
Reviewed by Andrija Filipovic (Singidunum University, Belgrade)

Published on H-Socialisms (March, 2024)

Commissioned by Philipp Reick (TU Berlin, Center for Metropolitan Studies)

The Labor of Art

In *Art Work: Invisible Labour and the Legacy of Yugoslav Socialism,* Katja Praznik sets her sights on several interconnected aims. First and foremost, Praznik aims to reconceptualize art and art practice in terms of labor. Grounding her theoretical approach in what she terms “red feminism,” she critiques modern and contemporary artwork, showing that the insistence on the concept of the male genius author and his autonomous work erases the gendered aspect of the institution of art and its bourgeois capitalist nature that displaces the artist’s labor. This move of double occlusion of gender and labor leads to the current predicament of depoliticization and exploitation of creative work because it is seen as expressive of an innermost personality and of belonging to the private sphere. This theoretical and global view is then applied to Yugoslav neo-avant-garde art, usually called new artistic practice, which was practiced during the 1960s and 1970s. Praznik takes socialist Yugoslavia as a case study because it offers interesting examples of sometimes surprising (non)existent relations between art and labor. She shows that studying the Yugoslav encounter with (neo)liberal capitalism in and through art (and art labor), and the eventual dissolution of Yugoslavia and forced acceptance of (neo)liberal market capitalism in successor states, offers insights important for current global late liberal or postcapitalist state of affairs.

The first two chapters are theoretical and serve the purpose of grounding the overall analysis. In chapter 1, “The Autonomy of Art and the Emancipation of Artistic Labour,” Praznik relies in large part on Peter Burger’s conception of historical avant-garde art where the avant-garde was not so much dealing with artistic concerns as it was a direct attack on the bourgeois notion and institution of art. The bourgeois institution of art entailed the idea and practice of art as an autonomous human activity unrelated to concerns of everyday life, such as wage work for the
(re)production of existence. With autonomous art, the artist also became a genius who created on the grounds of his own singular being. Praznik argues that such a conception of art is nothing but an effect of the development of capitalism and consequent class relations, which also required a particular division between public and private with attendant gender relations. Here, art became the only creative form of labor, which rendered labor invisible within the institution of art, while simultaneously other forms of labor, except for domestic reproductive labor, were alienated. (Re)productive labor—female as well as artistic—was pushed into invisibility in the private sphere so it could be better exploited in the maintenance of class divisions and capitalist labor.

Chapter 2, “A Feminist Approach to the Disavowed Economy of Art,” continues where the first chapter ends and explicates in more gendered terms the invisibilization of labor through its relationship to the private sphere. Historically, the artist as subject has been cast in solely male terms, which leads to a particular paradox since the only other form of invisibilized labor is domestic, which used to be reserved for women. However, this seeming paradox is explained by the fact that both forms of labor are produced as non-alienated expressions of the innermost self. Both were seen as natural inclinations, in the case of art of a genial creative man and in the case of domesticity of a selfless woman. To treat art as labor “then implies a rejection of artistic labour as the expression of creative genius or essentialized creativity and the social role that capitalism intended for the artists” (p. 42).

The following chapters chronologically deal with Yugoslav artistic institutions and practices within the framework of analysis of (un)paid artistic labor. Chapter 3, “The Making of Yugoslav Art Workers: Artistic Labour and the Socialist Institution of Art,” deals with the first two of three periods of socialist Yugoslav cultural policy. The first, from 1945 to 1953, is described by Praznik as “the cultural policy of a centralized state (also called agitprop cultural policy),” which was a period when the state supported artists as workers. The second period, encompassing the years between 1954 and 1974, was marked by a decentralized cultural policy of self-management. It is also the period “that expanded workers’ rights in culture and tested the limits of art as labour” (p. 49). The common thread running through all three periods is the idea of the autonomy of art, a Western bourgeois notion. Praznik shows how the idea of art as labor, which aimed to overthrow hierarchies set up by class division, clashed with the institutionalized concept of autonomous art. Socialist Yugoslav institutions of art were inherited from the times of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and were not dismantled (theaters, museums, libraries), although there were many “amateur” and cultural associations founded during the first period that enabled potential participation of all workers as professional artists or amateurs in the production and consumption of culture. The tension between institutions and associations regarding art as labor remained a defining feature until the end of Yugoslavia, especially when associations became sites of precarious labor conditions in comparison to the institutions that were economically prioritized.

Chapter 4, “The Mystification of Artistic Labour under Socialism,” deals with the third period of cultural policy (1974-91) during which “the language of self-management became redeployed as a facade for (neo)liberal policies” (p. 71). Praznik takes a rare example of Goran Đorđević, an artist who critically addressed the problem of art labor in his art, and his key work, “International Strike of Artists,” from 1979. While Đorđević also published several theoretical texts dealing with the problem of the erasure of labor within the art system, it was this work that most directly revealed what he termed the “pseudo subject position” of the artist within the system, meaning that artists were being exploited as workers and that this exploitation was actively obscured by the notion of
artistic exceptionalism. The second case study is RZU Podroom, a collective of artists who worked in a shared space in Zagreb between 1978 and 1980, which also critically addressed the art system and especially remuneration and paid work within it. RZU Podroom published a magazine, *Prvi broj*, in 1980 for which Dalibor Marinis and Sanja Iveković drafted the artist contract in order for artists to have “a collective position on how to relate to the institutions” (p. 92). The preamble to the contract was titled “In the Galleries with a Contract!” In the same issue, they published a chart showcasing the remuneration for independent artists together with living and professional expenses, illustrating the precarious position of the artist as worker.

Chapter 5, “Art Workers and the Hidden Class Conflict of Late Socialism,” describes the final decade of Yugoslavia and, in particular, the role “the 1980s alternative” played in obscuring labor conditions within the socialist art system. As Praznik notes, “issues of class character and unpaid labour in the arts were marginalized in critical discussions,” and they were replaced instead with “an ideal of establishing ‘civil society’ under socialism” (p. 101). The late period of Yugoslav socialism was marked by a crisis of the welfare state (an effect of the global economic crisis and pressure by foreign institutions to reform toward the market economy), as well as internal battles for political and social reforms. In Praznik’s analysis, ideas of civil society and civil liberties only served to push the struggle for (waning) workers’ rights aside and to institute neoliberal entrepreneurship as the guiding economic and cultural logic. This logic was also set in place by voting in laws concerning independent artist rights, which, contrary to the proclaimed aims, introduced individual competitiveness.

Specific case studies are analyzed in chapter 6, “The Contradictions of 1980s Alternative Art.” While alternative art critiqued socialist ideology (or, rather, party-ist ideology), its failure in addressing labor issues “resulted in a transformation of the protagonists of the alternative art scene into members of the post-socialist precariat of self-employed cultural entrepreneurs” (p. 117). Case studies include Disko FV, an alternative group that included performers, musicians, visual artists, and club organizers, and Neue Slowenische Kunst’s Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre. Disko FV illustrates the point of how an attempt at parallel institutionalization ended up showing that “selling goods and services is not a new model of art economy” (p. 122). Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre’s method “was based in critique of the existing stratification of the socialist institution of art wherein alternative art practices were marginalized.” It aimed its critique toward “the network of socialist theatres, which emulated the nineteenth-century bourgeois European theatre model and served as the bastion of nationalist ideology” (p. 123).

In conclusion, Praznik successfully argues that the “deconstruction of welfare mechanisms and the waning of the commitment to a fairer redistribution that marked the Yugoslav political project eroded the working conditions of art workers” (p. 132). The state of affairs in successor nation-states has been grim for (un)paid artistic labor. On the one hand, it has been “entreprised” by being recognized as a part of “independent culture” in the 1990s (which replaced the notion of “alternative art practices” from the 1980s), relegated to the private sector, and thus made vulnerable due to a lack of solidarity and collective responsibility. On the other hand, it has been made extremely precarious within the conditions of devastated neoliberal economies of transitional post-socialist nation-states. Artistic labor, concludes Praznik, has become invisible once again in the post-Yugoslav post-socialist period. It is seen as a free, creative activity, while the fact that it is “subjected to the conditions imposed on it by the capitalist organization of work and life” is institutionally obscured (p. 148). It is here that the main strength of Praznik’s book lies: in Praznik’s unwavering commitment to leaving no ideological
stone unturned and to demystifying even the dearest stories told by and to artists as well as by and to art appreciators.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60407

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.