**A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power**
edited by Angelica Bertoli, Giulia Gelmi,
Andrea Missagia, Maria Novella Tavano

# Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish
## Deconstructing the Performance of Labour in the Bureau of Melodramatic Research

Fabiola Fiocco
Edinburgh College of Art, UK

**Abstract** The advent of neoliberalism was accompanied by a substantial ideological and visual apparatus required to promote and legitimise the new forms of labour and mechanisms of power it generated. Concurrently, labour garnered significant attention from artists, particularly feminist artists, who started misappropriating the visual vocabulary of work as a means of political reclamation. This paper examines the practice of the artistic duo The Bureau of Melodramatic Research and the aesthetic strategies they implement to deconstruct the contemporary performance of labour and shed light on the distress, precarity and paradoxes of contemporary work.

**Keywords** Feminist art. The Bureau of Melodramatic Research. Labour of love. Neoliberal imaginary. Socially engaged art. Melodrama. Occupational realism.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Choose a Job You Love or The Moral and Political Economy of Neoliberal Imaginary. – 3 Occupational Realism and the Artist as Blueprint. – 4 The Dramatisation of Labour by The Bureau of Melodramatic Research. – 5 Conclusion.

### 1 Introduction

The turn of the twenty-first century marked a significant change in the organisation of the production system and labour market in Western countries, which in turn had substantial implications on a worldwide level. Following the 1970s transition to neoliberalism, an economic and productive framework centred on privatisation,

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

**Quaderni di *Venezia Arti* 7**
e-ISSN 2784-8868
ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-771-5

**Peer review | Open access**
Submitted 2023-09-17 | Accepted 2023-10-30 | Published 2023-12-22

© 2023 Fiocco | CC BY
**DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-771-5/006**

deregulation, and the free market, the new millennium witnessed the establishment of production paradigms that heavily relied on the affective and relational features of individuals. This trend was particularly evident in sectors such as the service industry as well as in the informational and digital economy. Beyond the establishment of new productive paradigms, this shift caused major disruptions in the social and cultural realms, generating new aspirational models and values (Boltanski, Chiapello 2005; Lazzarato 2012; Lorey 2015). This process of assimilation was sustained by a significant ideological and visual system. Cultural products and trends have, in fact, played a significant role in the formation of the neoliberal worker. Through the production of compelling and enticing media imagery, the system managed to produce an ideal worker eager to accept fewer benefits and protections in exchange for greater freedom, autonomy, and creativity. This mindset is well captured by the slogan 'Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish' with which Steve Jobs concluded his infamous 2005 commencement address at Stanford University, an appeal to one's 'hunger' for success and innovation that is still used to motivate precarious and 'hungry' individuals.[1]

Passion was a key feature in this process. Reminiscent of the 'labour of love', a term popularised by Marxist feminist theory in the 1970s to challenge the capitalist gendered division of labour and women's unpaid caregiving responsibilities (Dalla Costa, James 1975; Federici 1975; Fortunati 1995), the rhetoric of love has gradually expanded into all areas of work and is used to legitimise forms of free labour, precarity and exploitation in the name of professional sacrifice and devotion.[2] According to cultural analyst Angela McRobbie (2016), the concept of passionate work serves as a means of re-establishing conventional gender roles by channelling women's ambitions for emancipation towards lower-paying yet highly idealised professions. The focus on emotional language and the feminist movement reflects another important aspect of this shift, which is the process of 'feminisation of labour' (Cohen, Wolkowitz 2017), that is the incorporation of traditionally gendered traits, such as communication, empathy, and hospitality, as essential elements in the mechanisms of capitalist valorisation. Feminist researchers such as sociologists Emma Dowling (2007) and Arlie Hochschild (2012) and writer Sara Ahmed

1 This study was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 860306. A transcript of the speech can be found on the Stanford News website at: https://news.stanford.edu/2005/06/12/youve-got-find-love-jobs-says/.

2 In Marxist and post-Marxist theory, work and labour are used to denote two distinct modes of human action. The former generally refers to all productive activities, whereas the latter is associated with capitalist exploitation. Operating within a materialist feminist theoretical framework, this distinction is followed by the author.

(2014) have extensively examined the topic of affective labour, looking into the efforts and techniques used to manipulate and control one's emotions in the contemporary workplace.

The art industry is in an interesting position with regard to these economic and cultural changes. In line with the rise of neoliberalism, it is possible to observe an incorporation of the theme and visual vocabulary of labour in the work of neo-avant-garde artists (Molesworth 2003; Bryan-Wilson 2010; Child 2019; Cras 2019).[3] On the one hand, artists began to increasingly take on management tasks and outsource manual labour to external workers; on the other, they started to enact everyday tasks under the guise of art as a means to deconstruct and confront the conditions of production. A tendency that has been described by art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson (2012, 33-5) with the analytical subcategory of 'occupational realism'.

Of particular significance in this context is the deconstruction of reproductive labour initiated by second-wave feminist artists in the 1970s. As will be discussed further on in the text, feminist artists misappropriated and represented gestures of work, in different contexts and through different media, in order to denaturalise domestic labour as an inherently gendered practice and provide a different representation of women beyond the stereotype of the happy housewife and mother. This was achieved through both documentary forms of representation and the use of sarcasm and parody, which generated caustic depictions intended to elicit a sense of unease in the audience.

At the end of the twentieth century, the relationship between artist and work underwent a further transformation, marked by a departure from mimetic approaches and the recognition of the artist as an economic subject, along with a growing inflation of the topics of labour and capital as a subject of artistic production (Dimitrakaki 2016, 45-6). Feminist art provided again a strategic standpoint. From the 1990s, women artists started using their practice to discuss the process of economic subjectivation they were exposed to or to consider women's position and entanglement in global capitalism, problematising the ramifications of the feminisation of labour beyond the confines of the art field.

A comprehensive analysis of the relationship between art and labour is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, drawing from the crucial experience of feminist art, the author is interested in examining how these visual strategies are reimagined and re-actualised within the contemporary social and productive landscape. From this

3 While Andy Warhol and Larry Rivers incorporated the visual language of business and economics as iconographic elements in their artworks, artists such as Robert Morris, Edward Kienholz, and Richard Serra demonstrate a distinct manifestation of this influence, increasingly identifying themselves with manual workers and working class aesthetics.

perspective, the analysis focuses on the practice of the artistic duo The Bureau of Melodramatic Research (BMR). By adopting some of the aesthetic and scenic mechanisms of melodrama, BMR engages with and manipulates common visual tropes in order to generate a dissent imaginary that would challenge the post-Fordist performance of labour, shedding light on the distress, precarity, and paradoxes of contemporary work.

## 2 Choose a Job You Love or The Moral and Political Economy of Neoliberal Imaginary

Several scholars have discussed the archetype of the neoliberal worker, accurately captured by digital culture researcher Brooke Erin Duffy's concept of the 'aspirational labourer' (2017, 4-5), indicating an individual who continues to engage in creative endeavours based on the anticipation of future economic and social benefits, all while cognisant they are unlikely to materialise. Grounded in the principles of autonomy, passion, and vocation – encapsulated by the motto 'Do what you'll love, and you'll never work another day in your life' – this ideology manages to suppress the complex interplay between material conditions, social and cultural background, and capitalist mechanisms of valorisation.

Despite recent economic and social crises, which render appeals to autonomy and freedom even more ludicrous, and the social movements that arose in opposition to them, neoliberalism (in its various forms) continues to exert a strong hold on the individual and collective imagination. This is primarily due to the invention of an extensive ideological apparatus that granted neoliberalism the ability to exercise influence on the psychological domain of the people. Sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello ([1999] 2005) have extensively examined what they refer to as the 'spirit of capitalism', that is the ideology construction, comprised of moral justifications and cultural products, that serves to uphold and justify capitalist accumulation and varies in accordance with changes in the economic-political system in place. This idea, which can be traced back to Antonio Gramsci's theory of 'cultural hegemony' ([1948-51] 2012), is further articulated in post-Marxist scholarship, examples of which include Susan Buck-Morss' concept of the 'political imaginary' (2000, 11-12) and Mark Fisher's notion of 'capitalist realism' (2009, 2-5). All these instances highlight the strategic role of the imaginative apparatus in the continuation of capitalism. Ideology, in fact, operates beyond the symbolic domain to shape the institutions and material structures that constitute the system, directing the consensus of the masses so as to normalise a specific social and economic structure. The capitalist imaginary, as noted by Fisher (8-9), not only precludes the

envisioning of viable alternatives by entirely occupying "the horizons of the thinkable", but also manages to pre-emptively incorporate and outdo any potential forms of counteraction.

Within the scope of this analysis, the focus lies on examining how images and words have contributed to shaping a distinct type of labour performance, characterised by an unwavering and seemingly enthusiastic devotion to work. William J.T. Mitchell (2005) emphasises the dynamic nature of pictures, characterising them as 'living organisms' that possess intrinsic needs and desires that circulate across media and contexts. In a comparable direction, Hans Belting (2011) directs his attention towards the 'politics of images', arguing that images serve as intermediates between the material reality and people's psyche. Given their major role in shaping human imagination, pictures possess the capacity to exert influence over an individual's psycho-physical disposition with regard to particular issues or circumstances. Expanding upon the works of Mitchell and Belting, philosopher Pasi Väliaho (2014) departs from the notion of imagination as a purely individual phenomenon and instead examines its collective nature. According to Väliaho (2014, 92), by actively engaging with the normative influence of images, and thus generating new ones, it is possible to generate 'new materialisations' that would facilitate the envisioning of alternative modes and frameworks of interaction and existence. An argument that evokes Rancière (2004) and his concept of the distribution of the sensible.[4]

In the workplace, the mantra of 'Do What You Love' has traditionally been conveyed through consistent visual imagery consisting of motivational posters and quotes, as well as various forms of digital content centred on personal development. In his analysis of the graphic design context, designer Silvio Lorusso (2019, 133-6) cites the *Work Hard & Be Nice to People* poster by British designer Anthony Burrill as the progenitor of the numerous posters and neon signs to be found today in offices, co-working and co-living spaces. Even more well-known are the Successories posters, which are motivational posters with a single word or phrase, such as TEAMWORK, EXCELLENCE, or MAKE IT HAPPEN, set against a black background and accompanied by a photograph of a wild animal or natural landscape, and which served as a prototype for earlier internet memes. Through the use of concise, straightforward language and a minimalist design, these visuals seek to instil a sense of confidence and enjoyment, suggesting

4 Rancière employs the term '*partage du sensible*' to denote the mechanisms and power dynamics that regulate what is visible or sayable within a society, and thus illustrate the role of aesthetics in processes of political configuration. As this is not a neutral concept, it is also used to analyse the potential forms and sources of disruption or dissension that could disrupt the established order. To further explore the concept, see Rancière 2004.

that diligent work, despite obstacles, paves the way to a prosperous future. Together with other activities and protocols, they contribute to the definition of what management theorists Sigal Barsade and Olivia A. O'Neill (2016) refer to as the 'emotional culture' of a company, meaning the affective control system that underpins a workplace and influences the psychological well-being of employees as well as patterns of collaboration and the overall structure of the organisation.

Today, the message (and thus control) is transmitted not merely through two-dimensional images, but also through video tutorials designed to retrain the individual in her daily activities, regulating both work and non-work time. Exemplary trends are motivational YouTube or TikTok formats such as *How to Be Productive*, *The Perfect Daily Routine*, or *My 5 to 9 Before the 9 to 5*, all of which offer advice on how to improve sleeping and working patterns, nutrition, appearance, life and working settings based on those of famous wealthy entrepreneurs such as Apple founder Steve Jobs or Facebook initiator Mark Zuckerberg. Images, memes, and videos have been appropriated as a form of social programming designed to address the individuality of the worker and her need to survive in a hyper-competitive system. Failing to acknowledge the diverse material conditions and structural factors that significantly influence an individual's life, these videos perpetuate problematic notions of success that encourage individuals to focus solely on their own bodies and immediate surroundings, thus proposing standard individual formulas to address often systemic issues. In contrast to the motivational props discussed in the previous paragraph, in which the human body is almost never depicted, the main protagonists of the videos are the creators with their healthy and attractive bodies and aspirational lifestyles.

The neoliberal imagery targets all individuals, irrespective of their gender, race, and socioeconomic class, as it is crucial to sustain the perception that its lifestyle is potentially attainable by everyone. Aligned with the key focus of this paper, it is important to draw attention to the visual representations aimed at women and their significant role in diminishing feminist political potential, all the while appearing to comply with requests for more equality and autonomy, especially in the job market. As previously mentioned in the introduction, McRobbie (2016, 110) argues that the concept of passionate work should be considered a mechanism of gender 're-traditionalisation'. In her analysis, McRobbie discusses the image of the enthusiastic 'working girl' and the sophisticated aesthetic structure designed to conceal the unequal conditions that characterised the increased participation of women in the labour force and the general deterioration of living and working conditions. In films and television programmes such as *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *New in Town* (2009), and *Girlboss* (2017), the protagonists' exploitation, mobbing, and economic constraints serve merely as plot devices to further a love story or a

narrative of personal empowerment. McRobbie (2016, 87) uses the term 'post-feminist masquerade' to refer to the rituals established by the fashion-beauty-complex that give women a sense of power and independence while maintaining firm control over their bodies, both at work and at home. A 'masquerade' that is more ubiquitous in the previously discussed video tutorials, in which the obsessive curation of one's digital and physical presence responds to requirements of self-monetisation and self-representation. By directing attention towards instances of individual success under neoliberal constraints, these examples fulfil the need for bodily and financial autonomy advocated by second-wave feminism, thereby undermining the anti-capitalist demands and the various forms of collective political mobilisation and opposition they embodied.

As the ideology of capitalism and its productive and managerial paradigms become ingrained in the individual's body and psyche, any form of resistance would need to occur within the worker's consciousness. The contemporary phenomena of the 'great resignations' and 'quiet quitting', along with the worldwide escalation of the anti-work movement, signal an interesting fracture in the system and an increasing disaffection towards work (Coin 2023). The issue of disaffection is central because it implies the emotional separation from an ideal and its associated identity. Similar to neoliberal imagery, these phenomena have their own visual identity, memes, and trends, which are frequently derived from anti-global and anti-capitalist social movements. While not posing a substantial threat to the stability of the capitalist system, these movements reveal a crucial distancing from and questioning of a particular idea of work, shedding light on the exploitative practices that have long been concealed behind the rhetoric of passion and merit.

## 3 Occupational Realism and the Artist as Blueprint

When considering the historical development of the neoliberal organisation of work, artists occupy a privileged position, serving as both an influential precedent and a cautionary example of this mode of production. Sociologist Pascal Gielen and artist Paul De Bruyne (2009, 7-10) explicitly discuss the artist as a blueprint of the post-Fordist worker ethic. The authors, like Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), note how, beginning in the 1970s, capitalism increasingly adopted the artistic values of autonomy, authenticity, and creativity exemplified by the Bohemian artist and incorporated them into the new neo-manager's toolkit. During this time, the neoliberal productive-economic transformation generated a new thriving art market, transforming contemporary artists into entrepreneurs wholly immersed in the new productive paradigm.

As discussed in the introduction, various artists associated with the neo-avant-garde, such as Richard Serra and Gordon Matta-Clark, also began to explore the convergence between the figure of the artist and the worker as labour became increasingly immaterial under neoliberalism. In these instances, however, the temporary adoption of working-class identities often served the purpose of constructing a radical artistic person rather than contributing to a broader political discourse. A different application of these representational tactics may be observed in the deconstruction of (reproductive) labour undertaken by feminist artists in the 1970s.

As previously noted, labour, and contextually social reproduction, were at the centre of the Marxist feminist movement of the 1970s. Influenced by this political ethos and the resulting imagery and cultural context, feminist artists began to represent and perform reproductive labour with the intention of denaturalising its underlying social and production relations. Through a recontextualisation of actual care actions within the museum institution, Lea Lublin in *Mon fils* (1968) and Mierle Laderman Ukeles in *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracts, Maintenance Inside* (1973) aim to challenge the merging of art and life claimed by avant-garde artists, demonstrating the impossibility for a mother-artist to successfully reconcile these two commitments and how this condition has been systematically disregarded. Conversely, Margaret Raspé and Martha Rosler, in their works *Alle Tage wieder – Let Them Swing!* (1974) and *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), respectively, engage in the performative re-enactment of gestures of maintenance in the kitchen setting, infusing their gestures with progressively more and more anger and tension. A technique also used by director Chantal Akerman in her first film *Saute ma ville* (1968), which culminates with the explosion of the house and therefore the off-screen death of the protagonist. Despite employing distinct approaches, all these artists share a common objective of deconstructing the image of the happy housewife, shedding light on the inherent challenges faced by women in assuming the 'double burden' of motherhood and employment. This collective effort aimed to present a more realistic depiction of women's duties and formulate a broader critique of the patriarchal-capitalist system and the societal divisions it enforces.

Vishmidt (2017, 11) captures this distinction in posture by distinguishing between the heroic and anti-heroic approaches. While the first is characterised by an identification of the artist with the worker "as the agent of history", the second consists of a misappropriation of gestures of work, marked by emotions such as failure, entropy, and absurdity, in order to destroy established categories of art and labour and the moral proposition they entail. Although not restricted to feminist art, this second strategy is particularly visible in these instances as artists often create unsettling depictions of everyday life,

underlining its viciousness through slight deformations and deceptions that destabilise its familiarity. Without attempting to produce stilted or rough caricatures, the author contends that it is the tension between the dullness of ordinary acts and the apparent triviality of their replication, whether photographic, video, or performance, that makes these depictions especially poignant.

The feminist depiction of labour was not limited to the domestic, despite this being its most historically recognised form; rather, as in the case of *Women and Work* (1975) and *Who's Holding the Baby?* (1978) by The Hackney Flashers, it comes to represent the experience of women in factories, commerce, the service industry, sex work, wage cleaning, and caregiving. In most of these instances, though, what is enacted is again the deconstruction of a specific work performance, namely that of the 'labour of love' and the discrimination both in terms of tasks and wages that this rhetoric restated even outside the domestic realm.

Following the idea that resistance must emanate from the individual's psyche, the discussed artworks explore the specific psychological processes of contemporary production. Through an explicit dramatisation of the typical labour performance, the BMR seeks to disrupt the mood by producing interruptions in the personal and professional routine that denaturalise it and reveal it as the social and cultural construction that it is. In examining the practice of the BMR, the author aims to explore potential reinterpretations of this artistic and political legacy within the contemporary social and productive framework. Rather than focusing on the portrayal of the female body image, these representations prioritise the labourer, irrespective of their gender, within the framework of the feminisation of production and the extant exploitation of affective resources.

## 4 The Dramatisation of Labour by The Bureau of Melodramatic Research

The Bureau of Melodramatic Research (BMR) was an artistic duo founded in 2009 in Bucharest by Irina Gheorghe and Alina Popa.[5] Popa died in 2019, leaving Gheorghe as the sole member of BMR. On the occasion of *Heartbeat Detection Systems*, the duo's last solo show at Suprainfinit Gallery in Bucharest in 2022, Gheorghe teamed with other Romanian artists, who also happen to be their close friends, to collaboratively refine and perform some of their works. Despite this

5 While recognising the significant impact of feminist theory and politics on a personal and professional level, BMR refrains from explicitly categorising their artistic work as feminist so as to preserve a certain degree of strategic ambiguity.

compelling effort, which effectively materialised the broader network of practitioners and allies developed by the duo over a decade, Popa's untimely death represents a significant turning point, requiring an examination of the multitude of practices and knowledge generated thus far, as well as possible future developments.

Drawing inspiration from the work of photographers such as Jeff Wall and Cindy Sherman, and classical Hollywood movies, BMR uses film staging to critically explore the use of emotions in the public sphere in contemporary politics and economics, as well as the construction of history in post-Soviet Romania. Following scholar Elaine Hadley's book *Melodramatic Tactics* (1995), which posits melodrama as a behavioural model shaping social interactions across personal and public domains, the artists use melodrama as a lens through which to examine society, labour and the way affects are organised and valorised in the late capitalist economic system (Fiocco, unpublished interview to Gheorghe).

The trilogy *Alien Passions* – comprising *Protect Your Heart at Work* (2012-13), *Lovegold: A Cosmic Cooking Show* (2013-14), and *Above the Weather* (2015-16) – mimics the format of vintage TV instructional programmes to reflect on the relationship between capitalist extraction of natural and human resources and the impact this has on the individual well-being and social interactions. The first episode in the series, *Protect Your Heart at Work*, reflects on the impact that both manual and affective labour exacts upon the psycho-physical well-being of workers. The video, designed to replicate a work-and-safety instructional video, features the artists in work attire, executing a sequence of upsetting yet comical physical exercises intended to safeguard the worker's body and thus improve productivity for, as stated by Popa, "efficient bodies and a proper economy of movement will bring higher profits and make our industries flourish" (The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, 2012-13).[6] Passing from industrial attire to that of an office worker, denoting the transition from manual to cognitive labour, the artists move on to reflect on the dangers of affective labour, with the 'perfect smile' serving as a primary symbol. Maintaining an ambiguous stance, blending motivational suggestions and bombastic affirmations with sombre reflections on the reality of contemporary work, the artists insist on the need to protect one's heart and one's self 'at work and as work'. With an abrupt shift in tone, Gheorghe and Popa undertake their final change of clothes, baring their 'new uniforms', that is their bare bodies, so as to emphasise the pervasiveness and the physical and psychological effects of a production system that puts the entirety of the individual's being

6 The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, *Protect Your Heart at Work*, 2012-13, quotes from the video.

at work, as well as the self-exploitation and exhaustion this often entails. Discarded any ironic intent, the artists inquire the viewer on how to protect our bits of life from the constant attacks of capitalism, inviting everyone to work together to develop tools and practices of everyday resistance and solidarity. Along with the artists, the 'glass lady' is the other protagonist of the video. Brought to Poland from East Germany and exhibited in the Warsaw Technical Museum of Technology in 1972 for the educational show *Man and Work*, the mannequin was meant to help workers understand the functioning of the human body so as to better take care of it. It is particularly telling that the mannequin represents a woman's body and that all workers, regardless of their gender, were and are expected to recognise themselves in this transparent and silent body in a society where labour is increasingly becoming feminised.

*Lovegold: A Cosmic Cooking Show*, the second episode, is a 'cosmic' cooking show in which Gheorghe and Popa discuss the processes of capitalist valorisation of human emotions, weaving together reflections on the immateriality of love and materiality of gold, materialism and idealism, in a context in which, as summarised by Gheorghe, "love is the new gold" (The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, 2013-14).[7] Drawing from the Marxist analogy that likens alchemy to capitalist exchange, the artists establish an additional comparison between cooking and alchemy, thus shifting the attention to cooking as a reproductive work and reaffirming the material value of this seemingly immaterial element. Through this metaphorical device, the artists aim to expose the mechanisms of self-exploitation embedded within processes of production, captured in Popa's claim: "It doesn't matter what we cook but how we are being cooked through our own cooking" (The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, 2013-14). Furthermore, the mention of gold alludes to a coeval socio-political occurrence, especially the demonstrations against cyanide mining for gold in Roşia Montană, a mountain area in Romania.

Finally, *Above the Weather* is the concluding episode of the trilogy. This instalment adopts the road movie style and moves away from the thematic focus on labour, completing the process of progressive abstraction begun in the previous films. Popa and Gheorghe are shown while driving across a contemporary industrial environment dressed as old Hollywood divas, engaging in debates about love and the threat of human extinction. Within their dialogue, reference is made to Sara Teasdale's poem *There Will Come Soft Rains* (1920), a nuclear science fiction radio show from the 1950s, and the Turkish Eurovision song *Pet'r oil* (1980), a seemingly romantic composition that paradoxically

7 The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, *Lovegold. Contemporary Alchemy*, 2013-14, quotes from the video.

glorifies petroleum as the nation's source of wealth. The forced optimism performed by the artists serves to intensify the sensation of dread and terror caused by the current economic and environmental problems. Realised over the course of four years, the *Alien Passions* trilogy undertakes an odd deconstruction of the human body, not only as a worker but also as a consumer and producer. It seeks to highlight the interrelation and interdependence between economic and social phenomena, and how the ramifications of specific choices emanating from the organisation of production trickle down from society to the individual, thereby constantly shifting between the personal and the collective and systemic dimensions.

Mixing and distorting genres and media, Gheorge and Popa intervene in rhetorical modes of representation and action. However, their images do not offer a new insurgent political imaginary, nor do they convey a clear political project. There is no overt radicalism in these depictions, which take place inside familiar frameworks and do not involve any explicit remarks. Similar to the works of Akerman, Rosler and Raspé, dissent manifests itself in the tiniest of slip-ups in the traditional representation, whether of the housewife who cooks or the worker; these linguistic glimmers and shifts break the self-performance, revealing its construction and hinting more or less directly at the intentions that drive it. The discomfort produced in the viewer is the result of observing something that breaches the implicit norms of social performance, forcing them to become explicit.

The decision to engage with these discourses in a nonlinear and fragmented manner, deploying specific gendered tropes drawn from melodrama, forms a central aspect of the trilogy's approach. Political theorist Olivier Marchart (2019, 63-7) discusses the proliferation of melodrama after 1789 in relation to the dramatisation of political action. In the context of a heated political climate, melodrama was used, according to Marchart, to synthesise multiple and possibly conflicting positions, operating on a somatic level of action to induce specific emotions in the spectator/revolutionary subject. It would be misleading to describe melodrama or parody as an inherently gendered genre, but it is worth noting that it possesses specific gendered historical connotations and that it exists a legacy associated with the use of humorous representations in women's art practice. In the nineteenth century, due to the emphasis on the performance of emotions, melodrama became a means of contemplating the inconsistencies of gender ideology, proposing transgressive examples of femininity and challenging toxic expressions of masculinity (Williams 2018). Notably, women playwrights played a significant role in this endeavour while facing considerable censorship and revisions. Furthermore, Jo Isaak (1996, 194-5) discusses the feminist deployment of laughter and how the distortion of representation through mimicry and the carnivalesque has been used by contemporary women

artists to resist and destabilise forms of domestication and the sexual roles assigned to them.

These strategies are reminiscent of what Vishmidt defined as the anti-heroic approach as well as the concept of 'weak resistance' devised by the philosopher and activist Ewa Majewską (2021) to designate ordinary forms of political action frequently adopted by marginalised subjectivities. In the same way that Vishmidt's anti-heroic approach is constructed in opposition to heroic identifications with the working-class, Majewska's notion of weak resistance emerges in opposition to the prevailing macho imagery that characterises militant activism. While not having a utopian reach, these narrative devices effectively accentuate the cultural specificity of capitalist and patriarchal social configurations, emphasising their most paradoxical features and thus initiating a process of deconstruction of established narratives and beliefs. In BMR's videos, the aesthetic and emotional exuberance of the melodrama is counterbalanced by moments of bleak sobriety, to which the artists reserve the sorest statements and political vindication.

As was previously mentioned, the gender performance enacted by the artists does not try to limit the scope of discussion to the impact of broader economic and political transformations on women alone. Affects are used as a lens through which to examine these changes while addressing the feminisation of production that is characteristic of the current system. The artists do not assume distinct identities in terms of occupation or class, embodying ambiguous yet familiar figures. There is no clear depiction of labour as there was in feminist art of the 1970s or in instances of occupational realism. Reflecting the alleged dematerialisation of labour, the patterns of production are not immediately visible; rather, they occur within the characters, with gestures and words serving as only fragmentary manifestations. Using readily recognisable props, slogans, and buzzwords, the primary purpose of the videos is to challenge the post-Fordist performance of labour and the ideals of passion and sacrifice. This is done both literally, as in *Protect Your Heart at Work*, which addresses the theme of psycho-physical well-being in a meticulous manner and with varying degrees of gravity, and figuratively, as in the other two videos, in which the image of the two elegant and smiling women, who should convey a sense of warmth and security, is juxtaposed with jarring settings, highlighting an underlying sense of unease and distress.

## 5 Conclusion

The term ‘labour performance’ incorporates a form of representation and an evaluative criterion for which the worker is observed and assessed to determine her efficiency and success. While these evaluation mechanisms become more specific and pervasive, being assimilated and enacted by the worker himself, some recent cultural phenomena seek to challenge these identity and production models by accomplishing the bare minimum or even withdrawing. However, these minimal breaks in neoliberal ideology occur in a context where capitalism remains dominant.

In this article, reference is made to the legacy of occupational realism and to the practice of deconstruction and denaturalisation undertaken by feminist artists throughout the 1970s in connection to reproductive labour to discuss how this tradition has been recontextualized in the current artistic and productive context. Analysing the example of the BMR, the author examined how these representations attempt to challenge the affective and cognitive mediations prevalent in contemporary visual culture by distorting slogans and archetypes. Through interventions and distortions that aim to destabilise the familiarity and power contained in common visual tropes, the artists trigger processes of re-signification and open gaps of creation in the individual and collective imaginary.

The three videos discussed showcase three different forms of performativity by the artists, as they endeavour to generate disruptions within the prevailing systems of signification. In the concluding remarks of her text, Bryan-Wilson (2012, 46) posits the existence of a paradox within the framework of occupational realism, which arises from the artist’s identification with ‘other’ professions, such as cookers or cleaners, that would negate her own identity as an art worker and reveals the class divide that exists between these two realms. Acknowledging the validity of this argument, the author contends that BMR’s portrayals serve as a compelling illustration of artists who abstain from assuming any role beyond that of the precarious worker, hence emphasising a prevalent state and position within certain systems of production.

## Bibliography

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Barsade, S.; O'Neill, O.A. (2016). "Manage Your Emotional Culture". *Harvard Business Review*, 94(1), 58-66. https://hbr.org/2016/01/manage-your-emotional-culture.

Belting, H. (2011). *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Boltanski, L.; Chiapello, E. [1999] (2005). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London; New York: Verso.

Bryan-Wilson, J. (2010). *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bryan-Wilson, J. (2012). "Occupational Realism". *TDR (1988-)*, 56(4), 32-48. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183pf0s.9.

Buck-Morss, S. (2000). *Dreamworld And Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia In East And West*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Child, D. (2019). *Working Aesthetics: Labour, Art and Capitalism*. Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic.

Cohen, R.L.; Wolkowitz, C. (2017). "The Feminization of Body Work". *Gender, Work and Organization*, 25(1), 47-8. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12186.

Coin, F. (2023). *Le Grandi Dimissioni. Il nuovo rifiuto del lavoro e il tempo di riprenderci la vita*. Torino: Einaudi.

Cras, S. (2019). *The Artist as Economist: Art and Capitalism in the 1960s*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dalla Costa, M.; James, S. (1975). *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press.

Dimitrakaki, A. (2016). *Gender, ArtWork and the Global Imperative: A Materialist Feminist Critique*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Dowling, E. (2007). "Producing the Dining Experience: Measure, Subjectivity and the Affective Worker". *Ephemera*, 7(1), 117-32. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708611435215.

Duffy, B.H. (2017). *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Federici, S. (1975). *Wages Against Housework*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press.

Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*. Winchester; Washington: Zero Books.

Fortunati, L. (1995). *The Arcane of Reproduction. Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*. New York: Autonomedia.

Gielen, P.; De Bruyne, P. (eds) (2009). *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*. Rotterdam: NAI.

Gramsci, A. [1948-51] (2012). *Quaderni dal carcere*. Roma: Editori riuniti.

Hardt, M.; Negri, A. (2001). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hochschild, A.R. (2012). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Isaak, J.A. (1996). *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*. New York: Routledge.

Lazzarato, M. (2012). *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*. Cambridge: Semiotext(e).

Lorey, I. (2015). *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. London; New York: Verso.

Lorusso, S. (2019). *Entreprecariat: Everyone Is an Entrepreneur Nobody Is Safe*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

Majewską, E. (2021). *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*. London; New York: Verso.

Marchart, O. (2019). *Conflictual Aesthetics. Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. Cambridge: Polity.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (2005). *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Molesworth, H. (ed.) (2003). *Work Ethic*. Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art; Penn State University Press.

Rancière, J. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London: Continuum.

Väliaho, P. (2014). *Biopolitical Screens: Image, Power, and the Neoliberal Brain*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Vishmidt, M. (2017). "The Two Reproductions in (Feminist) Art and Theory since the 1970s". *Third Text*, 31(1), 49-66. https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1364331.

Williams, C. (ed.) (2018). *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.