A DEBATE   Belgrade, June 2011

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A debate is always a risky exercise. It implies a presupposed space for dialogue, some common codes, some potentially shareable zones of reference, but it also provides the perfect framework for comparing different perspectives, to find points of friction or to detect conflicts. The invitation to present our project, an enquiry made to the workers of Museo Reina Sofía (Madrid), at the Belgrade REX Centre session *In the Engine Room (working conditions for cultural workers),* gave us the opportunity to re-evaluate it in public. Once the project was presented within its own elaboration context and having in mind its self-referential nature, the new debate implied a very interesting change of perspective. It entailed an ideal prospect to take some distance from our immediate setting place and to compare our own practice to a cultural background virtually unknown to us, no matter the risk of bringing to the table a project full of problems, unfinished and under development. The idea was to take a particular experience, the 'Reina Sofía case', as an excuse to go further the anecdote and find, in this way, problems and key issues that were common to a variety of situations. The ultimate goal when submitting the enquiry project, its objectives, methodology and results under discussion, was to evaluate the possibilities and scope of a tool, the survey format which, in our case, specifically sought to investigate the proper working conditions of a given cultural institution. All this in order to start a dialogue on the transformations that in terms of precarization and new forms of exploitation have been taking place within the field of cultural work.

Talking about *cultural workers* as a specific category is a problem to the extent that designates a group of workers particularly heterogeneous and fragmentary, composed of a multiplicity of singularities resistant to be defined under the same label. To those of us who participated in REX debate, an equally diverse group of workers linked to the cultural field, the idea of identifying ourselves as a collective supposed one of the main difficulties when establishing an effective dialogue: ¿Who are we?, ¿what defines us as a group?, ¿are we speaking of a certain working sector, an ascertainable social category, a professional self-conception?, ¿which is the profile included, either for the activities, expectations, educational level or type of affiliation, within this category?, ¿who determines its boundaries and what's left outside?, ¿what do we share as a collective?, ¿which common issues can be traced beyond our particular cases?, ¿which will be the interest for determining this common zones?, ¿is it then possible to get to some kind of agreements, alliances, alignments or forms of cooperation?. The intrinsic difficulty that answering these questions implies was evident at the moment of the debate, bringing to the surface the problems we have as a collective in an inter-communicative level. As a starting point it might be important to remind ourselves that we coincided at the debate table for the common

interest in a particular situation: the growing precarization of the working and living conditions that affects, in a structural way, those who work in culture and the lack of any political action or organization around these circumstances. It was a matter of getting together to think about which practical mechanisms can we devise to make workers move from apathy, passive acceptance, fear and isolation and find their own path into a more critical and political way to think and act.

As cultural workers we are aware that the products of our work, masked behind its idealized social function and its strong vocational component, are a key piece of the cognitive capitalism gear. Therefore, we are also submitted to the different forms of exploitation that are inherent to the capitalism system that rules our lives. It is important to point out that, although this cannot be considered as a new phenomenon, we are now going through a period where in certain areas and groups it has become particularly visible. This can be explained if we frame our own situation within the more general context of precarization of the contemporary ways of living and working given by the actual socio-economic and political global crisis. However, the complex development of the cultural work, its fragmentation and specialization, has been reflected in new and diverse forms of precarization and especially subtle kinds of exploitation that are specific to the cultural field, such as the hyper-flexibility of our work conditions, the self-precarization, the permeability of the working and leisure times and the imbalance between the over-qualification of the cultural worker and the progressive loss of socio-professional status and economic retribution, among other things. Anyway, establishing different degrees or levels among the so called cultural or creative precariat and the wider group of precarious workers doesn't make much sense, on the contrary, what must be noted is the progressive overlapping between these groups as certain privileges that the first group used to hold has gradually been disappearing, thus making visible that a mass of creative workers share a common destination with the rest of the precariat in the contemporary employment landscape. If we also consider that the nature of the cultural work itself is partly responsible for generating the different modulations of the precariat by allowing the coexistence of an externally imposed precarity with a self-chosen one, then the question is how the workers as intellectual subjects, independent and "privileged" by their cultural capital, contribute to this situation by becoming active agents of their own isolation and self-exclusion; an isolation that, when taking place within a precarious working reality and in a context that makes especial emphasis in the individualism, accentuates the interpersonal competitiveness and, most important, the lack of solidarity.

The debate exercise built upon our different experiences, made evident that a common questioning on the cultural work conditions and the search for collective ways of reaction must necessarily integrate our diversity without any reductionism or homogenizing tendencies. Therefore, to avoid falling in generalizations or hasty identifications, we think that this work

will necessarily involve living with a certain level of contradiction. The question now is how, despite all the differences or from them, cultural workers would be able to become a *'collective for itself"*. In other words, regardless of the perception of this collective as a group of unrelated and scattered subjects, how is it possible to build shared strategies and develop actions that exceed the contextual issues and particular cases.

Our intervention in the debate was articulated from a very concrete experience: the elaboration and implementation of an inquiry in the particular context of a Spanish national museum. But this was just a way to lead us to think about possible uses of this tool as a form of collective action, outreached to other realities where it can be implemented as a mechanism to detonate and disturb spaces closed to dialogue. In reassessing the survey-format in this debate, we keep thinking that making questions remains a valid exercise. We are aware of the potential in the act of questioning and, at the same time, of its inevitable directionality. Just as those who make the questions cannot do it from some kind of neutral and detached instance, but from a specific situation which defines the nature of the questions and the interpretation of the answers, it would not have any sense to pretend a supposed universality of the questions that are made. For this reason, the questions we make will necessarily require a constant questioning and transformation. In order to do that, certain assumptions, anticipations or claims to categorize what it sought to know, should be avoided.

Finally it is important to make clear that our position on this debate was based on an eminently practical exercise; it was not only to compose a meaningful and relevant set of questions but, above all, to implement and confront them in a real context. Its contribution was intended to be the questioning of the factual, personal and collective situation, positioning ourselves and articulating this point of view within a practical field where an alteration of the existing mechanisms could be sought. From our actual perspective, a theoretical and abstract thinking, that sometimes delights itself in the loop of its own inscrutability, must be accompanied by politically active attitudes, to test its social effectiveness and enhance the development of support and reaction strategies to common areas of conflict.

WIG (Workers Inquiry Group)