Art (…) work

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The underlying text is a shortened version of the introduction to the novel-thesis ‘Art (…) work’, written for the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, department DOGtime IDUM 2017.

*Art (…) Work* shows the divergent positions, workings and subjectivities of artist and worker. 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 (in general someone with a daily, money-earning job) *or* an artist (someone who creates artworks, in general in general a practitioner in the visual arts) is a capitalist, Fordist way of assigning the individual its pre-described role and position within society. The worker mostly subjugated to place and time regimes, is in sharp contrast with the artist who is freed from these constrictions by being ‘his own boss’.

The artist (the epitome of this idea of self-reliance) has currently served neoliberalism in exemplifying this notion to us *all.* The artist has become an 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’, also as far as income and (in)security is concerned.

Both art and work deal with ‘subjectivation’[[1]](#footnote-1), the process that assigns us an identity, a sex, a profession, a nationality etc., and which divides us into categories: leaving some in being ‘bosses’ and others in being ‘workers’ or ‘artists’ (and being less well-off or maybe even precariously poor). Being ‘in service of a boss’ assigns and inscribes the individual with the worker’s role, in the case of ‘Art (…) work’ exemplified by the role of the ‘secretary’, with its accordingly feminine attributes of servitude, modesty, charm, precision and sexual innuendo. The artist, in contrast, is inscribed with notions of autonomy, self-realisation and unruliness. The being ‘one’s own boss’, the artist’s distinctive claim on autonomy, is nonetheless just as much a given role as the one of ‘secretary’. Contradictory to what one might believe, 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, which underlines the social division of labour and keeps the capitalist machinery going, 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 entrepreneurship. Neoliberalism in fact has worked and further elaborated on the artist’s myth of autonomy and self-actualisation to lure the worker into (rightfully) desiring the same: freeing oneself from the drudgeries and dulling routines of working life and the subjugation of working for a boss. Neoliberalism has been able to capitalize on these notions of individuation and self-actualisation and has upgraded them in being socially desirable *and* conditional. The artist is not only a role among roles, it has become the predominant one.

**Subjection and Precarity**

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’ entails.[[2]](#footnote-2) Subjectivation not only prescribes us certain roles in accordance with the division of labor (being a worker or a boss, being unemployed or entrepreneur, 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-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]](#footnote-4)

‘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-5)

The social or ‘megamachine’ [[6]](#footnote-6) that produces subjectivity’ not only assigns us our subjectivities and roles, 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 the neoliberal dictum of ‘self-reliance’. Self-reliance meaning the individuals capacity of caring for himself. 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’. The outcome of this situation for large groups within society is what is called *precarization.* [[7]](#footnote-7) 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’. [[8]](#footnote-8)

Under precarious conditions the individual is being propelled in a constantsurvival-mode, with hardly time left to do or think anything else. 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. [[9]](#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 (according to sociologists) 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. The production of subjectivity is paramount for the succeeding of the workfare state. If we believe in our roles and think them necessary and morally just, we contribute not only to the upholding of the performance society but also to the systematization 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.

In being ruled and governed through these ‘patterns of precarity’, we ultimately yearn for ways out of this confining labyrinth. Sparking off a longing for autonomy and ‘sovereign self-identification’[[10]](#footnote-10), which leads us into the terrain of the arts and its (supposed) autonomy.

**Autonomy and (Other) Artists’ Myths**

The logic of artistic autonomy implies that the artist works for himself and is subject only to the demands of his own conscience and inner drives. The studio, the (work)place that is shut off from daily worries and practicalities, is the apex of these notions. Placed at the other end of society, this is the place where the artist can reside in utter solitude. ‘Autonomy’ being a tricky and complicated notion, this representation of the artist is but half the truth. Strict autonomy does not exist, the artist is related *and* subject to the workings of the world. Autonomy exists only as a desire or illusion in being the utter dream of self-determination. But the illusion becomes ‘delusional’ in being unattainable – we are interrelated to and (in)*formed* by others.

The ‘real mechanisms at play’ within the arts and the art world can be investigated by looking closely at art’s conditions and by examining its claims on legitimacy, autonomy and self-determination. These ‘parameters’ can be questioned in their sustainability, 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’, its unseeable conditions are being explicated.

According to *Andrea Fraser* (well-known for her institutional critique), 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-11) These struggles determine the boundaries and membership in the field, 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 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-12) Maintaining their professional status in comparison to their colleagues is a never ending and self-strengthening loop.

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 and 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 needs it to dream of ‘something else’. 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 prevents artists to regulate their own economic conditions. 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. She 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-1)
2. *Signs and Machines, Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, Maurizio Lazzarato, Semiotext(e) 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Idem, p.13 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Idem, p.12 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Idem, p.13 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Idem p.14 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Its literal meaning being ‘uncertain’ and ‘dangerously likely to fall or collapse’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *State of Insecurity, Government of the Precarious*, Isabell Lorey, Verso Futures 2015, p.viii [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Socialists movements and socialist worker unions have played their part in this upgrading of work: ‘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.’’ “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs”, David Graeber, *Strike! Magazine* 2013,

   <http://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “The Truth of Art”, Boris Groys, *e-flux journal* #71 2016, p.9 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Museum Highlights, The writings of Andrea Fraser*, Andrea Fraser, MIT Press 2015, p.42 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Art (…) Work*, p.41 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)