

Hannah Arendt and Paolo Virno: Virtuoso Practices and Artistic Politics

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I: Introduction

Recent interest in the workplace as a political space is fueled by the unprecedented ubiquity of the economy and, quite possibly, a suspicion towards the proper functioning of democratic institutions, if not an outright questioning of their political nature. The latter charge, of course, hinges on what we mean by politics. Aristotle, for example, identifies distinct realms of work and politics, while accordingly distinguishing between activities. His concepts of the *oikos* and the *polis* are indicative of a mode of politics that prioritizes processes over products, *praxis* over *poiesis*. The familiar criticism issued against such a mode of politics calls attention to the exclusive and exploitative characteristics: The *oikos*, the household in which life is sustained and reproduced, relies on hierarchical structures and slavery, while the *polis*, the political arena for collective action, hinges on a rather selective admission. Against the background of these limitations, not even Hannah Arendt, who incorporates Aristotelian distinctions into her political thought, advocates a return to Ancient Greek politics. Yet, the idea to distinguish between modes of work and political activities reemerges in the 20th century not least due to Arendt's popularity. Arendt reflectively reintroduces Aristotelian concepts and distinctions, augmenting them with a virtuosic notion of political excellence.

Although I hope to show that Arendt's political theory is more apt to theorize problems of capitalism than Arendt's critics suggest, Arendt eventually does run into conceptual difficulties regarding severely transformed modes of production that challenge the validity of her conceptual framework. To account for these changes, I turn to the political

theory of Marxian philosopher and activist Paolo Virno, who is sympathetic to key Arendtian figures of thought but remains adamant in addressing her neglect of the intellect in neoliberal modes of production. With Virno I will highlight the main challenges of new productive forces without losing sight of the emancipatory potential of the workplace. The workplace is, then, political on at least two counts: work, construed as a means of sustaining life and providing for necessities, is fully politicized. Conversely, Virno insists that work - that is political work or “action” in the Arendtian sense – maintains its emancipatory potential even in light of the pervasiveness of contemporary economic modes.

II: *Vita Activa and Vita Contemplativa*

Arendt’s reliance on Aristotelian elements in her political theory has to do with the engulfing nature of what she refers to as “the rise of the social [...] the emergence of society.”¹ Although Arendt’s notion of the social remains diffuse, she frequently laments the spread of norms and behaviors at the expense of action, which she associates with spontaneity public virtue, and being seen by others. Instead, she observes that “the social realm transformed all modern communities into societies of laborers and jobholders [who] became at once centered around the one activity necessary to sustain life.”² This is why, despite the hierarchical and exclusive structures of the household, Arendt is generally reluctant to turn economic concerns into matters of public deliberation.³

Her fear of the social with its pervasive and normalizing effects is, then, enmeshed with her distinctions between labor, work, and action. In opposition to labor, work has the capacity to materialize action and thought, which then can be remembered by future generations. Arendt calls this “remembrance” or “the transformation of the intangible into the

¹ Arendt 1958, 38.

² Ibid., 46.

³ Benhabib (1996, 156), in disagreement, cites Arendt saying that “there are things where the right measure can be figured out. These things can really be administered and are not then subject to public debate.”

tangibility of things.”⁴ Arendt prioritizes a worry for the world over a worry over life’s necessity. According to her, there is something about labor that is both limiting and pervasive: Labor is limiting in that it stifles the pursuit of freedom, which for Arendt is precisely the point of politics. Labor is pervasive in terms of its very essence. Arendt writes,

It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends on it.⁵

Out of this concern with labor as a necessary, yet problematic activity grows Arendt’s criticism of Marx, whom she accuses of conflating labor and work and thus oddly valorizing labor.

Marx allegedly ascribes to the realm of labor the possibility of human emancipation from exploitation, once abundance renders labor redundant.⁶ Accordingly, Marx’s revolution depends on technological advancements, which would eventually free humans from the activity of labor and, by proxy, of exploitation. Arendt, however, places much less faith in the realm of labor and instead seeks to construe work as *praxis* as opposed to *poiesis*, as doing over making. While Arendt might well understate the constitutive aspect of economic forces in conceptualizing freedom and political action, her account nonetheless succeeds in highlighting the severe difficulties of a political project grounded in encompassing economic relations. Action all-too-often loses its political character, thus turning into normalizing behavior or economic competition.

According to Hanna Pitkin, both Marx and Arendt at least “agree that our hope for achieving freedom lies in the paradoxicality [...] that the resultants of our own activity now dominate us only because that activity keeps us isolated from each other, incapable of

⁴ Arendt 1958, 95.

⁵ Ibid., 87.

⁶ See Pitkin 1998.

solidarity.”⁷ But Pitkin also challenges Arendt’s criticism of Marx, describing her concept of the social as complex - at best - and as all-encompassing and, therefore, as running contrary to her own thought – at worst. Pitkin is not entirely off track, insofar as it is indeed difficult to pinpoint Arendt’s position regarding the “rise of the social.” The title of Pitkin’s book *The Attack of the Blob*, however, grants some insights into Arendt’s motivation, while also concealing an important aspect. Pitkin’s invocation of the blob, a 1958 sci-fi flick, is not only contemporaneous to Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, but also mirrors effectively her concerns about mass culture and consumerism which, as we already saw, threaten to dispose of political action.

Yet, Pitkin’s hyperbolic suggestion ignores that Arendt, despite admittedly painting a dim picture, reminds us to remain vigilant and to seize opportunities for new beginnings and mutual action. Thus she notes,

Not even the social realm [...] has been able altogether to annihilate the connection between public performance and excellence. While we have become excellent in the laboring we perform in public, our capacity for action and speech has lost much of its former quality since the rise of the social realm banished these into the sphere of the intimate and the private.⁸

Arendt notes that public performance and excellence are still linked, but that there has been a considerable shift from public to private and from action to behavior. Here, Arendt identifies an important opportunity for political action, while understating a crucial constraint. As problematic as the state of affairs might appear, Arendt seems to suggest that the means to overcome individualism and competition are still available. In a society that has internalized the characteristics of the *animal laborans* the only surviving occupation, for Arendt, is the artist, “who, strictly speaking, is the only ‘worker’ left in laboring society.”⁹ The artist, construed as a worker, allows for an interpretation of the virtues and excellences constitutive of political action, because “for excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always

⁶ Ibid., 141.

⁸ Arendt 1958, 49.

⁹ Ibid.

required.”¹⁰ Hence, Arendt gestures at a somewhat modified Aristotelian virtue, a kind of excellence that is less contingent on a conception of the good life, but rather focuses on political processes, spontaneous and indeterminate. In *Freedom and Politics* Arendt explicitly uses the term virtuosity to illustrate the political potential for artistic processes, rather than products, thus reemphasizing the need for *praxis*.

Arendt, although she dedicates the majority of her writing on the *vita activa* – the active life, also discusses the *vita contemplativa* – the contemplative life, which was held to be superior to the active life by the ancients, an ideal that translated well into Christianity.¹¹ To be clear, Arendt is not interested in reestablishing some kind of primacy of the philosopher’s way of life, but rather she delineates via secularization and the rise of laboring society a bifurcation of the contemplative life into “useless thought” and “cognition.”¹² Despite its constitutive, inspirational function to art and philosophy, thought pales to cognition in a society that demands products and results. But the ability to think, Arendt emphasizes, is constitutional for a free polity: “contrary to what is currently assumed about the proverbial ivory tower independence of thinkers, no other human capacity is so vulnerable, and it is in fact far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think.”¹³

Arendt, then, is clearly aware that capitalism - although she rarely calls it that – is pervasive and limits, as it were, not only the private ability to think, but also political action. Arendt though does not pay sufficient attention to the fact that political – virtuosic – action is not merely a passive object of encroaching mass society, but is part and parcel of contemporary modes of production. Even the life of the mind, apparently a critical element in her political theory, becomes complicit in capitalist production. Thus, when Arendt addresses the dwindling private, she fails to conceptualize the productive nature of the “not so private

¹⁰ Ibid., 49.

¹¹ Ibid., 14/318.

¹² Ibid., 170/71.

¹³ Ibid., 324.

nature of the private.” Although she spends considerable time emphasizing the importance to think, to dedicate oneself to the “life of the mind,” she chronically understates the constitutive aspects of both doing and thinking, of cognitive abilities, in an economy that increasingly relies on intellectual and creative abilities.

III: Paolo Virno: From the Factory to Political Action

To continue Arendt’s thought towards a political figure of virtuosity, I turn to the work of Italian philosopher and activist Paolo Virno, who analyzes the implications of substantially transformed working conditions that have emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time Virno organized several strikes and occupations in connection with the *Autonomia Operaia* in Italy.¹⁴ Virno’s work originates from a rather unstable background due to “the great disorder in the factories,” which he considers to have impacted not only factory workers, but also “doctors, the precarious professors at the university, and the Sardinian shepherds.”¹⁵ The recurring image of the factory serves as conceptual point of departure, not as a device designated to insulate the worker from other elements of society. In other words, Virno’s distinct political affiliation does not foreclose his pursuit of broad and heterogeneous alliances. Rather, his writings, particularly *A Grammar of the Multitude*, assess the possibilities for political action predicated on the new modes of production and on a coincidental decline of the state as a genuine political realm.¹⁶

Virno is a prominent figure of *operaismo* or workerism, an intellectual movement that grew out of the Marxist tradition.¹⁷ Despite his factory jargon and his close affiliation with workerism, Virno maintains an ambivalent relation with Marxism. Workerism, as Virno presents it, decidedly challenges the reduction of life to the realm of labor and explores ways

¹⁴ Joseph 2005, 27.

¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

¹⁶ Virno 2004.

¹⁷ Cf. Hardt/Negri 2000.

of resistance by means of communication and virtuosity.¹⁸ Hence, Virno's analysis shares important ground with Arendt's work, as I have presented it so far. Although Virno explicitly rejects Arendt's distinctions, both thinkers seem to agree on the relevance of thought, action, and speech with regard to political life.

I suggest that a closer engagement with Virno's thought can provide fruitful ways to think about work and its political potential. After all, Virno, more so than Arendt, deals with the severe contradictions of challenging the forces of capitalism and market society, while exploring ways of conceptualizing political action precisely within these very forces. Although realistic enough to diagnose the *Autonomia Operaia* as "a defeated revolution," Virno generally maintains an emphatic outlook in terms of the political activities of united workers.¹⁹ He argues that contemporary organization of work might be more pervasive and more uncertain than ever, but nonetheless maintains that these conditions enable us to draw new connections and to forge new alliances, which he conceptualizes henceforth as the multitude.

Since Virno premises his project on the transformation from Fordism to post-Fordism, I shall briefly sketch Fordism as a mode of economic production.²⁰ Fordism is indicative of an economic mode of accumulation that decisively enabled mass consumption. It denotes a mechanization of Taylorism, which in turn rests on the postulates of optimizing production and increasing efficiency. The scientific and mechanic influences of Taylorism result in practices that perceive workers as a mass of laboring bodies, rather than individuals. For Arendt, this is the nature of labor. The laborers make a living, but their living, as it were, is not in itself productive. Such currents amount to a mode of organizing labor that is primarily

¹⁸ Arendt would probably use "labor" instead of "work" in this context.

¹⁹ Ibid., 12; Lotringer (2004, 10) describes *Autonomia Operaia* as "a large movement involving students, women, young workers and the unemployed. Their rhizomatic organization embodied every form of political behavior – anti hierarchical, anti-representative – anticipated by Operaist thinkers."

²⁰ It should be noted that Fordism is not a widely acknowledged term, but was made popular by Antonio Gramsci's essay *Americanism and Fordism* and has subsequently been cited mostly by writers of the Marxist tradition (Marchart 2013, 38).

geared towards mass production of commodities. Virno asserts that Fordism as an effective model of production lasted only until the late 1960s.

Fordism regressed when its economic orientation, its emphasis on mass production, was no longer viable. More specifically, the focus on output gave way to a focus on profit and flexibility. The departure from a mode of production centering on mechanization and scientific efficiency towards a mode capitalizing on the intellect and the sociability of workers marks a critical turning point from Fordism to post-Fordism. Largely disregarded or condescended in Taylorist and Fordist contexts, the workers' intellect surfaces as a pivotal feature of post-Fordism. Post-Fordism profits from its workers' intellectual and creative abilities even, or rather in particular, as they exceed the confines of the workplace. In light of this Virno's thought transcends Arendt's distinctions regarding the social and the political, the private and the public.

As I have mentioned earlier, Virno is not interested in simply discarding Arendt's thought for a heavier emphasis on a Marxist tradition. At first glance Virno even appears sympathetic towards Arendt's distinctions:

When I began to get involved in politics, in the Sixties, I considered this subdivision to be something indisputable; it seemed to me as unquestionable as any immediate tactile or visual perception. It was not necessary to have read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to know that labor, political action, and intellectual reflection constituted three spheres supported by radically heterogeneous principles and criteria.²¹

Virno maintains that in a world organized by Fordist modes of production, i.e. the factory and its assembly line, "Labor, Intellect, and Politics remained essentially distinct."²² While labor mainly deals with "natural materials," political action revolves around "social relations," "the possible," and "the unforeseen." Whereas for Arendt labor denotes "bodily activity" that "serves exclusively to the provision of life's necessities," Virno suggests that under the current economic conditions action and speech, even the intellect, contribute to these vital

²¹ Virno 2004, 50.

²² Ibid.

functions and, perhaps more significantly, maintain their political potential.²³ Read emphatically, this conceptual shift attributes considerable political opportunities to the realm of labor. Again, this is not a simply refutation of Arendt's work, but rather an urgent modification that attempts to resist the conceptual absorption of virtuosity by post-Fordist modes of production.

Virno, however, recognizes the looming threat resulting from a fusion of political action and the provision of life's necessities. In a somewhat less optimistic projection he concedes that "the whole person [...] is subdued" due to the conflation of the old realms.²⁴ What is more, post-Fordism signifies a new reality not merely for certain creative and communicative professions such as advertising, entertainment, or research, but rather extends to "the *entire* contemporary workforce including fruit packers and the poorest of immigrants."²⁵ Thus, Virno outlines the challenges that the post-Fordist workforce faces in today's occupations:

The ability to react in a timely manner to the continual innovations in techniques and organizational models, a remarkable 'opportunism' in negotiating among the different possibilities offered by the job market, familiarity with what is possible and unforeseeable, that minimal entrepreneurial attitude that makes it possible to decide what is the 'right thing' to do within a nonlinear productive fluctuation, a certain familiarity with the web of communications and information.²⁶

These abilities are by and large learned outside a specific workplace through various types of socialization. It is, therefore, crucial to note that Virno includes action, speech, and the intellect into the basic productive process. This is to say that in contrast to orthodox Marxism, interpersonal relationships, affiliations, and forms of life not only relate to an economic superstructure, but also become constitutive of capitalist production and reproduction. Against this background, I read Virno's approach as a mediating position between Arendt's notion of politics and a Marxian emphasis on labor. Although more malleable in terms of the

²³ Cf. Arendt 1963, 38; Arendt 1958, 70/71.

²⁴ Virno 2004, 41.

²⁵ Joseph 2005, 29.

²⁶ Ibid.

constitution of the means of production than traditional Marxist approaches, Virno certainly does not omit exploitation of labor through a capitalist economy. The difference lies in the primacy of creative, some say immaterial labor.²⁷

According to Virno, “the living body becomes an object to be governed not for its intrinsic value, but because it is the substratum of what really matters: labor power as the aggregate of the most diverse human faculties.”²⁸ When work and life coalesce the way post-Fordist analysis supposes, and when this coalescence is appropriated by capital or an administrative state, we might recall Foucault’s studies on biopolitics and governmentality. Virno focuses on the potentiality of labor power, which used to designate physical or mechanical capabilities, but which now refers to “the life of the mind,” too.²⁹ Since the potential of labor power, i.e. the capacity to think, speak, and produce, is inextricably linked to life itself, a connection of post-Fordist analysis to bio-politics indeed makes sense: “Life lies at the center of politics when the price to be won is immaterial (and in itself non-present) labor power.”³⁰

Not least due to these developments, contemporary labor becomes a central aspect of human life, for it sustains basic life functions, while harboring the possibility for political action. In light of the implications of biopolitics and governmentality, Virno refuses to guarantee the realization of such political action, but affirms merely its potential in a realm of labor that is construed significantly more broadly than Arendt would have it. In this sense, the actual significance of labor in terms of its transformative potential remains uncertain, but is at least acknowledged. Virno, perhaps more so than Arendt, engages the profound contradictions

²⁷ See Hardt/Negri 2000. The problem with Hardt/Negri is their all-encompassing, total view of *Empire* and their somewhat romantic believe that affective or virtuosic action is somehow contained within the proletariat, the precariat, or the multitude. Virno, in contrast to Hardt/Negri, clearly recognizes that Arendtian politics, as it were, are not exclusive to the aim of emancipation, but are constitutive of capitalist production in general. Virtuosity is not a privilege of the multitude, but might appear in institutions of the state and economy.

²⁸ Virno 2004, 83.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

of challenging the forces of capitalism, neoliberalism, or post-Fordism, while exploring ways of conceptualizing political action in co-constitution with these forces. The central problem is that even the most virtuosic action is not political, according to this discussion, when it aims at getting ahead, when it is caught in a competitive, instrumental context. Virno, nonetheless, seems to suggest that the transformed working conditions harbor a potential that could translate into broader alliances among an increasingly precarious workforce.

IV: Precarization: Between Servitude and Emancipation

It is, however, no time to suggest strategies when the threat has not even been acknowledged to exist.³¹

The reorganization of production, as I have described it so far, leads to drastic changes for large parts of the post-Fordist workforce. These changes include a loosening of ties between factories and their workers, which is to say that instead of traditional wage labor, workers increasingly engage in temporary limited services and projects or simply work from their homes. This scattered type of production is especially common in vocations such as advertising, academia, and the culture industry, but it is certainly not limited to these fields. Some, therefore, refer to this phenomenon as the “fabbrica diffusa,” a metaphorical factory, whose employees are distributed geographically and across different layers of society.³² In many cases, production is no longer tied to a distinct location, but rather emerges as a result of such diffuse connections.

Accordingly, quasi-independent workers rely more and more on networking, flexibility, and the accumulation of favorable work relationships in order to ensure their livelihoods. The perceived state of independence, however, is misleading, because this view clouds the fact that post-Fordist modes of production imply great risks concerning work and private life alike. The term risk does not quite capture the depth of the issue. Thus, I follow

³¹ McLuhan 1994, 18.

³² Marchart 2013, 60.

political theorist Oliver Marchart in describing this development as precarization.³³ At the core of this notion is precisely the fact that post-Fordist modes of production affect all aspects of human life. New modes of production along with technological advancements have in some cases generated unprecedented possibilities in terms of how to “make a living,” but have largely rendered work fundamentally uncertain, precarious. According to this view, the euphemistic phrases of “home office” et al. cloud the ambiguities that go along with the pervasion of economic constraints into all areas of life. Considering recent technological advancements, not much imagination is needed to grasp the extension of the home office to virtually any location. The reality for those, who engage in work beyond the confines of secure and regulated wage labor, is aggravated by the constant demand of availability and, more often than not, an increased workload.

The modern image of contemporary capitalism as an all-encompassing, inescapable force stems largely from its relentless incorporation of “the potential for speaking, for thinking, for remembering, for acting.”³⁴ The concern that capitalism in its pervasiveness appropriates human life and undermines political activity culminates in Fredric Jameson’s claim “that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”³⁵ We might ask, then, how much political, even liberatory potential can we really expect in a world in which “the labor process mobilizes the most universal requisites of the species: perception, language, memory, and feelings?”³⁶ I suggest, however, a stance towards post-Fordist capitalism that acknowledges its expansive nature without regarding it as utterly ubiquitous in its constraining capacity. If this is the case, if precarization is widespread, rather than totalizing, the changeability of affairs remains timely despite and because of

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Virno 2004, 83.

³⁵ Jameson 2003, 76.

³⁶ Virno 2004, 77.

precarization. This is to say that the effects of precarization, the surfacing of intellect, speech, and action, introduce new possibilities of conceptualizing transformative political action.

Elements of former modes of production align with new impulses and create new realities. These changes, for better or for worse, constantly reconfigure our potential to improve our conditions. Every theory that purports to plausibly connect work to political projects must therefore carefully examine the constraints and possibilities in light of ever transforming modes of production. In a similar context, Marshall McLuhan asserts that “the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions and concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.”³⁷ McLuhan, therefore, understands technological advancements at a formal level, such that his view supports Virno’s claim that post-Fordism concerns all social positions.³⁸ Under such circumstances, Virno asks, “is it possible to split that which today is united, that is, the Intellect and (wage) Labor, and to unite that which today is divided, that is, Intellect and political Action?”³⁹ The remainder of the paper tries to sketch respective conceptual and practical approaches.

V: Outlook: Precarization and Virtuositic Production

At the moment art is taught as a special field which demands the production of documents in the form of artworks. Whereas I advocate an aesthetic involvement from science, from economics, from politics, from religion – every sphere of human activity. Even the act of peeling a potato can be a work of art if it is a conscious act.⁴⁰

How, then, might we conceptualize alternative politics that take into account the implications of post-Fordism and precarization? Marchart, for example, attempts to envision a setting in which intellect and action meet and wage labor is at least suspended: “There seems to be a

³⁷ McLuhan 1994, 18.

³⁸ McLuhan (1994, 65/66) also discusses the artist’s awareness of these developments and accords to art a principal role in developing strategies of resistance.

³⁹ Virno 2004, 68.

⁴⁰ Beuys 1990, 87.

[...] metaphorical complicity between public acting and theatrical acting, between public space and the space of theatre.”⁴¹ This notion recalls Arendt’s remarks on the matter:

The performing arts [...] have indeed a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists [...] need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their ‘work,’ and both depend on others for the performance itself.⁴²

According to Virno, political action is located precisely where workers employ their faculties in the absence of clear instructions, a “determined script.”⁴³ Virtuosity, thus, describes the ability to reflexively engage with the overwhelming uncertainty that exists in and around the contemporary workforce. It seems, therefore, plausible that such qualities pertain to more than just the immediate surroundings of a specific employment, as the organization of “the *fabrica diffusa*” enables the formation of new connections and networks beyond a particular workplace.

In light of the above discussion recommendations, a script, for action would be contrived. Instead, I hope to provide theoretical ground to conceptualize a mode of politics that is co-constituted by the workplace and, more broadly construed, the organization of work. It might still be helpful to consider some instances that approximate the ideas here discussed. At least from a conceptual point of view a movement like Occupy does reflect the main features as I have outlined them thus far. Not least due to precarization its demographic make-up was diverse. Rather than immediately formulating specific policy goals, Occupy established a horizontal, deliberative structure and prioritized the negotiations of spatiality and temporality. In other words, the movement’s initial concerns were organizational and reflexive. Of course, in that particular mode the movement didn’t last very long, maybe that was never the point. Arendt would describe these instances as fleeting and maintain that even

⁴¹ Marchart 2004, 2; in the same essay Marchart refers to the theater as a “deliberative public space - which we would also encounter in Hannah Arendt’s model of public space.”

⁴² Virno 2004, 52/53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 66.

if a public realm exists “no man [...] can live in it all the time.”⁴⁴ Occupy was political less through the eventual formulation of demands, but rather by demonstrating an alternative mode to think about politics.

On a similar note, Alan Moore, author of critically acclaimed graphic novels such as *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen*, offers a pertinent account of art as practice, production, and rare type of labor. Moore argues that “artistic treatments of economic themes inherently question settled understandings, and many contest things as they are.”⁴⁵ Moore’s discussion recounts a variety of artists and artistic circles. While his analysis concerns both content and form, he claims that “in recent decades, artistic practice rather than product has become the focus of much advanced art.”⁴⁶ This shift in emphasis allows Moore to delineate ways in which artists and communities engage in collective efforts of producing and showcasing art. In particular, artists benefit from efforts including “real processes (how artists live and make art),” or “gifts (of time, space, materials, opportunities, ideas)” and in general mutual aid.⁴⁷ These instances illustrate how artistic approaches simultaneously mark political action thus entertaining alternative notions of working economies. On this view, artistic production contains a moment that responds to the revolutionary disenchantment, in that even unfavorable economic conditions become an immediate ground for what Arendt would consider *praxis*.

Moreover, Moore notes artistic productions that specifically target Fordist modes of production like Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* or Diego Riviera’s murals of the automobile industry in Detroit and urban growth.⁴⁸ Both of these artists recognize the productive capacity of the Fordist industry and problematize the ways in which these modes take on the characteristics of an exploitative regime. Like Virno, Moore also notes the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism:

⁴⁴ Arendt 1958, 199.

⁴⁵ Moore 2004, 471.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 472.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 472/3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 474.

Artistic representations of political economy, both internal and external, have become increasingly more frequent and legible, to the point where such content may be said to constitute some artists' principal subject. This correlates broadly with changes in the base economy of advanced capitalist societies – that is, deindustrialization and the rise of the information economy.⁴⁹

In this passage Moore observes how political economy and specifically changes therein constitute shifts in artistic processes and trajectories. On a broader level, he addresses structural changes that instigate the gentrification of neighborhoods, but nonetheless effect different formations of artistic networks, thus presenting an argument in favor of political possibilities against the background of an art that “has become imbued with managerial and executive aspects.”⁵⁰ Again, we can observe how precarization acts as a constraint while simultaneously constituting new possibilities to critically engage with a transformed economic environment. The artist, as McLuhan notes, appears to be among the first to not only comprehend such developments, but also to act on them in a virtuosic manner, that is in reflexive and unscripted way.

A prominent overlap between politics and art are the so called social sculptures, installations that focus on the artistic process and hinge on participation. Social sculptures effectively challenge the divide between the artist and the audience, thus combining inclusivity, virtuosity, and spontaneity. In order to “mobilize mass human creativity” Joseph Beuys for instance worked with social sculptures or “pedagogic performances” that would eventually pave the way for his involvement with the German Green Party and animal politics.⁵¹ This is not to say that artists need to become politicians, but merely to suggest one of the many ways in which artistic features might help create political spaces. To be clear, art itself is not a sufficient requirement for the improvement of social relations, but certain artistic

⁴⁹ Ibid., 476.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 480.

features, like spontaneity and virtuosity or being seen in action, as Arendt would have it, help foster a transformative approach to politics. In light of this, Beuys promotes “a new understanding of art as creativity and new understanding of art (working) towards social change.”⁵² Beuys endorses a revolutionary understanding that seeks new connections beyond profession and economic standing while emphasizing mutual practices and concerted efforts.

V: Conclusion

What modes of politics can address the conceptual problems of revolutionary change? How heavy do the substantially transformed modes of production weigh on the potential for emancipatory projects? The question of newness, although tricky, is not to be misconstrued as a bleak verdict on revolutionary practices, but rather demonstrates how newness is but a contingent reorganization of existing constellations.

I have also shown that economic imperatives, while severely constraining, are not so exclusive as to prevent generating spaces that feature publicity and virtuosity. A greater understanding of the many ways in which critique and resistance manifest themselves against a pervasive conglomerate of productive and regulatory forces is crucial in conceptualizing alternative futures. Virno’s attempt to salvage the kind of political action Arendt advocates makes sense as soon as we recognize that despite its pervasive character our current economy is not all-encompassing, but continues to be conceivable in its multiplicity. Thus, highlighting and working towards projects that reveal the overlaps between artistic production and politics remains a fruitful endeavor. Despite the likelihood that every artistic mode of production may eventually perpetuate the current economic system, the fact remains that these practices are capable of constructing spaces that prioritize social relations over necessity as well as creating new formations that yield new possibilities.

⁵² Beuys 1990, 51.

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