

Learning to stand together

Elyssa Livergant interviews Precarious Workers Brigade

The following interview with the Precarious Workers Brigade (PWB) reflects on the theme of collaboration in relation to work, the creative industries and Higher Education. As the PWB outline in their book *Training for Exploitation? Politicising Employability & Reclaiming Education*, a resource for students, teachers and cultural workers, exploitative labour conditions in the arts are often obscured by claims that celebrate autonomous and independent work. As we discuss below, 'collaboration' might very well operate as a term that ostensibly redeems various forms of exploitation in the cultural sector and higher education. Describing new forms of post-Fordist labour relations, 'collaboration' simultaneously valorises them as expressive of an affectual co-operation.

In its conflation of labour and community, 'collaboration' tends to perform as a social good while its politics go unacknowledged and unexamined. 'Solidarity', as PWB offer below, might be a term that offers a more critical position from which to organise and intervene in the prevailing political economy. In practice it foregrounds affinities, to help one another create more just and ethical conditions for work and life through collective transformation. But, as PWB helpfully underline below, terminology requires ongoing attentiveness.

To draw attention to the relationship between higher education and the cultural industries through the lens of collaboration means reflecting on the conditions of work in both sectors. Many of us teaching and studying in the humanities and those of us working in the cultural sector face similar forms of precarity. It also means asking critical questions about the configuration of the artist and the scholar as categories of worker who love their labour for its own sake.¹ Doing what you love has, for certain sectors of workers, become the ideal panacea for exploitation while simultaneously obscuring the labour of others who are less lucky with the terms underpinning their exploitation.² The rhetorical importance of internal rather than external rewards reverberates through the narrative of alternative value that drives theatre and performance pedagogy, the arts and parts of the cultural industries. A deep personal investment in work motivates scholars and cultural workers to keep going while binding them to a dangerous neoliberal regime that relies on self-exploitation, inequity and intensified workloads.

For those teaching and studying practice in theatre and performance departments, inviting a critical approach to conditions of work appears complex. The emphasis that performance-making places on intimacy, on individuals being available to themselves and others, on taking risks and on maintaining a level of mobility and flexibility embed both productive and problematic norms. How might we promote students to attend critically to that ambiguity while keeping a focus on their status as workers? Practice-based modules represent experiences of 'work' while simultaneously camouflaging the actual conditions of a sector that, by and large, does not remunerate. When remuneration is removed from the equation, work is no longer really 'work'. And in the absence of work, the rhetoric of love, civicism, community and self-development rushes in to fill the gap.

As a group of teachers in higher education primarily working in visual art and design, the PWB noted this gap between the critical theories students engaged and the individualised narratives of selfhood promoted by practice-based modules. As employability moves ever closer toward the centre of education and the gap seems to grow even wider, the need for the resources they have begun to collect becomes ever more pressing. For example, in 2010 the Equality Challenge Unit highlighted a series of gaps in work placements as part of arts undergraduate programs. These included a lack of diversity in the cultural industries workforce; difficulty for working class students to juggle

placements with part-time work; the ways work placements engender inequalities (racial, gender or disability); and a lack of clarity around what is considered work experience and what is unpaid labour.³

Casting young people as responsive and available commodities reproduces dominant fantasies that position them as individualised agents in service to an exploitative neoliberal capitalist economy. Both PWB and I believe that a combination of systemic critical analysis and micro-political reflection, and spaces to undertake this work, are necessary if we are to close the gap between our critical preoccupations, our affective desires and our practices. Their book, one of the impetuses for our conversation, offers a series of pedagogical approaches and exercises that help ensure industrial contexts and conditions aren't merely a backstage concern.

Re-imagining theatre and performance's experiential pedagogy, and challenging increasing pressures to demonstrate our students', and our own, employability in the face of austerity, is an invitation to work together to explore ways to critically address working conditions. This co-labouring seeks to resist being leveraged by regimes of power through its invitation to critically reflect and act on our individual experience and shared position as precarious workers.

– Elyssa Livergant

Elyssa Livergant: Can you tell me a bit about how the Precarious Workers Brigade started?

Rosa: A smaller group of us started as the Carrot Workers Collective. Some of us were teaching in higher education; it was ten years ago now, and there was already a great deal of discussion around employability. At the time, it wasn't framed in such a way, though – not as strongly. But there was a disconnect in the arts, humanities and cultural studies between what happens in students' critical modules – where you would read your Marx and your post-colonial feminist theories and try to think through them – and the practice-based component of the course where the message that the institution formulates for students and the subjectivity it promotes is one of cutting edge competitiveness. There wasn't much space to talk about that gap. This took on a specific urgency around 2010 with the introduction of student fees and the student struggle. At the time, some of us put forward a proposal for others to come join us in a workshop related to a residency at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London.⁴ And through that we met these great people; comrades who were also wrestling with these things. At that point, it made sense to change our group's name to the 'Precarious Workers Brigade'. The name not only resonates with working conditions of the cultural sector but also reflects how we, as cultural workers or students, operate in solidarity with other kinds of struggles.

Frida: The name also reflects our interest in acknowledging, investigating, thinking through different aspects of precarity, including but also beyond labour. For example, the idea and experience of debt. This aspect of precarity was becoming increasingly pressing in the early days of Precarious Workers Brigade, circa 2010, with the increase of tuition fees and wider cuts to the welfare state. The aim was to further open the group's considerations and make those links.

Elyssa: How do you work together as a collective?

Frida: To address the question of working together we collectively formulated an ethics code help us navigate how we work as a group and in relation to invites and projects. It's a compass we refer to when we make decisions about what we want to work on or why we should be working on it. This includes considerations around peoples' interests, and an invitation's relation to the political project

of fighting precarity that we've outlined for ourselves. Our code of ethics offers us a set of questions that help us map the 'opportunity' in question in terms of the ethics associated with that invitation. That's been quite helpful. We also send the same set of questions to people who invite us. Their answers to these questions help to make the nature of that project more transparent. And that kind of transparency is not a regular practice for workers in the industry. You often find out the details later, usually in the middle of the working on something, or not at all.

Frida: Projects we take up often come out of the workshops that we do. Years ago, when we first drafted the pack that eventually became our most recent publication *Training for Exploitation?: Politicising Employability and Reclaiming Education*, a lecturer from a London-based art school came to one of our workshops explaining that she'd been asked to implement a year-long work placement into her course while students continued to pay part of their fees. She didn't know how to think about that and it became a moment for her to come to the workshop and collectively think about it. And we realised that was an emerging issue and decided to produce some material around it.

Elyssa: What do you think about the term 'collaboration' in relation to the issues and struggles PWB addresses and are engaged in? Is it a term you come across or think about?

Frida: In the book, we note that the word 'collaboration' is often used to talk about content production. Art and design students do a lot of collaborative projects or collaboration. So, it's often used on that level. But it's rarely used to address issues of labour or how we relate to each other as individuals all looking for work. That process, the one of being a worker, is individualised. Where's the collaboration there?

Elyssa: Theatre is thought of as a shared project that can't exist without collaboration, without co-operation and co-working. Some of the claims for theatre's resistant potential as an art form rests on it as a collaborative enterprise. Oddly enough, though, the material conditions of this co-labouring are rarely discussed.

Rosa: I'm thinking of the context of our conversation. About performing arts, specifically. Collaboration has been a preoccupation in this area for ages. It feels to me it's becoming difficult to use it as a term without further qualification. Are we looking at collaborative organisational structures? Are we looking at collaborative economies around projects we might do? Or is it just one of those key words that covers up rather than explores what's at stake? I wonder if one of the reasons it's been around for so long is precisely how it obscures. I'm thinking of collaboration as one of the various terms that we can use to think about co-existence, co-dependency, being-together; but it is one that, in a way, is precisely productive already. So, you collaborate to produce work. What comes to mind piece by Florian Schneider from about ten years ago that was quite useful.⁵ Collaboration can be very opportunistic, it can be a collaboration with regimes of power. Recently, for me at least, solidarity is becoming a much more precise tool to think through these issues.

Frida: Collaboration doesn't define the nature of the relations between the people who are in collaboration. In that sense, it obscures.

Elyssa: You mentioned employability as a term that informs higher education policy and practice. What is the employability agenda?

Rosa: The UK government has been speaking about employability since 1998. They define it as the ability to move self-sufficiently in the labour market, to realise potential through sustainable employment.⁶ This connects to some thinking by education scholar Tyson Lewis. He was noticing how students are told that through learning they should fulfil their potential as human beings,

except that potential should also be something that capital wants. The problem is how to break that very important nexus. What is that leaving out as an option for individuals and for groups? I think it's leaving out even the right to challenge the work ethic and the jobs that are available and the quality and conditions, terms of employment, of those jobs. And it places the anxiety and the violence of the job market and the economic crisis within the individual rather than in a systemic failure to redistribute opportunity.

Frida: Yes. It reinforces this idea that work is inherently morally good and is something that gives rise to identity, purpose and social recognition. To question work itself is completely taken off the table.

Elyssa: While students may appreciate being critically aware about other practices and modes of thinking, they may not want to analyse and reflect on themselves as workers within a wider political economy. This year I convened a module called Livelihoods, a final year zero-credit compulsory undergraduate module focused on bridging the gap from university study to working life. Students choose six sessions to attend throughout the semester. One session focused on debt, and it was the most well attended session. Another session addressed freelancing and alternative models of co-operation and I invited Altgen, a group of young freelancers set up as a co-operative, to run a workshop. Students seemed to struggle to understand what co-operative models of organising labour had to do with them. In module feedback, some students commented that it was irrelevant to their future. In another session one of our graduate companies, who has been successful in the industry (and we should qualify what we mean by 'success'), came in to talk about their career trajectory. They reflected on the important role housing benefits played in their development as a company. Some of the students seemed incredibly offended by this aspect of their presentation. They related being on benefits with a state of poor or non-achievement that was in opposition to their position as university students. How might you bridge that critical gap, between theory and students' own condition as workers, and should you?

Frida: I remember hearing something from graduates already a year or two into their field. They said that moment was when they really needed our workshop but that they probably wouldn't have understood its value while they were still in college. Since graduation they had been living and experiencing the issues and practices we were addressing. This, for us, was the big dilemma. We tried to reach interns, but they are dispersed and it is very difficult to draw people together. You would like universities to be an opportune place to engage these issues, especially as this is where students gather. And yet, university students might not be in that place where precarity is really felt as a pressing issue. It might be that they are yet to experience the affects of these crippling conditions. Or, perhaps, they may be holding on to the idea that they might be the exception to the rule.

EL: Possibly. I also wonder if anxiety is a strong force in that resistance. It's too scary to think about what comes next.

Rosa: It's funny that you mentioned someone on benefits. That option has changed, deeply. I was recently reading a piece by Ivor Southwood where he makes a link between employability, as its used in education, and the other place where it crops up, in government lingo around workfare. 7 The benefits regimes are more and more linked to compulsory retraining, to free labour. And that's attached to sanctions. People who refuse to work for free may stop receiving benefits as a retaliation measure. But to your question about bridging a critical gap, different pedagogies come to mind that might be effective, one systemic and the other micro-political. On the one hand, I wonder how much we could address the politicisation problem sideways? Allowing students to have not only a good sense of industry income levels and precarity levels but more broadly to integrate that

with an analysis of cultural policies and how education has been mobilised in relation to these policies. As a more general discourse this might help them to place themselves in a more societal socio economic analysis, which in the humanities not that many people do or are exposed to. On the other hand, and this is probably where Precarious Workers Brigade has had more experience, is to start where people are. To start with pedagogies on a micro-political level. To start with an analysis of your life, of your conditions now. Many of the radical pedagogies that we also mention in Training for Exploitation are useful for creating small processes and exercises that students can do individually or collectively, in their work placement or in class. What is your background? What do your parents do? Who pays for your life right now? What kind of networks of support do you rely on? Who's a citizen? Who's on a visa? And so on. It's about staying with the process with that group and acknowledging that anxiety also exists for us as teachers, as people working in the academy.

Elyssa: Might it be productive to characterise the relationship between higher education and the cultural industries (or industry more broadly) mobilised through the employability agenda as a collaboration with regimes of power? And if so, what is made operable by that collaboration?

Rosa: The hesitation I'm feeling is that your question makes me think there would be some sort of collusion or agreement by default between the mission of educators and the interests of an industry. That makes me wonder immediately what the role of the student is in all of that. Perhaps, it might be more interesting to reflect on what the potential terrain for collaboration could be between the humanities and the cultural industries in the face of current challenges. The humanities, critical studies and reflective practices in further education that kind of trajectory, is under attack. It is not valued for its capacity to produce a certain kind of subject. At the same time, within the current political shifts we're living through, parts of the cultural industries (and we should discuss what counts as cultural industries but for now let's use the term as a placeholder) are also under attack. There seems to be a deep transformation of both areas – the humanities and the creative industries. So, facing these challenges together might be a terrain for exploring collaboration. Perhaps one of the things the cultural sector could do a bit more effectively is to think about how we as workers collectively address governments, the private sector, the tourist industry, and the profits made from these. It would be a good time for the cultural sector to be much more of a presence in active citizenship because of the skills it can bring to those debates. Not as a protectionist thing, for example 'look at us we're an exception', but because the arts and public support for education and arts is part of the vision of collectivity that is going down the toilet.

Elyssa: How might we think about the university as a site of co-labouring, a site populated by a range of workers who are faced with ever worsening labour conditions? I'm thinking of the recent announcement of mass lay-offs of academic and professional staff at the University of Manchester and the outsourced cleaners on strike at the London School of Economics and King's College London.

Frida: To make visible that there are different forms of labour at play in the university, to bring that up and to encourage connections between the different struggles is important. While we may be in different modes of work, in different sectors, at the same time, we are all subjected to the same regime and we have more in common than in difference. The LSE cleaners are a good example of that right now. A small group of students have been very active in trying to make this struggle more visible on campus. There are attempts being made and perhaps we can do more. As workers, no matter what sector you are in, it's almost certain that you're facing bad practices and bad prospects. To make those connections between people rather than to divide them further is important. Again, solidarity as a key word rather than collaboration. I'm really not convinced by this word

‘collaboration’ – or at least it needs regular interrogation. The same goes for solidarity. Language can be tricky and we take it for granted at our peril.

Rosa: One of the assumptions that the university doesn’t acknowledge enough is that many students are workers already, just not in our sector or in the sector they are probably training for. I’ve been speaking with someone who is doing a project called Unpaid Britain, looking at the various ways employers from a range of industries avoid paying workers what they are due lawfully. Apparently, the creative industries are the first or second most toxic environment for work. The number of students in service industry work in London is high and few of them know they are entitled to paid holidays or sick leave or what unlawful termination is or what unions or processes they can access. I’m also not sure how many of our colleagues know these things, as they start to get axed. That’s when you discover – hey, there’s a union, I should go talk to the rep, something is coming down. Maybe this is helpful in terms of what the university might offer us – a place for thinking together about our status as workers rather than as entrepreneurial selves.

Further Resources

Carrot Workers Collective, *Surviving Internships: A Counter Guide to Free Labour in the Arts*, 2015, <https://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/counter-internship-guide/>

Fighting Against Casualisation in Education, <https://fightingcasualisation.org>

SMarteu, <http://smart-eu.org/about/>

Artists’ Union England, <http://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk>

Equity UK, Professionally Made Professionally Paid Campaign, <https://www.equity.org.uk/campaigns/professionally-made-professionally-paid/>

Gulf Labor Artist Coalition: Who’s Building the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi?, <http://gulflabor.org>

Erik Krikortz, Airi Triisberg & Minna Henriksson (eds), *Art Workers: Material Conditions and Labour Struggles in Contemporary Art Practices*, 2015, <http://www.art-workers.org>

Basic Income Earth Network, <http://basicincome.org>

Notes:

As someone who has spent twelve years as a casualised worker in higher education and thirty-three years working as an artist and cultural worker a commitment to work and a life of precarity, associated with both sectors, is deeply embedded in my psyche. It is interesting to note that prior to his role heading the Prussian educational administration Humboldt proffered the Romantic era’s familiar character of the artist as a model for the ideal individual who ‘loves his labour for its own sake’ in his 1792 tract *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, trans. by Joseph Coulthard (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996 [1854 edition]), p. 28. ↩

Miya Tokumitsu, ‘In the Name of Love’, *Jacobin*, 13, 01 December 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/in-the-name-of-love/> [accessed 30 May 2017]. ↩

Kim Allen, Jocey Quinn, Sumi Hollingworth and Anthea Rose, *Work Placements in the Arts and Culture Sector: Diversity, Equality and Access* (Equality Challenge Unit, 2010). The Equality Challenge

Unit, a public body funded by the UK higher education sector to further support equality and diversity for staff and students, commissioned the study. It sought to address a lack of diversity in the cultural industries while acknowledging that HEIs are under pressure to boost employability of students. ↩

Precarity: The People's Tribunal, ICA London, 20 March 2011. ↩

Florian Schneider, 'Collaboration: The Dark Side of the Multitude', SARAI READER 06: Turbulence, ed. by Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Ravi Sundaram, Jeebesh Bagchi (Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2006), pp. 572-76. ↩

See Ronald W. McQuaid and Colin Lindsay, 'The Concept of Employability' *Urban Studies*, 42.2 (February 2005), 197-219 and UK Commission for Employment and Skills', *Employability Skills: A Research and Policy Briefing* (March 2010). ↩

'Against precarity, against employability', *Mapping Precariousness, Labour Insecurity and Uncertain Livelihoods*, ed. by Emiliana Armano, Arianna Bove and Analissa Murgia (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 70-81. ↩