

**TROUBLER LA FÊTE, RALLUMER NOTRE JOIE/TO SPOIL THE PARTY,
TO SET OUR JOY ABLAZE**

Montreal: Journée sans culture (2016) 142 pp., Paperback,
ISBN: 978-2-98163-06, CDN \$30.00

**SURVEY FOR CULTURAL WORKERS/QUESTIONNAIRE POUR
TRAVAILLEURS CULTURELS, JO-ANNE BALCAEN (ED.)**

Montreal: self-published (2015) 76 pp., Paperback,
ISBN: 978-0-994-72830-2, CDN \$20.00

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As the context and working conditions of contemporary cultural production shifts under the increasingly neo-liberal mandates of governments and funding bodies, it can be difficult to gauge the real impact that is felt by artists and arts workers. The publications *Troubler la fête, rallumer notre joie/To Spoil the Party, To Set Our Joy Ablaze* (2016) and *Survey for Cultural Workers/Questionnaire pour travailleurs culturels* (2015), provide a range of insights into the realities of contemporary working conditions, firmly grounded in contributions by numerous workers across the arts.

Troubler la fête was developed from a day of reflection organized by Quebec's Journée sans culture, which simultaneously served as a symbolic mass strike for arts workers. Intending to be critical of the inadequate compensation of artists and arts organizations that Journée de la culture – Quebec's equivalent of Culture Days – supports, this collection of writings offers notes from the discussions as well as more sustained and cohesive reflections by one or more authors. The book functions on several levels, considering the lived experience of artists and administrators working in increasingly neo-liberal contexts, as well as the broader austerity rhetoric that justifies this neo-liberal paradigm. The variance in writing styles allows for a representation of a range of voices, though the editors note that despite the success in operating across disciplines the event was disproportionately white, francophone, professionalized and attended mostly by women.

The second publication, *Survey for Cultural Workers*, is more structured, being composed of answers to survey questions about the realities of working in the arts in Canada by curators, administrative assistants, publishers, exhibition coordinators and many others, reflecting a broad cross-section of arts workers. Despite this formal structure, the book contains insights at times devastating, hopeful and in a few instances humorous – the anonymity allowed respondents to comment with brutal honesty about executive directors 'asleep at the wheel' (11) and preparators expressing frustration regarding artists who take pride in having little knowledge of the material nature of their work, which invariably becomes a problem during installation.

While *Troubler la fête* is focused primarily on Quebec, *Survey for Cultural Workers* includes contributions from across Canada, with a large number of responses from Toronto and Montreal. Regional specificity is

a clear component of the former publication, which addresses numerous municipal and provincial associations and funding bodies, such as the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and the Regroupement des artistes en arts visuels du Québec. Although *Survey for Cultural Workers* shows some evidence of regional difference, with respondents from the Toronto metropolitan area especially attuned to power imbalances in the arts, overall it conveys a greater solidarity between regions. This appears to be a cause of the anecdotal nature of the survey answers, and while it is possible that different questions could have highlighted more pronounced regional differences, the shared sense of struggle makes it clear that arts workers are not alone in experiencing precarity, frustration and burnout. This was no doubt valuable and reassuring in reflecting on the challenges of my own work as an artist and arts administrator.

These texts are also valuable for their nuanced and personal reflection on the precarious state of arts labour. As the term 'precarity' gains greater prominence in discussions of arts labour in particular, as well as labour under global capitalism more broadly, it can become flattened or deflated in the process. The complexity of the particular form and logic of the political economy that maintains this precarity is often oversimplified, if not overlooked entirely, as is the particular, at times contradictory, experience of those who work in precarious positions.

Throughout *Troubler la fête*, contributors continually return to the logic of productivity that demands long hours with few breaks, as a primary contributor to this precarity. In the publication's introduction this logic is in turn connected to 'the commodification of cultural goods, a process that is itself encouraged by current neoliberal policies' (11), while Camille Renarhd's text foregrounds hierarchies, careerism and individualism as drivers of this precarity. There is a contradiction inherent in this form of individualism that is well known to artists, where the independence to work on one's own terms is both a benefit and a detriment, often promoting a sense of freedom mixed with isolation and competition.

The hierarchies present within institutions, as well as between individuals, arts organizations and arts councils, can reinforce this precarity and lead to further social stratification. The normalization of these hierarchies was commented on in a few places within *Troubler*, receiving particular attention in the text by Caroline Blais, Virginie Jourdain and Mercedes Pachó, 'Between Gift, Resilience and Exhaustion: How to Work and to What Extent?' The chapter weaves in and out of quotes by participants set in italics who ask, for instance, 'Why not move away from dynamics of domination and competition? Why always accept hierarchical relationships?' (24). This is followed by a call to challenge arts councils' privileged place in these hierarchies and seek more horizontal relationships with these funding bodies – a radical shift that would run counter to the current neo-liberal paradigm that appears to only reinforce competition between groups.

These social dynamics were also addressed in *Survey for Cultural Workers*, with an exhibition coordinator stating that '[c]urators only have to worry about artists. Artists only have to worry about curators. Arts administrators have to worry about both' (24–25). In a similar vein, an artist states that '[s]ome curators are afraid of artists because they recog-

nize an inequity. Some artists are afraid of curators because they recognize an inequity' (45). While the artist does not expand on the nature of this inequity, elsewhere an executive director and publisher working at an unnamed non-profit organization offers a more precise description of their view of such a social dynamic:

Generally, the curator holds a privileged position in terms of economic power and institutional position, but does not always understand this very well. Non-artist curators tend to think of artists as privileged to be doing what they do. The truth is much more mundane.

(4)

This excerpt is indicative of the overall tone of many respondents' comments, which oscillate between sounding reflective, frustrated and simply exhausted. Yet it expresses a further truth about the realities of precarious labour, a truth that is, as in the above comment, much more mundane. The answers to the two-part question, 'What do you find most stressful about your job? How do you manage it?', are particularly enlightening in this regard. The function and impact of precarity becomes evident in the answers, where respondents speak of uncertainty, instability, self-doubt, underfunding, as well as being understaffed, overworked and underpaid. The answers to the latter half of the two-part question are both funny and insightful, with responses ranging from recreational drug use to working collaboratively to sharing worries and fears with other cultural workers.

The mention of collaboration and sharing touches on a further value of these two publications; while *Survey for Cultural Workers* promotes a sense of solidarity through shared experiences, *Troubler la fête* calls for solidarity in both form and content. *Troubler la fête* was founded through a symbolic mass strike, and in turn features frequent references to the importance of organizing and alliances. In 'The Market, Philanthropy or the State: Who Supports Whom?', for instance, Edith Brunette and Catherine Lavoie-Marcus write of uniting logistical forces and pooling resources, while Camille Renard calls for collectivizing and shared leadership to address the issues of isolation and competitive relationships. Contributors to both of these publications were honest and realistic about the challenges in addressing issues of precarity and social stratification, but most were optimistic in the end, expressing hope that greater collaboration could gradually contribute to structural change for the better. One respondent to the survey, by contrast, resolved the stress of a job by resigning – demonstrating the importance of the option to say 'no' when conditions are untenable.

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