension of the changing policy and practice: mapping and measurement in order to identify the freelancer population more accurately; training and education in order to develop a creative workforce more effectively; and developing mediating institutions in order to manage and organize the new workforce more appropriately. The last section then draws some conclusions.

Precarity in the creative economy

Project work offers independents or freelancers the advantage of flexibility and adaptability, building professional portfolios in ways that can be transferable to different business networks and different clients. However, project work also makes for 'bulimic careers' (Pratt, 2002), in which there is a boom and bust pattern where people work long days and nights when a project is underway, then break until the next project. In fact, because the securities of old working patterns no longer hold, many find themselves holding down three or even four projects at once in anticipation of periods with no projects. Some keep a 'day job' while freelancing on the side. In a 2005 New York survey of 2800 freelancers, 85% of respondents cited unstable income as a disadvantage of working independently (Horowitz et al., 2005, p. 5). The 'bulimic' pattern of work is commonly kept up for a few years before fear of burn out leads to a change of career, taking up a 'regular' job using acquired skills, or taking time out for a 'sabbatical' (Pratt, 2002, p. 432).

The uncertainty of the next project and the consequent instability of income are compounded by yet other difficulties. While the extent varies in different cultures and intellectual property regimes, having one's bid for a project turned down only to find one's ideas used nevertheless is certainly a problem encountered by many independents. Another common problem is not being paid in a timely fashion, particularly as companies manage their cash flow in part by paying independents when it suits them. Freelancers also suffer the lack of health insurance, which is usually provided by employers to regular staff, and the lack of intermediary institutions that set rules or define roles for employment, acting as mediators in times of conflicts. Freelancers generally "do not have the political representation they would need to push through the necessary higher social standards" (Ellmeier, 2003, p. 10). Furthermore, the nature of freelance work, which is based on employment in projects, means that such workers have unclear career paths and need to constantly acquire new skills to market themselves.

How are these various risks mitigated? To minimize risks of unemployment, networking becomes all important in the new economy. Social relationships become social capital (Cultural Policy and Planning Research Unit, 2002). Usually, this also means that the separation of work and play is blurred as social occasions simultaneously become opportunities for sourcing work, recruiting appropriate talent for the next project, and keeping up with the latest in the industry. In the US, new media workers rate friends, networks, colleagues or co-workers as the most important source for freelance work (Christopherson, 2004, p. 55). Similarly, in Cornwall, UK, survey results among independent creative industry workers reflect unanimity among respondents that networks are an important source of 'social capital', in terms of practical information, knowledge and skills, changing technologies, jobs and contracts, access to equipment and other practical aspects of creative work (Cultural Policy and Planning Research Unit, 2002, p. 57).

Networking aside, to cope with this new world of work also means paying attention to education and training, requiring workers to continuously upgrade throughout their professional lives (Castells, 1996). This need not be formal training, but a willingness to pick up expertise on the job.

Coping with intellectual property infringements and late payments seem much more difficult. Often, the amount of time and energy required to seek redress in

small claims courts is just not worth the while, and independent creative personnel end up shortchanged. The lack of intermediary institutions to set rules and act as mediators is unsurprising as traditional unions are not set up to take care of the particular work-life situations of the new economy worker. It is difficult to organize temporary workers who are highly mobile, who may have divergent needs from the permanent workforce, and who have an enhanced interest in the regulation of the external labor market due to the temporary nature of their employment (Heery, Conley, Delbridge, & Stewart, 2001, p. ix–x). Thus, it is a challenge to represent such diverse individuals as a single collective group, and there are often few such formal institutions that act as mediators between freelance laborers and employers. The general lack of a bargaining and representation system translates into a diminished sense of control over work, and a diminished sense of professionalism associated with one's work (Christopherson, 2004, p. 551).

Why then do independents continue as many do? While some have little choice, taking this route because they are laid off regular work, scholars also argue that this is because of the rise of 'new labor'. For them, work is an important source of self-actualization (McRobbie, 2002). Many independents cherish the freedom, independence and creative space that come with freelancing. It is this spirit of enterprise and creativity in a changing world of work that requires a milieu of support.

Singapore: a hyperplanned economy?

Some scholars have characterized the Singapore economy as predominantly *laissez faire* (see Rodan, 1989, p. 25–30) while others have described it as "an economy under extensive state regulation and control" (Henderson, 1993, cited in Perry, Kong, & Yeoh, 1997, p. 126). The lack of a formal development plan process (except for the first covering 1960–1964) may have contributed to the perception of slight government intervention. However, as Perry et al. (1997), p. 126 point out, "key components of the domestic economy are in full or partial public ownership and subject to government direction, as are the conditions of employment for the domestic workforce and a high share of personal incomes". Drawing from Toh and Low (1993), p. 232, they also focus attention on the fact that there is close coordination of economic development among senior ministers and civil servants. Indeed, government planning and intervention is prevalent, evident in five ways: agencies, incentives, infrastructure, workforce control, and economic management (Perry et al., 1997, p. 126).

Since independence, Singapore has established a large number of agencies and government-linked companies to modernize and stimulate the economy. Indeed, they have multiplied over the years to translate the state's economic ambitions into reality. In some ways, this has been necessary because of the lack of a strong indigenous business sector. Among the more prominent of these agencies are the Economic Development Board, International Enterprise (formerly the Trade Development Board), and the Productivity and Standards Board (formerly the National Productivity Board). Additionally, most of Singapore's larger locally-owned enterprises are government controlled in the form of government-linked companies (GLCs), which are mainly administered through three holding companies – Temasek Holdings, Singapore Technology Holdings and Health Corporation Holdings – or a statutory board (Perry et al., 1997, p. 135).

Apart from the direct participation of the government in economic activity through its various agencies, they are also the conduit for the implementation of incentives and subsidies to guide and shape economic directions and behavior. The government is also the sole supplier of infrastructure. Additionally, the government is actively involved in macro-economic management, with the aim of keeping inflation low, and coordinating investment to maintain economic growth (Perry et al., 1997, p. 138), made possible because of the acceptance of state intervention (Huff, 1994, p. 345).

Finally, though by no means the least, evidence of extensive government involvement and planning is most apparent in matters relating to the labor market, particularly in relation to industrial relations, wages, skill formation, productivity performance and the recruitment of foreign workers (Perry et al., 1997, p. 139). Through the Employment Act (1968, 1984, 1995, and 2009), the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act (1968, 1972, and 2002) and the Trade Union (Amendment) Act (1982), legislation has been used to manage industrial relations. Trade union membership is low (at around 17%) of the total employed workforce, and a close relationship exists between the government and the National Trades Union Council (NTUC). The National Wages Council (a tripartite body comprising representatives from three social partners – the employers, the trade unions and the government) makes recommendations on wage increases. In fact, the Industrial Relations Act (1972, 1985, and 2004) allows the Industrial Arbitration Court to enforce the NWC's recommendations (Anantaraman, 1990, p. 174–180).

With respect to skills formation, the state maintains close monitoring of labor market trends through the Council for Professional and Technical Education (CPTE). The Council ensures that there is adequate supply of professional, technician and skilled manpower to meet industry needs, and does so by recommending enrolment targets in universities, polytechnics, vocational, and technical institutes and training centres (Soon & Tan, 1993, p. 254).

Apart from the CPTE which is intended to plan and manage the production of the workforce in the right proportions in selected areas, there is also complementary government regulation that controls the flow of foreign workers into Singapore. This can be in the form of guest labor on short-term (2–3 year passes) or immigrant labor, which are encouraged to take root in Singapore through the granting of permanent residency and even citizenship.

Developing the precarious economy

Within this context of careful planning, how is the emergence of an amorphous, hidden ecology of new economy workers to be managed and governed? In the next three sections, I examine three areas that the Singapore government is seeking to address in the face of a more "precarious economy". First, I examine how new methodologies and measurements are being sought in order to understand

who constitute "creative workers", and how to identify them. Second, I analyze the efforts at rethinking education and training in order to nurture creative workers. Third, I explore the emergence of new mediating institutions such as workers unions and professional associations catering to the needs of freelance creative workers.

Data for this paper is drawn from two related projects that I conducted on the creative industries in Singapore. In the first project, undertaken between 2006 and 2007, I conducted a series of interviews with freelancers[1] who work in a variety of creative industries establishments (including companies from the following sectors: arts and culture, design, IT and software services, and media).[2]

In the follow-up project which was conducted from 2008 to 2009, 53 practitioners of the creative industries (including artists from a variety of genres, arts educators, arts administrators, and policy makers) were interviewed to elicit their attitudes to and perspectives on the creative industries' development in Singapore.[3]

Identifying the protagonists of the creative economy: new methodologies and measurements

Devising methodologies to identify freelancers, estimate the size of the freelance population, and obtain accurate data on them is a challenge. Their unconventional and irregular work pattern of moving from one project to the next, as well as avoidance of traditional corporate structures, makes it difficult to track them and gather statistics on their economic size and contribution. Many freelancers may hold dual or multiple jobs simultaneously in different sectors of the economy, or may be temporarily unemployed at the point of formal employment surveys, thus remaining undetected in employment statistics. The amorphous nature of freelancers' work which takes them from one short-term project to the other, and involves merger with different groups over the course of assignments adds to the complexity of measurement (Shorthose, 2004, p. 153–154).

Most existing reports on freelancers either lack details on how the statistics were obtained (e.g. MKW, 2001; Vosko, Zukewich, & Cranford, 2003), or do not even focus on statistics (Menger, 1999). For instance, a report by the Nordicity Group (2004) on the profile of SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) in the Canadian cultural industries did not treat freelancers as a separate category of workers, merging them with other classes of employees.

Some studies have nevertheless attempted to estimate the size of the freelancer population in the creative economy. For example, the *Creative New York* report (Keegan et al., 2005) drew on three sources of data[4] to obtain statistics on sole proprietorships and on creative employment beyond the creative industries, in order to derive a more complete picture of freelancers. For the most part, however, freelancers are often not detected by formal statistics, and empirical data through surveys is the usual recourse for data collection. Here, accuracy depends on access to and willingness of freelancers to participate in the surveys. Thus, in London's Creative Sector (2004) update, it was found that estimates of the self-employed population from different surveys were in fact quite inconsistent with each other; specifically, the estimate obtained from the Annual Business Inquiry did not match that gathered from the Labor Force Survey. In another report on the UK freelance workforce (Kitching & Smallbone, 2008), the writers noted that sources of data based on respondents' self-reports of their work status may lead to over-reporting of self-employment. They also noted that as temporary foreign workers were excluded in the report, their figure for the freelance population may have been understated. Any information on the freelancer population and their economic contribution should thus, in general, be treated as best-efforts at estimation but likely to be flawed.

In Singapore, the efforts have been no less fraught. The following challenges have been identified: a lack of definition of freelancing, technical flaws in data collection, and unclear categorization of sectors.

First, there are no standard definitions for "freelancing" in the public domain or at an inter-agency level. The manpower surveys in Singapore categorize workers as full time or part time workers, depending on the number of hours per week that they work. Yet, a freelancer could exceed or not reach the number of hours that a part-time worker is thought to work, and thus, could be classified in either category. There is no other means of tracking who the freelancers are in formal statistics.

Second, the means of data collection may result in inaccurate information. Referring to data from ACRA Singapore (Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority), the nature of a business is identified in that database solely through self-identification, which may have allowed some businesses to mistakenly classify themselves under creative industries. For instance, some contractors in construction classify themselves as "interior design" businesses. It thus becomes difficult to identify which businesses are actually in the creative industries, and this impedes the estimation of the freelance population that the creative industries employ.

Third, Singapore's manpower surveys track employment by industries. While there are some which clearly belong to the creative economy, it is also impossible to filter out data pertaining only to creative industries, as some of the creative industries are embedded within larger categories of industries. Using the categories defined by ACRA

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[1] For the purposes of the research, freelancers were defined as: (a) those who are in full-time employment but who take on ad hoc projects that are not a part of their duties of full-time employment, (b) those who are "full-time freelancers", and (c) those who have sole proprietorships and take on individual projects independently.

[2] A total of 321 freelancers were interviewed from April to July 2006. The freelancers were identified through snowballing (via personal contacts and associations in the creative industries), and surveyed through face-to-face, phone and web-based methods. Extended interviews with 25 individuals were also conducted as these respondents were particularly forthcoming and approachable, and readily provided their contact details at the point of the initial survey.

[3] For the second project, face-to-face interviews were conducted from January to March 2008, focusing on individuals working in specified creative clusters in Singapore (including visual artists, musicians, arts administrators, museum curators, professionals in other sectors of the creative industry such as media, photography and advertising, and arts educators). Individuals were selected based on the location of their practice (be it art gallery, art or music studio, and other forms of creative businesses) within specified creative clusters.

[4] The three sources were the United States Census' Bounty Business Patterns, a separate data set on "non-employers" supplements (which included those who file tax returns as sole proprietorships), and the 2000 Equal Employment Opportunity Special Tabulation (to help capture creative employment outside of the creative industries) (Keegan et al., 2005).

(Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority) Singapore, creative industries are not always captured as a separate category. For instance, publishing and printing are grouped together in one category, even though publishing may be considered a creative industry, and not printing.

This issue is a conceptual one and not a technical one only. It draws attention to Pratt's (2004) notion of the 'cultural industries production system' (CIPS) which acknowledges that there are many people employed in activities that are necessary to the functioning of the cultural industries, even if they are not cultural producers themselves. Thus, when gathering employment data in cultural industries, it is not sufficient to count performers and artists only, Pratt argues, but it is necessary to take into account support workers, technicians and others who are also involved in the cultural production process. Because 'software' and 'hardware' are inter-related, they must be considered in total, including, for example, cultural producers and intermediaries, infrastructure and facilities, and systems of distribution and exchange. Acknowledging this would lead to wider boundaries when considering which sectors to include in measuring the freelancer population in cultural industries. However, the question that remains is just how wide a definition is reasonable. With such continued ambiguities in the definition of cultural industry freelancers, the difficulties of clearly identifying who they are persist.

Developing a new workforce: rethinking education and training

The creative industries rely on creative individuals who can "think differently, formulate questions and solve problems" (Ball, 2003, p. 18), who are risk-takers, lateral thinkers and creative problem solvers with new ideas (Harvey & Blackwell, 1999). Many countries recognize that education is key to developing such individuals, with intentions to move away from rote learning to "focusing on flexibility, creativity and problem solving" (Sahlberg, 2006, p. 261). In Finland, educational reform has been identified as a key driver in helping to transform the national economy, with educational policies geared towards flexibility and creativity (Sahlberg, 2009, p. 1). In similar efforts to undertake educational reform to nurture creative workers, Hong Kong established the Hong Kong School of Creativity (HKSC) aimed at cultivating "an exploratory spirit, creativity and other values for economic and cultural development" (Yung, Fung, & Yim, 2005, p. 1).

Whereas Singapore has not been very successful in measuring and tracking the freelance population as an important component of the creative workforce, it has given very focused attention in recent years to education as a means for developing a more creative workforce. The refashioning of the education system in Singapore is seen to be pivotal in nurturing and encouraging the growth of creative and entrepreneurial talent in the creative industries, and more generally, in the new economy. To this end, the government has undertaken a number of initiatives to reshape the way education is conceived, delivered and experienced. These efforts may be conceptualized in five areas – first, a revamping of teaching in schools, shifting the focus to methods of teaching and learning that encourage critical and creative thinking and greater flexibility; second, a greater emphasis on art and music in the school curriculum; third, creating and supporting specialized institutions that cater to the creative arts; fourth, attracting top foreign schools specializing in the arts and design to set up their institutions here in Singapore; and fifth, developing continuing education options for those already in the workforce. These are meeting with various degrees of success, as I will demonstrate below.

Revamping of teaching in schools

Former Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam admitted candidly in an interview with Newsweek correspondent Fareed Zakaria in 2006 that while Singaporean graduates are brilliant academically, they appear less adept at handling people, particularly managing teams, less able to deal with fuzzy situations, and are less daring:

> "Yours is a talent meritocracy, ours is an exam meritocracy. There are some parts of the intellect that we are not able to test well – like creativity, curiosity, a sense of adventure, ambition. Most of all, America has a culture of learning that challenges conventional wisdom, even if it means challenging authority. These are the areas where Singapore must learn from America" (Newsweek, 2006).

This was not the first acknowledgment of the challenge that Singapore faces. A number of educational reforms and initiatives had already been introduced since the 1990s, a major one being the "Thinking School, Learning Nation" (TSLN) vision. The TSLN vision, launched in 1997, focuses on developing a creative and critical thinking culture within schools so that all students may become active learners with critical thinking skills. Its key strategies include: (1) the explicit teaching of critical and creative thinking skills, (2) the reduction of subject content, (3) the revision of assessment modes, and (4) a greater emphasis on processes instead of outcomes when appraising schools (Tan & Gopinathan, 2000, p. 7). Following the TSLN initiative, an "Innovation and Enterprise" initiative was launched in 2004, aimed at developing an attitude of innovation and enterprise among students, not so much to develop entrepreneurs and student businesses as to develop intellectual curiosity, a spirit of initiative, and strength of character (Tharman, 2004). In 2005, schools were also exhorted to "teach less" so students may "learn more" (Tan & Pak, 2007, p. 161). Another initiative, the introduction of a new GCE 'A' level subject "Knowledge and Inquiry" (KI) in 2006 similarly hopes to imbue students with a spirit of learning and exploration, through its explicit attempt at formally teaching critical thinking skills in an academic subject (Tan, 2006, p. 89).

The jury is out on the impact of these educational initiatives. On the one hand, interviewees from my two studies recognized that the key directions in educational policies are encouraging, gearing towards encouraging students to think about rather than regurgitate what they have learnt (Lim, performing artist, personal interview, 18 March 2008). This is in part made possible because teachers are now taking on the role of facilitators of learning rather than being suppliers of information to students (Low, art teacher, personal interview, 19 February 2008).

On the other hand, despite these positive changes in both attitudes and experience, there nonetheless remain challenges to nurturing creativity in students. The long tradition of rote learning and exam-orientation is difficult to change overnight, as students and teachers are accustomed to knowledge being gained mainly from standard textbooks, and where the attitude is that there are "correct" answers to all questions (Deng & Gopinathan, 1999). Yet, "Thinking Schools" and creative students would require a culture of questioning and searching within and outside the classroom (Tan, 2006, p. 93). In many of the interviews conducted among both arts practitioners and educationists, there was significant agreement that Singapore's education system produces students who are diligent, exam-smart and motivated but neither creative nor inquiring. There is also criticism that sciences and technology are privileged over humanities and social sciences, not least because education policies are guided by government's evaluation of where the next growth engine is (Ang, gallery owner, personal interview, 3 March 2008). The education system is also seen to do little to "nurture passion in the arts" (Ng, arts administrator, personal interview, 6 March 2008).

Some educationists believe that a fundamental problem may be the role of culture, its influence on teachers and parents' prior beliefs, and the environment that students themselves are socialized into. Tan (2006), p. 93 argues that Asian values with influences from Confucian teaching do not endorse an individual's right to question, challenge and demand reasons and justifications for what is being taught. In addition, the stakeholders of education in Singapore – the government, school leaders, teachers, parents, and the community at large may not yet be prepared for students who critique and question sensitive as well as potentially explosive issues. Tan (2006) argues that a culture of openness and freedom of expression are necessary when seeking to cultivate the new 'creative' student, and these may not yet have taken root in Singapore.

Another factor that Tan and Gopinathan (2000), p. 10 raise is that Singapore's nation-building history has resulted in "an omnipresent state that cherishes stability and order". However, "the desire for true innovation, creativity, experimentation, and multiple opportunities in education cannot be realized until the state allows civil society to flourish and avoids politicizing dissent". Without clear guidelines as to what constitutes acceptable questioning and challenging in the spirit of inquiry, and what constitutes a seditious act, Singapore's education reform effort may not truly get to the heart of what it hopes to achieve (Tan, 2006, p. 94).

Promoting the arts in schools

If Singapore is to produce cultural/creative workers, it recognizes a need to better promote arts education in schools. To this end, an Arts Education programme has been implemented where the National Arts Council works with artists to introduce programmes into mainstream schools. Some examples are the Ministry of Education's "writers-in-residence" scheme, designed to encourage creative writing among students through interacting with writers; a mentorship programme to promote Chinese writing among students; and the invitation of foreign arts groups to come to Singapore to teach students and to expose them to a wide variety of artistic forms. These various initiatives not only expose students to the arts, but also provide alternative ways for students to approach and experience their formal education.

Despite the numerous initiatives established by the government, there is unfortunately a lack of highly qualified trainers to teach the arts in mainstream schools. Performing and visual arts lecturers and artists interviewed shared the view that many teachers who teach art in primary school, for example, have no training in the subject (Loh, and Chua, personal interview, 11 March 2008; Tan, 24 March 2008). Chua cites the fact that there is too small a talent pool with higher education qualifications in art to support the many activities that are taking place in Singapore. Thus despite the desire and the many efforts to bring about changes in the education system, there are still numerous obstacles that need to be addressed.

Specialized arts schools

In recent years, the government has also supported further the development of specialized arts schools. As a digital artist observed (Lim, personal interview, 18 March 2008), there are many more opportunities now to obtain an arts education compared to 30 years ago.

In 1999, government funding for Singapore's two existing arts schools offering diploma courses, LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) was raised to be on par with funding for Singapore's polytechnics whereas previously they had to rely on private sources. The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, Singapore's first, was established in 2001 at the National University of Singapore. In anticipation of the growth in the creative industries, other new courses were introduced in 2005, such as diplomas in arts management and theatre production design (NAFA) and more master of arts programmes and bachelor degree courses at LaSalle (Straits Times, 2005). In addition, at university level, a new School of Art Design and Media (ADM) was set up at the Nanyang Technological University in the same year, offering a Bachelor in Fine Arts degree. In 2007, Nanyang Polytechnic began to offer a new diploma in motion graphics and broadcast design, and Temasek Polytechnic a new diploma in retail and hospitality design (Straits Times, 2007). Indeed, with greater accessibility to quality arts education and the higher profile of the creative industries, interest in arts education has been fuelled. Enrolment at LaSalle-SIA grew 9% every year between 2001 and 2005 (Straits Times, 2005), and enrolment almost doubled between 2005 and 2009. NAFA's enrolment grew 13.6% between 1999 and 2004 (Straits Times, 2005), and by more than another 10% by 2010 (correspondence with NAFA, 13 December 2010). In 2008, Singapore's School of the Arts (SOTA) became the first pre-tertiary level dedicated arts school to be established. In addition to nurturing future artistic practitioners, more generally, the school hopes to cultivate in their students lateral thinking skills, risk-taking attitudes, and an appreciation for artistic forms (personal interview, Rebecca Chew, principal of SOTA, 26 February 2008).

Private local schools such as Raffles Design Institute have also come on-stream to cater to the greater demand

for arts education in Singapore (Today, 2006a). Another example is the First International Design School (FiDS), the only design school here that is managed and owned by professional designers (Today, 2006b).

While these developments have largely been applauded by arts practitioners, many note that there is still a paucity of degree and postgraduate programs that interested students can take to prepare them better for work in the creative industries. In addition, employers' interviewed have stated emphatically that specific skill sets are not necessarily lacking among freelancers; what is needed is more experience and exposure. Thus, universities and other specialized academic institutions considering the introduction of relevant courses must be aware that academic knowledge will not suffice, and that offering practical internship opportunities and exposure to industry will be critical for preparing students.

Attracting foreign arts schools

In addition to expanding the local arts education scene, famous arts institutes have been lured to Singapore to complement the efforts taken locally to develop an 'indigenous' creative class. Under the government's "Global Schoolhouse" initiative,[5] 16 internationally renowned institutions have set up campuses in Singapore. In particular, New York's prestigious Tisch School of the Arts which boasts Oliver Stone and Ang Lee as alumni, opened its first campus outside the US in Singapore in the second half of 2007, offering a masters degree in film production. Its inaugural class of just 33 saw an application of 300, attesting to the standing of Tisch internationally and to the fact that film studies is highly coveted in Singapore. The decision to locate in Singapore was based on an evaluation of the "vast number of film locations", "the reservoir of Asian stories in the region", "the extensive range of media services capabilities available" (Lee, 2007b), a rapidly mushrooming community of artists in Asia with a rich history of artistic expression and a high demand for quality film training in the region (Agence France Presse, 2006).

Another example of a foreign school that was successfully attracted to Singapore is the renowned design school, the Domus Academy in Milan, which linked up with NTU's School of Art Design and Media in 2006 to offer two master's programmes in product design and design management (Straits Times, 2006).

While welcome and attractive as options for students, some arts practitioners are also conscious that importing foreign (western) institutions represents a missed opportunity for Singapore to develop its own high quality institution, with emphasis on Asian art forms. For example, theatre practitioner Soleis has advocated the importance of developing programs that acknowledge and develop an appreciation for Asian cultural traditions, as well as those which celebrate multi- and inter-cultural possibilities, marked by multiplicities of language, pluralities of cultures and inclusivity of intercultural contexts (personal interview, 30 March 2008). Bringing in foreign arts schools of

a "western complexion" is deemed "detrimental" to the development of local and Asian genres and "intercultural idioms" (Jean, writer, personal interview, 16 March 2008).

Continuing education options

Beyond the formal education system, the government has also devised continuing education initiatives for the workforce. To provide training and skills development support for creative workers in the arts and culture, design, and media and communications sectors, the Workforce Development Agency (WDA), the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) and industry partners worked together to produce a national continuing education and training framework for professionals in these sectors. A Creative Industries Manpower Skills Training Council for this sector was appointed to guide the development and training needed for this sector, comprising creative practitioners, representatives from industries, and government agencies (MICA, Media Development Authority, National Arts Council, National Heritage Board, and Design Council Singapore). Consultants from the UK were brought in to help develop the framework, named the Creative Industries Workforce Skills Qualifications (CI WSQ), working with practitioners in Singapore. The framework maps the skills needed by a range of occupations in all the sectors, and forms the basis for developing training, curriculum and assessment programmes. They comprise three skill sets: occupational skills (specific skills required to perform a specific job in the industry); industry skills (broad industry knowledge and skills relevant to an industry); and employability skills (generic skills that are portable across all industries, including literacy, numeracy and soft skills). The intention is to convert these into training programmes "to help our workforce by closing the skills gaps, or building a pipeline of talents to meet the needs of the industry" (Personal interview, WDA officer, 6 March 2008).

Most recently (in May 2010), the WDA, in partnership with the Singapore Media Academy, introduced the Creative Industries Apprenticeship Scheme to help Singaporeans acquire relevant training and practical work experience (WDA, 2010a). In addition, the agency has also collaborated with academic institutions to provide avenues for aspiring students in creative industries opportunities to showcase and develop their technical skills in areas and increase their visibility in the work environment through competitions (WDA, 2010b). These initiatives recognize the fact that the normal routes of academic success are insufficient to develop the full potential of future participants of the creative industries economy, and need to be substantiated with practical experience.

From the perspective of freelance practitioners, while continuing education in technical skills and industry skills are welcome, skills development in areas such as management, financial accounting, legal contracts and advertising are also necessary, and perhaps most needed. As a theatre practitioner and a glass artist highlighted in interviews with me, while pursuing their artistic passions, they have had to undertake multiple roles such as accountant and manager, and both highlighted the fact that many artists do not have the requisite business skills. They have thus organized a number of workshops (such as "Introduction to Contract for Artists" and "Developing Marketing Skills" workshop)

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[5] The "Global Schoolhouse" initiative is was set up in 2002 to build up the Singapore Education brand-name, drawing world-class universities like *INSEAD*, *Chicago Booth Graduate School of Business* and *New York University's Tisch School of the Arts* to set up operations in Singapore.

to help artists cope with business issues (personal interview, 30 January 2008). This point is further reiterated by many of the freelancers interviewed, where it became apparent that there were freelancers who still did not know enough (or at all) about contracts and legalities. As such, they either did not draw up contracts with their clients, or did not fully scrutinize the contractual details to ensure that their own interests had been safeguarded. Some also thought that their projects were too small to bother about contracts. There were also those who thought it too difficult or troublesome to find out about and draw up the appropriate documents, to enforce contractual agreements or bring their case to the Small Claims Tribunal Court because they believed the process to be protracted, and the sum involved not commensurate with the effort needed. Continuing education thus needs to address these dimensions in addition to technical skills and industry-specific skills.

Inventing new mediating institutions

In an earlier section, I had elaborated on the precarities confronting freelancers in the creative economy, revolving around bulimic careers, uncertain remuneration and benefits, competition and seasonality, lack of capacity for development and progress, and infringements of intellectual property. These challenges have prompted the development of new processes in the entry to the labor market and new modes of labor organization.

New processes in the entry to the labor market

The new economy labor market seldom depends on formal recruitment procedures, such as going through a human resource agency, agents, advertising or sending in resumes (Blair, 2001, p. 152; Blair, Culkin, & Randle, 2003, p. 628). Formal selection processes are seldom used by employers to hire potential employees (Blair, Grey, & Randle, 2001, p. 181). Instead, informal mechanisms, such as depending on social networks, word of mouth, previous work experiences and establishing one's reputation are the pivotal means by which one obtains job information and employment opportunities (Haunschild, 2003, p. 916). Furthermore, the labor market is continually being populated by new entrants, who may or may not have had formal training. Thus, the freelancer needs to be creative in his/her job search strategy, and is sometimes dependent on both formal and informal avenues for employment.

Freelancers interviewed in my two studies favoured the setting up of a freelancer contact database through which they could be contacted. While in other countries, unions may be the platform through which creative workers obtain job referrals or contacts, this was one of the least favorable options in Singapore. Perhaps because the government has been quite involved in matters relating to the labor market, as I demonstrated earlier, here too, government agencies have recognized and responded to the desire for some platform for "matchmaking" freelancers and potential employers.

The first example of government effort to help manage the precarity facing freelancers is the organization of a Creative Industries Fair by the WDA, MICA, and SPRING Singapore. This fair sought to bring together potential employers and employees and aimed to offer interested applicants knowledge of the range of possible jobs in the creative industries (WDA, 2009). In addition, at the fair, a number of training courses for current practitioners in the creative industries were offered to develop their technical skills, thus further enhancing their employability.

A second example of how a government agency has sought to help manage the labor market of freelancers is the collaboration between MICA and Emily Hill Enterprise (a creative cluster enterprise). Together, they established in 2009 an on-line platform called sixdegrees.asia, which is not only a contact point for freelancers within the creative industries and potential clients, but also a space for all practitioners within the creative industry's diverse sectors to interact with other practitioners (freelancers included), exchange experiences, tips and advice. It is also a space to showcase work produced. This online platform seeks to facilitate not only potential collaborations, but also to encourage the establishment of respective industry benchmarks and best practices, and to allow freelancers to connect and interact as a community (Six Degrees Asia, 2010).

New modes of labor organization: the role of collectives

Another strategy to combat economic uncertainty amongst freelancers in the creative industry is the teaming up of independent workers, be they fashion designers, architects, graphic artists or even toy makers, as 'design collectives' so that they may achieve more than they could if they were on their own (Business Times, 2007). While such design collectives working as professional outfits are a norm in North America and Europe, they are less well-developed and well-known in Singapore though it appears to be gaining momentum. Amongst those that have developed in recent years are Studio, fFurious, Artvsts, and Chemistry. They offer a business model particularly suitable for young design graduates who do not want to be bound by corporate firms, preferring to take a stab at going it alone with small teams of other designers. This enables them to work in collaboration under a shared brand name yet maintain individual creative pursuits and distinctiveness (Business Times, 2007).

One of the advantages of such an arrangement is that it does not need to be confined to Singapore, but affords transnational opportunities. For example, 40% of Phunk Studio's business is agency work of which only 10% originates locally (Business Times, 2007). Another example of a collective, Outofstock Design, comprises a team of four (two Singaporeans, an Argentinean and a Spaniard), and although it is registered and based in Singapore, responds to opportunities from at least three cities: Singapore, Buenos Aires, and Barcelona. Indeed, its debut collection "Momento", a series of furniture inspired by childhood memories, showcased at the Salone Satellite Design Fair in Milan (DesignSingapore Council, 2007).

New modes of labor organization: the role of unions

A third kind of mediating institution for freelance workers in the new creative economy is slowly emerging. To cater to the particular need of freelancers and flexible workers, trade unions have had to reinvent themselves, adapt to the structural changes in the labor force, and change the way they organize, recruit and retain members (Heery, Simms, Conley, Delbridge, & Stewart, 2002; Heery et al., 2001).

Unions that seek to represent the flexible workforce need to move "beyond the enterprise" (Heery et al., 2001). This means that unions in the new economy need to take up particular strategies of representation that break away from traditional models of unionism: for example, recruiting at points where potential members seek work, providing individual services, providing direct representation and advocating for regulatory changes that benefit the freelance worker (Heery et al., 2001). Thus, there is a need for traditional unions to evolve so as to incorporate the growing freelance segment, as well as for new unions to be created specifically for freelancers and the flexible workforce.

In Singapore, the above shifts are slowing occurring. The Singapore Union of Broadcasting Employees, for example, has as its primary focus, full-time employees, but it aims to provide services to media freelancers as well. More recently, the Media Development Authority of Singapore has supported the setting up of an organization (which could be a union, an association or society) for media freelancers that will represent their needs and grievance (Today, 2010). Such a form of labor organization would be the first in the creative industries in Singapore, and it will undoubtedly be watched for its effectiveness, with a view to possible replication in other sectors of the creative industry.

Unions have the traditional roles of protecting workers from exploitation, and working for fair wages and working conditions, for example, suggesting minimum pay and pay structures, providing advice, ensuring members have access to health insurance and health services, and mediating during a dispute (Blair et al., 2001, p. 173; Blair et al., 2003, p. 623). For unions catering to freelancers, additional roles may be envisaged. One such role is to establish a central directory for both employers and employees, with formal systems for accreditation and certification. Due to the technical specialization of much freelance work and the project-based nature of production, employers may find a central directory helpful if it accredits and certifies potential employees, thus aiding employers in making decisions (Blair, 2001, p. 152). Unions may maintain this central directory by in effect restricting membership only to those who are qualified and certified. On the other hand, such a practice could negatively impact freelancers, if the union ends up controlling the labor market by limiting access to work via union membership.

Conclusions: can the precarious economy be planned?

In the first decade of the 21st century, much more attention has been given in Singapore to the potential of the creative industries in not only contributing directly to the economy, but in catalyzing growth in tourism, retail, manufacturing and education sectors (Lee, 2007a). In 2004, Singapore's creative industries contributed to 3.6% of GDP, a rise of 8% over the previous year. Total value-add was S$6.7 billion (Lee, 2007a). Jobs in the creative sector grew by 5.5% per annum compared to 2.3% for the whole economy from 1995 to 2003. From 2003 to 2008, Singapore's creative industries averaged about 6% in value-added growth yearly. Annual employment growth averaged 4% during this same period (EnterpriseOne, 2010). While this is encouraging, the traditional sector of manufacturing continues to do much better, accounting for a steady 25% of

Singapore's GDP in 2006 and the 15 years prior to that (WDA, 2006). On the other hand, the creative sector holds its own when compared to another relatively new sector (biomedical sciences industry), which contributes 4.1% of the nation's GDP (Contact Singapore, 2010).

If the creative industries are to progressively contribute more significantly to the economy, whether in terms of the GDP or in terms of employment, the question needs to be asked if that progress is to be achieved in *laissez faire* manner or through greater planning, Singapore-style. The answer may be some combination of the two.

In order to know if the creative economy is contributing to employment, it is necessary to develop a more robust method for identifying and recognizing those who work in the creative industries, particularly the freelancers. As one Singaporean arts educator put it, "the government thinks that some of the diploma programs in the creative arts are producing graduates who are unemployed and unemployable, but in effect, many are freelancing and it is the government that does not know how to locate them, identify them, and recognize them and their contributions" (Koh, personal interview, 22 March 2008). More careful planning is needed here, not in relation to economic development measures, but in relation to data collection measures, be it the means of data collection (e.g. ACRA databases, manpower surveys or other ad hoc or dedicated survey instruments) or inter-agency definitions of what constitutes employment, workforce (freelancers), and creative industry. Here, there are conceptual issues at stake in addition to technical ones. Whether an industry is a creative industry or not depends on one's definition of such an industry. In Pratt's CIPS, a more expansive notion of creative industry is envisaged, which can be helpful for some purposes, for example, in recognizing what contributions to GDP are being made by the creative sector. Yet, in terms of identifying the freelancers who are contributing most directly to the creative industry, a less expansive notion may be needed, at least in the first instance, in order that strategies and initiatives may be better focused and targeted at addressing their needs.

With regard to preparing potential future workers for the new/creative economy, a great deal of planning has already gone into educational reform and training programs in Singapore, as discussed earlier. However, the plans are only as good as their implementation. Deeply rooted cultural practices and values cannot be planned away. The approach to teaching and learning, the privileging of "pragmatic" disciplines that lead to well-established careers, and the attitudes towards artistic and related endeavours are all underpinned by value systems that need time to modify. What is needed is consistent, patient and widespread action for effective change to occur across the system.

As for the well-being of a class of workers whose very existence is characterized by precarity, thoughtful plans and careful management can offer them some assistance and provide a measure of relief from that precarity. Here, Singapore's first steps at developing platforms for "matchmaking" and for sharing experiences and advice among the freelancer class are well-conceived and well-received. In these ways, precarity can be managed and moderated somewhat as efforts proceed apace.

To the extent that careful planning and management can moderate the state of precarity for creative workers, the

economy need not be a precarious one. Indeed, the creative economy can thrive if its key resource – creative individuals – are allowed to thrive, with a nurturing education system, a willingness and ability to recognize who they are, and a concerted effort to develop mediating institutions to moderate (though probably never eliminate) their precarity.

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