

Editorial

Spinoza and Precarity in Contemporary Art

‘... the real of contemporary art is situated in *precariousness*’ Nicolas Bourriaud¹

In the recent film *Up in the Air* (Dir. Jason Reitman, 2009), George Clooney plays Ryan Bingham, more recently, *Frames of War* a US executive whose job is to perform ‘career transition counseling’; he flies into one place after another making employees redundant. As part of his job and his sense of self-identity, Bingham is constantly in motion, flying business class on corporate expense accounts funded by profits accrued, no doubt, from serial restructures. He is the epitome of Boltanski and Chiapello’s ‘great men’ described in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), whose oppressive mobility is part of their greatness: ‘Great men do not stand still. Little people remain rooted to the spot.’² Parallel may be drawn between the jet-set lifestyle of Bingham and the nomadic condition of the contemporary art world if one takes into consideration the global expansion of the art biennale and the networks of curators, collectors and artists who circulate within these economies. The real parallel with contemporary art, however, lies with the precarious conditions of labour produced in a post-Fordist, globally-networked economy, where labour has become increasingly precarious: immaterial, ‘virtuoso’ (that is to say, linguistic and communicative) and migratory. In an echo of the property-less proletariat, Paolo Virno has described these Post-Fordist, virtuoso workers as the *precariat*.³

Drawing upon the ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas, Judith Butler has interrogated precarity in the wake of September 11th in works such as *Precarious Life* (2004) defend, though never to define (repudiating definitions) his work: *When is Life Grievable?* (2009), where she writes: ‘Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other.’⁴ The debates within the field of economics and sociology⁵ and the political and philosophical reflections of thinkers like Virno and Butler lead the curator Nicolas Bourriaud to posit the existence of a ‘precarious art’. In a recent essay Bourriaud writes: ‘When we look at artistic production today, we see that in the heart of the global economic machine that favours unbridled consumerism and undermines everything that is durable, a culture is developing from the bankruptcy of endurance that is based on that which threatens it most, namely precariousness.’⁶ If there is a unifying theme to this current issue of *Art & Research* it is an exploration of the aesthetic, political and philosophical conditions of precarity.

Weegin with Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Bijlmer Spinoza-festival*, produced over a two-month period in the Bijlmer estate in the South East of Amsterdam, 2 May - 28 June 2009. A former middle-class suburb, the tower blocks of the Bijlmermeer were originally designed on the utopian Modernist principles of Le Corbusier. Since the 1970s, the Bijlmer increasingly became home to immigrant communities and, following the Independence of the Dutch Colony of Suriname in 1975, has become synonymous with the Dutch Suriname community. Another notable event in the area’s history was the rash of El Al Flight 1862 in Bijlmermeer in 1992, an event which precipitated a programme of urban regeneration in the ensuing decade and which was incorporated in the exhibition part of Hirschhorn’s *Bijlmer-Spinoza festival*, which, as with the *Deleuze monument* and *Bataille monuments* before it, reproduced the

institutions of the public sphere and the commercial life of society (exhibition space, library, theatre, internet café, bar, etc.). Indeed works such as *Deleuze monument* (Avignon, 2000), *Bataille monument* (Kassel, 2002) as *24h Foucault* (Paris, 2004) and the recent *Bijlmer Spinoza-festival* demonstrate the persistence of a precarious friendship between art and philosophy in Hirschhorn's practice. Hirschhorn's return to Spinoza forms the principle focus here. Towering above the festival structure is a huge sculpture of an open volume of Spinoza's *Ethics* – a book which Simon Critchley regards as 'one of the greatest books of philosophy ever written'.⁷ It is perhaps appropriate that a festival dedicated to the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher took place in Bijlmer with the help of the Suriname community there, and co-existed with them for its precarious duration, as Spinoza himself arrived in Amsterdam as a foreigner, the son of Portuguese Jewish refugees from the Spanish Inquisition.

The radical and political potential of Spinoza's thought can be seen in writings such as his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, in which Spinoza asserts: 'There is nothing, then, in our method which renders it necessary that the masses should follow the testimony of commentators, for I point to a set of unlearned people who understood the language of the prophets and apostles... As to the multitude of our own time, we have shown that whatsoever is necessary to salvation, though its reasons may be unknown, can easily be understood in any language... with regard to other questions, the ignorant and the learned fare alike.'⁸

Spinoza's rejection of the 'authoritarian regime of truth'⁹ and insistence upon the freedom and autonomy of the individual in the interpretation of scripture appealed to philosophers such as Louis Althusser, Jacques Rancière, Etienne Balibar, and Gilles Deleuze. Writing on Spinoza, Deleuze claimed: 'Writers, poets, musicians, filmmakers – painters too, even chance readers – may find that they are Spinozists; indeed, such a thing is more likely for them than for professional philosophers... He is a philosopher who commands an extraordinary conceptual apparatus, one that is highly developed, systematic, and scholarly; and yet he is the quintessential object of an immediate, unprepared encounter, such that a nonphilosopher, or even someone without any formal education, can receive a sudden illumination from him, a "flash".'¹⁰

The *Bijlmer Spinoza-festival* and Hirschhorn's previous *Spinoza monument* in Amsterdam (1999) testifies to the validity of Deleuze's speculation. Hirschhorn's claim that he is simply a 'fan' and not a specialist chimes with Balibar's later claim that 'the essential element in Spinoza's conception of democracy is freedom of communication... [and]... the search for a strategy of collective liberation, whose guiding motto would be as many as possible, thinking as much as possible'.¹¹ It is this radical and democratic dimension of Spinoza's thought, identified by Deleuze, Balibar, Negri and others, that infuses both Hirschhorn's ethos and formal approach as an artist for whom 'the most important activity that an art work can provoke is the activity of thinking'.¹² One of the daily 'Running Events' throughout the *Bijlmer Spinoza-festival* was a talk by the Italian philosopher Antonio Negri, who foregrounds the political role of 'the multitude' in Spinoza's philosophy in works such as *The Savage Anomaly* (1991), which Hirschhorn celebrates in his interview for *Art & Research*.¹³

Hirschhorn's quest for 'a universal artwork' which activates the thinking of a 'non-exclusive audience' could testify to his proximity to Spinoza's desire (via Balibar and Negri) for a collective liberation of the multitude. Notwithstanding the subversive currency possessed today by such Spinozist terms as the multitude, Hirschhorn insists upon a critical independence, which suggests that his association with contemporary thinkers and kinship with critical theory should be regarded as evidence of a precarious friendship between art and philosophy.

The slide sequence *Presence + Production* is drawn from a lecture Hirschhorn delivered on the *Bijlmer Spinoza-festival* at DCA on 17 September 2009 prior to the exhibition opening of *Thomas Hirschhorn, It's Burning Everywhere* (DCA, 19 September – 29 November 2009). The decision to isolate the word slides which served to structure and drive the narrative account and documentation of the two-month festival during the original talk in Dundee, registers an attempt not only to mark the importance to Hirschhorn of 'inventing one's own guidelines' to describe and defend, though never to define (repudiating definitions) his work as an artist, but also to manifest the potentiality of these words (presence, help, co-existence, precarity, never stabilize, faith) to perform a simultaneously pragmatic and poetic labour.¹⁴

In the text 'Doing Art Politically: What Does this Mean?', Hirschhorn offers a self-interrogation of the motivations and dynamics of his practice as it relates to the political. For Hirschhorn, making art politically 'means taking action, risking an assertion, assuming a position, a position which goes beyond mere criticism'. Above all, however, is the question of form: 'to understand the question of form as the most important question for an artist'. Ultimately, the aesthetic and political autonomy of the artist is always already engaged in confrontation and exchange with the other: 'I am only interested in what is really political, the political that implicates: where do I stand? where does the other stand? what do I want? what does the other want?' In his implication of the other in the politics of the self, Hirschhorn accords with the precarious ethics of Levinas and Butler. Furthermore, in locating his work in 'the form- and force-fields of Love, Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics', Hirschhorn parallels Alain Badiou's categories of truth, and evidences more than a degree of Badiou's ethical militancy.¹⁵

Although in public pronouncements and published texts there exists a rigorous critical lexicon which both asserts the artist's individual autonomy and mirrors many of the concerns of contemporary theory and philosophy, Hirschhorn maintains, in both the interview 'The Headless Artist' and the text 'Doing Art Politically', that his principal guideline for making art is not a fulfilment of theory but 'headlessness'.

An example of such headlessness might be found in the 'Spinoza-Theatre' events Hirschhorn devised during the *Bijlmer Spinoza-festival*. The short text 'Toward "Precarious Theatre"' reflects on this new development and direction within Hirschhorn's precarious practice. The precarity of Hirschhorn's work comes not only from the materials (tape, cardboard, foil, Perspex, polythene, books, tv sets, computers, etc.) employed in his works (or rather unemployed in non-functioning *unworks* of art) or from their situation in public space. Above all it is a question of form: "'Precarious Theatre" is happening in the unstable instant and the precariousness of the moment.' As the manifesto-like text of 'Toward "Precarious Theatre"' makes clear, its principle form is the disaster.

The space for the audience created in 'Precarious Theatre' has certain affinities with Jacques Rancière's essay 'The Emancipated Spectator' – the collection of essays published under this title is reviewed in this issue of *Art & Research* by Matt Rodda – in which Rancière reiterates a call made previously by many exponents of avant-garde theatre, for 'a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance... become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs.'¹⁶ Nevertheless, it is clear that Hirschhorn is not making a bid to join the ranks of avant-garde directors who seek to affect an audience through radical forms of participatory theatre. His proposal is much more modest, though no less contradictory, in its appropriation and rejection of theatre as an apparatus.

A key participant in the Running Events, performing a lecture each day during the *Spinoza-festival* was the Berlin-based philosopher, Marcus Steinweg, whose 'Nine Theses on Art' is

published here. A key passage from Thesis 4 of this consistently powerful and provocative text strikes a chord with the momentum and trajectory of artistic research: 'Every persuasive artwork comes from the future; it never arises from the past. Weak art can be recognized through its sentimentality, nostalgia, adoration of the past, in short, through its inability to make the future precise. Instead of competing with documentation and historical work, it is a matter of giving a form to the formlessness of tomorrow today, here and now. Art implies the courage to give answers to questions that do not preexist.'

The limits of the precarious friendship between art and philosophy are further explored by Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield in the second of three essays for *Art & Research*. In 'Outnotes for Indiscipline,' Dronsfield extends Rancière's assertion that linguistic interpretations 'pictorialize' the image,¹⁷ claiming that words govern 'the condition of possibility of seeing' itself: 'words reconfigure the visibility of what an artwork does – and can do, and enable new ways of seeing the artwork.' Rancière's redistributed relationship of word and image itself recalls, as does Dronsfield's essay, Foucault's discourse upon *Las Meninas* and suggests that Dronsfield's intervention might be read alongside Gary Shapiro's *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Saying and Seeing* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003). But the assertion here is not that the regime of language emerges *a posteriori* to practice in the reading and reception of artworks. Rather, language governs the existence of art works in their very presence and production: 'We – and this includes the artist – would not see what art does without critical discourse assisting the eye in seeing.' In many respects Dronsfield's conclusion prompts us to turn not to Rancière or Foucault, but to Heidegger and his claim that 'language is the house of Being'.¹⁸

Dronsfield and Steinweg are currently collaborating on a book with and about Hirschhorn, but the writings presented here by these philosophers are addressed to the concepts and conditions of art in general. In a phrase worthy of Adorno, to whom he often refers, Steinweg asserts: 'Art exists only as a conflict with its times.' He goes on to claim: 'An artwork behaves toward its objective reality necessarily in a destructive way.' These are statements which could well have been written with reference to the artwork of Gustav Metzger.

Gustav Metzger was the originator of Acid Nylon Action Painting and Auto-Destructive Art, co-organiser with John Sharkey of the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS), London (1966), and founder member of the Committee of 100 (the forerunner of CND). Influential upon subsequent generations of artists, including Cornelia Parker, Stewart Home, Michael Landy and the editor of this e-journal, and respected by prominent international curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist, Metzger has been the subject of major solo exhibitions including MOMA, Oxford (1998), the Generali Foundation, Vienna (2006) and the retrospective *Gustav Metzger, Decades* at the Serpentine Gallery, London (2009). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the two supreme catastrophes of the twentieth century - the Holocaust and Hiroshima - shaped and dominated the ethical and political horizon of Metzger's practice as both artist and activist. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first century a third presence began to dominate Metzger's practice: the spectre of impending environmental catastrophe.

Drawing upon each of these concerns is a recent collaboration Metzger undertook with the composer Rhodri Davies, titled 'Self-cancellation', in which we encounter a twofold precariousness of, on the one hand, artistic collaboration itself and, on the other hand, the attempt at compositional self-cancellation in experimental performative contexts. This was the scene of the recorded round table discussion, the transcript of which appears here, which was hosted by The Glasgow School of Art on 16 February 2008 as part of the Instal08 Festival in Glasgow (14-17 February 2008). This public discussion, which included contributions from Michael Hampton, Louise K. Wilson, Mark Bain, Stewart Home and several other artists and

musicians, investigated the term self-cancellation across a range of artistic practices and its role within Metzger's practice as a potential evolution from Auto-Destructive Art. Metzger begins with reiterating his call to 'Reduce Art Flights,' first launched as part of the Münster Sculpture Project (2007).¹⁹ He ends with a reflection on the memory of the Nuremberg marches, a catastrophic march to self-cancellation and auto-destruction.

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and its enduring physical trace is the context of a body of work which emerged during a research residency in Hiroshima which Nathalie De Briey undertook in 2008 and which was supported by the Scottish Arts Council. During this period of residency De Briey worked in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and the Museum of Meteorology in Ebayama. The image and text sequence, *How were the shadows made*, presents out of focus film stills of archival footage shot by the US Army in Hiroshima in 1946, scientists at an outdoor gathering, a photograph of the sky in contemporary Hiroshima at the exact position where Little Boy exploded on 6 August 1945, a poetic inventory of context and experience, documentation of De Briey's meetings with a museum curator and meteorologist, drawings of deformed Japanese ceramic incompletely painted, an ancient willow tree which survived the atomic blast, a mahogany mobile and 16mm film projection installed in an exhibition upon her return to Glasgow. In these pages De Briey performs a delicate balancing act, a precarious tightrope walk across a scene of infinite devastation. If the *real* of the atomic bombing is impossible, the focus instead is upon the remainder, the precarious object (archival footage, exposed x-rays, melted and misshapen ceramic bowls): a fragmented study of material and form.

A fragmentary methodology is also employed by Ursula Biemann in her ongoing video works which focus upon the geo-politics of exploitation and migration within the global economy. In 'Counter-Geographies in the Sahara', Biemann examines the geo-political dimension of her artistic practice with reference to her *Sahara Chronicles* (2006-2007). An art and research project on the Maghreb region of sub-Saharan Africa. *Sahara Chronicles* is 'a collection of videos on the modalities and orientations of migration' and documents the conditions of precarious and perilous journeys Northwards by Africans in search of a better economic future on the shores of Europe. *Sahara Chronicles* documented along with previous works in *Mission Reports. Artistic Practice in the Field: Video Works 1998-2008 - reviewed for Art & Research* by Amy Charlesworth. In 'Counter-Geographies in the Sahara' Biemann asserts: 'the task of a political aesthetics today is not to capture an image that best symbolizes our times; rather than positing the ultimate image, the task is to intervene effectively in current flows of representation, their narratives and framing devices.' Biemann achieves this not only in her *Sahara Chronicle* but in the related exhibitions, seminars, published writings and public lectures, such disseminatory forms being an integral part of her artistic practice: 'The preferred mode of signification in *Sahara Chronicle*, therefore, is fragmentation and disassembly.' Through an aesthetic of displacement, Biemann produces an artwork which in itself effectuates an act of migration, an 'exodus', in the words of Paolo Virno, 'away from the universal towards the general'.²⁰

On the surface, Biemann's practice, which intervenes in specific migratory economies, appears to be travelling in the opposite direction from Hirschhorn's stated aim to attain the 'universal art work'. But 'the general' also suggests 'the common' as in Marx's assertion of man's 'general intellect'. And we should recall that both Hirschhorn and Biemann work in the context of the contemporary *precariat*. However, the source of common ground is not that each artist intervenes in a context of migrant labour. Rather, a commonality is to be located in the precarity of their differing aesthetic. In this respect, Biemann and Hirschhorn represent, perhaps, alternative trajectories (in terms of localities, modalities and methodologies) of what Bourriaud terms 'precarious art'. In particular, Biemann's fragmentary methodology - which

seeks to register 'the shifting and precarious movements of life' - accords with the trajectory of 'precarious art' or 'precarious aesthetics', the essential and political task of which, Bourriaud claims, is 'maintaining the world in a precarious state'.²¹ As Biemann concludes of the intricate interconnections which exist between the economies of the diverse *precari* which her works trace: 'These links are fragile but nevertheless very important if we want to convey the complexity and precarity of contemporary human geographies.'

Upon graduation from The Glasgow School of Art in Fine Art Photography, Michael Mersinis was awarded the Alice Duncan Travel Prize. Mersinis' work has always been concerned with navigation and photographic representation and he decided to use the bursary to retrace the steps of Ulysses, the wandering hero of Homer's *Odyssey*. This ongoing research project combines narrative, photography and the tracing of outline maps of seven potential locations of Ithaca. If we began this issue with Spinoza and end it with Homer, it is perhaps worth remembering that the only episode where Spinoza appears in James Joyce's *Ulysses* is in the chapter known as 'Ithaca' which follows the co-existing wanderings of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom. As we co-exist with Mersinis in his fugitive search for a contemporary materialization of a mythical Ithaca we might do well to recall the words of Marcus Steinweg: 'Art exists only in the here and now of this one world without an exit'.

- ¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Precarious Constructions: Answer to Jacques Rancière on Art and Politics', *Cahier on Art and the Public Domain Open 17, A Precarious Existence. Vulnerability in the Public Domain*, Edited by Jorinde Seijdel, Nai Publishers SKOR 2009/No. 17, p. 23.
- ² Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 361.
- ³ Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen, 'The Dismasure of Art: An interview with Paolo Virno', *A Precarious Existence*, p. 83-4.
- ⁴ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 14.
- ⁵ See Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'Precarity as a Political Concept: New Forms of Connection, Subjectivation and Organization', *A Precarious Existence*, pp. 48-61. Importantly Neilson and Rossiter state: 'The emergence of precarity as an object of academic analysis corresponds with its decline as a political concept motivating social movement activity.' *A Precarious Existence*, p. 50.
- ⁶ Bourriaud, 'Precarious Constructions', *A Precarious Existence*, p. 23.
- ⁷ Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (London: Granta, 2008) p. 155.
- ⁸ Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise*, translated by R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), p. 116-7. According to Etienne Balibar, Pierre Bayle the seventeenth-century Huguenot philosopher and refugee in Holland, referred to Spinoza's text at the time of its posthumous publication as 'a pernicious and a hateful book'. See Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, translated by Peter Snowdon (London: Verso, 1998), p. 1. Two centuries later Spinoza was still eliciting extreme reaction, as Henry Adams records: 'Spinoza was the great Pantheist, whose name is still a terror to the orthodox, and whose philosophy is, — very properly, — a horror to the Church...' Henry Adams, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 270.
- ⁹ Christopher Norris, *Spinoza & the Origins of Modern Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 204.
- ¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, translated by Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), p. 129.
- ¹¹ Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, p. 98. According to Balibar's formulation, this radical and democratic element of Spinoza's thought is founded upon the distinction between *intuitive knowledge* (superstition) and *natural knowledge* (reason) and the equality of the 'learned' and 'unlearned' in the common production of language (Balibar, p. 97-8). It is not difficult, perhaps, to discern the degree to which the libertarian and democratic ethos of Spinoza's philosophy might inform the principles of knowledge transfer strategies impacting at present upon academic research conducted within HEIs across the UK, to the extent that the slogan '*as many as possible, thinking as much as possible*' might one day become their guiding motto.
- ¹² Hirschhorn cited in Jessica Morgan (ed.), *Common Wealth* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), p. 63
- ¹³ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, translated by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991). See also Antonio Negri, *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)Contemporary Variations*, edited by Timothy S. Murphy, translated by Timothy S. Murphy, Michael Hardt, Ted Stolze and Michael T. Wolfe (Manchester: Manchester University, 2004).
- ¹⁴ Readers who refresh the cover page of the journal will find the cover image, selected from Hirschhorn's word slides, randomly changed, embodying Hirschhorn's edict 'never stabilize'.
- ¹⁵ See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, translated by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005).
- ¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), p. 4. Rancière's reading of relational art offered in this text has been challenged by Bourriaud in 'Precarious Constructions', *A Precarious Existence*, pp. 20-37.
- ¹⁷ See Jacques Rancière, 'Painting in the Text', *The Future of the Image*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), p. 89.
- ¹⁸ Martin Heidegger 'What Are Poets For?', *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 132.
- ¹⁹ See also *The Conversation Series 16. Gustav Metzger: Hans Ulrich Obrist* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2008), p. 89-91, and illustrations throughout.
- ²⁰ Lavaert and Gielen, 'The Dismasure of Art', *A Precarious Existence*, p. 80.
- ²¹ Bourriaud, 'Precarious Constructions', *A Precarious Existence*, p. 36.