**The Performance of Labour In, As and Beyond the Image**

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Abstract:

***Within post-Fordist economies, work has been theorised as increasingly performative, relying on communicative faculties even at the menial level of call centres and carework. In popular discourse, automation has been presented as a threat to this model. However, since the extraction of value can only happen in relation to labour rather than machines, this fantasy continues to function in the way it has historically, as a disciplinary means of lowering wages. Within performance art, liveness has been fetishized in opposition to mediation. However, performance, like all art today, results in the documentary image, which becomes the commodity produced by artistic labour. The circulation of such images in turn relies on yet more performative labour, including the sharing of the image and other discursive practices. As a consequence, the more it tries to present a critique of mediation, the more artistic performance draws nearer to non-artistic, extractive labour practices. Instead of seeing liveness as external to mediation, then, we argue that it is more productive to explore the critical potential of the mediated image of living labour.***

In the Marxist tradition, capitalist labour has been described as alienated because of the separation between workers and the product of their labour. Within post-Fordist economies, this gap closes, because work is frequently a production of the self, a perpetual investment in one’s own human capital. This work has been theorised as performative, relying on communicative faculties even at the menial level of call centres and carework. For example, Paolo Virno writes:

For Marx, the absence of a finished work that lives on beyond the activity of performance puts modern intellectual virtuosity on a par with actions undertaken in the provision of a personal service [...] Within post-Fordist organization of production, activity-without-a-finished-work moves from being a special and problematic case to becoming the prototype of waged labor in general.

Increasingly, the product of service industry labour is a performance of the worker’s subjectivity, whether through speaking to other people directly, or in a more mediated sense, through self-promotion on social media, for example.

More recently, automation has been promoted as a vehicle through which the post-Fordist worker could delegate some of this cognitive, performative or even creative labour to the machine. This has been presented as either post work liberation or a dystopian displacement of humanity by AI, positions that Aaron Benanav, for example, has persuasively critiqued, by showing that automation consistently produces underemployment rather than unemployment. Both positions assume that automation could bring about the end of productive human labour. But this analysis simply ignores the fact that labour today is carried out under capitalist conditions of employment. The machine, Marx reminds us, is only capable of increasing the value of the product “in so far as it increases the relation of surplus labour to necessary labour”. Surplus labour (beyond necessary labour) is the sole generator of surplus value. Humans alone and not machines can produce this surplus, while the machine can only work to its technical capacity. In simpler terms, machines cannot be exploited, merely utilised. A company owner cannot make AI work longer hours for the same cost or lower its wages when financial conditions are deemed unfavourable (as our employers have recently done). Marx therefore understands automation as a process through which capitalism diminishes the agency of the worker further, making it seem as though it is capitalism that propels history forward, rather than the human workers who actually make the world:

[...] the accumulation of knowledge and skills, of the general productive forces of the social brain, is thus absorbed into capital, as opposed to labour, and hence appears as an attribute of capital [...] In machinery, knowledge appears as alien, external to [the worker]; and living labour [as] subsumed under self-activating objectified labour. The worker appears as superfluous to the extent that his action is not determined by [capital's] requirements.

So with AI, as with any wave of automation, the capitalist owner has no intention of replacing workers. The capitalist simply wishes to demote them further to suppress their wages (script writer / editor example). A script writer may lose their job to a narrative generating algorithm, but they will then get rehired to edit the poor script that results from the machine’s limitations. Automation may at first raise profits for its early adopters, who get a competitive edge on those still relying on living labour to do specific tasks. It might even initially seem to reduce unnecessary tasks, saving time, in the onboarding stage before labour demands intensify to meet the new productivity. But the horizon of automation always recedes: the process is never completed, because there will always be a labour force displaced by it that can do the work of machines more cheaply. As Jason E. Smith asks: “why would business owners invest in fixed capital that depreciates over years, when loose labor markets allow cheap labor to be picked up and dropped at a moment’s notice?”

Despite the limits on the capacities of automation to replace human capital, an excitable discourse surrounds AI, emanating from all sides of the political spectrum, which describes large language models and other algorithmic data processing technologies as a historical paradigm shift. A wide-spread disillusionment with political change and erosion of older modes of social organisation, has led many commentators to present these technological developments as capable of bringing forth a new horizon, echoing Marx’s warning that through the machine, capitalism alienates the workers from their own historical trajectory. But it is perhaps more helpful to remember that AI is only the latest in a long tradition of the automated control of human behavior in the workplace. Since the industrial revolution, capitalism has given birth to many instruments designed to make human behavior quantifiable, more malleable and predictable. A whole range of psychometric tools has been developed over the last century to achieve just that include: Rexford B. Hersey’s 1932 study “Workers' Emotions in Shop and Home” (re-interpreted by K. P. Brehemer as a musical score); predictive tables detailing the time clerical workers took to perform specific tasks such as opening and closing of drawers (as analysed by Harry Braverman); and ‘dynamic surge fee’ algorithms that dictate pay to Deliveroo workers. Automation cannot really replace human labour under capitalism but its implementation on a large scale is intended to regulate certain live aspects of work - to make actions more uniform and predictable, to distribute them more evenly across networks and perhaps to ‘upscale’ localised control by corporations and factories to a general population level. In this context, Kelly Pendergrast is right to note that surface appearances of automation frequently obscure the human labour that still inheres in them, for example when a human operator has to remotely assist a self-driving car. It is not machines that are increasingly able to perform more like humans, but people who are yet again being asked to conform to machinic logics of labour: “Workers have always been called upon to pretend to be inhuman, automated, in order to serve our bosses without disturbing their peace or sense of order”.

It is perhaps ironic that part of the allure of the fantasy of artificial intelligence is that it endows machines with the freedom and agency that is lost to the human worker: cars that drive themselves, books that write themselves or balance sheets that create themselves released from the tyranny of a driver, manager or author. It is an ideological inversion of the current conditions of work: human labourers whose toil under capitalism is tightly regulated by managerial technologies dream of machines that are liberated from humans. Pendergrast describes a host of instances, from pizza parlours with mechanical waiters to military drones, where robots are actually controlled or supervised by hidden human agents. Workers and colonised subjects, she argues, have long been thought of as robots, themselves named after workers (from the Russian *robota*) -  things without agency. According to György Lukács, this is the particular kind of blindness with which the capitalist class is afflicted: their inability to recognise the consciousness and humanity in and of the other means that they are unable to grasp their own point of view. But the current situation where human operators are covertly controlling robots, writes Pendergrast, adds another layer of alienation.

In the workplaces and on the stages where today’s pretend robots ply their trade, the relationship between the robot and their audience involves a shared negotiation of suspended disbelief. The robot-actor performs subservience and inhumanity, and the audience-master gets off on being served, both knowing the other could break the illusion at any time.

At the same time, it is precisely their ‘humanness’ or subjectivity that workers are required to put to work to satisfy the automated masters of the gig economy. A simple everyday example might help us to understand the complex relationship between live physical presence and digital, algorithmic control in contemporary post-Fordist labour. Over the last few years many new barber shops opened on our street in east London. When we visited one of these venues on our block, the young man who was plying his trade there was busy chatting to a customer. It was clear that the exchange was based on mutual familiarity - the two belonged to the same extended network of friends - and, as is the case with the performance of barbers from time immemorial, the services provided extended beyond the cutting of hair to include gossip, the sharing of views and the production of communal belonging. When we later asked the barber about his day, he replied that he enjoyed this very human aspect of his job and found the liveness of this linguistic, social and communicative interactions, the most essential part of his workday. But he also admitted that these events were not the only, or even the main, component of his labour. Most of his time was spent, we discovered, on social media platforms, as a way of promoting his services, displaying new products and styles, and serving as a constant reminder to his social network that they should prefer him over the other barbers in the area. This interaction is highly routinized and repetitive: in order to satisfy the criteria of the visibility algorithm, one has to constantly produce specific utterances and gestures, narrowly defined by the machine. In this case, a core of ‘genuine’ or live performative interaction between individuals occurs and is experienced as meaningful. But these brief events are wrapped in a layer of performative work of a different nature, where the ‘performance of the self’ is manufactured and circulated with the same repetition and predictability of any Fordist job.

Our barber’s example might seem at first to suggest a crude separation between authentic and meaningful forms of work - physical face to face interactions such as cutting hair and chatting - and mediatised technical or virtual site of production. But the picture is more complex. Both sites involved in valorising the barber’s work are a mixture of the technological and the physical. In the barber shop, in addition to the traditional ‘analogue’ tools of the profession such as scissors and shavers, one books and pays for an appointment via an automated platform linked to a QR code at the shop’s window. We hold a conversation about the music played in the space, selected to match the barber’s taste - or preferred projection of identity - via another algorithmic platform, which has in turn helped shape his taste (or projected identity). On the other hand, the barber spends long hours commenting on, liking and sharing other people’s music, art, views, news and banter. This work too is organised via algorithmic platforms, but, in essence, it is hard to distinguish between the conversations taking place at the shop and those online, as they blend into each other effortlessly at the end of the appointment, all the way through to the text received after leaving, asking customers to rate and review the service. Documenting the resultant cut or taking a selfie for Instagram or Tik Tok is an indistinguishable blend of social organisation and marketing, and the community that is produced by the physical coming together of barber and client is also sustained by these digital exchanges.

These complexities are often neglected in discussions around liveness in art, which is frequently presented as an antidote to the alienation brought about by engaging with chatbots and screens. Paradoxically, the exhibition, to avoid being a site of passive consumption, is increasingly considered to be capable of activating audiences the more it integrates precisely these technologies. In the Barbican’s current show on sound, ritual is invoked alongside extensive use of AI to promote an idea of real time interaction and meaningful engagement. In Domestic Data Streamers’ “Forever Frequencies”, for example, visitors are asked to input memories pertaining to music that are then transformed into melodies on music box mechanisms. Composition as a form of expression and communication is replaced by a prompt that can be decoded into set patterns, reinforcing conventions associating major scale with happiness, minor with sadness, and so on. At the same time, the real time human input ratifies the work’s value. Just as the human assistant is now the premium customer experience at the top of the algorithmic service provider tree, live interaction continues to be seen as an even more privileged site of ritual, encounter and sensory experience. A long history of performance practice and theory underpins this understanding of liveness. The Live Art Development Agency’s Adrian Heathfield, for example, writes:

As the cultural milieu becomes profoundly mediated and unreal, the body seems to offer the remaining ground through which the real may be encountered and felt. Live Art, with its aesthetic history of testing physical and psychological limits, and its persistent focus on the performing body, offers itself as a primary site where the contradictory impulses of the culture towards corporeal integrity and its dissolution may be played out.

And yet this access to the real is conveyed more often than not through documentation. Testifying to countless actions, black and white photographs fill institutional art spaces, capturing raw performances and canonising them to audiences far larger than would have been able to witness them. The camera all too often remains invisible in its mediation of this realness. This was noted by Philip Auslander, who concludes his influential essay on the relationship between performance art and its documentation:

The more radical possibility is that they may not even depend on whether the event actually happened. It may well be that our sense of the presence, power, and authenticity of these pieces derives not from treating the document as an indexical access point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself as a performance that directly reflects an artist's aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience.

In an age of deepfakes and AI avatars the notion that such documents can convey an artist’s sensibility regardless of any truth claims feels problematic. At the same time, the idea that liveness can circumvent mediation remains untenable. Even Tino Sehgal’s insistence on avoiding photographic documentation altogether doesn’t alter the fact that his work will have been narrated in writing to far more people than will have experienced its live instantiation. The performance of performance documentation, be it the sharing of images or the discursive act, remains key to the dissemination of such work. Sehgal is an interesting case because he directly links the artistic rejection of documentation to the works’ market value. In an interview from 2006, Seghal states that:

From a technical point of view, I don’t need documentation because I am collaborating with museums. All my work can be bought and can always be shown… Instead of a paper certificate, there’s an oral sale contract. There are three to six conditions depending on the work and a lawyer or a notary present… A lot of emphasis has been put on the fact that I don’t have documentation, but what is more relevant is that I don’t need it because my work takes place in exhibitions.

In other words, for Seghal there is no need for the work to go through a material and ontological transformation into a videographic, photographic or textual document in order for it to retain monetary value. The written document is replaced with a ritualised form of performative verbal agreement, turning the act of selling into another moment of liveness.

But hidden within this seemingly upfront account of sales lies another form of mystification. The inherently social character of value production is obscured by a narrative that gives undue weight to the decisions and actions of individuals. The agreement on the work’s value is supposedly arrived at through a direct exchange between the artist and a representative of the institution without the circulation and mediation of secondary documentation. But the value of Seghal’s work, as with the value of any artwork, emerges in reality from the discursive digestion of the work in reviews, interviews, curatorial exhibition texts, conference papers, university lectures and catalogue essays as well as art gossip and informal dinner party chatter. The role of this type of discursive activity in generating artistic value is described in Diedrich Diedrichsen’s work on surplus value, while Boris Groys writes about the many collaborators involved in the production and circulation of an artwork. Yet in this, art is no different to any branch of capitalist production. Beverly Best notes the important function of circulation in relation to production. Circulation, she argues, slows down the production cycle by creating a temporal gap (before production can start again while products are being absorbed into the market) that has to be filled by credit. Cultural capital in art usually grows much more slowly than the ability of the sole artist to produce work, enabling the market to operate through a system of ‘waiting lists’ or ‘commission slots’ and making specific works seem rarer and therefore more valuable.

As with the barber example before, the two economic activities that take place around live art - the visible staging of actions and the hidden circulation of cultural capital - are both forms of performative semiotic (and decidedly human) labour. There is often precious little to separate the two - a performance in a gallery could take the shape of a conversation or educational activity identical to the ones held around the work when the performance ends. Therefore the real hierarchy in contemporary art is between acknowledged and hidden forms of labour, not between live and mediated work. It does not matter whether the staged event incorporates automated elements such as algorithmic sensor-led lighting software or on-stage avatars, or even whether the work is produced exclusively for a live audience or for the camera to be staged in a different way as image or film in an exhibition. Machines can respond to prompts, but have no desire or ability to communicate. The problem then, for a critical art practice, is not how to push back at automation or compete with machines, but how to make this communicative labour, which is in any case demanded by the market, a site of resistance rather than capitulation.

In 1895, the film “Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory” inaugurated an age of cinema by showing the company’s employees exiting the workplace at the end of the workday. The filmmakers famously staged this fake documentary by asking the workers to show up in their Sunday best, but it remains an iconic representation of a moment in the history of labour when leaving the factory was an option. When the factory is embodied in the self, this is harder to do. 80 years later, Tamás St. Turba would make the short film *Kentaur*. In this Hungarian production, initially state funded but then banned before its public screening, the workers mostly remain silent, but their ‘thoughts’ or ‘conversations’ are occasionally superimposed on the image of their work, outlining a subtle critique through the disjuncture between action and interior world. In the film the alienation of the workers is twofold. While their physical actions are limited to a set of repetitive, machine-like moves, the suggested inner monologues and fictive dialogues offer no liberation: these are not their words but a text forced on their image by the artist. Freedom is not present in *Kentaur,* neither in the physical organisation of the factory nor in the interiority of thought, but is perhaps something to be worked on and demanded against state control and art alike.

Almost as a premonition, St.Turba understood that pitting idealist thought against physical action would be too simple for a world where production would increasingly be sited within the very subjectivity of the worker. Recent writing and performance work by the artist Frank Wasser captures this well. The artist, a precarious worker constantly negotiating a multitude of deadlines and commitments as his body falls apart, is himself the locus of both oppression and emancipation. Wasser’s use of the tape recorder as an interlocutor in much of this work is significant. The mediated voice of his split self operates at a predictable tempo while his onstage persona tries to catch up, stumbles, misses cues and asserts his precedence in vain. In his performance at South London Gallery, he removes layer after layer of uniform shirts and empties his pocket of a plethora of lanyards and ID cards as his pre-recorded voice reminds him of impending deadlines and competes with his onstage narration of the travails of zero hour contract work. The book Split (ZERO-HOUR FRAGMENTS), from which he reads, is presented as a series of memos typed into a phone during shifts of gallery invigilation and other art adjacent jobs. An account of a series of failures to keep up with the demands of self-management, at no point does the narrative become a plea for artistic freedom. Instead, it repeatedly points to the ironic co-optations and complicities that imbricate art institutions with the entirely uncreative extraction of value from human capital. A text about Mondrian that the artist has written for an exhibition in one capacity is given to him by a boss as a script to deliver to children in another role with no acknowledgment of his authorship. Alongside this depreciation of parts of his intellectual capacities, limbs literally fall off of his body, which grows progressively broken and unwell. By both laying bare the conditions of contemporary artistic labour and performing the resistance of the body to its quantifications, Wasser’s work rejects the mystification of laying the blame of immiseration on new technologies and naturalised catastrophe. Instead of the surface preoccupation with technological invention so prevalent in contemporary art, it points to the necessity of political, infrastructural change in the way we organise of labour.