The book cover features a red background with two large, irregular green shapes. One green shape is at the top, partially behind the title, and the other is at the bottom right. The title is printed in black serif font.

**The Murmuring  
of the Artistic  
Multitude**

Global Art,  
Memory and  
Post-Fordism

Pascal Gielen

# The Art Scene: A Production Unit for Economic Exploitation?

If a *Kunsthalle*, an experimental theatre, an international dance school, an alternative cinema, a couple of fusion restaurants and lounge bars and — don't forget — sufficient gays are concentrated in a place with high social density and mobility, the result is an art scene. "What's there? Who's there? And what's going on?" are what the American social geographer Richard Florida calls the three 'W questions' (he just happens to like simple management jargon). Those three questions have to be answered if we want to know whether ours is a 'place-to-be' (2005). A creative scene of this kind is good for the economy, for a city's image, and for intercultural tolerance, it would seem.

Today the art scene has become an important economic variable and a popular subject for study. However, the term is not exactly thriving in the sociological context. The classical sociologist does know how to cope with concepts like the group, the category, the network and the subculture, but the social scene remains relatively unexplored as an area of research. Obviously there are exceptions, like the work done by Alan Blum (2001). Yet the lack of scholarly interest is surprising, since the scene is perhaps the best-suited format for social intercourse. Within the prevailing Post-Fordian economy, with its fluid working hours, high mobility, hyper-communication, flexibility and special interest in creativity and performance, the scene is a highly functional social organizational form. Moreover, it is a favourite temporary haven for all those who trek over the globe with enthusiasm. Why is the scene such a good social binding agent in a Post-Fordian society?

### Scene to Be Seen

In everyday usage the word 'scene' invariably prevails in alternative discursive settings. For example, it is rarely found to indicate socially appropriate professions or groups. We do not refer to the scene in relation to civil servants, bankers, the police or heterosexuals; but we do refer to the art scene, the theatre scene, the gay scene and, not forgetting, the drugs or the criminal scene. Creativity and criminality seem to occur to a notable extent in the same semantic circles. They have at least one characteristic in common within society: both creative and criminal networks stand for innovation. Regardless of whether it is a matter of innovative cultural practices, alternative lifestyles or illegal economic transactions, they all form alternatives to what is socially acceptable or to common sense. The word 'scene' would always seem available to accommodate heterodox forms in the discursive sense.

Yet in recent decades there has been a remarkable advance of the discursive fringe towards the centre. In other words: the 'alternative scene' has become a quality label within the social centre. Today labels like 'alternative', 'independent', 'avant-garde' and so on rank as welcome brands in the economic epicentre. So the word 'scene' cannot lag behind. Something that Richard Florida understood clearly.

The scene as a form of social organization meets a number of criteria that fit relatively recent developments in society. In a world in which individuality and authenticity are highly prized in leisure-time pursuits as well as in the workplace, the scene constitutes a comfortable setting. That form of social organization generates the freedom of temporary and flexible relations not offered by, for instance, the group, with its relatively closed membership. The scene produces social cohesion and shared identity unknown in a social category like an age or professional group. Relations within the scene are relatively free of obligations, but not without rules. Someone wishing to enter the art scene, for example, must comply with certain rules or social codes. Yet they are far less specific than the admission codes of a group like the football club, youth movement or lodge. Added to which, one scene can easily be exchanged for another. That is where it differs from the subculture, which requires a specific, almost rigid identity.

These are the very characteristics that make the scene an ideal form of social organization in the present network society. Local scenes prove to be a familiar focal point in a worldwide network. They generate just enough, but not too much, intimacy for global nomads. If you visit the art scenes in Shanghai, Tokyo, New York, London, Berlin or Brussels, you find a familiar frame of reference in what are sometimes totally different cultural contexts. If, some time ago, you had mentioned the name Damien Hirst in one of those art scenes, you would immediately have had common ground for interaction, whether an intellectual debate or a pub chat. The scene provides a safe and familiar, though admittedly temporary, home in a globalized world. Or, as Alan Blum puts it: it offers a kind of 'urban intimacy' that enables a person to survive in a chilly urban environment and an anonymous global time. That is to some extent because professional and public activities within a scene affect the domestic domain. Professional and private activities, working and personal relationships often merge seamlessly, while the hotel lounge, vernissage or fusion restaurant is a setting for both informal chatter and professional deals. In fact, professional deals may well depend on gossip — and conversely, informal chatter may prompt professional deals. So the scene is the

place where formality and informality effortlessly intersect. And in the light of what was said about informality in the first essay of this book, the scene is the ultimate locus of biopolitical control.

The foregoing inventory of public and semi-public spaces that fit comfortably in the scene uncovers another aspect of this form of social organization. It creates a Foucaultian panoptical décor for visual control of seeing and being seen. If anything: whoever is not seen 'on the scene' does not belong to the scene, and the scene which is not seen is a non-scene. And so the notion remains very close to its original etymological meaning. The Greek *skènè* was actually a tent, the hut or wooden structure from which the actors emerged. Theatricality is an important constituent of 'the scene'. In other words, the scene always implies a *mise-en-scène*. And by extension, it ties in seamlessly with the demands made of the present-day Post-Fordian worker who lives, as we have seen, largely on the performance of creative ideas. Anyone who does that has much to gain from those ideas being communicated to an audience that is as wide and as international as possible. Foreign is chic on the scene. But this only works if the audience is reliable. After all, an idea can easily be ridiculed, and can easily be stolen too. An economy of ideas lives in a permanent state of paranoia. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005): 'With the increase of demand for singularity, we can thus foresee an increase in paranoid behaviour by people who are forever fearful that they have been manipulated, plagiarized or hijacked.'

A public, international yet intimate environment is just the place to promote the social conditions that enable the exchange of ideas to take place relatively safely. Anyone stealing ideas within the scene will at least receive a verbal sanction. A claim that an original thought has been copied elsewhere is only an option if there are witnesses and that thought has been aired in public. The originality or authenticity of an idea can, therefore, be measured recursively if that idea was ever 'put on the stage'.

### Freiheit macht Arbeit – Freedom Creates Work

Events like biennials and buildings like a *Kunsthalle* or museum are ideal semi-public venues for the art scene around which creative ideas can circulate. You could say they form the concrete infrastructure. Or rather, they make the scene more visible — the unseen scene becomes the seen scene. That primarily applies to artists whose work is displayed by the organizations in question or is on display in the build-

ings. The concrete infrastructure literally stages the art scene, thus making it something more or less lasting. And the staging of the scene takes place in complete accordance with the rules of Post-Fordian art, as already explained. The consequence is that someone works with a temporary contract or, in the art world itself, often without a contract — in what is always a vitalistic, project-based setting and of course with flexible hours, invariably involving night work, and irrepressible creative enthusiasm. In short, it involves a work ethic in which work is always enjoyable — or should be; in which dynamism is boosted unconditionally by young talent; and in which commitment outstrips money. That is what determines the spirit of the artistic scene. If you try to rationalize this great, spontaneous desire and freedom to work (for instance, by means of rigid contracts or labour agreements) or bureaucratize or routinize it, you are in danger of letting the metaphorical creative genie out of the bottle. However, we should not forget that creative work like this is always a form of cheap, unstable work where social security is exchanged for so called freedom — something that makes the art scene of great interest to outsiders like company managers and politicians. Not only does it boost the local economy and introduce the city into the world market. It also, and especially, reveals a biopolitical ethic which nowadays benefits the economy. The protagonists of the creative scene appear not to believe that 'Arbeit macht frei', as in the Nazi concentration camp, but that 'Freiheit macht Arbeit' (freedom makes work). Such an ethic of 'creative' freedom is eagerly adopted by temp agencies that advertise temporary contracts in terms of the 'freedom' they allow.

The following scenario might be a slight exaggeration, but there's a kernel of truth in it: you are dumped by the cultural economy because you've had a burnout, because you are forty five and no longer young and sexy, but above all because you are no longer affordable. You suddenly realize that you have no children (having kids is not done on the scene — it rules out flexible working hours); that your partner has just left you because you were always abroad; that your nearest friend is at least 350 kilometres away so you've got no one to help you move house; and that you haven't saved a cent towards your pension because you've always worked on temporary contracts or no contract at all. This is the often-forgotten shadow side of the cultural industry and the creative city that is blindly embraced by quite a lot of cultural policymakers and other politicians nowadays.

It is better to offer no opinion as to whether, with the rhetorical reversal 'Freiheit macht Arbeit', the concentration camp has

become the central social structure of all society, as Giorgio Agamben claims (1995). If the cross-over between professional, public and domestic activities — but especially, on the one hand, the interplay between formality and informality, and, on the other, seeing and being seen — is exploited on a rationally economic basis, the cultivated freedom of the art scene gets uncomfortably close to the inhuman lack of freedom of the camp. To draw such a comparison between scene and camp is no doubt carrying things too far, and disrespectful of the appalling suffering of the inmates of the Nazi camps. However, the point is that the freedom of the art scene within the capitalist *mise-en-scène* can merely be a false freedom, because it always serves a well-defined (i.e. un-free) goal: the pursuit of profit.

The fact that Richard Florida and his neoliberal ilk are perfectly happy with this scene renders it suspect to say the least. Of course, interest in the art scene from politicians and managers need not lead to paranoia. Their focus does, after all, demonstrate to some extent that artistic phenomena have considerable social support. But as soon as that focus causes the artistic scene to be exploited on account of its informality and ethic of freedom, and thus restructured via biopower into a real lack of freedom, the art scene will have something to worry about.

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In **The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude** art sociologist Pascal Gielen defends the hypothesis that the globalized art scene is an ideal production entity for economic exploitation. These days the work ethic of the art world with its ever-present young dynamic, flexible working hours, thematic approach, short-term contracts or lack of contracts and its unlimited, energetic freedom is capitalized within the cultural industry and has been converted into a standard production model. In the glow of the creative cities and the creative industry governments embrace this post-Henry Ford work model and seamlessly link it to the globally-dominant neo-liberal market economy.

In **The Murmuring** an attempt is also being made to provide alternatives. Gielen is searching for the ingredients that the art world needs to preserve its own dynamic and freedom. His quest leads to places of intimacy and 'slowability' in the hectic global flow of artistic events and artistically-minded trends.


**Pascal Gielen** is a sociologist of art who teaches at Groningen University. He also holds the 'Arts in Society' research chair at Fontys College for the Arts in Tilburg. Gielen has written several books about the visual arts, contemporary dance, cultural heritage and cultural politics.

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