

Artistic Work as Symbolic Capital

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Female artists and performers are at the top of the scale of precarious work relations in post-Fordist society. Their work is undervalued and seldom paid. This article deals with the issues arising from the controversial relations between the cultural, social and economic value of their work. How to re-valorize artistic work performed by women? In providing the answer to this central question, the value of artworks will be defined in terms of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital and in the context of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. The article argues that a contemporary alternative can be sought in the new chain of value accumulation, in which the surplus-value of the artwork is created by shifting its symbolic value into a direct relationship to the material resources. This point will be illustrated with the art projects presented at City of Women, an international festival of contemporary arts based in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

City of Women as the Art Scene

Since its founding in 1995, the City of Women festival has been problematizing the position of women in society and the valorizing of women's work. It has been organized by the non-governmental Association for the Promotion of Women in Culture. Every October, the festival hosts female artists, intellectuals and activists from all over the world. Its main aim is to enhance the visibility of high-quality and innovative artworks by female artists that experiment with, blur or cross boundaries between various fields of art and media, their genres and historical contexts. This transdisciplinary festival does not have a permanent venue, but continuously searches for new ones, ranging from deserted buildings and marginal venues (such as Metelkova – the former army barracks of the Yugoslav National Army that became an art squat and the centre of Ljubljana's alternative art after Slovenia separated from Yugoslavia and became an independent country in 1991) to eminent cultural institutions (such as the central Slovenian cultural and congress centre, Cankarjev dom). The festival aims to populate its venues with innovative artistic events and thus literally turn Ljubljana into a City of Women. In so doing,

it raises the political awareness of the female perspective and the value of their (artistic) work.

City of Women is a very good example of an art scene. Let us first deal with the concept of the art scene as defined by the sociologist Pascal Gielen. Rarely subject to scientific research, the 'scene' is discussed by Gielen in the context of the world of art. He regards the art scene not only as an efficient production unit for creative work and collaboration in a post-Fordist economy, but also as a clever model for economic exploitation:

Within the prevailing post-Fordist economy – with its fluid working hours; high levels of mobility, hyper-communication and flexibility; and special interest in creativity and performance – the scene is a highly functional social-organizational form.¹ (Gielen 2009, 9)

It is characterized by social cohesion and shared identity, which gives rise to an extremely attractive creative environment where the boundaries between the private and working domains as well as their formal and informal character, have been blurred. Along the lines of Paolo Virno (from whom Gielen's argument is derived), the art scene is marked by the fact that the qualitative difference between working time and non-working time has been abolished.² The art scene gives rise to a pleasant and informal working environment, in which unpaid production time is systemically embedded into non-working time, and paid working time reduced to a minimum for which the lowest price tariffs applies.

In short, it involves a work ethic in which work is always enjoyable, or should be; in which dynamism is boosted unconditionally by young talent; and in which commitment outstrips money. (Gielen 2009, 15)

This makes the art scene an ideal social formation for economic exploitation.

In 2004, the working conditions at the City of Women festival were researched by the feminist artists Laurence Rassel, Marie-Françoise Stewart-Ebel and Wendy Van Wynsberghe in *Cuisine Interne Keuken – Stirring the Pot and Showing the Seams*, a multidisciplinary project combining anthropological research and an artistic event. It is part of the wider research project entitled *Cuisine Interne Keuken*, focusing on the precarious working relations within the art scene. Since 2003, this research has been carried out at several festivals in Brussels,

1. As Gielen points out (2009, 13), the word 'scene' is used in alternative discursive settings: 'For example, the term "scene" is rarely used to indicate socially appropriate professions or groups. We do not refer to "the scene" in relation to civil servants, bankers, the police or heterosexuals; but we do refer to the art scene, the theatre scene, the gay scene and, not to be forgotten, the drug or criminal scene.' In short, the term 'scene' is connected with creativity and innovation. Gielen sees the lack of scholarly interest in 'the social scene' as quite surprising 'since the scene is perhaps the format best suited to social intercourse' (Gielen 2009, 9).
2. Presupposing the abolishment of the difference between working time and non-working time, Paolo Virno (in the fourth and fifth theses of *A Grammar of the Multitude*), sets the hypothesis that 'production time' also comprises non-working time. Virno (2004) bases his argument on Marx's differentiation between the 'period of working' (the time used by workers in the production process) and 'production time' (which is generally longer than the period of working and in which capital is not engaged in the production process).

Ljubljana and Montreal.³ In Ljubljana, the crew of artists occupied City of Women with their mobile research station: between the individual performances, exhibitions, films and other events, they interviewed the festival participants about how they made a living. In doing so, they used an audio recording device and a standardized questionnaire. They asked about the age, education and occupation of the random volunteers they interviewed, about how many people they took care of and whether they were able to support themselves with their work or occupation. They asked detailed questions on the interviewees' work conditions – whether the artists worked alone or in groups (with whom and for what purpose), how they charged for their services, whether they had a pricelist, who their clients were (public authorities, institutions, private clients, companies, audiences), what kind of equipment they used and whose investment it was (collective buying, loan, gift), whether they retained ownership of their work once it was transferred, etc. They also asked the interviewees to sketch their workspace. Surprisingly, most of the artists worked at home (chiefly in their kitchens or bedrooms). This research (not only at City of Women, but also at the other researched events) confirmed that non-work socialization in the art scene usually results in a poorly paid life.

On the basis of the selected data, an audio performance was created – a witty patchwork of interview excerpts, audio fragments and video recordings, connected by the sound of a sewing machine. In Ljubljana, the *Cuisine Interne Keuken* project also included a 'contextual breakfast', where the project authors, artists and experts were able to share their experiences and problematize the working conditions affecting workers active in the arts in a post-Fordist economy.

The group also created an online portal for artists to exchange ideas and work methods, as well as for data interpretation. Let's accept the invitation and focus on the comparison of the devalued work of female artists with the underrated and unpaid work performed by women in daily life, which includes housework, care, emotional work and maintenance.

Artistic Work versus Housework

A comparison between artistic work and housework was already made by Italian feminist conceptual artists in the 1970s. They revised Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and showed that unpaid housework is direct productive work inscribed into the circulation of capitalist value production. Marina Vischmidt argues that the discussions of Italian feminist conceptual artists on the valorization of subjectivity in contemporary Western post-Fordist economies remains highly topical today, since:

These economies are inextricably tied to a new global division of labour, the outsourcing of manufacturing and the commodification of previously state-supported

3. The project is documented at: <http://cik.constantvzw.org/history.php?lng=en> (accessed 10 June 2018). Its title is based on wordplay: 'cuisine' and 'keuken' mean 'kitchen' in French and Dutch; 'cuisine interne' and 'interne keuken', however, mean 'behind the scene', denoting something that is not visible and is sometimes taboo.

or non-marketised services, the economic and policy focus on the production of ‘experiences’ and ‘social relations’ as commodities, rather than objects. (Vischmidt 2010, 309)

She points out that the tendency to produce social relations as a commodity has been inscribed into the creation of capital from the very beginning. In the first book of *Capital*, Marx states:

The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. [...] I call this fetishism. (Marx 1976, 165)

Commodity fetishism shows the relations between humans as relations between things. Value arises from the process of the exchange that takes place between the producers of labour products, i.e. in a social process. Exchange is namely always a reflection of a social relation. Value is therefore an effect of trade economics, which has an ideological dimension. As the Italian feminist artists demonstrate, housework is an example of a service that is integrated into the production of social relations, which, in turn, are always subjected to the configuration of the (ideological) forces established in a certain social-political space. They explored the value of housework in a certain historical and geopolitical context, in which they attempted to revalorize the symbolic value or – in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms – the symbolic capital of artistic work.

Pierre Bourdieu expands the concept of capital beyond the financial dimension. He regards capital as accumulated labour and any resource that enables the generation of profit in a given social field. In addition to three fundamental types of capital (economic, social and cultural capital), he also develops symbolic capital as a special form of capital, defining it as

[...] all that is referred to under the term *nesba*, that is, the network of affines and relationships that is held through the set of commitments and debts of honour, rights and duties accumulated over the successive generations, and which can be mobilized in extra-ordinary circumstances. (Bourdieu 2010, 119)

Symbolic capital refers to symbolic practices that form ‘the market of symbolic goods’ (Bourdieu 1996). People perceive it as prestige, honour and recognition, but it is misrecognized as capital. In other words, symbolic capital is ‘denied capital, recognized as legitimate, that is, misrecognized as capital’; however, ‘recognition, acknowledgement, in the sense of gratitude aroused by benefits can be one of the foundations of this recognition.’ (Bourdieu 2010: 118)

According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital is often connected to material goods. An example would be the gift exchanges between the families of newlyweds. This exchange involves money, but is not a financial transaction and cannot be considered a proper economic exchange of material goods; rather, it is an acknowledgement and honouring of the new kinship and social bonds. This is also evident from so-called exhibitions of symbolic capital:

When one knows that symbolic capital is credit, but in the broadest sense, a kind of advance, a credence, that only the group's belief can grant those who give it best symbolic and material guarantees, it can be seen that the exhibition of symbolic capital [...] is one of the mechanisms which (no doubtly universally) make capital go to capital.' (Bourdieu 2010, 120)

The social relations weaved by the quiet, persistent yet often invisible work of women, can also be exhibited as symbolic capital. Women's work, be it housework or artistic work, can be revalorized today by demonstrating its value as symbolic capital and presenting its embeddedness in the circuit of service exchanges in the fields of economic, cultural and social capital. In this, women's work can reveal itself as the most material form of capital, i.e. economic capital; as cultural capital in the form of cultural goods, knowledge or competences; and as social capital, which arises from participation in social networks. This is also how the value production of the women's work at City of Women takes place.

Generally hidden behind domestic walls, housework was wittily brought into the open by the Croatian conceptual artist Sanja Iveković in her artistic intervention *Attention: Women at Work!* (2006). The artist changed the roadwork sign from showing a man with a spade to that of a female figure with a spade. The altered sign had a caption about the quantity of unpaid household work: 'On average, employed men devote 14,5 hrs a week to housework; employed women do so 25 hrs a week.' The intervention took place at the crossroads of Komenskega Street and Resljeva Street – two heavily trafficked streets in the Ljubljana centre. The altered traffic sign pointed out the gender division of labour and redefined the fields of exploitation and emancipation: unpaid housework, which is still mainly women's domain, was introduced into the field of paid, but still undervalued male work. The traffic sign warned of the symbolic capital that women invest in society free of charge.

This is only one of the numerous artistic events at City of Women that problematize the working conditions on the art scene, presenting female work from the perspective of commodified social relations and recognizing them as symbolic capital. These projects can be understood as exhibitions of symbolic capital. Let us have a look at the selected examples of how symbolic capital participates in the spheres of social, cultural and economic capital.

In 2002, a free exchange of artistic and therapeutic services took place in the scope of the *Women's Taxi* action by the Slovenian artist Aprilija Lužar. The artist took up the role of taxi driver (an occupation that is chiefly men's domain). She provided female victims of violence with free therapy by a professional therapist who accompanied them on their rides through the streets of Ljubljana. The participation in the project simultaneously placed the women's confessions into the context of artistic work. Their message to the public was clear: violence to women is not only the problem of the victims as individuals, but a wider social issue that needs to be tackled by the educational and medical institutions, the police, the court system and other social institutions. This mobile artistic action gave rise to a symbolic alchemy in which the donated artistic and therapeutic work generated a wider social

profit in the field of social capital. It is worth mentioning that the *Women's Taxi* project also received an award at the V-Day – Stop Rape international contest (organized by the US activist Eve Ensler).

A unique acknowledgement of women's work took place at the opening of City of Women in 2009. The refreshments at the opening consisted of traditional Bosnian and Herzegovinian dishes, prepared for the occasion by the artists Danijela Dugandžić Živanović, Lana Čmajčanin, Leila Čmajčanin, Adela Jušić and Alma Suljević. The dishes were made with the ingredients that were available in Sarajevo at the time of war and were provided to its inhabitants by humanitarian organizations. The opening was a credit to women, who find ways of 'making something out of nothing' and making their families survive even in times of crisis. At the festival, the artists carried out the performance entitled *Bujrum – Help Yourselves*. The food preparation process was a painful experience for them and was not open to the public; they attended the spread together with the visitors. In the company of the visitors, an exchange of the symbolic and material components of their work took place, for which they received an unsolicited gift: appreciation, which filled painful experiences with transformational power.

The symbolic capital of female work also has economic value on the market. This was demonstrated in *Milk 2002–2003*, a project by the Croatian artist Kristina Leko. Its aim was to highlight the problems faced by Zagreb milkmaids in the period of adjustment to EU economic standards. The new working conditions could only be met by big farms. This put the milkmaid occupation and the existence of this traditional women's trade under risk (not only in Croatia, but also in other EU countries). For this reason, Kristina Leko (in collaboration with BLOK – Local Base for Culture Refreshment, Zagreb, Croatia) performed an artistic action in which she collected signatures in support of the preservation of the traditional occupation of milkmaid as cultural heritage. The trade of the milkmaids may not be highly profitable from an economic standpoint, but it is increasingly becoming a cultural value. The action began at the Zagreb market, with three milkmaids along with Kristina Leko giving fresh cheese and cream to the passers-by free of charge and collecting their signatures in exchange. In Ljubljana, Kristina Leko showed a documentary on their work, with the milkmaid Višnja Čukelj presenting her daily routine at the Central Market and collecting 600 signatures.

The participatory projects above shed light on ways in which women's work (both artistic and housework), displayed as symbolic capital, participates in the circulation of cultural, social and economic capital. At the same time, these ways can be interpreted as a consequence of the changed understanding of precarious work in neo-liberal capitalism. The last decades have seen a considerable rise of participatory events and rehearsals of sociality, especially in performance and the visual arts. Bojana Kunst explains this phenomenon as the most visible form of connection between the precarization of artistic work and the so-called normalization of precarity in contemporary neo-liberal society (Kunst 2015, 12).

In liberal capitalism, precariousness established itself through the process of Othering: according to Isabell Lorey, it denoted the insecurity and vulnerability of the Others, who used to be constructed as a threat. In neo-liberal society, however, precarity no longer stands for a condition of inequality in terms of exception, but 'is instead in the midst of a process of normalization, which enables governing through insecurity' and represents 'the common existential vulnerability that is *shared with others*.' (Lorey 2011, emphasis in original). Today, precariousness is no longer an instrument for the economic exploitation of the threatening Others because 'from everyone now, regardless of gender, class or origin, an individual risk management is required' (Lorey 2011). By exhibiting and presenting the artistic work at City of Women, participatory projects of this kind enable their audiences to value the work invested by women artists into the social field and recognize it as social, cultural and economic capital. In this, the City of Women festival turns out to be an art institution which intervenes in the existing conditions with inventive practices that reveal the potentialities for an alternative future.

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