ATTITUDE

"I PROPOSE, THEREFORE I AM": NOTES ON THE ART WORLD'S PROPOSAL ECONOMY

Martin Waldmeier

My desktop is home to a folder called "proposals." In it, several dozen Word documents of a few pages each live an obscure life. Some of them have long been forgotten. Others raise a mixed set of feelings: nostalgia, vexed pride, embarrassment, even outright anxiety. It goes without saying (to my fellow curators, anyway) that a good number of these proposals never made it anywhere, and probably never will. In retrospect, their ambitions were too airy, their ideas too vague, their language too repetitive.

For so-called emerging curators today, there's hardly an activity more familiar and yet more shrouded in mystery than the recurrent gesture of *proposing.* A quick look at professional platforms such as e-flux or Call for Curators creates the illusion that the worlds of art, research, and education are universes of wondrous opportunity. At the same time, they are sites of mind-boggling competition, where an emerging class of displaced, polyglot, mobile, and, often, privileged protagonists from around the world speak an increasingly homogenous discursive language, perpetually surpassing each other. Nothing symbolizes this better than the proliferation of the format of the proposal. Not only does this phenomenon speak volumes about the ongoing transformation of the activity of curating, but it also testifies to the enduring attraction between curating and the economic conditions of post-Fordist capitalism and neoliberalism.

Recurring calls for cuts, privatization, increased efficiency, and greater

accountability have forced cultural and educational institutions and their protagonists to orient themselves toward a globalized marketplace, and in the process, to reinvent the ways they work. As a consequence, they have increasingly come to resemble that very marketplace. One defining characteristic of that change is the almost universal embrace of competition as an organizing principle. In this context, the seemingly trivial gesture of making a proposition—writing a proposal, pitching an idea—increasingly defines the roles of curators, administrators, educators, researchers, and other protagonists of art institutions and other similar organizations.

My assertion is that in the act of proposing, we recognize ourselves as neoliberal "entrepreneurs of the self," a term used by Michel Foucault to describe a model of selfhood that aspires to "being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings."[1] We take our ideas—that is, the product of our human capital put to work—to the marketplace in exchange for reward and self-appreciation. But what does the proliferation of the gesture of proposing tell us about the transformation of institutions, and, moreover, the transformation of curating? What are the rules and implications of following the lead of opportunity, and what does proposing reveal about the complex psychology and economy of the individual as an entrepreneur of the self?

Competition in the art world is, of course, not a new phenomenon. Ever since the rise of the public art exhibition in the 17th and 18th centuries, competition has been a defining feature in the relation between artists, institutions, critics, and the public. The first exhibition at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris in 1663 was widely criticized by artists who opposed its "mercantile" character; this step simultaneously marked the gradual but irreversible freeing of art from the commissioners on which it had depended so far: royal courts and churches.[2] In the mid-19th century, artists such as Courbet operated as full-fledged creative entrepreneurs, simultaneously acting as producers, documentarists, and salesmen of their own work and spectacularly soliciting the attention of the public. While it is impossible not to oversimplify the complex history of art's economy here, I would argue that recent developments signify less a change in the entrepreneurial role of the cultural producer, and rather a transformation of art's underlying infrastructures and institutions, and a growing similitude between the economy of cultural production and the mainstream economy of post-Fordist capitalism.

Neoliberalism is easily traced back to postwar ideologues such as Friedrich Hayek: Cut back spending, increase efficiency, minimize bureaucracy, privatize, and—as the highest dogma of all—replace *planning* with *competition* in order to produce growth.[3] Ultimately, the neoliberal state was supposed to be one that is, in all its aspects and interventions, governed by the forces of the market.[4]

Translated into the governance of cultural institutions, these ideas are

1. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College De France, 1978–1979* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): 226.

2. Oskar Bätschmann, *The Artist in the Modern World: The Conflict Between Market and Self-Expression* (Cologne: DuMont, 1997).

3. See Friedrich von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944): 105–22.

4. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics,* 116.

immediately visible in hiring policies. Huge museums with assets worth billions rely on volunteers for educational programs, citing a lack of funds. Curators and project coordinators are hired on junk contracts, ready to be laid off at any time. Commercial galleries outsource work from permanent employees to project-based temporary collaborators. In higher education, tenured professors are replaced by a workforce of "flexible" adjuncts.

Simultaneously, a new generation of cultural institutions and infrastructures has developed that not only fully embraces the logic of global mobility and circulation, but pushes aside more traditional art institutions, with their expensive personnel, administration, storage, and conservation costs. This is the success story of biennials, art fairs, festivals, and other "platforms" led by small, agile, mobile production units. They promise to produce greater and more focused attention and attract massive audiences, and are held in high esteem by private or corporate sponsors who recognize the advertising exposure and cost-benefit ratios. Governments also appreciate them, for purposes ranging from location marketing to urban revitalization to self-representation—or simply for overcoming the costly routine of "having to fill the space" again and again, as the director of BAK, basis voor actuele kunst in Utrecht, Maria Hlavajova, recently put it.

What these new temporary and mobile infrastructures have in common is a structural flexibility that permits them to reshape, reinvent, and regroup in response to changing conditions, including the changing forces of supply and demand. With minimal bureaucratic clutter, they thrive on an outsourcing model in which available resources are constantly and dynamically matched with an ever-changing set of collaborators working on a project-specific basis. In its dialogue with the public, the institution or organization is often engaged in a critical, progressive, ethical discourse, while its structure is simultaneously complicit with the dogmas of neoliberalism. There are exceptions, of course, and the promise of art continues to be its ability to produce alternative spaces and modes of engagement, particularly at its real or assumed margins. Everywhere else, in its old and new centers, this institution increasingly appears to be the only option—the only possible, "reasonable," fundable model.

At the surface, this global scene of cultural production appears to be the best of all worlds: diverse, innovative, dynamic, international. A place of unique encounters, progressive values, openness, informality, community, and abundant opportunity. But, speaking in Marxist terms, isn't the rhetoric of opportunity simply the preferred way of addressing labor power from the vantage point of capital? Isn't "opportunity" an essential term of the neoliberal vocabulary that suggests that the worker no longer does the employer a favor by offering his or her labor power, but that, rather, the employer does the worker a favor?

For curators, compensation, social security, and other benefits are frequently replaced by the promise of being allowed to do something unique

and special, something one can personally identify with. Occasionally the rhetoric of opportunity is deployed to create the semblance of institutional openness and community-mindedness, while masking a lack of actual transparency and accountability. The rhetoric recodes exploitative or semi-exploitative work conditions as worthwhile, fun, and rewarding steps toward the greater goals of self-realization and self-promotion. Whereas in liberal capitalism, "opportunity" signaled the possibility to make great profits, in neoliberal post-Fordist capitalism, "opportunity" promises an entirely different kind of reward: the opportunity to be someone, to do something that matters, to do something one can believe in.

In following the rhetoric of opportunity, the emerging curator, artist, or researcher today also acts like a model neoliberal subject, "privatizing" work to the degree that the individual is no longer distinguishable from it. The activity of proposing perfectly symbolizes this. Preparing a proposal is almost always a private matter, taking place outside the workplace and without the benefits that come with it. Further, as an act that is anterior to paid work, proposing usually draws from private means, resources, and networks. And the risk of failure is carried entirely by the individual.

It is not surprising, therefore, that creative communities have been trying to raise awareness about this condition on social networks and elsewhere, calling for the recognition of proposals as work, which, so they hope, would place the spotlight on the social and ethical responsibilities of the institutions that solicit them. But these entirely understandable demands don't address the underlying post-Fordist shift that has gradually eradicated the boundaries between work and life. In such an economy, the proposal is no longer just an unpaid, precarious, inevitable prelude to paid work. Rather, it becomes the work.

Proposing is an intimate business. We would rather not count the hours spent drafting proposals, or speak to our friends or colleagues too openly about our precarious proposal-writing behavior. They might feel sorry for us. Or, worse, we might discover that we have been competing against them all along. But proposing is an intimate affair in other ways, too. It makes us reveal our human capital—that is, our stock of knowledge, cognitive abilities, habits, social skills, and personal attributes—and expose it to the judgment and the valuation power of the marketplace. And it forces us, each time anew, to be naive, idealistic, courageous, and bold. To overcome our fears of rejection, to be vulnerable. As opposed to the liberal subject, which strives for satisfaction by maximizing profit, the neoliberal subject strives for self-appreciation in the arena of competition.

Consequently, the stakes of failure are different. With each rejection, the neoliberal marketplace speaks to the subject: *Get more experience. Work harder. Study more. Be more convincing. Invest in yourself. Get a coach. Ask for less. Try something else.* The neoliberal subject is vulnerable: His or her self-appreciation depends

on the ability to attract investment. Otherwise, the psychological power of rejection acts as a disciplinary force: the production of shame and the devaluation of the self. The marketplace is therefore not a neutral space of competition among individuals offering "disinterested" goods, but the very place of the formation of neoliberal selfhood, including its impressive range of pathologies.

One figure particularly thrives in the immaterial economy of post-Fordist capitalism: the narcissist. The political economist Earl Gammon makes the argument that the excessive vulnerability of the neoliberal subject seeks compensation in a sort of "fantasy of autonomy" in which the subject projects him- or herself as the perfectly successful, fulfilled, autonomous subject that capital wants.[5] Simply put, the production of narcissistic subjects is an integral pathology of the human condition of neoliberalism. A society where the value of the self is generated in the marketplace creates a "mass neurosis" that is "obstructing identification with others, and manifests itself in a dispassionate social destructiveness."[6]

The narcissist is, however, an excellent proposal writer. Making a successful proposition is often aided by displaying "narcissistic" attributes: above all, one's willingness to show that one is worthy of receiving investment, that one has something to say, that one is deserving of recognition. Whereas the neoliberal subject is riddled with doubt, uncertainty, and fear of rejection, the pathological narcissist is less troubled by these constraints.

The notion of narcissism also highlights another interesting aspect about the gesture of proposing: its performativity. As I suggested earlier, the gesture of proposing could be thought of as a set of protocols and practices whose purpose, within an economy of post-Fordist capitalism, is to match resources with ideas, capital with labor power, investors with investees. But what is it that capital "wants"?

In his book *A Grammar of the Multitude,* the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno introduces the term "virtuosity" to highlight what he sees as one of the defining attributes of the post-Fordist cultural entrepreneur. The latter must possess "the special capabilities of a performing artist," that is, persuasiveness, authority, authenticity, and the ability to captivate. Success and reward belong to the individual who is simultaneously "a skilled dancer, a persuasive speaker, a teacher who is never boring, and a priest who delivers a fascinating sermon."[7] These performative skills convince the investor that the work will be profitable and delivered as expected. After all, it is the nature of proposing to project a future outcome that does not yet exist, and therefore requires a relationship of mutual trust between the investor and the investee. It is also precisely this purpose that Virno identifies as political: In politics, he points out, these very same techniques serve the purpose of "conquering and maintaining power."[8]

Virno suggests that virtuosity is entangled with a politics of address, in

5. Earl Gammon, "The Psycho- and Sociogenesis of Neoliberalism," *Critical Sociology* 39, no. 4 (July 2013): 511–28.

6. Ibid.

7. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude,* Semiotext(e) (2004): 52.

8. Ibid., 57.

that it not only requires awareness of the audience, but also entails a specific mode of speaking that strives to communicate with the audience in its own discursive language. Curators and academics navigating the international funding landscape well know that foundations, state institutions, journals, and academic departments speak different discursive and theoretical languages, at times seriously hampering the migration of ideas from one field to another without proper "translation." Facing the growing multitude of institutional discourses and the rapidly shifting geographies of cultural and knowledge production, it appears that translation is becoming an increasingly important skill. In economic terms, virtuosity might then also be understood as the ability to translate, again and again, into the ever-changing languages of capital.

Virno points out that virtuosity must also be thought of as "an activity without an end product," that is, "an activity which finds its own fulfillment in itself."[9] We now know that making propositions, writing proposals, is to deploy virtuosity to an economic effect. But is there fulfillment in making propositions? Is there pleasure in writing proposals? Is there hope in sending off yet another submission? As neoliberal individuals, we know there is no alternative. To write yet another proposal is to stay afloat. *This time we're smarter. We've worked harder. We've studied more. We've taken a coach. We asked for less. We changed our place. We propose, therefore we are.*

9. Ibid.