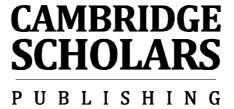# The Permanence of the Transient

The Permanence of the Transient: Precariousness in Art

Edited by

Camila Maroja, Caroline Menezes and Fabrizio Augusto Poltronieri

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PREFACE

This book is the result of academic collaborations concerning the same question: how to approach the notion of precariousness in art, its meanings and outcomes? Precariousness is a concept that overarches a wide range of theoretical sources from which art has been created, established, and studied, being thus vital to promote a greater debate on the term in visual arts. Particularly since, due to the intrinsic nature of the term precariousness in itself, the span of its meanings is variable and difficult to grasp. Therefore, as editors, we aim through this publication to open the term to a consistent critical reflection on the variety of ways it underlines contemporary art.

This publication originated at the 39th Association of Art Historians Conference, in Reading, UK, in April 2013. Under the topic "The Permanence of the Transient: Precariousness in Art", a two-day academic session was organized in which participated most of this book's collaborators. The discussion initiated at the conference has developed further, and other researchers have joined the publication project, giving special prominence to artists' narratives and theories. The essays here, while focusing on art, broaden the discussion to other areas such as political studies, sociology, and philosophy. This interdisciplinary scope reveals the phenomenon of art as a unifying force for diverse fields of knowledge. Moreover, studies on art increasingly align themselves with the complex systemic thinking that guides contemporary discussions in many academic areas as well as everyday life.

The book has been organized into four parts in which similar perspectives on precariousness converge. Each part should not be understood in isolation as its several interrelated debates compose the core of this publication. The introductory essay operates as an overview of the questions that will be examined more extensively in the essays—initiating a debate on how precariousness can work in the visual arts during the 20th and 21st centuries.

The notion of precariousness first unfolds as defined by its physical or intangible attributes. Named "Dematerialization/Materialization", Part One places precariousness in everyday life in the digital era and considers new media art and spectatorship. This session questions the issues of collecting, documenting, displaying, and preserving art nowadays. Cristina

Albu shows that, paradoxically, the "immateriality" and fragility of this collective data is key both to its proliferation and its dispersion. Through the use of digital photographs and videos the spectators' behavioural responses to large-scale sculptures, installations, performances, and new media environments can be understood as a means for the inclusion of their subjectivity into the artworks. Albu examines a series of reflective and responsive artworks that act as a magnetic core attracting the viewers to take part in the construction of their meanings using digital technologies.

In this digital domain the role of the viewers as well as of the art professionals, and institutions involves change. The digital capture of the participative gesture in an exhibition also implies its mutability. Thus, Part One includes the debate around mediation between art and public through digital apparatus in the realm of cultural institutions. Regarding this topic, Florian Wiencek puts forward these questions: How can the unpredictability of digital media enrich the reception of art? And how can cultural institutions benefit from this on-going and interchangeable relationship with the public? Wiencek's questions relate to some challenges faced by cultural institutions in the 21st century, including ones that have arisen from the emergence of a participatory culture in our current information society. As the author discusses in detail in his essay, this participatory emphasis brings several new layers of precariousness to cultural institutions.

From the elusive aspects of digital media art practice, reception, and institutionalisation, we shift to Matthew Bowman's essay, which uses fictitious examples from blockbuster movies to compel us to notice the less fragile forms of precariousness in art. Starting with the description of a couple of iconoclastic movie scenes, Bowman suggests the indestructibility of digital media. Along this path the reader realizes that some established notions of dematerialization, widely affirmed in the history of art during the 20th century, could point to other directions.

Part Two, titled "Cultural Politics", concerns the precariousness present in current socio-political, ecological, and economical situations. A complex picture of precarious labour can be taken on observing the bond between the art object, its contextual meaning and its representation through images. Analysing the artwork by Harun Farocki presented at documenta X, Friederike Sigler examines the new form of labour that emerged from the ambivalence between materiality and invisibility in the last decades. Her perspective embraces a micro and macro analysis in which Farocki's artwork functions as a metonymy of documenta's curatorial project. In the text by Maja and Reuben Fowkes, economical

and socio-political conditions, art perception, and art making are interwoven into their study of the Eastern European neo-avant-garde emphasizing ecological precarity. By relating environmental awareness to an art that has become known mostly for its direct political implications, they widen the political concept to include other dimensions explored by artists in the region, such as community building and collective creation.

Expanding precariousness into areas considered taboo in the academic field—namely the manoeuvres of the resilient art market—Andrés David Montenegro Rosero critically discusses how the term was decontextualised and utilized as a style. The lack of fair economic and social conditions in "underdeveloped" countries has ended up being considered a distinguishing factor for art production that is then explored as a stylistic attribute. Thus, with the boom of marginal areas in the art market, the precarity that has affected socioeconomic realities is lent to other contexts, aiming the specific trade of art goods.

Part Three is dedicated to studies in Latin America, a region in which the notion of precariousness is a constant feature in art history. "Precariousness in Latin America: Some Studies" situates the discussion of precariousness regionally. Sophie Halart brings back the issue of dematerialization, scrutinizing the theories that associate political gesture to *Conceptualismo* in Chile and Argentina. According to Halart, strict definitions given a posteriori and mainly linked to the socio-historical context revised by post-colonial lenses can eclipse the significance of other important practices, which captured and dealt with the same precarious conditions but in different fashions. Halart calls attention to artists whose artworks are constituted by instigations similar to the ones related to Conceptual trends, but whose artistic manifestations result in different visual outcomes. Focusing on Argentina, Elize Mazadiego examines a lively period of artistic experimentation, investigating the rapid growth and development of Happenings into transient and destructive actions. The author argues that the impact of these artistic ephemeral events was indeed permanent and left an urge for constant innovation and transformation in the Argentine artistic scene.

Understanding language as being the core substance of precariousness leads to the comprehension that all artistic experiments are processes in perpetual mutation and never completed. This is the approach given by Ana Mannarino when contemplating the production of Mira Schendel, a Swiss-born artist who worked and lived in Brazil. Part of Schendel's oeuvre incorporates written language and Mannarino demonstrates that the subtle, fragile, and transient qualities of Schendel's graphic manipulations derive from the profound understanding that the artist had of precarious

structures of language—influenced by her close contact with the Brazilian Concrete poets.

The final session is dedicated to artists' voices. Still taking into consideration the notion that language is a precarious index of the external world. "Precariousness in Art: Artists' Narratives" exposes the experiences, aims and investigations of three distinct artists: Fabrizio Augusto Poltronieri, Gerard Choy, and Nicholas Pope. Poltronieri continues the discussion about language as a precarious modus-operandi through which the world is perceived. He delivers a philosophical discussion about the primacy of play and its inextricable connection to art, exploring the "games" carried out by his art group, [+zero], employing media art, technology and performance.

Choy further develops the debate regarding the volatile substance that composes communication via language. Using fiction, images, and theory, the artist delves into language's precarious aspect to highlight the fragile relationship between word and meaning. The artist makes visible the provisional truth that surrounds each phrase in a particular cultural context. The leitmotif of his creations are the words themselves, their representation and a sort of "translatability". Playing with these elements, he presents the "translatability" not only of verbal codes but also of sounds, material and images.

Closing the fourth part, Pope generously tells us his life-history, giving a first-hand testimony of a life dedicated to art wrought with precariousness. Since he was an art student he has challenged the limit of precarious shapes when creating his sculptures. Thus, precariousness has become embedded in his approach. Later on, a dramatic shift in his personal trajectory expanded the manner in which precariousness became present in his art and life. His essay, written with Kevin Mount, reminds us of the fundamental role that biography can play in art.

Bringing together multiple aspects in which precariousness can feature in contemporary art, this book aims to be a compendium in which the readers will find evidence that the notion of precariousness is deeply embedded in the issues of making, thinking, and perceiving art.

Finally, we would like to thank everyone who helped with this publication, especially Alexandra Dodson, Luciana Dumphreys, Erin Hanas, Serena Qiu, and Mariola V. Alvarez for their attentive and most useful suggestions during the editing process of this manuscript. We are also deeply indebted to Amanda Millar from Cambridge Scholars Publishers for her dedication to this project. Further thanks go to those who graciously granted permission for the reproduction of images. Lastly, we would like to acknowledge Duke University, the University of the Arts

London, and the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, institutions that generously supported us and facilitated our academic session at the 2013 AAH Conference. We also wish to express our gratitude to our families and friends who have encouraged us to complete this endeavour.

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Camila Maroja, Caroline Menezes,
and Fabrizio Augusto Poltronieri

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INTRODUCTION

APPROACHING PRECARIOUSNESS IN ART

CAMILA MAROJA

In the visual arts, precariousness *per se* does not constitute an art movement, school, or style. Nor does it define a particular art historical period or a general state of aesthetics. Rather, the concept implies a condition: a transient, uncertain, state that can stay in contrast to established or stable ones. Ironically, precariousness's precarity, and its resulting ambiguity, makes clearly articulating the term a difficult task. Yet, even operating beyond traditional categories of art history, artists and critics have consistently associated precariousness with various art discourses.[1] During the 20th and 21st centuries, the term has been related to several artistic events that are now part of established art history: Marcel Duchamp's famous anti-retinal art, epitomised by his readymades; the ephemeral Dadaist soirées, which incorporated change in their production process and appeared meaningless; Neoconcrete artworks that depended

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[1] I will focus here on the 20th and 21st centuries, a temporal frame that has known an unprecedented amount of instability. Conversely, Theodor Adorno famously started his *Aesthetic Theory* (1984, [1970]) by highlighting the precarity of any current definition of art: "It is now taken for granted that nothing which concerns art can be taken for granted any more: neither art itself, nor art in its relationship to the whole, nor even the right to art to exist." However, precariousness can also be associated with the arts of other time periods; two examples include the late 17th century Baroque's taste for the transitory and the grotesque, and the 19th century romantic obsession with the fragment and ruins. Outside the artistic domain, during neoliberal times, the term is profusely associated with the total lack of protection and rights in work relations, and the rise of immaterial labour. But even in political discourses and social science research, precariousness's significance has become highly polysemic. For instance, after debates on post-Fordism denounced increasingly precarious work conditions under new labour regimes, a sense of precarity also entered the ecological sphere, by means both of radical climate changes and nuclear danger, as life conditions on earth appeared to be increasingly tenuous.

on the viewer's active engagement, theorised by poet Ferreira Gullar in
"*Teoria do não-objeto*" ("Theory of the Non-Object", 1958); Gustav
Metzger's experiments with "acid action painting" as well as his radical
"Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto" (1959); critic Germano Celant's coinage
of the term "*Arte Povera*" (1967) in reference to a young generation of
artists whose contingent pieces explored changing physical states; Robert
Smithson's fascination with the concept of entropy, often interpreted as the
degree of disorder or randomness in the system, which was materialised in
his earthworks; Artur Barrio's pieces made of perishable materials, like his
Trouxas Ensanguentadas (*Bloody Bundles*, 1969), which attempted to
resist the commodification and institutionalisation of art; VALIE
EXPORT's feminist performance *Aktionshose: Genitalpanik* (*Action
Pants: Genital Panic*, 1968), which unsettled conventions of presentation
and documentation, as the "documentary" photographs that featured the
artist wielding a machine gun were taken a year after the actual
performance in 1969; and Nam June Paik's *Electronic Fairy* (1989), a
historic new media work, whose now obsolete display may alter the way
that present-day viewers perceive the artwork. Although incomplete, this
list supports two considerations: first, that in the last century
precariousness has been primarily associated with experimental art
production, operating as a way to defy or subvert traditional views of art;
second, that rather than being solely restricted to the artwork's material
fragility, the term can operate on several juxtaposing levels.

   Instigated by this belief that precariousness can be loosely present in
an artwork's diverse features—form, material, method of production,
medium, presentation, reception, documentation, narration, collection, and
conservation—this introductory essay constitutes a rather broad discussion
of the term "precariousness" in the field of the visual arts during the late
20th and 21st centuries.[2] Precariousness can operate as a theme, a concept,

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[2] Recently, curator Nicolas Bourriaud proposed "precariousness" as a determinant
feature for contemporary art in his book *The Radicant* (2009). In a smaller article
in the magazine *Open*, responding to Jacques Rancière's critique, Bourriaud
reviewed and further explained the concept of precariousness, concentrating on its
ethical and political aspects. He explains: "A precarious regime of aesthetics is
developing, based on speed, intermittence, blurring and fragility. Today, we need to
reconsider culture (and ethics) on the basis of a positive idea of the transitory,
instead of holding on to the opposition between the ephemeral and the durable and
seeing the latter as the touchstone of true art and the former as a sign of barbarism.
[…] In this new configuration, the physical duration of the artwork is dissociated
from its duration as information and its conceptual and/or material precariousness
is associated with new ethical and aesthetic values that establish a new approach to
culture and art." He then proposes three main patterns in precarious aesthetics:

a condition, a context, and a process in contemporary art production. By examining some of the ways that precariousness permeates artworks as well as art history, I hope to provide an overview of the issues surrounding precariousness that are more thoroughly examined in the following essays. I start by arguing that the concept has played a central role in subverting the Modernist credence of the autonomous art object. Precariousness in modern and contemporary art often acquires a positive value, despite its negative semantic context in common usage.[3] I will also consider how precariousness can be present in the context of both institutional and socio-political contemporary art production, spurring debates about the legitimation and diffusion of marginal artists, artworks, and art histories. Finally, I call attention to the term's potency in providing spectators with

"transcoding, flickering, and blurring". He associates these characteristics, present in the work of artists like Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, to the world we live in, which is explained via Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity". His view of the political dimension of the artwork being present in its capacity to create new forms and not in its content touches on philosopher Paolo Virno's proposal, expressed in an interview published in the same magazine. Although I agree that there is a political potential in mobilising "precariousness" in the arts, I don't believe that we can define contemporary art via precariousness. Moreover, it is always dangerous (and paradoxical) to create a structural model out of concepts such as "precariousness" or "formlessness", especially when this model is applied indistinctively to "contemporary art" at large. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2009); Nicolas Bourriaud, "Precarious Constructions: Answers to Jacques Rancière on Art and Politics", in Open, no. 17 (A Precarious Existence) (2009): 32-35. Available at: http://www.skor.nl/_files/ Files/OPEN17_P20-37%283%29.pdf. See also Paolo Virno's interview: Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen, "*The Dismeasure of Art: An Interview with Paolo Virno*", in Open, no. 17 (A Precarious Existence) (2009): 72-85. Available at: http://www.skor.nl/_files/Files/OPEN17_P72-85%281%29.pdf.

[3] Although precariousness is etymologically linked to the sacred, sharing in Latin the same root with the verb "to pray", the term normally signifies frail and/or ephemeral conditions. With the questioning of the Enlightenment's ideals and master narratives, it has assumed a positive valence not only in the visual arts, but also in the humanities and social sciences—as have other concepts like "opacity", advocated by Caribbean intellectual Édouard Glissant. In the article "A Snapshot of Precariousness", while discussing the feminisation of labour and precarity in Italy, the authors highlight the positive flexibility and criticism that the term enables: "Insofar as the concept of precarity belongs to semantically negative areas (instability, transience, fragility) it is at the same time also connected with the idea of re-questioning, of becoming, of the future, of possibility, concepts which together contribute to creating the idea of a nomadic subject without fixed roots." Cf. Manuela Galetto et alli, "A Snapshot of Precariousness: Voices, Perspectives, Dialogues", *Feminist Review*, no. 87, Italian Feminisms (2007): 106.

an ambiguous territory in which regulated and standardised behaviour is not a given, leaving the public free to develop alternative actions.

The ephemeral nature implied in the term precariousness supposes a tense relationship within the tradition of fine art. Conventionally, a work of art is defined as an object that displays a high degree of dexterity in the handling of its medium, a condition that normally excludes precarity. Opposing this and other artistic traditions, precarity presupposes that the object's status as art cannot be established by the fact that it shows appropriate formal and/or technical characteristics. The term also defies the assumption that the work of art is something "made to last", to be stored in museums as part of society's cultural heritage. Therefore, precariousness can be collated not only to the avant-garde's love for the transitory, the elusive, and the ephemeral, but also to its assault on academic training and the European aesthetic tradition. Likewise, precariousness is associated with the so-called "crisis of the object" in the 1960s.[4] This period saw an explosion of new artistic practices—Happenings, Performance, Installation, Environmental Art, Body Art, Conceptual Art, Mail Art, and Video Art, among others—that either crossed the borders of recognised media or cross-pollinated art with media that had not previously been understood as art forms. As a direct result, artists came up with different terms to identify their art production, like Gullar's "non-object" cited above, Donald Judd's definition of "specific object" ("Specific Objects", 1964) in reference to minimalist works, or Dick Higgins's artwork *Intermedial Object #1* (1966), which introduced the term "intermedia" in an attempt to characterise Fluxus work. It was clear that by the second half of the last century traditional art categories could not encompass the new methods of art production. This opening up of the definition of art introduced the idea of the art piece as a process or a task rather than as a finished object for contemplation. For instance, in Yoko Ono's *Beat Piece* (1963) participants read on a small piece of paper: "Listen to a heart beat". As part of the artist's event score series, the

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[4] In an essay on Conceptual Art, art historian Charles Harrison suggested that the "crisis of the object" was in reality a crisis in the critical relation between "art" and "language": "a crisis brought by the collapse of those protocols that had previously served to keep the two apart. […] [T]he making of art and the making of theory might had to be seen as indistinguishable." Although Harrison is obviously referring to his experience with the group *Art & Language*, his comment reminds us that there was a blending among different media even before the 1960s. It also illustrates another characteristic of the period: the increasing number of artists who included art criticism and theorisation within their responsibilities. Cf. Charles Harrison, "Conceptual Art", in *A Companion to Art Theory*, ed. Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Oxford: Blackwell Publising, 2002), 319.

artwork focused on a simple and yet intimate action—calling attention to the potentiality and fragility inherent in every living body.

The notion of the artwork as a process resulted in an increasing number of participatory experiments—e.g. objects to be manipulated, scores to be performed, installation spaces to be actively explored, and/or digital images to be downloaded and manipulated—that have re-shaped the concept of reception in contemporary art. Comparable to the fraught relationship between language and intentionality that is permeated with precariousness, this reception enables both readings and misreadings, accepts instability and rejects definitive interpretations. In the 1990s, when participatory art started to receive consistent attention from US and European curators and critics,[5] these artworks were perceived as a tool to engender art communities by imbricating human relations with social context. Therefore, the contingency of these artworks adapted the avant-garde project of inserting art into daily life, and operated as a critique to exclusive and isolated art.

Viewed from this angle, precariousness in art can constitute a critical means for confronting Modernism's formalist legacy, epitomised in the Anglo-American art world by the writing of the US art critic Clement Greenberg.[6] Certainly, precariousness's recent philosophical, conceptual, and formal acclaim can be correlated to a crisis of certitude that became preeminent in the humanities in the late 20th century. By the 1990s, the most popular methods of critical inquiry—including post-structuralism, post-colonial studies, and feminism and gender studies—had in common the inclusion of some kind of revision and critique of hegemonic ideologies within their intellectual projects. In such a scenario, art history became increasingly interdisciplinary, dismissing traditional stylistic and iconographic focuses as well as the emphasis on the visual. As a direct

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[5] I am thinking here not only of Bourriaud's "relational art" focus, but also of Hans-Ulrich Obrist's project *Do it* started in 1994, in addition to Claire Bishop's attempt to systematise the history of participatory events with the publication of an anthology of primary sources, *Participation* (London: Whitechapel; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006). These readings propose spotlighting ethical and political concerns, and privileging art that can be understood as social practice—though sometimes without sufficiently questioning who constitutes the public in contact with these practices. When showcased within an institutional space, the incorporation of participatory artworks should function as a powerful institutional critique, forcing art institutions to review their display parameters; this, unfortunately, is not always the case.

[6] For a critical contextualisation and revision of Clement Greenberg's texts and legacy, see *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

consequence, precariousness, viewed as another challenge to the institutional authority associated with Eurocentric Modernity, gained new popularity. Precariousness thus became a current concept in the art world, even without the same *succès de scandale* of terms like "dematerialisation" in the 1970s, "postmodernism" in the 1980s, or "*informel*" in the 1990s,[7] each of which represented a different critique of the Modernist artwork. In the 2000s, the success of the term was re-kindled in academia and activist circles vis-à-vis debates on the neoliberal order and the rise of immaterial labour and the global precariat.[8]

Precariousness's currency in the visual arts is also associated with the advent of new media art,[9] which, similar to media like performance, is dynamic, customisable, and time-based. If understood as an art form that uses the inherent possibilities of the digital and that is produced, stored, and presented in a digital format, new media is inseparable from the rapidly transforming field of digital technologies. Here, issues of obsolescence and preservation become key. Being associated with an

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[7] The critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler coined the term "dematerialization" in their 1968 article "The Dematerialization of Art", in reference to art that "emphasises the thinking process almost exclusively" and "may result in the object becoming wholly obsolete". *Grosso modo*, the so-called "postmodern turn" in the arts reacted against the decay of an institutionalised and elitist Modernism and the "failure" of the avant-garde project. As such, critics challenged the opposition of high and low culture and attacked concepts like "originality". Georges Bataille's concept of "the formless" (1929) was popularised by the show *L'Informe: Mode d'Emploi* (*Formless: A User's Guide*) curated by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois (Centres George Pompidou, 1996) in which the concept intended to operate as a critique and subversion of Modernism's precepts. Needless to say, all these concepts touch on the notion of precariousness in the subversions of the status of the contemplative art object as defined in High Modernism.

[8] The magazine *Open* dedicated the 2009 issue, entitled *A Precarious Existence. Vulnerability in the Public Domain*, to discussing the term in relation to aesthetics, the visual arts, and the creative industry.

[9] The book *Precarious Visualities* uses the notion of precariousness to analyze new directions in media like photography, film, video, and performance. Here, the term relates to the advent of what art historian Christine Ross names the "bodily turn" in visual studies. For Ross, the presence of the body complicates the perceptual experience of the spectator in contemporary art and visual culture, as it addresses "the agency, yet finiteness and fallibility, of vision, together with its interrelatedness with other senses." Cf. Christine Ross, "Introduction: The Precarious Visualities of Contemporary Art and Visual Culture", in *Precarious Visualities: New Perspectives on Identification in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture*, ed. Olivier Asselin, Johanne Lamoureux, and Christine Ross (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 7-8.

industry that is constantly updating itself, new media art has become a precarious territory, difficult to define. Theoretician and curator Christine Paul elucidates: "A definition of new media art, although the focus of many discussions in physical and virtual space, is an elusive goal, since the technological and conceptual territory occupied by this art form is constantly being refigured."[10] Moreover, as her comment infers in its mention of virtual space, new media art also creates different modes of display. Able to inhabit spaces other than the museum and the gallery, it prompts new approaches to art collection and display. As such, art in the digital era instigates new institutional models in the art world, impacting the way that cultural institutions, curators, artists, and art educators operate. Precariousness then enters the institutional sphere: artists and curators become mediators or facilitators for an audience that collaborates and interacts with the pieces—continuing the emphasis on the artwork as an "open-work", to use Umberto Eco's famous term, originally highlighted in 1960s experimental production. Furthermore, the accessibility of cyberspace and of the new infrastructures of production welcome underground art activity, which subverts the language of the society of the spectacle towards its own ends—as in the work of The Yes Men who, through official spoof websites and passing as corporations' spokesmen, insert fake news in the media in order to create social awareness of real problems—evoking the Argentinean experiment *Happening para un jabalí difunto* (*Happening for a Dead Boar*, 1966), which also employed mass media as a political tool.

Precariousness can also be present in the institutional art space as an index of the deficiency or the lack of an artistic apparatus. The paucity of spaces to discuss, study, produce, display, and commercialise art in areas far away from consolidated art centres has direct consequences in the assiduity and dissemination of its local production. It is also a great contributor to artistic diaspora and nomadism. Undeniably, artists and art professionals who decide to stay in their local areas may find creative solutions to overcome the precariousness of their institutional field—by organising artist-run spaces, exhibitions, and communities, for example. Departing from the established art centres and its canonical rules, these independent organisations potentially introduce other criteria into the art world—especially since these marginal spaces sometimes do not conform to (or are not interested in) the rules and narratives instituted by canonical art history. However, if marginality relative to major art networks may

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[10] Christiane Paul, "Introduction", in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond. Curatorial Models for Digital Art,* ed. Christiane Paul (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3.

indeed foster new artistic parameters, institutional precarity hinders artistic legitimisation and dissemination. As cultural theorist Mieke Bal has noted, the museum is a discourse, a structure that via collecting and exhibiting creates and propagates an art narrative.[11] Consequently, without local institutional support, marginal production runs either the risk of becoming invisible and inoperative in constructing new artistic parameters, or of being incorporated uncritically into hegemonic art narratives. The problem is geopolitical and has direct consequences in the writing of the history of art, which only recently with the emergence of so-called "global art" has consistently incorporated artists from geographical areas other than the US and Europe.

Institutional precarity is generally associated with turbulent political and socio-economic contexts: areas under totalitarian or unstable regimes as well as regions stricken with poverty. Contextual instability affects not only the local production but also the criticism and historiography of such production, which is generally read through the lens of its socio-political context—which happened for Latin American *Conceptualismo* as well as for Eastern European neo-avant-garde art. In conflict zones, the consequences may not only thwart the contemporary art scene, but also put at risk the region's cultural legacy—as in the case of the Bamiyan Buddhas destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. During such traumatic events, the fragility of the artwork and of human life become perilously intertwined. Curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev pinpointed this shared fragile condition, asking: "How does their violated materiality come to matter, and how does the example of their loss and damage help us to react to a sense of the precariousness of life, the loss and damage to a flow of persons projected onto, and projected from, those artworks?"[12] Her question brings to mind the work of Hannah Arendt and other theorists who interrogate the human condition, trying to find common ethics in the turbulent world that we inhabit together.[13]

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[11] See Mieke Bal, "The Discourse of the Museum", in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 201-218.

[12] Precarity here not only spurs ethical questions, but also debates about conservation and reconstruction; a satisfactory solution to this traumatic episode seems far from realized. Cf. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "On the Destruction of Art – or Conflict on Art, or Trauma and the Art of Healing", in *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts n. 40* (Kassel/Ostfildern-Ruit: documenta 13/Hatje Cants, 2012), 8.

[13] Spurred by the work of intellectuals like Arendt, Jeremy Rifkin, and Judith Butler to analyse the ethics of our time, the exhibition *Human Condition. Empathy and Emancipation in Precarious Times* (Kunsthaus Gras, 2010) debated the *zeitgeist* of our century, which "has an almost paranoid character and in any case

Artist Hélio Oiticica famously employed materials as diverse as sand, plastic, television sets, cheap plywood, and live parrots in his environmental piece *Tropicália* (1967). Materiality here operated metonymically and metaphorically as an index of precariousness. By mixing "poor materials" and technological appliances, nature and culture, the artist exposed the transitory space that Brazil (and he as a "third world artist" living under a dictatorship) occupied. The artwork gave visual form to the historical belief that two Brazils coexisted: one that is urban, avant-garde, and modernised; the other, rural, kitschy, and primitive—without any attempts to resolve this contradiction into an artificial final synthesis.[14] By being deeply inserted in its local context and culture, the precariousness that can be viewed and experienced by walking through the environmental piece ultimately reminded the participants that art is indeed a social act. Though enacting adversity—materialising the artist's motto "on adversity we thrive"[15]—the artwork had the political potential to create personal and social awareness. What is more, *Tropicália* created an ambiguous arena in which contradictions coexisted.

While performing the embodied experience of walking through *Tropicália*, participants could find personal answers to the contradictions

expresses existential fear". It showcased the artwork of Lidia Abdul, Marcel Dzama, Maria Lassnig, Mark Manders, Renzo Martens, Kris Martin, Adrian Paci, and Susan Philipsz. The goal was to express how "the complexity of [the] current situation that foregrounds precariousness and fragility of global systems of economy and political order calls for a more profound reflection upon contemporary mechanisms of social movements, structures of labour, distribution of power and the ethics of judgment." The show thus understood that some artworks embody or denounce socio-economic unpredictability, political adversity, and existential precariousness. However, the "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" of Martin's sculpture *Mandi VIII* (2006), based on the Hellenic piece *Laocoön and His Sons*, was more an evocation of the Romantic sublime and a fascination with the apocalyptical than a space for a critical consideration of human and ecological fragility. Cf. Universalmuseum Joanneum, *Human Condition. Empathy and Emancipation in Precarious Times*, (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010).

[14] For an extensive analysis of *Tropicália*, see Celso Favaretto, "Oiticica and the music of *Tropicália*", in *Arte contemporânea brasileira: um e/entre outro/s*, v. 4 of *XXIV Bienal de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1998), 152-155.

[15] The motto, "*Da adversidade vivemos*" was formulated in the text "*Esquema geral da nova objetividade*" ("General scheme of the new objectivity", 1967). Proposing that adversity was a common condition in Third World countries, Oiticica suggests "adversity" as the starting point for any Brazilian artist and for a shared "Third World" identity.

the piece proposed or simply accept irresolution.[16] Thus, when refusing to deliver easy or prefabricated solutions, artworks can provide spectators with a critical space in which to affectively exercise freedom through small gestures. Therefore, precariousness in art can be organised politically to prevent categorical resolutions, hold the future in abeyance, and create an arena in which the spectators can perform actions and critically reflect. Yet, when strictly summoned for formal reasons, precariousness runs the risk of becoming a fetishized commodity for the art market, thereby losing its political potentiality. This formalist danger seems to be exacerbated as the underground production during the 1960s and selected production from marginal places have been amply institutionalised and successfully commercialised. After all, as the examples discussed in this essay show, precarious artworks are already part of canonical art history—a discipline that is, of course, a precarious construction in itself.

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[16] My view here departs from Bourriaud since I don't believe that the political is an inherent quality of precariousness, which, in representing a fundamental instability, is ingrained structurally in contemporary artworks. Especially since this all-encompassing quality weakens the term, blunting its critical potential. Instead, I claim that there are several ways that precariousness can be present in artworks and art history, an argument to which I believe that the essays in this book testify.

PART I

DEMATERIALIZATION/MATERIALIZATION

CHAPTER ONE

PHOTOGENIC ART:
PRECARIOUS PARTICIPATION
AND DOCUMENTATION

CRISTINA ALBU

As preparations were in full sway for President George Bush's visit to England in November, 2003, a group of protesters temporarily took over the space of Olafur Eliasson's installation *The weather project*, which simulated the image of the Sun rising or setting in a reflective abyss on the ceiling of the Turbine Hall (Tate Modern). By twisting and turning their bodies on the floor, participants formed the message "BUSH GO HOME" to express their dissatisfaction with the American president's foreign policy (Plate 1). Almost as rapidly as it got projected into the mirror ceiling, the image surfaced in the news and the blogosphere. The intervention was organized by a group of anti-war artist protesters accompanied by photographers who ensured that this ephemeral gesture would be turned into an iconic representation. Onlookers are said to have spontaneously joined the group and enhanced the urgency of the message by forming the word "NOW" out of their bodies. It was also rumoured that the artist himself might have been present at the scene. The photograph later appeared in art magazines and was published under the "democracy" entry in *Studio Olafur Eliasson: An Encyclopedia.*[1] While this image of social engagement has become historicized, countless other individual and collective performative gestures staged in the context of *The weather project* will remain outside the canonical representation of the installation even though they constitute significant evidence of its participatory qualities. Many of them are still widely available via Flickr or blogs, but numerous others have disappeared since online sources sometimes have a short-lived existence in the public eye.

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[1] Anna Engberg-Pedersen, ed., *Studio Olafur Eliasson: An Encyclopedia* (Köln: Taschen, 2008), 114.

   Large-scale sculptures, installations and new media environments that generate reflective feedback encapsulate within their sphere spectators' behavioural responses and are highly photogenic. They set on display collaborative and competitive gestures as viewers-turned-participants attempt to set their ephemeral imprint onto the fluctuating visual and social system framed by the artworks. Precarious empathetic ties emerge between art spectators as they contemplate each other's participatory responses and take pictures of performative acts to immortalize their temporary belonging to an affective community. Art historian Caroline Jones has noted the proliferation of artworks that call for viewers' collaborative involvement. She maintains that we are witnessing the rise of a "server/user" mode of art production and reception that relies on the exponential growth of information within dynamic networks of image consumers and producers.[2] Art museums have been alert to these transformations in art production and reception fostered by the widespread use of Web 2.0 technology that permits users both to gain access to information and to create and share new content. The Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) has created a discussion board on Flickr to find out why people feel the urge to take pictures of artworks.[3] The web postings reveal a wide range of motivations, including: museum visitors' desire to create evidence of their presence in the proximity of unique artworks, their compelling need to compensate for their inability to collect actual art objects, their wish to consolidate memories of artworks, their eagerness to capture other visitors' reactions to artworks, and, last but not least, their creative inclination to staging performative gestures in the proximity of art objects.

   In what follows, I will examine a series of reflective and responsive artworks that remain somewhat incomplete in the absence of viewers and generate a strong participatory interest in staging photo-ops with the purpose of capturing a unique aesthetic experience or performative gesture. While acknowledging their inherent variability I will elucidate their contingence upon such factors as the dynamics of visiting groups, the shifting sites of display, or the plethora of photographs documenting and expanding their content. I argue that the instability of these art practices reflects the conditions of "liquid modernity" enunciated by Zygmunt Bauman.[4] According to him, contemporary societies are increasingly

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[2] Caroline Jones, "The Server/User Mode", *Artforum* 46, no. 2 (October 2007): 316-325.

[3] "Flickr: Discussing – Why do people take pictures of works of art?" Available at: www.flickr.com/groups/themomaproject/discuss/72157600239853229.

[4] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

fragmentary because of the transient relations established between individuals loosely affiliated via mutable social networks. Photographs of participatory responses to artworks often bring to the surface the fragility of interpersonal ties developed between viewers congregating around them. Images produced by exhibition visitors frequently diverge from the codes of visual representation utilized by art institutions for documenting participatory works.[5] Far from suggesting an objective or generic illustration of the artwork, many of them highlight its transformation in relation to changing audience groups and capture short-lived performative gestures enacted within its space.

At first glance, any attempt at discussing photography in conjunction with notions of precariousness may seem doomed to failure. Photography has traditionally been acknowledged as a medium that condenses fleeting moments in still representations, thus offering seemingly permanent (yet fragmentary) evidence of experience. However, upon being confronted with an excessive range of images of an artwork that calls for participatory engagement, one realizes that the hard proof of the photographic reproduction of an artwork becomes unstable and tenuous. Moreover, digital photography and montage further destabilize the notion of a fixed picture that can offer enduring visual evidence. In discussing the methodological challenges faced by researchers of participatory art, Claire Bishop explains that photographs "rarely provide more than fragmentary evidence, and convey nothing of the affective dynamic that propels artists to make these projects and people to participate in them."[6] While I share

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[5] Installation shots included in exhibition catalogues typically display only the components of the work in the absence of viewers. In the 1960s and 1970s, images of spectators would very rarely be included in photographs of installations or environments. At present, some art museums specifically stage spectatorial experiences for the purpose of constructing photographic evidence of art reception. Recently, *New York Times* photographer Fred R. Conrad took snapshots of MoMA staff members individually posing in front of paintings in the *Abstract Expressionist New York* exhibition (October 3, 2010 – April 25, 2011). The photographs were suggestive of an absorbing and highly private aesthetic experience. They accompanied Roberta Smith's review of the exhibition "With A Jury of their Peers" (September 30, 2010). The editors of *New York Times* published an online addendum to the review, explaining that the staged photographs were taken at the suggestion of MoMA officials and are in violation of the newspaper's ethical standards. Available at:
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/01/arts/design/01abex.html?adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=
1380586009-8qWfLzRXCDVT017ZHAryhA.
[6] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 5.

Bishop's cautious attitude,[7] I contend that photographs of installations and new media artworks that call for spectatorial engagement either through reflections, shadows or manipulable images/sounds can in fact help us acquire a deeper understanding of the interpersonal dimension of art reception.

Precarious affective collectivities in photogenic installation art

Olafur Eliasson has often capitalized on the versatility of mirror-like surfaces in order to challenge viewers to reconsider their sense of selfhood and re-connect with their surroundings. First displayed at PS1 MoMA in 2008 and subsequently exhibited in the *Pinacoteca de São Paulo* in 2011, his installation *Take your time* encourages viewers to slow down their perception and contemplate their shifting ties to others. The work consists of a circular mirror placed at an oblique angle against the gallery ceiling. Activated by an engine, the mirror revolves slowly, making a very subtle rhythmic sound. It is made up of adjoining reflective strips whose edges can be fairly easily observed in situ. The generic installation shot (Plate 2) presents the artwork in isolation from viewers, perfectly inscribed within the pristine gallery space. The object appears unitary, showing no evidence of being constructed out of multiple foil strips. Far from conveying a sense of the destabilizing effect of the work or indicating the perplexing experience of having one's reflections submerged in a large field of endlessly fragmented body images, the photograph presumably offers solely a denotative representation of the work, "a message without a code", as Roland Barthes suggested in his analysis of image rhetoric.[8] Yet, the invisible institutional code encapsulated in the generic installation shot becomes conspicuous as participants' countless photographs of visual and performative interaction with *Take your time* surface online in spite of the PS1 policy forbidding visitors' photography on its premises. In discussing

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[7] Claire Bishop's observation concerning the documentary inadequacy of photographs applies to a more restrictive category of participatory works that does not include installation art and new media. She considers such art practices "interactive" rather than participatory since social relations do not represent their primary medium. I consider this divide somewhat artificial since large-scale object-based works and environments do not entail only binary feedback. They frequently catalyse the formation of affective ties between multiple viewers concomitantly interacting with the works and staging performative acts.

[8] Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms. Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 34.

the institutional bias against bodily presence on the exhibition site, Brian O'Doherty explained that the typical installation shot is meant to enhance the permanence of the art object and the ideal dimension of the gallery space: "Here at last the spectator, oneself, is eliminated. You are there without being there—one of the major services provided for art by its old antagonist, photography."[9] Participants' photographs of *Take your time* have the opposite effect—they showcase the signs of bodily presence and the fleeting collectivities of viewers exposed to each other's gaze as they lie on the gallery floor, playfully engaging with the reflective field (Plate 3). On his website, artist Olafur Eliasson presents the generic installation shot along with a wider range of photographs that showcase participatory responses in order to emphasize the affective impact of the work.

Flickr images of *Take your time* show visitors creating abstract shapes out of their bodies, mimicking each other's movements, or getting closer to their friends as they try to conceal the boundaries between their individual mirror images.[10] These signs of non-verbal communication reveal the affective attunement catalysed by Eliasson's installation, which prompts participants not only to see themselves seeing, but also to become engaged in interpersonal exchanges that indicate our complex and fortuitous negotiation of identity in relation to increasingly temporary collectivities. In some of these photographs, it is hard to tell who is the participant taking the picture. Frequently, the camera is not oriented solely towards the image producer, but purposefully includes within its frame the image of multiple others. The photographs testify to the precarious relations formed between oneself and familiar strangers. Voyeuristic impulses counterbalance narcissistic tendencies, but neither of these desires is satisfactorily fulfilled given the mutability of reflections. Moreover, the rotating disk of *Take your time* constantly defers the viewer's identification with the mirror image, thus impeding the collapse of identification into identity. Judith Butler defines "precariousness" in terms of the sense of human vulnerability experienced by oneself in the face-to-face encounter with the "Other". Building upon Levinas's theory of alterity, Butler explains the fragile ethical dimension of interpersonal relations: "To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of

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[9] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 15.
[10] An online gallery of *Take your time* photographs taken by visitors is available via Flickr. Available at:
http://www.flickr.com/photos/35565475@N06/galleries/72157633098846594/.