

CONFRONTING PRECARIETY IN THE WARHOL ECONOMY

Notes from New York City

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Normative cultural economy discourse on New York City embraces the creative industries as engines of job creation but neglects the quality of employment within them. This article sets out to both illuminate the precarious conditions of nonstandard workers in New York's vaunted creative sectors and identify emerging collective responses to precarity in this city. Three areas of labour activity are focused upon: fashion industry frictions, art world agitations, and independent worker initiatives. Under each of these headings, the article profiles two organizations that are variously exposing, resisting, and mitigating precarity among flexible labour forces in the arts, the media, cultural industries, and beyond. The discussion of these organizations is informed by interviews with some of their protagonists, by documents produced by the organizations, and/or by media coverage of them. Challenging the assumption that getting by in informal cultural labour markets obliges individual coping strategies, this article reveals scenes from a metropolitan laboratory of precarious labour politics. These initiatives are inklings of a recomposition of labour politics in which flexible workforces in creative industries are important participants.

KEYWORDS: labour; precarity; unions; New York City; fashion; arts

The Warhol Economy

The 2012 edition of New York Fashion Week will inject \$865 million into the city's economy (Campbell 2012). Hundreds of galleries populate Manhattan's Chelsea district – the geographic core of an art market currently enjoying a boom, or so suggests the \$171.4 million profit of New York based art auctioneer Sotheby's in 2011 (Boroff 2012). And about half of the revenues from the publishing and television industries in the US reportedly derive from operations in New York (NYCEDC 2010b, p. 20). These factoids land us on the lucrative terrain navigated by urban planner Elizabeth Currid in her book, *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art & Music Drive New York City* (2007). Currid is interested in the social dynamic sustaining New York's vaunted 'cultural economy' (2007, p. 4). Her book's title is inspired by Andy Warhol's 'Factory', the legendary Manhattan loft the artist inhabited in the 1960s where diverse cultural workers mingled, stars were manufactured, cultural forms cross-pollinated, and art commodities were generated – all in a setting where projects and parties mixed.

What Currid terms 'the Warhol economy' is the sociality of the Factory enacted on the scale of New York City, or, more precisely, the strategic places within it where cultural workers exchange. The Warhol economy designates the 'seemingly informal social world' of art openings, fashion shows, clubs, restaurants, neighbourhoods and other sites of

face-to-face interaction among cultural producers and industry gatekeepers (Currid 2007, p. 6). It is in this social milieu that New York's 'cultural economy' is, according to Currid, 'most efficient' (p. 4). For it is here that services are promoted, contacts maintained, projects spawned, collaborations formed, and gigs advertised or acquired – a portrait of buzzing 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001) informed by interviews with visual artists, fashion designers, musicians, curators, graphic designers, and editors of varying, yet frequently comfortable, levels of celebrity. Overall, Currid's tone is that of an urban booster, though the book's plot is shaped by its author's worry that New York's cultural economy is at risk, not least on account of prohibitively expensive property which threatens to dilute the city's creative-population density. Discounted artist domiciles and relaxed nightlife regulations are among the policy proposals that are floated in the name of protecting the 'social life of creativity' at a time of escalating inter-urban competition for the 'creative class' (Florida 2003).

The concept of the Warhol economy is illustrative of 'normative cultural economy' thinking. Chris Gibson and Lily Kong use this phrase to refer to the familiar policy 'script' in which 'culture', and more recently 'creativity', is framed as a resource to be harnessed for capital accumulation (2005, pp. 549–553). Valuing those forms of culture and creativity that make an economic contribution, *The Warhol Economy* shares normative cultural economy's enthusiasm for art, culture, and media as forces of job creation. Given that art and culture are Gotham's fourth largest occupational subset, Currid's point that in New York City 'culture is an employer' is not contentious (2007, p. 49). The issue is that this employer's benevolence cannot be taken for granted. Lacking in Currid's peppy chronicle of getting by in the Warhol economy is any serious consideration that working in this diffuse factory could be experienced as exploitative, oppressive, or exclusionary. To this extent, Currid's book is a hipster edition of the official discourse on the 'creative industries' which has been roundly criticised for neglecting the precarious employment widespread in the sectors celebrated as sources of post-industrial prosperity (Banks & Hesmondhalgh 2009).

That critique dovetails with the research in which 'precarity' has emerged as a keyword (Dowling et al. 2007; Gill & Pratt 2008; Neilson & Rossiter 2005; Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Ross 2009). Broadly, precarity refers to existential, financial, and social insecurity exacerbated by the flexibilization of labour associated with post-Fordism. Freelancing, contract work, solo self-employment, temporary work, and part-time jobs are among its paradigmatic employment arrangements. If the lack of a safety net, income insecurity, an erratic schedule, uncertainty about continuing employment, the blurring of work and non-work time, and the absence of collective representation are among its symptoms, then precarity is neither a novel condition nor restricted to one sector.

Alert to 'the pleasure-pain axis' of work in culture (McRobbie 2003), scholarship around labour precarity has revealed a workforce that is variously *low-paid* – subsidized by social cachet and existential gratification (Ross 2000); *unpaid* – pushed into the zero-wage internship that is often the entry ticket for a chance at paid employment in the media and cultural institutions (Perlin 2011); *anxious* – about meeting financial obligations on intermittent income, about health when bereft of benefits, and about reputation, that fickle currency of informal labour markets (Gill 2007; Ursell 2000); and *always on* – as self-responsibility for maintaining a steady flow of paid work can give rise to a job search without end. And while precarity differentially affects populations, it is universally the

effect of a longstanding drive to shift the burden of accumulation to labour, which capital seeks to access like ‘water’ – ‘a resource to be turned on and off at will’ (Gray 2004, p. 47).

Another concern about normative cultural economy is, write Gibson and Kong, that its characteristic ‘use of encompassing phrases might blind us to the extent that economic formations are merely imagined into solidity...’ (2005, p. 553). A catchphrase like ‘the Warhol Economy’ glosses over fault lines in the sphere of activity such representations seek to designate. Gibson and Kong urge sensitivity to another dimension of the social that eludes Currid’s attention: contestation. Highlighting the connection between flexible employment and vulnerable livelihoods, Gibson and Kong propose that ‘[m]uch more research is required to understand just how workers in various occupations across the cultural economy respond to such circumstances, mitigate risk and establish relationships with other players in their sectors’ (2005, p. 554). They suggest that research along these lines might ‘[temper] the certainty with which normative cultural economy can be translated into coherent policy prescriptions, and invite more reflective research that seeks to frame such volatility as part of a broader process of contestation of “the economic”’ (2005, p. 554). This in mind, I set out to spotlight what Currid sidelines: not only the labour precarity that is the flipside of New York’s creative industries but also collective responses to it.

This article is a contribution to research on workers’ struggles in the arts, media, communication, and cultural industries (e.g., Brophy 2010; Cohen 2011; Mosco & McKercher 2008; Raunig et al. 2012), a preliminary report drawn from an ongoing inquiry into emerging organizations exposing, resisting, and mitigating precarity among flexible labour forces in creative-economy sectors. These notes from New York are presented under three headings: *fashion industry frictions*, *art world agitations*, and *independent worker initiatives*. The profiles of the organizations that follow are informed by interviews with some of their protagonists, by documents produced by the organizations themselves, and/or by news coverage of them. The politics and constituencies of these organizations vary, often sharply. Yet they have one thing in common: they dispute the unstated premise of the Warhol economy thesis, which is that getting by in an informal cultural labour economy obliges individual coping strategies.

So whereas Currid observes a low-friction labour market of culturepreneurs spurring an urban growth machine, this paper reveals scenes from a metropolitan laboratory of precarious labour politics that is emerging *in spite of* the Warhol economy. New York City, as a centre of global creative industry, may be a test site for cultural workers struggling to get by in precarious times. Rather than a case for New York exceptionalism, the experiments touched upon here are a part of a search across the geography of flexploitation for organizing models more adequate to those outside a ‘standard employment relationship’ (Vosko 2000), an estimated one-third of the US workforce, and the protagonist of collective organizations and policy proposals lying beyond the predominately male, full-time employee in the industrial or public sector conventionally identified with post-war trade unionism.

Fashion Industry Frictions

New York City’s fashion industry generates \$55 billion a year, turns out prestigious brands, draws high-spending visitors, and headquarters taste-making media. Responding to escalating competition, the New York City Economic Development Corporation has

singled out fashion as one of Gotham's 'legacy' industries in need of nurturing (NYCEDC 2010b, p. 18). Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, City officials, in consultation with fashion executives, launched a suite of public-private initiatives spanning from an 'entrepreneurial "boot camp"' to a 'fashion incubator' for design 'talent' (NYCEDC 2010b, 2010c). Such projects seek to operationalize normative cultural economy, formatting spaces and subjectivities imbued with a potential to generate wealth and jobs. Highlighted in City discourse is that 5.5% of New York's private sector labour force works in fashion (NYCEDC 2010a, n.p.). The next top designer and international wholesale buyers may be policy-makers' most valued subjects, yet the circulation of the clothing commodity is codependent on two considerably more populous workforces: fashion models and retail staff. Distant from standard-employee unionism, these contingent workers are voicing their precarity and organizing against it via two organizations: Model Alliance and Retail Action Project.

Efforts to mobilize consumer desire for fashion rely on the labour of display performed by models. The glamour associated with this gendered job is disrupted by the documentary *Picture Me* (2010), co-directed by New York model Sara Ziff, founder of Model Alliance. Making the film allowed Ziff to speak with fellow models about workaday realities ignored in a public discourse on modelling, which has tended to focus on body image. At the New York premiere of *Picture Me*, the director of the Fashion Law Institute at Fordham University offered her support to Ziff, who wanted go on to form an organization to improve working conditions in the US modelling industry.

Models are typically classified as independent contractors. This status belies the fact that most models are in an exclusive agreement with one agency that manages the bookings on which agencies siphon a 20% commission. The situation of many models has been likened to 'indentured servitude' (Mears 2012). Before a model receives payment she must work off her 'debt' to the agency, a meticulous, and often 'opaque', tally of expenses from airfare to email (S. Ziff 2011, pers. comm., 8 Dec.). Ziff adds that 'a lot of the time, we're not being paid at all'. It is estimated that 70% of designers showing at New York Fashion Week pay models in clothing rather than cash (Vingan 2010). Averaging \$27,000 (US) per year (Harris 2012), models' earnings are polarized between a relatively high-earning minority and a low-earning majority. Compensation is not the only contention: sexual abuse on a shoot is not uncommon; child labour is a mounting concern as the age of new entrants dips; models of colour confront racism; many models are undocumented; workplace protections are scant; and schedules are notoriously unstable (S. Ziff 2011, pers. comm., 8 Dec.).

Confronting these challenges through collective action is difficult: models are 'rarely together' as they flit from gig to gig; are reluctant to agitate when job security hangs on 'reputation'; are plentiful, and hence replaceable, knowledge of which can heighten self-discipline; and are not immune to the industry's glamorous image (S. Ziff 2011, pers. comm., 8 Dec.). Mindful of these issues, Ziff describes Model Alliance as an organization that is not exclusively 'of models but for models'. Its development is the product of three primary organizing strategies: meeting one-on-one with models to secure high-profile endorsements and to inform a Models' Bill of Rights; meeting with industry 'stakeholders' (e.g., agencies, industry associations) to get them on side – a strategically non-confrontational approach, informed by earlier industry efforts to thwart a bid to unionize New York models; and working with models to write stories about their experience, and posting these to Model Alliance's Web site – a piece of the group's counter-publicity

campaign, premised on the mobilizing power of personal narratives, which seeks to 'reframe' modelling from a labour perspective for a public whose support is difficult to obtain given the industry's projected image of effortless and prestige (S. Ziff 2011, pers. comm., 8 Dec.).

Model Alliance is envisioned as a platform for raising labour standards in modelling, pushing, in particular, for minimum standard rates, a health insurance plan, billing transparency, and the enforcement of child labour laws. Formally, it is a non-profit organization governed by a board of directors. Although Model Alliance is not a union per se, it has partnered with established cultural industry unions. For example, Actors' Equity Association and American Guild of Musical Artists have helped it set up a system for models to confidentially report sexual harassment. Since its 2012 launch, Model Alliance has garnered extensive media coverage and has received expressions of support from a growing roster of industry players. While it is too early to assess the change it will affect, Model Alliance has already begun to ruminate on the longer-term prospect of organizing along the wider 'fashion food chain' (S. Ziff 2011, pers. comm., 8 Dec.).

Such an effort would have to encompass another group of ubiquitous, yet hardly glamorised workers, whose labour is integral to the fashion business: those stocking shelves and interfacing with shoppers in clothing stores. Retail is the largest occupational subset of New York fashion (NYCEDC 2010b). As its ranks swell so too does precarity. 'Retail', according to one union-sponsored report, 'is the largest employer of low-wage workers in New York City' (Fiscal Policy Institute 2008, p. v). About half of New York retail staff are paid less than \$10 per hour, and about one quarter eke out \$8 (p. 7). While virtually split on gender, people of colour are over-represented in retail (p. 5). Nearly eighty percent are over 25 years of age; half over 35 (p. 4). Retail capital's discount labour budget is subsidized by social assistance (Luce & Fujita 2012). Beyond pay, involuntary part-time hours, fluctuating schedules, and a lack of health insurance are among the forms of precarity in New York clothing stores. Quitting is probably the most popular individual response to retail job frustration; doing so, however, is tantamount to disqualification for unemployment insurance.

It is in this overwhelmingly non-unionized sector that Retail Action Project (RAP) intervenes. Started in 2005, RAP is a membership organization of about 1000 rank-and-file retail workers and allies. Partnered with the 100,000-strong Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU), RAP germinated in Manhattan's SoHo, an area RAP's director, Carrie Gleason (2010, pers. comm., 6 Oct.), describes as the emerging 'epicenter of retail in New York City'. A survey of SoHo workers revealed that some retailers were not paying mandatory minimum wage. RAP found an 'easy target': Yellow Rat Bastard, a local clothing chain whose managers left a paper trail documenting systematic under-payment, or 'wage theft'. In 2006, RAP helped to bring the case to the New York State Attorney General, which ultimately awarded about 1000 staff \$1.4 million in unpaid back wages. Yellow Rat Bastard workers later voted to join RWDSU, and in 2009 ratified their first collective agreement.

RAP, however, is an experiment in a style of unionism for which bargaining unit certification is not the lone objective nor is an individual worksite the exclusive terrain of struggle. RAP provides services – from résumé support to job fairs – that are relevant to workers' 'immediate needs' (S. Basile 2010, pers. comm., 6 Oct.). A 'long-haul' commitment to organizing retail, in RAP's view, demands this pragmatism. The group's repertoire extends to direct action. To take one example, a roaming band of RAP members crashed

'Fashion's Night Out', a multi-site event to promote New York's fashion industry, with their own 'Interns' Night Out', which troubled the industry's reliance on un(der)paid internships. RAP participates in policy activism as well. Its involvement in the Living Wage NYC coalition is an example of how RAP joins forces with a range of groups – immigrant, faith-based, policy think-tanks – based on the assumption that 'we have power through organizing in our communities in addition to the workplace' (C. Gleason 2010, pers. comm., 6 Oct.).

RAP organizers are sober about the obstacles to improving retail livelihoods. Retailers' 'disinvestment' in the employment relationship is reinforced when retail staff believe their occupation is destined to remain precarious. 'They have expectations', says Gleason; 'they want more hours, they want benefits'. How 'to translate that into the expectation that you can actually achieve those things through ... collective action is', she adds, 'a part of a lot of our organizing conversations' (C. Gleason 2010, pers. comm., 6 Oct.). RAP's Stephanie Basile (2010, pers. comm., 6 Oct.) puts it this way: 'I feel like a lot of the time we're just trying to create the conditions for organizing'. Another hurdle relates to the status hierarchies structuring retail labour. Not only are earnings stratified by store (e.g., low-end, high-end). The workforce is socially 'divided by department', often with 'the pretty, skinny sales girls, and ... the African guys working in the basement and the back' (S. Basile 2010, pers. comm., 6 Oct.). Identifying shared concerns is one way to work across the differentiated retail workforce. Relevant here is Gleason's point that a major problem for part-time retail workers is 'scheduling practices'. When shifts are unpredictable up to the last minute it is nigh impossible to meet demands like holding a second job, attending school, or caring for family. Gleason imagines a 'scheduling campaign' might have the potential to 'cross industry tiers'. Unreliable scheduling, according to Gleason, 'hits to the heart of the (part-time) employment condition', which is the deprivation of control over one's time – which resonates with the definition of precarity itself as 'a special kind of poverty, a temporal poverty' (Hardt & Negri 2009, p. 147).

Art World Agitations

New York's status in the transnational art system is underwritten by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (2012), which describes itself as 'the largest cultural funding agency in the nation'. The greatest share of its operations budget goes to the Cultural Institutions Group of thirty-odd City-owned properties, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts. Focusing funding on institutions, the City has been urged by some policy commentators to adopt a 'labor perspective' on the arts (Horowitz et al. 2006, p. 2). The Bloomberg administration favours low-cost programmes encouraging the formation of 'enterprising individuals' (Rose 1998). Workshops like 'The Art of Money' and 'Artists as Entrepreneurs' (Catton 2010; NYFA 2010) are a governmental reaction to a 'problem' identified in the think-tank report *Creative New York*: 'many creative workers are uncomfortable with or resistant to even thinking or talking about their work as a business' (Keegan et al. 2005, p. 22). Two nascent collectives – W.A.G.E. and Arts & Labor – refuse to accept the self-reliant business-artist as the preferred response to precarity.

Posted to the Web site of W.A.G.E. – Working Artists and the Greater Economy – is a letter written in 1973 by filmmaker Hollis Frampton. A curator at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York contacted Frampton about a possible retrospective. In his reply,

the filmmaker interrogated one line of the curator's invitation: 'It is all for love and honor and no money is included ...' (cited in Frampton 1973, p. 1). Frampton listed many people whom he pays to produce his films, and those whom MoMA would pay if his work was exhibited: 'nonetheless, I, the artist, am not to be paid' (Frampton 1973, p. 2). Itemizing his fee, Frampton signed off that, without compensation, 'there can be no retrospective...' (p. 5). This spirit of refusal is revived by W.A.G.E., an activist group started by artists A.K. Burns, K8 Hardy, and A.L. Steiner as a vehicle for exposing and redressing the unpaid labour subsidizing New York's vaunted art institutions.

At a public talk in 2008, W.A.G.E. addressed artists, curators, and arts administrators at Park Avenue Armory. K8 Hardy (2008) pierced any lingering romance about the life of the New York artist: 'Let me tell you about the glamour of being an artist in this city. ... The glamour of not being able to go to the doctor, ... of moving every year or two further and further away from the city, ... of spending your last dollar every month' – and 'of being made to feel idiotic when you ask to be paid'. The contradiction around which W.A.G.E. agitates is that although an art institution might receive public funding, charge admission, and put curators on the payroll – the artists who contribute to a show are not consistently compensated. Payment, if it manifests, tends to be the result of an ad hoc decision whose criteria are opaque to artists (DeNorch 2008). It is not only the free work that W.A.G.E. sets out to challenge, but also its routine justification: the artist is remunerated in 'exposure' (Steiner 2008). This rarely converts to more durable currency, and in any case, says Hardy, denies 'the value of our labour' (cited in van Tomme 2009). The promise of exposure in lieu of monetary payment impels artists, argues Steiner (2008), 'to become market speculators rather than cultural workers'.

W.A.G.E. uses talks at art events, interviews, and public forums to circulate its demand that US cultural institutions cease to exempt themselves from the capitalist protocol that labour is paid for 'services rendered' (cited in DeNorch 2008). W.A.G.E. calls upon museums to allocate a budget to artist fees and to establish a minimum fee structure. W.A.G.E. (2010) has been unafraid to address its opponent directly: 'Your institution', reads one letter to museums 'is enforcing a system of non-payment to cultural workers'. By the same token, W.A.G.E. has invited arts administrators to act as allies. The group successfully negotiated fees for participants in a show at the New Museum in 2010. Beyond this pilot of what it calls 'W.A.G.E. certification', the group has formed transnational links to art workers in other countries with artist fee systems, and in 2011 conducted an online survey of art workers designed to 'bring greater transparency to the economic practices of (art) institutions in New York City...' (W.A.G.E. 2012).

Intensifying art world agitation awaited the inspiration of the Arab Spring and the *indignados*. One cell of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was 16Beaver, an artist-run space in the Financial District, whose protagonists have been engaged with contemporary struggles for more than a decade (McKee 2011). Public discussions at 16Beaver on the politics of occupation fed into the development of the New York City General Assembly. Implanted in Zuccotti Park on 17 September 2011, the General Assembly became a seedbed of working groups. One, Arts & Culture, is concerned with artistic production by and for OWS. At an Arts & Culture assembly, a participant proposed a thematic group concentrating on artists as workers (Riley 2012). The new group, Arts & Labor (2012a), designates its constituency inclusively: 'We are artists and interns, writers and educators, art handlers and designers, administrators, curators, assistants, and students. We are all art workers and members of the 99%'. The colossal class division that OWS quantifies is hardly new to the

art world. Over the past decade, however, the 1% has insinuated the contemporary art scene with increasing thoroughness, in the guise of collector-investors, museum trustees, and art fair sponsors (Fraser 2011). As increasing volumes of capital move into the art world the inequality constituting it is that much more conspicuous, particularly in a city like New York where income distribution has been described as ‘more unequal than Brazil’ (Henwood 2011).

Arts & Labor (2012a) aims to make ‘exploitative working conditions’ visible. A sketch is supplied in an open letter addressed to ‘Labor Servicing the Culture Industry’, and signed by ‘a member of arts & labor #ows’ (Kasper 2011). The letter zeroes in on three jobs – art handler, gallery receptionist, and adjunct professor – especially vulnerable to some mix of intermittent work, exacting bosses, low pay, and degrading duties. These keep company, it is suggested, with varieties of bad faith: that the artists frequently in these jobs believe themselves to be ‘in transition’; that they are ‘paying (their) dues’; that decent ‘opportunities’ are rare; or that their ‘own work’ may one day sustain them, if they only ‘keep their head down’. The initially attractive ‘free’ time between gigs is squeezed by the ‘constant hustle’. Asserting that what artists do to subsist has induced ‘collective low self-esteem’, this communiqué nonetheless seeks a countervailing affect, one borne from the recognition that the art world would cease to turn if those servicing it collectively ‘refused to work’. Dreaming of a massive withdrawal of labour and advocating unionization, the letter concludes with a plea to art workers to begin a conversation.

One framework for this, Arts & Labor is a space for the co-production of subjectivity and conflict. Following the OWS consensus process, members began assembling for meetings in one of the indoor privately owned public spaces to which many OWS protagonists dispersed after their expulsion from Liberty Plaza. In keeping with OWS, direct action is integral to the group’s repertoire. With Occupy Museums and 16Beaver, Arts & Labor swarmed the lobby of the MoMA, held an assembly, and unfurled a banner expressing solidarity with the art handlers who joined them from Teamsters Local 814 (Arts & Labor 2012b). MoMA continued to engage the services of the art handlers’ employer, the super-profitable auction house Sotheby’s, whose decision to lock out Local 814 was a catalyst of Arts & Labor (McKee 2011). Another collaborative action targeted the Sotheby’s-sponsored 2012 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art: one night, activists commandeered an ‘inflatable fat cat’ who peered through the windows of the VIP reception; another, sympathetic invitees brought members of Local 814 and activists as their ‘plus one’ who had an impromptu assembly once inside (Arts & Labor 2012c). Beyond fugitive occupations of strategic places in the New York art world, Arts & Labor has been organizing teach-ins and seeding its own working groups taking up specific lines of inquiry including unpaid internships and alternative economies.

Independent Worker Initiatives

Since the early 1980s self-employment has been the ‘biggest source of job creation’ in New York City (Vanderkam 2009). Propelling it are corporate and technological forces including the outsourcing of lower-margin and higher-risk activity, the diminishing expense of networked communications, and the hiring of nonstandard employees so to cut benefit costs. Flexibilization of labour is animated by subjective forces as well. A survey of some 2,800 New York freelancers reported that the majority agreed they work in this

way 'because they want to', seeking greater 'control' and 'freedom' (Horowitz et al. 2005, p. 3, 4). In the early 2000s US business writers narrated such desires for autonomy as the work of a 'free agent nation' (Pink 2001), an affirmative tale that fits hand in glove with the drive to claw back social protections against the vagaries of the market. So although there are enticing qualities of solo self-employment, these are often traded off against volatile income, insufficient healthcare, and social isolation – forms of precarity confronted by Freelancers Union and Hive at 55.

Freelancers Union is a Brooklyn-based non-profit membership organization started in 2003 by Sara Horowitz, a former labour lawyer and union organizer. Its membership has swelled to nearly 175,000 across the US, mostly 'creative types' in New York (Erickson, A. 2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.). Drawn from diverse sectors and occupations, what members share is exclusion from employer-sponsored benefits. Spanning the self-employed, contractors, freelancers, and other categories of contingent worker detached from a single employer, the union's constituency is not viewed by Horowitz as 'precarious': 'it's ... not like we need to feel sorry for them' (2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.) The preferred label of Freelancers Union is 'independent workers', a collective identity appealing simultaneously to an anti-corporate sentiment and entrepreneurial forms of self-understanding. The problem to which Freelancers Union responds is a mismatch between, on the one hand, the system of social protection in the US which was designed in the New Deal era around the premise of a standard employment relationship, and, on the other hand, the growing portion of the US labour force – an estimated one-third – in nonstandard employment and, as a result, at a security disadvantage relative to counterparts in 'standard' work arrangements. The challenge, says Horowitz, is to 'architect' the 'next safety net' for workers who do not signify within the existing welfare framework (2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.).

If organizing freelancers is akin to 'herding cats' (Goldbetter, L. 2011, pers. comm., 7 Dec.), the growth of Freelancers Union reflects the corralling power of insurance. In a national context of overwhelmingly private healthcare, many freelancers hover in a midway: their income is too high to qualify for Medicaid, too low (or too erratic) for the costly monthly premiums charged by commercial insurers. To extend coverage to this unprotected middle, Freelancers Union's gambit was to mimic the big employer model by aggregating disparate 'independents' in a single consumer pool so to purchase group-rated insurance. Backed by low-interest loans from foundations, it went on to launch its own insurance company. Freelancers Insurance Company is, as required by state regulations, a for-profit entity, though a subsidiary of the non-profit union. The insurance does more than fulfil an otherwise unmet need among relatively affluent nonstandard workers. Insurance is the 'undergirding' of Freelancers Union (2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.): it is the organizing model in that it brings diffuse workers together; it opens a line of communication for gauging this workforce's conditions; and it generates proceeds – the insurance arm has annual revenues exceeding \$80 million (Stonington 2011) – that can be parlayed to advocacy.

The advocacy of Freelancers Union operates on and across multiple political scales. It successfully campaigned in 2009 to change a City law that taxed freelancers individually and again as businesses. An ally in the campaign was Mayor Bloomberg, then seeking re-election. Local politicians, as Althea Erickson comments, have 'started to view freelancers as an emerging constituency' (2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.). Freelancers Union has formed a Political Action Committee, a legal status allowing it to make contributions to candidates

for office. It supported a slate of candidates for New York State elections pledging to pass the Unpaid Wages Bill, legislation drafted by Freelancers Union in response to learning of the 'startling number' of freelancers who 'don't get paid', but, unlike standard workers, are unable to file a claim for free with the Department of Labor (S. Horowitz 2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.). Ultimately seeking policy change federally, Freelancers Union is developing a proposal, in collaboration with the City, for extending unemployment insurance to freelancers. In these and other ways, Freelancers Union is becoming a 'political voice' in New York (S. Horowitz 2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.). Member participation remains limited. The bulk of its communication over the Internet, a challenge, says Erickson, is converting 'online connectivity into offline ... engagement'. Rather than directly involve members in governance (one member representative sits on the board of directors), Freelancers Union is focused on building 'member power around advocacy campaigns', a task for which organizers can 'capitalize on freelancers' need to 'meet more people' (A. Erickson 2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.).

Freelancers Union has been viewed with 'trepidation' by some in the labour movement (A. Erickson 2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.). It underwhelms those for whom collective bargaining is the sine qua non of unionism (S. Horowitz 2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.) – notwithstanding that US law prohibits freelancers from organizing (Horowitz 2011). And to those for whom the 'solution' is to 'get people back into standard employment', Freelancers Union 'legitimizes something that we should be opposing' (A. Erickson 2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.). Cognizant but unconvinced of such claims, Freelancers Union has begun exploring tactical alliances with other non-traditional workers' associations (e.g., Domestic Workers United, Model Alliance). Its bread-and-butter is controversial, however. Its 'benefits schemes', argues a critic in *Dissent Magazine*, 'let corporations off the hook': 'there could be nothing more convenient to the corporate and governmental powers-that-be than a nonprofit that takes it upon itself to placate, insure, and temper the precarious middle-class' (Abrahamian 2012). Impatient with this variety of Left analysis, Horowitz (2010, pers. comm., 4 Oct.) has lately framed Freelancers Union as an example and advocate of 'the new mutualism' – designating cooperatives, credit unions, and social-purpose business; a 'mutualistic ethos', Horowitz (2012) argues, is the forward edge of a twenty-first-century labour movement.

Further outside the union movement is a set of initiatives sprouting in response to another difficulty faced by New York's independent workers, that of finding affordable workspace. This is making the city a seedbed for coworking, the accelerating trend of freelancers, the self-employed, and other nonstandard workers coming together to share a common space to work. Early coworking experiments in New York were informal, motivated not strictly by expense but by the isolation of working alone. In 2006, a pair of roommates periodically started to open up their apartment to friends and their friends for 'work togethers'. Dubbed 'Jelly', the concept caught on: a Wiki now lists 'jellies' scheduled from Seattle to Sydney. Jelly preceded several coworking facilities now operating as private businesses in New York. Another early entrant to the city's coworking scene was the Hive at 55.

A short walk from the Stock Exchange, the Hive is a project of Downtown Alliance, one of New York's largest Business Improvement Districts. Downtown Alliance has a hulking \$16 million budget funded by a City tax on commercial properties within its premium geographic boundary. The Hive also received a \$100,000 grant from the City as part of an economic development programme to boost the media sector. The Hive is in a

suite of an office tower owned by a Downtown Alliance board member. Its open-concept, communal workspace has room for fifty, and is frequented by freelance writers, Web site developers, graphic designers, app developers and business-service providers. The Hive offers its rotating cast discounted rent, Wi-Fi, printing, scanning and so on. Yet 'that's not really what it's about', according to its director, Daria Siegel (2011, pers. comm., 7 Dec.). The draw, says one Hive member, is 'the culture we've created here' (cited in Rueb 2011). Siegel identifies the 'vibe', community, and collaboration as the appeals: 'what you're getting out of this is a network of people'. Supplying more than generic sociality, coworking is a milieu in which 'interacting leads to new ideas, new projects, and new clients' (Korkki 2011). Although much of this productive interaction arises informally, the Hive employs a 'community manager' who will make introductions when, say, two members are known to work in a similar field.

Coworking makes independent work more viable by providing space, contacts, and services. Between 2010 and 2011, coworking facilities in the US doubled to an estimated 760 (*Economist* 2011). Dozens are cropping up in New York, especially in neighbourhoods home to 'lots of arts and creative people' (D. Siegel 2011, pers. comm., 7 Dec.). Coworking facilities are heterogeneous not only in their atmosphere and occupational niche (e.g., Paragraph caters to writers, General Assembly to techies), but also their political commitments. Most are commercial enterprises catering to creative-economy operatives. Some, like Brooklyn Creative League, emphasise social-purpose business. A more politicized example is Brooklyn's No↔Space, which makes coworking space available during the day and puts on art-activist events at night. For its part, the Hive at 55 is at the time of writing in the final year of what was conceived as a three-year project; indicating the pressure to adopt an entrepreneurial frame, some of the future possibilities being floated include an 'arts incubator' or a facility with more 'start-up space' (D. Siegel 2011, pers. comm., 7 Dec.).

Inklings of Recomposition

Declining union density, high unemployment, concessionary bargaining, widening income inequality, and the imposition of austerity reflect and reinforce the widely diagnosed 'crisis' of organized labour (Camfield 2011; Silver 2003). The embattled state of the union is exacerbated by the flexibilization of labour – a process that, many critics suggest, is exemplified by the artist and other cultural workers outside of a standard employment relationship (see Gillick 2010; Neff et al. 2005; Ross 2000; von Osten 2007). Cultural workers have been characterised as 'role model' and 'ideal' labourers of post-Fordist, neoliberal capitalism: entrepreneurial, habituated to self-reliance, feverishly networking, folding work and life into each other, perpetually striving for innovation, willing to put the gratification of the work before the size of the pay cheque.... Such propensities can be understood as pragmatic strategies for getting by in precarious times. So although the role-model line of argument is compelling, it risks adding to the sense that there is no way out of flexploitation, its command so thorough as to format subjectivity in its likeness.

The research that informs this article catches a glimpse of the agency that is occluded if subjects of precarity are conceived primarily as role models – or, by the same token, as victims – of contemporary capitalism, or, similarly, if these workers are defined largely by what they lack as compared to those in standard employment. Affirming the

capacity to contest does not mean turning a blind eye to the enormous difficulties that organized labour in the US, as elsewhere, faces. New York is the country's most densely unionized state, but here too the obstacles are many (see Milkman & Braslow 2011). The point remains, however, that a perspective restricted to either the fortunes of big labour or quantitative indicators such as unionization rates risks neglecting experiments at the margins of the traditional labour movement, many of which are unfolding in the very sectors that Currid identifies with the Warhol economy. The sort of initiatives introduced in this article do not register in union density statistic – and yet experimentation along these lines must proliferate if the decline of labour as a social and political force stands a chance of being reversed.

The fashion industry frictions, art world agitations, and independent worker initiatives profiled in this article can be understood as inklings of a recomposition of labour politics. Derived from the tradition of autonomist Marxism, the concept of decomposition designates a process through which sources of workers' organizational counter-power and material security are clawed back through capitalist restructuring. The decomposition effects of deindustrialization, of the disaggregation of production, and of the destandardization of employment, among other processes of post-Fordist transformation, are well known. The same restructuring processes, writes Nick Dyer-Witheford, open 'the possibility of working-class recomposition involving different strata of workers with fresh capacities of resistance and counter-initiative' (1999, p. 66). Seen through the lens of recomposition, capitalism's reassembly around, say, precarious employment and creative industries, does not necessarily exhaust dissent but potentially remixes its coordinates, reshuffles its actors, and revises its demands.

A few currents of recomposition manifesting in the New York cases can be flagged in conclusion. To begin with, the celebratory portrait of work that is such a cliché of the normative cultural-economy script is served up as a reality-check, if not outwardly rejected, by the protagonists confronting precarity in Gotham's creative industries. The organizations informing this research put little stock in the myths surrounding their lines of work. Yet, what their efforts underline is that the labour capacities and material infrastructures upon which the cultural economy vitally depends exceed capital's preferred use of them. Freelancers Union, for instance, was described as impossible without the Internet – the very communicative apparatus that facilitates the spatiotemporal disaggregation of the workforce (S. Horowitz 2010, pers. Comm., 4 Oct.). Model Alliance enjoys a high profile in the press in no small part because of the group's public-relations savvy – a verve befitting the image-based industry whose labour standards it sets out to transform.

Adapting to occupational and employment restructuring, the flexworker organizations profiled in this article emerge from the margins of established unions. This is partly because the labour movement has tended to privilege the standard employees in the manufacturing and public sectors that are its thinning postwar strongholds. Notably, it is not necessarily a profession or sector that is the basis of solidarity in these experiments, but a particular style of employment. These experiments, along with the low-wage worker organizations whose emergence they follow or parallel (see Fine 2011), are part of labour's organizational adjustment to new conditions. Even if the initiatives described here sprang from outside the corridors of big labour, they defy a hard and fast distinction between 'mainstream' and 'autonomous' worker organizations. For example, Retail Action Project is a rank-and-file membership group that has received financial support from a large union.

Model Alliance is a not-for-profit that has collaborated with established unions in the provision of services. And coworking spaces are disconnected from unionism altogether. So although they have varying relations to established unions, these collective organizations share at least one quality in common: the desires and grievances animating them cannot be satisfied by a labour politic whose horizon is the rehabilitation of standard employment. Rather than demand jobs for life, these initiatives are designing, from below, elements of a new mode of social regulation fit for the age of 'flexploitation' (Gray 2004).

These notes from New York confirm that nonstandard workers and their allies are fully capable of confronting precarity. The task of amplifying these inklings of recomposition is, nonetheless, formidable. Three challenges will be mentioned in conclusion. First, with important exceptions, these initiatives often operate in isolation from one another. There are, however, concerns around which several of these groups might converge. One candidate is unpaid labour. The push by Freelancers Union for an Unpaid Wages Bill for independent workers, the legal battles against wage theft involving the Retail Action Project, the challenges to unpaid internships by Arts & Labor, and the call by W.A.G.E. for an end to the custom of compensating artists in 'exposure' – virtually all of these groups are tackling one form or another of free labour.

A second challenge concerns the division of labour, which is simultaneously a challenge of working across and against the stratification of 'New York's creative class ... along racial and ethnic lines' (Ramirez 2009). One possible response to this challenge is to intensify efforts to organize along a wider circuit of exploitation. Promising moves in this direction are being made: Arts & Labor's solidarity activism with locked-out art handlers; Model Alliance's openness to the prospect of working across the 'fashion food chain'; and Retail Action Project's constituency includes both frontline retail staff and backroom workers – the latter linking to a racialized distribution labour force in a decisive position in the fashion commodity circuit (see Ikeler 2011).

A third challenge is to go beyond opposing labour precarity – and even beyond developing policy mechanisms to cope better with it – to proposing alternative economies. Discussion of the 'new mutualism' at Freelancers Union and the Alternative Economies subgroup of Arts & Labor are beginning to address this massive challenge. There are, however, untapped possibilities. Coworking facilities, to mention just one, could conceivably be run as worker-owned cooperatives rather than private commercial enterprises. Beyond any specific model, the broader question is whether these initiatives in New York, and others to come, will act as crucibles of experimentation in the production of new economies of cooperation that would strive to minimize precarity in all its forms – rather than thrive off it, or mystify it, in the spirit of the Warhol economy.

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