

# The Trouble with Value

# Notes on the Death of the Genius and Artistic Labour

Kris Dittel

## 1. The Birth and Death of the Genius

I have imagined writing a short story, one that describes a disappearance, or perhaps one about a public assassination.<sup>①</sup> This disappearance would not concern a person or a thing. Nor would it be a true crime story. It would be a story of the disappearance of a subject, the notion of the genius, or rather its transformation into something else.

The story would have started in the distant past, some time around the eighteenth century, a time known as the ‘century of philosophy’. It was at this point that life was divided into binaries: body and mind, nature and culture, human and animal, the self and ‘the other’. In this time period, on the ground of Western

<sup>①</sup> I have no language of my own, my vocabulary scattered, and it is a net of coincidences, observations and a few traces and treasures from a dive in the sea of ideas and intuition.

exceptionalism a new figure emerged: it was Man, representing progress, reason and secular rationality. Standing high above the ground, above all other living beings, he became considered the perfect individual.<sup>②</sup> Or perhaps it started much earlier. The image of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man* (1490) comes to mind, depicting the ideal proportions of a flawless body that also supposedly stood in as a symbol of the perfect workings of the universe. By around the end of the eighteenth century, the superhuman figure of Man had defeated God, who was no longer needed as a source of morality and control. And it was Man, the creator of Enlightenment, who radiated a new vision of humanity. In his vision, it was physical laws and science that provided the source of authority rather than the caring and punishing hands of God. Man of control, of supposed freedom, of virtuosity, a genius-Man.

In his *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant wrote that ‘fine art is possible only as the product of genius’.<sup>③</sup> The genius is described as a distinctive figure, an *individual* whose foremost property is *originality*.<sup>④</sup> His labour transcends the notion of regular labour or profession, emergent from his status of a half-god, his ‘innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art’.<sup>⑤</sup>

The term *genius* originates in ancient Rome. Then, it described a guiding spirit or ‘tutelary entity’ of a person or place. It was only in the late-eighteenth century that the word acquired a secondary meaning, more closely associated with its use today, denoting an exceptionally talented person. Blending the divine with the special abilities of an individual, the idea of the genius was elevated to that of a half-god – one whose qualities exceeded human possibility with otherworldly gifts of the spirits.

Things get easily taken for granted, as if they were always there, always true, a tradition of sorts. Just like the tradition of Western politics and science that has manifested in the figure of Man and dominant systems of illusions of progress. For Donna Haraway, tradition stands for ‘the appropriation of nature as resource for the production of culture; the tradition of the reproduction of the self from the reflection of the other’.<sup>⑥</sup> Yet tradition is not given, it can dissolve into thin air.

<sup>②</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 36.

<sup>③</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (1790), Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 1986.

<sup>④</sup> Ibid.

<sup>⑤</sup> Ibid.

<sup>⑥</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York, 1991, pp. 150.

By the end of the nineteenth century, God was dead.<sup>⑦</sup>

God's death was, however, soon followed by the weakening of the fundamental assumptions of Enlightenment with its prevailing rule of rationality and reason. It did not take long for Foucault and other poststructuralist thinkers to then pronounce the 'death of Man'.<sup>⑧</sup> This death signalled both the end of Man as the simultaneous object and subject of knowledge, and of its inherent anthropocentrism.

## 2. The Melancholy of Man

In 1881 Auguste Rodin created what would become one of the most well-known figures in Western art history, *The Thinker*. The life-sized bronze figure is presented nude, sitting on a rock pedestal, supporting his head on his hand, in heroic isolation that is often read as a representation of melancholy.<sup>⑨</sup> The wide-spread iconography of this figure appears in celebrity- and pop-culture, perpetuating multiple clichés about its meaning.

Artists Gert Jan Kocken and Arnoud Holleman have been conducting research into the changing iconography, appropriation and distortion of *The Thinker*, prompted by the relatively recent attempt to steal and monetise the sculpture for its material value. In 2007 the artwork disappeared from the Singer Laren museum's sculpture garden in Laren, The Netherlands. Within a few days, the work was recovered with significant damage. Deep lines had been cut across its surface with a metal grinder. As it turned out, copper thieves had attempted to cut the sculpture into smaller parts in order to sell it for its precious material, leaving it in a scarred and pitiful state as media attention rose around its disappearance.

Kocken and Holleman's life-sized photograph *The Broken Thinker* depicts the half-dissected, damaged sculpture of the bare-skinned man as an image of seemingly irreversible loss of a canonised object of Western art history, yet it also becomes a coincidental symbol of the 'fall of the Man' as the universal representation of the human.<sup>⑩</sup>

In a short response to Kocken and Holleman's project, Hito Steyerl addresses this symbolism and draws

parallels to the current threat to humanities – their dismantling and exploitation by neoliberal forces – as well as raising the question of 'whether "Rodin" as the form the metal has taken for some decades – the form of genius product, individual creativity, personal copyright – is really not a bit overestimated, too.'<sup>⑪</sup> Overestimated or, as I like to think, obsolete. *The Broken Thinker* is a cracked image of the exceptional genius, as its symbolism slowly crumbles and turns into a thing of the past, calling for new becomings and new roles.

## 3. Artist at Work – a Divine Creation?

Despite all this, has the idea of the genius in some way survived in the popular imagination, projected onto the figure of the artist?

It is an often-heard and romanticised assumption that the artist's work is a response to a higher calling, stemming from a desire to create, thus rendering artistic work a labour of love. A labour of love is, by definition, unwaged labour, undertaken solely for the emotional fulfilment and gratification. The supposition of artistic work as something done for pleasure and not reward, can be linked back to the figure of the genius, whose acts transcend the earthly act of work. And perhaps it is this myth of the genius artist that is in our way to consider art as work.

The figure of the genius is entwined with that of the exceptional individual. Contemporary neoliberal politics celebrate the individual as a source and apotheosis of talent and success, as if one's future and chances in life are solely in one's own hands. This doctrine, however, obscures the fact that an individual, a body, within its capacities and limits can no longer challenge injustices and violations imposed upon it.

Labour and work are not the same, even if several languages use the same term, for instance German (*Arbeit*), French (*travail*), or my native Hungarian (*munka*) and Slovak (*práca*). As I have come to understand, and following the Marxist tradition, in the English language work relates to quantity as well as content. In work, 'the individual uses tools to realise himself or herself in nature'.<sup>⑫</sup> Labour has been associated with exploitation and alienation – think

<sup>⑦</sup> As Nietzsche famously proclaimed.

<sup>⑧</sup> The final lines of Foucault's *Order of Things* (1966) read 'Man would be erased, like a face drawn at the edge of the sea' (Routledge, Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2005, p. 422)

<sup>⑨</sup> I wonder if such interpretation emerged only later, in the twentieth century, when the gloss of this grand representation of Man started to fade. Is melancholy a result of this loss?

<sup>⑩</sup> A few years after the disappearance of *The Thinker* it was restored to its original form using 3D technology, 'De Larense Denker van Rodin in ere hersteld met 3D-techniek', University of Amsterdam, <https://www.uva.nl/content/nieuws/persberichten/2019/02/de-larense-denker-van-rodin-in-ere-hersteld-met-3d-techniek.html?1568735931105>, accessed 15 September 2019.

<sup>⑪</sup> 'Broken Thinker' project website, [www.brokenthinker.nl](http://www.brokenthinker.nl), accessed 4 January 2020.

<sup>⑫</sup> Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt, *Reproducing Autinomy: Work, Money, Crisis & Contemporary Art*, Mute Publishing, London, 2016, pp. 30.

‘reproductive labour’ – where ‘the individual becomes the tool of the realisation of value’.<sup>①③</sup> To put it differently, whereas work is more of an intended, conscious activity that has a beginning and an end, labour is an uncountable process, the ‘things we just do’, which oftentimes leave us after a tiring day with the feeling that one has not accomplished anything. Labour is something that avoids the framing within a 9 to 5 scheme, it has its own timeframe, it dictates its own rhythm. It is bound up in life and emotion.

‘They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work,’ are the provocative opening lines of Silvia Federici’s 1975 pamphlet ‘Wages Against Housework’. In this publication that reads as a manifesto, she raises central questions about domestic labour. Federici’s piece was influential in initiating a debate around the political economy of women’s housework and reproductive labour, which not only ‘produces’ workers but also makes men’s waged labour possible. Since the publication of Federici’s text, female reproductive labour remains a much-discussed matter. The manifesto contributed to a larger organisation of women around the issue of reproductive labour, as well as to the ongoing discourse on the value and shared condition of alienated labour. Still, up until today, Federici’s proposition to remunerate and recognise reproductive labour as the foundation of industrial work, sounds like science fiction, which would require the complete reorganisation of the distribution of wealth in society.

Once the worker’s relation to capital is mystified, it’s difficult to disentangle connections and see one’s situation and relation to the larger systems of capitalisms workings.<sup>①④</sup>

#### 4. So, What Is an Artist’s Work Worth?

Rachel Carey’s film and installation titled *Liquidate It All Away* was presented in two iterations at The Trouble with Value exhibitions at Bunkier Sztuki, Krakow and Onomatopoe, Eindhoven. The work comprises everyday objects, discarded materials from the two institutions, decorative items found at flea markets, alongside clay sculptures created by the artist, all available for sale to exhibition visitors. The objects were evaluated and given price tags with the help

of an estate sales expert and professional appraiser. Rather than following evaluation methods for artworks in the commercial art market, the works’ price tags mirrored those of everyday items. For example, the pricing method of a lightbulb sculpture and its framed photograph followed the ‘real’ liquidation value of ‘real’ lightbulbs. Or in case of ceramic soap dispenser sculptures, their price tag matched the value of a similar-sized paperweight (suggesting their potential use). Handcrafted and painted trolleys were appraised for the value of their wood material. A handmade ceramic vase was sold for the price of a vase found on the flea market, and so on. To put it differently, artworks and other second-hand objects were evaluated similarly, on the basis of their use- and/or material value.

All items displayed in the installation could easily have been labelled readymades, were the items evaluated and treated as art objects.<sup>①⑤</sup> Contrary to the speculative appraisal criteria of art, which takes into consideration the artist’s career, experience and other measures of success, Carey’s sculptures circumvented those measures and illuminated a gap between the evaluation methods of an everyday object and that of an artwork.

In Carey’s installation a few objects stood out for how they addressed the complex nature of an (art) object’s relation to value and the value of (artistic) labour. *The Worker’s Foot* is a sculptural assemblage composed of twigs held together by a cement base that is wrapped in a sock. Its price tag reflected the broader issues of labour’s relation to value by directly juxtaposing it against market measures of ‘what is a leg worth’. In Poland, insurance companies determine the value of a lost limb from a workplace accident as 34,776 Polish złoty, a price that corresponds with the price tag of the sculpture. As ‘a phantom limb of sorts’,<sup>①⑥</sup> the sculpture, a representation of the monetary compensation for a lost limb, became in this case also that of the missing income of an artist.

Aside from pondering the various ways in which an art object might be evaluated, none of Carey’s methods took into consideration the number of working hours spent on the making of the sculptures, or attempted to match up to a living wage for the artist.<sup>①⑦</sup> On the contrary, oftentimes the sales price barely covered the material value of the sculptures. In this way the

①③  
Ibid.

①④  
Or as Karl Marx put it in 1867, ‘The law of capitalist accumulation, mystified by the economists into a supposed law of nature, in fact expresses the situation that every nature of accumulation excludes every diminution in the degree of exploitation of labour, and every rise in the price of labour, which could seriously imperil the continual reproduction, on an ever larger scale, of the capital-relation.’ (*Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1976)

①⑤  
Albeit their ‘status’ as artworks was already confirmed by being included in an art exhibition in an established art institution.

①⑥  
Rachel Carey’s description of the work from an email conversation with the author, 26 September 2019.

①⑦  
This was partially compensated from the production expenses and artist fees provided by the host institutions, however it is not necessarily common practice in the sphere of art.

installation dramatised and tested the circumstances in which artists create and show work in an institutional context: without any guarantee of return on investment, provision or wage.<sup>①⑥</sup>

Art is thought to be an exceptional commodity.<sup>①⑦</sup> Yet in times when all commodities become exceptions to the rules, just as when all labour becomes more estranged from labour, the question of the value of artistic labour arrives at a turning point.<sup>②⑧</sup>

The disparity and complex relation between artistic labour and work is accentuated in Anca Benera and Arnold Estefán's ongoing piece *I Work, Therefore I'm Not*.<sup>②⑨</sup> Since 2012, through a series of daily drawings, the duo has been charting the time they spend not making art. As with many artists, they support their artistic practice through additional day jobs. On days that they have to earn their living as graphic designers rather than making art, Benera and Estefán capture the movement of the cursor on their computer screens. The resulting abstract drawings, which get printed and chronologically assembled, delineate the number of working hours spent in front of a computer when not making art. On days when they are able to fully dedicate their time to art making, the sheets remain blank.

On the one hand, Benera and Estefán's drawings showcase a 'calendar of precarity', displaying the amount of time they must spend earning a living while maintaining their position as established artists and fulfilling certain measures of success in the art world – exhibiting widely and featuring at art biennales. On the other, the work points at the complexities of quantifying artistic labour. Least, it is a 'negative way of valuation' – measuring the time spent on waged work instead of art making – showing what is earned and what is lost.

As they receive more and more art commissions that fill their working days, more and more sheets of the 'calendar' remain blank. Ultimately, this would mean that the drawings vanish and the piece ceases to continue. There will be no more cursor movements to document, no more sheets of paper necessary. Such a premise would point to their ability to support themselves with art, to collect a living wage from art sales and commission fees. Paradoxically, this would

also mean the discontinuation of *I Work, Therefore I'm Not*. Benera and Estefán's performative artwork stops the moment its 'negative value' form is balanced out by earned income from art making. A seemingly logical extrapolation on this scenario suggests that if an artwork were to cease being an exceptional commodity in its modes of valuation (i.e. if its value reflected the working hours spent on its making), then it would also disappear (or at least it would stop being considered as an exceptional commodity – an artwork – per se).<sup>②⑩</sup> Such logic, however is deceptive. Not only because 'the commodity form' in itself does not say much about living conditions and fairness towards its maker, but also because art as a form never 'is' but it is always in a mode of becoming, transforming, changing into something else. The question here then concerns the maker, who is less of an exceptional half-god and more of a flesh-and-blood labouring person.

①⑥

In recent years, multiple organisations and activist groups took up the task of advocating for a sustainable relationship between art and its institutions in regards to remuneration for artistic labour, such as W.A.G.E. in the USA, Platform BK in the Netherlands, and The Norwegian Association of Curators, among others.

①⑦

In Marx's conception, an artwork is an exception from the labour theory of value, which considers the labour socially necessary for its production as the basis of the commodity's value.

②⑧

Anthony Iles and Marina Vishmidt write about 'labouring subjects who do not identify with themselves as labour. On the one hand all labour becomes in some sense aesthetic self-creation, on the other, formerly unalienated forms of activity are subsumed by capitalist social relations on an unprecedented scale.' ('Make Whichever You Find Work', *Variante* 41, Spring 2011)

②⑨

On pages 80–87 of this book they present four compressed drawings for the period of April – July 2018, the duration of The Trouble with Value exhibition at Onomatopoeie, Eindhoven.

②⑩

Less abstractly, I'm referring here to frequently heard tropes in discussions concerning the fair remuneration of artists for their work. Its critics express fears that once art work is waged, it will become just like any other work, just like any other job or position, with its strict working hours and administered wages, and that that somehow would also mean the end of art and its 'autonomy'.