

## RECESSION! TRANSFORMING CITIZENSHIP ONE CREATIVE PERSON AT A TIME

While speaking on the phone with a colleague in New York recently about how deeply the recession was affecting people's lives in the city, she noted that she had made an extraordinary decision. How extraordinary? After years spent working in the arts, she had decided to join the military in response to massive layoffs and bleak employment prospects. "I'm in this unexpected situation," she explained, "I'm in my late 30s, unemployed and need to think about my future. The army (if you don't get killed) is one of the few remaining employers that offers job security."

Although many people have had to join the military as a result of systemic and institutionalized precarity, surely nobody enrolls in design school expecting one day to have to put down their pencil and pick up a gun. How does this predicament fit in with the widespread adoption of Floridian Creative Cities planning?

Building economic precarity into existing systems and institutions is one of the themes of this issue. Looking at institutions and the forces that create shifts in their organization, we consider how precarity has become a seemingly inevitable outcome of a troubled political-economic system. Speaking to institutional change is in part inspired by the precedence of economic recession — not just the actualities and repercussions of a financial system that is undergoing correction, but recession as a cultural phenomenon, used as explanation for wide, sweeping and ideological changes. This is addressed both in this issue's shortFuse, Notes on a Strike, where Gita Hashemi reflects on the 85 day fight over working conditions at York University and in Rob McLennan's account of the battle for arts funding in Ottawa.

Interestingly, many present day institutional changes are being justified if not in the name of art, then under the umbrella of creativity. Institutions from universities to city governments are unhinging many of the rights that people have struggled to establish over the years to deliver bewildered workers and students to the "creative economy" — a neo-liberal model for social and economic planning that is simultaneously destabilizing important sources of independent creation such as arts, literature and academic research. In

Ontario, this approach to planning was delivered in a report from the Martin Institute for Prosperity, positing, "The real challenge of the creative age is to build something more than a creative economy — a truly *creative society* that can harness the energy we have unleashed and mitigate the turmoil and disruption that it generates." Could the source of anticipated turmoil and disruption be an increasing number of precarious citizens?

For previous generations, economic and social integration was redressed through redistributive mechanisms implemented by government, and citizenship was as much about collective rights to a decent standard of living and a secure future as it was about responsibility to participation. These days, we see our everyday rights eroded in the name of "responsible" fiscal planning, to be replaced with an individualized, competitive and neo-liberal creative citizenship. A citizenship that is increasingly implemented and judged by business-driven creative initiatives that reframe priorities and re-establish guidelines for success. For instance, The newly minted and federally-funded Canada Prize for Art and Creativity (brainchild of businessmen and Luminato founders Tony Gagliano and David Pecaut), awards international emerging artists both money and the opportunity to exhibit in Canada. Not a bad idea, though it follows on the announcement of the cancellation of TradeRoutes and PromArt programs — arms-length funds that allowed Canadians to take their work overseas — as a result of budgetary constraints.

But do not lose hope, dear friend. While conditions have been bad in Canada, with economic uncertainty causing many to lose their jobs and many more to worry about their future, and institutions and government using this moment of shock to roll back gains once attributed to a healthy society (SSHRC, for instance, has snuck in a line with the recent budget about prioritizing researchers with business related degrees for funding and there is rumour of plans to develop a Toronto undergraduate university made up entirely of sessional, contract faculty and undergraduate students), I have yet to hear of anyone locally being driven to the military.

— Izida Zorde



Photo: Lisa Kannakko