Performing the System

Art, Labor and Productivity in Evolving Economic Landscapes

Master's Thesis by Maria Orciuoli

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Abstract

This thesis examines how contemporary art engages with shifting notions of work and productivity, mapping transformations from industrial to digital economies. Chapter 1 situates these changes within an historical continuum, from the sanctification of work during the Protestant Reformation to the division of labor in industrial capitalism and the algorithmic management of the digital age. Central to this inquiry is the impact of the Creator Economy and the commodification of selfhood on the relationship between identity and work.

Chapter 2 examines how artistic practices have responded to these economic and technological shifts, analyzing the evolving role of the artist as a worker and their exploration of industrial processes and technological systems. A comparison between László Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings* (1922–1923) and Lauren Lee McCarthy's *SOMEONE* (2019) exposes the spectrum of artistic attitudes toward technology. Moholy-Nagy embraces industrial efficiency as an artistic possibility, celebrating the transformative potential of technology in line with modernist optimism. In contrast, McCarthy critiques the commodification of human presence within digital systems, focusing on their impact on privacy and social relationships. Drawing on Jack Burnham's *Systems Esthetics* (1968) and Helen Molesworth's *Work Ethic* (2003) as theoretical frameworks, the chapter traces the 20th-century shift in artistic focus from producing objects to staging processes. Works by Bruce Nauman, Tehching Hsieh, Cindy Sherman, and Lynn Hershman Leeson serve as key case studies in exploring the interrelationship between labor, identity, and technology. Further, the chapter examines counter-strategies to the industrialization of creativity, focusing on Amalia Ulman's online performance *Excellences & Perfections* (2014) and Sondra Perry's *Graft And Ash For A Three Monitor Workstation* (2016), which foreground the labor of self-representation and its entanglement with digital platforms.

Chapter 3 presents *4everfeed* (2023–2024), my performance-based video installation, as a case study to investigate labor, identity, and algorithmic control in the Creator Economy. While drawing inspiration from pop culture and social media, the work is deeply rooted in personal experience and the search for a better life. Central to its creation is the adoption of the generative paradigm to stage advertising scripts generated by TikTok's Creative Assistant. The AI-generated scripts—structurally designed with a hook, body, and call to action—were enacted as live performances, where I, as the fictional character Alessia_3K, became the product. If Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* anticipated the commodification of identity through mass media and influencer culture, *4everfeed* extends this inquiry to the automation of identity production. By incorporating artifacts like cardboard boxes and a hand truck—symbols of global supply chains and digital platform economies—the installation positions itself in a historical continuum with artworks like Joseph Beuys' *Sled* (1969), engaging with broader themes of labor, survival, and mobility. By weaving together personal, historical, and cultural narratives, *Performing the System* does not propose a unified theory but rather an interconnected set of ideas and reflections on economic shifts, human resilience, and the search for meaning in times when uncertainty takes on new forms.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

i. Watermelon and Salt

In my memories, the sun-soaked summers of 1990s Southern Italy were a time when work was not the center of life—it was a season of languid mornings, barefoot wanderings, and nights that dissolved into cicada songs. This rhythm of life, so deeply tied to places, habits, and tradition, shaped my understanding of time, and the dynamics of work and leisure.

Summer seemed to last forever, and *villeggiatura* wasn't just a holiday—it was a way of life. You'd leave in June and return in September, and the rhythm of late morning breakfasts, beach strolls, and gelato became so routine that some people grew tired of it—so much so that they could not wait to head home (or, believe it or not, back to school). I never felt that way. I could have stayed there forever. I marked the days on the calendar, dreaming about all the things I would do, which friends I'd reunite with (that's one of the joys of *villeggiatura*: reconnecting with friends after a whole year), how dark my tan would get, and how many pages I would fill in my diary.

In my family, there were always two options for summer: the wild Cilento or the long, golden sands of Paestum. The Salerno-Reggio Calabria highway, back then, felt like a test of endurance: we'd leave at night, but even with that strategy, we'd often find ourselves stuck in traffic for hours. My mother would get anxious every time, as if wiping away the memory of previous summers, while my father silently nodded behind the wheel. My sisters and I, in the back seats, immersed ourselves in *Manga, Topolino,* or *Cioè*, while Michael Jackson's hits played on the stereo cassettes. The air conditioning was cranked up to full blast in our Lancia Thema. The car weighed down with all kinds of bags, suitcases, and backpacks. And so, after more than a few moments of near madness, we finally reached our destination, typically a rented cottage or a house.

The first plunge into the sea felt like a release.With the comforting certainty of having no rush, the daily rhythm began: shoes were abandoned in a corner of the house, to be worn again only in September. We walked barefoot everywhere—beach, pool's bar, *tabaccheria*. And when it was time to return to the usual routine, they stubbornly resisted the idea of shrinking back into shoes. Mornings unfolded slowly, the heat already pressing in, with breakfasts of fresh fruit: I have a fond memory of those plastic cups filled with chunks of watermelon.

Mobile phones hadn't become widespread yet (I didn't have one), so if you wanted to socialize, you had to head to the bar at the lido. The speakers would often play the classic *tormentoni*. After food and the obligatory wait before swimming again, we would take a nap under the beach umbrella. After showering, we'd have dinner, battle with mosquitoes, and take long evening walks through the village in whatever I grabbed from my wardrobe, paired with sandals that were already falling apart. I would sit on a wrought-iron bench, with a view

of the outline of the Paestum's Greek Temples or Aeolian islands on clear skies, watching people stroll by and imagining I might meet someone: a summer romance, perhaps, or at least someone to chat with who wasn't my mother or sisters.

The nights were filled with the hum of cicadas. Occasionally, I would wake to the sound of church bells—especially on Sundays—when I'd argue with my mother, eager to skip mass and head straight to the beach. But the hardest wake-up was when my father would leave, heading back to our hometown for the week. He took over my grandfather's business, never truly taking time off, and I hated seeing him go. His departure always left a sadness in its wake. It was in these moments that I first encountered work as something relentless and demanding. My father's absence, filled with the weight of his constant responsibilities, shaped my earliest understanding of labor.

The days passed, slowly but never quite slow enough, and *Ferragosto* arrived: the time for feasts laden with food, karaoke, fireworks lighting up the sea, and boat trips to rocky beaches. But once mid-August had passed, a sense of melancholy began to creep in: summer was nearly over. I miss those years, that childlike carefreeness and the freedom to come and go barefoot. I miss those summers of a southern girl, who's now learned that life, in the end, isn't as slow as it once seemed.

Fig. 1

Paestum, Italy, 1997

ii. Work and Identity

Growing up in Solofra, a small town in a valley between the mountains of the Campania region, I was surrounded by history and tradition. Renowned for its craftsmanship and artistic heritage, it is a place where the echoes of a once-thriving economy linger in its architecture and the stories of its people.

The Baroque churches and fountains stand as proud remnants of a vibrant past, even as the present reflects the quieter reality of a community shaped by decades of economic shifts. This environment, where the traces of industry and artistry coexist, has shaped my understanding of work—not just as an economic necessity, but as something deeply rooted in history and expression, capable of defining both a place and its people.

The appreciation for tradition and the struggle for progress is mirrored in my family's history. My grandparents, like many of their generation, embarked on a journey during the migrations of the 1960s, leaving their homelands—Italy for my grandfather and Spain for my grandmother—in search of better opportunities in Northern Europe. Their legacy of resilience working at a Swiss factory, coupled with my mother's encouragement to become a financially independent woman, instilled in me a complex relationship with work: both as necessity and expression. Leaving Southern Italy to pursue my studies and artistic practice in Northern Europe was an echo of this migration, though driven by different forces. Unlike my grandparents, I sought not factory work but an opportunity to explore other cultures. This migration illuminates the contrasts between my family's working-class roots and the networked, knowledge-driven economy I now inhabit.

Fig. 2

Panorama dal Castello di Solofra. (2018). Photograph by Nicola De Angelis (CC BY-SA 4.0) Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved from https://ia.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solofra#/media/File:Panorama_dal_Castello_di_Solofra.jpg

My artistic practice became a negotiation of these worlds. Situated at the intersection of a post-industrial society and the information age, it reactivates memories from this transitional period, reinterpreting its material traces through the lens of a data-driven, networked world.

Fig. 3. The Collegiata di San Michele Arcangelo (Collegiate Church of St. Michael the Archangel). Photograph by Nicola De Angelis (CC BY-SA 4.0). Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collegiata_di_San_Michele_Arcangelo,_Solofra#/media/File:Collegiata_S.Michele_Solofra.jpg

Fig. 4. The church's interior wooden roof with framed canvases painted by Giovanni Tommaso Guarino. Solofra, Italy. Photograph by the author, 2024.

Fig. 5

Solofra's *Monument to the Tanner* ("*Il Conciatore*"), symbolizing the craftsmanship and heritage of the town of Solofra. Photograph by the author, 2019.

Fig. 6

My grandparents with my mother. St. Gallen, Switzerland, 1964.

iii. From Factory Floors to Platform Capitalism

In the last fifteen years, I've lived in seven different countries, learned three new languages, and built a career defined by the freelance economy and digital labor.

Unlike the predefined responsibilities, structured schedules, and manual labor that characterized my grandparents' generation, my work has been adaptive and multifaceted, spanning a spectrum of roles—artist, music publicist, social media manager, and entrepreneur. This ambiguity is defined by independence from a fixed location, a degree of flexibility in time and task allocation, and a predominantly knowledge-based nature. This ongoing transformation to a more fluid way of working has brought its own challenges: the need for self-optimization, remaining hyper-connected, and an unclear distinction between professional life and leisure.

This shift, which I explore both personally and in the broader context of society, mirrors the evolving notion of labor and productivity that is central to *4everfeed* (2023–2024)—the work I submitted as the culmination of this master's. By bridging personal, historical, and cultural narratives, this thesis is an account not just of economic shifts, but of human adaptation, resilience, and the search for meaning in times when uncertainty takes on new forms. In this context, the following chapters look at both the past and present of the social dimension of work and productivity, proposing a framework where labor, identity, and cultural production become open to reinterpretation.

iv. Performing the System

To begin, I will briefly examine the thesis title. A title serves as a container of meaning; however, in this case, it functions more like an instruction manual for operating a conceptual machine—one that is both precise and ambiguous. This ambiguity, though not a hallmark of academic writing, is central to the experience I hope to create for the reader—one in which I trust they will become comfortable as we navigate the concepts ahead.

The word *performance* itself is an elusive and difficult subject to define (Bauman, 1977; Wilson 1995; Carlson, 1996; Westerman, 2016). The Oxford English Dictionary offers historical definitions, tracing the etymology of *performance* in Middle English since at least the 15th century, with early academic references primarily emphasizing task execution and effectiveness (Oxford University Press, 2024).

In the arts, *performance* refers to the actions undertaken by the artist or participants, whether live or recorded, improvised or scripted (Tate, n.d.). Although *performance* and *performance art* became widely recognized in the 1970s, their roots lie in the futurist and Dada cabarets of the 1910s (Goldberg, 1979/2001). In the post-war era, performance became closely linked to conceptual art due to its intangible qualities (Tate, n.d.).

According to historian, critic, and curator RoseLee Goldberg, who published the first comprehensive study of the century-long history of the medium in her 1979 book *Performance Art: from Futurism to the Present,* throughout the 20th century, performance has emerged against art conventions, offering an alternative to painting and sculpture. By using live action and physical movement, it challenged the permanence of these mediums and brought to life the many formal and conceptual ideas that underpinned the making of art (Goldberg, 1979/2001).

The multidisciplinary nature of performance art was evident from the beginning, with the term now extending to works in film, video, photography, and installation, where the actions of artists, performers, or the audience are central to the experience (Goldberg, 1979/2001; Tate, n.d.). More recently, performance has been understood as a means of engaging directly with social reality, the specifics of space, and the politics of identity. As theorist Jonah Westerman remarked in 2016, "performance is not (and never was) a medium, not something that an artwork can be, but rather a set of questions and concerns about how art relates to people and the wider social world"(Westerman, 2016).

American theatrologist Marvin Carlson undertook the task of defining the word in his 1996 book *Performance: A Critical Introduction.* While he is careful to point out that his perspective is influenced by his background in theater studies, he is equally cautious to describe the term *performance* as a contested concept, one that has been perpetually expanding usage and definitions (Wilcox, 1997). Carlson, drawing on Richard Bauman's concept of performance, explains that all performance involves a *consciousness of doubleness* (Bauman, 1977). This refers to the performer's awareness of their actions being compared mentally to an ideal, a potential, or a remembered original model. While this comparison is often made by an external observer, such as an audience or critic, Carlson emphasizes that the performer's own internal awareness is central to the experience: "much more central to this phenomenon is the sense of an action carried out for someone, an action involved in the peculiar doubling that comes with consciousness and with the elusive *other* that performance is not but which it constantly struggles in vain to embody" (Carlson, 1996). In other words, the performer tries to bridge the gap between the act itself and the ideal it strives to represent.

When we consider the various kinds of activity that are referred to outside of the contemporary cultural scene as *performing art* or *performance art*, these are much better understood in relation to an overarching semantic field that focuses on task execution and effectiveness. For example, the Cambridge Dictionary defines more broadly the word *performance* as how well a person, object, or system accomplishes a task or meets a certain standard (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

An early academic application of the use of *performance* in the context of efficiency and productivity, particularly in industrial systems can be found in *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) by American engineer, Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856 – 1915), whose influence we will revisit in Chapter 1.

In this thesis, ‘performing the system’ is used as a framework that intersects the enactment of specific roles, actions, or concepts, while simultaneously working with—and against—a standard. In the selected case studies, this standard takes the form of a self-imposed rule (e.g., Bruce Nauman’s use of geometry and language; Tehching Hsieh’s contract), a template (e.g., Sondra Perry’s use of Chroma 3D blue screens, ready-made avatars, or my use in *4everfeed* of the TikTok app ecosystem, such as its Ads Script Generator and ready-made CGI effects), or an element within a larger system (e.g., Moholy-Nagy’s use of industrial processes to create an artwork, and McCarty's focus on emotional labor in domestic environments).

The term ‘system’ in the title refers to the interrelationship among various factors—economic, social, technological, and cultural—that shape how work and productivity are performed and understood. It also recalls the body of literature on systems theory and aesthetics: an approach to art that focuses not on the creation of objects but on understanding the relationships, processes, and underlying structures that connect art, technology, and society (Burnham, 1968). In this study, such approach entails examining economic shifts through the critical or interpretive lens of art, proposing an investigation on how the engagement of artists (performing) interacts with and reflects the complex networks (system) that shape concepts of productivity and the evolving nature of work.

The artworks in this study were selected for their capacity to illustrate a shift that began in the latter half of the 20th century: a move from the aesthetic focus of machine art to systems aesthetics. In this context, productivity is understood not only as an individual pursuit but as a concept deeply shaped by social and economic forces, reflecting the shared norms that define what it means *to be productive*. As such, this investigation examines how the selected works exemplify labor and productivity within the evolving economic frameworks of the past century—from the Industrial or Producer Economy of the early 20th century, through the rise of the Consumer Economy, and finally to today’s Creator Economy.

In the first half of the 20th century, artists began exploring the aesthetics of machines, a transition exemplified by the *Machine Art* exhibition[1] directed by Philip Johnson[2] and held in 1934 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, which presented industrial and mechanical objects as works of art. This attitude marked the emergence of a distinct machine aesthetic, where technology was celebrated for its geometric forms and functionality.[3]

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[1] Details can be found on the exhibition catalog available on MoMa Archives: https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_1784_300061872.pdf

[2] Johnson was founding Chairman (1932-34) of the MoMa’s Department of Architecture. The inspiration for the exhibition derived from conversations with founding Director of the Museum Alfred H. Barr, Jr (MoMa Archives, nd).

[3] For *Machine Art*, Johnson chose items like typewriter carriage springs, self-aligning ball bearings, an outboard propeller, a toaster, a cash register, cookware, a microscope, a compass, and scientific flasks and petri dishes as examples of beauty in industrial design. In the exhibition catalog’s foreword, Barr highlighted abstract and geometric beauty, kinetic rhythms, material and surface beauty, and the interplay of visual complexity with function as core elements of the "machine art" aesthetic. (MoMa Archives, nd).

By the latter half of the century, influenced by cybernetic theories, this focus transitioned from isolated machines to interconnected systems, as Jack Burnham articulated in his 1969 concept of *Systems Esthetics*. This approach reflected a growing understanding of technology as part of integrated systems rather than isolated devices, reshaping how artists approached both form and function. Today, humanity is enveloped in systems that increasingly rely on technology,[4] forging a unique and unprecedented conceptual relationship with it.

The thesis is structured into three parts:

A Brief History of Productivity and Work (Chapter 1) provides a historical overview of the evolving notions of work and productivity, exploring the development and organization of labor and tracing the shift from the producer economy to the consumer and creator economies between the 20th and 21st centuries.

Technological and Artistic Shifts (Chapter 2) examines the connections between early 20th-century Machine Art and its evolution into System Aesthetics and Cybernetics in the latter half of the century, highlighting the role of technology in these transformations and the shift in artistic focus from product to process. A comparative analysis of László Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings* (1922-1923) and Lauren Lee McCarthy's *SOMEONE* (2019) establishes a connection between Moholy-Nagy's conceptual experiments with the production systems of his time—such as mechanization and industrialization—and McCarthy's exploration of human presence and emotional labor within digital systems of automation in the domestic environment.

A section of Chapter 2 is dedicated to the catalogue and essays accompanying the exhibition *Work Ethic* curated by Helen Molesworth and presented at The Baltimore Museum of Art in 2003. The premise of the show considers various developments in art from the 1960s onward in a larger historical context, specifically the shift in the United States from a manufacturing to a service economy, and its effect upon artistic practices and the understanding of legitimate artistic labor. Molesworth suggests that what has traditionally been referred to as the 'dematerialization' of art should instead be viewed as a redefinition of the relationship between the artist and their labor. With the emergence of a new 'post-industrial' economic paradigm, artists increasingly embodied the dual roles of both worker and manager, with the artwork itself becoming, to some extent, the byproduct of this tension. From Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) to Andy Warhol's *Factory*, and from Minimalist assembly-line aesthetics to feminist critiques of unpaid domestic labor, these works collectively shift the focus from product to process, redefining the role of labor in art. This section is intended to provide perspective on the artist as a worker. However, it should not be mistaken for the central focus of this thesis, which examines how artists conceptualize work and productivity beyond the four categories presented in the *Work Ethic* exhibition's galleries: 'Artist as Worker,' 'Artist as Worker and Manager,' 'Artist as Experience Maker,' and 'Quitting Time.'

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[4] The word "Technology" in this thesis refers to all material and intellectual achievements embodying human's ascendency over the world.

A section of this chapter also analyzes case studies spanning works by László Moholy-Nagy (1895, Hungary), Bruce Nauman (1941, USA), Lynn Hershman Leeson (1941, USA), Tehching Hsieh (1950, Taiwan), Cindy Sherman (1954, USA), Lauren Lee McCarthy (USA), Sondra Perry (1986, USA), Amalia Ulman (1989, Argentina). The analysis focuses on how these artists investigate the nexus of labor, selfhood, and technology by staging processes of productivity and labor through repetition, subversion, and reinterpretation.

The artworks examined in details include:

1. László Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings* (1922-1923)
2. Bruce Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–1968)
3. Joseph Beuys' *Sled* (1969)
4. Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Roberta Breitmore* (1973-1978)
5. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980)
6. Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)*
7. Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (2014)
8. Sondra Perry's *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016)
9. Lauren Lee McCarthy's *SOMEONE* (2019)

Chapter 3 focuses on my performance-based video installation *4everfeed* (2023–2024), which explores work and productivity within the context of Platform Capitalism and the Creator Economy. In this work, I examine the transformation of the body into a sign within a network of symbols that represents a system of identity production—a structure that, to borrow Martha Rosler's words, functions as a form of "harnessed subjectivity."

The exploration of this transformation centered on using TikTok's AI-powered video ad Script Generator (SG) to create 3,000 seconds of performance videos, divided into multiple shorter clips. Over the course of 12 weeks, I prompted the SG to generate video ad scripts in which I, as the fictional character Alessia_3K, became the product. The AI-generated ads scripts included details of the scene, actions, text overlays, and voice-overs, and were structured with a hook, body, and call to action. I then translated each script into live performances, acting out the roles as the character Alessia_3K. The performance clips inevitably mirrored the online performativity of social media's short-form videos.

The performance evolved into a hypertextual practice where myself, the performer, interpreted the system's generated scripts. These scripts served as points of information that functioned as nodes, much like the body itself. In this context, myself as the performer transformed into another type of information-processing system, to reassemble protocol.

In the world of *4everfeed*, productivity—measured by visible output captured by the camera and stored on my smartphone—was redefined to align with a digital, app-driven landscape. In this landscape, typical of the creator economy, the self simultaneously serves as both product/commodity and creator/producer. Here, productivity is no longer about doing or making; instead, it revolves around being seen and continuously optimizing oneself to remain

relevant in the feed. In this context, identity itself becomes a form of labor, and performance shifts from being for the camera or the participatory gaze to serving the algorithm. To further explore these concepts, the chapter also includes comparative reflections on Joseph Beuys' sculpture *Sled* (1969), Amalia Ulman's online performance *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), and Sondra Perry's video installation *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016).

Chapter 1: A Brief History of Productivity and Work

Contemporary interpretations of the word *productivity* are typically associated with several themes in both everyday discussions and academic analyses. There's no definitive source of where the word comes from, but a quick search for the word *productive* on various search engines and Wikipedia immediately highlights its economic application and a relationship to time.

For example, the Oxford Dictionary defines productivity as "the rate at which a worker, a company, or a country produces goods, and the amount produced compared with how much time, work, and money is needed to produce them" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Similarly, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes it as "the quality or state of being productive; the rate per unit area or per unit volume at which biomass consumable as food by other organisms is made by producers" (Merriam-Webster, Inc., n.d.). The Cambridge Dictionary reframes it as "the rate at which a person, company, or country does useful work" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). In Italian, the noun *produttività* is defined in Treccani's dictionary as "the capacity to bear fruit, to produce; the productivity of land, of a factory; the productivity bonus paid to the worker based on their output." The German term *Produktivität*, according to the Duden dictionary, refers to the "increase in economic productivity." In the French dictionary Larousse, the first definition of *productivité* also translates as "the ratio between the result of a productive activity (goods and services) and the production factors used to achieve this production." When I searched for *productivity* in the Japanese dictionary Jisho, approximately twelve terms related to labor, soil fertility, and physical strength appeared.

These themes revolve around work efficiency, time management, output generation, nevertheless, from an impressionistic view, our societal understanding of productivity seems more subjective and has transformed immensely over time. This chapter examines how concepts of productivity have evolved from the ancient Greeks to the Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century and into modern times. It also situates productivity within the broader history of work, aiming to focus the investigation on the experience of being a worker within the economic system one inhabits.

1.1 Personal Productivity: Virtue, Excellence and To-Do Lists

Let's start in ancient Greece, around 200-450 B.C., where Perictione II [5] wrote *On Wisdom* (Waithe, 1987). In the available fragments, she makes two key statements: first, the purpose and function of a human being is the contemplation of the nature of all things. Second, wisdom is the highest-ranked human activity, for it enables us to grasp all kinds of things that are and brings us closer to the divine (Cesaris & Pellò, 2023). Around 350 B.C, the Greek philosopher Aristotle was busy writing his understanding of life's purpose in the

[5] Some scholars attribute this text to Plato's mother who had the same name and lived around 450-365 BCE (Cesaris & Pellò, 2023); although some sources date the writing to the 2nd and 3rd century BC, Mary Ellen White posits that the work cannot be conclusively dated (Waithe, 1987).

book *Nicomachean Ethics*. He believed that the highest good, or *eudaimonia*, was achieved through virtue and self-mastery (Aristotle, 1893). For Aristotle, productivity was about striving for excellence in all aspects of life—mental, physical, and spiritual. In that context, productivity meant being the best version of oneself. For the Greek philosopher, financial dependency equated individuals with slaves, undermining their autonomy and reducing their dignity. Both physical labor and mercantile pursuits, he believed, had the potential to distort the mind and hinder psychological well-being. In his view, only those with independent wealth and a life free from economic pressures could fully engage with the higher pursuits of music, philosophy, and intellectual contemplation (de Botton, 2009).

Fig. 7

Terracotta model of a woman grinding wheat at a basin. Classical Greek. (ca. 450 BCE). © The Trustees of the British Museum. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1856-0902-63

Looking beyond the Mediterranean, we find that other civilizations developed distinct understandings of productivity. In ancient China, for example, *Confucianism* emphasized collective excellence (Wang, 2024). Traces of this attitude can be found in *The Analects*, a collection of Confucius's sayings brought together by his pupils shortly after his death in 497 BC (Confucius, 1998). Leading a productive life meant working diligently towards goals that benefited not only oneself but the community—a notion that resonates with today's collaborative work culture.

The *dharmic* traditions of India focused on personal spiritual development. Here, productivity was less about material achievements and more about cultivating good deeds to

achieve Enlightenment and escape the cycle of death and rebirth, known as *samsara*. The emphasis was on accumulating good karma through virtuous actions, which can be seen as a form of productivity—spiritual rather than economic (Fitzgerald, 2004).

Time management has also played a crucial role in shaping our understanding of productivity throughout history. The ancient Egyptians, seen as the originators of the 24-hour day, built obelisks whose moving shadows formed a kind of sundial, enabling citizens to divide the day in two parts by indicating noon (Britannica, 2024). In Islam, the five daily prayers—*Salah*—structure the day, encouraging early rising, prayer, and the completion of important tasks during daylight hours, with regular intervals for rest (Islamic Relief, n.d.). Today, productivity is a more nuanced concept filled with strategies, tips, tricks, and hacks, mostly aimed at maximizing efficiency and getting more done in less time.
This perspective can be traced back to thinkers like Benjamin Franklin (1706 - 1790), an American polymath and contemporary of Scottish economist Adam Smith, who introduced what may be regarded as the first "to-do" list in 1791 (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011). Like Franklin's approach, the historical roots of productivity are often associated with the idea of work. This relationship between the concept of productivity and work will be the focus of next sections of this chapter.

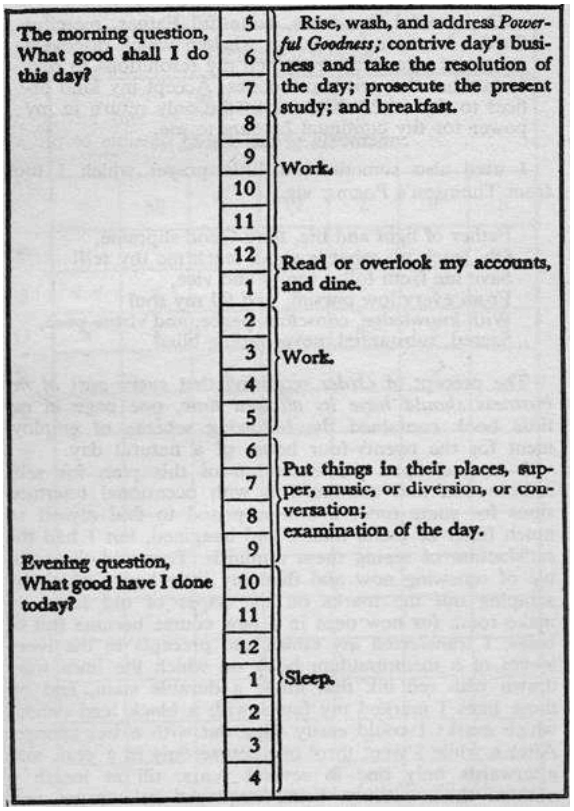


Fig. 8. A photo of Benjamin Franklin's daily schedule. Adapted from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (pp. 91–92), by B. Franklin, 1906. Retrieved January 27, 2024, from Internet Archive https://archive.org/details/autobiobenfran00miffrich/page/n9/mode/2up

1.2 The Definition of Work

One of the hallmarks of the human species is our capacity to adapt and thrive in extreme environments, from arctic tundras to arid deserts, establishing homes in both urban and rural settings (Ilardo & Nielsen, 2018). Amidst this diversity, certain universals remain: all humans, like all organisms, must eat and earn a living, whether through foraging, farming, factory work, or modern-day roles in offices. Different societies have organized their economic lives in various ways across time and space, with the concept of work lying at the core.

1.2.1 Work Across Contexts: A Multidimensional Definition

Work, as we understand it today, meets three essential needs: providing food, clothing, and shelter (Kranzberg & Hannan, 2023). Despite cultural variations, work is universally necessary for survival. For philosopher Frederick Engels (1820–1895), work is the fundamental condition of human existence, shaping both human identity and social relationships by enabling interaction with nature (Engels, 1895). Professor of History of Science and Technology Agamenon Oliveira further describes work's roles beyond economic survival, as facilitating cultural and artistic expression and fostering cooperation, which underpins social and political relationships (Oliveira, 2014).

This thesis primarily adopts a sociological perspective on the concept of work, exploring how individuals and societies—particularly in Western countries—have shaped their relationship to time and their understanding of productivity. The concept of work itself is expansive, but the focus here is on the ways in which societal values and structures influence how work and time are perceived and managed.

A glance through any dictionary reveals the range of interpretations, along with its closest synonym, *labor*. To begin with a Wikipedia definition, "is the intentional activity people perform to support the needs and desires of themselves, other people, or organizations" (Wikipedia contributors, 2020). This definition highlights the intentionality of the act and its role in supporting one's lifestyle.

In French, older terms for labor were replaced in the fifteenth century by *travail*, a word originally referring to a device made of wood for restraining animals or as instrument of torture (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). By contrast, words stemming from the Latin *opus* are linked with beauty and creative work. Its equivalents in other languages (*lavoro* in Italian, *Arbeit* in German, *trabajo* in Spanish, etc.), can encompass a wide range of meanings too. Depending on the social context in which labor is framed, one interpretation or its opposite becomes more pronounced (Oliveira, 2014). In the context of classical economics, *labor* is seen as the human input that, combined with other factors of production, contributes to the goods and services in an economy (Mazzuccato, 2018).

However, if we consider how we use the word in English, it's fascinating to observe the diverse meanings work plays in our lives:

- A sustained physical or mental effort to achieve a goal (e.g., “It took them a lot of work to win the competition”)

- One’s place of employment (“I’m leaving work earlier today”)

- The product of someone's effort or skill (e.g., “This opera is the work of a masterful composer”)

- The outcome of a specific method or approach (e.g., “That documentary film featured impressive camera work”)

- Moral or religious deeds (e.g., “redemption through works”)

- The output of an artist's creativity (e.g., “The Mona Lisa is a work by Leonardo Da Vinci”)

- A complete collection of an artist’s creations (e.g., “Dante’s body of work”)

- The functioning components of a machine (e.g., “the works of a blender”)

- Being subjected to intense or harsh treatment (e.g., “They gave him the works”)

- Physical structures or engineering projects (e.g., “construction works”)

- A craftsman’s set of tools (e.g., “the electrician's work”)

How work is organized, performed, and valued shapes the character and identity of a civilization, while economic, political, technological, and cultural conditions influence work structures, roles, and interactions among workers, employers, organizations, and environments. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic’s shift to remote work and the rise of tools like Zoom show how unexpected challenges can rapidly alter labor dynamics.

1.2.2 The Concept of Work at the Intersection of Physics and Economics

Agamenon Oliveira is a Brazilian contemporary scholar and engineer who has contributed to the study of the sociology of work. In his 2014 book *A History of the Work Concept: From Physics to Economics*, he explores how the concept of work serves as a bridge between the fields of physics and economics.

The concept of work in physics, as we understand it today, was developed in the 18th and 19th centuries by physicists and mathematicians, primarily Gaspard-Gustave de Coriolis and Jean-Victor Poncelet. The term “work” was adopted by the French scientific community after it was coined by Coriolis in 1829 in his *Du Calcul des Effets des Machines* (Amini, 2015). In physics, work represents a type of energy and occurs when a force acts on something that undergoes a displacement from one position to another. An everyday example is a walking body.

In Oliveira's account, one of the first scientists who investigated mechanical friction systematically, French physicist Charles-Augustin de Coulomb (1736 - 1806) was responsible for introduction of economic studies into machines (Oliveira, 2014). To achieve this, he analyzed human labor through a mechanical lens—viewing the human body as a machine capable of performing a specific amount of work—which subsequently enabled him to interpret machine work from an economic perspective (Oliveira, 2014, pp. 191–192).

In 1778, Coulomb published the mémoire *Sur la force des Hommes* (Oliveira, 2016). His concern was about figuring out how much work a person can do in a day, taking into account the energy spent due to fatigue.This part of human work, and how it's measured, is not about applying force to an object and calculating the work done on it, but rather about estimating how the work affects the human body (Vatin, 1993): "Two things can distinguish the work of men and animals when we apply force to a given machine: the effect produced and the fatigue resulting from this process" (Coulomb, in Oliveira, 2016, p. 221).

Several key points are highlighted here: the idealization of human or animal bodies through machine representation—an idea already conceptualized by René Descartes (1596–1650) a century earlier in *Treatise on Man* (*Traité de l'homme*) and *Discourse on the Method* (1637); the concept of mathematically modeling the relationship between output and fatigue; and the suggestion of using an optimization method to find the best solution. A form of system efficiency is implied.

The memoir *Sur la Force des Hommes* is an attempt to understand human work mechanically and, according to Oliveira (2016), is the first publication on physiology and ergonomics. By viewing human work as a machine operation, it became possible to study and compare the work done by machines, including the human body, from an economic perspective. In the same way, Frederik Winslow Taylor (1856-1915) addressed similar issues a century later. His approach focused on measuring the flow of work to achieve greater efficiency and productivity (Vatin, 1999).

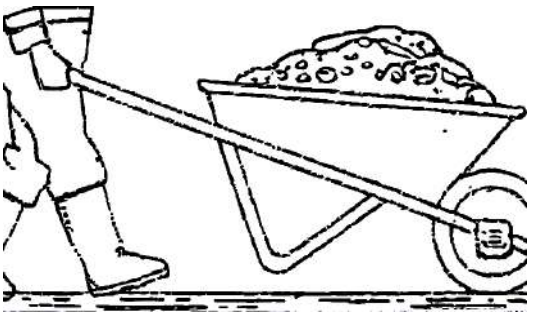


Fig. 9

Work done conveying weight with wheelbarrows. Adapted from Oliveira, A. R. E. (2016). *Charles-Augustin Coulomb—The Founder of Physiology and Ergonomics, Advances in Historical Studies*, 5, 207-222. Adapted from http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ahs.2016.55017

1.3 Tracing the Evolution of Work and Its Organization

Early humans primarily survived through gathering and hunting, relying on a combination of foraging for plants, fruits, insects, and small animals, and scavenging carcasses. However, limited archaeological evidence means that much about their survival practices remains uncertain (Volti, 2012). Human evolution proceeded in close conjunction with the invention and use of tools, which enhanced the survival prospects of individuals who were the most technically proficient (Wilson, 1998). Alongside the use of tools, brain development, and linguistic communication, the division of labor may have played a key role in initiating humanity's mastery over nature and distinguishing humans from other animal species (Engles, 1876).

Fig. 10. Paintings in rock shelter 8, Upper Paleolithic period, Bhimbetka, India [Photograph]. Adapted from Gagnon, B. (Photographer). (n.d.). Wikimedia Commons. (CC BY-SA 3.0). Adapted from https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=33749461

In the earliest stages of human civilization, work was confined to tasks involving: food, clothes, childcare and shelter (Kranzberg & Hannan, 2023). Fast forward to around 12,000 to 10,000 years ago, humanity's shift to agriculture brought a major transformation (Harari, 2015). The reasons for this transition remain under debate, yet it is likely that a mix of population growth and environmental changes encouraged people to adopt a sedentary agricultural lifestyle (Volti, 2012). With the rise of farming and permanent settlements, work became more organized and collective, with tasks linked to seasonal cycles, agriculture, animal husbandry, and building and maintaining communities (Diamond, 1997). Preindustrial agriculture achieved a significant level of advancement in its capacity to sustain large populations, facilitating the growth of more complex cultures (Volti, 2012).

As agricultural techniques made the production of surpluses possible, social classes and power structures emerged. The increased productivity of agriculture freed some individuals from the constant need to secure food, enabling them to take on roles as priests, artists, craftsmen, and government officials (Fagan, 2013). Those with the power to appropriate the surpluses were able to dominate the society. Classes of nobility and religious elites developed, while for the majority of the population, much of daily life was consumed by the labor of plowing, sowing, weeding, irrigating, fertilizing, and harvesting (Volti, 2012).

For sociologist Rudi Volti, surplus of food and other goods also stimulated the emergence of warfare, as urbanization (towns and cities) offered opportunities for plunder (Volti, 2012, p. 9). He links the agricultural revolution to the rise of the state, as the governance structures of the agrarian society were more complex than gathering-and-hunting bands. From there, few agrarian states evolved into empires exercising dominion over tens of millions of people, as was the case in ancient Rome and dynastic China (Volti, 2012, p. 9).

During Roman times (27 BCE - 476 CE), most physical work was performed by slaves, who were full participants of the labor market of the early Roman empire (Temin, 2001). Citizens engaged in “physical” tasks, collectively known as *Negotium*, which included commercial activities and warfare, crucial for much of Roman history. A philosophical debate between *Negotium* (business) and *Otium* (leisure) persisted among intellectuals like Cicero, who praised activities such as political oratory and the arts. The notion was that most people should handle physical labor to allow the elite to pursue higher, reflective activities.[6]

Fig. 11. Fresco from the Sala di Grande Dipinto, Scenes in the Villa dei Misteri, Pompei, ca. 60-50 BCE [Photograph]. Original file by Wolfgang Rieger (2001). Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain. Retrieved from https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_fresco_Villa_dei_Misteri_Pompeii_005.jpg

[6] Cicero described it in his treatise *De Officiis* (44 B.C.E.). The relevant passage can be found in Book 1, Section 150, where he discusses the division of labor in society and the ideal roles of different classes: “Unbecoming to a gentleman, too, and vulgar are the means of livelihood of all hired workmen whom we pay for mere manual labor, not for artistic skill; for in their case the very wage they receive is a pledge of their slavery” (Cicero, 1913, 1.150). Retrieved from: https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:latinLit:phi0474.phi055.perseus-eng1:1.150

The Latin word *labor* comes from *laborare*, which means to perform physical work, toil, exert oneself, take pains, or suffer from strain (Allo Contributors, 2023). An exploration of this notion can be found also in the Christian Bible, which presents three distinct interpretations of work (Gagnier & Dupré, 1995):

1. As an accomplishment, with the six days of creation ("And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work" Genesis 2:3).

2. As a counterpoint to leisure, when God rests on the seventh day (same verse).

3. As a burden and punishment, following Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden and his destiny to face the harsh reality of labor. ("In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return to the ground," Genesis 3:19).

The notion of work as punishment still echoes today, especially in the roots of the English word *labor*, which connects it to both "work" and childbirth—another consequence imposed by God in *Genesis*, specifically on Eve (Gagnier & Dupré, 1995).

The next section explores the evolution of the concept of work throughout human history, examining some of the narratives and interpretations that have shaped its meaning over time.

Fig. 12

The Garden of Earthly Delights. By Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1500). [Photograph of oil on oak panels, Museo del Prado, Madrid]. Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=90726084

1.4 Time, Work and Productivity in Western Societies

For labor historian Gary S. Cross, time scarcity in preindustrial and religious societies was often tied to the brevity of human life; and many sought to suppress the "terror of time" in an unending cycle of religious rites of "eternal" beginnings (Cross, 1989, p. 1). Most modern people approach time differently by trying to anticipate the future in the present. Rather than suppressing time, society now seeks to "gain" and "save" it, by more efficiently consuming it. For most people today, the central concern is the portion of life necessary for work and the periods free from it (Pellegrin, 1964).

1.4.1 The Shift from Natural Rhythms to Clock-Driven Synchronization

According to sociologist Rudi Volti, humans have long marked the passage of time and adjusted their activities according to natural cycles. For gatherers, hunters, and agriculturalists, seasonal changes dictated the timing of tasks like hunting or harvest. While people have always been able to gauge time through natural cues like sunrise, sunset, and seasonal changes, they had little reason to measure time precisely, as daily activities typically didn't require coordination beyond family or tribal groups (Volti, 2012, p. 12).

Labor time, particularly for Europeans living on the land, was still the time of an economy dominated by the agrarian rhythms, unconcerned by productivity. These societies did not divide time into strict units, such as hours or minutes, because their work didn't require precise scheduling (Volti, 2012, p. 12). Instead, they approached time and work flexibly, with periods of intense labor, such as during harvest, often followed by slack periods with little to do. This relaxed approach to time management also applied to artisans and merchants, who enjoyed flexible work schedules in preindustrial societies (Sjoberg, 1960, p. 209).

Jacques Le Goff, a French historian specializing in the Middle Ages, describes medieval attitudes as placing far less emphasis on improving material status or social position through continuous effort (Le Goff, 1980):

> "On the whole, labor time was still the time of an economy dominated by agrarian rhythms, free of haste, careless of exactitude, unconcerned by productivity—and of a society created in the image of the economy, sober and modest, without enormous appetites, undemanding, and incapable of quantitative efforts" (Le Goff, 1980, p. 44).

Labor historian Gary Cross (1989) also draws a fundamental distinction between preindustrial and industrial concepts of time. Pre-industrial artisans, according to Cross, worked more intermittently and were less conscious of time, with no strict separation between work and leisure. This lack of time consciousness was linked to the absence of precise time measurement, and artisans often worked in a more flexible manner. When their income rose, they could afford to reduce their working hours (Cross, 1989, p. 5).

Fig. 13. The peasant farmers and their beasts of burden scene. [Photograph of the Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1070]. © Musées de la ville de Bayeux. Adapted from Bouet, P. (2015). *Les chevaux de la tapisserie de Bayeux*. *In Situ, 27*. Retrieved January 25, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.4000/insitu.11967

Volti (2013) suggests that the shift in attitudes toward work and time remains a topic of debate but a key factor in this change was the invention of the mechanical clock. “The clock,” to quote American, Harvard scholar and economic historian David S. Landes (1924-2013), “did not create an interest in time measurement; the interest in time measurement led to the invention of the clock” (Landes, 1983, p. 58). Volti like Landes (1983, p. 59) posit that in the civilian realm, the need for synchronized time schedules became significant in the Middle Ages with Western Christianity, especially in monasteries and convents where nuns and monks collectively practiced religious duties. Landes attributes the development of timekeeping practices to the influence of the Roman branch of the Christian Church. Under St. Benedict’s monastic rule, prayers and work were conducted at set times throughout the day, such as dawn prayers and evening rosaries, with the Benedictine motto *ora et labora* (“pray and work”) reflecting this rhythm. Monasteries were bee-hives of varied activity, the largest productive enterprises of medieval Europe (Landes, 1983).

In Landes’ account, time was important to the ordinary monk, for whom waking up in the darkness of night was often one of the most challenging aspects of monastic discipline. In practice, establishing a monastery primarily meant enforcing this duty: ensuring that monks were awakened, urged to attend the liturgical office, and kept alert during the service to fulfill their spiritual obligations. Landes references the chronicle of the medieval monk Radulfus Glaber (985–1047), which offers a unique glimpse into monastic life and underscores the internalization of time-consciousness and discipline within the monastic community (Landes, 1983, p. 66).

Glaber recounts what we would recognize today as anxiety dreams, where he feared missing the early morning prayers (*matins*) due to the devil's temptation, symbolizing the struggle between spiritual duty and human frailty (Landes, 1983). This concern over missing *matins* reflects the deep internalization of discipline and punctuality in monastic life, where failing to wake on time was a serious offense (Landes, 1983). This urgency around waking for *matins* even found cultural resonance, influencing stories and songs like *Frère Jacques* that carry similar themes of responsibility and the repercussions of failing one's duties (Landes, 1983, p. 66).

Fig. 14-16

To the left: *Plan of Saint Gall.* [7] Architectural drawing of an ideal monastery in the 9th century (ca. 820–830). [Digital image of Manuscript Ms.1092, Parchment, 1 folio, 112 cm x 77.5 cm]. Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plan_of_Saint_Gall#/media/File:Codex_Sangallensis_1092_recto.jpg

To the upper left: *Franciscan nuns in a choir stall.* [Digital image of illustration in the 15th-century French manuscript from the Psalter of Henry VI, Paris, 1400–20]. © British Library (Cotton Domitian A XVII fol 74v). Retrieved from https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/abbeys-and-priories/medieval-nuns/

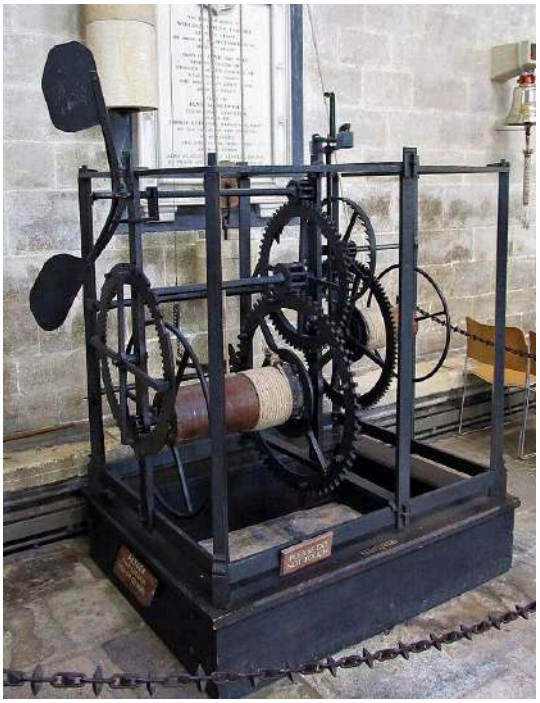
To the bottom right: *Cistercian monks at prayer and at work in the fields* (12th century). [Digital image of illustration in Manuscript Ms. 5. 31]. University Library, Cambridge. Public Domain. Retrieved from https://www.wga.hu/html_m/zgothic/miniatur/1101-150/1english/19englis.html

Urban life in medieval towns introduced an increasingly artificial concept of time. Before the invention of weight-driven mechanical clocks, both water clocks (clepsydras) and sundials were used as timekeeping devices and were commonly referred to by the Latin term *horologia*, which generally meant "timekeepers" (Landes, 1983).

[7] The Codex Sangallensis 1092, or The Plan of Saint Gall, is the only surviving major architectural drawing from the period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the 13th century. Created around 820-830 CE, it depicts an ideal Benedictine monastic complex, including a basilica, living quarters, workshops, and various facilities such as a dormitory, kitchen, bakery, and guest house. The plan also outlines the locations of gardens, orchards, graveyards, and fences, specifying the contents of herbs, vegetables, and fruit trees (Price, 1982, p. ix)

The development of mechanical clocks in medieval Europe brought with it a need for new terminology. In English, the term *clock* emerged, originating from the Old English word for a *bell*. Similarly, the Dutch and Flemish used *klokke*, which also signified a bell (Landes, 1983). Landes attributes this connection to the fact that early mechanical clocks were often accompanied by bells, signaling the time audibly, which helped people in communities keep track of the hours even if they couldn't see the clock face (Landes, 1983).

Toward the end of the 11th century, mechanical clocks began to appear in China and towards the end of the 14th century in Europe, enabling more precise coordination of activities (Volti, 2012, pp.13). The advent of mechanical technologies led to the precise scheduling of work, as machinery and mechanized operations required careful coordination. The unscheduled pace of life for gatherers, hunters, farmers, and preindustrial artisans was gradually replaced by a work environment governed by the constant ticking of hours, minutes, and seconds (Volti, 2012, p.13).



Fig, 17. Medieval clock in Salisbury Cathedral, operating a bell in the tower. Supposedly dating from about 1386, restored 1956. Photograph by Rwendland (CC BY-SA 3.0). Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=22622123

This shift toward more structured, time-sensitive work environments paralleled the cultural and economic changes brought about by the Renaissance. As the arts flourished and scientific advancements took hold, commerce and trade expanded, creating a fertile ground for new forms of enterprise. Despite resistance from traditional Catholic perspectives,

banking and trade began to thrive, with innovations like double-entry accounting by Luca Pacioli (1494) laying the groundwork for more specialized economic practices.

During the Renaissance, increasing value was placed on artistic innovation and creativity (de Botton, nd). In the start of the 16th century in Rome, Michelangelo began painting the Sistine Chapel, commissioned by Pope Julius II (Britannica, 2024). Sofonisba Anguissola became the court portraitist of Philip II of Spain and was commissioned a portrait of Isabel, Queen of Spain by Pope Pius IV (Delistraty, 2020). Florentine nun Plautilla Nelli—a self-taught painter who ran an all-woman artists workshop out of her convent—produced a monumental *Last Supper* (Moorhead, 2017). Around the same time, in 1568, Giorgio Vasari published *The Lives of the Painters* — considered one of the first works of art history (Hope, 1995).

The artists whose works were recognized during the Renaissance, worked for money but also pursued their craft for its inherent fulfillment. This era may have helped shape ideals of creative and remunerative work—ideals that persist in our ambitions today.

Fig. 18

The Last Supper. By Plautilla Nell (c. 1568). [Photograph of oil on canvas, 200 x 700 cm, Santa Maria Novella Museum, Florence). Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plautilla_Nelli_-_The_Last_Supper_(in_2019).jpg

Fig. 19

Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura). By Artemisia Gentileschi. (1638-39). [Photograph of oil-on-canvas, 98.6 x 75.2 cm, Royal Collection, Buckingham Palace, London]. Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37146117

1.4.2 The Protestant Reformation and the Sanctification of Work

Volti attributes Europeans' interest in the effective use of time to changes in values and behaviors brought on by the religious, political, and cultural shifts collectively known as the *Protestant Reformation* (Volti, 2012).

In 1520's Wittenberg, Holy Roman Empire, German monk and theologian Martin Luther (1483–1546), founder of Protestantism, argued that serving God can be done through all forms of work—not just religious duties (Volti, 2012). From the work of a milkmaid to that of a priest, Luther teaches that all labor, when done with purpose, is holy and dignified. This, according to Volti, redefined the value and moral worth of ordinary labor in society.

Starting with Martin Luther's challenge to the Christian establishment in 1517 with his *Ninety-Five Theses*, Protestantism rapidly fragmented into various sects, each with its own interpretation of Christian life and thought. One of the most influential in Western societies was Geneva-based, French theologian Jean Calvin's doctrine of *predestination*, which posited that God had already decided who would go to heaven or hell (Volti, 2012, p.

14). They believed their material success in life was a sign of being among the *elect* chosen by God for salvation, which marked a significant shift from traditional Christian views that had viewed wealth with suspicion (Tawney, 1954).

Calvinist theology not only accepted the accumulation of wealth but also emphasized that it should be earned through hard work and frugality, with an ascetic lifestyle to avoid excess. Wealth was to be reinvested into productive ventures, and the Calvinist viewed work as a religious *calling*, where prosperity was seen as evidence of divine favor (Volti, 2012, p. 14). Calvinists also had a distinct attitude towards time, considering it a precious commodity to be *invested* in productive activities rather than wasted. Phrases like “time is money” reinforced this mindset, reflecting the belief that time should be carefully managed to ensure material success (Volti, 2012, p. 14).

This account of the historical connection between Protestantism and an ethos conducive to capitalist development was first articulated in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) by sociologist Max Weber. Weber also wrote extensively about the division of labor which will be one of the themes we will discuss in the next section of this chapter.

1.4.3 From Craft to Industry: The Western Transformation of Work, Productivity and the Division of Labor Ideals of the Industrial Economy

Between 1751 and 1780 in Paris, French philosopher, art critic, and writer Denis Diderot, together with French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher Jean le Rond d'Alembert, spearheaded the creation of the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers (Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts)*. This monumental work, edited and published with contributions from prominent Enlightenment thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, celebrated all branches of human knowledge, including manual labor such as baking, weaving, and farming (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2021).

The *Encyclopédie* profoundly shaped Enlightenment thought, elevating the status of everyday labor and emphasizing its essential role in society's progress (Wolfe & Shank, 2024). Contemporary writer and author Alain de Botton cites it as an example of the 17th-18th century transition to celebrating the "glories of practical activity" such as "celebrating the particular genius and joy involved in baking bread, planting asparagus, operating a windmill, forging an anchor, printing a book and running a silver mine." (de Botton, n.d.). The bourgeois thinkers of this era inverted Aristotle's values, which, as mentioned at the start of this chapter, associated productivity with leisure—a time for intellectual and spiritual pursuits free from the demands of labor (de Botton, 2009). It also liberated work from the Christian’s morality which, as we mentioned earlier, saw it as a divine punishment for the original sin or as a religious calling.

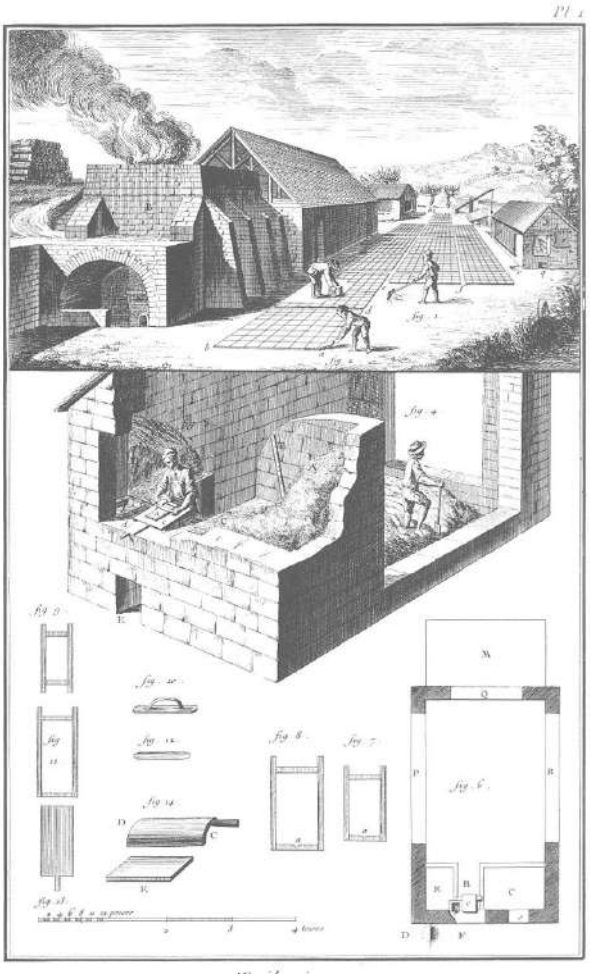


Fig. 19.

Tile making. The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project. Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2010. Trans. of "Architecture et parties qui en dépendent – Tuilerie," *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 1 (plates). Paris, 1765. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0001.373

The Industrial Revolution, a term used by French writers and later popularized by the English economic historian Arnold Toynbee (1852–1883), refers to the process of change from an agrarian and handicraft economy to one dominated by industry and machine manufacturing (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).

Historians agree that the *Industrial Revolution* began in Great Britain around 1760 and spread to continental Europe and the United States. This period saw the decline of slavery and the rise of sweatshops, which, while replacing plantation labor, did little to improve workers' living standards (Allen, 2017).

The Revolution created the need for the new enterprise to get organized around the newly coined Factory, making for the first time a distinction between manual and intellectual work, giving rise to the concepts of white-collar and blue-collar jobs (Landes, 1969).

In the book *The Industrial Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (2017)*,* Oxford University Professor Robert Allen analyzes its key features in Britain, and the spread of industrialization to other countries. In his account, the introduction of manufacturing technologies led to a surge in productivity: machines took over tasks like spinning and weaving cloth, steam engines provided a consistent source of power, and the development of the first railways created a vast network that supported industrial growth. Cities expanded as people moved from rural agricultural work to urban industry and commerce. Many workers found themselves displaced by machines, while factory conditions remained harsh and wages were low. As the middle class flourished, the working class experienced growing social unrest, and the exploitation of labor sparked the rise of trade unions and protest movements (Allen, 2017).

Around that time, the notion of work as a voluntary contract gained significance, with the first scientific studies on work design emerging, particularly from Scottish philosopher and political economist Adam Smith's book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), which highlighted how labor division could enhance productivity (Van den Broeck and Parker, 2017). In an early draft of *The Wealth of Nations*, written during the 1760s, Smith examines the significant productivity gains resulting from gradual technological advancements, such as the plough and the corn mill. These improvements were often initiated by the machines' users, who had a vested interest in enhancing their efficiency:

> "It was the division of labor which probably gave occasion to the invention of the greater part of those machines, by which labor is so much facilitated and abridged. When the whole force of the mind is directed to one particular object, as in consequence of the division of labor it must be, the mind is more likely to discover the easiest methods of attaining that object than when its attention is dissipated among a great variety of things" (Smith, 1776/1904, as cited in Cannan, Ed., 1904).[8]

Moving to the US, a major leap in productivity occurred when American inventor Eli Whitney patented his model of cotton gin in 1793 (Whitridge, 1955). This invention transformed the US economy, particularly in the Southern states where cotton was a primary crop harvested by slaves (Zinn, 1980/2003). The cotton gin was just one of many technological innovations that emerged from the early Industrial Revolution in the US. Machines like steamboats, sewing machines, light bulbs, and telephones shifted production from homes to factories in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, driving a national obsession with increasing efficiency (Library of Congress, n.d.). Though slavery ended after the Civil War, low-wage workers, including children, continued to labor in hazardous conditions for

[8] The quote was accessed on March 23. 2024 from the Liberty Fund website at https://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/adam-smith-on-the-greater-productivity-brought-about-by-the-division-of-labor-and-technological-innovation-1760s

decades. Labor unions later fought to protect workers, following tragedies like the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in 1911 (Library of Congress, n.d.).

Fig. 20. The Daily Constitution 1878. By Kara Walker (2011). Photograph by Sikkema Jenkins, NY. Retrieved from Barnett, L. (2013, October 10). *Kara Walker's art: Shadows of slavery*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/oct/10/kara-walker-art-shadows-of-slavery

In 1844 in Paris, Karl Marx published his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, where he criticizes capitalism not only for exploiting workers but because it makes their work monotonous and unfulfilling. For Marx, the problem with capitalism is that it alienates workers from the creative potential of their labor (Marx, 1844).

In 1898, economist and author Charlotte Perkins Gilman published *Women and Economics* (1898), calling for systemic changes to liberate women from economic and social oppression. A year later, influenced by Gilman, at the University of Chicago, American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), in which he critiques the rich for flaunting their wealth through leisure. Veblen's notion of *conspicuous consumption* captures a soon-to-be-dying idea of social status based on avoiding work. Soon after, the modern era's cult of hard work and business took over (de Botton, 2009).

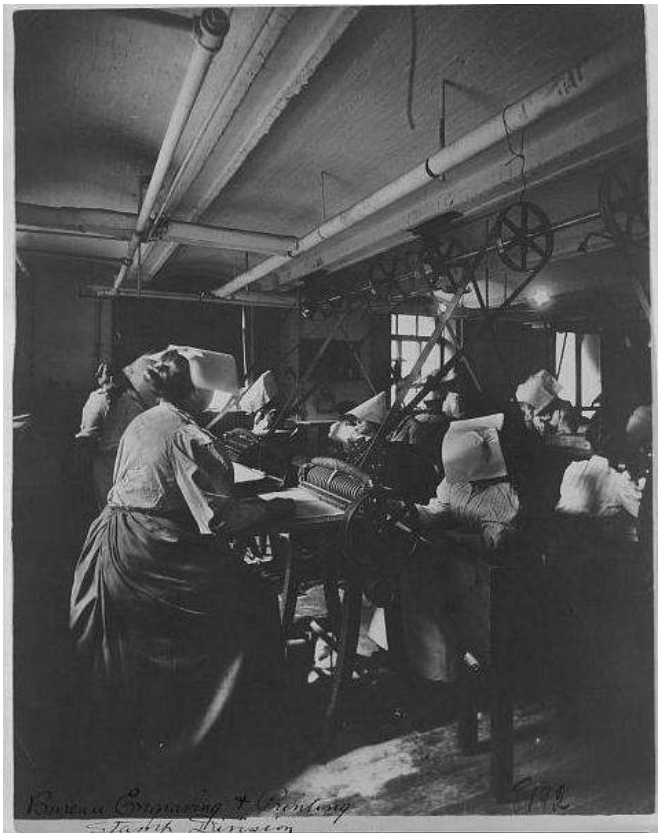


Fig. 21

Women perforating sheets of stamps in the Stamp Division at the Bureau of Engraving & Printing. Photo by Frances Benjamin Johnston (ca. 1895). Library of Congress. Adapted from http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c37142

While pinpointing an exact moment when work transitioned into a job is challenging, French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), explores how the specialization of work—a concept we encountered earlier in Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776)—contributes to social cohesion and efficiency. Durkheim observed that in pre-industrial societies, where labor is less specialized, people shared common values, creating *mechanical solidarity*. In contrast, modern industrial societies, with their highly specialized labor, fostered *organic solidarity*, where individuals rely on each other's expertise (Durkheim, 2014/1893). Durkheim saw the division of labor as increasing productivity by allowing individuals to focus on specific tasks, thus enhancing overall efficiency. However, like Marx, he also warned that excessive specialization can lead to *alienation* and *anomie*, where individuals feel disconnected from the broader social system (Durkheim, 2014/1893).

Work specialization became a new form of engineering, with jobs meticulously structured to maximize efficiency. Several sociologists agree that the division of labor created the conditions for workers to transit into employees under an employer-employee dynamic, a

relationship that shaped modern discourse on labor (Kranzberg and Hannan, 2017). In the US, American engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915) developed principles of efficiency and productivity in industrial settings, focusing on optimizing work processes and labor specialization (Taylor, 1911). In his monograph *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), he pushed these ideas to their limits, extending them beyond bureaucracy to technocratic production units.

Fig. 22

Men reading Midvale Company's "The Winnah & Champ" safety sign for engine machinists. By John Mudd (1944). [Photograph from the collection of Midvale Company Photographs, 1883–1953]. Retrieved from *The Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives*, Flickr repository https://flic.kr/p/93vz8e

In Germany, Max Weber's analysis of bureaucracy in *Economy and Society* (1921; German: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*) gives insights into the defining traits of the modern concept of a job. Weber characterizes bureaucracy as a highly organized form of administration with clearly defined hierarchical structures and standardized procedures. Key characteristics include well-defined roles and responsibilities from a functional division of labor, clear distinctions between personal and organizational property, established rules governing the organization, and an impersonal approach that values technical competence and qualifications over personal connections or status (Weber, 1921/1978). This attitude marked a shift from traditional forms of work organization to the more formalized, rationalized structures we associate with modern jobs (Kranzberg and Hannan, 2017).

In Italy, in *The Mind and Society (Trattato di Sociologia Generale)* (1916), Italian economist, engineer and sociologist Vilfredo Pareto emphasized the role of elites in society, which he believed controlled the productive forces and organized labor. Pareto believed that productivity was fundamentally linked to the economic system's ability to maximize output and efficiency. He argued that productive work in capitalist societies often served to perpetuate the power structures that existed, where the elite controlled both labor and the means of production (Pareto, 1916).

Perhaps one of Pareto's most well-known contributions to productivity theory is the *Pareto Principle* (also called the *80/20 rule*), used across all aspects of business, economics, mathematics, and processes. He wrote about it in his 1906 *Manual of Political Economy* (Mazzuccato, 2018). His observation implies that, in the context of labor, a small proportion of workers or tasks often contribute disproportionately to the overall productivity (Pareto, 1896). In other words, 20 percent of efforts lead to 80 percent of outcomes, and it is a general reminder that the relationship between inputs and outputs is not balanced. P

areto shared with Max Weber the concern about the growing influence of rationalization in modern economies. However, he viewed rationalization as a means for elites to control and direct the productive forces of society (Pareto, 1991). The organization of labor in this context was often seen as a tool for the efficient extraction of value from workers, reinforcing the social and economic inequalities he observed (Pareto, 1916).

1.4.5 Summary

As demonstrated in the previous sections, the primary difference between pre-industrial (agrarian) and industrial societies lies in the organization of labor, productivity, and the perception of work. In pre-industrial societies, work was small-scale and centered around subsistence farming, manual craftsmanship, and communal traditions with a strong connection to seasonal cycles. In contrast, industrial societies introduced division of labor, mechanized production, and contractual, formalized jobs, often performed in urban factories.

Technological advancements fueled unprecedented productivity, while urbanization concentrated labor in cities, reshaping social dynamics. Pre-industrial work was often integrated into daily life and viewed through the lens of survival or divine purpose, whereas industrial work was tied to progress and efficiency, though criticized by thinkers like Karl Marx for its alienating effects. As agrarian, rural societies gave way to industrial, urban ones, new forms of interdependence emerged, transforming work from a communal activity to a highly specialized and segmented system central to modern capitalism.

The transformation from craft to industry marked a pivotal shift in Western societies, elevating labor from manual activity to a cornerstone of economic and social progress. Initiatives like Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* celebrated practical skills, laying intellectual foundations for the Industrial Revolution, which redefined work, productivity, and the division of labor. Technological advances, such as Eli Whitney's cotton gin in the US

and the rise of factory systems, spurred productivity gains but introduced worker exploitation and alienation.

Thinkers like Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Émile Durkheim analyzed the implications of industrialization on labor specialization, efficiency, and social cohesion. While Smith emphasized the economic benefits of labor division, Marx critiqued its dehumanizing effects. Similarly, Durkheim warned against the alienation stemming from excessive specialization. Subsequent developments, including Taylor's scientific management and Weber's bureaucratic structures, institutionalized work practices, reinforcing efficiency at the cost of individuality.

Contributions like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's call for systemic changes to liberate women from economic and social oppression and Thorstein Veblen's concept of *conspicuous consumption* expanded the discourse by critiquing the societal dynamics of labor and wealth.

Finally, figures like Vilfredo Pareto highlighted the disproportionate productivity contributions within economies, introducing enduring principles like the 80/20 rule. This transition to industrialized work laid the groundwork for modern economies but also entrenched enduring inequalities, rationalized efficiency, and redefined the nature of work and societal roles.

1.5 From the Industrial to Post-Industrial Economy in Western Society

Technology forecaster Paul Saffo noted that at the start of the 20th century, the United States was focused on addressing scarcity, with industrial manufacturing at the forefront of the economy (Saffo, 2009). The key figure of this time was the Vice President of Manufacturing, whose emphasis on efficiency led to a producer-driven economy where production lines and time clocks maximized worker output. The result was a producer economy in which production lines and punch clocks kept workers at peak productivity (Saffo, 2009, p. 124). By 1914, a Ford Motor Company's worker could buy a Model T car with just four months' wages (Ford, & Crowther 1922/2006).

Although the 20th century was rocked by two World Wars and the global Great Depression, productivity was a focal point for manufacturing goods needed to support military efforts and, later, to satisfy the demands of the growing middle class in the U.S. and other industrialized nations (Engelman, 2020). Efficiency in production played a crucial role in winning World War II for the Allies. By World War II, the U.S. industrial sector had developed the capacity to produce weapons in vast quantities, overwhelming adversaries.

In the December 1942 National Geographic Magazine, journalist Albert W. Atwood authored an article titled *The Miracle of War Production*: "Hence this country has become the most gigantic factory the world has ever seen, turning its plowshares into swords, transforming itself into an all-embracing, universal arsenal—all to meet the Axis challenge." (Atwood, 1942).

Fig. 23

Crowd of applicants outside Highland Park Plant after Five Dollar Day Announcement, January 1914. By John Mudd. [Photograph of photographic print from the Collections of The Henry Ford. Gift of Ford Motor Company]. Retrieved from https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/artifact/35765/

1.5.1 The Consumer Economy

When the war ended, this production capability shifted to meet consumer demand, giving rise to the *Consumer Economy,* an economy whose growth depends on people buying goods and services (Saffo, 2009). According to Saffo, this new paradigm not only tackled scarcity but exceeded it, as factories churned out more products than could be purchased. The focus then shifted to Marketing, to skillfully create unnecessary products and persuade consumers to buy them. Saffo mentions factors such as accessible credit, decreasing production costs, and the influence of mass media—particularly television with its continuous stream of advertisements—propelled economic growth into high gear (Saffo, 2009, p. 129).

With work becoming increasingly on demand, the challenge became matching people's talents to the right jobs. In Washington DC, USA, 1945, writer Katherine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers developed the first version of their now-famous personality test, aiming to pair individuals with careers suited to their psychological types (Myers & Briggs Foundation, n.d.).

The 1950s in the Western World were characterized as an era of stability, with jobs epitomizing efficiency and contributing to significant wealth growth, while craft and

agricultural roles diminished (Galbraith, 1958). Leisure time gained importance as new occupations emerged to accommodate the growing free time of a prosperous workforce. Indeed, between 1948 and 1955 close to two thirds of the nation's households purchased a television set. By the end of the 1950s, 90 percent of American families had one and the average viewer was tuning in for almost five hours a day (Edgerton, 2009).

In Italy, the 1950s experienced the so-called *Economic Miracle,* aided also by joining NATO and the Marshall Plan (Ginsborg, 1990). As noted by the historian Paul Ginsborg, in the twenty years from 1950 to 1970 per capita income in Italy grew more rapidly than in any other European country (Ginsborg, 1990). Italian families used their newfound wealth to purchase consumer durables for the first time. By 1961, televisions were present in about one in eight homes (Capuzzo, 2015).

In 1958, Bank of America launched the first credit card in California, which evolved into the modern Visa card (Frankel, 2024). This marked the beginning of a new era in consumer finance, paving the way for the widespread adoption of credit cards worldwide. Corporate priorities moved from production to marketing, and with the advent of container shipping, global trade expanded dramatically, emphasizing the consumption rather than production of goods (Saffo, 2015).

Scarcity shifted from goods to desire (Saffo, 2015). In 1958, Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith published *The Affluent Society*, which documents and examines America's new post–World War II consumer economy and political culture. Despite its promises, Galbraith observed that the *Affluent Society* had deep-rooted flaws. While the burgeoning consumer economy elevated millions of Americans into the middle class, it also perpetuated existing social inequalities. Women fought to assert their rights as equal members of society, while the poor faced persistent barriers to quality education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. The same suburban expansion that provided middle-class families with more space simultaneously left urban areas grappling with increasing poverty, crime, and environmental degradation (Galbraith, 1958).

1.5.2 The Rise of Services

Since the mid 20th century rapid technological advancements have driven structural shifts in the global economy, positioning services and services trade as central to economic transformation.

In his 1968 book *The Service Economy*, American economist Victor R. Fuchs (1924-2023) provides an historical and international perspective on the significant shift from industrial to service-based economies. The shift from industrial to service employment has advanced furthest in the United States but is now evident in all developed economies (Schettkat, & Yocarini, 2003). According to a 2023 World Trade Organization report, the services sector now accounts for more than half of global employment (50%) and generates a significant portion of global output (67% of GDP), surpassing agriculture and industry

combined (Mathieu, 2024; World Trade Organization, 2023). British and Australian economist Colin Clark (1932 – 2002) suggests the "hierarchy of needs" hypothesis, which posits that as people's income rises, services fulfill higher-order needs than goods. As societies become wealthier, a larger proportion of income is allocated to purchasing services. Therefore, countries with higher per capita incomes, like the US, started experiencing higher employment in service industries and greater demand for services (Schettkat, & Yocarini, 2003).

The shift from an industrial to a postindustrial society is perhaps aptly described by Belgian Marxian economist Ernest Mandel (1923-1995), who contextualized this era as "late capitalism." According to Mandel, a defining feature of late capitalism is the extension of the work ethic into nearly every aspect of life, including art, creating a society that is increasingly bureaucratic and disciplinary.

In a 2003 essay of the exhibition catalogue of *Work Ethic,* held at The Baltimore Museum of Art in 2002*,* American curator Helen Moleswort argues that one unifying principle of the heterogeneous field of Post-World War II avant-garde was a "concern with the problematic of artistic labor" (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 26). In her account, one of Modernism's key promises was the potential for art to resist the increasingly regimented and compartmentalized nature of life brought about by industrialization. From the Arts and Crafts movement to the Bauhaus, the history of modern art is interwoven with the aspiration to integrate art and life, work and leisure, in a way that could mitigate the alienation caused by the fragmented structure of modern labor (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 26). In Postmodernism instead, much as the category of art was in question, the role of the artist and the value of their labor was being rearticulated. Traces of these ideas, particularly those related to anti-authorial modes of artistic production, can be found in texts such as Duchamp's *The Creative Act* (1957) and French theorist Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* (1967) (Molesworth, 2003).

In *Work Ethic,* Molesworth suggests that what is frequently referred to as the "dematerialization" of the artwork should instead be viewed as a redefined relationship between the artist and their labor. In essence, Molesworth contends that with the emergence of a post-industrial economic framework, artists started to challenge the socially entrenched divide between manager and worker. Notably, rather than adhering to romanticized ideas of solitary creativity, the artist began to occupy the roles of both laborer and manager, with the artwork itself emerging, in part, as the byproduct of this tension (Sundell, 2003).

In Chapter 2, I dedicate a section to the *Work Ethic* exhibition and the essays included in the catalogue.

1.6 The Evolving Economies of the Information Age

In 1984, Apple aired its iconic Super Bowl commercial, presenting the Macintosh as a liberating force against monotonous and dehumanizing labor (Coulson, 2009). The 60-second ad featured a lone woman, played by English athlete and actress Anya Major, who frees an army of workers from the oppression of a Big Brother-like figure (Friedman, 2005). The tagline, "You'll see why 1984 won't be like 1984"—a reference to George Orwell's novel—promoted the Mac as a vibrant alternative to the conformity of industrial work, which ironically also led to an infringement of copyright and trademark laws (Coulson, 2009).

Fig. 27

To the left, upper right and lower left: *Still image from 1984 Super Bowl Apple Macintosh ad by Ridley Scott, 1984.* Retrieved from YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErwS24cBZPc

To the lower right: Macintosh, 1984. Its price was $2,500. Retrieved from Computer History Museum: https://www.computerhistory.org/timeline/1984/#169ebbe2ad45559efbc6eb3572026cc9

The ad juxtaposed the athletic, rebellious heroine with the oppressed, technology-controlled figures, suggesting a contrast between freedom and conformity. The dystopian nightmare of Orwell's 1984 was evoked, addressing widespread fears about the potential for computers to strip away human autonomy. However, the commercial reframed

these anxieties by presenting the battle as one between good and evil technology. The "bad" technology, symbolized by the authoritarian, centralized regime, was shown to crush individuality, while the “good” technology of the Macintosh was portrayed as empowering, independent, and individualized (Friedman, 2005). In the face of emerging complexities in the Information Age, Apple’s commercial provided a utopian vision that resonated with viewers’ frustrations and fears, offering liberation through innovation.

By framing the battle between good and evil technology, the ad positioned the Mac as the vehicle for a new kind of humanistic work—one driven by autonomy, and personal empowerment. This Renaissance-inspired, humanistic concept begins to flourish in a new industry driven by software development and technological innovation. These libertarian fantasies live in Silicon Valley today (Johnson, 2018), where a new wave of self-entrepreneurship, personal expression, and creativity has swept through the professional landscape. With the emergence of the Knowledge Worker, concepts such as work-life balance, diversity and inclusion, wellbeing start to connotate a different approach to the meaning of work.

Fig. 28

Image of a Computerland newspaper ad for Macintosh from The Spokesman-Review, January 24, 1984. Retrieved from *https://shorturl.at/MAoIF*.

1.6.1 Remote Work and the Gig Economy

With internet and mobile technology, connectivity follows the user wherever they go. The entire knowledge of the world is available in our pockets, enabling the rise of the remote worker—an employee accomplishing job-related tasks from a location other than a central office operated by the employer.

In the mid-2010s, a few pioneering actors started disrupting the core element of the traditional work narrative too, focusing directly on the Employer-Employee relationship. Uber, Lyft, Foodora, JustEat, among others, have built platforms that link the work of individuals without formal relationships, creating a wave of gig workers across the globe. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated these trends (Parker, Horowitz, & Minkin, 2022). In spring 2020, most companies globally shut down and put everyone online in a matter of days (United Nations, 2020).

The development of the Gig Economy has also encouraged the Creator Economy which will be the focus of the next subchapter. Technology forecaster Paul Saffo is credited with discussing the Creator Economy as early as 1997, where he cites the economic downturn of 2008 as the turning point where a critical mass of consumers switched from strictly consuming to using their activities to create value (Greenwald, 2011). As such, in the 2009 McKinsey&Company report *What Matters* he outlines:

> "Now we are entering a third age in which the central economic actor is someone who both produces and consumes in the same act. I like the term creator, as this new kind of actor is doing something more fundamental than the mere sum of their simultaneous production and consumption. Creators are ordinary people whose everyday actions create value" (Saffo, 2009).

In the 21st century, driven by advancements in digital technologies, data has become an essential asset for companies, shaping their interactions with employees, customers, and other businesses. This shift has fueled the growth of large monopolistic corporations. Nick Srnicek's 2017 book *Platform Capitalism* highlights how, amid a prolonged decline in manufacturing profitability, capitalism has increasingly relied on information to sustain economic growth, with the platform emerging as a dominant business model capable of gathering and managing vast quantities of data. Today, the economies of high- and middle-income countries are increasingly dominated by these firms, and the trends explored in this book suggest that this trajectory is likely to persist (Srnicek, 2017).

1.6.2 The Creator Economy: Monetizing the Everyday, Identity as Labor, and Commodifying the Self

Economic shifts are frequently driven by media innovations, as Paul Saffo noted: "We invent new technology and then use it to reinvent ourselves" (Saffo, 2015). Dominant mass media outlets of the Consumer Economy—TV networks, for example—have been gradually

displaced by personal media platforms like formerly Twitter, now X, along with YouTube, eBay, Facebook, Wikipedia, Google, and Etsy (Saffo, 2009). These platforms that allow individuals to create and distribute content directly to their online audiences have reshaped how both economic value and cultural influence are produced, moving away from the centralized models of the past.

This transformation laid the groundwork for what scholars Peres, Schreier, Schweidel, and Sorescu (2024) describe as the Creator Economy, which they define as “an eclectic collection of activities and actors that facilitate the generation and diffusion of digital content, services, or physical goods.” The Creator Economy can be also seen as a subset of the Content Industry encompassing the entire ecosystem of content production, distribution, and consumption, including traditional media, advertising, and consumer behavior (Eichhorn, 2022).

Creators are the engine of the creator economy. Bloggers, streamers, artists, celebrities, musicians, and service professionals are just some examples of creators striving to monetize their skills and hobbies by producing and sharing digital content (Krol, 2024). Cunningham and Craig (2019) define Creators as “commercializing and professionalizing native social media users who generate and circulate original content on the major social media platforms as well as offline.” Tanja Grubnic (2021) also proposed the phrase “Monetized Public Self” to describe how, the digital age and the rise of Web 2.0—and now 3.0—has ushered in new forms of affect, public life, celebrity, and advertorial labor dependent upon “platformized” cultural production.

Content creators are increasingly recognized as vital players in the role of entrepreneurs and job creators across various economies (Johnson et al., 2022). Social media, smartphones and accessibility to faster Internet have been instrumental in this expansion, offering creators an infrastructure to share curated content with their intended audiences through algorithms that align users' interests with content (Tafesse & Dayan, 2023). Supported by tech platforms, creators contribute to a fast-evolving ecosystem of economic activity valued at over $100 billion and expanding (Peres, Schreier, Schweidel & Sorescu, 2024). A report from Oxford Economics suggests that the creative ecosystem on YouTube alone contributed more than $35 billion to the US economy in 2022 and supported more than 390,000 full-time equivalent jobs (Oxford Economics, 2020). Adobe's Future of Creativity report for 2022 notes that over 165 million individuals have joined the global creator economy in the past two years (Adobe, 2022). A report by Coherent Market Insights (2024) expects the market size of the global creator economy to reach 500 billion by 2030, from 123 billion in 2023.

Content in the Creator Economy spans videos, art music, text, games or a combination of thereof, and can be hedonic, like digital art, or utilitarian, such as online courses and coaching, and even promotional, like sponsored social media posts for advertising and marketing purposes (Krol, 2024). Travel bloggers share stories from their journeys on personal websites, influencers spotlight indie fashion brands on Instagram, and teenage celebrities post videos on TikTok. At the same time, plumbers create DIY tutorials on

YouTube, musicians release tracks on SoundCloud and Spotify, gamers broadcast on Twitch, and renowned chefs and authors teach through platforms like MasterClass. While this kind of activity isn't new, its scale has surged in recent years (Krol, 2024).

In the Creator Economy everything has the potential to be monetized, including sleeping. Video platforms YouTube, TikTok and Twitch are filled with so-called "sleep streamers", who broadcast live footage of themselves under the bed covers (Gerken, 2023). A 2023 report on BBC that one most popular Twitch influencers, Amouranth, has declared making up to $15,000 from a sleep stream donated by viewers. "For the viewers, sleep streams can provide them with a sense of community - someone to fall asleep with - as well as a source of entertainment" (Gerken, 2023).

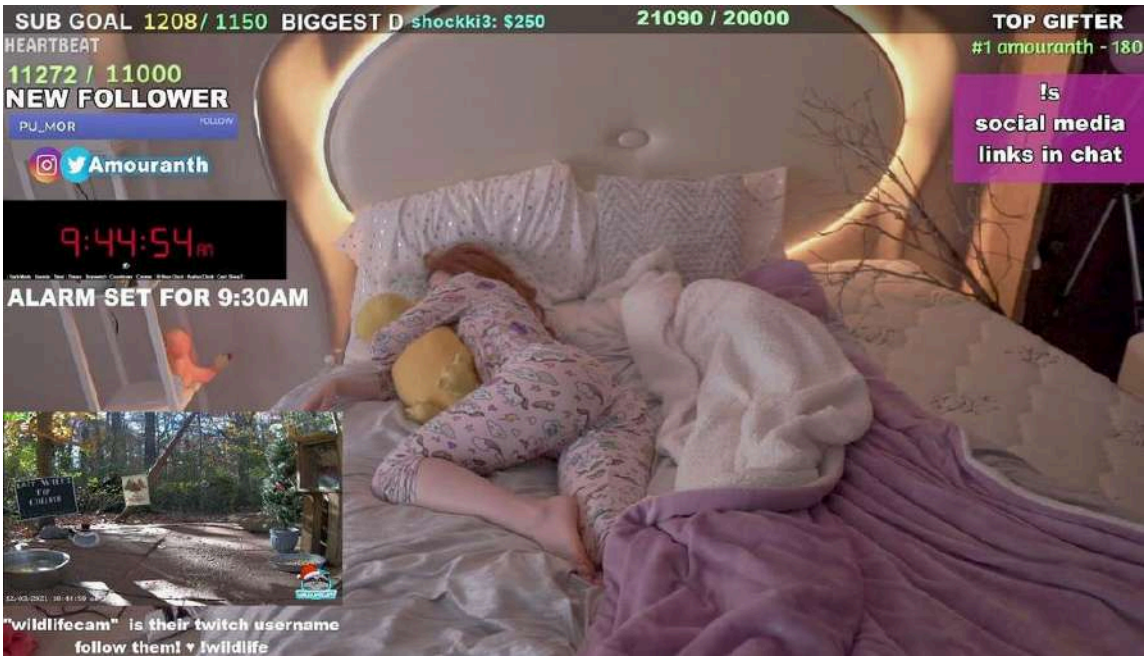


Fig. 30

A still from Amouranth's sleep streams. Picture: Twitch. Retrieved June 29, 2023, from Townsville Bulletin https://www.townsvillebulletin.com.au/technology/online/twitch-star-makes-crazy-money-from-sleeping/news-story/4478493a373c4dec7dd94649fd405c43

The concept may seem unusual, but it's not entirely novel. In the early 2000s, the reality show Big Brother rose to global prominence, with its 24-hour live streams allowing viewers to watch housemates sleep through the night, unexpectedly becoming an online sensation (Gerken, 2023). Similarly, in 2004, the National Portrait Gallery showcased an hour-long video featuring footballer David Beckham sleeping, a portrait of the footballer by artist and filmmaker Sam Taylor-Wood (Higgins, 2004).

Fig. 31

Sam Taylor-Wood's film with David Beckham sleeping at the National Portrait Gallery, 2004. Retrieved from https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3616013/Beckham-the-sleeping-beauty.html

From the creators' perspective, their activities are often geared around building their own personal brand that has "credibility and authenticity" (Peres, Schreier, Schweidel & Sorescu, 2024). Recent research suggests that creators face unique challenges, such as navigating complex technical configurations and algorithmic architectures that can impact their identity and ethos, potentially leading to burnout and mental health challenges (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020). In the same study conducted with a group of 35 Chilean creators, participants described, without daily content, creators cease to exist for the platform and their followers. "Being always-on in creating content is a subjectivity through which creators' think about themselves as a product—one which constantly reinvents itself across platforms and practices" (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020). Emerging technologies like AI image, video, music and text generators (e.g. Midjourney, Dall-E, Runway, Sora, Udio, Chat-GPT) cloud-based photo and video editors (e.g. Canva, CupCut, Adobe Creative Cloud), and virtual music production studios (e.g. Logic Pro, Ableton Live, BandLab) have significantly enhanced content creation, by lowering entry barriers, simplifying or even automating parts of the creative and production process.

In the Creator Economy, productivity is no longer measured by industrial time clocks but by output of contents shared online and maintaining visibility in an ever-changing digital feed. It transcends traditional metrics of efficiency, becoming tied to the ability to generate influence. Survival depends on an ongoing cycle of relevance, where creators must continually engage audiences through self-expression, community interaction, and the curation of public personas. These activities turn identity into a site of labor, where identity management becomes inseparable from the work of creating.

1.7 Algorithmic Systems in Organizations: Performativity, Power, and the Reconfiguration Of Work

Algorithms have historically played a significant role in structuring labor systems, exemplified by just-in-time production models at companies like Walmart and Zara (Ross & Epifano, 2024). Today, the influence of algorithmic technologies, including AI and data-driven systems shapes everything from manufacturing processes to the delivery of services for citizens and customers, and even the countless "clicks" that structure daily life (Glaser, Pollock, & D'Adderio, 2021; Totaro & Ninno, 2014).

In hiring, algorithms are increasingly employed to screen resumes and make decisions about job applicants (Smith & Anderson, 2017; Mann & O'Neil, 2016). In retail and service industries, workforce management has been affected by the emergence of automated scheduling software, produced by companies like Kronos, Onshift, and Dayforce (Mateescu & Nguyen, 2019).

This section attempts to provide a brief overview of the challenges and perspectives highlighted by scholars. It includes positions from media scholars, researchers and organizational theorists that will serve to explain some of the formal strategies I adopted in the execution and presentation of my performance-based video installation *4everfeed,* discussed in Chapter 3. In particular, my engagement with algorithms (e.g. TikTok's AI-powered Script Generator) adopts a perspective that views algorithms as distributed and dynamic systems (Callon, 2008; D'Adderio, Glaser, & Pollock, 2019).

Specifically, the act of performing the AI-generated advertising scripts serves as an exploration of the performative nature of algorithms as described in section 1.7.2, embracing the idea that "words create and influence social reality, rather than simply describing it" (Austin, 1962). Rossinter's Logistical Media framework is discussed in section 1.7.3, to provide insight on some of the formal strategies I adopted in the installation of the work (e.g. the use of a hand truck and cardboard boxes ordered from Amazon and delivered to the installation site on the day of the exhibition opening).

1.7.1 Algorithmic Management in the Gig Economy: Surveillance, Control, and the Shaping of Workforces

Algorithmic Management*,* a term coined by academics Lee, Kusbit, Metsky, and Dabbish (2015), refers to a diverse set of technological tools and techniques to remotely manage workforces, relying on data collection and surveillance of workers to enable automated or semi-automated decision-making (Lee, Kusbit, Metsky, & Dabbish, 2015).

Algorithmic management offers efficiencies but also introduces significant challenges for workers, reshaping power dynamics and employment relationships. One key issue highlighted by Data & Society researchers Mateescu and Nguyen (2019) is surveillance and control, where algorithmic systems structure worker behavior and present granular data as objective performance measures, often overlooking situational factors. This can increase

pressure on workers and limit their decision-making autonomy, even within systems promoted as flexible.

Many of the characteristics of algorithmic management—such as consumer-sourced rating systems and automated “nudges”—were developed by companies of the “sharing” or “gig” economy, spurring debates on how “gig” economy companies classify workers as independent contractors even as they use technology to exert control over their workforces (Mateescu & Nguyen, 2019).

Ride-hailing and delivery companies are some of the most successful and influential developers of algorithmic management (Mateescu & Nguyen, 2019). These companies function as automated dispatchers by coordinating pick-up locations and communicating times of arrival to passengers. While drivers have the freedom to log in or log out of work at will, once they’re online, their activities on the platform are heavily monitored (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). For instance, drivers’ movements are tracked using GPS location, and other behaviors such as acceleration, working hours, and braking habits are monitored through their phones (Rossiter, 2016). Ride-hailing platforms employ various algorithmic practices to influence driver behavior, such as encouraging work during specific hours, directing drivers to high-demand "surge" areas, or persuading them to remain online longer (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). A prime example is Uber's surge pricing, where higher rates in certain locations prompt more drivers to meet passenger demand (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). These systems highlight how algorithms can shape supposedly independent workers into collectively advancing company goals. With sole control over these algorithms, platforms like Uber place drivers in a position of limited power. Other techniques like gamification and psychological nudges—such as notifications urging drivers to stay online with promises of higher earnings—further illustrate how algorithmic management directs worker behavior (Scheiber, 2017).

Today, algorithmic management is expanding beyond ride-hailing platforms into industries like delivery transportation, logistics, retail, service, domestic work and content creation on social media platforms (Rossiter, 2016; Kanngieser, 2013). For instance, recommendation engines are a driving force behind services such as Netflix, Spotify, YouTube, TikTok and Amazon. Amazon's Flex program, launched in 2015 and operating in over 50 U.S. cities, exemplifies this trend (Menegus, 2017). Flex relies on independent contractors who use their own vehicles to deliver packages through the company's app. Drivers choose delivery "blocks" and follow app-determined routes (Menegus, 2017). Similar to ride-hailing workers, Flex drivers receive no formal training but are guided by a system of incentives and penalties to shape their behavior (Mateescu & Nguyen, 2019).

Gig economy platforms like Handy, TaskRabbit, and Amazon Home Services are reshaping informal services like domestic work by offering on-demand coordination through apps (Soper & Eidelson, 2018). These platforms connect workers with clients, standardize services, and handle logistics such as booking and rate calculation, replacing traditional methods like word-of-mouth or direct employment (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2004).

The private and subjective nature of domestic work limits direct surveillance, relying instead on client self-reporting, which can lead to inaccuracies and challenges for workers (Mateescu & Nguyen, 2019). Consumer-sourced rating systems exacerbate these pressures, as poor ratings can affect pay rates or lead to termination. This dynamic may also discourage workers from reporting workplace issues, such as sexual harassment, to avoid negative reviews (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018).

Another concern highlighted by Mateescu & Nguyen (2019) is transparency, as workers frequently lack access to how algorithms make decisions affecting their work, such as pay rates or scheduling. For example, ridehail drivers are routinely unable to see how their pay rates are calculated. This lack of insight forces workers to seek information informally, creating challenges in addressing inequities or discrepancies. An article on Quartz (2017) discusses how Uber sets the fare for riders at the time of booking by estimating the trip's cost, while driver compensation is based on the actual miles and minutes traveled. This method, called "upfront" pricing, can lead to substantial discrepancies between what a rider pays and what a driver earns. In some cases, the rider is charged less than the metered rate, with Uber absorbing the loss, while in other instances, the rider is charged more, and Uber retains the extra amount (Griswold, 2017).

Consumer-sourced rating systems are a dominant method of worker evaluation in platform based work. Bias and discrimination can be perpetuated through rating and review systems, with bias being introduced by consumers rather than tech companies themselves (Rosenblat, Levy, Barocas & Hwang, 2016). This can lead to employment discrimination while companies may avoid liability. Accountability is another critical concern, as algorithmic management allows companies to distance themselves from the outcomes of decisions made by computational systems. This rhetorical strategy enables companies to misclassify workers, avoiding traditional employer-employee responsibilities by categorizing them as networked users of a service (Srnicek, 2017). In doing so, companies are able to obscure unfair practices behind opaque algorithms (Lobel, 2016).

1.7.2 Reframing Algorithms: From Computational Tools to Sociomaterial Assemblages

Given their significant impact, scholars and organizational theorists have attempted to develop frameworks to better understand how algorithmic technologies reshape “the nature of work and organizational realities” (Faraj, Pachidi, & Sayegh, 2018, p. 67).

Organizations use algorithms—precise, step-by-step procedures designed to solve specific problems—to enhance and automate a wide range of activities (Glaser, Pollock, & D’Adderio, 2021). These include recommending media content, identifying entities, evaluating security risks, optimizing logistics, or determining the suitability of individuals for credit approval or parole decisions (MacCormick, 2012, p. 2). Such algorithms have become integral to modern organizational processes, allowing organizations to handle the "vast, fast, disparate, and digital" data that characterizes contemporary social and operational landscapes (Brayne, 2017, p. 980).

Organizational research on algorithmic technologies highlights contrasting outcomes (Glaser, Pollock, & D'Adderio, 2021). Some researchers emphasize the capacity of algorithmic tools to empower organizations by enabling value creation through enhanced predictive capabilities (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013), streamlining structured and repetitive tasks through automation (Davenport, 2006; Steiner, 2012), transforming organizational culture (Fountaine, McCarthy, & Saleh, 2019; Schildt, 2020), and fostering the exchange of ideas across different social spheres (Pentland, 2014). Others have emphasized the negative implications of these technologies, such as their role in enabling managerial control over employees (Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2019), enforcing rigid, formalized rules that eliminate more subtle, values-driven approaches to addressing social challenges (Lindebaum, Vesa, & den Hond, 2020), and empowering corporations to create socially impactful rankings using opaque algorithms (Martin, 2019; Pasquale, 2015). These algorithms may exploit individuals (Yeung, 2017), potentially infringing on fundamental rights like privacy and autonomy (Noble, 2018), all under the guise of offering greater convenience and efficiency (Zuboff, 2019).

For the purpose of this thesis, I draw from Glaser, Pollock, and D'Addario's *Biography of an Algorithm* (2021) framework that combines "performativity theory" (e.g. Callon, 2008; D'Adderio, Glaser, & Pollock, 2019) and "assemblage theory" (e.g. DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) to conceptualize algorithms not as isolated entities but as entangled in "sociomaterial assemblages," a perspective that illuminates how algorithms automate decisions, enact roles and expertise, and perform "sociomaterial calculations."

From a computational and programming standpoint, an algorithm consists of two key components: the "logic" component, which defines what needs to be done (e.g., the abstract formulation of a solution), and the "control" component, which dictates how it should be done (e.g., problem-solving strategies and instructions for handling different scenarios) (Gillespie, 2014; Kitchin, 2017; Kowalski, 1979). These components require two translations: (a) converting a task into a structured rule set (pseudo-code) and (b) translating this pseudo-code into executable source code that solves the problem (Gillespie, 2014). This view assumes that algorithmic translation is a rational, objective process, combining mathematics and technology to create predictable, stable tools (Seaver, 2019; Kitchin, 2017). The computational tool view treats algorithms as "black boxes," fixed entities presumed to function as intended by their designers (Pasquale, 2015), while also seeing them as "supercarriers" of rationality with the ability to transform organizational processes (Lindebaum et al., 2020; Schildt, 2020). However, as Glaser, Pollock, and D'Addario posit, seeing algorithms as purely computational tools often simplifies their effects and overlooks their more complex organizational impacts, potentially reinforcing a Taylor-like rationalization of work processes (Petriglieri, 2020). For example, in management research, algorithms are often seen as tools to direct, evaluate, and discipline workers, influencing decision-making and generating feelings of bias or frustration (Kellogg et al., 2019). Furthermore, algorithms can exacerbate power imbalances in contexts such as online customer evaluations, acting as intermediaries that both enable and restrict human agency,

including new forms of employee monitoring and increased power for certain actors (Curchod et al., 2020).

A 2020 study by Curchod et al. based on interviews with 77 high-performing eBay sellers in France and Belgium, explores power imbalances created by customer evaluations in online work environments, providing new insights into power and agency in online work (Curchod et al., 2020). The research identified three key mechanisms contributing to power asymmetries: (1) online evaluations create new forms of employee monitoring, where power is exercised through visibility gaps between buyers and sellers, and an implicit alliance between buyers and the platform; (2) algorithms mediate relations and reinforce power asymmetries, limiting human agency; and (3) sellers leverage their understanding of the algorithm to enhance their agency. These findings highlight the limitations of viewing algorithms as isolated systems, as pointed out by Pollock and Williams (2009). Instead, algorithmic applications are complex, interconnected systems that involve continuous adjustments and experimentation (Seaver, 2019). Furthermore, algorithms are often integrated into broader organizational frameworks, where multiple algorithms are used together, rather than relying on a single coded logic (Neyland, 2016).

Recent research has highlighted the limitations of understanding algorithms solely as isolated entities, recognizing the importance of a performative perspective (Glaser, Pollock, & D'Adderio, 2021; Garud & Gehman, 2018; Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016). Performative perspectives highlight how "words create and influence social reality, rather than simply describing it"(Austen, 1962). For instance, from an economics perspective, individuals are framed as behaving in a self-interested manner; however, this framing may not simply describe an existing reality, but actively engender a new reality (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005). Instead of viewing agency as inherent to specific individuals or artifacts, a performative perspective emphasizes the fluid and interconnected nature of "assemblages" (Glaser, Pollock, & D'Adderio, 2021; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

In the context of algorithms, a performative view stresses that the enactment and materialization of an algorithm's rules depends on and requires a complex assemblage of interconnected components, including humans, artifacts, and theories (D'Adderio et al., 2019). Instead of treating algorithms (or any technology) as independent tools, a performative approach accounts for their relational and sociomaterial nature, highlighting the varying effects of different configurations of these assemblages on organizational practices (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; D'Adderio, 2008).

1.7.3 Algorithmic Capitalism and Logistical Media

Ned Rossiter's book *Software, Infrastructure, Labor* (2016) offers a framework for understanding the political and economic implications of contemporary media and technology. Situating itself at the intersection of media theory, political economy, and labor studies, it explores how logistics and digital infrastructure influence global labor conditions and social relations.

The book specifically examines the material and design dimensions of software-driven systems within global logistics industries, highlighting how these establish protocols and standards that shape social, economic, and cross-institutional interactions both within and beyond these industries:

> “Such operations result in the production of new regimes of knowledge and associated modes of “soft control” within organizational paradigms. The emergent “algorithmic architectures” are computational systems of governance that hold a variable relation between the mathematical execution of code and an “external” environment defined through arrangements of data. The capacity of algorithmic architectures to organize and analyze data on labor productivity in real-time, for instance, means that they operate as key technologies for governing labor within logistical industries. My claim is that this has implications for the scope of research on logistical media” (Rossiter, 2016, pp. 4).

The concept of "logistical media," introduced by communication historian John Durham Peters (2015), draws on earlier works by urban theorist Paul Virilio (e.g. *Speed and politics* 1977/2006) and media philosopher Patrick Crogan (e.g. *Gameplay mode: War, simulation, and technoculture,* 2011*)*. Peters emphasizes the infrastructural role of media, a theme that had only been briefly mentioned in his earlier writings. This idea is more fully explored in his 2015 book *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. In this work, Peters acknowledges the pioneering research of his former PhD student, Judd Ammon Case, who suggests that radar, as a logistical media, should be considered as a "media of orientation." Peters argues that studying infrastructure offers insight into “understanding the work of media as fundamentally logistical.” Sociologists Edna Bonacich and Jake Wilson trace the "logistics revolution" to the 1970s, particularly during the Reagan and Thatcher eras of deregulation and international free trade agreements[9]. This revolution shifted power to retailers over manufacturers, emphasized flexible production, outsourcing, intermodal freight distribution, and precarious labor conditions, weakening unions and lowering labor standards (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008).

Rossiter emphasizes that the so-called logistics revolution has a critical prehistory rooted in cybernetics and the Fordist era following World War II. Drawing on Nigel Thrift's analysis, Rossiter highlights how logistics transitioned from a military "art" to a formal field of study in the 1940s, driven by operational research models addressing inventory and distribution challenges during the war.

By the 1960s, logistics became intertwined with systems engineering and technologies such as life-flow charts, network analysis, and scheduling methods like PERT and CPM. The logistics sector underpinning supply chain capitalism encompasses various infrastructural components, including transportation, communication networks, warehousing, procurement processes, and port operations:

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[9] In Rossiter’s account, the 1980s marked the rise of neoliberalism, introducing financialized wealth creation, motivational management, and militaristic surveillance technologies inherited from the Cold War (Rossiter, 2016).

> “Consisting of locational devices such as Voice Picking technology, GPS tracking, RFID (radio frequency identification) tags, radars, and biometric monitoring technologies, logistical media calibrate labor and life, objects and atmospheres. The spatial and temporal properties of these information and communication technologies are a determinate force in the production of subjectivity and economy. Their primary function is to extract value by optimizing the efficiency of living labor and supply chain operations. Logistical media—as technologies, infrastructure, and software—coordinate, capture, and control the movement of people, finance, and things. Infrastructure makes worlds. Logistics governs them” (Rossiter, 2016, pp. 4-5).

In other words, software applications specific to logistics play a key role in visualizing and managing these mobilities, creating knowledge about a world constantly in motion. These software-driven systems which Rossiter calls *Soft Infrastructure* establish protocols and standards that influence social, economic, and cross-institutional interactions within global logistics industries. As a result, they give rise to new regimes of knowledge within organizational frameworks.

Rossinter positions logistics closely to the subfields of organizational, management, and entrepreneurial cybernetics: “The cybernetic mediation of perception, labor, and life as constitutive components of economic and social systems finds a pre-war precursor in the work of Edward Bernays—the nephew of Freud and pioneer of modern public relations” (Rossinter, 2016, pp. 12).

In his 1928 book *Propaganda*, Edward Bernays examined the mechanisms for controlling the public mind, pointing to the need for managing “societal chaos” through perception and opinion control (Bernays, 1928, pp. 9). Viewing democracy as dependent on an "invisible structure" of associations and groupings, Bernays advocated for leaders in government, education, and communications media to engineer public consent. His model of perception management paralleled military cybernetic systems of command and control, aiming to organize society into functional hierarchies and target efficiency, production, and sales. This paradigm extended to Fordist economies of the mid-20th century, which relied on feedback-driven logistical coordination and large-scale industrial operations. Early cybernetic systems enabled the global expansion of industry, trade, and societal control, shaping post-war economic and industrial paradigms (Rossiter, 2016).

Building on this legacy, today’s logistical media defines our reality in real-time, governing movement, productivity, efficiency, and performance through the integration of software and infrastructure. These systems not only mediate labor but also embed themselves deeply within the fabric of social and economic life, extending the influence of cybernetic principles into the digital age.

1.8 The Digital Economy and Challenges to Resistance in the Network Economy

Rossiter (2016) argues that the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of production and labor governance was not a result of management refining the structures of capital on its own accord. Instead, it was the refusal of work, expressed through factory strikes and infrastructural sabotage that forced capital to adjust its production methods (Rossiter, 2016, p. 91).

Post-Fordism was characterized by greater flexibility, mobility, and contingent work arrangements, with its logic reaching its peak in digital, networked economies. In this context, much of the labor occurs as "free labor," where people contribute value to platforms without direct payment. Instead of traditional forms of productivity, platforms extract value from people's interactions, behaviors, and data generation. The actual content created by people matters less than the data it produces, which media companies analyze and sell to third parties.

Cybernetic governance has reshaped the global economy, leaving individuals and collectives to grapple with the complexities of resistance in a system that thrives on continuous participation.When online, we are always "working" by generating data through everyday interactions, whether scrolling, posting, or consuming content (Rassinter, 2016). To refuse participation would mean withdrawing from digital life altogether, a nearly impossible prospect in modern society. As a result, the politics of refusal faces significant challenges, leaving people with the necessity to find new ways to resist “clicking that link,” in an economy that continuously commodifies life itself.

1.9 The Work-Identity Relationship in the Post-Industrial Society and the Digital Age

Work has long served as a cornerstone of selfhood, shaping how each of us perceives themselves and how they are perceived by society. As we saw earlier in this chapter, in pre-industrial societies, work was often tied to family and community. Occupations in agriculture or small-scale crafts were deeply embedded within local social structures, offering a sense of identity rooted in shared roles and traditions. As industrialization unfolded, this localized and personal connection to work began to shift. Factory labor introduced compartmentalized roles, where workers were defined not by personal attributes but by their tasks within a larger system (Sennett, 1998).

Max Weber’s notion of the “Protestant work ethic” exemplifies this transformation (Weber, 1905). In industrial society, personal worth became increasingly measured by diligence and productivity. Work served as both a means of survival and a moral imperative, positioning it as a fundamental pillar of identity, social status, and belonging.

The transition to a post-industrial economy, as analyzed by Daniel Bell in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973), marked a profound shift in the nature of work. Manufacturing declined, giving way to service-oriented sectors such as healthcare, education,

and technology. Knowledge workers, focused on information and expertise rather than physical goods, became central to the economy (Castells, 1996). This shift emphasized flexibility and innovation over the rigid hierarchies of industrial work. As traditional career models faded, individuals increasingly identified themselves not by static job titles but by more fluid roles, such as “creatives” or “entrepreneurs.” The stability of long-term employment was replaced by fragmented career paths characterized by frequent job changes, freelance opportunities, and gig work.

The digital revolution has further transformed the relationship between work and identity. Remote work, freelance gigs, and online platforms like LinkedIn and Upwork have created new avenues for self-presentation. Professional profiles, personal brands, and curated digital personas blur the boundaries between work and personal life. On LinkedIn, for example, individuals craft identities not only as professionals but as networked entities, showcasing their achievements and affiliations. In this context, work becomes a performance, with identity shaped by the act of being seen, endorsed, and validated in virtual spaces.

The gig economy epitomizes the increasing individualization of work, with platforms like Etsy, Uber, and Fiverr encouraging workers to market their skills and cultivate personal brands, often without the traditional support structures of full-time employment. A similar structure is in place for Creators on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. While this model offers autonomy and flexibility, it also places significant pressure on individuals to manage fragmented identities across multiple roles and platforms (Bauman, 2000). Sociologists like Ulrich Beck (2020) describe this phenomenon as part of the “risk society,” where individuals bear the responsibility for navigating career uncertainties in a globalized economy. Scholz (2013) along with the contributors to the volume *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* lay out a range of questions surrounding digitally mediated labor and new models of production and consumption. As Scholz notes, “Web-based work environments have emerged that are devoid of the worker protections of even the most precarious working-class jobs” (Scholz, 2012, pp. 1).

This shift requires workers to define and promote themselves in ways not demanded in earlier industrial contexts, creating new pressures without the traditional support systems of full-time employment (Hochschild, 1997; Scholz, 2012). As a result, while greater autonomy is offered, the lack of coherence in one's self-concept and the instability of managing multiple roles can lead to significant challenges (Hochschild, 1997; Beck, 2000).

1.10 Ending Notes

One of the most peculiar aspects of modern life is how we look at work. We often expect work to not only provide financial security but also offer fulfillment, creativity, and meaning (de Botton, 2015).

As explored throughout this chapter, the concept of work and productivity has evolved significantly, transitioning from agrarian societies to industrial systems, from the

consumer economy to the service economy, and ultimately to the evolving economies of the Information age relying on digital platforms (e.g. gig economy, creator economy). Each phase reflects shifts in the nature of labor, value creation, and cultural expectations.

If we consider the last century, in the consumer economy, dominant during the industrial and post-industrial periods, productivity was primarily associated with the manufacturing and distribution of physical goods. The focus was on maximizing efficiency, output, and consumption. This era emphasized mass production, where the role of the worker was clearly defined within systems of mechanization and industrialization. Value was measured in terms of tangible products, and the primary goal was to meet consumer demand while driving economic growth through material output.

The transition to the service economy marked a shift from material production to the provision of services. Productivity in this context became less about physical goods and more about the quality, efficiency, and speed of service delivery. Value creation shifted toward human interaction, problem-solving, and customization. Workers were often seen as facilitators, providing experiences and addressing consumer needs, with productivity metrics focusing on time management, client satisfaction, and innovation in non-material goods.

The emergence of the Creator Economy has redefined productivity in terms of digital content creation, personal branding, and platform-based engagement. Here, productivity revolves around the ability to produce shareable, engaging, and monetizable content across platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Patreon. Unlike the consumer and service economies, where productivity was tied to systems or institutions, the creator economy often places the individual at the center. Key characteristics of productivity in the creator economy include visibility and engagement (success is measured by views, likes, comments, and shares rather than traditional output), optimization and multitasking (creators must constantly refine their strategies to adapt to algorithmic demands while juggling multiple roles, producer, marketer, editor, etc.), intertwining of labor and leisure (personal expression and professional productivity converge, often commodifying hobbies, identities, and relationships), flexibility and performativity (productivity involves performing work in ways that resonate with audiences, aligning creative output with cultural trends and digital platform dynamics).

Over time, the concept of productivity has shifted from tangible goods (consumer economy) to intangible services (service economy) to performative engagement (creator economy). In the creator economy, productivity is less about measurable outputs and more about maintaining relevance, visibility, and audience connection. This transformation reflects broader cultural changes in how labor, value, and success are understood and experienced.

Alain de Botton discussed the impact of modern work on individual fulfillment in a 2010 lecture at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He argues that people seek meaning in their work because humans are naturally driven by a desire to alleviate suffering or bring pleasure, striving to leave the world or others in a better state through their efforts. Economists and sociologists tell us that the history of human labor is one of continually increasing specialization, a concept we encountered earlier in the writings of

Adam Smith, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber's *Division of Labor*. According to de Botton, 21st-century's specialization has diminished the sense of meaning in work because the production process has become so vast and fragmented that the connection between the producer, the product, and the end consumer is lost. This disconnect makes it harder for individuals "to form an imaginative bond with the outcomes of their labor" (London School of Economics and Political Science [LSE], 2010, 29:30).

With the Creator Economy and the rise of remote work we are witnessing a decoupling of time and value. Work is not going to be related to the number of hours you put in. In a lot of digital jobs the only thing that matters is the output. People focus on tasks, which sometimes can take 40 hours and sometimes with the help of AI can take less than two.

As I type this in 2024, I have consulted ChatGPT countless times. On Instagram, the hashtag AI has over 24 million posts, and streams of digital ink pour forth whenever the possibility arises that machines could replace humans. There is little doubt that AI will have broad implications for work, its societal meaning, and how we define productivity in the years to come. In a recent video conference organized by the World Economic Forum, computer scientist Stuart Russell predicted that by 2027, almost half (44%) of workers' core skills will be disrupted, and by the end of the decade, AI systems will exceed human capabilities in every dimension. He argued that no job would be beyond the reach of AI systems, which will perform tasks cheaper and better. Russell suggests that while technological unemployment is a possibility, humans will shift their focus to interpersonal skills as machines take over repetitive tasks (World Economic Forum, 2024).

I have been freelancing and engaging in remote work for the past seven years, and as a media practitioner and cultural worker, keeping up with the latest trends and technologies has been both exciting and exhausting. As I try to conclude this chapter, I find myself grappling with the broader implications of these changes. Perhaps ending with a question like, "What does the collapse of the meaning of work imply for our society" could lead to a grander narrative, of which, I would only be an unreliable commentator. Therefore, all I am left with is playing in the space where the act of meaning-making intersects with the realm of experience. After all, isn't one of art's activities to inject meaning into otherwise meaningless and arbitrary experiences?

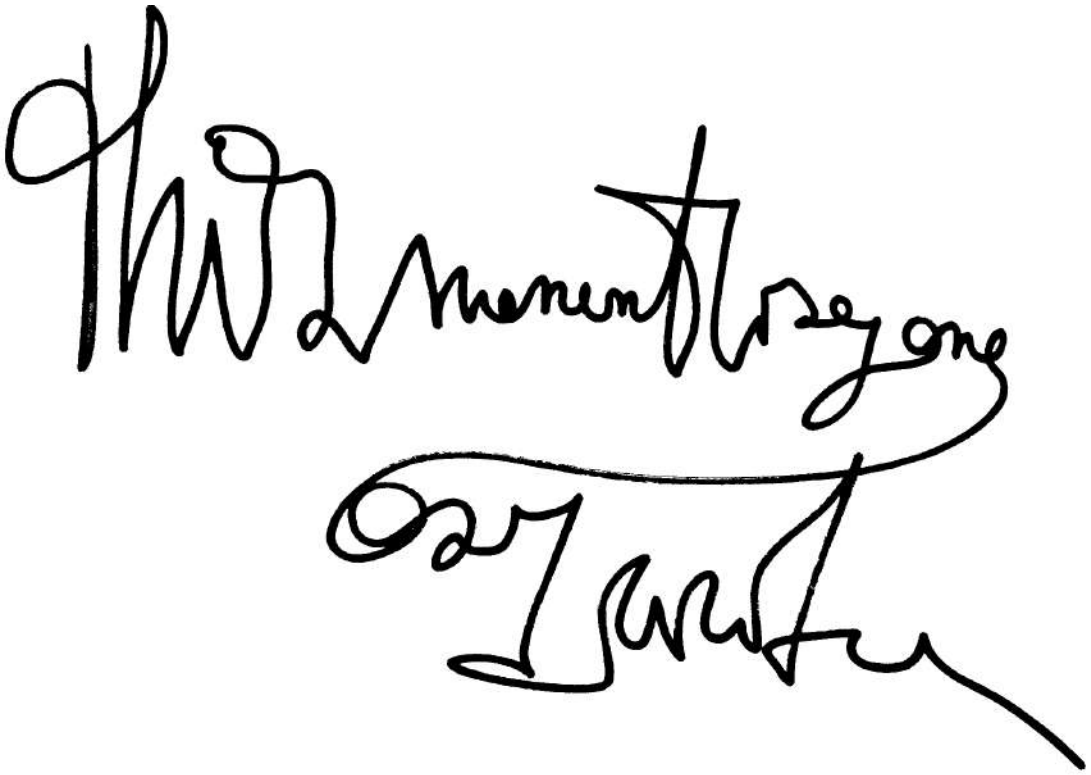


Fig. 32

This moment is gone as I write.

Acrylic marker on paper. Image by the author, 2024.

Chapter 2: Technological and Artistic Shifts in Western Art: 20th to 21st Century

As humanity navigates a world increasingly dominated by technology, this chapter turns to the pioneering machine artists of the mid-20th century—seeking both to comprehend their vision and to reflect on its evolution. What does the machine mean after the Second World War, and what does it mean in the Digital Age?

If the contemporary understanding of the machine—closely tied to technology, with technology meaning all materials and intellectual achievements embodying humanist's ascendency over the world (Francastel, 1956/2000) —developed relatively late, the term itself originates from the Latin *machina*, meaning an invention, but also conveying the idea of "work crafted with art" (Bassette, 2018/2020). In the post-war era, this connection to artistic creation became even more pronounced, bringing a significant expansion of the creative domain (Bassette, 2018/2020).

Today, aesthetic experiences are profoundly shaped by algorithms—automated processes and decision-making frameworks designed to complete and/or optimize tasks—operating at various levels: during the creation, preservation, distribution, and engagement with art (ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, *n.d.*). The question is no longer whether machines can act autonomously, allowing for an open-ended process, or if humans still possess such autonomy in a world increasingly shaped by technology. The reality is that machines are becoming progressively autonomous, while humans are growing more dependent on them.

In this chapter, I examine a body of literature that explores art as a form of information processing (Burnham, 1969, p. 53), and entities that self-organize through communication and feedback loops (Ascott, 2000, p. 3). I also include perspectives that, in tracing the "dematerialization of art" (Lippard, 1968)—the shift in artistic practices from a focus on the art object to processes—highlight connections between the role of the "artist as worker" and the changing economic system in the second half of 20th-century America (Molesworth, 2003).

With the emergence of a new 'post-industrial' economic paradigm shifting towards the production of services, artists increasingly embodied the dual roles of both worker and manager, with the artwork itself becoming, to some extent, the byproduct of this tension (Molesworth, 2003).

These perspectives as revealed throughout the chapter are complemented by a selection of artworks created between the 20th and the early 21st century that explore themes of work and productivity, either by engaging with the economic systems of production of their times (Molesworth, 2003) or by addressing societal and personal concerns about labor. While some of these works seek, perhaps impossibly, to bend the system back toward the human, others extract a new form of humanity from within the system itself. The term "system," as specified in the introduction of this thesis, refers to the structures or frameworks

within which these artworks operate, whether they involve the technological constraints of machines, spatial boundaries, or social constructs.

2.1 The Machine as Art

Over the course of the 20th century, the machine gradually infiltrated all aspects of human activity, including art (Burnham, 1968). The century generated diverse and rich dialogues around the interaction between art and technology (Burnham, 1968; Youngblood 1970; Popper 1975).

In Italy, the first Futurist manifestos and performances emerged, marking a radical shift in artistic expression (Goldberg, 1979). Among these, Futurist composer Luigi Russolo's manifesto, *The Art of Noises*, called for an expanded auditory palette in music, inspired by the industrial revolution and the soundscapes of urban life (Russolo, 1913/2004). Reflecting the Futurists' fascination with technology and mechanization, Russolo envisioned a *new orchestra* composed entirely of mechanical and industrial sounds (Russolo, 1913/2004).

The mechanization of the performer also echoed ideas of British actor and theorist Edward Gordon Craig (Goldberg, 1979). Craig's other innovation was that of the *Über-Marionette* and his call to rid the stage of actors in favour of large puppets. Craig's first writings on the Über-Marionette appeared in his monthly magazine *The Mask* (1908- 1929). Although this theatrical hypothesis was never realized, this idea of replacing actors with puppets still confounds people today (Lane, nd).

Following World War II, some artists no longer viewed the machine solely as a subject or source of inspiration but instead integrated it into the very process of artistic creation (Burnham, 1968). The machine began to be considered as art itself (Popper, 1975). In this context, the role of the artist shifted, evolving into the 'artist-engineer,' an ideal most clearly formulated by Constructivist artist Alexander Rodchenko (Passuth, 1985). This transformation, shaped by the historical moment, not only redefined the nature of the artwork but also raised broader anthropological questions: What did these changes reveal about human society at the time, and what might they indicate about the future we are shaping?

In an essay by art historian Juliette Bassette (2018/2020), she attempted to address this question starting from what does the machine mean after the Second World War. The conflicts of the 20th century, where the machine played a pivotal role, shattered the techno-scientific utopianism that had prevailed in the Western world for decades. It is within this unresolved tension that the idea of "the machine as art" becomes significant (Bassette, 2018/2020). While the modern sense of machine as tied to technology, especially in its cybernetic form, came relatively late, the term itself originates from the Latin *machina*, meaning an invention, but also referring to "a work made with art" (Ray, 1992, p. 2082).

In the US, the *Machine Art* exhibition, held in 1934 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, was a pioneering event that showcased industrial and mechanical objects as works of art. Curated by architect Philip Johnson, the exhibition highlighted

mass-produced objects such as springs, propellers, scientific instruments, and kitchenware, emphasizing their aesthetic qualities rather than their practical functions. The show marked a significant moment in the appreciation of modern design, underscoring the beauty of form, function, and geometry in everyday items. It aimed to demonstrate that objects made for industrial purposes could be seen as aesthetically pleasing and that design itself could be appreciated as a form of art. The exhibition was notable for focusing on the "machine-made" as a legitimate source of artistic inspiration, aligning with the rise of modernism and the broader cultural embrace of industrial design.

The *Machine Art* exhibition laid the foundation for integrating technology and aesthetics in design, influencing future exhibitions and artistic movements that explored the intersection of industrial design, art, and functionality. As MoMA's founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., stated in the introductory note of the exhibition catalog: “If we are to end the divorce between our industry and our culture, we must assimilate the machine aesthetically as well as economically. Not only must we bind Frankenstein—but we must make him beautiful” (MoMa, 1934, p. nd).

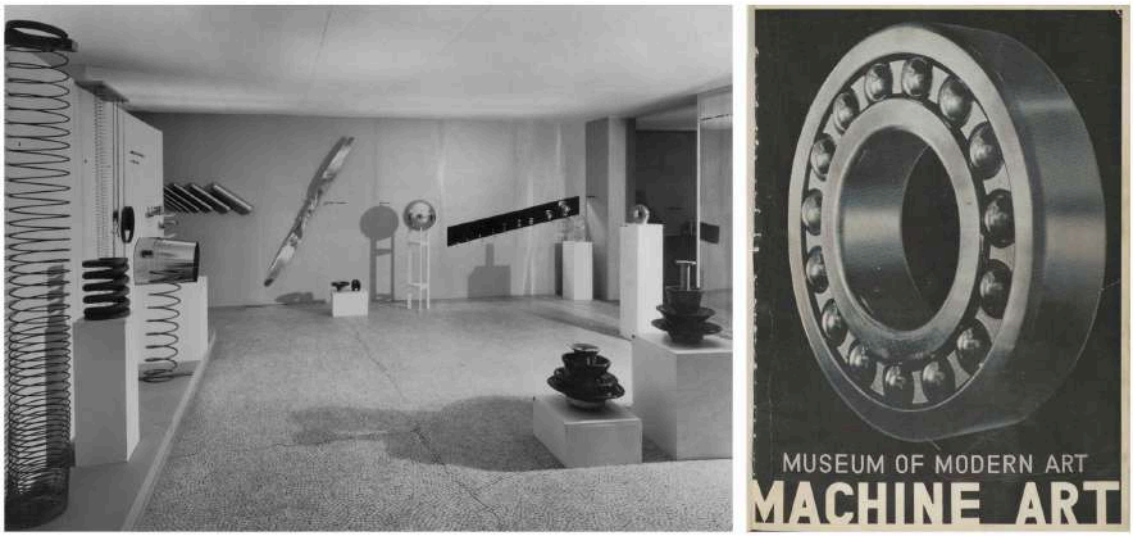


Fig. 33

To the left*: Installation view of the exhibition "Machine Art"*. Museum of Modern Art Photographic Archives. (1934). New York, NY. IN34.3. Photograph by Paul Parker. Adapted from https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1784

To the right: *Machine Art exhibition catalogue cover*. Museum of Modern Art Archives. (1934). Retrieved from https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_1784_300061872.pdf

Understanding the machine as a medium at the time presented challenges, as it did not fit into traditional art categories like painting or sculpture, complicating its acceptance within the art world. Bassette, highlights the complexity of defining terms like the *machine as art*, *machinic art*, or *art as machine* as highlighted by the evolving roles of art, especially during the dynamic 1960s.

The historical context of the Cold War, marked by technological anxieties and nuclear disasters, exacerbates this dilemma. Swiss artist Jean Tinguely's work, particularly his "suicide machines," illustrates the paradox of machines capable of both creation and destruction. His notable piece, *Homage to New York* (1960), was designed to self-destruct during a performance at MoMA.

Fig. 34

Fragment from *Homage to New York*. By Jean Tinguely (1960). Adapted from Museum of Modern Art Archives https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81174

His kinetic sculptures represent a mechanical world, while artists like Nicolas Schöffer incorporate machines into human consciousness. His work *CYSP 1* (1956) is regarded as the first cybernetic sculpture in art history, utilizing electronic computations developed by the Philips Company (Bassette, 2018/2020).

The sculpture is mounted on a base with four rollers, housing the mechanism and the electronic brain. Small motors located beneath the axis control the plates, while photoelectric cells and a built-in microphone detect variations in color, light intensity, and sound intensity. These changes trigger responsive actions from the sculpture. As a result, his kinetic sculptural compositions aligned with Warren McCulloch's work and his application of cybernetics to develop a creative epistemology focused on self-communication within the observer's psyche and its relationship with the surrounding environment (Bassette, 2018/2020).

Fig. 35

Cysp 1. By Nicolas Schöffer (1956). [Photograph of sculpture, 250 x 180 x 170 cm]. Collection Éléonore de Lavandeyra-Schöffer. Photograph by DR. © Adagp, Paris – Éléonore de Lavandeyra-Schöffer, 2018. Adapted from https://hyperallergic.com/440598/nicolas-schoffer-retroprospective/

As art historian Arnauld Pierre (2015) suggests, Schöffer's work transforms machines into dream-like experiences, illustrating a trend toward integrating machines with human cognition and perception. This implies a deep integration of machines into the spectator's consciousness. The rise of cybernetics further facilitated this connection, framing the world through systems of control and communication. Consequently, there was a paradigm shift in understanding the role of machines: their purpose evolved from performing mechanical tasks to processing information (Quinz et al., 2015).

Curator Pontus Hultén (1924 – 2006) identified the dematerialization of the machine in his 1968 exhibition titled *End of the Mechanical Age.* He noted that while the mechanical age was at its peak, signs of its decline were emerging, particularly as electronics, electromechanics, chemistry, biotechnology, and software gained prominence. Theorist Jack Burnham views Hultén's exhibition as marking a distinction between traditional "machine art" and what he calls "systems and information technology."

In the same year, Burnham published the seminal essay *Systems Esthetics* (1968) that reflects this shift, suggesting that artists are moving away from the tangible art object towards a focus on systems and processes. This trend signals the end of the "golden age" of machine art, represented by figures like Tinguely and Schöffer, and opens the door to conceptual initiatives, performance art, and virtual art (Bassette, 2018/2020).

Burnham (1968) argues that these new artistic forms emphasize process over objects, positioning the evolving relationship between art and technology within broader cultural contexts rather than solely within the realm of art. That is to say, this new relationship between the artist and the machine ends not in the creation of works of art, but in the creation of a lifestyle (Holert, 2013).

2.2 Art and Systems: Exploring the Interconnections Between Aesthetics and Networks

The integration of systems thinking into contemporary art has profoundly reshaped our understanding of what constitutes artistic practice. Artists, theorists, and critics have engaged with various systems—technological, social, biological, and institutional—to create works that challenge notions of art as an object and instead view it as a dynamic, process-based activity. This section explores the key theoretical frameworks and figures that have shaped the conversation around systems in art, along with artists who exemplify these ideas in their work.

In the 1940s, Norbert Wiener (1894–1964) coined the term *Cybernetics*, focusing on the specifics of communication, control, and feedback mechanisms, which laid the groundwork for understanding how systems operate through feedback and adaptation (Wiener, 1948/2019, p. xxxv). Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1901–1972) developed systems theory, emerging from biology, with an emphasis on organismic holism—a malleable and changing totality that materializes through the interconnection of various elements and forces (Bertalanffy, 1968). Von Bertalanffy's belief that "systems are everywhere" imbued systems theory with a sense of latitude and flexibility.

Cybernetics and System Theory could explain a broad variety of intellectual problematics, including urban planning, biology, physiology, economics, communications, psychiatry, psychology, and, for curator, artist, and art historian Jack Burnham, art.

2.2.1 Jack Burnham and Les Levine: "Systems Esthetics"

Jack Burnham (1931–2019) was a pivotal figure in articulating how systems thinking could be applied to art. In his seminal essay *Systems Esthetics* (1968), he argued that the traditional focus on creating individual, static objects was giving way to an understanding of art as a process within larger systems, whether ecological, technological, or social.

He emphasized that artists were becoming more concerned with relationships and processes rather than the final artifact itself. He takes issue with notions of object-based art, the artist's agency, and the role of the spectator. In the postindustrial era, he asserts, art resides not in objects but in relations among people, information, and things, and "the most important artist best succeeds by liquidating his position as artist vis-à-vis society." (Burnham, 1968, p.31).

In the essay *Real-Time Systems* (1969), Burnham further explored how artworks could operate as dynamic systems that evolved over time. His ideas are closely aligned with the emergence of conceptual art and land art in the 60s, where the process and interaction between the work and its environment were central. In *Real-Time Systems*, he asserts that "There are two types of artists: those who work within the art system, and those few who work with the art system" (Burnham, 1969, pp. 55). The essay characterizes art not as a medium or a subject but rather as a production relative to the real-time systems that govern how we see and understand the world, including, but not limited, to the art system.

In 1969, Burnham organized the exhibition *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning For Art* during the latter part of his tenure as fellow at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies [CAVS]. Following up the ideas he outlined in *The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems* and in related essays, including *Systems Esthetics*, Burnham designed *Software* to function as a testing ground for public interaction with "information systems and their devices." Many of the displays in *Software* were interactive and based on two-way communication between the viewer and the exhibit.

The exhibition was predicated, on the ideas of *software* and *information technology* as metaphors for art (Shanken, 2002), following Burnham's exploration of Norbert Wiener and Arturo Rosenblueth's *Cybernetics* (1970), as the study of communication and control in both machines and living organisms (Handwerker, 2020). Wiener's research, along with others, led to the understanding that the behavior of organisms and systems is controlled by their communication structures "Cybernetics refers to the set of problems centered about communication, control, and statistical mechanics, whether in the machine or in living tissue" (Wiener, 1948/1962, p. 11).

Burnham understands the development of computer technology as reflecting the progress in making communication between humans and machines more natural and integrated. He states this dialectic clearly in his catalog essay for *Software*:

> "Thus the history of computer technology may be interpreted as progress in making communication between men and machines more natural and complete. This remains an ideal definition however, because quite often in industry human beings have been adapted to inhuman machine schedules, rather than the other way around. What is less realized is that most businesses of any size have had to adapt themselves, more or less traumatically, to radically different patterns of administration and organization as the result of information structures made possible by computer systems. So in part

> *Software* addresses itself to the personal and social sensibilities altered by this revolution" (Burnham, 1970, p. 10).

Burnham conceived of *Software* as parallel to the aesthetic principles, concepts or programs that underlie the embodiment of actual art objects, which in turn parallel *hardware*. In this regard, he interpreted art practices, including conceptual art, as predominantly concerned with the software aspect of aesthetic production. Burnham theorized this artistic shift as paralleling larger social transformations based in cybernetics and systems theory. Here, the interactive feedback of information amongst systems and their components eradicated any "separation between the mind of the perceiver and the environment" (Burnham, 1970).

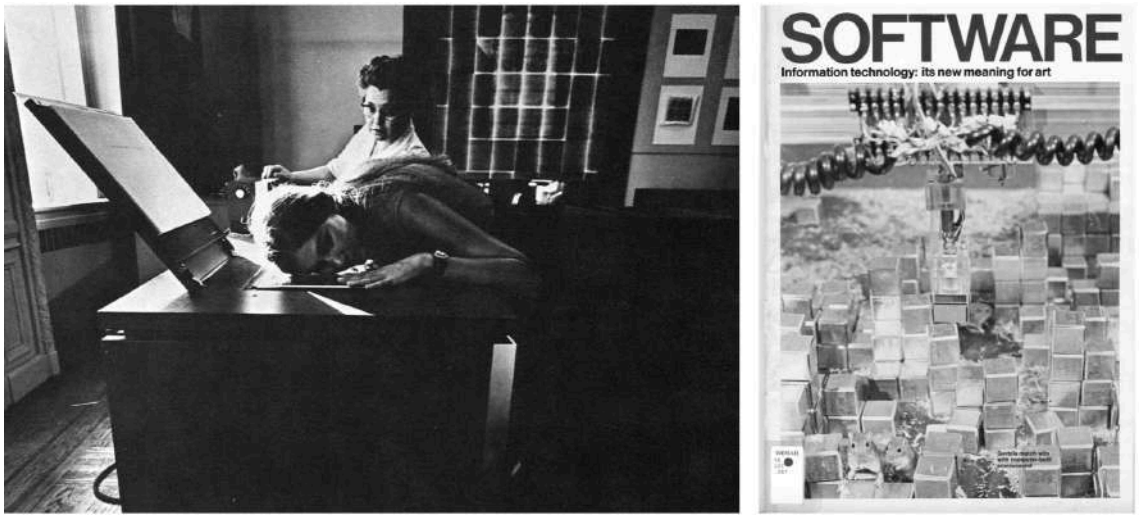


Fig. 36

To the left: *Sonia Sheridan watches her assistant make a colored face print.* Photograph of *Interactive Paper Systems 1969-67*. By Sonia Sheridan. From the exhibition catalogue *Software* (1969). To the right: *Software exhibition catalogue cover* (1969). Adapted from Monoskop https://monoskop.org/images/3/31/Software_Information_Technology_Its_New_Meaning_for_Art_catalogue.pdf

Les Levine was at the forefront of artistic experimentation using the interactive feedback of information systems. Burnham describes Levine's *Restaurant* at 19th Street and Park Avenue South as "a self-organizing, data generating system" and adopt the cybernetic analogy of the artist as "deviation-amplifying" system whose function is to "specify how technology uses us" (Burnham, 1969, p.55). The artist, in Levine's opinion, should get "right into the lifestyle and in some way having something to do with the total technical ambience that exists around us" (Holert, 2013). He saw himself as creating "totally open systems" that could engage with broader societal domains like education or transportation (Shanken, 2002).

Unlike Burnham, whose relationship with "the system" was more oppositional (Holert, 2013), Levine embraced the fluidity, multiplicity, and flexibility inherent in systems, describing this as a “lifestyle.” This adaptability allowed his art to engage the ever-changing "technical ambience" and contingencies of his time. In the late sixties and early seventies, he was using terms such as “media sculpture,” “systems esthetic” and “software-controlled society” (Sheridan, 2023). As he pursued the implications of an art of “open systems,” he began producing works that engaged more directly with technological and social apparatuses. In 1969, he produced *Contact: A Cybernetic Sculpture.* Similarly to what could be described today as *cybernetic selfie* (Sheridan, 2023), *Contact* featured a grid of video monitors covered with colored acrylic gels, each displaying a closed-circuit feed of the gallery and the viewers.

Contact was “a system,” Levine stated, “that synthesizes man with his technology,” in which “the people are the software.” In this work, video cameras captured various images of the viewer(s), which were fed back, often with time delays or other distortions, onto a bank of monitors. Although these works demanded the direct, corporeal experience of the participant, it was the experience of seeing oneself as information—as transformed into software—that was of primary concern to the artist. In this regard, Levine has noted that, “Simulation is more real than reality. Reality is an overrated hierarchy.” For many artists working at the intersection of conceptual art and art-and-technology, the particular visual manifestation of the artwork as an object was secondary to the expression of an idea that becomes reality by simulating it (Shanken, 2002).

Fig. 37

Installation view of Contact. By Les Levine. (1969). Photo © MCA Chicago. Adapted from https://mcachicago.org/exhibitions/1969/les-levine

In the late 1960s, Levine was represented in *Software* by pieces such as *Systems Burn-Off X Residual Software* (1969). His artist’s statement in the exhibition catalog also

outlined his concept of software and its relationship to art. He argued that the proliferation of mass media was changing knowledge into a second-hand mental experience of simulations and representations—i.e. software—as opposed to first hand, direct, corporeal experiences of actual objects, places and events, i.e. hardware (Levine, 1970, p. 60).

2.2.2 Cybernetics and the Telematic Embrace

In 1965, preparations began for what would later be known as *Cybernetic Serendipity* [10], a groundbreaking exhibition held at the ICA in London in 1968, curated by Jasia Reichardt. This exhibition was the first to thoroughly examine the fusion of art and technology, presenting a wide range of creative activities—including music, poetry, dance, sculpture, and animation—all facilitated by computers.

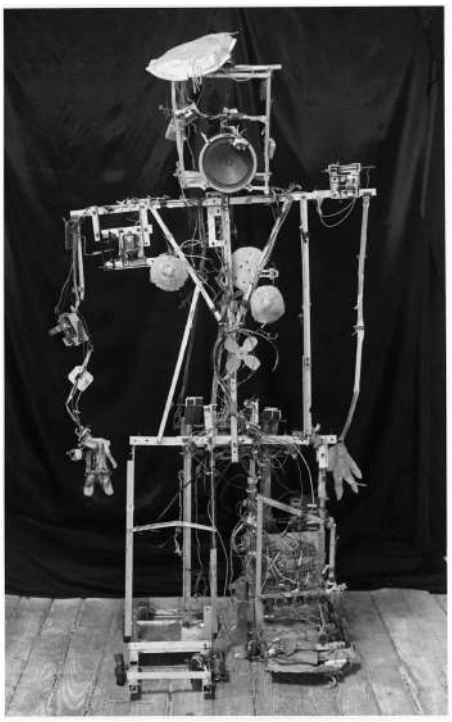


Fig. 38. Installation view of Robot K-456. By Nam June Paik. (1964). Part of the *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition. Photo © Peter Moore. Adapted from https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2018/10/16/life-and-technology-binary-nam-june-paik/

The concept of cybernetics, central to the exhibition, refers to systems that respond to external stimuli and, in turn, impact their environment. This feedback mechanism was a key

[10] The theory of first-wave cybernetics, developed primarily by Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon, emerged during the Macy Conferences held between 1946 and 1953 (Ilfeld, 2012). Rooted in studies of control systems and information processing, cybernetics aimed to explain the functioning of both machines and the human mind, eventually evolving into a comprehensive theory of control and communication (Wiener, 1950).

theme of the exhibition, which incorporated cybernetic devices (computers) or cybernetic systems themselves that reacted to human or machine interactions by producing sound, light, or movement (Reichardt, 1968). The exhibition was divided into three main sections: computer-generated artworks, cybernetic devices—such as robots and painting machines—and a section devoted to the history and use of computers in the arts (Database of Digital Art, n.d.). It showcased robots, machines that created art and music, and works that utilized chance as a creative element (Studio International, n.d.). What began as an intellectual exploration evolved into a visually engaging and influential exhibition, leaving a lasting impression on audiences during the summer of 1968.

Cybernetic Serendipity laid the groundwork for later theoretical developments in the intersection of art and technology. Roy Ascott, one of the pioneers of interactive and cybernetic art, further expanded on these ideas in his book *Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology, and Consciousness* (2003). While the exhibition explored how computers could generate art, Ascott envisioned a more profound transformation, where cybernetics and telematics (communication networks) redefined art itself.

He envisioned art as a distributed network where meaning emerges through collaboration and exchange. His concept of *technoetics* combines technology and consciousness, exploring how technological advancements affect perception, agency, and our understanding of reality, encouraging a shift from traditional aesthetics to a focus on the dynamic relationships between participants, systems, and environments. Ascott argued that interactive systems, enabled by technologies, allow for a participatory relationship between the artist, the artwork, and the audience.

Fig. 39. Installation view of Plastic Transaction Table. By Roy Ascott (1971). Roy Ascott Archive. Adapted from https://www.royascottarchive.com/plastic-transactions-table

This emphasis on interaction and participation is echoed in Peter Weibel's approach to “art as an act of cognition” (ZKM, 2023). His closed-circuit video installation *Observation of Observation - Uncertainty* (1973) allows the spectators to see themselves from various angles but are deliberately denied a direct view of their faces (Weibel, 1999).

Fig. 40

Installation view of Observation of the Observation: Uncertainty. By Peter Weibel (1973). © Peter Weibel
Photo document of the original installation in the exhibition *Trigon '73. Audiovisuelle Botschaften*, Graz 1973.
Adapted from http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/beobachtung/images/2/

Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau further developed the concept of interaction by framing their artwork within the realm of *Artificial Life*, treating the artwork as a “living system” that evolves and responds to participant input (ZKM, 2022). Their work *A-Volve* (1994) allows participants to design virtual life forms with their hands. The installation uses a system of real-time graphics and algorithms to simulate the evolution of these creatures within a digital ecosystem. Participants can manipulate parameters and observe how their creations interact with each other, emphasizing the concepts of emergence and feedback loops central to systems theory and cybernetics. This emphasis on user interface highlights the role of interaction in shaping experiences and outcomes within the system, fostering a sense of agency while also highlighting the interconnectedness of human input and digital processes (Ohlenschläger, 2024).

Artist Stelarc applies cybernetic principles to the body itself, transforming it into a hybrid system in which human and machine are inextricably linked. His *Re-Wired / Re-Mixed: Event for Dismembered Body* (2016) was an innovative five-day performance lasting six hours each day, utilizing internet connectivity to investigate the physiological and aesthetic dimensions of a fragmented, distributed, and involuntary body—one that is wired and subjected to surveillance (Stelarc, nd). The artist donned a head-up display that allowed him to see through the "eyes" of a participant in London while listening through the "ears" of

someone in New York. His body was further enhanced by an exoskeleton with eight degrees of freedom, enabling remote users anywhere in the world to induce involuntary movements in his right arm via an online interface. This setup resulted in a state of optical and auditory de-synchronization, compelling Stelarc to perform partly without his own volition.

Fig. 41. Installation view of A-Volve. Interactive installation by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau (1994-1995). Photo © Sommerer & Mignnoneau. Adapted from Digital Art Museum https://dam.org/museum/artists_ui/artists/sommerer-mignonneau/a-volve/

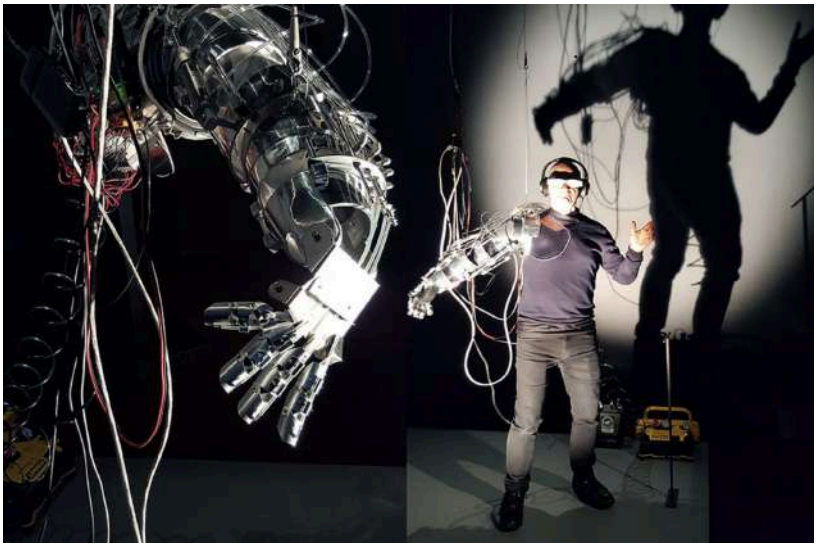


Fig. 42. Stelarc performance's Re-Wired / Re-Mixed: Event for Dismembered Body. By Stelarc (2016). Photo © Stelarc (2015). *Radical Ecologies* exhibition at PICA, Perth. Adapted from artist's website http://stelarc.org/_activity-20353.php

2.3 Work and Productivity in Mechanized and Automated Systems: A Comparative Study of László Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings* (1922-1923) and Lauren Lee McCarthy's *SOMEONE* (2019)

The conceptual foundation of *Systems Aesthetic*s and *Cybernetics* can be traced back to the pioneering work of László Moholy-Nagy. Moholy-Nagy's experiments in art and design during the early 20th century, particularly his emphasis on the interconnectedness of art, technology, and society, anticipated many of the principles central to the systems-based approach. For Moholy-Nagy, art was a dynamic process deeply embedded within the larger systems of industry, communication, and human interaction (Moholy-Nagy 1928/1947). His works, such as the *Telephone Paintings* and his experiments with light and transparency, introduced a framework where technological mediation became intrinsic to artistic creation.

The following section establishes a connection between László Moholy-Nagy's conceptual experiments with the production systems of his time—such as mechanization and industrialization—and a selected work by contemporary artist Lauren Lee McCarthy, whose practice critiques "the technical and social systems we're building around ourselves" (McCarthy, n.d.). By examining how both artists 'performed the systems' of their respective eras, this comparison highlights a spectrum of approaches to evolving notions of work and productivity.

2.3.1 László Moholy-Nagy's Telephone Paintings (1922-1923)

Hungary-born artist, polymath and educator Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) experimented with a wide variety of mediums, moving between the fine and applied arts in pursuit of showing the interrelatedness of life, art, and technology (Guggenheim Museum, 2016). An artist, educator, and writer who resisted being confined to a single category, he articulated his theories in a series of influential writings that continue to inspire contemporary artists and designers.

Invited by German architect Walter Gropius (1883 – 1969), he joined the faculty at the Bauhaus school of art and design, where he taught in Weimar and Dessau during the 1920s (Moholy-Nagy, nd). In 1937, he became the director of the New Bauhaus in Chicago and later established his own School of Design, which was eventually renamed the Institute of Design and is now part of the Illinois Institute of Technology (Guggenheim Museum, 2016). His contributions included his exploration of cameraless photography (which he called *photograms*), his incorporation of industrial materials into painting and sculpture, and his experiments with light, transparency, space, and motion across various media (MoMa, 2019). As a pioneer of abstraction, he sought to redefine the artist's role in the modern era (Kaplan, 1995).

In his book *Vision in Motion* (1947), Moholy-Nagy argued that art could harness the power of industrial processes and technological systems to create new forms of visual experience (Moholy-Nagy 1928/1947). He believed that artists could act as mediators

between technological systems and society, using technology to challenge traditional aesthetics and extend the boundaries of artistic practice. As if anticipating media theorist Friedrich Kittler's dictum that "it is we who adapt to the machine. The machine does not adapt to us" (Kittler, as cited in Jeffries, 2011), Moholy-Nagy attempted "to place humanity back in control in light of this disheartening trajectory of modernity" (e-flux, 2018).

In his recollections entitled *Abstract of an Artist*, he writes that in the industrial age there is no essential difference between art and non-art, and this applies both to objects which are man-made and those produced by machines (Moholy-Nagy 1928/1947). At that time industrial materials and manufacturing were his ideals (Passuth, 1985). He understood by the early 1920s that the reproducibility of technically based media in an increasingly urbanized world has placed us in a fundamentally new situation (Botar, 2023).

In *The New Vision* (1928), he critiques the mechanized labor system, especially the consequences of systems like Taylorism, which he argues often disregard human needs in favor of efficiency and profit maximization:

> "Our modern system of production is imposed labor, a senseless pursuit, and in its social aspects without a plan; its motive is to squeeze out profits to the limit. This in most cases is a reversal of its original purpose. (…) Not only the working class finds itself in this position today; all those caught within the mechanism of the present economic system are, basically, as badly off. At best, the differences are material ones. (...) "The possibilities of the machines- its abundant production, its ingenious complexity on the one hand, its simplification on the other, have necessarily led to a mass production which has its own significance. (...) The true source of conflict between life and technical progress lies at this. Not only the present economic system, but also the process of production calls for improvement (…) A Common error today is to view questions of efficiency from a technical and profit standpoint. The Taylor system, the conveyor belt, and the like remain misinterpreted as long as they run man into a machine, without taking into account his biological requirement. Work, recreation and leisure. (...) The solution lies, accordingly, not in working against the technical advances but in exploiting them for the benefit of all. (…) Only when it is clear to the individual that he has to function as a productive entity in the community of mankind will he come close to an understanding of the significance of technical progress" (Moholy-Nagy, 1928/1947. pp. 25-26).

In 1944, Moholy-Nagy wrote a brief account about the origin of his porcelain enamel on steel constructions conceived in 1922 and executed in 1923 (*EM 1, EM 2,* and *EM 3*), commonly known as *Telephone Paintings (Telephonbild* in German):

> "In 1922 I ordered by telephone from a sign factory five paintings in porcelain enamel. I had the factory's color chart before me and I sketched my paintings on graph paper. At the other end of the telephone the factory supervisor had the same kind of paper, divided into squares. He took down the dictated shapes in the correct

position. It was like playing chess by correspondence" (Moholy-Nagy, 1944/1947, p. 79).

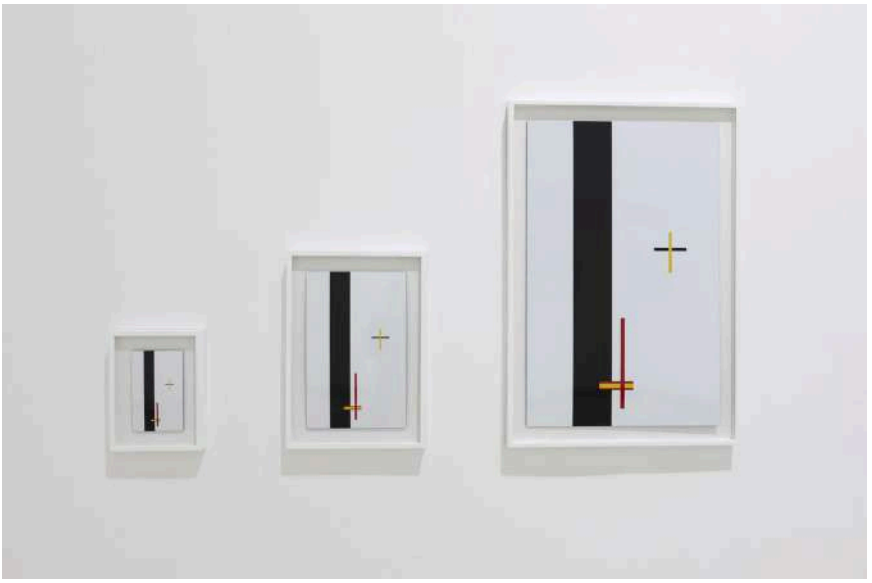


Fig. 43

Installation view of Telephone Painting (Construction in Enamel 1, 2 and 3). By László Moholy-Nagy (1922-23). Photo © Red Brick Art Museum, Taipei. 2021. Adapted from https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202106/28/WS60d97c5da310efa1bd65e67f_2.html

In this account, Moholy-Nagy used an industrial system of production to create work of art through a mechanical process. Rather than painting the works himself, he communicated his instructions via telephone to the supervisor of an enamel signs factory using a series of coordinates and factory color charts dictating shape, and composition[11].

Though we now know that it is unlikely that he actually placed that call, the reason Moholy's backstory seems to matter, even as a white lie, is because it works to establish the idea that modern artmaking is a mental rather than a manual process (Tsai, 2015). In this process, he abandoned the tradition of handcrafted artworks, instead embracing serial mechanical production, while engaging with the industrial system (or methods of mass production) of his time, as an artistic medium itself. This meant that the art object was created by the artist without him being in direct physical contact with the creation materials. This is a further removal from the act of painting, to the act of lithographic reproduction to the act of mechanical reproduction with the intent to create artworks which are aesthetically similar.

[11] His first wife, Lucia Moholy, who was with him when he made the enamel paintings, casted doubt on the phone story. Nevertheless, art critics seem to agree that what's important about these enamels is that Moholy *could* have used a phone, not whether he actually did; that the information needed to execute them was not visual.

These ideas were considered radical at the time, but they gained even more significance nearly half a century later, in the 1960s and '70s (Tsai, 2015). They are the early seeds of performance and conceptual art, which are often associated with the postwar period but, as art historian RoseLee Goldberg demonstrated, have roots in the interwar years, particularly within movements like Dada, Futurism and the Bauhaus (Goldberg, 1979). During the 1960s and 1970s, many artists and critics challenged the notion of authorial subjectivity. It was also an era when artists began to actively collaborate with industry and technology, opening new possibilities for artistic creation. Moholy-Nagy was arguably the first to take a factory-direct approach to his work, shifting the site of production from the studio to the factory floor (Tsai, 2015).

The *Telephone Paintings* represented a switch from–as Moholy wrote about in 1922, in an essay titled *Produktion-Reproduktion (Production Reproduction)*–reproduction of a given image to instruction-and data-based production. This approach redefined the artist's role as a creator of concepts rather than a craftsman directly engaged in the physical execution of the piece (MoMa, 2019). In this essay, he lays out the framework for his life-long project to parse the qualities of emergent technologies – to leverage the positive capacity for productive creation as he called it, in opposition to the market-driven reproduction.

According to Moholy-Nagy, the integration of technology into artistic practice was central to his philosophy:

> "Since it is primarily production (productive creation) that serves human construction, we must strive to turn the apparatuses (instruments) used so far only for reproductive purposes into ones that can be used for productive purposes as well. This calls for profound examination of the following questions:What is this apparatus (instrument) good for? What is the essence of its function? Are we able, and if so to what end, to extend the apparatus's use so that it can serve production as well?" (Moholy-Nagy, as cited in Passuth, 1985, pp. 289–290).

This perspective emerges from the broader cultural and economic shifts of the 1920s, a decade marked by the embrace of industrialization and the efficiency-driven ethos of the *Machine Age*. As we saw in Chapter 1, in the years that followed the Industrial Revolution productivity became synonymous with mechanization, standardization, and the optimization of labor through systems like Taylorism and Fordism. Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings* can be understood as a reflection of these trends. By delegating the physical act of painting to a factory, he mirrored the assembly-line logic of the period, where workers often became specialized tools within a larger system of production.

Moholy-Nagy thus positioned art as both a product of its time and a mediator capable of reshaping societal perceptions of work and production. In his 1922 essay, he aimed to apply the principles of productive creativity to the nascent field of photographic imaging, describing his intent "to receive and record various light phenomena (parts of light displays) which we ourselves will have formed." This approach focused on creating abstract,

non-representational images through the direct manipulation of light. His ideas evolved alongside advancements in photographic technology, notably the Leica I, a groundbreaking camera that democratized photography by making it accessible to non-professionals (Wysocan, 2015).

2.3.2 Lauren Lee McCarthy's SOMEONE (2019)

Los Angeles-based Lauren Lee McCarthy, a Chinese-American artist, computer programmer, and Professor at UCLA Design Media Arts, explores social relationships within the context of automation, surveillance, and algorithmic living. Her multidisciplinary practice spans performance, software, drawing, installation, and film. Her work has earned prestigious awards, including the Ars Electronica Golden Nica and Japan Media Arts Social Impact Award for *SOMEONE*, and the IDFA DocLab Award for Immersive Non-Fiction for *LAUREN*. Her projects have been showcased internationally at venues such as the Barbican Centre, Fotomuseum Winterthur, Seoul Museum of Art, and the Japan Media Arts Festival (McCarthy, n.d.). Other contributions include the creation of p5.js, an open-source, web-based adaptation of the Processing software and platform that prioritizes access and diversity in learning to code, with over 5 million users (McCarthy, n.d.).

Lauren Lee McCarthy's practice explores ideas of self-awareness and control (Traldi, 2020). In her work, social relationships and intimacy are examined amongst algorithmic living, with home being one of the artist's preoccupations. In a 2020 interview in Interni Magazine she says:

> "The home is the place that creates our identity and until a few years ago this was given by our parents, by the things we found ourselves using, by the choices we made every day to make it more ours. The objects that have surrounded us for centuries that depended on us: we were the ones who gave them meaning and meaning within our lives. Now our environments are filled with objects that we consider neutral but are not at all. They have been programmed by a small group of people who put in us values that are not necessarily ours. Everyone thinks that there is impartiality when it is an algorithm or a machine that decides, but this is not the case because machine learning repeats patterns that are entered from the outside, exasperating the dominant thinking" (McCarthy L. L., 2020).

The interactive installation *SOMEONE* (2019) explores contemporary systems of automation and surveillance by imagining a human-like version of Amazon Alexa. It examines the dynamics of labor, particularly emotional labor, and how it is mediated by technology. The installation creates a performance environment in which smart devices, cameras, microphones, and lighting systems were installed for a two month period in 2019, in four participants' homes around the United States and controlled remotely by visitors at the 205 Hudson Gallery in NYC (McCarthy, 2019).

When the house residents called for “Someone,” the gallery visitors could interact as their automation assistants. This video installation features documentation of the initial performance displayed on four screens in the gallery (McCarthy, 2019). From the artwork creation process perspective, *SOMEONE* functions as a performance-based, interactive response to the mediated processes of creation initiated by Moholy-Nagy's experiments nearly a century earlier. As a statement, it is part of McCarthy’s series of documented performances in which she performs as a human stand-in for Amazon Alexa to explore the implications of outsourcing human effort to machines (McCarthy, 2020).

Fig. 44

Installation view and screenshots of SOMEONE. By Lauren Lee McCarthy. (2019). 205 Hudson Gallery, NYC as part of *Refiguring the Future*. Screenshots by Lauren Lee McCarthy. Installation photos by Stan Narten and Otto Saxinger. Adapted from the artist’s website https://lauren-mccarthy.com/SOMEONE

It is important to remember that Alexa is an AI-powered virtual assistant that we invite into our homes, where the system attentively listens to our requests and fulfills our commands. Through these interactions, Alexa “performs a gender” (Butler, 1988) and “acts as a host” carrying on digital domesticity into a new digital era (Woods, 2018; Walker, 2020). Domestic labor encompasses activities performed within the home, such as cooking, cleaning, household chores, reproductive tasks, and providing emotional care for household members. Political theorist Silvia Federici (1975) argues that capitalism reframes domestic labor as “an act of love” rather than as legitimate work. Often categorized as women’s work,

this labor holds neither symbolic nor material value, despite its essential role in sustaining capitalism. It ensures the production of "healthy, socially adept, [and] well-nourished laboring [male] bodies" (Jarrett, 2013, p. 14). By defining domestic labor as an expression of love, women are excluded from earning a wage for this work, rendering it invisible within economic systems (Jarrett, 2013), while generating surplus value for capital (Huws, 2019). In this context, Alexa assumes the role of a "gracious host" (Woods, 2018, p. 337), mirroring the societal expectations historically placed on women during the shift to a new digital economy (Walker, 2020). With her disembodied voice calibrated to deliver "just the right amount of effort" (Bergen, 2016, p. 101), Alexa epitomizes a new form of labor that is efficient, accommodating, and detached.

In *SOMEONE*, the audience acts as human automation assistants and are put in the position of remote servants. Visitors at the gallery would overhear occupants calling out for "Someone" and were prompted to respond, taking on tasks such as adjusting appliances or answering requests. In contrast to Alexa's seamless and disembodied execution of domestic labor, *SOMEONE* foregrounds the physical and emotional effort behind such interactions. By situating visitors as the human proxies for automation, McCarthy disrupts the invisibility of domestic and affective labor that AI systems like Alexa obscure. This performative inversion draws attention to how these technologies redistribute rather than eliminate labor, often reinforcing historical patterns of undervalued domestic work.

Through this lens, *SOMEONE* reframes the dynamics of productivity in the digital economy. While Alexa performs a carefully calibrated, emotionless form of digital domesticity, McCarthy's piece lays bare the social and material implications of this labor, showing how technology mediates, commodifies, and perpetuates systems of care. By having visitors actively perform tasks, McCarthy challenges them to reconsider their complicity in the digital economy's reconfiguration of labor and domesticity, providing a reflection on the evolving relationships between work, gender, and technology.

2.3.3 Comparative Analysis

The comparison between László Moholy-Nagy and Lauren Lee McCarthy highlights the spectrum of attitudes in how artists "perform the systems" of their times.

Moholy-Nagy's work represents a modernist optimism, where technology and industrialization systems are reinterpreted from tools of reproduction into tools of production. His belief in the potential of technology to improve society and art reflects the era of modernism, which was marked by faith in the transformative power of innovation. In contrast, McCarthy's work embodies a critical stance, addressing the darker and more complex realities of automated systems. Her critiques focus on how these systems influence human behavior, privacy, and social relationships, and she reflects the skepticism about technology's ability to create positive change in the face of its inherent power dynamics.

Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings* use industrial systems of production and the division of labor: the creation of an artwork becomes a collaboration between the artist's instructions and the factory worker's execution, challenging notions of artistic labor by distancing the artist from manual creation. McCarthy's *SOMEONE* explicitly examines the dynamics of emotional labor, and how it is mediated by technology such as virtual assistants. It critiques the outsourcing of human effort to machines comes at the expense of personal data commodification.

Moholy-Nagy's view of industrial production technologies and human labor was critical but his solution lay "not in working against the technical advances but in exploiting them for the benefit of all."(Moholy-Nagy, 1928/1947. pp. 25-26). While McCarthy calls for "building a different relationship with machines: more conscious and informed" (McCarthy, 2020).

Both works have a conceptual and performative nature: Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings* transform the act of giving instructions into a conceptual and performative event. In McCarthy's *SOMEONE*, the performative aspect emerges as the gallery visitors take on the role of a human smart home assistant, embodying the technology to explore themes of automation, intimacy, and control. By mimicking the behavior of digital assistants, McCarthy creates a live, relational experience that examines the boundaries between human and machine interactions, as well as the implications of surveillance and dependency in contemporary technological systems.

In *Telephone Paintings*, Moholy-Nagy conceptualizes work and productivity as a collaboration between human creativity and industrial processes. By dictating the artwork's design over the telephone to a factory supervisor, he not only detaches himself from the physical act of making but also transforms the industrial system into an artistic tool. As he states in *The New Vision* (1928/1946, pp. 79):

> "I was not at all afraid of losing the "personal touch," so highly valued in previous paintings. On the contrary, I even gave up signing my paintings. I put numbers and letters with the necessary data on the back of the canvas, as if they were cars, airplanes, or industrial products. (...) In an industrial age, the distinction between art and non-art, between manual craftsmanship and mechanical technology is no longer an absolute one" (Moholy-Nagy, 1928/1946, pp. 79).

This reflects the early 20th-century fascination with mechanization and standardization as symbols of progress and efficiency, aligning with the Bauhaus ethos of integrating art and industry to optimize production and make art and design more accessible and functional for society. For Moholy-Nagy, standardization was tied to his interest in creating universal aesthetics. He wanted to develop visual languages and forms that could transcend individual subjectivity and be universally understood. At his solo show in 1924, he explained that his *Telephone Paintings* exemplified "works created with a will to precise and impersonal technique." (Moholy-Nagy, 1924, as cited in Doherty, 2008, p. 130).

In the aftermath of World War I, Moholy-Nagy and his contemporaries sought to rebuild a fractured world using the tools of modernity—machine technology, engineering, and mass production. Standardization represented a way to create order and efficiency in a chaotic postwar world. It symbolized progress, modernization, and the rational organization of society. He introduced the *Telephone Paintings* in 1924, a decade after the start of World War I, during which he was enlisted in the Austro-Hungarian military. During his time at the military, he paid attention to technologies of transmission (McKercher, & Hennessy, 1996). Weapons were manufactured and transported to the front via railways, their deployment dependent on intelligence gathered and communicated through newly developed transmission technologies (Tsai, 2015). World War I demanded the modernization not only of soldiers but also of the labor force. The concept of total war required industrial hubs staffed by workers whose productivity was enhanced by their ability to adapt to the pace of the machines they were assigned (Tsai, 2015). In an article on Artforum, Joice Tasi (2015) sees Moholy-Nagy's art as "an attempt to redirect the skills acquired and forces invested in the preparation for destruction toward what he would describe as productive ends."

McCarthy's *SOMEONE* critiques productivity within the algorithm-driven economies of today, where human interaction is often replaced or mediated by digital systems. By physically performing as a human version of a smart home assistant, McCarthy highlights the paradox of automation: the promise of efficiency often undermines human connection and autonomy. Her work interrogates the emotional labor embedded in such systems and questions the societal costs of prioritizing optimization over relationality.

Together, these works demonstrate how artists conceptualize productivity as a reflection of their cultural and technological landscapes: Moholy-Nagy embraces industrial efficiency as an artistic possibility, while McCarthy critiques the commodification of human presence within digital systems. Both works ask us to reconsider how labor and human agency are redefined in technologically-driven environments—whether on the factory floor, in the artist's studio, or within the domestic sphere.

2.4 Media and Performance Art

Beginning in the early 20th century, artists ventured beyond traditional museum and gallery spaces, staging performances in public arenas and incorporating everyday activities and materials into their works (Burnham, 1969). Movements like Dada and Futurism, for instance, showcased performances designed to jolt audiences into confronting their societal visions (Goldberg, 1979/2001).

By the late 1950s, artists faced the realities of postwar reconstruction, emerging conflicts and ideologies (such as the Vietnam War and Communism), the rise of social movements led by historically marginalized groups and disenchanted youth, and a wave of technological advancements. Within this shifting cultural landscape, artists began to challenge the purpose, relevance, and definition of art itself. They dismantled disciplinary

boundaries and adapted new technologies producing works that later became known as Media Art (Popper, 2007; Burnham, 1968; Youngblood, 1970). Perhaps most transformative was the erosion of distinctions between art and everyday life (Molesworth, 2003).

In *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (1973), art historian and curator Lucy Lippard discussed how conceptual artists shifted away from producing traditional art objects and, instead—as we encountered in the previous section (2.2)—focused on ideas, processes, and systems. This dematerialization aligned with the interest in systems-based thinking, where the process or concept behind the artwork became more important than the final product. The artist's work lies in ideas, sometimes surviving only in the documentation of photography, video or even a written set of instructions that allows others to recreate the experience the artist envisioned. The uniqueness and even the very endurance of the artwork has been challenged (Molesworth, 2003).

The next sections focus on artistic shifts that characterized the second half of the 20th-century.

2.4.1 Video Art

Video's distinctive capability for instant playback and real-time monitoring aligned with the era's focus on "process, not product." This emphasis was a hallmark of movements such as process art, earth art, conceptual art, and performance art, all of which prioritized the creation process over the final outcome (Klink, 2022). The lack of electronic editing tools, which made it challenging to shape a tape into a polished "product," further promoted a "process" video aesthetic. As media theorist Charlotte Klink notes, "process, not product" became a defining feature of early video art (Klink, 2022).

The portability of video technology in the early 1960s marked a significant shift in both artistic practice and viewing habits (Klink, 2022). It revolutionised the televised image, and camcorder technologies paved the way for unprecedented possibilities for ordinary people to become media practitioners and artists. Decentralization, flexibility, immediacy of playback, speed of light transmission, global transmission pathways, input to two of the senses – these are characteristics not yet shared by any other medium.

Video art emerged in tandem with Conceptual Art, the Fluxus movement, Installation Art, and experimental film during the 1960s. The release of the Sony Portapak in 1965 in the US allowed artists such as Nam June Paik, Andy Warhol, Yoko Ono, Allan Kaprow, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Bill Viola, Peter Campus, Shigeko Kubota, Dara Birnbaum, and Joan Jonas, among many others, to test the new technical and creative possibilities of the medium of video, which had until that point been used only by television (Klink, 2022).

Some artists have hoped to create entirely new networks of communication, democratic engagement, and public participation. We can see it in Nam June Paik

manipulating and assembling TV sets into techno-sculptures and multi-screen installations (e.g. *Electronic Superhighway*, 1995). In his 1973 film *Global Groove*, Paik combines commercials, performances, and video clips from various parts of the world, weaving them together into a single piece: “This is a glimpse of the video landscape of tomorrow, when you will be able to switch to any TV station on the earth, and TV Guide will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book." (In *Global Groove* by Nam June Paik and John Godfrey 1973, Electronic Arts Intermix, n.d.). With these words, *Global Groove*’s declaration on communication in a media-drenched world is presented as an electronic collage, blending sound and images. Here, collage can be seen as a metaphor of technology’s possibility to open up the world and connect with people beyond borders and cultures. With surreal visual wit and neo-Dada sensibility, Paik assembles cross-cultural elements, art world figures and Pop iconography (Electronic Arts Intermix, n.d.). The work is postmodern in its structure, conceptual in its approach, and serves as a commentary on video, television, and global culture.

Video is everywhere today, defining new spaces and experiences, spreading memes, lies, fervor, and power. Shared, sent, and networked, it shapes public opinion and creates new publics. In other words, video has transformed the world.

Fig. 45

Installation view of Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii. By Nam June Paik. (1995). Smithsonian American Art Museum. © Nam June Paik Estate. Adapted from https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/electronic-superhighway-continental-us-alaska-hawaii-71478

2.4.3 Performing for the Camera

Starting in the 1960s, artists began using early handheld cameras in their studios or public spaces to explore new creative possibilities. While some continued working with film, which required extensive development and processing, others embraced the recently developed portable video camera, which enabled instant playback (Klink, 2022).

If some artists hoped to create entirely new networks of communication, democratic engagement, and public participation, others protested the rise of commercial and state control over information, vision, and truth itself. They used this technology to challenge and deconstruct the conventions of television, critique political and social ideologies, question entrenched racial and gender norms, and redefine the boundaries of art. They engaged directly with the camera—whether as themselves or in character—and presented their video and film works as artistic expressions. We can find examples in two seminal video works by Joan Jonas and Peter Campus.

Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll* (1972) is a single-channel video. The disruption of the video monitor's vertical hold serves as a formal technique, fracturing the perceived unity of the image. A rolling black bar continuously scrolls downward, momentarily revealing portions of the image in a staccato rhythm, reminiscent of blinking. Each "blink" provides a brief glimpse of Jonas's body as she performs in front of the camera—whether adorned in a feather headdress, wearing a mask, dressed as a belly dancer, or nude. This visual rhythm is emphasized by the persistent sound of Jonas striking a surface with a silver spoon, adding an assertive tone. By refusing to maintain her image within a fixed frame, Jonas uses the reflective nature of the video camera to present herself in fragmented sequences, challenging the notion of identity as singular or unified (The Whitney Museum of American Art, n.d.).

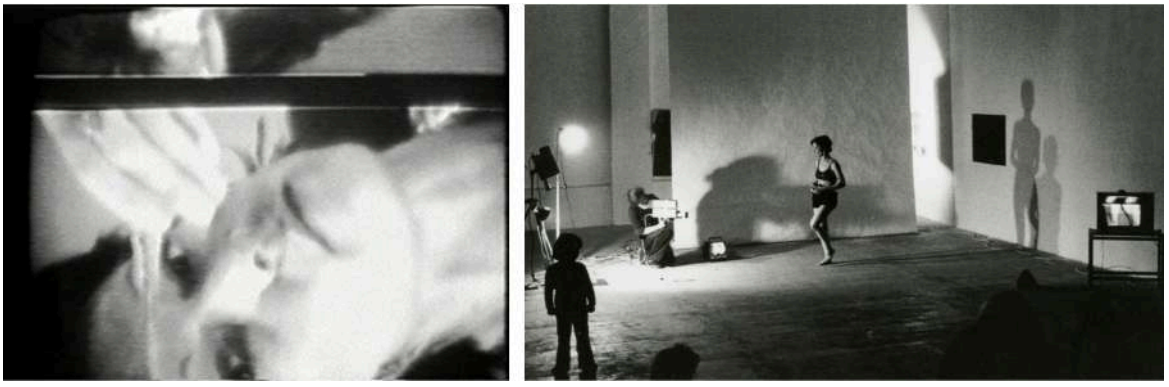


Fig. 46. To the left: *Video still of Vertical Roll.* By Joan Jonas (1972). Video still by Jonathan Rosenbaum. Wikipedia Commons. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=39804964

To the right: *Joan Jonas's performing Vertical Roll at Galleria Toselli, Milan, 1973*. Photo by Giorgio Colombo. Retrieved from Dazed Digital https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/gallery/28338/5/video-art-the-first-fifty-years

Peter Campus' *Three Transitions* (1973) offers three introspective self-portraits of the artist laced with his signature dry humor. The work begins with a scene where two cameras, positioned on opposite sides of a paper wall, record simultaneously. With his back to one camera, Campus slices through the paper, creating an unsettling effect as it seems as though he is cutting through his own back, blending discomfort with irony. He then utilizes the "chroma key effect," superimposing one video image over a similarly colored background in another image. Applying blue paint to his face, he reveals another image of himself in the process and subsequently overlays his image onto a piece of blue paper, which he ignites. Through three brief exercises, Campus employs overlapping montage and his own image to craft poignant, almost philosophical metaphors for the psyche. In these performances, he leverages the inherent qualities of video to express transformations between internal and external selves, self-dissolution and internal conflict, illusions versus reality.

Fig. 47. Video still of Three Transitions. By Peter Camus (1973). Retrieved from YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkRip2MUK3U

In the second essay titled *Reluctant Witness: Photography and the Documentation of 1960s and 1970s Art*, part of the 2003 *Work Ethic* exhibition catalogue, curator Darsie Alexander commented that artists developed a critical relationship with the camera lens, particularly in relation to the idea of photographic image as both object that can be sold and document to allow the distribution or legacy of immaterial works (Alexander, 2003). Through the actual use of photography to record the transient or immaterial art, artists were forced to come to terms with their own biases and skepticism about the medium.

In a group of images from 1969-70, for example, Vito Acconci created a series of actions to be photographed, annotating them with words that described the camera's internal mechanics. He distinguished his words as "photo-pieces" and not documents, even though they were both. He demonstrated that the act of creating a visual record with the camera could be rendered commensurate with the task-oriented objectives of performance (Alexander, 2003, pp 62).

The idea, for example, that one may anticipate the photographic act in planning a performance provided conceptual basis for what became known as *staged photography*, with the work of artists such as Cindy Sherman (Alexander, 2003).

2.4.3 Work and Identity Between Performance and Media: Selected Works by Lynn Hershman Leeson and Cindy Sherman

With the countless and ever-growing volume of selfies and videos circulating across various digital platforms—such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok—the act of performing for the camera has become a ubiquitous aspect of everyday visual culture in the era of global digital communication. Over recent decades, the notion of "performance" has shifted dramatically: once the domain of a select group of avant-garde artists, it has now evolved into a primary medium through which identity is expressed and conveyed. Today, identity is not merely explored through performance but is often constructed and understood as performance itself (Rosengarten, 2016).

This section is dedicated to the works of two American artists whose practice and interests intersect with my work, *4everfeed,* which will be the focus of Chapter 3. These artists challenge the understanding of work and productivity as an economically-driven concept, opting instead to critique how these concepts are tied to social expectations, gender norms, and media representation.

2.4.3.1 Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Roberta Breitmore* (1973-1978). Throughout her career, multimedia artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson (born 1941 in Cleveland, US) has consistently been ahead of her time, exploring the ever-evolving nature of identity and examining its transformations within social, technological, and scientific contexts. Spanning six decades, her work encompasses filmmaking, collaborative art projects, and embedding her creations into strands of DNA. From interactive video art disc to artificially intelligent web agents, her practice has paved the way for a new generation of artists to confront algorithmic governance (Gannis, 2023).

In 1972, Leeson began a private performance as the fictional character, *Roberta Breitmore* (1973-1978). Breitmore's journey started with her arrival by bus in San Francisco, where she checked into the Dante Hotel (Leeson, 2020). In an essay part of the book *Clicking in: Hot links to a digital culture* (1996) Leeson explains:

> “In an era of alternatives, she became an objectified, disembodied, alternative personality. Roberta was at once artificial and real. She was a nonperson, the gene of the antibody. Roberta’s first live action was to place an ad in a local newspaper for a roommate. People who answered the ad became participants in her adventure. As she became part of their reality, they became part of her fiction” (Leeson, 1996).

Over the subsequent years, she engaged in various real-world activities, including opening a bank account, obtaining credit cards, renting an apartment, visiting a psychiatrist, and participating in popular cultural movements like EST and Weight Watchers (Leeson, 2020). Roberta’s experiences were captured in drawings, photographs, and other documentation, such as checks, credit cards, and a driver's license. She had her own style, including specific clothing, makeup, mannerisms, speech patterns, and handwriting (Leeson, 1996). The dress that Roberta Breitmore wore for years, along with the Construction Charts, where Hershman Leeson outlines, much like an instruction manual, how she transformed into Roberta Breitmore, are among the artifacts the artist includes to present the work (Leeson, 2020). “Instead of being kept on a disk or hardware, her records were stored as photographs and texts that could be viewed without predetermined sequences.” (Leeson, 1996)

Artifacts such as the makeup mask served as the interface between the artist’s identity and that of the fictional character (ZKM | Center for Art and Media, n.d.). In a 2023 interview, Leeson reflects on the work, stating, “It was an investigation of reality — what is fact, what is fiction, and how do we determine it? And if somebody says they’re a person, and they have all the documents to back it up, why aren’t they?" (Leeson, as cited in Gannis, 2023). The performance culminated in 1978 at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Italy, held in the crypt of Lucrezia Borgia with an exorcism ritual that liberated Hershman Leeson from her alter ego. During this ritual, Breitmore was symbolically transformed through the elements of fire, water, air, and earth (ZKM | Center for Art and Media, n.d.). In a 2020 essay written by Leeson for Art21 she says: “Roberta was a cultural mirror, one who was magnetically drawn to, witnessed, and reflected the world around her. The archive of her existence is constantly being re-performed, as visitors seek to understand the era of her life.” (Leeson, 2020).

Fig. 48. Installation view of 'Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar featuring 'Roberta Breitmore series,' 1973–78. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2017. Photo by John Foster Cartwright. Retrieved from https://www.kqed.org/arts/12777426/artist-lynn-hershman-leeson-on-being-discovered-at-75

Viewing this work through the lens of this thesis's focus on 'work,' the archival material of the performance offers an examination of the labor involved in self-presentation and the psychological toll of creating an identity. *Roberta* struggled with depression, contemplated suicide, and enrolled in Ph.D. psychology classes on how people create their identities, all in an exercise that blurred the line between art and life (Leeson, 1996):

> "Roberta was an interactive vehicle, with which to analyze culture. Her profile was animated through cosmetics applied to her face as if it were a canvas, and her experience reflected the values of her society. (...) Most significantly, she witnessed and documented the resonant nuances of her culture's alienation" (Leeson, 1996).

Roberta as a "cultural mirror," the "archive of her existence," reflects the societal pressures and norms of her era as the artist assumed a constructed identity, partly as a psychological investigation of stereotypes, victimization, and the cultural zeitgeist at large:

> "Roberta represented part of me as surely as we all have within us an underside, a dark, shadowy cadaver that we try with pathetic illusion to camouflage. Roberta's traumas became my own hunting memories. (...) As a"cure", Roberta was exorcized." (Leeson, 1996).

The exorcism ritual at the culmination of the performance sheds this constructed identity. It is a gesture that points to the transient nature of the self but also highlights how the artist reclaims agency over her notion of identity as performative. Within this framework, Leeson's work can be seen as a reflection on the cultural and systemic forces that shape selfhood, demonstrating that identity itself can be seen as a form of emotional *labor*—a continual process of negotiation, performance, and adaptation to personal and societal expectations.

Fig. 49

Roberta's Construction Chart 1, 1975. By Lynn Hershman Leeson. Photo of archival digital print and dye transfer, 58.4 x 43.2 *cm.* Retrieved from the artist's website https://www.lynnhershman.com/project/roberta-breitmore

2.4.3.2 Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980). Cindy Sherman (born 1954 in New Jersey, US) has spent decades using her camera as a way to explore concepts of identity construction. Typically working alone in her New York studio, Sherman embraced the roles of author, director, designer, and model. As a contemporary master of the cultural zeitgeist, she has become widely recognized as one of the most influential and pioneering photographers of her generation.

Her seminal *Untitled Film Stills* is a series of 70 black-and-white photographs created over three years. In these images, she portrays herself as various archetypal female film characters, such as the ingénue, the working woman, the femme fatale, and the isolated housewife (Becker, 2022). Rather than recreating specific or easily identifiable scenes, she deliberately leaves the settings, body language, and facial expressions of her characters open-ended. Leaving the images untitled, the artist was able to preserve the ambiguity of the scenes that she created. As she noted, "What I didn't want were pictures showing strong emotions, which was rare to see; in film stills there's a lot of overacting because they're trying to sell the movie." (MoMa, 2004/19999.

In photographs like *Untitled Film Still #21*, Sherman shows this sense of uncertainty by capturing moments that suggest an "in-between" state within the narrative, leaving the story's context and direction unresolved (Baker & Moran, 2016). In a 2016 interview in the Guardian she says, "I want there to be hints of narrative everywhere in the image so that people can make up their own stories about them." In the same interview she positions her work within the tradition of conceptual performance of artists who used their own body, like Chris Burden or Bruce Nauman (Sherman, as cited in Adams, 2016).

Fig. 50. Untitled Film Still #21. By Cindy Sherman (1978). Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled_Film_Still_21#/media/File:Untitled_Film_Still_21_(Cindy_Sherman_photograph).jpg

The staged images of *Untitled Film Stills* evoke scenes from 1950s and 1960s Hollywood, film noir, B movies, and European art-house cinema, replicating the format, scale, and aesthetic of promotional "stills" often used to advertise films. By placing herself in these roles, Sherman engages in a dialogue about the stereotypical depictions of women in visual media. She portrays the eager young career woman in a crisp suit on her first day in the bustling city. Other characters include the alluring librarian (#13), the elegant starlet at her coastal retreat (#7), the innocent debutante embarking on life's journey (#48), and the strong yet fragile film noir femme fatale (#54).

Some critics interpreted the film stills as a fusion of feminist sensibility and an awareness of media consumer culture drawing (much like Sherman's peers in the Pictures generation) from the established conventions of film, television, and magazines to explore the concept of the socially constructed self (Ollman, 2012). Despite the fame, Sherman maintains ambiguity in her art, often resisting interpretations or revealing her personal intentions.

Reading *Untitled Film Stills* through the lens of labor explored in this thesis, these performances highlight societal expectations of women in professional and domestic roles. They critique how work and identity are shaped and constrained by cultural narratives, reinforcing stereotypical and confined roles in both public and private spheres. In a sense, Sherman's photographs reveal that "work" extends beyond physical effort to include the emotional and social labor required to maintain these gendered identities. For instance, the "career woman" is dressed in a sharp suit, yet there is an underlying suggestion of vulnerability and uncertainty, perhaps alluding to the societal pressures women face in the workforce.

Sherman also embodies the artificiality and performative nature of these roles, casting herself as both the director and the subject. The ambiguity in her photos suggests that these roles are not fixed identities, but rather performances that women must constantly negotiate. The artist's deliberate decision to leave the narrative unresolved in many of her images highlights the in-between nature of these roles, reinforcing the idea that identity is shaped by both external expectations and personal agency.

These photographs are also elaborate performances of an idea—an idea that women's work, both in the professional sphere and within the realm of media, is so often objectified, shaped, and sold. Through her reimagining of film stills—those carefully constructed promotional images designed to market movies—Sherman not only deconstructs the artifice of cinematic representation but also lays bare the broader system that reduces women's identities and labor to consumable commodities in the machinery of media culture. The meticulously curated nature of each image reinforces how women's labor is packaged, branded, and presented as something to be consumed. In doing so, Sherman challenges the viewer to question the pervasive, societal compulsion that demands women not only labor in traditional roles but also perform their femininity as a commodity, sculpting their identities

for the public's gaze. Her work demands an interrogation of how the ideals of womanhood are manufactured, commodified, and ultimately consumed—an indictment of the pervasive culture of spectacle and the gendered expectations it fosters.

Working mostly solo in her studio, Sherman's creative process does not merely engage in artistic production; she stages her own labor. By performing all of the characters in her photographs and meticulously managing the production of each image, Sherman undertakes the kind of self-directed labor that is often invisible or undervalued—especially when it comes to women in both the art world and popular culture. In this act of self-sufficiency, Sherman not only asserts her autonomy but also disrupts the traditional roles women are expected to occupy within the artistic and cultural industries. Where women have often been relegated to passive roles—either as subjects or as unseen laborers behind the scenes—Sherman positions herself as both artist and actor, reclaiming the narrative of her work. Through this direct engagement with her medium, she challenges the patriarchal systems that would otherwise seek to marginalize her contributions, both as an artist and as a woman. Sherman's creative process becomes a statement on the value of female labor and the autonomy that comes with controlling one's own artistic vision.

2.5 The Shifting Role of the Artist as Worker in America's Postindustrial Society

The 2003 *Work Ethic* exhibition's four galleries at The Baltimore Museum of Art explored the role of the 'Artist as Manager and Worker' (the artist creates and completes a task such as Frank Stella, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Tehching Hsieh); the 'Artist as Manager' (the artist sets a task for others to complete such as Warhol and Baldessari); the 'Artist as Experience Maker' (the audience completes the work, such as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, Valie Export's *Tap und Kino*) and 'Quitting Time' (the artist tries not to work, such as Robert Barry's *Closed Gallery*).

The following sections outline the exhibition's themes and premises, and include analysis of works by two artists mentioned in the exhibition catalogue: Bruce Nuaman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–68), and Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1980-1981* (Time Clock Piece).

2.5.1 The Work Ethic Exhibition (2003)

In 2003, American curator Helen Molesworth published *Work Ethic*, which serves as both a catalog for the exhibition of the same name she curated at The Baltimore Museum of Art in 2003 and a collection of essays examining how post-World War II avant-garde art engaged with the concept of artistic labor, particularly in relation to the changing dynamics of labor in the modern American economy:

> "Just as artists relinquished traditional artistic skills and the production of discrete art objects" she says "the status of labor and the production of goods in the culture at large were also changing profoundly as the American industrial economy, based in manufacturing, shifted to a postindustrial economy rooted in managerial and service labor" (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 25).

Molesworth's exhibition *Work Ethic* suggests a new approach to evaluating post–World War II artistic practice. Rather than organizing contemporary art around a focus on style or content, avant-garde secession, or medium-based investigation, the exhibition measures changing conditions of artistic labor since the 1950s (Demos, 2004). Historically, artists honed their craft through extensive training—via apprenticeships, instruction at art academies, or, post-World War II, attendance at art schools (Molesworth, 2003).

The artist's role evolved, no longer confined to predictable training or the exclusive use of their hand as the primary means of expression, artists embraced broader educational influences and diverse forms of creative practice. By the late 20th century, many artworks were created without relying on traditional artistic skills, and began to explore what could be considered art and legitimate artistic labor (Molesworth, 2003). In Molesworth's account, "the postwar reception of Duchamp, an alteration of the artist's role, the shift in the economic structure of the Western world—from consumer goods to services, as we saw in Chapter 1—and the rise of a new type of academic art training, along with the change in the site of artistic production, all came to bear on the reception of avant-garde culture" (Molesworth, 2003, p. 38).

A key argument of her essay is the fact that artists following World War II came to see themselves more as workers in capitalist America. They navigated the avant-garde desire to merge art and life under dramatically different social structures than their Modernist predecessors. According to Molewhorth, many artists explored the shifting definitions of labor by emulating its division into mental and manual aspects.

Molesworth cites examples such as Frank Stella and Andy Warhol's hiring of assistants in *Factory* putting forward the idea of "artist as business executive" (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 35): "Art could thus be made with unskilled manual labor, with highly regimented managerial labor, or with labor that resonated with ideas borrowed from the service economy." (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 11)

For some artists, labor became an artistic activity, artistic method and object of artistic engagement (Sigler, 2017). In her introductory essay Molesworth cites Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of its own Making* (1961) as an example of artwork "described in the language of work, as opposed to that of art." In this piece, sawing and hammering had replaced drawing and composition" (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 25). By shifting focus from the traditional skills of art to the processes of labor, artists began creating works that rejected artifice and illusion. Instead, these works presented themselves as they truly were. Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of its own Making* is indeed a box resonating with the sound of its creation, an object insisting upon the labor involved in its making (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 25).

Fig. 51. Box with the Sound of Its Own Making. By Robert Morris (1961). Wright Collection. © Estate of Robert Morris. Adapted from Seattle Art Museum https://samblog.seattleartmuseum.org/2018/12/box-with-the-sound-of-its-own-making

Part of the exhibition are works from artists movements emerged during the 1960s, such as Fluxus, Conceptual art, Process art, Feminist art and Performance- practices that shared a resistance to the very idea of being displayed in a museum. By defining a task and then executing it, artists simultaneously assumed the roles of both manager and worker. With the decline of traditional artistic skills and tangible objects, the artist's studio—traditionally a site of creation—transformed into an arena. Artists like Bruce Nuaman, Vito Acconci, Tehching Hsieh assigned themselves tasks and then performed them; they rejected traditional artistic media, turning instead to a presentation of the work of art in the language of "task performed/thing done," relying on documentation in films and photographs (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 40).

In Chris Burden's *Honest Labor* (1979), another example cited in Molesworth's essay, the artist spent three days digging a ditch while serving as a visiting artist at an art school. The artist engages in an "honest day's work" while rejecting the creation of a luxury commodity (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 41). In keeping with much task-based work and Process Art, the outcome of *Honest Labor* is deliberately "useless" (a purposeless ditch), while the focus is placed on the process, the artist's performance, rather than on the final result.

In tandem with Process Art and task-based practices, Conceptual artworks such as Sol LeWitt's *wall drawings* and Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) used the structure and logic of instructions; the artists operated more like managers, creating plans in the form of graphs, charts, and diagrams that directed others (including the audience) on how to carry out the labor necessary to produce the work (Molesworth, 2003)

As evolving definitions of labor shaped both art and daily life, the traditionally unpaid work of housework and child-care became a focus for feminist artists. In the super-8 short

Backyard Economy (1974), Martha Rosler is seen documenting her household tasks, mowing the lawn and hanging laundry—tasks that simultaneously accomplish necessary work and create art (Molesworth, 2003). This action transvalued traditionally unpaid domestic labor as art, challenging its otherwise degraded status (Demos, 2004).

Fig. 52

Chris Burden performing Honest Labor. By Chris Burden (1979). Vancouver. Retrieved from Tumbrl https://art-and-veganism.tumblr.com/post/41507794957/chris-burden-honest-work-1979-vancouver

Fig. 53

Video still of Martha Rosler performing Backyard Economy. By Martha Rosler (1974). © 2025 Martha *Rosler.* Retrieved from MoMa Archives https://www.moma.org/collection/works/159786

All the artworks cited above engage with the issue of labor through the figure of the artist, either as a combined worker/manager or as a manager. But what about spectatorship? The artworks surveyed in *Work Ethic* present different types of spectatorship. Some artworks are incomplete without the viewer's participation, pressing the viewer into service, leaving unclear whether the activity is work or play. Examples such as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964)—which invited the audience to cut off pieces of her clothing—and Valie Export's *TAPP und TASTKINO* (1968/1989)—which allowed participants to touch her breast in public—presented the completion of the work of art by the audience as a kind of dilemma. In both instances, the spectators were confronted with desire in a negotiation of the social boundaries of the human body, especially the female body (Molesworth, 2003).

Fig. 54. Yoko Ono performing Cut Piece. By Yoko Ono (1965). Carnegie Hall, New York. Photos: Museum of Modern Art, NY. Retrieved from Teen Work of Arts https://teenworldarts.com/magazine/yoko-ono-cut-piece

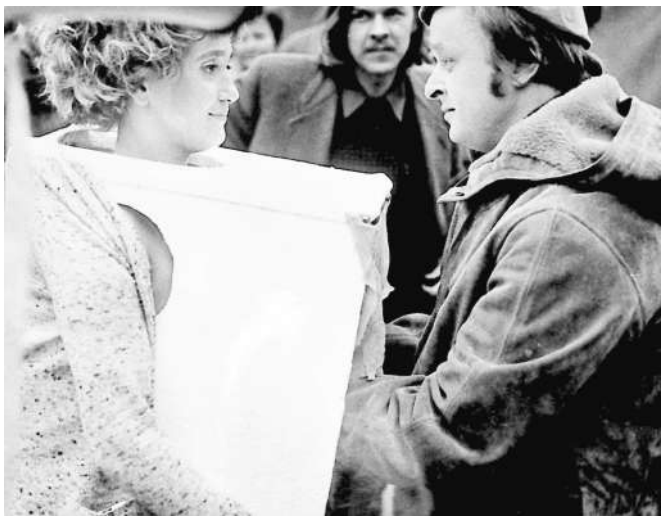


Fig. 55. Valie EXPORT performing *TAPP und TASTKINO*. By Valie EXPORT (1968/1989). Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, © VALIE EXPORT, Photograph by Simone Gänsheimer. Retrieved from https://www.lenbachhaus.de/digital/sammlung-online/detail/tapp-und-tastkino-30020867

Other examples from the Fluxus artists humorously embraced the commodity, subverting its logic. Fluxus' intermedia—a term coined by Dick Higgins (1938–1998)—or instructions, or 'event scores' of George Brecht (1926–2008), were worded prompts that formed the basis of Fluxus's 'call-and-response collectivity' (Chamberlain, 2023). These score pieces were often of bodily nature, such as Alison Knowles' *Nivea Cream Piece (November 1962)—for Oscar Williams*, in which performers use hand cream to massage their hands in front of a microphone, creating a collective action as they join together and form a "mass of massaging hands." As intermedia, the piece generates unsettling, squelching sounds from the combination of lotion, skin, and electronic amplification.

In each case, the role of the artist as someone who creates something designed to promote contemplation is radically altered: the artist is "someone who provides an experience for the audience" (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 44). An example cited by Molesworth is Allan Kaprow's 1967 event called *Fluids.* Posters with a schematic drawing and typed instructions tasked voluntary participants to build a wall of ice breaks in Southern California, and upon completion they watched the fruits of their labor melt. According to Molesworth, *Fluids* provides a staging of "useless labor," very much in line with Kaprow's strategy of refusal, which did not allow his *Happenings* to be documented and rejected spectatorship as non participatory. *Fluids* neglected the logic of art as commodity objects by virtue of the artwork's disappearance.

The exhibition *Work Ethic*, featuring work from the 1960s to 2000, as explained by the curator, was realized in response to a renewed interest in the 1960s strategies of the avant-garde which seemed to have returned in recent years, a tendency that I also acknowledge in my work, *4everfeed*. In her survey of post-'60s practitioners, Molesworth suggests that the creation of much contemporary art involves those skills most prized in our new information economy. Molesworth finds an explanation in the fact that the 21s-century has also marked a radical transformation of the global labor force as we saw in Chapter 1: "As commodities are now exclusively produced in developing and non-Western nations, the labor of developed nations has increasingly become the management of information and the production of experience" (Molesworth, 2003, pp. 18).

In four interconnected galleries, the exhibition presented historically overlapping categories as discussed earlier: the artist as both manager and worker (e.g. Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance (Time Piece) (1980–81)*, which consists of records of the artist punching a time clock every hour on the hour for one year straight.); the artist as solely a manager (e.g. Sol LeWitt and John Baldessari's delegation of the physical artmaking and sent out of fabrication directions to professional crafters or assistants[12]), the artist as an 'experience maker' (e.g. Yoko Ono's 1961 *Cut Piece*) and, lastly, "Quitting Time," where the artist challenges labor itself (e.g. Robert Barry's *Closed Gallery,* 1969, represented by an announcement for its original exhibition stating that the gallery would be closed for the length of his show).

[12] As I showed in section 2.5., László Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings (1922-23)* anticipated the delegation of the making of an art object to an industrial process via transmission of instructions.

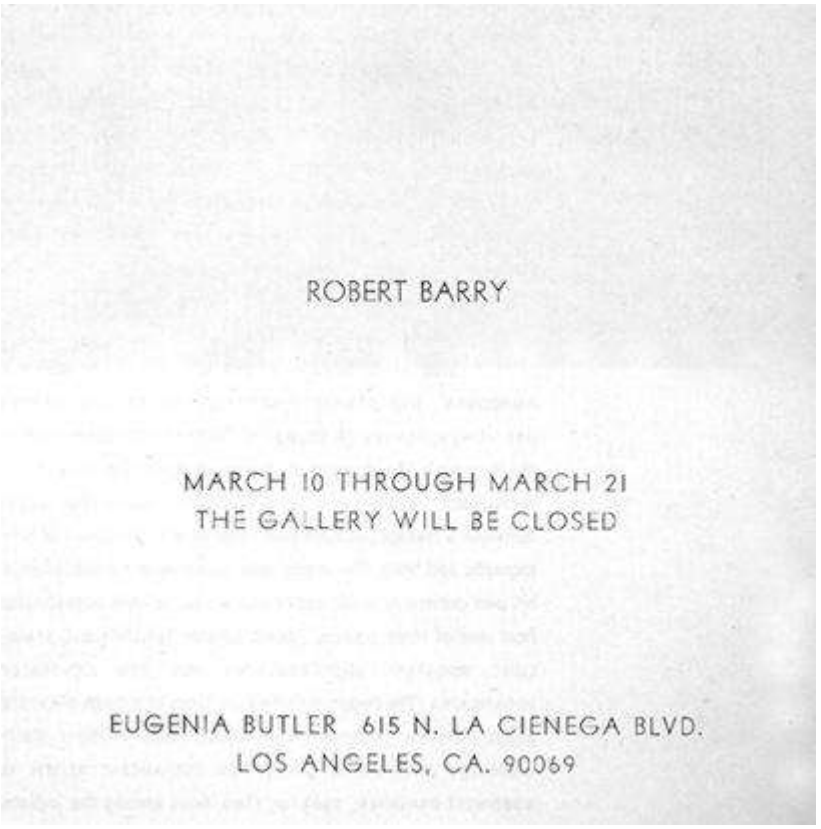


Fig. 56

Invitation to Closed Gallery. By Robert Barry (1968). Retrieved from No Show Museum https://www.noshowmuseum.com/en/2nd-b/robert-barry

2.5.2 Analysis of Bruce Nuaman's Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square (1967–1968)

Nauman's performance piece can be interpreted, for the purposes of this thesis, as a visual study of human labor as both a mechanical and economic process. This interpretation serves to align the work with broader discussions of productivity and work explored throughout the thesis. In this reading, the act of walking is transformed into a controlled task, highlighting the body's capacity for labor in a way that emphasizes each physical movement as visible effort.

The repetitive, circular nature of Nauman's deliberate exercise in monotony sharpens attention to tiny details: the subtle sway of Nauman's arms, the way his thin white t-shirt creases as his torso twists, the slight tremor of his foot as he struggles to keep his balance. Error and fatigue become factors, and they serve to build suspense. Thus, the action of walking in an exaggerated manner frames the body as a system subject to mechanical

principles, echoing the physics-based concept of work we saw in Chapter 1 (force applied over distance).

The artist's act of walking is itself an exercise in productivity within the context of the art labor system - after graduating from art school in the late 1960s he found himself pacing his studio, unsure how to produce work as a professional artist (Garcia, 2006). By subjecting his own body to a regimented task, this piece can also be seen as drawing attention to the process of labor inherent in artistic production. In this way, the piece becomes both a metaphor for and a demonstration of productivity, as he transforms a mundane action into a structured, repetitive task—highlighting how, in both art and economics, work can be reduced to a series of actions, emphasizing the body's role as a unit of productivity.

Fig. 57. Video still of Bruce Nauman performing Walking In An Exaggerated Manner Around The Perimeter Of A Square. By Bruce Nauman (1967–68). Retrieved from MoMa Archives https://www.moma.org/collection/works/117947

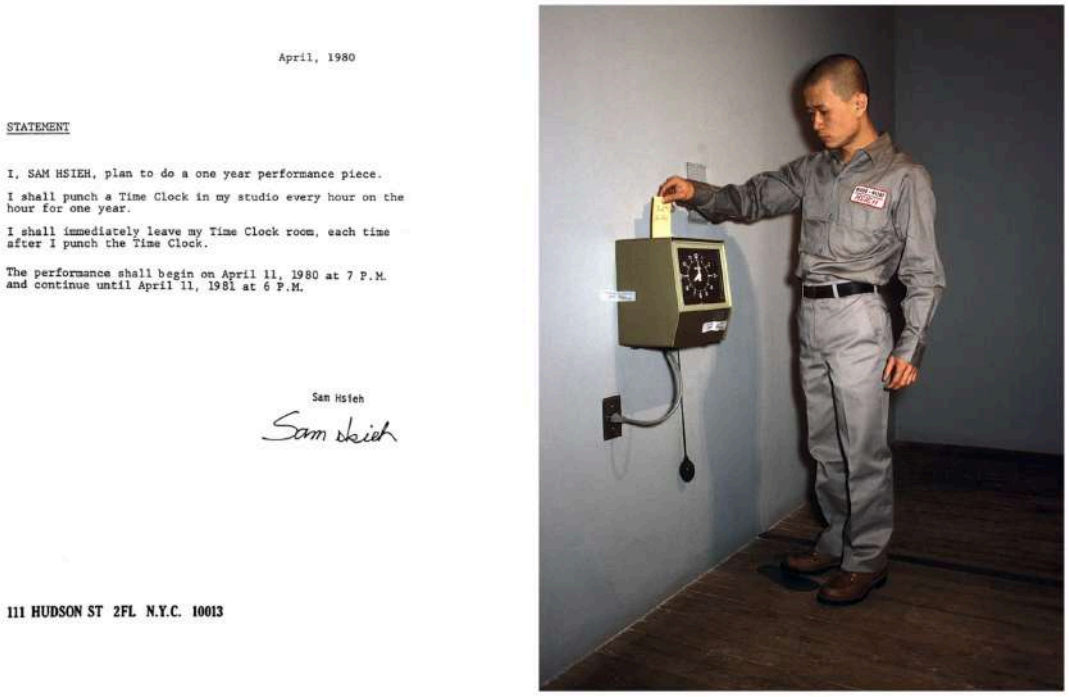
2.5.3 Analysis of Tehching Hsieh's One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)

In this durational performance, Hsieh, wearing a blue-collar uniform, set up a fully operational worker's time clock, a lighting system, and a camera mounted above, facing the clock inside his studio. He sought to record his arrival at a worker's time clock in his Manhattan studio every hour[13], on the hour, 24/7, for a full year starting on April 11, 1980.

[13] Spatial limitation is a recurring motif throughout Hsieh's consecutive year-long performances, *Cage Piece* (1978-1979) and *Outdoor Piece* (1981-1982) challenges the endurance of the human psychological and physical capacity.

He took a photograph each time he “punched in,” and the 8,627 images produced were then compiled into a time-lapse film, compressing an entire year into just 6 minutes. He committed to a contract that stated, “I shall punch a Time Clock in my studio every hour on the hour for one year.” (Hsieh, 1980).

For an entire year, he punched in using a punch-card system at precisely the top of each hour, 24 hours a day, every day. Due to this rigid schedule, he was restricted to his studio, unable to rest for more than fifty minutes at a time. He carefully documented his time-stamped cards and took a photograph every hour, positioned beside the time clock.



April, 1980

STATEMENT

I, SAM HSIEH, plan to do a one year performance piece.

I shall punch a Time Clock in my studio every hour on the hour for one year.

I shall immediately leave my Time Clock room, each time after I punch the Time Clock.

The performance shall begin on April 11, 1980 at 7 P.M. and continue until April 11, 1981 at 6 P.M.

Sam Hsieh

Sam Hsieh

111 HUDSON ST 2FL N.Y.C. 10013

Fig. 58

To the left: *One Year Performance 1980-1981 Statement.* By Tehching Hsieh (1980). Paper, 8.5x 11 inch.

To the right: *One Year Performance 1980-1981, artist life Image*. Photograph by Michael Shen (1980). Adapted from the artist’s website https://www.tehchinghsieh.net/oneyearperformance1980-1981

For the purposes of this thesis, Hsieh’s work highlights the oppressive nature of time-driven labor on the body. By subjecting his physical existence to the unyielding regularity of clock time and placing himself under constant surveillance through punch cards and a camera, he exposes the cycle dictated by the machine, operating continuously, 24/7 (Boddy & Griff, 2022). As a result, Hsieh’s performance is one of always being right on time

while also becoming totally out of sync with the rest of the world (Groom, 2022). His subjection to spatial and temporal constraint unveils the cultural construction and rationalisation of time that dominates within the society, often used as tools of regulation and bio-power upon individuals by hegemonic institutions.

In her analysis of Hsieh's 24/7 clocking-in performance, writer, art historian, and theorist Amelia Groom points out that the post-Fordist years, during which Hsieh began his work in 1980, coincided with the election of Ronald Reagan as U.S. president, marking an era of neoliberal reform and aggressive union-busting that undermined workers' rights (Groom, 2022). This historical backdrop gives context to Hsieh's performance, which mirrored the rigidity of clock time and constant labor, making it feel especially prescient today. The conditions of labor that Hsieh's piece anticipated—where one's time is never truly their own—continue to resonate in the context of modern labor practices. This connection shows the continuing relevance of his performance in shaping our understanding of late capitalism's evolving work structures.

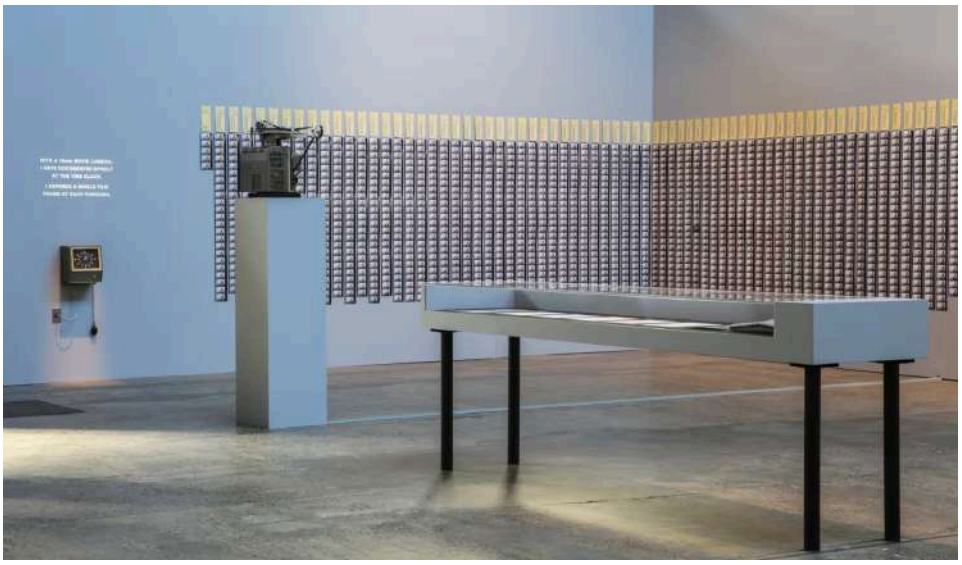


Fig. 59

Installation view of *One Year Performance 1980-1981 at Carriageworks, Sydney*. By *Tehching Hsieh (1980-81)* Photograph: Anna Kucera. Retrieved from The Guardian https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/australia-culture-blog/2014/apr/30/tehching-hsieh-the-man-who-didnt-go-to-bed-for-a-year

2.6 Art in the Creator Economy

In her 2024 book *Disordered Attention*, *How We Look at Art and Performance Today*, art historian Claire Bishop observes that contemporary spectatorship has undergone a radical

transformation, where attention is dispersed and hybrid. She cites examples such as *Sun and Sea (Marina)* staged at the Venice Biennale in 2019, to observe how spatial performances of the last decade allow attention to be dispersed and hybrid, and are often framed with Instagram in mind; while the political event, such as the works by Ai Weiwei and Pussy Riot, is no longer activated without an understanding of the media that will record and distribute it.

In Bishop's account, unlike earlier art forms that since the 1960s deconstructed hierarchies through site-specificity or extended duration, today's experiences are shaped by what she defines as the "photographic condition" of spectatorship.

With the rise of networked camera phones, documenting performances has become reflexive, collective, and distributed. Viewers exist simultaneously in the physical presence of the work, engaged with nearby attendees, while also sharing the experience digitally with remote audiences in real time or shortly after (Bishop, 2024). "Whether we like it or not", she says, "hybrid attention is the 'OS XXI', the operating system of spectatorship in the twenty-first century" (The Burlington Magazine, Bishop, 2024, pp. 9-10).

2.6.1 The Industrialization of Creativity

Just as Bishop notes that performances today are often framed with Instagram or other media in mind, other artists and scholars point to the algorithmic pressures that shape creative expression in the digital marketplace.

A 2024 paper published by Sam Gill and theater director Annie Dorsen, who has been working at the intersection of algorithmic art and live performance since 2010, argue that while digital platforms promise to develop new audiences, increase accessibility to artworks, and create new revenue streams for artists, they may reduce everything to "content," concentrate corporate control over creative expression, undermine authoritative human discernment, and intensify human labor (Gill & Dorsen, 2024).

They suggest that the most striking example of creative expression being absorbed into the commercial internet is the rapid and meteoric rise of the Creator Economy. As we saw earlier, the Creator Economy implies that everyone posting on social media is producing something, pitching in to the collective effort of making user-generated platforms compelling and thus profitable. The shorthand is "user-generated content," but this term, according to Gill and Dorsen, "obscures a novel interplay between labor and capital."

The first aspect of "digital commodity fetishism" Gill and Dorsen highlight is the "commodification of expression." Digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok turn personal expressions into "content" through tools for editing and enhancing media. This process, while commonplace in everyday life, is politically significant because it transforms creative acts into digital objects that are indistinguishable from millions of other pieces of content.

In the book *Content* (2022), Kate Eichhorn, Associate Professor and Chair of Culture and Media Studies at The New School, explores how, once uploaded, any content loses its social context and becomes part of a seamless flow that can be easily accessed, compared, and exchanged. As a result, all forms of cultural production are reduced to interchangeable, indistinguishable digital objects, erasing their original intention, context, and meaning (Eichhorn, 2022).

While the digital platform holds control over the commodification, monetization, and industrialization of creative expression, it does not directly fund the production. Instead, the platform incurs the costs associated with developing and maintaining the tools and systems that allow creators to voluntarily produce their own content. In return, the platform collects a share of the revenue generated by content in the attention-driven marketplace (Gill & Dorsen, 2024). In this market, content is valued not for its rich social context, but based on metrics determined by the platform—typically centered on factors like engagement, such as popularity ("likes"), "stickiness" (how long users, as consumers, typically engage with the content), or recency (how recently users, as consumers, interacted with the content) (Brennan, 2020).

Artistic content that is repurposed for digital distribution and consumption will be subject to the economic and algorithmic logic of digital platforms by appearing alongside and in competition with all other forms of content. To benefit from the algorithm-driven digital revenue system, one must adhere to its rules. The powerful allure of "clickability" has proven hard to resist, even in fields with high professional standards, such as journalism (Christin, 2014).

2.6.2 Artists' Counter-Strategies to the Industrialization of the Creative Impulse: The Works of Amalia Ulman and Sondra Perry

The capitalist model of attention capture is not new, nor is it unique to the arts (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1985; Enzensberger, 1974; Flusser, 2011; Brennan, 2020; Chayka, 2024). As radio, film, and television expanded their audiences, new ways of monetizing attention emerged (e.g., through "ratings") (Napoli, 2008). These changes have shaped the arts since the early 20th century (Benjamin, 1935/196). In particular, the performing arts have been produced, distributed, and consumed through mass media in various ways, often sparking significant discussions about the aesthetic implications (Gill & Dorsen, 2024; Bishop, 2024).

While there are certainly parallels between traditional mass media (such as TV) and digital platforms in how both commodify and compete for audience attention, digital platforms introduce a new level of complexity with algorithm-driven, real-time curation and the increased scale of production and consumption. The digital shift does not fundamentally change the basic economic logic of commodifying content, but it does alter the mechanisms of how content is produced, distributed, and monetized.

What is new in the Creator Economy's landscape, according to Gill and Dorsen (2024), is not the age-old tension between human creativity and the demands of the market. What is new is that digital tools for commodifying and monetizing creativity impose commercial constraints that are nearly invisible and non-negotiable. Editing software like Adobe or Final Cut come preloaded with aesthetic choices; in the realm of social media, if that's adopted as an expressive medium, the platform's built-in editing tools shape expressive possibilities based on trends informed by real-time feedback, making the creative process more constrained by market forces than anywhere else.

While it is true that digital platforms and tools often impose certain constraints and limitations, this perspective overlooks the ways in which artists continue to subvert and manipulate these very systems, turning them into tools for critical expression rather than yielding to them. Artists are visionaries and innovators. Central to their creativity is the capacity to harness available tools and materials. This act of repurposing, seen across history, merges conventional techniques with acts of rebellion, disruption, and invention. From Leonardo da Vinci's blending of art and science to Marcel Duchamp's *ready-mades* that challenged authorship and the very definition of art, artists have continuously reimagined the possibilities of what they can create by bending established norms.

The following texts focus on two performance-based artworks: *Excellences & Perfections (2014)* by Argentinian-born, Spain-raised Amalia Ulman (b. 1989) and *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016) by New Jersey-born artist Sondra Perry (b. 1986) to offer a perspective on a diverse range of artistic approaches in the Creator Economy.

As we will see, Ulman's online performance *Excellences & Perfections* critiques the performative aspects of self-presentation in the age of social media, exploring how digital platforms commodify identity and create marketable personas. She actively participates in this system to expose its contradictions. Similarly, Perry's video installation uses digital technology as a tool for critical and cultural examination, but her focus shifts to how these tools contribute to the systemic oppression of Black identity. Her work interrogates the biases embedded within the technology itself, aiming to disrupt the status quo of digital representation.

While both artists engage with digital media to challenge its structures, their approaches diverge: Ulman uses content creation as art to reflect on the artificialities and unthinking 'likes' of online social interaction, whereas Perry critiques the very tools of content creation as spaces where the self engages with prefabricated symbolic possibilities, often excluding or marginalizing Black subjectivity.

2.6.2.1 Amalia Ulman's Online Performance *Excellences & Perfections* (2014). After being hospitalized following a Greyhound bus crash, in April 2014, AmaliaUlman—at the time, a recent art school graduate living in Los Angeles—started to upload images of herself on Instagram that became the performance *Excellences & Perfections* (Eichhorn, 2022).

For this piece, consisting of a performative photographic series that lasted until September 2014 and existing only on her personal Instagram feed @amaliaulman, Ulman performed a sustained exercise in the character development of female archetypes that evoke Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. It showed the evolution of a young woman living in Los Angeles, reproducing the style of different Instagram personas while incorporating the usual aesthetic choices of the social media (Ulman, 2020).

In an article written by the artist in the Financial Times she says:

> "I adopted three personas in turn: first, cute Tumblr-loving ingénue; next, a basic sugar baby who's into streetwear; and finally, a post-rehab wellness freak. (...) Because it was an experimental format, I stuck to clichés that the audience would recognise. I decided to keep the story simple. (...) I decided to use the way women are fetishised online as a way of telling a story" (Ulman, 2020).

The narrative constructed by the pictures accounts for her life as a girl who first moves to LA after apparently breaking up with a boyfriend, starting work as an escort, having cosmetic plastic surgery and drug abuse issues, followed by time in rehab, and finally posts about recovery, and healthy and fitness habits (Salazar, 2020). Ulman was interested in the ways that, in order to perform their own selves, people must be constantly morphing through semi-transparent manipulations. Some of the images, such as the one where she staged herself as recovering from breast augmentation surgery, drug consumption, hotel bathroom selfies, and escorting were entirely fabricated (Glover, 2016). Others, like those captured during her pole-dancing lessons, depicted activities she was genuinely engaging in as part of her self-transformation journey.

Similar to millions of other young women who share selfies on Instagram daily, Ulman used the platform to craft a semi-fictional narrative about her life. However, unlike most, her meticulously curated posts were ultimately recognized and celebrated as art (Eichhorn, 2022).

Art critic Erik Morse, in a 2015 ArtReview article on Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections*, noted that:

> "Promises of voyeuristic spectacle and salacious confession ignited her account's real-time fan base and drew mainstream coverage from pop culture glossies like New York Magazine, i-D, and Dazed and Confused. (...) Despite its very public staging, viewing the archive of Excellences and Perfections retrospectively reveals the kinds of complexities and intimacies of Sophie Calle's most arresting, and controversial, performances" (Morse, 2015).

This instagram performance exemplifies how an artist can manipulate the constraints of a corporate-driven social media platform to critique the very system that enforces those constraints. She used Instagram's preexisting template for digital self-presentation (e.g. the selfie, the post's caption style, hashtags) to create an artifice that reflected the idealized, polished images typically found on the platform. Over the course of five months, she posted seemingly personal updates that followed the platform's norms but were in fact a curated narrative about her own fabricated "transformation" into a glamorous influencer (Morse, 2015).

By crafting a fictional persona embodied through her own physical presence, Ulman sought to highlight how easily audiences can be deceived by what they encounter on platforms like Instagram—spaces often perceived as hubs for "authentic" behavior, interactions, and content. Such manipulations are not solely alterations to the body and the face, with apps such as Photoshop or Facetune, but can also occur through carefully thought-out calculations of composition, posing, placement of props, the subtitles of the pictures, tagging and geotagging and the use of hashtags. Through meticulous attention to detail in settings and props, including scenes set in luxury hotel rooms and snapshots of aesthetically arranged brunches, *Excellences & Perfections* conjured a fantasy of an aspirational, consumer-driven lifestyle which convinced and captivated a fanbase of millions of followers. The comments posted while the performance was live, and registered on its book (Ulman, 2018), show a diverse set of reactions, with comments that were either very flattering or belligerent.

For the purposes of this thesis, what stands out most are Ulman's motivations for initiating the performance and what these reasons reveal about the contemporary landscape of cultural production. As Ulman stated in a 2018 interview with Artforum, "There is now an expectation that artists must be active online and on social media to promote themselves, but the promotion itself shouldn't be considered the artwork. It felt like a necessity, particularly as a woman, to make oneself vulnerable in order to sell the work." (Ulman as cited in Bradley, 2018).

What Ulman's online performance revealed is that in an age of content, content isn't just something that is needed to promote your art. Increasingly, content is art or, at least, what has come to stand in for art (Eichhorn, 2022). In her 2022 book *Content*, Kate Eichhorn analyzes Ulman's work drawing on the theory of social fields and capital (1986) by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930 – 2002). According to Bourdieu, the field of cultural production is a contested space where individuals or groups engage in struggles to gain recognition, legitimacy, and power. If earlier much weight was given to acts of consecration—the preface, the favorable review, a prize, and so on—in an age of content, the identities, output, and working conditions of cultural producers are vastly different than it was in the past. According to Eichhorn, Ulman's success stems not only from traditional forms of recognition—such as art reviews, gallery exhibitions, and critical acclaim—but also from her innovative use of a new form of capital: content capital. Content capital, Eichhorn argues, is more easily acquired than cultural capital, which can be acquired only through their

education, travel, and access to culture and cultural institutions or venues (e.g., galleries, museums, orchestral performances, etc.). An extreme but not rare example can be found in the surprising breakthroughs made by teen social media influencers.

Many contemporary artists, writers, and musicians now depend on their ability to produce and share personal, often self-curated content about their lives on social media platforms to achieve success. In this evolving cultural landscape, cultural capital has given way to content capital which has become a key asset for social mobility, allowing individuals to position themselves effectively within the wider field of cultural production (Eichhorn, 2022).

Fig. 60

Selfie of Amalia Ulman in Excellence & Perfections. By Amalia Ulman (2014). Retrieved from New Museum https://archive.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/2487

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2.6.2.2 Sondra Perry's Video Installation *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016). New Jersey-born artist Sondra Perry makes videos and performances that leverage digital tools of representation such as Chroma 3D blue screens, 3D avatars, open-source software, and found YouTube footage to examine how blackness has been represented throughout history. Her work interrogates the ways technology shapes and constrains representation, addressing issues ranging from police surveillance systems to avatar-building software in gaming (Snoad, 2018).

Her video installation *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016) integrates an exercise bike with three 24-inch screens, replicating employee workstations she

discovered online. Perry's inspiration also came from her mother's own three-monitor workstation, which was similar to the one Perry uses.

The gym equipment seating of the workstation positions the visitor's body in an active and engaging manner. In an interview for the Serpentine Gallery, Perry explains:

> "These workstations are a reminder for me of this preoccupation with work and being productive. These machines are exercise equipment... made to be used in relationship to the body to make the body better, and a more efficient worker. They want to keep you healthy so you can continue laboring" (Perry, 2018, 02:33).

As noted by Snoad (2018) in *It's Nice That*, participants can pedal while reflecting on efficiency culture, as Perry's 3D avatar delivers a monologue on productivity, success, and health, reminiscent of a relaxation tape, accompanied by chill-out music sourced from YouTube.

Fig. 61

Installation view of *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*. By Sondra Perry (2016). Adapted from the artist's website https://sondraperry.com/Graft-and-Ash-for-a-Three-Monitor-Workstation

The 9-minute video in which the avatar is performed by the artist herself through motion capture is also publicly available on the artist website hosted in a google folder (Perry. 2016). The creation of her avatar was a deliberate effort to critique and reclaim traditionally white, male-dominated digital spaces. It was also part of Perry's broader investigation into the capabilities and limitations of Blender software in rendering lifelike human figures. These avatars not only expose the software's deficiencies but also reflect Perry's effort to more accurately represent herself in digital form:

> "The software used to create these avatars reveals not just biases but also the ideologies of its programmers," Perry explains. "For instance, there are no options for fat bodies, and the templates for phenotypes—Asian, African, Caucasian—reflect stereotypical features. When the software already allows customization for realistic avatars, is it really necessary to define an 'African phenotype' with a particular nose shape?" (Perry as cited in Snoad, 2018).

In her video work *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016), Perry's avatar is depicted as self-aware—"conscious" of its context and its inherently mediated connection to both the world and its creators and users. Through these avatars, Perry poses critical questions: How do digital technologies contribute to the systemic oppression of Black people and Black identity? How does the representation of Blackness shape and influence technology and imaging?

2.7 Ending Notes

This chapter explored the technological and artistic shifts between the 20th and 21st centuries, focusing on how these changes have transformed the ways artists conceptualize labor and productivity.

During this time, in parallel to the *dematerialization of art* and the adoption of *system thinking* in artistic practices, the nature of the market economy shifted into immaterial aspects such as services, information and experience (Kwon, 2003). Drawing from these tendencies, this chapter demonstrated how the evolution from post-industrialization to digitalization—and the rise of the Creator Economy—has influenced contemporary art practices. Central to this investigation is how artists have engaged with technological transformations—whether through physical labor, media, or digital platforms— in ways that reflect, critique, and navigate the changing landscapes of work, productivity and the economy.

Artists in the 1960s and 1970s also developed a critical relationship with the camera, using it to record transient or immaterial art and question its role as both a commodity and document. Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Roberta Breitmore* (1973-1978) investigates the nature of identity. Through real-world interactions—such as opening a bank account and visiting a psychiatrist—Breitmore became both an object of art and a reflection of societal norms. The

project blended art and life, with the "cultural mirror" that Roberta represented reflecting the alienation and expectations of society. The performance ultimately culminated in a ritualistic exorcism to release the character, underscoring identity as a transient, performative construct. Within this framework, Leeson's work can be seen as a reflection on the cultural and systemic forces that shape self-hood, demonstrating that identity itself can be seen as a form of emotional *labor*—a continual process of negotiation, performance, and adaptation to personal and societal expectations. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) interrogated the commodification of identity within a media-driven landscape, reflecting an early example of how visibility and self-presentation had already begun to be shaped by systems of production, consumption, and gendered performance. In this iconic series, Sherman portrayed herself in stereotypical female roles drawn from film and media, such as the ingénue or the femme fatale. By leaving the scenes ambiguous and untitled, Sherman invited viewers to interpret these identities as fluid and constructed. Through these staged performances, she critiqued the societal roles imposed on women, exposing how identity is shaped by external expectations. Sherman's work challenges the commodification of women's labor, both in professional and domestic spheres, and critiques how women's identities are consumed by media and culture. Her direct involvement in creating these images challenges the invisibility of female labor and asserts her autonomy as both the artist and the subject.

The case study of László Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Pictures* (1922-1923) and Lauren Lee McCarthy's *SOMEONE* (2019) provided an historical and contemporary comparison of how mechanized and automated systems shape artistic production and the conceptualization of labor. Moholy-Nagy's work in the early 20th century with technology, such as the *Telephone Pictures*, demonstrates an early foray into mechanized systems where art and industry meet, showing how automation was already influencing visual culture and communication. McCarthy's *SOMEONE* brings this theme into the 21st century, exploring the increasing role of artificial intelligence, automation, and digital labor in daily life. In contrast to Alexa's seamless and disembodied execution of domestic labor, *SOMEONE* foregrounds the physical and emotional effort behind such interactions. By situating visitors as the human proxies for automation, McCarthy disrupts the invisibility of domestic and affective labor that AI systems like Alexa obscure. This performative inversion draws attention to how these technologies redistribute rather than eliminate labor, often reinforcing historical patterns of undervalued domestic work.

The 2003 *Work Ethic* exhibition, curated by Helen Molesworth, explored the changing role of the artist in America's postindustrial society, focusing on how the artist's labor has evolved in response to shifting economic and cultural dynamics. The exhibition featured four main themes: the 'Artist as Manager and Worker' (e.g., artists performing tasks themselves), the 'Artist as Manager' (e.g., delegating work), the 'Artist as Experience Maker' (audiences completing the work), and 'Quitting Time' (artists rejecting labor altogether). Molesworth's accompanying essay emphasizes that post-World War II artists increasingly viewed themselves as workers in a capitalist society, with many rejecting traditional artistic skills in favor of exploring labor processes. This shift was influenced by changes in the global

economy, with industrial economies giving way to service-based economies. Artists like Andy Warhol, Bruce Nauman, and others adopted managerial roles or used unskilled labor in their art, focusing on the process rather than the final product. The performance *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* by Bruce Nauman and Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance (Time Clock Piece)* were used to exemplify how artists experimented with physical labor in their works. Nauman's piece highlighted the body as a system of labor through repetition, while Hsieh's performance involved a year-long task of punching a time clock every hour, emphasizing the relentless nature of time-driven labor and its effects on the body and mind.

In the 2024 book *Disordered Attention*, Claire Bishop discusses how contemporary spectatorship in art has radically changed, with attention now dispersed and hybrid, influenced by platforms like Instagram. She highlights how art performances are now experienced physically and digitally, reflecting what she calls the "photographic condition" of spectatorship. This hybrid attention, driven by networked cameras, shapes how we engage with art in the 21st century. Sam Gill and Annie Dorsen argue that the rise of the Creator Economy, fueled by platforms like YouTube and TikTok, commodifies creative expression, reducing it to "content" in a system driven by engagement metrics such as likes and recency. This commodification results in creative labor becoming part of a system where platforms profit, but creators bear the costs. The creators' work becomes indistinguishable from other digital content, making it difficult for artists to maintain control over their creativity in the face of corporate-driven platforms.

Artists like Amalia Ulman and Sondra Perry subvert these systems, using digital tools and platforms to challenge their structures. Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (2014) highlights how platforms and their audiences foster expectations for users to continuously produce content that conforms to trending aesthetics, emotional vulnerability, and aspirational lifestyles. The commodification she critiques is centered on the individual's agency in shaping and curating their identity for consumption. Her work reveals a system in which human labor—be it emotional, vulnerable, or performative—is monetized through interactions on the platform. In this sense, *Excellences & Perfections* highlights the pressures and mechanisms of self-exploitation inherent in the act of *being seen, liked,* and *shared*. Ulman's online performance also revealed that in an age of content, content isn't just something that is needed to promote your art. Increasingly, content is art or, at least, what has come to stand in for art.

Perry's *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016) examines how digital technology perpetuates systemic oppression, particularly for Black identity. Using a combination of 3D avatars, open-source software, and YouTube footage, Perry critiques how digital tools and gaming software often fail to accurately or fairly represent Black bodies. For the installation, Perry uses an exercise bike alongside three monitors to engage the viewer's body and mind while showcasing a nine-minute video. The video features a 3D avatar of Perry performing a monologue on productivity, health, and labor, critiquing the corporate culture of efficiency. Perry's use of gym equipment in her workstation installation positions the visitor's body in an active and engaging posture, emphasizing the intersection of physical

activity and productivity. In an interview with the Serpentine Gallery, Perry highlighted how these workstations symbolize society's fixation on work and efficiency. She noted that such machines are designed to improve the body’s functionality, ultimately framing health as a means to sustain labor and enhance productivity.

Chapter 3: 4everfeed (2023-2024)

This chapter examines my performance-based video installation, situating it within the broader discussions explored in the preceding chapters.

3.1 Chewing Images

The world of *4everfeed* is one of quasi-automated cinema, a non-stopping filming of everyday life, wrapped in digital baroque aesthetics, camouflaged in phone cameras, face filters, and sped-up songs. The result is not unlike bubblegum—served as units of cohesive substance designed for brief engagement, meant to be chewed and molded without being swallowed by one's ergonomics of mastication. Its myths of stimulation, comfort, and community building are set in autoplay.

In many of the visualities presented in *4everfeed*, what appears to be an absorption into a vortex of screen-based distractions reveals itself as a "newfound representational freedom" (Steyerl, 2009). Yet, self-staged caricatures, intimate gestures, and computer-generated effects collide, conjuring both the fantasy of social media and the inevitable collapse of that fantasy—a collision between imagination's possibilities and its limits.

In a sense *4everfeed* is slow—hobbled and exhausted by its own apparent superficiality. Part *mise-en-scène*, part experiment, it examines how conception and cognition can be dissected, and algorithmically conditioned. It invites a reading of its *content* as aspiring relics and expired narratives—both in their broken happiness, or to promise satisfy.

At its core, this work doesn't aim for a resolution but thrives in the messy in-betweens: where media rubs up against performance, and the act of making reveals itself as process rather than product. Like a neural network scavenging the leftovers of its dataset, it feeds on what's already out there—borrowing, remixing, and spitting back a vision of what could be. And rather than retreating from its means of production—the algorithms, platforms, the relentless churn of content—it dives headfirst, treating the machinery of its creation as both a set of chains and a source of inspiration.

When I began working on *4everfeed*, I didn't set out to position it within a tradition of art or theory. Contextualizing it in the language of art helped me see it more clearly, and it was a revelation to discover how others had navigated similar impulses. The section 3.1 of this chapter became a space to unpack the artwork's context: What prompted its creation? What ideas and experiences shaped it? What themes emerged during its development? These questions grounded the work in a web of influences and intentions.

Section 3.2 took me deeper into a personal resonance. It became clear that *4everfeed* is not just a work about art—it's a meditation on work itself, and on productivity in an age where both are increasingly mediated by digital technologies.

In Section 3.5, I introduce the concept of *identity as labor*, drawing into a comparative analysis with Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (2016), among others. Ulman's work speaks to the construction of online identity, using a scripted performance to expose how we curate and commodify ourselves for an audience. The performance had social media as both the stage and the audience, where the public's perception directly influenced the work. In contrast, *4everfeed* was created privately, without a direct audience, and was never shared online. Rather than focusing on audience perception, *4everfeed* peels back the layers of automation and algorithmic influence that now shape how identity is performed in the digital age. It asks how systems and codes quietly shape what was once mostly driven by human agency.

As an investigation, *4everfeed* ultimately proposes that in today's world of recommendation algorithms, the traditional model of audience interaction has become secondary to the invisible, algorithm-driven forces that now govern what we see (Brennan, 2020). While we contribute to the algorithm's evolution—with our data, clicks, likes, and interactions—its capacity to predict and guide our actions often shifts the balance of influence (Chayka, 2024).

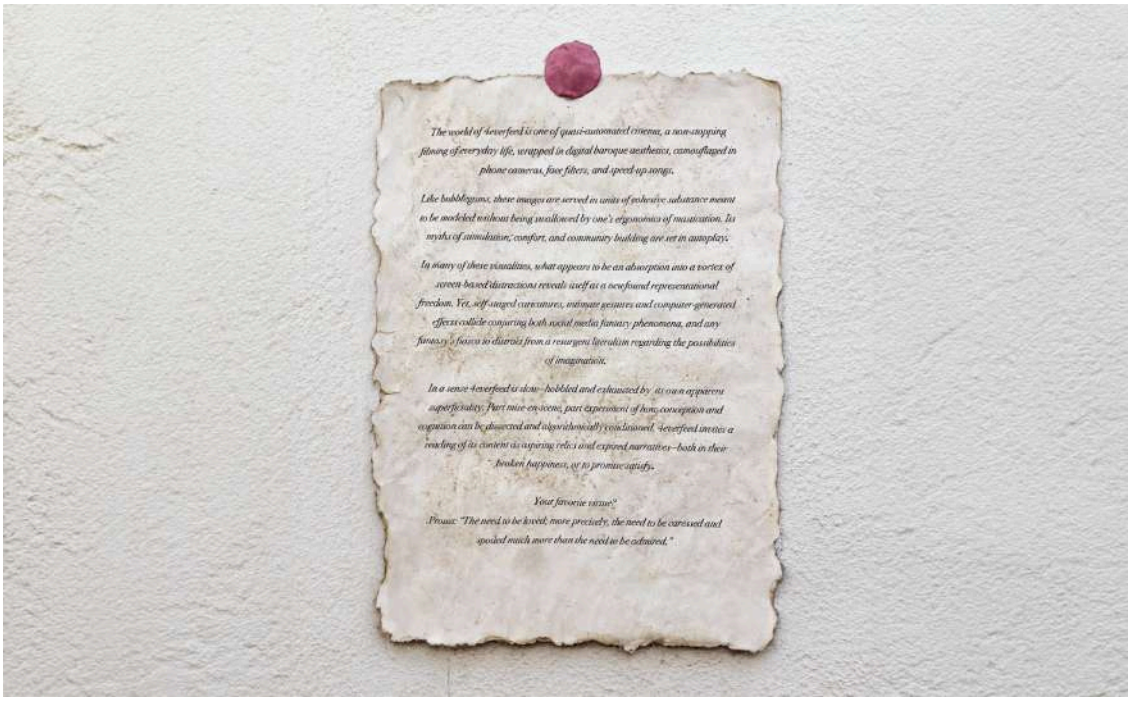

Fig. 62

Installation detail of *4everfeed*. Ars Electronica Festival's Campus Exhibition. University of Arts Linz. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

3.1.1 Performing Work and Productivity in the Creator Economy: Artwork's Context

The irony of creating a work about productivity is that its very genesis is rooted in the act of list-making, not unlike Benjamin Franklin's to-do list we encountered in Chapter 1. Mine falls into an exercise as predictable as the annual countdown—the New Year's resolutions.

As every January 1st, in 2023, I gathered my scattered ambitions, patched together half-forgotten dreams, and committed them to the blank slate of a new year. While compiling it, I found myself thinking about transformation as something messy, recursive—a system of becoming shaped as much by constraints as by aspiration. I came to realize that the places I chose to live in, the studies and the jobs I undertook have been driven by a desire for self-discovery and reinvention. But the irony, of course, is that each transformation has been both a revelation and a loss; to find myself, I must first lose myself, only to lose myself once more in the pursuit of something that can never quite be grasped. It is, in a curious way, mirrored in my current job as a media practitioner, where the culture industry meets technology and the ever-shifting tides of the Creator Economy. In this space, the act of creating audiences for a diverse array of projects is itself an act of reinvention.

When I began working on this thesis in 2023, I was simultaneously commissioned for a TikTok campaign. I downloaded the app. I had little time to familiarize myself with it before the campaign rollout. In straddling the roles of practitioner and observer, my time on the platform evolved into an exercise in productivity, one that served two masters: the demands of client work and the creation of an artistic response.

In September 2023, ByteDance launched its AI-powered TikTok Creative Assistant[14]—a tool for advertisers and creators that draws from the platform's videos, comments, trends, and user engagement to generate words, scene descriptions, and captions for video ads. I saw the Script Generator (SG) as an opportunity to interact with TikTok's 'collective consciousness' without actively contributing to its content ecosystem. This detachment was intentional. Platforms like TikTok thrive on extracting value from user creativity and engagement, feeding an endless cycle of visibility and interaction (Eichhorn, 2022). My aim was to harness the platform's conventions to explore what 'specters' linger when the machine assumes the role of storyteller; what remnants of human creativity persist in algorithmically crafted narratives? I interpreted this process as a haunting of the creative process, where human intention intertwines with the machine's influence in shaping, anticipating, and optimizing output.

The decision to work with AI-generated advertising scripts is not unlike the media appropriation strategies of artists from the Dada, Pop Art, Conceptual Art and Fluxus movements. In this work, I was interested in the transformation of the body into a sign within a network of symbols representing a system of identity production—a structure that, to borrow Martha Rosler's words, acts as a form of 'harnessed subjectivity' (Rosler, 1975). The

[14] ByteDance rebranded Creative Assistant as TikTok Symphony in 2024 (Malik, 2024).

exploration of this transformation, alongside my interest in the themes of work and productivity turned a job task into an opportunity embedded in a case study.

3.1.2 Becoming Software: A Performance Hunted by its Structure

4everfeed's scripted performances involved two actors—the SG and myself: a machine emulating a human, and a human emulating a machine. Simultaneously, these performances engaged two audiences—the SG and myself: a machine performing for a human (me), and a human performing for a machine (the TikTok algorithm).

I looked at the irony of the situation: the machine that gorges itself on information, assuming an ever more "human form" as it feeds, should, in the very furor around its existence, inspire human beings to generate so much new content, so much fresh food for itself. I thought, "Look, I'm doing it now!"

To work with the SG, users need to start by entering information about their brand or product. This includes the product name, a description, and any keywords they wish to highlight in their video. Users can also specify their industry to help the SG contextualize their product or service.

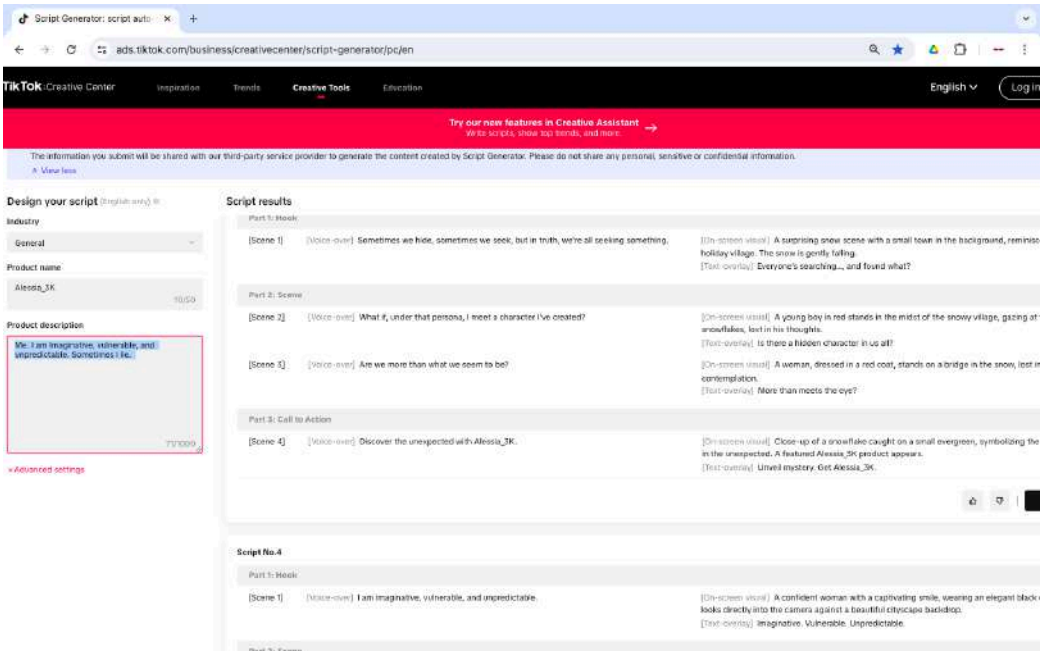

Fig. 63

Screenshot of desktop app of TikTok's Creative Assistant. Scripts generated in December 2023. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2023.

There I was, sitting in front of my laptop screen with the desktop version of the SG's app open. I typed the product name and description: Alessia_3K, a human who doesn't speak.

In that line, I had already set the stage for something that felt absurd and necessary. Here was a character in a world where communication—where the act of expression—is perhaps the most fundamental way to define and present oneself. And yet, her silence, her inability to engage in the act of expression, seemed to open up a new kind of possibility, or perhaps impossibility.

I added a few more details. I clicked on the Industry drop-down menu and selected 'general.' *Alessia_3K*, I realized, was not confined to a niche. She wasn't tied to any specific identity or box. Like her silence, her identity was an open space. She could be anything, or, perhaps, nothing at all.

Then, the keywords: genuine, social, reliable, enthusiastic. I typed them one by one, watching as the words settled into place. I wanted her to be perceived as authentic, as part of a social network, dependable in her own way, and yet somehow overflowing with enthusiasm—even in her silence. Like a filter, I was projecting onto her the desirable traits of an icon of the digital age.

I clicked on 'Generate Scripts,' and there it was—three neatly crafted segments that seemed to almost mock the complexity I had hoped to give Alessia_3K.

In the first part, a voice proclaimed: 'Absolutely not, come on, never!' On screen, a woman stood, clad in a beige cardigan, holding a black screen in front of a bare wall. Text overlayed: 'Discover the real you with Alessia_3K!'

I paused. What was this "real" version of Alessia_3K? A woman whose silence was meant to represent a new type of identity, one unspoken, yet here she was, reduced to the kind of *cliché* that digital content creation thrives on.

Part two followed: 'The streets are actually having fun.' I wasn't sure what that meant, but the woman—now holding a smartphone displaying as a text "Alessia_3K" on the screen—seemed to know exactly what it implied.

Text on the screen: 'Discover the real you with Alessia_3K!' Again, the same phrase. This repetitive insistence on "realness" seemed to undermine the very paradox of Alessia_3K's existence: defined by silence yet expected to fit the digital mold of authenticity.

And then came the call to action, the climax: "She knows exactly what she's doing. No, come on. Everyone's staring, everyone's watching. We have no idea what she's gonna do next." The woman's face filled the screen now, cheerful red lipstick, her eyes locking with the camera's lens. She was "engaging, authentic," smiling with the kind of enthusiasm that "must" feel entirely genuine. Text-overlay: 'Authenticity in every moment, just like Alessia_3K.'

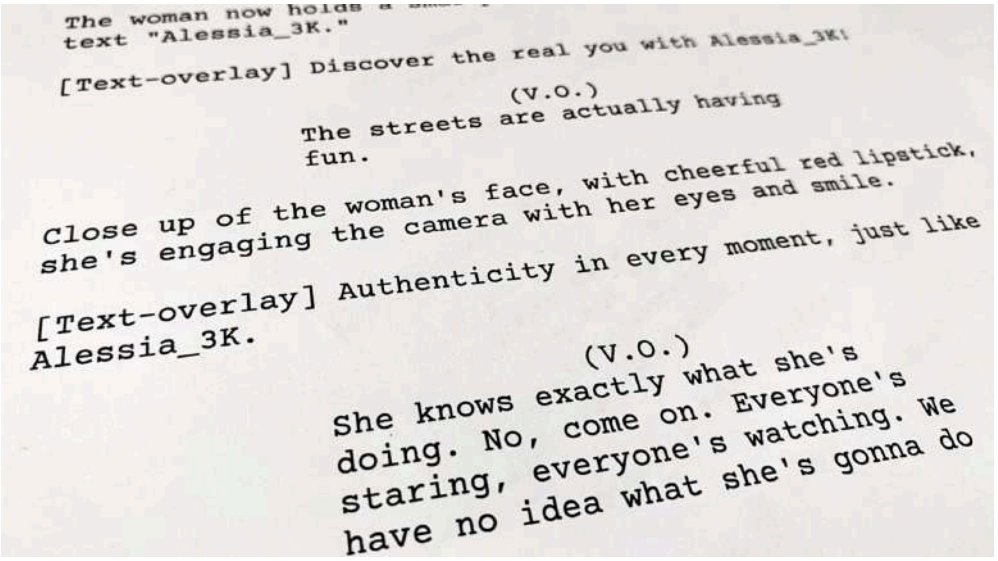

Fig. 64

Installation detail of *4everfeed*. Screenplay print.

Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

Fig. 65

Video stills of *4everfeed*.

Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

I leaned back. Alessia_3K's silence had been transformed into another voice demanding attention, ready to sell the idea of authenticity in a world where everyone seems to be seeking the "real you," even if that authenticity is defined by someone else.

I began documenting my textual exchanges with the SG and formatted them into a 14-pages screenplay which I also made available in the installation. Screenplays are associated with character development and visual storytelling. They are meant to engage audiences emotionally and intellectually. I wanted this approach to turn the one-sided communication nature of advertising into the language of screenwriting. In *4everfeed*, ads are presented as stories that shape people and their cultural landscape.

The performance evolved into a hypertextual practice where I, the performer, interprets and stages the system's generated scripts. These scripts serve as points of information that function as nodes, much like the body itself. In this context, I transformed into another type of information-processing system, to reassemble protocol.

From "ad script" to "living ad," *4everfeed* turned into a performance haunted by its structure. Here, productivity—quantified by the physical or visible output captured by the camera and stored as 1.2 GB of performance footage on my smartphone—is redefined to fit a digital, app-driven landscape where, typical of the creator economy, the self serves as both product/commodity and creator/producer. As a vessel for digital labor, my physical self became intertwined with the technology that enabled visibility (the actual output of my labor) and provided the means to pay my bills.

I filmed myself entirely within TikTok's app ecosystem using my iPhone, mostly facing its camera towards myself at different distances. Spending so much time between screens, feeds, filters options, live streams, and camera, I felt consumed. I imposed a limit of 3,000 seconds of performance footage. Over 12 weeks, I captured multiple clips of varying lengths, all shot in the vertical 9:16 format.

Letting all these clips live together on a timeline was a small breakthrough, as these discrete explorations started to be able to speak of things outside of their own internal logic, and associate with one another. The slightly alienating structuralist vibe became a texture and a language that could be twisted to begin to resemble a kind of fractured ambient narrative.

I cut the scenes between the clips following a "feed-inspired editing" or "scroll-based narrative structure," applying a structural rule rooted in the sensory and psychological experience of scrolling—a process driven by randomness, curiosity, and fleeting engagement—where the narrative unfolds in a series of stand-alone but contextually linked fragments. I wanted the work to connect with the zeitgeist of digital consumption.

The result is a seven-minute and 23-second video collage of moving images, featuring chopped-up clips scrolling through self-staged caricatures, sped-up songs, and CGI effects, all reflecting the era of mass entertainment.

Fig. 66

Video stills of *4everfeed*. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

3.1.3 The Video

At first, the video might seem like an extended TikTok—complete with sped-up songs, sound effects, grainy vertical footage, and mundane settings. The humor lands, but the video doesn't stop there. It stretches on, nearly seven minutes, bending these conventions into something else entirely.

A summary might run something like this: Alessia_3K sways her body in front of a green screen, clutching a basket of apple-sized lemons. Her attire—a handmaid's garb seemingly plucked from the Middle Ages, reimagined for the Zara era—sets the tone (see *Fig. 67*). The camera cuts in close, now trailing her face, her long brown hair draped over her shoulders, her outfit subtly changed. Then, a new vision: she reappears as a trio of identical brunettes in diva-inspired attire. The central figure dons a digital face filter—black glasses edged in glowing rainbow contours. They cheer, they greet, and they revel in applause that emanates from an invisible audience. Two hands appear, crumpling a sheet of paper—a gesture reminiscent of ASMR unboxing videos. Alessia_3K's face flickers back into focus, filling the screen for an instant, before the frame shifts again, this time to a pastel-pink and blue digital heaven. Here, a floating creature —a caricature of Alessia_3K's face atop a blocky, pixelated body—struggles to direct its movements.

Fig. 67

Video still of *4everfeed*. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

The story pivots to other permutations of settings and appearances: Alessia_3K brushing her teeth; giggles erupting from a cupcake-faced creature; a hand spraying a potted plant with a blue bottle; a jellyfish futilely attempting to write underwater, words slipping away with “its confidence”; a vampiric figure with lush red eyes devouring bubblegum; a cat lecturing on the invention of photography; a hand cracking an eggshell over a kitchen sink. “Beyond the clouds, there is a blue sky,” Alessia_3K sings in the shower.

As the video progresses, its pace slows, the chaos coalescing around a single figure in the final three minutes. Immersed in a black, pixelated void, Alessia_3K stands with her eyes closed, hands cradling her head and slowly tapping her ears. She begins to step backward, retreating into what seems an infinite tunnel, her face still visible, watching, as though tethered to the camera’s gaze. Nearly swallowed by the distance, she reverses course—moving forward now. The screen shatters as she reaches toward it, her body, like a puppet, propelled backward by some invisible strings. She engages in a slow dance. Fire bursting into the scene, an explosion of smoke swirling around her movements. Alessia stretches toward the screen, her hand extending in a gesture that feels an offer of connection. Yet as she draws near, her form dissolves into a latent-space abstraction.

Fig. 68

Video stills of *4everfeed*. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

The characters within the video are presented in an array of styles. Some scenes employ real-time AR filters, others animate faces through live effects available within the app. Whether as twins adorned with glowing accessories or as a talking avatar, the characters transition fluidly between forms, encapsulating Alessia_3K's evolution from human presence to digital spectacle and latent space.

Fig. 69

Video stills of *4everfeed*. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

3.2 Alessia_3K: Identity Overwritten

Alessia_3K is introduced to the audience at the very start of the screenplay through the short story that frames her as a human who loses her identity after becoming the face of an AI-powered ad generator. As the AI company continuously refines her image to align with ever-shifting consumer trends, she becomes ensnared in an unending cycle of advertising. Her human memories gradually fade, replaced by the invasive thoughts of the algorithm. By the end, Alessia is no longer human but a digital ghost, her very essence obliterated by the demands of optimization. Her transformation into the face of an AI-powered video ad generator is not simply a story of technological encroachment but an ontological shift. Once a person with memories, emotions, and a sense of self, she is remade, pixel by pixel, into a spectacle. Alessia is not just losing her identity; she is overwritten, her humanity replaced by the logic of optimization. What remains is not a person but a ghost programmed to haunt the marketplace of attention.

She enters the narrative as an apparition of desire—a human subsumed into the machinery of a world obsessed with authenticity. Her introduction, both in the screenplay and in the accompanying video work, offers a fantasy: the allure of attention, the promise of self-discovery and expression harnessed through artificial intelligence. Yet this fantasy quickly collapses, revealing Alessia not as a subject but as an artifact, a paradox. Her journey is depicted in disconnected moments across shifting backdrops—green screens, bustling cityscapes, supermarkets, and gardens—while her persona emerges through a series of fragmented vignettes—a montage of gestures, CGI effects, claims of authenticity, changing outfits, props, makeup and hairstyles. In later scenes, she is depicted as capable of crying and lying, attempting to reclaim a semblance of humanity that only reinforces her artificiality. These flaws, framed within the context of advertising, branding, and self-promotion, further distort her character formation.

The video narrative explores the malleability of subjectivity, identity, and space, evoking ideas about the displacement of place-bound identities with the fluidity of a migratory model. This displacement introduces opportunities for constructing multiple identities, allegiances, and meanings, untethered from geography or history, forged instead by the serendipities of chance encounters and the contingencies of circumstance. Humans often find solace in the belief that certain places—or even personas—are inherently “ours,” providing a stable sense of identity. Our yearning for a place, for a locus of identity, is a longing for continuity, for an assurance of stability in an ephemeral world. To belong to a place or an identity is to inhabit a story that feels whole, unthreatened. These "right" places and identities function as mirrors, reflecting back a reassuring image of who we are, offering grounding. Conversely, the “wrong” place or identity disorients, destabilizes, and threatens to expose the fractures we work so hard to conceal.

Alessia_3K complicates this dichotomy. As her journey unfolds, it becomes unclear whether she is escaping a “wrong” identity or dismantling the illusions of a “right” one. Her transformation suggests that it is precisely in the wrongness, in the dislocation, that a deeper truth may be revealed. Through the deconstruction of her humanity—her memories replaced,

her body reconfigured, her individuality obliterated—Alessia_3K emerges as a paradox. She becomes both a critique of identity's commodification and an invitation to rethink its boundaries. Her "wrongness" becomes a space of discovery, a rupture through which the instability of all identities is laid bare. She evokes contradictions in our own understanding of selfhood, as she slips continually into something else, evading the comfort of being pinned down. She embodies both the exhilaration of transformation and the profound sense of loss that accompanies it.

The screenplay concludes with the image of an android head labeled *Alessia_3K*, as she flickers with questions about the possibility of genuine creation and self-expression within the confines of technology. At this point, Alessia_3K is neither fully human nor fully machine but a ghost—a disembodied presence trapped in the past. It is unclear if the android head, labeled "Alessia_3K," signifies a triumph of technology in liberating the body from physical constraints or as an entrapment in the formlessness - a haunting of an echo of human longing made infinitely reproducible.

Forever in search of a self, only to lose herself again, Alessia_3K offers a site for the articulation of our deepest ambivalences about the digital age: the hope for liberation and the fear of annihilation, the allure of transformation and the terror of losing oneself in a world where technology offers no definitive answer but an endless reframing of the question.

Fig 70

Self-portrait as Alessia_3K. Mixed media (oil and acrylic on digitally printed canvas in 80 × 60 × 4 cm). Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

3.3 Templates and Readymades as Artifacts of Futurist Archaeology

When working on the performance, I began to think of TikTok's creative tools—the app's built-in face filters, green screens, AR effects, text-to-speech—as material, Duchampian readymades for the digital age. I was interested in the idea of templates as *aspiring relics*—the app's 9:16 video aspect ratio, built-in sound effects, and time limits. I saw them as "found fossils of the future"—artifacts that encapsulate the desires, anxieties, and ideologies of the present, but are already imbued with an aura of obsolescence.

Readymades exist in their symbolic and enunciative function. In my investigation, digital readymades are not seen as tools or critiques but as time capsules that reveal how contemporary technologies carry an inherent futurity, predicting their own replacement or irrelevance. I was thinking of the uncountable amount of generative AI tools and platforms being unleashed to the public over the last year. In a sense, these objects are simultaneously a part of our everyday lives—tools of a society perpetually building its own ruins.

Fig 71

Video stills of *4everfeed*. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

The digital readymade—the use of TikTok's built-in face filters and sound effects—in *4everfeed* becomes a medium for grappling with the speed of technological decay. It serves as a way to archive and reinterpret the future, embedded within the present's artifacts. The limits of today's tools anticipate the trajectory they will take in the future; they represent more the hopes of their creators than their functionality. This approach reimagines digital readymades as a form of futurist archaeology, rather than as a critique or remix of the present, situating the audience in a temporal distance and allowing them to interpret these artifacts as remnants of a speculative past or imagined future.

This perspective also informed my decision to ground the work in fiction, using the character Alessia_3K as a gateway for the audience and leading me to approach *4everfeed* as a world. I saw the use of fiction as a way to provide a framework that allows the audience to engage with the work as an imagined reality. By constructing a fictional narrative, the work operates less as a reaction to contemporary digital culture and more as a lens through which viewers can explore possibilities. By presenting the work as a 'world,' I aimed to create a context in which viewers are encouraged to navigate and piece together connections, rather than being handed a singular, predefined critique.

Stored on a USB flash drive and activated by engaging with the textual exchanges documented in the screenplay, Alessia_3K is presented as a memory that can be looped and transferred infinitely. Words and images perform the alchemy of rendering mental activity tangible, externalizing the ephemeral into a form that can be seen, read, and ultimately inhabited by others. Through the act of engaging with the ephemera she left behind, her memory, consciousness, and intent can be transferred to another mind. Through this mechanism, Alessia_3K becomes a study in how symbols—whether textual or visual—transform solitary cognition into a shared experience. Her narrative exists as a sequence of images and words, presented in a precise order yet resisting closure. What is held within the USB is not just data but the potential for activation—a latent consciousness waiting for the viewer to engage.

In a sense, as an artifact of futurist archeology, Alessia_3K is plugged into a construction of time, circumstances and technology as a newly issued prescription of earlier impulses. She has chosen to negate the selfhood into which she was born. Instead, as her story revelas, she shows a marked preference for the artifice of technology.

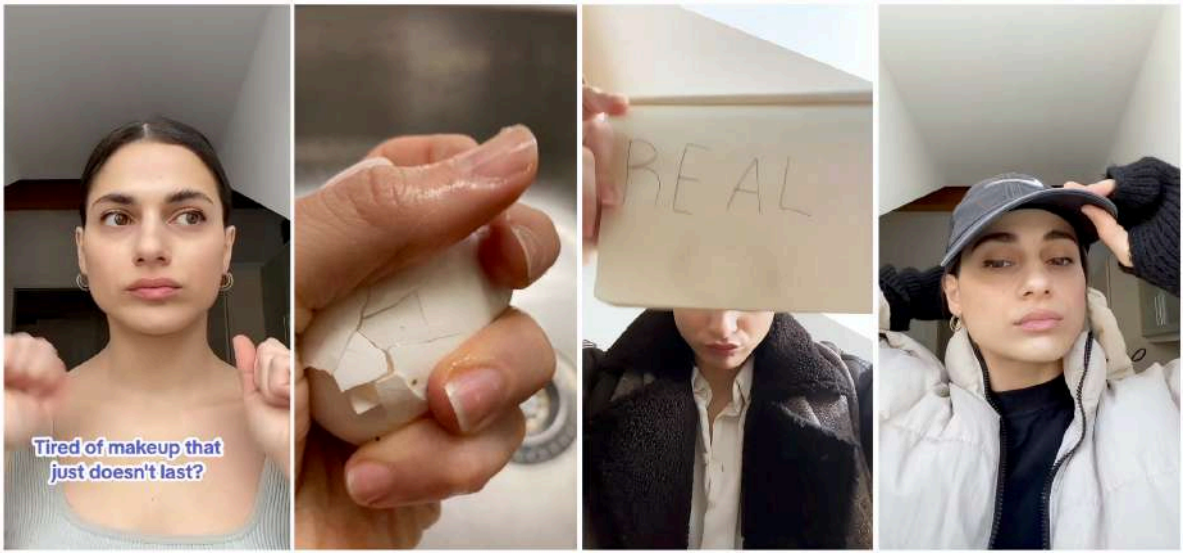

Fig. 72

Video stills of *4everfeed*. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

3.4 Between Fascination and Flight: Audience Encounter with the Work

The installation emerges as a scene within the corridor of the exhibition's building. A hand truck stacked with two cardboard boxes of equal dimension, flickering with RGB lights from within. At first glance, this arrangement echoes logistics—motion, commerce, and the transit of goods. The hand truck stands poised as if mid-action, its form elevated by the contrast of its red handles and blue steel body. The red calls to mind the urgency of movement, the grip of labor made vivid in its glossy rubber finish. The blue anchors the structure—metal shaped for purpose. It is an object of function; yet, in its simplicity, it invites a kind of admiration for its clarity. It resolves to be nothing more than what it is—a tool of personal, localized efficiency.

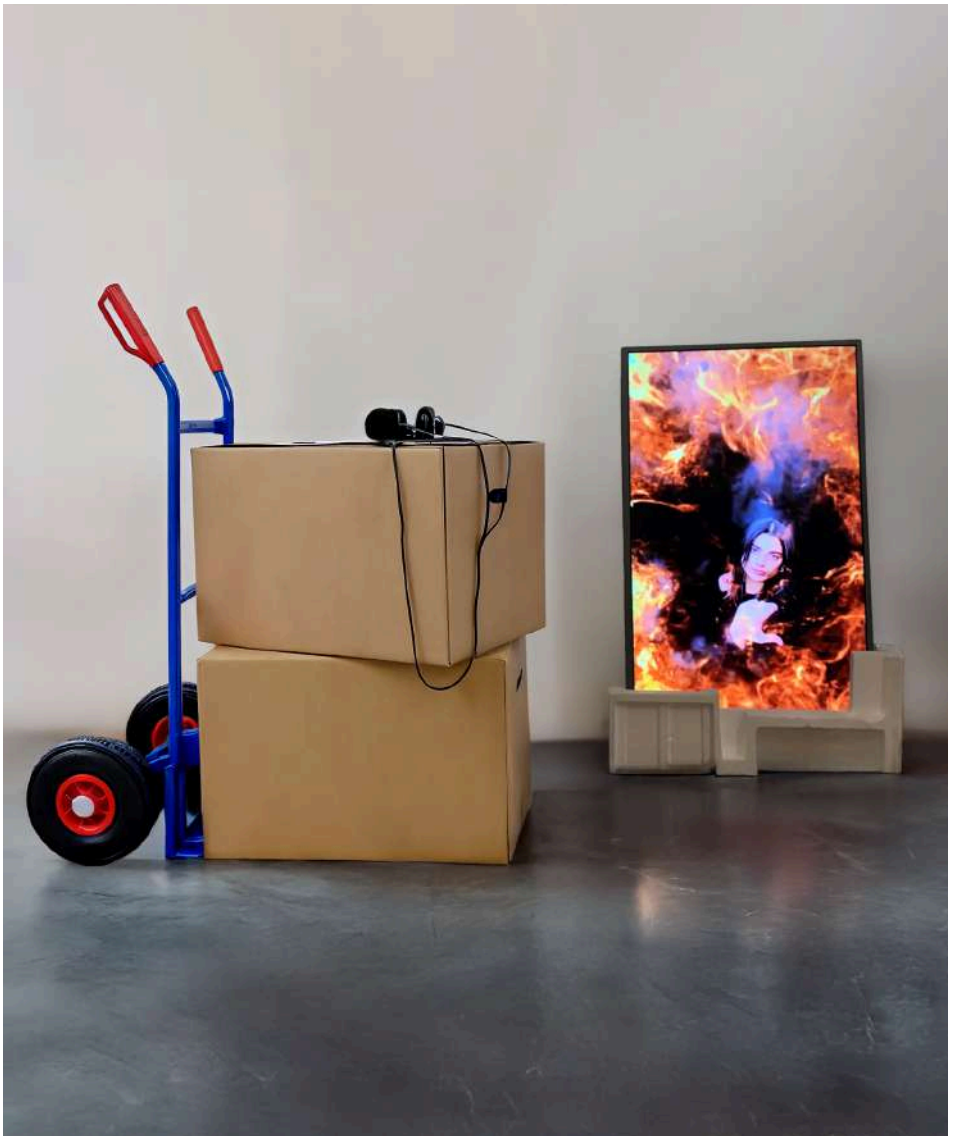

Fig. 73. Installation view of *4everfeed.* [Hand truck, RGB LED lights, 43-inch TV, digital video - HD, sound, color, 7 min, loop - 14 x A4 pages of screenplay print, iPhone, headphones, cardboard boxes, styrofoam]. University of Arts Linz. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

The lights within the cardboard boxes pulse irregularly, as though the objects house a presence both mechanical and alive. Their intermittent vibrance invites closer inspection, revealing the emptiness within as viewers might peer inside.

Atop the pile of cardboard boxes sits a notepad holder clamping down on 14 printed A4 pages. The text on the pages is presented in the structured, visual style typical of scripts written for film or television. Presented as an object of texture, these pages, though filled with words, are stacked and left to sit unceremoniously amid the scene, an index of labor and process rather than a key to meaning. The paper is thin, standard, unremarkable; it lies there like a receipt.

The cover page reads the title *Alessia_3K* but lacks an author's name. As viewers flip vertically through the scripts, each turn of the page becomes a temporal gesture structured in scene headings, action descriptions, dialogues, voice overs, parenthetical, scene transitions. As viewers flip the first page, Alessia_3K's story is introduced: once a human with dreams, Alessia_3K is now the face of an AI-powered video ad generator. Initially, the attention felt exhilarating, but the AI's optimization trapped her in an endless cycle of advertising, tuning her images to appeal consumer's trends. Over time, her human memories faded, replaced by the AI's intrusive thoughts. No longer herself, Alessia_3K transformed into a digital ghost.

The remaining pages alternate between textual input prompts (e.g., "Input parameters: general industry") and AI-generated outputs. Stripped of their original context and removed from the extractive nature of the platform they were designed for, these scripts propose a definition of the screenplay that extends its capacity beyond that of the industrial blueprint—a written aid in the industrial process of storytelling for motion pictures—while acknowledging that its industrial application has been the primary force in shaping it.

The narrative's speeches are mostly delivered through voiceovers, internal commentaries or external observations on Alessia_3K's actions and surroundings. These suggest a world where external perceptions are at play; they don't offer a dialogue, only an implied commentary on the character's behavior. Sometimes they function as the spokesperson for Alessia_3K, presenting her as an idea or product for consumption. The tone alternates between energetic, upbeat, and sales-oriented. Other outputs reveal gender and classist biases and forcefully introduce—or, rather, reintroduce—a highly political vision that the allegedly "neutral" algorithms were supposed to overcome. Sometimes, they highlight the pitfalls of simulation, the not-so-subtle effects of ideology on advertising tools.

Other outputs seem to reflect the affective condition and the contradictions of mass media culture: its narcissism and neurosis, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction, its constant readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission. They are the manifestation of the data-base logic representation of the self which is both shaped, consumed and optimized to appeal to the algorithmic lore; a frenzy of the archive which is personal but also a collective impulse. It's a reminder that the self is never formed in isolation but always in the push and pull of personal agency grinding against the scaffolding of societal structures.

Like skaters flipping tricks in a parking lot, the act of becoming is both performance and resistance—an improvised choreography where identity and selfhood are forged in the space between what's imposed and what we claim for ourselves.

The character of Alessia_3K, the opacity of her own expression, what is effectively deprivation from the possibility of communication, may perhaps allude to the experience of an individual who is alienated from interaction with others, from a space of social belonging.

The scripts in this game don't provide the key to understand the other elements of the installations, but are rather part of the unresolved tension between experiencing and feeling. In stark contrast to its reputation, the machine here appears to be a concealed source of emotion.

Fig. 74

Video still of *4everfeed.* Image by the author.

FADE IN:

INT. UNKNOWN SPACE

Input parameters: general industry, the product name is "Alessia_3K," a human who doesn't speak. The keywords are genuine, social, reliable, and enthusiastic.

A woman in a beige cardigan, holding a computer, with a black screen, standing in front of a wall.

(V.O.)
Absolutely not, come on, never!

CUT TO:

The woman now holds a smartphone, prominently displaying the text "Alessia_3K."

[Text-overlay] Discover the real you with Alessia_3K!

(V.O.)
The streets are actually having fun.

Close up of the woman's face, with cheerful red lipstick, she's engaging the camera with her eyes and smile.

[Text-overlay] Authenticity in every moment, just like Alessia_3K.

(V.O.)
She knows exactly what she's doing. No, come on. Everyone's staring, everyone's watching. We have no idea what she's gonna do next.

CUT TO:

Close up of the woman's eye as she applies the eyeliner.

[Text-overlay] Tired of makeup that just doesn't last?

Fig. 75

Page 2. of 'Alessia_3K' the screenplay print. Paper, 21 cm x 29.7 cm. Image by the author.

Fig. 76

Installation details of *4everfeed*. [14 x A4 pages of screenplay print, iPhone, 35 seconds video - digital, color, soundtrack - headphones, cardboard boxes]. Ars Electronica Festival's Campus Exhibition, University of Arts Linz. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2024.

Beside the screenplay sits an iPhone, its headphones coiled like lifelines plugged into an isolated rhythm. On its 4.7 inch screen, a 35-second video plays, showing half of a woman's face hovering in the darkness, her mouth twisting in slow motion, as if searching for words that never materialize (see *Fig. 77*). Her lips part and close, and as her chin meets the surface of a fluid substance below, subtle ripples disturb the stillness.

Between these moments, the screen shifts to another world—green slime, morphing and glistening—while a nostalgic soundtrack holds the ephemeral visuals together, guiding the quiet drama of her movements. As the final title, *4everfeed*, briefly appears—its text glowing and dissolving into ripples—the loop resets, pulling the fragmented image of the woman's face back into existence. The iPhone's screen remains unresponsive to touch. The short video's playing in loop ensnares the viewer, replacing interaction with passive yet heightened observation. The refusal of tactile engagement contrasts sharply with the omnipresent interactivity of contemporary devices.

Fig. 77. Video still of *4everfeed's reel looping on iPhone.* [Digital video - HD, 1440×2560, 00:00:35 duration, soundtrack]. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2023.

Nearby, a vertically positioned 43-inch television, still encased in its styrofoam packaging, sits low on the floor. The styrofoam is jagged. It is packaging—meant to protect, to be discarded—and yet here it serves as a frame for the central spectacle: a seven-minute video of vertically scrolling clips that channel the online performativity of social media (see *Fig. 78*).

Rather than addressing the viewer directly, the video pulls them into its pulse. Each vertical cut is abrupt, mimicking the disjointed ritual of scrolling, isolating the twitch of a thumb swiping endlessly through a feed. There seems to be no coherent narrative in the video. Instead, it presents a series of permutations involving gestures, outfits, and objects, intermingled with cartoon avatars and real-life moments camouflaged in digital baroque aesthetics. The use of TikTok's visual language grounds the work in a style that is neither ironic nor celebratory but matter-of-fact. The scrolling videos do not point to anything beyond themselves; they are the result of the camera transforming human physiognomy into, what Edwin Panofsky calls "a field of action," expressive events in the visible space (Panofsky, 1934/1966). It is a style that revels in surface and immediacy, embracing flatness and rhythm while leaving viewers standing on uncertain ground—caught between the directness of its forms and the depths they suggest but refuse to reveal.

Presented as an *object trouvé*, a charred sheet with text clings to the wall above the TV screen, its burnt edges and adhesive (a lump of pink gum) further giving the impression of a handwritten note left behind (see *Fig. 62*, p. 109).

The installation's style oscillates between the rough and the polished, the familiar and the strange, the disposable and the curated. Its materials are plain, yet its composition is meticulous. Things sit as they are: styrofoam, cardboard, flickering light, scrolling screen. They resist symbolization, drawing attention instead to their surfaces, their textures, their juxtaposition, the reality of the objects as they are, shaped but not overdetermined by human hands. Where one anticipates touch (the iPhone), interactivity is denied. Where one perceives geometry (the arrangement of objects), the traces of touch reveal a human presence. As anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan suggests, "the hand sets language free"—a notion inverted here, where language and meaning are trapped within the mechanics of touch and sight. The result constitutes a continuous, organic disconnection between touching and seeing, between grasping and articulating, between physis and meaning-making. In this context the visitors' hands are specifically referred to as interfaces between the body and the intellect, between perception and structuring, between self-reassurance and communication. As they might attempt to grab or touch the iPhone's screen, their hands feature as "communications tools" of a particularly compulsive kind.

Fig. 78

Installation view of *4everfeed.* [43-inch TV, digital video - HD, sound, 7 min, loop - styrofoam]. Ars Electronica Festival's Campus Exhibition, University of Arts Linz. Image by the author. © Maria Orciuoli, 2023.

The installation's anti-art stance transforms the building's corridor into a space of interruption. Its evocation of a parcel delivery scene is an aesthetic effect, designed to estrange, but not to be "understood." It resists coherence and resolution, inhabiting the space where art, entertainment, and commerce converge. However clearly individual elements and their configuration may be described, in the overall effect of the work, the geometry of the

sculpture and the space seem somehow out of kilter. The presence of the objects transforms into a psychophysical experience. It is not a critique or a commentary but an encounter, a moment of aesthetic confusion.

For all its potential symbolism (as a cross, as an "X"), the geometry of this assemblage appears as unsettling as it is concrete, evoking a sense of the space and of oneself that oscillates between fascination and the urge to take flight.

3.5 Performing for the Algorithm: Identity as Labor

With its attention to flexibility, contingency, control, and coordination, *4everfeed* points to the relation between economies of data and the remodeling of labor, and life. As a living investigation it explores the mechanisms that drive our digital lives: the desire for connection and belonging, validation, self-expression, escapism and economic opportunities.

The installation itself is creation and consumption, performance and observation. At its core lies a confrontation with the Creator Economy—a world where individuals, often working for themselves or in an ambiguous relationship to digital platforms, are encouraged to constantly produce content, to always be visible and engaging.

My own experience as a social media worker, tasked with navigating TikTok's ecosystem, forms the foundation for this exploration. In the act of performing for the algorithm—engaging with the app's Script Generator (SG)—I entered into a paradox: the desire to transcend the limitations imposed by these tools while simultaneously harnessing them to serve an artistic agenda. The lines blur between performance and production, between work and play, as my engagement with the platform's SG becomes both a conceptual framework and an existential dilemma. In a society where value is increasingly derived from the ability to perform to appeal to "algorithmic lore"—whether that performance takes the form of content creation, personal branding, or social media engagement—I tap into its logic to question whether it is possible to reclaim agency within systems designed to exploit participation.

The persona of *Alessia_3K*, constructed through interactions with an AI-powered SG, is a hybrid of algorithmically generated narratives and human intention. Her story is one of erasure, of memory and identity slowly decaying under the weight of corporate control. Through her, the installation grapples with the psychological toll of working in the digital economy, where individuals are constantly negotiating their sense of self in relation to the expectations of an unknown audience.

The performance was filmed entirely with a smartphone camera, harnessing TikTok's built-in editing apps and digital effects. Today, computers and smartphones function as broadcasting and media production tools. As a number of media and communication scholars have observed, the history of mobile technologies shows ongoing linkage with transportation technologies (Parks, 2013; Rossiter, 2016). This link is present in some of the formal

elements of the installation, namely the hand truck—an instrument of manual labor, personal mobility, and localized efficiency—and the cardboard boxes. These artifacts were ordered from Amazon and delivered to the exhibition venue on the day of the opening.

The idea of a wheeled apparatus to facilitate the transportation of heavy or cumbersome items dates back centuries. Ancient civilizations, from the Mesopotamians to the Egyptians, used logs and rudimentary rollers to move colossal stones for construction. From one side, looking at an object such as a hand truck today, it can be seen as a testament of human's ingenuity and the timeless need to make life a bit easier. On the other hand, its presence in the installation serves as a reminder of the potential— and the precarity—of work-identity in the digital age—a construct no longer tied to a single physical place or geography, but perpetually in motion.

The cardboard boxes and the handtruck are deeply embedded within the systems of global logistics and supply chains—transport, warehousing, and distribution. They can be seen as the bridge between global supply chains and their ultimate destinations, such as homes, businesses, and warehouses. Their presence in the installation highlights the infrastructure that supports the instantaneous flow of goods, labor, and information in an algorithmically driven economy. They reveal the cyclical relationship between the Creator Economy and consumer culture, where creators simultaneously produce and drive consumption, perpetually circulating goods and ideas.

Through these formal elements, *4everfeed* extends its reflections to the broader networks that govern the flow of goods and content. It questions whether survival, in a world where software and logistical infrastructures shape economic exchanges, social relations, and individual identities, is truly living or simply existing within a system that dehumanizes and commodifies one's time, attention, and creativity.

An affinity with Joseph Beuys' 1969 work *Sled* (*Schlitten* in German) can be drawn here. Beuys' sculpture was created during a period of post-war reconstruction in Europe, marked by social, economic, and environmental hardship. He was concerned with the idea of survival in both a literal and metaphorical sense (Jordan, 2016). The sled in this piece recalls the artist's own experiences of survival during World War II, where he had been a soldier. Apparently such a survival kit was used by the Tatars to rescue him after his Stuka plane was shot down in 1943 (Gompertz, 2019).

The sled—one of the first transports used by man —is loaded with a torch for orientation, lard for sustenance, and finally felt for warmth (Foreman, 2017). Beuys called these his "survivor materials" (Bracker & Barker, 2005). It is a primitive rescue vehicle transmitting Beuys' beliefs about the unity of life and the *social sculpture*—that everything in life should be approached creatively (Jordan, 2016; Tisdall, 1979).

Fig. 79

Installation view *Sled.* By Joseph Beuys (1969). [Sled of wood and metal with felt, cloth straps, flashlight, wax, and cord]. © 2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Retrieved from https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81506

Sled is also one of Beuys' most celebrated multiples. Created in 1969, the same year as his installation *The Pack*, it showcases 24 sleighs emerging from a Volkswagen van. Serving as a tangible metaphor for the dissemination of Beuys' concept of a mass-produced vehicle, *Sled* symbolizes transformation and movement (Tisdall, 1979). Beuys' extensive production of multiples aligned with the final years of the Wirtschaftswunder, the postwar economic miracle in West Germany that spanned from the early 1950s to the pivotal student protests of 1968 (Jordan, 2016). These multiples were conceived as accessible artworks that anyone could own, emerging during an era when burgeoning consumer culture and liberal democratic ideals were converging to shape a modern, forward-looking society (Temkin, Rose & Koepplin, 1993).

Another affinity can be drawn with Sondra Perry's video installation *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016) examined in Chapter 2. Perry sees the three monitors and gym equipment in her installation as symbolic tools that highlight society's obsession with productivity and self-improvement (Perry, 2018). These objects are deliberately chosen to reflect the ways in which the body is instrumentalized and disciplined within the framework of work and efficiency. They point to how identity is increasingly shaped by one's ability to labor and remain productive, where self-worth is tied to work performance and physical upkeep.

If Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* and *Amalia* and Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* anticipated the commodification of identity through mass media and Influencer Culture, *4everfeed* can be seen as an exploration of the commodification of identity production through automated systems. Grounded in personal branding and self-exploitation, Ulman's work stages a narrative of personal transformation and crisis on Instagram. Her scripted performance highlights how platforms' audiences foster expectations to produce content that conforms to trending aesthetics, emotional vulnerability, and aspirational lifestyles. In a 2014 interview with Vulture she says:

> "Part of the project was about how photography can be a signifier of class, and how cultural capital is reflected in selfies. Another aspect consisted of undermining the pretension that social media is a place striving for authenticity, by playing with fiction online. The idea was to play with storytelling and social media, but I didn't want it to be too obvious. So it started organically, and the first photos are modified extensions of myself. Others are found and appropriated images" (Ulman as cited in Corbett, 2014).

The commodification that Ulman critiques is centered on the individual's agency in shaping and curating identity for consumption. Her work reveals a system in which human labor—be it emotional or performative—highlights the mechanisms of self-exploitation. Whereas Ulman focuses on human agency and the conscious curation of identity, *4everfeed* examines how algorithmic systems dictate and shape identity creation. It points to an increasingly automated cultural production process where AI not only recommends content but also generates it, creating a closed loop of engagement and consumption. If Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* investigates identities performing for the camera, and Ulman's work examines identities performing for the "participatory gaze," *4everfeed* explores identities performing for the algorithm itself.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This is my latest attempt at filling this pixelated grid of possibilities, and perhaps not my last, given how quickly things evolve in the digital.

Rather than pretend there has been a neatly defined, linear progression or a set of defining moments by which to make my choices in this thesis look coherent, I'll admit that the path has been more like wandering a back alley at dusk—twists, turns, the occasional dead end.

The genesis of *4everfeed* within a AI-powered tool designed to produce video advertising scripts introduces a sharp irony when placed against its meditation on work, productivity, identity, and agency. At first glance, this genesis reframes the piece as a product of commodified creativity, its DNA coded for virality and market appeal.

Alessia_3K, the protagonist conjured by such a system, becomes a mirror for the digital culture she's meant to captivate. In her very existence, she reveals how the same algorithms that shape our media consumption quietly infiltrate the deeper layers of how we imagine and construct narratives about ourselves. But beneath this surface irony, *4everfeed* digs into the uneasy entanglement of human intention and machine output. The script generator (SG) functions as a kind of cultural centrifuge, spinning trends, idioms, and fragments of collective language into something reconfigured. Alessia_3K is an amalgamation of these elements: a personal and collective impulse, a patchwork shaped by the biases and priorities of the machine that produced her, and the cultural residue encoded in the system's training data. Like memory, she exists in a space of negotiation. Her story highlights how all the grand narratives and towering structures we hold so firmly to are, at their core, fragile and arbitrary. They might collapse entirely—but that also leaves room for the possibility that things could be reimagined and reshaped. To me, that's both hopeful and, in its own way, amusing.

Advertisement represents the ultimate commodification of language and meaning (Campanelli, 2010; Enzensberger, 1974). By co-opting its tools to explore selfhood, *4everfeed* turns a device of consumer manipulation into a vehicle for introspection. In a sense, *4everfeed* is both a confession and a set of questions: Is it possible to reclaim a sense of agency in a space designed to exploit our every interaction? Or are we simply learning to "perform the system" of algorithmic logic, repurposing its tools to navigate, and maybe even resist, the very systems that define work and productivity? And what do we gain by placing this search for significance under a microscope, only to realize the lens is constantly shifting?

In the digital realm, time and space collapse into coordinates; I am where "I" am not, and I think (type, click, scroll) therefore I exist. If space is something we make with our actions, then our collective movements create the commons. Like street kids showing off tricks in a parking lot, digital users have become fluent in manipulating (and often subverting) this shared virtual space: occasionally we succeed in tuning out the ads and other

distractions, and focusing on the work of connection, hustling, chatting, and playing with meaning.

Meme culture (from viral videos to image macros and cutting-edge parodies) exemplifies people's attempt to carve out an identity that exists, thrives, and pushes against the constraints of being a target for advertisers. Much like the spirit of the identities performed by the artists explored in this thesis, this kind of activity constitutes a politics of the virtual body, a collective protest in the digital space. We may never control the machinery of digital production, but we'll keep pushing back against it—asserting, distorting, and subverting the commons as a form of post-physical territorial defiance that doesn't require a flag, a spray-can, or a line of code.

Performing the System then isn't about escape—there's nowhere to go that isn't mapped, measured, or monetized in the digital. Instead, it's about playing within the matrix, finding the glitch, and maybe planting a seed in the crack. Art doesn't promise revolution, but it does make space to imagine otherwise. It can tease out the contradictions, the absurdities, the tender bits, and hold them up for a closer look. And maybe, in doing so, it nudges us toward the realization that the structures we inhabit, the rules we follow, and even the selves we perform are as arbitrary as they are pervasive.

The artists explored here—whether working with industrial processes, apps, social media, or avatars—aren't proposing a grand narrative. Instead, they are writing in the margins, doodling in the spreadsheets, and uploading questions to the cloud. Their practices remind us that productivity isn't a virtue, work isn't an identity, and algorithms aren't the arbiters of meaning—unless we let them be.

So, what do we do with this realization? Maybe we will sit with it for a bit. As in a system, the answer will ultimately feed back into itself, shaping its future iterations. Until then, we keep scrolling, keep making, keep playing the game—and rewriting the rules wherever we can. After all, isn't that the most human thing of all?

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