//Günther Friesinger

Why we do cultural work in spite of it all…

To be a cultural worker, either on a voluntary basis or trying to make a living off it, has in the last couple of years become an increasingly precarious life plan – not just in Austria. The terms under which the huge majority of free and independent forms of cultural work are forced to operate are constantly deteriorating. In times of economic crisis – which is no longer a recurring intermezzo in the economic development, but has become a permanent condition – budgetary policy can always make effective cuts in the cultural sector without having to face any substantial resistance. So art funding is slashed or discontinued altogether. As a result, free culture, operating wherever it can still manage to get by at all, is facing aggravating constraints, and not just financially. There are also constraints of communicability and event standardisation, as well as dependence on third-party funds.

Taking all of this into account, it is certainly no longer a particularly glamorous life plan to work in the independent cultural sector. You can not expect to make a lot of money, nor are the typical working conditions for freelancing sub-contractors without employment and social benefits attractive in any way. So the question is: why do so many people still choose to work in this field?

For people working in the cultural sector having a regular pay check is usually not a priority. The image we have of the cultural worker as financially undemanding and wantless has been established centuries ago as being an integral part of “the artist” as bourgeois art theories have depicted him. Ever since the free and autonomously art subject has been established, it needed to be distinguished from the everyday citizen whose life was totally under control of a capitalist economy. In opposition to such a trivial life artists were supposed to only live for their art not for the living they made out of it. Such an image is still perpetuated by the media today. And the cultural workers themselves have internalised this cliché as an imminent part of their self-perception. This image is rooted in a narrative conveying that cultural production is not triggered by external incentives (like money, prosperity, or security) but by internal motives. These motives are supposedly most pure, genuine and undisguised when they outweigh the negative effects of impoverishment and social marginalisation. The reward for making art, according to this narrative, is individual fulfilment in a sphere of autonomy which is conceived as radical (and sometimes presented as being entirely uncommunicable). This promise of an exceptional and – for the bourgeois society – unique autonomy still constitutes the prevailing appeal of the cultural sector as a work field.

Essentially, „genuine“ autonomy can only be achieved here, in the context of cultural work, because autonomy is not just a condition of production, it is also the topic of cultural work, and at the same time its emancipatory and progressive content. Ever since the aesthetics of the ‘genius’ has emerged during the Sturm und Drang and the Romantic periods, this concept of autonomy has supposedly represented the essence of art. Therefore, art can never depend on external intentions and someone else’s desire to represent. Something is considered art only if it intends and represents exclusively through and for itself.
Art has to prove to us that this is the case by confronting us with pride to be independent from our viewing patterns, our expectations, our demands, unwieldy, uncompromising, and unconquerable; in such a way that art only complies with the standards it has set for itself. To the bourgeois society this freedom is the value that

needs to be preserved and nurtured.
Both, the artwork and the occupations supporting and surrounding it – for example publishing, the gallery scene, or cultural journalism – profit from their aura of assisting this autonomy, supporting it and helping it to take on the sometimes unforgiving form of autonomous culture. While autonomous production conditions may become less probable and more heteronomous (i.e. more dependent of patronage and public funding) in the current environment, the desire to preserve an autonomous enclave in the heteronomous, money dominated and substantially alienated bourgeois middle class remains a powerful effect. The cultural sector is and will probably remain the only domain to actually – if only symbolically – represent this enclave, and that constitutes its appeal. The essentially negative aspects of cultural work – lack of social security, precarious working conditions, and meagre wages – are reinterpreted as a manifestation of the independence we want it to embody.
In this way we are able to follow our impulses to do what we find interesting and to like what we do while at the same time realising what constitutes us, the way in which we are special and different. Therefore, we are already privileged over those who (have to) make a living under the typical working conditions of late capitalism.

The autonomy we are thus given is a valid alternative plan to the alienation and heteronomy determining the day-to-day lives and jobs of most people. For that we are willing to put up with a highly fragmented life, with the patchwork identity that comes with cultural work. Since only a tiny fraction of cultural workers are able to really focus on one thing, working in the cultural sector usually means to live at the intersection of many disparate occupations and roles, performed simultaneously. He or she does many things and most of them at once. For example administrative work for a cultural institution while at the same time writing journalistic reports and curating other artists – and along the way he or she will have to produce his or her own cultural content. All of these occupations ideally sustain each other and therefore depend on each other. So the prevalent autonomy is always merely a relative one.

All this sounds exhausting and stressful, and it usually is. Resilience still seems to be one of the key credentials a cultural worker should possess. Burn-outs are not unheard of. Working in the cultural field may mean 80 hour work weeks, 7 days a week. And yet this workload is not solely regarded in a negative way. Because it also seems to implicate the utopia of undivided non-alienating labour: an interesting and exciting life for those who are willing to pay the price of having to work under these conditions.

For numerous cultural workers a middle class employment routine, with its rigid and inflexible time management, constitutes a negative matrix of their own existence. We tend to think of it as being mindless and dull and not very fulfilling.

Naturally, the cultural workers themselves have repeatedly pointed out the partially ideological contents of this specific conception of autonomy. It is ideological mainly with regard to the delusion it creates: its purpose is to substantiate the freedom the middle class is attributing to itself, while in the reality of its day-to-day routines the bourgeois society has long lost this freedom. Because cultural work is the manifestation of an inner or social necessity rather than of an economic or class agenda, it is able to uphold the illusion that somewhere within society (with developed capitalism and the all-pervading commodity form as its transaction basis) something exists which is not just another commodity. The autonomy it conveys is a privilege that is granted almost exclusively to cultural workers who in turn have to make it real by putting their hearts and souls into it which turns them into protagonists of an idea that remains unrealisable in the everyday lives of the middle

class. So the (relative) autonomy of productions in the cultural sphere is in itself heteronomous because it depends on ideological images and an audience who wants to see it realised at least in the cultural sector. An audience spending money on avant-garde art precisely because the art is not available for purchase in the way the bourgeois subject is.

Cultural autonomy thus implies a dialectic that needs to be further unfurled, sometimes even beyond the limits of our resilience. For in spite of its ideological meaning for the self-delusion of the bourgeois society it contains a shimmer of utopia, a foretaste of a non-alienated, self-determined life. It is comprised of the non-compliance (even if only symbolically simulated) with framework conditions whose violation only avant-garde art is able to get away with (as a manifestation of its status). Because this is exactly what the art is expected to do.
In spite of the material conditions under which the majority of cultural work is currently taking place, the entailed promise that a different life is if not possible then at least imaginable, is the incentive keeping those who still do cultural work in spite of adverse circumstances, at it. If and where we work in the cultural sector, we do it against the horizon of a promise of freedom which shall never be surrendered.

And because this freedom can only exist in advanced art, we shall also never surrender avant-garde art. Only in this symbolic way we are able to overcome our hopelessness and our enslavement to the maxims of valorisation and hegemony which blatantly confront us in everything else we do.

Because we are aware of or are at least anticipating this, we will remain committed to the cultural sector and it doesn't matter what the work conditions are and how high a price we have to pay in our private lives. For this is the way to gain the maximum possible personal autonomy provided by the society we live in.

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Günther Friesinger

Günther Friesinger lives in Vienna and Graz. He's a philosopher, university lecturer, artist, producer, curator and journalist; CEO of monochrom, organizer of the paraflows Festival for Digital Art and Cultures in Vienna, the Arse Elektronika Festival and the Roboexotica Festival. Publications: Context Hacking: How to Mess with Art, Media, Law and the Market (2013), The Wonderful World of Absence (2011), Urban Hacking: Cultural Jamming Strategies in the Risky Spaces of Modernity (2010), Public Fictions (2009), Pr0nnovation?: Pornography and Technological Innovation (2008).