

Wages for and against Art Work: On Economy, Autonomy, and the Future of Artistic Labour

In her article, Katja Praznik deconstructs the idea of artistic work as an expression of individual creativity independent from the economy and its processes. She demonstrates that this persistent ideology of autonomy of the arts contributes to the precarious position of artists and the exploitative working relations in the art sector. Instead, she suggests to look at artistic work as labour, embedded in economy and subject to the economic relations. Taking inspiration from the arguments for the recognition of invisible labour put forward by Marxist feminists, Praznik calls for a demystification of creativity and supports the imperative of artistic remuneration, as a necessary step towards a broader goal of redefining value and labour in our society.

I. Art and economy

At the end of this pandemic summer, I presented my research on unpaid labour in the arts at a conference that had as its topic precarity and self-management. I was invited by the organisers since my work is based on the analysis of the legacy of Yugoslav self-management and how the socialist political system grappled with the relationship between art and labour, i.e. how it integrated the idea of artistic labour into its political economy (Praznik 2021). This integration, I argue, was quite successful for the first two and a half decades of socialist Yugoslavia's existence and transformed the invisible labour of artists into a form of paid, socially protected professional work. My presentation at the conference, however, focused on the final two decades of Yugoslav socialism when this promising state of affairs took a turn and resulted in the emergence of precarious working conditions in the field of cultural production – a condition that has only gotten worse after Yugoslavia's violent breakup and during the ensuing neoliberal devastation of the socialist welfare state regime, which also marks our present. I explained that one aspect of why art workers in socialist Yugoslavia became precarious workers was their reliance on the ideals of the autonomy of art, which as Pierre Bourdieu notably argued, is founded on a disavowal of economy (Bourdieu 1992) – an argument that I will elaborate further in this essay. In gist, however, Western art is grounded in a peculiar ideology that defines art as a realm of freedom where matters of money don't apply and where artists should create and disregard economic aspects. Ever since I entered the art scene as a professional art worker at the turn of the millennium and encountered so many artist and art workers, myself included, struggling to make ends meet, I find these views quite inane and contradictory but also extremely pervasive and resilient to critique. Needless to say, my attempts to deconstruct these precepts by employing a materialist labour-centred perspective, pointing out that artists are not some ethereal beings that can live on thin air and create out of nothing, are not always met with enthusiasm. I am often asked 'but what about art?', or faulted for promoting 'unionist' logic or discourse. This time around, however, I got a new, peculiar question from an audience member, philosopher to boot, who attended the conference on precarity and self-management and asked: 'What do you mean by economy?'

The question captures a contradiction that is symptomatic of the social relations of art production and is succinctly expressed in an infamous dictum (used by another philosopher in a fabulous piece about artists as workers): 'You are an artist, which means you're not doing it for the money.' (See, for example, Lesage 2005, 93) This may be very true and in line with the empirical reality, but how are these artists supposed to pay their bills, a nuisance that befalls artists too. Surely not by creating art. Perhaps, however, they could do so, if we leave the abstract world shaped by privileged Western philosophy, and begin to understand artists' creative powers *as labour* that can and should be remunerated. Alternatively, we could also not pay them. But then we all, including artists, would be better off with a basic universal income that would allow us to practice art, or anything else we may love to do, and not worry

about the economy. Clearly, we would also be able to spend our time ‘doing nothing’ and not have to write texts about what kind of role artists play on the economic stage and in what kind of economic relations they engage despite the fact that some philosophers think that art has nothing to do with the capitalist economy. Or, that some philosophers are having a hard time to see the connections between art and economy and appear to be confused about what is the meaning of economy when we talk about art.

Alas, the present is characterised by extreme and very explicit issues related to the economy in its contemporary neoliberal capitalist form. This particular mode of economy, which in simplest terms means ‘the way we provide ourselves with the necessary material provisions’ (Graeber 2018, chap. 7, sec. 3), is founded on the structural exploitation of human labour in its myriad shapes. The emphasis here is on the compulsion to labour or work because it is how the majority of the world’s population secures its subsistence. Put bluntly, one must work – and be paid for it – in order to ‘make a living’, or one is dependent on someone who performs paid work. Except the one percent, of course. As Kathi Weeks points out: ‘Work is crucial not only to those whose lives are centred around it, but also, in a society that expects people to work for wages, to those who are expelled or excluded from work and marginalised in relation to it.’ (Weeks 2011, 2) However, common cultural perceptions of art in the West rest upon a curious conception that this realm of human labour is somehow separate from matters pertaining to economy. This idea’s formidable expression is epitomised by the concept of autonomy of art that emerged along with the modern Western system of the arts during the eighteenth century and is endemic to a capitalist mode of production (Bürger 1984; 1998).

What is more, art in the West is based on an ideology that what artists do is not work, and the issue of poorly paid or nonremunerated labour in the arts is its ubiquitous corollary. As scholars and numerous cultural policy reports tend to observe, the largest subsidy for the arts comes in the form of unpaid labour (Neil 2019, 6; Ross 2001, 6). I term this condition the paradox of art. Its central feature is the idea that art is not labour but an essentialised expression of individual creativity or an individual need for self-expression, which is why art and its results appear as something that is independent, or autonomous from the economy. Then what artists do is not work but creation, a capacity ascribed to deities. In other words, persistent cultural (mis)representations of artistic labour in the West are founded on a mystification of the artist’s labour and render it invisible.

I am not arguing that artists are some delusional group of people, or that what they do is not meaningful and valuable. Quite the contrary, my aim is to dispel these pernicious dogmas that essentialise artistic work because they contribute to the exploitation of artists’ labour and therefore to exploitative working relations in the arts. Philosophers who historically established and promoted these ideas about art’s apartness from pecuniary concerns (i.e. the economy) and ascribed it to creative powers of an individual could surely be charged with establishing this delusional impropriety. To a great extent, this state of affairs resulted from the unexamined class position of these Western bourgeois philosophers, who declared art and the aesthetic judgment a universal value and suggested that those who engage in such a noble

undertaking should not think of it as a money-making profession. What classes could afford to do such labour, then at the end of eighteenth century, and can afford to do it now, in the twenty-first?

If we are to think about the problem by considering the economy, then we can see the dark side of the dazzling life of artists. The mystification of artistic labour as nonlabour and as a realm of freedom makes it possible to divorce this work from other kinds of labour and from economic needs and rights. Even critical studies about art, autonomy, and labour commonly consider art as nonlabour and take it as a given rather than as an ideological category that needs scrutiny. Some scholars discuss labour in the arts but still regard art as exceptional non-commodified emancipated work (see, for example, Beech 2016). Others argue that artists have become the model workers in the era of neoliberal capitalism (see, for example, Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Nonetheless what they fail to address is that this transformation is internally vested in an unexamined instrumentalisation of aesthetic autonomy. Creative work, I argue, is devalued precisely because of its exceptionality that contributes to the invisibility of artistic labour, and is in turn supported by the idea of the autonomy of art. The bourgeois ideal of autonomous art is a symptom of a larger structural and ideological problem that obscures artistic labour as a particular form of exploitation. Moreover, it begs the question, who and under what conditions can afford to practice art as non-commodified emancipatory labour. What are the benefits of arguing for autonomy and the separation of art and the economy then, and how politically pertinent are such views? These are urgent questions today in the era of neoliberal capitalism, in which a global pandemic ruthlessly exposed all its fallacies, such as the lack of basic social security, and the vulnerability of art and its paradoxical relation to the economy.

Let me illustrate my point here by an obvious, rhetorical question. How much free art have you enjoyed during the three-or-more-month lockdown due to the global pandemic? And why do you think art should be available for free while at the same time you feel it's perfectly fine to pay Netflix or Amazon or Spotify or whatever online platform you may have a paid subscription for and from which art workers making the art you are enjoying will see pitiful amounts? It would behove us, at this historic moment, to rethink the point made by Andrea Fraser after the 2008 financial crash and ensuing Occupy Wall Street movement. 'Despite the radical political rhetoric that abounds in the art world, censorship and self-censorship reign when it comes to confronting its economic conditions, except in marginalised (often self-marginalised) arenas where there is nothing to lose – and little to gain – in speaking truth to power.' (Fraser 2011, 124) When if not now will we confront the neoliberal powers that profess the importance of creativity while they rely on our need for self-expression and desire for autonomy and force us to compete on an artistic labour market without providing either fair payment or welfare protection?

Neoliberal rationality as the all-encompassing condition that does not define merely the type of economy but also pertains to issues of governance and defines new normative ways of conduct (Dardot and Laval 2013), is in fact based on some of the most cherished ideals of Western art, creativity and autonomy in particular. While the central principle of neoliberalism lies

in the promotion of competition and therefore defines all areas of human life as a market, creativity and autonomy are its valuable assistants, especially in the realm of work. Neoliberalism has caused a transformation of work that is often discussed in the context of the paradigmatic shift in capitalist economy from Fordist (industrial) economic paradigm to post-Fordist (service-based) economic paradigm and a new rise of precarious working conditions.

II. Art and autonomy

Post-Fordist neoliberal rationality ‘liberated’ workers, encouraging their autonomy and creativity, as opposed to the stifling effects of the Fordist paradigm in which workers were tied to rigidly controlled workplaces. Externally, the transformation divorced these workers from the social conditions of production and survival by imposing on them the burden of welfare provision, such as social security, healthcare, and retirement funding. Neoliberalism redefined employment relations in legal and economic terms. The hallmark of neoliberal transformation of work is the rise of the so-called self-employed workers, which resulted in a disenfranchisement of social security and labour rights. Self-employed workers need to secure not only payment for the work they do, they also need to fund all other costs that used to be covered by employers or was subsidised by welfare state mechanisms.

Internally, however, the transformation of work is vested in the instrumentalisation of autonomy of artistic labour and ideas of creative genius/creativity. The specific form of neoliberal instrumentalisation of creativity is an internal transformation of work. Artistic labour became the laboratory for the neoliberal rationality that instrumentalises aesthetic ideas of creative genius and autonomy to promote self-sufficient, self-relying subjects. Under neoliberalism we don’t work to earn a living, rather we do what we love and love what we do. Work is no longer seen as a process through which we also secure our livelihood but as a psychological category of self-expression. Sergio Bologna calls this process a dissolving of the notion of labour (Bologna 2014). And this dissolution is importantly vested precisely in the founding pillars of Western art, where work is by definition invisible and beyond matters related to subsistence and supported by ideals of autonomy of art that define the art practice as something unrelated to economic processes. Disarticulation of art from subsistence in the interest of articulating the value of autonomy produces false dichotomies, such as creative work versus paid work, and situates art at the heart of twenty-first-century forms of capitalist exploitation.

I am not arguing that unfair working conditions and unpaid labour in the arts are caused by the autonomy of art, but that the autonomy of art and labour’s invisibility coincide. This invisibility is partially facilitated by the ideology of autonomy of art because the latter rests on a separation of art from its socio-economic context rather than an acknowledgment of how they are imbricated. The lack of recognition perpetuates the mystification of the labour process and the normalisation of unpaid work in the arts. A ubiquitous contemporary precept that precisely embodies this contradiction is the aforementioned doctrine ‘do what you love, love what you do.’ It signals a

‘privatisation of work’ as if work (and employment) was a completely private relation rather than a social system and a site of power relations (Weeks 2011, 4). Such doctrines suspend work’s relation to the matters of securing subsistence in the context of a capitalist economy, where most of us have to work to live. They depoliticise work and turn it into a question of status, self-fulfilment and identity.

In the context of art, matters are worse precisely because art is understood as creation, not work and is buttressed by an ideology of autonomy that depoliticises working conditions and class relations in the arts. The tension between the two trends affects the problematic (often absent) remuneration of artistic labour and exploitative working conditions. The prestige and perceived exceptionality of artistic work tend to eclipse the injustice of the precarious, often unpaid labour that sustains art as an institution. In other words, the ideal of autonomy operates within an inequitable socioeconomic structure that disavows the economic pressures faced by art workers. The erasure of work from art, or the institutionalisation of art as a form of invisible labour is the flip side of establishing the autonomy of art as a depoliticised category that disavows economy and neutralises the class dimension of art production. Why should autonomy and creativity have to be divorced from fair payment, welfare protection, and artists’ labour rights? Autonomy does not mean independence from economy, especially not under neoliberal capitalism where social domination and oppression is organised in economic terms. Maintaining such an ideal of autonomy that is based on disavowal does not lead to any kind of empowerment, rather it leads to problematic twisted dependence. True autonomy means an acknowledgment of the interdependence between art and economy and a recognition that art has a part on the economic stage. This will allow us to define what roles we want to play on this stage and what kind of relations we want to build.

The conditions of disavowed economy that the Western aesthetic discourse of autonomy reproduces also created the context in which it is possible to ask what we mean by economy when we discuss the issues of art and labour and precarious working conditions of artists. By now, tons of edited volumes and articles have been written to address the problem of the economy and the arts, some with such pointed titles as ‘it is the political economy, stupid’ but seldom has this issue been addressed as a (self)critique of Western art and its precepts, such as autonomy and invisibility of labour in the arts that reproduce structures of exploitation and make the entire institution of Western art part of the problem rather than the solution.

III. The future of artistic labour

One politically productive and insightful perspective to address these problems is provided by critical Marxist feminists through their analysis of the invisibility of women’s domestic labour. In fact, any analysis that exposes the invisible forms of labour will necessarily invoke well-known feminist analyses of the invisibility of women’s domestic labour, and the concept of ‘housewifisation’ or ‘housewifed labour’ as the term describing flexible,

atypical, devalued, and unprotected forms of labour (Dalla Costa and James 1973; Federici 1975; Mies 1986; Mies 2013).

Marxist feminists in the 1970s articulated a prominent critique of domestic labour by revealing how its social and economic devaluation derived from the essentialising link to the female character or physique. The transformation of domestic work into an internal need, aspiration, and an attribute of the female personality – its essentialisation or naturalisation – made unpaid housework invisible as a form of labour and its economic as well as cultural devaluation socially acceptable. Because housework was viewed as a woman’s natural calling – it was ‘transformed into a natural attribute of female physique and personality’ and thereby altered into non-work, invisible work (Federici 1975, 2). In her seminal text *Wages Against Housework* from 1975, Silvia Federici emphasised that ‘[the] unwaged condition of housework has been the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work, thus preventing women from struggling against it.’ (Federici 1975, 2)

Moreover, the feminist analysis of the division between the private and public sphere and women’s delegation to the realm of the former reveal that autonomy in the context of art is not only a problematic ideology, which like any good ideology obscures the social relations of production. Feminist scholars also uncovered that the autonomy of art understood as apartness from the market has in Western societies paradoxically relied on class and gendered notions of domestic labour. Mary Poovey points to the fact that the ideological construct of art as an autonomous social sphere that is unrelated or suspended from the market logic uses unpaid invisible domestic labour as the model for artistic labour (Poovey 1988).

If we undertake a comparative analysis between the invisibility of domestic and artistic labour, we uncover the very mechanisms that drive the economic exploitation of artists’ labour to this day. However, this comparison also exposes important differences between these two types of work, which sharpen the paradoxical condition of art. Two theoretical contributions in feminist epistemology are significant when we theorise the invisibility of artistic labour. First, the feminist analysis reveals that invisibility of work rests on the separation of public and domestic/private sphere (or, the sphere of production and reproduction) under capitalism whereby the latter is excluded from the economy but is nevertheless a site of value-creation and social and economic exploitation. Secondly, the feminist viewpoint reveals that invisibility of labour is based in the essentialisation of particular types of work or skills, which leads to their economic and/or social and cultural devaluation. Put differently, the first contribution helps us understand that defining art as non-labour under capitalism leads to invisibility, that is economic devaluation and exploitation. The second one helps us understand that essentialisation is the operating logic behind the invisibility.

In the sense that artistic labour remains to be understood as non-work, as an expression of an inborn gifted, creative personality, it parallels the understanding of domestic labour as the natural attribute of a female subject. Feminised domestic labour has been historically conceived as women’s natural calling, an extension of essentialising feminine traits. In the same way, artistic labour was established as nonwork that originates in a subject’s nature, inner

calling, inherent artistic genius, or talent (Reckwitz 2017; Woodmansee 1995). Similar essentialising mechanisms animate domestic labour and artistic labour then. In both cases, particular skills are essentialised, declared or culturally constructed as naturally stemming from the subject's essence or nature. Neither is defined as work; they are invisible in relation to the process of production. By equating artistic labour with nebulous or theological notions of creativity or ideals of self-expression, the essentialising of artistic work produces similar consequences for the economic condition of artists: poorly, if at all, remunerated labour.

The similarities between domestic and artistic labour are striking, but for a critique of invisible artistic labour the distinctions are also revealing. While domestic labour is selfless, aesthetic discourse manages to remove labour by making the self visible. On the one hand, artist labour is essentialised and hence defined as nonwork that is poorly, if at all, remunerated. On the other hand, it is elevated as an act of creation and self-expression and thus admired and glorified. The essentialisation contributes to the fact that artistic and domestic work become invisible, i.e. is economically exploited. While women's work is selfless and undifferentiated labour in service of humanity, artistic labour is defined as self-affirming individualistic exceptionality. The distinction reveals that the artist's reward is the promise of self-realisation and self-expression. Because artistic labour is an expression of self and therefore comes naturally, it should not be paid, it is not work. Still, as with gender, any form of essentialising by definition contributes to exploitation.

A demystification of creativity and its connection to the ideology of the artistic genius have profound consequences for a critique of artistic labour. Calling art labour then implies a rejection of artistic labour as the expression of creative genius or essentialised creativity and the social role that capitalism intended for artists on the economic stage. A role in which artists serve as the embodiment of individualistic self-reliance and self-sufficiency propelled by the spirit of creativity and desire for self-actualisation. In the twentieth century, artists heavily probed the ideology of the artistic genius and that of the author; some tried to divorce it from ingenuity and to establish art as labour even (Arvatov 2017; Kiaer 2005). In the capitalist context, however, their strategies of demystifying the author and exposing artistic labour as work had ambiguous effects. These attempts didn't bring much change to the economic hardship of art workers nor succeeded to demystify the problem of unpaid artistic labour. Rather, the dynamics seem to have gone in the opposite direction. Artists, with their presumed power to persevere and be flexible became the model neoliberal workers (see, for example, Ross 2003 and Brouillette 2013, 30–43), but their earnings are not something one would want to model.

The term invisible labour as devised by feminism then becomes a critical tool in unpacking the exploitation and gendered character of artistic labour. However, while feminists have criticised this predicament, the discourse of aesthetics and art theory uncritically perpetuates ideas about artistic practice as non-work. Moreover, the value of Marxist feminist analysis also lies in the fact that they pointed out the problem of the definition of labour as one strategic point to politicise the problem of work and payment, or the lack thereof. As I pointed out it is not strategic to define artistic labour as nonwork

because it then becomes excluded from the hegemonic social contract under which people are paid to work and it is how they make ends meet. Certain types of labour that are not defined as labour are excluded because they presumably don't have an economic value – which is one of the biggest ruses of capitalism. Clearly both domestic labour and artistic labour have economic value from the standpoint of the capitalist system, nonetheless they are, out of various motives, not defined as 'real' work.

Marxist feminists redefined domestic work as labour, but the end point of this analysis was not simply to be paid for housework. Quite the contrary, this exposure of invisibility of certain kinds of labour was central for a larger political project, which aims to abolish paid labour altogether. That is why Federici's manifesto was titled *Wages against – and not for – Housework*. As a political perspective it revealed the exploitation and economic devaluation of domestic work. It was and still is a method of addressing that all work has value, even if the capitalist system denies certain human activities the status of work and therefore ignores their economic value.

Commodification of any kind of human activity is surely not a solution, at least not an anti-capitalist solution. It is no news that what we need to change is the system itself and redefine the concept of value and labour. The task is to de-commodify work and divorce it from being the source of our livelihood. So, the point of my critique of autonomy and invisibility of artistic labour then might seem just another academic exercise in splitting hairs, but the ultimate goal is to contribute to social transformation, one that leads us beyond capitalism and the compulsion to work. The larger social movement around Universal Basic Income offers some interesting solutions in terms of how to achieve a detachment of work from income by offering a reasonable standard of living to all. It has become – in the past months and due to the impending economic crisis exacerbated by the global pandemic – a more and more feasible and credible solution. In this case, the whole argument to understand art as a form of work I propose, is simply to recognise art as a type of human activity that anyone can do and to demystify its attachment to essentialising notions of creativity that turn art into a religious cult that is presumably the domain of the talented and gifted and controlled by the rules of the Western institution of art. Nonetheless, until an emancipated understating of art becomes our reality and while we must engage in eliminating the capitalist compulsion to work to live, we should in the meantime demand wages for art work.

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