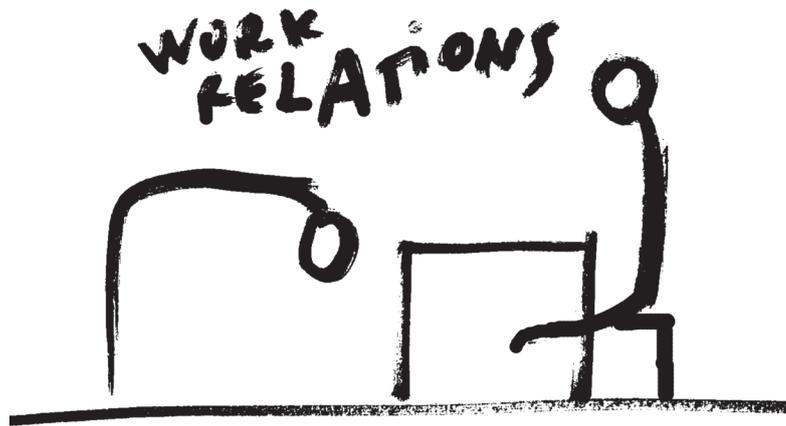


Contemporary art workers: Precarity and alternatives in Romania

Stefan Voicu examines the rhetorical confusion in the Romanian art market and the consequent material and emotional exploitation of intern workers.



Work Relations, Dan Perjovschi (2009)

In 2011, a period of acute global economic crisis, the art market was doing fine. Artprice¹ estimated that that year more than 41,000 contemporary artworks were sold in the world which generated a total profit of over \$1.26 billion, experiencing a growth since 2001, when the general revenue was estimated at \$87.7 million. In contrast, the majority of *art workers* were and still are faced with economic *precarity*. One of the most vocal groups of art workers that addressed the issues of precarity is the Arts & Labor working group from the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. The Arts & Labor group aimed to outline the discontents of art workers and to incorporate

them into the “99%”, defining themselves as:

*artists and interns, writers and educators, art handlers and designers, administrators, curators, assistants, and students. We are all art workers [...] dedicated to exposing and rectifying economic inequalities and exploitative working conditions in our fields through direct action and educational initiatives. By forging coalitions, fighting for fair labor practices, and reimagining the structures and institutions that frame our work.*²

Romanian art workers organised similar initiatives. On March 21, 2011, a group of artists occupied The National Center of Dance – Bucharest (CNDB Ocupat)

and sent a callout to ‘artists, students, teachers, activists, sympathizers, friends and whoever is interested’. This action was a response to the uncertain relocation of CNDB after the commencement of renovation works at the National Theater of Bucharest (TNB) building, where it had resided since 2004. But, as choreographer Madalina Dan stated in an interview, ‘it was also a form of artistic resistance that militates actively for the legitimization of contemporary art in Romania.’³

That year I worked at and did research on a non-profit contemporary art and culture institution based in Bucharest, Romania. When I started

participating in their activities in February, the institution was composed of a four-member executive board and a nine-member administrative team. Nevertheless, only five persons were day-to-day

justified by the financial crisis. I argue that precarity is a position within hierarchical power relations of neoliberal politics, in a given situation, rather than a collateral effect of the 'free market'.

(ICR), from 2003.

Alternative funding came from international cultural organisations, representing nation states, like the French Institute, the Goethe Institute,

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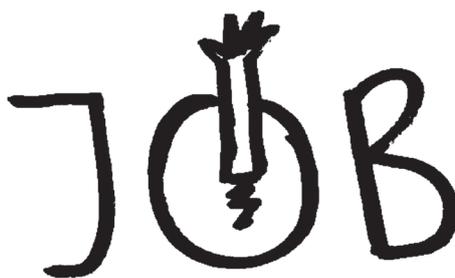
active: the intern, the assistant director, the coordinator, the executive of the board and the director. It consisted of three so-called 'instruments for critical thinking': namely the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture, the Biennial of Contemporary Art and the Journal of Politics and Culture. The goal of the institution was, and still is, 'to produce and research the visual, the performative and the discursive', 'to know and to be active for the society, the city, and the community', 'to promote an understanding of art and cultural institutions as socio-politically involved'.⁴

In this article, focusing on my practices as a worker in this institution, I will be describing precarity in context, and the alternatives to it unraveling in the Romanian art networks. Besides the description of contemporary art associations in Romania, this article implicitly stands as a critique of the modes in which precarity is often

Market revenues, state and corporate subsidies

In Romania, the primary sources of income for contemporary art workers were state subsidies. Rațiu⁵ mentions that contemporary art has been funded by the Ministry of Culture through the artistic institutions found in its administration, like the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC), open since 2004, or the National Center of Dance

the British Council, etc. More recently the Polish, Czech and Austrian institutes became active in Bucharest. Private organisations contributed as well, like the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and, very active in recent years, the ERSTE Foundation. The art workers' unions established during the communist period, like the Union of Plastic Artists (UAP), did not disappear, but received less funding and to a certain extent emerging artists were underprivileged by these. The art market was hardly an alternative source of income since, as Rațiu⁶ points out, it did not flourish. In 2007, Bucharest had only 12 commercial galleries.



Job, Dan Perjovschi (2005)

– Bucharest (CNDB); as well as through relatively autonomous organisations like the Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN), from 1999, and the Romanian Cultural Institute

The institution I researched is one of the few non-profit contemporary art organisations in Romania, if not the only one, that gets funded by a corporate bank. This bank provides 50% of the annual budget, and the working facilities needed. For the other 50%, the institution has to associate with the Romanian and

What drives this intricate circulation of capital is the adoption of a *metapragmatic register*

international governmental and government-affiliated institutions and private foundations and corporations.

Art, which requires an amount of finance too big to be amortized by using the regular strategy of not paying art workers' fees. During the 5th edition of the Bucharest Biennial (BB5), which took place in 2012, a leaflet with the financial stats was distributed to the visitors, as a response to the critiques faced by the institution on behalf of Romanian art workers.

From a total budget of 124,100€, 16.1% in cash came from the bank as strategic partner. 10.4%, also in cash, was granted by the institutional partners, among which the 'traditional' ICR, but also new institutions like: BAM, the Flemish Institute for Visual, Audiovisual and Media Art; IASPIS, the International Artists Studio Program in Stockholm; the University of Bucharest; and the US and Netherlands Embassies. This budget was distributed in the following manner: 47.2% exhibition costs, 30.5% PR and communication costs, 9.2% went on publications, 4.7% curators' costs, 4.6% artist-related costs and 3.8% organisational costs.

What drives this intricate circulation of capital is the adoption of a *metapragmatic register*, i.e. an abstract set of ideas that justify actions,⁷

that considers art workers and artworks as instruments for social and economic development. The same metapragmatic justified that particular distribution of the biennial's budget.

Metapragmatic registers

Why, instead of the more popular terms of ideology, discourse or narrative, employ the concept of metapragmatic register? Because, although these analytical tools seem to describe similar things, I believe that this concept avoids the ubiquity of the habitual terms used in the humanities and social sciences. Taking for granted words like ideology, discourse or narrative leads to misunderstandings generated by the interpretations made from a certain trajectory of the term. The metapragmatic register is a relatively pristine concept. I draw its usage from Boltanski who argues that metapragmatic registers are transformations of

“the opinion that everyone can have “in their possession” into a common knowledge, such that everyone henceforth knows that what he knows (or is supposed to know) the others also know and know that he knows it, in accordance with the logic of, common knowledge on which game theory establishes the possibility of epistemic equilibria (but treating them as the result of interactive



Be More Explicit, Dan Perjovschi (2006)

In order to form these associations, the team elaborates short-term projects with which they apply for grants.

Exhibitions, journal publications or lectures are such projects, but most of the time this endeavour is more demanding, as in the case of the Biennial of Contemporary

mechanisms, without raising the question of the bodies authorized to give the judgement the character of an attested public fact').⁸

Moreover
'[t]his signifies that performances of this kind must not only be realized with others, but also in front of others, placed in the position of witnesses, and whose presence, far from being restricted to being physically actual in a certain place at a certain time, must be associated with some form or other of engagement, if only that of memorizing what has occurred – that is to say, being in a position, if necessary, to recall its factual character to a contradictor.'⁹

Metapragmatic registers do not capture the idiosyncratic characteristics of art workers' and artworks' actions, leading often to disputes over the value of art work and artworks that break associations made between different institutional entities. Moreover, institutions adopt

justification for state support of the arts in Romania. First, artworks are viewed as responsible for creating and disseminating national identity and art workers as being 'guarantors of national cultural identity'.¹¹ Secondly, artworks and art workers are seen as tools of and factors in social and economic development. Thirdly, the government conceives its actions as interventions meant to reinstate social and economic equity among art workers, as a result of art market failures. Fourthly, the intrinsic value of artworks are considered as an 'essential element of a life that deserves to be lived' and a 'human accomplishment'.¹²

Likewise, in the institution I researched there were different interchanging metapragmatic registers. One involved cultural marxism with anarchist tendencies,¹³



Budget Cut, Dan Perjovschi (2011)

made possible the associations between the institution and the Romanian government, the corporate bank and other sources of funding, the former justified disputes emerging from the idiosyncrasies of the institution's actions.

Because of this oscillation, there was a lack of rhetorical consistency in the institution's actions, perpetuated in the associations made between the institution and state, corporate, non-governmental institutions, informal groups and individuals, which had an impact on the perception of these different entities on the institution. For example,

as a worker I saw this oscillation between the two metapragmatic registers in the polarity between the emphasis on collective decision-making and top-down directives

intermittently different registers.

The postcommunist Romanian governments valued artworks and art workers according to different metapragmatic registers, depending on the *interests* of the political parties in power. Rațiu¹⁰ identified four types of

by which art workers' actions were considered to be different, but of equal value. The other was an anti-communist, neo-liberal one that emerged after 1989 in most of the former communist nation-states from Eastern Europe, with some overt nuances in the case of Romania.¹⁴ Whereas the latter

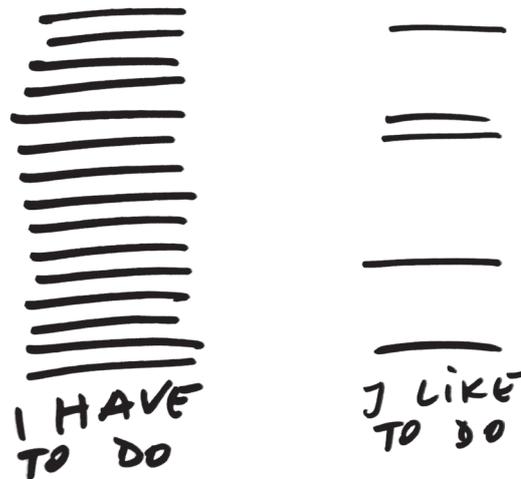
an art collective which was supposed to participate in an exhibition, but withdrew because the institution did not provide a fee, has termed this inconsistency of the institution's practices 'anarcho-corporate schizophrenia',¹⁵ stating that the apparent anarchist point of view of the institution is in

fact a mode of concealing corporate interests.

Organising art work

This inconsistency had an impact on my point of view as well, when as a worker I saw this oscillation between the two metapragmatic registers in the polarity between the emphasis on collective decision-making and top-down directives. In processes of collective decision-making, it was stressed by the director that every member of the team, the intern, the coordinator, the executive of the board and the assistant director, had equal rights to present and pursue their opinion, as in the case of my appointment as an intern, and later on in the periodical meetings we had for the purpose of evaluating and planning activities. Still, at the same time, the formal hierarchies of the team were often reinforced in moments of authority disputes, especially by the director himself.

Regardless of the relatively emancipatory position of the institution's cultural marxism, the two metapragmatics deployed within the working environment were unbalanced, with hierarchical structures of domination being frequently asserted. As such, subaltern art workers like myself were often impeded from pursuing their own interests and were being ascribed with identities that they themselves hardly



I Have To, I Like To, Dan Perjovschi (2003)

identified with.

Both the emphasis on collective decision-making and the reinforcement of the hierarchies were made within a very elusive and open ended *affective* realm, composed of actions and re-actions of the senses. According to Massumi, 'affect is synesthetic, implying a participation of the senses in each other: the measure of a living thing's potential interactions is its ability to transform the effects of one sensory mode into those of another'.¹⁶ In the institution, strategies within this affective realm consisted in sensorial interactions abstracted as trust-building, in the case of the collective decision-making, and ranged from emotional blackmail to verbal abuse, in the case of hierarchy reinforcement.

The benefit of operating affectively was that, for example, uncertainties were

framed in an organising mechanism of trust-building and easily recodified in emotional blackmail or verbal abuse and *vice versa*. My fear of making mistakes or uncertainty regarding the future were either comforted or intensified accordingly to the effects it might have had on the immediate goals of the institution.

Whereas affect set the premises for the relations of work in connection with the metapragmatic register adopted, *materials* made the inconsistency between the two durable.¹⁷ The latter were artifacts as diverse as mobile phones, portable computers, business cards, books, folders, legal contracts and artworks. The inconsistency between the two metapragmatic registers was *inscribed* into these objects, fixing the associations made by the institution.

Precarious intern

The intern's work was affectively organised according to the metapragmatic registers inscribed in the job announcement made by the institution. This announcement stated that the intern had to work full time, maximum twelve weeks, but with the possibility to extend this period, and he/she would not be paid. He/she had to be 'hard-working', meticulous and interested in contemporary culture, provide assistance in crucial administrative tasks, such as dealing with correspondence, and other tasks. The intern was required to have skills and

board. In these three months, the exhibition of the assistant director was being organised, which required me to work also on the editing of the exhibition publication and its installment. During the events with public attendance, lectures, and exhibition openings, I had to take photographs and in certain cases make video recordings which later had to be downloaded on the computer and uploaded on the webpages of the institution. Often, I also had to go to the post office to send correspondence and sometimes to the bank to transfer money. Making coffee, buying food, cleaning the restroom were also on the activities list.

the institution; managing the library area and the storage space; contacting artists and institutions for collaboration; and on certain occasions being a teaching assistant for the director's course on curatorial practices held at the University of Bucharest. Like the director, coordinator and chairman of the executive board, I had my own office.

The intern was frequently recruited from among the undergraduates and graduates, with high English language skills, able to work on a computer and willing to work in cultural management/curating. In other words, this is the demographic category that has been experiencing the

The internship program affectively transformed and organised my uncertainties into and as what Marx called *labour power*

previous experience in DTP, to do research for articles, exhibitions and projects, improve the distribution and promotion of the journal, assist with production of press releases, to help find funding and install the exhibitions.

I worked for twelve months, unpaid, from Tuesday to Sunday, from 12.00 till 19.00. Throughout my internship I was responsible for the administration of the enrollments and participation in the institution's educational program, called Free Academy, organised by the chairman of the executive

After three months, I became the assistant coordinator of the institution. From this position the hierarchies in the organisation of work felt more pervasive. Even though still unpaid for my work, I was granted the opportunity to curate a year-long film programme. Besides the interns, every other member of the team curated exhibitions and film screenings, with the director and the chairman of the board putting on shows at least once a year. I was also responsible for attending to official visitors who wanted to get extra information on, or establish partnerships with

devaluation of their newly, or on the way to be acquired, academic degrees and high rates of unemployment. Announced as 'offering the possibility to examine the role, function and activity of a wide array of professionals from the cultural sector, as well as the role and function of an institution', the job appeared more as an educational program, rather than a job. Plus, unlike the academic programs, 'the accumulated experience and knowledge constitutes an informational asset that might help in the pursuit of a future career'.

The internship program affectively transformed and organised my uncertainties into and as what Marx called *labour power*.¹⁸ The institution's internship was presented as the context in which my labour power can be self-valued by framing the 'experience and knowledge accumulated' as a market asset, into something that looks good on my CV, thus rather than being paid or demand a wage I should have showed gratitude for the opportunity by working harder. But, the oscillation of the two metapragmatic registers fed the uncertainty upon which the internship was based, benefiting the institution's accumulation of labour. When adopting a cultural marxist metapragmatic register, the possibility of self-valuing my labour power seemed to be a gain in autonomy. From an anti-communist neo-liberal perspective, this self-valorification legitimated work as a mean of exploitation.

The hierarchies of the neoliberal metapragmatic registers gave rise to precarity. Nevertheless, the oscillation between the two registers was responsible for the difficulty to make a decision to withdraw from the working associations with the institution. The inconsistency of this justification made it possible to attract art workers who were then placed in a precarious state from which it was hard to escape.

Disputing hierarchies

Once my affects were transformed into labour power, precarity defined the conditions of the subaltern position I was delegated to according to the hierarchies of power installed by the adoption of a neoliberal metapragmatic. Despite the difficulties of withdrawing from the working association with the institution, because of the metapragmatic oscillation, these hierarchies and structures could have been challenged, if alternative institutions and the media had not failed to support art workers who found themselves in similar situations.

In Romania, art workers formed associations with a renewed social critique that has been addressing and received media coverage on ecological issues involved in cyanide pollution resulting from gold mining and shale

gas exploitation by means of hydraulic fracturing, urban gentrification and speculative real estate investments, and women's rights. In the ongoing protests against the gold mining project at Roşia Montană,¹⁹ that started on Sept 1, 2013, art workers acted as alternative media, organisers and commentators. Nonetheless, a workers' movement dealing with exploitation and precarity did not emerge, the traditional trade unions – often suspected of corruption – being the only ones active in this sense.

I believe that there is an absence of a workers' movement because in Romania the dominant metapragmatic register is the anti-communist neoliberal one, according to which only artists, institution directors and curators are considered to be art workers. Those subaltern workers that do not reach the top of the hierarchies are most of the times overlooked. In disputes over state, or other types of funding, they become invisible. Actions, such as CNDB Ocupat or anarchist cultural events, driven by a radical metapragmatic register, become modes of contesting funders and re-appropriating resources in the interest of a few high positioned art workers. As soon as these reach their goals, they switch to the dominant metapragmatic register in order to reinstate the 'regular' circulation of capital. The interests of these 'elite' art



Less Is More, Dan Perjovschi (2005)

workers is not to counter precarity, but to secure their high-brow social status.

The Romanian situation did not stop international commentators and activists conceptualising the *precariat*, defined by Guy Standing²⁰ as a fragmented global class ‘in-the-making’ – a cross-class coalition²¹ that puts together farmers and artists, migrants and civil servants, based on the common experience of temporary and uncertain jobs, no social security and low to no income. Highly educated young interns have been fierce proponents of the articulation of such a class.²² Yet some critical theorists and activists are skeptical regarding the possibility of not re-deploying the already existing hierarchies between these working identities into the

dynamics of the *precariat*.²³ And rightly so. My experience of precarity, compared with the precarity of low-skill and unskilled workers, looks like a bourgeois lament.

As a precarious worker, I do identify with certain characteristics of the *precariat*: low to no wages, uncertainty, and no social security. Yet, unlike in Italy, Germany and France, a Romanian *precariat* class did not emerge. Moreover, I do not agree with some of the solutions circulating among the *precariat*. Instead of their demands for a better wage, stable jobs and social security, I propose a ‘radical’ metapragmatic transformation of work – work conceived as the articulation of the ‘outside’ of capital. What would this imply?

Rather than exchanging labour power for a wage, this power should be employed in the elaboration of networks of solidarity and resistance among precarious art workers, based on consensual decision-making. In other words, it would imply the adoption of an *anarchist metapragmatic*. But, since the institution I worked with adopted at times a metapragmatic register akin to anarchism, further research should be conducted in order to understand whether in the case of Romanian contemporary art workers a ‘pure’ anarchist metapragmatic register is required, as I suggested, or if the re-establishment of a balance between two opposite modes of conceptualising actions is possible and more suitable, as artists, institutions directors and curators seem to be suggesting. 



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Dan Perjovschi is a Romanian contemporary artist who has exhibited internationally. Thanks for his permission to use these illustrations.

Notes

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