

Art in Residency: Precarity or Opportunity?

Written by Sebastjan Leban

Our contemporaneity is flooded with art-in-residency programmes offered globally. From big city centres to peripheries, from chaotic to calm surroundings, from super-technological to completely wild environments, you are being offered a unique opportunity to become an in-residency artist. Open calls, awards, grants, prizes, competitions, anything goes these days. Fulfilled with fancy phrases of mobility, exchanging of ideas, interculturality, collaborative work, etc., those programmes offer a product for which in the majority of cases the artist is charged for. If on the one hand we have a symbolic value – in terms of curriculum vitae – that the artist directly gains from a residency and the hope/promise of a possible breakthrough on the International scene, on the other we have an economy that expropriates creativity and produces surplus value. The analyses provided by the paper makes visible the mechanisms of precarisation of artists within the artist residencies programmes.

The scope of the analysis is not to defame any artist residency, but to critically reflect upon an economy based on precarity. Of course, artist residencies are very important since they do not represent just some kind of artistic tourism but real spaces for knowledge production, exchange of ideas, personal and professional growth, development of

individual and collaborative projects, research, etc.

As reported, residencies “can offer access to new technologies, partnerships and funding streams as well as, in some circumstances, lead to the development of new products and ideas that expand the artists’ oeuvre. The experience of being in residence also builds capacity for cultural awareness and competence, for organisational development, personal development and managerial skills.”[1] But all of this comes with a price. It is not just about the personal costs an artist has to face in order to be in residency, but also about the price in terms of precarisation. Prior to investigating this, let’s take a closer look at the *Policy Handbook on Artists’ Residencies*

developed within the *European Agenda for Culture during 2011 – 2014*. The results deriving out of this policy were highlighted by the *Working Group of EU Members States Experts on Artists’ Residency – OMC (Open Method of Coordination)*. In it the group detected that artist residencies “play an important role in facilitating and catalysing artists’ ability to move across the world...build bridges between countries and cultures which contributing to cultural diversity.”[2] From the report we learn that the artists mobility and their inclusion in artist residencies significantly contribute to the time we live in, where intercultural understanding are of crucial importance. The

Policy Handbook highlights the importance of artist residencies and the benefits directly experienced by the artists, the host institutions and the regions. Artist residencies are presented as a story of success, as a must do for any ambitious artist willing to succeed. The opportunities accordingly are vast, from competitive and challenging environments, to professional and thoroughly elaborated programmes, where you are offered spaces for development and investigation, fulfilled with creativity, research, knowledge, enthusiasm in deep connection with the art and cultural scene, the local and the international community. What strikes the eye in the *Policy Handbook* is a significant element located in section four of the report *Benefits of artists' residencies programmes* where the group identified five key elements contributing to the common benefits artist residencies bring to the cultural sector. Those are the artists' professional development; the economic benefits for the artist, the host, the region, etc.; the cultural development for the artist, the host organisation, the local community; organisational learning and capacity building for the host and the community; and the profile raising, particularly for the city/region where the residency is located.[3] Although we could agree that four of the highlighted elements may hold

true, there is the question of the economic benefit

that for sure holds true for the host institution and the region but is completely inaccurate when it comes to the economic benefit experienced by artist. By analysing the market of artist residencies, it becomes immediately clear that there are only very few residencies that cover direct costs occurred by the artist in the residency (almost all of which require an application fee before the selection process), whereas the majority cover direct costs just in part. What you are normally being offered is a studio, even though there are many residencies requiring you to pay a rent, in some cases costs of accommodation or travel costs are offered, but mainly you will have to pay part or the entire expenses in relation to the costs of accommodation, transportation, meals, art supplies, etc. The list goes further, where for a unique opportunity to be in residency besides free labour and self-cost covering, you are also expected to donate a work of art or two. This market has become so bizarre that you can find open calls for residency that has literally turned into lottery campaigns. One such host institution provides a fully covered residency abroad with stipend that is funded by the very same artist participating in the open call. A raffle! If you decide to apply, you have of course to meet the eligibility criteria by showing proper art experience

up to which you have to buy a numbered ticket/s which
are subsequently drawn at random where the holder of the winning ticket wins the residency. In a supermarket manner if you buy more than one ticket you get a special discount. However, besides the direct costs, what artists embarking in a residency encounter are also the indirect costs, meaning the loss of income from jobs, a difficulty in maintaining a home/family while being in residency, and much more. This precarious working and living conditions do not define just what Corina L. Apostol detects as being the precarious reality where “young art students, newly graduated from academies and universities, have to deal with not being able to afford a studio, with scrambling for teaching positions, with having almost no health benefits”[4] but it determines the mode of expropriation and subjugation within the creative economy. One could justifiably argue that the expenses covered by the host institution includes much more than just the costs exposed so far in the text, i. e. the costs of studio visits, equipment, recurrent costs, advertisement, all the expenses connected by running a space. But as the *Policy Handbook* clearly points out the host institution is among those who directly gain an economic benefit from every single residency. That's why they manage to survive. And, of course, we should be precise in emphasising that many

artist residencies are run by artists themselves being in

the same precarious situation as their fellow residents. So, what then is the trigger behind this economy? What is the role and purpose of an art in residency programme? Is its sole purpose to promote art or are there some more deeply rooted elements in its backgrounds? What if residency is in fact a form of precarisation of the artist's life? Andrew Ross in *The New Geography of Work: Power to the Precarious?* writes, how the majority of those working in the creative economy are very much familiar with its feast and famine.[5] As precarious workers they have to live in a “limbo of uncertainty, juggling their options, massaging their contacts, never knowing where their next project or source of income is coming from.”[6] According to Ross, this economy is defined by subcontracting, outsourcing and other modes of flexploitation of which artists' residencies are a constitutive part. Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt explain how artists and the creatives are the “model entrepreneurs, the ideal workers of the future.”[7] In their analysis they expose how the lives of those creative labourers are in fact precarious, insecure and discontinued, signed by “long hours and bulimic patterns of working, by the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play, by poor pay, by high levels of mobility, by passionate attachment to the

work and to the identity of creative labourer (e.g.

web designer, artist, fashion designer), by an attitudinal mind-set that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism, by informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality, and by a profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields.”[8] The creative labour, the cognitive labour, the affective labour, the network labour, the immaterial labour, those are the definitions of the new forms of labour within the new economy where, as detected by Christian Marazzi, we have to cope with the destruction of stable employment, of regular wages, and of the increasing size of the capitalist reserve army. Jamil Jonna and John Bellamy Foster in *Marx's Theory of Working-Class Precariousness - And Its Relevance Today* reflect upon the global reserve army of the contemporary world. In it they detect that after the financial crisis of 2007/08 we saw an increment of global unemployment and a restructuralisation of labour. What started to determine the international labour market was “an enormous growth of part-time, temporary, and contingent work, as well as greater unemployment and underemployment generally.”[9] By referring to the International Labour Organisation figures from 2013 “the global reserve army consisted of some 2.3 billion

people, compared to around 1.65 billion in the active

labour army, many of whom are precariously unemployed.”[10] On this evidence it becomes clear why the precarious conditions artists are forced to work and live in are not decreasing but rather escalating. The new frontier of the capitalist valorisation in the new economy lies in the marginalisation of waged labour and the valorisation of free labour, that is essentially precarious, and that allows capital to execute the same control as in the wage labour system, but with the significant difference of capital having no obligation in terms of welfare, social security, pension funds, working hours, etc. That is why Gill and Pratt highlight what Ross in *No-Collar: The Human Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* names as industrialization of bohemia when analysing the geeksplotation of programmers being formed on the basis of the so-called artist bohemian work/life. According to Ross, many of those who establish the bases of the Internet sector had training in the arts and brought to the IT sector “their experience in sacrificial labour, a willingness to work in low-grade office environments, solving creative problems for long and often unsocial hours in return to deferred rewards.”[11]

Similarly in the creative economy artists are compelled to bring into the field their experience,

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knowledge and creativity, forced to labour without

~~wages, with scarcely or any reward either from the~~

mirage of a possible breakthrough. As stated by

Rebecca Garrett and Liza Kim Jackson, "artists are

the least paid of the so-called professions and

generally live under the poverty line. Artists dangle

between self-employment, casual contract work,

artists' grants, and the very remote possibility of

success on the art market (a star system that

promotes exceptionalism)."[12] How can we than challenge

this precarious economy? As a matter of fact, this

precarious reality represents just one of the forms of

precariousness within the capitalist mode of production.

That is why we should read it in the same constellation of

exploitation as the one reproduced upon the migrants, the

working class, the capitalist reserve army. Gill and Pratt

instruct us of the meaning of being precarious in relation

to work that includes "all forms of insecure, contingent,

flexible work - from illegalized, casualized and

temporary employment, to homeworking, piecework and

freelancing."[13] What is more precarity for them

does not define just the mode of exploitation of life

and work but it also represents a possibility for a

formation of a new political subjectivity. Precarity

thus signifies "both the multiplication of

precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living and,

simultaneously, new forms of political struggle and

solidarity that reach beyond the traditional models

of the political party or trade union.”[14] The demand

for a formation of a new political subjectivity should also be implied when referring to artist residencies.

By returning to the *Policy Handbook* what this work plan for culture brings about is also a guideline providing recommendations for policy makers at EU level, at national level (EU members) and at regional/local/city level that completely fails to acknowledge the precarious working and living conditions of the artists within the creative economy. We can thus conclude that we are confronted with two possible scenarios: the one going in the direction already determine in the text where precarity will be expanded to the utmost or the other that demands from us to struggle in order to gain back our rights.

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http://ec.europa.eu/culture/policy/cultural-creative-industries/documents/artists-residencies_en.pdf, 37.

[2] Ibid., 9.

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[3] Ibid., 37.
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[4] Corina L. Apostol, 'Art Workers Between Precarity and Resistance: A Genaology', ArtLeaks no.3, 2015. Accessed at <https://art-leaks.org/artleaks-gazette/>, 15.

[5] Andrew Ross, 'The New Geography of Work: Power to the Precarious?', On Curating Issue 16, 2013. Accessed at <http://www.on-curating.org/issue-16.html#.WZmUeYpLeog>.

[6] Ibid., 07.

[7] Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, 'Precarity and Cultural Work in the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work', On Curating Issue 16, 2013. Accessed at <http://www.on-curating.org/issue-16.html#.WZmUeYpLeog>, 26.

[8] Ibid., 33.

[9] Jamil Jonna and John Bellamy Foster, Marx's Theory of Working-Class Precariousness - And Its Relevance Today. Accessed at <https://monthlyreview.org/2016/04/01/marxs-theory-of-working-class-precariousness/>

[10] Ibid.

[11] Andrew Ross, 'Jobs in Candyland: An Introduction' in No-Collar: The Human Workplace and Its Hidden Costs, Temple University Press, 2014, 10.

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[12] Rebecca Garrett and Liza Kim Jackson, 'Art, Labour and Precarity in the Age of Veneer Politics', *Alternate Routes* vol. 27, 2016, Accessed at <http://www.alternateroutes.ca/index.php/ar/article/view/22404>, 283.

[13] Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, 'Precarity and Cultural Work in the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work', *On Curating* Issue 16, 2013. Accessed at <http://www.on-curating.org/issue-16.html#.WZmUeYpLeog>, 27.

[14] Ibid.

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