

Cooperative Culture? Organising sustainable Work/Lives in the Arts and Creative Industries

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In times where the present forms of organising Western societies are more and more questioned with regard to their ability to offer opportunities, distribute resources and sustain diversity, the call for alternative ways of organising working and living together becomes more pressing (Parker *et al.* 2014). With working conditions both, in low-end services as well as in high-end knowledge sectors sharing certain elements of precarious, or nonstandard employment (Ross, 2008), this longing for alternatives revolves around questions of collaboration, of commonality and solidarity (Helfrich and Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2014).

In the wake of this longing, cooperatives have regained prominence as viable forms of or-

ganising. (Webb and Cheney, 2014). As worker-owned-and-governed organisations cooperatives are considered a way of participating people in shaping the conditions of employing their labor and capital for production (Pleister, 2001). At the same time, cooperatives are not only assumed to better be able to sustain jobs in times of crisis (Burdin and Dean, 2009), they are also perceived as contributing to environmental, educational and social well-being of their local communities. Worker cooperatives, according to Cheney *et al.* (2014), can increasingly be found in various sectors, such as health care, marketing and advertising, engineering, consultancy firms or law. Yet, although Webb and Cheney (2014) suggest, that “virtual collaboration also allows for a variety of kinds of knowledge and cultural work to be organised in terms of principles of cooperation and relying on established models of worker-owned co-operatives as well”, this sector does not seem to be prone to such ideas. Instead, it seems, cultural workers currently use other strategies of coping with the economic hardships of their work-lives. This paper aims at contributing to a further understanding of or-

ganising in the cultural sphere to discuss conditions for sustainably organising immaterial and creative forms of work-lives.

For organising and sustaining their work-lives, cultural workers are considered to be highly dependent on what Lange (2014) calls “professional scenes” and cultural industries are very often considered as constitutively linked to urban environments. For over a decade now, policy-makers and business people consider cultural workers and specifically artists key to urban prosperity (Florida, 2002) and increasingly made them part of policy-programming and city-marketing campaigns (Hesmindhalgh and Pratt 2005). However, despite the hopes of policy-makers to foster a “productive economy with an engine of sustainable jobs at its core. Much of the evidence so far suggests that the primary impact is on land value and rent accumulations” (Ross, 2008: 33; Harvey, 2001).

Artists have always been prone to both - precarious working conditions and vulnerability with regard to affordable living and working spaces. Yet, these latest developments, including artistic life being part of speculations of capital

(Kunst, 2015) and processes of gentrification that increasingly withdraw the possibility for artists to find and maintain affordable spaces for working and living in urban environments, seem to have intensified (Landau and Mohr, 2015).

Asking how artists manage to foster, nurture and maintain collaborative structures that exceed the temporality of individual art projects, I present a case study of an ongoing research project on an emerging artist organisation (Critical Concrete) that aims at tackling both, sustaining own working and living conditions as well as generating stable residential arrangements for low-income households that are not part of the cultural sphere.

Keywords

Emerging Artist Organisation, Cultural workers, Co-operative Culture

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