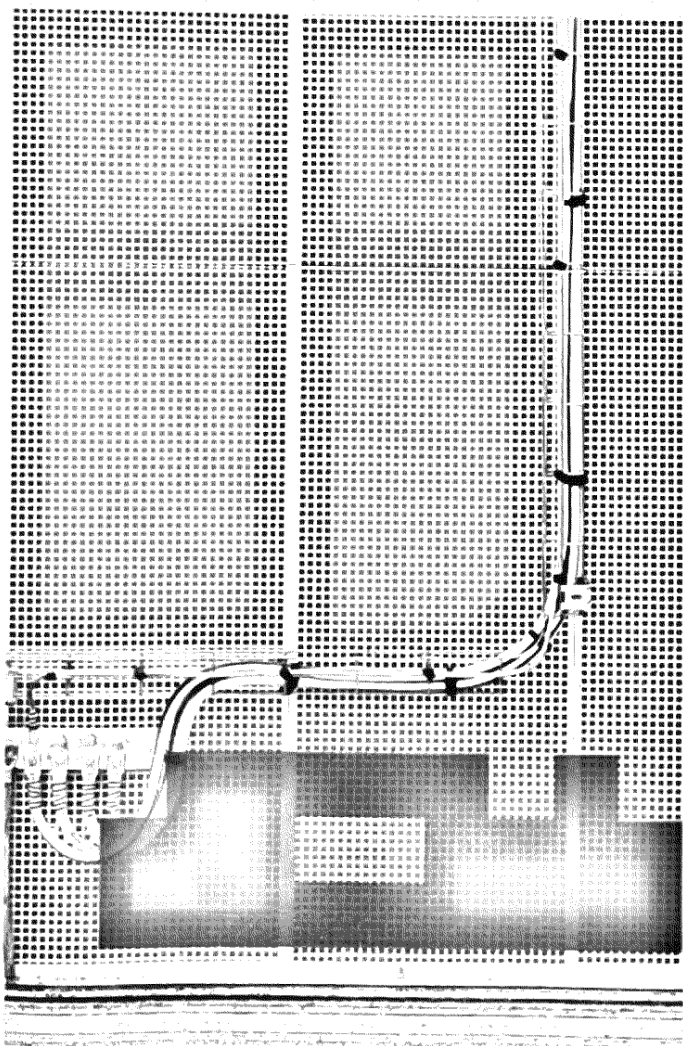
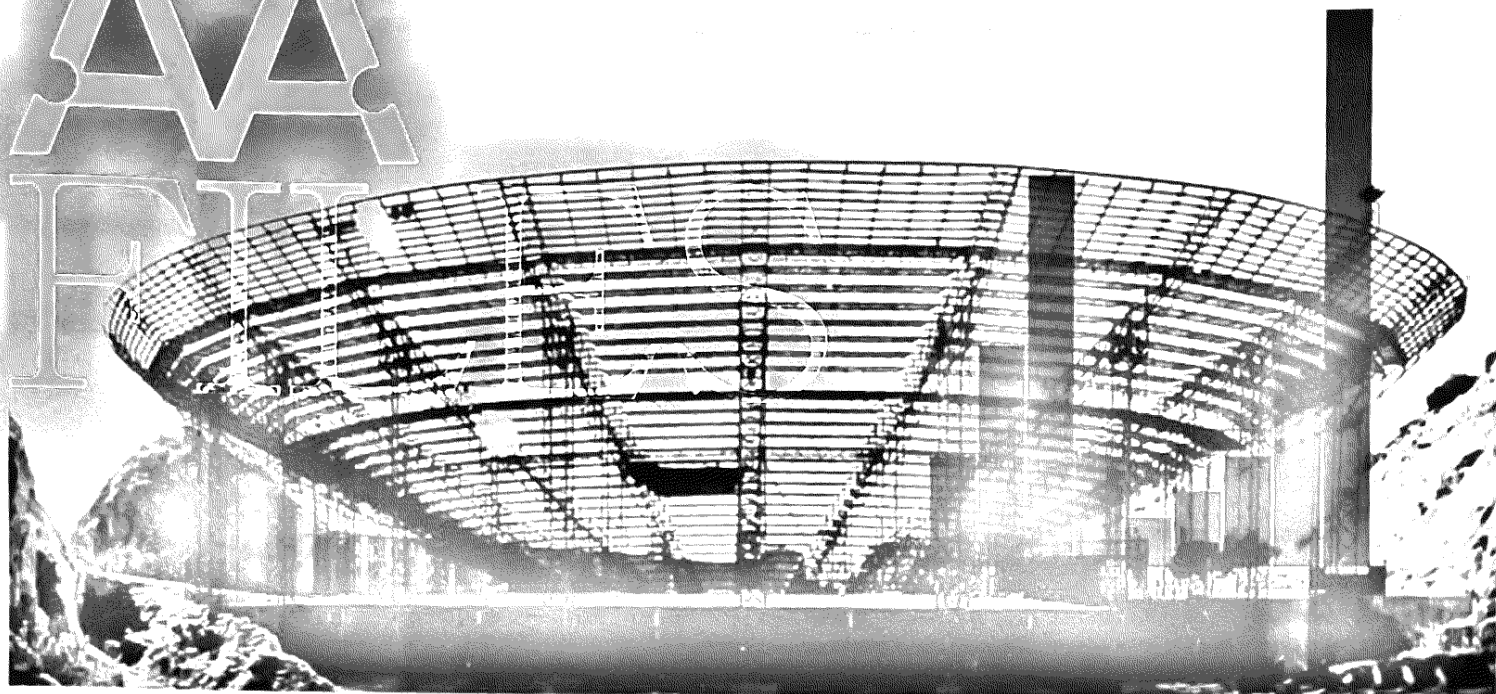
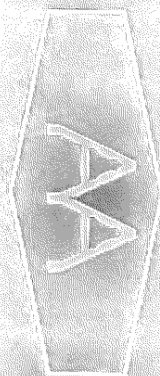
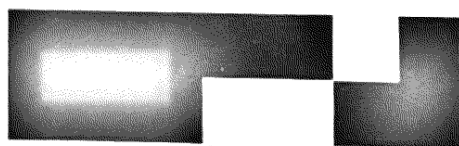
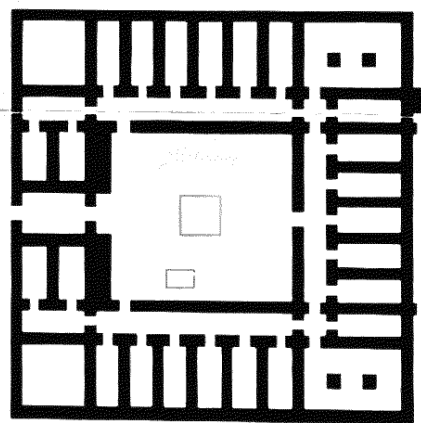


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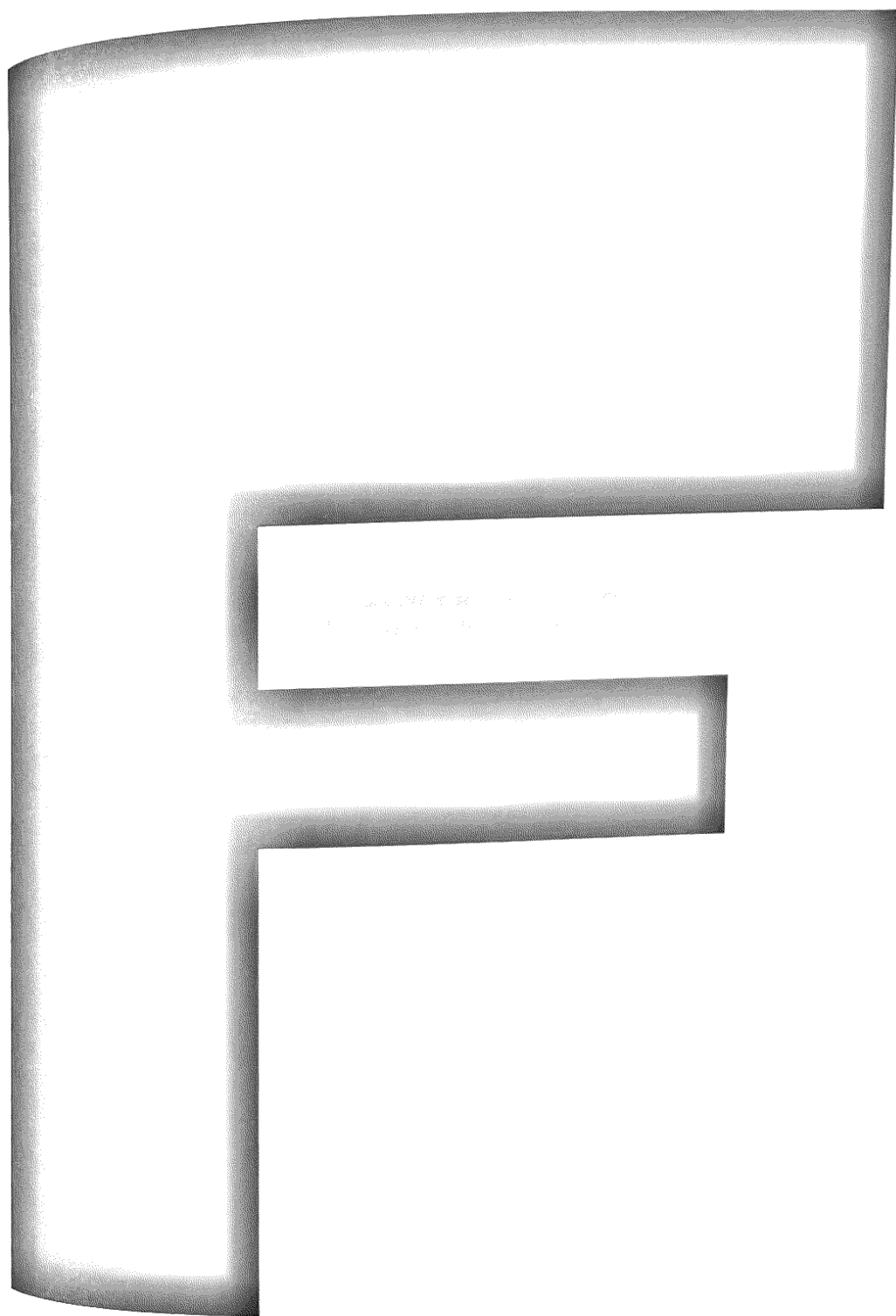
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# HOME



# COVID-19 AND THE CONTENT ECONOMY (BLN)

'Nothing has struck me more in the past few weeks [...] than the endless procession and parade of scientists, experts, researchers, doctors, of academics, artists and politicians, of sociologists, philosophers, political scientists, historians, cultural workers, who constantly express their thoughts on the new pandemic.'

ALEXANDER GARCIA DÜTTMANN

It is week eight of lockdown, and I have never been busier. Since mid-March, when universities, schools and offices closed in Germany, I have been asked to add a chapter to my forthcoming monograph on disasters, contribute to a book evaluating the repercussions of Covid-19 on democracy, write two think-pieces, engage in a 'crisis call' with a foundation researching violent international conflict and record promotional Skype conversations with the authors of an anthology that I recently edited. As public life ground to a halt, I found myself with more work than ever, hot-desking in my living room.

This spike in the production of discourse, however, has not been limited to academia. As public health systems neared breaking point worldwide, creative workers participated in hackathons, media channels hosted virtual roundtables and influencers with time on their hands pondered whether 'the pandemic was making Facebook great again'. Mimicking the war rhetoric of many conservative politicians in response to the virus, one could say that cultural production has been engaged in 'total mobilisation'. Just as Britain's excess mortality rate – which currently stands at 67% above the annual average – cannot be pinned to a mere seasonal fluctuation, this hypertrophic growth in discourse-production too is not accidental, but Covid-specific.

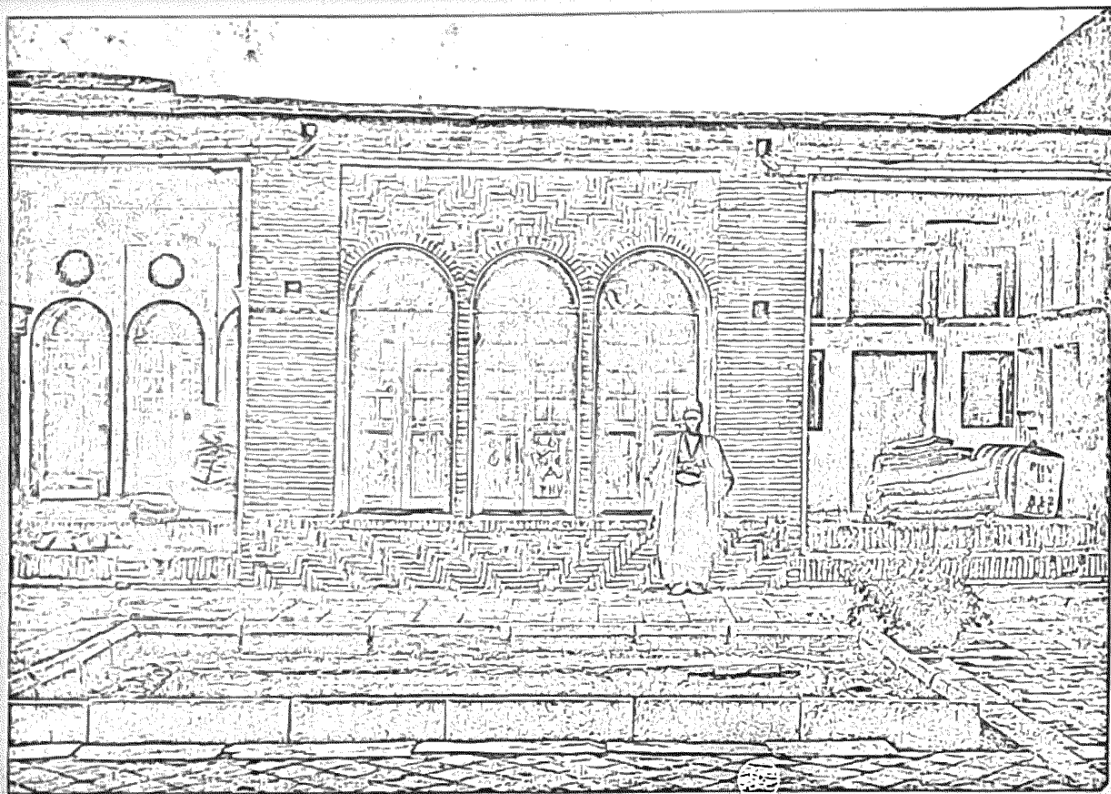
Why has the pandemic lead to such an inflation of cultural activity? At a first glance, the increase in debate seems understandable. Covid-19 has revealed the staggering damage that decades of austerity have wrought on households and communities. The global health emergency has provided a backdrop for authoritarian power grabs by governments that are keen to widen their sphere of influence. Faced with so many unprecedented crises, there certainly is a lot to talk about. It is all the more surprising, then, that in discussing the possible impacts of the virus, commentators have repeatedly fallen back on well-rehearsed patterns of explanation – be it the end of capitalism as we know it, the terminal reduction of ethical life to bare life or the global extension of technological networks, which compounds the accumulation of generalised risk.

However, there is something awry about the Covid-driven discursive expansion. This is because, at the same time as cultural practitioners have been ramping up production, the material basis

for their activity is simultaneously being dismantled. Even in these early days of the pandemic, it is becoming clear that its repercussions have led to the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. With skyrocketing levels of unemployment and millions of workers on furlough, universities in the US and the UK have announced hiring freezes to combat the financial pressures resulting from the predicted drop in student numbers. The first in the UK to roll out its action plan to combat the anticipated income squeeze has been Roehampton University, which announced measures including: the acceleration of work to generate new sources of income, such as new academic programmes; a staff recruitment freeze; the suspension of a senior and professorial pay review; voluntary severance; a voluntary flexible employment scheme; and an immediate salary reduction for the vice-chancellor and the most senior members of staff.

Strategies like these are set to further exacerbate the precarity of loosely-employed academic staff, who often juggle an impressive portfolio of temporary contracts. Already greatly casualised in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown, non-tenured members of faculty are facing a labour crisis of unprecedented dimensions. Following their enormous efforts in moving teaching online in response to Covid-19, swathes of precarious university employees are being thanked by having their contracts terminated. The same is true for cultural practitioners at large: with most paid work having been cancelled for months to come and government bailout schemes largely proving insufficient, artists, curators and architects are facing monumental losses of income. These conditions present cultural workers with a dilemma. On the one hand, maintaining a high output during the crisis may be necessary to increase their visibility and underline the value of the arts. On the other, unchanged or even inflated productivity runs the risk of playing into the hands of institutions' already stringent austerity measures by demonstrating that the cultural sector can survive in a collapsed market and with zero subsidies. It sends the message that rain or shine, pandemic or crisis, culture is here to stay.

This attitude is encapsulated in the very concept of austerity, invented by the British war cabinet to convince a strained citizenry to tighten their belts and keep their spirits high in embracing strict rationing and universal sacrifice for the 'home front'. Its logic is captured by what political theorist Joshua Clover calls the affirmation trap, 'in which labour is locked into the position of affirming its own exploitation in the guise of survival'. Though Clover is referring to de-industrialisation, during which automobile workers facing plant closures campaigned to keep factories open rather than going on strike, something similar can be said of the current crisis. When cultural workers voluntarily work overtime in the face of mass layoffs, wage cuts and further precaritisation, they approximate capital's dream of becoming self-reproducing automata: free labour inputs, the reproduction of which capital does not even have to pay for. This is the bane of austerity: an oversupply of labour facing a persistent deterioration of working conditions. This situation precedes Covid-19. Perhaps, rather than endorsing the rhetoric of warfare and its all-out mobilisation of the economy, these are times to reconsider the material bases for communal living, and to reflect on what we choose to valorise and how we choose to do it.



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# STRIKE OF '71

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