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Vaida Stepanovaitė is a researcher, curator, and organizer, as well as an associate lecturer in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research examines the relationships and tensions between art, work, and labour across both institutional and self-organized contexts. She questions the notion of art as an aesthetic practice disconnected from the broader economy, and challenges the idea of labour as belonging solely to the economic sphere.

Vaida played a pivotal role in establishing the Art Workers' Union in Lithuania in 2023. A branch of the May 1st Labor Union, the Art Workers' Union seeks to protect workers' rights in the field of visual arts while also reimagining 'art workers' as a new, broader collective subject. In her practice-based research, Vaida highlights the unspoken hierarchies and the differential value assigned to roles in the field of art, as well as the material differences this discrepancy fosters between creative and infrastructural work.

In this podcast, Vaida Stepanovaitė guides us through some of the intricate lineages of past and present trade unions in the post-Soviet Baltic states, while also drawing inspiration from international movements such as the Art Workers' Coalition and W.A.G.E., as well as from recent collective efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. She reflects on the devaluation of labour and people within the context of 'uber-economics' or the gig economy, on the toll, precarity takes on the tired bodies of workers, and on the need for radical action to foster new forms of collectivization. The struggle against inhospitable working conditions and the gaps in the social safety net affecting art workers, serves as a starting point for devising better models for arts institutions and building new solidarities in the quest for a good life.

The following is a transcription of our podcast with Vaida Stepanovaité, which has been lightly edited for clarity and readability.

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00:00

Art, work, labour

The question about the relationship between art and work and labour is obviously a very fraught question. It’s one that has been raising many conflicts between people working in art and those invested in the topics of labour. I've always been very curious about why these two things don't seem to come together in a neat way. Why is there a co-optation of art as an aesthetic practice that is somehow autonomous and disjointed from the greater economy and society, and a co-optation of labour as something that belongs only to the economic sphere? There are brilliant researchers who have been thinking about art, work and labour together, like Katja Praznik. There is a discourse on that, but it is not as well-known perhaps, or maybe hasn’t been developed as much in the arts.

01:20
Getting together: The Art Workers’ Trade Union in Lithuania

When I think about these questions, my mind immediately goes to the Art Workers’ Union that we’re running in Lithuania. We started thinking about it in 2020. I remember one of the first meetings we had with people who were interested in it, or at least had been thinking about the question: ‘Could there be a possibility for a labour union in the arts in Lithuania?’ I remember it was a sunny afternoon, and there were still some COVID restrictions on how many people could meet indoors. We decided to meet outside and have a potluck lunch in Vilnius somewhere on the grass. A few cultural workers came together to share their experiences during COVID and ideas on how to collectively address the governmental restrictions on access to their workplaces. Also, to discuss the general precarity that became so evident during COVID, not just in the arts, but in the broader strokes of society, too.

There was such a great sense of sharing. We came together to see whether we needed some extra collective protection for independent cultural workers. We thought that those who work in institutions are fine, they're protected: they have permanent contracts, they have employers, they can survive any precarity and any kind of pandemic. But those who are self-employed –so, of course, artists at large, but also curators, writers, translators and all of that– they are the ones who need the most protection, or at least support during very difficult times and inhospitable, very precarious conditions, such as those brought out during COVID.

However, when we met that afternoon, there were not only people who were self-employed, but also museum employees, and people from art institutions and governmental cultural funding agencies. We started sharing our material conditions and feelings that arose around 2020 in the arts. And it turned out that everyone was feeling a certain level of precarity, instability, sorrow, and unknowability. What will happen to their jobs? What will happen to their means of subsistence, to their possibilities to sustain themselves working in the arts: whether it's the governmental sector, the independent sector, if they're people employed with an institution, or if they're working on their own and paying their own taxes? These conversations spurred a wider understanding.

I always like to quote Marina Vishmidt. She was a brilliant researcher who said that it's not about finding better contracts or thinking only about formal tools and hinges of support for artists' labour or work; it's more about understanding each other and recognising one another in the arts as complex subjects. She emphasised how it's about finding a way in which to address precarity in the arts on more general terms.

05:34
A first meeting

We met in 2020, and then it took us at least a year of meetings, trying to understand what exactly the labour union would be. You know, Lithuania is a post-Soviet, post-communist country, and the form of an artist's union has a very contested and difficult meaning and history. It took us a while to try to convince people that a union is something that protects art workers, something artists and art workers could consult on legal terms, and something that would help negotiate better working conditions. But somehow, after a year of us starting to think about the union, when the pandemic was kind of over, but the impacts and effects were still lingering, we didn't continue with the establishment of the union. We were back at our workplaces, and everything kind of started up again.

But then something shifted again in 2023, and this was the year we legally established the union. There was this article, a very reactive one, which was meant to instigate some questions in the Lithuanian art scene. This journalist wrote an article suggesting that if we wanted higher wages and salaries in the arts, there would have to be more men working in the arts because the Lithuanian cultural sector is dominated by women. The article basically suggested that if we want to negotiate better pay, we must have more men working in the arts because they're better negotiators. This take is complete nonsense, at least from my perspective, and a lot of people thought that, too. But I think this was the moment where we thought, wait a minute: do we need more men, or can we do something

else about the lack of proper wages and means of subsistence in the arts, and establish the union? And so, we did.

It seems that these types of collective radical action (at least it's radical in Lithuania to have this union) really come from points of absolutes, where you're just done, you just have to do something, because there's absolutely no other way to go. It just comes from a point where we really come together and see each other as we are. Even if we work in the same sector, we're divided by so many kinds of different positions: the positions of power, positions of income, positions in the wider frame of precarity. We're always divided and disjointed like that. But sometimes these wider problems or situations just make you feel sick to the stomach, and you don't know what else to do. This is exactly where this type of collective action can come out.

09:35
Similar problems, similar worries: finding new solidarities in the art world

The Art Workers' Union is an independent labour union. We consult our members on different work cases. We had a few cases where we helped artists to get paid, where either the contracts were broken or where contracts were never even signed, because, of course, who signs contracts in the arts? We're helping with this kind of thing, but also, we go into advocacy and policy, and we're trying not to stay within the lane of what an artists' labour union does. We are also suggesting that we should look into the precarity of art workers on all levels. Artists are usually the focal point of a lot of discussions about labour and work, and there are artists' unions, artists' associations; Lithuania, especially, has a history of artists' associations with wide membership, and they're extremely influential. But when we had that first meeting in 2020, you know, that lunch between all the different types of workers on permanent contracts, institutional and self-employed workers, artists, admin workers, translators, and curators… when we shared the conversation, we realised that our problems and worries were actually very similar.

Then we began to realise that maybe it would be interesting to disperse the focus on artists and their conditions, this focus on artists as *the* subject in the arts. And maybe we could start thinking more in terms of solidarity between all kinds of workers, that is, anyone who has any fraction of labour in the arts. That we should not individuate, hierarchise, and disjoint the collectivities that are in the arts. It's also about recognising each other's labour and work. It's not always about just the income, but also about the conditions of labour. For example, what hours people have to work, what sacrifices they need to make to be there.

How are they treated not only by the institution or the organisation, but also how do workers treat each other? We thought that if we could broaden the understanding of everyone's conditions in the art world, that might lead to something more interesting, more earnest and more transparent.

13:01
Voice Over Intro

15:49
Aesthetic labour and the disbelief in the union

In the Soviet times, artists were collectivised around their labour. Their aesthetic output was viewed through a political lens adherent to the state, and that output was highly managed through all kinds of state relations. When Lithuania and the Baltics broke out of the Soviet Union, there came this reaction to having been so centrally managed by the state. Artists really wanted to move as far away as possible from having the arts viewed on any political terms, from allowing any kind of state or institutional power to influence their work, so they wanted to reinhabit this romantic idea of artists as autonomous, independent. Someone like an observer of life who should never be tainted by anything like a contract telling them what to create, or by having any kind of restrictions on them. So if we're bringing back the idea that we need to come together through the means of our labour, and if we come back to the idea of unionising as artists and art workers, that is somehow a very big betrayal of the freedom that was fought for, the freedom from the Soviet style of management of the arts. Of course, for me –and I mean for us, the initiative group who were working on establishing the Art Workers' Union in Lithuania– this question is not insignificant. It does require consideration on why there's been such a shift in the meaning of artistic work and of labour due to these major geopolitical shifts, and these lingering historic traumas. It's difficult to negate that. But then, beyond the post-Soviet sphere, people have also doubted workerism and labour unions, which can be seen as an organisational, institutional structure that simply re-establishes the power position between the employer and the employee, and tends to overdetermine any kind of relation by economic measures. So to say, any contract captures your hours, your body and your mind into a certain kind of economic unit, and it just reinforces the goal towards productivity in economic terms. And, of course, there's a lot of that happening. The thing is, I've been organising in various forms and towards various goals for a while now in the arts.

What I think I've learned, or what I've arrived at, or maybe come to believe at this point, is that it's not always about finding the new, most innovative, or unheard-of form of organising ourselves or coming together. It's not necessarily about finding another term or a completely reinvented way of sharing some goals and desires, and recognising each other as we are. In the post-Soviet Baltics, to think about art workers and a labour union is really radical.

Our labour union is the first in such form in the post-Soviet Baltics in the last 30 years. People in Latvia and Estonia have been trying to establish something like this, or they were thinking about this, but it's something that's been discredited or outdated for them. Somehow, for us in Lithuania, it is a radical action. The question is, then, how do we move forward and establish something new, or draw a collective desire, as something going otherwise to the inhospitable conditions of neoliberal capital, of precarity, and all of these woes of contemporary times? But how do we do so without reproducing the historic lineages, or historic inheritances, especially within the Soviet framework of our region? In practice, this is just raw. And when you see someone who has lived through Soviet collectivisation and has had to be part of that Artists' Union and who had to fight for or against different things that I have never fought for or against –to tell them that their trauma, historic traumas, or feelings or modes of working or beliefs are not valid, well, I can't do that. This is not about validating or negating anyone's experience of self, collectivity, art, or aesthetic pronunciation of the world. But rather it's more about finding solidarities that don't necessarily result in either being for or against. There might be a transversal value in neither presence nor absence in our thinking about the greater economy, histories, politics, or constitutional conditions.

23:36
A context for struggles in the arts

There's a book called *Art Workers – Material Conditions and Labour Struggles in Contemporary Art Practice,* put together by Erik Krikortz, Airi Triisberg and Minna Henriksson, and they speak in depth about organising around labour in the arts in the Nordic and Baltic region. This is a very good book; it's a kind of guidebook on what it means to think about the material struggles of art workers, especially in post-Soviet lands. Airi speaks about how, in the moment of igniting their mobilising efforts of Estonian art workers in 2010, there was this exhibition in Tallinn that questioned the disparities in the systems of wage and income in the arts. But the thing is, in that specific exhibition, the artists were not paid. So that was one of those moments where everyone thought, 'wait a minute, this is a kind of a façade, they're discussing the disparities and precarities in the arts, but they're practically inhabiting the same kind of unfair system'. And out of that, the

workers started mobilising. And, you might notice, in the year 2010, there was an economic crisis.

25:50
Art Workers' Coalition (MoMA, 1969)

I've been following the lineages of art workers mobilising. The Art Workers' Coalition was around the time of the protests happening against MoMA's board members' involvement in supporting the Vietnam War. Out of that, after those protests and through this protest action, they started addressing working conditions in more general terms at MoMA, and wanted to establish artists as art workers. There's a long lineage of things happening like that. Around the economic crisis in 2010, the Estonian art world started mobilising around labour and work. And around that time in New York, the W.A.G.E. initiative also came about, the Working Artists and the Greater Economy, I think that's behind the acronym. It is still going. It's a very powerful action that elicits transparency in the working conditions of artists and involves art institutions that pledge to create fairer working conditions. This has been a model that's been followed widely.

25:50
A resurgence in union action: Tate, London

During the COVID pandemic, our Art Workers' Union in Lithuania started coming about, but of course, there has been a kind of resurgence in union action in many countries, along with the realisation of how precarious we are in the arts. For example, Tate workers in London unionised and collectivised, and their union actions became widely discussed and visible in the public sphere. There were a lot of workers who came together, both institutional workers and others.

27:59
Waiting for the next crisis

I think there is something very telling in how people come together when times are really dire. I find it quite interesting that we need a crisis to be reminded how bad things are for us and how precarious we are working in the arts. It seems that we need something, something huge, like a global pandemic or economic crisis, or wars or genocides, to

realise that we need to be in conversation with others who work in the arts, and that we need to be in solidarity to address how difficult it is to sustain ourselves on a day-to-day basis: economically, emotionally, and otherwise. However, each crisis also brings about a need to address the crisis itself. It has become so normalised that a crisis comes, and then is followed by a new normal. And this has been especially true in neoliberal conditions, which have really managed to create a crisis as a mode of normalcy: a state of exception has become a state of normalcy.

30:11
Visible changes: the art worker as a new collective subject

I think what we've managed to achieve so far with the Art Workers' Union, or the most visible change that happened over the course of our very short existence, is the formation of the art worker as this new collective subject. I see that a lot of people are starting to refer to themselves and others as art workers, not only as artists. There are people in all kinds of professional positions who also have the capacity to discuss their problems. We see this a lot in the public sphere, where people have become more open and transparent in sharing things like the workplace conditions in various Lithuanian art institutions, but also, there are more general conversations on how difficult it is to sustain oneself while working in the arts. At least for me, this is one of the more interesting things or changes that happened in recent times. I do believe this is where a lot of political action could begin. I think it's important that we start recognising ourselves in different terms than those we had previously considered.

32:06
Strategic goals and living a good life

For now, we haven't been able to change any laws or create any action in state politics, for example, but we have been trying to ensure much better social and economic conditions for those who are self-employed in the arts. For self-employed people, it's very difficult to go on paid maternity leave, to get sick pay, or take out a mortgage, which are all the things that people with permanent, institutional contracts can do. Sadly, this is not as accessible for independent workers. This is one of our strategic goals for the future, to address this.

There has been way more discussion about the need for all art workers on different pay scales to live a good life. I think people are afraid, or maybe just bored, of thinking about

this kind of thing. It somehow seems so trivial: I want a good salary. I don't want to work on evenings and on weekends. I just want to go on holiday. I want this and that, and so on. That's why I understand why so many researchers and practitioners don't take up the question of the merging of art, work and labour. And that's true even for myself. I have to find different entrances into this, so it doesn't again become something that speaks about you having to pay artists this fee for this, and that fee for that, and for these hours of work. I think that's where the work on this topic starts, instead of ending there. But speaking of all this triviality, I also want to be able to go on maternity leave someday. I wouldn't mind taking a mortgage as well and having some things to just enjoy… enjoy a good life.

This comes after you've been so tired of working in the arts, where you're on the verge of quitting because you can't sustain yourself, and then these questions become very relevant. There needs to be more discussion about what we need to live a life. I mean a life with leisure and life with pleasure: a good life. I'm borrowing from Lauren Berlant, who speaks of living the good life, and who attended critically to this idea, as this is a very Western projection. But there is something to that. There is something to that wish of not wanting to struggle, which is fair. It's fair not to want to struggle. It's very understandable.

35:42

The case of budgetary transparency

There's no ideal way of organising ourselves. There's no ideal institution. There's no ideal organisation. The only ideal conditions are those that work the best for particular people in a very particular case. But of course, if I had to explain my imaginary for these ideal conditions, I would say 'transparency'. I see transparency as people knowing where money comes from, how it's being distributed. And I think this is already a good start for a lot of conversations. I've seen a lot of difference in working on projects where people are informed, where everyone knows how the budgets are allocated, and who is getting paid for what. This gives so much power to people. It allows everyone to say how much they're willing to contribute, and then it's also a bit clearer why certain fees are offered or why people accept them.

On the other hand, they understand the larger framework of the budget and see how much of it goes not only to salaries and fees, but also towards supporting the infrastructure. And this is a conversation that not a lot of people are privy to. I've been working in and I've been part of running a few self-organised spaces or project spaces. I've worked a lot in a self-organisational capacity, and you see how much money and effort go into everything, and you also see the absolutely boring work that goes into sustaining an infrastructure, or sustaining an organisation on a bureaucratic, administrative level. It includes all the rent,

the utilities and things that break and which you must fix. You have financial reports too, and somehow that type of work and that side of work really excites me, although I think I'm in a minority. But there is something interesting about knowing and understanding how much work it takes to actually sustain something. There’s great value in that. And this is why I feel that if we start talking with transparency about budgets, financials, and economics in organisations to all its members, then all these other conversations can start happening.

39:36

The differential value of art and maintenance

I've had a lot of fallings-out in my practice, with colleagues in projects, with partners in project spaces, and with all kinds of collectives and organisations, which I've been part of running, particularly with people not wanting to do the maintenance work, but also not seeing value in that. They think that if you're sustaining the material, administrative, and infrastructural side of an organisation or of a project, then you should be compensated less than those doing the aesthetic development of ideas and production. It makes me quite sad. And this is a topic that's caused some negative emotions for me, because if you're a person who usually picks the material on top of the creative side of running an art project, and you're consistently devalued by your colleagues who only want to work on the curatorial or artistic side of things, it starts cutting quite deep. That's why the transparency I spoke about before could be a start to forming an ideal kind of working structure that would allow people to see how much work and economic resources are needed. It would help to understand that this work is no less important than the development of the aesthetic side of artistic projects.

42:36

Art, work and the Greater Economy

I'm not sure that we need to look for the value of art either completely inside or completely outside of the economy, the greater economy. If we start steering away from assigning any economic value to art, then we might fall into the questions, or rather propositions, of art’s aesthetic and larger autonomy from society. But also, we don't want to assign or over-determine art and artistic practice only by its economic value; assigning an economic measurement to practices that can be so raw, undetermined, and difficult to capture. For instance, saying, ‘this is the price of that’ or ‘here's a contract for the exhibition’, but having no way to actually count the hours you will spend on that exhibition. Perhaps you could

measure in some way, but not entirely. No one works like that. No one works by saying ‘I'll spend five hours on the exhibition this week’. You might, but it doesn't mean that you stop thinking about the exhibition after you spend those five hours in the studio. It just doesn't need to be captured in those more general and more rigid economic measurements of our time and of our output, to cram something as sporadic and as vast as art into predetermined measures of value of output, of productivity, of growth. In its entirety, it simply doesn't fit, although some parts should fit if we want to live from art.

45:04

Value and equitable working conditions in the Arts

Value can be quite abstract, but it can also be very rigidly measured if we’re talking about the neoliberal economy. There can, of course, be an economic value of an artwork, but it can also have a collective and affective value, the value of the friendship that went into creating and producing that artwork. I think this is where we tend to fall into these kinds of rigid categories, where we only see one value in one thing, but it just doesn't work like that. Life is weird, life is difficult. Life is always full of contradictions, and art, it especially thrives on that. That’s why I'm always coming back to the idea that if we want to start thinking about more equitable working conditions in the arts, we must start with people. This is where the idea about dispersing the focus from artists came, and thinking instead about art workers. That means everyone who works in the arts: the exhibition technician, the museum shop worker, the curator, their assistant, the invigilator, and the volunteer who came to help with your installation. These people are all worth thinking about with the same intensity. I don't see much difference in the value of each of these people’s work. And the problem occurs when we start assigning such differential values to these very different practices. Of course, it’s a very different job to invigilate an exhibition or to be the artist who created that exhibition. There is no denying that it's a different practice. It requires a different set of skills, different intensities in a project, maybe even different kinds of affective constellations that appeared out of a certain body being in the space. But, at least for me, it doesn't mean that there's a lesser value to each of the kinds of involvement. If we start thinking like this, of not assigning value to different subjectivities and professions in the arts, I think that could lead us to a more radical thought about value itself.

This is also a very gendered question. So many projects in the arts and in organisations and institutions depend on women doing the maintenance work. And I don’t think we can easily escape that. This is just one of the perspectives where rethinking value on subjective terms can lead to more radical thought and greater equity.

48:54

Labour as a common resource

When we speak about value in the context of art and work and labour, but also in a broader context, there is this idea that the totally quantifiable value is what's being addressed. But this is again falling into dangerous territory when you think that there is a totality of anything, that there's a possibility of a total access of any economic or political system onto its subject, collectivities, communalities, and individual and collective desires. Even when we think about the most authoritarian, the most rigid and stratifying political economic systems, I would say that there's never a total capture of a self and of a subject and of a certain ‘we’. There's always something else going against and around the idea and the projection of a totalising system. If we want to think beyond value, we need to first dispel the idea of being able to grasp someone’s and something’s value as purely quantifiable, but also to dispel the idea of us as subjects inhabiting any kind of totality. It's not about being a total self, the total person, which is what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten speak about in their book *All Incomplete*. They say there is the necessary incompleteness of self, of our identity, our experience, our relation to the world and to the other. The supposed completeness is also an economic projection onto the self. It projects that there's a completeness of a subject that can then be used for the means and ends of the neoliberal political economy. When we start rethinking that, when we start going away from the idea of a valorising totality, then this is where more radical conversations can happen. And that’s also when the value of labour in the arts can enter a very interesting conversation. I've been trying to think of labour as a common resource and seeing that as something that can be shared between us, instead of being assessed under capital's economy, or under institutional economy. This could lead to questions of the commons.

53:29

Precarity and social disposability

We've recently been having a lot of conversations between our Art Workers' Union in Lithuania and other kinds of more activist or radical initiatives of art workers in Nordic and Baltic countries. We’ve also been trying to get into conversation with the more established and long-running artists’ associations in these regions. I have such a great hope and desire that we can all come together in a collective action and bask in friendships between these long-standing initiatives and some very particular initiatives for art workers, different

organisations and institutions. The thing is that artists' and art workers' unions and associations are not only for solving one issue around the production and circulation of art, or the value of art or artists' work and labour, but they're also addressing a much larger field of precarity and of social disposability of workers. There is a valuelessness of certain labour and of certain people and thus of certain subjects in society, deemed precarious. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou spoke about the social disposability of precarious subjects in society, in how they and their lives are seen as having differential value. We're all addressing much wider issues of precarity in the world. By 'we' I mean all these institutions, organisations, radical actions, and communal platforms. Things come up all the time, and we solve very particular worries in the world, and then they dissipate, and all the energy can float back into society. We're all part of something much bigger.

I am such a fierce believer in not relying on only one mode of action and one mode of recognition of ourselves in the world and of each other. I think there's a lot to learn from each other, and more particularly, at least in the Baltics, artist associations have vast experience in building the understanding of artistic practice and artistic labour, together with the building of new democratic societies in the post-Soviet times. We cannot reject this at all. In Lithuania, the Artists' Association were the ones who said, 'Listen, we need social security for artists in this new democracy of Lithuania'. If we're taking care of our new democratic subjects and democratic nation, artists must be integrated into that process. And they fought and passed laws, and they collectivised artists. And they are positing something in the world from this. They're positing that their artists, while such romantically revered and individualised social figures, have a place and a time for all these collectivities, membership activities, and just being together and asking advice or hanging out. It's a space in which they can be consulted on legal issues that arise within the artistic practice, or a place where they can just show their work. There are also some more intimate traditions that surround even the most traditional and largest artists' associations. I feel there's a lot to learn from that.

58:30

Falling through the cracks: a larger union of couriers, cleaners, art workers

I'm very proud to say that the Art Workers' Union in Lithuania is a branch of a wider union. That means that we are not just floating around by ourselves, but we were lucky to be accepted by a larger union that actually has nothing to do with art. May 1st Labour Union started out as a fast-food courier's union. There are all these groups of people: couriers, security guards, cleaners, who fall through the cracks of an economy thriving on sub-contracting, shady and grey type of practices. These people are very difficult to unionise

because there are no direct employers. They are self-sustaining. They're self-employed. Their hours are unregulated. That rings a bell with artists and artistic practice. Our colleagues started this union for couriers, and over time, it became clear that there were more professions that could also benefit from being unionised. The union grew into seven or eight branches. It's becoming large, and it offers a shelter to all those professions that otherwise can't find representation within the traditional trade unions.

Art workers forming a branch as part of this union was also quite a good test for the Lithuanian arts scene, which really began to understand that if one became a member of our union, they would also become part of the larger discussion on labour. That it's not a performance of a union, but we are actually making unionist efforts. I think that us joining the larger union and becoming a branch of it really sends the message out. I think that our collaboration with the larger union creates a recognition that we do share something with other precarious types of labour; it creates an understanding that we don't have to over-romanticise artistic labour because it is defined by everything that guides all labour (law, the greater economy, and the like). But it is also about finding nuance in the commonalities between the different kinds of labour. This has been very productive and interesting.

62:47

Working conditions within a constant state of unknowability

Thinking about my own working conditions, I was really laughing at myself a while ago. I thought: I've been working in the arts, and the second field or profession I choose is academia. And I thought, why can't I just choose something like advertising, or go into accounting as a second field? I just went and chose a field as precarious as art. I'm trying to work in between academia and the arts, and I honestly try just to survive. Basically, because I am self-employed mostly. I sometimes have gigs or jobs that may last longer than a year. For example, I've been an Associate Lecturer at Goldsmiths, and that was a part time employment. It was one of the few times that I've been employed by an institution. Another time was for six months as a gallery director at an institution. Also, I've worked part-time in various organisations as a director, curator or similar. But otherwise, it's always precarious, self-employed adventures that somehow come together in a way that I'm able to sustain myself. I write, teach, manage and lead projects, and I publish. I'm working on my fourth book now. I go to conferences and present my papers. They're unpaid, but at least the university covers the expenses, and that's also some sort of money coming in. I have tried to think about this experience positively, but of course, I am living in a constant state of unknowability. I've paid the price with my health, with the sacrifice of my social life and overall life responsibilities. I have overworked myself trying to put some

income together by doing work that's interesting for me, that’s valuable and also brings value to others. But this has meant that I have foregone social security. I don't have sick leave, maternity leave at the moment, my pension… I’m forgetting the pension; it is not going to happen for my generation either way. And then you start thinking, why it seems so unsexy and boring to talk about money in the arts, and why so few people take up the question of art and labour. Why do few people claim this as their field of interest? When that becomes your largest worry, when your precarity takes you to a point where you're always in a mode of survival, this is when it kind of has to become interesting to you, and then suddenly this is not as boring to demand some fairness for your working conditions.

66:43

The precarious and privileged paradox

Turning the gaze and the interest into your own working conditions is perhaps a bit of a coping mechanism. Because I want to keep working on things that I believe in, I'm deeply passionate about, and I see the collective joy in that as well. But maybe creating an artistic or curatorial practice, or researching or building your academic interest around it, helps you to not lose your mind. However, it might be a coping mechanism or a self-fulfilling prophecy, which may keep you working and researching precariously and maintaining the precarious order of things. But of course, there is that question that always leads from these conversations: the question of privilege. I'm not going to kid myself that there is no privilege that allows me to work in both the fields of art and academia and to sustain myself. But that's why it's interesting to hear everyone's stories and understand where they come from. So that's why I'm also open to sharing how I'm doing.

68:43

Exhaustion and the economy of art

The tired body of a tired worker is very much undesirable in many ways. On the one hand, from the perspective of the need to sustain the capitalist economy and from the employer's perspective, but also of upholding the wider imaginary of how we want to see the prestigious field of art functioning. I think we're very unforgiving in the economy of art to bodies that refuse to or can't go on. These are bodies that can't participate in the way that you're supposed to in the economy of art, which requires all the emotional labour to hold oneself through the crazy hours of networking, being available for things all the time, and constant creative output. I think we're moving away from that imaginary and the need to constantly push ourselves to the limit. I've had a couple of burnouts already, and I'm so

young, and my colleagues have had that as well. It's alarming. On the other hand, I have a desire or hope for the art world (or the world) in which we can recognise each other's worry and sorrow, or see the possibility to come together in multiple ways without reaching that level of exhaustion, or without being mired in a crisis where you're completely depleted of your resources and of yourself. I wish we would not allow things to go to that point. I believe we're getting better at recognising those moments where the exhaustion sets in.

72:40
Inhospitable conditions and collectivising otherwise

‘Collectivising otherwise’ is a concept I've been working with for a while now. I don't even know where it came from, but it has become a staple in my thinking of different forms of collectivity and communality that we desire in conditions that seem to require too much of us. I call these inhospitable conditions, that is, political, social, material, affective and all other conditions that pose imperatives onto us as subjects, bodies, relations, ourselves, how we should act, and that exhaust us. I think about the desire to collectivise otherwise, as against those inhospitable conditions. When I think about coming together in ways that are not assigned to us, not pre-empted, then ‘desire’ is very much a word of interest. When I think about desire, I think of Denise Ferreira da Silva’s words on desire in her foreword to *All Incomplete* by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, where she speaks about how it is not possible to meet desire’s demands. Echoing Ernst Bloch’s thinking of hope, desire is something that can’t be just fulfilled. When we drink a glass of water, we're not thirsty anymore, and now we're happy, and everything's great. What really happens after drinking a glass of water is that we get thirsty again. In Ferreira’s writing, we don’t think about desire in a sense of being organised under the imperatives of neoliberal capital –desire is not about finding the right legal form or ticking the right box, or finding the shortest route… It's a desire as positing a different modality of being in the world that is different to the over-stratified, over-determined social, political and economic modes.

75:16
Rethinking the collective: post-Soviet collectivisation in the Baltics

Collectivising: this is a very loaded word. My research does stem from the affective geographies of post-Soviet Baltics and post-socialist realm. I am interested in what happens to collectivity after collectivisation. What happens to the possibility of imagining ourselves as collective subjects or imagining certain forms of collectivity, after you have undergone the absolute violence of a state regime imposing very specific ways of being collectivised? We can speak about the utopias of collectivised life, of the absolute abundance that supposedly should have come from what some state regimes imposed. But I'm not sure that utopias can come from military action. I'm not sure that they come without consulting those who will be taken into that utopia of collectivisation. There is this kind of historic lineage in my research, although I tend to stay away from historicising the idea of collectivity from the socialist times to the current democracy and the neoliberal modality of it.

When I speak about the desire, or the possibility to collectivise otherwise in the arts in this very particular framework of post-Soviet Baltics, what really interests me is the rethinking of our living in the wake of historical and political violence and then having to deal with the traumatic histories of our nations. Thinking this in conjunction with people moving as far away as possible from a collectivist ideology to a completely post-ideological life. And what happens in post-socialist and post-Soviet regions is that the idea of individuality, of private ownership and property become a substitute for freedom from the state collectivisation that people experienced. This is a very tender topic. I think that to have the possibility to create imaginaries for collective life that do not reproduce the inheritances of historical and political violence, it does not mean that we need to succumb to the ideology of individualism and private property. I'm sure there must be something else beyond the two high extremes of these two ideologies, and this is where the imaginaries need to be loosened.

80:40

An unreliable witness

It's always a very loaded proposition to look at the past that so many people think of as filled with absolute violence and totalising trauma. It’s difficult to look and see if there was any good there, or what worked there, not necessarily in the large scale of the political system, but in the everyday experiences or in what was brewing around those totalising political systems. When I started my dissertation at Goldsmiths, I was resistant at first to the idea of staking my research interest in post-Soviet Eastern Europe and post-socialist Central Europe, having come from there. You understand that you come from a country that's kind of on the margins of (or at least it's treated as being on the margins of) hegemonic knowledge production, cultural production, and all of that. And then you go to

the centre of this very production, in my case, London, and very often there's this expectation from the centre to represent your culture and your history in a certain totality. You become a witness to your own conditions, a kind of diplomat, whether you want it or not. I started my dissertation from the perspective of what I call being ‘an unreliable witness of my own conditions’ –of my own historic and cultural conditions. I say this because I can’t witness. I did grow up in a realm of certain historical, cultural and political inheritances and realities. I will always have a story to tell from that perspective. However, I can't be expected to be the representative of that, or rather, the perfect representative of that. I can’t be expected to grasp all of it with my one singular body and mind. I will tell the story, but it's going to be my story. It will absolutely have a certain amount of speculation there, inventions, and my own hope. Once I got that sorted out, that I would be the witness but an unreliable one, then everything just kind of fell into place.

84:08

Totalizing conditions and communal abundance

If we want to negotiate the total value being placed on anything, or being seen as this complete subject and having our life experiences and desires attuned to a certain imagined totality, a political-economic totality, then we can't keep seeing the past in its perceived totality, either. It’s important to attend to the caveats or the social fractures that happen even in the most totalising conditions. But also, it’s important not to fall into this antagonism of there being this big, bad system, and only a heroic resistance or a collaboration with this totality. I have to say, in post-Soviet countries, it's very contested, it's very conflictual. It's very, very difficult to say, ‘listen, let's look back and see what worked system-wise’. I don't think we're there yet, if I'm honest. We’re not ready to start thinking not only that differential life happened within a certain political framework of the Soviet state, but that we can also go back to its certain promises. One thing would be to pick out certain strategies, policies, or ways of organising people into collective cohesions and utopias, but we can also maybe go back to those promises for abundance and a beautifully collectivised life. I think we can do that. I also think we will need to do that. And that's where the Commons comes up as a discourse with such popularity and intensity in academia and art, within institutions, organisations, and with people thinking about how to create collective and communal abundance, or have a collective and communal resource and use it and share it without depleting it for individual needs. It’s about organising things in a way that's equitable, that does not hinge on an extractivist co-option of our energies, drives, material and earthly resources, and all of that. It’s also about rethinking or negotiating with the idea of property without completely allowing it to be subsumed under the ideology of property being only within private ownership. And this is what we can look into: we can investigate the histories and practices of different ideologies.

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