

The Centre for Cultural Research (CCR), University of Western Sydney presents:

***Are We All Cultural Workers Now? Getting By In Precarious Times***

*9:30am-5pm, November 25-26, 2010*

*GOODGOD 'Small Club', 55 Liverpool St, Sydney CBD*

Recent debates have identified precarious labour as a key feature of contemporary capitalism. Precarity has had a corrosive effect on vocational identities and aspirations, but its effects have extended well beyond working lives to disrupt familial and friendship bonds. Social movements have emerged to contest insecurities around labour and livelihood, and the notion of precarity has emerged as a key analytical concept for social and cultural theory. The Workshop brings together a range of contributors including labour activists, cultural workers and academic researchers from various fields (such as labour, cultural and urban studies) to interrogate the changing relations between labour and culture. Participants will address the extent to which precarity has become a common feature of everyday life, and how it can be understood with regard to wider geographical and historical developments.

In the past much academic attention has been directed at precarity in the creative and cultural sectors. But today there is widespread recognition that work in general has become more cultural in nature, as interpersonal relations as well as skills of communication and adaptation have become central to working lives. But does this mean that cultural labour now provides a kind of paradigm by which more general changes in work and organisations can be tracked, analysed and assessed? Are we all cultural workers now? Or do such claims obscure important divisions and inequalities in labour practices across different social contexts and geographical regions? Indeed, perhaps the concern with precarity offers a cover under which workers in the wealthy parts of the world can attempt to protect historical privileges that are under threat with the emergence of regions such as India and China.

This workshop will include, but move beyond, the focus on cultural labour to embrace other fields – from service employment through to high-end work in, for example, the financial sector. On the transnational scale, shifting patterns of migration (both skilled and unskilled) and geo-economic changes have transformed global divisions of labour and produced new forms of insecurity at work. These are not simply economic and political processes; they have the potential to produce changes in culture and subjectivity. Precarity allows capital to colonise the domestic and personal spheres, to conscript affective and creative practices, and to blur the boundaries between productive and reproductive labour, life and work. In an economy driven by communication and the management of interpersonal conduct, this development has profound consequences, particularly for women.

How, then, can we understand precarity and through which means should/will it be resisted? Its significance for the politics of mobility and migration, of health and embodiment, of gender, of housing and urban space, and/or of the politics of knowledge needs to be closely analysed. Whether precarity is a quality that can be subject to ways of knowing developed through the frames of academic disciplines or institutions such as trade unions and public policy organizations is a matter of pressing importance. It could, for example, be viewed as an ungovernable experience that challenges such established ways of producing knowledge and building institutions. Exploring these and other issues, the workshop will ask how and why precarity has emerged as a concept that is vital to understanding contemporary culture.

## Workshop Program

Thursday 25 November

9.30 *Welcome and Introduction*, Brett Neilson, University of Western Sydney

9.40 *Precarity, (Self)exploitation and Unspeakable Inequalities in the Cultural and Creative Industries*, Rosalind Gill, King's College, London

10.40 *Coffee Break*

11.00 *Something Old, Something New...? The Reframing of "Class" in Precarious Work Research*, Sharni Chan, Macquarie University

*Day Job Dissociation - Young Men and the Vocational Middle Distance*, George Morgan, University of Western Sydney

*Precarious Affect: Social Networks and the Archive of Feeling*, Jennifer Pybus, Victoria University of Technology

13.00 *Lunch*

14.00 *Creativity as Emancipation: A Short History*, Justin O'Connor, Queensland University of Technology

*We Are All Creatives Now*, Roy Green, University of Technology Sydney

15.20 *Coffee Break*

15.40 *Representations of Precarity in Italy: Collective and Individual Stories, Social Imaginaries and Subjectivities*, Annalisa Murgia, University of Trento, Italy

16.40 *Discussion*

17.00 *End*

Friday 26 November

9.30 *Ant Tribe: Can it Become the Fourth-Largest Vulnerable Group in China*, Lian Si, University of International Business and Economics, Beijing, China

10.30 *Coffee Break*

10.50 *Graffiti or Street Art? Negotiating the Moral Geographies of the Creative City*, Cameron McAuliffe, University of Western Sydney

*Vice or Virtue? Dealing with Precarity and Creative Vocational Aspiration*, Pariece Nelligan, University of Western Sydney

*Part-time Precarity: Discount Labour in the White Collar Workplace*, Melissa Gregg, University of Sydney

12.50 *Lunch*

13.50 *Exploitation 2.0: What Makes "Free Labour" Labour?*, Mark Andrejevic, University of Queensland

*Geosocial Networking: Communication, Affect, Labour, Movement*, Mark Coté, Victoria University of Technology

15.00 *Coffee Break*

15.30 *Creative Economy Contested: Notes on Precarious Labour Politics in New York City*, Greig de Peuter, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

16.20 *Discussion*

16.50 *Thanks and Workshop Closure*, David Rowe, University of Western Sydney

## Abstracts

‘Precarity, (Self)exploitation and Unspeakable Inequalities in the Cultural and Creative Industries’

*Rosalind Gill, King’s College, London, UK*

This talk has three aims. Firstly, it will review ‘what we know’ about the features of cultural and creative work, discussing issues such as precariousness, bulimic patterns of working, and the intensification and extensification of work over time and space. Secondly, it will explore the notion of ‘self exploitation’ that has emerged as a key term for theorizing the labouring conditions and subjectivities of workers involved in the cultural and creative industries. Whilst this originated as a critical term from a Foucaultian tradition concerned with theorizing new modalities of power and discipline, its usefulness both as an analytical and political tool will be interrogated. Has it become another neoliberal term of abuse—blaming workers for their own exploitation and rendering invisible the structural conditions in which work is carried out? Why has the word exploitation only become speakable when it prefixed by the notion that we are somehow doing it to ourselves? What would it take for us to start talking about exploitation again? And what kind of resistance is possible without recourse to this vocabulary? Finally, the talk will raise questions about what still remains a largely silenced issue in debates about the conditions of cultural workers—inequalities between workers. I will develop from the notion of ‘unmanageable inequalities’ to explore how gender, race and class inequalities have become not simply unmanageable but unspeakable in cultural work—even by those most adversely affected by them. How do we begin to challenge the toxic myths of egalitarianism and meritocracy that circulate in the cultural and creative industries—and in much writing about them? And how can we make sure that questions about inequality are on the agenda of a politics that seeks to challenge and resist contemporary labouring conditions. The aim of this talk is to stimulate discussion and raise questions in the early part of the workshop.

‘Something Old, Something New...?’ The Reframing of “Class” in Precarious Work Research’

*Sharni Chan, Macquarie University*

Precarious forms of work are on the increase in Australia. This is not just reflected in the high proportion of people affected, but also in the expansion of precarious work into new social groups. So far, much research has either focussed attention on the experiences of workers with the least resources to navigate precarious work situations or has had the tendency to polarise workers so that an ‘intermediate’ class is overlooked. This paper will argue that the experiences of those at the fuzzier edges of the class divide warrant attention in their own right. This paper explores the emerging phenomena of middle class precarious work and will present preliminary findings of in-depth interviews with workers who are both highly skilled and working in broadly professional fields and yet have no access to statutory employment benefits.

‘Day Job Dissociation - Young Men and the Vocational Middle Distance’

*George Morgan, University of Western Sydney*

This paper reports on biographical narrative research with young men who aspire to work in creative industries but who, from lack of opportunities, are forced to tread water in day jobs. Many such people work in shops, building sites, factories, hotels, call centres and restaurants where employers know they will endure low pay,

exploitation, intermittency and insecurity because they nurture larger ambitions. Allocation of shifts/hours and continued employment is at the whim of managers and workers have few enforceable rights. This normalizes precarity a condition that is not simply a function of labour markets but which has a wider discursive force. The discourses of the new economy encourage restless vocational subjects with individualistic, entrepreneurial and strategic dispositions towards career. Relations with fellow workers and students can become instrumental and ephemeral. Friendship and career networks can merge. The paper will consider the day-job narratives of interviewees who are facing up to the prospect of ever-receding vocational horizons and the long-deferral of creative ambitions.

‘Precarious Affect: Social Networks and the Archive of Feeling’

*Jennifer Pybus, Victoria University of Technology*

For social networks to function and be economically profitable, they must archive aggregatable data. Such archives represent a new site of increasing value to the information economy, relying on the immaterial labour of users who regularly upload and update their online subjectivities. Arguably, the act of archiving can be understood as a crucial cultural practice of the ‘precarious worker par excellence’, and as the critical act sustaining the structural backbone for new virtual sources of surplus value and exchange. This ‘archive of feeling’, following Anne Cvetkovich, *is* a platform of identity production; an affective substrate rendering a ‘person recognizable.’ This paper will focus on the constitutive role social networks and their archives of feeling play in reproducing and resisting an ontology that straddles ‘uncertainty, fluctuation and fleeting association...and, those moments of intensity, hope and exhilaration.’ I will highlight the tensions that arise as the virtual archives are simultaneously sites of accumulation and affective platforms for the subjectivisation of users. Both precarity and flexibility animate the agency and affect expressed in social networks, particularly via friendship maintained through such technosociality.

‘Creativity as Emancipation: A Short History’

*Justin O’Connor, Queensland University of Technology*

In this paper I try to trace the notion of creativity as emancipation through the lens of the cultural and then creative industries discourse. I will start with discussion of the new economy or symbolic workers, and related ideas of the ‘new class’ and the construction of these as a politically progressive force. I will then focus on Boltanski and Chiapello’s idea of the ‘artistic critique of capitalism’ and how they link this to the idea of the ‘new left’ in post 1968 France. I will then link these ideas to the emergence of counter-cultural movements in European and North American cities, especially the emergence of new urban cultural actors who have subsequently been associated with ‘cultural’ or ‘creative entrepreneurs’. Having laid out this I will then attempt to account for some of the political shifts in this discourse over the 1990s as it was taken up (in part) by the idea of creative industries. I will end by discussing the future prospects for a progressive notion of ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ and associated policy discourses.

‘We Are All Creatives Now’

*Roy Green, University of Technology Sydney*

As competitive advantage in global economies is increasingly driven by knowledge and ingenuity, the marginalisation of the creative industries is not only likely to be reversed but creative talent will become central to the success of all industries. This

poses a challenge for management especially given the recent finding that Australian managers fall far short of global best in the area of ‘instilling a talent mindset’ in their organisations. Can creativity and innovation be managed and, if so, what role can universities play in preparing graduates, undertaking collaborative research and engaging with firms and organisations? I will investigate these questions.

‘Representations of Precarity in Italy: Collective and Individual Stories, Social Imaginaries and Subjectivities’

*Annalisa Murgia, University of Trento, Italy*

This contribution aims to analyse the phenomena of non-standard work in Italy, characterized by a growing rate of precarity, that mainly concerns the instability of work, but also extends pervasively to other spheres of the lives of people engaged in it. Referring to the semiotic-political phenomenon of ‘San Precario’, I will show the invention of a creative and collective approach to precarious labour. San Precario, in fact, is a collective invention, an attempt to escape from the vicious circle of precarity through the development of a symbolic imaginary, able to reunify the fragmented nature and the heterogeneity of contemporary working conditions. The creation of San Precario is a particularly interesting phenomenon, because it is a case in which work is the subject of a critical reflection, a collective subject of social and political claims and of practices of representation. In this sense, the case of San Precario suggests that, in order to understand the social dimension of precarity, it is necessary to redirect the attention from the analysis of the structural elements of work to the analysis of biographical experiences and of the everyday lives of individuals. From this collective story I will move to possible ways to study precarious subjectivities, proposing the biographical and narrative approach as a research tool to understand feelings and individual experiences, articulated into everyday life.

‘Ant Tribe: Can it Become the Fourth-Largest Vulnerable Group in China’

*Lian Si, University of International Business and Economics, Beijing, China*

In the recent years, there has emerged a group of newly graduated university students in Chinese cities, particularly in the big cities, known as the ‘inhabitant group of low-income gregarious college graduates’ (or the Ant Tribe). They are well-educated but insecurely employed. They have received higher education and are mainly engaged in insurance sales, electronic equipment sales, advertising marketing, catering services and other temporary work, and some are even unemployed. Their average monthly income is less than 2000 RMB and most do not have social security and labour contracts. Their average age is 22-29 years old and 90% of them were born in 1980s. They mainly live in urban fringe areas or outskirts rural areas, having formed unique ‘villages of college graduates’. They are as small and strong as ants and thus little known to other members of society. Studying the ant tribe raises questions about urban management, graduate employment, the stability of low socioeconomic groups, the social distribution system, the household registration management system, the education system and other important problems in China. These need particular attention against the backdrop of the continuous expansion of enrolment in Chinese higher education, increasingly complex urban management and the grim employment situation caused by the international financial crisis. This article is based on a 2010 field survey of ‘ant tribe’ living conditions in the seven major cities of China. It mainly focuses on ‘ant tribe’ identity, network behaviour and their sense of social injustice.

‘Graffiti or Street Art? Negotiating the Moral Geographies of the Creative City’  
*Cameron McAuliffe, University of Western Sydney*

The drive to eradicate the ‘scourge of graffiti’ from the urban environment is a common theme in the governance of the contemporary city. In cities such as Sydney, a succession of wars on graffiti has produced a moral geography of artistic practice in public and private spaces. State legislators produce bespoke anti-graffiti laws; local governments invest in increasingly sophisticated graffiti management plans; and police and other security agencies mobilise direct resources in the fight against graffiti. Graffiti crime data is collected and collated by state agencies and the burgeoning industry in graffiti removal sub-contractors fuelled by spiralling anti-graffiti budgets. At the same time, the rise to prominence of creative cities discourses and the subsequent revaluation of creativity as a post-industrial salve unsettles the dominance of the normative criminalisation of graffiti. The profusion of cultural plans and public art policies, along with metropolitan initiatives promoting the creative city, provide opportunities to resignify graffiti as productive creative practice. Set in a discursive world of murals, street art and ‘legal graffiti’, some graffiti writers are grasping these opportunities, deploying multiple subjectivities in order to negotiate the moral geographies of the creative city. This paper looks at contemporary state responses to graffiti in Sydney and the ways graffiti writers and street artists work within and beyond the various attempts to capture, enclose and engage graffiti and graffiti writers. It also considers the wider implications of the tension between processes of criminalisation and co-option, and the (re)production of precarious forms of inclusion in the creative city.

‘Vice or Virtue? Dealing with Precarity and Creative Vocational Aspiration’  
*Pariece Nelligan, University of Western Sydney*

Precarious labour is a growing trend throughout the Western world and especially in Australia. As a result secure employment has become the exception rather than the norm. Symptomatic of precarious labour are working conditions that require constant negotiation and self-reinvention. Individuals must be able to multi-skill, move from job to job seamlessly, and connect disparate work experiences all the while remaining connected and ‘in the know’. The constant pressure on individuals to recognise and then act upon what may be potential working opportunities drives people to act in ways that reflect what Beck, Giddens and Leadbeater might call self-reflexive entrepreneurialism. Those involved in precarious labour are often caught between what might be called individual neo-liberal entrepreneurialism and old industrial workplace solidarity. Its effects can be seen particularly in the lives of people with creative ambition. This paper will look at ‘creative wannabes’ who are defined not by their work but by their ‘potential’ unfulfilled gift. Through life history narrative analysis it will explore the ways in which people with creative ambitions dissociate with ‘day job’ work and colleagues as they search for the elusive break or tangential way into the Australian film industry. The paper will discuss the consequential vocational restlessness experienced by people who seek to fulfil creative dreams. It will explore how the elusive job network plays an essential role in the lives of creative workers, and also look at the types of job choices and sacrifices that are made by filmmaking hopefuls who are in pursuit of their creative ambitions. Finally, it will explore the ways in which creative industries discourse works its way through people, impacting family life, work, friendships, and ultimately a sense of identity.

‘Part-time Precarity: Discount Labour in the White Collar Workplace’

*Melissa Gregg, University of Sydney*

A significant feature of the so-called ‘flexible’ information workplace is the fixed term contract. Many of today's white collar workers are hired repeatedly and at short notice to deliver specific tasks vital to the functioning of organizations. The security of ongoing employment eludes these workers, despite their ongoing and important contributions. Yet there is pressure on them to perform to a standard that is proven and reliable—if not for their current boss to recognize, then to build a portfolio for prospective employers. In the broader context of cultural labour, universities join media and arts organizations as representative public sector industries deploying the categories of ‘casual’, ‘contract’ and ‘sessional’ staff. Such roles are purposefully constructed to prevent the benefits of salaried work, whether this means sick leave, superannuation contributions or continuing employment following pregnancy. By contrast, salaried employees may expect a certain level of job security, but their permanent status renders them liable to other kinds of discount labour. This includes an accumulation of new tasks - for instance, constant skills upgrades related to the roll-out of new technologies - that extend working hours beyond agreed expectations. Permanent staff carry the surplus of work that remains unaccounted for in the quantitative measures organizations use to facilitate budget efficiencies. This paper draws on a three year study of information workers in key cultural sectors to show a variety of experiences of precarity. It does this to raise the question: what forms of security can today's white collar apprentices seek to attain?

‘Exploitation 2.0: What Makes “Free Labour” Labour?’

*Mark Andrejevic, University of Queensland*

The critical literature on commercial monitoring and so-called ‘free labour’ locates exploitation in realms beyond the workplace proper, noting the productivity of networked activity including the creation of user-generated-content and the profitability of commercial sites for social networking and communication. The changing context of productivity in these realms, however, requires further development of a critical concept of exploitation. This presentation defines exploitation as the extraction of unpaid, coerced, and alienated labour. It considers how such a definition might apply to various forms of unpaid but profit-generating online activity, arguing that commercial monitoring redoubles the conscious, intentional activity of users in ways that render it amenable to a critique of exploitation. Given the role of commercial monitoring in the emerging online economy, the presentation emphasizes the importance of supplementing privacy critiques with approaches that identify the ways in which new forms of surveillance represent a form of power that seeks to manage and control consumer behaviour.

‘Geosocial Networking: Communication, Affect, Labour, Movement’

*Mark Coté, Victoria University of Technology*

There is an important new techno-social modality—geosocial networking—most often expressed through FourSquare, Google Buzz and Facebook Places. Utilising GPS technology—crucial to ‘just in time’ and flexible accumulation, and thus precarity—this marks a new kind of movement and communication, as well as labour, albeit in a form obfuscated to most users. I will build on our ‘learning to immaterial labour’ thesis to examine the mutually constitutive play and work of geosocial networking. That is, how it traces a networked location on what I have been calling the (non)local body in two distinct ways: one for capital, tracking fluctuating and



mobile labour/consumer power; second, as a desired quotidian extension of communicative and affective capacity, precisely by mapping our mobility. I suggest the sensuous as an important category for critical analysis into precarity/flexibility. I will use the (non)local body as a lens for examining geosocial networking to reconsider the relation between the human and technology, via both Andre Leroi-Gourhan, and the iconic ‘Fragments’ of Marx. What interests me in the latter, though, is not just that ‘Capital absorbs labour into itself [via machinery]’ but its immaterial and affective modality ‘as though its body were by love possessed’.

‘Creative Economy Contested: Notes on Precarious Labour Politics in New York City’

*Greig de Peuter, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada*

Reinvigorated by capital’s search for a way out of its ongoing crisis, the discourse selling the promise of a new ‘creative economy’ has been challenged by labour researchers for its tendency to neglect the working conditions in the sectors it champions. There is now a vast and varied literature documenting the longstanding but increasingly prevalent insecure employment relationships marking the arts, media, IT sector, and cultural industries. Beginning with a distillation of some of the recurrent themes in that literature, this presentation focuses on collective responses to precarious work in the creative economy. While European mobilizations against precarity have attracted considerable attention, this paper addresses a North American context, in particular, New York City, a metropolitan capital of global creative industry. A preliminary report on research in progress, the presentation describes collective organizations and policy proposals—emerging from outside or at the margins of established trade unions—that seek to mitigate labour precarity in New York’s vaunted creative economy.

## Access

### Venue Address:

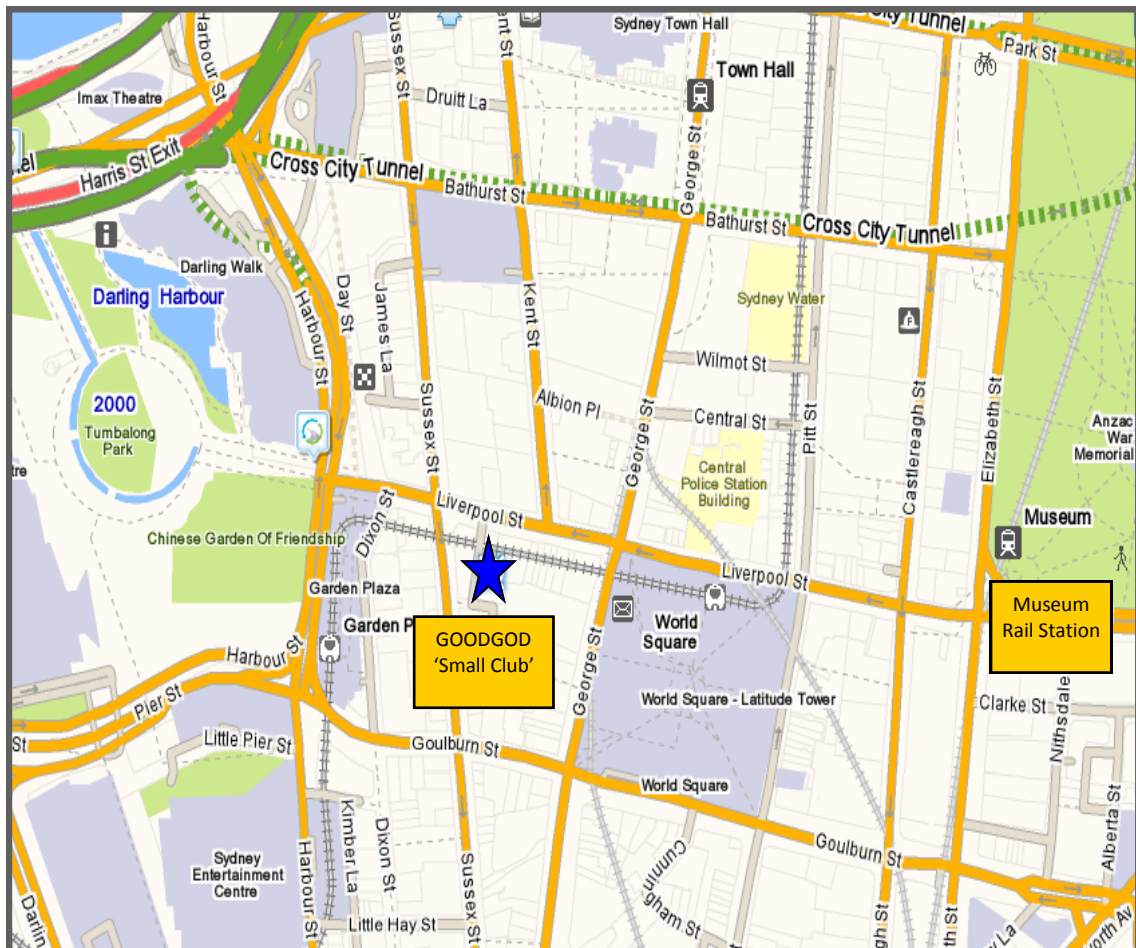
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