

## **Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism**

By Bojana Kunst

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Reviewed by Tom Baily

**A**RTIST AT WORK: PROXIMITY OF ART AND CAPITALISM, PUBLISHED BY ZERO Books, takes as its subject the nature of artistic life and its relation to a hyper-mediated late-capitalist culture. Its author, Slovenian philosopher Bojana Kunst, argues that capitalism affirms itself by subsuming artistic labour, even the artist's life—and not just the work of art—within its circuits of production.

Kunst is a theoretician of dance and theatre and a professor at the Institute for Applied Theater Studies in Justus Liebig University, Giessen. *Artist at Work* emerged from a period when Kunst was working and travelling as an independent writer and dramaturg, holding what she describes as 'nomadic' teaching positions at various institutions. Kunst uses the term 'nomadic' to describe her own life at that time as she moved from festival to festival and from university contract to university contract. But the term also clearly doubles as a logo for artistic labour in contemporary culture. *Artist at Work* is forthright in the way it bridges institutionalised academia with local artistic practice. Her numerous case studies are often esoteric or obscure, and often involve minor artists, but she frames her analyses within a methodology drawing on major theoretical figures such as Walter Benjamin, Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière.

For Kunst, the problem facing performance art in our late-capitalist (or post-Fordist—she uses both terms) era is the sense of compromised agency arising from a mode or form of art that is all too aware of its destiny of reproduction and circulation in mediatised formats.

In this cultural context, imagery is endlessly proliferating, swarming and clashing. Kunst addresses the resurging power of the image in dance and performance. It is an interesting observation, given that dance and performance have been regarded as artistic media that dissolve the notion of the artistic image as a fixed object. In the hyper-mediated age, performance is not so much a

historical process as an aesthetic one based on simulated imagery. If this is what performance art is, then we're made to ask: How is the performance of political questioning changing? And what are the lives like for those who engage in that act?

And—what type of art emerges from this situation? Hal Foster has recently described how 'experimental performance and dance have come to the art museum both for audience exposure and out of economic necessity' (Foster 128). This is a prevailing problem for new critical art that seeks to occupy and redefine the spaces of capitalism whilst at the same time relying on them for its survival. *Artist at Work* proposes some ways to navigate this situation.

Artistic labour exists in a precarious position: austerity measures, cuts to arts funding and universities, and the increased barriers blocking social movement created by constant financial instability, all have created a difficult scenario for the artist working today. Added to this, contemporary cultural production exists in an aesthetic and affective state of speed, waste and overconsumption. In the hyper-mediated world, image devours image until we are left with nothing but overlaid space.

As Kunst argues, the impasse this introduces to subjectivity, to the way artists think, act and feel, is at the root of what it can be like living as a cultural worker today. The previously divided areas of labour and leisure have been merged by the neoliberal paradigm. In order to recognise and survive this situation, art should shrug off any compulsion to affirm itself as a socially useful activity. It is this compulsion that enmeshes it within capitalist circuits of value. Instead, art will need to engage with a value-system that is not guided by capitalist ideas of productivity.

From this context comes Kunst's exploration of the symbolic value of the labour of performance art. As Kunst shows, many contemporary performance works dramatise the amalgamation of work and leisure. An example is the performance '1 poor and one 0' (2008) by the Zagreb-based group BADCo., in which its performers repeatedly re-enter a factory door, flimsily signified by a lone horizontal bar. The circuitous organisation of movement turns 'performer' into 'worker', as homogenous bodies move in a dull, affectless zone. The subjects are devoid of either the leisure they are leaving or the labour they are entering. The spaces of work and rest converge. There exists only a mediated present.

Another question emerges in *Artist at Work*. Has the institutionalisation of performance art reduced its critical efficacy? Many of the case studies Kunst draws on share a discomfiting dichotomy: the artists and their work confront palpable political causes (and with great urgency), but at the same time seem

burdened by a forlornness, even a quietism, as to the potential effect of their work. More specifically, as Kunst acknowledges, much contemporary performance art seems to internalise an inability to effect political change. Instead, there can often seem to be a saturation of art with novelty and gimmickry, with outcomes more often than not befuddling, rather than activating, the audience. On this theme in the book, more questions were proposed than answered, particularly about the rapid emergence of radical performance works in major national museums. But they provide a valuable accompaniment to the book's focus question of how artists can overcome the powerlessness faced under capitalism.

The predicament posed by late-capitalist labour guides Kunst's arguments, but it does not overwhelm her analyses. Kunst's tone is frequently light and ironic, in particular during a memorable dissection of the work of perhaps our era's most famous performance artist, Marina Abramović. *Artist at Work* is laden with such varied and peculiar case studies that it cannot avoid affirming a mood of optimism in the potential for new powerful and autonomous creative spaces.

*Artist at Work* constantly opens out onto this sense of hope. Kunst avoids the trap of merely bemoaning what some regard as a politically weak, cynical postmodern art sphere. Instead, she strives to re-affirm artistic practice by denying endgame rhetoric and to reconsider the ways in which artists can find value through living and working today.

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### **Works Cited**

Foster, Hal. *Bad New Days*. London: Verso, 2015.