

# PERFORMING THE SYSTEM

Art, Labor and Productivity  
in Evolving Economic Landscapes



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# **Performing the System**

## **Art, Labor and Productivity in Evolving Economic Landscapes**

Master's Thesis by Maria Orciuoli

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how contemporary art engages with shifting notions of work and productivity, mapping transformations from industrial to digital economies. Chapter 1 situates these changes within an historical continuum, from the sanctification of work during the Protestant Reformation to the division of labor in industrial capitalism and the algorithmic management of the digital age. Central to this inquiry is the impact of the Creator Economy and the commodification of selfhood on the relationship between identity and work.

Chapter 2 examines how artistic practices have responded to these economic and technological shifts, analyzing the evolving role of the artist as a worker and their exploration of industrial processes and technological systems. A comparison between László Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings* (1922–1923) and Lauren Lee McCarthy's *SOMEONE* (2019) exposes the spectrum of artistic attitudes toward technology. Moholy-Nagy embraces industrial efficiency as an artistic possibility, celebrating the transformative potential of technology in line with modernist optimism. In contrast, McCarthy critiques the commodification of human presence within digital systems, focusing on their impact on privacy and social relationships. Drawing on Jack Burnham's *Systems Esthetics* (1968) and Helen Molesworth's *Work Ethic* (2003) as theoretical frameworks, the chapter traces the 20th-century shift in artistic focus from producing objects to staging processes. Works by Bruce Nauman, Tehching Hsieh, Cindy Sherman, and Lynn Hershman Leeson serve as key case studies in exploring the interrelationship between labor, identity, and technology. Further, the chapter examines counter-strategies to the industrialization of creativity, focusing on Amalia Ulman's online performance *Excellences & Perfections* (2014) and Sondra Perry's *Graft And Ash For A Three Monitor Workstation* (2016), which foreground the labor of self-representation and its entanglement with digital platforms.

Chapter 3 presents *4everfeed* (2023–2024), my performance-based video installation, as a case study to investigate labor, identity, and algorithmic control in the Creator Economy. While drawing inspiration from pop culture and social media, the work is deeply rooted in personal experience and the search for a better life. Central to its creation is the adoption of the generative paradigm to stage advertising scripts generated by TikTok's Creative Assistant. The AI-generated scripts—structurally designed with a hook, body, and call to action—were enacted as live performances, where I, as the fictional character Alessia\_3K, became the product. If Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* anticipated the commodification of identity through mass media and influencer culture, *4everfeed* extends this inquiry to the automation of identity production. By incorporating artifacts like cardboard boxes and a hand truck—symbols of global supply chains and digital platform economies—the installation positions itself in a historical continuum with artworks like Joseph Beuys' *Sled* (1969), engaging with broader themes of labor, survival, and mobility. By weaving together personal, historical, and cultural narratives, *Performing the System* does not propose a unified theory but rather an interconnected set of ideas and reflections on economic shifts, human resilience, and the search for meaning in times when uncertainty takes on new forms.