

# 'Living Artistically' under Post-Fordist Conditions

Bojana Matejić

No new artistic system will withstand the pressure of a growing new culture until the very foundation of Art has been erected on the real laws of Life.

Until all artists will say with us...

All is fiction... only life and its laws are authentic, and in life only the active is beautiful and wise and strong and right, for life does not know beauty as an aesthetic measure... efficacious existence is the highest beauty.

Life knows neither good nor bad nor justice as a measure of morals... *need* is the highest and most just of all morals.

Life does not know rationally abstracted truths as a measure of cognizance... *deed* is the highest and surest of truths.

Those are the laws of life. Can Art withstand these laws if it is built on abstraction, on mirage, on fiction?

We say...

Space and time are re-born to us today.

Space and time are the only forms on which life is built and hence art must be constructed... That is why we in creating things take away from them the labels of their owners... everything which is accidental and local, leaving only the reality of the constant rhythm of the forces within them.

Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner,  
'The Realistic Manifesto' (1920)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, 'The Realistic Manifesto', in Stephen Bann, ed, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, Viking Press, New York, 1974, p 9

Those are words from Naum Gabo's famous 'Realistic Manifesto' of the early twentieth century. Indeed, if one takes a closer look at this demand for the production of an artistic subjectivity, it can be noticed that the concept of 'living artistically' is at the core of nineteenth- and twentieth-century emancipatory artistic practices, as mostly expressed in the practi-

cal indications of agitation, collective action, struggle, protest techniques and self-education in art. Today, however, it seems that most of these twentieth-century avant-garde artistic ideals – the ‘creative production of subjectivity’,<sup>2</sup> participation, enunciation, social and political engagement, etc. – have become the main dicta of the contemporary global art-world.<sup>3</sup> Such an artistic constellation, it might be said, goes hand in hand with the humanist, neoliberal, post-industrial shift.

On the one hand, the current imperative says that art must play an active part in interfacing with social reality. Such a change in perceiving the modality of a work of art and artistic practice corresponds to post-Fordist economic changes and immaterial and flexible labour imperatives.<sup>4</sup> The contemporary logic of conceiving a work of art can be traced back even more, to the conceptual threshold of the participatory impulse of the 1960s, which was grounded in 1), the desire to produce an agency/subjectivity (true community/equality); 2), the deconstruction of the boundaries between a work of art as object and the participant; and 3), the dismissal of ‘authorship’ (one could recall many such concepts, for instance, Umberto Eco’s ‘open work’, Lucy Lippard’s ‘dematerialisation of art’, or the artwork as ‘textual production/signification’ or ‘production of intertextuality/discourses’ as envisaged by Ronald Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, et al); and 4), the ‘cognitive turn’, according to which the protocols of information distribution have become more crucial to the conception of the work of art than its optical properties, as the main feature of the modernist artistic paradigm. Data production has become the most pervasive hallmark not only in and of contemporary art but of life in general, playing a preponderant role in the shift from a society based on discipline to contemporary regimes of biopolitical control.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, another symptom of the contemporary disposition of art has become conspicuous. Any dispute regarding traditional aesthetic concepts such as beauty, truth, *sensus communis*, etc, has been withdrawn from the artistic horizon of thinking. ‘They’ now say ‘those concepts are metaphysical, doctrinal, self-explanatory’. What appealed to Antonio Negri about this withdrawn theme was exactly the paradox of an aesthetics as a discourse on the beautiful, whose existence is not possible in circumstances wherein art operates only within ‘bodies and languages’:

*But today the body is no longer just a subject which produces and which – because it produces art – reveals to us the paradigm of production in general, the potency of life. The body is from now on a machine within which both production and art are inscribed. This is what we, the postmoderns, know.*<sup>6</sup>

Living labour is regarded here as the potentiality of non-alienated productivity – in a word, the possible sum of productive capacities that eschew reduction to the system of waged commodity production. As Gene Rey has highlighted and affirmatively acknowledged, in the wake of the long tradition of leftist avant-garde thinking and practice, in order to prefigure and escape the commodity form, art must undo its own category by breaking out of the art ghetto: ‘That is, art must devise

2 For instance, two of Joseph Beuys’s main critical points of departure were: 1) the identification of art and creativity as the means by which human existence reaches maximum individualisation vis-à-vis the given socioeconomic and political constellations; and 2) everyone can be an artist – art may evoke social change (human emancipation).

3 Bojana Kunst, ‘O nelagodju aktivne umetnosti’, *Umetnik na delu. Bližina umetnosti in kapitalizma*, Maska, Ljubljana, 2012, p 16<translation of article title useful here>

4 Clair Bishop, ‘Introduction: Viewers as Producers’, *Participation. Documents of Contemporary Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006, p 10

5 Stephen Wright, *Dataesthetics: How to Do Things with Data*, Arkazin – Revolver, Frankfurt am Main, 2006, p 9

6 Antonio Negri, ‘Letter to Raul on Body’, in *Art & Multitude: Nine Letters on Art, Followed by Metamorphoses: Art and Immaterial Labour*, Ed Emery, trans, Polity Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2011, p 78

practices that carry it beyond the policed boundaries of the institutionalised art world and into the conflictual field of real life.<sup>7</sup> Yet, how to understand this ‘realness’ of life today? Contemporary art is, it seems, more integrated into everyday life than ever when considering the formal aesthetic and phenomenological aspects of an art object, as well as its social and political roles, but nevertheless, it is all the more abstracted from the ‘realness’ of life as an assumption of living labour. How to ‘create things by taking away from them the labels of their owners’? How to ‘leave only the reality of the constant rhythm of the forces in them’?

Capitalism, maintains Negri, has taken away from us ‘the concrete of life’. What was meant by ‘the concrete of life’ in the long twentieth century, today is reappropriating abstraction, commodity and value.<sup>8</sup> In such circumstances, the production of beauty is not permitted by the human condition, which realises itself within the expression of the body and communication. More precisely, the production of beauty is reduced to artistic poetics:

*Thus only a poetics can exist, can be given, can consist; a poetics as an artistic ‘poietics’ of a very singular kind, as an action expressing a practice of beauty from within acting... the avantgardes of modernity have wanted aesthetics to dissolve itself into a universal poetics of the body, or into a politics of art. This wish, however, was empty. Today, on the contrary, in our postmodern era, this mutation is under way. Poetics is becoming an ontological ‘potenza’, a tool of the becoming concrete of the abstract.<sup>9</sup>*

Consequently, my question is, what can the presupposition of ‘living artistically’ tell us today under the shifting social and political circumstances articulated around the immaterial conception of labour, the positivist, humanist ideal of the Good, and the dictum ‘war on terror’? Does this hypothesis have a critical and political value? What is it to ‘live artistically’?

In trying to provide an answer, first, I shall commence from Marx’s theses on the equation of subjectivity with labour that he developed in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* – particularly from the text on alienated labour – recalling his famous early distinction between political and human emancipation in the context of his early so-called ‘humanist’ philosophical approach to the alienation of labour. Second, I will extend this polemic on the concept of ‘labour becoming praxis (artistic life)’ as the fundamental presupposition of human emancipation in the aesthetic work of Yugoslav philosopher and member of the Praxis Group, Danko Grlić, as it was developed in the radical humanist aesthetic approach. Finally, I will try to demonstrate how Marx’s conception of beauty, which he unexpectedly used in his socioeconomic analysis, in relationship to Grlić’s theoretical account, may be interpreted via Lacanian notions of beauty and ‘surplus-*jouissance*’ for the artistic production of sociability (‘artistic life’), and problematise this insight from the standpoint of the current status quo – the all-pervasive neoliberal restoration of the class system and the ideology of the ‘global justice movement’.

7 Gene Ray, ‘Another (Art) World is Possible: Theorising Oppositional Convergence’, *Third Text* 71, vol 18, issue 6, November 2004, p 568

8 Negri, ‘Letter to Raul on Body’, op cit, p 79

9 Ibid, p 81

## (Artistic) Subjectivity = Labour

- 10 Lawrence H Simon, ed, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1994, p 66
- 11 Gajo Petrović, *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century: A Yugoslav Philosopher Reconsiders Karl Marx's Writing*, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1967, p 172
- 12 This thesis on the equation of life and labour will be radicalised later, especially in *German Ideology*, where Marx says: 'This sum of productive forces, capital funds and social forms of intercourse, which every individual and generation finds in existence as something given, is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as "substance" and "essence of man", and what they have deified and attacked; a real basis which is not in the least disturbed, in its effect and influence on the development of men, by the fact that these philosophers revolt against it as "self-consciousness" and the "Unique". These conditions of life, which different generations find in existence, decide also whether or not the periodically recurring revolutionary convulsion will be strong enough to overthrow the basis of the entire existing system.' Karl Marx, 'Part I: Feuerbach. Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook', *The German Ideology*, 1845–1846, Marx-Engels Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>, accessed 16 February 2020
- 13 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx-Engels Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf>, accessed 14 February 2016
- 14 Danko Grlić, *Contra dogmaticos*, Praxis, Zagreb, 1971, p 23
- 15 Danko Grlić, 'Umjetnost je stvar života ili smrti', an

For this purpose, I have singled out two main theses.

Firstly, Marx provided a detailed account of the discrepancy between political and human emancipation, particularly from around the time of 'On the Jewish Question' and 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' (both 1843). However, he extended this question, examining the problem of labour in the text on 'Estranged Labour' (1844). If political emancipation involves a legal, normative dimension of emancipation, then human emancipation is the name for universal emancipation – universal inasmuch as it is supernumerary to the conceptual pairing legal–illegal. According to Marx, political emancipation affirms the 'essence of difference', while human emancipation affirms the 'essence of community'. The level of political emancipation naturalises the political economy which 'proceeds from labour as the very soul of production, and yet gives labour nothing, and private property everything'.<sup>10</sup> In capitalist society, Marx maintains, the alienation of labour means the externalisation of labour, which is the result of the movement of private property.

Secondly, according to the 'young' Marx, the process of human emancipation should lead to objective production as a realisation of the genericity of a/n (in)human's being, which unfolds as an 'active species-life' (*Gattungslieben*). Marx maintained that this specific objective labour implies an objectification of a human's species-life as a free expression of universal human life. In other words, Marx equalises the idea of life with labour (praxis: the 'universal, free, creative and self-creative activity'),<sup>11</sup> whose conjunction forms the notion of 'artistic life'.<sup>12</sup>

What Marx tries to demonstrate is that political emancipation cannot resolve the problem of alienation of labour, and therefore, of life. Political emancipation acknowledges the division of the human animal into a public and a private human being. According to the 'young' Marx, unlike political emancipation, human emancipation should lead to the labour that has become 'artistic life activity'. From such a perspective of thinking, art is the name, or better, the metaphor for the collective product; a labour which is not external to the human being. It is the specific production of sociability: a kind of work/life activity which universalises or constructs without totalisation. As opposed to political emancipation, the presupposition of human emancipation is the objective production that should be governed, as Marx maintained, by the 'laws of beauty'.<sup>13</sup>

## 'Living Artistically'

The concept of 'living artistically',<sup>14</sup> alongside the work of members of the Frankfurt School and theorists of the New Left, was markedly developed by the Yugoslav philosopher Danko Grlić, one of the prominent disciples of the Praxis Group. Grlić repeatedly asserted that 'art is either a thing of life – or it is dead'; it is the 'real-human' within the 'human'.<sup>15</sup> Art is a demand for a life in art – in other words, for a life unfettered, unorchestrated and uncensored.<sup>16</sup> What he saw as the main objective of the Marxist critique was not akin to a Marxist aesthetics. Grlić abandoned

interview with Milorad Vučelić, *Filozofija i umjetnost*, Naprijed Publishers, Zagreb, 1988, p 378 <journal article translation useful here>

16 Ibid, p 373

Marxist aesthetics in favour of a Marxist critique-praxis in art, claiming that Marxist aesthetics is a '*contradictio in adjecto*'. However, this abandonment does not imply Hegel's stand regarding the 'end of art' – in other words, the so frequently proclaimed anti-aesthetics and anti-art – but the concept of a 'space beyond aesthetics'.

What does Grlić want to say with this assertion?

First of all, Grlić believes in Marxist possibilities that are more than that which has been realised over the course of the history of Marxism's relationship with art. The crucial idea of Marx's intellectual and theoretical endeavour cannot be reduced to the idea of aesthetics as an Enlightenment category. In Marx's thought, theory becomes a constituent of the practical life 'praxis' or 'artistic life', by which it breaks loose from its distorted abstractness. Aesthetics always remains an idealistic discipline, even when it is directed towards the empirical realm in its theoretical demands. Aesthetics may only reach the threshold of the unrealised demand for the concrete. As a theoretical subjectivity, the aesthetic realm cannot find its real practical realisation, owing to the impossibility of a synthesis with art (lifelike/living, practical activity). Therefore, according to Grlić, the only truth of aesthetics can be its abolition in, and in a favour of, art as a 'realness' of life.<sup>17</sup> Art is, according to Grlić's Marxist point of view, a dimension of activity that does not imply a world of illusion but its most 'authentic' negation, and therefore 'a revolutionary act in its cleanest and most revolutionary sense'.<sup>18</sup> The artist is someone who is not a conformist, and according to her/his habitus, is against everything existing.

Grlić insists on the thesis concerning the absence of philosophical and scientific disciplines and methods in Marxist critique. Any disciplinary treatment has nothing to do with the Marxist approach to art. The synthetic consolidation of art and theory, which is a precondition of 'praxis' ('artistic life'), cannot be achieved as long as theory subsumes (art) practice and vice versa. Most importantly, Grlić stresses the thesis that the 'life of art' is more precious than any ideological analysis or interpretation. Art can never exist as an object of some philosophical discipline, theory or interpretation – it is a matter of the possibility of the 'subsistence' of a (wo)man – of 'her/his being or not being'.<sup>19</sup> Every science is a false counter-move to ideology, and basically is only a variation which derives from the same ground bringing us to the same results – consolidation in the status quo. In other words, Marxism, when it comes to art, seeks to overcome aesthetics by conquering the spiritual and material conditions which created aesthetics, and not by an insurgency against aesthetics in its reversal into anti-aesthetics. Emancipatory art advocates abandonment of an empty idealistic and contemplative aesthetic standpoint, as well as of fitting into materialistic economical-technological conditions.

Grlić claims that Marx could not write aesthetics because his thought did not think in an aesthetic way. The aesthetic standpoint as regards art, present in the whole history of the discipline, was strange to him. The literary Marxist critique and approach to art cannot be based on scientific acknowledgement of the existing – on methods of classification and categorisation – because then it only remains on the civic horizon of thinking.<sup>20</sup> Grlić insists on the thesis that the deconstruction of aesthetics may open the possibility of breaking through boundaries and offer the transition to a new way of thinking beyond aesthetics. The

17 Danko Grlić, 'Marksizam. Smisao marksističkog pristupa umetnosti', *Estetika IV: Sa onu stranu estetike*, Naprijed Publishers, Zagreb, 1979, p 273<translation useful>

18 Ibid

19 Ibid, p 275

20 According to Marx, science converges with bourgeois ideology. This supposition is characteristic particularly of the 'early' Marxist discourse.

three main misapprehensions when approaching the Marxist view on art are: 1) the ideological character of art; 2) an affirmative stand with respect to the theory of reflection; and 3) art as a social analysis of the historical period, where it is expected that Marxist critique will present the social elements of the work of art.

The metaphysics of the scientific and technical realm is notably more characteristic of aesthetics than it is of any other philosophical discipline. Therefore, Grlić argues, Marx's thought regarding the thesis on 'artistic life' rests upon the idea regarding the revolutionising of the necessary material production into a 'free self-activity (praxis)'; also, that our entire relationship to and dependence on nature (material necessity) should be subjected to the 'laws of beauty'.

## 'Laws of Beauty'

How may we understand these 'laws of beauty' in the context of the problem of labour, especially today? If Marx assumed a production of sociability directed towards human emancipation as a political activity which does not leave behind a work or a product (that is to say, an autonomous art object), except maybe new social relations, what would it mean to 'live artistically' under the new post-Fordist social circumstances, in which work and labour are considered as 'virtuosity' inasmuch as they have become predominantly 'linguistic and communicative'?<sup>21</sup> How are we to differentiate terms such as 'poiesis', 'intellect' and 'political praxis', as well as productive and unproductive labour, when such distinctions can no longer be sustained in post-Fordist circumstances? I advocate the thesis that it is still possible to speak of these distinctions, but one must find the cause(s) and points that blur their recognition – in other words, in the current/any 'crisis of politics', one must think the inducement(s) and principle(s) of the inanition of the signifiers that already exist in the knowl-edge/structure, and find the new possible meaning.

I believe that Lacanian conceptions of beauty and 'surplus-*jouissance*' may provide some of the possible answers to this question.

The problem of labour presents one of the key issues in Marx's latter work, particularly in *Das Kapital*, although he repeatedly wrote about the paradoxicality of its bipolar conception in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. Marx devoted a section of chapter 7 of *Das Kapital* to the polemic on the issue of labour in general. I have singled out two dominant determinations of the notion of labour. The first determination considers the relationship between human being and nature in terms of labour:

*Labour* is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates, and controls the metabolism between himself and nature... He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head, and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs... Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes his own nature.<sup>22</sup>

The second determination takes into account the historical realm of labour and, so to speak, the properties of the activity of labour itself.

21 According to Virno, productive labour – which in Marx's terms signifies labour determined in relationship to capital ('Productive labour is exchanged directly for money as capital ... and sets the values it has created against the worker himself as capital') – has, as a whole, subsumed the particular properties of the artistic (performing) activity: 'Whoever produces surplus value in post-Fordism behaves – seen from a structuralist standpoint, of course – like a pianist, a dancer, et al.' Paolo Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2004, p 154. Cf Isabell Lorey, 'Virtuosos of Freedom: On the Implosion of Political Virtuosity and Productive Labour', in Gerald Raunig, Gene Ray and Ulf Wuggenig, eds, *Critique of Creativity, Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the 'Creative Industries'*, MayFly Books, London, 2011, p 83.

22 Karl Marx, 'The Labour Process and the Valorization Process', in Simon, ed, *Marx: Selected Writings*, op cit, pp 274–275



According to Marx, labour is purposeful activity aimed at the production of use values:

*The simple elements of the labour process are (1) Purposeful activity, that is, work itself; (2) The object on which that work is performed, and (3) The instruments of that work... Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [verwirklicht] his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it.*<sup>23</sup>

From this it follows that the activity of labour and its meaning are joined together in the same act.

If the concept of living artistically implies the specific aspect of 'life activity', in other words, the labour which is not pure rigid purpose, how is it then possible to emancipate this estranged labour from its estrangement, from its abstractness in contemporary communication, from the imperatives of 'virtuosity' and 'general intellect'?<sup>24</sup>

The concept of beauty which Marx mentions has often been interpreted against the background of classical German idealistic aesthetic tradition. Beauty is at once a form, when it is appreciated, and also life, when it is felt: 'It is at once our state of being and our creation.'<sup>25</sup> As I have pointed out elsewhere,<sup>26</sup> Marx tried to loosen the concepts of beauty and aesthetics from their theological purport, and to subordinate them to the socioeconomic plane. The 'collectivity' now became the real premise of 'species-being', as it has replaced the classical moral theological meaning of a 'species-being'. The universal 'free' expression of (human) life coincides, therefore, with Marx's conception of 'producing in accordance with the laws of beauty'. The objectification of the 'species-life' of humankind, as the object of such labour, is, according to Marx, possible only in communist society. Making a human 'species-life' into a means of her/his own physical existence becomes, as a consequence, a fundamental assignment of the process of de-alienation.

The meaning of this statement of Marx's regarding beauty in the context of the problem of the alienation of labour remains quite ambiguous. It seems that beauty is that which is both objective and subjective, insofar as it escapes both objectivity and subjectivity. It may be said that Marx's conception of beauty, in the context of the problematisation of the de-alienation of labour, coincides, therefore, with certain Lacanian notions: 'the appearance of beauty', on the one hand, and 'surplus-jouissance', on the other.

Here, in Lacan's theoretical context, it may suffice to point out that the characterisation of the de-alienation of labour as a fundamental presupposition of human emancipation, in which 'artistic life' stands for the special 'element' or 'form' of the possible de-alienated life (praxis: the 'universal, free, creative and self-creative activity'), has certain parallel implications.

A first implication regards the Lacanian concept of beauty in reference to Marx, which Lacan elaborated in his Seminar VII (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: especially the section devoted to the 'death drive'). This implication is that beauty involves a specific non-essentialist place which is a 'true barrier' that prevents the subject from entering the unspeakable

23 Ibid, p 275

24 Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, op cit, p 64

25 P Leonard Wessell, 'The Aesthetics of Living Form in Schiller and Marx', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol 37, no 2, winter 1978, p 196

26 Bojana Matejić, 'The Conjunction of Art and Life: Ontology of the Site', *SAJ Serbian Architectural Journal*, vol 7, no 2, 2016, p 225

field of radical desire – a field Lacan equalises with the essentialist terrain of absolute destruction (radical desire).<sup>27</sup> At the core of this issue lies the ‘property’ of *jouissance*, as it has the quality of ‘inaccessibility, obscurity and opacity’:

the field is surrounded by a barrier which makes access to it difficult for the subject to the point of inaccessibility, because *jouissance* appears not purely and simply as the satisfaction of a need, but as the satisfaction of a drive.<sup>28</sup>

In his argumentation on the ‘death drive’, Lacan’s point of departure is the problem of (bourgeois) progressivism, which he examines against the background of Marx’s *Philosophical Works*, particularly in the wake of ‘The Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’ and ‘The Jewish Question’. It would seem the reason is clear: Lacan’s aim is to advocate the thesis that Freud’s work (theoretical and clinical psychoanalysis) was not in any way progressive. Nevertheless, still staying behind the fences of psychoanalytical discourse, he provides some theses which might be of great help for the purpose of examining the relation between labour, beauty and ‘surplus-*jouissance*’.

I suggest one dwells for a while on Lacan’s own words:

*Marx* takes up the tradition of a thought that culminated in the work which was the object of his perspicacious comments, namely, Hegel’s *Philosophy of Law* – a work that articulates something that, as far as I know, we are still immersed in, namely, the foundation of the State, of the bourgeois State, which lays down the rules of a human organization founded on need and reason. Marx makes us see the biased, partial and incomplete character of the solution given in this framework. He shows that the harmony between need and reason is at this level only an abstract and dissociated solution.<sup>29</sup>

What Lacan’s dispute suggests should lead us to the insight that need and reason fit in with the law, for human organisation is founded on ‘the egoism of private needs’. Therefore, what Marx demands is not only political emancipation – which is ‘partial’ insofar as it rests upon the ‘good’ (law) – but ‘real’, ‘(in-)human’, and therefore ‘universal’ emancipation, where a person is supposed to set themselves in a non- or de-alienated relation to their organisation/society. As the problem of human emancipation implies the question of how to initiate the process of de-alienation in capitalist society – which would, under this presupposition, direct ‘us’ to human self-realisation – the focus of this examination, from the standpoint of theoretical psychoanalysis, becomes the very functions of desire, drive and *jouissance*.

Strictly speaking, Lacan situates the notion of drive in historical conjecture, criticising the evolutionist psychoanalytic dimension of the comprehension of the (death) drive in terms of primordial instinct. The presupposition of the (death) drive is a signifying chain, not some primordial instinct(s).<sup>30</sup> What prevents the ‘human animal’ from entering this central (essential and destructive) field of desire is the beautiful, which forms the ‘second stopping place’, alongside the ‘good’ (law) as the ‘first stopping place’.

27 Jacques Lacan, ‘The Death Drive: Marx and the Progressives; Jouissance, the Satisfaction of a Drive; The System of Pope Pius VI; Creationism and Evolutionism; Woman as *ex nihilo*’, in Jacques-Alain Miller, ed, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, Dennis Porter, trans, W W Norton, New York, 1992, p 216

28 Ibid, p 209

29 Ibid, p 208

30 Ibid, p 213



However, neither drive can be unconditionally separated from ‘organic’, ‘natural’ or ‘human’ needs; nor can it simply be reduced to them.<sup>31</sup> In a sense, what distinguishes drive and desire from need is the impossibility of a ‘homologue’ relationship between subject and object – Lacan’s maxim ‘This is not It!’ Desire, in its difference from need, sustains itself only insofar as it remains unsatisfied, while in terms of drive, the very evidence that ‘it is not the right way that for it to be satisfied’ brings about the (endless) process of finding satisfaction ‘elsewhere’.

I might go back for a moment to the clarification of the distinction between need and drive, on which I have already elaborated elsewhere in the context of the issue of the possibilities of the emancipatory artistic act as an action which is done in conjunction with actions ‘in accordance with duty’ (ie political emancipation) and actions ‘from duty’/law (ie human emancipation), with the help of Alenka Zupančič’s theoretical framework.<sup>32</sup> As Lacan suggests in *Seminar XX*, in the first section (‘On *jouissance*’), right/law (*droit*) is not the same as duty; that is, ‘right-to-*jouissance*’ should not be confused with ‘surplus-*jouissance*’:

A word here to shed light on the relationship between law (*droit*) and *jouissance*. ‘Usufruct’ – that’s a legal notion, isn’t it? – brings together in one word what I already mentioned in my seminar on ethics, namely, the difference between utility and *jouissance*. What purpose does utility serve? That has never been well defined owing to the prodigious respect speaking beings have, owing to language, for means. ‘Usufruct’ means that you can enjoy (*jouir de*) your means, but must not waste them. When you have the usufruct of an inheritance, you can enjoy the inheritance (*en jouir*) as long as you don’t use up too much of it. That is clearly the essence of law – to divide, distribute, or reattribute everything that counts as *jouissance*. What is *jouissance*?... *Jouissance* is what serves no purpose (*ne sert à rien*). I am pointing here to the reservation implied by the zone of the right-to-*jouissance*. Right (*droit*) is not duty. Nothing forces anyone to enjoy (*jouir*) except the superego. The superego is the imperative of *jouissance* – Enjoy!<sup>33</sup>

Tracing Lacan’s theoretical path, it may be said that every ideology (today, the ideology of ‘democratic human rights’) rests upon the superego’s ‘will’ to enjoyment, as the right is correlative to it. Duty (a dimension which includes the beautiful) resists both pleasure and the will to enjoyment by evacuating them. Accordingly, need belongs to the realm of actions in accordance with duty (*pflichtmäßig*) – or right/Law – while the approach of desire to the death drive – to the non-essentialist place of beauty as the ‘second stopping barrier’ – involves not only actions in accordance with duty (Law), but actions ‘from duty’ (*aus Pflicht*) in conjunction.<sup>34</sup>

A second implication as regards the possibility of the de-alienation of labour includes Lacan’s notion of ‘surplus-*jouissance*’. What is ‘surplus-*jouissance*’ in Lacan’s nomenclature? First of all, *jouissance* is enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle, in Freud’s terms, and, consequently, it is comprehended, in the narrow sense, as a drive. The drive formula rests upon the thesis that the body ‘tames’ *jouissance*, impeding excessive enjoyment, thanks, on the one hand, to the ‘erogenous zone’, and on the other, to the specific incorporeal object (‘object “a”’) which topologically does

31 For more on this problematic see Alenka Zupančič, ‘Human-Animal’, unpublished manuscript, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlciLvQVtNE>, accessed 16 October 2020.

32 Cf Bojana Matejić, ‘Emancipation, Duty and the Artistic Subject’, *Theoria*, vol 59, no 3, 2016, pp 105–112

33 Jacques Lacan, ‘On *Jouissance*’, in Jacques-Alain Miller, ed, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore 1972–1973*, Bruce Fink, trans, W W Norton, New York, 1998, p 3

34 Alenka Zupančič, ‘The (Moral) Pathology of Everyday Life’, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan*, Verso, London and New York, 2000, p 12

not belong to ‘me’/‘my body’(no matter how much it is articulated with it), but is located in the body of the Other.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, it might be stated of the ambiguity present in the drive-*jouissance*, that it (the drive-*jouissance*) belongs both to the signifier and to the ‘surplus-*jouissance*’ as an object. This ‘surplus-*jouissance*’ is ‘asexuated’ on account of the fact that it is unwritable – and therefore impossible.<sup>36</sup> Upon this last argument rests Lacan’s thesis that desire divides the subject insofar as drive divides desire. As Zupančič precisely depicted it, at the same time that *jouissance* is found everywhere, it does not exist – inasmuch as it is the lack which (simply) could not be filled up:

If enjoyment is not that which might fill up the lack, it is also not something that could be added to it. Instead, it is that which *subtracts itself from the lack* (in the mathematical sense of the term).<sup>37</sup>

Lacan argued that pleasure ‘limits the scope of human possibility’, insofar as the pleasure principle implies a principle of homeostasis.<sup>38</sup> Participating in contemporary consumerist society within the postindustrial circuit, which coincides with the imperative of accumulation of (always) new objects of desire (pleasure principle, needs, incentives, etc), involves nothing other than hiding from a lack of the ‘One true object which would satisfy us completely’<sup>39</sup> – whether it be ‘true community’, ‘love’, ‘unalienated labour’, etc. This is why, as Zupančič states, the ethics of desire implies a “heroism of the lack”, as the attitude by which, in the name of the “lack” of the True object, we reject all other objects and satisfy ourselves with none’.<sup>40</sup> Lacan epitomised such complex phenomena in his famous statement, ‘Do not give up on your desire’ (*Ne pas céder sur son désir*), upon which Alain Badiou builds his own ethics of a ‘materialist dialectics’ vis-à-vis what he calls ‘democratic materialism’ (ethics of human rights), where ‘ethics does not exist’.<sup>41</sup>

The first task of the emancipatory attempt in art or life in general, therefore, would be to work on mechanisms for arriving at the drive, by passing through desire and insisting on it to the very end (to the ‘pure’ desire – that which ‘I’/‘We’/‘Artist’ ‘really’ desire(s)/demand(s)), regardless of any artistic form, medium or content (as criterion or norm). This ‘renunciation’ of the ‘right-to-*jouissance*’ gives rise to the appearance of a ‘remainder’, which Lacan calls ‘surplus of *jouissance*’.

Transferred to the field of socioeconomic analysis, ‘surplus-*jouissance*’ is simultaneously an element which thus marks a break with the purposiveness of labour (since, basically, ‘*jouissance*’ is what serves no purpose), and, paradoxically, an element needed for the production of the surplus value of capital.<sup>42</sup> Lacan introduced the issue of the equalisation of ‘surplus-*jouissance*’ (‘object “a”’) and Marx’s conception of surplus value in ‘Seminar XVI’, claiming that ‘the absolutisation of the market is only a condition so that surplus value can appear in discourse’.<sup>43</sup> It might seem that labour, as a purposive activity, implies the ‘renunciation’ of *jouissance* (yet which *jouissance*?), which, in turn, paradoxically, brings about a ‘surplus-*jouissance*’.<sup>44</sup> The alienated labour stems from a work process that produces subjects as ‘alienated’, by producing a loss (object “a”). Under this supposition, the Other (capitalist) enjoys this excess product, since the worker/subject works for the Other’s enjoyment,

35 Jacques Lacan, ‘The Partial Drive and its Circuit’, in Jacques-Alain Miller, ed, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, Alan Sheridan, trans, W W Norton, New York and London, 1998, p 177

36 Jacques Lacan, ‘Rings of String’, in Miller, ed, *On Feminine Sexuality*, op cit, p 131

37 Zupančič, ‘From Pure Desire to the Drive’, *Ethics of the Real*, op cit, p 242

38 Lacan, ‘The Partial Drive and its Circuit’, op cit, p 31

39 Zupančič, ‘From Pure Desire to the Drive’, op cit, p 240

40 Ibid

41 Alain Badiou, ‘Does the Other Exist?’, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Peter Hallward, trans, Verso, London and New York, 2002, p 28

42 Kiarina Kordela, *Surplus: Spinoza, Lacan*, SUNY Press, New York, 2007, p 24

43 Jacques Lacan, ‘Seminar XVI: From an Other to the other, 1968–1969’, Cormac Gallagher, trans, <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/>, accessed 16 February 2020, p 24

44 Bruce Fink, ‘Surplus Value, Surplus Jouissance’, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1996, p 96

bringing them to the situation of ‘sacrifice’ for the Other’s *jouissance*. This is the usual interpretation based on the ‘homology’ between Marx’s conception of the production of surplus value and the Lacanian principle of ‘surplus-*jouissance*’. This is the position of the pervert – not being able to find enjoyment themselves, they (the pervert/masochist) supply the Other with the ‘surplus-*jouissance*’ she/he lacks.

What Lacan teaches ‘us’, however, is that in fact no one has access to ‘surplus-*jouissance*’ (ie neither Capitalist, Master nor Other). The S(A) involves the crucial question (as regards change/de-alienation/human emancipation), ‘how to make the One [surplus] into something that holds up, that is, that is counted without being’.<sup>45</sup> The ‘surplus’, as ‘still’ not assimilated (or even never) within capitalism, has the possibility of opening up a new domain of production beyond reproduction and the satisfaction of basic needs (acting in relation to legality, which conforms with duty). Desire which governs labour as a purposeful life activity is needed for the reproduction of capitalism, and at the same time, if it is sustained long enough by the ‘surplus-*jouissance*’, it can be suspended and disarmed by the appearance of beauty.

The beautiful in Lacan’s nomenclature is closer to evil (desire risks) than to the good. The beautiful invades the place of the beyond-the-good principle, insofar as it has the power of suspending and intimidating desire.<sup>46</sup> But as regards desire, it does not integrate ‘self’ into a structure, although it ‘helps us adjust to desire insofar as it is itself linked to the structure of the lure’.<sup>47</sup> Lacan points out that beauty is that which ‘must not be touched’, otherwise the subject would experience the side of pain (‘criminal good’). As a matter of fact, the beautiful involves a dimension of pain beyond the pleasure principle, inasmuch as it implies the ‘limit of the second death’.<sup>48</sup> This limit presupposes a certain conjunction between the play of pain and the beautiful, which, according to my thesis, enables the (nonconformist) artistic emancipatory act (‘artistic act of living’), regardless of any artistic medium, form or a content. This artistic emancipatory act has nothing to do with the participatory art in its formal, phenomenological (today dominant) social and political occurrence, since this form cannot be guaranteed for the production of the possible ‘true community’.

Put like this, a suggestion emerges implying that to ‘live artistically’ means neither the experience of the pleasure in an imaginary relation (which is in Lacan’s terms regarded as ‘the first death’/pathological incentives and drives, pleasure principle or self-preservation) nor its prohibition, ie, the sacrifice of ‘enjoyment-*jouissance*’ (the simple subordination to the law of the Other, which means ‘second death’, artistic self-approval in accordance with the law of the Other),<sup>49</sup> but rather a reaching towards the edge of the borderline that always lies ‘between two deaths’. As I have put it elsewhere,<sup>50</sup> this site is the only ‘place without a place’ where praxis in accordance with and for the sake of the law of (in-)human beauty may become possible. Finally, to ‘live artistically’ implies the simultaneous appearance of ‘surplus-*jouissance*’, which might sustain the desire long enough, and beauty, which evacuates the will for the purposiveness of labour as the life activity.

My position regarding the presupposition of human emancipation in and by art, which ‘living artistically’ represents, implies an ethics of fidelity to a lost enjoyment. In the wake of the Lacan–Zupančič conceptual nexus,

45 Lacan, ‘Rings of String’, op cit, p 131

46 Jacques Lacan, ‘The Function of the Beautiful’, in Miller, ed, *The Seminar of Lacan Book VII*, p 238

47 Ibid, p 239

48 Ibid, p 260

49 Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, op cit, p 252

50 Matejič, ‘Emancipation, Duty and the Artistic Subject’, op cit, p 228

I advocate an ethics of preservation of this fundamental non-essentialist lack ‘that introduces a gap between the Thing and things, and reminds us of the fact that beyond all ready-to-hand objects, there is “someThing” which alone would make our life worth of living!’<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

After the fall of the socialist and communist regimes, it seemed apparent that the concept of ‘living artistically’ had lost its value, power and agency. This remark does not presuppose the loss of the idealistic images of the past, and therefore, of some specific horizon of expectation, but simply the loss of the (transgeopolitical) ideological framework that allowed, like any other law (Other), the struggle for and realisation of that which the communist/socialist Other ‘really desires’ from the law itself – in communist and socialist regimes, it was the maxim ‘living artistically’ (breaking with both capitalism and state socialism for the sake of the production of sociability/community). The concept of ‘living artistically’ has nothing to do with the production of subjectivity in its abstract sense. In the course of the twentieth century this maxim has, rather, signified something more profound in the given Fordist circumstances – it has meant the demand for the revolutionising of the Fordist modality of labour itself, and therefore of subjectivity, since Marx equated labour with subjectivity (subjectivity = labour) in industrial societies – and not only in art as a discourse, but in life, as it appears to ‘us’ and is imposed on ‘us’. The question for the present-day critique of political economy is how to transform labour as an activity governed by necessity into a ‘joy’ (‘artistic life’); into the production of a sociability which will qualitatively differ from contemporary ‘human’ capital, ie creativity. The problem for ‘us’ today is how to resolve capitalist creativity (‘communism of capital’),<sup>52</sup> as a precariat of labour and life which are imposed on ‘us’, by means of the very presupposition or belief as to what is a truly ‘artistic life’. The issue for ‘us’ is how to ‘live artistically’ (‘true community’, ‘real participation’, etc) under current hegemonising forms of production, which are based on communicative and cognitive competencies, and flexibility when it comes to labour power. Should one/the artist push one’s/their desire to its end (the beautiful before the (death) drive),<sup>53</sup> under the presupposition that every ideology (contemporary democracy) rests upon a lack that enables the masses and their opinions to be unfaithful to what the Other ‘really’ desires? How to oppose the current precarious forms of production and life? If contemporary (Western Euro-American) form(s) of life rest(s) upon ‘general intellect’, ‘immaterial labour’, ‘creativity’, ‘virtuosity’, etc – given that knowledge has become predominant in respect to the labour-time that ‘becomes “miserable foundation”’ – the de-alienation of labour in such conditions might imply what Lacan calls “knowledge that does not know itself”. ‘General intellect’ comprises knowledge, information, discourses and epistemological paradigms, in which the most important element of the reproduction of capital represents the ‘one who speaks, utters, break silence...’ Alienated labour in such circumstances presupposes, to use Virno’s words, ‘labouring action’ embodied in the ‘common participation in the “life of mind”’, the preliminary sharing of generic communicative and cognitive skills’.<sup>54</sup>

51 Ibid, p 240

52 Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, op cit, p 16

53 As Zupančič noted very precisely: every ideology rests on a cynical attitude towards its own official dicta, which enables the regime to be perpetuated. The greatest catastrophe for a regime would be if the ideology were to be taken too seriously (ie ‘for real’), cf Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, op cit, p xi.

54 Paolo Virno, ‘General Intellect’, Generation-online.org, <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno10.htm>, accessed 11 May 2017

In Lacan's words, it might be said that it has to do with the knowledge that does, however, 'know itself' – it counts on the flexibility of language usage, thoughts and actions. 'Surplus-*jouissance*', as a supposition of the possible de-alienation of labour, involves a work which, from the standpoint of 'symbolised'/'articulated' knowledge, has not taken place – it always 'gets lost' (regardless of its form), as being still not assimilated within the capitalist totality:

It is by means of knowledge as means of enjoyment that work gets done, the work that has a meaning, an obscure meaning. This obscure meaning is that of truth.<sup>55</sup>

What is at stake here is the fact that present-day living and working conditions correspond to the genealogy of the social movements of alternative modes of life originating in the sixties. The rebellious desires for different bodies and self-relations (the 'concrete of life', as Negri put it) were supposed to counter Fordist working conditions, its disciplinary regimes and controls. Voluntary acceptance of the precarious modality of labour has resulted in the expression of a need to overcome the patriarchal division of reproduction and wage labour. However, today, in shifting circumstances (mostly in terms of Western Euro-American discourse), this patriarchal logic has survived despite the changed conditions (self-precarisation) of life forms, and this structure rests even more upon a flexible, insecure and 'self-realising' labour regime. One may remark how the old, fundamentally Enlightenment critical ideal of 'being and living as an artist', that stems from the old aesthetical European tradition ('I live as an artist when all my action and my expression in general, in connection with any content whatever, remain for me a mere show and assume a shape which is wholly within my power' – Hegel–Marx) has become the main feature of contemporary dominant (re)production of the forms of life. Self-renewal, or recreating oneself through one's own power and accord, acknowledges and ensures the currently dominant neoliberal productive relations and forces (self-precarisation).

Nevertheless, it does not mean that this conception cannot come alive again today, even if its signifier has become empty over the last decades. Every social, political and artistic constellation produces its own 'in-' or 'real-(in)humane surplus-*jouissances*' – our task, therefore, is to 'recognise' them in the given, and to push a desire to her/its (own) very limit.

This article has been edited by Jonathan Boulting, MA (Cantab), IDEC-Universitat Pompeu Fabra and New Academy of Arts at the European University of Belgrade.

55 Zupančić, *Ethics of the Real*, op cit, p 201; cf Jacques Lacan, *Le Seminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*, Seuil, Paris, 1991, p 54

## ORCID

Bojana Matejić  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1325-0546>