

Event Review

A Reflection on Precarity: The Institute for Urban Futures and Le Banquet des Précaris

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Precarity is an issue that affects us all. As a direct result of capitalism, we are watching our world crumble. Environmental issues are progressing rapidly, housing is becoming scarce, assets like a well-paying steady job are rarities. Basic human rights, such as access to healthcare and education, are increasingly becoming privatized, concentrating the wealth of the world into a few hands at the top. This paper will briefly outline what precarity is, and how the Institute for Urban Futures (IUF) grappled with this question in the form of a Long Table discussion called *Le Banquet des Précaris* at Bâtiment 7 in September 2019. The IUF is a research and research creation group in the Fine Arts Faculty at Concordia University, currently under the leadership of Dr. Shauna Janssen. The Institute undertakes work that attempts to foreground a collective and varied understanding of what the urban sphere looks like, and what can be changed going forward.¹ While I am a member of the IUF team, the opinions in this paper are my own, and do not reflect the opinions or positions of the entire IUF team or affiliates.

As the title suggests, the discussion was around issues of precarity, and what it means to be alive and working within a neoliberal, capitalist-fueled society. As Kasmir defines it, “*Precarity* describes and conceptualizes this unpredictable

cultural and economic terrain and conditions of life” (Kasmir 2018, 1). The Banquet des Précaris engaged attendees with discussions on exhaustion, collective action, taking care, changes in the world as we know it, and what the future will look like in the new “gig-economy.” Pierre Bourdieu has claimed that “It has emerged clearly that job insecurity is now everywhere: in the private sector, but also in the public sector, which has greatly increased the number of temporary, part-time or casual positions; in industry, but also in the institutions of cultural production and diffusion” (Bourdieu 1998, 82). This can be seen in cases as diverse as casual conversations with colleagues, to academic papers, and newspaper articles which cross disciplines (see Kenney and Zysman 2016; Tolentino 2017; and Muntaner 2018). Precarity as a condition is experienced throughout the world, especially as gig and platform labour, embodied in sites such as AirBnB, Uber, Amazon and Etsy, become global norms as a way of making a living and supplementing existing work in order to survive.

With these global conditions in mind, the importance of hosting a long table discussion on the issue of precarity felt more pertinent than ever. In a discussion with Alex Tigchelaar, who spearheaded this event, she notes:

It is always important to discuss precarity. It touches all of us in different ways but when I think about those of us making our way in the increasingly neoliberalized art and academic worlds, sharing our feelings of precariousness is imperative to breaking the competitiveness that neoliberal modalities demand. We make assumptions about privilege and status in these spaces that often belie the real and painful circumstances of peoples' experiences. When we can share our fears and challenges, we become more approachable. We become more human. We are more inclined to share resources. (Tigchelaar, interview October 28, 2019)

The notion of sharing our feelings within a space that is accessible and easy to engage with develops a new layer of resistance to the hierarchical structures involved in promoting and protecting capital. It forms a unique way to address economic insecurity, as well as sharing thoughts on 'self-care' and mental and physical exhaustion in a society that always appears to be on the brink of burning out. Tigchelaar expands on this:

Vulnerability is a terrifying position to take in hierarchical institutional structures, yes. I have regretted being vulnerable at times in my life. But I am coming back to it as a power position to break the isolation I have felt holding on to shames and fears that have prevented me from moving forward with confidence. Vulnerability is essential to developing empathy and by extension more empowered social and political relationships. It is very important to me as a middle-aged woman who has lived the gig economy her entire working life (so from the age of eleven when I had my first job out of the house), to develop supportive intergenerational networks in and around increasingly inhumane institutions. (Tigchelaar, interview October 28, 2019)

These topics of discussion were essential to our conversations which we held around a long table discussion at Batiment 7, a community space in Point-St-Charles, a working class neighborhood in Montréal, Québec, Canada.

Inspired by Marleen Gorris's film *Antonia's Line* (1995), Lois Weaver developed the Long Table format to provide an open and inclusive, non-hierarchical way to discuss and process a

topic, without imposing too many restrictions. (Split Britches 2019) There are a few etiquette rules for the long table, which are easy to follow and "include items like 'There can be silence', 'There might be awkwardness' and 'There can always be laughter'" (ibid.). The Long Table format has roughly 12 seats around a table, with additional seats surrounding so that participants can move in and out of the table. This format is simple, and those who wish to talk can simply sit at the table by taking an empty seat or asking someone for their seat. This promotes a spatial awareness of the room, and allows participants to come in and out of the conversation, as you would at a dinner party. The performance-based practice leads to a breakdown of hierarchical knowledge that can be experienced in traditional academic settings, such as the conference panel format, or even classroom discussions. There is no right or wrong answers, and the space invites participants to explore ideas collectively, allowing for space to parse out ideas that are still in the process of formation. As Tigchelaar told me, "Personally, I have participated in a few and really like the format. They have always initiated interesting/enraging/engaging/fruitful/complex conversations around the chosen topic. And the non-hierarchical structure stops droners from droning" (Tigchelaar, interview October 28, 2019).

The long table format inspires truly remarkable social relations, as Shauna Janssen, the director of the IUF states:

It's a great space for breaking down hierarchies of expertise—for me a much more democratic approach to participation and engaging different publics in a conversation—so links with IUF aims to produce space—even temporarily—that foregrounds inclusion and diversity and a variety of perspectives from people. It's also mobile—we can go anywhere with two tables and some chairs! (Janssen, interview October 28, 2019)

This form of decentralizing knowledge is beneficial for a number of reasons. While it does create a non-hierarchical mode of discussing a topic, it is incredibly accessible for academics and non-academics alike to engage in conversation across positions. It is easy to set up, the materials are minimal, and it promotes face-to-

face communication. In addition, the long table format breaks down common visual cues, such as the person of expertise positioned at the front of the classroom, lecturing to a passive audience. By sitting around a table, one can listen, engage, take notes, or day dream without being judged.

I personally found the engagement with the Long Table format wonderful at the Banquet. The energy around the table was calm, the discussion brought forth was fruitful, and the attitudes were positive and inquisitive. There were more questions posed than answers given, but that is not necessarily negative. Despite the difficult concepts addressed, the long table format allowed people to discuss questions and concerns regarding the world that we live in in a way I can only describe as comfortable. With the dim mood lighting and the wonderful urban foraged meal to keep ‘hanger’ at bay, I felt at ease sitting around a table of mostly strangers, discussing issues that affect us all. It was nice to realize that one is not alone, as the conversation bounced around, addressing issues such as the constant struggle to find affordable housing, a job that pays well, or to find any time at all to sleep. In my (albeit limited) experience with the long table, I believe that there is space for this model to proliferate even within the institution. It is accepting, forgiving, and kind, which is something that can be hard to come by in a neoliberal, post-capital, ever-more precarious world.

In conclusion, the event that we hosted was eye-opening in realizing shared feelings of extreme exhaustion and generated possibilities for a kind of collective self-care. By listening and vocalizing fears of my precarious position as a graduate student working multiple jobs, the event helped me assess my own position within the university, as well as the world at large. There needs to be more space for these performance-based discussion practices, and I believe that all disciplines can benefit from this type of engagement. There are more capacious avenues possible for political discussion. Lois Weaver, the credited developer of the long table format, has also experimented with other forms of performance-based discussion. Others that deserve more exploration within the institution are the Care Cafés, Porch Sitting and Situation Rooms, which all prioritize community engagement, as well as spaces to think and flow with natur-

al discussion. In a world that is becoming more fractured, individualized, and isolated, these collective agreements to discuss issues which affect us all, such as precarity, should be employed in order to break down the traditional modes of learning, and collectivize action around topics that are important to us. The idea of sitting down with a group of peers and strangers alike to discuss issues such as precarity opens up an important site for dialogue, and keeps it flowing long after the event is over. Let us remember one of most important the etiquette rules from the long table: “there is an end, but there is no conclusion” (Split Britches 2019).

Notes

1. The IUF was initiated in 2016 by Dean Rebecca Duclos, Faculty of Fine Arts. The IUF “is a space for bringing together faculty, artists and researchers, visiting artists and scholars, as well as students across the university and greater Montréal community, who seek to actualize and shape the potentiality of urban life—of possible and more just urban future—through the arts, culture, media, technology, business, architecture and design” (Institute for Urban Futures, n.d.). Through this framing it has hosted a variety of events from banquets, talks, conferences and workshops. In 2018 the IUF changed its focus to “developing topical research clusters with an ethos towards social justice and speculative modes of expression within the areas of Performative Urbanism, SmArt Technologies & Inclusive Cities, Social Practice & Community Engagement, Design, Sustainability & the Built Environment, and Urban Research Methodologies” (Janssen, n.d.). My own role within the IUF is to manage web content and development. In this role I update the website, promote events, and try to engage with the affiliates in the digital sphere. I am honoured to provide a reflection on the event *Le Banquet des Précarisats*.

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