ART+ MEDIA
Journal of Art and Media Studies

Issue No.
37 / 2025

ISSN 2217-9666
ISSN-online 2406-1654
UDK 7.01:316.774

The Marginalization of Art: A Permanent, Complex,and Ongoing Process

Issue No.
37 / 2025

ART+ MEDIA

Journal of Art and Media Studies

AM
Journal of Art and Media Studies
Issue No. 37
Belgrade, September 2025

Publisher
Faculty of Media and Communications
Karađorđeva 65, Belgrade, Serbia
+381 11 26 26 474

As Publisher
Nada Popović Perišić Ph.D.

Press Artprint, Novi Sad
Print Run 100

AM Journal of Art and Media Studies was founded by
Dr. Miodrag Šuvaković and Dragorad Kovačević in Belgrade, 2011. It is issued three times per year.

The *Journal* is classified in ERIH PLUS, EBSCO, DOAJ, CEEOL, and in the List of Scientific Journals Categorization of Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Republic of Serbia (M51 – 2019; M24 – 2021, M23 – 2024). Beginning with No. 12 2017, *AM* is indexed, abstracted, and covered in Clarivate Analytics service ESCI.

Editors' Note

The contemporary moment of the first quarter of the 21st century is marked by a complex, not entirely visible, and permanent process of the marginalization of art. This process calls into question the privileged position of art, which has long been tied to its dominant function, the representation of power. Originating from the traditional system of art (representation of the power of the church, state), this function, in various modifications, also characterized the 20th century. The representation of political, ideological, imperial, or colonial power (e.g., Nazi art, socialist realism, capitalist realism, abstract expressionism) served the purpose of "aestheticizing politics" (Walter Benjamin). During the Cold War, art was regarded as a "soft power" and was promoted, funded, and imposed by various power hubs. At the same time, the 20th century was marked by numerous avant-garde artistic practices, united in their critique of the reduction of art to the representation of power. It is from such critiques that the contemporary art paradigm of the 1960s emerged.

With the arrival of the 21st century, globalization, and the tension between digital and fossil capitalism, a shift occurs that may be linked to the marginalization of art. Conversely, since artwork prices in the art market have reached astronomical levels, one could conclude the opposite: that there has never been more money (and power) in art than today. However, this seems to be more related to capital, the development of new financial derivatives, and monetization rather than art itself. Supporting this idea is the fact that artists' positions are increasingly aligned with the most socially vulnerable groups, especially in economically underdeveloped areas, where the art market has not yet been established.

Currently, power is detaching itself from politics and no longer needs representation, as it shifts into the hybrid hubs of a networked world. The digital post-informational paradigm we live in – where information and attention are treated as capital – normalizes marginalization, extending beyond art to include creative and critical thinking.

In light of these processes of marginalization, several questions emerge regarding the role of art in the complex, networked world of the 21st century: What changes in contemporary art can be observed today amid emerging multipolarity? Has the critical potential of art been equated with activism across social spheres, or is it entirely on hold, considering that in recent decades, art has increasingly been associated with entertainment, blockbuster works, commodification, and technological innovations – factors that contribute to the blurring and masking of its marginalization

process? How are current changes – such as the deepening ecological crisis, the emergence of AI technologies, the impacts of the Anthropocene, and other challenges that question the concept of the human – connected to the process of marginalizing art in the 21st century?

This issue, titled ***The Marginalization of Art: A Permanent, Complex, and Ongoing Process,*** compiles a series of interdisciplinary essays that examine the changing landscapes of contemporary art, theory, curatorial practice, and cultural labor within the broader context of digital mediatization, posthumanism, and socio-political critique. The authors approach these topics from different geographical backgrounds and various critical perspectives, including feminist theory, media studies, digital aesthetics, institutional critique, and political economy. Together, the contributions analyze how the margins of artistic discourse – whether historical, material, ideological, or geographic – are being reshaped by technological infrastructures, platform algorithms, and cultural power structures.

In "How Else Can We Think About Art? Aesthetics, Technosphere, and the Post-Metaphysical Image", **Žarko Paić** challenges the viability of traditional aesthetic categories in the age of the technosphere and artificial intelligence. Paić proposes a new conceptual language – figurality, aisthesis, and visualization – as tools for understanding how art functions within a reality increasingly shaped by algorithmic processes and machine-driven creativity. These terms create space for rethinking sensory experience, image-making, and the ontology of artistic events beyond human intentionality. Drawing on a broad theoretical lineage – from Martin Heidegger's critique of technology to Gilles Deleuze's ontology of becoming – this essay situates contemporary art within a larger transformation where the boundaries between the human, the machine, and the artwork dissolve. Paić asks us to consider how artificial intelligence, digital images, and post-biological forms of creativity redefine not only the practice of art but also the very conditions through which we perceive, interpret, and value it.

In "Performance and Protest: Questions on Art and Life", **Jasmina Čubrilo** examines the critical potential of the body as both artistic medium and political agent, tracing continuities between performance art and civic protest from the 1960s to the present. Through close readings of works by Marina Abramović, Tanja Ostojić, and Ivana Ivković, she shows how female artists have used endurance, exposure, and vulnerability to confront systems of power, negotiate institutional frameworks, and question the limits of agency. Čubrilo extends this analysis to recent student and civic protests in Serbia, where collective bodily acts such as silence, marches, and endurance performances of protest blur the line between art and life. The essay argues that performance art not only anticipates but also informs contemporary forms of resistance, offering paradigms for activism and social change.

In "Marginalized Code: Feminist Interventions in AI Art," **Jelena Guga** examines the AI art through feminist theory, critical data studies, and media history. The essay argues that artificial intelligence systems are not only technical artefacts but also

sociocultural constructs heavily influenced by gendered power dynamics, epistemic violence, and labor exploitation. Guga places the AI art within a broader feminist tradition of resisting technological marginalization and advocates for feminist intervention as a crucial epistemological and aesthetic practice. The main argument asserts that feminist critique should go beyond simply spotting bias in AI systems and should focus on reimagining the infrastructural, epistemic, and emotional foundations of technology. Guga shows how the feminist AI art challenges the prevailing narratives of neutrality, objectivity, and innovation. The paper also links these practices to the historical continuity with the feminist media art and cyberfeminism of the 1990s and 2000s, highlighting how early digital artists critically engaged with identity, embodiment, and representation.

"A Critical Examination of Emotional Labor and Emotional Capital in Social Media Interaction" by **Fuat Boğaç Evren** explores how users' emotional expressions on social media are turned into emotional capital, revealing the exploitative mechanisms of algorithmic control and affective labor in digital spaces. Through a critical analysis of user behavior on social media platforms, the paper questions how emotional expression becomes a form of unpaid digital labor – generating algorithmic visibility, social capital, and ultimately, economic value for platforms. The author argues that the digital emotional labor is central to the modern platform capitalism, as users perform emotional work not for wages but for attention, engagement, and symbolic validation. This labor is managed by algorithms that amplify specific emotional performances and content types, resulting in an uneven distribution of emotional capital. The study presents social networks as new fields of power where digital subjects compete for visibility and status under unequal conditions.

In "To Fail Better: Curating as a Resilience Practice", **Jovanka Popova Unkovska** critically reimagines curatorial work as an act of resistance against institutional, ideological, and economic limitations. Popova presents failure not as a weakness but as a radical strategy of resilience, solidarity, and subversion within the contemporary cultural production. At the core of the essay is a challenge to curatorial norms embedded in neoliberal frameworks that prioritize visibility, productivity, and aestheticized activism. Instead, Popova advocates for a model of curating-as-care, rooted in vulnerability, inproductivity, and mutual support – a practice that actively resists cooptation by market and state forces. The essay examines how contemporary institutions – especially museums – often instrumentalize marginalization, exploiting precarious artistic labor while aestheticizing politics. Popova criticizes the fetishization of activist art and identity-based struggles that are broken into funding-friendly projects, stripping them of systemic political impact and exposing the contradictions faced by intellectuals and curators when their work becomes commodified.

Expanding on historical continuity, **Milica Pekić**, in her essay titled "Engaged Art Practice and Institutional Change: A Brief Introduction to Art Experiments in Yugoslavia and Serbia from 1968 to the Present", traces a lineage of engaged artistic practices in Yugoslavia and Serbia from the 1968 student protests to the present-day

student-led movement. She positions art as an essential tool in the struggle for institutional critique, social transformation, and collective emancipation. The paper describes how artists and curators over decades have consistently challenged the capitalist logic and hierarchical structures of dominant art institutions by experimenting with participation, collective authorship, democratic self-governance, and alternative modes of production. Pekić highlights a key conceptual shift from "artwork" to "art labor" and critiques the invisibility and devaluation of artistic labor under neoliberal systems, linking it to broader struggles for democratic restructuring, solidarity, and economic justice. The study concludes with the current wave of student protests in Serbia, which have reclaimed institutional spaces and reignited avant-garde legacies. Art, in this context, becomes a means of collective resistance and reimagination – not just as aesthetic production, but as a social force capable of reshaping public life.

In "*Framing the Margins: Representation of the Working Class in Contemporary Serbian Visual and Cinematic Art*", authors **Maja Petrović** and **Ana Filipović** examine how the working class is depicted in visual and cinematic forms in post-socialist Serbia. They focus on how art both reflects and critiques the increasing socio-economic marginalization since the country's shift to capitalism. Using an interdisciplinary approach rooted in the social history of art, the paper analyzes key case studies – including films like *Working Class Heroes* (2022) and *Working Class Goes to Hell* (2023), along with socially engaged artworks by Milica Ružičić. The authors explore how realism, often seen as an outdated style, reemerges as a powerful, politically charged method capable of reaching wider audiences and addressing real class struggles. The study also highlights stylistic variations – from documentary realism to genre blending and camp aesthetics – raising important questions about the communication power and boundaries of different representational styles. At the heart of the analysis is the question of agency: how much contemporary art and cinema not only portray but also envision resistance and collective action among the working classes.

In "Residual Aesthetics: Rethinking Zoran Todorović's *Warmth* against the Benchmark of the Anthropocene", **Danica Đorđević Janković** offers a deep critical analysis of Zoran Todorović's artwork *Warmth*, a large-scale installation made of industrially processed human hair collected from various institutional and social settings. Moving beyond traditional biopolitical interpretations, the author situates the piece within the context of the Anthropocene, posthuman theory, and the aesthetics of waste and abjection. Discarded hair becomes a central medium – abject and residual, both personal and anonymous, biological and symbolic – through which Todorović questions the mechanisms of surveillance, disposability, and social marginalization. Addressing necropolitics, ungrievability, and the crisis of the posthuman subject, the essay presents *Warmth* as a powerful case study of how contemporary art can embody resistance through abjection and material decay. The installation serves as a space for redefining life, death, and aesthetic value – not as fixed categories but as contested fields shaped by ecological collapse, algorithmic governance, and social exclusion.

In addition to the main theme, this issue features two important contributions that, although outside the primary curatorial focus, provide valuable insights into architecture, exhibition history, and digital art practices in Southeast Asia. "Women in the Modern Movement: Léonie Geisendorf and Architectural Practice in Mid-20th Century Europe" by **Şölen Köseoğlu** offers a feminist curatorial and historiographic intervention into modernist architecture, highlighting a historically marginalized figure in Swedish modernism and reflecting on how exhibition-making can reshape gendered histories. Using archival and ethnographic research, she uncovers the contributions of this overlooked figure and discusses how museums can serve as platforms for institutional memory and gender reparation. Meanwhile, "From Margins to Algorithms: Mediatization of Yogyakarta Visual Art on Instagram" by **Nadiyah Tunnikmah** presents an ethnographic study of how Yogyakarta's visual art scene is mediatized on Instagram, showing how platform logic influences cultural production and professional artistic practices. Her work examines how the algorithmic shaping of artistic creation, distribution, and self-representation affects the cultural and professional realities of visual artists in Indonesia.

Together, these contributions challenge the idea that technological mediation automatically democratizes art or labor. Instead, they reveal how new systems of visibility, value, and exclusion are embedded within digital infrastructures and cultural institutions. Whether through the AI-generated aesthetics, reappropriated realism, feminist data practices, or Instagram-based self-curation, the artists and theorists in this volume show the complex nature of mediation in our current moment – both expanding and limiting, freeing and extracting. By emphasizing critical, situated, and speculative approaches, this issue rethinks the role of art and theory in a world increasingly influenced by algorithms, automation, and economic instability. It encourages readers to think about not only how art is evolving because of these forces but also how art can actively shape more ethical, inclusive, and freeing cultural futures.

Guest Issue Editors
Dr Maja Stanković
Dr Jovan Čekić
Faculty of Media and Communications, Belgrade, Serbia

CONTENT

AM
Journal of Art and Media Studies
Issue No. 37, September 2025, Belgrade

MAIN TOPIC: The Marginalization of Art: A Permanent, Complex, and Ongoing Process

MAIN TOPIC

THE MARGINALIZATION OF ART: A PERMANENT, COMPLEX, AND ONGOING PROCESS

ART+MEDIA

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.624

Žarko Paić
Faculty of Textile Technology, University of Zagreb

How Else Can We Think About Art? Aesthetics, Technosphere, and the Post-Metaphysical Image

Abstract: In this article, the author asserts that *the technosphere* denotes the last frontier of metaphysical thought within which both aesthetics, as a philosophical discipline, and the aesthetic replaced by the concepts of *aisthesis, figurality and visualization,* after the end of all conceptual-categorical systems of thought about the essence of art from Immanuel Kant to Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Schelling to Theodor Adorno, still appear as relics of language and its ontological structure of telling "about" the world. Aesthetics emerged in the era of the rise of rationalism and modern technology. *Aisthesis, figurality and visualization* are conceptual tools for what connects the thought of the *technosphere* and its world-forming "aesthetic objects". The central problem of this article is to articulate post-aesthetic thinking. The conceptual tools are figurality, aisthesis, visualization, and the main thesis attempts to demonstrate that art in the technosphere, as autopoietic semiosis, becomes an assemblage of new categories and concepts that transcend all metaphysical matrices.

Keywords: technosphere; figurality; aisthesis; visualization; art; aesthetics; posthumanism; digital aesthetics.

Introduction: Historical framing

Friedrich Schlegel's twelfth fragment from 1797 argues that what is usually designated by the concept of philosophy of art generally lacks one of the two, either philosophy or art. The matter could still be remedied if there is too much of one and too little of the other. But what if this fragment of Schlegel and its critical aphorism is nothing more than a good joke, or if, to make matters worse for him, it is no longer a relevant thing directed at philosophy and art? Perhaps it could still have been interesting when Hegel and Schelling constructed their philosophical systems, thus elevating metaphysics to the pinnacle of modern philosophy. At that time, it was self-evident that philosophy as a fundamental ontology, as Martin Heidegger would say, should speculatively and reflexively address art from on high to give it a foundation as a kind of new discipline within the philosophically understood *metaphysicae specialis* Thinking about art in the era of the emergence of transcendental systems and Romanticism

Author's contact information: zarkopaic58@gmail.com

was already marked by an apparent controversy – namely, philosophy since Kant had been impregnated with rationalism and the language of natural and technical sciences. The Age of Enlightenment was necessarily guided by the idea that any mysticism and mysteriousness of nature, as well as that of human superstition and religious dogmatism, take precedence over the scientific method and research into being and the essence of man. Kant, as is known, did not establish any philosophy of art in his *Critique of Judgment*, nor did he develop philosophical aesthetics, because Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten had already done so. The entire problem with the emergence of aesthetics as a reflection on the beautiful and sublime nature and the human world of art was best summarized by Hans-Georg Gadamer:

> Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline emerged only in the 18th century, i.e., in the era of rationalism, obviously provoked by modern rationalism itself, which rises based on constructive natural sciences, as they developed in the 17th century and as they determine the face of our world to this day, so that they are transformed into technology at an increasingly dizzying pace.[1]

However, aesthetics as a philosophical discipline and the aesthetic as a way of thinking about sensibility, through which the world appears on the horizon of human thought, has something else that is extremely important. The Italian semiotician Umberto Eco primarily aims at liberating us from ignorance about the Middle Ages, and thus from the mistaken belief that scholasticism was inferior in these matters because transcendental beauty was always relegated to the last place. God is first and foremost One, sound and valid, a being of pure perfection, and only finally does He appear to man through the splendor and veil of beauty. Therefore, starting from the "founder" of philosophical aesthetics, Baumgarten, Eco lists all its meanings, and these are:

> *Science of sensory cognition, theory of the liberal arts, […] art of beautiful thinking, art of what is analogous in reason.* But if by aesthetics we understand the area of interest in the value of 'beauty', its definition, its function and the way of its production and use, then the Middle Ages spoke of aesthetics. [...] We define 'aesthetic' as the problem of the possible objective consistency and subjective circumstances of some special experience, which in everyday language is called 'beauty'; therefore, the problem of 'beautiful' objects and the so-called 'aesthetic pleasure'.[2]

We see that the difference always places the aesthetic in the realm of nature, even though crime represents an act of "spiritual nature". At the same time, we perceive it artistically from the connection of spirit, society, life, language and technique.

[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Ogledi o filozofiji umjetnosti*, trans. Darija Domić (AGM, 2003), 27.

[2] Umberto Eco, *Estetički problem u Tome Akvinskoga*, trans. Sanja Roić (Globus, 2001), 10–11.

However, what is missing in Eco's enumeration of Baumgarten's terminology lies outside the realm of traditionally understood aesthetics. In the middle is the insight that Heidegger and Gadamer mention in their discussions of criticism of modern metaphysics, especially aesthetics, claiming that the 18th century, when aesthetics arose, was the age of the birth of rationalism and contemporary technology. The machine that determines this *mathesis universalis* denotes the beginning of the mechanical era, with which a complete acceleration of life occurred. Art in its profane form became nothing more than an aesthetic shape of the ethical virtues of modernity that Schiller celebrated in his *Letters on Aesthetic Education*.[3] Everything that aesthetics meant at its origin no longer means today. However, what remains lies beyond any epistemological-theoretical relativism so close to the postmodern critique of metaphysical universalism. Beauty cannot be immortalized because it is not primarily a matter of computer art, but something that transcends the boundaries of both the aesthetic and the artistic, and appears in entities not as an illusion of truth and goodness, but as a synthesis of technical-human activity and a synthesis of nature-and-spirit. Therefore, that's all the epiphany and transcendental, construction and existential in a completely different notion, unlike the traditional metaphysical one.

Figurality: Correlation of the idea and its appearance

The philosophy of art that has emerged since then has left no doubt that what is proper to art – its ontological groundlessness and cognitive-reflexive intuitiveness – cannot be thought irreducibly without a radical critique of philosophy, specifically rationalism, and philosophy as the foundation of art. German Romanticism, with Novalis and Schlegel, found an alternative in a return to the pre-reflexive, to that which lies beyond the *logos* as the foundation of Being in general. Hence, it is no coincidence that the most significant breakthroughs within and outside the philosophy of art were made simultaneously in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard, as critiques of Hegel's absolute metaphysics and Romanticism. Many will nevertheless add that the most significant philosophy of art of the 19th century is that of Schelling, from which even today we can arrive at the possibility of finding a condition of possibility for the system of logical foundation of the science of art that is neither philosophical nor theological, but arises from the abyss of the world as that irreducible artistic action outside the logic of causality and purposiveness.[4] However, it seems that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are closer to an attempt to renew philosophical thought in its essence, starting from the nature of art, rather than from any scientific-technical rationality, on which, as Gadamer has shown, philosophical aesthetics is also based. In this regard, Nietzsche required the philosopher to think and live artistically, whereas Kierkegaard, in his early phase, established art as an existential necessity for guiding human freedom, marking it as the modern destiny of man.

[3] Friedrich Schiller, *Über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (W. de Gruyter, 2019).

[4] Wolfgang Welsch, *Äesthetisches Denken* (Reclam, 1993).

I addressed this problem in the articulation of the concept of technosphere and concluded that no new philosophy of art can provide a salutary insight into, for example, the achievements of trans-gen art or post-conceptualism, let alone possess an adequate conceptual-categorical apparatus for understanding the problem of the body as a techno-genetic construction.[5] Why? This is because the philosophy of art cannot conceptualize what the concept of event signifies already in Heidegger, let alone in the case of Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze. For Nietzsche, art designates already an event of the will to power as an aesthetic becoming (*Werden*), and not a permanent and unchanging Being to which beauty and sublimity, as in Kant and even Hegel, are bestowed by God as a regulative concept of the purposiveness of nature or as a theodicy of the world spirit. Therefore, art after Heidegger's requiem for ontology, *Being and Time,* before Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, must become the existential-aesthetic project of the synthesis of life and that which transcends life. This is evident today in artificial intelligence, as seen in ChatGPT, an OpenAI product. What should this be other than a fascinating artistic event that synthesizes mind and will, aesthetic appearance and self-reflection, the autopoietic and the autogenetic in all forms of possible existence within this world? What would any hermeneutics and phenomenology, in a Gadamerian-Husserlian tone, have to say about this paradigmatic case of proof that the relationship between philosophy and art in the age of the technosphere means the end of philosophy and the end of art within the limits of Western metaphysics? Heidegger was the first to clearly warn that the time of the reign of the enframing (*Gestell)* as the essence of technology is coming and that the only salvation of what belongs to the nature of philosophy and the essence of art lies in the event (*Ereignis*) as the place of the openness of the meaning of Being which cannot be Parmenidean the same and unchangeable, but appears in the event and postponement of its possible, but not necessary, happening. Nothing is fundamental or essential any longer as it was for the philosophy of art and the aesthetics of the Kantian-Hegelian circle of thought. Still, anything becomes only open as a possibility. However, this possibility in the sense of potentiality cannot be simultaneously the condition for the possibility of the emergence of the "new" as the fundamental concept of avant-garde and contemporary art. Nothing "new" is any longer accurate or necessary, and perhaps it is only possible if a complete reversal occurs in the very essence of the post-metaphysical notion of philosophy and art.

What was left is "usurped" by different, so-called new aesthetics of performativity, installation, atmosphere, image, digitality, and corporeality, by the fact that instead of Deleuzian thinking in terms of eschatology, they started with the analysis of the brain as the creator of thought events of fractal virtualization. From this, we are no longer talking about philosophies of art or philosophical aesthetics. Still, aisthesis comes into view only in the plural world of the aesthetic Being, which ranges from Max Bense and cybernetics to Dieter Mersch, in the irreducible openness of human

[5] Žarko Paić, *Aesthetics and the Iconoclasm of Contemporary Art: Pictures Without a World* (Springer, 2021); Žarko Paić, *Art and the Technosphere: The Platforms of Strings* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022).

creativity versus the technological reduction of *AI creativity.*[6] It is about considering the relationship between figure and concept in thinking about the already practical use of artificial intelligence tools in creative activities, such as writing texts in the humanities, literary works and composing and performing musical forms. Namely, we see that it is becoming more and more and day by day, a question of whether creativity as the essence of human thought activity, as Deleuze also does in his philosophical texts, especially in the late stages, is threatened by the *technosphere* has the possibility of autopoietic experimenting with language, image, and sound in creating the "new".[7]

In his book *Discours, Figure*, Jean-François Lyotard exceptionally strikingly performs figurality in thought. These figures deal with the analysis of Paul Klee's painting and his instructions on how modern drawing should be shaped by reducing the content to the form of lines, colors, and figures in space.[8] Conceptuality in thinking, on the other hand, when it comes to the pictorial organization of thinking, becomes a key place in Deleuze's ontology of becoming (*devenir*). Figures and concepts within the framework of poststructuralist philosophy played a crucial role in challenging the classical metaphysical ideas of transcendence, particularly regarding the primacy of language. Furthermore, it is not at all accidental that both terms are derived from the effort to liberate thinking in the face of technologies of reproduction and their powerful dispositifs of repetition and simulacrum from the logic that characterized Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* and which he soon abandoned. It is a transcendental structure of thought that a priori determines the limits of language. However, what Lyotard does with the concept of figure, but also Deleuze in his book on the painter Francis Bacon, shows that we must bear in mind that this non-rational process of thought in painting and film, which provokes an even more pictorial rupture of affectivity because it addresses the masses, is not predetermined by anything. After all, Deleuze insists that Bacon's authentic act of painting was done without sketches.[9] In cinema art, the actor changes the script on the spot, because the very event of creating something new has a contingent "necessity" in itself. Therefore, figural thought appears as creatively determined from the indeterminacy of intuition. Consequently, a figure always represents free formation in space-time, but within the limits of what gives the form its formativeness – this attempt to follow a conceptuality in thought in correlation between Platonism and contextualism.

The form in which the figure appears testifies to the correlation of the idea and its appearance. Hence, painting should be understood as an expression of figural materialization that rests on the creative principles of autopoiesis, because the image as information constantly produces other information. The concept is what gives the image meaning within a specific context. That is why artificial intelligence, like

[6] Paić, *Art and the Technosphere*; Max Bense, *Estetika*, trans. Radoslav Putar (O. Keršovani, 1978); Dieter Mersch, *Epistemologien des Ästhetischen* (Diaphanes, 2015).

[7] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991).

[8] Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, Figure* (Klicksieck, 1971).

[9] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

a third hand, can paint the object of figurality, encompassing the noematic field of conceptual openness of the art of presentation. How does it do that? By mimetically and representationally imitating and constructing what already exists, plus adding one's artificial creativity, which belongs to experimentation with numbers, based on post-memory or files of information about a painting style. Namely, figurality is spatially determined, and conceptuality stems from the idea of time as *nunc stans*. This means that thanks to the programmed set of calculated images, as the new media theorist Friedrich Kittler would say for the concept of the digital image,[10] it becomes possible for a "thinking machine" to produce a new reality as a creative simulacrum in the shortest possible time, just as Lyotard and especially Deleuze conceived in their ontologically innovative reflections on the relationship between image and language of thought. The same applies to linguistic forms in the sense of literary reflections. *AI* will soon "write better" than Michel Houellebecq or Salman Rushdie because it will combine the experiences of Joyce and the new novel, provided that the prose writing program has a few key words or sintagmas. Figurality and conceptuality are interconnected, contrary to the misconception that there exist two distinct forms of thought. Heidegger refers to these as *Rechnen* and *Dichten.*

AI is based on the logic of "rational intuition", a combination of concept, figure, and sound, despite its metaphysically fluid meaning and mystification of the meaning of music, is mimetic *par excellence,* so that already on *YouTube* we have a melody sung "more perfectly" than the original and authentic one, for example, some Neapolitan aria from Verdi's operas. The technosphere denotes artificial life and a phantom of organic and inhuman synthesis. That is precisely why it is necessary to see how and in what way humans, as creatively irreducible, can still and under what conditions survive in thought without becoming a mere technical artefact, a *ready-made,* an object without the sublime within it? In the contemporary discussion about the possibilities of aesthetic thinking today, the German philosopher Dieter Mersch must undertake an exceptionally stimulating reflection on contemporaneity, focusing on three decisive concepts: aura, event, and aisthesis. The first two are inevitably linked to Walter Benjamin and Heidegger. At the same time, the third denotes a newly created concept that breaks with the tradition of modern aesthetics and seeks to foster an openness of meaning regarding the connections between technology, artificial intelligence, and creativity. My research aligns closely with his premises in this regard.[11] Unlike his attempt, the technosphere concept represents a result of *autopoiesis* and the artificial intelligence of machines of the third order, namely cybernetics. So, I conclude that *new AI* devices, by the very logic of things, will no longer be copies and simulacrums of the human in terms of technical mimesis and representation, but rather in the creation of new as synthetic in something that goes beyond the history of art to date, not of course in the sense of "better" and "higher quality", but "aesthetically more

[10] Friedrich W. Kittler, "Schrift and Zahl: Die Geschichte des errechneten Bildes," in *Iconic Turn. Die Neue Macht der Bilder*, ed. Hubert Burda and Christa Mahr (DuMont Publisher, 2005),186–203.

[11] Dieter Mersch, *Ereignis und Aura: Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen* (Suhrkamp, 2002).

efficient", hyperplastic and performatively more fascinating than anything seen so far. The problem that Mersch analyzed in detail belongs to the essence of thinking that lies in the so-called creativity of artificial intelligence, which raises questions about the human mind and its achievements, precisely in this mystery of creativity. Be that as it may, it seems necessary to rethink the limits of the language with which human thinking relates to the technological environment, primarily because the non-human or artificial thinking of a machine, no matter how intelligent, cannot have within itself what Lyotard called a *conceptual hologram* or openness in all directions.

Aisthesis: Beyond corporality

Aisthesis denotes an undeniable, truly stimulating philosophical concept. What is natural and technically sensory cannot be a storehouse of pseudo-emotions in the sense of programmed actions in response to external stimuli, such as sadness, joy, suffering, pleasure, anger, and contempt. Human corporeality encompasses sensory hyperplasticity, just as the human brain does. The fundamental difference lies in the "ontological" difference between vision and program, "embodiment" and "embedding". When something can be programmed, it follows the logic of computation. When something has a vision, it becomes, in its ultimate intention, creatively open to the possibility of the emergence of the new. The program's language becomes *know-how*, and the language of vision is precisely this *aesthetic*, a telling horizon that unites philosophy and art.[12]

However, it seems that the real question should be how long can this creative language of events, from its aesthetic perspective, be an alternative to the language of programs, to that empire of bare pragmatics that moves forward at such speed and destroys everything before it, including the world of natural languages, which it reduces to the question of Gottfried Leibniz monadological infinity starting from the logic of 0-1? Number is nothing more than a pure form in which Being becomes thought of as the creation of a being from Nothing. Isn't Roger Penrose, therefore, justified in asking whether mathematics represents the work of God's providence or, rather, our constructive invention of the idea of the world and its rules and laws?[13]

Can we take it one step further and consider what if it reflects a matter of pure contingency? What if with numbers and mathematics, it simply emerged as an event, neither from the mind of the immovable mover nor the human imagination, but from pure chance? Namely, all concepts of traditional philosophy of art and aesthetics, as we have already seen in the quote from Gadamer, are imbued with the "impurity" of modern scientific and technological constructions. If that is so, it was necessary to understand that the future of the aesthetic cannot be outside the technological one, even if they put themselves on a head made of obsidian. The matter seems so simple that

[12] Žarko Paić, "The Brain as a Vision and Program: From 'Embodiment' to 'Embedment'," in *Brain, Decision Making, and Mental Health*, ed. Nima Rezai (Springer, 2023), 575–93.

[13] Roger Penrose, *The Road to Reality: A Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe* (Vintage, 2007), 12–17.

the head must ache, not from the uncanny complex problem but from the most complicated possible simplicity. The concepts of philosophy and art, as well as aesthetics, can no longer be used. The journey with the technosphere is complete. What will still "happen" as "new" will not be anything new, because newness denotes the repetition of actualization in the temporal structure of the "now", which only extends like the Cartesian *res extensa*. New is the obsolescence of this world and its eternal novelty, a concept unknown to the ancient Greeks. Socrates, after all, mocked an Athenian who travelled everywhere and said that he met "new" people and places, without knowing and not realizing what old people and places were, let alone new ones. When the *technosphere* becomes an artistic event of interactive visual communication, we are in a state of accelerated work by artificial intelligence, and it is no longer a *work of art*. The synthetic is nothing fixed and unchangeable, nor static and permanent. Rapid changes and transformations mark it; therefore, neither art nor aesthetics can lack reflection and speculation. Because *ChatGPT – OpenAI* tends to think by programming its visions and speak by algorithmically calculating and planning constructed states thanks to artificial language as the technological dispositive of all existing dead and living languages of human civilization.

A picture without a world: Heidegger and the technoscientific turn

The most significant philosophical treatise of the 20th century is Heidegger's "The Age of the World Picture" ["Die Zeit der Weltbildes"], published in 1938. The reason seems so obvious and is already clearly stated in the title. Time, as the age of the world picture, has always been present throughout the history of Western metaphysics, marked by its epochality. It is therefore not some immobile eternity of the permanence of the same, but the historical world-making of the world as the rule of that complex of Being and time which is no longer anything open in the sense of the historicity of "nature" and "Human". Instead, we encounter the rule of Being as the established objectivity of the object, which encloses the whole of nature and the Human in the complex scientific-technological thrust of thought. All of this begins by transforming the Greek concept of hypokeimenon into the Latin idea of *subjectum*. When the subjectivity of the subject appears on the horizon of modern representation of the world, the original openness of the world, to which meaning was given by thought as telling (Dichten) in the sense of the mythopoetic secret of the encounter between gods and Humans, nature and the non-human, is over. The modern world of the subject's rule over the original appearance of Being, beings and the essence of Human unfolds under the power of that thinking characterized by calculability and representation. Calculating thinking becomes thinking "about" nature in its representability. It does not appear as an original world phenomenon, but as a scientific and technical work of research and transformation of the appearance and essence of Being. According to Heidegger's analyses, this process unfolds so that we no longer have the world before our eyes in the purity of its openness, but rather in the worldliness of the world.

The modern world represents a radical and fundamental shift in thinking and Being, which is now constructed from the perspective of the world.

From the beginning of his treatise, Heidegger shows why metaphysics has this unconditional power to determine and shape the essence of Being in this distinguished epoch of the historical conception of Being. Namely, "science belongs to the essential phenomena of the modern age".[14] However, science cannot be something in and of itself, independent of giving Being a different meaning and place in the world. The rank of this modern-age-specific science lies in the omnipresence of the mechanical technology (*Machinentechnik*), which for Heidegger does not mean "the mere application of modern-age mathematical natural science in practice."[15] Mechanical technology inherently involves a reproduction logic, transforming nature into a means for other purposes. The problem with the instrumental notion of technology, as it evolved through German philosophy of technology from Hegel to Karl Marx to various currents and orientations of the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory, is that the essence of technology cannot be derived from the changed nature of modern science. Instead, it becomes organo-logically assumed that science is still an insight into the logic of Being, which is permanent and unchanging. It denotes the natural-scientific structure of thinking about nature as something existing in the sense of objectivity of objects.

It must be admitted that Heidegger shows how this "mechanical technique" in its instrumentality necessarily represents a visible "essence of modern technology". What does this mean? Is the essence shown or hidden if the technique that stands in the light of mathematical natural science as its flywheel and driver is something other than the mere application of science in practice? Heidegger, therefore, shows how the presentation of Being in the modern era becomes essentially determined by the appearance of "mechanical technology". This applies not only to the practical world of nature but also to that which emanates the concepts of beauty and sublimity, that is, to art. The change that Heidegger observes is of far-reaching significance for understanding aesthetics as a philosophical discipline that emerged at the end of the 18th century, along with rationalism and the penetration of natural and technical sciences. This applies equally to art itself, which is no longer under the authority of the traditional concept of imitation (*mimesis*) of Being. Still, the concept of aesthetic appearance was introduced to the world in the 20th century, with the emergence of the historical avant-garde movement. It is about representation (*raepresentatio*). When the image is mimetic, it always happens in the natural environment as the openness of Being. When the image appears as a representation of the world, then the world must be scientifically and technologically constructed to represent precisely this new thinking that unites nature and mechanical technology. Such thinking determines a modern-age blueprint and outline of what is not Being as such and in its entirety, but is created by an act of thought or scientific and technological construction. For Heidegger, art changes significantly in its difference from Greek art in such a way that

[14] Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in *Holzwege* (Klostermann, 2003), 69.

[15] Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," 69.

"the work of art itself becomes the object of experience, and accordingly art becomes the expression of human life".[16]

By clarifying the derivation of thought as the conception of Being in "The Age of the World Picture", Heidegger arrives at something genuinely decisive for the further philosophical analysis of modernity. Modern culture, therefore, cannot be something autonomous and magnificent. Still, a drive made possible by the transformation of the Greek paradigm of knowledge into modern science, which, with the help of mechanical technology, conditions the emergence of the new in the sense of a Being that becomes the work of Human and as such a matter of the provision of "cultural politics". Science and mechanical technology are the conditions for the possibility of the emergence of the "new", in which the aesthetics of experience transforms into the enjoyment of beautiful objects that must be preserved from destruction by time through state measures of cultural policy. Both the causal and the purposeful, science-technology and aesthetics-art-culture, are nothing other than the already established order of the modern reduction of the world to a picture of the world, starting from the change in the concept of image from *mimesis* to *representation*. However, the image in question here arises from the "image of thought", so the image as an object that is observed and that observes us is, as Paul Klee would say, what now connects no longer Being and thinking, but thinking and Being in the sense of a pure technological construction. Finally, what does Heidegger include in his analysis as the fifth phenomenon of this metaphysical reversal of the relationship between Being and thinking with the emergence of the modern picture of the world?

Nothing other than the emergence of "un-deification" (*Entgötterung*), but not as "crude atheism".[17] I will not go further and deeper here into the thoughts that Heidegger probably expresses most radically in contemporary philosophy about the loss of the rank of religiosity and the total theological inability to think through this event as something of crucial importance for the future of faith in general and Human as a religious "subject". I will only say that "un-deification" becomes an act of the final process of disintegration of Western metaphysics that ends with Nietzsche's statement about the death of God as the rule of nihilism, in which what Heidegger calls "the emerging void that is replaced by the historical and psychological research of myth" necessarily comes about.[18]

The act of "un-deification" is not, therefore, a matter of a human-too-human worldview-political decision to bestow upon the modern age both active-passive nihilism in the form of atheism and religious fundamentalism, both of which are perpetrators and witnesses of the same Janus-faced process of denying the divine and its furious and militant reintroduction into the world of secularization and profaneness. Heidegger, therefore, shows that the concept of the "new" in the sense of its unconditional rule and power cannot be a matter of any mere anthropological reduction of

[16] Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," 69; Paić, *Aesthetics and the Iconoclasm of Contemporary Art*, 2021.

[17] Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," 76.

[18] Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," 76.

metaphysics, but of something essentially "deeper" than what appears in the "new" phenomena. The "new" cannot be understood without a thinking that rests on the image as a representation of the object's construction in its objectivity and without an answer to the fundamental question about the essence of modern science. The modern age should be understood, therefore, as the "age of the picture of the world", and this image has already been significantly changed in its essence because it does not mirror the world as such in the sense of imitating its permanence and durability. Instead, the image becomes a matter of representative thinking whose essence lies in the construction.[19]

Let's stop here. It is needless to repeat that in this discussion as a lecture, Heidegger has come furthest of all the philosophers in the circle of the end of metaphysics from Hegel through Nietzsche to Wittgenstein. Only Gilles Deleuze in his "ontology of becoming" established the image in a completely different way as an "image of thought" and that it was not by chance that he saw from the logic of the cinema event how the progress of information technology in recording technology (image-movement and image-time) and the understanding of what I call the technosphere as the third order of cybernetics or *autopoiesis* are a signpost that points to two fundamental concepts of contemporaneity. They arise from the technoscientific turn as *quantification* and *visualization*.[20]

In Heidegger's reflection on the image, which is rooted in the paradigm of mechanical technology, it becomes clear that a reversal has occurred within the causal-teleological direction of metaphysics itself. It is no longer science that determines the "what" of technology as modern technology, but the "how" (in medieval ontology we call this the primacy of *quoddittas* over *quiddittas*) that is crucial in the logic of research that becomes the "essence" of the entire turn in the very essence of science. We see, therefore, that already in 1938, in the context of the "Age of the World Picture", Heidegger reaches the most crucial step towards his fundamental concept that ends the period of ontology in general, and that is the enframing (*Gestell*) as the essence of technology. Of course, this will happen later in the lecture "The Question of Technology" from 1953.[21]

But one thing should be undeniable. Moreover, it remains a subject of unfinished reflections. Suppose the question of the essence of modern science is impossible to resolve without insight into the nature of contemporary technology. Is it impossible to derive the question of the image as the essence of the technosphere from Heidegger's thinking, which he so inspiringly brought out in 1938 in "The Age of the World Picture"? My answer would be in the affirmative. The limits of thinking that speaks of "Being", "metaphysics", "representation", "image" are the limits of thinking that overcomes metaphysics as the rule of cybernetics with a fundamental concept in five phenomenal articulations in which the image appears as a condition for the possibility of the emergence of (1) science, (2) mechanical technology, (3) the aesthetics

[19] Paić, *Art and the Technosphere*.

[20] Žarko Paić, *Izgledi nadolazeće filozofije: Metafizika-kibernetika-transhumanizam* (Mizantrop, 2023).

[21] Martin Heidegger, "Die Frage nach der Technik," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Klett-Cotta, 2009), 9-40.

of experience and art (4) culture as cultural politics and (5) the un-deification of the world in the void of a substitute for the original myth and religious experience. These limits are precisely determined by the triad of what does not correspond to Heidegger's paradigm of mechanical technology, which he attempted to follow until the end of his life, in the changes in the essence of technology from atomic to nuclear. But his notion of cybernetics never reached the last "twilight zone", namely, the reign of quantification and visualization of the technosphere itself, which transcends the limits of the causal-teleological notion of the world. The technosphere, in contrast to mechanical technology as a modern technology of reproduction of "Being", "beings" and "essence" of Human, can no longer be an image in the sense of *mimesis* and *representation*, but should be determined from the triad of calculation-planning-construction of "artificial reality" which, with the help of numbers, creates an image as a visualization of events in its contingency-emergency through the cybernetic of four, which are information-feedback-control-communication.[22]

What does this mean other than that it seems impossible to think of the image as the essence of the technosphere philosophically within the framework of thinking of overcoming metaphysics as ontology, because the image can no longer be constructed from the representative thinking of the subject. Instead, the image denotes the autopoietic transversal logic of the rule of autonomous objects that think by seeing themselves in the same way that the god Dionysus looks at his eye, as Peter Sloterdijk effectively expresses in his study of Nietzsche.[23] The problem is, therefore, that the idea of the "age of the world picture" in its magnificence is still only the most significant reach of an image as a conception of the world on the horizon of the end of metaphysics. Even when the possibility is opened that the new paradigm of science represents the one that Heidegger had in mind at the end of the 1960s in conjunction with atomic and nuclear physics, the image has not yet become an autopoietic "time machine" that creates contingent events, rather than mirroring and representing an already existing reality. The image can no longer be thought of philosophically, because it transcends the limits of metaphysics as a horizon that presupposes a distance between event and reflection. The problem cannot be in the image itself, but in the thought itself. If thought lies in the extra-metaphysical sense, it signifies the possibility of characterizing work or structure of those four without which there is no metaphysics, namely, Being-God-World-Human. It is not a matter of the mere disappearance of the framework or structure of metaphysics, but of the disappearance of metaphysics. This means philosophy is no longer a love of wisdom or absolute knowledge (Heraclitus-Hegel). What remains of philosophy in contemplating the image as the essence of the technosphere can only be the "image of thought" in the language of the conceptual event of creating the "image-ness of the image", which no longer has its object or image in the so-called reality. The image has been constructed since the modern age with the help of mechanical technology. In the contemporaneity of the

[22] Žarko Paić, *The Superfluity of the Human: Reflections on the Posthuman Condition* (Schwabe Verlag, 2023).

[23] Peter Sloterdijk, *Der Denker auf der Bühne: Nietzsches Materialismus* (Suhrkamp, 1986).

21st century, the image should be created as a visualization of an event, not an image or a copy of reality in the sense of the objectivity of the object. Of course, the mimetic and representational functions of the image thus lose their relevance for contemporary thinking of the technosphere.

Visualization: A networked telepresence

Mechanical engineering has become a thing of the past. We live in an age of technoscientific construction of "artificial worlds" determined by the binary logic of quantification and visualization. And that is why we no longer have pictures of the world. We have the emergence of new probabilistically created worlds as contingencies in which completely different "concepts" and "categories" rule than those analogous ones with which Heidegger meant the original notion of Being and time. It is no longer an "image" because its "essence" lies in the realization of cybernetics in the technosphere, and its imagery cannot be understood starting from ancient historical-epochal "images" as symbols and metaphors of a world that may have passed forever. The art we call by habit has become the aestheticization and culturalization of "artificial life" and only those fluid and changeable rules, like the simulacrum of life, apply to it. We do not have an image of the world because our so-called "age" arises from the metastasis of hyperreality technosphere that neither imitates nor represents anything. It simply constructs new states and contingent events, and that is why we are indifferent to its "pictorial" disappearance, just as we are to the image of the Roman statue of the god Apollo, the first valid deified symbol of vanished beauty in the ruins of a bygone time. What we still call "image" results from the cybernetic production of events as the fourth element of information, feedback, control, and communication. Man is not the producer of images, but the agent of the process of their illumination, because the meaning of an image has historically always been to depict the splendour and sublimity of its referential frame. Therefore, the classical age of the image was characterized by the prevalence of myth and religion in the Greek and Christian Middle Ages. With the new Era and the age of the scientific-technical "image of the world", the process of the end of metaphysics begins, and in its place, in the mid-20th century, comes the cybernetic system of the technosphere.

Since it is no longer about technique or technology, because the *technosphere* cannot be a means to an end, nor an end in the sense of representing the world of modernity, the *technosphere* signifies the transformation of "Being" into "becoming" by the world as calculation, planning and construction of artificial worlds from the essence of artificial intelligence. What is happening with this other than the establishment of a complete nihilism in which it is no longer a question of the rule of the Overman in the Nietzschean sense, but of the nihilism of autopoietic autonomous machines that think and shape new virtual worlds from the essence of simulation. The age of the "pictures without a world" becomes an age of contingency, entropy, and chaos in which neither philosophy nor art can be a relevant discourse anymore. Therefore, it seems entirely wrong on the horizon of thought to continue to prolong

the life of philosophical aesthetics that have already lost credibility with Adorno. In the real world of artificial intelligence, the aesthetic is nothing other than the technosphere that, like the eye of Dionysus, sees its image in the fractals and transversals of an ever-new reality. However, something else becomes highly intriguing in the issue of belief or loss of faith in the power of images. It is precisely this excess of theological-religious "thinking" in the concept of image that appears from the very beginning in the Greeks, and continues throughout the entire history of Western metaphysics, even in the notion of the technical or digital image in Willém Flusser, who, like the late Max Horkheimer, modernized his Jewish eschatology and messianism with the idea of a telematic society for which the transparency of the image signifies the possibility of merging with the divine.[24]

In *The Pictures Without the World – The Iconoclasm of Contemporary Art*, I speak of the end of the image, not only as the end *of mimesis* and *representation* but also of the end of the image in the sense of any sublime remnant of the divine in the image.[25] With the concept of immanent transcendence, I aimed to illustrate the impossibility of the image becoming a new language, as that would merely be the continuation of logocentrism by other means. The real problem with this notion of the image as a technosphere is the disappearance of the traditionally understood space and time of its form of appearance, rather than appearance itself.[26]

My theoretical position regarding the *iconic turn* was to find what medieval theology called *tertium datur*. Thus, both language and image are enabled by something synthetically and analytically autonomous, the very "thing" of thought that becomes, from the aesthetic object of Marcel Duchamp to the autopoietic activity of Ken Rinaldo's robot, the same thing as self-producing and self-moving, but so that there is no longer a difference between idea and appearance, transcendence and immanence, but instead of *linguistic and iconic turn* now works on the visualization of the concept as a *technosphere.* Power no longer has images, but rather what directs the image from the technical dispositif of power to the power of number, or rather the mathematization and technologization of Being and time, to use the language of Heidegger from the *Sein und Zeit* period.

The technosphere designates the rule of the absolute triad of calculation, planning, and construction, and can no longer be understood in traditional metaphysical terms, whether in language or image. Admittedly, the late Wittgenstein sensed this when he introduced the concept of *language games* (*Sprachspiele)* into philosophical discourse as forms of life.[27] However, here we are discussing pure Platonism in a reversed manner. The idea that the *technosphere* autopoetically visualizes the world as an image arises from its hyperplasticity expressed by artificial intelligence. Hence, the

[24] Vilém Flusser, *Kommunikologie* (S. Fischer, 1998).

[25] Paić, *Aesthetics and the Iconoclasm of Contemporary Art*, 2021.

[26] Krešimir Purgar, *Pictorial Appearing – Image Theory After Representation* (Transcript, 2019), 106–121; Ingeborg Reichle, *Art in the Age of Technoscience: Genetic Engineering, Robotics, and Artificial Life in Contemporary Art* (Springer, 2009).

[27] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1953).

image in the post-digital world, which presupposes precisely the power of numbers and the mathematicalization of the world as a metaverse, requires the abandonment of philosophy, theology, and art history. Let's go one step further, *Bildwissenschaft* and *Visual Studies*.[28]

Why? The answer also presupposes an answer to the question, "Do we still believe in the power of images?" Our so-called faith was not a question of faith in the secular god of information as a condition of the possibility of cybernetics. So, when I titled the book "Pictures Without the World" with the subtitle "The Iconoclasm of Contemporary Art", I wanted first and foremost to follow in the footsteps of the late Heidegger and his concept of *Kunstlosigkeit* to reach the other shore, one where there is no longer any difference between art and non-art, but also no difference between living and non-living. That is why the technosphere concept denotes an era that transcends the idea of art, from the Greeks to Hegel and beyond. Art, like science, exists in the age of the *technosphere* and is only possible as a research and experiment in the emergence of the new from the spirit of *autopoiesis*. This spirit, metaphorically speaking, denotes that thinking which itself produces its reality no longer as the difference between idea and phenomenon, *noesis and noema,* the Kantian-Husserlian discourse. Such thinking produces beyond any knowledge of the image in the sense of philosophy or semiotics, as was necessary for the science of images.

The end of the so-called faith in the power of images is not the end of philosophy and art in the face of the triumphal march of the techno-scientific "image of the world", which will accelerate as soon as quantum computers start operating. After all, the fundamental issues of today are not decided by philosophers, theologians or artists, but only by a triad of astrophysics, cosmology and biogenetics. This means that thinking speculatively or reflexively, with the image as its subject, must become transversal and experimental in the face of a radical shift in the concepts of power and image in general. Power is not merely political power, but rather that which conditions everything and arises from the cybernetic turn, in which the management of systems and the environment emerge as the fourth element of information, feedback, control, and communication. *Homo kybernetes* marks the culmination of all previous anthropologies, including those that claim cybernetic affiliation.[29]

The image is no longer an external-internal matter of the relationship between the sublime and the banal in the field of phenomenology and psychoanalysis, as Deleuze demonstrated in *Cinema 1–2*, when he established an ontology of images of movement and time following Henri Bergson, but above all following Antonin Artaud and his idea *of the brain-as-screen*.[30] What follows from this becomes uncanny. If the image denotes an autopoietic model of creating new worlds from the logic of

[28] Klaus Sachs-Hombach, *Bildwissenschaft zwischen Reflexion und Anwendung* (Herbert vom Halem Verlag, 2005).

[29] Paić, *The Superfluity of the Human*; Susan Broadhurst, *Digital Practices: Aesthetic and Neuroaesthetic Approaches to Performance and Technology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[30] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

number and its infinity, then language and narration have become superfluous for the functioning of the *technosphere.* Instead, we have "concerts of machines" and the frenzy of "symbolic mathematics". Everything becomes a visualized world of interaction that is no longer substantial or corporeal but is a networked telepresence of matrices in the play of the inhuman. Three examples can testify to this and speak of the end of painting as the essence of art in the contemporary world.

The first is Jean-Luc Godard's film essay on the history of the 20th century as the history of film, *Histoire(s) du cinéma,* in which the end of the film marks the end of the "Great narrative" about the representation of what we are watching.[31] The effect of the de-realization of the visible, already seen in other films, images, and texts, is modeled on Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* through the montage of discursive chaos, resulting in a pure melancholy of the technical film device that disappears with the arrival of pure visualization. The second is the launch of the *James Webb* telescope into space, which will provide astrophysics and cosmology with a visual insight into the constellations of the universe, the origin and fate of stars, the age of galaxies, and possibly the "image of God" as an intelligent designer before the Big Bang. Of course, with the progress in visualization technology itself, it will become apparent that science can no longer exist without two fundamental concepts: measurement and imagery, which arise from the essence of the *technosphere,* such as calculation, planning, and construction. The mystery of black holes in the universe will be solved by progress in the quality of visualization and the mathematical calculation of the universe's entropy. The third is the emergence of the new in the sense of the contingent cause of consciousness as a simulacrum of human thought.

Brain scanning and neurocognition, therefore, belong to the only remaining mystery: the issue of self-consciousness as a way of existence of all beings in the universe, with the potential to distinguish good from evil. The image is always the *tertium datur*, the connection between the sublime and the phenomenon in its metamorphic structure of synesthetic "illusion". Film, telescope and the simulacrum of the artificial brain show us the end of the metaphysics of art and the end of the image as sign and meaning. Instead of the history of the world as the history of the development of self-consciousness starting from language as *logos* with the referential framework of myth in the Greeks and the Christian religion in the Middle Ages, *images* as representations from Diego Velázquez to Paul Cézanne and images as information from photography to film, our age is defined by the rule of *the technosphere* as powers of *number* in an infinite variation of models and simulations of reality. It is an age without images, the one that, like in Godard's *History(ies) of cinema*, needs philosophy and art as a speculative-reflexive musealization and historicization of events that are irrevocably disappearing at the speed of light, and precisely for this reason, the necessity of new thinking presupposes a different way of thinking about the issue of visualization.

The world no longer opens on any horizon of meaning that Human bestows from their freedom of imagination. The twist is that the world becomes a project and

[31] Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (Gallimard, 1998).

a concept. The project (*proiectum)* represents the strategy of the transcendental subject in its subjugation of nature and culture. Conceptual combinatorics and thinking as a schematism of categories (Immanuel Kant) should be understood as a modern cognitive map of the world. It is an entry into the realm of pure thought through the virtual image. The artist no longer produces works of art. He does not stage events or aesthetically construct the surrounding world. However, as the expressionist painter Paul Klee understood long ago, he has become an object of perception, a thing among things, a phenomenon among phenomena. The world has been reflected as a self-generative scientific production and construction concept within a media-determined space. In it, everything unfolds within the visualization of the world. *I see, therefore I am*. This should be a way for us to paraphrase René Descartes' fundamental thought – I think, therefore I am (*cogito ergo sum*). An idea has its main intention in the foundation of the modern picture of the world. The subject of thought decides on the reality of existence and the external world. Thought becomes a logical visualization of the world. Seeing something means discerning its meaning. The connection of image and logos through project and concept corresponds to the modern "metaphysics of light". Art that is based on the project/concept of the world necessarily already takes the character of conceptuality. Therefore, visualization marks the final act of transforming ideas into their visual representation.

It is sufficient to mention two examples that serve as illustrations of the creation of new synesthetic works of art. Deep Dream Generator is a computer vision platform that enables users to upload photos into the program and transform them using an artificial intelligence algorithm. Created to help scientists and engineers understand what a deep neural network sees when viewing a given image, the algorithm has evolved into a new form of psychedelic and abstract art. Blurring the lines between art and technology, The Next Rembrandt is a 3D-printed painting created exclusively from data derived from Rembrandt's work. It was created using deep learning algorithms and facial recognition techniques. In 2016, it toured the world and triggered an avalanche of reactions in terms of creativity, winning over 60 advertising awards.

Conclusion

The technosphere represents the last frontier of metaphysical thought within which both aesthetics as a philosophical discipline and the aesthetic that is replaced by the concepts of *aisthesis, figurality and visualization,* after the end of all conceptual-categorical systems of thought regarding the essence of art from Kant through Hegel and Schelling to Adorno, still appear as relics of language and its ontological structure of saying "about" the world. Only because it is an entirely different way of thinking that constructs "its" sensibility not as what is already always existing from God or nature in the sense of beauty and sublimity, but in the mind of the process of *autopoietic semiosis* which, unlike the intentionality of consciousness, can no longer be directed towards the representation of the world. Instead, what remains of the

aesthetic thinking of contemporaneity encounters processes of aestheticization of life itself, not just the so-called world of life (*Lebenswelt*). This is credibly demonstrated by the adventure of contemporary art, which combines self-referentiality and techno-genetic experiments with what, instead of the secret of life, becomes the *mystery of object X*. Aesthetics emerged in the era of the rise of rationalism and modern technology. *Aisthesis, figurality and visualization are conceptual tools for what connects the thinking of the technosphere and its world-forming "aesthetic objects", which, unlike the metaphysical order of the world, think their synesthetic objectility, not objectivity, to use the* figure by Artaud, beyond all logical-corporal "laws" of language. So, it is neither the self nor the transcendental subject, but "That" which in its "creepiness" goes beyond any "aesthetic" orientation to the sublime object of thought, without which traditional metaphysics could not even imagine what it thought in the complete splendor of a beautiful illusion.[32]

What remains becomes the possibility, which Heidegger calls the necessary possibility of art, to open the horizon of events of a "new" world beyond the reduction to the technological configuration of the world. This is the only thing that still has the overtones of metaphysical "faith" in art at the end of its historically exhausted possibilities of being something more than art, of giving birth to an event of mythical, cultic, mystical history from within itself in the wake of the surplus of the imaginary. Otherwise, why do we need some new aesthetics, among others? Why, even the intercession of the self-evident illusion that perhaps only in a world without God can art save us? The future of art lies in contemplating a new relationship between space and time, which has already been fundamentally reshaped aesthetically. Everything else is a whirlwind in the vicious circle of the nihilism of the new.

References

Bense, Max. *Estetika*. Translated from German by Radoslav Putar. O. Keršovani, 1971.

Broadhurst, Susan. *Digital Practices: Aesthetic and Neuroaesthetic Approaches to Performance and Technology*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Eco, Umberto. *Estetički problem u Tome Akvinskoga*. Translated from the Italian by Sanja Roić. Globus, 2005.

Flusser, Vilém. *Kommunikologie*. S. Fischer, 1998.

[32] Paić 2023d.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Ogledi o filozofiji umjetnosti*. Translated from the German by Darija Domić. AGM, 2003.

Godard, Jean-Luc. *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Gallimard, 1998.

Heidegger, Martin "Die Zeit des Weltbildes." In *Holzwege*, 75-113. Klostermann, 2003, 8th unchanged edition.

Heidegger, Martin. "Die Frage nach der Technik." In *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 9-40. Klett-Cotta, 2009, 11th edition.

Kittler, Friedrich W. "Schrift and Zahl: Die Geschichte des errechneten Bildes." In *Iconic Turn. Die Neue Macht der Bilder*, edited by Hubert Burda and Christa Mahr, 186–203. DuMont Publisher, 2005.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *Discours, Figure*. Klicksieck, 1971.

Mersch, Dieter. *Epistemologien des Ästhetischen*. Diaphanes, 2015.

Mersch, Dieter. *Ereignis und Aura: Untersuchungen zu einer Ästhetik des Performativen*. Suhrkamp, 2002.

Paić, Žarko. "The Brain as a Vision and Program: From 'Embodiment' to 'Embedment'." In *Brain, Decision Making, and Mental Health*, edited by Nima Rezai, 575–93. Springer, 2023.

Paić, Žarko. *Aesthetics and the Iconoclasm of Contemporary Art: Pictures Without a World*. Springer, 2021.

Paić, Žarko. *Art and the Technosphere: The Platforms of Strings*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022.

Paić, Žarko. *Izgledi nadolazeće filozofije: Metafizika-kibernetika-transhumanizam*. Mizantrop, 2023.

Paić, Žarko. *The Superfluity of the Human: Reflections on the Posthuman Condition*. Schwabe Verlag, 2023.

Penrose, Roger. *The Road to Reality: A Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe*. Vintage, 2007.

Purgar, Krešimir. *Pictorial Appearing – Image Theory After Representation*. Transcript, 2019.

Reichle, Ingeborg. *Art in the Age of Technoscience: Genetic Engineering, Robotics, and Artificial Life in Contemporary Art*. Springer, 2009.

Sachs-Hombach, Klaus. *Bildwissenschaft zwischen Reflexion und Anwendung*. Herbert von Halem Verlag, 2005.

Schiller, Friedrich. *Über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*. W. de Gruyter, 2019.

Sloterdijk, Peter. *Der Denker auf der Bühne: Nietzsches Materialismus*. Suhrkamp, 1986.

Welsch, Wolfgang. *Äesthetisches Denken*. Reclam, 1993.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1953.

Article received: April 3, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Original scholarly paper

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.633

Jasmina Čubrilo
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

Performance and Protest: Questions on Art and Life

Abstract: The paper addresses the critical potential of the body in performance art and in political protest, examining the relationship between an art form that aims to be indistinguishable from life and a socio-political practice that uses (appropriates) the performance art tactics, methods, and themes to articulate itself. The central problem our research addresses is related to the question of how various performance features, procedures, or techniques (for example, endurance, exposure, objectification, limits of individual agency) contribute to the articulation of protest practices, and whether these articulations turn political protest into a new kind of 'live art' that is more like life than art ever was.

Keywords: body; performance art; political protest; performativity; live art; Serbia.

The paper discusses the critical potential of the body in performance art, examining its persistence and, analogously, its enduring presence throughout artistic practices across generations and the implications of its ability to continuously provoke whatever context it is related to. Structurally, the paper follows the circular pattern of concentric movement similar to the patterns created by knots on a tree or ripples from a stone tossed into water. Gradually converging, these circles collect fragments of various facets of body potentiality to express resistance to political, ideological, social, cultural power and hegemony, and embrace them into the central currents. The core of this circular pattern is the amalgam ("cluster") of the ideas and processes that preceded and culminated in the year 1968 and continued to be a driving force and relevant agent to the present day,[1] with the most recent, outer circle represented by the ongoing student and civil protests throughout Serbia that started in December 2024. The aim of this paper is not to map and systemize the relations between examples of performance art from different decades of the 20th and 21st centuries in Serbia, nor to interpret those relations as a "repetition with differences". Instead, it aims to discuss the effects of usage of the body by female performance artists (Marina Abramović, Tanja Ostojić, Ivana Ivković) as a continuously critical (re-)examination of the same problems and paradigms: objectification (within gendered voyeuristic

[1] Maja Stanković, "Art Is What Makes Life More Interesting than Art," *Zbornik Seminara za studije moderne umetnosti Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu* 14 (2018): 130.

*Author's contact information: jasmina.cubrilo@f.bg.ac.rs

viewing structures), "bringing objective and subjective self together",[2] limits of individual agency, presentness, vulnerability, control and endurance in specific time-related geopolitical, social, economic and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the paper problematizes how female performance artists from the powerful performative margin of the local and/or marginalized art scene, using their bodies, operate and negotiate with art world network and recognized institutional frameworks, as well as with late capitalist, post-socialist and neoliberal commodification of all aspects of everyday life, particularly focusing their critical acts on the issues of the institutionalization of the art and the artist through the art market's commodification and, consequently, cultural fetishization. It also refers to the shift from a live presence of a single performer and immediacy via the artist's own body, through temporary and occasional formed communities of participants who produce social relations and share environment to the recent, outsourced model of performance, characterized by its collective body of nonprofessionals or specialists in other fields who, guided by artist's directions, accept to be present and perform at a particular time and a particular place on an artist's behalf.[3] Ultimately, the paper reconsiders how an art form that is epitome of blurring the boundary between itself and life, due to political and social circumstances and challenges, becomes lived experience, i.e., life itself, and particularly how performance art as influenced by protest practices of the 1960s and 1970s provides models for contemporary political activism and protest ("provides a paradigm for social action"[4]) and becomes "vehicle for social change"[5].

Gesturing, expressive, activistic, and delegated bodies

The uncanny capacity of the body, its ever-present and almost brutally apparent vulnerability, no matter whether it is naked or dressed, made performance art become a controversial and powerful personal, cultural, and social experience. Performance is situated in a liminal space – between presentation and representation, being and doing, autobiography and fiction, private life and public practices of exposure and production, reality and its symbolization, life itself and its interpretation (or spectacularization), frequently obfuscating demarcation lines and generating ambiguities. The performance artist principally treated his or her body in unconventional ways in order to express psychophysical, social, political, and cultural experiences and needs, and to demonstrate the effects of its oppression on his or her body.[6] The artist's body is simultaneously an (art) object and the body of a subject that performs artwork. It

[2] Cindy Nemser, "Subject–Object: Body Art," *Art Magazine* 46.1 (September – October 1971): 42.

[3] Claire Bishop, "Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," *October* 140 (May 2012): 91.

[4] Kristine Stiles, "Performance and Its Objects," *Arts Magazine* 65 (November 1990): 47.

[5] Robyn Brentano, "Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life," in *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object, a Survey of the History of Performance Art in the USA since 1970*, ed. Robyn Brentano and Olivia Georgia (Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994), 31.

[6] Kristine Stiles, "Performance," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 75–77; 95.

serves as cause, site, and medium of perpetual cultural self-transformation. In the occasion where the naked body is involved in the performance, the self-transformation process goes from the nature of givenness of the flesh to the culture symbolization and construction, and back again.

During the 1960s and 1970s artists and critics proposed many terms for their specific strategy for the activation of the body as a form and medium in the domain of art – happenings, Fluxus, actions, events, ceremonies, demonstrations, situations, activities, body art, artist's theatre, kinetic theatre, bodily expressions. In the 1970s, the term 'performance' began to circulate among art critics, curators, and artists as a generic name for these actions that express corporeal circumstances within their psychological and cultural settings, as well as for the creation of live and in the particular space-time frame, visual representations of human social and political agency. Later, this term will include video mediation, such as video performances and installations, as well as reenactments, delegated bodies, evolving and expanding to the various forms of participation, constructive social engagements and projects that will shift the focus from individualism and individual, here-and-now presence to the community and the idea of communal. Hence, we can single out three possible trajectories, each of them belonging to a different period and context, and follow the processes of their alteration from singularity towards multitude, from an art form that converses the motif of depicted figure into actual body towards participating bodies, from art gesture and expression back to the vulnerability and versatility of real life, from self-determining individualism to various models of collectivity, from passive and discrete aesthetic experience to resistance, endurance, activism. By dissolving boundaries between art and life, all these alterations deconstruct artistic hierarchies, transgress passive sensibilities, foster an engaged and active interpretation of art, and critically address issues of art as both a form of representation and a means of aestheticizing power.

The first trajectory of bold challenging the body's limits and strong emphasizing the body as the site of the personal as political, starts in the pioneering days of performance in the 1970s. During this period, the artists involved in performance art were primarily women that adopted various counter-cultural positions of social movements and political associations. Confronting aesthetic modernism with their flesh, women created powerful statements of female defined subject positions and agency. This refocusing of the attention from traditional, modernist and mass media forms of figuration (that is, from representation, subduing and objectification of the female body) to the actual body, and from the abstract modernist sublime to the base materialism ("bassesse") of the flesh, not only "revalidated the timeless subject matter to the body",[7] but made visible all aspects of the body and life that were ignored by art and culture up to that point. This engagement with the material conditions and limits of the body – which include discomfort, pain, boldness, daring, endurance – created

[7] Stiles, "Performance," 86.

the narcissist and heroic body, or evoked "universal empathy",[8] or strictly referred to female experiences based on biological specificities. Distinctions along gender lines as well as differences between feminist and non-feminist performance are often difficult to determine. Not only do the differences between men's and women's performances remain elusive,[9] but the feminist agenda behind the performance art can also be vague, indeterminate, uncertain or ambiguous.

Through the exploration of her body's ability to perform beyond pain, vulnerability, and intentionality,[10] and by controlling the limits of objecthood throughout this process,[11] Marina Abramović performs an extraordinary and heroic figure who overcomes great and dangerous challenges and transforms into the same "narcissistic" and "Artist as hero"[12] extraordinary mythic figure that male artists have performed. Moreover, the context of her family upbringing in the new stoic post-revolutionary and socialist society and culture that praised the idealistic, heroic, and sacrificial acts, as well as the rigorousness and self-discipline provided another model of (masculinized) role model hero, which she also questioned. In addition to challenging the gender matrix of the 1970s art world, Abramović's "heroic figure" also addressed the ideal

[8] Tracey Warr, "Sleeper," *Performance Research* 1.2 (1996): 3.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Marina Abramović was always very explicit about her performances: "I didn't accept the body's limits." See: Klaus Biesenbach, "Interview," in *Marina Abramović*, ed. Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach, and Chrissie Iles. (Phaidon Press, 2008), 17. "I was never interested in shocking. What I was interested in was experiencing the physical and mental limits of the human body and mind. I wanted to experience these limits together with the public. I could never do this alone." See: Kristine Stiles, "Cloud with Its Shadow Marina Abramović (2008)," in *Concerning Consequences, Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma*, by Kristine Stiles (The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 230. Ulay explained many years later in an interview with Linda Montano: "So the whole notion of being an object became a very obvious thing in our work, in all of our performances – to make yourself an object. [...] If you make a mistake and fall, at that very moment you are an object. [...] You see, it's the noninvolvement of self, of consciousness, of decision, of realization." Linda Montano, "Interview with Marina Abramović and Ulay," in *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, by Linda Montano (University of California, 2000), 330.

[11] This aspect in her work was emphasized on various occasions either in her statements that follow her performances or in her interviews. For example, Abramović acknowledged her authorial role and took all the responsibility for creating the *Rhythm 10* performance: "I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility"; later, she asserted that she finished the performance at exactly the previously appointed time: "After six hours, at 2 in the morning, I stopped, because this was exactly my decision: six hours. I started walking to the public and everybody ran [sic] away and never actually confronted me." See: Marina Abramović, "Body Art," in *Marina Abramović*, by Marina Abramović (Charta, 2002), 30.
Likewise, she expressed frustration for the disruption of her *Rhythm 5* performance when Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan (Joseph Beuys or anonymous doctor) brought her out from the blazing star after noticing that she had lost consciousness due to an elevated carbon monoxide concentration, perhaps saving her life. See: Marina Abramović, *Sur la Voie* (Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1990), 30; Marija Đorđević, "Publika može da ubije, intervju sa Marinom," *Politika*, October 30, 2004. Marina Abramović risked her life in the *Rhythm 5*, 1974 performance, posted December 8, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6z7hOOWQNZg.

[12] See: Lucy Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth,"*Art in America* 64, no.3 (May/June, 1976), 75; Warr, "Sleeper," 3; Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (Routledge, 1997), 25, 31, 37, 76; Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 46; Jane Blocker, What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 33, 39.

ideological body of the socialist Yugoslavia, which was modeled by revolutionary principles, expectations, and needs that reorganized gender differences and endorsed gender equality but remained gender uncertain, masculinized by its very phallocentric symbolic order prototype. Ritual character, minimalized and intense movements, gestures, and expressions that involve pain and danger (as a way "to actually understand how the mind and body work"), and consequently violence and suffering as well, by challenging "universal empathy", produced a kind of decontextualized and universal quality that made it possible for Marina Abramović to overcome the gap between the local and international art worlds.

Two decades later, Tanja Ostojić paraphrases the enduring body of the 1970s in her performance *Personal Space*[13] (see illustration 1). The performance was a part of the homonymous project that, beside performance, encompasses a series of black and white photographs and a sculpture. The square as the key motif of the project referring to Malevich's Suprematist composition *White on White* (circa 1918) and its conceptual framework, reflected the legacy of the avant-garde. The square appears as 'positive' and 'negative' of the hair on the head, as a square of black-dyed hair that has been separated from the rest of the hair, as a square of pubic hair that is shaped on the triangle of the mons pubis, as a square of marble dust that Tanja Ostojić stands on during the performance, as a parallelopiped sculpture base with a carved square that is "inscribed" on top (filled with unfixed marble dust that was created during the carving process), and as a square format of the photographs. Furthermore, the photographs record four positions of the face and body (each offset by 90° from the previous one): facing forward, left and right profile, and the back of the head, so that each of the four series of photographs has a square layout.[14] White (and) square as Malevich's ultimate finale of his transformation "in the zero of form and through zero" his achieving the "creation, that is, Suprematism, the new painterly realism – nonobjective creation" he announced in 1915,[15] in Ostojić's project became essential to challenging the notions of autonomous art and introspective artistic position, as well as the emphasis on aesthetic issues that constituted the local paradigm of art. There are two crucial aspects of this performance and project: body and relationality. With historical examples of body art this performance shares (over)exposure of the enduring body and questioning its objectification within voyeuristic viewing structures. By physically separating herself from the public and clearly defining the boundaries between her space and public space (inside/outside, internal/external), shaving her body, covering it with marble dust, and adopting an almost monumental posture in the middle of

[13] Performance *Personal Space* was performed six times: Yugoslav Biennale of Young Artists, Konkordija, Vršac, Yugoslavia, 1996; Hollywood Leather Venue, London, UK, 1997; Manifesta 2, Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg, Luxembourg, 1998; Skin, Deste Foundation, Athens, Greece, 1999; Digital Media Festival, MKC, Maribor, Slovenia, 2000; Utopia, Rogaland Kunstmuseum, Stavanger, Norway, 2000.
In terms of its duration there are two performance variants: of 120 and of 60 minutes, with and without the music score written by Vladimir Radonjić.

[14] See: Jasmina Čubrilo, "Etre une artiste," *ProFemina* 21–22 (2000): 270–71.

[15] Kazimir Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism [1915]," in *Russian Art of the Avant-garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*, ed. John E Bowlt (The Viking Press, 1976), 133.

that white and incredibly delicate space made of fine and microscopic tiny particles, Ostojić simultaneously redefined this control over the objectification and vulnerability of the female performer's body. The space between her body inside the square and the public outside the square produced the emptiness, i.e., a complete interruption of any possible interrelation she provoked and fostered by her 'square' hairstyles using them as a starting point for everyday conversations during the months before she performed *Personal Space* for the first time in Vršac. In this performance, Ostojić retains the basic relationality - objecthood as precondition of subjecthood,[16] but she distances herself from any kind of interaction with the audience, by placing the actual limits (marble dust) as well as symbolic ones (herself as art object) by which she 'protects' herself of any kind of physical closeness with audiences and places her body not just as a viewed object, but as a seeing subject as well. There is nothing heroic regarding her body – standstill, isolated, petrified body that makes no noise. The performance was the central piece of the whole project that mediated between relationality and heteronomy of art in her 'hairstyles' works and reflection on the aesthetic issues and autonomy presented in her 1996 white marble abstract sculpture. It represented all the perplexity produced by her artistic education as well as by than ongoing debates on the nature of an artwork and its symbolic value in the context of 'closed society' of isolated and under UN sanctions post-Yugoslav and post-socialist state.[17] However, her performance *Private Space* gained international attention from the identity politics perspective: as an example of a gender and post-socialist critique of the ethno-nationalistic paradigm and of that "raging macho-nationalism of a regime that had forcefully imposed uniformity on public discourse in Serbia".[18] After this project, Tanja Ostojić completely turned to performance as a medium for institutional critique, exposing the gender, sexual, and geopolitical power structures of the art world (*Strategies of Success/Curators Series*, 2001–2003),[19] and to a contextual, participatory, and collaborative art practice that often blurs the distinction between her art and her private, ordinary, everyday life, critically questioning various aspects of alternative, marginal, and invisible positions in a globalized world produced by biopolitics, consequently never reaching blockbuster status, hovering over various niche positions (lectures, resident's programs, thematic exhibitions, publications) (see illustration 2). Since her projects in the last two and a half decades create a line between artwork and her lived experience difficult to draw, it is reasonable to conclude that her bodily endurance as a feature of her performances through time entirely became a living act of enduring in these precarious times.

---

[16] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005), 70–78, 87; Lara Shalson, *Performing Endurance, Art and Politics Since 1960* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 18–19.

[17] Zoran Erić, "Personal Space – Public Body," *Artefact* (2003) https://tanjaostojic.com/personal-space/.

[18] Iva Glišić and Biljana Purić, "Art as a Living Archive: Post 1989 Performance Art in Serbia and Russia," *Third Text* 157 (March 2019): 223.

[19] The project *Strategies of Success* consists of the following performances: *I'll Be Your Angel* (2001), *Be My Guest* (2001), *Sofa for the Curator* (2002), *Vacation With Curator* (2003) and *Politics of Queer Curatorial Positions* (2003). See: https://tanjaostojic.com/artworks/.

In her hybrid art practice of site-specific delegated performances: *In Him We Trust Trilogy* (*Lines, Rows, Columns* (2016), *Babylon the Great* (2017), *In Him We Trust* (2020)), *I Only Want To Love Me* (2020), *Monument: No One is Lost* (2021–2022), *Monument: The School of Athens* (2023), and *Monument of Trust* (2024), Ivana Ivković has introduced the nude or semi-nude male bodies as a collective body, and performative medium, objectifying the body of the *other* – that is a male layperson, coming from various and disparate socioeconomic backgrounds, without any previous stage experience. Her projects are organizationally and production-wise tremendously demanding, carried out in collaboration with diverse authors (curators, composers, playwrights, directors of photography, editors, sound designers) and performers (whose numbers range from fourteen to over forty, and some of them have been involved in more than one performance/project). They go beyond the 'standard' form of performance and contextual, participatory, and collaborative art practices, expanding them by using the language of theater, television, and digital media just to open art to "immersive experiences and tactile, auditory, and corporal affects".[20] From the feminist perspective, Ivković examines the gender experiences, deconstructing the existing heteronormative models produced and normalized by contemporary patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism, emphasizing the fluidity of gender, uncovering and coming to terms with the sensitivity of the *other*. She recruits male bodies as a performative tool to question gender prejudices, and given social roles, which turn men into pillars of stability and put them in a position of power. These bodies in Ivković's projects became objectified by their role as participators,[21] as well as by the gaze of the audience; nude or semi-nude they became exposed, vulnerable, powerless, and even lost in the quiet, sometimes murmuring, and minimalist choreography – completely the reverse of the stereotypical expectations of the masculine body. With delegating performing and relocating the authorship to collective *others*, Ivković outsourced not only authenticity on her "performers to supply this more vividly, without the disruptive filter of celebrity",[22] she outsourced the physicality and materiality of performance. Now, the outsourced bodies are the enduring ones; they experience the hardness of the floor/ground (*Lines, Rows, Columns*, *Only Want To Love Me*), or coldness and even freezing conditions (*Monument: No One is Lost – Afterpiece,* performed in front of the Humboldt Forum Museum in Berlin), being squeezed in enclosed space (*Only Want To Love Me*), and they were exposed for hours in a theater (*In Him We Trust*),

[20] Ivana Ivković, "Artist Statement," from *Portfolio*, n.pag. see: https://ivanaivkovic.com/.

[21] Kaitavouri makes the distinction between 'participator' and 'participant' – 'participator' refers to a position and participant to an individual. Just as Foucault's 'author function' is a position constructed within the discourse and conditioned by society, the participator's function is constructed in the work and structured as a set of societal relations; in addition to structural and social aspects, it has a discursive and institutional dimension. Participator is descriptive of a more general behavior of a person and does not refer to a specific event or individual. It is a function that includes potential for participation built into the project. On the other hand, 'participant' embodies individuals who take part in specific events and art projects. In practice, participator is a function and a way in which the participator can be positioned in a work and actualized by a participant. See: Kaija Kaitavuori, *The Participator in Contemporary Art* (I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2018), 11.

[22] Bishop, "Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," 110.

gallery or museum space (*Babylon the Great*), or urban square (*Monument: No One is Lost – Afterpiece* in Berlin (see illustration 3), *Monument: The School of Athens* in Athens in front of the Academy of Athens and the University of Athens (see illustration 4)).[23] Since all of her projects were focused on the subtle and complex interplay of deeply personal narratives and contemplative and introspective questioning, blending her "experiences of frequent travels and an enduring nomadic life"[24] she used as a means of exchange, the starting point of each one of them is mutual trust cherished by all the actors involved in the projects. Therefore, performances come as a finale of a gradual trust-building based on the open process of exiting the personal, sharing and revealing oneself, shaping the collective conceived as a network of many distinct singularities who resisting dominant system and authority (even that of artist), multiple and plural (see illustration 5). Although Ivković's delegated performances are always structured according to the oculocentric Western painting tradition, similar to Vanesa Beercroft's *tableau vivant*, they never result in cold and hyperreal displaying of (half)nudes that resemble advertisements or fashion photography. Beecroft's 'girls', standing for hours in silence, painful immobility on high heels, and physical and psychological agony[25] with unfocused look in their eyes, made an impression of being not 'present' but 'an image'. As "living paintings", Beercroft's installations or delegated performances just reproduce heteronormative voyeuristic rhetoric of uninhibited observation that structures actual mass media imagery. Ivković's delegated situations not only decolonize the masculine sensitivity, opening it to a more fluid, all-embracing, and sharing collective experience, including the audience, but they also situate painting into the expanded field of "tactile, auditory, and corporal affects" and "unstable sensory experiences" that deal with the intertwining of intimate stories with contemporary political and cultural as well as historical circumstances specific to the places and areas where performances take place.[26]

[23] For the description of abovementioned projects see: Ivana Ivković, *Portfolio*, https://ivanaivkovic.com/; https://www.eugster-belgrade.com/artists/ivana-ivkovic/?section=exhibitions.

[24] Ivković, *Portfolio*, n. pag.

[25] Hard conditions for performers included bleaching of hair and eyebrows, waxing of pubic hair, body painted, swollen feet and bruised legs from endless waiting and standing, etc. See: Julie Steinmetz, Heather Cassils, and Clover Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31.3 (2006): 1–30.

[26] These would relate to the limits of male identity and the gender issue, which is always linked to national and religious issues in the Balkan region; in Germany, where stories about colonialism, the Holocaust, and the current migrant crisis are the main focus; and in nations like Greece and Portugal, the dominant theme is the oppressive relationship between the center of Europe and its periphery, particularly in light of the roles that these territories have played in the history of the Western civilization, as well as the existence of double standards in the experience of the European identity.

From performing endurance to enduring as performative: bodies in protest

Marina Abramović introduced the concrete and material body, Tanja Ostojić started with materiality that owes to sculptural tradition only to model it, paraphrasing Joseph Beuys' suggestion, in the discursive and activist body, and Ivana Ivković, exempting her own body, made a way for not just one (somebody's) body but for a collective body of other in the very expanded field of painting. All three artists re-examined lived experiences, physicality and meaning of bodies in contemporary culture. Their artistic practices have several characteristics in common: the body as a medium for communication and provocation, its physical vulnerability, limits of exposure, pain and stamina, as well as the endurance and structure of behavior, its gesture and action and their ritualistic and uncertain aspects. Abramović's 'heroic,' Ostojić's monumental and relational, and Ivković's outsourced collective body formed from a multitude of relational and contingent subjects serve as indexes of the three temporally differentiated but conceptually interrelated paradigms in contemporary art and do not disjoint them as much as complement each other.

All these characteristics can be noticed in expressing the protest against corruption, conveying grief for the 16 people killed in the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad, and representing civil disobedience against the government's disregard for public demands for accountability.[27] This brings up several questions (and

[27] On November 1, 2024, a newly renovated concrete and glass canopy at the Novi Sad railway station collapsed, killing sixteen people, including two children. The disaster raised immediate and painful questions about the institutional failure, corruption and responsibility. In the immediate wake of the tragedy, students responded first by organizing public candlelit vigils and moments of silence for the victims, first in front of the railway station and in the streets of Novi Sad and very soon in the streets of towns all around Serbia. Weeks later, members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) physically assaulted a small group of peacefully protesting students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade during a one-minute silence for the victims. This act of violence triggered a wave of solidarity from other students, who disrupted lectures at their universities, marking the true beginning of the large-scale protests. The wave of civic action expanded through the winter – student protesters blocked universities, bridges, and roads, not out of rage but in remembrance and demanding accountability for the corruption that led to the tragedy, and were joined by farmers, veterans, lawyers, and citizens in general. Large gatherings took place across Serbia in cities like Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, and Novi Pazar, drawing people from all regions. The momentum built toward 15 of March 2025, when more than 300,000 people, according to the Archive of Public Gatherings (Arhiv javnih skupova, https://javniskupovi.org/index.php/2025/02/, accessed April 12, 2025), an NGO that counts people at protests (or 107,000 people, according to the Serbian Interior Ministry estimation), filled the streets of Belgrade in what is widely believed to be the largest protest in Serbia's history. In the months that followed, the challenge became how to lead this protest into sustained pressure for change.
For a brief overview of the largest and ongoing student-led protests in Serbia's modern history, see: Aleksandar Ivković, "Political Tensions in Serbia Keep Rising after the Novi Sad Tragedy," November 30, 2024, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/11/30/political-tensions-in-serbia-keep-rising-after-the-novi-sad-tragedy/;
Guy De Launey, "Serbia's Largest-Ever Rally Sees 325,000 Protest Against Government," March 16, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2g8v32q30o; Paul Millar, "Serbia's Student-Led Protesters Wanted Accountability. Now They're Calling for Elections," August 15, 2025, https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250815-serbia-student-protesters-wanted-accountability-now-they-calling-for-elections-vucic; Breza Race Maksimovic and Srđa Popovic, "How Serbian Students Created the Largest Protest Movement in

not necessarily in this particular case). Do the protesters intentionally and knowingly take certain components of performance art, implying that performance art serves as a model for political activism? Or, does this capacity of performance art to be "vehicle for social change" come from the fact that early performances "were both influenced by protest practices and at times aimed to function as a form of political activism itself"?[28] Furthermore, are these 'similarities' logical, given the broader conceptualization of performance as "vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated [...] behavior"[29] that suggests performance is a kind of everyday activity that has been around for as long as humans?

The main issue here is the relationship between life and art, particularly how life can become art and how art can subsequently become life. Both the performance art and protest practices, especially those based on passive resistance (as is the case with ongoing student and civil protests in Serbia), have much in common: physical efforts, endurance,[30] objectification, "*possibility* for radical engagement that can transform the way we think about meaning and subjectivity".[31] The collective act of first 15 and then 16 minutes of silence held in public by stopping the traffic at traffic roundabouts, crossroads, and highways, followed by students' organized marching, biking, and running, initially between Serbian cities and later biking from Novi Sad to Strasbourg and the headquarters of the Council of Europe and other European institutions in April 2025, as well as the ultramarathon relay run from Belgrade to Brussels and the European Parliament in May 2025 were manifestations of enduring bodies/collective body in protest (see illustrations 6, 7, and 8). Additionally, this collective body in protest was exposed to the danger of being beaten, hit by a car, or even subjected to a kind of a sonic device for crowd control.[32] Thus, the analogies with Abramović's performance *Rhythm 0*, or with her ultimate collaboration with Ulay in *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk*, or with the silence she introduced as a method in her collective performance in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade

Decades," August 2025, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-serbian-students-created-the-largest-protest-movement-in-decades/; Aleksandar Ivković, "One Man, One State: Vučić and Serbia's Student Protests," August 18, 2025, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/08/18/one-man-one-state-vucic-and-serbias-student-protests/; Bojan Elek and Balša Božović, "Winter of Serbian Discontent Turned into Summer of Civic Disobedience", September 4, 2025, https://rs.boell.org/en/2025/09/04/winter-serbian-discontent-turned-summer-civic-disobedience; Raul Gallego Abellan, *Wake up, Serbia! Pumpaj: The Student Uprising, Point of No Return* (documentary film), 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3t4EiRYzHM&t=320s.

[28] Shalson, *Performing Endurance, Art and Politics Since 1960*, 79.

[29] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003), 2–3.

[30] Lara Shalson takes the endurance in performance art to inform her reading of the Greensboro Lunch Counter Sit-in nonviolent protest actions from February to July 1960, primarily in the Woolworth store, comparing problems of objectification and questions of how bodies occupy space and the ambivalences that circulate around them with those produced by Yoko Ono's Cut Piece (1964) and Marina Abramović's Rhythm 0 (1974). See: Shalson, *Performing Endurance, Art and Politics Since 1960*, 81–92.

[31] Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*,, 14. (Jones' emphases).

[32] European Court of Human Rights, https://www.echr.coe.int/w/interim-measure-granted-concerning-serbia, accessed September 20, 2025.

in September 2019 on the occasion of opening of her retrospective with which she concluded her lecture and with the public as performers,[33] as well as the 24- and 72-hour student blockades of the bridges and roads with Abramović's *The House with the Ocean View* or *The Artist is Present*, were imposed by themselves. It is possible to continue this series of comparisons with Ostojić's motionless posture in *Personal Space* and with her creation of various and temporary collectives around specific identities, bare life, or aging issues, as well as with Ivković's sensible transitions that take place in liminal spaces, creating multitude in the Hardt and Negri sense, as the form of political subjectivity capable of realizing democracy for what it truly is, namely the rule of everyone by everyone with the right for disobedience and the right for difference as fundamental rights.[34]

However, behind these associative equations between performance and political protest lies another problem – do political protests simply appropriate and/or emulate techniques and tactics of a performance art and performing arts (theatre, dance) or they become a new form of 'live art'?[35] Performances as well as protests consist of "a wide range of behaviors, subjects, and agents, spanning from individual bodies to protest bodies".[36] Additionally, the protests typically base their actions more on dance and theater than on performance art, even though many people informally perceive protest actions as performances. The line that distinguishes performance art from political protest is the line of differentiation between performance and performativity in terms of Judith Butler's explanation of performance as a conscious act by a pre-existing subject and performativity as a process where repeated actions and discourse construct and solidify the very idea of a subject.[37] There are differences in how the term performativity is understood and interpreted in contemporary writings on art as a result of its roots in both philosophy of language and gender studies. As James Loxley points out, it seems that it is the rather the concept of performativity than the term itself that has been transplanted since neither of its "usages has yet managed to displace or entirely accommodate itself to the other".[38]

---

[33] Ivan Šuletić, "Kolektivno telo društva u celini," *Radar*, February 2, 2025, https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/ivan-suletic-radar-autorski-tekst-blokada/.

[34] Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Multuitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Pinguin Press, 2004), 340.

[35] The term 'Live Art' came into usage in the UK in the mid-1980s as a response by arts professionals to experimental art practices that expanded or escaped the classifications in use. It is a contested category for performance practices and approaches that were not quite performance art, or dance, or theatre, i.e., for work that didn't fit into any of the categories on offer. 'Live Art' was an attempt to acknowledge the diversity of live-based arts practices, so it is wider and more comprehensive than the term 'performance art.' See: Maria Chatzichristodoulou, (ed), *Live Art in the UK, Contemporary Performances of Precarity* (Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama, 2020), 1–15.

[36] Marcela A. Fuentes, "Performance, Politics, and Protest," in *What is Performance Studies*, ed. Diana Taylor and Marcos Steuernagel (Duke University Press, Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics at New York University and HemiPress, 2015), https://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/wips/table-of-contents-eng.

[37] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (Routledge, 1993), 234–41.

[38] James Loxley, *Performativity* (Routledge, 2007), 140.

Protests' choreography or protesters' behavior in the case of student-led protests in Serbia 2024/2025 evolves through the repetition of gestures and actions, becoming a citational practice that continuously constructs political subjects.[39] Not only does the daily repetition of the 15–16 minutes of silence, which can begin at the precise moment the canopy collapses or at any other time in accordance with the protest schedule, express grief, but these silent standings also pose a challenge to the legal and governmental system, turning them into political mourning. Mourning is a way people perform rituals to express grief, acknowledge loss, and enact their relationship to the departed. The performativity of mourning involves the citationality of the ritualized acts that give form to grief, according to Butler, opening them to potential subversion and transformation.[40]

In conclusion, if the performance art blurs the boundaries between art and life, inclining to become "indistinguishable from life at the level of both production and reception",[41] protests like student-led protest in Serbia, with its vulnerable, but persist bodies in mourning and transforming are (bare) life itself that, through repetition of gestures and actions as well as by images/documentation, critically re-signifies the existing relations and concepts, tending to create new routines as well as new and more immediate agencies.

[39] In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler sees the potential for subversion in Derrida's characterizations of the citational sign, and she moves in her own theory from performativity to citationality, since rethinking performativity through citationality is deemed useful for radical democratic theory.

[40] Butler re-envisions melancholia and mourning as sources of personal transformation that have profound social and political consequences. See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1999), 73-84; 108-109.
She asserts social vulnerability of our bodies-as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed and she concludes: "To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself. The disorientation of grief-'Who have I become?' or, indeed, 'What is left of me?' 'What is it in the Other that I have lost?'- posits the 'I' in the mode of unknowingness". See: Judith Butler, *Precarious Life, The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso 2004), 30.

[41] Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance*, 54.

Photography #1: Tanja Ostojić: *Personal Space* (1996), 120 minute performance, Biennale of Young Artists, Vršac, Yugoslavia Photo: Saša Gajin, copyright: T. Ostojić.

Photography #2: "Protest Scarves Against Turkey's Retreat from the Istanbul Convention", 2021. İstiklal Street, Istanbul, September 9, 2021. A collective performance and public action in the frame of Tanja Ostojić's *Mis(s)placed Women?* workshop, with the participation of: Arzu Yayıntaş, Bahar Seki, Gülhatun Yıldırım, Gizem Yılmaz, Nazlı Durak, Persefoni Myrtsou, Vanessa Ponte, Sabbi Senior, Selma Hekim and Tanja Ostojić. Photo: K. Kaygusuz, copyright: T. Ostojić.

Photography #3: Ivana Ivković, Monument: No One Is Lost, Afterpiece, Humboldt Forum Museum, Berlin, 2022, photo credit: Hue Hale.

Photography #4: Ivana Ivković, *Monument: No One Is Lost, The School of Athens*, 2023, Academy of Athens and the University of Athens, photo credit: Nefeli Papaioannou, ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen).

Photography #5: Ivana Ivković, *The Base of Trust*, 2024, Non Canonico Gallery, Belgrade, photo credit: Filip Koludrović, Ivana Ivković.

Photography #6: 16 minutes of silence, Slavija Square, Belgrade, Jun 28, 2025; photo credit: Archive of Public Gatherings [Arhiv javnih skupova]

Photography #7: 16 minutes of silence, Slavija Square, Belgrade, Jun 28, 2025; photo credit: Archive of Public Gatherings [Arhiv javnih skupova]

Photography #8: 16 minutes of silence, Slavija Square, Belgrade, Jun 28, 2025; photo credit: Archive of Public Gatherings [Arhiv javnih skupova]

References

Abellan, Raul Gallego. *Wake Up, Serbia! Pumpaj: The Student Uprising, Point of No Return* (documentary film), 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3t4EiRYzHM&t=320s.

Abramović, Marina. *Sur la Voie*. Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1990.

Abramović, Marina. "Body Art." In *Marina Abramović*, by Marina Abramović and the Fondazione Antonio Ratti, 27–40. Charta, 2002.

Arhiv javnih skupova. https://javniskupovi.org/index.php/2025/02/. Accessed September 20, 2025.

Biesenbach, Klaus. "Interview." In *Marina Abramović*, edited by Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach and Chrissie Iles, 7–30. Phaidon Press, 2008.

Bishop, Claire. "Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity." *October* 140 (May 2012): 91–112. https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00091.

Blocker, Jane. *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Brentano, Robyn. "Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life." In *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object, a Survey of the History of Performance Art in the USA since 1970*, edited by Robyn Brentano and Olivia Georgia, 31–61. Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1999.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life, The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004

Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Fordham University Press, 2005.

Chatzichristodoulou, Maria (ed). *Live Art in the UK, Contemporary Performances of Precarity*. Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama, 2020.

Čubrilo, Jasmina. "Etre une artiste." *ProFemina* 21–22 (2000): 261–79.

Đorđević, Marija. "Publika može da ubije, intervju sa Marinom." *Politika*, October 30, 2004.

Elek, Bojan, and Balša Božović. "Winter of Serbian Discontent Turned into Summer of Civic Disobedience." September 4, 2025, https://rs.boell.org/en/2025/09/04/winter-serbian-discontent-turned-summer-civic-disobedience.

Erić, Zoran. "Personal Space – Public Body." *Artefact* (2003). https://tanjaostojic.com/personal-space/

European Court of Human Rights. https://www.echr.coe.int/w/interim-measure-granted-concerning-serbia. Accessed September 20, 2025.

Fuentes, Marcela A. "Performance, Politics, and Protest." In *What is Performance Studies*, edited by Diana Taylor and Marcos Steuernagel. Duke University Press, Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics at New York University and HemiPress, 2015, https://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/wips/table-of-contents-eng.

Glišić, Iva, and Biljana Purić. "Art as a Living Archive: Post 1989 Performance Art in Serbia and Russia." *Third Text* 157 (March 2019): 213–34.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Multuitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. Pinguin Press, 2004.

Ivković, Aleksandar. "One Man, One State: Vučić and Serbia's Student Protests." August 18, 2025. https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/08/18/one-man-one-state-vucic-and-serbias-student-protests/.

Ivković, Aleksandar. "Political Tensions in Serbia Keep Rising after the Novi Sad Tragedy." November 30, 2024. https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/11/30/political-tensions-in-serbia-keep-rising-after-the-novi-sad-tragedy/.

Ivković, Ivana. "Artist Statement." from *Portfolio*, n. pag. See: https://ivanaivkovic.com/.

Jones, Amelia. *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Kaitavuori, Kaija. *The Participator in Contemporary Art*. I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2018.

Launey, Guy De. "Serbia's Largest-Ever Rally Sees 325,000 Protest Against Government." March 16, 2025. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2g8v32q30o.

Lippard, Lucy. "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth,"*Art in America* 64, no.3 (May/June, 1976): 73-81.

Maksimovic, Breza Race and Srđa Popović. "How Serbian Students Created the Largest Protest Movement in Decades." August 2025. https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-serbian-students-created-the-largest-protest-movement-in-decades/.

Malevich, Kazimir. "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism [1915]." In *Russian Art of the Avant-garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*, edited by John E Bowlt, 116–35. The Viking Press, 1976.

Marina Abramović Risked Her Life in Rhythm 5, 1974 performance, posted December 8, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6z7hOOWQNZg.

Millar, Paul. "Serbia's Student-led Protesters Wanted Accountability. Now They're Calling for Elections." August 15, 2025. https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250815-serbia-student-protesters-wanted-accountability-now-they-calling-for-elections-vucic.

Nemser, Cindy. "Subject–Object: Body Art," *Art Magazine* 46.1 (September – October 1971): 38–42.

Schneider, Rebecca. *The Explicit Body in Performance*. Routledge, 1997.

Shalson, Lara. *Performing Endurance, Art and Politics Since 1960*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Stanković, Maja. "Art Is What Makes Life More Interesting than Art." *Zbornik Seminara za studije moderne umetnosti Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu* 14 (2018): 129–42.

Steinmetz, Julie, Heather Cassils, and Clover Leary. "Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31.3 (2006): 1–30.

Stiles, Kristine. "Cloud with Its Shadow: Marina Abramović (2008)." In *Concerning Consequences, Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma*, by Kristine Stiles, 211–43. The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Stiles, Kristine. "Performance and Its Objects." *Arts Magazine* 65 (November 1990): 35–47.

Stiles, Kristine. "Performance." In *Critical Terms for Art History*, edited by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 75–97. The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Šuletić, Ivan. "Kolektivno telo društva u celini." *Radar*, February 2, 2025, https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/ivan-suletic-radar-autorski-tekst-blokada/.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press, 2003.

Warr, Tracey. "Sleeper." *Performance Research* 1.2 (1996): 1–19.

Article received: April 30, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Original scholarly paper

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.625

Jelena Guga
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Marginalized Code: Feminist Interventions in AI Art[1]

Abstract: What does it mean to critically engage with the AI art through a feminist lens – and how can such engagement help reveal and resist the power structures encoded in its systems? This paper argues that AI systems are not only a cultural product but also a symptom of broader sociotechnical infrastructures marked by gendered exclusion, epistemic injustice, and hidden labor. The central thesis is that feminist critique is essential to unpacking how AI systems reproduce marginalization under the guise of objectivity and innovation. Drawing on feminist scholarship and critical media history, the paper situates the AI art within a broader lineage of feminist engagement with technology, from cyberfeminist net art to contemporary AI art, and within the emerging scholarly discourse on feminist AI. Methodologically, it combines historical analysis, theoretical synthesis, and qualitative case study interpretation. The analysis frames selected feminist AI artworks through both media-historical context and the perspectives articulated by the artists themselves. Through the analysis of selected feminist AI artworks, it demonstrates how these practices challenge dominant narratives of neutrality and progress. Rather than seeking inclusion within flawed systems, the feminist AI art reimagines technological infrastructures around care, accountability, and alternative ways of knowing. These interventions resist the abstraction and erasure that characterize much of mainstream AI, offering epistemological and aesthetic strategies that confront and reconfigure power relations in digital culture.

Keywords: feminist AI art; cyberfeminism; data feminism; sociotechnical systems; algorithmic marginalization; technological power structures.

Introduction

The rise of the AI-generated art has catalyzed new conversations around creativity, authorship, and aesthetics. Yet, much of this discourse has either centered on technological novelty or aesthetic innovation, often leaving unexamined the existing power structures embedded in the systems that generate these images. As the AI is deeply entangled with the cultural sphere, feminist perspectives are essential to the interrogation of how generative models perpetuate systemic inequalities and reinforce dominant techno-patriarchal narratives.

[1] This article was realized with the support of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, according to the Agreement on the realization and financing of scientific research 451-03-136/2025-03/ 200025.

Author's contact information: jelena.guga@ifdt.bg.ac.rs

This paper argues that the AI art, as both a product and a symptom of broader sociotechnical systems, reproduces forms of marginalization that have long structured technological development and cultural production. By foregrounding feminist critique, the paper examines the historical exclusion of women and marginalized groups from technological domains, the gendered nature of algorithmic design, and the political economy behind AI-generated images. At the same time, it highlights critical feminist art practices that resist these logics and propose alternative modes of engagement with the AI. Through this dual approach, the paper positions the feminist AI art within both the historical lineage of cyberfeminism and the emerging scholarly discourse on the feminist AI, emphasizing care, accountability, and justice as central to reshaping the cultural politics of artificial intelligence. The title *Marginalized Code* encapsulates this dual critique. On one level, it refers to the marginalization of women and underrepresented groups in technological development and cultural production. On another, it points to the algorithmic "code" itself – where exclusionary values are written, executed, and normalized. Feminist interventions in the AI art thus not only call out these encoded biases but also propose new modes of imagining, designing, and deploying technology that center embodied knowledge, relationality, and justice.

Methodologically, the paper combines historical analysis, theoretical synthesis, and qualitative case study interpretation. It draws on feminist theory, critical media studies, and AI scholarship to frame a selection of contemporary feminist AI artworks. Works were identified for their explicit or implicit engagement with questions of gender, power, and AI systems, using both primary sources (artist statements, project documentation, interviews) and secondary sources (critical reviews, scholarly analysis) to establish relevance. These works are situated within both the historical lineage of cyberfeminism and the emerging discourse on feminist AI. A media-historical and theoretical lens is then applied to interpret these artworks in relation to earlier feminist media interventions, highlighting continuities and innovations. This approach recognizes that some artists explicitly position their practice in relation to the feminist AI, while others employ strategies that align with its principles without adopting the label. By combining historical contextualization with the perspectives articulated by the artists themselves, the study balances interpretative analysis with attention to practitioner-defined aims. In doing so, it presents the feminist AI art as both a continuation and a transformation of earlier feminist strategies, adapted to the sociotechnical conditions of contemporary AI. Drawing on a wide range of feminist scholarship – including Judy Wajcman's analysis of gender and technology,[2] Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein's work on data feminism,[3] Caroline Criado Perez's research on gender data gaps,[4] Sasha Costanza-Chock's framework of design justice,[5] and Donna Haraway's theories

[2] Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

[3] Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, *Data Feminism* (The MIT Press, 2020).

[4] Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (Abrams Press, 2019).

[5] Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (The MIT Press, 2020).

of situated knowledges[6] and cyborg feminism[7] – alongside theoretical contributions by Joanna Zylinska[8] and Dejan Grba[9] on critical approach to the AI art, the paper develops a framework for understanding the AI art as a site where epistemic, aesthetic, and political struggles intersect. In doing so, it also builds on a lineage of feminist engagement with media technologies.

Through selected examples of feminist-driven artworks, the paper shows how these practices both diagnose and resist the structural inequalities embedded in AI systems. A growing body of feminist AI artworks offers critical responses to the power structures encoded in algorithmic systems. These works expose gaps, distortions, and systemic biases in the way data is collected, analyzed, and deployed. For instance, projects that build counter-archives or speculative interfaces, like Caroline Sinders' *Feminist Data Set,*[10] not only challenge the neutrality of machine learning but actively propose alternate epistemologies. Such artistic interventions illuminate the emotional and embodied dimensions of existing under pervasive surveillance. Rather than depicting users as mere data points, they emphasize the complex entanglement within unequal technological infrastructures. For example, Lauren Lee McCarthy's *Someone*[11] simulates an AI-powered assistant managing a user's social life, underscoring both the intimacy and absurdity of algorithmic mediation. Mimi Ọnụọha's *The Library of Missing Datasets*[12] visualizes what's omitted from data collection, stressing how absence and invisibility can be forms of algorithmic violence. By foregrounding lived experience and absence alike, these practices challenge dominant techno-optimist narratives and position feminist artistic practice as a space for ethical inquiry and sociotechnical critique.

Feminist histories of resistance in media art

Feminist engagement with technology did not begin with AI. Long before the current wave of interest in generative models, feminist artists and theorists critically responded to the ways in which emerging media technologies shaped identity, knowledge, and power. From the 1970s, feminist artists and collectives across photography, video, and computer and media art, responded to socio-political currents, such as the women's liberation movement, post-1968 countercultural critique, and the rise of

[6] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

[7] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 1991), 149–81.

[8] Joanna Zylinska, *AI Art: Machine Visions and Warped Dreams* (Open Humanities Press, 2020).

[9] Dejan Grba, "Art Notions in the Age of (Mis)anthropic AI," *Arts* 13, no. 5 (2024): 137.

[10] Caroline Sinders, *Feminist Data* Set (2017–ongoing), https://carolinesinders.com/projects/feminist-dataset/, accessed June 4, 2025.

[11] Lauren Lee McCarthy, *Someone* (2019), https://lauren-mccarthy.com/Someone, accessed June 4, 2025.

[12] Mimi Ọnụọha, *The Library of Missing Datasets* (2016), https://mimionuoha.com/the-library-of-missing-datasets, accessed June 4, 2025.

identity politics. Against this backdrop, feminist interventions in media art emerged as both critique and praxis: addressing how technological systems reinforce gender norms while experimenting with ways to subvert them. These practices formed part of a broader movement to question dominant narratives within both art institutions and technological discourse, advocating for more inclusive, participatory, and politically engaged approaches to media production.

The feminist media art of the 1990s and early 2000s was deeply influenced by Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto,"[13] which envisioned the cyborg as a hybrid figure transcending binaries such as nature/culture, human/machine, and male/female. Haraway introduced the cyborg as "an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism,"[14] framing the cyborg as our ontology – a hybrid entity in a post-gender world with "no origin story in the Western sense."[15] This became a powerful metaphor for resisting fixed identities and exposing embedded power structures. This paradigm catalyzed cyberfeminism, reclaiming digital space by disrupting hegemonic narratives. Haraway's related notion of "situated knowledges," defined as knowledge grounded in partial, locatable, and embodied perspectives, challenged the "god trick" of seeing everything from nowhere. As she writes, "Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource."[16] Haraway's foundational insights inspired feminist theorists and artists to foreground power and positionality in the production of both knowledge and images, and to interrogate the sociotechnical systems through which these are mediated.

A generation of cyberfeminist thinkers that addressed similar concerns as Haraway emerged in the 1990s – they were particularly interested in the issues of gender, embodiment, and power through the lens of emerging forms of technological mediation and digital environments. In *Zeros + Ones*,[17] Sadie Plant recovered the hidden history of women's involvement in digital culture, reframing the origins of computing through a feminist lens. Allucquère Rosanne Stone[18] interrogated the assumption that digital environments enable disembodied freedom, arguing instead that the body remains a central, though often repressed, actor in virtual identity performance. Her work exposed how even in supposedly fluid digital spaces, identity remains tethered to normative cultural frameworks, particularly around gender. Radhika Gajjala[19] introduced postcolonial critique into cyberfeminism to examine how digital technologies mediate identity, power, and agency for South Asian women, challenging Western-centric narratives of cyberfeminism and digital liberation.

[13] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 149–81.

[14] Ibid., 149.

[15] Ibid., 150.

[16] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 592.

[17] Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture* (Doubleday, 1997).

[18] Allucquère Rosanne Stone, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary Stories About Virtual Cultures," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (Routledge, 2000), 504–28.

[19] Radhika Gajjala, *Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women* (AltaMira Press, 2004).

Verena Kuni[20] contributed theoretical and curatorial insights on the entanglement of gender and media aesthetics. Collectively, these and other scholars articulated cyberfeminism as a project of both critique and reimagination.

Artists also intervened to contest the supposedly utopian promise of the early internet. Pioneering works, such as Shu Lea Cheang's *Brandon*,[21] the first web-based commission by the Guggenheim Museum, examined issues of gender fluidity, queer identity, and institutional surveillance. Similarly, the collective subRosa's interactive installation *Sex and Gender in the Biotech*[22] critically explored intersections of gender, biotechnology, and capitalist ideology, using multimedia tactics to demystify scientific narratives and provoke reflection on bodily autonomy. Prema Murthy's *Bindigirl*[23] employed digital performance to confront racialized and sexualized representations of South Asian women in online environments. Olia Lialina's *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War*[24] used hypertext and fragmented storytelling to explore themes of communication breakdown, trauma, and the emotional effects of militarized masculinity, implicitly critiquing dominant gendered narratives in technology and media. These works not only challenged dominant techno-utopian discourses but also exemplified what Mary Flanagan later theorized as *critical play*: forms of play that function as strategies of cultural and political intervention. By creating interactive, performative, and often ironic engagements with digital media, such practices "create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life."[25] As the concept suggests, these artistic practices were more than aesthetic gestures; they were experimental tactics that challenged dominant logics and opened imaginative alternatives. Rather than simply illustrating feminist theory, these works enacted it through various forms, laying the groundwork for later feminist critique of algorithmic culture.

By experimenting with identity, embodiment, and interactivity, feminist artists exposed the sociopolitical dimensions of emerging media and highlighted who was included, excluded, or misrepresented in digital culture. The cyberfeminist art thus provided fertile ground for rethinking power relations, strategically employing both traditional and digital forms to challenge dominant technological narratives and to inscribe female subjectivity into masculine-coded domains of digital culture.[26] This legacy carries forward into contemporary feminist approaches to the AI art, where

---

[20] Verena Kuni, "Cyberfeminism – Index and Archive," in *Women, Art & Technology*, ed. Judy Malloy (MIT Press, 2003), 285–300.

[21] Shu Lea Cheang, *Brandon* (1998–1999), https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/15337, accessed September 16, 2025.

[22] subRosa, *Sex and Gender in the Biotech Century* (2002), http://www.cyberfeminism.net, accessed June 6, 2025.

[23] Prema Murthy, *Bindigirl* (1999), https://artbase.rhizome.org/wiki/Q4304, accessed September 16, 2025.

[24] Olia Lialina, *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* (1996), http://www.teleportacia.org/war/, accessed June 6, 2025.

[25] Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (MIT Press, 2009), 7.

[26] Jelena Guga, *Digital Self: How We Became Binary* (University of West Bohemia, 2015), 27–8.

similar questions around agency, representation, and technological power are rearticulated in relation to algorithmic systems and data infrastructures. Sophie Toupin extends this genealogy by proposing a six-part typology of the feminist AI that encompasses model, design, policy, culture, discourse, and science.[27] Her framework shows how feminist interventions can operate across infrastructures, institutional practices, and epistemic systems, linking earlier feminist struggles in media and technology to current debates on artificial intelligence. In this way, Toupin resonates with Haraway's insistence on situated knowledges and partial perspectives, showing how the cyborg's challenge to fixed categories evolves into contemporary strategies for rethinking AI's conditions of possibility. As the tools and terrains of digital production evolve, so too do the strategies of feminist resistance and critique.

Feminist critique of AI: Knowledge, labor, and power

As artificial intelligence systems increasingly shape cultural, political, and economic life, feminist critique offers essential tools to interrogate their foundations and impact. However, the feminist analyses of AI predate current debates. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars such as Alison Adam,[28] Sue Jansen,[29] Lucy Suchman,[30] and Sherry Turkle[31] identified how computational systems reproduce gendered assumptions about knowledge, agency, and labor. Their work establishes that the AI is never a neutral tool but a sociotechnical apparatus that embeds and perpetuates existing hierarchies of gender, race, class, and geography.

AI technologies are built on patterns of exclusion and marginalization that mirror broader structures of inequality. Ruha Benjamin captures this dynamic in her concept of the 'New Jim Code,' where technologies "reflect and reproduce existing inequities but are promoted and perceived as more objective and progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era."[32] This insight resonates with Simone Browne's analysis of the afterlives of racial surveillance, where practices of monitoring continue to govern Black bodies and spaces.[33] Judy Wajcman likewise argues that technological systems reflect the values of male-dominated cultures, from the masculinist framing of what counts as "technology" to design choices that reinforce gendered divisions of labor,[34] thereby shaping both who designs technology and for

[27] Sophie Toupin, "Shaping Feminist Artificial Intelligence," *New Media & Society* 26, no. 1 (2023): 580–95, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221150776.

[28] Alison Adam, *Artificial Knowing: Gender and the Thinking Machine* (Routledge, 1998).

[29] Sue Curry Jansen, *Critical Communication Theory: Power, Media, Gender, and Technology* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

[30] Lucy Suchman, *Plans and Situated Actions: The Problem of Human-Machine Communication* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[31] Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (Simon & Schuster, 1984).

[32] Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Polity Press, 2019), 5–6.

[33] Simone, Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2015).

[34] Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology*, 100.

whom it is made.[35] This legacy persists in the AI, where systems continue to marginalize alternative perspectives and reinforce existing social hierarchies.

The supposed neutrality of AI masks the political decisions embedded in system design: what counts as "data," whose knowledge is included or excluded, and who is made visible or invisible. As Kate Crawford argues in *Atlas of AI*,[36] the AI production relies on extractive processes ranging from mining rare earth minerals to harvesting social data, each marked by environmental and epistemic exploitation. She warns of a persistent failure to address how the instruments of knowledge in AI serve the logics of an extractive economy. The result is a structural asymmetry of power, where technical infrastructures sustain inequality regardless of designers' intentions.[37] Her collaborative project with Vladan Joler, *Anatomy of an AI System*,[38] visualizes the hidden labor and planetary resources behind devices like Amazon Echo, revealing the global networks of exploitation sustaining seamless technologies. Their most recent work, *Calculating Empires*,[39] extends this critique by mapping five centuries of entangled technological and political power, illustrating how contemporary AI inherits logics of colonialism, militarization, and industrial control. These works demonstrate that AI systems are not immaterial or objective; they are infrastructures of power that determine who is seen, heard, and valued.

Labor exploitation is a central component of this infrastructure. Much of the labor that supports AI – such as data labeling, moderation, and maintenance – remains hidden, precarious, and outsourced, often to underpaid workers in the Global South.[40] This labor is gendered and racialized yet rendered invisible in dominant narratives. Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism shows how AI commodifies personal experience, extracting behavioral data in ways that echo older forms of dispossession. This not only dehumanizes users but also conceals the structural exploitation at the AI's core, reinforcing the asymmetries of power embedded in technological systems.[41] These dynamics further underscore the necessity of feminist epistemologies, which reject the myth of apolitical data. Scholars like Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein call for data feminism – rethinking data science through

[35] Ibid., 155–9.

[36] Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (Yale University Press, 2021).

[37] Ibid., 135.

[38] Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, *Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo as an Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources* (2018), https://anatomyof.ai, accessed June 6, 2025.

[39] Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, *Calculating Empires: A Genealogy of Technology and Power Since 1500* (2023), https://calculatingempires.net, accessed June 6, 2025.

[40] Sarah T. Roberts, *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media* (Yale University Press, 2019); Paola Tubaro, Antonio A. Casilli, and Marion Coville, "The Trainer, the Verifier, the Imitator: Three Ways in which Human Platform Workers Support Artificial Intelligence," *Big Data & Society* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1–12; Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri, *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

[41] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (PublicAffairs, 2019), 457-61.

principles of equity, transparency, and situated knowledge. As they argue, designing datasets and data systems that dismantle oppression and work toward justice, equity, and co-liberation requires tools that go beyond technical optimization. It is not enough to build more understandable algorithms; we must also examine and account for the histories, cultures, and contexts that produce discriminatory outcomes in the first place.[42] Meredith Broussard similarly critiques "technochauvinism," describing it as "the belief that tech is always the solution,"[43] and noting its hallmarks as "blind optimism about technology and an abundant lack of caution about how new technologies will be used."[44] Her critique emphasizes how uncritical faith in technology often masks and perpetuates systemic inequality rather than resolving it.

By contrast, techno-optimist perspectives frame the AI as a democratizing force that broadens access to creative tools and enables new forms of cultural production. Lev Manovich, for instance, highlights that "artificial neural networks can generate fresh texts and visuals on the level of highly competent professional writers, artists, photographers, or illustrators."[45] Similarly, projects like Ahmed Elgammal's AICAN,[46] celebrated for its ability to autonomously generate novel artworks, are often held up as proof of the AI's creative agency. While such accounts foreground the AI's creative potential, they risk obscuring the systemic inequities and exploitative infrastructures that the feminist critique insists must remain central. Aesthetics, too, play a crucial role in shaping how the AI is perceived and legitimized. Prevailing aesthetic forms in AI art often reproduce hegemonic norms and technocentric fantasies, masking the exploitative systems underlying their creation. Dejan Grba critiques how generative AI's "regurgitative learning inflation promotes and amplifies clichés and biases, reinforces stereotypes, and widens cultural gaps, possibly leading to narrow, entropic, or homogeneous new models."[47] He argues that such systems "cannot facilitate the intentions, actions, and accountabilities available to other artistic media; crucially, they do not invent, name, and further develop new concepts."[48] Instead, they often prioritize machinic spectacle over critical engagement. "Foregrounding the creative uses of currently vogue technologies, such AI art vocabularies reduce the space for the appreciation of a complex art field with strong scholarship and deep historical foundations to marketing labels and promotes its uncritical appreciation."[49] This concern is also present in Joanna Zylinska's media-philosophical critique of technocentric narratives in AI art. She argues that artists must tell better stories about AI that move beyond

[42] D'Ignazio and Klein. *Data Feminism*, 64–5.

[43] Meredith Broussard, *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World* (Press, 2018), 7–8.

[44] Ibid., 69.

[45] Lev Manovich, "The AI Brain in the Cultural Archive," *Medium*, August 12, 2023, https://medium.com/@manovich/the-ai-brain-in-the-cultural-archive-414fefecd72f, accessed August 10, 2025.

[46] Ahmed Elgammal, "Meet AICAN, a Machine That Operates as an Autonomous Artist," *Interalia Magazine*, September 2019, https://www.interaliamag.org/articles/ahmed-elgammal/, accessed August 10, 2025.

[47] Grba, "Art Notions in the Age of (Mis)anthropic AI," 4.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., 6–7.

superficial novelty to address the cultural, ethical, and ecological entanglements of intelligent systems:

> […] one of the most creative – and most needed – ways in which artists can use AI is by *telling better stories about AI*, while also *imagining better ways of living with AI*. Reflecting on the nature of this double 'better' would be the crux of such artistic endeavors. Mobilizing the tools of imagination, visualization, narrative, metaphor, parable and irony, artists can perhaps begin by blowing some much-needed cool air on the heat and hype around AI currently emitting from tech companies.[50]

She thus situates AI art within broader reflections on creativity and human-machine relations, challenging the spectacle-driven aesthetics favored by corporate and institutional actors.

Though not all of these thinkers are explicitly feminist, their critiques converge with feminist concerns by foregrounding exploitation, bias, labor erasure, aesthetic spectacularization, and systemic inequality in AI. They underscore how marginalization is built into the very architecture of these technologies. Feminist AI art practices extend these perspectives by interrogating the structural conditions of AI and reimagining its possibilities. Through their interventions, artists expose hidden infrastructures, challenge dominant aesthetics, and center marginalized experiences, thus opening space for alternative imaginaries that resist and reconfigure the status quo.

Feminist AI art: Tactics of resistance and reimagination

Before turning to the feminist AI art specifically, it is essential to acknowledge the broader field of critical and tactical AI art that interrogates algorithmic systems. These works expose the ideological, economic, and political dimensions of AI while experimenting with modes of critique and resistance. Trevor Paglen and Kate Crawford's *ImageNet Roulette*[51] highlights the biases in AI image classification systems, revealing how training data reflects and reinforces racial and gendered stereotypes. Zach Blas's *Facial Weaponization Suite*[52] uses performance and mask-making to protest biometric facial recognition and its enforcement of normative identity categories. Rather than celebrating technological novelty, such projects confront algorithmic authority and open space for subversive tactics in digital art.

Other artists, including Stephanie Dinkins, Anna Ridler, Egor Kraft, Vladan Joler, Jake Elwes, Ben Snell, and Heather Dewey-Hagborg, employ visual strategies to

[50] Zylinska, *AI Art*, 31.

[51] Trevor Paglen and Kate Crawford, ImageNet Roulette (2019), https://paglen.studio/2020/04/29/imagenet-roulette/, accessed September 16, 2025

[52] Zach Blas, *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2011–2014), https://www.zachblas.info/works/facial-weaponization-suite/, accessed June 6, 2025.

critique surveillance, bias, and hidden labor. These practitioners resist the commodification of AI art through methods such as counter-surveillance, algorithmic mimicry, and speculative design to expose the hidden infrastructures, exploitative labor, and structural asymmetries embedded in these technologies.[53] While not always explicitly feminist, such practices resonate with feminist concerns about power, agency, and the invisibility of labor. They also mark a historical shift from the autonomy of the early net art – which used hacking and experimentation to resist corporate systems – toward the AI art that must operate within a digital sphere already shaped by commodification and platform-driven aesthetics.[54] Feminist AI art directly challenges these constraints by addressing not only the AI's technical flaws and social harms but also the structural inequalities embedded in its design and deployment. Unlike the mainstream AI art, often aligned with corporate aesthetics of spectacle and efficiency, the feminist AI art foregrounds relationality, embodiment, inclusion, and care. Drawing from feminist traditions of critique, activism, and speculative world-building, these artistic practices resist the invisibilization of labor, the extraction of data, and the reinforcement of hierarchies within AI systems.

Caroline Sinders's *Feminist Data Set*[55] builds a dataset from feminist principles, using participatory workshops and human-curated content to rethink what counts as "good data." The project resists the automated scraping methods used in most AI systems, highlighting the political nature of data collection and emphasizing context, consent, and care. Anna Ridler's *Myriad (Tulips)*[56] similarly rejects extractive data practices: she hand-photographed and annotated over 10,000 tulips to create both dataset and artwork, making the labor, subjectivity, and craft often erased by conventional AI training methods visible. These projects echo Caroline Criado Perez's critique of data systems often defaulting to male-centric norms that exclude women's experiences and reinforce real-world inequalities.[57] Mimi Ọnụọha's *The Library of Missing Datasets*[58] continues the thread by compiling datasets that institutions omit, such as records of police violence, housing discrimination, or labor conditions, revealing systemic invisibility and challenging AI's epistemic violence.

Lauren Lee McCarthy's *Someone*[59] explores surveillance and intimacy by turning the artist's home into a controllable smart environment. Volunteers remotely

[53] Jelena Novaković and Jelena Guga, "Art after AI: The Impact of Generative AI on the Artworld," in *Navigating the Digital Age: An In-Depth Exploration into the Intersection of Modern Technologies and Societal Transformation*, eds. L. Bojić, S. Žikić, J. Matthes, and D. Trilling (Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade and Department of Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Vienna, 2024), 584–604.

[54] Vera Mevorah and Jelena Guga, "From Net Art to AI Art: Questioning the Post-Internet/Post-Digital and New Aesthetic Art Discourse," in *Culture, Innovation and the Green Economy: Towards a Sustainable Future in Europe*, ed. B. Mickov (Routledge, 2025), 127.

[55] Sinders, *Feminist Data Set* (2017–ongoing).

[56] Anna Ridler, *Myriad (Tulips)* (2018), https://annaridler.com/myriad-tulips, accessed August 10, 2025.

[57] Criado Perez, *Invisible Women*, 136-145.

[58] Mimi Ọnụọha, *The Library of Missing Datasets* (2016).

[59] Lauren Lee McCarthy, *Someone* (2019).

manage McCarthy's daily life, prompting reflection on agency, consent, and the entanglement of human relationships with AI systems. Similarly, Stephanie Dinkins's *Not the Only One*[60] centers Black familial histories through a multigenerational AI trained on oral narratives. Unlike mainstream datasets, this project privileges lived experience and community memory over technocratic abstraction.

Other artists take on the mythologies surrounding AI and the aesthetics of power. Morehshin Allahyari's *She Who Sees the Unknown*[61] resurrects mythical female jinn from the Middle Eastern folklore using AI-generated text and 3D modeling. In reclaiming these suppressed narratives, Allahyari critiques techno-colonial erasure and articulates feminist posthuman agency. Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's *I Can't Remember a Time I Didn't Need You*[62] constructs interactive archives centering Black trans lives, using game logic and speculative design to challenge dominant data regimes and invite more inclusive interactions with machine logic. Similarly, Sofia Crespo's bio-inspired neural artworks like *Artificial Natural History,*[63] examine how AI renders nonhuman life, inviting reflection on ecological entanglements, multispecies imaginaries, and machinic vision.

Together, these diverse practices exemplify how feminist artists critically interrogate the AI's extractive and exclusionary logics while proposing alternative modalities of interaction and knowing. They cultivate counter-narratives and infrastructures that center lived experience, ethical interdependence, and feminist epistemologies. Their approach aligns with Sasha Costanza-Chock's framework of design justice, which calls for technologies shaped by those most affected by them, centering marginalized voices and challenging dominant, top-down design models.[64] By bridging critique with speculation, these works create spaces for affective engagement and community-driven design. In doing so, they resist existing structures and imagine new techno-social possibilities rooted in justice and co-liberation.

---

[60] Stephanie Dinkins, *Not the Only One* (2018–ongoing), https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/ntoo.html, accessed June 6, 2025.

[61] Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown* (2017–2020), https://www.morehshin.com/she-who-sees-the-unknown, accessed June 6, 2025.

[62] Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, *I Can't Remember a Time I Didn't Need You* (2021), https://www.daniellebrathwaiteshirley.com/i-cant-remember-a-time-i-didnt-need, accessed September 16, 2025.

[63] Sofia Crespo, *Artificial Natural History* (2019), https://sofiacrespo.com/Artificial-Natural-History, accessed June 6, 2025.

[64] Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice*, 85–8.

Conclusion: Coding otherwise

This paper has argued that AI art cannot be disentangled from the sociotechnical systems that shape it – systems marked by histories of gendered exclusion, epistemic violence, and hidden labor. Far from neutral or autonomous, generative models often aestheticize inequality under the guise of innovation, reproducing the very power structures they claim to transcend. Aligned uncritically with the logic of techno-capitalism, AI art risks aestheticizing systemic inequality while obscuring the extractive infrastructures and human costs that sustain it. Feminist critique confronts this complicity head-on. It does not seek to simply correct bias within the existing systems, but to interrogate the foundations on which these systems are built. Feminist artists and theorists expose how exclusion becomes normalized and how visibility is granted only on unequal terms. In doing so, they reclaim AI as a site of critical intervention, where narrative, aesthetics, and political agency intersect.

Importantly, these interventions do not simply seek inclusion within existing technological paradigms; they call for a fundamental rethinking of what AI is, what it does, and for whom it functions. Drawing on genealogies from cyberfeminism to current feminist AI scholarship, these practices operationalize care, accountability, and justice through alternative datasets, counter-archives, and community-centered design. This strand of practice unsettles the assumption that technological progress is inherently liberatory, asking who benefits, who is burdened, and what alternative futures might be possible if lived experience and collective responsibility replace efficiency and scale as guiding principles. By tracing both the structural inequalities embedded in AI and the feminist practices that resist them, this paper positions the feminist AI art as a contested cultural site shaped by ongoing political struggle.

Against techno-optimist narratives that frame the AI as democratizing or inherently creative, the feminist AI demonstrates that resistance and reimagination are equally central to shaping technological culture. As the AI continues to permeate cultural life, the question is not only how we use these systems, but whether we are willing to challenge and reconfigure the power structures they encode. Feminist interventions remind us that another way is not only possible – it is necessary. To code otherwise is not simply to revise technical systems, but to reimagine the cultural logic and epistemologies they carry. Feminist interventions insist that re-coding – of both infrastructures and values – is not just possible, but essential for building more just and accountable futures.

References

Adam, Alison. *Artificial Knowing: Gender and the Thinking Machine*. Routledge, 1998.

Allahyari, Morehshin. *She Who Sees the Unknown* (2017–2020), https://www.morehshin.com/she-who-sees-the-unknown, accessed June 6, 2025.

Benjamin, Ruha. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code,* Polity Press, 2019.

Blas, Zach. *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2011–2014), https://www.zachblas.info/works/facial-weaponization-suite/, accessed June 6, 2025.

Brathwaite-Shirley, Danielle. *I Can't Remember a Time I Didn't Need You* (2021), https://www.daniellebrathwaiteshirley.com/i-cant-remember-a-time-i-didnt-need, accessed September 16, 2025.

Broussard, Meredith. *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World*. MIT Press, 2018.

Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press, 2015.

Cheang, Shu Lea. *Brandon* (1998–1999), https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/15337, accessed September 16, 2025.

Costanza-Chock, Sasha. *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*. The MIT Press, 2020.

Crawford, Kate and Vladan Joler, *Calculating Empires: A Genealogy of Technology and Power Since 1500* (2023), https://calculatingempires.net, accessed June 6, 2025.

Crawford, Kate. *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*. Yale University Press, 2021.

Crawford Kate and Vladan Joler. *Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo as an Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources* (2018), https://anatomyof.ai, accessed June 6, 2025.

Crespo, Sofia. *Artificial Natural History* (2019), https://sofiacrespo.com/Artificial-Natural-History, accessed June 6, 2025.

Criado Perez, Caroline. *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men.* Abrams Press, 2019.

D'Ignazio, Catherine and Lauren F. Klein. *Data Feminism.* The MIT Press, 2020.

Gajjala, Radhika. *Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women.* AltaMira Press, 2004.

Dinkins, Stephanie. *Not the Only One* (2018–ongoing), https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/ntoo.html, accessed June 6, 2025.

Elgammal, Ahmed. *AICAN.* https://www.aican.io, accessed August 10, 2025.

Flanagan, Mary. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design.* MIT Press, 2009.

Gray, Mary L. and Siddharth Suri, *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

Grba, Dejan. "Art Notions in the Age of (Mis)anthropic AI." *Arts* 13, no. 5 (2024): 137. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13050137.

Guga, Jelena. *Digital Self: How We Became Binary*. University of West Bohemia, 2015. Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149–181. Routledge, 1991.

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066.

Jansen, Sue Curry. *Critical Communication Theory: Power, Media, Gender, and Technology*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

Kuni, Verena. "Cyberfeminism – Index and Archive." In *Women, Art & Technology*, ed. Judy Malloy, 285–300. MIT Press, 2003.

Lialina, Olia. *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War* (1996), http://www.teleportacia.org/war/, accessed June 6, 2025.

Manovich, Lev. "The AI Brain in the Cultural Archive." *Medium*, August 12, 2023. https://medium.com/@manovich/the-ai-brain-in-the-cultural-archive-414fefecd72f, accessed August 10, 2025.

McCarthy, Lauren Lee. *Someone* (2019), https://lauren-mccarthy.com/Someone, accessed June 4, 2025.

Mevorah, Vera and Jelena Guga. "From Net Art to AI Art: Questioning the Post-Internet/Post-Digital and New Aesthetic Art Discourse." In *Culture, Innovation and the Green Economy: Towards a Sustainable Future in Europe*, ed. B. Mickov, 115–32. Routledge, 2025.

Murthy, Prema. *Bindigirl* (1999), https://artbase.rhizome.org/wiki/Q4304, accessed September 16, 2025.

Novaković, Jelena and Jelena Guga. "Art after AI: The Impact of Generative AI on the Artworld." In *Navigating the Digital Age: An In-Depth Exploration into the Intersection of Modern Technologies and Societal Transformation*, edited by L. Bojić, S. Žikić, J. Matthes, and D. Trilling, 584–604. Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade; Department of Communication, University of Vienna, 2024.

Ọnụọha, Mimi. *The Library of Missing Datasets* (2016), https://mimionuoha.com/the-library-of-missing-datasets, accessed June 4, 2025.

Paglen, Trevor and Kate Crawford. *ImageNet Roulette* (2019), https://paglen.studio/2020/04/29/imagenet-roulette/, accessed September 16, 2025.

Plant, Sadie. *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture.* Doubleday, 1997.

Sinders, Caroline. *Feminist Data* Set (2017–ongoing), https://carolinesinders.com/projects/feminist-data-set/, accessed June 4, 2025.

Ridler, Anna. *Myriad (Tulips)*. 2018. https://annaridler.com/myriad-tulips, accessed August 10, 2025.

Roberts, Sarah T. *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media.* Yale University Press, 2019.

Stone, Allucquère Rosanne. "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary Stories About Virtual Cultures," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy. Routledge, 2000, 504–528.

subRosa. *Sex and Gender in the Biotech Century* (2002), http://www.cyberfeminism.net, accessed June 6, 2025.

Suchman, Lucy. *Plans and Situated Actions: The Problem of Human-Machine Communication*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Toupin, Sophie. "Shaping Feminist Artificial Intelligence." *New Media & Society* 26, no. 1 (2023): 580–95. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221150776.

Tubaro, Paola, Antonio A. Casilli, and Marion Coville, "The Trainer, the Verifier, the Imitator: Three Ways in which Human Platform Workers Support Artificial Intelligence," *Big Data & Society* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720919776.

Turkle, Sherry. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. Simon & Schuster, 1984.

Wajcman, Judy. *Feminism Confronts Technology*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs, 2019.

Zylinska, Joanna. *AI Art: Machine Visions and Warped Dreams.* Open Humanities Press, 2020.

Article received: April 3, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Original scholarly paper

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.626

Fuat Boğaç Evren
Department of Visual Communication Design, Near East University, Nicosia

A Critical Examination of Emotional Labour and Emotional Capital in Social Media Interaction

Abstract: This study examines the concepts of emotional labour and emotional capital in the digital space. Drawing on Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labour, it discusses how users apply their emotional expressions in social networks as a performative act that produces social capital, economic value and algorithmic visibility. At this point, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theories provide a framework for analyzing the effects of digital emotional labour on field-specific power dynamics and social stratification. The study explores how emotional capital accumulates, circulates and transforms into other forms of capital in social networks. It examines how inequalities in the digital space are reinforced through algorithmic governance and capitalist structures, and critically evaluates the role of digital labour in the capital accumulation process. It is concluded that digital labour commodifies users and transforms them into a mechanism that reproduces social inequalities.

Keywords: emotional labour; digital labour; emotional capital; digital culture; digital sociology.

Introduction

Emotional labour was first conceptualised by Arlie Hochschild in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Hochschild discussed the service sector, particularly flight attendants and customer service representatives, as workplaces where courtesy is enforced and emotions are managed and suppressed to ensure customer satisfaction.[1] With digitalization, the domain of emotional labour has expanded beyond traditional workplaces to social networks, where individuals consciously or unconsciously engage in emotional labour to build social connections and increase their visibility. In networks such as Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok and LinkedIn, users adopt emotional expression not only as a form of personal interaction but also as a performative act that generates social capital, economic value and algorithmic visibility. This has led to the emergence of digital emotional labour, where emotions are commodified and sacrificed to digital capitalism.[2]

[1] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (University of California Press, 2003).

[2] Nick Srnicek, "The Challenges of Platform Capitalism: Understanding the Logic of a New Business Model," *Juncture* 23, no. 4 (2017): 254–57; Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Profile Books, 2019).

*Author's contact information: bogacevren@yahoo.com; fuat.evren@neu.edu.tr

As digital spaces continue to shape interpersonal communication and relationships, the ways in which emotions are expressed and maintained in online environments emerges as a new research topic. By introducing the concepts of 'emotional labour' and 'emotional capital', this study examines the accumulation and exchange of emotional capital in the digital space and addresses the digital emotional labour that users spend on networks. In addition, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theses are used to analyze emotional capital in social networks. During the analysis, it is critically examined how digital emotional labour is shaped by field-specific power dynamics and how emotional capital functions as a form of social stratification in the digital economy. The study adopts a theoretical and conceptual approach drawing on Bourdieu's sociology, contemporary critical theories on digital labour, emotional labour and digital capitalism. Within the scope of the study, the following basic questions are sought to be answered:

- How do social networks function as emotional spaces where emotional labour is performed and rewarded?
- How is emotional capital accumulated, circulated and transformed into other forms of capital in social networks?
- What are the power dynamics and inequalities embedded in the digital economy and how do they reinforce existing social stratification?

While seeking answers to these questions, the study is also aimed at presenting an innovative theoretical perspective on the commodification, regulation and consumption of digital and emotional labour in social networks. The study examines multiple social network examples and comprehensively analyzes the production of emotional labour, the accumulation and exchange of emotional capital in the digital sphere within the framework of Bourdieu's theories.

Labour of emotion

Emotional labour in social media refers to the conscious and subconscious efforts individuals make to express and react to their emotions in networks. It involves the creation of emotional expressions and the management of emotional responses to interactions in the online environment. At this point, Hochschild's theory of emotional labour provides a basic framework for understanding how emotions are regulated, performed and commodified. However, in the digital age, emotional labour has extended beyond traditional workplace settings into decentralized and algorithmically managed spaces.

Unlike traditional employment structures, emotional labour in social networks operates under informal economies where social media companies extract value without any remuneration (Table #1). This has created an unequal system in which users perform digital emotional labour for free, while the networks turn it into large-scale financial gain. Users perform unpaid labour for social media companies by producing all the content on the network, while emotional experiences are converted into data and

turned into economic capital. All commercial social networks, on the other hand, make financial gains from emotional interactions through the targeted advertising model.

Emotional labour is the effort applied to express emotions in interpersonal communication and the planning of this effort.[3] Hochschild defined emotional labour as the process of managing emotions and expressions to meet the emotional requirements of a job.[4] According to another definition, emotional labour is the act of expressing emotions appropriate to the situation.[5] In the 19th and 20th centuries, industrial labour was the dominant form of production. However, since the 1990s, as the importance of industrial labour has declined, the type of labour that produces intangible products such as information, communication and relationships has come to the fore.[6] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argued that this new form of labour involves the production of certain emotions.[7] In this process, especially in the service and entertainment sectors, the production of emotions such as comfort, satisfaction, excitement and passion was defined as emotional labour. Emotional labour has a decentralized structure that can be produced anywhere without being tied to a specific place. For example, flight attendants, call centre workers, fast food and supermarket workers are among the occupational groups that directly produce emotional labour. The most important qualities that employers expect from employees in such jobs are strong social skills, effective communication, a positive attitude and a smiling face.[8] Hochschild argued that with the decline of industrial production and the rise of the service sector, the ability to deal with people, the ability to manage and direct emotions has become more important for many professions.[9] Employees in the service sector have to convey positive emotions to consumers while performing their profession. If emotion management is carried out for a fee, this process is called emotional labour.[10]

Emotional labour in the digital space has also led to the emergence of emotional capital, where individuals accumulate value through emotional performances. Unlike face-to-face communication, social networks encourage emotional self-presentation by users. Deliberate management of emotions is required to create a desirable online identity. The competitive nature of social networks based on visibility often emphasizes emotional exaggeration and over-emotional performance. This raises the following questions.

- Is emotional authenticity possible in algorithmically managed spaces?

---

[3] J. Andrew Morris and Daniel C. Feldman, "The Dimensions, Antecedents, and Consequences of Emotional Labour," *Academy of Management Review* 21, no. 4 (1996): 986–1010.

[4] Alicia A. Grady, "Emotion Regulation in the Workplace: A New Way to Conceptualize Emotional Labour," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 5 (2000): 95–110.

[5] Blake E. Ashforth and Ronald H. Humphrey, "Emotional Labour in Service Roles: The Influence of Identity," *Academy of Management Review* 18, no. 1 (1993): 88–115.

[6] Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin, 2004).

[7] Negri and Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

[8] Negri and Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

[9] Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

[10] Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

- How do social networks condition users to produce emotional content for interaction?

For example, influencers constantly engage in emotional labour by not only producing content but also curating their online identities to develop social relationships with their followers. The expectation to be constantly engaging, positive and emotionally available increases the burden of emotional labour. Similarly, temporary workers, such as ride-hailing drivers and food delivery couriers, engage in emotional labour to achieve positive ratings that directly affect earning potential. The visibility of the number of interactions on networks inevitably pushes both influencers and ordinary users to receive more interactions, making it inevitable that content is produced with the concern for interaction.

Digital labour and targeted advertising policies

The main view in digital labour studies is that the capital accumulation model that dominates the internet exploits the unpaid labour of users. Nevertheless, two main perspectives have emerged in the field. The first perspective draws a rather optimistic framework, emphasizing the economic and social opportunities offered by digital labour. According to this view, digital labour allows individuals to spend their leisure time in a productive and enjoyable way.[11] Therefore, Shirky argued that digital volunteering is not a type of labour but a creative leisure activity.[12] This view positions users involved in the digital labour process as voluntary participants or 'micro-entrepreneurs'.

Christian Fuchs, a leading figure in the literature, draws attention to the fact that users, especially those engaged in content production in social networks, are not at the center of the profits generated by social media companies while creating value for these networks.[13] Digital labour is usually an unpaid activity performed by users of the internet and social networks, from which websites and social networking companies make profit.[14] According to Fuchs, the internet hosts different types of labour and these types of labour are based on various forms of exploitation.[15] While highly paid employees of Internet companies are defined as the 'digital labour aristocracy', low-paid precarious knowledge workers and Internet users who perform completely unpaid labour are also part of this structure. In addition, slave labourers who mine the minerals required for electronic devices stand out as the invisible labour force of the digital economy.[16]

[11] Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (Penguin, 2010).

[12] Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*.

[13] Christian Fuchs, "Labour in Informational Capitalism," *The Information Society* 26, no. 3 (2010): 176–96; Christian Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (Routledge, 2014); Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (Sage, 2018).

[14] Antonio A. Casilli, "Digital Labour Studies Go Global: Toward A Digital Decolonial Turn," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 3934–3954.

[15] Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*; Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

[16] Christian Fuchsand Sebastian Sevignani, "What Is Digital Labour? What Is Digital Work? What's Their Difference? And Why Do These Questions Matter For Understanding Social Media?" *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 11, no. 2 (2013): 237–93.

Digital communication is an important opportunity for marginalized subcultures that cannot find a place in traditional media to be seen by the wider society.[17] Social networks offer a new media environment for societies, especially in the face of government restrictions, censorship and commercial limitations.[18] Therefore, Manuel Castells argues that the architecture of the network enables widespread access for everyone.[19] According to Castells, social inequalities can be eliminated since everyone who can connect to the network can benefit from its power of expression.[20] Furthermore, the traditional media consumer model has been replaced by a new producer-consumer model through the internet and social networks.[21] This has enabled network users to interact with their social circles, form online communities, and access network-based resistance opportunities. According to Henry Jenkins, the main feature of social networks is their scalability,[22] and since the media flow is actively created by users, networks enhance participatory cultural opportunities.[23] Jenkins explains the participatory potential of networks as users interacting with each other, forming communities and creating content through the network. [24] However, Fuchs challenges Jenkins' claim, arguing that users have no say or rights in the ownership of social networks, the management of material interests, or economic decision-making processes, and therefore networks cannot provide a participatory platform.[25] John Hartley also argues that as the number of social networks increases, so will the opportunities for participatory democracy, since users can not only consume content on networks but also produce it.[26] Nico Carpentier states that full participation can be achieved regardless of ownership participation.[27] Fuchs, on the other hand, argues that fully participatory media democracy is only possible with property democracy.[28] According to Fuchs, an internet dominated by companies that accumulate capital by

[17] Andreas Oldenbourg, "Digital Freedom and Corporate Power in Social Media," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2022): 383–404.

[18] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[19] Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*.

[20] Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*.

[21] Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn, *Democracy and New Media* (The MIT Press, 2003).

[22] Henry Jenkins, "What Happened Before Youtube?," in *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, ed. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (Polity, 2009), 109–25.

[23] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in A Networked Culture* (New York University Press, 2013).

[24] Jenkins, "What Happened Before Youtube?"

[25] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

[26] John Hartley, *Digital Futures of Cultural and Media Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

[27] Nico Carpentier, *Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle* (Intellect, 2011).

[28] Christian Fuchs, *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age* (Routledge, 2008); Christian Fuchs, "Labour in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet," *The Information Society* 26, no. 3 (2010): 176–96; Christian Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies* (Routledge, 2011); Christian Fuchs, "Dallas Smythe Today – The Audience Commodity, The Digital Labour Debate, Marxist Political Economy and Critical Theory," *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 10, no. 2 (2012): 692–40; Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*; Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

commodifying and exploiting users can never be participatory.[29] For the vast majority of users, social networks are monopolized by large companies that subject them to their own hegemony.[30] Due to the monopoly of social networks, users are dependent on the companies that own and manage them. This situation provides the companies in question with the opportunity for uncontrolled intervention.

The critical view bases its main argument on the economic infrastructure of the internet and social networks on the exploitation of the unpaid digital labour of its users. Dallas Smythe's notion of the spectator commodity has been transformed in the context of social media into a big data commodity produced by the digital labour of internet users.[31] Smythe introduced the concept of audience commodity to analyze the advertizing model in which viewers are sold to advertisers as commodities.[32] In the capitalist system, the media reduces the audience to the status of consumers of advertisements and commodities and creates the phenomenon of audience commodity by commodifying the audience. Audience commodity is formed by media companies selling the interest of the audience to advertisers. Smythe explains the audience commodity as follows: "You, the members of the audience, donate your unpaid working time and in return you receive programme material and explicit advertisements."[33] According to Smythe, mass media produce consumers for capitalism, and what the capital-owned media produce is not content but audience power.[34] The mass, which was considered an audience in the past, has become a part of a new form of exploitation called "prosumer commodity". Although the phenomenon of exploitation continues, its form and dimensions have changed over time.

In commercial social networks, users constantly create new content, interact with existing content, connect with other users and join various communities or create new communities. In this process, advanced artificial intelligence algorithms record and track users' personal data and online activities. The collected data is then analyzed and arranged into categories such as gender, age, interests, socio-economic status and financial purchasing power. While users leave digital footprints every moment they spend on social media, this data allows social media companies to obtain comprehensive information about them.[35] Therefore, commercial social networks are a system built on user labour, and the exploitation of this labour is one of the main elements that increases capital accumulation. The capital accumulation model adopted by corporatized social media operates by using the unpaid labour of internet users

[29] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

[30] Beate Rössler, *Autonomy: An Essay on the Life Well-Lived* (John Wiley, 2021).

[31] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

[32] Dallas Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1, no. 3 (1977): 1–27; Dallas Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada* (Ablex, 1981).

[33] Smythe, *Dependency Road*, 233.

[34] Dallas Smythe, "Culture, Communication 'Technology' and Canadian Policy," in *Counterclockwise: Perspectives on Communication*, ed. Thomas Guback (Westview, 1990), 306.

[35] Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*; Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

and selling the data they produce, as well as information about their behaviour, as commodities to advertisers.

Algorithms contribute to the ability of social networks to publish personalized advertisements through targeted advertising and thereby generate revenue for the network. In addition, they record and analyze user data in order to provide personalized advertisements in line with users' emotions, preferences and behaviours. Network algorithms therefore play an important role in shaping users' emotional experiences by tailoring ads to individual preferences, behaviours and emotions. Advertisers effectively use targeted advertising to encourage users to interact with content. The emotional impact of targeted advertising extends to users' purchasing behaviour.

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology and emotional capital

Pierre Bourdieu defines the field as a structured social space with its own rules, power relations and forms of capital.[36] The field is an arena of struggle in which actors compete for specific resources, and the logic of each field determines who holds power, how resources circulate, and which forms of practice are rewarded or devalued. Fields serve as arenas where individuals and groups compete for different forms of capital. Social space consists of various fields; therefore, it is incorrect to speak of a singular social life. Fields are interwoven, interrelated, and interconnected. Bourdieu's metaphor of the game conceptualizes fields as structured like a game. The fundamental prerequisite for entering a field is that the individual perceives the game as valuable and adheres to its rules.[37] What determines the rules of the field is the dominant class's designation of whatever is most advantageous to itself as the legitimate way of life within that field. The rules of the game are not fixed; if an individual possesses the necessary competence, they can alter these rules. As one begins to ascend within the field, they gain the ability to shape it.[38]

Algorithms shape the flow of emotional capital through content moderation and interaction metrics. Emotional capital is not equally accessible; certain emotions and users hold greater legitimacy. Users within the field compete to accumulate emotional capital and convert it into social, cultural, and economic advantages. However, not all users enter the field with equal resources.

The concept of habitus refers to the internalized social structures that shape individuals' thoughts, actions, and emotional responses.[39] Habitus is a product of an individual's historical and social positioning and is shaped by the conditions in which they exist. It teaches individuals where and how to act. While habitus shapes individuals, it can also be shaped by their actions. Within habitus, there are predefined structures such as family, social environment, and the culture in which one is raised.

[36] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of the Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[37] Pierre Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[38] Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State* (Polity Press, 2014).

[39] Bourdieu, *Outline of the Theory of Practice*.

However, individuals can add to these structures themselves. The ability to intervene in existing structures lies within the individual. Bourdieu argues that individuals engage in actions aimed at increasing their power and influence in every field they inhabit.[40] Even if this field is the family, an individual's actions aimed at increasing their power and status within the family are driven by the need to maintain their position in that field. The individual is constantly in pursuit of power and prestige, but the way in which they engage in this pursuit is shaped by habitus. In a sense, it is determined by the structures and patterns acquired through family and education.

Individuals do not enter the emotional field as neutral agents. Instead, they are predisposed to act, feel, and express their emotions in specific ways based on their social background. Therefore, we can speak of the presence of habitus in digital spaces as a set of internalized dispositions that shape how individuals engage with emotional labour and emotional capital. Just as habitus is shaped by past experiences, users can also internalize platform-specific emotional approaches. Those who successfully adapt to the trends and tendencies of the network are more likely to accumulate emotional capital.

One of Bourdieu's most influential contributions to the field of sociology is his expansion of the concept of capital beyond economic resources to include cultural, social, and symbolic capital.[41] Bourdieu did not define capital solely in material terms, as Marx did. In addition to his critique of political economy, he incorporated the cultural elements possessed by individuals into his theory, formulating the concept of cultural capital.[42] Bourdieu's fundamental paradigm is based on the idea that individuals act in pursuit of their interests. Their primary goal is to enhance their social status. From a Bourdieusian perspective, if an individual cannot convert the cultural elements inherited from their family into capital and thereby increase their social standing, this cannot be considered cultural capital. Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is primarily acquired through family and education. The combination of material and cultural capital determines whom an individual knows and the extent of their social network, which corresponds to social capital. The recognition of an individual's material, cultural, and social capital by others constitutes symbolic capital. Fundamentally, individuals acquire material and cultural capital within habitus.

According to Bourdieu, capital exists not only in economic form (money and property) but also in social form (resources provided by long-term relationship networks), cultural form (education, knowledge, skills) and symbolic form (respect, prestige, honour).[43] Bourdieu states that economic capital is the fundamental source that generates the other three types of capital, and that each type of capital aims at

[40] Bourdieu, *On the State*.

[41] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (Greenwood, 1986), 241–58.

[42] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."

[43] Tasawar Hannan, "Facebook 'Selficide': Are They Modern-Day Tragic Attempts of Our Symbolic Capital?," *European Journal of Sociology* 3, no. 1 (2020): 22–35.

generating profit or efficiency through accumulation.[44] Social capital, on the other hand, is the sum of actual or potential resources arising from ongoing acquaintance and recognition relationships.[45] An individual's position and status in social networks are the determinants of social capital. Symbolic capital, on the other hand, is the legitimately accepted form of other types of capital. In other words, as the types of capital one possesses are socially approved, they become visible as 'honour' or 'prestige.'

Emotional capital, derived from Bourdieu's conceptualization of various forms of capital, is based on accumulated emotional resources that individuals and groups use to gain influence, status, and material benefits. In social networks, emotional capital has transformed into a new tool of power, where emotional expressions, interactions, and relationships are converted into power and money. Bourdieu defined social capital as a network of relationships that provides individuals with advantages within social structures.[46] Emotional capital is based on this concept and emphasizes the role of emotions in shaping social ties, influence, and status. Helga Nowotny, building upon Bourdieu's conceptual framework, introduced the concept of emotional capital.[47] While considering this concept as a subcategory of social capital, it has been defined as a characteristic of a private sphere rather than the public sphere.[48] Emotional capital is generally shaped within the framework of emotional bonds formed with family and friends and includes the emotional resources an individual transfers to those they value. First introduced into discourse by Nowotny, emotional capital has been defined primarily in the context of the social and cultural resources produced by women through emotional relationships within the family.[49] Subsequently, Patricia Allatt further developed the concept in her study, where she examined how privilege is reproduced in middle-class families.[50]

Maria Merisalo and Teemu Makkonen argued that different types of capital are both necessary in the use of digital technologies and that various forms of capital emerge in the process of digitalization.[51] This view, in fact, constitutes a contribution to Bourdieu's approach to the concept of capital. Bourdieu focused on the processes of transformation and change of capital, particularly explaining how economic capital evolves into cultural capital through examples related to educational institutions.

---

[44] Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.

[45] Tristan Claridge, "Bourdieu on Social Capital – Theory of Capital," accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/bourdieu-on-social-capital-theory-of-capital/#:~:text=Bourdieu%20framed%20social%20capital%20as,1.

[46] Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.

[47] Helga Nowotny, "Women in Public lLife in Austria," in *Access to Power: Cross-National Studies of Women and Elites*, ed. C. Fuchs, Epstein and R. Laub Coser (Allen & Unwin, 1981), 147–56.

[48] Nowotny, "Women in Public Life in Austria."

[49] Nowotny, "Women in Public Life in Austria."

[50] Patricia Allatt, "Becoming Privileged: The Role of Family Processes," in *Youth and Inequality*, ed. Inge Bates and George Riseborough (Open University, 1993), 139–59.

[51] Maria Merisalo and Teemu Makkonen, "Bourdieusian E-Capital Perspective Enhancing Digital Capital Discussion in the Realm of Third Level Digital Divide," *Information Technology and People* 35, no. 8 (2022): 231–52.

However, with the today's rapid development of digital technologies, this transformation occurs through digital environments. Emotional capital in social networks can also be theorized as a distinct but convertible form of capital that carries social, economic, and symbolic value. Like other forms of capital, emotional capital can be transformed into economic, social, and symbolic capital:

Material Capital: emotional capital can be converted into economic value through sponsorships, advertisements, and money-making models provided by the network (e.g., YouTube ad revenue, Patreon memberships, etc.).

Social Capital: emotional capital can enhance networking opportunities, thereby increasing visibility, collaborations, and social influence.

Symbolic Capital: emotional capital can create opportunities for greater recognition and enhance an individual's authority within digital communities.

Emotional capital refers to the ability to create, manage, and use emotions to achieve social, cultural, and economic gains. It can be defined as an accumulation of emotional experiences, expressions, and reactions through users' interactions in social networks. Unlike economic capital, emotional capital is intangible; it affects a user's online presence, interaction metrics, and economic opportunities. Emotional capital does not exist in isolation; it functions within a broader system of exchange, allowing users to transform it in various ways. Those with higher emotional capital can attract more followers, thereby increasing their power and visibility within the network. Therefore, while emotional capital becomes a significant force in determining who gains visibility, influence, and economic rewards in digital economies, not all emotional expressions can be equally converted into material value. Users contribute to emotional capital by interacting with content in the network, and in doing so, emotional capital becomes a determinant of status within the network. Users with higher emotional capital may be seen as more effective, more visible, or more popular. Social status, in turn, influences network dynamics by triggering users' visibility and attracting attention.

While some users are able to successfully convert emotional labour into economic gain, the majority face digital labour exploitation without receiving the economic rewards for their emotional capital. This structural inequality highlights the insecure and unequal distribution of emotional resources within digital labour economies. Unlike traditional labour, emotional labour in digital spaces typically does not have a material counterpart for ordinary users and is often expended voluntarily. Emotional labour is algorithmically directed and commodified within the network economy. Social networks are emotional spaces shaped by power dynamics and digital hierarchies. Emotional labour is conditioned by habitus, and emotional capital is a stratified resource unevenly distributed among social, economic, and cultural forms of capital.

Emotional labour and emotional capital in social networks

The "Like" button on Facebook revolutionized social network interaction by offering users a simplified way to express approval of content. In a short period, the "Like" button became a central element of the user experience on the platform, redefining digital expression and interaction. Over time, Facebook expanded the scope of the "Like" button, allowing users to provide a range of emotional responses beyond a simple like. The most significant feature of the "Like" button is its measurability. The visible number of likes on circulating content provides users with information about the visibility and approval of their posts. The measurability and visibility of likes influence users' perceptions of social approval and shape their online actions. Additionally, it has created a phenomenon of social comparison, where users measure the success or acceptance of their content in relation to others.

The visibility of likes has revealed emotional labour driven by the desire for approval and validation, creating an environment where users can customize their content to receive positive responses. This situation highlights the tension between the desire for social approval and the individual's wish to express themselves authentically, raising concerns about the originality of content circulating online. Users carefully select the content they share due to the desire for likes, indicating that they engage in strategic efforts to gain social approval, with emotional expressions on the network being the result of performative actions. The accumulation of likes significantly shapes users' online reputation, with a high number of likes potentially boosting a user's status within the network and increasing their visibility in the online community. A lack of likes or negative interactions, on the other hand, can adversely affect an individual's online reputation.

Social networks can be defined as structured environments reminiscent of Bourdieu's concept of field. For example, on Instagram, various actors such as companies, advertisers, influencers, and ordinary users pursue economic interests by increasing the number of users and interactions. In these media, users are in the position of 'producers' (both producing and consuming content).[52] From Bourdieu's perspective, all forms of capital are significant in this competitive field. Gaining a large following and high engagement leads to the accumulation of symbolic capital and social capital, which determine one's position within the network. Network shares and likes reveal a user's cultural tastes, social network, and the symbolic capital they possess. When a regular user's shared content is liked, it provides that user with a certain prestige (symbolic capital) among their friends; it also triggers the sharing of information and resources within the friend network, thereby nurturing social capital.[53]

High-reach content shared on the network by influencers can be converted into sponsorship deals and advertizing revenue. Ordinary users do not have this opportunity. Instead, their likes and followers indirectly generate capital. For example, an

[52] Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

[53] Claridge, "Bourdieu on Social Capital – Theory of Capital."

ordinary user watching videos on YouTube can gradually increase their symbolic/social capital through the content they produce and the comments they make. However, the interaction numbers achieved by ordinary users can generate more symbolic capital and social capital. According to Bourdieu's definition, social capital consists of the potential resources offered by others in the network to which it is connected. Having a large number of followers on social media does not, in itself, constitute significant capital. What matters are the opportunities offered by the people in the network.[54] For example, being connected to well-known individuals or institutions can provide far more advantages than ordinary friendships. Therefore, the interactions obtained by ordinary users can be interpreted as symbolic recognition rather than direct material (economic) gain.

According to Bourdieu, capital is not merely personal pleasure, but rather recognition in the field and the possibility of convertible advantages.[55] Although this may not appear to be traditional (economic) capital, network interactions are indicators of value in the field that are accepted by others. With every like they receive, users accumulate a kind of prestige (symbolic capital) on the network.[56] Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as the perceived and legitimately accepted form of other types of capital.[57] Thus, as long as network interactions are considered 'prestige,' they become a real resource for users. When any content on the network achieves a high number of interactions, it is interpreted as recognition by others; this recognition can indirectly contribute to future job or collaboration opportunities. Additionally, social network relationships are based on direct power relations, similar to Bourdieu's concept of challenges. As users increase their accumulation (number of interactions), they are actually striving to strengthen their social position. Therefore, for an ordinary user, gaining likes is more than just psychological satisfaction; it is a concrete sign of their position within the network. From Bourdieu's perspective, network interactions can thus be considered capital. Interactions represent social value and, at least theoretically, can be converted into other gains (network activity or prestige accumulation).

In social networks, emotional value and emotional capital are quantitatively determined through indicators such as likes, shares, comments, and emoji reactions. The more emotional responses a user generates, the greater their visibility and influence in the network, as interactions increase accordingly. Thus, the process of quantification has made emotions measurable. Users consciously create emotional content to maximize engagement. Emotional capital, especially for influencers and digital content creators, can be transformed into economic capital. In social networks dominated by participation-based ranking systems, those who successfully develop their emotional capital have a higher chance of gaining more visibility and financial profit. Users who can effectively reflect their emotions onto the network can acquire cultural

[54] Claridge, "Bourdieu on Social Capital – Theory of Capital."

[55] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."

[56] Hannan, "Facebook 'Selficide.'"

[57] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."

and social capital and increase their visibility. Additionally, emotional interactions can be converted into economic capital through brand sponsorships, donations, and network partnerships.

Algorithms actively shape the content that users encounter in their social media feeds, determining the content with which users form emotional connections. The selection and prioritization of content based on user preferences, interaction history, and the network's advertizing policies affect emotional experiences in the digital realm. Algorithms use personalized recommendation systems tailored to user preferences. While personalization enhances the user experience, it also has the potential to create echo chambers. Users, guided by algorithms and trapped in limited information spaces, are only exposed to content that aligns with their own opinions and emotions, preventing them from gaining knowledge of different perspectives.

For example, TikTok's algorithm uses artificial intelligence learning and user behavior analysis to personalize content recommendations. The algorithm determines the content flow on the "For You" page by referencing individual preferences and emotional responses, presenting content designed to evoke specific emotions. It analyzes user interactions such as likes, shares, and comments to determine emotional preferences and then presents content that aligns with the user's emotional tendencies. As a result, the user experience is enhanced, long-term engagement is encouraged, and the network contributes to user addiction.

The intersection of emotional and digital labour raises concerns about labour alienation, network surveillance, and algorithmic governance. Drawing on Karl Marx's concept of "alienation," it can be argued that due to the fragmented nature of network-based labour, digital workers become alienated from their own labour. Furthermore, Michel Foucault's concept of bio-power highlights how networks control both emotional and digital labourers through constant surveillance and data collection. Workers are not only required to perform optimally within algorithmic constraints but also to emotionally construct their presence on the network in ways that maximize interaction.

Conclusion

Building on Bourdieu's theoretical framework, this study has demonstrated that emotional labour and emotional capital in digital spaces are neither impartial nor universally accessible. Digital labour has introduced a new form of class division in contemporary society, becoming a concept that explains how the productive activities of internet users are integrated into the process of capital accumulation. While users' interactions on social networks have become an element that creates value for capital owners, targeted advertizing has emerged as one of the key mechanisms influencing users' emotional and cognitive processes. Additionally, structural hierarchies that shape digital subjectivities and reinforce inequalities are embedded within algorithmic governance and the capitalist structure. In the digital realm, emotional capital

is not merely an accumulation of assets but a mechanism that structures power relations, digital influence, and social mobility.

In line with the perspectives discussed in the study, it has been demonstrated that digital labour is not merely a form of entertainment or leisure activity; rather, it occupies a central position within capitalist production relations. Following Fuchs' critical approach, the study analyzes how social media companies commodify user labour and the role of this labour in the process of capital accumulation. The big data generated through users' content production and interactions has become the primary source for targeted advertizing, which is then converted into economic value through algorithms.

The analyses based on Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital reveal how the digital space is structured as a new social field and how users accumulate emotional capital. In the realm of social media, individuals act in accordance with the opportunities provided by the digital environment to accumulate emotional capital; however, it is emphasized that this process is not equitable. Algorithms highlight certain types of content and interactions, directing the flow of emotional capital and thereby shaping the power relations within the network. Digital habitus is directly related to the processes through which users internalize the rules of the digital space and emerges as a key factor determining individuals' behaviors on online platforms.

Emotional capital is more easily accumulated by individuals who possess pre-existing forms of privilege, such as celebrities, influential figures in society, or corporate-backed personalities. The ability to express, manage, and accumulate emotions is distributed unequally among social groups, which results in digital workers being exposed to network-based emotional exhaustion, labour exploitation, and the pressures of branding. Social networks influence users' emotions through real-time notifications and engagement metrics, shaping how emotions circulate and accumulate value. In this process, emotions are no longer personal or societal; they are increasingly shaped by capitalist demands and profit-driven motives. Therefore, in order to mitigate the exploitative dimensions of digital labour, there is a need for emotional labour and emotional capital accumulation to become more transparent and user-controlled. Additionally, while users' digital labour is presented as a seemingly free activity, it actually serves directly in the process of capital accumulation. The increasing monopolization of digital spaces has turned them into mechanisms that further control and direct users' labour and emotional capital. In this context, it has been concluded that digital labour and targeted advertizing policies create a structure that reproduces social inequalities, and that the digital space is increasingly becoming more capital-driven.

Table 1. The main differences between traditional and digital emotional labour (created by the author).

Feature	Traditional Emotional Labour	Digital Emotional Labour
Work Environment	Physical workplaces (e.g., airlines, call centers)	Digital spaces (e.g., social networks, other online communities)
Control	Institutional control	Algorithmic management
Expectations	Customer service norms	Target audience interaction metrics
Material Gain	Salary	Interactions converted into economic capital (likes and views)
Regulation	Face-to-face interaction	Written and visual social network content

References

Allatt, Patricia. "Becoming Privileged: The Role of Family Processes." In *Youth and Inequality*, edited by Inge Bates and George Riseborough, 139–59. Open University, 1993.

Casilli, Antonio A. "Digital Labour Studies Go Global: Toward A Digital Decolonial Turn." *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 3934–3954.

Ashforth, Blake E. and Ronald H. Humphrey. "Emotional Labour in Service Roles: The Influence of Identity." *Academy of Management Review* 18, no. 1 (1993): 88–115. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1993.3997508.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of the Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research For The Sociology of Education*, edited by John Richardson, 241–58. Greenwood, 1986.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *On the State*. London: Polity Press, 2014.

Carpentier, Nico. *Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle*. Intellect, 2011.

Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Claridge, Tristan. "Bourdieu on Social Capital – Theory of Capital." Accessed June 20, 2025. https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/bourdieu-on-social-capital-theory-of-capital/#:~:text=Bourdieu%20framed%20social%20capital%20as.

Fuchs, Christian. *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age*. Routledge, 2008.

Fuchs, Christian. "Labour in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet." *The Information Society* 26, no. 3 (2010): 176–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972241003712215.

Fuchs, Christian. *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*. Routledge, 2011.

Fuchs, Christian. "Dallas Smythe Today – The Audience Commodity, The Digital Labour Debate, Marxist Political Economy and Critical Theory." *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 10, no. 2 (2012): 692–740. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v10i2.443.

Fuchs, Christian. *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. Routledge, 2014.

Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. Sage, 2018.

Fuchs, Christian and Sebastian Sevignani. "What is Digital Labour? What is Digital Work? What's Their Difference? And Why Do These Questions Matter for Understanding Social Media?" *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 11, no. 2 (2013): 237–93. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v11i2.461.

Grady, Alicia A. "Emotion Regulation in the Workplace: A New Way to Conceptualize Emotional Labour." *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 5 (2000): 95–110. https://doi.org/10.1037//1076-8998.5.1.95.

Hannan, Tasawar. "Facebook 'Selficide': Are They Modern-Day Tragic Attempts of Our Symbolic Capital?". *European Journal of Sociology* 3, no. 1 (2020): 22–35. https://doi.org/10.47672/ejs.526.

Hartley, John. *Digital Futures of Cultural and Media Studies*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press, 2003.

Jenkins, Henry and David Thorburn. *Democracy and New Media*. Malden: The MIT Press, 2003.

Jenkins, Henry. "What Happened Before Youtube?" In *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, edited by Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, 109–25. Polity, 2009.

Jenkins, Henry, Sam Ford and Joshua Green. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in A Networked Culture*. New York University Press, 2013.

Merisalo, Maria and Teemu Makkonen. "Bourdieusian E-Capital Perspective Enhancing Digital Capital Discussion in the Realm of Third Level Digital Divide." *Information Technology & People* 35, no. 8 (2022): 231–52. https://doi.org/10.1108/ITP-08-2021-0594.

Morris, J. Andrew and Daniel C. Feldman. "The Dimensions, Antecedents, and Consequences of Emotional Labour." *Academy of Management Review* 21, no. 4 (1996): 986–1010. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1996.9704071861.

Negri, Antonio and Michael Hardt. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. Penguin, 2004.

Nowotny, Helga. "Women in Public Life in Austria." In *Access to Power: Cross-National Studies of Women and Elites*, edited by C. Fuchs Epstein and R. Laub Coser, 147–56. London: Allen & Unwin, 1981.

Oldenbourg, Andreas. "Digital Freedom and Corporate Power in Social Media." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2022): 383–404. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2022.2113229.

Rössler, Beate. *Autonomy: An Essay on the Life Well-Lived*. John Wiley, 2011.

Shirky, Clay. *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*. Penguin, 2010.

Smythe, Dallas. "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1, no. 3 (1977): 1–27.

Smythe, Dallas. *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada*. Ablex, 1981.

Smythe, Dallas. "Culture, Communication 'Technology' and Canadian Policy." In *Counterclockwise: Perspectives on Communication*, edited by Thomas Guback, 303–17. Westview, 1990.

Srnicek, Nick. "The Challenges of Platform Capitalism: Understanding the Logic of A New Business Model." *Juncture* 23, no. 4 (2017): 254–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/newe.12023.

Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for A Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Profile Books, 2019.

Article received: April 13, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Original scholarly paper

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.627

Jovanka Popova Unkovska
Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje

To Fail Better: Curating as a Resilience Practice

Abstract: The text addresses the position of the curator within the contemporary system of cultural production, where "failure" becomes not an avoidable error but a method of work and political articulation. Drawing on the concept of queerness and "fail", as explained by Pablo Martínez and José Esteban Muñoz, the text analyzes curatorial practice as a form of resilience developed through the limitations imposed by financial, ideological, and institutional frameworks. The text critically examines how curatorial practices are increasingly unfolding at the intersection of the market, state, and activism, and how this intermediate space leads to the instrumentalization of politics through aesthetics, the fragmentation of identity-based struggles, and the exploitation of precarious artistic and intellectual labor. In contrast, "failure" is proposed as a strategy of resistance, not as defeat, but as a means to evade cooptation and create space for new political subjectivity, collective knowledge, and engagement beyond the logic of success and visibility. The text advocates curatorial positions that embrace vulnerability and unproductivity as conditions for opening spaces of genuine solidarity, mutual care, and transformative action. It emphasizes the need to conceive curatorial practice not as a tool of representation but as a practice of acting, listening, and learning from failure.

Keywords: curating; identity politics; institutional critique; failure; solidarity; museum practices; activism.

Marginalization of curating: Institutional ambivalence and neoliberal fragmentation

Today, art produced for institutions increasingly serves as a tool for political and social intervention. Cultural institutions are positioned as players in the rejuvenation of disadvantaged areas, and museums and galleries act as agents of urban renewal, healing, and community building within contexts of socio-economic marginalization.

Yet, contemporary art institutions embody a contradiction: while promoting transformation and solidarity, they often reproduce neoliberal logic. Funding bodies demand neutrality or depoliticized projects, translating engagement into sanitized, aestheticized experiences.[1] Cultural institutions often offer superficial solutions to

[1] Marwa Arsanios, "Who's Afraid of Ideology? Ecofeminist Practices Between Internationalism and Globalism," e-flux journal 93 (2018), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215118/who-s-afraid-of-ideology-ecofeminist-practices-between-internationalism-and-globalism/.

*Author's contact information: jovanka.popova@gmail.com

structural crises, resulting in peaceful but compromised forms of engagement within society.

Curators navigate the boundary between critical engagement and the instrumentalization of art for ideological or economic purposes. They think politically but avoid direct ideology. Rather than engage in local socio-political struggles, they are drawn into general humanitarian projects that reward isolated narratives. In the race for funding, value is placed on personal stories, ones that stand out amidst a sea of project applications. This reinforces identity politics as a fragmented system, where each group (LGBTQ+, labor, youth, feminism, migrations, for example) functions in isolation through its own NGO. The result is a depoliticization of the struggle. Resources are distributed according to levels of marginalization or crisis severity, constructing a competitive economy of grief and disaster.[2]

A central ethical dilemma in contemporary art practice is its complicity in capitalist exploitation, especially regarding marginalized subjects. There is something in the curators' attitude that leaves them dissatisfied with their position, compelling them to engage with the masses, participate in public activism, and immerse themselves in the "real world".[3]

Intellectuals who lack the confidence to subvert the system often critique the system, amplifying the voices of the weak and marginalized, and showing a fascination with their subject of study. There are many examples in artistic and curatorial practices that aim to give voice to those silenced within the existing hegemony by using them as material for their work. Françoise Vergès, for instance, describes the museum as part of the colonial infrastructure of knowledge that participates in "racial capitalism" by aestheticizing suffering for institutional gain.[4]

Clémentine Deliss also highlights how institutions capitalize on difference by transforming otherness into content, claiming inclusivity without altering their structures.[5] Since cultural bodies increasingly rely on marginalization and vulnerability to appeal to funders, curators exploit the lived struggles of vulnerable communities to generate compelling narratives, risking reinforcement of exploitative dynamics rather than fostering solidarity. The labor and lived experiences of marginalized individuals, shaped by precarity, poverty, or exclusion, are transformed into material capital, commodified as value that serves to attract funding, institutional validation, or visibility within the art market.

The fascination with marginalized subjects reinforces power dynamics by positioning the curator as a privileged director rather than a participant in the community struggles. Bojana Piškur warns of this slide from solidarity to representation, where

---

[2] Arsanios, "Who's Afraid of Ideology?"

[3] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso, 2012), 13.

[4] Françoise Vergès, "Decolonizing the Museum," Medium, January 13, 2023, https://medium.com/@adamsudewo4/a-decolonial-conversation-with-françoise-vergès-decolonising-the-museum-2776a54cd161.

[5] Clémentine Deliss, in Victoria Camblin, "Exhibition and Empire: Decolonizing Museums Requires a New 'Metabolic' Architecture, Says Curator Clémentine Deliss," *032c*, August 11, 2021. https://032c.com/magazine/exhibition-and-empire-curator-clementine-deliss-calls-for-a-decolonial-museum-architecture.

institutions simulate inclusiveness while maintaining exclusion.[6] The rise of "new institutionalism", as Claire Doherty notes, reflects a shift in which institutions present themselves as engaged while still reproducing the structures they claim to challenge.[7] According to Rasha Salti, curatorial approaches to suffering can inadvertently replicate epistemic violence, as museums aestheticize silence without engaging the structural conditions that produce it.[8]

Art production is also entangled with economic structures, where writing grant applications becomes a central form of labor.[9] Attempts to remain critical often take the shape of what Andrea Fraser has called the "aesthetic of administration", navigating between market expectations, institutional demands, and activist aspiration.[10] Project applications become critical works in their own right, emphasizing aesthetics over political engagement. Curatorial practices that foreground political activism are often constrained by institutional policies and funding strategies, resulting in weakened messages and compromised outcomes. Consequently, the curator's political positioning becomes commodified, a paid representation rather than activism.

Critical practices are tolerated, even encouraged, but only to the extent that they remain harmless, reduced to symbolic gestures, and do not disrupt institutional hierarchies or funding flows. Gerald Raunig describes this condition as a "double-bind", where institutions invite critique only within the framework of their own authority. This duality raises questions about curatorial autonomy, caught within dynamics shaped by funders and market forces, its involvement with neoliberal agendas, and the neglect of community needs.[11]

Within art institutions, politics is treated visually rather than structurally. Protest movements and activist practices are appropriated by museums and recontextualized as aesthetic spectacles. Re-enactment-based works transform activism into an aesthetic experience, and political engagement is reduced to representation or performance, distancing audiences from the actual struggles these movements seek to confront. Theorists like Tiqqun argue that the aestheticization of resistance by the spectacle neutralizes dissent: by operating within the spectacle's representational logic, resistance forfeits its subversive potential and must instead evade visibility in order to remain effective.[12]

---

[6] Bojana Piškur, "Possibilities for Emancipation," in The Constituent Museum: Constellations of Knowledge, Politics and Mediation, ed. John Byrne et al. (Amsterdam: Valiz and L'Internationale, 2018), 174–77.

[7] Claire Doherty, "Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism," Engage 15 (2004): 1–9, https://engage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Engage15_ClaireDoherty_Theinstitutionisdead.pdf.

[8] Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri, *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine* (MACBA, HKW, MSSA, Sursock Museum, Framer Framed, 2015), n.p.

[9] Arsanios, "Who's Afraid of Ideology?"

[10] Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum*, September 2005, 278.

[11] Gerald Raunig, "The Double Criticism of Parrhesia: Answering the Question 'What Is a Progressive (Art) Institution?'," Re-public Art 4 (2004), https://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/raunig04_en.htm.

[12] Tiqquin, Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl, in This Is Not a Program (Semiotext(e), 2011), 38–39.

Boris Groys, on the other hand, examines how contemporary political realities have become aestheticized, shifting politics into the domain traditionally occupied by art. The issue, according to Groys, is not that art lacks political capacity, but that today's political sphere is already aestheticized. Contemporary politics has adopted artistic strategies and operates as a machine for producing images and spectacles. The terrorist acts, for example, produce powerful, recognizable visual narratives, bypassing the need for the artists to reinterpret or mediate them. Their actions are performative, self-conscious events, already designed for media circulation. Political violence functions as an aesthetic regime in itself, where the boundaries between representation, performance, and propaganda dissolve.[13]

This problem is also connected with broader concerns about the spectacularizing of violence in cultural institutions. The visual representations of violence, according to Judith Butler, are never neutral; they are mediated through ideological frames that determine which lives are considered worth being grievable and which suffering is worth visibility.[14] Ariella Azoulay, on the other hand, critiques what she terms "imperial image regimes," produced by museums and other cultural institutions, which often, unintentionally, replicate colonial logics by turning the suffering of the colonized into curated visual narratives. She also emphasizes that when representation becomes a form of domination, individuals must have the political right to refuse being represented.[15] Susan Sontag similarly warns that the constant circulation of images of suffering leads to desensitization, turning atrocity into consumable aesthetics.[16] These critiques are especially relevant for art institutions that engage with trauma, war, and political unrest through representational strategies that risk depoliticizing structural violence.

In this context, instead of a space of resistance and solidarity, the museum risks becoming a site where dissent is curated and aestheticized. The institution risks absorbing critique into its own cultural capital, producing a hollow simulation of engagement. Instead of challenging violence, the institution might become its decorator. Hence, curatorial practice must not only expose but also resist its complicity with regimes of representation. This challenge calls for alternative institutional models rooted in negation of the neoliberal dictates and a different kind of care.

The paradox of immaterial labor and institutional exploitation

All the previously mentioned institutional contradictions are also mirrored in the broader failure of protest movements, particularly where artistic and intellectual labor are centrally present, yet structurally limited in their capacity to effect systemic change.

[13] Boris Groys, *Art Power* (MIT Press, 2008), 122–26.

[14] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009), 63–66.

[15] Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019), 23–27.

[16] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 105–106.

The global wave of protest movements has revealed limitations in contemporary activism, particularly in the relationship between art, intellectual labor, and political efficacy.[17]

Artists and intellectuals were crucial in initiating these movements, yet the failure to achieve systemic change reflects a deeper structural issue. The inefficiency of protest movements lies in their inability to expand the movement beyond the circles of the "general intellect", a term Maurizio Lazzarato uses to describe immaterial workers whose presence challenges modernist distinctions between invention and work, creativity and routine. The "general intellect" is a collective of immaterial workers defined by cognitive and creative labor, which makes Marxist distinctions between manual and intellectual work.[18]

Intellectuals, or the representatives of the "general intellect", occupy an ambiguous position: although they establish themselves through knowledge and qualifications, and can afford the leisure to imagine alternatives through art, they lack direct political and economic power. As free thinkers, they belong to the most democratic strata, but they also operate as leaders, though not in commanding roles, within authoritarian spheres such as education and expert governance. While closely linked to the ruling class, they often act from the margins, existing apart from both the elite and the working classes.[19] bell hooks names this contradiction a form of "class betrayal", where rhetorical radicalism is performed without material alignment with working-class struggles.[20]

This stratum of immaterial workers, curators, artists, intellectuals, academics, and cultural producers generates value through knowledge creation, affective labor, and communication. The prefix "cultural' functions as a neoliberal form of social literacy, a kind of expertise that knows "how to do it". Cultural literacy describes a bourgeois virtue that distinguishes the "conscious" bourgeois from the consumer of spectacular kitsch. It creates distinctions between "enlightened" citizens and those deemed less educated, reinforcing social hierarchies instead of dismantling them.[21]

Andrea Fraser argues that the art world's economy of prestige masks material inequalities behind the illusion of autonomy and intellectual credibility.[22] But while some view participation in the art world as democratizing or inclusive, closer scrutiny reveals systemic injustice rooted in capital, geography, and elite networks. Access to contemporary art circles often depends on economic, social, and cultural capital status. The use of appropriate language in applications presupposes class belonging.

---

[17] Önder Özengi and Pelin Tan, "Running Along the Disaster: A Conversation with Franco 'Bifo' Berardi," e-flux journal 56 (2014), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60328/running-along-the-disaster-a-conversation-with-franco-bifo-berardi/.

[18] Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Semiotext(e), 2014), 45–47.

[19] Lazzarato, Signs and Machines, 45–47.

[20] bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (Routledge, 2000), 104–107.

[21] Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 39–45.

[22] Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions", 278–86.

Social networks are also important, where do you come from, your educational background, your proximity to global art elites, your ability to travel, the conflicts you represent, and your knowledge of current crises.[23]

Today, with broader access to education and the widespread opportunity to become an "intellectual", the divide between material and immaterial labor appears to be dissolving. However, while education appears to democratize intellectual opportunities, it also facilitates the commodification and exploitation of intellectual labor within neoliberal structures, rendering intellectuals increasingly precarious.[24] The intellectual work is now frequently appropriated by institutions that monetize cultural production. Isabell Lorey describes this as "precarization", not merely a condition of labor, but a mode of neoliberal governance that normalizes social and financial insecurity as a way of life.[25]

Hito Steyerl highlights this transformation of intellectuals into precarity through the term "occupation", defining it as an activity disconnected from specific outcomes and driven by perpetual engagement.[26] Unlike traditional labor, an occupation lacks closure; it is defined only by the passage of time itself. The cultural sector is engaged in occupation through unpaid internships, prolonged educational programs, and projects that favor process over product.[27]

Marina Vishmidt also critiques this model, which glorifies experimentation while masking exploitation through continuous occupation and the performance of engagement, which becomes its own reward, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of self-valorization and unpaid visibility.[28] According to Pierre Bourdieu, the field of cultural production systematically transforms economic advantage into symbolic distinction.[29] Material capital becomes inseparable from the cultural capital that one builds. Institutions exploit this, often failing to pay artists or curators, offering instead symbolic recognition, 'cultural capital', as compensation.

Thus, the critical question arises: should the "general intellect" be defined through terms that cannot be reduced to knowledge and qualifications?

The "general intellect" and its embodiment as the "immaterial worker" must assume a more avant-garde position, siding with the oppressed and recognizing themselves as workers, isolated from their own intellectual instrumentalization. The cognitive and creative laborers, according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, will remain politically ineffective unless they develop new collective identities and modes

[23] Arsanios, "Who's Afraid of Ideology?"

[24] Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 45–47.

[25] Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg (Verso, 2015), 10–15.

[26] Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 50.

[27] Hito Steyerl, "Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life," e-flux journal 30 (2011), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/30/68140/art-as-occupation-claims-for-an-autonomy-of-life/.

[28] Marina Vishmidt, "Value at Risk: From Political Economy to Aesthetic Abstraction," in *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, ed. Marina Vishmidt (Mute Books, 2018), 109–122.

[29] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Harvard University Press, 1984), 194.

of organization.[30] Finally, it's time for curators and artists to stop lecturing from their pulpits and learn to step into someone else's shoes.[31] As Nikita Dhawan will stress, such a shift must be grounded in a decolonial ethics of accountability, where knowledge production is no longer separated from histories of privilege, erasure, and geopolitical inequality.[32]

To resist systemic precarization, curatorial practice must abandon its reliance on cultural capital, authoritative lecturing, and visibility. Instead, it should align itself with practices of affiliation with the less privileged and embrace collective accountability, grounded not in success but in failure.

Curating futures: Queer sociality, structural care, and institutional ethics

In advocating such an approach, Jacques Rancière's concept of equality becomes crucial. He insists on the fundamental "equality of intelligence" among all subjects, rejecting hierarchies between "experts" and "non-experts," artists and audiences, curators and communities. It is equality freed from knowledge hierarchies, an equality of intelligence itself. This equality is not based on uniformity or sameness, but on the recognition that everyone has the capacity to participate meaningfully in social, cultural, and political life.

As Rancière argues, emancipation cannot be expected from art forms that presuppose viewer passivity or aim to make viewers "active" through methods borrowed from advertising. Art practice is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of imposed messages, targets audiences, and when it stops trying to emancipate us.[33]

For art to transform into life, it must deny its autonomy, privileged position, and participative projects where the curator or artist-as-expert designs the set, whether gallery or public space. Curators must renounce their authoritative stance; they need to step down from their position of expertise and engage as equal participants in shared social realities. This transformation requires dismantling art's privileged autonomy, breaking boundaries between art and life, and embedding theory and practice directly in community struggles.[34] As Miwon Kwon has emphasized, such a shift involves moving from "art in the community" to "art with the community," which demands a politics of accountability, not just access.[35]

[30] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (Penguin Press, 2004), 66–72.

[31] Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (Verso Books, 2013), 60.

[32] Nikita Dhawan, "Decolonizing Epistemologies: The Subaltern and the Critique of Representation," in *Decolonizing Enlightenment: Transnational Justice, Human Rights and Democracy in a Postcolonial World*, ed. Nikita Dhawan et al. (Barbara Budrich, 2014), 265–78.

[33] Jacques Rancière, Fulvia Carnevale, and John Kelsey, "Art of the Possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation with Jacques Rancière," Artforum (March 2007), https://www.artforum.com/features/fulvia-carnevale-and-john-kelsey-175243/.

[34] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Verso, 2009), 20–23.

[35] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (MIT Press, 2002), 133–137.

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe also argues:

> Today, artists cannot pretend anymore to constitute an avant-garde offering a radical critique, but this is not a reason to proclaim that their political role has ended. They can still play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting the dominant hegemony. In fact, this has always been their role, and it is only the modernist illusion of the privileged position of the artist that has made us believe otherwise. This does not mean that they could alone realize the transformations needed for the establishment of a new hegemony. A radical democratic politics calls for the articulation of different levels of struggles to create a chain of equivalence among them.[36]

In its most radical forms, art cannot merely represent social critique, but it must transform the coordinates of art itself. Art is imprisoned by its conventional identity. If we ask: how can art contribute to hegemonic struggle, or how can it give voice to the silenced and oppressed, we are already subordinated to a hegemonic idea of what art is and what it does. Ideology lies in the question, not the answer.

By shifting its focus away from questions that presuppose autonomy and expertise in spaces that operate as passive institutions of authority, museums and galleries should become platforms shaped by community voices and shared experience. Curators and artists can no longer merely represent marginalized groups. Rather than offering care from a position of authority, they must relinquish that role, entering collaborative practices rooted in recognition of diverse knowledge and intelligence. This requires merging directly with community struggles and forming genuine partnerships grounded in mutuality and equal exchange. Meaningful solidarity, according to Patricia Hill Collins, must be built on accountability to structural difference, not as abstract empathy, but sustained, coalitional labor.[37] Françoise Vergès has described this shift as a move from "saviorist care" to politicized "decolonial care", which foregrounds historical injustice and collective resistance rather than charity.[38]

Building on the call for curatorial solidarity and institutional transformation, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz offers a visionary model for rethinking the museum through his concept of "queer futurity". This concept proposes an alternative understanding of sociality and institutional engagement, one that transcends the constraints of the present, especially the norms imposed by heteropatriarchal systems, and moves toward an inclusive "then and there". The queer futurity foregrounds minority communities excluded from dominant historical narratives, social visibility, and institutional participation. According to Muñoz, these marginalized groups

[36] Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces," *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Context, and Methods* 1, no. 2 (2007).

[37] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2000), 224–29.

[38] Françoise Vergès, *A Programme of Absolute Disorder: Decolonizing the Museum* (La Fabrique, 2024), 12–15.

activate aesthetic and cultural strategies not merely as artistic expression but as tools for survival, resilience, and community building.[39]

Politicization, as understood by Muñoz, departs from political representation or performative activism. It involves embracing the lived realities of marginalized and minoritized communities and integrating those experiences into the very operations of the institution. Museum leadership and curatorial staff must practice solidarity with those traditionally excluded or misrepresented by dominant culture. This means that curatorial decisions must reflect long-term engagement with LGBTQ+ rights, racial and migrant justice, disability rights, gender equity, and other marginalized groups, not as temporary projects or token gestures but as ongoing, institutionalized commitments.[40]

In practice, a museum informed by Muñoz's queer futurity would adopt a more fluid, horizontal structure, emphasizing collaboration and dialogue over hierarchy. Exhibitions would not just represent marginalized voices but be co-produced with communities, prioritizing their agency, knowledge, and lived experiences. Curators would serve less as gatekeepers and more as facilitators who encourage co-creation with diverse groups.[41] The museum would question hierarchies and exclusions not only in exhibition content but also curatorial methods, emphasizing horizontality and participatory practices that challenge traditional authority. Institutions, as Audre Lorde reminds us, must risk rethinking their own foundational premises, not just redistribute space.[42] Rather than serve as repositories for prestigious objects or cultural goods, museums would act as responsive social spaces for experimentation and inclusive community-building. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's idea of "the undercommons" goes even further by envisioning not reform but fugitivity, spaces of refusal within institutions where community and experimentation flourish beyond managerial logics.[43]

This concept also applies to museum collections and exhibitions. Museums often privilege canonical and historically validated forms of cultural production, marginalizing art and practitioners whose narratives or identities resist categorization or commodification. In that sense, T. J. Demos advocates for institutions that support "speculative aesthetics", allowing for future-oriented narratives rooted in Indigenous, queer, and anti-capitalist world-making.[44] In line with this, Muñoz's vision also resonates with contemporary calls for decolonizing museum practices, challenging institutional structures rooted in colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist histories. A museum informed by the queer art of failure would embrace the experiences and aesthetics

[39] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 1–18.

[40] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 19–32.

[41] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 19–32.

[42] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 110–113.

[43] Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 10–22.

[44] T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Sternberg Press, 2017), 45–50.

of groups previously marginalized or erased by conventional histories and dominant narratives.[45]

The conceptualization of failure offers a critical lens through which museums can also reevaluate their educational programs. Institutional education often reinforces standards of productivity, cultural literacy, and legitimacy, marginalizing alternative forms of knowledge, learning, and exchange. In contrast, the queer art of failure proposes educational approaches that are less outcomes-oriented and more flexible, reflective, and critical toward the institution itself, seeing uncertainty and experimentation as valuable outcomes. A queer institution embraces discomfort, uncertainty, and critical reflection as core to its identity.[46]

In this queer vision, curating becomes a practice of refusal of fixed value, and institutional authority. Failure, here, is not defeat but a queer disobedience: a strategy of unsettling and reimagining. As Muñoz remind us, queer failure holds radical potential, not as absence, but as a generative space for alternative modes of life, care, and solidarity.[47] Letting go of autonomy and visibility, curatorial work is reoriented toward collective care, shared responsibility, and the ethics of becoming, always unfinished, always relational.

Failure as method: Rethinking museum practices beyond capitalist ideals of success

Jack Halberstam, who draws upon Muñoz's concept in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, critiques how capitalism and heteropatriarchy impose normative and false ideals of happiness and success. Hence, instead of interpreting failure negatively, as the absence of achievement, he suggests viewing it as a counter-narrative, as an act of rebellion against the imposed norm.[48] Within cultural institutions traditionally defined by capitalist logic, hierarchy, and authority, this perspective demands a rejection of well-being based on purchasing power and a resistance to the logic of accumulation, productivity, value, possessions, novelty, and pressure to maintain income and secure sponsorships.

Despite appearing progressive, museums often reproduce structural inequalities. Their success is measured through metrics, visitor numbers, blockbuster exhibitions, funding, and acquisitions that mirror the capitalist ideal towards growth and accumulation. This success-driven model creates precarious environments for cultural workers, curators, and artists, who become entangled in competition, forced to conform to institutional expectations, and marginalized if they fail to produce measurable outcomes or prestige. Museums stage high-profile exhibitions to attract sponsorship while relying on underpaid or unpaid labor.[49] All these practices reinforce the exploitative hierarchy that Halberstam's notion of failure seeks to dismantle.

[45] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 19–31.

[46] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 87–122.

[47] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 172–175.

[48] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 87–122.

[49] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 87–122.

In the same line of thought, Pablo Martínez calls for a reorientation of museum practice toward a politics of care that begins internally. Museums must genuinely "care for those who care", including curators, administrative and technical staff, educators, artists, and all cultural workers. The internal politics of care directly confronts exploitative labor conditions such as precarious contracts, unpaid internships, rigid hierarchies, and institutional burnout. By embedding responsible empathy into their daily operations, museums can model social solidarity through humane working conditions and fair compensation, thereby aligning their internal ethics with their external commitments.[50] "The museum will have to provide care like a hospital, while still being critical", as Manuel Borja-Villel will declare.[51] His vision correlates with Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's concept of "crip care collectivity," where care is not an institutional obligation but a collective, interdependent resistance to structural ableism.[52]

A museum grounded in the queer art of failure would also reject elitism and fame-driven programming. It would refuse participation in the global race for "megastar" artists, commercial pressures from blockbuster shows, and elitist cultural tourism, which often overshadow local relevance and community engagement. The museum embracing Muñoz's queer sociality would cultivate programs responsive to local social concerns rather than spectacle-driven international trends. It would support the local population without being provincial, refusing to submit to the race for rosters of famous artists and low-paid workers.[53] The queer curating, as Catherine Lord claims, refuses this alignment with prestige economies by deliberately foregrounding marginal and unruly art histories.[54]

In its queer ideal, the museum must also examine its ethical frameworks, funding models, and programmatic choices. Ivana Bago and Antonija Majaca also discuss this resistance to institutional expectations through their critique of the bureaucratic and PR-driven demands for funding cultural policies. They argue that curatorial practice should not focus on clear messages or broad audience outreach, goals aligned with grant logic, and measurable impact. Instead, they describe curating as a classroom of difficult questions, empowering precisely because it is unquantifiable, transformative in ways that cannot be reported or counted.[55] By redefining success outside economic imperatives, museums could cultivate environments where creative, intellectual, and social labor is equitably valued.

---

[50] Pablo Martínez, "Fail Better – Notes for a Museum Yet-to-Come," CIMAM News, June 10, 2020, republished from Ctxt Contexto y Acción, May 28, 2020, accessed September 8, 2025, https://cimam.org/news-archive/fail-better-notes-museum-yet-come/.

[51] Martínez, "Fail Better – Notes."

[52] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 31–38.

[53] Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure, 87–122.

[54] Catherine Lord, "Their Memory is Playing Tricks on Her," in *Art and Queer Culture*, ed. Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer (Phaidon, 2013), 224–33.

[55] Ivana Bago and Antonia Majča, "Exposures: Reflections on a Curatorial Strategy," in *Exposure: Verletzlichkeit und das Politische in Zeiten radikaler Ungewissheit*, ed. Christine Hentschel and Susanne Krasmann (Transcript Verlag, 2020), 59–76.

Adopting the queer art of failure would compel museums to rethink relationships with funders and stakeholders who prioritize safe, proven, and uncontroversial projects. Embracing failure as a curatorial practice involves risk: honesty about its own limitations and openness about projects that may not meet traditional success metrics. In doing so, museums might become genuine agents of critique, rather than symbolic institutions offering superficial gestures toward diversity or inclusion.

Few people today remember that renowned architect and theorist Oskar Hansen participated in the 1966 competition to design the building for the Museum of Contemporary Art – Skopje. Hansen's radical proposal envisioned a museum as a dynamic, flexible entity, capable of continually adjusting to the evolving and unpredictable trajectories of art and society.[56] Rather than establishing a static architectural monument, Hansen imagined adaptable museum spaces that could literally transform in response to changing artistic needs and broader socio-political conditions.

His idea of a transformable museum space was based on hexagonal elements mounted on hydraulic lifts, allowing the galleries to fold and unfold like an umbrella, sinking underground when not in active use. Such an institution would literally rise to visibility or withdraw from it, depending on whether art had new contributions to offer or solutions to propose in contemporary society.[57]

Hansen's approach challenges traditional ideas of permanence, stability, and monumentality that typically define museums. Instead, he envisioned an architectural structure grounded in flexibility, responsiveness, and radical adaptability, qualities urgently needed in times of social upheaval.

His design questions the museum's function as a static container of authoritative narratives, urging institutions to consider whether their roles remain relevant or ethically defensible in contexts of conflict, political instability, or societal trauma. Beatriz Colomina notes that modern architecture often conceals vulnerability beneath sleek surfaces.[58] By contrast, Hansen's design performs vulnerability; it bends, hides, and rests when needed.

This visionary model remains strikingly relevant today, as we face global crises such as wars in Ukraine and Palestine, systemic inequality, displacement, and ecological collapse. It calls for museums to reconsider their visibility and authority, transforming them from symbolic representations of culture into protective and responsive institutions.

Hansen's proposal embraces strategic invisibility when necessary, transforming the museum into a space of shelter and care. His underground orientation marks a decisive break from dominant museum models that emphasize visibility, market presence, and perpetual audience expansion. The museum would reject the imperative to produce spectacle, novelty, or marketable exhibitions. Rather than pursuing

[56] Aleksandra Kędziorek and Łukasz Ronduda, eds., *Oskar Hansen – Opening Modernism: On Open Form Architecture, Art, and Didactics* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2014), 78.

[57] Kędziorek and Ronduda, *Oskar Hansen – Opening Modernism*, 78.

[58] Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2019), 14–19.

institutional visibility or prestige, this model reshapes both its architecture and mission to address urgent social needs. Operating as a dynamic, adaptive platform, the museum would even retreat underground, metaphorically or literally, dedicated to supporting communities most impacted by violence, exclusion, or political instability. Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller argue in their work on transnational museology that museums must become both "porous and grounded", rooted in local realities while remaining accountable to global histories of violence and inequality.[59]

At certain times, strategic withdrawal or silence can function as a powerful political and ethical response. The strategic museum withdrawal, as referred to in Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, can become an ethical refusal of visibility in systems that exploit transparency for control.[60]

Hansen's model also reimagines the role of the curator. Implementing Hansen's concept today calls for curatorial humility: an acknowledgment that the museum does not always need to speak, exhibit, or act publicly, especially when such gestures offer no meaningful engagement or solution. As Felix Enslinn notes, "there may be silent artists, but there are no silent curators", and yet today's curating requires more than speech. It demands resonance: a space in which listening becomes a curatorial act.[61] In the spirit of Hansen's museum, which folds underground when it has nothing urgent to say, the curator's task may be to create conditions in which others – audiences, workers, the excluded – can speak for themselves. If the curator "fails" from his authoritative position, and if the community begins to transform the curator more than the curator transforms the audience, that reversal would mark a significant institutional shift.

Conclusion: curating otherwise – refusal, withdrawal, and the ethics of care

To speak about failure is to speak against the current logics that shape the cultural institution: logics of productivity, visibility, accumulation, and prestige. Throughout this text, failure has not been treated as a passive state or an absence, but as a conscious and strategic position. A curatorial position that refuses to perform success, that resists co-optation, and that opens space for another way of doing, knowing, and relating.

This is not a romantic or nihilistic failure. It is a form of resistance: against the neoliberal conditions that reduce curatorial work to competition; against institutions that aestheticize activism while reproducing hierarchy; against the symbolic economies that reward proximity to power. Failure becomes a tool to step aside from the spectacle, to slow down, to withdraw when necessary, and to begin again from a different place.

[59] Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society," *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1002–1039.

[60] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189–94.

[61] Felix Enslinn, "Curating and the Role of the Curator: An Essay in the Political Aesthetics of Exhibition Practice," in *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art*, ed. Maria Lind (Sternberg Press, 2012), 183–90.

The museum, in this sense, must also fail. It must fail to meet the expectations placed upon it by sponsors, metrics, nationalist narratives, and market logic. It must instead begin to function as a shelter, as Oskar Hansen imagined – not a space of display, but of support. Not a stage, but a structure that breathes, collapses, and re-emerges. A space that listens.

Queer and decolonial thinking, as explored by Muñoz, Halberstam, and others, reminds us that institutions do not change solely through inclusion. They change when they question their foundations: when they shift from speaking about care to practicing it; when they refuse authority and embrace solidarity, when they center lived experience over policy language. This is not a call to abandon the institution, but to remain within it with discomfort, to insist that another way is possible.

To curate from failure is to curate with humility, with others, without guarantees. It is to refuse the polished outcome in favor of a shared process. It is to recognize that not all visibility is liberation, and that sometimes silence, withdrawal, or slowness may be the most radical gesture.

In this failure, something else becomes possible.

References

Arsanios, Marwa. "Who's Afraid of Ideology? Ecofeminist Practices Between Internationalism and Globalism." *e-flux journal* 93 (2018). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215118/who-s-afraid-of-ideology-ecofeminist-practices-between-internationalism-and-globalism/.

Azoulay, Ariella. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism.* London: Verso, 2019.

Bago, Ivana, and Antonia Majča. "Exposures: Reflections on a Curatorial Strategy." In *Exposure: Verletzlichkeit und das Politische in Zeiten radikaler Ungewissheit*, edited by Christine Hentschel and Susanne Krasmann, 59–76. Transcript Verlag, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839451106-006.

Berardi, Franco "Bifo." "Running Along the Disaster: A Conversation with Franco 'Bifo' Berardi." By Önder Özengi and Pelin Tan. *e-flux journal* 56 (2014). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60328/running-along-the-disaster-a-conversation-with-franco-bifo-berardi/.

Bishop, Claire. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. Verso, 2012.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Translated by Richard Nice. Harvard University Press, 1984.

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.

Camblin, Victoria. "Exhibition and Empire: Decolonizing Museums Requires a New 'Metabolic' Architecture, Says Curator Clémentine Deliss." *032c*, August 11, 2021. https://032c.com/magazine/exhibition-and-empire-curator-clementine-deliss-calls-for-a-decolonial-museum-architecture.

Colomina, Beatriz. *X-Ray Architecture.* Lars Müller Publishers, 2019.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. Routledge, 2000.

Demos, T. J. *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today.* Sternberg Press, 2017.

Doherty, Claire. "Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism." *Engage* 15 (2004): 1–9. https://engage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Engage15_ClaireDoherty_Theinstitutionisdead.pdf.

Fraser, Andrea. "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique." *Artforum*, September 2005: 278–86.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation.* Translated by Betsy Wing. University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Groys, Boris. *Art Power.* MIT Press, 2008.

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure.* Duke University Press, 2011.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire.* Penguin Press, 2004.

hooks, bell. *Where We Stand: Class Matters.* Routledge, 2000.

Kędziorek, Aleksandra, and Łukasz Ronduda, eds. *Oskar Hansen – Opening Modernism: On Open Form Architecture, Art, and Didactics.* Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2014.

Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity.* MIT Press, 2002.

Lazzarato, Maurizio. *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity.* Translated by Joshua David Jordan. Semiotext(e), 2014.

Levitt, Peggy, and Nina Glick Schiller. "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society." *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1002–39.

Lorey, Isabell. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious.* Translated by Aileen Derieg. Verso, 2015.

Lord, Catherine. "Their Memory Is Playing Tricks on Her." In *Art and Queer Culture*, edited by Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer, 224–33. London: Phaidon, 2013.

Martínez, Pablo. "Fail Better: Notes for a Museum Yet-To-Come." *Ctxt: Contexto y Acción*, May 28, 2020. https://cimam.org/news-archive/fail-better-notes-museum-yet-come/.

Martínez, Pablo. "Fail Better – Notes for a Museum Yet-to-Come." CIMAM News, June 10, 2020. Republished from Ctxt Contexto y Acción, May 28, 2020. Accessed September 8, 2025. https://cimam.org/news-archive/fail-better-notes-museum-yet-come/.

Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically.* Verso Books, 2013.

Mouffe, Chantal. "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces." *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Context, and Methods* 1, no. 2 (2007).

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* NYU Press, 2009.

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice.* Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.

Piškur, Bojana. "Possibilities for Emancipation." In *The Constituent Museum: Constellations of Knowledge, Politics and Mediation*, edited by John Byrne et al., 174–77. Valiz and L'Internationale, 2018.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator.* Translated by Gregory Elliott. Verso, 2009.

Rancière, Jacques, Fulvia Carnevale, and John Kelsey. "Art of the Possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation with Jacques Rancière." *Artforum*, March 2007. https://www.artforum.com/features/fulvia-carnevale-and-john-kelsey-175243/.

Raunig, Gerald. "The Double Criticism of Parrhesia: Answering the Question 'What Is a Progressive (Art) Institution?'" *Re-public Art* 4 (2004). https://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/raunig04_en.htm.

Salti, Rasha, and Kristine Khouri. *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine.*: MACBA, HKW, MSSA, Sursock Museum, Framer Framed, 2015.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

Steyerl, Hito. *The Wretched of the Screen.* Sternberg Press, 2012.

Steyerl, Hito. "Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life." *e-flux journal* 30 (2011). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/30/68140/art-as-occupation-claims-for-an-autonomy-of-life/.

Tiqqun. *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl.* In *This Is Not a Program*, 38–39. Semiotext(e), 2011.

Vergès, Françoise. *A Programme of Absolute Disorder: Decolonizing the Museum.* La Fabrique, 2024.

Vergès, Françoise. "Decolonizing the Museum." *Medium*, January 13, 2023. https://medium.com/@adamsudewo4/a-decolonial-conversation-with-françoise-vergès-decolonising-the-museum-2776a54cd161.

Vishmidt, Marina. "Value at Risk: From Political Economy to Aesthetic Abstraction." In *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, edited by Marina Vishmidt, 109–22. Mute Books, 2018.

Article received: April 3, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Review article

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.623

Milica Pekić
Kiosk Platform for Contemporary Art, Belgrade

Engaged Art Practice and Institutional Change: A Brief Introduction to Art Experiments in Yugoslavia and Serbia from 1968 to the Present

Abstract: This article will explore examples of art practices and the work of curators in Yugoslavia and Serbia, from 1968 until the present, and will attempt to challenge the capitalist logic of the dominant art institution and its criteria that enable the exploitation of the work of artists. Focusing on collaboration, participation, democratization, and transformative experiences, these practices are shifting the modes of production and disturbing hierarchies between the artist, the artists' work, and the audience. This shift implies changes in the nature of artwork, trying to re-imagine and test a new institutional framework outside the dominant art system and its logic of exploitation. The examples explored emerged from the student and youth centres in Yugoslavia around 1968, from the anti-war movement of the 1990s in Serbia, and from the so-called *independent cultural scene* in Serbia during the first decades of the 21st century. This paper's focus is inspired by the current students' protests taking place in Serbia and the need to analyze them in relation to the legacies of the art practices which can be recognized in some features of the current movement and its related artistic articulations.

Keywords: participation; engagement; art labor; avant-garde; democratization; art institution; social change; Student Cultural Centre.

Introduction

Starting in November 2024, when the canopy of the public train station collapsed, killing sixteen people in Novi Sad, Serbia has been going through an intensive movement of social transformation led by students. Continuous protests, faculty blockades, marches throughout the country, public gatherings, discussions, street actions, collective silences commemorating the death of sixteen people, all manifest students' and citizens' calls for accountability and responsibility of the state institutions mired in corruption. Within an eight-month-long process, student-organized plenums, forums of direct democracy, have demonstrated a new logic of collective organizing, horizontal decision making and communal living. The movement has no leaders, and everybody's voice matters. Inspired by their efforts, citizens and workers have also started to self-organize through forums, informal initiatives, and new waves of unionized struggle, in an attempt to collectively re-imagine democracy, its

Author's contact information: pekic.milica@gmail.com

structure, values and principles for the future.[1] The students' struggle has also become marked by street actions, protests, exhibitions, and the occupation of the Student Cultural Center (which, for decades, due to the mismanagement and corruption, has had no relevance for youth culture and students). The very nature of these interventions and actions initiated by students demonstrate the values of community work, interdisciplinary approaches, collective endeavor, and the dismantling of the hierarchy between artists, artwork and the audience. They draw on a rich heritage of cultural activism; artists, curators and art collectives active within the youth centres and student cultural centres in Yugoslavia around and after the students' protests of 1968; art collectives, curators and artists involved in the anti-war movement of the 1990s in Serbia; numerous art collectives, curators and artists of the independent cultural scene[2] which emerged at the turn of the century.

This article aims to introduce examples of this rich heritage of art practices, focusing on collaboration, participation, community building, and transformative experiences in Yugoslavia and Serbia from 1968 to the present. One of the most important characteristics of the examples in question is their tendency to challenge the hierarchies inherent within the dominant art system, as well as the modes of production, distribution and communication of the work of artists maintained and reproduced by the institution of art.

Art work and ideology

The art practices addressed in this article aim to test and challenge the modes and conditions of production in the best tradition of Walter Benjamin's ethics regarding authors as producers. His instruction to authors not only on the level of "transcending the specialization in the process of intellectual production"[3] but also on the level of organizing potentiality of the character of work of an artist as a new resonance today. Publicly presented in 1934, Benjamin's article offers the following articulation:

> His [the author's] work will never be merely work on product but always, at the same time, work on the means of production. In other words, his products must have, over and above their character as works, an organizing function, and in no way must their organizational usefulness be

[1] More on the nature of current protests in Serbia and its relation to the process of reimaging democracy in: Saša Savanović, "The protests in Serbia are historic, the world shouldn't ignore them," *Aljazeera,* February 23, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/2/23/the-protests-in-serbia-are-historic-the-world-shouldnt-ignore-them.

[2] The notion of the independent cultural scene is still informal but a widely accepted term that defines civil society`s artistic and cultural organizations, free-lance artists, informal groups and collectives operating based on self-organization, non for profit logic, economically dependent on unstable project financing but active in the struggle to preserve art and culture as public good, confront commercialization of artistic and cultural production with pro-active relation toward wider social processes both locally and internationally.

[3] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer", in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 775.

> confined to their value as propaganda…What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce, and, second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.[4]

This organizational function of the work of an artist and the focus on the conditions of work and modes of production rather than the final product, exposes the inherent danger of the capitalist system, which hides, in its very logic, structural mechanisms of exploitation and reproduction of injustice. The apparatus of production, reshaped by the artist as an integral part of their practice, should emancipate and empower audiences from being passive to active, turning them from spectators to collaborators, as Benjamin is suggesting, or from 'viewers' or 'beholders' toward 'co-producers' or 'participants', as Claire Bishop suggests in her influential study *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*.[5]

Sociologist Katja Praznik identifies the tactics of glorification of the figure of an author/artist, the mystification of the artistic work, and the fetishization of an art object as the main strategies of institutional control. She recognizes the artistic labor is "neither seen nor defined as 'work' let alone appropriately remunerated".[6] Praznik is offering an important parallel between women's domestic labor and the labor of the artist, both made invisible by the strategy of essentialization:

> […] one is understood as the natural inclination of women – a quintessential femininity and expression of love – and the other as the natural inclination of those who possess artistic genius, creativity, or, better yet, an ability to create. In both cases, particular skills are essentialized, 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 their production. Only the outcome (the clean house or the work of art) is allowed to be visible, in such a way as to obscure the work involved. Both are therefore economically devalued by being essentialized.[7]

This essentializing strategy within the art system is linked to the notion of autonomy of art, which Peter Bürger defines as an ideological category of the bourgeois class, implying "dissociation of the work of art from the praxis of life" and thus creating

[4] Ibid., 777.

[5] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells – Participatory Art and Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso, 2012), 2.

[6] Katja Praznik, *Art Work: Invisible Labour and the Legacy of Yugoslav Socialism* (University of Toronto Press, 2021), 4.

[7] Ibid., 41.

conditions for understanding the work of art as "totally independent of society".[8] The avant-garde project identified the bourgeois art institution as one that is "unassociated with the life practice of man"[9] and set about attempting to dismantle the form of an artwork and its modes of production, as well as its relationship with an audience. However, transitioning from the logic of the artwork toward the logic of labor is, maybe, most directly enacted by the productivism movement of the Soviet avant-garde during the 1920s, as explored and pointed out by art historian Nikola Dedić.[10]

The attempts of artists to change the apparatus of production and thus the notion of the 'work' of art go hand-in-hand with the demand to transform the art institution and the norms and values it represents and nurtures. Examples of avant-garde, socially engaged art practices, are often followed by experiments in institutional transformation; attempting to provide adequate conditions for new practices to develop. This tendency, particularly related to wider social movements and critique of the politics in power, can be traced through numerous examples in Yugoslavia and Serbia from 1968 until today.

Self-governance

Although the global student movements of 1968 sparked artistic resistance to the commercialization of art and the influence of the art market, Yugoslav students engaged in the struggle from a position shaped by their distinct political and ideological circumstances. The Yugoslav self-management socialist model was supposed to contribute toward greater decentralization of power. However, the creation of the party's elites and hierarchies provoked students to protest in favor of greater democracy within society. In opposing the so-called "red bourgeoisie" – a term used to describe the party elites – students expressed their resistance to the adoption of bourgeois habits and the increasing centralization of power.

One of the first to challenge the dominant modernist model of cultural policy, which embraced the logic of glorification, mystification, and fetishization of the artist, artwork and art object, was art historian Želimir Koščević.

In 1969, in the Gallery of Student Centre in Zagreb, Koščević organized the *Exhibition of Women and Men* conceived as an empty gallery space where the only exhibits were visitors themselves. A few years later, in 1972, he organized the exhibition *Postal Packages* with the only object on display being a postal package containing the works of artists who had exhibited at the 1971 Paris Biennale.[11] In 1970, Koščević ini-

[8] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Manchester University Press, 1984), 46.

[9] Ibid., 49.

[10] Nikola Dedić, "Avant-Garde Transformation of Artistic Labor: The Productivist |View of Boris Arvatov," *Art and Media Journal* 28 (2022): 133–51.

[11] On curatorial experiments within student centers in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s pointed toward anti-capitalist critique of the institutional logic see in: Ivana Bago, "Dematerijalizacija i politizacija izložbe: Primjeri kustoske prakse kao antikapitalističke institucionalne kritike u Jugoslaviji tijekom 60ih i 70ih godina 20. stoljeća", *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti* 36 (2012): 235–48.

tiated a public action entitled *Action Total*[12] within which the leaflets of a *Decree on the Democratization of Art* were distributed in the streets, calling for the abolition of all traditional artistic forms, from painting to architecture, the banning of art criticism and activities in the field of art history, calling for all art institutions to be shut down. The decree also stated:

> Galleries, museums, exhibition halls, pavilions must become homes of active art, homes of culture…The monstrous creation of Yugoslav contemporary art, composed of thousands and thousands of paintings, sculptures, prints, countless applied arts, luxury design, foolish architectural and urbanistic ideas and realizations, and even more foolish 'critical' interpretations, increasingly resembles a purely reactionary activity in a society that needs the ideological force of art more than ever.[13]

An active curatorial position in critique of the dominant institution of art was further demonstrated within programs of the editorial team of the gallery of the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade; not only on the level of working ethics but also within experiments with exhibition formats. During her time as the gallery editor, from 1971–1975, art historian Dunja Blažević introduced a process of horizontal and open decision-making to the team of curators and artists linked to the work of the Centre. The so-called *Wednesday Encounters* became a regular platform for everyone interested in the program to take part and discuss formats, topics, tactics and strategies of the gallery's activities.[14] A series of annual exhibitions entitled *October* were consciously articulated as an alternative to the *October Salon*; a mainstream annual city manifestation, which nurtured the tradition of Yugoslav modernism. Within a few years, *October* became a polemical space where artists and curators actively debated the nature of the art practice as well as the role of art in the wider social context. In 1975, through the initiative of Dunja Blažević, the only exhibit at the *October75* exhibition was a publication with statements by artists, art historians and curators on self-managing art. This was an attempt to create a blueprint for transformation of the organizational function of art production within the official self-management system of the state.[15] The *October 75* publication, with contributions by Dunja Blažević, Raša Todosijević, Jasna Tijardović, Ješa Denegri, Goran Đorđević, Zoran Popović, Dragica Vukadinović, Slavko Timotijević, Bojana Pejić, and Vladimir Gudac, offers a series of artistic articulations of possible alternatives within the art system which could respond to the needs of the artistic production. The overall tone of the publication is

[12] Davor Matičević, "Zagrebački krug," in *Nova umjetnička praksa 1966–1978*, ed. Marijan Susovski (Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1978), 21–28.

[13] Želimir Koščević, "Akcija Total – nacrt dekreta o demokratizaciji umetnosti," *Almanah 4* (Bitef, 1970), 120. Author's translation.

[14] More on Wednesday encounters in: Биљана Томић, "Сусрети средом," in *Дрангуларијум* (Студентски културни центар, 1971).

[15] Jelena Vesić, "SKC (Student Cultural Centre) as a Site of Performative (Self-)Production: October 75 – Institution, Self-organization, First-person speech, Collectivization", *Život umjetnosti* 91, (2012): 30–53.

directed toward a critique of the existing art system, whether it concerns the Western market-oriented model or the model of the bureaucratic socialism, seen as one in which ideology instrumentalizes art, as a "strategy of control over all material and spiritual resources of society."[16] The monopoly held by the ruling structure is identified as a major barrier to a broader democratization due to its control over the domains of education and information. It is recognized that this monopoly inhibits the affirmation of the public sphere and prevents the wider impact of new artistic ideas within society. On the notion of institutional transformations that would adequately respond to new principles of the artistic production, different ideas are presented in the publication, from the recommendation to secure the status of science for the art field – thus ensuring permanent employment for artists engaged in new practices and their economic independence from market relations (Timotijević) – to emphasizing the need for decentralization of society, which would disable top-down control over labor and its outcomes, enabling a principle of direct decision-making as a path to creating space for individual and collective freedom (Đorđević). Bojana Pejić emphasizes the necessity of emancipating art from its decorative authority toward a socially responsible act. The publication offers a relevant debate on the position of art practice within society, its role and function, and ideas and opinions presented by artists and curators still resonate with current challenges faced by artists and art collectives.

In Novi Sad, the radical artistic direction and program of the Youth Centre (*Tribina mladih*) triggered a sharp response from local party authorities, culminating in the withdrawal of the managerial autonomy granted under the self-management legislation.

Student and youth centres in Yugoslavia of this period were characterized by the close collaboration of artists and curators and their joint efforts to change the conditions of art production. Artists were experimenting with form and techniques, but one of their main concerns was to challenge the strategies of exploitation of the work of artists and radically democratize processes of production. The nature of new art practices and the artist–audience relationship was addressed by artist Slavko Bogdanović in his text *"Art (Today), Artist (Creator), Participant (Author)"*:

> Art (today) ceases to be commercial; it has increasingly stopped producing objects that could be manipulated…That space (of art) must seek the viewer's activity, which means their willingness not only to complete the artist's idea but to expand it, correct it, make it more perfect. Such art requires the viewer to become a participant... The position of the artist–creator, the originator of the idea, remains the same: they are no longer the author...The activity of the 'real author' is reduced to the role of an arranger, while the viewer has become participant and author.[17]

[16] Јеша Денегри, "Језик уметности и систем уметности," *Октобар 75* (Студентски културни центар, 1975). Authors' translation.

[17] Slavko Bogdanović, *POLITIKA TELA: Izabrani radovi 1967–1997*, (Književni novosadski krug K21K, Prometej, 1997), 143. Authors' translation.

In his exhibition in the Student Cultural Centre in 1975, artist Attila Csernik offered propositions for the audience to navigate their perception: "On this sheet of paper, draw the letter you like the most; Imagine that everything around you is purple; Observe the clouds for three minutes. What shapes did you perceive? Try to consciously register the visual experience unfolding before you as you analyze the form of your left hand".[18] The same year, in the Youth Centre in Novi Sad and a year later, within the *April encounters* at the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, Katalin Ladik organized an action entitled *ExchangeArt – Art of Exchange, Alteration, and Change.* Under the slogan *Free Art*, displayed on the gallery wall, she created an open marketplace within the gallery space, as a place of direct exchange between artist and audience. A series of instructions set the framework of the action, including the following:

- Exchange Art does not aim to become a new "-ism";
- The art of exchange is the oldest invention of humankind;
- You encounter the art of exchange at every step;
- With the art of exchange, you will become richer;
- With the art of exchange, you will become poorer;
- Unconsciously, you participate in the art of exchange daily and often against your will;
- This is a chance to consciously choose the object and the person with which you want to carry out the exchange;
- This is a chance to refuse (to break) the object of exchange;
- This is a chance to express your opinion;
- This is a chance to change your opinion;
- This is a chance to adopt someone else's opinion;
- This is a chance to participate in the most direct communication;
- This is a chance to, for once, not participate in anything;
- This is a chance to remain indifferent to art[19].

Ladik tested the potential for free communication, and the object of exchange became a motivator for communication, for acceptance or refusal, for a horizontal economy. The gallery became a place where all existing hierarchies were dismantled, whether they related to the relationship between the goods and the consumer or between the artist, the artwork/labor and the audience.

The examples presented so far, together with numerous other works and experiments of Yugoslav artists and curators active around student and youth centres of this period, demonstrate the potential of the self-management logic within the art institution, and its possible democratic consequence on institutional management and art

[18] Miško Šuvaković, *Csernik Attila* (Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, Vujičić kolekcija, 2009), 85–86. Authors' translation.

[19] Каталин Ладик, "Пројекат за акцију – ИКС ЧЕНЏ АРТ – уметност, размене, измене и промене,"*7. Билтен, 5. априлски сусрет*(Студентски културни центар, 1976), 4–5. Authors' translation.

production. The logic of art production was not dependent on specialized education or privilege and the artwork was not fixed by material outcome but was practiced through diverse experiments, encounters, exchanges, situations, experiences. The avant-garde alternative, shaped by students through the practice and exploration of the potentials of self-managing socialism, posed a threat to the established power relations that were not to be questioned. This is precisely where the specificity of the Yugoslav cultural policy lies: it provided the required infrastructure for the development of youth culture, but then, once it demonstrated its creative capacity, it tried to suppress the alternative (in case of Novi Sad) or to neutralize it within the existing institution of art (in case of production of student centres in Zagreb and Belgrade).

Precarious art labor

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the world was gradually shifting toward the complete domination of the interests of capital in all aspects of society. Yugoslavia underwent this transition through a devastating strategy of war-driven destruction of the state and its dismantling into a series of smaller, national units. Disagreement with war politics, as well as a need for direct confrontation and engagement, led certain art collectives and artists, such as Led Art, Škart, Magnet, Saša Marković Mikrob, and many others, to work in the public space as a platform of social struggle. Motivated by political resistance and revolt, artists intervened in the social sphere using a variety of tactics.

Magnet group carried out a series of performances during 1996 and 1997 as symbolic actions in front of the institutions representing power and oppression (the performance *Last Supper* in front of the Academy of Arts and Sciences where seven performers were eating bread and drinking red wine on a long table in the street, or the performance *Revelation* where artists broke televisions in front of the National Television during the broadcast of the Evening News. In words of the artist Miroslav Nune Popović, those performances represent "[...] a form of resistance against mass paranoia, and a way of struggle for a different kind of consciousness – one necessary for awakening from the nightmare and creating a new society in Serbia."[20]

Actions, performances, happenings, situations, acts of giving, and site-specific interventions are just some of the artistic strategies used by different collectives and artists. Involving citizens in playful encounters and performing acts of *giving* are tactics shared by Saša Marković Mikrob[21] and the Škart[22] group. And while Marković was giving out ludic hand-made masks to incidental participants of his street performances, Škart produced a series of *Sadness* poems printed on cards which were given to the citizens from 1992 to 1994 at various locations: the *Sadness of Potential Vegetables*

[20] Miroslav Nune Popović,"Falus revolucija za novo društvo," *Nune Popović i grupa Magnet, Živela sloboda*(Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, 2011), 18. Authors' translation.

[21] Darka Radosavljević (ed), *Zbogom andergraund Saša Marković Mikrob* (Remont, 2013).

[22] Seda Yildiz (ed), *Building Human Relations Through Art: Škart collective (Belgrade), from 1990 to present* (Onomatopee, 2022).

was distributed at marketplaces, the *Sadness of Potential Travellers* at train station, the *Sadness of Potential Consumers* in front of almost empty-shelved department stores, the *Sadness of Potential Return* was mailed to acquaintances who had left the country, the *Sadness of Potential Rifles* was packed in humanitarian aid boxes sent to Bosnia and Herzegovina. As gifts to a stranger, an acquaintance, or an anonymous recipient, *Sadness* poems created micro-cracks in the system, interspaces of civic solidarity, understanding, and empathy.

These practices fundamentally challenged the status of the artwork and its potential for commodification. Works, focused on the event, process, exchange, communication, or short-term interventions in public spaces, were temporary in nature and linked to direct experiences whose outcome cannot be anticipated and whose result cannot be objectified. This type of production was mostly self-financed or supported (on the level of logistics and production) within the network of civil society cultural organizations, such as Soros Centre for Contemporary Art, Cultural Centre REX, Centre for Cultural Decontamination or Art Association Remont.

At the turn of the century, a significant number of art collectives, artists and self-organized groups emerged, dedicated to process, interdisciplinary approaches, work with communities, collective authorship, and social engagement. Škart continued their practice whilst initiating new collectives and platforms for collaborative work and participation, such as choirs *Horkeškart*, *Proba*, *Hor-ruk*-choir for youth and elderly, *Poetrying* festival, embroidery group for men or *Non-practical Women* collective. Art collectives initiated by numerous artists and curators, such as MiniPogon, kuda.org, Hop.La!, Belgrade Raw, Matrijaršija, Šok Zadruga, Group for Conceptual Politics, and many others, operate within the frame of the independent cultural scene, self-organized collectives dedicating their work, knowledge, experience and initiatives toward the sphere of public good. As such, they are the ones to critically approach both governments and businesses, trying to rethink the notion of the work of art, its nature, function and values in contemporary society. The vitality of this scene manifests itself on the level of content, by critically exploring topics such as ecology, health, social justice, migration, Yugoslav heritage, nature of democracy, community engagement, participation, and minority rights but, just as significantly, by redefining ways of organizing, working and creating together, rethinking self-organized structures and working conditions of artists. This interest and struggle have led to new paths toward institutional transformation.

The Cultural Centre Magacin in Belgrade, constituted by the practice of its users (artists and art collectives active within the independent cultural scene), is one example of possible institutional alternatives. It is organized as a self-managed space, horizontally governed by the users, without any curatorial or editorial restrictions, available to all on the basis of an open calendar. Without stable funding, Magacin still operates outside any legal status, as a space occupied by artists and art collectives. The space has been open for users for more than 15 years and is one of the most vital infrastructural resources for the Belgrade art scene. It is used for rehearsals,

exhibitions, production and as a co-work space, for public performances, festivals, and workshops.[23] *Probate* (*Ostavinska)* gallery, which operates as a part of Magacin centre within the same open access logic, in the first two years of its establishment (2016-2018) was led by artists Ana Dimitrijević, Jelena Mijić, Marko Dimitrijević and Luka Knežević-Strika. As a temporary collective, they experimented with the presentation and exhibition formats, exploring the role and function of the gallery space outside the commercial and market dictates (*Your 15 Minute Opening, Space for Mistake, Probate Conversations,* etc.).[24] One of the members of the team, artist Jelena Mijić, defines their experience as follows:

> „I think we have played a lot with the events around us, not only those concerning daily politics or cultural and political issues. In that moment many new galleries and spaces appeared. We looked at them all and found them infinitely boring. So we reacted to how the gallery functions as a gallery. We sought answers to it with a touch of humor, but also questioning certain rules such as selection or representation.[25]

Within the independent scene, new practices of empowerment, solidarity, care and support have been developed, which have proved to be especially important during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the whole sector, being at the forefront of the critique of cultural elites and their capitalist institutional logic, remains exposed to precarious working conditions, unrecognized labor, and continuous economic and social instability. Project logic still dominates artistic production, making it dependent on imposed priorities, limited time frames and schedules, and exhausting administration.

Conclusion

While artists and collectives are trying to create alternatives and figure out ways to operate within the hostile environment of the capitalist and corrupt state apparatus, a new social movement is being shaped by students in Serbia. As mentioned at the beginning of this text, as part of the movement, students occupied and reclaimed the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, which, during the past 30 years of incompetent and inert management, had become inactive and irrelevant, housing mostly commercial programs and sublet spaces. The exhibitions, actions, and counter-festival programs that students initiated in the liberated Student Centre, including the revival of

[23] More on the institutional model of Magacin see in: Iva Čukić and Milica Pekić, "Magacin as a Common Good," in *Magacin: A Model for Self-organized Cultural Centre*, ed. Iva Čukić, Ana Dimitrijević, Lana Gunjić, Luka Knežević-Strika, Jelena Mijić, Milica Pekić, Aleksandar Popović, Sanja Radulović (Association Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia, 2019), 6–17.

[24] More on *Probate (Ostavinska)* gallery at: https://kioskngo.net/ostavinska-galerijaluka-knezevic-strika-ana-dimitrijevic-jelena-mijic-i-marko-dimitrijevic/.

[25] Ibid, 13:47–14:34

the *April Encounters,* one of the most radical art manifestations of the 1970s, clearly point to the avant-garde traditions students are reclaiming. Numerous art actions, exhibitions, performances and interventions in public spaces, initiated by students within the protests, are transcending disciplinary boundaries and divisions, recognizing the potential of the art practice to intervene within the field of social relations. Forms and techniques used, such as choir performances, arts and crafts, and public interventions, recall works of many of the previously mentioned art collectives. Students' re-enactment of the performance *Heart Object* from the 1970s by artist Bogdanka Poznanović, when a large object, in the simple shape of a red heart, was carried by the artist and her colleagues from the bridge in Novi Sad to the Youth Centre (Tribina Mladih) gallery,[26] points to the artistic values they nurture. Their art practice is openly linked with the larger social movement they initiated and is situated within the values such as togetherness, solidarity, collective work, democratization, and the empowerment of all. The art tradition being referred to in students' works and the logic displayed in their actions continue from and build on the experiences and experiments presented in this brief introduction.

And here again we are faced with the subversive potential of art to take an active role within the process of social transformation. The struggle of artists, art historians and curators to challenge the bourgeois autonomy of art, to confront the capitalist logic of the dominant art institution and its criteria enabling exploitation of the work of artists, to change the ways we understand and value the labor of artists, to transform language and terminology used to discuss transformation of the nature of art work, has unfolded continuously for many decades. Although the effects of these efforts, faced with the current conditions of work, could be understood as failure, the new developments, led by the students, restore hope. The subversive potential of artistic experiments, it seems, is not exhausted by failure, institutional neutralization or systemic marginalization. On the contrary, each of these experiments continuously reclaim a space of freedom and emancipation, reshaping, along the way, our understanding of the ethics and aesthetics of artistic work.

References

Bago, Ivana. "Dematerijalizacija i politizacija izložbe: Primjeri kustoske prakse kao antikapitalističke institucionalne kritike u Jugoslaviji tijekom 60ih i 70ih godina 20. stoljeća." *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti* 36 (2012): 235–48. https://www.ipu.hr/content/radovi-ipu/RIPU-36-2012_235-248_Bago.pdf.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer." In *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, 768-782. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells – Participatory Art and Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso, 2012.

[26] Sanja Kojić Mladenov, *Bogdanka Poznanović – Contact art* (Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, 2016), 39.

Bogdanović, Slavko. *POLITIKA TELA: Izabrani radovi 1967–1997*. Književni novosadski krug K21K, Prometej, 1997.

Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Translated by Michael Shaw. Manchester University Press, 1984.

Čukić, Iva and Pekić, Milica. "Magacin as a Common Good." In *Magacin: A Model for Self-organized Cultural Centre*, edited by Iva Čukić, Ana Dimitrijević, Lana Gunjić, Luka Knežević-Strika, Jelena Mijić, Milica Pekić, Aleksandar Popović, Sanja Radulović, 6–17. Association Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia, 2019.

Dedić, Nikola. "Avant-Garde Transformation of Artistic Labor: The Productivist View of Boris Arvatov", *Art and Media Journal* 28 (2022): 133–51. https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.523.

Денегри, Јеша. "Језик уметности и систем уметности." *Октобар 75*, Студентски културни центар, 1975.

Kojić Mladenov, Sanja. *Bogdanka Poznanović. Contact Art*. Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, 2016.

Koščević, Želimir. "Akcija Total – nacrt dekreta o demokratizaciji umetnosti."*Almanah 4.* Bitef, 1970.

Ладик, Каталин. "Пројекат за акцију – ИКС ЧЕНЦИ АРТ – уметност, размене, измене и промене."*7. Билтен, 5. априлски сусрет*, Студентски културни центар, 1976.

Matičević, Davor."Zagrebački krug." In *Nova umjetnička praksa 1966–1978*, edited by Marijan Susovski, 21-28. Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1978.

Popović Miroslav, Nune. "Falus revolucija za novo društvo." *Nune Popović i grupa Magnet, Živela sloboda*, Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, 2011.

Praznik, Katja. *Art Work: Invisible Labour and the Legacy of Yugoslav Socialism*. University of Toronto Press, 2021.

Radosavljević, Darka, ed. *Zbogom andergraund Saša Marković Mikrob*. Remont, 2013.

Savanović, Saša. "The protests in Serbia are historic, the world shouldn't ignore them." *Aljazeera,* February 23, 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/2/23/the-protests-in-serbia-are-historic-the-world-shouldnt-ignore-them.

Šuvaković, Miško. *Csernik Attila.* Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, Vujičić kolekcija, 2009.

Томић, Биљана. "Сусрети средом." In *Дрангуларијум* (exhibition catalogue). Студентски културни центар, 1971.

Vesić, Jelen. "SKC (Student Cultural Centre) as a Site of Performative (Self-)Production: October 75 – Institution, Self-organization, First-person Speech, Collectivization." *Život umjetnosti* 91(2012): 30–53. https://www.ipu.hr/content/zivot-umjetnosti/ZU_91-2012_030-053_Vesic.pdf.

Yildiz Seda, ed. *Building Human Relations Through Art: Škart Collective (Belgrade), from 1990 to Present*. Onomatopee, 2022.

Article received: April 13, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Original scholarly paper

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.634

Maja Petrović
Faculty of Media and Communications, Signinum University, Belgrade
Ana Filipović
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

Framing the Margins: Representation of the Working Class in Contemporary Serbian Visual and Cinematic Art

Abstract: This paper examines the modes of visual representation of the working class in contemporary Serbian art and cinema. Employing analytical tools grounded in the study of social conditions – such as the social history of art, it explores various elements of visual language used to communicate scenes from the margins with the purpose of answering the questions of how the subject is chosen and portrayed, as well as their contributions to the visibility and representation of these issues. The paper also examines the proximity to, or established dialogue with, historical models of representation and approaches to these themes. Ultimately, realism is identified as the dominant model, though certain departures from it and experimental approaches are also recognized.

Keywords: working-class representation; contemporary Serbian art and cinema; *Working Class Heroes* (2022); *The Working Class Goes to Hell* (2023); Milica Ružičić.

The circumstances of the Serbian society's transition over the past three and a half decades have drastically altered the status and position of the working class. This transition has taken place along the path of transformation from a real-socialist to a capitalist society, accompanied by the introduction and implementation of various processes, among which privatization has had a detrimental impact on the status of the working class in Serbia.[1] In addition to the near-total devastation of industry, new social, economic, and class divisions and inequalities have emerged, with the working class being pushed to the margins in that process.[2] A large segment of former industrial workers[3] was driven into precarious employment in the service sector or the informal economy; some sought opportunities abroad, while others became permanently unemployed. These trajectories fragmented what had previously been a

[1] Nada G. Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije." *Nacionalni interes* 17, no. 40 (2021): 155.

[2] Ibid., 165.

[3] The destruction of industry played a particular role in the process of the working class marginalization. According to Nada G. Novaković, from 2001 to 2013, the number of industrial employees decreased from 700,000 to 340,000, which is even lower than in 1960 (Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 165). As she cites Božo Drašković, "Slom industrijskog sektora u Srbiji. Postoje li šanse za deindustrijalizaciju," u *Deindustrijalizacija u Srbiji. Mogućnosti revitalizacije industrijskog sektora*, ur. Božo Drašković (Institut ekonomskih nauka; Beogradska bankarska akademija, Fakultet bankarstvo, osiguranje i finansije, 2014).

Authors' contact information: maja.petrovic@fmk.edu.rs; anafilipovic98@gmail.com

relatively cohesive working class, eroding its collective agency, weakening trade union structures, and limiting the capacity to defend labor rights and social protections.[4] Once positioned at the symbolic and economic core of socialist Yugoslavia, the working class was progressively displaced,[5] thereby opening space for the ascendancy of political elites and entrepreneurial actors.[6]

A certain number of contemporary works of art and projects emerge and precisely address these problems, which will make them the subject of analysis in this paper. The foundation for this study lies in the following questions: how is the margin represented in Serbian contemporary art, and what kind of margin is it? In seeking answers to these questions, it was concluded that contemporary Serbian art more often aligns itself with the margins than it addresses the establishment – or at least, so it seems. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we turn to selected examples that have found their place in public, accessible, institutional, and representative spaces, and which focus on issues related to the position of the working class. A limited number of examples will serve as a series of case studies used to explore this issue, including films such as *Working Class Heroes* (2022) and *The Working Class Goes to Hell* (2023), as well as art projects by Milica Ružičić: *Jugoremedija 2004* (2010), *Women of Sićevo* (2017), and *Housing Issue* (2022).

In contemporary Serbian art and film, the working class is represented through a range of perspectives, from explicitly engaged and activist approaches to other, various representational models. This paper examines these different modes of representation by analyzing a selection of works of art that focus on themes of labor and class. Employing analytical tools grounded in the study of social conditions – such as the social history of art – this approach affords an equal analytical framework for

[4] On the position of trade unions during the process of transition and privatization, see: Nada G. Novaković, "Štrajkovi, sindikati i privatizacija u Srbiji," *Sociološki pregled* 47, no. 1 (2023): 23–52.

[5] According to Nada G. Novaković: "The most important effects of the international factors, the domestic capitalist class and the neoliberal model of transition can be seen in the material and social position of the Serbian working class. It is one of the largest social groups that, during the transition, experienced marginalization, accelerated stratification and almost complete disappearance from the social scene. This is reflected in the massive loss of jobs and wages, poverty and an increasingly poor participation in the social standard" (Novaković, Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 163).

[6] Over the past two and a half decades, Serbia has undergone a transition process whose main factor was the privatization of socially owned property, which led to the constitution of Serbian society as a capitalist periphery. In this process, social and economic development, as well as national interests, have been subordinated to the interests of international capital and the developed countries of the capitalist center (see: Novaković, "Štrajkovi, sindikati i privatizacija u Srbiji," 23–24). As a consequence of the transition and privatization process, the consolidation of the capitalist class in power and the growth of economic and social inequalities can be observed. The Yugoslav society before the transition was characterized by a relatively low Gini coefficient of class inequality, up to 28.0, according to Branko Milanović, as cited by Novaković (Novaković, Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 160–161, cit. according to: Branko Milanović, *Ekonomske nejednakosti u Jugoslaviji*, Ekonomika, 1990). Novaković further notes that after 2000, the Gini coefficient in Serbia grew faster than in most countries in the region, reaching 33.0 in 2002 and 38.6 in 2014 and 2015 (Novaković, Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 160–161). The income gap between the poorest and the wealthiest in Serbia also indicates class stratification. Using Eurostat data, Nada G. Novaković notes that in 2017, 20% of Serbian citizens with the highest income had 9.4 times more than the poorest, which placed Serbia in first place, as the EU28 average was 5.2 (Novaković, Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 161).

examining works of contemporary visual and cinematic art, aiming to trace how the working class is visually and cinematically constructed.

Representation of the working class in the films *Working Class Heroes and Working Class Goes to Hell*

The representation of the working class, their milieu and lifestyle is a recurring topic in the Serbian cinema over the past two decades.. Notable examples include *Tilva Roš* (Nikola Ležaić, 2010), *Klip* (2012, Maja Miloš), *Barbarians* (*Varvari*, Ivan Ikić, 2014), and *The Load* (*Teret*, Ognjen Glavonić, 2018), where narrative development, character construction, and motivation are strongly informed by class. Social issues often underpin the central dramatic conflicts, while the cinematic settings clearly reflect marginalized living conditions. What sets these two films apart is that the working class is not merely a narrative element but their core theme. Their prolonged production – marked by limited funding and structural obstacles, as in the decade-long making of *Working Class Heroes* (*Heroji radničke klase*, Miloš Pušić, 2022) – reflects both the broader conditions of the Serbian film industry and a sustained engagement with the topic, also evident in Đorđević's *Working Class Goes to Hell* (*Radnička klasa ide u pakao*, 2023). Key questions emerge as to how these films engage with the real-world conditions of the working class in the post-transition era, and how they construct their representation.

Working Class Heroes is a socio-political drama[7] that foregrounds the systemic exploitation of illegal construction workers in contemporary Serbia. The story centers around Lidija, a PR manager employed by a construction company, whose task is to maintain the firm's polished image while concealing the realities of labor on the ground. Behind this façade of compliance with international safety standards, workers endure hazardous conditions, withheld wages, and the complete absence of legal protections. As the situation deteriorates, the workers, led by their colleague known as the Professor, organize to resist their employers, transforming diffuse discontent into collective action. Their decision to confront those in power introduces both dramatic tension and political urgency, situating their struggle within broader patterns of corruption, precarity, and the erosion of labor rights. In dramatizing these dynamics,

[7] Both Đorđević and Pušić made their feature debuts during the 2000s. Pušić's first film, *Autumn in My Street* (*Jesen u mojoj ulici*, 2009), was released in the same year as Đorđević's prominent and critically acclaimed *The Life and Death of a Porno Gang* (*Život i smrt porno bande*). Already in these early works, both directors turned their attention to the social margins, Pušić by following the lives of two teenagers from a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Novi Sad (also the setting of *Working Class Heroes*), where class position constitutes an integral part of the protagonists' identities and the social milieu in which they move. In the same manner, Đorđević consistently focuses on marginalized worlds, including the porn industry and migrant workers, with *Working Class Goes to Hell* extending this line of inquiry into another exploration of social peripheries. In terms of style, both directors remain close to their earlier artistic concerns. Pušić gravitates toward realism, while Đorđević, though known for blending documentary and fiction, in this film adheres more clearly and consistently to fictional conventions – eschewing authorial self-insertion, blurred boundaries between filmmaker and subject, or technical variations such as handheld camerawork. Both films premiered at major international festivals: Pušić's at the Berlinale Panorama program and Đorđević's at the Toronto International Film Festival.

the film offers a critical commentary on the post-transition Serbian society: it exposes the contradictions between neoliberal aspirations toward European integration and the lived reality of the working poor. *Working Class Goes to Hell*, on the other hand, blends elements of satire, horror, and social drama, situating its narrative in a decaying Balkan town still haunted by the aftermath of a devastating factory fire. The catastrophe – widely believed to have been deliberately staged to facilitate corrupt privatization – claimed numerous workers' lives and left the surviving community in economic ruin. Several years later, the local union continues its futile struggle for reparations, facing entrenched corruption, bureaucratic apathy, and a complete lack of institutional accountability. Amid these circumstances, Svetlana, whose husband perished in the fire, mobilizes the remaining workers in an effort to resist the system. Confronted with forces that far exceed their capacity for political struggle, they ultimately turn to the occult, perceiving it as the only remaining path toward reclaiming a sense of justice and restoring their agency.

Unlike most films featuring working-class protagonists, both *Working Class Heroes* and *Working Class Goes to Hell* foreground class not only thematically but also in their titles, signaling a shift from individual-centered narratives to collective experience and action. This is evident even at the script level, where the central protagonist is replaced by an ensemble cast.[8] *Working Class Heroes* evokes the rhetoric of socialist realism, specifically how art throughout history framed the working class as the engine of progress and the driving force sustaining the entire system.[9] However, a secondary layer of meaning emerges when the film's antagonist, after his misdeeds, refers to the workers as 'heroes' in a self-serving media statement. This ironic twist complicates the portrayal of workers in post-transition Serbia as marginalized and devalued subjects, whose occasional and calculated symbolic valorization lacks real recognition. In contrast, *Working Class Goes to Hell* suggests movement and direction, with its title referencing one of the most famous portrayals of the working class – *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* (*La classe operaia va in paradiso*, Elio Petri, 1971). This reference has appeared repeatedly in the local context, most notably in the sculpt(o-tect)ural series by Mrđan Bajić. By joining this tradition, Đorđević's film directs the working class toward hell rather than heaven – a choice that dialogues more closely with the Yugoslav Black Wave heroes[10] from the working-class milieu than with the idealized victim figure found, for example, in some of De Sica's neorealist films. While heaven, taken literally, implies a sacralized image of the working class or, in a sense, passivity – acceptance of the Christian narrative of otherworldly justice – going to hell

[8] While heroines Lidija (Jasna Đuričić) and Svetlana (Tamara Krcunović) appear as characters with the most screen time, this does not undermine the depiction of the working class as a unified entity in either film.

[9] It is also worth considering the existence of John Lennon's 1970 song *Working Class Hero*, whose lyrics closely align with the explicit class hierarchy depicted in Pušić's film.

[10] As the author of the study *Sjaj crnog* points out, filmmakers of that provenance "advocated for a cinema that addresses the existence of contemporary man in all its complexity, including the right to depict even the darkest individual and collective traits." Veljko Radosavljević, *Sjaj crnog: Prilog za bolje razumevanje jednog razdoblja srpske kinematografije* (Filmski centar Srbije, 2019), 225.

in Đorđević's film opposes both of these notions (as well as trust in religious institutions). This is one of many ways in which Pušić's and Đorđević's films similarly engage with the off-screen realities of these regions.

Regarding the cinematic language, the two works employ different approaches. While Pušić's social drama maintains a veristic, almost documentary tone[11] aimed at reaching the "ordinary viewer",[12] Đorđević, viewing the topic of post-transition in Eastern Europe as "worn out," seeks to offer "a new angle by combining various genres with a camp approach".[13] Pušić's approach rests on realism as a style designed not only to be understood by the "ordinary viewer" but primarily aimed at them. Đorđević, on the other hand, pursues a defamiliarization of his subject, although one could argue that camp – as a destabilizer of the boundaries between high and low culture and an expression of deliberately 'bad' taste[14] – is particularly apt for portraying the working class by mocking authority or exaggerating crude everyday life into grotesque comedy or melodrama.[15] The historical discrediting of camp as frivolous, excessive, or aesthetically devalued parallels the persistent discrediting of the working class through the notion of 'taste'.[16] In this context, working-class culture is stereotypically labeled as vulgar or unsophisticated, serving as a mechanism of symbolic exclusion and illustrating the entanglement of aesthetic and class hierarchies. From this perspective, camp can be understood as a suitable response to the question of which aesthetic reflects the perception of the working class from the standpoint of the mainstream visual regimes constructed by elites – the very same elites that relegated the working

[11] The dual-lens handheld camera captures the sparse environment in a manner reminiscent of amateur documentary footage. This stylistic austerity stems from production constraints but also aligns with the director's artistic intentions.

[12] "I don't think this film is hermetic, something an ordinary viewer can't understand. I made it so people could easily identify with the characters and recognize their struggles. I hope it finds its audience among the most normal, wonderful people—not just in elitist film circles." Danilo Brakočević, "Miloš Pušić: I dalje želim da pobedi dobro, koliko god to možda bilo iluzorno," intervju sa rediteljem Milošem Pušićem. Filmoskopija. Filmski centar Srbije, February 9, 2022, https://www.fcs.rs/milos-pusic-i-dalje-zelim-da-pobedi-dobro-koliko-god-to-mozda-bilo-iluzorno/. Author's free translation from the original.

[13] Đorđević attributes another, broader cultural dimension to his choices by asking whose preconceived image influences the selection of themes and representation of social relations: "I wouldn't say I'm a fan of the Eastern European cinema, because I don't believe its identity comes from within Eastern Europe – it's dictated from the outside. To secure funding, filmmakers tailor their films to the image the West has of the Balkans." Ana Filipović, "Mladen Đorđević: 'Mejnstrim ne voli kada postane neprijatno, bez obzira na to koliko je istinito,'" Filmoskopija. Filmski centar Srbije. October 31, 2023. https://www.fcs.rs/mladen-djordjevic-mejnstrim-ne-voli-kada-postane-neprijatno-bez-obzira-na-to-koliko-je-istinito/. Author's free translation from the original.

[14] "Camp taste turns it back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement. Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different – a supplementary – set of standards." Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964): 525.

[15] One need only recall the working class in John Waters' films, epitomes of cinematic camp. In recent Serbian cinema, camp and the working class intertwine in *Have You Seen This Woman?* (2022) by Dušan Zorić and Matija Gluščević.

[16] Although the changes brought by the 21st century have in many ways complicated this issue, Bourdieu's thesis on the relationship between taste and cultural capital still provides a crucial counterpoint to the idea of inherently good or bad taste tied *to* an individual or an entire class. See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

class to the margins. Regarding realism, from French poetic realism, through Italian neorealism and British postwar realism, to contemporary social dramas stylistically leaning toward realism, there remains a persistent need to depict the world 'as it really is'. This need is closely tied to the premise that certain styles suit certain themes better than others. The communicative power of these movements with the working class relied both on the choice of subject and on the commitment to faithfully represent their off-screen realities. Their cinematic language – devoid of stylistic experimentation, heavy intertextuality, or figurative speech – was clear and accessible regardless of the audience's prior cinematic knowledge. The subjects of these films were predominantly working-class lives, portrayed outside studio settings (*in situ*), with scripts inspired by conversations overheard in the streets and performed by non-professional actors embodying their own class identities on screen. In this regard, both Pušić and Đorđević engage workers and/or local residents, employing them as a form of practical, extradiegetic agency.[17] However, it is important to note that realism had revolutionary potential precisely because of the context of its emergence and the audiences it primarily targeted. The question that arises is whether, and to what extent, this remains the case within the framework of 'capitalist realism' (in Mark Fisher's formulation, the dominant cultural condition in which capitalism appears as the only realistic option, while other possibilities are rendered unthinkable),[18] and how much genre and stylistic play can serve as a suitable model for representing and addressing the working class.

Working Class Heroes and *Working Class Goes to Hell*: key points

The selected films address two significant issues that have directly affected the working class in Serbia since the transition period: the conditions of labor on illegal construction sites in Pušić's film, and the consequences of factory privatization in Đorđević's work. In both cases, the collapse of workers' rights and the failure of institutions to protect them reflect the realities of the post-transition Serbia, where research shows the "working class is in a far worse position than before the transition to capitalism".[19] Both films establish a direct connection with the pre-transition legacy: the construction of *Stanovi solidarnosti* in Pušić's film evokes socialist-era mass housing projects, while the *Prvi maj* factory in Đorđević's film references the fate of numerous factories, including the textile industry *Prvi maj* Pirot, which operated successfully for decades but declined in the 1990s due to wars and sanctions, ultimately declaring bankruptcy in the 2010s. Yet the contemporary moment betrays the vision of a bright future: *Working Class Heroes* depicts appalling working conditions, while the plot of *Working Class Goes to Hell* unfolds four years after a (possibly deliberately set) fire in the factory that claimed the lives of family members, friends, and colleagues of the protagonist.

[17] While its reach is particular, it can alter the class position of the performer – yet this does not affect the class question in general. What does, however, reflect agency is the freedom to – at least to some extent – have a certain identity represented by those who embody it in real life.

[18] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), 4–5.

[19] Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 156.

The landscapes depicted in both films are deeply rooted in the tangible local context. While *Working Class Heroes* repeatedly emphasizes Novi Sad as its setting, Đorđević's unnamed town functions as an archetype of the post-industrial Serbian periphery, once sustained by local industry. The concrete skeleton of the future building complex in *Working Class Heroes* evokes not so much the Yugoslav 'concrete utopia'[20] as it does the widespread destruction of green spaces caused by illegal expansion of investor projects (Figure #1). A shot of trees being cut down recalls Fisher's words: "The relationship between capitalism and eco-disaster is neither coincidental nor accidental: capital's 'need of a constantly expanding market,' its 'growth fetish,' mean that capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability."[21] This critique is even more pronounced in *Working Class Goes to Hell*, where wide shots of a small, polluted, and impoverished town accumulate transitional tropes: a neglected factory, an unfinished hotel, church, and tavern as the sole *locus* of social life.

The process of working-class marginalization is depicted as a direct consequence of the actions of an emerging capitalist class, specifically through the accumulation of capital via the transfer of socially owned into private property. This process is further enabled by institutions such as the judiciary and the church, as well as by public media,[22] which both films portray with deep distrust and associate with the decline in living standards, quality of education, and access to healthcare.[23] Figuratively speaking, Đorđević's film begins where Pušić's ends – years after the accident. While Pušić traces hierarchical class relations (workers answer to Braca, Braca to Lidija, Lidija to Miki, and he to the investors), Đorđević examines the internal community dynamics. The former highlights unpaid labor, unsafe conditions, and systemic neglect; the latter shows how prolonged unemployment and systemic passivation hinder political agency and collective action. As Novaković notes, "workers' empirical class consciousness is underdeveloped and confused"[24], an issue central to Đorđević's film, which questions the possibility and shape of resistance. Although Pušić's film addresses working-class issues, its narrative centers on the company's PR representative, Lidija, who herself leads a precarious life. She serves as an intermediary figure and is the only character to undergo internal transformation, while the workers, by

[20] The perception of socialist architecture in former Yugoslavia as a 'concrete utopia' is particularly prominent from a Western perspective – confirmed by the title of MoMA's major retrospective exhibition in 2018/9.

[21] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 18.

[22] In Đorđević's film, the television screen becomes a central motif for reality distortion, and while 'brain rots' in popular internet discourse primarily refers to the effects of excessive online content consumption, Đorđević's characters, glued to the TV screen, can be said to undergo a similar process. Those scenes evoke Fisher's words: "If the figure of discipline was the worker-prisoner, the figure of control is the debtor-addict. Cyberspatial capital operates by addicting its users.", Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 25.

[23] In the Serbian post-transition context, public media often aligned with political and business elites, legitimizing privatization processes while obscuring their social consequences. This discursive function is closely tied to the erosion of living standards: rather than acknowledging precarity, media narratives frequently depicted workers as living relatively secure or adequate lives, thereby masking structural inequalities and legitimizing institutional inaction in areas such as wages, healthcare, and education. See: Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase u Srbiji."

[24] Ibid.,169.

contrast, are portrayed only in broad strokes – as types[25] who, aside from occasional acts of defiance (self-inflicted injury or refusal to work until overdue wages are paid), remain largely passive (Figure #2). The ossified hierarchy seems to leave no room for change, so the film's most radical act of rebellion is not a challenge to the system itself, but an act of revenge. *Working Class Goes to Hell* depicts the powerholders as equally ruthless, but somewhat more fearful of the workers' rage, that unfolds into an 'eat-the-rich' fantasy – one of today's prevalent cinematic models of class revolt.[26]

While the antagonists in both films are largely unnuanced, the workers in Đorđević's film are not portrayed as 'ideal victims'.[27] Instead, they appear demoralized by systematic discrediting, surviving without direction and susceptible to any self-proclaimed leader (Figure #3). This depiction corresponds with the self-image many of them have internalized after years of such societal treatment.[28] For instance, former Jugoremedija employees described their sudden descent into unemployment: middle-aged individuals found themselves unable to support their families and became dependent on parents' pensions.[29] Reflecting on this, the film's community is predominantly composed of middle-aged and older generations. Gender-wise, the composition is more varied, though in both films women are the ones primarily subjected to sexual exploitation. The exploitation of female workers – doubly marginalized category due to both gender and class – is presented as inevitable in a society lacking key labor protections.[30] The lower one's position on the social ladder, the more brutal the abuse: in *Working Class Goes to Hell*, young women are literally stored in a refrigerator, treated like raw meat. In terms of education, character portrayal suggests that the protagonists fall below the societal average, echoing sociological findings of

[25] Among them are the Professor – likely one of many highly educated people who turned to this work due to lack of jobs in their field – alongside the naïve young Mali and the alcoholic Mile.

[26] In recent years, numerous global productions, such as Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) and Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness* (2022), have engaged in constructing 'eat-the-rich' narratives.

[27] This is especially evident in a scene that recalls the wish-fulfillment fantasy from *Miracle in Milan* – beginning with small, empathetic requests and ending with dreams of wealth and reality show fame.

[28] Several interviewees in Marko Cvejić's 2017 documentary *The Working Class Goes to Heaven* speak to this as well. *Radnička klasa odlazi u raj* [The Working Class Is Off to Paradise], directed by Marko Cvejić, feature documentary, 80 min., Serbia, 2017, Film Center Serbia / Mandragora Film, YouTube video, published ca. 5 years ago, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NaTGJAvyoM&t=1445s.

[29] Before privatization, *Jugoremedija* ranked as one of Serbia's most prominent pharmaceutical producers. Its bankruptcy and disintegration came to epitomize the broader dismantling of the state-owned industry, while its privatization represented both a site of labor struggle and the dispossession of thousands of families who depended on its survival. See: BBC News na srpskom, "Jugoremedija: Kako su radnici postali 'suvišni ljudi'," February 27, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-47375337.

[30] Since the 2000s, Serbia has progressively weakened several labor protections inherited from the socialist era, including limits on fixed-term and precarious contracts. Women employed under arrangements such as temporary, part-time, or casual contracts are often excluded from full benefits and protections. This legal and structural precarity has heightened their vulnerability to exploitation, discrimination, and workplace harassment. That is to say, the weakening of labor protections not only erodes economic security but also deepens gender-based inequalities, leaving women workers disproportionately exposed to abuse and systemic marginalization.

persistent class-based exclusion from education since the 2000s.[31] With this in mind, Đorđević does address the issue of patronizing representations of the working class, yet it remains ambiguous whether his satirical scenes – such as exaggerated close-ups of vacant stares at a TV set – function as critique or reproducing of media stereotypes.

The susceptibility to occult figures results in the transference of class struggle from one genre to another, with each genre being deliberately obstructed and thus never fully realized. This aligns with the premise that salvation does not come from the outside – neither the Church, the state, nor the devil – rendering the long-awaited working-class liberation ultimately unattainable through any of the film's particular narrative arcs. The cathartic potential of 'eat-the-rich' films is purposely abandoned at its peak intensity. In a camp-style revenge scene[32] rebellion quickly turns into spectacle, further reinforcing the idea of the countless obstacles to self-organization in an era in which "the empirical class consciousness of workers is underdeveloped and confused" (Figure #4).[33] And while the film's protagonists do not acquire a clear sense of how to act effectively during this struggle, the final scenes suggest that awareness of one's position may not be sufficient, but is a necessary precondition for revolt. It is telling that the climactic camp revenge scene is ultimately framed as escapist, as something doomed to fail, while the return to the subdued aesthetic of a social drama serves to restore dramatic seriousness and underscore film's concluding message. The right to represent the working class at its critical moment of awakening is, in the end, not granted to camp.[34] Within the narrative of *Working Class Heroes*, however, agency is not channeled through collective action but is instead the expression of an individual's revolt against class violence. Since the film does not aim to dissect models of collective struggle, the act of resistance is not its culmination but rather a sudden reversal in which one member of the working class seizes control that had long been systematically denied. The consequences of killing the investor – depicted in a scene that evokes the *deus ex machina* both visually and narratively – remain outside the diegesis, much like in Đorđević's film, where the open ending withholds any resolution to the question of how to proceed with the newly acquired class consciousness. Does this suggest that, within the contemporary Serbian context, the agency of the working class, and the consequences of reclaiming control, are unimaginable, even in fiction?

[31] Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 168.

[32] As in many other 'eat-the-rich' films, the rich are trapped in a confined space – an indicator of their luxury – where they are degraded and reduced to bare physicality (*Parasite*: the house; *Triangle of Sadness*: the yacht; Đorđević's film: a newly built hotel-brothel)

[33] Novaković, "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije," 169.

[34] This choice seems in line with Sontag's conclusion that "the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious", and that "it neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness". Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" 527, 529.

Jugoremedija, Women Of Sićevo, Housing Issue, and the working class representation

Labor-related themes have not been entirely absent from contemporary Serbian art in recent decades.[35] However, the domestic art scene has more strongly engaged with a wider range of social, political, gender, and ecological issues, as well as other forms of discrimination and marginalization. The artistic practice of Milica Ružičić to date has been largely defined by socially engaged themes, focusing on issues of marginalization and other problems rooted in the contemporary socio-political and economic circumstances in Serbia. She deals with them in an engaged manner and through various approaches, addressing issues such as labor, the position of women workers, homelessness,[36] poverty, illegal and destructive urbanization, problems of unregulated industry, and pollution. In short, her work touches upon nearly all pressing social, political, and economic issues in Serbia and beyond, as well as smaller-scale problems directly related to them.[37] While she explores a wide range of media, including collaborative works, video works, photography, interactive sculptures, objects, and spatial interventions, pieces that will be analyzed in this text, *Jugoremedija*, *Housing Issue*, and *Women of Sićevo*, belong to the domain of painting. More specifically, *Jugoremedija* is an acrylic on canvas, measuring 287 by 213 centimeters, *Housing Issue* is a series of watercolor works, and *Women of Sićevo* is a series of drawings.

The painting *Jugoremedija* (Figure #5) was created in connection with specific events in Serbia's transitional society, referring to the pharmaceutical factory in Zrenjanin of the same name. The events surrounding the destruction of this factory during the privatization process are emblematic of the broader collapse of former state-owned industry across Serbia. The painting depicts a specific event from August 2004, namely the moment when the state police sided with the privately hired security

[35] According to Lidija Merenik, the totalitarian model of the socialist realist image was dominant in the period 1945–1948, and in a weakened form persisted until 1953/54. In the second half of the 1940s, a modernist model took shape and became the "second mainstream" in Serbian art, while from the mid-1950s a critical model "beyond modernism" began to develop. Lidija Merenik, *Umetnost i vlast: srpsko slikarstvo 1945–1968*, 2nd rev. ed., vol. 2, Fond Vujičić kolekcija; Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, 2010), 13–19. Within these models which supplanted socialist realism, there was no engagement with themes of the working class, and certainly not through the use of the language of realism. From the 1950s onward, Yugoslavia witnessed the emergence of various phenomena that were ideologically connected, but not related through their ways of expression, designated by Jerko Denegri as the "second line" (*EXAT-51*, *New Tendencies*, *Gorgona*) (Ješa Denegri, *Prilozi za drugu liniju. 2, EXAT-51, Nove tendencije, radikalni enformel, Gorgona: dopune hronici jednog kritičarskog zalaganja* (Macura; Topy, 2005, 16), which also encompassed the emergence of "new artistic practices" (*Nova umjetnička praksa: 1966–1978*, vol. 36 (Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1978, 5–13) (conceptual art, new media art, *arte povera*, and other tendencies). Thus, although socially and politically conscious, these phenomena did not directly address subject matters related to the working class.

[36] Such as the collaborative art project *Hope = Home*, presented at the 60th October Salon in Belgrade within the section *Hope is a Discipline*. For more, see: *Oktobarski salon, 60. 2024. "What's Left?"* (Cultural Centre of Belgrade, 2024)

[37] For example, her work on Trolleybus 28, which was at one point discontinued but reinstated after months of citizen protests (*Trolley 28*, 2020). For more, see: Milica Ružičić, *Trolley 28*, published August 17, 2020, https://milicaruzicic.wordpress.com/2020/08/17/troley-28/.

forces of businessman Jovica Stefanović, who sought to falsify evidence of the majority ownership. At that time, the workers were in fact the majority owners – a status that was legally confirmed three years later through a court ruling. As co-owners of the factory, the workers defended the plant and its machinery, their property, and their jobs, keeping watch in the factory premises after finishing work, while the privately engaged security forces, supported by the state police, attempted to evict them from the premises.

Jugoremedija functions as a media image that never truly existed. While based on real, documentary content,[38] it is constructed through the appropriation of formal characteristics of the official historical genre. In doing so, it surpasses the populism of media imagery and is conceived with the intention of occupying official, institutional spaces.[39] The content of the painting, above all, reveals an inversion of the subject in relation to what the title suggests: rather than workers' collective, the central, dramatically lit, and active figures are members of the police force. Thus, the subject of this image is neither workers as individuals nor as a collective body, but rather the act of repression itself. The depicted scene takes place in front of the factory, where the workers, previously expelled from the premises, are being pushed back, while the factory itself is guarded by private security forces, with the police positioned between the two groups. The dimensions of the canvas clearly reflect an effort to monumentalize the subject matter, while the dense accumulation of human figures serves to underscore the repression exerted by minority forces over the majority workforce. In contrast to the prominently displayed, brightly illuminated police officers, the workers are decentralized, positioned along the edges of the composition, rendered in shadowy tones matching their industrial uniforms. Particularly significant is the female figure placed at the bottom edge of the canvas. Her presence underscores both the imbalance of the depicted event and points to the structural conditions shaping the status of women workers in contemporary society, who, in the case of Jugoremedija, constituted the majority of the workforce.

The question of women workers is addressed more directly in the drawing series *Women of Sićevo* (Figure #6), created during a feminist workshop held in the village of Sićevo. This series presents portraits of women with whom the artist interacted during her stay, and by including their names and nicknames (Mira, Mila, and Sneža), she also conveys the character of their interaction – whether through a portrait that includes handwritten phone numbers for advertising homemade goat cheese, a depiction of their hostess in Sićevo, as well as the woman from whom she received – and

[38] The painting *Jugoremedija* is based on a still taken from the documentary film *Jugoremedija: Ugovor na štetu trećeg* (2005) (*Jugoremedija: Contract to the Detriment of a Third Party)* by Ivan Zlatić.

[39] The painting *Jugoremedija* was exhibited at the Cultural Centre of Belgrade, 27th *Memorial of Nadežda Petrović* in Čačak, as well as at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade. In the catalogue for the exhibition at the Cultural Centre of Belgrade, Jasmina Čubrilo states that: "The very concept of the political in Milica Ružičić's recent works is realized as a decision to depict scenes that are uncomfortable, unpleasant, disturbing, and traumatic in a fetishized format: the format of collectible paintings and the format of museum paintings." Jasmina Čubrilo, *Slike. Milica Ružičić* (Kulturni centar Beograda, 2010) Author's free translation from the original.

recorded – advice on how to brew sage tea. Unlike other examples analyzed in this text, the artistic approach in these portraits is centered on making visible women who are otherwise marginalized and unseen. The work was created within the framework of the Feminist Art Colony in Sićevo, whose engagement with gender issues does not alter the class- and gender-determined conditions of the women who live and work in this village – women whom the artist encountered during her stay and who are engaged in strenuous physical labor. For this reason, *Women of Sićevo* adopts an intersectional perspective, emphasizing the interconnectedness of class- and gender-based discrimination. Such an approach functions as a rhetorical strategy that resists anonymity, typification, or the subsumption of women and workers into an indistinct mass.

The visual expression, in the case of *Jugoremedija* and the *Housing Issue* series, corresponds to the so-called 'documentary style', characterized by a critical orientation, grounding in real events, and a tendency to examine these events in their social and ideological dimensions.[40] The language of realism employed in *Jugoremedija* reflects the artist's intention to communicate issues of labor in a clear and accessible manner. Given that this is a contemporary artwork, it is important to emphasize that the use of realism does not represent an anachronism,[41] but rather a deliberate strategy for articulating social concerns. In other words, the chosen visual language serves a specific function: through its communicative clarity, it seeks to be understandable and accessible to a broad audience – precisely those whose experiences and questions it addresses.

Historically, realism has always existed at the margins or in opposition to modernist currents,[42] and its use today inevitably engages in a dialogue with its earlier applications. When viewed from the position of the contemporary *capitalist realism*, they may be seen as referring to the transformative shift that occurred in the realist art of Gustave Courbet. More precisely, the use of such tools points to a historical moment marked by the collapse of traditional artistic models and genres, an act of intelligent provocation, and the elevation of marginalized aspects of society and modern life to the status of representative historical painting.[43]

On the other hand, the realism found in the work of Milica Ružičić can be situated in relation to historically and geographically closer models, such as the *combative realism* of the 1930s, "which represented a political, social, artistic, and critical alternative",[44] and the *socialist realism* that, after 1945, was established as "one of the

[40] Čubrilo, *Slike. Milica Ružičić.*

[41] "Contemporaneity in the phrase contemporary art would signify that it is not a matter of art that depicts contemporaneity, but rather [...] art that is articulated from the artist's problematization of and work with social symptoms, using a language, form, and medium that critically correspond, in a material, procedural, and conceptual sense, with the content of the given context or symptom." In: Jasmina Čubrilo, "Savremena umetnost i doba nove normalnosti," in *Kovid-19 u Srbiji '20*, ured. Bojan Žikić (Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2021), 57–58. Author's own (free) translation from the original.

[42] Briony Fer, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1993), 253.

[43] Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Penguin, 1971), 23.

[44] Lidija Merenik, *Umetnost i vlast: srpsko slikarstvo 1945–1968*, 2nd rev. ed. Vol. 2 (Fond Vujičić kolekcija; Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, 2010), 2. Author's free translation from the original.

political pillars and a foundation of the cultural policy of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FPRY). [...] functioned as a mechanism for preserving the memory of the Yugoslav People's Liberation War, as a fighter against remnants of the 'reactionary' old regime, and as a propagator of the new social order and its leader"[45].

Nevertheless, any historical-artistic parallels should be limited to, on one hand, recognizing the recurring need for art to articulate social and economic issues from the margins – something that aligns with the critical potential of *combative realism* – and on the other, to the specific visual language employed, which shares certain traits with *socialist realism*, such as its monumentality and comprehensibility. Importantly, this is a form of art produced in a radically different ideological context, and with the intention of being critical of the conditions produced by privatization and the adoption of a liberal economy, wherein references to socialism and the visual traditions of *combative* and *socialist realism* in this interpretation primarily serve to underscore the contrast with the present condition, in which the working class has shifted to a state of decline.

The *Housing Issue* series addresses the interconnected nature of labor-related concerns, depicting scenes associated with construction workers, the uncontrolled and invasive expansion that has come to define both urban and non-urban spaces in Serbia over the past years, the housing crisis, and the looming threat of homelessness. The works are structured as a storyboard, which points to the inextricable, systemic problems embedded in contemporary society. Each individual piece presents a distinct motif, while all are executed using the same technique. One of the drawings depicts a close-up portrait of a construction worker against a neutral, unpainted background, his facial expression evoking the struggles of precarious labor under unfavorable conditions (Figure #7). A different work portrays a construction site through intersecting red vertical and horizontal lines, within which workers are rendered as distant smudges in grey tones. This near-abstract visual treatment conveys a sense of artificiality, highlighting at the same time the adverse and unsafe conditions under which construction workers labor as well as the inadequacy and megalomania of contemporary urban planning in Serbia (Figure #8). Subsequent drawings allude to a protest of unpaid workers (Figure #9) and pleas for help in the face of eviction threats, particularly those targeting former workers of the Trudbenik company who have long faced displacement from their homes.[46] The series culminates in images that suggest the potentially dire consequences and outcomes of such situations – in the case of this storyboard, the fictional death of a worker, with an increasingly somber and darkened background and color palette that reinforces the progressively negative atmosphere, which suggest a narrowing of options and the worsening of living and working conditions. The final work in the series presents a painted screenshot – an appropriated media image translated into a visual form[47] – raising the issue of homelessness and the

[45] Ibid., 4. Author's free translation from the original.

[46] Petra Živić, "Trudbenik – od zaboravljenog građevinskog džina do radničkog muzeja" (Trudbenik – From a forgotten construction giant to a workers' museum) Accessed February 17, 2024. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-46404677.

[47] Čubrilo, *Slike. Milica Ružičić.*

broader question of how this problem is approached, both in Serbia and in economically more developed countries. It underscores the serious threat posed to the survival of existing social welfare systems and the worsening of housing insecurity.[48] This body of work clearly revisits the issue of intersectionality first raised in the analysis of *Women of Sićevo*, emphasizing the need for a systemic, comprehensive, and integrated response to the complex and interdependent challenges of class, economics, and social marginalization. While in some of the cases represented the self-organization and activism of workers – both women and men – has led to favorable outcomes in resisting a system that persistently targets them, such efforts remain exhausting and unsustainable. Without concrete and durable structural support, this model of resistance is unlikely to successfully address the full range of obstacles posed by contemporary political realities.

Conclusion

The representation of the working class in contemporary Serbian art – both in film and the visual arts – coincides with its extra-artistic reality, whereby the predominant use of language of realism ensures the communicability of the works with a broader audience. This paper draws on examples that consistently build on the tradition of realism (*Working Class Heroes*) – from local, such as Yugoslav social realism to international (e.g. Italian neorealism)—as well as those that, through the recontextualization of this language, complicate its semantic scope and potential in the representation of the working class (*Jugoremedija*, *Women of Sićevo*). It also involves examples that introduce partial departures from realism in order to explore, as in the case of the film *Working Class Goes to Hell* and the storyboard series *Housing Issue*, possible alternatives in the representation of the working class through contrasts of genre and style.

The works analyzed engage either directly or indirectly with the legacy of socialism in the artistic representation of the working class, while remaining primarily rooted in contemporary (capitalist) conditions and the side effects of the post-socialist transition – such as illegal construction, factory closures, and, consequently, deteriorating working and living conditions. Whether as a central or secondary concern, the works raise the question of possible models of resistance, most often responding through attempts to articulate collective struggle and to reclaim agency – both by representing workers as active subjects and by involving them directly in the artistic process. Above all, the analyzed examples underscore the importance of portraying the working class as a coherent social group and explicitly address it in those terms.

[48] Milica Ružičić, "Housing issue 2022," accessed September 5, 2025, https://milicaruzicic.wordpress.com/housing-issue/.

Figure #1: Still from the film *Working Class Heroes*, dir. Miloš Pušić, 2022.
Courtesy of the director

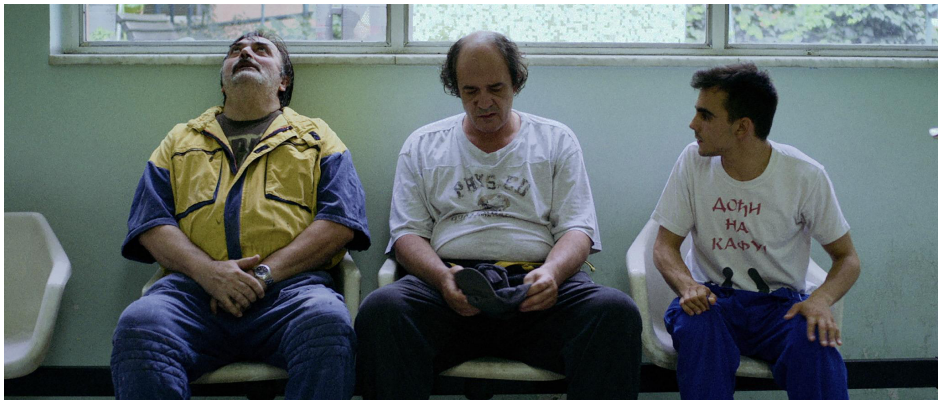


Figure #2: Still from the film *Working Class Heroes*, dir. Miloš Pušić, 2022.
Courtesy of the director

Figure #3: Still from the film *Working Class Goes to Hell*, dir. Mladen Đorđević, 2023.
Courtesy of the director

Figure #4: Still from the film *Working Class Goes to Hell*, dir. Mladen Đorđević, 2023. Courtesy of the director

Figure #5: Milica Ružičić, *Jugoremedija 2004*, 2010, acrilyc on canvas, Courtesy of the artist

Figure #6: Milica Ružičić, *Women of Sićevo, Mira*, 2017, drawing, Courtesy of the artist

Figure #7: Milica Ružičić, *Housing issue*, 2022, watercolor, Courtesy of the artist

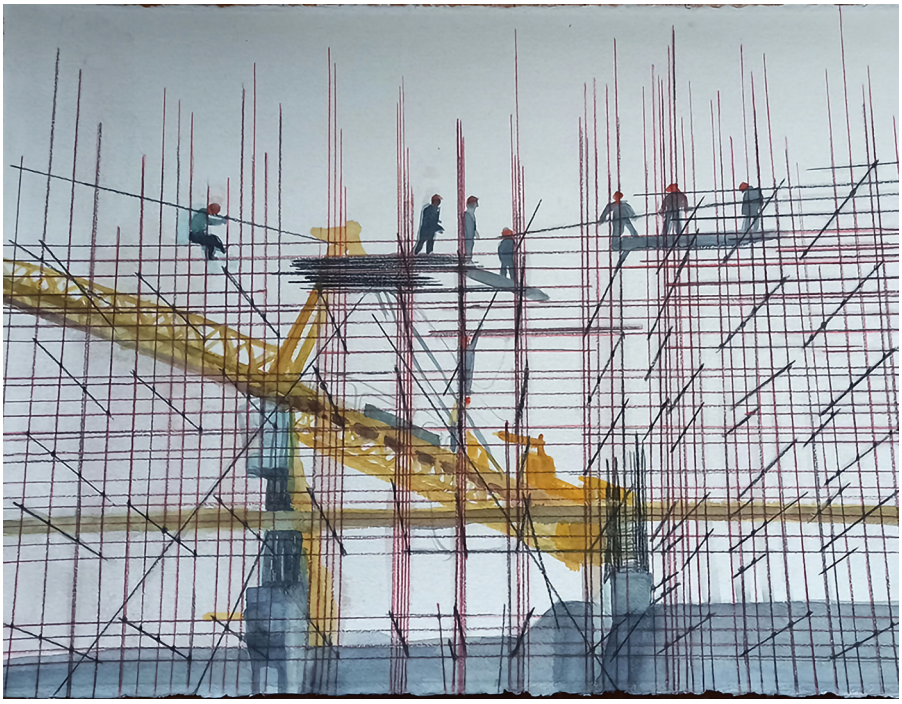


Figure #8: Milica Ružičić, *Housing issue*, 2022, watercolor, Courtesy of the artist

Figure #9: Milica Ružičić, *Housing issue*, 2022, watercolor, Courtesy of the artist

References

BBC News na srpskom. "Jugoremedija: Kako su radnici postali 'suvišni ljudi'." February 27, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-47375337.

Bourdieu, Pierre. Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. Harvard University Press, 1996.

Brakočević, Danilo. "Miloš Pušić: I dalje želim da pobedi dobro, koliko god to možda bilo iluzorno," intervju sa rediteljem Milošem Pušićem. Filmoskopija. Filmski centar Srbije. February 9, 2022. https://www.fcs.rs/milos-pusic-i-dalje-zelim-da-pobedi-dobro-koliko-god-to-mozda-bilo-iluzorno/.

Čubrilo, Jasmina. "Savremena umetnost i doba nove normalnosti." In Kovid-19 u Srbiji '20, edited by Bojan Žikić, 57–58. Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Beogradu, 2021.

Čubrilo, Jasmina. Slike. Milica Ružičić. Kulturni centar Beograda, 2010.

Denegri, Ješa. Prilozi za drugu liniju. 2, EXAT-51, Nove tendencije, radikalni enformel, Gorgona: dopune hronici jednog kritičarskog zalaganja. Macura; Topy, 2005.

Drašković, Božo. "Slom industrijskog sektora u Srbiji. Postoje li šanse za deindustrijalizaciju." In Deindustrijalizacija u Srbiji. Mogućnosti revitalizacije industrijskog sektora, edited by Božo Drašković, 107–133. Institut ekonomskih nauka; Beogradska bankarska akademija, Fakultet bankarstvo, osiguranje i finansije, 2014.

Fer, Briony, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood. Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars. Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1993.

Filipović, Ana. "Mladen Đorđević: 'Mejnstrim ne voli kada postane neprijatno, bez obzira na to koliko je istinito.'" Filmoskopija. Filmski centar Srbije. October 31, 2023. https://www.fcs.rs/mladen-djordjevic-mejnstrim-ne-voli-kada-postane-neprijatno-bez-obzira-na-to-koliko-je-istinito/.

Fisher, Mark. Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? Zero Books, 2009.

Merenik, Lidija. *Politički prostori umetnosti 1*929–1950: borbeni realizam i socijalistički realizam. Galerija likovne umetnosti, poklon zbirka Rajka Mamuzića, 2013.

Merenik, Lidija. Umetnost i vlast: srpsko slikarstvo 1945–1968, 2nd rev. ed. Vol. 2. Fond Vujičić kolekcija; Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, 2010.

Milanović, Branko. Ekonomske nejednakosti u Jugoslaviji. Ekonomika, 1990.

Nochlin, Linda. Realism. Penguin, 1971.

Nova umjetnička praksa: 1966–1978. Vol. 36. Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1978.

Novaković, Nada G. "Štrajkovi, sindikati i privatizacija u Srbiji." Sociološki pregled 47, no. 1 (2023): 23–52. https://doi.org/10.5937/socpreg1301023N.

Novaković, Nada G. "Tranzicija i nestajanje radničke klase Srbije." *Nacionalni interes* 17, no. 40 (2021): 153–79. https:doi.org/10.22182/ni.4012021.5.

Oktobarski salon, 60. 2024. What's Left? Kulturni centar Beograda.

Radnička klasa odlazi u raj [The Working Class Is Off to Paradise]. Directed by Marko Cvejić. Feature documentary, 80 min. Serbia: Film Center Serbia; Mandragora Film, 2017. YouTube video, published ca. 5 years ago. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NaTGJAvyoM&t=1445s.

Radosavljević, Veljko. *Sjaj crnog: Prilog za bolje razumevanje jednog razdoblja srpske kinematografije*. Filmski centar Srbije, 2019.

Ružičić, Milica. "Housing Issue." 2022. Accessed September 5, 2025. https://milicaruzicic.wordpress.com/housing-issue/.

Ružičić, Milica. Trolley 28. Published August 17, 2020. https://milicaruzic.wordpress.com/2020/08/17/troley-28/.

Sontag, Susan. "Notes on 'Camp.'" Partisan Review 31, no. 4 (1964): 515–30.

Živić, Petra. "Trudbenik – od zaboravljenog građevinskog džina do radničkog muzeja (Trudbenik – From a Forgotten Construction Giant to a Workers' Museum)." Accessed February 17, 2024. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-46404677.

Article received: April 15, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Original scholarly paper

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.628

Danica Đorđević Janković
Museum of Naïve and Marginal Art, Belgrade

Residual Aesthetics: Rethinking Zoran Todorović's *Warmth* Against the Benchmark of the Anthropocene

Abstract: This paper examines Zoran Todorović's *Warmth*, an artwork composed of cut and discarded human hair, exploring its aesthetic, political, and social implications through the lens of marginal aesthetics, abjection, biopolitics, and posthuman theory. Drawing on thinkers such as Julia Kristeva, Rosi Braidotti, and Judith Butler, the analysis situates hair as abject, waste, form of life, and un-grievable within broader contexts of cognitive labour and the ecological crisis. The paper aims to argue the agency of discarded hair as a material, instrument, and method in contemporary art to disrupt the anthropocentric discourse by decentering the human along the lines of Braidotti's theory of posthuman subjectivity.

Keywords: Zoran Todorović; posthuman; hair-based art; waste; abject; ungrievability; Anthropocene.

1.

In 2009, Zoran Todorović was selected as one of the two artists to exhibit at the Serbian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial, alongside Katarina Zdjelar. He presented *Warmth*, which formally takes on a minimalist guise, consisting of layering multiple square pieces of felted fabric made out of trimmed, discarded human hair on standardized factory pallets.[1] The installation also included, rather than being accompanied by, a video projection, documenting, and thus emphasizing, the *making-of* process, including cutting, gathering, storing, transporting, and industrially processing the hair into murky grey blankets/fabrics.[2] Anchored in contemplating the body, and its parts and residue, as subjects of normative control, social care, and surveillance, Todorović's *Warmth* has, naturally, been interpreted and analyzed thus far through the lens of biopolitics, foregrounding hair not so much as waste but rather as a potent

[1] Zoran Todorović, "Warmth," *Zoran Todorović*, accessed May 31, 2025, https://www.zorantodorovic.com/portfolio_page/warmth/, Zoran Todorović, *Zoran Todorović: Warmth = Toplina*: *[The Serbian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial, June 6 – November 22, 2009]* (Museum of Contemporary Art = Muzej savremene umetnosti, 2009). The exhibition catalog features key essays, referred to in this text, by Branislav Dimitrijević, "Warmth/ But If You Take My Voice, What Will Be Left to Me?", Stevan Vuković, "Art in the Field of Bioeconomics", and Jasmina Čubrilo, "Documents on Experiments in Biopolitics," 9, 40.

[2] The video documentation that accompanied *Warmth* is available on the following link: Zoran Todorović, *Warmth*, video, 2:10 min, Vimeo, uploaded August 24, 2016, https://vimeo.com/181954128.

*Author's contact information: danica.djordjevic.jankovic@gmail.com

carrier of genetic material, a condensed collection of the DNA of a part of the adult Serbian population, and a manifestation of how life – and its by-products – are subject to control by the state and its entities.[3] Here, two points need to be made. First, that the hair used in the installation was gathered over a period of several months of rigorous planning from hair salons, as places of volitional hair-cutting, and sites that epitomize state control and rule, such as prisons and military barracks.[4] Second, that *Warmth* operates as an amalgam of the installation, the process that preceded it, and the video material that documents its creation/production, i.e., the hair-based fabrics represent the result of a complex production process. This inscribes an open-ended structure to the work entwined with its consumption, perception, and affect, transforming the work from a seeming installation to an event, a singularity that is referentially linked to the document.[5] This paper aims to extend the analysis of *Warmth* toward considering the use of discarded hair as an abject, waste material against the benchmark of the Anthropocene, and its subsequent dilemmas, the posthuman crisis and ecological discourse. By arguing that the work employs and harnesses a residual aesthetic, this text contextualizes the work as a posthuman reflection on what forms of matter, labour, and life are deemed visible, valuable, or grievable.

2.

Unraveling humanism as a historical construct that centred the "Man" as a universalistic ideal, Rosi Braidotti defined posthumanism as "the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework."[6] Echoing Foucault's "Death of Man", the author put forth the outline for a posthuman subjectivity, explaining that it "is not about the death of the subject, but about the proliferation of multiple subjects in a process."[7] This includes overcoming the narrow notion of what counts as the *human*, i.e., abandoning the predominant binary logic that rests on differences.[8] Braidotti recognizes the "crisis of the subject" as a symptom of global challenges, such as the permeation of technology into every pore of life, the precarity of contemporary war, and the ecological crisis.[9] These aspects are not the only circumstances that propel the crisis, but they do emerge as pivotal in contemplating life, as well as its governance and commodification. In

[3] Dimitrijević, "Warmth/But If You Take My Voice, What will Be Left to Me?," 9.

[4] Dimitrijević, "Warmth/But If You Take My Voice, What Will Be Left to Me?," 9. Jasmina Čubrilo, "Documents on Experiments in Biopolitics," 40.

[5] Dimitrijević, "Warmth/But If You Take My Voice, What Will Be Left to Me?," 7; Miško Šuvaković, "Unavoidable Antagonisms or Three Biopolitics: Biopolitical Modalities in the Artistic Productions of Zoran Todorović," in *Ogled*, Winter 2022, edited by Anica Tucakov, accessed May 31, 2025, https://www.zorantodorovic.com/text/

[6] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity, 2013), 37.

[7] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 50.

[8] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 15–16.

[9] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 9.

terms of labour, the information age and the rapid development of digital technology instigated a crucial shift, ushering in "semiocapitalism", defined by Franco "Bifo" Berardi as an entity that treats information as a commodity, a new type of cognitive labour marked by affective engagement, fragmentation, and abstraction.[10] Technology-driven economies, dispersed across fields of stem cell research, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, biotechnology, etc., push forward the agenda of "universal progress" at the expense of blurring the boundaries of ethics by simply not addressing these issues or dealing with them too late. This development indicates a critical leap from Foucault's biopolitics, as a systemic effort to regulate, subjugate, and control the (social) body, to Mbembe's formulation of necro-politics subsumed in "sovereignty as the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not."[11] In other words, if biopolitics implies the power to rule over life, necro-politics suggests the power to rule over death, i.e., it implies governance over the question of what constitutes as *life* and whether its *materiality* is expendable or not. In that vein, introducing the concept of "grievability", Judith Butler begins by delineating several key concepts. First, she makes the distinction between "recognizing" and "apprehending" life, explaining the soft nuance that apprehending life does not imply its recognition as a (grievable, i.e., politically and socially visible) life, which is a process that takes existing social frames as a prerequisite.[12]

However, the human returns like an entity of utmost authority and power over the terrestrial domain in the Anthropocene thesis, centering the (hu)man and his/its activities as the predominant factor in the extensive and geologically significant transformations of the planet. While alarmingly calling for a certain sense of awareness, accountability, and recognition of non-human life, the thesis, as T. J. Demos lucidly points out, anaesthetizes its potency by reinforcing "the techno-utopian position that 'we' have indeed mastered nature, just as we have mastered its imaging – and in fact the two, the dual colonization of nature and representation, appear inextricably intertwined."[13] Demos' collective "we" echoes the arguments by Claire Colebrook, who foregrounded the issue of conflating *all* humans into one undistinguishable pile by essentially formulating "a new form of difference" between the *Homo sapiens* and other life forms and forms of life.[14] To follow the line of argument set out by Mbembe and Butler, the Anthropocene discourse positions *humanity* as the sovereign entity that is paradoxically and simultaneously responsible for the devastating ecological transformations that threaten its existence, which, as a prerogative, must be preserved, i.e., the only *life* that is grievable. The precariousness of such a position is made disturbingly

[10] Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Semiotext(e), 2009), 73–89.

[11] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, 1990), 135–45; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Duke University Press, 2019), 53.

[12] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009), 1–34.

[13] T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Sternberg Press, 2017), 28.

[14] Claire Colebrook, "We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene," in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 7.

visible as the most recent effect of the ecological crisis unfolded before our eyes, when an entire village of Blatten in the Swiss Alps was engulfed under ice and rock after a glacier catastrophically collapsed.[15] Considering that an evacuation was organized, this ecological incident underlines how humanity acts for humanity's sake, with the devastated valley serving as an ungrievable reminder.

In terms of contemporary art, two questions arise as significant – what *sort* of art can navigate, contemplate, and articulate the complexities of the post-human crisis outlined here briefly, and how is such art perceived and received? To answer this question, we must return to Braidotti's concept of the posthuman subjectivity that is "rather materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere, as both materialist and relational, 'nature-cultural' and self-organizing, and as such, crucial to this process."[16] According to Braidotti, "this new knowing subject is a complex assemblage of human and non-human, planetary and cosmic, given and manufactured."[17] In other words, art that correlates to the new posthuman subject emerges in the interstice; it explores the breadth of the in-betweenness to generate meaning as a complex singularity.

3.

The in-between is central to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as the epitome of what provokes it, as she writes: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order."[18] The abject exists in the interstice/as an interstice, as a phenomenon that escapes and subverts binary logic. In that line of thought, hair – particularly trimmed, discarded human hair – emerges as a manifestation of the abject, a simultaneous *self* and *other*, but neither entirely *self* nor *other*, a carrier of life (DNA) and a *lifeless* form, but not *life* itself. Discarded hair is a life's trace, a code, and a vessel of memory. On the other hand, trimmed hair is waste, it is residue, and, as Mary Douglas put it in her seminal study *Purity and Danger*, it is "matter out of place."[19] The Cambridge Dictionary defines hair as "the mass of thin threadlike structures on the head of a person or any of these structures that grow out of the skin of a person or animal."[20] From a biological standpoint, hair is a complex structure composed of proteins, water, lipids, minerals, and pigments. Culturally and historically, hair has been a core element of identity, a symbol of status and beauty, and a highly sought-after commodity. Yet, when trimmed, hair becomes devoid of its

[15] Tess McClure, "This is ground zero for Blatten: the tiny Swiss village engulfed by a mountain," *The Guardian*, June 1, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jun/01/this-is-ground-zero-for-blatten-the-tiny-swiss-village-engulfed-by-a-mountain.

[16] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 51–52.

[17] Ibid., 159.

[18] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

[19] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge, 2002), 36–40.

[20] *"Hair,"* Cambridge Dictionary, accessed June 1, 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hair.

personal and social function, transforming into waste to be disposed of, despite carrying genetic material. In essence, cut hair becomes an excess, a surplus, it becomes abject by activating the boundaries between self and non-self. As a residue of human life and existence, discarded hair represents the antithesis of the "ideal Vitruvian Man", a threat that demasks its fictionality, and thus a suitable *matter* to illuminate and expose the multifaceted crisis of the posthuman.

If we follow the line of thought presented by Nicolas Bourriaud, expunged hair belongs to the domain of the *exform* – "the site where border negotiations unfold between what is rejected and what is admitted, products and waste. Exform designates a point of contact, a 'socket' or 'plug', in the process of exclusion and inclusion – a sign that switches between center and periphery, floating between dissidence and power."[21] According to the French theorist, contemporary art exhibits an explicit anti-idealism, adopting what the regimes of art deem insignificant, ugly, uncanny, abstract, uncomfortable […] to alter its modes of (in)visibility. Put differently, contemporary art harnesses the ungrievable by methods and processes that might grant it recognition through apprehension. Discarded hair, thus, might be considered an ungrievable matter, a lifeless vessel of genetic material that has been marked as superfluous. Due to its abject nature, discarded human hair in contemporary art is far from common; it is rather marginal as a material, constituting a particular niche within practices that are predominantly textile-related. However, when considered in the context of the ecological crisis brought about by the anthropos, this specific bodily detritus seems to induce a peculiar "closed circle" when employed in art. Compared to synthetic materials, foremostly plastic, as "the substrata of advanced capitalism," and the hallmark of humanity's environmental footprint, hair-as-waste-as-material represents a more ecological solution, albeit raising ethical and biological issues in textile production.

4.

As introduced in the opening chapter, Zoran Todorović assembled the stockpiles of discarded hair, industrially processed into identically sized felted blankets, as an installation consisting of minutely layering the materials one on top of the other, akin to a factory storage setting. Exhibited at the Serbian pavilion, *Warmth* mimicked, or rather, subverted the minimalist formula with an ambiguous display of several identical textile-laden pallets, whose production was exposed through the video documentation, making the invisible labour one of its points of interest. The hair as raw material was collected over several months from approximately 240,000 people in an arduous process that brought together and engaged a large number of individuals, establishments, and organizations. In its ideal form, the installation would have been composed out of the hair of every adult Serbian citizen, transforming it into a composite genetic map.[22] Although the artist's intention would more firmly iterate issues

[21] Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, trans. Erik Butler (Verso, 2016), x.

[22] Dimitrijević, "Warmth/But If You Take My Voice, What Will Be Left To Me?," 9.

of how identity, nationality, and representation intertwine and correlate, the felted installation still embodies the social and the personal body within each hair strand. Alongside its reference to governing one's body (or body remnants, in this case), the work tackles the issue of biopolitics more explicitly in terms of gathering hair from people who were in hospitals, prisons, and military barracks at the time, confronting the genealogy of the institution as a sovereign body.

As Kristeva underlines, the abject has no object, and, in the case of Todorović, he neither perverts nor purifies the abject, instead simply and neutrally materializing it, and in doing so, engages the meanings discarded hair can generate with its exformal, waste-based, organic, and lifeless, abject nature. On the other hand, if the raw substance is in itself "matter out of place," then *Warmth* becomes "form out of place", or, in other words, abjecting the abject. This is further emphasized by assigning a function to the hair-textiles, implying that the raw material, waste, has been through a recycling process that has reassigned its value in social frameworks. As waste, abject residue, the hair represents the excess of the human, debris, a surplus, entering the domain of ungrievability, a meaningless loss and a paradoxical congruence of *living* and decay, a relational matter marked by a distinct vital materiality.[23]

Here, we must digress to emphasize that *Warmth* is not an isolated incident in Todorović's oeuvre, considering the abject features throughout his works. As Miško Šuvaković aptly put it, Todorović engages in a dual apprehension of "new media," viewing them as both "devices in art" and "products of mass social technologies, such as hypnosis, medicine, plastic surgery byproducts, etc."[24] Namely, Todorović meticulously exhumes the abject to probe and create layers of societal disturbances, aiming to expose them. The elegance of his approach in employing the abject becomes particularly evident in artworks like *Agalma* (2003), which involved making soap from the surgically removed body fat of the artist, hosting a public bath, and selling the soap in a flash sale. In *Assimilation* (realized between 1997 and 2010), the artist presented food made from human flesh, confronting social taboos, health concerns, and cultural nuances. In *Integration* (2017–), Todorović brewed beer from the urine collected from refugees in a Belgrade-based center, exposing the imposed paradigm of both object and waste embedded within the refugee status.[25] Considering this, *Warmth* emerges as a continuation of engagement with and within the liminality of materiality.

The video documentation represents an integral part of the installation, not only as a means of mediating the production process, illuminating the (ungrievable) labour of nearly 500 people, but also as a way of traversing the minimalist code toward an open-ended structure of the work. While the organization of the work rests

[23] Joshua Reno, "Waste and Waste Management," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015): 566.

[24] Zoran Todorović, Miško Šuvaković, *Z.T. Intenzitet afekta: performansi, akcije, instalacije – retrospektiva Zorana Todorovića / Z.T. Intensity of Affect: Performances, Actions, Installations – retrospective of Zoran Todorović*, Novi Sad: Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, 2009, 9.

[25] Sonja Jankov, "Savremene umetničke prakse kao vid interkulturalne komunikacije sa izbeglicama sa drugih kontinenata", *Interkulturalnost: časopis za podsticanje i afirmaciju interkulturalne komunikacije* 18 (2019), 26–27.

on manpower and networks, the production is entirely industrial, which at this point particularly comes to the fore – not as a way of negating the manual but as a way of highlighting the transformation in the labour process. As Berardi highlighted the historic shift toward cognitive labour, the work interwoven within the production process of *Warmth* counteracts with an era ruled by the digital and the informational, by fostering a participatory, community-generating occurrence as a singular event and a manifestation of the artwork's pre-production affectation. As the artist states, *Warmth* is not a result, a finished product, but rather "a result of art that can be comprehended as a form of life and existence." He continues:

> This simultaneously means that the work is open to intervention and that its product is, in a certain way, made counting on the participation of a large number of people, so the consumption, perception and affectation of the work are largely part of the production itself and it is difficult to observe them separately. In this way, this installation, as well as the process of its realization, is actually an intervention space, a space of politicization of art and, in the context of this exhibition, a space of thematization of the state as a biopolitical agent.[26]

Todorović's oeuvre is anchored in affectation, as reapplied and perhaps most tangibly manifested in *Warmth*. In Braidotti's terms, this implies "the outward-bound interconnections or relations they enable and sustain."[27] In the context of *Warmth*, the installation, or rather the material, has not only become part of many museum collections but also began its own journey. Namely, it drew the attention of fashion designer Aleksandra Lalić, who designed a collection of dresses out of the abject material, and provoked a "reaction piece" by London-based Alix Bizet. On the other hand, Todorović's *Warmth* was the subject of institutional marginalization in 2020, when the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art displaced the work from its original spot, as part of an ongoing exhibition entitled *Reflections of Our Time*, for the purpose of an unauthorized building adaptation.[28] Although it might not be related to the specificities of the work in question, this bizarre incident does manifest itself as a demonstration of how art can be swiftly labelled as insignificant and a surplus within the institutional framework assigned to preserve and present it. In essence, it could be said that *Warmth* was proclaimed as ungrievable, leading us to recall Jacques Rancière's redistribution of the sensible to underline how this work re-exposes the regime of aesthetics that renders (in)visibility both within itself and through the affectations it independently generates.[29]

---

[26] Zoran Todorović, "Stejtment umetnika," *Umetnost: Blog o umetnosti*, accessed May 31, 2025, https://umetnost.wordpress.com/stejtment-umetnika/.

[27] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 165.

[28] "Umetnik čije je delo sklonjeno: Todorović – Kiš brka pojmove," *Nova.rs*, September 10, 2021, https://nova.rs/kultura/umetnik-cije-je-delo-sklonjeno-todorovic-kis-brka-pojmove/.

[29] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004), 12–19.

Finally, let us return to the dichotomy intrinsic to discarded hair, as both living and dead, as a viable genome sample and an ungrievable, decaying, redundant matter, and how *Warmth* precisely operates within the threshold of such material. On the verge between bio-material and bio-waste, Zoran Todorović's work exposes the pivotal convergence of biopolitics and necropolitics. If we consider the decaying, trimmed hair as a posthuman form of life, as traces of existence and vessels of memory – along the lines of Braidotti's argument – we could connect *Warmth* to Mbambe's theory in more ways than one, starting from his repositioning of death "as the very principle of *excess* – an anti-economy."[30] Mbambe draws on the history of slavery to argue for a form of death-in-life and, building on that, we could interpret the discarded hair in this work, processed and layered, exhibited and functional, as a manifestation of *life-in-death*. *Warmth*, thus, operates as a certain *death-world* of the (social) body, a demonstration of necro power and a reminder of social modes of existence marked by slow processes of erasure.[31]

5.

By considering Zoran Todorović's work *Warmth* against the grain of the Anthropocene, instead of singular analysis along the lines of the pre-set framework of biopolitics, the paper examines the artwork and its use of discarded hair as a raw resource to engage a residual aesthetic. Aimed at disrupting the aesthetic regime, the aesthetic in question employs the residual, the cast away, the discarded, the discharged, accepting and harnessing its abject nature to expose the injustices of a political, social, and aesthetic system that governs over the power of (in)visibility, sayability, and grievability. The following chapters introduce the lenses of the posthuman crisis, the ecological catastrophe, and the cognitive labour shift to deepen the understanding of how *the art of the residual* can illuminate the precariousness of the living condition. Contemplating concepts of materiality, decay, and waste, the paper foregrounds discarded hair as a material in art that can expand the narrative of the *human* in relation to life and forms-of-life, interconnecting humanity's role as producers of waste and redistributors of waste. Finally, the paper opens the complex question of the margins of/in art through the perspective of Todorović's *Warmth* as a case study, or rather as a template that has been marginalized directly and that embodies a margin, not in terms of residue-as-material, but in connection with the looming future of immaculate algorithms, smarter-than-human AI, and the posthuman debate. Both abjection and aesthetic, life and death, art and life intertwine within this work, that emerges as a champion of residual aesthetic as a form of resistance suitable to the challenges of the posthuman subject. In conclusion, by employing hair as bio-waste, Zoran Todorović's work renegotiates the power dynamics within the art system that, in turn, extends abjection and ungrievability from the realm of the material to the framework of the artwork itself to reaffirm its affective potential.

[30] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 69.

[31] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 40.

References

Berardi, Franco "Bifo." *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Translated by Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia, 73–89. Semiotext(e), 2009.

Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *The Exform*. Verso, 2015.

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.

Colebrook, Claire. "We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene." In *Anthropocene Feminism*, edited by Richard Grusin, 1–20. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Čubrilo, Jasmina. "Documents on Experiments in Biopolitics." In *Zoran Todorović: Warmth = Toplina: [The Serbian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial, June 6 – November 22, 2009]*, edited by Zoran Todorović. Museum of Contemporary Art = Muzej savremene umetnosti, 2009.

Davis, Heather. "Life & Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic." In *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, edited by Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, 347–58. Open Humanities Press, 2015.

Demos, T. J. *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*. Sternberg Press, 2017.

Dimitrijević, Branko. "Warmth/But If You Take My Voice, What Will Be Left to Me?" In *Zoran Todorović: Warmth = Toplina: [The Serbian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial, June 6 – November 22, 2009]*, edited by Zoran Todorović. Museum of Contemporary Art = Muzej savremene umetnosti, 2009.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge, 1966.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Vintage Books, 1990 (original 1976).

Jankov, Sonja. "Savremene umetničke prakse kao vid interkulturalne komunikacije sa izbeglicama sa drugih kontinenata." *Interkulturalnost: časopis za podsticanje i afirmaciju interkulturalne komunikacije*, 18 (2019), 22–33.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon Roudiez. Columbia University Press, 1982.

Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.

Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Duke University Press, 2019.

Šuvaković, Miško. "Unavoidable Antagonisms or Three Biopolitics: Biopolitical Modalities in the Artistic Productions of Zoran Todorović." In *Ogled*, Winter 2022. Edited by Anica Tucakov, https://www.zorantodorovic.com/text/

Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. Continuum, 2004.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Verso, 2009.

Reno, Joshua. "Waste and Waste Management." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015): 557–72.

Todorović, Zoran. *Zoran Todorović: Warmth = Toplina: [The Serbian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial, June 6 – November 22, 2009]*. Museum of Contemporary Art = Muzej savremene umetnosti, 2009.

Todorović, Zoran, and Miško Šuvaković. *Z.T. Intenzitet afekta: performansi, akcije, instalacije – retrospektiva Zorana Todorovića/Z.T. Intensity of Affect: Performances, Actions, Installations – retrospective of Zoran Todorović*. Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, 2009.

Vuković, Stevan. "Art in the Field of Bioeconomics." In *Zoran Todorović: Warmth = Toplina: [The Serbian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial, June 6 – November 22, 2009]*, edited by Zoran Todorović. Museum of Contemporary Art = Muzej savremene umetnosti, 2009.

Internet sources

Artist's Portfolio Page: Todorović, Zoran. "*Warmth*." *Zoran Todorović*. Accessed May 31, 2025. https://www.zorantodorovic.com/portfolio_page/warmth/.

Vimeo Video: Todorović, Zoran. *Warmth*. Video, 2:10. Vimeo. Uploaded August 24, 2016. https://vimeo.com/181954128.

Cambridge Dictionary. "*Hair*." Accessed May 31, 2025. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hair.

Interview on Ogled: "Zoran Todorović: Umesto sažetka – intervju." *Ogled*. Accessed May 31, 2025. https://ogled.org/intervjui/zoran-todorovic/.

Artist Statement on Blog: Todorović, Zoran. "Stejtment umetnika." *Umetnost: Blog o umetnosti*. Accessed May 31, 2025. https://umetnost.wordpress.com/stejtment-umetnika/.

News Article on Nova.rs: "Umetnik čije je delo sklonjeno: Todorović – Kiš brka pojmove." *Nova.rs*. September 10, 2021. https://nova.rs/kultura/umetnik-cije-je-delo-sklonjeno-todorovic-kis-brka-pojmove/.

News Article on The Guardian.com: McClure, Tess. "This is ground zero for Blatten: the tiny Swiss village engulfed by a mountain," *The Guardian*, June 1, 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jun/01/this-is-ground-zero-for-blatten-the-tiny-swiss-village-engulfed-by-a-mountain.

Article received: April 10, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Original scholarly paper

BEYOND THE MAIN TOPIC

Şölen Köseoğlu

Women in the Modern Movement: Léonie Geisendorf and Architectural Practice in Mid-20th Century Europe

Nadiyah Tunnikmah

From Margins to Algorithms: Mediatization of Yogyakarta Visual Art on Instagram

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.629

Şölen Köseoğlu
Faculty of Architecture and Design, Atatürk University, Erzurum

Women in the Modern Movement: Léonie Geisendorf and Architectural Practice in Mid-20th Century Europe

Abstract: The aim of this study is to introduce the works of architect Léonie Geisendorf (1914–2016). From the 1940s to the 2000s, she was one of Sweden's most accomplished architects, gaining significant recognition in a male-dominated field. She is recognized as one of the most significant representatives of the International Style in Sweden. A recently opened exhibition at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design in Stockholm focuses on Léonie Geisendorf, aiming to highlight and introduce her architectural works, which also aligns with the objective of this study. In terms of methodology, the study combines exhibition analysis, interviews, and site visits. The contribution of this study lies in its focus on highlighting an exceptional woman architect in contrast to the prevailing male-centred narratives of architectural history. By introducing Léonie Geisendorf's works, the study intends to emphasize the significance of the exhibition and the museum in bringing forward women architects who have been overlooked for decades.

Keywords: women in architecture; gender; 20th century architecture; exhibitions.

Introduction

The contributions of women to the field of architecture have long existed, yet they have been overlooked due to gender-biased perspectives. The historical visibility of women in the architectural profession is closely linked to the changes in their societal status. It was through the efforts of the first-wave feminist movement fighting for women's right to vote, to participate in governance, to enter all professions, and to access the necessary education to do so that women were admitted to architecture schools. As a result of these efforts, the first female graduates in architecture received their diplomas in Finland in 1890, in France in 1898, in Germany in 1909, in the United States in 1915, in the United Kingdom in 1917, and in Canada in 1920.[1]

The second-wave feminism, on the other hand, played a crucial role in making women in architecture more visible and triggered the writing of the first texts in the fields of architectural theory and history. Following the earliest texts from the 1970s (*From Tipi to Skyscraper: A History of Women in Architecture* by Doris Cole, 1973; *Architecture and Urban Planning* essay by Dolores Hayden and Gwendolyn Wright, 1976), the 1980s and

[1] Neslihan Türkün Dostoğlu and Özlem Erdoğdu Erkarslan, "Türkiye'de Kadın Mimarların Statüsü Üzerine Niceliksel Analiz," in *Cinsiyet ve Mimarlık*, ed. Belgin Turan Özkaya (Matsa Plushing House, 2010), 22–26.

Author's contact information: solen.koseoglu@gmail.com

1990s saw a growing body of literature. Over time, various books were produced with the purpose of documenting the contributions of women who had been practicing architecture for nearly a century, cataloguing their biographies and significant works, and establishing a theoretical foundation for the field in relation to feminist theory.[2]

Initially rooted in the United States, these studies gradually expanded to the UK and Europe. From the 1990s onwards, literature in Europe began to focus on making visible the overlooked contributions of European women architects within the modern architecture movement. Among the figures highlighted in these works are Irish pioneer Eileen Gray (1878–1976), Finnish architect and designer Aino Aalto (1894–1949) and Italian-born Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992). In addition to this, studies have focused on women whose contributions to CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) were historically neglected. These include European architects and urban planners such as Hélène de Mandrot (1867–1948), Lotte Stam-Beese (1903–1988), Charlotte Perriand (1903–1999), Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (1897–2000), Jacqueline Tyrwhitt (1905–1983), and Frieda Fluck (1897–1974).[3] These studies not only documented the work of women in the fields of architecture and design with concrete evidence, but also critically addressed the exclusion, belittlement, disregard for their labour, and even harassment perpetrated by their male colleagues. One of the most striking examples of this can be found in Beatriz Colomina's writings on Eileen Gray and E.1027.[4]

The most significant study on the history of the first women architects in Sweden is Helena Werner's 2006 dissertation titled *Women Architects: On Building Pioneers and the Debates Surrounding Women's Professional Practice in Sweden* (*Kvinnliga arkitekter: Om byggpionjärer och debatterna kring kvinnlig yrkesutövning i Sverige*). In her dissertation, Werner examines the biographies, educational backgrounds, and professional careers of Sweden's earliest women architects between 1897 and 1936. According to her research, Margit Hall (1901–1937) became the first woman to study architecture at Chalmers in Gothenburg, and in Sweden, graduating in 1919, while Brita Snellman (1901–1978) was accepted as a special student at KTH (Royal Institute of Technology) in Stockholm in 1920.[5] Although the number of female students

[2] Joan Rothschild and Victoria Rosner, "Feminisms and Design: Review Essay," in *Design and Feminism, Re-visioning Spaces, Places, and Everyday Things*, ed. Joan Rothschild (Rutgers University Press, 1999), 7–33.

[3] Beatriz Colomina, "Battle Lines: E.1027," in *The Sex of Architecture*, ed. Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway and Leslie Kanes Weisman (Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 167–182; Susan R. Henderson, "A Revolution in the Women's Sphere: Grete Lihotzky and the Frankfurt Kitchen," in *Architecture and Feminism*, ed. Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze and Carol Henderson (Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 221–53; Cathrine Veikos, *Lina Bo Bardi: The Theory of Architectural Practice* (Routledge, 2013); Rixt Hoekstra, "The Role Played by Women Linked to the CIAM, The Case of Frieda Fluck, 1897–1974," in *Architecture and Feminisms, Ecologies, Economies, Technologies*, ed. Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson, and Helen Runting, (Routledge, 2018), 30–37.; José Esparza Chong Cuy et al., *Lina Bo Bardi: Habitat* (Prestel Publishing, 2020).

[4] Colomina, "Battle Lines: E.1027."; Beatriz Colomina, "Eileen Gray and E.1027," in *Women in Architecture: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Ursula Schwitalla, (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2021), 35–41.

[5] Helena Werner, "Kvinnliga Arkitekter: Om Byggpionjärer Och Debatterna Kring Kvinnlig Yrkesutövning i Sverige" [Women Architects: on Building Pioneers and the Debates around Women's Professional Practice in Sweden] (Ph.D. diss., University of Gothenburg, 2006).

and registered women architects steadily increased after this period, the examples of modern architecture from the early 1900s in Sweden and indeed across Scandinavia listed are exclusively the works of men. It is therefore evident that early modernism in Sweden was predominantly shaped by male architects.[6]

Modern-era exhibitions, such as the *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition (1932)*, excluded women architects, reinforcing their marginalization in architectural discourse. To counteract the longstanding discrimination faced by women, and only after the modern period, exhibitions that explore the relationship between gender and space, as well as those exclusively showcasing the work of women architects, have increasingly been organized. Notable examples include *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* in 1977, *Sex & Space*, held at Shedhalle Zurich in 1996, and recently *AAXX100: AA Women in Architecture 1917–2017* in London; *Good News: Women in Architecture*, opened in 2021 at the MAXXI Museum in Rome.[7]

In this context, the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design in Stockholm is hosting an exhibition on Léonie Geisendorf (1914–2016), "one of Sweden's most significant architects"[8] of the 20th century, from September 27, 2024 to October 5, 2025.

Léonie Geisendorf was born in 1914 in Warsaw, Poland as Leonja Marie Kaplan. She passed her Baccalaureate exams in 1932 and then started her architecture studies at ETH Zürich. In 1937 and 1938 she interned at Le Corbusier's (1887–1965) office in Paris. In 1938, she graduated from ETH Zürich and moved to Stockholm, Sweden, with references from Le Corbusier. In 1940, she married her Swiss colleague at ETH, Charles-Édouard Geisendorf (1913–1985). The couple had three children. In Stockholm, she worked in various architectural offices for several years and pursued advanced architectural studies at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. In 1946, her diploma project won an award, and in 1947, she won first prize in the architectural competition for a new municipal building in Stockholm in collaboration with Curt Laudon (1906–1964), Ralph Erskine (1914–2005) and Charles-Édouard Geisendorf. In 1949–50, Léonie and Charles-Édouard together founded their own architectural studio. In 1957, Charles-Édouard was offered a professorship at ETH, prompting his return to Zürich. However, Léonie chose to remain in Sweden, and during this time, Charles-Édouard opened the Zürich branch of their studio, where he carried out

[6] Rana Noorzadeh, "The Place of Female Architecture as a Design Language: A Study into the Progression Of the Female Architect and The Variables of the Feminine Architecture in Sweden" (Bachelor's thesis, Malmö University, 2022).

[7] Marion von Osten, "Sex & Space: Space/Gender/Economy," in *Altering Practices Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*, ed. Doina Petrescu, (Routledge, 2007), 213–240; Elizabeth Darling and Lynne Walker, "Recording and Reflecting: On AAXX100AA Women in Architecture 1917–2017," in *Women Architects and Politics, Intersections Between Gender, Power Structures and Architecture in the Long 20th Century*, ed. Mary Pepchinski and Christina Budde, (Transcript Verlag, 2022), 199–214; Duygu Bezazoğlu, "Resetting Medium: Proactive Practices of Women in Architecture in the 21st Century" (Ph.D. diss., Middle East Technical University, 2022).

[8] Campo Ruiz, "Experimenting with Prototypes: Architectural Research in Sweden After Le Corbusier's Projects" (paper presented at the Le Corbusier, 50 Years Later International Congress, Valencia, November 18–20, 2015.

various projects. Léonie Geisendorf served as an advanced educator at KTH between 1959–63 and as a professor at KTH and Lund University in 1968–69. Throughout her career, she worked on a variety of building types, ranging from interior designs and residential projects to educational buildings and churches. She collaborated with other architects on numerous competition projects and won various awards. The most important source on Léonie to date is the publication prepared in connection with the *Upwind* exhibition held at ArkDes in 2014. The list below presents the design projects Léonie worked on throughout her career, as compiled from this publication:

- 1951 Interior design for the Swiss Tourist Office, Stockholm;
- 1950–1951 Villa in Ranängen, Stockholm;
- 1952 Church project in Malmö;
- 1953–1956 Terraced housing residential area, Stockholm;
- 1954–1961 Building for St. Göran Gymnasium, Stockholm;
- 1955–1957 Interior design for Nordisk Resebureau travel agency, Stockholm;
- 1957–1970 Residential area, Lake Geneva, Switzerland;
- 1957–1959 Interior design for Swissair, Stockholm;
- 1962–1966 Student residential building, Stockholm;
- 1963–1976 Project for a new catholic church, Stockholm;
- 1965–1966 Interior design of Rôtisserie Brunkeberg, Stockholm;
- 1965–1967 Competition entry 'Corso' for the area south of Sergels Torg, Stockholm by EGT group (Ralph Erskine, Léonie Geisendorf, Anders Tengbom (1911–2009);
- 1967 Feasibility study for a supermarket for NK department store, Stockholm;
- 1968–1970 Villa Delin, Stockholm;
- 1970–1973 Villa on Stockholm archipelago;
- 1971 Several assignments for the Swedish National Board of Public Building, e.g. prisons, municipal buildings, cultural centres and learning institutions;
- 1971 Project for a new urban development area in Stockholm by EGT group;
- 1971 Competition entry 'Upwind' for a new parliament building, Stockholm:
- 1974 Project for a new university library for the Stockholm University;
- 1979 Project for a new Museum of Medieval Stockholm;
- 1980 Competition entry for urban renewal at Södra Station, Stockholm in collaboration with Mischa Borowski (1950–2020) and Marek Krajewski (dates unknown);
- 1981 Project for a new building in Stockholm;
- 1987 Project for a new building by Londonviadukten, Stockholm, in collaboration with Björn Blomé (dates unknown) and Ann Westerman (dates unknown);
- 1990 Exhibition design 'Léonie Geisendorf Arkitektur' at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, in collaboration with Charlie Gullström (b. 1962);

- 1998 Exhibition design 'Visions of Stockholm' at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts;
- 2005–2007 Project for a small house on Stockholm archipelago[9]

During her career from 1938 to 2009 in Stockholm, some of her works were built, while others remained at the conceptual level. In her active years, she was recognized as one of the most influential architects in the field.[10]

The aim of this study is to present Léonie Geisendorf and her works through the lens of this exhibition. The methodology combines three distinct approaches: exhibition analysis, curator interviews, and field study.

Through this study, the goal is to enhance the recognition of Léonie Geisendorf, an architect who left a significant mark on her era but remains underrepresented in scholarly works. By drawing attention to her contributions, the study seeks to highlight issues of gender inequality in the field and underscore the achievements of women architects. Addressing the disparities in visibility and representation requires the collective effort of museums, journals, and all areas of architectural research.

Exhibiting Léonie Geisendorf

Located in the capital of Sweden, Stockholm, Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design (ArkDes) has a rich archive, capable of displaying nearly a century's worth of models and drawings of many of Stockholm's monumental buildings. The main exhibition area contains drawings and models of some of Stockholm's and even Sweden's most historically significant buildings. The exhibition includes Gunnar Asplund's (1885–1940) Stockholm Public Library (1924–1928), David Helldén's (1905–1990) Hötorget Buildings (Hötorgsskraporna) and Sergels Torg (1951–1967), as well as the city's tallest building, the Kaknästornet TV and radio tower designed by Bengt Lindroos (1918–2010) and finished in 1967. Additionally, models and drawings from the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition, which was visited by millions, is housed here. The museum is currently curating a thematically focused exhibition. In this context, a selection of materials from the archive is on display in the Léonie Geisendorf exhibition, located directly across from the Stockholm Exhibition section. The museum has announced that as part of a new project, they will feature the archive of a different architect each year, and the first exhibition in this project is dedicated to Léonie Geisendorf.

The exhibition offers a broad range of information about the architect's personal and professional life, bringing together various materials: photographs, a slide

[9] Dan Hallemar, Tomas Lauri, Julia Svensson and Marianne Lundqvist, eds., "*Upwind: The Architecture of Léonie Geisendorf 12th April-31st August 2014 at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design*" (Stockholm, Arkitektur Förlag, 2014).

[10] Frida Melin and William Wikström, "Léonie Geisendorf", ArkDes the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design: Stockholm Sweden, September 27, 2024–October 5, 2025.

show, an audio recording of an interview made for television, and, of course, drawings and models, which are among the highlights of the exhibition (Figures #1 and #2).

At the entrance of the exhibition, the first panel on the left greets the visitor with a smiling portrait of Léonie. On the right, a small panel represents the walls of her home/studio in one of Stockholm's most important areas. Notable figures on this panel include a male ballet dancer and Le Corbusier. Postcards from Paris, Venice, and Rome, along with a British Airways advertisement and postage stamps, remind one of Léonie's nomadic life.

On the first panel to the left, drawings and photographs from the Nordisk Resebureau, completed in 1956, are displayed. Among the most striking visuals are axonometric and perspective drawings for the three-story office, which included ticket offices and a cinema. The perspective drawing of the cinema and the dynamic triangular door composition are particularly notable. A 1:20 scale drawing of a wall surface, composed of two rectangles, is also replicated as a unit.

On the right side, a large panel describes the School for Domestic Education and Sewing, constructed between 1954 and 1960. It features facade drawings, material sketches, and a 1961 TV interview in which Léonie responds to architect Lennart Holm (1926–2009).

Near this section, a horizontal panel in the centre focuses on the same building and Léonie's personal information. The first model of the building is displayed, along with a photo of Léonie holding the model and smiling. Construction photographs, interior drawings, and detailed interior photos are also included.

This table also features photos of Léonie with King Gustav VI Adolf (1882–1973) during the opening of the building, which brought her recognition in the architecture world. Her Polish and Swiss passports, stamps from the studio she shared with Charles-Édouard Geisendorf, and materials related to Le Corbusier are presented. Although she did not work with him extensively, his architectural philosophy had a lasting influence. A 1925 French edition of Vers Une Architecture is displayed beside five photographs on a red background—four of which show Le Corbusier, and one shows Léonie working in his office. A letter from her friend and colleague Arnold Wasson-Tucker (1909–1995), sent from the USA, is also included.

Further ahead, a slideshow presents photographs from Léonie's travels. She never missed an architects' association meeting and she documented both traditional and modern architecture in countries such as India, France, and Tunisia, often including local people, women, and children.

Behind the slideshow there is a display case with 18 models from the St. Eugenia's Church project, her longest project, which spanned 13 years. The models range from the neighbourhood-scale block to detailed studies of the bell tower. Behind these are 1:20 interior models of prison cells she designed. To the right, a panel displays 20 sketch drawings, and a vertical panel features correspondence, drawings, and photographs related to the same project, including a 1971 letter to Parish Priest Peter Hornung (1920–2006).

Léonie's interest in this project began in 1963 during a period of demolitions in Stockholm. She proposed a modernist facade with rectangular elements and entrances connecting to Kungsträdgården park. Her design was approved in 1970 by Pope Paul VI (1897–1978), but public protests caused by the demolitions in Stockholm led to construction being suspended. Later the project was ultimately handed over to another architect.

An important aspect of this process was the professional solidarity Léonie received. Between 1965 and 1976, architects collected signatures, issued press statements, and wrote letters in support. These documents are also presented in the exhibition.

On the opposite side of the entrance, a panel presents the prison cell project from the 1970s. It features full-scale photographs, 1:1 models, showing her close involvement with furniture, fabrics, and especially window design. The emphasis on full-scale experimentation adds to the impact of the exhibition.

The exhibition presents a selection of Léonie's significant realized and unrealized projects. Despite its compact format, the material's variety and density invite prolonged engagement.

The exhibition aims at presenting an overview of Léonie Geisendorf's professional life while also introducing her as a person. It follows a chronological structure, from her early works to her later projects, focusing especially on large-scale and socially significant commissions. These include a major educational complex, a church in one of the city's central locations, and a prison—each emphasizing architecture's role in the public sphere.

Unlike ArkDes's 2014 exhibition *Upwind*, which included Léonie Geisendorf's car, some furniture she designed, and other personal belongings in an intimate, almost domestic setting (*a spatiality to be inhabited*), this exhibition puts forward a more public and popular image of her. Archival materials such as her correspondence and photographs with religious leaders, the Pope, and the King, as well as her interviews with the media, suggest that she was not only a designer but also a prominent figure in the intellectual and public life of her time.

The exhibition portrays Geisendorf as an independent and iconic figure, supported by artists and architects of her time, shown apart from her husband or other male collaborators. This is reinforced through images in which she appears elegant and authoritative, building a narrative that aligns her with the idea of a "diva" – not unlike Zaha Hadid (1950–2016).

Along with architectural drawings, there are also personal objects – postcards, passports, and photos – on display, which help present both her personal and professional identity. Through this exhibition series, ArkDes is clearly intended to address historical exclusions by placing a "diva" figure across from the many celebrated male architects in its collection. The exhibition's representational strategies reflect a conscious curatorial choice regarding gender and the politics of memory in contemporary museum practice.

The stardom system prioritizes men and glorifies individual success. The diva system may help making women more visible, but it similarly reduces success to a single figure. While it appears to support women, it risks reinforcing stereotypes and overshadowing collective production. So, it requires a critical distance.

Interview with the curators about the exhibition

As part of this research, an interview was conducted with the exhibition's curators, Frida Melin and William Wikström, at ArkDes on December 11, 2024, to obtain more detailed information about the exhibition.

Şölen Köseoğlu:

> While touring the exhibition, the first question that came to my mind was: ArkDes' collection includes 150 years of architectural history, and you announced a new decision: each year, a changing exhibition will provide a deeper look at the life and work of a particular architect. The collection of Léonie Geisendorf is the first example in this series. Why did you choose Léonie for this selection?

Frida Melin responds to this question as follows:

> The archive is truly vast, and there are many archival materials from a variety of architects. However, Léonie is a true icon. She was one of the most powerful and influential figures of her time; not only an architect but also a famous intellectual of her era, an avant-garde, with pioneering influence. Her architectural stance was very innovative; for example, she had a distinct preference for the use of raw concrete. Moreover, her archive is quite extensive. We have many archives from various architects, including female architects like Léonie, but almost no female architect has accumulated such an extensive archive. That's why we chose Léonie.[11]

William Wikström adds:

> We know that Léonie influenced the new generation of architects due to her teaching at KTH. She is highly respected at KTH, and even if she arrives late to the classes she teaches, she quickly identifies and addresses the most critical issues in the projects. For example, saying things like 'You're hitting your head over there'. This is why she commands great respect among her colleagues.[12]

Moving on to the next question:

> In Turkey, in the 1940s and 1950s, many architects worked with their

[11] Frida Melin and William Wikström (the curators of Léonie Geisendorf exhibition), in interview with the author, December 2024.

[12] Melin and Wikström, interview.

spouses. In the projects they carried out in the studios they founded together as a couple, the media often focused on the male architect or attributed the success achieved by the women to the men, disregarding the efforts of the women. Was there a similar situation with Léonie and her husband?

Frida Melin and William Wikström respond to this question as follows:

After Léonie and her husband founded their studio, her husband returned to Zurich, which is why, in the media, it is usually only Léonie who is featured. Léonie becomes not just the designer of buildings, but also the spokesperson for their work, becoming the face of the projects. On the other hand, the projects produced at the Zurich branch are perceived as being managed by her husband, and Léonie does not speak of these projects as if she owns them. As a result, due to living in different cities, Léonie becomes the person representing the joint projects they authored.[13]

You mention that Léonie struggled as a woman within the male-dominated structure of the time, but you also present evidence in the exhibition showing that she received support from her colleagues. What about her identity as an immigrant? As someone who came to Sweden later, did Léonie find herself in a disadvantaged position compared to Swedish-born architects, at least in her early years?

Frida Melin's response is as follows:

When Léonie arrived in Sweden, the Swedish construction market was quite attractive at the time, and many architects were migrating to the country. Therefore, architects from abroad were a familiar and accepted presence. Léonie did not come alone; others, including her husband and other architects she met in Paris, came with her. Moreover, because Léonie worked alongside Le Corbusier, she received some reference letters, and with his recommendation, it was not difficult for her to find work in Sweden.[14]

Did Léonie preserve her relationship with Poland? In the exhibition, we saw her passports and travel photos. Does she visit Poland again or establish any other connections with her home country?

Frida Melin and William Wikström's response:

We know that when they were about to get married, she communicated

[13] Melin and Wikström, interview.

[14] Melin and Wikström, interview.

with her relatives in Poland, but afterward, her mother also moved to Sweden. Beyond that, we're not aware of any other connection.[15]

Has Léonie created works outside of Sweden? For example, does she have projects in other parts of Scandinavia or Poland?

William Wikström's response:

They have projects produced in Switzerland through her husband. Additionally, there is a villa project she designed in Spain; I will be presenting it soon.[16]

The exhibition does not provide a clear answer to this question: Why is the project for Saint Eugenia's Catholic Church given to another architect?

Frida Melin and William Wikström's response:

Actually, there were reactions from the public related to the demolitions that took place in Stockholm at that time. However, this is not the reason. The reason is that working with Léonie during that process was not easy, and they wanted to quickly complete the renovation project that had been ongoing for 13 years. Danish architect Jørgen Kjaergaard, who was already a familiar name, was able to carry out the construction of the temporary church smoothly, so this job was given to him. However, when this process concluded, Léonie wasn't informed properly and found out from others that the job had been given to another architect![17]

Léonie can be evaluated solely as an architect, but she was also a wife and a mother. Focusing only on women's professional identities overlooks the greater responsibilities they often bear compared to men. Their success, achieved despite these additional duties, reflects a greater accomplishment than their male counterparts. What do we know about her marriage? Where did they meet? How many children did they have? Balancing a successful career with motherhood is challenging, especially over many years. You mentioned she worked from a room in her home for years, what was that home like?

Frida Melin and William Wikström's response:

Léonie and her husband met at university and got married after they moved to Stockholm. They settled together in an apartment in Östermalm, and this became the place where Léonie lived and worked until

[15] Melin and Wikström, interview.

[16] Melin and Wikström, interview.

[17] Melin and Wikström, interview.

> her final days (for over 70 years). Many architects also worked at the studio, and several nannies were hired for the children. However, working with Léonie was very difficult, so there were constant changes. Léonie's nanny ads are quite interesting because, for example, she was looking for a nanny who could speak several languages besides Swedish. The same applied to the studio when architects working with her wanted to go home at night, they would be met with comments like, 'Where are you going? The work isn't finished yet?' Léonie admits she had high standards, but she was not just difficult, she was impossible. However, she never strays from what she believes to be right, and this is what brings her success, despite the personal challenges. For example, when her son was 12, while Léonie was working and her son was playing with a friend, her son and his friend fell from a window of their home and died tragically . Despite this, Léonie continued living and working.[18]

When asked about the gender composition of the architectural teams they collaborated with in their home-based studio, curators referred to one female architect who was involved for a limited period and several male architects who worked with them at different times.

To my question, "What else is in Léonie's archive?" The curators offer me an opportunity to visit the archive. They explain that ArkDes has two different archives, one in the museum building and one outside of it, where Léonie's works are both stored. They mention that it is not possible to display everything in a limited exhibition, but they show a model, Léonie Geisendorf's competition entry for the new parliament building in Stockholms Ström from 1971, which they plan to permanently display in the general exhibition in the coming days. The model looks like it could have been from the 2000s; it's an idea far ahead of its time.

Traces of Léonie Geisendorf in Stockholm

In Stockholm, the following buildings bear the marks of the architect: St. Göran Gymnasium on Kungsholmen, the Riksrådsvägen Terrace Houses in Skarpnäck, and Villa Delin in Djursholm. Also, the Catholic Church for the Parish of St. Eugenia in Kungsträdgården, Engelbrektsgatan 25, and her home and studio in Humlegården. Situated on the island of Kungsholmen, St. Göran Gymnasium's imposing scale and distinct architectural language, contrasting sharply with the surrounding structures, immediately stand out. With no comparable structures nearby, it remains a striking example of a different architectural era (Figure #3).

Unlike typical educational facilities, Léonie Geisendorf's design defies convention by reaching skyward rather than spreading across the ground floor. This creates an incredibly pleasant social space at the entrance, with a sizeable gallery-like foyer.

[18] Melin and Wikström, interview.

From the exterior, the use of bold colours on the façade draws attention, while inside, the vibrant palette transitions into exposed concrete, softened by the abundant natural light streaming through the large windows, lending the interior a sense of airiness and lightness (Figures #4 to #7).

Despite its monumental scale, every side of the structure is thoughtfully designed with its own rhythm and sense of movement. On the western façade, the concrete entrance canopy stands out as a sculptural feature, crafted from exposed concrete with an artistic finish, seamlessly blending functionality with bold architectural expression.

Upon arriving at Riksrådsvägen to visit the Terrace Houses, the harmonious integration of the homes with their natural surroundings immediately stood out. Nestled amidst trees, rocks, and the slope of the land, the terraced houses seem to climb the hill like a centipede, perfectly in tune with the environment. It is truly enjoyable to see such clearly defined lines, functional, and modernist units in an area still filled with traditional homes featuring slanted triangular roofs (Figure #8).

The U-shaped street, which gradually ascends with the slope, hosts four different typologies of houses placed on either side. These homes are deeply connected to nature, with spacious gardens at the front and a wooded natural area at the back, offering a sense of immersion in greenery from both directions.

Although the neighbourhood consists of row houses grouped in sets of – for example – four, six, or seven, it never feels crowded. On the contrary, the houses are thoughtfully positioned to avoid direct sightlines into one another, creating a sense of openness and privacy that enhances the overall atmosphere of the area. There are three main types of terrace houses, each approximately 110 square meters. In some, the living room is on the lower floor and the bedrooms are upstairs, while in others it is the opposite. The houses are spread across different levels, with one type occupying two different elevations. The façades feature a varied composition of rectangles designed using red brick, grey cladding slabs, rendering, and wood materials.

A small courtyard is designed in the centre of the houses, providing a space for families and children to socialize (Figure #9).

The small blue sign in the middle of the area provides the following information: "*The 114 terrace houses, comprising four different types of dwelling, were built in 1953-1956. They were designed by Charles-Edouard and Léonie Geisendorf, architects trained in Switzerland. They were assisted in adapting the houses to the terrain by landscape architect Nils Orento (1922–2010). The houses are partially prefabricated.*" This is a positive step in honouring the architects' names and ensuring that their contribution is recognized and valued.

The next stop is Villa Delin, located in the historic area of Djursholm, Stockholm. As you arrive at the site, the land is filled with villas and mansions in various architectural styles, each built in traditional layouts, large and small. While searching for Villa Delin among these parcels, nothing prepares one for the expansive, pitch-black view of the Baltic Sea that unfolds before them. Mesmerized by the stillness

of the vast water, one turns towards the building to encounter a sculptural composition of raw concrete. The surrounding environment and context are so powerful that the building's extraordinary stance becomes even more pronounced and meaningful. This appears to be the structure with the most refined and powerful form among her designs. Its scale, modest and pure composition, and large windows revealing the interior create an atmosphere that is both intimate and distantly extraordinary (Figure #10).

The contrast between the building and its surroundings, as well as its orientation towards the view, recalls Pavillon Le Corbusier in Zürich. However, this time, the structure faces the Baltic Sea rather than Lake Zürich, and it is almost right on the shore, with only a 5-6 meters wide road separating the building from the sea. Kungsträdgården, one of the most important parks in central Stockholm, is a key intersection. In this significant park, located on the eastern side of the block, lies the Catholic Church for the Parish of St. Eugenia. While the building serves a different purpose from the others in the block, it blends into the continuity of the surrounding structures, with the exception of the golden cross. Had Léonie's proposal been realized, this block would have taken a markedly different form. Despite the missed historical opportunity, both built and unbuilt designs remain integral to the architectural history and collective memory (Figures #11 and #12).

Walking from Kungsträdgården to Humlegården, a noticeable shift in the urban fabric occurs as Engelbrektsgatan 25 is approached where Léonie first settled in Sweden and lived and worked for many years. Now it's in Östermalm, one of the city's most vibrant and exclusive neighbourhoods, whose streets are lined with luxury boutiques, crowded restaurants, and lively bars. Upon reaching Engelbrektsgatan 25, Léonie's home and studio come into view (Figure #13).

Conclusion

This study aimed to introduce Léonie Geisendorf through the exhibition held at ArkDes and to examine in detail the architect, who holds a place in the social memory with her significant works related to the International Style found in many parts of Stockholm. In addition to the exhibition, interviews with the curators and site visits were conducted to summarize not only the important aspects of Léonie Geisendorf's architecture but also how her personality was reconstructed as an architect and the curators' perspectives on the subject.

As a result of the research, it was understood that the exhibition tries to create a new narrative against the historical exclusion of women architects by presenting Léonie Geisendorf's professional and personal life together. The architect is shown as a figure who stands out in modern Swedish architecture and with projects related to social life through the idea of a "diva." None of the many residential projects in her career were exhibited; instead, public and social projects were highlighted.

In this context, the exhibition's representational strategies are very important in terms of promoting gender equality. At the same time, the diva figure also brings up the risks of individual heroization. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the importance of making Léonie Geisendorf's architectural practice visible and highlights the importance of exhibition practices aimed at increasing the visibility of women architects.

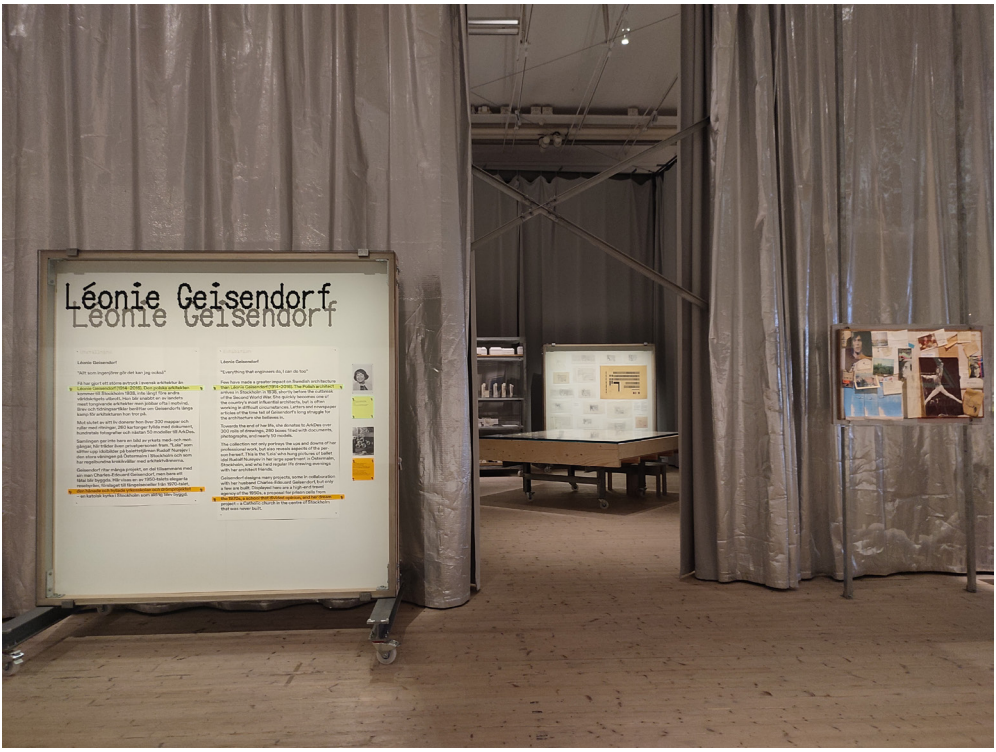


Figure #1: Léonie Geisendorf exhibition at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design;[19]

[19] This and all other figures belong to the Şölen Köseoğlu's personal photo archive.

Figure #2: Léonie Geisendorf exhibition at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design;[20]

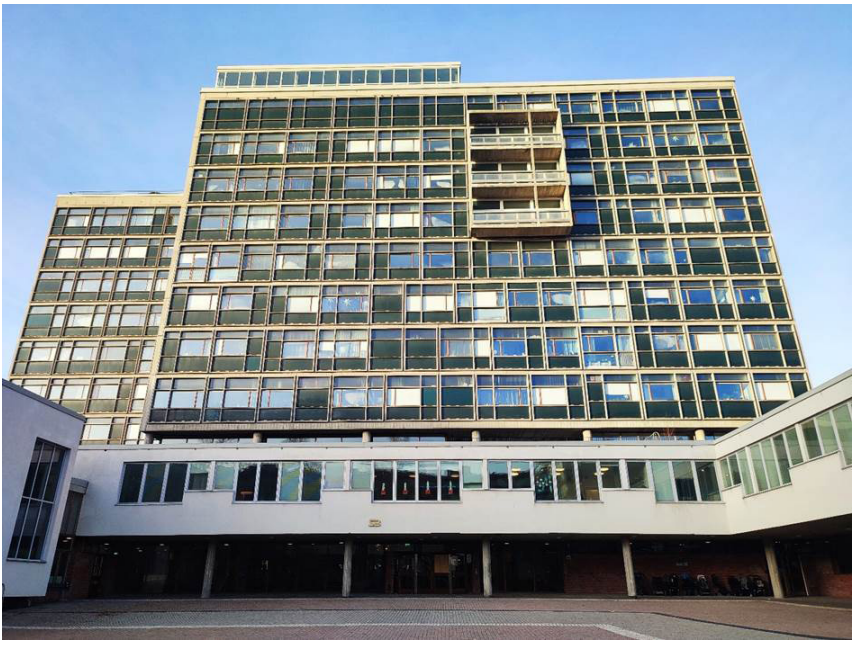
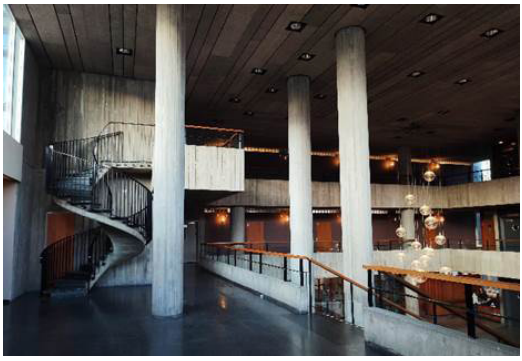


Figure #3: St. Göran Gymnasium;

[20] This and all other figures belong to the Şölen Köseoğlu's personal photo archive.



Figures #4 and #5: Interiors of St. Göran Gymnasium;

Figures #6 and #7: The west entrance and the north façade of St. Göran Gymnasium;

Figure #8: Images of terrace houses with different plan layouts;

Figure #9: Images of terrace houses with different plan layouts;

Figure #10: Villa Delin in Djursholm;

Figure #11: Catholic church for the Parish of St Eugenia today;

Figure #12: Léonie's design for the Catholic Church of the Parish of St. Eugenia, featured in the exhibition model;

Figure #13: Bondeska Huset at Engelbrektsgatan.

References

Bezazoğlu, Duygu. "Resetting Medium: Proactive Practices of Women in Architecture in the 21st Century". PhD diss., Middle East Technical University, 2022.

Colomina, Beatriz. "Battle Lines: E.1027." In *The Sex of Architecture*, edited by Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway and Leslie Kanes Weisman, 167–182. Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

Colomina, Beatriz. "Eileen Gray and E.1027." In *Women in Architecture: Past, Present and Future*, edited by Ursula Schwitalla, 35–41. Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2021.

Darling, Elizabeth and Lynne Walker. "Recording and Reflecting: On AAXX100AA Women in Architecture 1917–2017." In *Women Architects and Politics, Intersections Between Gender, Power Structures and Architecture in the Long 20th Century*, edited by Mary Pepchinski and Christina Budde, 199–214. Transcript Verlag, 2022.

Esparza Chong Cuy, José, Julieta Gonzalez, Adriano Pedrosa, and Thomas Toled. *Lina Bo Bardi: Habitat*. Prestel Publishing, 2020.

Hallemar, Dan, Tomas Lauri, Julia Svensson, and Marianne Lundqvist, eds. "*Upwind: The Architecture of Léonie Geisendorf 12th April-31st August 2014 at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design*" (catalogue). Stockholm: Arkitektur Förlag, 2014. https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:808314/FULLTEXT02.pdf.

Henderson, Susan R. "A Revolution in the Women's Sphere: Grete Lihotzky and the Frankfurt Kitchen." In *Architecture and Feminism*, edited by Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze and Carol Henderson, 221–53. Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.

Hoekstra, Rixt. "The Role Played by Women Linked to the CIAM, The Case of Frieda Fluck, 1897–1974." In *Architecture and Feminisms, Ecologies, Economies, Technologies*, edited by Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson and Helen Runting, 30–37. Routledge, 2018.

Melin, Frida and William Wikström. "*Léonie Geisendorf*". Didactic panel to accompany the shown at Léonie Geisendorf Exhibition, ArkDes the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design: Stockholm Sweden, September 27, 2024–October 5, 2025. Visited on December 11, 2024.

Melin, Frida and William Wikström. Interview by author. Personal interview. Stockholm, Sweden, December 11, 2024.

Noorzadeh, Rana. "The Place of Female Architecture as a Design Language: A Study into the Progression of the Female Architect and the Variables of the Feminine Architecture in Sweden" Bachelor's thesis, Malmö University, 2022.

Osten, Marion von. "Sex & Space: Space/Gender/Economy." In *Altering Practices Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*, edited by Doina Petrescu, 213–240. Routledge, 2007.

Rothschild, Joan and Victoria Rosner. "Feminisms and Design: Review Essay." In *Design and Feminism, Re-visioning Spaces, Places, and Everyday Things*, edited by Joan Rothschild, 7–33. Rutgers University Press, 1999.

Ruiz, Campo. "Experimenting with Prototypes: Architectural Research in Sweden After Le Corbusier's Projects." Paper presented at the *Le Corbusier, 50 Years Later International Congress*, Valencia, November 18–20, 2015. http://dx.doi.org/10.4995/LC2015.2015.893.

Türkün Dostoğlu, Neslihan and Özlem Erdoğdu Erkarslan. "Türkiye'de Kadın Mimarların Statüsü Üzerine Niceliksel Analiz." In *Cinsiyet ve Mimarlık*, edited by Belgin Turan Özkaya, 22 –26. Matsa Plushing House, 2010.

Veikos, Cathrine. *Lina Bo Bardi: The Theory of Architectural Practice*. Routledge, 2013.

Werner, Helena. "Kvinnliga Arkitekter: Om Byggpionjärer Och Debatterna Kring Kvinnlig Yrkesutövning i Sverige" [Female Architects: on Building Pioneers and Debates around Women's Professional Practice in Sweden] PhD diss., University of Gothenburg, 2006.

Article received: April 5, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Original scholarly paper

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.630

Nadiyah Tunnikmah
Faculty of Visual Art and Design, Indonesia Institute of the Arts Yogyakarta

From Margins to Algorithms: Mediatization of Yogyakarta Visual Art on Instagram

Abstract: This research explores the mediatization of Yogyakarta's fine arts scene on Instagram, analyzing how algorithmic mediation influences artistic interaction, representation, and professionalization. Through ethnographic and netnographic methods conducted between October 2021 and April 2023, this study examines five Yogyakarta-based artists with varying career lengths (15–30 years) and follower counts (5,000–38,000). The findings reveal that Instagram serves not only as a distribution channel but also as a transformative space that reconfigures artistic practices, challenging traditional exhibition paradigms while reinforcing algorithm-driven visibility. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of digital mediation in contemporary art, highlighting both the opportunities and limitations imposed by the platform.

Keywords: mediatization; Instagram; Yogyakarta visual arts; digital art practices; social media algorithms.

The emergence of modern art in Indonesia during the Dutch colonial period indicates that its presence was marginalized from the outset. Historical studies document early art activities before Indonesian independence, when European artists, especially Dutch painters such as Adriannus Johannes Bik, Antoine Payen the Younger, and Hubertus Nicholas Sieburgh, were commissioned to document archaeological sites and local life.[1] Art institutions such as the Reindwardt Commission and the Bataviaasch Genootschap Institute played a significant role in this effort, which later developed with the establishment of a commission in 1901 that focused on Javanese and Madurese antiquities.

The increasing presence of foreign painters in Batavia led to the emergence of galleries and exhibition spaces, such as the Bataviasche Kunstkring, Kolff & Co., and the Hotel des Indes. The Kunstkring held particular influence over the Batavian art world, despite offering less favourable sales terms.[2] The Dutch East Indies Art

[1] Helena Spanjaard, *Cita-Cita Seni Lukis Indonesia Modern 1900-1995: Sebuah Kreasi Identitas Kultural Nasional*, trans. Iswahyudi Iswahyudi (Ombak, 2018), 30–32.

[2] M. Agus Burhan, *Perkembangan Seni Lukis Mooi Indie Sampai Persagi Di Batavia, 1900–1942* (Galeri Nasional Indonesia, 2008), 24–25.

Author's contact information: nadiyah.tunnikmah@isi.ac.id

Association, founded in 1902, with seven regional branches, including Yogyakarta, further institutionalized modern art through exhibitions and drawing meetings, democratizing access to art across social strata. These activities not only familiarized the public with modern art but also constructed a social space that validated and legitimized artworks, embedding modern art into the fabric of Indonesian culture.

After 1945, the artistic activities of indigenous artists became more widespread. In the newly independent Indonesia, art changed from mere decoration to a tool for awareness, social justice, and nationalism. The function of art in the early days of Indonesian independence differed from its role in the pre-independence period. It later influenced the development of the art world in Indonesia.

In the early 2000s, the development of digital technology in Yogyakarta was visible, marked by the presence of print shops. The ease of accessing digital printing technology brought many new ideas to visual arts in Yogyakarta. The acceptance of artworks created through digital printing can be seen at the Indonesia Art Award 2003. Most artists working with traditional fine art media, such as painting, sculpture, and graphic arts, are not significantly impacted by advances in digital printing technology. Many did not adapt digital technology or digital printing in their artistic process. The increasingly pervasive development of digital technology in everyday life has begun to influence Yogyakarta's visual arts, not in production, but rather in consumption within exhibition spaces. Selfies with works of art have become increasingly commonplace at art exhibitions. Selfies with artworks such as paintings, sculptures, and graphics uploaded on Instagram often did not include the artist's name in the caption, partly because many artists did not have Instagram accounts at that time.[3]

A massive change was observed when the pandemic, which limited outdoor activities, prompted artists to turn to social media as part of their artistic process and activities. Many artists who are active on social media share images of their artwork and document their creative process. Several artists consistently upload updates, from the initial design concept and working stages to the final display of their works in the gallery. Among the various platforms, Instagram remains the most commonly used, due to its primary focus on sharing visual content.[4] This raises the question of how and why the mediatization of Yogyakarta art occurs on Instagram. Using ethnographic and netnographic methods, this study is based on the Instagram activities and interviews of five Yogyakarta visual artists who actively engage with the platform for artistic expression and networking. Applying mediatization theory, this study highlights how these artists navigate the interplay between self-promotion, algorithmic constraints, and global artistic discourses. While Instagram disrupts traditional gatekeeping mechanisms, it also reinforces an aesthetic driven by engagement, hard work in building one's brand, and digital creation, which subtly reshapes the structure of

[3] Nadiyah Tunnikmah, "Instagram Selfie Di Pameran Artjog," *Ars: Jurnal Seni Rupa Dan Desain* 21, no. 2 (2018): 116–32.

[4] Nadiyah Tunnikmah, "Impact of COVID-19 on the World of Fine Arts; between Online Exhibitions, Virtual Exhibitions in Cyberspace Appreciation," in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Interdisciplinary Arts & Humanities (ICONARTIES)*, 2020, 149–158.

artistic recognition. By analyzing the interplay between digital exposure and ongoing marginalization, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of the evolving position of art in the digital era. It challenges the notion that digital platforms automatically democratize art, revealing instead how mediatization produces new layers of inclusion and exclusion in the contemporary art world.

Algorithm

An algorithm is a fundamental concept underlying software development. Computation is known to be linguistic, formal, and syntactic; at a certain level, it consists entirely of numerical arrangements. Computer programming is conducted using specialized languages, which are ultimately reduced to sequences of numbers. Even at a more abstract level, algorithms are defined linguistically through various logical formulations.[5]

Instagram employs algorithms to suggest accounts, moderate content, and organize the Explore section, though the mechanisms behind these processes are often invisible to users. These algorithms embed cultural assumptions and social norms that may reinforce inequalities. In addition to the automatic dissemination of content by the algorithm, users can increase the reach of their posts by adhering to its rules, such as using hashtags. Instagram also considers factors like usage frequency and activity duration within the app. Although the shift to an algorithm-based timeline initially received criticism, users eventually adapted and developed strategies to optimize the system.

Instagram's algorithmic guidance for each user is based on three core categories:

1. Interest: Based on prior interactions with similar content.
2. Recency, how new is the post.
3. Relationship: The closeness between the viewer and content producer, determined through likes, comments, and tags.[6]

Instagram is neither the first nor the most widely used photo-sharing platform on social media, but it possesses unique characteristics, as it was initially designed as a mobile application. This aligns with the logic of speed and mobility inherent in smartphone usage. Instagram has also reframed the production and display of visual content, making it easier for anyone to create and share visually engaging content, thus giving rise to a new visual culture. As a constantly evolving platform, Instagram's boundaries are often fluid, functioning as a channel for various types of content and user behaviours. The combination of its technical logic, impact on visual culture, and inherent complexity makes Instagram a compelling subject of study.[7]

---

[5] Paul A. Fishwick, *Aesthetic Computing* (MIT Press, 2006), 34–35.

[6] Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, eds., *Instagram Visual Social Media Cultures* (Polity Press, 2020), 30–31.

[7] Lachlan MacDowall and Kylie Budge, *Art after Instagram: Art Spaces, Audiences, Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2022), 13.

Interaction on Instagram is reflected in artists' posts through captions, comments, and other features, shaping both the meaning of their artworks and their self-image. Comments, likes, and shares not only facilitate communication but also create a virtual community that influences the appreciation of art. The interpretation of artworks on Instagram occurs through captions, visual analysis, and discussions in the comment section, all of which are shaped by cultural symbols and meanings. The use of Instagram has driven changes in artistic practice, shifting from the production of artwork to digital distribution and interaction. One significant change is the publication of the artistic process itself, where posts featuring videos or photos of the creative process generate greater engagement compared to posts that solely display the final artwork.

Traditionally, the operational domain of an artwork has followed a linear trajectory: once a piece is completed, it is distributed for consumption (Figure #1). However, Instagram allows unfinished artworks to be both distributed and consumed during the production process. This means that the artistic process no longer follows a linear path but instead involves repetition (Figure #2). This process is further supported by the use of hashtags such as **#wip** (work in progress). The realm of distribution plays a crucial role in bridging production and reception, structuring the aesthetic experience in particular ways, and thereby enabling the realization of artistic value.

Interactions on an artist's Instagram account enable the repeated distribution of a single artwork, unrestricted by time. As long as the content remains on the account, it can be accessed at any time and by anyone. Posting an artwork is an act of distribution, meant for consumption, not only to be viewed but also to receive likes, be reshared (thus redistributed), and generate further interactions. The act of uploading an artwork, even if it is unfinished, marks the beginning of its distribution, which inherently involves consumption as well. An artwork can be distributed multiple times, but this also means that what is being distributed is not just the artwork itself, but also the artist's self-image. Table #1 shows the differences between production, distribution, and consumption in the art world and Instagram.

The processes of production, distribution, and consumption on Instagram provide artists with the opportunity to showcase their creative processes while simultaneously taking on roles traditionally held by curators, art dealers, and galleries. Yogyakarta artists, renowned for their independence, have long been involved in distributing their works, including through collective exhibitions. When another account posts an artwork, it can function as a form of distribution and reproduction, although it also carries the risk of copyright infringement. However, interactions on Instagram, such as tagging artists in posts by exhibition visitors, can help mitigate this risk. Beyond serving as a distribution tool, Instagram also has the potential to be an educational medium about the artist's profession and creative process. However, its effectiveness depends on maintaining an engaging and sustainable account. Successful interaction on Instagram is not only determined by visually appealing posts but also by supporting narratives that ultimately foster art appreciation in exhibition spaces.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed ethnographic and netnographic approach to examine Instagram usage among visual artists based in Yogyakarta. The ethnographic method was chosen to observe the characteristics of the research subjects and interaction patterns formed through social relationships between the research subjects within Yogyakarta's visual arts field and the Instagram platform. Overall, ethnographic research is expected to provide a rich and detailed picture of how Yogyakarta artists' interactions on Instagram shape Instagram users, and how and to what extent Instagram influences the visual arts field in Yogyakarta. Therefore, this research employs netnography to examine how artists interact with Instagram social media users and the mediatization of Yogyakarta visual arts on Instagram. Data collection was conducted between October 2021 and April 2023.

Initial observation focused on Instagram accounts actively used by practicing visual artists residing in Yogyakarta. The research population consisted of visual artists living and working in Yogyakarta who maintained Instagram accounts. From an initial survey of 100 artist accounts, five artists were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Public accounts with professional art-related content;
2. Active usage: minimum two posts per week;
3. Professional relevance: posts featuring artworks or career-related activities (exhibitions, studio visits, artistic processes);
4. Local engagement: active participation in Yogyakarta's visual arts scene;
5. Medium specificity: focus on conventional media (painting, sculpture, printmaking);
6. Career diversity: varied career lengths (10-30 years) to capture different stages of professional development.

Until the end, it consisted of 5 artists who actively use Instagram, live and work in Yogyakarta:

1. Putu Sutawijaya, 5,000 followers, approximately 30 years of career;
2. Dedy Sufriadi, 8,000 followers, approximately 25 years of career;
3. Ronald Apriyan, 7,000 followers, approximately 20 years of career;
4. Oky Rey Montha, 25,000 followers, approximately 15 years of work;
5. Seruni Bodjawati, 38,000 followers, approximately 15 years of work.

Data collection and analysis:

Data collection employed a four-stage process: (1) systematic evaluation of 100 Yogyakarta artist accounts using quantitative metrics (follower count, posting frequency, engagement rates) and qualitative criteria (content relevance, professional activity); (2) intensive netnographic observation of the five selected artists' digital practices, documenting interaction patterns and online community dynamics; (3) semi-structured interviews exploring artists' motivations, strategies, and experiences with Instagram; and (4) longitudinal tracking of content evolution and platform adaptation strategies. This multi-method approach captured both observable behaviours and subjective experiences across varied career trajectories and engagement levels within Yogyakarta's professional art community.

Analytical Framework:

Analysis employed a three-tier coding system addressing core research dimensions. Account Management examined the strategic use of platforms, including account objectives, content curation decisions, audience targeting, performance monitoring, and professional self-presentation tactics. Platform Interaction investigated the bidirectional communication dynamics between artists and users, analyzing comment patterns, direct messaging practices, and the effects of community engagement on artistic visibility and reception. Instagram's Artistic Impact assesses the platform's influence on professional practice, including the significance of followers for career development, challenges in representing artwork within platform constraints, and the relationship between digital metrics and offline artistic success. This framework enabled a systematic analysis of how Instagram functions simultaneously as a distribution channel, a professional tool, and a cultural mediator within Yogyakarta's contemporary art ecosystem.

Mediatization

Social media, based on digital communication technologies, operate with complexity in connecting spaces, intervening, and mediating all processes that inherently involve distance. Each platform has specific technological characteristics that shape how users interact and communicate with one another. Joshua Meyrowitz emphasizes in his Medium Theory that every medium has unique technological rules that shape media experiences, rules often overlooked in studies focused solely on content. He highlights how the technological characteristics of a medium play a role in restructuring social and cultural life. The use of media as a communication tool is not a new phenomenon. Still, each medium has a unique capacity to shape social structures, demonstrating that technology is not just an intermediary but also an agent of change in human interaction.[8]

[8] David Crowley and David Mitchell, eds., *Communication Theory Today* (Polity Press, 1994), 50–73.

Media development is influenced not only by technological innovations such as the printing press, telegraph, electricity, and the internet but also by political, economic, cultural, and social factors. This process is bidirectional; media both shape and are shaped by society. The concept of mediatization highlights long-term transformations that affect various aspects of life, including art, culture, and politics. The emergence of new media does not necessarily replace older media; instead, it interacts with and coexists alongside them. Media are interconnected and collectively shape communication environments, much like how social media create spaces for social interaction. As digital media continue to evolve, media studies can no longer be limited to seeing media as mere message conveyors. However, they must recognize them as active elements that shape social and cultural structures.[9]

Every technology carries an inherent message related to its original purpose. This also applies to social media platforms, such as Instagram, which was initially designed as a social media platform specifically for sharing photos among friends. As a medium, Instagram has specific technological characteristics, often referred to as its features. These features create a universe governed by Instagram's own "grammar" of technology, which its users understand and appreciate. The unique character of each medium ensures that every medium carries its implicit message.

Marshall McLuhan[10] explains that "the message" conveyed by any medium or technology lies in the changes it brings to the scale, speed, or pattern of human activity. Media have the capacity to shape the structure of human relationships and behaviours, both in private and public interactions. Social media technology, for example, has the ability to erase spatial and temporal boundaries, thereby altering social dynamics. Mediation in social media is not merely the transmission of information but also a process of constructing meaning within a specific cultural context. Even before information is delivered, media already play a role in shaping a version of reality through the interpretation of content producers, such as artists or Instagram account owners. Although users have control over their accounts, social media platforms still impose rules and interests that influence this construction of meaning. Thus, mediation in social media involves not only technological aspects but also how meaning is formed, interpreted, and influenced by various external factors.

When examining mediation, three key aspects come into play: the producer, the text, and the audience. The institutional concept of mediation focuses on viewing the producer of meaning as an institution, emphasizing the crucial roles played by various actors and institutions in shaping meaning within an information-rich society. In this institutional sense, producers operate within economic and political interests, where media institutions actively shape the mediation process. The reality constructed by media institutions cannot be separated from these economic and political interests, such as profit-making and reinforcing political influence.[11]

[9] Asa Briggs, Peter Burke, and Espen Ytreberg, *A Social History of the Media. From Gutenberg to Facebook* (Polity Press, 2001), 21.

[10] Douglas Kellner and Meenakshi Durham, eds., *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works* (Blackwell, 2006), 107–16.

[11] Nancy Thumim, *Self Representation and Digital Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 58–59.

Mediation is both a technological and social phenomenon. This concept becomes even more profound as social actors increasingly rely on media-supplied meanings and public interpretations of the world to understand themselves and their place in it. Mediation has significant consequences for how the world appears in everyday life. Mediated appearances, in turn, provide a framework for defining and shaping human relationships, especially with distant others, individuals who exist primarily within media representations.[12] Today, the significance of mediation is closely linked to its dual nature, both as a technological and social phenomenon. This duality symbolizes the evolving relationship between individuals and media, which has transformed the way societies perceive and interact with the world. As society becomes increasingly dependent on media as the primary source of meaning and interpretation, the implications of this dependency are vast and complex.

Dependence on media as a source of meaning highlights a fundamental shift in how humans process information and construct their understanding of the world. With the advancement of digital technology and the widespread availability of information channels, society has become increasingly accustomed to seeking news, knowledge, and entertainment through digital media platforms. As this dependency grows, the media play a crucial role in shaping human perception, interpretation, and response to the world around them.

Mediatization, on the other hand, involves long-term structural changes in the relationship between politics and media, resulting in new conditions for communication and interaction.[13] The concept of mediatization is valuable in defining the role of media in transforming society and stimulating analysis of the transformational processes it facilitates. Four key processes represent mediatization: (1) extending human communication capacity, (2) substituting social activities and institutions, (3) integrating non-media activities, and (4) accommodating media logic.[14] The expansion of communication capacity has led to the emergence of diverse platforms, changing how people exchange information and share ideas. Traditional social activities and institutions have been replaced by digital structures, affecting societal order. The integration of non-media activities has blurred the boundaries between media and non-media domains, altering how individuals perceive and interact with the world. Mediatization provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the profound impact of media on contemporary life and societal transformations.

Mediatization demonstrates the expanding influence of media in shaping social structures, cultural norms, and individual behaviours. It refers to a broader social process in which media technologies become integrated into various aspects of life, affecting how people perceive reality, engage with information, and construct their self-identity. Mediatization encompasses macro-level transformations brought by

[12] Roger Silverstone, "Complicity and Collusion in the Mediation of Everyday Life," *New Literary History* 33, no. 4 (2002): 761–780.

[13] Caja Thimm, Mario Anastasiadis, and Jessica Einspänner-Pflock, eds. *Media Logic(S) Revisited: Modelling the Interplay Between Media Institutions, Media Technology and Societal Change* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 71.

[14] Rachel Esner and Sandra Kisters, eds.,*The Mediatization of the Artist* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3.

media in society as a whole, as well as micro-level changes in everyday practices and experiences. Its significance lies in recognizing media as a force that not only reflects but also actively shapes social reality.[15]

Mediation, as a dialectical process, circulates symbols within society, shaping meaning and social interactions. While media can construct these meanings, individual engagement and power dynamics remain significant factors. Mediation, both technological and social, affects perception and interaction, ultimately influencing how people relate to the world around them. It is important to distinguish between mediation and mediatization: mediation functions primarily as an intermediary in communication processes, whereas mediatization examines the broader structural and institutional changes resulting from media's integration across various domains of life. Media systems prioritize audiences' everyday realities, shaping both perceptions and actions. The increasing influence of media technology on human perception and daily navigation demonstrates how mediation has become a defining feature of contemporary communication. Through this process, media technology not only influences daily routines but also provides frameworks through which individuals make sense of an increasingly complex world.

Mediatization of Yogyakarta visual art on Instagram

Mediatization in fine arts is not a new phenomenon. Artists have long used mass media to shape specific images and narratives. The mediatization of artists in mass media illustrates the evolution of the artist's role, marked by the emergence of artistic autonomy and new media, reflecting how media is used to gain visibility and control the interpretation of artworks.[16]

Instagram algorithms mediate artists' access to global audiences, with engagement metrics determining visibility more than artistic merit. While Seruni Bodjawati's 38,000 followers demonstrate algorithmic success, artists like Putu Sutawijaya, despite 30 years of artistic achievement, remain constrained by lower engagement rates that limit platform-driven exposure. Before the advent of social media, the interaction and promotion of artworks primarily occurred through galleries and physical exhibitions. Instagram has replaced some of these functions by providing a digital platform where artworks can be promoted and sold. Artistic activities that once took place outside the media are now integrated with social media. The creative process, exhibitions, and audience interactions have become part of Instagram's digital ecosystem. Artists adapt their content strategies to accommodate Instagram's media logic, including algorithms that determine content visibility, the use of hashtags, and visually engaging aesthetics.

From an institutional perspective, artists continue to engage with art institutions such as galleries and curators while navigating the rules of digital platforms

[15] Thimm, Anastasiadis, and Einspänner-Pflock, eds. *Media Logic(S) Revisited*, 71.

[16] Esner and Sandra Kisters, eds., *The Mediatization of the Artist*.

without entirely disconnecting from the conventional art world. Mediation operates both technologically and socially, shaping meaning and interactions in everyday life. This dependence on media transforms how artists understand and navigate the art world, requiring them to adjust to platform dynamics. Mediation on Instagram has become a crucial aspect of artistic communication, shaping the meaning and reality constructed by artists. The interplay of technology, aesthetics, and institutional structures creates a digital art ecosystem that broadens artistic reach while preserving professionalism and artistic value.

Mediation in artists' Instagram activities involves algorithms that influence the production, distribution, and consumption of art content. This mediation not only shapes interactions between artists and audiences but also impacts perceptions of the world and daily life. Mediated artistic activities create social relationships within digital spaces, reflecting the interconnectedness of technology and social aspects. Artists act as content producers, posts function as texts, and Instagram users serve as recipients, illustrating how the platform operates within the art world. Different media forms coexist and operate simultaneously, creating a social media environment that expands interaction and shapes cultural experiences. The proliferation of digital media further deepens the understanding of media as more than just a communication tool; it is an evolving part of social construction.

Instagram mediates visual art by transmitting content through its technology, connecting artists with a broader audience. The role of artists on Instagram has evolved, transforming them not only into creators but also into managers of interaction through the platform's features. Through strategies such as maintaining an engaging profile and using hashtags, artists construct a professional image through visual storytelling and carefully crafted captions.

Mediatization reveals how the media shape and construct social reality. Instagram mediates audience perceptions of art and artists, creating a version of reality shaped by algorithms and digital interactions. This mediated reality refers to meanings constructed by both media and content producers. Mediatization transforms artistic practices and the professional identity of artists. Today, artists must integrate artistic skills with digital and social media competencies to expand their networks. The identity of a professional artist is now closely linked to online presence and engagement on Instagram. Mediatization extends artists' professional networks, enabling connections with galleries, collectors, and audiences worldwide. This shift alters power dynamics and relationships within the art world, where artists active on social media often gain a competitive advantage.

The mediatization of visual art on social media, particularly on Instagram, occurs when artists upload photos of their artworks and artistic activities to their social media accounts. This represents a direct method of distribution, bypassing intermediaries. The visual consumption of artworks happens through mobile screens, where a three-meter-wide artwork is viewed at the size of a phone display. Consequently, captions accompanying each post serve as additional information that aids

the consumption process. Captions containing details such as the title, year of creation, and medium become essential. Additional text can enhance the appreciation experience for followers or viewers of the post. Furthermore, text can serve as an educational tool, providing insights into the artist's work.

The mediatization of art on Instagram is evident from the increasing number of artist accounts and posts featuring artistic activities. Instagram has become an institutionalized platform for artists to share their work, interact with audiences, and connect with the art community. The frequent use of Instagram by artists and the involvement of other art industry players, such as galleries, art dealers, and collectors, highlight this process of mediatization. Communication and interaction with fellow art practitioners, which previously occurred via email, now commonly take place through Instagram direct messages, becoming an accepted norm.

Mediatization in artists' Instagram accounts implies that the platform has a social impact, shaping how artists communicate, promote their artworks, build their self-image, expand their networks, and reach new audiences. On an artist's Instagram account, mediation involves the individual artist's choices and actions in presenting their work. At the same time, mediatization extends beyond individual posts to consider the structural, institutional, and social impact of Instagram on the art world.

Mediatization, though a process, can also be viewed as a framework for gathering observations.[17] It results from changes in communication practices, an ongoing mediation process that takes time. However, mediatization within social media occurs rapidly due to the high intensity of social media usage. Mediatization is a long-term process that transforms social and cultural institutions and interaction patterns due to the growing influence of media.[18]

The mediatization of art on Instagram is evident in the increasing number of artist accounts and their artistic content. Instagram has become an institutionalized platform for artists to share their work, engage with audiences, and connect with the art community. Putu Sutawijaya positions Instagram as supplementary to traditional art institutions, maintaining the platform at the margins of his professional practice, primarily for promotional purposes. In contrast, Ronald Apriyan, Oky Rey Montha, and Seruni Bodjawati have moved from the margins to embrace algorithmic mediation, integrating Instagram as a central component of their artistic careers through promotion, distribution, and collaborative networks. Dedy Sufriadi demonstrates a hybrid approach, extensively utilizing algorithmic distribution while maintaining connections to traditional non-virtual art networks.

Each artist's engagement illustrates the spectrum from margins to algorithms in contemporary art practice. Some artists have fully integrated algorithmic mediation into nearly all career aspects, while others selectively adopt digital tools while preserving traditional distribution methods. The widespread adoption of Instagram

[17] David Deacon and James Stanyer, "Mediatization: Key Concept or Conceptual Bandwagon?," *Media, Culture and Society* 36, no. 7 (2014): 1032–44.

[18] Stig Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (Routledge, 2013), 19.

by artists, galleries, art dealers, and collectors demonstrates the platform's algorithmic influence on Yogyakarta's art ecosystem. The normalization of Instagram direct messages for professional communication, replacing traditional email correspondence, exemplifies how algorithmic platforms reshape artistic interaction patterns. This mediatization process reveals Instagram's role in moving artistic practice from institutional margins toward algorithm-dependent visibility and professional networking.

The degree of mediatization through Instagram usage among artists varies depending on the extent to which social media integration influences different aspects of their artistic practice, public engagement, and self-image management. There are 3Levels of Artist Mediatization:

1. Low-level mediatization

Artists create accounts and upload content with minimal strategic optimization. Putu Sutawijaya (5,000 followers, 30-year career) exemplifies this approach, maintaining a basic Instagram presence by posting finished paintings weekly but continuing to rely primarily on traditional galleries for sales and professional communication. His posts feature completed works without accompanying process documentation, and he responds to comments sporadically, lacking systematic engagement strategies.

2. Medium Level mediatization

Artists actively optimize engagement through platform analytics and strategic audience interaction. Dedy Sufriadi (8,000 followers, 25-year career) exemplifies this level by utilizing Instagram's insights features to determine optimal posting times, adapting his sculptural works for mobile viewing through multiple angles and detailed shots, and maintaining consistent interaction with followers. Ronald Apriyan (7,000 followers, 20-year career) similarly analyzes audience demographics to tailor content, uses strategic hashtags for discoverability, and documents his art process to increase engagement beyond finished work presentations.

3. High-Level Mediatization

Artists are integrating Instagram's algorithm into core business operations, replacing traditional professional intermediaries. Oky Rey Montha (25,000 followers, 15-year career) reports that Instagram direct messaging is now part of expanding interactions and networking. Seruni Bodjawati (38,000 followers, 15-year career) uses Instagram not only to showcase her work but also to build strong professional and social relationships, manage her professional image, and serve as a primary platform for communication with fans and collectors. This demonstrates a high level of integration of social media into all aspects of her career.

Mediatization through Instagram has significantly transformed artistic practices, with some artists utilizing the platform for nearly all aspects of their careers. In contrast, others still incorporate certain traditional elements into the distribution and consumption of their artwork. The routine use of Instagram by artists, alongside the participation of other art industry players such as galleries, art dealers, and collectors, exemplifies the ongoing mediatization. Communication and interaction among art practitioners, which were previously conducted via email, are now commonly carried out through Instagram direct messages, becoming a standard practice. The mediatization of artists' Instagram accounts indicates that the platform has a social impact, shaping how artists interact and engage within the art world.

Conclusion

The use of Instagram by artists in Yogyakarta has redefined power dynamics in the art world, enabling them to directly manage the recognition and distribution of their works. This platform extends the reach of art beyond geographical boundaries and has become an integral tool for career development and building a professional identity. Mediatization through Instagram has created a virtual art world, altering how artists interact with audiences, distribute their works, and engage in artistic practices as a whole. Instagram functions not only as a promotional tool but also as an extension of the artist's studio practice – a space for interaction, idea development, and management of the commercial aspects of their art.

Interactions on Instagram shape a virtual art community that influences the perception and appreciation of art. The platform allows artists to share not only finished works but also their creative processes, fostering a more dynamic and continuous cycle of artistic production and distribution. With its global presence, Instagram encourages artists to adapt to media logic, build their self-image, expand their networks, and interact with both the art community and the wider public.

Instagram has emerged as a new space for visual art, distinct from traditional exhibition venues. The experience of presenting and consuming art on Instagram is mediated by mobile phone screens, creating unique interactions. This mediatization process highlights that artists' Instagram accounts are not merely extensions of the existing art world but also contributors to the formation of a new artistic landscape, one that intersects with established art practices while introducing new contextual dimensions.

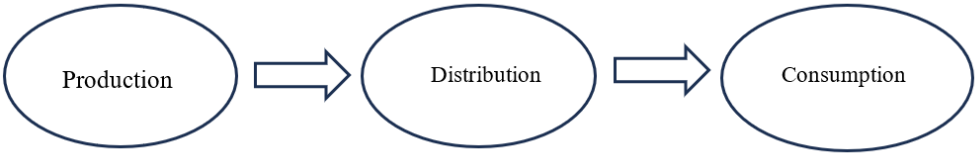


Figure #1: Flow of Production, Distribution, Consumption of Art Works in the Art World

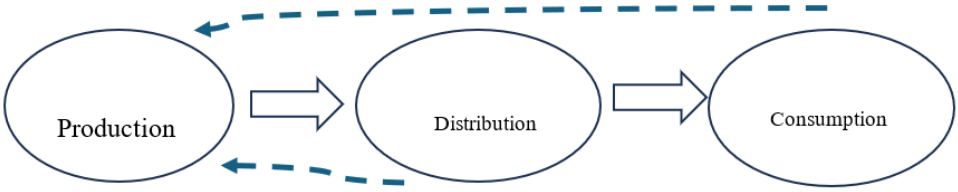


Figure #2: Flow of Production, Distribution, Consumption of Art Works on Instagram

	Art World	**Instagram**
Production	The artworks (finished) by the artist	- The artist finishes the work - Work is being made (in the process of completion) by the artist
Distribution	An intermediary provides the exhibition space	- Instagram by the artist or other account users - resharing of the artist's content regarding the process of making the work or the artwork by other users
Consumption	Exhibition visitors can view the artwork in the exhibition space or collect it on display.	- Other Instagram users give likes, comments, direct messages, and reshare uploads.

Table #1: The differences between production, distribution, and consumption in the art world and Instagram

References

Briggs, Asa, Peter Burke, and Espen Ytreberg. *A Social History of the Media. From Gutenberg to Facebook*. Polity Press, 2001.

Burhan, M. Agus. *Perkembangan Seni Lukis Mooi Indie Sampai Persagi Di Batavia, 1900–1942*. Galeri Nasional Indonesia, 2008.

Crowley, David, and David Mitchell, eds. *Communication Theory Today*. Polity Press, 1994.

Deacon, David, and James Stanyer. "Mediatization: Key Concept or Conceptual Bandwagon?" *Media, Culture and Society* 36, no. 7 (2014): 1032–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714542218.

Esner, Rachel, and Sandra Kisters, eds. *The Mediatization of the Artist*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66230-5.

Fishwick, Paul A. *Aesthetic Computing*. MIT Press, 2006.

Hjarvard, Stig. *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*. Routledge, 2013.

Kellner, Douglas, and Meenakshi Durham, eds. *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*. Blackwell, 2006.

Leaver, Tama, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, eds. *Instagram Visual Social Media Cultures*. Polity Press, 2021.

MacDowall, Lachlan, and Kylie Budge. *Art After Instagram Art Spaces: Audiences, Aesthetics*. Routledge, 2022.

Silverstone, Roger. "Complicity and Collusion in the Mediation of Everyday Life." *New Literary History* 33, no. 4 (2002): 761–780.

Spanjaard, Helena. *Cita-Cita Seni Lukis Indonesia Modern 1900-1995: Sebuah Kreasi Identitas Kultural Nasional*. Translated by Iswahyudi Iswahyudi. Ombak, 2018.

Thimm, Caja, Mario Anastasiadis, and Jessica Einspänner-Pflock, eds. *Media Logic(S) Revisited: Modelling the Interplay Between Media Institutions, Media Technology and Societal Change*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Thumim, Nancy. *Self-Representation and Digital Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Tunnikmah, Nadiyah. "Impact of COVID-19 on the World of Fine Arts; between Online Exhibitions, Virtual Exhibitions in Cyberspace Appreciation." In *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Interdisciplinary Arts & Humanities (ICONARTIES)*, 2020. 149–158.

Tunnikmah, Nadiyah. "Instagram Selfie Di Pameran Artjog." *Ars: Jurnal Seni Rupa Dan Desain* 21, no. 2 (2018): 116–32. https://doi.org/10.24821/ars.v21i2.2887.

Article received: April 5, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Original scholarly paper

ARTIST PORTFOLIO

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.631

Dijana Milošević
DAH Theater Research Center for Culture and Social Change; Institute for Modern Dance, Belgrade

DAH Theater Research Centre for Culture and Social Change

DAH Theater Research Centre for Culture and Social Change is a contemporary artistic collective that examines social issues built on the principle of social action and excellence in arts production and projects. The mission is to provoke, inspire, and incite personal and social transformation, both locally and globally, through engaging art and culture.

DAH was co-founded in Belgrade, Serbia, in 1991 by theatre directors Jadranka Anđelić and Dijana Milošević.

"In the contemporary world, destruction and violence can only be opposed by the creation of sense" is the founding and continuing motto of DAH Theatre.

The theater's vision is to contribute to the creation of a more just, peaceful, and sustainable society.

Throughout its more than three-decade-long history, DAH Theatre has always worked with and been committed to protecting the most vulnerable groups, including children, youth, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled, senior citizens, migrants, war veterans, victims of human trafficking, and many other distinctly sensitive groups. The work of DAH Theater is highly socially aware, consistently raising issues related to human rights and equity, and more recently, environmental protection. Principles of equality, respect for human rights, tolerance, collaborative work, justice, and the right to ongoing personal growth guide it.

DAH Theater Research Centre for Culture and Social Change is a genuine pioneer in Serbia regarding peace building, theatre, and arts whose goal is to create conditions for community members – artists, experts, different organizations and initiatives, women and activist groups, youth, and audiences – to meet in safe surroundings and create bridges across all divisions. Through cooperative participation (projects, performances, meetings), DAH Theatre's goal is to create contact between individuals from opposing sides. By developing creative youth programs, a foundation for the future that nurtures young people living together would be established.

The goal is to link the arts to civil society, active citizenship and politics, celebrating and promoting dignity and respect for all people equally through a series of activities such as performances/productions, work demonstrations, workshops, lectures, programs for youth, festival and meetings (bi-annual International Festival

Author's contact information: dijana.mlsvc@gmail.com

"Arts and Human Rights" founded in 2020), networks, educational programs (Inside of Laboratory, International School for Actors and Directors, Artist in Residence) and tours – local and international.

DAH Theatre has maintained a continuous thread of resistance since 1991 to the present day. Throughout its three-decade-long history, DAH Theatre has collaborated with feminist activist organizations, including Women in Black and ACT Women. Together, using theatre tools, they made visible the nonviolent resistance to militarism, war, sexism, and nationalism. They carried out numerous street actions and protests, theatre performances, and toured the region with various events, including conferences, meetings, workshops, and talks for and with women.

I watched their performances that celebrate life. I think of courage, dignity, perseverance, artistic finesse and dark matter that transcend the boundaries of art. […] They were, and remain, butterflies. Like a mystery, I watch them dream, how, flying out the window, they soar straight into History. – Eugenio Barba, director of the ODIN Theater, Denmark.

DAH Theater is one of the most successful and innovative theater troupes in modern history. What makes DAH so remarkable? Their passion and creativity go far beyond pure performance. – Dennis Barnett, professor of drama and theater, COE College, USA.

With more than 45 theatre productions, 25 European projects, 20 international collaborations, and 17 organized festivals, DAH Theatre is one of the most enduring and successful theatre companies in the region and beyond.

Over the years, DAH Theater has received numerous national and international awards for its work and significant contributions to the cultural landscape. DAH Theater made a substantial contribution to the development of contemporary theater in Serbia and beyond.

DAH Theater has been featured in numerous professional books and articles. PhD dissertations, Master's theses, graduate theses, strategic analyses, and project evaluations have been defended on the subject of work and poetics of DAH Theater at various universities locally and around the world.

DAH Theatre is a member of many national and international networks: Assitej – Center for Drama in Education and Art – ITI [International Theatrical Institute] – The Independent Cultural Scene in Serbia (NKSS) – Theatre Without Borders – The Magdalena Project (International Network of Women in Theatre) – EURORESO – International Association for Science and Education – IMPACT (The Platform for Art, Culture and Conflict Transformation).

The first book about DAH Theatre was published in 2016. The title of the edition was *DAH Theatre, A Sourcebook* – edited by Dennis Barnett and published by Lexington Books.

DAH Theatre is included in the book *The Twenty-First Century Performance Reader*, edited by Noel Witts, published by Routledge, 2019.

DAH Theatre's work is based on a devised theatre form that connects theatre, dance, and visual arts. The themes through which DAH Theatre expresses its poetics are always connected to the individual's position in society and history.

DAH Theatre's team consists of nine dedicated women as core members with more than 50 collaborators (artists, technicians, designers, musicians, scholars, etc.).

https://en.dahteatarcentar.com

Figure #1: *ONE. Ispred svog vremena* (*SHE. Ahead of Her Time*). Photo: Nata Korenovskaia

Figure #2: *Drveće pleše* (*Dancing Trees*). Photo: Đorđe Tomić

Figure #3: *Drveće pleše* (*Dancing Trees*). Photo: Nata Korenovskaia

Figure #4: *Zagonetka revolucije* (*The Conundrum of Revolution*). Photo: Đorđe Tomić

Figure #5: *Za tvoje dobro* (*For Your Own Good*). Photo: Đorđe Tomić

Figure #6: *Za tvoje dobro* (*For Your Own Good*). Photo: Đorđe Tomić

Figure #7: DAH Theatre Team with associates. Photo: Nata Korenovskaia

BOOK REVIEW


ART+MEDIA

https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i28.632

Miško Šuvaković
Faculty of Media and Communication, Singidunum University, Belgrade

Sven Spieker: *Art as Demonstration. A Revolutionary Recasting of Knowledge*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2024.

Sven Spieker is a professor of Comparative and German Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the founder and editor of the influential journal *ArtMargins*, which is published in both print and online versions. He is the author of the book *The Big Archive/Art from Bureaucracy* (The MIT Press, 2008). He has edited two collections: *Destruction* (The MIT Press, 2017) and *Akusmatik im Labor/Kultur-Kunst-Medien* (Königshausen & Neumann, 2023).

Spieker focuses on comparative theoretical studies of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde phenomena in various cultural and geopolitical environments during the long 20th and early 21st centuries. His approach is methodologically defined by the analysis and discussion of artistic, cultural, and political acting, in relation to theoretical constructions of the networks and maps of modernity and contemporaneity between artistic practice, cultural theory, epistemology, and politics.

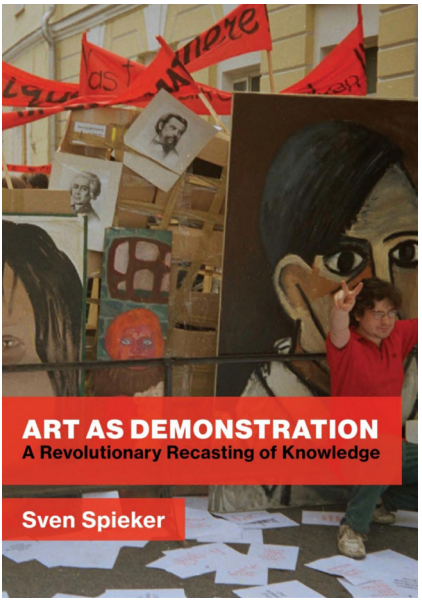
In his book *The Big Archive*, the concept of the memory archive is analyzed as a psychoanalytical concept (Freud), as well as an archive as an apparatus for storing and displaying information, knowledge, and even artworks and documents. The archive is also viewed as a medium for artistic research and work with data, memories, artworks, and documents. On a chosen theme – the concept of the archive – Spieker demonstrated the modalities of discussion of individual and collective, human and media capabilities for gathering, preserving, and utilizing important and reflective data. In Spieker's words, the archive exists in the interspace or "[…] the archive's precarious position between order and chaos, between organization and disorder, between the presence of the voice and the muteness of objects." He wrote about the works of artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Andre Breton, El Lissitzky, Sergei Eisenstein, Gerhard Richter, Walid Raad, Andrea Fraser, and others.

In his new book, *Art as Demonstration*, Spieker introduces the reader to the uncertain field of revolutionary or proto-revolutionary actions and performances by artists from the time of the neo-avant-garde through conceptual art to contemporary art. He focuses his attention on the concrete power of conceptualization and expression, that is, the articulation of political, cultural, artistic, and aesthetic positions in specific geopolitical spaces of the Cold War between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as the transitional world with the illusion of non-existent borders and the illusion

*Author contact information: miodrag.suvakovic@fmk.edu.rs

of liberal freedoms. He argued that demonstration is more than a technical device "in the armor of global modernism, functioning as it does as a powerful means for artists to intervene in the reality that surrounds them. […] Art-as-demonstration then presents us with a conundrum: while on the one hand, it is inextricably connected to an optimistic belief in dialogue, progress, and instruction as an emancipatory force, on the other hand, its optimism is forever threatened by an equally intractable blind spot with regard to its proclivity for being manipulated."

In his book *Art as Demonstration*, Spieker addresses the ways in which demonstration has helped (re-)shape art and politics from the height of the Cold War to the late 20th century. He analyzes what he calls "art-as-demonstration" in two regions: "Western Europe (especially Germany) and the US – the 'West' – and the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union – the so-called 'East' – paying close attention to how demonstration manifests in or as art on either side of the Berlin Wall. Indeed, while the emancipatory agenda of the 1960s used to be identified squarely with the West – the 1967 anti-shah protests in the Western half of Berlin, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, May '68 in Paris, Germany's *außerparlamentarische* Opposition (APO), and so forth – a more comprehensively oriented take on the era has now emerged that not only includes the nations of the former Eastern Bloc but is also mindful of the many ways the two sides remained connected, defying the Cold War's binary logic." This approach highlights the essential idea of the importance of geopolitical and geo-aesthetic comparability. It shows that it is not enough to develop discourses and narratives within the possible worlds of the West and East, but today it is necessary to show on both sides the analogies, similarities, overlaps, contradictions, and conflicts in the practices of artistic, cultural, and political aspirations towards emancipation and the realization of phantasmatic or real freedom.



Cover image of the book:
Art as Demonstration.
Published courtesy of Sven Spieker.

The book *Art as Demonstration* is composed of ten chapters.

In the first chapter, "Introduction: Art-As-Demonstration in the 1960s and Beyond", the theoretical context of the discussion on art rooted in acts, gestures, performances, or practices of public and private demonstration is established. The concept of demonstration is associated with acts and practices of public protest developed within art and alternative cultures of the 1960s. It is characteristic that the idea of art as a practice of demonstration is considered along a spectrum – from political public acts to political-ethical transgression and the immanent deontologization of the artwork, extending to didactic practices between utopian and pragmatic, i.e., between live and archival work.

In the second chapter, "Ostentatious Neutrality", Spieker updates and elaborates on the modalities of didactic and productive art established among Weimar-era figures, such as Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, with references to post-Duchampian 1960s art. The tactics of decision-making and performative demonstrative or showy actions are applied to the practices of conceptual artists such as Bernar Venet, Daniel Buren, and Adrian Piper.

The third chapter, "Burlesque Lecture Demonstration", discusses the lecture performances of American minimal and post-minimal artist Robert Morris (*from March 21*, 1964/1994) and the Belgrade post-conceptual anonymous artist Walter Benjamin (*Mondrian Lecture*, 1986). Spieker offers an interesting and instructive interpretation of the concept of lecturing as a form of demonstration.

In the chapter "Film as Operation", the demonstrative productions of German filmmaker Harun Farocki and Polish experimental visual artist Paweł Kwiek are analyzed and discussed. In the chapter "Taking It to the Street: Eastern European Art Demonstration," public manifestations and actions of neo-avant-garde Czech artists Milan Knižák and Jiří Kovanda, Hungarian artist Endre Tót, post-conceptual artist Mladen Miljanović from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and contemporary Romanian artist Ciprian Homorodean are examined. Particular attention is given to demonstrations in public space. Notably illustrative is the chapter "Learning from the Situation," which analyzes the work of the leftist activist Ulrike Meinhof and video artist Clemens von Wedemeyer. The subsequent section discusses the work of Bazon Brock and Włodzimierz Borowski in relation to gaze strategies – "Instructions for Seeing".

In the chapter "Teaching What Does Not Exist!", the work of the Moscow group *Gnezdo* (*The Nest*) and conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov is discussed. The phenomenon of demonstrations in the Soviet and post-Soviet social and cultural space is especially examined through project platforms such as the Extra-Governmental Control Commission, Radek Community, and Chto Delat. The concluding tenth chapter, "Postscript: The Migrant's Hands: Between Demonstration and Archive in Sylvain George's Qu'ils Reposent En Révolte (Des Figures de Guerre)", guides the reader into contemporary issues and introduces a significant political conflict between the global North and South, exemplified by migrant demonstrations, activities, and actions. It, also, emphasizes the relationship between demonstrations and archives.

In contemporary art history and theory, a critical shift has occurred from a linear historicization of artistic, cultural, and social phenomena toward unexpected resets of history from a perspective of contemporaneity. For example, Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois reconstructed the history of modern art based on a selected reference quote from Georges Bataille's *Dictionary*. In other words, they performed deconstruction and reontologization of modernist research and the recreation of aesthetic and artistic forms by invoking the idea of "formlessness". Sven Spieker established, as the fundamental condition for his reontologization of late modern and contemporary art, culture, and politics, a concept rooted in "demonstrative" or "demonstration" artistic practice, contrasting it with concepts of performance, live, activist, or participatory art. Today, it appears that every new study of modernity and contemporaneity hypothetically marks a shift from "historically linear presented aesthetic-artistic facts" toward hypothetical constructs of political, cultural, aesthetic, and artistic models. The universal weaving of the history of modernity and contemporaneity involves the introduction of theoretical differences and symptoms of recontextualization and resemantization of effects, where a revolutionary recasting of knowledge is being interpreted.