Abstract
At the Edge of Precarity and Vulnerability
Laura Onions

What does it mean to be precarious? The word itself echoes its meaning. Pre-carious. Half of the word seems to hang in mid air, just tilting over the edge of a line, dangling by the thread of a hyphen. Insecure, likely to fall or collapse at any moment, suspended in uncertainty. A simple definition search demonstrates how you might use precarious in a sentence:

"He made a precarious living as a painter."  

’He made a precarious living as a painter.’ Could a different profession have substituted ‘painter’? A stunt double, a deep-sea fisherman, a lion tamer for example. What is it about sitting in a studio applying paint to canvas that makes it so precarious. Put your head in the lion’s mouth.

Precarity may be an unfamiliar term, but it is a familiar mode of being. The defining sentence above initiated the momentum for what has become a complex discussion, seeking to explore the edges of precarity – for precariousness is always at the edge. The edge of society, the edge of consciousness, the margins of the page. Precarity can be identified economically as conditions relating to uncertain work, that which artists and those working within the wider cultural fields know too well. The expression originates from the taxonomy ‘to prey’ or ‘to plead’ mirroring the livelihoods of low income or isolated social groups across the globe.

From the point of this single word, I begin at two key threads: (one) the prospect of an uncertain livelihood in relation to the structure of the art school and beyond, and (two) the precariousness of the creative process that propels ideas and making forwards. The moments between these threads run in parallel, with the art school caught in the middle. Caught between craving certainty and embracing uncertainty, from this friction arises a commonality, that of vulnerability. This becomes a challenge in making the invisible, visible so that vulnerabilities may become transparent and connect with the tangled systems at play.

This research paper draws upon written reflections of the unfolding creative process that attempt to describe how working with the unpredictable or uncertain may be translated into a language that connects with the reader (listener) directly. Taking an open position towards vulnerability we may emphasise intersubjective relationships and possibilities that art and art education presents. In acknowledging the invisible we are on the path to visibility.

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I am an artist and graduate teaching assistant (GTA) teaching Fine Art at the University of Wolverhampton. I have just embarked upon an MA in Arts and Education Practice at Birmingham City University. My research interests include questioning the notion of precariousness and how we might claim this as an ontological and pedagogical position.