The Dismeasure of Art. An Interview with Paolo Virno

Open: For a few years now there has been an international discourse surrounding the notion of 'precarity' or 'precariousness', boosted by European social movements and philosophers such as

Paolo Virno: Precarity refers to the relationship between temporary and flexible labour arangements and an existence without predictability and security, which is determining the living conditions of increasingly larger groups in society. Precarity occurs simultaneously at many places within society as a consequence of the neoliberal, post-Fordist economy with its emphasis on the immaterial production of information and services and continuous flexibility. The same is true of the creative sector: flexible production and outsourcing of work, typical aspects of the service economy, can also be seen in businesses devoted to art, culture and communication.

The art world has displayed an avid interest in your work over the past few years; we ourselves are here to interview you for an art magazine. Yet you've hardly written anything explicitly about art. Where do you think this interest in your work comes from?
It's true. I sometimes get invited to talk about art at conferences or seminars organized by art academies and that always embarrasses me a little, as if there has been some mistake, because my knowledge of modern art is actually very limited. I think that people involved in art being interested in my work has something to do with a concept I use, namely 'virtuosity'.
In my opinion, this concept is the common ground between my political and philosophical reflection and the field of art. Virtuosity happens to the artist or performer who, after performing, does not leave a work of art behind. I have used the experience of the performing, virtuoso artist not so much to make statements about art, but rather to indicate what is typical of political action in general.
Political action does not produce objects. It is an activity that does not result in an autonomous object. What strikes me is that today work, and not just work for a publishing company, for television or for a newspaper, but all present-day work, including the work done in the Volkswagen factory, or at Fiat or Renault, tends to be an activity that does not result in an autonomous 'work', in a produced object.
Of course the Volkswagen factory cranks out cars, but this is entirely subject to a system of automatic mechanized labour, while the duties of the individual Volkswagen factory workers consist of communication that leaves no objects behind: of this type of virtuoso activity.
I see virtuosity as a model for post-Fordist work in general. And there is more: what strikes me is that the earliest type of virtuosity, the one that precedes all others, precedes the dance, the concert, the actor's performance and so on, is typically the activity of our human kind, namely the use of language. Using human language is an activity that does not result in any autonomous and remaining 'work'; it does not end in a material result, and this is the lesson De Saussure, Chomsky and Wittgenstein taught. Post-Fordist work is virtuoso and it became virtuoso when it became linguistic and communicative.

What do I think about art? The only art of which I have a more than superficial knowledge is modern and contemporary poetry. I think that the experience of avant-garde art including poetry in the 20th century is one of disproportion and of 'excess', of lack of moderation. Great 20th-

century avant-garde art – and poetry in particular – from Celan to Brecht and Montale, has demonstrated the crisis of experiential units of measure. It is as if the platinum metre bar kept in Paris to define the standard length of a metre suddenly measured 90 or 110 centimetres. This emphasis on immoderation, disproportion and the crisis in units of measure is to be credited greatly to avant-garde art and this is also where it edges up to communism. With regard to the crisis of measure, art is a lot like communism.

Only poetry, or other art as well?

Art in general, I expect, but I know poetry best. It is about disproportion. In addition to explaining the crisis, poetry wants to find new standards of measure and proportion. Along the same lines the major Italian poet and critic Franco Fortini has said that there is an objective common ground between avant-garde art and poetry and the communist movement – and I do not use the term 'communist' in the sense of actual socialism. What's more, I consider actual socialism as interpreted within the communist party and the Soviet Union as communism's worst enemy.

This emphasis on the disproportion or crisis of units of measure is present in the communist movement and they are looking for new criteria, too. The experience of the artist-performer can provide us with a general post-Fordist model.

What do you mean by 'crisis of the unit of measure'?

It is as if the metre, the standard set to measure cognitive and affective experience, no longer works. We see the same crisis in the fields of politics and history: social prosperity is no longer produced by labour time, but by knowledge, by a general knowing, by 'general intellect', and as a result social prosperity and labour time are no longer directly connected.

The new standard to measure prosperity is within the domain of intelligence, language and collaboration. The problem is that social prosperity is still measured by the old standard of labour time, while realities have changed and it is actually determined by 'general intellect'.

We can see the same thing happening in 20th-century art. It demonstrates the inadequacy of the old standards and suggests, in the formal sphere and through the formal work of poetry, new standards for the appraisal of our cognitive and affective experience. This is a point that brought the artistic avant-garde close to the radical social movement and in this sense there is a kind of brotherhood between the two: they would like to explain that the old standards are no longer valid and to look for what might be new standards.

Another way to put the problem is: how can you locate a new public sphere, which has nothing to do with the state? Avant-garde art proved the impotence, the inadequacy, the disproportion of the old standards through a formal investigation. The common ground of art and social movements is never about content. Art that relates to social resistance is beside the point, or rather art expressing views on social resistance is not relevant. The radical movement and avant-garde poetry touch on the formal investigation that yields an index of new forms denoting new ways of living and feeling, which results in new standards. All this is far removed from a substantive relation.

So you see only a formal parallel? Do you think there is a historic evolution in this formal parallelism and can there be any interaction between form and content?

No. When it comes to content, there is no common ground. There is only contact with regard to

form and the quest for forms. To me, it is purely a matter of a formal investigation. The form of the poem is like the form of a new public sphere, like the structure of a new idea. Looking for forms in the arts is like looking for new standards of what we may regard as society, power, and so on.

As new rules?

Yes, exactly, it's about new rules. This collapse of the old rules and anticipating new rules, even if only formal, is where aesthetics and social resistance meet: this is the common ground where a new society is anticipated that is based on 'general intellect' and not on the sovereignty of the state anymore.

Do you mean: rules to organize the standard?

It is a matter of defining concepts: the concept of power, of work, of activity and so on. In connection with art I would like to add, and this perhaps goes without saying, that after Benjamin we cannot but wonder what the fate of technical ability to reproduce is going to be. In our present context we need, aesthetically and politically, a concept of 'unicity without the aura'. You both know Benjamin's concept of the unicity of a work of art involving the 'aura', a kind of religious cult surrounding the artwork as is for instance evident in the case of the Mona Lisa. Benjamin points out that the aura is destroyed by reproduction techniques: think about film and photography.
The problem we face today is the problem of the singularity of experience, which has nothing to do with aura or cult. To grasp the particularity of the experience we need a concept of unicity without aura, for that particularity or unicity no longer has the character of an aura. Nowadays it is all about finding the relation between the highest possible degree of communality or generality and the highest possible degree of singularity. In art forms, too, what matters is finding the relation between the most general and the most particular. Art is a quest for unicity without any aura.

Art and philosophy face the same problem?

Absolutely. Philosophy is supposed to formulate a critique against the universal on behalf of the general.1 The concepts of 'universal' and 'general' are constantly being mixed up, while they are in fact opposites.
The 'comune' or 'general' is not that which we encounter in you, in him, in me but that which occurs, passes, between us. My brain is general yet simultaneously particular because it is not like yours or his: only the universal aspects are. Aspects that are equally present in us all are universal.
'General' refers to what exists or occurs in the borderland, between you and me, in the relation between you, him and me, and in that sense there is a constant movement between the particular and the general. Marx's concept of 'general intellect' is general, just as the English language is general and not universal.
Language serves as a model for the general that only exists within a community and that cannot exist apart from the community. Our mother tongue, the language we speak, does not exist apart from the relation with a community each of us has individually, whereas our bifocal eye sight does exist in each of us individually, apart from the community. There are things that only exist inside relationships.

When Marx speaks of 'general intellect', he refers to collaboration and so to something like that, which only exists in the in between. This concept of Marx's refers to the general good.

Now I think that in modernity, the general in both art and philosophy is involved in a complex emancipatory struggle to get away from the universal. This is also how I interpret 'other globalization' or 'new global' movements: they represent the dimension of the general that criticizes the universal. Sovereignty, on the other hand, is a form of the universal.

So the question we now face is: What aesthetic and political experiences can we develop to transfer from the universal to the general without consequently destroying the particular?

Or take what philosophers call the 'individuation principle', meaning the valuation of everything that is unique and unrepeatable in our lives. Speaking of individuation implies that you consider the individual a result, not a starting point. The individual is a result of a movement that is rooted in the 'communal' and yet is, or is becoming, particular. It is Marx who, for 'general intellect', uses the term 'social individual'. We can postulate that the general is something pre-individual, a kind of general consciousness that exists before individuals form, and from which they form. This general pre-individual is a 'we' that exists before the different I's develop, so is not the sum of all I's.

This is also in perfect agreement with the view on human development of the Russian psychologist and linguist Vygotsky, who was actually heavily influenced by Marx: prior to anything else there exists a collective social context and only beyond and from that context does the child develop into a separate individual subject.

Or remember the formidable discovery of the 'mirror neurons' by the neurosciences, which tells us there is a kind of general sensing, an empathy that precedes the constitution of the separate subject.

The Italian scientist Gallese, who contributed to this discovery, speaks of a space in which the 'we' is central. I think all these expressions by Vygotsky, Marx and Gallese are different ways to grasp the concept of the general as opposed to the concept of the universal. I would like to highlight this contrast, which is a hard nut that both political movements and artistic research will have to crack. The alliance between the general and the singular opposes the state and its machinery.

Today, movements that side with the multitudes carefully anticipate this alliance: the multitudes are individuals who nevertheless maintain strong ties with the general. On the other hand, the state and post-Fordist society transform the general into the universal; they transform the general intellect into a source of financial gain and social collaboration, and virtuosity into patterns and structures of post-Fordist production.

Returning to the connection between art and politics: how do you feel about engaged art, for instance about what Brian Holmes does or Michelangelo Pistoletto and his Cittadelarte – Fondazione Pistoletto? How do you feel about art that takes up a substantive political standpoint as well? Is it relevant?

In this context I would like to talk about the Situationists and Debord, for they provide an example of an artistic movement, Debord and Situationiste Internationale, turning into a political avant-garde. To me, engaged art is an integral part of political movements, one of its components. Political movements use a lot of tools, including means of communication like the Internet, and politically engaged art is one of those tools. It is a component of movements' political capital.

Yet I would once again like to underline that the most important effect of art is set in the formal sphere. In that sense, even art that is remote from political engagement touches upon the social

and political reality. The two are not conflicting matters. They operate on different levels. The formal investigation produces criteria, units of measure, whereas the directly political engagement of the artist is a specific form of political mobilization.

Do you mean to say that even politically engaged art is still part of a formal investigation? Engagement is closely connected to a successful formal investigation?

Yes, what I mean is that even artists who are remote from the political movement may, through their search for new forms and expressions and in spite of themselves, get in touch with the needs of such a political movement, and may be used by it. Brecht as well as poets much more remote from social realities, like Montale, realized a similar relation.

The Situationists were very important when they became a political movement, but from that moment on they were no longer avant-garde art: it's about two modes of existence. They clearly illustrate this double take. Before 1960 they were an artistic movement rooted in Dadaism and Surrealism, afterwards they participated in social resistance, making the same mistakes or gaining the same merits as other political activists.

Another problem is that when language becomes the main principle according to which social reality is organized, social reality as a whole becomes aesthetic.

So where would you situate art within society from a sociological perspective? Or put the other way around: What would happen if art was cut away from society? What social role do you ascribe to fiction in society?

Well, I think that Enzensberger's quip is appropriate here. He said poetry is no longer found in volumes of poetry but scattered over society like an effervescent tablet dissolved in a glass of water. You will find art everywhere, even in commercials. There is no longer a monopolistic location for the production of art; the artistic experience is molecularly disseminated.

We also live in a time, the post-Fordist era, in which human nature has become an economic stake. Every aspect of human nature (that we are linguistic beings, the effect of environment on the human species) constitutes raw material for production.

The debate about human nature that took place between Foucault and Chomsky in Eindhoven in 1971 was very important to me. This debate was at the heart of the social movements' deliberations from the moment its translation was published in Italy. You could say both parties were wrong. Foucault denied there was any such thing as innate human nature, whereas Chomsky's concept of this innate human nature was so rigid and deterministic that he thought he could deduce a political programme from it. I believe this discussion ought to become the subject of renewed study and that we need to have it again, to find new answers to contemporary questions about the relation between human nature and politics.

You see, today aspects of human nature have become sociological categories. One example is flexibility. Anthropologists like Gehlen teach that the hallmark of human nature is the absence of specialized instincts: we are the species without a specific milieu. Anthropology uses notions such as 'natural, unchanging truth' but, particularly in our day and age, such natural truths have become sociological truths and the phenomenon of flexibility and sub-phenomena, like migration, along with them.

Another example: we human beings always remain children, we hold on to certain childlike aspects our entire lives, we are chronically childlike. This, too, has always been true but only now has lifelong learning become an issue.

Yet another example: the metahistorical aspect that we are highly potential creatures. In the

present context, this potential has become labour power. From this perspective we can speak of bio-politics, because biological features have become a sociological category – that is to say, a sociological category of capitalism. In no way do I mean to say that flexibility and capitalism are sociological laws of nature. Nothing stipulates that society has got to be organized in this way, on the contrary. There is an aesthetic base component in human nature which, in the present context, has become an aspect of economic production. That is why matters have to be dealt with on a fundamental level. The concept of labour power also includes an aesthetic component, beside a communicative and a linguistic aspect.

The problem of and for art, both intrinsically and formally, is to show this aesthetic component of the production process.

Does contemporary art indeed represent this widespread aesthetic dimension of present-day production?

I cannot answer this question, but I do think it needs to be asked. Human nature, aesthetic component, post-Fordism, labour power: the discussion about art needs to be held in this conceptual constellation. What is left of aesthetics in present-day production in the collaboration and in the communication that have become production power? Something transformed the extraordinary position of the aesthetic experience within society, for it is no longer extraordinary, singular and separate but has, conversely, become an integral part of production.

Let's go back a little, to Enzensberger's quip and the place where art is produced, does something like artistic autonomy exist anymore? Do artistically autonomous places exist?

I think so, but not as many as there used to be.

So is it still possible for art to remain disengaged? Can art be resistance and exodus?

I think it can. Linking the terms I used before to this question: the land of the pharaoh, from which the exodus takes place, is the universal. The exodus is away from the universal towards the general, however this occurs among the phenomena of the present context. The exodus involves the transformation of those very present phenomena. Nothing is external, there is no outside.

The exodus occurs within post-Fordist production where linguistic production and collaboration, as labour and production power, create a public dimension that is not identical to the dimension of the state. It is an exodus away from the state and its machinery and towards a new public space that makes use of general intellect and general knowledge.

During the exodus the general intellect no longer has the power to produce profit and surplus values but becomes a political institution. What comes to mind is the space in which a central 'we' is a realistic basis for a new political institution.

I think the pre-individual dimension and the features of human nature that post-Fordism put to work and converted to cash (flexibility, chronically childlike, no instinctive orientation or specific milieu) also give us the opportunity to create new forms, but in a manner opposite to what happens in today's institutions – an exodus that provides what we can see happening in post-Fordism with a new form.

Flexibility therefore, but interpreted as freedom. The chronically childlike understood as prosperity, on condition that it stops transforming into the necessity to learn lifelong as described by Richard Sennett. An exodus within the present landscape.

It is generally understood that post-Fordism's breakthrough as a global production principle took place in the 1960s and 1970s together with the student revolts and the Fiat strikes.

Do you think that prior to that time there were areas that ranked as kinds of social laboratories for this production process? You could say that immaterial labour commenced when Duchamp entered his urinal in the New York exhibition. Would you support the hypothesis that the laboratories of the present post-Fordism are to be found in artistic production itself, particularly in early modern readymade art? Max Weber showed that the spirit of capitalism is deeply rooted in Protestantism. Can you indicate locations (of an artistic, religious or subcultural nature) in society, in this Weberian or historical sense, where preparations are being made for post-Fordism as a mental structure?

You mean a genealogy of post-Fordism? I would be very interested in a genealogical perspective dating back further than the 1960s and 1970s. I think we could regard the culture industry of the 1930s and 1940s and onwards as the laboratory for post-Fordist production that anticipated that which was embodied in industry in general in the 1980s.

What would you consider examples of the 1930s culture industry?

Radio, film . . . to me, they anticipate post-Fordism for technical reasons: at that time, the unexpected becomes an indispensable element in the culture industry. The unexpected, which later becomes the pivot of post-Fordist production in the form of the just-in-time inventory strategy. There is no culture industry without an outside-of-the-programme factor.
And that reminds me of what the two great philosopher-sociologists Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in their chapter on culture industry of their Dialektik der Aufklärung: culture, too, became an industrial sector and a capitalist assembly line but one with a handicap, for it was not fully rational yet.
It is this handicap, not being able to foresee and organize everything, which turns the culture industry into a post-Fordist laboratory. The culture industry is the antechamber of present-day production techniques. For what escapes programmes is, indeed, that element of flexibility. And of course I also see that anticipation because the culture industry's base materials are language and imagination.
Horkheimer and Adorno advocate a pessimistic theory of culture and an elitist artistic space. Their diagnosis of the culture industry as underdeveloped capitalism is interesting to me because it's a description of a given reality, not because of the way they subsequently use it.
I am not talking about their pessimism here, and certainly not about their elevating aristocratic art to a privileged position. In that discussion, I am on Benjamin's side. But their description is useful with regard to laboratories for the structural preparation of post-Fordism. It touches on the 'outside-the-programme' and on the unexpected.
With regard to the question of whether the genealogy of post-Fordism also extends to the earliest avant-garde art performances, I agree that there is some expectation among those performers and in the artistic laboratories in which, after all, people created virtuoso performances instead of new objects.
Of course precedents were also set during the social struggles of the 1960s and '70s by Italy's free radios, whose subversive element was removed while its form was preserved. Free radios' new way of communicating was captured.
Today, we see artistic expressions and activities simply being situated at the centre of post-Fordist economy. Think about, for instance, artistic expressions in commercials or advertising but also about the incredible growth of the cultural and creative industries. Art, or at least creativity, has not been socially marginal, which was how Michel de Certeau saw them for a long

time. Yet even Wittgenstein and you yourself place creative space in the margin or as you call it, on a sidetrack. Might the discrepancy between margin and centre not be obsolete?

Paradoxically, we encounter some of the most apt philosophical-theoretical descriptions of post-Fordism in Derrida's deconstructionism, in post-modernist authors, and in the philosophies of 'difference' and of 'distinction' in general.

After all, post-Fordism is a game of 'differences' itself – it is de-structuring, deconstructionist and far from homogeneous. The philosophies of difference and deconstruction, which obviously exist independently as well, each with its own cultural history, are two expressions of post-Fordism's mode of existence. An existence without a centre and carrying an infinite chain of internal differences.

Look at it that way, and post-Fordism becomes a cruel travesty of communism – assuming that communism is a kind of philosophy of difference as well, with 'difference' being its main element.

In my Grammar of the Multitude I refer to post-Fordism as the capital's communism, as it uses subjects that are typical of communist freedom, such as the appreciation of differences and the transcendence of wage labour to the advantage of a capitalist mode of production. Nowadays artistic labour is turning into wage labour while the problem is, of course, how to liberate human activity in general from the form of wage labour.

Yet you also criticize post-modernism and call it an ideology. As opposed to the fusion of linguistic communication and wage labour, post-modern ideology extols the opportunities for liberation that are implicit in that communication, but cloaks wage labour by doing so. Does that summarize your criticism of post-modern ideology – if it is an ideology?

Post-modern philosophers as a body grasp some element of the truth, but extrapolate from that another truth which is connected to it. They are truly harnessed language philosophers. For them, linguistic experience and communication come first and are taken for self-realization. Whereas actually, linguistic practices, creativity and communication have been bound together under capitalist control.

In that sense I consider post-modern thinkers as kinds of apologists of the present, as if they understand a thing very well but fail to see that this element they have detected so brilliantly is subject to the logic of capitalism.

Returning to creativity and innovation, would you still place creative opportunity on the fringe or in the centre?

I see creativity as diffuse, without a privileged centre. As a no-matter-what creativity, under weak leadership if you can call it that, having no specific location connected to the fact that we humans are linguistic beings: art is anybody's.

Does creativity transform when it is at the centre of the post-Fordist production system? Or, more concrete: is there a difference between a creative thinker or artist and a web designer or a publicity expert at the centre of the economic process? Are these two kinds of creativity, or is it about the same kind of creativity?

This is a complex dialectic. First, it is important to post-Fordist capitalism that creativity develops autonomously, so it can subsequently catch it and appropriate it. Capitalism cannot organize reflection and creativity, for then it would no longer be creativity. The form applied here is that of the ghetto: 'You go on and make new music, and then we will go and commercialize that new music.'

It is important for creativity to have autonomy, because it forms in the collaboration that is general and consequently the opposite of universal. Creativity feeds off the general.

I would like to elucidate this through the distinction Marx made between formal and real subsumption or subjection. In the case of formal subsumption, the capitalist appropriates a production cycle that already exists. In the case of real subsumption, the capitalist organizes the production cycle moment by moment.

Now it seems to me that the existent post-Fordism in many cases implies that we have returned to formal subsumption. It is important for social collaboration to produce its intelligence and create its forms. Afterwards, that intelligence and those forms are captured and incorporated by the capitalist, who has no choice but to do so if he wants to acquire that which can only grow outside of him or outside his organization. So the capitalists want to seize autonomously and freely produced intelligence and forms: to realize a surplus value of course, not to realize greater freedom for the people.

A certain degree of autonomy or freedom is necessary and therefore permissible. Social collaboration has to be something with a certain degree of self-organization in order to be productive in a capitalist manner. If the work was organized directly by the capitalist, it would be unprofitable. To yield a profit and be useful from the perspective of the capitalist, the work needs to some extent to be established through self-organization.

It is difficult to grasp this complex dialectic by using theoretical categories. That which is really productive from an economic point of view is not the sum of the individual labourers' output, but the context of collaboration and interaction – provided that it follows its own logic of growth, investigation and invention to some extent

Let me give you another example: what counts in collaboration is not so much the separate contributions as the network that unites them. Fordist structures feature objective collaboration, which means that the labourers do their jobs and the factory manager subsequently connects the separate results, thus taking a step forward in a production process that is literally organized around a thing, an object.

Post-Fordism features a form of subjective collaboration. In this context, 'subjective' means that the task to improve collaboration is included in our job. We have to instigate collaboration ourselves at work, and that is why they have to let us be. There has to be some degree of autonomy. In other words, the process is subject to our own initiative. It is a condition for my exploitation that I produce intelligence and collaboration, and I can only do so when I am, to some degree, free. So I need to be granted a certain degree of autonomy in order to be exploited. Which are the qualities required of a post-Fordist worker? They are never qualities regarding professional expertise or technical requirements. On the contrary, what's required is the ability to anticipate unexpected opportunities and coincidences, to seize chances that present themselves, to move with the world. These are not skills people learn at the workplace. Nowadays, workers learn such required abilities by living in a big city, by gaining aesthetic experiences, having social relationships, creating networks: all things workers learn specifically outside the workplace, in real life in a contemporary big city.

Those very wide-ranging skills, acquired elsewhere, as wide-ranging as life itself and as basic as encompassing human existence, subsequently become professional roles in the workplace. And so this is about a socialization that exceeds all classic bounds of labour. Post-Fordist workers educate themselves outside the workplace and their entire lives become job competency and thus devoted to the labour process.

Can the myth of the autonomous artist be seen as a capitalist construction?

First and foremost I think about the autonomy that is functional in creating surplus value, the autonomy that is essential to innovation and to the optimization and development of

collaboration. This is a patented and therefore a regulated autonomy, which is absolutely vital when labour has become linguistic and communicative. At that time, speaker-workers must be permitted autonomy.

In Wittgensteinian terms it is a matter of 'language games' being used as a source of production. Language games do not just exist, they need to be developed and that is impossible within a rigid structure with all sentences and dialogues pre-recorded and scripted. Language games presume some degree of freedom or autonomy.

However, I do not share the view that the present context includes more freedom and prosperity. A grinding poverty reigns in post-Fordism. The worst poverty you can imagine, for it is communication skills themselves that are claimed, exploited, and as capital, too.

We can only resist by being silent?

No, that's not how I see it. If language is the key to creating surplus value, it becomes our mission to free our linguistic competence of this role of production power by turning it into the foundation of another public sphere. It is important to cast that which is presently 'production power' in the role of 'foundation of a new politics'. Realizing a 'general intellect' is, I repeat, using language that way and transforming it into 'general intellect'. The key words are 'to transform' or 'to translate' from a key role in post-Fordist production into a pivot of a political, non-state constitution.

Now that we are talking about exploitation perhaps we might address the question of how to fight it. Today in Rome we saw posters displayed by the opposition featuring the slogan 'Il lavoro nobilita. Il precariato no'. Whether or not there is nobility in labour remains to be seen, but we all agree that the precariat is a condition to avoid, a grinding exploitation. We urgently need forms of resistance, developed by and for 'precarious workers' or precari. What is your take on such forms of resistance? Are they, in keeping with what you said earlier, forms of life? Can they be artistic expressions as well? Can you concretize this?

Let's take the example of someone who works for Italian television and radio: thousands of people with an unclear and insecure status . . . are being exploited. They form a so-called precariat. They have to work a lot, work hard, be inventive and focused all the time. They do not make a lot of money, are employed for three months and then unemployed for six more. How can these people organize? Not in the workplace: now you see them there, now you don't. As a rule, TV and radio's precari are well-educated creative people with a lot of cultural baggage, a rich cultural and social life: typical post-Fordist workers. However, what applies to them also applies to any example of a precariat, including Alitalia's.

Developing forms of resistance from, for and by the precari means doing so within the very broad context in which they live their lives. It means involving every aspect of their lives, their place of residence, the places they spend their leisure, their communication networks. You cannot organize television people without involving the districts they live in. You cannot abstract from the theatres they visit. In short, the whole problem concerns so many aspects and vital dimensions that developing a form of resistance means inventing new institutions.

How should I concretize this? How do we invent new institutions? What can the forms of resistance of the precari look like? This is of course the big X on the European political scene. Politics in Europe means finding the precariat forms of resistance.

There is a precedent, an example perhaps for this problem, in the IWW, Industrial Workers of the World. At the beginning of the 20th century no-one knew how to organize the mobile migrant labourers in the USA, either. They were highly scattered, very mobile and their resistance did not look as if it could be organized. Yet for about ten years the IWW managed to put up their seemingly impossible struggle with some success. Their importance therefore should not be underrated, even if they did lose in the end and get massacred.

Perhaps today, we ought to look in the same direction, to a new kind of union that will find a new form of resistance. The strike no longer works. We need new forms that are much more linguistic and creative, much more collaborative.

The precari are the extreme product of the big city experience and of post-Fordist capitalism. That is why they are a foothold for the onset of reflection. Organizing them means organizing lives and there is no model for that. It cannot be done without investigating the districts they move around in, their circuits of cultural consumption, their collective habits. The precari are actually the social individual, therefore they are always more than one, they are the counterpart of the 'general intellect'.

But organizing the social individual is very hard for, as I said, they are more than one, scattered, a brittle faction. We need research. Philosophy, including the philosophy of language, has to concern itself with the issue of what resistance forms may be developed starting from the precari. This is not a technical problem, on the contrary, it is an ethical matter and also an artistic matter. It is an institutional problem.

Organizing the precari will mean finding new institutions in the broad sense of the word and the opposite of state sovereignty. The measure of resistance today depends precisely on dedication to this major objective.

This takes us to the concept of the multitude, which features both in your work and in that of Michael Hardt and Toni Negri. Where would you place the multitude with respect to democracy? What, do you think, is the constituent principle of a multitude? Do you see any legal foundation for the multitude?

First and foremost I understand multitude in opposition to the concept of people. 'People' in the political sense of the word. The people are a mass of individual atoms that join in the unity of the state. The geometry of the multitude on the other hand consists of a kind of preceding unity, which allows differentiation and singularity. I sometimes call that unity 'general intellect' and sometimes the 'comune', the communal, general, common, collective, as well.

The people are a web of simple, singular atoms that move towards unity. To the people, unity is a promise. That's why I talk about geometry, not a geometry that proves anything but one that demonstrates the difference between the general and the universal. The state is universal and its unity is a goal towards which individual atoms move. The general, the 'comune', is the foundation for a differentiated singularization.

Remember Rousseau's concept of volonté générale, which refers to a kind of conclusive unity, whereas 'general intellect' refers to a pre-emptive unity. The difference is between a unity that precedes and a unity that concludes. Pre-emptive or conclusive. The problem of the multitude is that it always has a relation with the one; there is always that oscillation between the one and the many. To think that multitude is the opposite of unity is absurd. What unity, that's the problem, what kind of unity? Mine is a unity that is the basis for singularization, a precedent unity that leads the way, which people therefore proceed from. That's something completely different than the unity of state and sovereignty, which is a promise, which people pursue, and which no-one proceeds from.

In this respect, there doesn't seem to be any difference with the views of Hardt and Negri. Yet your understandings of the multitude differ. Theirs seem to involve a strong utopian perspective or even optimism which you have doubts about. It is as if you emphasize negative features more, or at least as if your story is less positive. Do you agree? Or what do you see as the most important differences between your perspective and those of Hardt and Negri?

First and foremost I would like to say that Michael Hardt and Toni Negri are friends – of course we agree a great deal. But to me, multitude is an ambivalent notion. It is a concept for a mode of existence and, like any mode of existence, it accommodates good and evil. Multitude is

ambivalent.

It is also a seat of corruption and violence against its own members. Unlike that of the people, it is a political mode of existence and that means, among other things, that it is an ambiguous mode of existence. Besides freedom, multitude includes destructive motives.

This is the first difference between my views and Toni's – my emphasis on the fact that it is a mode of existence that results in ambivalence. Another difference is that I think that multitude is closely connected to the concept of human nature, especially since all aspects of human nature have a central stake in politics and in modes of production. I am under the impression that Michael and Toni, even if they talk about biology, ultimately say little or even nothing about the biological aspect.

I believe that multitude is a political concept of human nature and that all of its aspects have become important in the capitalist production process and the social relations inseparable from it. Multitude has 'naturalness' and multitude has 'negativity'. By 'naturalness', I refer to the politico-social expression of a situation in which capitalism has harnessed human nature. 'Negativity', because the multitude has destructive and self-destructive tendencies.

The trouble with French post-structuralism and with contemporary critical thought in general, is that it wanted to rid itself of Hegel and his dialectics; rightly so I think. But the hard part is not to throw out the notion of negativity simultaneously. Negativity exists, that's just the way it is. A living being who is capable of saying 'no', that is, who has linguistic negation and is possessed of the notion of potentiality, is a dangerous being for both itself and others.

Therefore multitude must be interpreted as ambivalence, as the oscillation between a destructive and self-destructive tendency on the one hand and an inclination towards freedom on the other. In my essay 'Il cosidetto male' (The So-called Evil) I quote Carl Schmitt on the subject; a great political thinker even if he was compromised by Nazism. Schmitt criticizes the good-hearted views of communists, anarchists and all sorts of starry-eyed idealists who assume people are good in se. Schmitt thinks they are not, as did Hobbes, etcetera: people are dangerous and political institutions exist precisely to curb such negative tendencies. We have to come right back at Schmitt. We cannot let the matter rest or leave it to Schmitt and his friends, and we cannot endorse their view that militant movements consider people intrinsically good.

If there is any destructivity, it needs to be handled quite unlike the way state sovereignty is handling it. So I would argue that these biological roots of the multitude and its ambivalence are the two dissimilarities between my understanding and Negri's and Hardt's.

Your interpretation, maybe because multitude includes negativity, is an important criticism against anarchism?

Exactly. I would also like to emphasize that the basis for creativity and virtù is identical to the one to which destructivity attaches. The notion of the possible and linguistic negation are also bases for the invention of anything new.

Isn't this view like Agamben's? Doesn't Agamben's criticism of Negri consist of precisely this emphasis on negativity?

I don't know. We've lost touch since he moved to Venice, but at the time Agamben was not just my neighbour but also a very good friend, we created Luogo Comune magazine together.

Agamben doesn't mention multitude. He talks about biopolitics and has a sombre view of it, a tragic view that is the opposite of Negri's rather optimistic or sometimes euphoric view.

Let me repeat that what's important in this context is that the basis for creativity is identical to that of negativity. A being without a definite and definable milieu, with no specialized instincts and that is familiar with the categorical possible, can either go and do new things or become a tormentor. Therefore and therein, politics is conclusive. Politics faces the task of expressing the ambivalence in a certain way and not in any other way. And in this sense too, politics and art are

alike.

Do you see any mechanisms that might be able to guarantee the elimination of negativity? This is still in the purview of the question of what you think a democracy of the multitude would look like.
I would like to refer to the biblical image, from the exodus passage, of the 'grumbling of the community'. The episode is about the time when the Hebrews that fled the land of the pharaoh were being shattered by severe violence among themselves. No-one acknowledged authority anymore, people indulged in idolatry, even wanted to reinstate the old structures, etcetera. The exodus had to integrate this possibility of grumbling and conflict. I do not use the exodus image in the sense of a mellifluous Disney fairy tale, with harmony its central theme, but in the conflictual sense.
Again, the key word is 'translation': the point is, to translate destructivity into new forms of life – in 'virtuosity' in every sense of the word. Either the exodus is nothing, and then there's no problem, or it needs to be a strong theory and address the big political issues, as the reactionary Schmitt and Hobbes did – it has to have a taste for politics.
In Luogo Comune we recalled this classic exodus image. It keeps coming back throughout history – in Machiavelli, the Bolsheviks, Marx – and in the American political philosopher Michael Walzer in Exodus or Revolution, to outline a contemporary model for a strong theory that addresses all of those issues. Politics of the multitude, as politics of the exodus, does not mean seizing power or building a new state, but rather removing the state.
Compared to social collaboration, the form of the modern sovereign state has become such a blunt tool! So I am talking about the exodus as an escape from the form of the state. Which of course also means severing oneself from the classic workers' movement that, contrarily, has always aspired to become a state, to realize a workers' state.
But multitude and working class aren't conflicting concepts, are they?
They refer to different levels. Multitude is a concept of political thought, whereas working class is a sociological concept. The working class can express or translate itself politically as a people or as a multitude, it has these two different options. I, for one, think that the post-Fordist working class expresses itself as a multitude.
How would you define the difference between today's working class and Marx's? Are intellectual non-material workers working class?
They certainly are. Intellectual, artistic workers are the most important component of the new working class. Today's working class is a lot wider than it used to be. Also, there no such thing as a pre-definable, once-and-for-all social type of a worker. The working class is the range of people that produce surplus value, which is how Marx saw it, too. I don't want to start a debate here about whether Marx's view of the working class was correct, but to him they were the class of people that produced surplus value and I use the term in that sense, too. The worker is not linked to a social figure with certain habits, morals, from a certain culture, etcetera. Precariat, service people, nurses, radio people . . . all are workers. Today, work no longer takes place in a central factory but that doesn't matter, that is just how it is. The concept of working class is disseminating and widening.
Where, empirically – sociologically speaking – would you place this working class? Won't sociologically vague concepts like multitude make it easy for a manager with a Mercedes to pass as a worker that produces surplus value, too? Won't concepts such as these allow simply everyone, equally including the manager, to call themselves precari? Doesn't the concept of the multitude apply to everyone? Can't all people call themselves precarious?
You're right, there is a kind of ideological reflex connected, to be sure, to a material truth that is

very important. Some entrepreneurs have this cunning mentality and say: 'Me, too', but their attitude is possible because of the objective truth of production. Of course we must criticize this ideological use of the terms, but we must also acknowledge its broad sociological source or base. Though Hardt and Negri would surely deny it, their analyses and considerations often seem to suggest a kind of direct democracy. You think representative democracy is outdated, you see no good coming from direct democracy. So, what kind of democracy do you support?

Representative democracy is undoubtedly going through a crisis. In Italy, for instance, Berlusconi and the Lega Nord are expressions, reactionary far right expressions, but expressions nevertheless, of that crisis. There is no going back to the harmony of representative democracy. However, the question of how to escape it remains. Europe sees solutions like Berlusconi's party-as-a-company or Bossi's ethnical party surfacing. These are significant examples of a non-representative democracy I think, though right wing. It is important to point out actual examples. In Italy, like anywhere else in the world, the other-globalization movement attempted to formulate an alternative left-wing answer with the social forums. After Genoa, a successful experiment with social forums in big cities was carried out for at least a year and I think we can elaborate on that. Non-representative democracy is by no means direct democracy. Essentially, it must be capable of transforming the collaboration that is factual in production into political collaboration. This is complicated, because all of the intelligence and skills in that area are concentrated in the state administration. That intelligence must be appropriated.

That is also the problem of intellectual ownership, copyrights, etcetera. How do we translate productive collaboration into institutional forms, that's what's on my mind. And those institutional forms are at least not synthetic; they come about on different levels.

Is the European practice of governing on different levels, as couched in the subsidiary principle, an example of non-representative democracy, too?

Absolutely, that is the track I'm on – in a galaxy of foundations, a network of institutes, a dissemination of decision-making locations. Let me repeat, the point at issue is to appropriate intelligence and to create autonomous positions for that intelligence and communication. Non-representative democracy is the opposite of direct democracy. A rich social collaboration cannot be delegated. Of course this type of reformed democracy has to use that rich social collaboration and translate it politically.

How do you see the role of the public sphere in a non-representative democracy? What is your take on the debate between Habermas, who defines the public sphere on the basis of rational communication and the consensus idea, and Chantal Mouffe who suggests the opposite? How would you define the public sphere, and can it play a constituent part in the formation of a non-representative democracy?

I do not agree with Habermas (Luhman, for that matter, is a lot stronger than Habermas). One of Wittgenstein's maxims, expounded in an entirely different context yet striking and applicable to the public sphere, is: all rules I use to verify a condition must always be considered verifiable rules themselves as well. Each rule is both grammatical and empirical. Wittgenstein makes his statement in a context of linguistic philosophy, with respect to the problems of logic but it summarizes, as I see it, the constitutional principle of the new public sphere.

Of course there are rules and one ought to abide by those rules, but each rule can be considered something that needs regular adjustment and verification. The transition from the verification maxim to the actual empirical level is the basic principle of a non-representative democracy, which means the possibility to transform rules, to construct new rules and to reduce old rules to a factual state are integral parts of a non-representative democracy.

I absolutely do speak out for the public sphere. We need it. Without a public sphere, for instance, the precariat cannot put up any resistance. The difficulty with their struggle is, after all, that it

cannot take place without the simultaneous construction of a new public sphere. This sphere, incidentally, is a very discordant sphere; it is not the harmonious sphere of the volonté générale and of peace. It is a sphere of ongoing conflict, for only conflict is capable of transforming destructivity into creativity – we've come back to the problem of the ambivalence of the multitude, which adjusts to new public spheres and conflict situations.

Those centripetal moments of synthesis and transcendence befitting state sovereignty structures no longer exist. The public sphere can only be a sphere of conflicts, with maxims of verification always becoming the subject of verification themselves. The stake in this conflict is to prevent the ambivalence of the multitude from expressing itself as negativity.

In your essay about the joke ('Motto di spirito') that was recently published in English you state that one of the conditions for innovation is extreme urgency. Innovation develops in situations of urgency, of crisis. However today, that exceptional situation is to a large extent simulated. Think about the attention-seeking activities of the mass media or the publicizing of events in the art world, the instances are innumerable: the Biennale boom and the involvement of the media in politics. Is this context of simulated urgency really the cradle of innovation anymore?

The mechanism to innovate develops when we have to apply rules, because we can always apply rules in many different ways. Creativity does not depend on the absence of rules, on the contrary. Assuming that creativity and rules are mutually exclusive means taking a mystical view on creativity.

The exceptional situation develops because we can apply rules in different and unexpected ways. The innovative moment occurs precisely when we feel forced to apply rules, yet do so in a way that leaves set standards. The unexpected application sets back the existing rule in the sense that it is sidelined, thus creating an exceptional situation. The old rule no longer works, because it is applied in an unorthodox way: because it is used extravagantly or unexpectedly. The exceptional situation is rather the result of creative processes.

The exception is this high, intense and at the same time empty moment of creativity when we find ourselves in this no-man's-land of that which exists no more and that which does not yet exist. The old rules no longer work, but there are no new rules yet, and the old rules no longer work because they've been applied innovatively, which has caused confusion.

Are there any favourable conditions for creativity? What would encourage creativity and innovation?

Incentives for creativity or innovation are subject to the multitude's mode of existence. The point is, however, which are the mechanisms of creativity and/or innovation? Mechanisms are subnormative and this means that we apply the rules in a heterodox way, not that we can do without them. I am dead set against a perception of innovation that ignores rules.

To illustrate a permanently urgent situation; post-Fordist production is production that is always in an exceptional situation. It always requires a heterodox application of existing rules, it requires a degree of innovation, even of transgression, and it is therefore always in a situation of urgency or crisis where the old rules no longer work and the new rules do not yet exist. In this context, too, the aim is to translate the truth of post-Fordist production into subversive and anti-capitalist terms and to find institutions that fit them.

Can we translate the reality of production into political terms and take them to the level of the public sphere?

Can you point out some translation strategies? Is subversion still possible?

Every political theory must include some empty space. Pre-representation, and this is not a theoretical restriction or deficiency, is impossible. The essence of thought itself, of political and theoretical thought, is that logic shows us the locations of problems and possibilities, the actual

form of which cannot be pre-represented. The presence of an empty space within discourse is a logical requirement.

Let me clarify what I mean citing the example of the Paris Commune. Marx was looking for a different form than the form of the state, a form for a social republic, but he did not know what this other form was actually supposed to look like. He thought the experiences of the Paris Commune possibly gave an initial impetus to that new form. Now the example in itself is not all that important, but is does tell us that ideas about actual forms accompany the experience of actual innovations.

The actual experiment provides us with elements that help us find new forms. I am always saying how necessary it is to think of the public sphere as being unlike how it is perceived in the structure of the state. I do not know what this would result in actually. I guess the early-20th-century social forums may give us a clue, but then again, no more than that. In political thought, from Hobbes to Hannah Arendt, the notion of a miracle, of 'wonder', is not understood theologically but specifically according to what I mean here: the miracle is a clinamen, an unexpected move. The 'wonder' of the multitude is couched in terms of the institutional construction of a new public sphere; the present situation shows scattered symptoms of it, but no more than that.

You compare the innovation of the joke with the innovation of an entrepreneur, not to be confused with the innovation realized by the inventor. The entrepreneur is not the manager or owner of a capitalist company, either. Could you explain once more what you see as the difference between the invention of the inventor, of the entrepreneur and of the manager?

I started with the reflections of Schumpeter, a great economic theorist like Keynes and Sraffa. His theory of innovation is of interest because his entrepreneur is not a sociologically determined individual, his perspective is generic.

An entrepreneur is someone who manages to combine given elements in a new way, like a wordsmith. Now, 'wordsmith' refers to the linguistic animal; using language means making new combinations with given elements. Describing the entrepreneur, Schumpeter mentions general human features. Those typically entrepreneurial features become general at the heart of post-Fordism.

I use his distinctions in my essay about making a joke, about a play on words. The joke, too, is the successful use of words that were known from the beginning, but are now combined differently. The work of this liberal economist includes the following distinctions: there is the innovative capacity that consists of combining elements differently and, in addition, there is another kind of innovation that consists of the introduction of a new original element. Two forms of innovation and as I suspect, of artistic production. These distinctions may help us to understand the new situation of production and politics and may also indicate the logic of our possibilities. In addition to Schumpeter's model, I would like to suggest a third option, namely that of the exodus – there is always the possibility of leaving Egypt to go and look for a new constitution. These are ways to describe the possible innovation, the chances of innovation, in which we currently, with the situation as it stands, have no actual representation at all.

An important distinction of yours is between the logic of discovery and the logic of justification. To discover something new we cannot proceed deductively, we have to use 'unvalidated tools' such as analogy and hybridization. Today, we see the logic of justification being very dominant in scientific practice and in the human sciences as well. Hence the emphasis on methodology, comparability, etcetera.

Academic practice offers hypothetical thought less and less breathing space. Think about the marginalized position of critical social theory at European universities, for instance. Can you

explain this?

No, I cannot, except to say that it is always easier to provide a logic of justification because of the law of inertia, which acts as a conservative reflex. Even if it is in contradiction with post-Fordist production and social relationships that are, by the way, based on logic of discovery. That is why universities are not able to deal with post-Fordist society.
The tools employed by the logic of discovery are more familiar to the world of art than to the world of fiction.

What good do you think art is to innovative thought, in both science and politics?

Artistic thought provides a model of the logic of discovery but in a vague way, because of the dissemination I mentioned earlier – because it has left its specific position, it no longer has its former concentration. There is more thought going on in post-Fordist economics than in the universities, and it is more political than politics itself. And I am talking about politics according to Machiavelli, namely meaning the art of the opportune. More than to the existing scientific and political institutions, art belongs to post-Fordist production and economic life.

Note
1. We have in most cases translated the Italian 'comune' by 'general' because of Virno's moves in the field of logic, his wordplay on a principal level, his translational referrals to Marx's notion of 'general intellect'. However, the Italian 'comune' also means 'common', 'communal', 'collective'. So please keep in mind that in each case, the logical 'general' also echoes the English 'common'.