At the Edge of Precarity and Vulnerability
Laura Onions

An empty studio issues a demand as a blinking cursor taunts and a pen hovers over an empty page. Let us mean something together. There is anticipation, expectation. This is where thoughts must take on new forms and develop in an outward and upward direction. These words must connect in a string of legibility that removes all errors, slips, trips, and red wiggly lines. The stammers and the sore eyes must not reflect in the final work. This façade is tiresome, producing surplus threads of ideas that could have been. With this process comes the act of covering up, disguising the gaps between trail and error, intent and accident, editing and re-editing. Scrunching the idea up into a ball and throwing it aside, deleting. Start again.

This paper considers a double-edged nature of precarity. From the perspective of the artist working and living in today’s turbulent landscape and the potential of embracing precariousness in art practice. The presentation is punctuated by a textual narrative that I have been developing to give a form of voice in dealing with the uncertain in through it’s unfolding as a form of research. First I will rewind slightly to consider the definition of precariousness.

A buzzword in our current political, economical and artistic landscape, taking on an added layer of poignancy in light of the European Referendum decision 3 weeks ago today. But what does it mean to be precarious? The word itself echo’s 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.’¹

What makes the act of applying paint to canvas precarious? 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. Judith Butler states that precariousness is ‘surely a form of power without a subject, which is to say that there is no center that propels its direction and destruction.’² So this has internal and external implications through the internalization and (re)production of neoliberal structures. People have to design her/himself to sell her/his whole personality on the market of affective labour. Short term, low wage jobs become normal for the bigger part of society. This insight into the current model of labour in contemporary art could explain the representation of the ‘precarious painter.’ The flexible, resilient and evolving worker suited to and for steering through uncertain neo-liberal...
terrain. Marion Von Ousten et al. unravel a narrative of this laborer, who could be our painter; it could be anyone and everyone.

There is much about her (working) life that she likes. She wishes though, that there were less stress and a greater social balance with her life, with the permanent insecurity in her working biography. This also includes social commitments or ‘securities’ and less of the existential fears that surround her.3

In the case of this narrative figure, work and life have gradually become one entity; work pervades almost every corner of her home and social life, even though she decides how to organise it. She motivates herself to work on temporary projects that are interesting yet poorly paid, therefore this is a mode of cultural production where she is sustaining her own precarious livelihood. Returning to Butlers comment, ‘power without a subject’ the source of precarity here pressures from internal and external sources.

MAKING

With the spark of an idea there is always the feeling it could become anything. A fresh page, a fresh wall. We are trying to talk about a process which stops being that process as soon as we talk about it. When I have written typed something and read it back it becomes an experience of the writing process, joined by a sense of surprise that this actually occurred, ‘did I actually write that?’ Somehow the words become a different way of being, between the physical and the virtual. What happened in that moment where you lost yourself?

Unpredictable, unsure, risky, delicate, problematic. These are attributes that could be connected to art practice itself. By deviating through process we can begin to understand the nuances within experiences of precarity in art. This is a sensation, an embodied experience conjuring thoughts that tilt between something that is known, safe and firm to making a leap towards the unknown. This alludes to a process of continued development in a state of flux. Helga Notowny, professor of social science, proposes that it is the fluctuation between these limits where we find the potential to transform:

It is in the productive, ever changing tension between the two poles of a dynamic spectrum, of being in control and exposed to uncertainty, that personal and collective identities are formed by seeking continuity in defiance of what might happen next.4

The ‘what-might-happen-next’ is an emerging situation. An unpredictable, anti linearity resembling the experience of an artist as un-raveller of the-yet-to-come. Grounded in emotional, physical and sensory experience, art practice is in one sense supported by actuality whilst confronting the unknown. Here experience becomes
learning through the evolution of conscious and unconscious impressions of making in an *immanence of learning* (Atkinson 2013: 6) – if one can let go. ‘The surrender of the consciously planning deliberative mind to the spontaneous creative force can be felt as a dangerous undertaking’5. Perhaps sit with your feet dangling over the edge for a while. Let go of control, pre-established constraints, and your own comfort. Risk taking can be a liberating experience that propels the artist into new territory, the path less trodden. However, risk carries loss potential, frustration, vulnerability and disturbance. ‘The plane of immanence can thus be conceived as a dynamic process of becoming which contains an infinite potential inherent to the chaos of forces immanent to it’.6

In light of this thinking, I come to an ‘object perspective’ written anonymously by a fine art student at the University of Wolverhampton. This is a writing task, which literally asks students to pen a narrative from the perspective of an object within the studio – placing the mind of the writer within an object. In reflecting upon this we may consider how some of the aspects of ‘precarity in the making’ discussed previously may develop and envelop the artist.

Waiting and waiting,
constantly waiting.
Moving places,
seeing different faces.
Waiting and waiting,
constantly waiting.
Then suddenly thrust into action.
Fine Art Student 20167

A rhythmic response appreciating the life of a paintbrush, providing insight into the artist’s proclivity, where periods of stillness and creative emptiness occur. This murmuring is suddenly ruptured, sending ripples through the inactivity, disturbing practice from the antechamber of the studio as waiting room. Dennis Atkinson theorises that this moment of disturbance leads to ‘real learning’ that contributes to the process of becoming. ‘A moment of crisis that disrupts biographically lived time.’8 The learner must be disturbed from previous patterns of thought, thereby taking a risk or embracing the unknown, we may find ourselves susceptible to these moments.

I regard the object perspective above as the beginnings of the student becoming aware of the learning event in artists practice. A kind of creative anxiety, that if acknowledged and recognised, the less threatened by it the artist becomes. For it is transformed into a productive mode of anxiety in spite of established structures and constrictions that externally and internally meddle in the immanence of learning. In striving towards ontologies of immanence,
precariousness may be claimed back to subvert the power hold of the pre-
determined, target driven system. To maintain and enable the conditions for
artists to expand from a position of actuality, to that which-is-not-yet I think we
need to find spaces to be vulnerable and speak through this with others or find a
language in which to do so.

WHAT does this MEAN?

*I take a step back; re-read, grasp the overlay of the paragraph, now to tune into this
activity in minute detail. Trace the contours along this slippery concept. The lines
quiver and slide across the surface, one step forward two steps back, words appear
and are then wiped out. They are restless, momentary and undependable, within
reach of your fingertips - yet they are not graspable.*

What if we were to take precariousness as an ontological and pedagogical position?
Highlighting the issues at stake, problem solving and engaging in change.
Precariousness is an enduring process, much like art practice is an ongoing and
changing mode of being. Adopting an open agenda towards the existence of
vulnerability, by allowing space for the mishaps, anxieties and seams to be made
communicable would increase the transparency between practice within the studio
and in the working world enabling us to move towards coping with precariousness in
productive ways.

The University should ‘engage with precarity as a positive political force and
consequently, to encourage the University to engage in ethical acts as an ongoing
process’. Through this engagement and acknowledgment the self-sustaining patterns
of exploitative precarity may be ruptured, this does not resolve but promotes the
connections between understandings of others in mutual vulnerability. Returning to
the ‘precarious painter’ and the narrative formed by Marion Von Ousten in Now She
Works Flexible

She also thinks it is urgent that precarious modes of existence should
become more visible in society both in their singularity and in their
structurality, so that the process of an altogether more broadly conceived
de-individualisation can be set in motion.

We may be uncertain and cautious of the ground we stand upon and the
institutionalized air we inhale, but we are conscious of the need to respond.
References

1 Google definition search, accessed Feb 2016.