Architecture school produces professional knowledge workers who regulate themselves into performance at the extremes of productivity, mental and physical health, and susceptibility to exploitation. The Multidisciples project suggests that, in order to render that process visible, we might look at how the bodies of students are configured and ultimately inscribed into the apparatus of a complex of discipline, control, and subjectivation in the service of a capitalist machine.
Clearly the production of freedom may not be the immediate programme of the majority of our architectural work, but our liberal education, our code of ethics, and our roots in humanism make it the horizon of our disciplinary conscience.
Self-determination! All are debatable and all have ideological underpinnings that make not just their possibility fraught, but their allure deceptive. Slavoj Zizek, the Slovenian continental philosopher, has pointed out that we actually do not want to be free; that freedom is anxiety producing and in our heart-of-hearts we seek the safety of limited options. Critics of American Neoliberalism, including psychologists, suggest that in a country that now values autonomy above all else, freedom can become a type of tyranny imposed by an ideology of economics and rational choice, a muddle that leads to perpetual dissatisfaction with our lives. Nevertheless, subjective self-determination – even incomplete or compromised – is a sine qua non for pondering the difficult path of personal, social and cultural freedom. As the French philosopher Michel Foucault has said: ‘There are times in life when the question of knowing whether one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.’ For us architects, freedom (or self-determination) is illusive not because it is ambiguous, contradictory or uncontested, but because it is an abstraction. In other words, it is not that we cannot agree on a definition of freedom or that we cannot trust in its possibility; rather, as long as it is not experienced, it is unknowable.

**Architecture can be exposed for what it is: a profession providing the ‘unfree’ working conditions identified in the opening premise of this article that have long since been mitigated in other disciplines**

Abstraction

The role of abstraction in obfuscating the true meaning of a term is indicated by Marx’s distinction between abstract and concrete labour, where, as indicated above, it is associated with the transformation of experienced labour into its market value. Marx argues that the abstraction of labour is part of a process in which commercial trade in products not only alters the way labour is viewed, but also how it is practically treated. In other words, when labour becomes a commercial object traded in the marketplace, then the form and content of work in the workplace will be transformed as well. Abstraction and commodification go hand in hand. But the critique of abstract thought goes beyond Marx and labour. The Frankfurt School, the early 20th-century Neo-Marxist German think tank, described the pride of ‘reason’ that tears the individual away from a life of genuine wants and needs. Abstraction, associated with rationality, was implicated for its distancing of the subject from felt life and allowing totalitarianism to appear acceptable. Further, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s discourse on affect in Empire, their influential book on contemporary power in which emotional, sensual and caring life is designated as the realm of both value and exploitation, and Foucault’s on biopolitics, where the body becomes the locus for hegemonic colonisation, are linked in their study of ‘lived’ authority: biopower is understood to target affect as part of its controlling mechanism; at the same time, affective life may be an ‘outside’ that exceeds biopolitical mechanisms. Affect and biopolitics share a starting point: attending to affective life orientates inquiry into how new ways of living may emerge. As the contemporary Italian media theorist Matteo Paquinelli has suggested in addressing ‘the essential problem (of) the politics of abstraction’, capitalism continues to evolve towards even more sophisticated and abstract algorithms that allow it to maintain its control over social networks, global logistics and financial transactions. To combat this, as Baruch Spinoza in the 17th century, Rudolph Steiner in the late 19th century, and Gilles Deleuze in the 20th century have said, one must operate in the context of ‘living work’.

Architecture can be exposed for what it is: a profession providing the ‘unfree’ working conditions identified in the opening premise of this article that have long since been mitigated in other disciplines. It is precisely these working conditions that contrast with what we, as architects, have been trained to admire and produce: a humanitarian life. What is of interest, then, is how architects have not only failed to make the connection between our working conditions and our life, but actively deceived ourselves into believing that we are a sine qua non for always having been what the rest of the knowledge economy is. On the other hand, we can see it as a more complex (and architecturally tilted) version of the schizophrenia that Deleuze and Félix Guattari have described as capitalism’s natural consequence. In architecture, this schizophrenic state is our polarised identity as creator versus worker. Despite the fact that we go to an office, get

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Recordings were made at different times over the course of a week near the end of the semester. Each episode around one-hour of mostly digital work by MArch students in different years of the graduate programme. Most of the images were processed so as to expose visually variation in body positions relative to technical equipment and workspace over time, but it is inside that is neither easily quantified nor simply integrated through normal techniques of visual inspection.
The images remain within a visual regime, but seek to obscure possibilities for optimisation in favour of exposing the process of subjectivisation enacted through modulation; that is, the repetitive implementation of the (micro)techniques of disciplinary power through the structural and informational regulation enacted within the institution of the university.

a pay cheque and fill out our time sheet, architects bypass these evident characteristics of ‘work’ and emphasise, instead, ‘art’. This failure of identity has many secondary schizo-consequences – aristocratic/privileged versus middle class; management versus labour – but the overall effect is a total ignorance of labour discourse and, consequently, any grasp of the reality of our daily work life. We are dutifully shocked by the unjust treatment of nail-salon workers, fashion models or graduate teaching assistants while never making the connection to our own work circumstances.

Architecture, Affect and Freedom

We do not want to insist that the architectural profession can operate outside capitalist structure to affectively ‘live’ freedom and thereby produce it. That would be naive. However, one can resist the models of work – the division of labour, lack of creative autonomy of all workers, disappearance of work/life balance – that are the acceptable norm and become a template of a socially organised profession. The goal of an emancipated work environment would not be measured by absolute standards of freedom (impossible, as we have indicated), but by constant work on the contingency of our affective life. On the one hand this would be, in effect, the reversal of work that organises our bodies into productive design labour (not entirely different to how Fordist factory labour shaped us through a series of repeated, cyclical steps); and on the other it would measure success in terms other than profit or aesthetic kudos. It would not be an easy organisational fix, but a commitment to respect all individuals involved – staff, consultants, firm owners, managers, clients – as they articulate their visions and angsts, their strengths and weaknesses, their self-determined value. It means everyone becoming involved in solving problems and making decisions that affect all of our lives. The fact that architecture is connected to other disciplines that conform to Neoliberalism’s competitive demands does not mean that in our own homes we cannot experiment with what freedoms we actually control.

Notes

10. For the relationship between affect and economics, see Anderson. et al.