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Mimi Mercedez and übermateriality of sex work

Abstract: Starting from Beatriz Preciado's claim in her 2013 book *Testo Junkie* that all current conceptions of labour (immaterial, cognitive, linguistic, even biopolitical) treat the human body as desexualised, and her proposition that the paradigmatic model of labour today is "pharmacopornopolitical", I would propose to examine the contemporary practice using the example of a Serbian female artist named Mimi Mercedez – a stripper and trap singer.

Keywords: labour, pro-sex feminism, sex work, rematerialisation

The main intention of this essay is to compare the concept of post-feminist sex work with available positions on the current labour market. A self-entrepreneur in a feminist way ("*Mimi Mercedez, young entrepreneur, no work hours, no petty wages*"), this definitively marginal artist (middle class, but deliberately uneducated and not accepting of patriarchal models) expresses herself through a predominantly male art form which is marginal by definition: trap, based on drug dealing. Besides accepting the most disdained female model (that of a whore), she opposes the ideals of the female body, empowering herself to be "Guda iz Huda" (Piggy from the Hood), singing about the perfection of her imperfect body. Her other heteronym "Sestra Drugarica" (Sister Comrade) is explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-gender ("*brotherhood, sisterhood, we are all fighting for the same thing [...] cash doesn't recognise two sexes*").

Explicit, exciting, fresh, daring, unique and loyal to a group of her female co-fighters – sisters (*our family is bold, we shave our pussies bald/bahata familija obrijane đane*), Mimi Mercedez is an example of an artist challenging the notion of immaterial labour in a übermaterial way, as Preciado suggests.

“Anti-heroine of 21st century”¹

It is not easy to discuss a complex phenomenon like Mimi Mercedez in a short text. Interest in her work and the work of her collective *Bombe Devedesetih* (90s Bombs) is exploding – not just in Belgrade, but the whole of Serbia and even in the wider region. After a few public performances and her first appearances in the mainstream media, this female trap singer has provoked various public reactions from popular magazines,² feminist theoreticians, even inspiring a documentary movie – *(Non)Working Class Hero*³. When Slovenian feminist Anita Tolić was recently asked for an example of a song which she considered inspirational for the women’s struggle, she pointed out Mimi Mercedez. Mimi started her career a couple of years ago as a lonely female voice on the trap scene. She claims she was inventing and performing as several different female heteronyms so it would seem that the female section is more diversified, that there are more of them: *Sestra Drugarica*, *Guda iz Huda*, *Jovanka Oroz*, *Mimi Mama*. The list is by no means exhaustive, and now all of them are equal parts of her complex artistic personality, which can be accessed most directly through these lyrics:

“Life gives you no choice, the choices are your own / But believe it, each one is wrong / Yes, times are tough, but I’m a tough girl / Young, confident, and always ready / Sometimes I’m nice, sometimes I’m not/ My mind is strong as a rock, the third shift’s no game / But I’m a lioness, Belgrade born and raised / All I do, I do so boundaries are erased / German quality, Serbian mentality / People make up stories, but the stories are no worries / Your phony lives just make you pussies / My only goal is to be my own master / And that’s why I sleep by day, work all night / Making my own money, I’m living like a boss / I get off on stuff guys like / Sex, rap, violence and cash/ If you dig this, raise your hands / We are few, but we are bitches.”⁴

Based on her lyrics and the fact that in ‘real life’ Mimi is (or already was) a stripper, my interest here is to contrast post-feminist sex work with existing theoretical positions about the contemporary labour market. I find justification for this approach in Mimi’s explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-gender attitudes that are closely interrelated and inseparable. I would define it as a self-entrepreneurship in a feminist way (“*Mimi Mercedez, young entrepreneur, no work hours, no petty wages*”), saturated with heritage from the socialist working class ideology and the implosion of all possible ideologies (except the power of money) from the 90s. For the picture to be complete it requires the addition of the logic of the strong but abstract sisterhood, opposing the ideal female body, singing about the perfection of the imperfect body, along with trap music constants such as drug dealing and loyalty to the collective.

By choosing to work as a stripper, and by referencing it in her songs, she chose a position on the labour market (post-socialist, transitional wild neoliberal capitalist) that is at the same time liberating (compared to the wage labour model that offers only minimal wages) but also

¹ Mimi Mercedez, “Ko će da mi zabrani”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09QpvXdVzi4>

² “Mimi Mercedez bez dlake na jeziku: Od striptizete do ‘Bahate familije obrijane dane’”, *24 sata*, <http://www.24sata.rs/mimi-mercedez-bez-dlake-na-jeziku-od-striptizete-do-bahate-familije-obrijane-dane/9198> ac. 19. 04. 2015.

³ “Heroj neradničke klase” authors Jovana Papović and Astrea Pejović.

⁴ Mimi Mercedez, “MMM”, (feat. Salier Del Flores), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsqF9xBgM0>

precarious⁵. This brief study will thus be an attempt to disclose of all these components of her approach through several phases. All of them are feminist positions that are gradually coming close to the issue of labour, i.e. the issue of immaterial labour – from accepting the position of a precarious virtuoso worker who controls her own schedule, potentials and body, through the proposition of *übermateriality*, to a radical shift toward feminist re-materialisation. The first position will be the recognition of similarities of her approach with what is called pro-sex or pro-whore feminism, which is the fact that she feels empowered and not degraded by her work in the sex industry. Since this feminist approach was appropriated by the neoliberal strategy of absolute freedom of self-articulation, the second approach examined will be Beatrice Preciado's critique of the concept of *immaterial* labour by pharmacopornographic labour. The drawbacks of this theoretical conceptualisation led me to the Red Feminist Teresa L. Ebert's claim for the dematerialisation of feminism that I find most suitable for the anti-capitalist-patriarchal-gender issue Mimi Mercedez so vividly poses.

“Our family is bold, we shave our pussies bald”⁶

At first glance, this is a post-porn or pro-sex feminist position. To summarise it I will use the opening scenes of Virginie Despentes' documentary *Mutantes. Feminisme Porno Punk*.⁷ This started as a revolutionary movement in the 80s called pro-sex feminism or pro-whores, i.e. porn that is feminist, S&M and lesbian. In short, when we are talking about feminism we are usually referring to the abolitionist feminism that treats any pornographic image as an attack on the dignity of women and calls for its censorship. It sees all prostitution as merchandising of the human body. The strategy of pro-sex feminism is the opposite: the body, pleasure, pornography and sex work can be political tools that one must seize. Liberated from victimisation, pro-sex feminists claim the right to use their bodies as they want, including participation in sex work. Artists and performers that practice this feminist approach rarely make an issue of it in terms of labour and they usually linger on the politics of identity or female subjectivities.

The perfectly justified question that emerges from this would be to ask if the pro-porn approach to feminism has become yet another legitimised and precarious form of labour, a mechanism for creating ideal virtuoso workers in the field of what post-operaismo would call cognitive, linguistic, communicative or immaterial labour. “However, desire, sex, and gender resemble neither the earth nor manufactured products. Desire, sex, and gender are, in reality, closer to information as an embodied technosemiotic system (Harraway).”⁸

Though they share similar qualities, performance artists such as Maria Beatty, Lydia Lunch, Quimera Rosa, Annie Sprinkle, who are typical examples of the feminist approach which deals with identities and subjectivities, cannot explain the position of Mimi Mercedez, which is closely related to the issue of labour. Her entire work to date shows that (non)working class issues and labour market positioning are predominant. Mimi is not a feminist subject and she does not appropriate a feminist identity.

⁵ Isabell Lorey, “Governmentality and Self-Precarization. On the normalization of cultural producers”, 01. 2006, Translated by Lisa Rosenblatt and Dagmar Fink http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en/#_ftnref4

⁶ Mimi Mercedez, “MMM”, (feat. Salier Del Flores), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsqF9xBgM0>

⁷ Despentes, Virginie, *Mutantes. Feminisme Porno Punk*, Blaq Out, 2010.

⁸ Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics*, New York, The Feminist Press, 2013, 277.

“Those who freak out over me because I’m a ‘strong woman’ and I’m doing this ‘guy thing’ head to head with the guys probably show equal respect to women police officers using the same logic. If you don’t care what I’m saying in my songs, but you only notice the attitude, then you’re making judgments about me based on my gender, and that’s why I put those people in the same category as those who hate me for the same reason. You wouldn’t like me if I were a guy, and they’d like me for the same reason. It is an equally superficial story.”⁹

Since transitional labour conditions are as they are, a constant and contingent fact of being a female (though it seems to be a secondary fact), her choice was to work in the sex industry. In her theoretical novel *Testo Junkie. On Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics*, Preciado posits that every period in history has a certain type of work and worker that defines the form of production that is paradigmatic for that particular economy. The contemporary neoliberal paradigmatic type of labour is sex work. Some of the examples she uses are: the body of the cotton-picking male and of the female worker and reproductive slave (economy of plantation), the body of the miner (the economy of the steam engine), the body of the male or female factory worker (the Fordist economy). This does not mean that during those periods there were no other kinds of work and production, but that such roles played the dominant part in determining relations within society. Today, when we talk about the deindustrialisation of labour it does not mean that industrial production has ceased to be, or has become a quantitatively smaller part of the whole production chain, it simply means it was relocated outside the dominant one that decides the societal and economic circulation of value.

The whore, the housewife and the domestic worker belong to the same category of service and nonproductive work. All these forms of labour share the characteristics of Virno’s virtuosic labour – there is no finished product, i.e. the product is inseparable from the process of labour. However, this is not the “political labour” of *praxis* (it differs only in that they are not part of the public sphere, except Preciado redefines public as marketable). It is important to Preciado that these corporeal practices cannot be easily and entirely absorbed by technical production. Preciado notes that the work and the worker that were representative for each period and its economy retrospectively appear as the most endangered, labouring under the most devalued working conditions.¹⁰ She concludes: “The work and specific kind of exploitation that today defines the pharmacopornographic economy is sex work, and the paradigmatic body of this model of production is that of the migrating whore, the transgender sex worker, or the porn actress or actor.”¹¹ She condemns the definition of the contemporary transformation of labour as feminisation of labour as not only insufficient but also biased, and suggests to speak of pornification of work and production.

She is highly critical of notions of the feminisation of work,¹² which she finds representative of the discourse that found sex work and the work of reproduction out of the scope, therefore protecting the domain of sexuality from that of economic production and making it a sacred zone of human activity. Nothing is more feminine in the post-Fordist model, if we do

⁹ Mimi Mercedez, <https://www.facebook.com/mimimercedez34?fref=ts>, ac. 29. 04. 2015.

¹⁰ Beatriz Preciado, op. cit., 286.

¹¹ Ibid, 286–287.

¹² As elaborated by Christian Marazzi (*The Violence of Financial Capitalism*), Maurizio Lazzarato (*Les Révolutions du capitalisme*), Antonio Negri (*Fabrique de porcelaine: Pour une nouvelle grammaire du politique*) and Judith Revel (*Devenir-femme de la politique*).

not rely on presupposed heterocentricity and a rhetoric of gender (that considers sure, stable and permanent to be qualities that imply the industrial and male; with flexible, changeable, mobile and precarious as postindustrial and female). She finds the running debate within the post-operaismo position on the immateriality of labour about the degree to which cognitive or immaterial work is truly immaterial to be completely inadequate and instead she suggests reconceptualising labour as ubermaterial, supramaterial, technomaterial or hypermaterial “because its texture is biological, molecular, as well as carnal and digital.”¹³

If we take as the central issue of the non-sustainable notion of immaterial labour, Preciado’s *übermateriality* from *Testo Junkie* might be one solution. However, in contemporary theory there is a concordance among theoreticians coming from different sides in their demand to re-materialise exhausting precarious labour. One of the obvious examples can be found in the field of performance art posited by Ana Vujanović and Bojana Cvejić:

“The initial suspicion implied rematerialising the immaterial of performance in performance, not in the sense of ‘capitalising’ it, but in the sense of articulating it as a theoretical problem from a materialist critical point of view. First, this departure aims against misrecognising the ontological immateriality of performance, its ephemerality and disappearance, and superficially associating them with (immaterial) resistance to commodification. From a materialist point of view, performance is a material artifact, a product and commodity of the institution of the performing arts. Secondly, we recognise that besides the commodity of performance, the processes of production, distribution, circulation, and consumption of performances involve activities that don’t just support or enable the ‘product’ of the performance, but also substitute for it.”¹⁴

Another resolute demand for re-materialisation relating to reinstating the issues of labour comes from Teresa L. Ebert. Her demand is based on the conviction that the canonical feminist understanding of sexuality and gender in post theories (poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, postmarxism) are strategies for bypassing issues of labour and capital, focusing on cultural differences (as in lifestyle).¹⁵ She clearly situates gender in the world historical process of labour and capital.

The only mobilisation of counterhegemonic agency that she recognises is through class. Without that we end up with a series of subjects (a feminist, an African American, or any other subject). A productive notion of agency has to be highly critical of poststructuralist theories of agency that substitute class for lifestyle and identity politics.¹⁶

“I am not in any way rejecting sexuality, gender or race as sites of struggle, but I do not regard them to be autonomous spaces. Sexuality becomes a marker of social difference only in a class society. [...] In other words, although race, gender and sexuality are indeed spaces of historical agency and sites of social struggle, *they become so because of the divisions of labour and property relations (class)*.”¹⁷

¹³ Beatriz Preciado, op. cit., 294.

¹⁴ Ana Vujanović, Bojana Cvejić, “Exhausting Immaterial Labor”, *TkH*, Beograd, 2010, No. 17, 8.

¹⁵ Ebert, L. Teresa, “Rematerializing Feminism”, *Science&Society*, January 2005, Vol. 69, No. 1, 33–35.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 37–38.

Even when the question of labour cannot be avoided, for example, in discussions about feminist and anti-racist struggles (she takes these two as prominent examples of identity politics), it becomes mostly a question of employment and income (equal pay). However, income does not determine the relation of subject of labour to structures of labour.¹⁸ Power is always generated at the point of production (power is the manifestation of ownership over the means of production), which leads her to the conclusion that racism and sexism are not just forms of oppression, but of exploitation.¹⁹

Or, like Mimi Mercedez says: “*brotherhood, sisterhood, we are all fighting for the same thing [...] cash doesn’t recognise two sexes*”. That is at the same time a variation on the official motto of the former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia – “brotherhood and unity”,²⁰ where unity as a national question is substituted by a gender question – and the question of the workers’ struggle in a way that Anita Tolić explained postsocialist heritage when coming out against the separation of the feminist fight from the workers’ movement. “Yugoslav women fought during the war alongside partisans and workers and gained their first significant rights only under the new common country, the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia: the right of women to vote was legalized in 1945, at the end of the national liberation war, with the socialist transformation of society. Feminism, we could argue, was a state policy, which was translated directly into social life via new legislature and economic directions, enabling as a result a higher inclusion of women into political, economic and social life. A well-deserved importance was given to the holiday, political celebrations were organized and women were given carnations as a symbol of their fight, which was never considered separate from the workers’ movement.”²¹

My thesis is that feminist views in the work of Mimi Mercedez largely fit into the Marxist revision of feminism that rejects the poststructuralist politics of identity and demands that gender, race and sexuality be seen only as manifestations of class divisions, i.e. the one that restores the key question of a relationship towards labour in light of production relations. It is a fact that the work of Mimi Mercedez has similarities with post-porn or pro-sex feminist poetics, but unlike artistic or theoretical proponents of this current, she does not accept feminist subjects and is not using them for her artistic or theoretical work. She performs on the open labour market versus the more privileged artistic or academic markets. Her work as a stripper was a conscious choice in order to earn, which means rejecting wage labour, which is servitude (*Each sister knows work for peanuts blows*), connecting the two categories Ebert talked about, but also shows the precarious position of a contemporary form of labour.

“I say I’m not happy with the minimum wage / They all assume I fuck for change
[...] They say I’m a whore, as if I pretended I was a lady / Whoever sold you rap
has surely screwed you plenty.”²²

¹⁸ Ibid, 38.

¹⁹ Ibid, 40.

²⁰ In an interview she claims that it is not about Yugo-nostalgia, but that it is a part of the ideology promoting team work and communality as eternal values, <http://www.vijesti.me/caffe/beogradska-rep-senzacija-bombe-raznose-domacu-scenu-830858>

²¹ Anita Tolić, “International Women’s Day in the Balkans: Anita Tolić”, *LeftEast*, 13 March 2015, <http://www.criticatoc.ro/lefeast/international-womens-day-in-the-balkans-anita-tolic/>

²² Mimi Mercedez, “Porno”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BW1cB2A0aQY>

Potential misunderstanding

The key problem with this position is the question of the relation toward self-endangerment as a misunderstanding of freedom, i.e. the question of whether it is a delusion also applied to the position of the artist, where it seemed freedom was actually a source of exploitation. Just as the artist was a person 'outside' of labour within the context of industrial production, where the flexibility basically meant as precarity was experienced as freedom. Experiencing as freedom something that is traditionally designated as slavery is a form of twisting, but from the standpoint of precarity of labour it is the same as housework or artwork. Within the context of re-traditionalisation, re-patriarchalisation and re-domestication of women²³ it represents a challenge to the dominant positioning of female roles in society – due to the relationship toward labour and the self-conscious choice to work in the sex industry. The (post)socialist heritage clearly has roots in her anticapitalist attitude, her advocacy of unity, brotherhood and sisterhood, as well as her pseudonym Sister Comrade.

Compared with other faces of precarity, work in the sex industry represents its illegal face, and therein lies its subversive strength, at least in relation to dominant, acceptable cultural models. However, Preciado completely equates sex work and drug trafficking with cultural and pharmaceutical industries: "The relation of the pornographic industry to the industry of culture and the spectacle is equivalent to the relationship of traffic in illegal drugs to the pharmaceutical industry. It represents two of the covert engines of capitalism of the twenty-first century."²⁴ Pharmacopornographic production functions on ambivalence – it is a marginal and hidden aspect of the contemporary cultural industry, but it is also a paradigm for all other types of post-Fordist production. Thus, the strength of illegality cannot hide the strength of subversion.

Preciado reveals three domains of capitalist cycles of production and consumption that were considered peripheral: 1. the production, trafficking and consumption of (legal or illegal) drugs;²⁵ 2. the production, circulation and consumption of audiovisual pornographic materials;²⁶ 3. sexual labour.²⁷ This can be the main point of criticism of Mimi Mercedez's position. Is it possible to oppose any structure by using its own means of exploitation? Can one be a money maker (as the tattoo on the back of her thighs suggests) and simultaneously fight the structure that makes it possible? My reply is that the first step to subversion is making certain mechanisms visible. I would argue that it is the strength of her proposition, revealing a multilayered problematic of the most current situation that includes the present, recycled heritage of the past and projections for the future (*Everyone's waiting for better days to come, Mimi makes them happen all the time*). This is even if she does not always fight them consequently – but why would she be obliged to?

²³ Anita Tolić, op. cit.

²⁴ Beatriz Preciado, op. cit., 267.

²⁵ All biologically-active substances that are able to modify the metabolism of the cells on which they work. Texts and visual signs are also considered drugs in this sense.

²⁶ Any audiovisual technique capable of modifying the sensibility and production of desire and of capturing the body's system of affect production.

²⁷ Beatriz Preciado, op. cit., 274–275.

“Let’s return to what’s important, let’s return to me”²⁸

This gradual movement through possible feminist readings of relationships towards sex work, labour in general and questions of dematerialisation did not even begin to scratch the surface of a subject as complex as Mimi Mercedez, as well as the entire collective 90s Bombs that she is a member of. One of the causes for this is that Mimi recognises genderness as “the place of difference”, in the way that Dragana Stojanović writes about it. The question is if the discourse of difference is the one allowing the recognition of different “readings/re-readings/interpretations/views/inscribing, and not the difference as openness of relations of Two equals or non-equals.”²⁹ This discourse is conscious of different inscribing, but it is against oppositely-constructed binarities. In such a space, dealing with the question of labour, and also the heritage of the (non)working class, Mimi Mercedez clearly places this phenomenon with the heritage of postsocialism of the 1990s. It is interesting to note that the culture produced during the 90s has a negative connotation within the elitist academic and art discourse. The alternative posed by 90s Bombs lies in taking over a marginalised, never-accepted-as-worthy heritage, which is another form of subversion. Finally, I would like to investigate a potential interpretation of the recycling of this heritage through conceptualisation of retroguard practices as a specific artistic method characteristic of the post-socialist cultural pattern – a subsequently restructured and re-formed history. “Similar to retroguard practices, the alternative culture adopts and borrows sometimes dominant cultural patterns and codes, and enters the process of decomposing and constructing new meaning. The alternative culture is therefore an eclectic cultural practice of a specific societal milieu and its cultural space. The retroguard aesthetics is not familiar with the discourse of the public, the popular culture, and is closer to elite expression of utopian thought.”³⁰ All of this taken into account produces the explicit, exciting, fresh, daring, unique lyrics which express loyalty to a group of female co-fighters and sisters:

“Winner’s mentality / I’m no knight in shiny armor/ Just a young street-wise fighter/ Who knows when to show some balls / Always looking ahead because I know who’s behind me / All my crazy girls, my pitbull homies / All as one when we have some, and even when we don’t / You creepin’ behind my back? You gonna get blown.”³¹

²⁸ Mimi Mercedez, “Ko će da mi zabrani”, op. cit.

²⁹ Stojanović, Dragana, “Razlika kao mesto *odakle*: teorijsko izvođenje telesnosti i rodnosti iz perspektive feminizama razlike”, *AM. Časopis za studije umetnosti i medija*, Beograd, 2014, No. 6, 29.

³⁰ The explanation of an alternative to avantguard practices within the context of socialist societies is what constitutes the basis. The difference of course is in the breadth of scope of the avantguard standing against the entire paradigm of contemporary Western art. The notion of retroguard was taken from Marina Gržnić. Cf. Vanja Milovanović, “Alternativa i njeno značenje u kontekstu poznog socijalizma Jugoslavije”, *AM. Časopis za studije umetnosti i medija*, Beograd, 2014, No. 6, 74.

³¹ Mimi Mercedez, “Ko će da mi zabrani”, op. cit.