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 their desk and the artist in their 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, inbeing 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 their 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]](#footnote-2) 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-off (or even precariously poor). In the case of this thesis, the categories of work and art produce the 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% arewomen), 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 believe 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 to 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]](#footnote-3) 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]](#footnote-4)

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]](#footnote-5) 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 us in an assemblage that no longer distinguishes between human and non-human, subject and object, or words and things.’ [[5]](#footnote-6)

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 first and foremost of the social or the ‘megamachine’ that produces subjectivity’.[[6]](#footnote-7) 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 theirselves. Whether as one’s own boss (the neoliberal’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 preoccupation of the subject’. [[7]](#footnote-8)

Precarization, or what is more generally called precarity, is *the* hidden driver for the positions of both worker and artist. Working as a secretary or as an artist is basically given by the necessity to ‘earn a living’. Under precarious conditions the individual is being propelled in an *immer, a* constant 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]](#footnote-9)

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 call 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 systematzation of subjectivation 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]](#footnote-10)

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 spark off a longing for autonomy and ‘sovereign self-identification’,[[10]](#footnote-11) 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 is 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]](#footnote-12)

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) 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]](#footnote-13) 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]](#footnote-14)

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 expanse 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.

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Martine Folkersma is trained as an art historian at Utrecht University, has a background in photography and works as a secretary. Recently she graduated from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy (department DOGtime IDUM). Martine is a writer of scripts, short prose text and critical discourse and performs her own scripts, whether through voice acting or through public live performances. The dual and ‘nomadic position’ of being both a worker and an artist is a starting point for making work (out of work).

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. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Signs and Machines, Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, Maurizio Lazzarato, Semiotext(e) 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Idem, p.13 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Idem, p.12 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Idem, p.13 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Idem p.14 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *State of Insecurity, Government of the Precarious*, Isabell Lorey, Verso Futures 2015, p.viii [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. 'On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs', David Graeber, *Strike! Magazine* 2013, <http://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Lorey, p.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. The Truth of Art, Boris Groys, e-flux journal #71 2016, p.9 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Museum Highlights, The writings of Andrea Fraser, Andrea Fraser, MIT Press 2015, p.42 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Art (…) Work, p.41 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Fraser, p.158 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)