

Precarious Spaces – Precarious Times

Commercial Exhibition Cultures in Times of Conflict

by

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In the recent prize-winning book *Prekäres Wissen* (2012) Martin Mulsow explores the history of ideas in early Modernity through precariousness; themes that have conventionally been regarded as marginal; through magic, numismatics and writings from those scholars who are rather forgotten or have never been accepted as serious. Most importantly, however, it is a book which exercises a new approach towards the understanding of scholarship in general, namely not through dominant narratives, but through ‘precarious’ ones that let the author conclude that knowledge as such is precarious.

Central Aim and Argument

According to Mulsow, precarious is the antonym of certain, definite, but also guarded and protected, secured and stable, steady and firm; it can also mean endangered and dangerous. Different from Mulsow, however, who highlights the aspect of the mini-narratives of his case studies of the precarious (p. 401), I would like to relate precariousness to the theoretical voyage that begins with the *différance* (Derrida) and the hybrid (Bhabha), over the ‘passages’ (Benjamin) and networks (Latour) to something that includes a temporal element in the in-betweenness; ‘precarious’ is connected with the dominant, but, different from Foucault’s marginalisation, it also expresses a sense of change: something might have been dominant, but has, for whatever reason, become precarious; likewise, the dominant can be actor and brands something as precarious, probably something that is considered dangerous; thus it becomes unsecured, unstable, perilous and fragile.

With such an understanding of precarious, I would like to use art exhibitions as a case study to argue that these constitute precarious spaces of public display of art; if one assumes that art is only the art that is seen, this might even lead to being able to say that art as such, particularly during times of conflict, is or becomes precarious. Thus, the discipline of art history would not only benefit from the exploration of a new approach with a possible changed perception of (modern) art, but also from the discovery of new material that has not been researched yet; the case study chosen are those exhibitions held at commercial art galleries in Second World War London, as outlined below.

Precariousness in Art History

While precarious has directly been brought into discussion by Mulsow, others have already referred to 'precariousness.' In art, it has been used to describe certain contemporary art works; under the title of 'The Beauty of Distance. Songs of Survival In a Precarious Age,' the 17th Biennale of Sydney, held in 2010, was dedicated to the 'affirmative power of art in the face of unprecedented threats: conflict, famine, inequity, environmental despolitation and global warning.'

Precarious has also been applied to the description of fragile material; for example, Maurya Wickstrom described the plywood and brown packing tape used in Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument shown in the Forest Houses projects in the South Bronx, New York City in 2013 as precarious.

Assessing contemporary American art, the renowned art historian Hal Foster described works of the last decade as having not shared any concept, but a precarious condition, namely that of uncertainty: 'a stolen presidential election; the attacks of 9/11 and the war on terror.' Such a description reminds of Judith Butler's use of 'precarious' in her book *Precarious Life*

(2004), in which she reflects on the events of 9/11 that have brought to the fore questions about the ‘unbearable vulnerability’ heightened through aggression and violence that followed the attack on the US. Butler critiques the use of violence that has emerged as a response to loss, and argues that the dislocation of first-world privilege offers instead a chance to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized and in which interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for a global political community.

Hence, this selective overview of the use of ‘precarious’ demonstrates that precariousness has found some usage regarding arts.

Times of Conflicts and Exhibitions as Precarious

In the project ‘Commercial Exhibition Cultures in Times of Conflict’ both exhibitions and conflicts can be described as precarious for a number of reasons:

- 1) Conventionally, times of conflict have been neglected in any art-historical research. This is particularly true of the Second World War; for example, books about modern art end with 1939 (e.g. Fletcher/Helmreich, 2011) and begin again in 1945 (e.g. Garland, 1998). Only recently, as part of the First World War centenary commemorations, has art during the war attracted attention. Regarding the Second World War, it is particularly Brian Foss’ *War Paint* which examines the work of the War Artists’ Advisory Committee. He also the one who recognises the war’s ‘huge impact upon art production and consumption. Practitioners’ attempts to make, exhibit and sell their work collided with radically altered patterns of social organisation, employment, exhibition practice, and even the availability of the raw materials upon which artists depended’ (p. 1). However, he only did prove it by studying the official war artists, but not commercial art galleries and the exhibitions. And although

some galleries closed, others opened amidst the war, such as for example the Modern Art Gallery in London in 1941. Economy was better off than during the years of Depression. And, as Alexandra MacGilp has observed, people streamed to the National Gallery to see the one work shown per month during the Second World War in the attempt to escape into the world of beauty and aesthetics, away from the everyday dreariness. On the other hand, without doubt, the war inflicted on art: male artists were on the front and, in some instances, killed, female artists were involved in the warfare at home with little time for practising art. The war as such moved art, particularly national collections, out of the cities (the paintings of the London National Art Gallery were in a depot in Wales during World War Two). Thus, in respect to both art-historical research but also times of conflict, in particularly the Second World War, can be argued are precarious for exhibitions as well as art on several layers.

- 2) Exhibitions are relevant regarding society and power. In a way, exhibitions are the public face of art; they bring art into the public sphere. I would even go so far to argue that exhibitions organise and construct knowledge on art for the public: Foucault, who studied prisons and schools, but not galleries and exhibitions, believes very strongly in the relationship between power and knowledge, and in institutions which exercise these powers. Accordingly, galleries with their exhibitions form another medium on which one could demonstrate the link between power and knowledge and are thus relevant. However, exhibitions are principally in a state of flux; what remains from exhibitions, once the show is over, are archaeological elements including installation photographs, exhibition catalogues and reviews. Therefore, exhibitions occupy a precarious status. Furthermore, exhibitions

in commercial art galleries are even less likely than exhibitions held at national galleries and other non-commercial institutions to guarantee that the exhibit is still at the same place as it was exhibited and publicly available due being able to be sold, possibly also to private collectors. Therefore, exhibition catalogues in particular become significant documentation of the existence of such objects. Exhibition catalogues will therefore not only help map exhibition cultures, but also be invaluable in tracing art works. Exhibitions as fluxus, as being endangered.

- 3) The artists are precarious. Most of the works exhibited were those by émigrés from National Socialism; these artists are precarious in the sense of being endangered as artists who have lost their old home and thus their reputation, trying to establish new links in a foreign country; indeed, female emigre artists were particularly endangered, as they found easily work as housekeepers and thus became the main breadwinner of the family, as in the case of the Dachingers. This meant for today that we have art from Hugo Dachinger, but less from his wife Meta. The Meidners faced a similar fate; although their relationship and the living arrangements were complicated, it is fair to say that it was Else who was more involved in child-rearing of their son David and thus had less time to practise art. Therefore, we have much more works of Ludwig Meidner, well-known for his Expressionist Apokalypses in Weimar Germany but nearly forgotten in the UK. In this sense, not only are exhibitions and art in times of conflict precarious, but also the artists that were included in the exhibitions.

Relevance of and Gain from the Project

The excavation and electronic digitalisation of exhibitions, in order to recapture knowledge which was at the brink of getting lost, are of such value that they were financially supported by national funding bodies, such as the digitalisation project of nineteenth-century exhibitions funded by the British national funding body AHRC under the title ‘Exhibition Culture in London 1878-1908’. Amongst a number of benefits, the following could be gained from a similar project covering the years 1939-1945 that includes both empirical research in form of a database and theoretical analysis in form of a monograph:

- In view of the historical and conceptual side, the proposed project broadens the knowledge of what happened in London during war time; in this sense it would complement already existing research, such as that of Foss who surveys the official war artists and their exhibitions, but also the aforementioned project ‘Exhibition Culture in London 1878-1908.’ A monographic investigation would also be able to explore the relevance of aesthetics during precarious times.
- It would also be useful to help locate provenance of works of art; a searchable database would provide a source to locate forgotten (‘precarious’) art works
- The project would also be a tool for commercial art galleries to retrace some of their histories; on the other hand, some commercial art galleries could feed into the project and help with complementing material.

Output

The major output of the project would be a database and a monographic study.

The Connection with Previous Fellowships

The research for *Space and Spatiality in Modern Art* (which also has a chapter on exhibition design in relation to space), the project of my previous Fellowship at the Max Weber Center (which has resulted in a book manuscript, articles, papers, co-organising workshops and an internationally shown exhibition), has helped me to assemble already some information on the galleries. However, the research so far has concentrated on abstract art exhibitions and exhibitions of exile associations and some emigrants, but not been systematicised yet. The new research would be able to help me continue the work on the development of a Spatial Art History (here with view on exhibitions) that I have been able to develop in context of my research on conceptions of space in 1930s Britain.