

Art (...) work

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Art (...) work is a novel-thesis that deals with notions on art and work and the divergent positions of artist and worker. It is consciously constructed as a fusion of contemporary critical theory, art theory, short story and (sitcom-)script to show the workings of both art and work in an understandable, conceivable and imaginative way.

The underlying text is a shortened version of the Introduction to the thesis, being the broader theoretical framework to the actual novel.

Under the conditions of high technology, Pallas, the goddess of art, is a secretary.
Friedrich Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter

Art (...) Work deals with notions of art and work and the divergent positions of artist and worker. It shows (in a performative way) the different workings and subjectivities of both artist - someone who creates artworks, in general a practitioner in the visual arts - and worker, someone with a daily, money-earning job. It does so by showing their different, formative contexts and settings: Desk and Studio.

The worker behind his desk and the artist in his studio are exemplifications of different roles and identities shaped by a complex of societal (mainly capitalist) constructions, myths and beliefs. The division of the individual in a worker *or* an artist, is a capitalist, Fordist way of assigning the individual its pre-described role and position within society. Being a worker meaning in general being subjugated to time and place regimes, whereas the artist - in contrast - is freed from these contraptions by being his own boss.

The artist in being the epitome of this idea of self-reliance, has served neoliberalism in exemplifying this notion to us *all*. Art has become the example for the worker to become an 'entrepreneur', to become free and autonomous in making his own decisions, free in dealing with his own 'personal management' as far as income and (in)security is concerned.

Both art and work deal with 'subjectivation', the process of the 'construction of the individual subject', the being made into an individual by the given (capitalist) context and its inherent mechanisms.¹ Subjectivation not only assigns us an identity, a sex, a profession, a nationality etc., but also divides us into categories: leaving some in being 'bosses' and 'well-to-do' and others in being 'workers' or 'artists' and being less well of (or even precariously poor). In case of this thesis, the categories of work and art produce the

¹ Subjectification is a philosophical concept coined by Michel Foucault and elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It refers to the construction of the individual subject.

different subjectivations of worker and artist. The worker is subject to the characteristics of his own specific work-field but also to the more generic notion of 'work as a virtue' ('work is good *and* necessary'). Being 'in service of a boss' *assigns and inscribes* the individual with the worker's role, in this thesis exemplified in the role of the 'secretary'. The secretary mostly being a 'she' (99% is woman), this profession is therefore inscribed with the accordingly feminine attributes of servitude, modesty, charm, precision, *and* (as the icing on the cake) sexual innuendo. The artist on the contrary, is inscribed with notions of autonomy, self-realisation and unruliness (*I am an artist and therefore I can do whatever I want*). But the being 'one's own boss' (the artist's distinctive and formative claim on autonomy) is just as much a given role as the one of 'secretary'. Contradictory to what one might think when thinking of the artist's autonomy, the role of being 'one's own boss' is *the* current neoliberal form of social subjectivation. The artist is currently his own 'human capital' in being the 'entrepreneur of the self'.

The production of subjectivity, the being made into a subject with its accordingly prescribed behaviour and ways of life (in the interest of keeping the capitalist machinery going and underlining the social divisions of labour), might spark a longing for a 'real me' and for 'real freedom'. This longing for authenticity and autonomy is nevertheless a tricky business, all too easily sliding off to the realms of human capital and entrepreneurship. Neoliberalism in fact has worked and further elaborated on the artist's myth of autonomy and self-actualisation to lure the worker into desiring the same: freeing oneself from the drudgeries and dulling routines of working life and the subjugation of working for a boss. Notions on individuation, or self-actualisation, are currently prevalent and even socially desirable *and* conditional. The artist is not only a role among roles, it has become the predominant one.

Subjection and Precarity

The laid-out differences between work and art, between the harsh but accepted reality of the worker and the social fantasy of the artist, are related to the broader context of the 'production of subjectivity'. The formation of the self, the 'what we want to be' or better: what we actually need to be, is the primary and perhaps most important work of capitalism.

Maurizio Lazzarato in his 'Sign and Machines' gives us an idea of what the 'production of subjectivity' means and entails.² Subjectivation not only prescribes us certain roles in accordance with the division of labor (being a worker or a boss, being unemployed or an entrepreneur, being a man or a woman etc.) but is also related to what Lazzarato calls 'machinic enslavement': '[...] machinisms have invaded our daily lives; they now 'assist' our ways of speaking, hearing, seeing, writing, and feeling by constituting what one might call 'constant social capital'.³

This process of combining humans and non-humans as component parts 'proceeds through *de*-subjectivation. Machinic enslavements dismantles the individuated subject', creating a completely different hold on subjectivity.⁴ Social subjection is not only maintained through individuation, but also through de-individualisation or 'machinic enslavement'.

'Capitalism reveals a twofold cynicism: the 'humanist' cynicism of assigning us individuality and pre-established roles in which individuals are necessarily alienated; and in the 'dehumanizing' cynicism of including

² Signs and Machines, Capitalism and the production of subjectivity, Maurizio Lazzarato, Semiotext(e) 2014

³ Idem, p.13

⁴ Idem, p.12

us in an assemblage that no longer distinguishes between human and non-human, subject and object, or words and things.’⁵

The alienating mediations or mechanic enslavements of both worker and artist (in the novel-thesis the respective characters of the secretary ‘Nancy Paris’ and the photographer ‘Vienna Parreno’) are ‘not only part of a technical machine but foremost and primarily of the social or the ‘megamachine’ that produces subjectivity’.⁶ This megamachine not only assigns us our subjectivities and roles (the secretary/ the service-provider and the photographer/ the artist), it also *nullifies* them in their ‘working reality’ through machinic enslavement - leaving the individual, the author out of sight.

Paradoxically this nullifying of the individual, the becoming of a ‘dividual’, is in sharp contrast to that other capitalist (or better neo-liberal) dictum of ‘self-reliance’. Self-reliance meaning the individuals capacity of caring for himself. Whether as one’s own boss (the neo-liberal’s wet dream) or ‘the new working poor’ (the socialist’s nightmare), makes no difference in being left to one’s own in realizing ‘well-being’ (meaning security and thus income). The outcome of this situation for large groups within society (even in the rich regions of Europe) is what is called *precarisation*. Its literal meaning being: ‘uncertain’, ‘dependant on chance’ and ‘dangerously likely to fall or collapse’. Isabell Lorey in her *State of Insecurity, government of the precarious*, describes precarization as ‘a process that produces [...] insecurity as the central pre-occupation of the subject’.⁷

Precarity is *the* hidden driver for the positions of both worker and artist. Working as a secretary or an artist is basically given by the necessity to ‘earn a living’. Wearing of insecurity, taking care of oneself, forces us all to work, to devoting our precious time to working hours. Under precarious conditions the individual is being propelled in an *immer* continuing survival-mode, with hardly time left to do or think anything else, other than doing the things that ‘need to be done’. One way of forcing us in doing so is to validate work as a virtue in itself. Working is good, working is necessary and working is a way to express and validate yourself. Socialists movements and socialist worker unions have played their part in this *upgrading of work*:

‘...the division between anarcho-syndicalist unions and socialist unions played an important role; the latter were always asking for higher wages, while the anarchists were asking for less hours. The socialists were essentially buying into the notion that work is a virtue and consumerism is good, as long as it’s managed democratically; while the anarchists were saying: ‘no, the whole deal that we work more and more for more and more products, is rotten from the get-go.’’⁸

We are all forced to play our parts in a performance society where it is mandatory to work out of moral imperatives and consumerism. We no longer live in a welfare state but (as sociologists have it) a *workfare state*. Within that citizens are only conditionally free. If you’re able to discipline yourself, you’ll be left alone, but when you fail to do so, society or the government will step in, as in cases of time discipline: *thou shalt work*.

The production of subjectivity, of assigning us the role of ‘worker’ (whether secretary or boss) is paramount for the succeeding of the workfare state. If we believe in our roles and think them necessary and morally just (because working is good), we contribute not only to the upholding of the performance society but also to the systematics of subjectivation

⁵ Idem, p.13

⁶ Idem p.14

⁷ State of Insecurity, government of the precarious, Isabell Lorey, Verso Futures 2015, p.viii

⁸ On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs, David Graeber, Strike! Magazine 2013, <http://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs/>

itself. In a never-ending loop, both subjectivation and workfare state confirm us in our roles.

Being made a subject is thus directly related to the necessity of working - which in its turn is born directly out of fostered feelings of insecurity. Subjectivity and insecurity (or precarity) are directly interrelated: precarity is subjectivity's (pre)condition.

'By way of insecurity and danger, precarization embraces the whole of existence, body, and modes of subjectivation.'⁹

Precarious conditions and subjectivations both constrain us in our personal space and freedom, binding us up in an entangled web of insecurities and role-models. In being ruled and governed through these 'patterns of precarity', we ultimately yearn for ways out of this confining labyrinth. The precarity and subjectivation-systematics in the end sparks off a longing for autonomy and 'sovereign self-identification',¹⁰ leading us into the terrain of the arts and its (supposed) *autonomy*.

Autonomy and (other) artists' myths

Autonomy is one of the prevalent characteristics of the artist. The term opens up a whole terrain of ideas and feelings encircling notions of freedom, independence and self-actualisation. The logic of artistic autonomy has it that we only work for ourselves, for our own satisfaction and subject only to the demands of our own conscience and drives: the emblem of 'the artist in his studio'. The studio, the (work)place that is shut off from daily practicalities and worries, is the apex of these notions. Placed at the other end of society the studio is the place where the artist can reside in utter solitude and silence to work out his personal, (authentic) feelings and ideas.

But 'autonomy' being a tricky and complicated notion, this representation of the artist in his studio is but half the truth. Strict autonomy does not exist, the artist is related *and* subject to the workings of the world - just as anybody else. Autonomy exists only as a desire or illusion in being the utter dream of self-determination and independence; free from the hassles of everyday life and free to explore at will. But the illusion becomes 'delusional' in being unattainable – we are interrelated to and (in)formed by others.

In *Art (...) work* the searching for the 'real mechanisms at play' within the arts and the art world is done by investigating art's conditions and its claims on authenticity, legitimacy, autonomy and self-determination. These notions and so-called 'parameters' of the arts are questioned in their sustainability or even 'truth', alongside the question whether the conditions of the art world are finally any different from the ones at play in the working world. When art is being placed under 'social scrutiny' (as is done by Vienna in the novel's chapters of 'Studio') its unseeable and unsayable conditions are being explicated. These social conditions are mostly accepted as being part of the conditions under which the art world operates.

According to *Andrea Fraser* the 'artistic field can only be understood as the product or prize of a permanent conflict: as a field of forces that is always also a field of struggles.'¹¹

These struggles determine the boundaries and membership in the field, the 'can I be part of this exclusive club?', and determine the positions within it according to certain hierarchies of artistry. The value of the artist and his artwork actually depends upon its rarity, 'the sacrosanct mysteries of the cult of the artwork', and so all art professionals have an interest in maintaining, not to say, *increasing* their monopoly on certain (or so-called)

⁹ Lorey, p.1

¹⁰ The Truth of Art, Boris Groys, e-flux journal #71 2016, p.9

¹¹ Museum Highlights, The writings of Andrea Fraser, Andrea Fraser, MIT Press 2015, p.42

competences of artistry. The omnipresent (but covered up) competition among artists leads them to constantly accumulating as much authority, legitimacy and recognition as they can in order to *safeguard their own position*, because in the end, 'positions are scarce, money is lacking and there is no ideological coherence as far as the judging of art is concerned'.¹² Maintaining their professional status in comparison to their colleagues is a never ending and self-strengthening loop.

'The cynical version of this kind of analysis is that the artistic field is no different from any other market in luxury goods. They all serve social competition for status and prestige.'¹³

Being a field of competition and permanent conflict, the artistic field resembles the uncertainties and struggles (the *precarities*) of the working world. Indeed, the conditions of the artist, working under own conditions, inspired neoliberalism in propagating new terms of working: free, self-determining, autonomous. The notion of 'being a freelancer' is *propagated* by alluding to the 'freedom of the artist', but is *actualized* at the expense of certainty, by paying the price of precarity.

Working in the studio is a longed-for position and the artist (supposedly) needs it to dream of 'something else': a time-out zone that is conditional for making work. But the studio is also an artistic myth, one that needs to be kept alive in being the basis for artistic credibility. At the same time, the studio-myth also prevents artists to regulate their own economic conditions (because 'artists are solitary and will be poor'). By keeping the myth alive artists secure their own precarity.

Art making in the end is a profession of social fantasy. A fantasy of self-determination and recognition, a fantasy of being part of an exclusive club (the art world) that fosters huge aspirations as far as autonomy, legitimacy and authenticity is concerned. Aspirations that represent freedom from subjection but also (and mainly) freedom from necessity. The art world, nonetheless, is unable to fulfil these aspirations because it is governed by the same workings as the 'working world', that is: through mechanisms of precarity and subjection.

Subjectivation within the arts is effectuated by make- and wanna-beliefs: the confirmation of one's identity with 'an image of that which I should hope to become'¹⁴ is given by the systematics of subjectivation. Subjectivation provides us with a diversity of given roles and as there are subjects that are subjected to the confinements of daily routine work (like the secretary), then by contrast there should also be subjects that are supposedly free from these contraptions - subjects that are free and unruly, like the artist. But the artist is as much a given role as any other, with the additional characteristic of being a role that in its exception serves the purpose of confirming 'normality', confirming the norm of work.

Work out of work

If the mechanisms of working-world and art-world are the same in producing different subjectivities in order to affirm and actualise the division of labour *and* the myths of art, then the prevailing question would be:

'what are the conditions for a political and existential rupture at a time when the production of subjectivity constitutes the most fundamental of capitalist concerns?'¹⁵

¹² Art (...) Work, p.41

¹³ Fraser, p.158

¹⁴ Fraser, p.25

¹⁵ Lazzarato, p.14

Instigating an ‘existential rupture’ would provide us with the opportunity to invent new forms of subjectivity ‘independent and autonomous of capitalism and its modalities of production and forms of life.’¹⁶ Neoliberalism (the current form of capitalism) has been unable to foster us with any other subjectivity than the one of ‘entrepreneur of the self’, leaving us in precarious conditions. This undesired condition of uncertainty might instigate a longing for ‘something else’, it might even give us the opportunity to think of ‘*somebody* else’. Precarity might (in the end) be the condition for breaking the established conventions, habits, and values at play. It might be the blessing in disguise to break open the ruling subjectivities of (for instance) secretary and artist. It might be the elliptic moment or rupture that pre-conditions the subverting of given roles and contexts. The rupturing ‘ellipsis’ is the ideal non-place or state of mind for investigating and criticizing the subjectivities of both work and art. In this ‘point of suspension’ we are not only able to understand the mechanisms at play but we’re also capable of creating something new. To propose *an other* subject and an *other* life.

And although ‘*through language subjectivation creates a signifying and representational web from which no one escapes*’¹⁷, language might just as well give us the opportunity to escape the entangling web. In the act of storytelling and writing, both capacities of language, we are able to create new subjectivities and new forms of life.

‘[...] as in all creation, the suspension of the ordinary course of things first of all affects subjectivity and its forms of expression, by *creating the conditions for new subjectivities*.’¹⁸

In writing a story that is not fantasy (being mostly myths), we can understand occurrences as true, even if we don’t know if they really happened. The writer (of for instance *Art (...)* work) brings order in facts but also uses imagination, for writing is not only about the describing of lives, but *is the writing or creating of lives*.

The artist, that apex and emblem of creation, ought to change its cliché-ridden parameter of ‘*I am an artist and therefore I can do whatever I want*’ to: ‘I am an artist and therefore I can be whatever I want’. Reversing the subjectivities at play, the choosing of one’s own identity - an act of sovereign self-identification, whether worker or artist - is an existential rupture in the all-pervading and overruling subjectivations under capitalist rule.

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¹⁶ Ibidem

¹⁷ Lazzarato, p.24

¹⁸ Lazzarato, p.20

Desk



Week 37

Monday – office

This morning I remembered why I'm here in the first place. It was 1999, the setting being an employment agency: one woman sitting in front of the other (desk and computer in between). Woman one typing: 'First impression: she has a nice face. Could be ok for receptionist work.'

I wasn't supposed to see that, but I did. Being offended (*and let's be honest: flattered*) I managed to squeeze myself into a slightly better position: that of the secretary. Now there is a desk between me and my boss. To soften up life's brutalities I lure myself into the thought that his status and importance might be flowing back to me (me being his extension after all).

Telephone rings.

Need to take this. Reception: guest for boss. Need to go down and take him up to the seventh floor.

Right... they're comfortably settled in his office, coffee, tea, everything under control. Continue: e-mail. 35 left to read, scan, answer, act upon. All important, all for *him*.

12.30 hours. Lunch, 30 minutes in cafeteria. Talk, laughter with colleagues (boss in office). Thank god, G. was here. Gives a little spunk to the day. We, again, had the smallest, tiniest of eye contact. Lovely.

Right. Desk again. Mail down to 10, still lots to do. Last week's minutes are breathing down my neck. Can't seem to find the right moment for it: telephone rings, guests are waiting to be welcomed, meetings to be scheduled, etc.

Ah... Mr. G. came in. A distraction I can handle (*looking great, nice suit, great hair, little shabby, great contradiction, love it*). Anyway. He wants the minutes today. Great.

To distract myself (in complete stress-denial), let's read what friend E. send me over the weekend. *Mechanical Brides*: '...cultural expectations about the behaviour of female employee's parallel expectations about communications devices: both are asked to serve as passive hosts to a drama played out by others.'

'...passive hosts, drama played out by others'. Not quite the motivational thing to read right now. 'Women regulate the flow of information by taking messages, transferring calls, receiving orders, dialling for the boss, etc. Such jobs make the female worker a human extension of a technological system, charged with mediating – rather than *producing* - messages.'

Fuck, telephone.

Tuesday – office

Forget about this day. Crazy, sick, stressed out, no lunch, mental jogging between mail and phone. What is it with this delirious, running-riot mailbox? What is it that people want from him that is so important? Well, that's not the real issue here. The issue being:

Fuck, telephone.

In the privy (which should be unisex) - having a small break *slash* hide away *slash* very much deserved elliptic moment - I thought of this: the time and effort to render all my services (eight fucking hours a day) are completely occupying: they not only occupy my brain, but also my body. My brain because of all the information I need to process, my body because of being physically tied to the chair. So... I not only *have* an occupation, I also *am* occupied - time, space and physique-wise.

Off course I immediately got frustrated with the idea that I'll probably instantly forget this quite interesting thought, once back at my desk. I need a voice-recorder, catch some of these precious insights.

I once asked my colleague why there are so little men working as secretaries. She said: 'They're not as tidy and precise as we are'. *Yeah right*. I didn't bother confronting her with the question why we, women, supposedly *are*? It wouldn't have mattered, she would've probably said 'that's just how we are'. I was tempted to send her the piece of text I read last night (I'm excerpting here, taking minutes so to speak): 'In addition to accepting low wages, women offered a number of attractive qualities to employers, including their perceived docility and agility, their willingness to perform routine work, and their lack of career ambitions.'

I don't think dearest colleague could be bothered, even if it hit here right in the face.

I didn't see Mr. G. Left at five.

18.00 hours, home, dinner, laundry, dishes, TV: nothing. Early bed, exhausted, tea and book (E. gave me another 'intellectually challenging' piece of writing. Sometimes I wonder what she is dragging me into. Can't I just simply read a novel?). Anyway, the given subject could be nice, but the style of writing *slash* used lingo *slash* the complete aura of the book annoys me. It's a catalogue, no, it's a collection of artists' writings. E. being artistically involved (*her* words) reads this stuff. She met an artist photographer at a venue (hideous places by the way) who told her about the issue of Art and Service. She thought it could be interesting for me, being a service provider myself. But then: *what's art got to do with it?*

Instead I entered a query on 'bull shit jobs'. Actually got a hit (*what the hell does that mean?*):

Growing up in a lefty, working class family, I felt this all the time: the ideological imperative to validate work as a virtue in itself; which is by the way constantly being reinforced by society at large. But there is also the reality and feeling that most work is obviously stupid, degrading and unnecessary; it is best avoided whenever possible.

Ha! I could have said that!

...there is a whole infrastructure of receptionists, janitors, computer maintenance people, which are kind of second-order bullshit jobs: *they are* actually doing something, but they're doing it to support people who are doing nothing.

I'll tell boss this tomorrow - who knows, he might be relieved.

I read on a bit and found out about movements proclaiming *The Right to be Lazy* (*why haven't I ever heard of that before?*).

...the division between anarcho-syndicalist unions and socialist unions played an important role; the latter were always asking for higher wages, while the anarchists were asking for less hours. The socialists were essentially buying into the notion that work is a virtue and consumerism is good, as long as it's managed democratically; while the anarchists were saying: 'no, the whole deal that we work more and more for more and more products, is rotten from the get-go.'

Never knew it, but supposedly I'm an anarchist.

Wrapping it up: we have a performance society here where it is mandatory to work out of moral imperatives and consumerism (the latter as a sort of fucking consolation price). We no longer live in a welfare state but (as sociologists have it) a *workfare state*. Within that state citizens are only conditionally free. If you're able to discipline yourself, you'll be left alone, but when you fail to discipline yourself, society or the government will step in, as in cases of time discipline (*thou shalt work*) or applying for a new job: the employment agency, the *miss-she-has-a-nice-face-imbecile*.

Always hated the economic smugness of daily life, always wanted a life without having to work *ever*. My latent wish - let's be blatantly honest here - is to give into laziness, dormancy, hibernation, the better curling up, vacuity as a gift, the zen-factor of meaninglessness. But no. Instead I relentlessly find myself in a state of mental jogging. In the workfare state. Sounds like a song:

'Mental Jogging in the Workfare State'

Is it? No, it's not, only hit on YouTube: 'Mental Jogging – understanding success'.

'...the impact of increased self-discipline is nowhere as visible as in the so-called 'free or autonomous creative professions'. An impressive workers' morality prevails that has no need for boss, supervisor or time clock.'

Should send this to E.

22.30 hours, getting tired, should sleep. Clock set. 07.00.

'...to force back that insane performance-society that forces us to conduct our lives in an undesired manner didn't we become too obedient too well-behaved beginning of a solution might be situated in the notion of being naughty we should be dreaming more and