

# Art and immaterial labour

'Art and immaterial labour'... the conjunction is at once innocent and presumptuous. As Adorno suggested, if the general problem with using the word 'and' in titles is that it 'permits everything to be connected with everything else and is thus incapable of hitting the mark', in some instances it nonetheless conveys a strange inevitability. 'Art' and 'immaterial labour' seem to belong together – even if we don't know why.

In such instances, there is a literalness to the conjunction, highlighting the aconceptual aspect of titles, which marks their closeness to names, and hence to things, and in particular to those most peculiar of things, works of art. Adorno agreed with Lessing about 'the stupidity of conceptual titles', and he agreed with Peter Suhrkamp's 'taboo on "and"'. But he had to admit that in some cases 'the colourless word "and" sucks the meaning up into itself' when it 'would have turned to dust if it had been conceptualized'. Yet conceptualize it we must.

The 'rightness' here derives, I think, as much from the conceptual oddity of the connection as from the self-evidence of its expression. The identification of art with immaterial labour has become so strong that it is not so much affirmed as problematized – thrown into doubt – by the assertion of a connection. The connection functions to separate the terms – to assert their difference – when placed against the background of the presumed identity. 'Art and immaterial labour', then, is not the description of a topic; it is the name of a problem: the problem of the identity and non-identity of art and immaterial labour, not merely with each other, but with themselves.

But why the presumption of identity? It derives, on the one hand, from the recent history of art – or at least a particular canonical (mis)description of it – and, on the other, from the promiscuousness of the concept of immaterial labour itself. It is from the conjugation of these contexts and their ramifications within the internationalized discourse of theory that the problematic of 'art and immaterial labour' arises.

In 1973, the US art critic Lucy Lippard famously declared the six years from 1966 to 1972 the years of the 'dematerialization of the art object', by virtue of the primacy of 'so-called conceptual art or informa-

tion or idea art' (having previously expounded the dematerialization thesis in a more restricted context, in an essay co-authored with John Chandler, published in *Art International* in February 1968). In 1996, in 'Immaterial Labour' (expanded in the as-yet-untranslated book, *Lavoro immateriale: Forme di vita e produzione di soggettività*, 1997), Maurizio Lazzarato extended the autonomist expansion of the concept of productive labour into unwaged activities, through the notion of 'informational content'. Thus, one might say, nearly thirty years later, post-Marxist economics caught up with contemporary art. However, things are not quite as simple as this picture suggests.

According to these two narratives, at least, conceptual art 'dematerialized' the *object* (specifically, the *art* object), while information technology made *labour* 'immaterial'. There is a disjunction here between object and act, which restages the classical modern philosophical antinomy of the subject. And it makes the identification between art and immaterial labour appear differently depending on one's starting point. From the standpoint of a 'dematerialized' art object, it is the immateriality of the new forms of labour that establishes the connection with art, tracking the dematerialization of the object back to the immateriality of its source (thinking as art labour). From the standpoint of immaterial labour, on the other hand, this 'immateriality' has the alternative function of generalizing the concept of labour beyond the 'economy' to all spheres of life, within which 'art' is included, indifferently, like any other. There is no specificity to art labour here. It is not clear that these problematics are compatible, or indeed that each is individually coherent. Hence the transformative potential of their crossing, at the point of reflection on the purported becoming-labour of art and becoming-art of labour – a point at which each risks 'turning to dust'.

The essays that follow were presented to the conference 'Art and Immaterial Labour', organized by *Radical Philosophy* at Tate Britain, London, on 19 January 2008. They are preceded here by the introduction given on the day by Éric Alliez on behalf of the French journal *Multitudes*.

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# A very different context

‘Art and Immaterial Labour’ and *not* ‘Conceptual Art and Immaterial Labour’. I want to state this at the outset to echo the ‘disquiet’ voiced by some of our speakers before confirming their participation in this ‘Italo-French’ day, which follows the ‘German’ day organized at Tate Britain at the end of 2005. On that occasion, we were already dealing with ‘art and politics’, and with the link between these two terms proposed by what we called, with no tongue in cheek, the Karlsruhe School of Peter Sloterdijk, Boris Groys and Peter Weibel (see the dossier ‘Spheres of Action: Art and Politics’, *RP* 137, May/June 2006). I say this in order to put our participants entirely at ease, as they belong neither to the ‘artworld’ nor to the Anglo-Saxon ‘cultural’ sphere, which in this respect are largely dominated and driven by a debate articulated in terms of Art ‘after Philosophy’ and ‘after Conceptual Art’.

The brief for this conference begins with a reminder of the ‘fierce debate since claims about the “dematerialization” of art were made in New York at the end of the 1960s’, or, one might say, *How New York Stole Conceptually the Idea of Contemporary Art*. But this is juxtaposed straightaway to ‘the very different context of libertarian political debates in Italy and France, [where] claims have been made about the “immaterial” character of labour processes based on information-technology, and of the cultural and intellectual content of commodities’. So, if the hope that this event might

bring these two discourses together is realized, it will be because we are here, at Tate Britain, ‘to stage a debate about contemporary art, “immaterial” labour and new modes of production of subjectivity’. It is the centrality of this last issue – new modes of production of subjectivity – that ‘gathers’ our speakers, here and elsewhere; for instance, within the orbit of the French journal *Multitudes*, with an ‘s’ at the end, which opens up an entire play of differences and differentiations. But it can do this only by distributing their differences with regard to the *historico-politico-philosophical* analysis (the clunkiness of this expression conveys the complex implications of what is at stake) of the aforementioned ‘immaterial’ labour – where the putting into quotation marks of ‘immaterial’ refers back to the ‘s’ of *Multitudes*.

The context of political debates in Italy and France is a very different one indeed with regard to the aesthetic (that is, the *in-aesthetic* or *an-aesthetic*) questions elicited by the dematerialization of art in its conceptual/contemporary environment. For we can justifiably imagine that the different meanings given to the quotation marks around ‘immaterial’ will determine the plurality of positions on art and the ‘new aesthetic paradigms’ called for by the new social or biopolitical constitution of labour/non-labour and of life in our societies of control (following Deleuze), of security (following Foucault), or in the Empire of cog-



nitive capitalism (following Hardt and Negri). This is a context for which the Anglo-Saxon linguistic sphere provides only the all-too-generic term 'libertarian', in which I'm sure none of our speakers will recognise themselves.

In spite of this semantic obstacle, I am not enough of a Martian not to know that the great tendencies of this 'continental' debate are today well-known *Outre-Manche*, beyond the channel as the continentals say (who aren't lucky enough to live on an island, man's dream according to the young Deleuze). So I will not here present the differences that, in a sense, constitute the very principle of this meeting: the quotation marks around 'immaterial' may serve to problematize the two (falsely) common notions at stake, art and labour. Rather, I would like to improvise a homage, less to our three Italian 'theorists' than to the *revolution in theory and in practice* whose major exponents they are.

For me, as a good Frenchman and a good (or bad) Deleuzo-Guattarian with Foucauldian leanings, everything commences or recommences with *Anti-Oedipus* – this book unlike all others that came before it, this book that should be approached, following Foucault's suggestion, as an 'art' of living and thinking, rather than as a 'philosophy'; this book that was able to articulate the reality-conditions of 1968 at their most disruptive by (in Foucault's words) 'using political practice as an intensifier of thought', to unfetter selves from the negative in order to invest the revolutionary force of desire's connections into a reality that is no longer dissociable from it, and its 'machines' of production and anti-production. None of our Italian friends will contradict me. But one would not have known how to take leave of structuralism *à la française* in order to invest the plane of insistence of 'becomings' – or to break with the primacy of the logic of sense over the power relations and minoritarian logics of the assemblages of desire – without investigating and investing *from within* the mutations of contemporary capitalism. Such an investigation and an investment renews the link between 'theory' and 'practice' through the study of new forms of labour and new types of 'molecular' struggle in all domains of life, in a manner that is both 'critical' and 'clinical', as well as 'historical'.

Let us recall – in the after-'68 of a May that would be prolonged and intensified in Italy for ten years, to culminate in the '77 Movement – the Copernican revolution produced by the Italian *Autonomia*: 'Marx beyond Marx'. 'Marx beyond Marx' effectively meant undertaking the most violent passage possible from the socialist and post-socialist critique of capitalist valorization to the communist affirmation of a *self-*

*valorization* that could no longer be ascribed to the 'worker' alone (think of the movement of *emarginati* and students, the women's movement, etc.). Capital would then be presented as an 'apparatus of capture' proceeding by means of a 'machinic enslavement' of the 'processes of subjectivation' that it puts to work. 'Apparatus of capture', 'machinic enslavement', 'processes of subjectivation' – these are the key locutions in the emphatically Franco-Italian pages of *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), swarming with direct and indirect references to Tronti, Negri and Bifo. It is surely a curious 'Marxism' that overturns the capital-labour dialectic by *opposing* to the self-valorization of capital the self-valorization of social forces. Yet this is a Marxism to which Deleuze was nonetheless laid claim to the very end, while Guattari would end up 'deterritorializing' the Marxian reference so absolutely in his *permanent molecular revolution* (the collection of articles entitled *La Révolution moléculaire* appeared in 1977) that it vanished completely as a literal reference.

But can an analysis of Integrated World Capitalism really do without a beyond *Marx*? In real time, the time in which this notion was elaborated, the article that I wrote with Guattari in 1983 ('Capitalistic Systems, Structures and Processes', [www.mdx.ac.uk/www/crmep/events/TheGuattariEffect.htm](http://www.mdx.ac.uk/www/crmep/events/TheGuattariEffect.htm)), just like the book he wrote with Negri in 1985 (*Communists Like Us*, Semiotext(e), 1990), suggested the opposite, even though, as Lazzarato puts it, 'it is the dynamic of forces that explains the economy and not the reverse'; even though work would become the capture of force-invention 'as the dynamic of the cooperation among brains'. In any case, the notion of labour comes out so utterly transformed that Deleuze and Guattari, still under Italian influence, were able to propose that the reality of labour explodes in two directions: 'that of an intensive surplus-labour *that no longer even passes through labour*, and that of an extensive labour which has become *precarious and floating*'.

To conclude this archaeology of the present in a deliberately abrupt manner, I propose that the analysis of what announced itself at the beginning of the 1980s carries with it the immediately political stakes of the differences and convergences between our speakers. Furthermore, what is today spoken of in terms of 'immaterial' labour entails a relation to art that problematizes in the extreme the most 'sensitive' notions on the basis of which, for a long time, not *politics* but 'the political' has been defined. Needless to say, this does not mean speaking of aesthetics as a *surrogate* politics.

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