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Clouds of discontent: art, work, solidarity and digital platform labour

Kispert, M.

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Matthias Kispert

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Abstract

This thesis charts the course of a practice-based project that has employed a range of artistic research methods to explore modes of critical engagement with digital platform labour (commonly referred to as the 'gig economy'). Digital labour platforms act as intermediaries between buyers and sellers of labour, through which a temporary employment relation can be entered into with a few clicks of a mouse or taps on a mobile phone. The wide range of questions that this throws open in relation to how work is organised include issues of workers' rights and organisation, precarity, management by algorithm, opacity of decision-making, the disconnect between digital interfaces and the bodily reality of labour, and an entrepreneurial ideology that is promulgated in order to obscure the problematic aspects of work of this kind.

The central question that has motivated this project is how artistic inquiry, with its specific concerns and methodologies, as well as the distinct kinds of precarities it engenders, can intervene in this emerging area of work on several levels, particularly in relation to questions of representation and the critique of hegemonic discourses, as well as practiced solidarity. The practice conducted in the process comprises two broad strands of inquiry: one has made use of digital platforms as a medium with which to create artistic works, the second has taken to working directly with labour activists. Reflecting on what has emerged in the process, this thesis is ultimately concerned with a methodological investigation that asks, firstly, what kinds of interventions are possible within the restrictions of proprietary digital infrastructures when the objective is to highlight the contradictions of work under platform capitalism; and secondly, how artistic practice can engage with its own problematic position in the capitalist division of labour, particularly when leaving its field of operation and extending solidarity outwards, to workers whose struggles are external to the sphere of art.

The main contribution to knowledge in this thesis is twofold: firstly, the development of a methodology by which artworks employ the functionalities of digital labour platforms in order to critically intervene within their own structures, as well as test what kinds of oppositional flows can be inserted into or extracted from their workings. Secondly, a critique of the former methodology through working with labour rights activists has led to the development of a form of and attitude towards practice that seeks to undermine art's position in the capitalist division between intellectual and manual labour, through what I call artwork that is not artwork as a model for artistic counter-production.

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Author's declaration

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Wherever copyrighted images have been included for illustrative purposes, this has been indicated in the image caption.

Introduction

This thesis charts the course of a practice-based research project in which artistic methods have been drawn upon to explore modes of critical engagement with digital platform labour (now commonly referred to as the *gig economy*). The kind of work in question has emerged relatively recently with the growth of digital platforms that use algorithmic management systems to connect buyers and sellers of labour on an on-demand basis. Its proliferation in recent years has already brought about significant transformations in labour relations that have generally tipped the power balance between labour and capital in favour of the latter. There also are concerns (or hopes, depending on whose interests are considered) that more and more kinds of work are liable to be 'gig-ified' in the future (Doctorow 2021; *Economist* 2018), with gig employment providing a blueprint for the expansion of insecure, short-term work in which many functions of middle management can be automated, and business costs and risks offloaded onto workers.

The work of artists shares some commonalities with what is now called gig work. This is particularly true for conditions of precarity: artists' income often comes from short-term projects after whose completion new sources of earnings must be found. At the same time, the work of artists and that of workers on digital platforms involve very different kinds of precarity, and usually also very different class positions. Working across these differences gives rise to a set of methodological questions as to how artists could or should engage with this particular social problematic: what kinds of artistic processes can be mobilised to interrogate, critique and destabilise the modes of being (of subjects, of bodies) put in place by digital platform labour regimes? How does artist practice speak to but also exceed the concerns raised by theorists and sociologists in relation to digital platform labour and work under neoliberalism more generally? How can differences in precarities and class positions be addressed in an artistic research project that proposes to mobilise artistic practice as well as practices of solidarity with precarious workers outside the field of art?

During the course of the research, these issues have been articulated in a number of ways: the account of the work undertaken begins with a series of interventions that have utilised the workings of digital labour platforms themselves as artistic mediums with which to create artworks that propose a critical engagement with the same platforms. These interventions have coalesced around two broad sets of concerns: on the one hand,

there is the figure of the entrepreneurial subject that is one of the ideological cornerstones of the neoliberal *weltanschauung* and which finds consummate expression in the imaginary of the always-hustling gig worker. On the other hand can be found the embodied aspects of labour that are at risk of being obscured behind imaginaries of technological disruption, as well as the digital surface of platform interfaces. At the same time and with the purpose of critically interrogating the interventionist methods just discussed, the project has also embarked on direct work with labour rights activists. This latter aspect of the research has allowed for the inquiry to examine its own conditions of production through a wider set of reflections on art's own problematic positioning in relation to activism and to the capitalist division of labour, and this in turn brings the discussion back to a number of methodological proposals that seek to destabilise the hierarchies implicit in the division between artistic and other forms of work.

The social problematic that this project has staked its terrain on is one whose development still is very much in process. Initially, the research proposal developed out of a preliminary interest in financialisation and the theme of liquidity, in the latter's figuration of a smooth global space available for capital to move wherever it pleases with little concern about the effects of its operations on actual lives in any particular locale, combined with the imaginary that the term conjures up of a slippage between flows of desire and flows of currency, which can be found in the writings on libidinal economies by authors such as Pierre Klossowski ([1970] 2017), Jean-François Lyotard ([1974] 1993), and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ([1972] 1983; [1980] 1987).

As this preliminary inquiry developed further with the aim of establishing a more delimited field of research, the term *liquid labour* hit a nerve, as it suggests an antagonistic encounter between the frictionless space of abstract flows invoked by the notion of liquidity on the one hand, and the concrete, embodied experience of precarious work on the other. Liquid labour as a concept was at the time being introduced by sociologists of work such as Ursula Huws (2016a) who were developing a critical language to account for the ways in which technological developments were put to use to further tip the power imbalance between capital and labour. Simultaneously, business consultancy firms such as Accenture (2016) were predicting a bright future for what they described as the *liquid workforce*. Over time, the notion of liquidity did not gain much traction in either the critical or the business literature to describe an emerging field of work that instead came to be known, by and large, as the gig economy. Still, the imaginary that the former term conjures up of a situation in which human labour-power can be bought and sold with the

ease of a financial instrument is in many ways apt for describing changes that are under-way in the ways in which work is organised, and for accounting for how these changes, both in terms of the technologies that are mobilised in their implementation and of the economic logic of which they are an expression, spring from the same sources and are bound up with the same kinds of social transformations as those related to financialisation.

Liquidity also comes into play through the figure of the cloud that adorns the title of this thesis. Clouds are shapeless shapes, their contours diffuse, mutable and liable to change at any point; their outlines can be recognised from afar, but up close all that remains to be discerned is an indistinct haze. Clouds consist of vapour, of liquid in a gaseous state that drifts and coalesces into unstable forms until it eventually reaches the stage of condensation and rains down, attracted by the pull of gravity. The Oxford English Dictionary entry for 'cloud' (2020; original emphasis) lists definitions such as 'a visible mass of condensed watery vapour floating in the air'; 'a local appearance of dimness or obscurity in an otherwise clear liquid or transparent body'; 'an innumerable body of insects, birds, etc., flying together; hence *transferred* and *figurative* a multitude, […] a crowd'; 'anything that obscures or conceals'; 'anything that darkens or overshadows with gloom, trouble, affliction, suspicion'; and 'networked computing facilities providing remote data storage and processing services, […] considered collectively'. Clouds then can serve as something of a general cypher that can highlight many of the issues at play in the social field that provides the contextual frame for this research, through their relation to liquidity, mutability, condensation and flows, opacity, crowds, and the political economy of digital technologies, as well as through their signification towards a realm where materiality meets metaphysics, both via their heavenly connotations in religious imagery and the ways in which data processing takes on an appearance of dematerialisation in 'the cloud'.

As these dictionary definitions suggest, clouds can also signify a sense of foreboding, and this is where the discontent alluded to in the title comes in, which in this case is intended to upend any semblance of weightlessness and free-floating mutability untethered from the contingencies of material social life. Discontent here acts as a catalyst through which the seemingly intangible can be rematerialised, networks recast as social relations and data points traced back to the humans whose lived activities have been abstracted into numerical values. These kinds of transfigurations weave their way through the artworks discussed in chapters 3 and 4, in which the workings of digital labour plat-

forms are repurposed as media for art-making, and discontent in a more immediate form will make its appearance particularly in the series of videos titled *Keep your promises* discussed in chapter 5. Transfigurations of this sort however are not the sole preserve of art, as part and parcel of the modus operandi of platform-mediated work is to transform humans into appendages of digital networks.

Digital platform labour

The development of the field of work that this research is concerned with can be traced back to the inauguration of Amazon's website Mechanical Turk on 2nd November 2005 (Amazon 2005). Named after an 18th-century fake chess playing machine that in fact hid a human in its form, Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) is a platform that distributes simple cognitive tasks to be completed by individual workers on their own computers or mobile phones for a small fee. These are tasks that computers are still unable to perform, and Amazon calls this 'artificial artificial intelligence' (Irani 2015: 723).

Besides the terms *liquid labour* and *gig economy*, digital platform work and its various subvariants have been given numerous names, such as the *sharing economy*, the *on-demand economy* and *lean platforms* as the most general terms, *crowdwork*, *clickwork*, *microwork* and *microtasking* referring to the networked distribution of simple cognitive tasks through platforms such as AMT, and *ride-sharing* or *ridehailing* as terms for platform-mediated taxi driving. In the interest of delimiting the field of inquiry, this thesis is not concerned with platforms such as Airbnb that allow users to sell access to assets that they own, even if monetisation of these assets does require a certain amount of work on the part of their owners. The area of work at the centre of this research can be outlined to have the following characteristics: digital platforms act as intermediaries between buyers and sellers of labour, using proprietary software to provide a marketplace on which the transactions between these two parties can take place and that allows for monitoring and extensive data collection on all activities occurring within their infrastructure. Jobs can be very brief, at times lasting only minutes, and there is no obligation on either side of the transaction for any further interaction once the work is done; in fact, platforms forbid this, as their main income derives from fees charged on transactions through their systems and they thus need to preclude any possibility for workers and customers connecting through alternative means. Most platforms, and certainly the ones that are currently dominant, also go to great lengths to avoid taking on any responsibilities towards the workers

who earn an income through their services, with the help of carefully worded contracts and terms and conditions that classify workers as independent contractors, as well as by defending their interests in court and through lobbying and political campaigns if necessary. Chapter 1 will revisit some of the issues brought up in this context in more detail.

Since the inauguration of AMT, different ways in which work is distributed through digital platforms have proliferated, and with this have come a number of proposals for taxonomies of the field. One important distinction is between digital services performed remotely such as those traded on AMT, Freelancer or Fiverr, and localised services carried out in person through platforms that include Uber, Deliveroo or TaskRabbit (Huws, Spencer and Joyce 2016). The former kinds of platforms emerged earlier and tend to provide business-to-business services, while the latter in many cases sell services aimed at the general public. Another set of categories is provided in a report by the US Congressional Research Service (Donovan, Bradley and Shimabukuro 2016), which describes divergences along whether companies allow providers to set prices and choose jobs or not, and lists services such as driving (e.g. Lyft, Uber), personal and household services (e.g. TaskRabbit, Handy), business services (e.g. Freelancer, Upwork), delivery services (e.g. Instacart, Postmates, Deliveroo) and medical care (e.g. Heal, Pager).

At the time when the research proposal for this project was developed in early 2016, interest in this area had still been relatively limited, comprising a steady but measured stream of articles by academics and journalists, as well as a number of artist projects engaging with digital labour platforms. As Figures 0.1 and 0.2 demonstrate, this changed significantly from 2016, during which began a flurry of activity, including the publication of books, academic articles, research reports, news items; conferences being organised such as *Log Out!* (University of Toronto Mississauga, 2018) or *Reshaping Work* (Amsterdam, 2017, 2018, 2019); as well as the creation of a wider range of artworks that in different ways engage with this field.

Term	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Sharing economy	13	52	165	359	469	712	662
Gig economy	1	0	10	42	69	148	124
Digital labour	3	6	13	12	22	30	27
Crowdwork	1	8	12	4	8	12	17

Figure 0.1 Number of articles published about digital platform labour-related topics listed in the Social Sciences Citation Index; search date: 7 December 2020
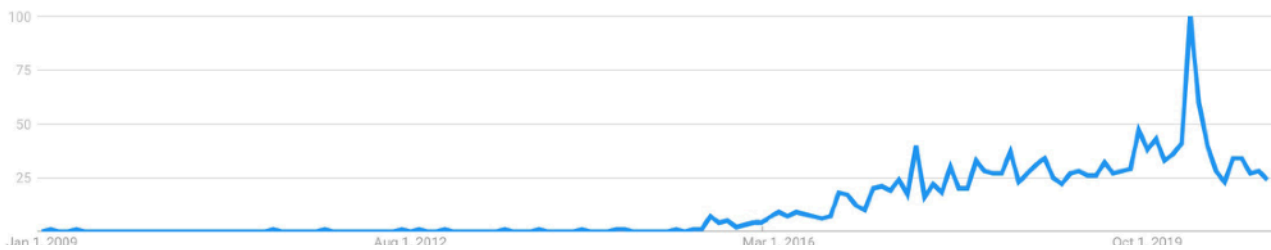
Figure 0.2 Number of internet searches for the term 'gig economy' from 2009–2020; data source: Google Trends (https://www.google.com/trends)

While early research into remote gig work had begun to highlight many problematic aspects (Aytes 2012; Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2014; Irani and Silberman 2013), it is likely that it was the growing prevalence of in-person, localised work that gave rise to the sudden increase in interest, for a number of reasons: the platforms in question were, true to the Silicon Valley spirit of 'disruption', responsible for social transformations across different registers, which include their cannibalising of existing business models, their services being used by growing numbers of people in their everyday lives, sustained legal battles over employment rights and competition law, lobbying and political interference, and the transformation of cityscapes with the visual presence of company logos on the clothing and equipment of delivery workers. Another important aspect introduced by in-person platform work is the emergence of new possibilities for worker self-organisation. In remote gig work, workers are inevitably dispersed and atomised; thus the main channel for workers to connect and share information, experiences and problems lies with online message boards and social media groups. In lines of work such as food delivery or taxi driving, on the other hand, workers encounter each other in the street, and this brings about interpersonal connections that make it possible to gradually develop solidarity networks aided by group messaging services such as WhatsApp (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020: 45), through which workers can discuss common grievances and counteract the individuation that is enforced by the platform architecture.

Eventually, the discontent that had been accumulating in these channels viscerally erupted in London in August 2016. A group of Deliveroo couriers staged a noisy wildcat strike in response to contract changes unilaterally announced by the company, with the aim to enforce a change in pay structure from hourly wages to piecework rates (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020: 42). This protest, the first of many to come, took place in the space of time between the submission of the proposal for this research project and the start of my PhD studies, and was covered widely in the UK media (e.g. Osborne 2016a), and since then, reporting on the rights, conditions and struggles of platform workers has markedly increased in news media.

The wildcat strike also spurred into action a number of grassroots unions that had recently formed in the UK out of the struggles of migrant workers. These unions have made it their purpose to organise the 'unorganisable' sections of the working class—the precariat—whose situation is marked by issues such as short-term employment, out-sourcing arrangements that split management functions between several employers, and in many cases workers' migrant status and low proficiency of English, all of which make this group of workers difficult to reach with traditional methods of union organising (Alberti 2016; Kirkpatrick 2014). The new unions that have sprung up in the UK around these is-sues include the rejuvenated Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and the United Voices of the World (UVW), among others. Their campaigns have been successful in winning better conditions for workers who were either out of reach of more established unions or who felt that their interests were not ad-equately represented and even undermined by larger unions. These successes have to do with the fact that precarious migrant workers themselves have been at the forefront of or-ganising from the start rather than having their interests represented by others, and that the organising involved intersectional approaches that took workers' ethno-cultural and linguistic specificities into account (Alberti and Però 2018: 702).

The project

The project sought, in a broad sense, to mobilise artistic methods in order to research conditions, contradictions and possible solidarities in digital platform labour. The central question that has motivated this project is how artistic inquiry, with its specific concerns and methodologies, as well as the distinct kinds of precarities it engenders, can intervene in this emerging area of work on several levels, particularly in relation to questions of representation and the critique of hegemonic discourses, as well as practiced solidarity. The set of research questions more broadly set out to probe issues surrounding the representation of a workforce that is dispersed and atomised; to look for possible solidarities and to explore how artistic practice can contribute to these; to engage critically with existing discourses around digital platform labour; and, linked to the preceding point, to explore modes of critique of the ideological constructs mobilised around the notion of entrepreneurialism which serves to obscure increasing precarity and exploitative labour relations. The practice that forms the core of this research project exists in three distinct clusters which will each be dealt with in a separate chapter, and work on which occurred in parallel for the most part.

The main contribution to knowledge in this thesis is twofold: firstly, the development of a methodology by which artworks employ the functionalities of digital labour platforms in order to critically intervene within their own structures, as well as test what kinds of oppositional flows can be inserted into or extracted from their workings. Secondly, a critique of the former methodology through working with labour rights activists has led to the development of a form of and attitude towards practice that seeks to undermine art's position in the capitalist division between intellectual and manual labour, through what I call art-work that is not artwork as a model for artistic counter-production.

Before a discussion of the practice itself comes the contextual review in chapter 1, which lays the groundwork of assembling the theoretical and artistic concerns that stake out the research area. The chapter begins with a history, in broad brushstrokes, of art and labour under capitalism in parallax, which starts in the late modern period and runs until the dawn of post-Fordism, and focuses on a few noteworthy historical moments. This is followed by a discussion of the post-*operaismo* concepts of the social factory and immaterial labour, and the notion of precarity, all of which have been influential in social and labour movements since the 1990s, as well as in artistic circles concerned with the dy-

namics of labour under post-Fordism. They are thus put in context with artistic practices and related theoretical debates that focus on immateriality and precariousness through employing strategies that involve interpersonal encounters and various modes of participation and performance. Here, Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of *relational aesthetics* comes up against critiques of its vacation of the terrain of politics, as well as against later developments that bring in, on the one hand, proposals for antagonistic strategies that amplify social contradictions, and on the other, social practice art whose focus is on interventions that engage directly with particular socio-political situations. The latter part of this chapter moves on to the topic of digital platform labour and a review of the different issues raised in the sociological literature on this field. The chapter ends with an overview of different artist practices that engage with digital platform labour, with a few case studies examined in more detail.

Chapter 2 outlines the methodology as it has been developed throughout this project. This begins with a list of the original research questions, followed by an elaboration of the research paradigm in its ontological and epistemological aspects, including reflections on the role that issues of class and positionality have played in the development of the research. Following on from this, the two main strands of the research are described, along with a project timeline and an exploration of paths that the research did not take and the reasons why. The chapter finishes with an elaboration of the concept of situated analysis as it is used in this thesis and an account of the different procedures used for gathering participant consent.

The analysis in chapter 3 is centred around an intervention on the platform Fiverr titled *Work hard dream big*. Fiverr, which has by the time of writing become a company that is traded publicly on the NASDAQ with a market capitalisation of $7.59B, gained notoriety in 2017 with an advertising campaign that pulled out all the stops when it came to glorifying entrepreneurial self-exploitation and competition to the point of complete exhaustion. In something of a response to this, *Work hard dream big* used the Fiverr online interface as the medium with which to create an interventionist artwork that puts forward a critique of the entrepreneurial logic of the kind propagated by Fiverr's advertising campaign. This intervention came up against some obstacles within the platform's strictly policed walled online garden; still the hindrance put in the way of this project led to its being expanded in new directions. In dialogue with this and a number of other works created as part of this research, a range of themes related to subjectivity under neoliberalism are being explored, including Michel Foucault's thought on the subject and governmentality;

Frédéric Lordon's Spinozist analysis of subjectivity at work under capitalism; the relations between liquidity, derivatives and dividuals, based on the theories of Dick Bryan and Michael Rafferty, and Arjun Appadurai; and machinic enslavement, via Maurizio Lazzarato's reading of Deleuze and Guattari. The final section of the chapter introduces a framework that has been developed to collect all the art works and other research created as part of this project: superconductr. Outwardly, this is the name of a research institute with ambiguous affiliation or purpose that is housed on its own website (www.superconductr.org). Besides this, superconductr also puts forward a theoretical proposition that plays off a pun based on Foucault's quasi-tautological definition of power as the conduct of conduct.

Chapter 4 moves on to consider the embodied aspects of digital platform labour. This comes with the intention to ground the ostensible immateriality of the digital in the ineluctable fact that labour is an obstinately embodied practice. The work discussed in this chapter is grouped around two themes: sweat and affect. The first of these, sweat, is an everyday product of the body, particularly the body under exertion, and figuratively it also appears in the notion of the sweatshop, which since the nineteenth century has become a byword for exploitative labour practices. Sweat is explored through two quite different practices: the first, *Sweat, data and liquid assets* is a collection of responses to a simple set of questions about the embodied experience of work that have been posted on the clickwork platform Microworkers. The second piece, *Fromage faux frais (of production)* engages with in-person platform labour and the labouring body, through the production of cheese from the sweat of food delivery cycle couriers. Here, besides the obvious visceral (and olfactory) aspects of the piece, a number of short-circuits are created between food as the delivered commodity and the exertion of the body of the worker engaged in the delivery, and between algorithmic management of work and the concept from political economy of the *faux frais* (operating expenses) of production. This part of the practice is contextualised through writings on new materialism, particularly its inflection in contemporary Marxist thought. The latter part of this chapter is centred around the concept of *auto-affective labour*, development of which has been informed by a piece titled *Workers laughing alone for money*, which consists of recordings of laughter that have been sourced through the platform Microworkers. This concept is then also applied to a reading of the video series *Capitalism doesn't love me*, for which ASMR performers offer whispered readings of disciplinary emails received from digital labour platforms.

Chapter 5 proceeds from a critique of the methodologies outlined above. The questions raised in this chapter ask how artistic research can position itself in relation to precarious labours that lie outside its own remit, in ways that propose modes of practiced solidarity and increase the agency of workers, neither of which can be fully addressed with the practices discussed thus far. What this calls for is a methodology that can interrogate art's own position in relation to other forms of work, and this is developed in this chapter through a collaboration with labour activists that straddles the boundary between artist practice and activist praxis, which has resulted in the creation of a series of activist videos. The questions raised here in the first instance interrogate how such work operates in the context of a wider artistic research project. In this regard, it would be easy to foreclose debate by either confining the videos and the process of their creation to the realm of the extra-artistic, or, on the contrary, to simply declare the videos to be artworks in a nominalist gesture through which anything can be declared to be art. What is more interesting, however, is to accept neither position as given and to instead read these videos and the process of their creation through various conceptual apparatuses that operate across the intersections of art and politics. Following this approach gives rise to a series of investigations in which the practice at hand is interpreted through the lens of discourses such as those related to nominalism, the avant-garde, autonomy and post-autonomous art, social practice art, usefulness and Tania Bruguera's Arte Útli movement, debates on art, labour and capitalism, and militant and decolonial research. This discussion asks how artist practice can address its own problematic position in the capitalist division of labour, particularly when this involves collaboration between artists on the one hand and workers and labour rights activists on the other. From this emerges a set of methodological proposals that seek to unsettle hierarchies between intellectual and manual labour through a critical interrogation of art's complicity in the same.

1 How did we get here? A contextual review

1.1 Fordism melts into air

Labour under capitalism exists in forms that contain some underlying consistency and continuity—workers are forced to sell their labour-power in order to secure the means for their own survival—while also undergoing historical transformations, as well as existing under geographically dispersed disparate regimes.

In the beginning decades of the late modern period in the mid-nineteenth century, the effects of the Industrial Revolution were making themselves fully felt across Europe, uprooting existing social structures and putting in their place a new order based on capital accumulation. The newly forming proletarian classes, free in the double sense of possessing the freedom to sell their labour-power and the freedom from ownership of any means of production (Marx [1867] 1976: 874), were first represented in art by painters who broke with the then prevalent Neoclassical tradition. French Realist painters such as Gustave Courbet and Jean-François Millet, and British Pre-Raphaelites including Ford Madox Brown and John Everett Millais were among the first artists to expand both the kinds of social realities that could be represented in visual art and the artistic language in which these representations would be realised (Eisenman 1994: 206–220). Courbet ([1855] 1966) in particular, but also many of his fellow travellers, were influenced by socialist thought which gained currency at the time as a counterforce to the emerging bourgeois order: he penned his *Realist manifesto* seven years after Marx and Engels' ([1848] 2002) *Communist manifesto* was published (Apostol 2015: 103), and his involvement in the Paris Commune of 1871, as well as his exile after the latter's brutal suppression are well-documented (Herding 2000: 113).

Figure 1.1 Gustave Courbet, The Stone Breakers, oil on canvas, 170 x 240 cm, 1849; public domain image

In the early 20th century, some of the European avant-garde movements continued this alignment of artists with anti-capitalist positions, with artists having (often uneasy) relations with various communist parties. This includes, for example, Berlin Dada (Doherty 2003) and the Surrealists (Bronner 2012: 102–103). At the same time, the global centre of capitalist development was shifting to the US, where the Fordist factory became the emblematic case of the kind of industrial production that was to be dominant in capitalist economies for decades to come. Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry Murals* (1932–1933) represent in many ways the quintessential art work of Fordist production, through their subject matter of industrial work, their location at the heart of the burgeoning US car industry, and through the contradictions involved in their creation: funded by Henry Ford's son Edsel, who was a patron and director of the Detroit Institute of Arts at the time (Rubyan-Ling 1996), Rivera, a Mexican communist, created a major piece of public art, while 'Ford Motor Company guards shot striking car workers' (O'Connor 1993: 60).

Figure 1.2 Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry Murals*, 1933 (detail);
photograph by Paula Soyer-Moya (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

In parallel to the unions of industrial workers, artists started to create their own collective organisations. The Harlem Artists' Guild was founded in 1928 to agitate 'for the end of race-based discrimination and for the inclusion and fair pay of African American artists in arts organisations' (Apostol 2015: 106), while the American Artists' Congress was launched in 1936 to agitate 'for a permanent federal arts work program and [propose] that museums pay rental fees to artists' (Sholette 2009: 18). A second wave of organising by artists in the US occurred towards the end of the Fordist era, with the Art Workers' Coalition founded in 1969 and the Art Strike Against Racism, War and Oppression initiated in 1970 (Bryan-Wilson 2009: 1).

In the broader economy, the period until 1973 was marked by a Keynesian compromise between labour, capital and the state, as well as gradual international expansion and, after World War II, a period of continuous economic growth. Still, the discipline and monotony of assembly line work led to repeated conflicts between labour and capital. Gradual wage increases were the result of labour struggles, as well as of the need of capital to ensure a market for its products in a consumption-driven economy. At the same

time, these wage increases mostly benefitted a specific group: the white male worker. This led to demands for equal treatment from others who had been excluded from the spoils of economic growth, particularly women, people of colour and migrants. Interlinked with these challenges from the margins of the capitalist order was a growing sense of general dissatisfaction with the rigidity of industrial production and the monotony of the uniform products it unleashed onto the world in great numbers (Dyer-Witheford 2015; Harvey 1989).

Consumer markets became increasingly saturated during the 1960s, which was counteracted by governments through loose monetary policy, leading to increased inflation. The eventual reining in of monetary expansion, combined with an oil price shock, led to a sharp recession in 1973, which brought about the decline of the Fordist model and the gradual shift to a different paradigm, most commonly referred to as *post-Fordism*. Some of its salient features are a shift from Keynesian to neoliberal economic governance; a move of industrial production to regions with lower wages and fewer labour protections; increased automation and outsourcing; the disciplining of labour in the formerly industrialised countries through this automation, outsourcing and the increased mobility of capital; and an increased importance of finance and service sectors.

Among the theoretical models put forward to account for the dynamics at work since this disjuncture, two lines of thought deserve particular attention in the present context, as they deal with concerns raised by sociologists and activists which have found strong resonance in some artistic circles: these are the debates arising out of Italian workerism and discourses around precarity.

1.2 Post-*operaismo*, immaterial labour and art

Italian workerism or *operaismo* and the associated autonomist (*autonomia*) movement emerged in the early 1960s in response to the Italian Communist Party and the main labour unions' increasing accommodation with the interests of the Italian state and capital. The workerists' main concern lay with workers' autonomous self-organisation, and with expanding workers' struggles into alliances with unwaged groups such as students, the unemployed and homemakers. *Operaismo* fell into a deep crisis at the end of the 1970s, as both the post-Fordist transformation of work and society necessitated the development of new strategies that did however not materialise due to intensifying internal disagreements, and as a result of the persecution of leftwing activists and theorists by the

Italian government in retaliation for a series of terrorist killings by the Red Brigades (Wright 2017). Still, many of the movement's intellectuals continued their work, and in the mid-1990s post-*operaismo* arose out of the ashes of workerism and became increasingly influential in activist, artist and academic circles. With Antonio Negri as the most prominent figure, the post-*operaisti* both developed an updated conceptual apparatus and facilitated a reassessment of earlier workerist categories. In the present context, it is particularly the concepts of the *social factory* and *immaterial labour* that deserve further investigation, as they have been influential in analyses of post-Fordist social transformations more broadly as well as in debates on the relations between art and labour under neoliberalism.

In its initial form, the social factory thesis was developed as a counter to orthodox Marxist positions that saw class conflict as limited to the confines of the factory. What *operaisti* sought to emphasise is how capitalism's reach went much further than this, how 'the "factory" where the working class worked was the society as a whole' (Cleaver 2000: 70), in which 'work (production), education and training (reproduction), and leisure (consumption) all become points on an increasingly integrated circuit of capitalist activity' (Dyer-Witheford 2005: 138). At the time, the social factory thesis was instrumental for linking the struggles of workers with those of other social movements. Viewed in the present context, it is not difficult to see how this notion acquires renewed urgency in a situation where the boundaries between work and non-work have in many ways become blurred to the point of indistinction, and many social activities that used to lie beyond the reach of capital have been turned into sites of profit extraction. This is true to an even greater extent in the context of digital labour platforms and the ways in which they make it possible for work to be split up into tiny fragments and distributed in time and space, to be carried out anywhere with an internet connection, for whatever duration is required for a specific task.

The notion of immaterial labour, even more so than the social factory thesis, has held considerable sway over recent debates at the crossroads of art and labour (Dimitrakaki and Lloyd 2015; Osborne 2008; Virno 2004), and as much as it has to an extent helped to articulate important concerns regarding changes in labour relations under post-Fordism, both its conception and its reception are bound up with a number of problematic assumptions, historical blind spots and flawed readings. One of the main reference points for these debates is Maurizio Lazzarato's (1996) 'Immaterial labor', in which he describes this as the 'labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the

commodity' (132). Lazzarato's conception of immaterial labour encompasses two different aspects: on one hand, *informational content*, which

> refers directly to the changes taking place in workers' labor processes, […] where the skills involved in direct labor are increasingly skills involving cybernetics and computer control (and horizontal and vertical communication);

on the other hand, *cultural content*, which 'involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as "work"—[…] defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion'.

Lazzarato terms the activities relating to cultural content *mass intellectuality*, which he sees as created 'out of a combination of the demands of capitalist production and the forms of "self-valorization" that the struggle against work has produced' (133). Changes in capitalist conditions of production have brought about compulsory adjustments in workers' subjectivities – towards proficiency in 'management, communication and creativity', where subjectivities themselves are 'made susceptible to organization and command'. Workers are responsible for their own control and motivation, and labour-power is 'able to organize both its own work and its relations with business entities' (138). Foreshadowing the more recent development of on-demand work distributed through digital platforms, Lazzarato continues: 'industry does not form or create this new labor power, but simply takes it on board and adapts it', involving 'a kind of "intellectual worker" who is him- or herself an entrepreneur, inserted within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space' (139).

A number of important features should be highlighted here, features which have found more acute articulations in relatively recent developments in labour relations: (1) the fact that capital is not involved in creating labour-power, but is simply making use of it; (2) the transformation of the worker into an entrepreneur; (3) radical contingency whose effects are borne first and foremost by workers; and (4) the entanglement of workers and their labour in unstable networks. Furthermore, social communication becomes subsumed within the economic as part of a process of production of subjectivity that, in Lazzarato's view, undergirds the entire capitalist productive apparatus. He thus suggests that to grasp this process it is necessary 'to use, rather than the "material" model of production, the "aesthetic" model that involves author, reproduction, and reception' (143). For Lazzarato, the 'author' function here becomes de-individualised and

transformed into an industrially organized production process, […] 'reproduction' becomes a mass reproduction organized according to the imperatives of profitability, and the audience ('reception') tends to become the consumer/communicator.

This nexus of subjectivity, communication, relationality, aesthetics and economics has, in different but related ways, also been the focal point for a range of artist practices that set out to mobilise different variants of a politics of art that could address the changed social conditions brought about by post-Fordist production.

1.2.1 Immaterial art, material relations

It was Nicolas Bourriaud's (1998) *Relational aesthetics* that initiated a broad debate on new currents in the way art was produced in the 1990s, describing the ways in which artists were moving away from the production of objects to the creation of process-based works that directly intervene in or produce social relations. Artists that Bourriaud discusses include Rikrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe and Maurizio Cattellan. It is perhaps no coincidence that the book was published shortly after Lazzarato's (1996) 'Immaterial labor'. The social critique Bourriaud himself put forward however is centred around issues raised in Guy Debord's ([1967] 1995) *The society of the spectacle*—alienation brought about by passive consumption and reification of social relations in a capitalist society mediated by images. However, as Claire Bishop (2012a: 193–194; 215–216) notes, the changes in artist practices from the creation of objects that exist as finished works to more temporary, process-oriented interventions—which Bishop sees exemplified in the increased currency of the term *project*—could also be seen as very much in tune with the demands of post-Fordist capital for more temporary, contingent, project-based labour arrangements, as analysed in Boltanski and Chiapello's ([1999] 2007) *The new spirit of capitalism*.

The kinds of practices that Bourriaud's book brought to the fore have since proliferated, and Nato Thompson (2012: 19) lists *social aesthetics*, *new genre public art* and *social practice* as related terms. He sees precursors to this in *tactical media* (Critical Art Ensemble), *dialogic art* (Grant Kester), and *social sculpture* (Joseph Beuys). Thompson (2012: 28–29; original emphasis) uses the phrase *living as form* as a somewhat programmatic statement to describe an art that expands conceptual art's critique of aesthetic formal arrangements by making forms of living themselves the subject of art: 'whatever has a certain form can be measured, described, understood, misunderstood. *Forms of*

living can be criticized, disintegrated, assembled'. There are obvious parallels here to Foucauldian ([1978–79] 2008) *biopolitics*, which encompasses life in its totality, and the *operaist* notion of the social factory discussed above. There also are many other kinds of politics playing out in artist practices that take leave from object-centred creation in order to cross over into the social, and some of the implications of this will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5. One of the central notions under which these practices have co-alesced is that of social practice art, which is concerned with artists intervening directly in concrete social situations, often related to marginalised populations, with the aim of empowering the communities in question.

Returning to Bourriaud, the main shortcoming of his analysis lay with his proposal for art to engender little more than a shared conviviality, an ameliatory micropolitics that appeared all-too-comfortable with the status quo and seemed to resonate with contemporary theories of the end of history (Fukuyama 1992), where any major systemic change was off the table. Claire Bishop (2004) published an influential critique of Bourriaud's book, in which the argument hinges on two main points: the first is that Bourriaud somewhat reductively identifies relationality and open-endedness to reside only in art that has a social relationship at the core of its structure, and the second is that Bourriaud's idea of sociality is in fact repressive, as it neutralises dissent and naturalises any exclusions that do not fit into the sanitised model of conviviality he proposes.

1.2.2 Antagonism as social relation

Instead, Bishop proposes antagonism as a fundamental category that is necessary for any true democracy to be possible. Her argument builds on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) notion of decentred subjectivity, which is always incomplete and impossible to be fully constituted. This incompleteness causes one's sense of self to be particularly vulnerable in the encounter with the other, and this impossibility of ever fully constituting a complete self can be transposed to the level of society, which at its own social and identity boundaries is never able to constitute a full presence, but instead encounters conflicts and antagonisms as a condition of its possibility as a democracy.

As an artist who has a propensity to tackle social antagonism without any apparent attempt at ameliorating the attendant contradictions, Bishop discusses Santiago Sierra, whose work is known for the discomfort it elicits in the viewer and the controversies that tend to surround it. Bishop (2004: 70) describes it as 'a kind of ethnographic realism, in

which the outcome or unfolding of his action forms an indexical trace of the economic and social reality of the place in which he works'. Sierra's work usually involves employing low-paid people from marginalised backgrounds to perform senseless and at times degrading tasks for a gallery audience, either in person or documented on photographs or video. One of his most-discussed works is *250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Paid People* (1999), for which six Cuban youngsters received $30 each to have a straight line tattooed on their backs.

Image redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 1.3 Santiago Sierra: *250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Paid People*, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 75 x 107 cm, 1999; © Santiago Sierra

Bishop (72–73) reads Sierra's work as performing certain delimitations in terms of choice of participants as well as context (as opposed to the ostensible open-endedness of much relational practice), and these delimitations are crucial for a staging of antagonism. In a discussion of Sierra's *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed* Blond (2001) Bishop describes a situation of mutual non-identification between audience and performers, which nevertheless opens up a kind of ambiguous space where racial and class divisions between the hired performers on the one hand and the presumably middle-class art audience on the other are put to work without being reconciled. This claim of mutual non-identification has been challenged by Andrés David Montenegro Rosero (2015), but what

might be more valuable than arguing about identification, is to try and assess whether the contradictions that Sierra stages in his projects carry any potential for disrupting, even if only symbolically, the power relations that are their underlying subject matter, or whether these power relations tend to simply be put on show, in a performative reproduction of reification.

The suggested answer to this question is, in fact, the central fault line that separates Sierra's admirers from his detractors. While Bishop emphasises the disruptive potential in Sierra's work, Grant Kester (2011: 162–171) does not acknowledge much if any generative dialectical tension in the same. Without this, what remains is a reading of the work that remains fixated on its appearance as a kind of didactic shock-therapy activism: 'Sierra […] believes that he can shock (implicitly bourgeois) viewers out of their complacency and into the correct critical consciousness of both the Other's suffering and their own privilege' (163). While Kester's criticism is undeniably coloured by his own allegiance to what he calls *dialogical art*, whose concerns are in many ways diametrically opposed to Sierra's staging of the negative, he certainly has a point when he takes Sierra's work to task in regards to the lack of agency of its subjects.

Bishop (2012a), on the other hand, repeatedly points out that many of the kinds of socially engaged practices championed by Kester and the like can being easily co-opted to operate as cheap substitute-social work, an issue that will be explored in more detail in chapter 5. Still, her repeated insistence on the primacy of art's autonomy does lead to the appearance of something of a blind spot in her analysis: if antagonism is to be the fundamental category for interpreting the significance of Sierra's work, then it remains somewhat strange that one side of the antagonistic relation, that is, the workers employed by Sierra, is rendered entirely passive and mute. Sure, at the most basic level, the relations of inequality that are the subject of Sierra's output are no more benign than what is enacted in his delegated performances. Yet one is left to wonder whether it would not be possible, if antagonism is to be staged, to stage it in ways that implicate the viewer through *more* than just discomfort and shock; in short: what if the *tableau vivant* could talk back at the viewer? This line of questioning could open up a range of further paths of inquiry, less in terms of emphasising the dialogical as such on Kester's terms, but instead as a move towards sustaining, perhaps even escalating, social antagonism, in a way that goes beyond the one-sidedness of Sierra's insistent re-staging of the instrumentalisation of some people by others.

1.3 Precarious, adj.

> Etymology: 'given as a favour, depending on the favour of another, (of property) held by tenancy at will, uncertain, doubtful, suppliant; […] held or enjoyed by the favour of and at the pleasure of another person; […] exposed to risk, insecure, unstable' ('precarious' 2020).

Another artist whose work is often invoked by Bishop as an example of how unresolvable antagonisms can be articulated is Thomas Hirschhorn. Bishop's (2004; 2012a) analysis is centred around how Hirschhorn's work sustains the tension between his unrelenting assertion of art's autonomy and the deep social embeddedness of his installations in public space, such as his monuments to the philosophers Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, Georges Bataille and Antonio Gramsci, which were located in Amsterdam's red-light district, the outskirts of Avignon, at a housing estate in Kassel, and in the South Bronx, respectively. Besides his idiosyncratic approach towards thinking and making art politically, his work is of interest because Hirschhorn has been one of the first artists to make issues of precariousness a central theme motivating his practice.

Image redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 1.4 Thomas Hirschhorn, *Gramsci Monument*, 2013; © Ángel Franco/The New York Times

As Anna Dezeuze (2014) explains, discussions around job precarity, for example by Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 81–87), became prevalent in France in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which led Hirschhorn (quoted in Dezeuze 2014: 53) to re-appropriate the term as he was 'fed up' with hearing it being used negatively. Thus the latter appears in titles such as *Kunsthalle Prekär* (1996) and *Musée Précaire Albinet* (2004), and Hirschhorn frequently emphasises the precariousness of his work through its form, location, and in his own discussions of and writings about his projects. Regarding his series of *Monuments* and similar large-scale public installations, Hirschhorn has emphasised the precariousness of the work in terms of its dependence on acceptance and care by the communities where the work is sited, a situation made particularly visible when Hirschhorn decided, together with local residents, to cut short *Deleuze Monument* (2000) by two months after some equipment had been stolen. Dezeuze (2014: 33) highlights the precariousness implicit in Hirschhorn's use of cheap, perishable everyday materials to construct his works—including plastic sheets, cardboard, aluminium foil and packing tape—as well as in his adopting of a Deleuze-inspired 'minor', vulnerable position through '[performing] weakness and stupidity willingly'. It is important to note here that this 'stupidity' has nothing to do with a celebration of failure or inadequacy; on the contrary, what Hirschhorn is aiming at is a non-hierarchical, affective short-circuit between his own perplexity at the state of the world and his audience.

1.3.1 A revolutionary subject?

Returning to the discussions that originally animated Hirschhorn's concern for precariousness, the term *precarity* that has become prevalent in the English-speaking world has been translated from the French *precarité.* While it has been in circulation since the 1980s, its use markedly increased in the social movements of the early 2000s in Western Europe. Precarity

> refers to all possible shapes of unsure, not guaranteed, flexible exploitation: from illegalised, seasonal and temporary employment to homework, flex- and temp-work to subcontractors, freelancers or so-called self-employed persons; […] its reference also extends beyond the world of work to encompass other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations (Neilson and Rossiter 2005: np).

The discourse on precarity is embedded in a larger set of related debates on, for example, *liquid modernity* (Bauman 2000), *risk society* (Beck 1992), or *financialisaition* (Martin 2002). All these deal in some way with increased contingency of social, economic

and political configurations, from globalised phenomena down to the level of subjectivity. It is, however, the notion of precarity that has provided the most salient rallying cry for activists, theorists and artists alike, because its wider ramifications (together with the concept of immaterial labour) suggest the possibility of new solidarities across traditional class divides. In relation to this, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2005: np) have noted that the notion of precarity has

> provided a rallying call […] for struggles surrounding citizenship, labour rights, the social wage, and migration; […] struggles [that] are imagined to require new methods of creative-social organisation that do not make recourse to social state models, trade union solidarities, or Fordist economic structures.

Guy Standing (2011) famously called the *precariat* 'a new dangerous class'—an emerging and potentially revolutionary class subject. In cultural and academic sectors, discussions around precarity have led to vigorous critical debates and interventions (Gill and Pratt 2008; Precarious Workers Brigade 2017). Artist and writer Hito Steyerl (2013) has traced back the etymology of the word *freelancer* to its origins in the figure of the mercenary, while artist Silvio Lorusso (2016) has coined the term *entreprecariat* to describe how precarious conditions necessitate individuals to view and conduct themselves as entrepreneurs.

Already in 'Immaterial labor', Lazzarato ([1996] 2012: 144–145) claimed that there is revolutionary potential inherent in the structural conditions of this labour itself: 'immaterial labor constitutes itself in immediately collective forms that exist as networks and flows', which 'poses a problem of legitimacy for the capitalist appropriation of this process'. Since immaterial labour always happens in cooperation, as part of a network of social actors, workers could simply do away with the capitalist appropriation of their labour and use the already existing collaborative networks for their own ends. In the words of Hardt and Negri (2000: 61): 'the deterritorializing power of the multitude is the productive force that sustains Empire and at the same time the force that calls for and makes necessary its destruction'.

1.3.2 Or a pointless category?

However, both the notions of the precariat and of immaterial labour have come in for some criticism: Angela Mitropoulos (2006), as well as Neilson and Rossiter (2008), highlight the fact that stable long-term employment has historically been the exception rather than the norm in capitalism, reserved for the male factory worker in Europe and North

America, fulfilment of whose demands for better working conditions was directly and indirectly supported through the unpaid labour of women and hyper-exploitation in the colonies.

Early on in the debate on the digital economy, Ursula Huws (1999: 31) set herself the task to 're-embody cyberspace', finding that, for the most part, existing categories are largely sufficient to explain phenomena attributed to the proliferation of digital technologies and networks. Taking the example of a fashion shoe, Huws can detect little difference to a 'sought-after Paris bonnet in the 19th century' (38), which is also purchased for its 'snob value' (37), save that the latter is produced by skilled labour while with the former the production process has been deskilled, with the 'knowledge' aspect of the work transferred to specialised employees such as designers or marketing managers.

Christian Fuchs (2014: 252) dismisses the concept of immaterial labour outright, as he sees information as material resulting from the activity of the human brain and accuses post-*operaismo* thinkers of dabbling in 'spiritualism, esoterics and religion'. Fuchs stresses that while information plays an important part, capitalism is many things at the same time, and even the digital infrastructures that support informational capitalism rest on many different types of labour, including mining for raw materials, production and assembly of electronic parts, and production and maintenance of software. In a similar vein, Nick Dyer-Witheford (2015: 11) notes how the notion of immaterial labour denies 'the persistence of hard, corporeal, and all too material toil'.

David Graeber (2008) sees the idea of immaterial labour as flawed from the outset, as it is based on a Marxist misconception that divides societies into a material base and an ideological superstructure. This leads to a fetishisation of material production which then allows theorists to present immaterial production as something altogether new, while in fact even the most banal material object is (and always has been) produced through a network of social relations involving intellectual and other 'immaterial' elements.

Anna Dezeuze (2006) is critical of artists who create works based on survival strategies of dwellers in informal settlements, for a tendency to romanticise conditions of precarity among economically marginalised populations. Examples she gives are Marjetica Potrc's *Caracas: Growing House* (2003) and Francis Alÿs's photo series *Ambulantes* (1992–2002). These works tend to emphasise the resourcefulness and sheer tenacity of people living in difficult circumstances. However, a simple celebration of survival under uncertainty does little to address the structural conditions that have brought these condi-

tions into being in the first place. Instead, what remains is an empty aestheticisation of precariousness, a rhetoric of empathy that obscures social and class struggles, and a fixation on survival that distracts from the need to organise so that effective demands can be made.

Finally, Lazzarato (2010: 4) himself abandoned the notion of immaterial labour shortly after publication of his article, stating as the main reason for this the concept's ambiguity, the fact that 'distinguishing between the material and the immaterial was a theoretical complication we were never able to resolve'. The way in which the concept ended up being applied by others, for the purpose of categorising different kinds of labour as either material or immaterial, was never what Lazzarato had intended, and he thus went on to focus his research on the production of subjectivity instead. It should be added that there is a much longer and underacknowledged intellectual lineage to the term, particularly in relation to the Italian *autonomia* feminism of Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici and others, since 'traditionally, a large section of immaterial labor has been domestic labor and caring, traditionally performed by women' (Fortunati 2007: 145), and it is this line of thought in particular in which the most radical potentials of this concept can be found.

1.4 Precarity 3.0

Issues of precarity, the social factory, as well as the intersections between material and immaterial aspects of labour come to a head in recent developments around work that is distributed through digital platforms. The term *gig economy*, which originates from an article by Tina Brown (2009) in *Daily Beast*, evokes the work of artists, particularly musicians, who get hired for a single engagement with no further commitments or responsibilities on either side (Prassl 2018: 2). Meanwhile, in the growing body of sociological literature on gig work, a wide range of issues is being raised, as the following list will show. In the published research, AMT and Uber are the most discussed cases by far, the former as an instance of remote gig work, the latter in the category of locally delivered in-person services. Presumably, this has to do with AMT being the platform that stands out as the initial instance of remote gig work, while Uber has quickly garnered both ubiquity as a service used by many in their daily lives through its rapid growth, and notoriety through its ruthless business practices.

1.4.1 Workers' rights

Most digital labour platforms insist on treating their workers as independent contractors, in a bid to absolve themselves from any obligation for adhering to basic standards and protections for workers enshrined in law. Such responsibilities as providing space and/or equipment needed for work, compensating for the effects of illness or accidents, covering holiday pay and pension contributions, protecting against discrimination, adherence to minimum wage standards or the right to union representation are, for the most part, assiduously avoided. This is one of the reasons why Nick Srnicek (2017: 76), in his analysis of platform capitalism, uses the term *lean platforms* in this context: 'a hyper-outsourced model, whereby workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced, maintenance costs are outsourced, and training is outsourced', allowing platforms to 'shift nearly all of their business risk and cost onto others' (Prassl 2018: 10). This, as Hubert Horan (2017: 52) observes in the context of Uber, 'transfers wealth from labor to capital but does not improve efficiency or service'. The new extremes to which outsourcing is taken are neatly summed up in a statement by CrowdFlower CEO Lukas Biewald (quoted in Marvit 2014: np):

> Before the Internet, it would be really difficult to find someone, sit them down for ten minutes and get them to work for you, and then fire them after those ten minutes. But with technology, you can actually find them, pay them the tiny amount of money, and then get rid of them when you don't need them anymore.

In addition to its glib celebration of hire-and-fire culture, this statement gets right to the heart of the regime of temporality put in force through digital labour platforms. Here, any activity that is not directly part of the work mediated through the platform and thus also generating fees for the same is externalised to workers, whether this entails registering and creating profiles on platforms, searching out work opportunities, training, maintenance, or the various kinds of downtime experienced in regular employment. During times of low activity, it is not the company that loses money, but workers who are denied an income (Prassl 2019: 21).

Hiding behind euphemisms such as 'deactivation' lie aggressive firing policies that are usually based on customer ratings and performance metrics calculated through extensive data harvesting, with little if any transparency and no recourse to legal challenge due to workers' status as independent contractors. Platform workers live with the constant risk of losing their main source of income from one day to the next.

Digital labour platforms put in place rigid hierarchies between the different kinds of work forces that they employ, 'between those who design an app and those who physically provide the service it sells' (Gregg 2015: np), with programmers and other office workers enjoying the customary perks of start-up culture, while service providers usually are treated as disposable. The management of workers through algorithms puts in place a layer of abstraction that obscures the humans whose work is being called up with the software. As Lilly Irani (2015: 721) observes in relation to AMT, crowdwork platforms' mode of operation through which workers can be called up with a few lines of code leads to 'problems of worker management [being] handled as computational problems' (724), something which Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos (quoted in Irani 2015: 730) terms 'humans-as-a-service'.

Bias and discrimination affect both workers and customers in gig work. Uber has used its standard ruse that it is a technology and not a transportation company to try and escape its legal responsibilities towards disabled passengers (Strochlic 2015). While among San Francisco's app-based drivers, 78% are people of colour (and 20% of the city's app drivers earn nothing after expenses) (Smiley 2020), only 7.5% of Uber's employees are Black (Dickey 2020). In relation to how algorithms can perpetuate existing social prejudice, Uber has been sued in San Francisco over its rating system for 'allowing racist bias to run rampant' (Ongweso Jr 2020: np).

Beneath gig companies' narrative of disruptive innovation lies a return to labour relations that turn out not to be all that new. The observation that the temporary hiring of workers though platforms resembles the much older practice of day labour is a common one, linking gig workers to 'agricultural workers, dock workers, or other low-wage workers—who would show up at a site in the morning in the hope of finding a job for the day' (Srnicek 2017: 78). An even more apt analogy might be that of the putting-out system, as Jeremias Prassl (2018: 74–85) has observed: complex tasks are split into small fragments that are distributed through powerful intermediaries to a reserve army of workers who are hired short-term as and when needed, who need little to no training, and who are paid a piece rate. Finally, there are analogies between gig work and servant economies that have more or less disappeared across Europe and the US but still are very much alive in South Asia (Mirani 2014; Samarajiva 2019).

1.4.2 Regulatory arbitrage, lobbying and political interference

In this concentrated attack on workers' rights, forms of legal deception called 'regulatory arbitrage' (Fleischer (2010)—play a major role. As the story spun by digital labour platforms to regulators and lawmakers goes, their technologies are simply too new to be covered by existing laws. In reality, the Silicon Valley doctrine of 'disruption' built around this creed of newness has become little more than 'tech-speak for breaking the law' (Prassl 2018: 9), fuelled by an ideology taken wholesale from the writings of the tech startup community's patron saint Ayn Rand that asserts 'that all government intervention is bad, that the free market is the only protection the public needs, and that if weaker people get trampled underfoot in the process then, well, fuck 'em' (Carr 2012: np).

Thus, work is rebranded as '"gigs", "tasks", "rides","lifts","hustles","hits", and "favours"' (Prassl 2018: 42). Workers are called 'Taskers, Turkers, Driver Partners, Roo-women and-men' (43), and also 'Rabbits', 'partners' or even 'consumers' (Rosenblat and Stark 2016: 3761). An internal Deliveroo memo was leaked in 2017, outlining the phrases staff were to use in order to avoid the company being classified as an employer of its riders: instead of being hired, workers are 'onboarded', rather than an employment contract, workers sign a 'supplier agreement', instead of wages being paid, invoices are processed, and instead of getting fired, workers have their supplier agreement terminated (Prassl 2018: 43–44).

Not content with pushing existing rules to their limits or evading them altogether, taxi platforms in particular are known to be engaged in wide-ranging lobbying efforts aimed at changing the legal framework to suit their business interests, something that Barry and Pollman (2016) call 'regulatory entrepreneurship'. In its political fight, Uber is using techniques developed by 'pro-corporate, libertarian, and objectivist-oriented think tanks' and advocates for 'complete elimination of all forms of legal and regulatory restrictions on the freedom of capital accumulators' (Horan 2017: 76–77). The company has, for example, been actively involved in the drafting of US state laws that classify their drivers as independent contractors, precluding any possible legal challenges of this status (Somerville and Levine 2015), as well as pushed for private hire drivers to be charged the city's congestion charge in London in order to avoid the introduction of an overall quota for drivers, thus helping to saddle its already struggling drivers with extra daily costs (Quinn 2018).

1.4.3 Predatory business models

The rise of platforms as dominant economic actors is, according to Srnicek (2017), bound up with a number of wider economic developments, chief among which are the post-2008 low-interest environment combined with huge cash hoards amassed by the largest tech corporations, both of which mean that there is a considerable money surplus in private hands that is looking for a profitable outlet. In this context, investing in tech startups offers a high-risk, high-reward strategy, and this is leading to conditions reminiscent of the 2001 dot-com bubble. Today, tech companies again attract huge amounts of investment without being profitable. This has allowed Uber, for example, to engage in 'predatory competition' by using its capital to attempt to drive out local competitors who need to cover the entire cost of their operation from fares, through 'years of below-cost pricing subsidized by Silicon Valley billionaires' (Horan 2017: 43). Srnicek (2017: 88) predicts that 'these models seem likely to fall apart in the coming years' once venture capital runs out.

The reason why platforms aggressively pursue loss-leading strategies is that their business model is built on rapid user growth, mirroring that of earlier dot-com companies. As Srnicek (2017: 45) observes, 'digital platforms produce and are reliant on "network effects": the more numerous the users who use a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else'. This leads to platforms 'having a natural tendency towards monopolisation'. Once competition has been neutralised, monopoly pricing follows (Prassl 2018: 38).

Another important macroeconomic condition favouring digital labour platforms is 'the vast growth in the levels of unemployment after the 2008 crisis' (Srnicek 2017: 81), which has forced many workers into precarious employment since and has given platforms free rein to pursue their attacks on workers' rights and repeatedly cut wages. Low wages also drive workers to put in longer hours, which serves platforms' goal to have as many workers online as possible at any given time so that every job can be taken up quickly, while the glut of workers at the same time puts further pressure on wages (Prassl 2018: 61). The liquefaction of work that has already come up in the introduction also has an adverse effect on wages: platforms' 'underlying quest is to remove as much "friction" as possible from each interaction' (5), turning 'what was once non-tradable services into tradable services, effectively expanding the labour supply to a near-global level' (Srnicek 2017: 82).

These business practices create negative externalities, through which 'the social cost of platforms' activities [is] higher than their private cost' (Prassl 2018: 21). This applies, for example, to the ways in which workers' often low incomes and risk of destitution in case of accident or illness need to be remedied through government support, or to companies such as Uber's reliance on significant numbers of idle cars populating city streets at any point, increasing congestion and pollution. There also are significant issues with efficiency: while there is some truth behind the narrative of of platform-mediated work enabling 'increased efficiency in matching labour supply and demand' (7), new inefficiencies are introduced through offloading aspects that used to be the responsibility of employers onto individual workers. This includes, for example, the cost of financing, insuring and maintaining vehicles for drivers and delivery workers, which could be done much more efficiently through the economies of scale of a centralised system.

To some extent, platforms' business models are also built on making the labour that they employ redundant. Much work distributed through AMT, for example, entails training artificial intelligence systems so that once this has been achieved, humans' 'artificial artificial intelligence' will not be required any more. Uber has for a long time used the ride data that the company has collected to work towards replacing drivers with self-driving cars, although the company has recently conceded defeat in this regard and sold off its autonomous vehicle research division (Domonoske 2020).

1.4.4 Algorithmic control

Platforms, through their infrastructures and interfaces, their terms and conditions, and through data harvesting and surveillance, control what kinds of interactions are possible through their architecture, and also who is able to make use of their services; they 'in fact embody a politics' (Srnicek 2017: 47). Digital labour platforms in particular operate at the forefront of *algorithmic management*, a term coined by Lee et al. (2015: 1603) to describe 'software algorithms that assume managerial functions and surrounding institutional devices that support algorithms in practice'. These algorithms are constantly being tinkered with by programmers; business models can be changed with a software update (Prassl 2018: 12), and updates are usually forced onto users by management without prior consultation. The discontent that these frequent changes in payment and other conditions can cause among workers has already made its appearance in the introduction.

Through algorithmic management, many of the functions of middle management have become automated, with workers' main way of interacting with a platform being through its software, or through usually outsourced 'customer service' call centres or email addresses. The representatives dealing with workers' problems are often located in a different country and have little idea of the day-to-day experiences of the job in question. Thus their responses are often standardised and modelled on the company's FAQs; many Uber drivers, for example, suspect that initial email responses are generated by software, and that it takes persistence to have an issue passed on to an actual person to be dealt with (Rosenblat and Stark 2016: 3771).

One of the most significant consequences of algorithmic control is wide-ranging surveillance. The principle generally boils down to: if it is possible to collect data, then this data will be collected and engineers will figure out a way of turning this into another avenue for the monitoring and control of workers with the goal of maximising income for the company. The amount of fine-grained surveillance and control over workers' activities and interactions represents, in stark contrast to the imaginary of the freedom of working as a 'micro-entrepreneur' that is put forward by platforms and their advocates, a new and intensified form of Taylorist production (Prassl 2018: 52–53).

The workings of the algorithmic tools that platforms use to monitor and control workers are invariably opaque and often subject to speculation on online forums where workers connect. The disciplinary functions of algorithms analysing data collected about workers can vary widely: on a platform such as Uber, customer ratings and job acceptance rates need to be kept above certain levels, failing at which risks job loss. On AMT, workers are threatened with account closure if too much of their output is rejected by customers or if the company detects a violation of the vaguely worded terms of service. Workers can also be awarded a 'Master qualification' which unlocks better-paid jobs, although the criteria according to which this happens are unknown to workers. On Fiverr, an algorithm is responsible for deciding which of many near-identical listings appear on the first page of any particular category of services. This can change at any time, leading to previously successful workers experiencing a sudden drop in income.

The use of customer ratings and other data to assess workers is generally presented as a legitimate alternative to legal regulation of platforms' business activities. Tom Slee (2015: 91–92) calls this *algorithmic regulation*, in which 'rules protecting consumers are replaced by ratings and software algorithms'. Slee points out that these ratings sys-

tems are in fact extremely inefficient on a number of accounts: attributes that can be rated by consumers leave out issues that are usually covered by government regulation, such as vehicle road safety; ratings are inadequate for dealing with extreme violations of trust such as assault or rape; on taxi services like Uber and Lyft, ratings are heavily skewed towards the top grade of five, and the minimal divergences they show are practically meaningless when it comes to assessing actual performance. Where customer ratings are successful on the other hand is as disciplinary tools that force workers to always adopt a subservient attitude because of the risk of one entitled customer threatening their future employment.

Another way in which data and algorithms are used is gamification of work, with platforms using 'information asymmetries' (Rosenblat and Stark 2016) and behavioural science to guide workers' behaviour in ways that increase profit. The Uber Driver app has been studied extensively in relation to this. Alerts for new jobs come up for 15 seconds on the app, and in earlier versions there was no way to decline a job apart from waiting for the alert to finish (Lee et al. 2105: 1604). Uber's 'surge pricing'—higher rates aimed to entice more drivers into areas of high demand—has been described as 'a pay lottery' (Rosenblat and Stark 2016: 3766). When Uber drivers are about to log off, the app often sends them messages promising additional earnings if they keep on working, such as 'Are you sure you want to go offline? Demand is very high in your area. Make more money, don't stop now!' (3768). All these are ways in which Uber nudges drivers to act in ways that are profitable for the company (and potentially harmful to overworked drivers), while still being able to claim that drivers decide to continue working out of their own volition as independent contractors. Performance dashboards or weekly performance summaries sent to workers by various platforms are modelled on game scores while demonstrating companies' powers of worker surveillance, leading workers to internalise a drive for optimal performance.

1.4.5 Platform cooperativism

The proposal for a movement of platform cooperativism was first put forward by Trebor Scholz (2014): since there are numerous software engineers and other digital workers who do not want to participate in the venture capital-driven world of platform capitalism, there is ample opportunity to develop more equitable models for worker-owned and worker-controlled platform enterprises. As Yochai Benkler (2016) notes, platform cooperativism has some links with the earlier free and open-source software (FOSS) movement, in that it

privileges commons-based co-operation over self-interested action. The main challenge of FOSS was that participation required relative economic security and an external source of income. The main advantage, but also unique challenge, of platform cooperativism is that its mission is to enable workers to make a living from their co-operative work. Scholz's call to action was widely received; at present, there is a steady stream of conferences as well as publications, e.g. Schneider & Scholz (2016), on the topic, as well as an increasing number of platform cooperatives working in a wide range of sectors and experimenting with different models of governance. Some examples include *Stocksy*, a co-owned stock photography website; *Fairmondo*, an online marketplace owned by its users; and *Coopify*, a marketplace for low-income worker cooperatives.

There are however doubts about whether a cooperative model could ever successfully fight venture capital-funded platforms that engage in predatory competition in order to try and achieve a monopoly position. As Srnicek (2017: 127) notes,

> all the traditional problems of coops (e.g. the necessity of self-exploitation under capitalist social relations) are made even worse by the monopolistic nature of platforms, the dominance of network effects, and the vast resources behind these companies.

Instead, Srnicek argues for state action, in the first, less ambitious, instance through more regulation and regulatory enforcement, but more importantly through the creation of state-owned platforms that operate as public utilities.

Some academics have also directly intervened in the labour relations put in place by platforms. Lily Irani and M. Six Silberman (2013) designed the browser plug-in *Turkopticon* for AMT, allowing workers to create and share reviews of customers on the platform. Chris Callison-Burch's (2014) *Crowd-workers* is another browser extension for AMT, allowing workers to calculate average hourly earnings for a task, enabling them to make an informed decision before accepting a task. Salehi et al. (2015) designed the web site *Dynamo*, a platform for AMT workers to organise and develop collective actions. Saiph Savage (2020) has developed an artificial intelligence-powered tool that allows AMT workers to share information about customers and other tips, and uses algorithms to establish what kinds of information are most helpful.

1.5. Artists' works

It did not take long for artists to begin developing projects that deal with the mediation of work through digital platforms. The approaches here vary widely, ranging from Guido Segni's sourcing of images and videos from AMT or Fiverr for pieces such as *The middle finger response* (2013) or *Work less, work all – We are the 99% on Fiverr.com* (2015); Ben Becker and Elliot Glass's fake website for an app that offers on-demand pickup of dog excrement, *Pooper* (2016); Akseli Aittomäki and massescape's theatrical performance on the subject of food delivery enacted by former Deliveroo riders, *Liquid Labour (case no.1)* (2019); or Andrew Norman Wilson's long-term work with a virtual personal assistant employed through the outsourcing company GetFriday, titled *Virtual Assistance* (2009–11)*.

The artworks chosen for further discussion below represent some of the breath of processes employed by artists working with digital platform labour, and also show ways in which both localised and remote gig work have been mobilised in artists' projects. Aaron Koblin's work deserves attention in part because his pieces created with AMT were the first to gain critical attention, but also because the limitations of the critiques of crowdwork that it poses are indicative of some of the problematic aspects of Silicon Valley's startup ideology. Eva & Franco Mattes's work provides an interesting counterpoint to this, as the artists have used similar online sourcing processes to create work that, while not taking an explicitly critical stance, combines questions of power and (self-)exploitation with a sense of perverse enjoyment in ways that are successful in making strange not only work mediated through digital platforms but the entire edifice of labour relations under capitalism. Sebastian Schmieg's project is interesting for the ways in which it repurposes the medium of delivery and also the props of delivery workers to distribute art instead of the customary take-away food. Alina Lupu's work can be put in conversation with this, as the latter has made critical reflection on her own experience of working both as a food delivery worker and as a cleaner through digital platforms the subject of her practice. Finally, Liz Magic Laser's work with online freelancers is notable for its ambition, durational engagement and international scope, although ultimately the work based on the format of a reality TV show fails at really surpassing the limitations of the form she has chosen as a template for her project.

1.5.1 Aaron Koblin

Image redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 1.5 Aaron Koblin, *The Sheep Market*, digital image, 2006; © Aaron Koblin

Koblin's first work made with AMT is *The Sheep Market* (2006), for which 10,000 simple drawings of sheep facing left have been sourced from workers on AMT, for a payment of US$ 0.02 each. The results can be viewed on a website, bought as stickers, and have been exhibited in galleries. In a review for *Furtherfield*, Rob Myers (2007: np) links the image of the sheep to the pastoral, to how the labour of shepherds played a part in the production of the rural idyll enjoyed by the ruling class. In the same vein, the sheep in *The Sheep Market* 'are vehicles for the virtues of the market as seen by people who will never have to toil in its fields. They are tended by atomized labour reduced to moments of payment in the dynamic market'. While Myers's interpretation highlights a potential critique of labour conditions and class divisions put in place by a platform such as AMT, *The Sheep Market* was nevertheless also praised by none other than Amazon Web Services' 'chief evangelist' Jeff Barr (2006: np) in a blog post as 'an example of how to quickly, easily, and inexpensively get 10,000 people to do something for you'. Koblin's (2006) own evaluation of the project in his Master's thesis mainly reflects on the lack of workers' ability to express themselves creatively in relation to work on AMT. This latter point is significant for understanding the position that Koblin's work ultimately takes: calls for creative expression as part of a wider demand for more fulfilling work have long ago been integrated into capitalism's own functioning through notions such as the *creative class* (Florida 2002) or

the management literature surveyed by Boltanski and Chiapello's ([1999] 2007), at the expense of questions around labour rights, fair pay and job security.

Image redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 1.6 Aaron Koblin, *Ten Thousand Cents*, digital image, 2008; © Aaron Koblin

The creation of *Ten Thousand Cents* (2008) by Koblin, with Takashi Kawashima, involved workers on AMT drawing tiny sections of an image of a one hundred Dollar bill, which were then assembled back again on screen. The project exists as a video showing all 10,000 sections being drawn simultaneously, as a web site where the drawing of individual sections can be recreated, and prints are available for sale. According to its creators, 'the project explores the circumstances we live in, a new and uncharted combination of digital labor markets, "crowdsourcing", "virtual economies", and digital reproduction' (Ten Thousand Cents 2008: np). Reviewing the work for *Furtherfield*, Madeleine Clare Elish (2010) takes issue with the conceptual murkiness surrounding the project. Paying workers to recreate a representation of a bank note surely entails making a bold statement, but issues of money and labour remain woefully unaddressed.

Koblin's last AMT work is *Bicycle Built for 2,000* (2009), with Daniel Massey. It is based on the song 'Daisy Bell', which was used to demonstrate the first example of musical speech synthesis in 1962. Koblin and Massey split the song into short sound fragments; workers would listen to a fragment and then record themselves imitating what they heard, and the resulting recordings were assembled back into a new version of the original song. The result is certainly cute, and the video explaining the process, more technical demonstration than aesthetic reflection, has been made a Vimeo staff pick. Considering that here are more than 2,000 cloud workers recreating the performance of a computer imitating the sonic characteristics of a human voice, there is beneath the chirpy surface a

distinctive sci-fi noir undercurrent of a future humanity enslaved by technology of its own creation. This does invoke the quasi-religious expectations of some Silicon Valley luminaries of the coming of the *technological singularity*, a form of artificial intelligence far superior to human capacities. Yet, as with the preceding pieces, any implications beyond the immediate appearance of the work have remained woefully underexplored by the artist.

In summary, Koblin's work is certainly innovative in its methodology, but this is pretty much all that can be said about it. While the strategies pursued in his projects do carry a potential for some effective critical currency, this fact seems to have been almost purposely brushed under the carpet in the artist's own analysis. Besides these projects, he has also created data visualisation projects, music videos, worked for Google and started his own virtual reality company. There is something reminiscent of Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's (1996: 42) 'Californian ideology*'* discernible here, a combination of 'the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies'.

1.5.2 Eva & Franco Mattes

Image redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 1.7 Eva & Franco Mattes, *BEFNOED, Licking Rim*, video still, 2014–ongoing;
© Eva & Franco Mattes

Eva & Franco Mattes's work sidesteps Koblin's surface-level critique in which fascination with the processual possibilities offered by technology takes precedence over any deeper engagement with the problematics that these technologies give rise to. *BEFNOED* (*By Everyone For No One Every Day*) (2014–ongoing) works on the viewer through eliciting an

ambient sense of discomfort by skirting along the boundary between enjoyment and exploitation, implicating the viewer's voyeuristic pleasure in the same, while making visible the workers hidden behind the platform interface in ways that are bizarre rather than revelatory. The project consists of series of videos that show performances outsourced to anonymous workers on unspecified crowdwork platforms. Instructions for these videos were made up of simple, slightly absurd statements in the lineage of Fluxus performance scores, such as 'banana couple', 'heads tube', or 'fingers eyes'. The videos are great in number, and mostly look somewhat weird and unsettling. Haphazard camerawork and arbitrary backgrounds identify them as home videos, yet the strange poses and concoctions of people and objects make them appear more like free-floating remnants from a series of strange dreams. On the surface they look exploitative, yet one cannot help the suspicion that workers performed the instructions with some glee, being somewhat intrigued by the latter's eccentricity and open-endedness. Looking at the videos feels voyeuristic, like witnessing a ritual in which the inhumanness of capitalist relations is reenacted in an absurdist manner, enthusiastically. The sense of discomfort was even heightened at an exhibition of the videos at Carroll/Fletcher in London (2016), with screens mounted in ways that required visitors to crouch, lie down or otherwise contort their bodies, implicating viewers in the performative nature of the work.

Both Koblin and the Mattes's make use of an artistic method that Claire Bishop (2012a: 219) calls *delegated performance*, in which the acting out of artists' instructions is outsourced to paid performers. Two themes that have been raised in related debates are particularly useful for a reading of *BEFNOED*. One of these is over-identification, which involves a zealous reproduction of dominant power structures in artistic work in order to expose the former's dehumanising tendencies. The term itself first emerged around the activities of the band Laibach and the affiliated artist movement NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst), as analysed by Slavoj Žižek (1993). Laibach's work can be read as a parody of totalitarianism that takes itself so seriously that it is barely distinguishable from the original, which allows it to bring to the fore the latter's grotesqueness all the more vividly. Over-identification has also been mobilised as a category for reading the work of Santiago Sierra, the Yes Men and others by the Dutch duo BAVO (2007b), who see this as the last remaining strategy against an all-encompassing neoliberal order that is only too permissive towards any critique levelled against it. *BEFNOED* speaks to Sierra's work in that both, through their employment of workers for meaningless tasks, strip the capitalist labour relation down to its basic components and put this on show without further commentary.

And while *BEFNOED*, just like Koblin's work, also demonstrates how easy it is to hire people to carry out tasks through platforms such as AMT, it is unlikely that one would see it being praised on Amazon Web Services' own blog.

The second issue related to delegated performance is Klossowski's ([1947] 1991; [1970] 2017) theory of perversion. According to Bishop (2012a: 233),

> Klossowski defines perversion as the separation that occurs as soon as the human is aware of a distinction between reproductive instincts and pleasure ('voluptuous emotion'): this first perversion distinguishes the human from the mechanical, the functional from the non-functional.

This perversion is then channeled and appropriated: by 'reducing human actions to a functional tool' (234), industry engages in its own perversion and expels 'as perverse everything that overruns and exceeds this functional gesture'. Klossowski's concept of *living currency*, according to Bishop (236) is 'a meditation on how subjects may come to pervert and thereby enjoy their own alienation at work', further adding that, while Klossowski's text was written in response to the conditions of Fordist industrial capitalism, its conclusions are even more relevant in the current context, where workers' whole subjectivities are activated for the generation of profit. This dynamic is played out and further radicalised in delegated performance, according to Bishop (236–237), in which a number of perverse pleasures collide: the pleasure of the exploiter, of the exploited (who, in addition, is put on display), and of the viewer implicated in this process. These dynamics clearly play out in *BEFNOED*, and also come up in posts on the AMT workers' Reddit forum where the alias 'Random Acts' assumed by the Mattes's to post their tasks is introduced as 'every turker's favorite "WTF?!" requester' (lotkrotan 2015). The same thread however also documents serious ethical issues with the project: from a screen grab of the video request that the Mattes's posted on AMT, it can be seen that the artists have given no indication as to how the videos were going to be used, and a poster later in the thread who managed to identify Eva & Franco Mattes as authors commented: 'anyone who was already willing to consider doing these HITs [jobs on AMT] hopefully didn't care where their videos end up….' (clickhappier 2015).

1.5.3 Sebastian Schmieg

Image redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 1.8 Sebastian Schmieg, *Gallery.Delivery*, 2018–ongoing;
photograph by André Wunstorf, © Sebastian Schmieg

Schmieg's *Gallery.Delivery* (2018–ongoing) is a portable art gallery housed in a food delivery box that can be ordered for temporary installation at the recipient's address, including an introduction to the included works by the delivery person. The project has taken place with a varying selection of artworks being delivered in Berlin, Milan and Mulhouse (France). One of its strengths lies with the simple act of transference of the contents of the standard delivery box—from take-away food to art—which represents a rare example of making food delivery work the subject of art. This allows for playful engagement with the situation thus constructed, through presentation and subsequent offer for sale of the artworks at their destination, through project imagery showing a rider's grazed and bleeding knee rising from a delivery bag, the satirising of delivery companies' marketing tropes and the like. There however are some limitations to Schmieg's approach, which an article in *The New York Times* hints at when summarising the project as 'a droll take on apps such as Seamless and Deliveroo' (Dickson 2020: np). What else might there be to say about it? Schmieg (2018: np) provides some hints in the text that accompanies the project's first iteration, in which the ubiquity of the internet is 'giving rise to a mindset

where we expect immediate availability in all aspects of our material world', which is however facilitated by 'real workers who wash our clothes, make sure our meals arrive on our tables on time', etc. The latter part that does contain a nod, however tentative, towards an interest in the experiences of workers in manual service labour, has been omitted from the texts accompanying later iterations of the project. In any case, what takes precedence is a somewhat moralist critique of consumer culture and the rush of capitalist time: the 'we' here is the implicitly middle-class art viewer, who is being reminded that their rapacious hunger to consume ever more, ever sooner, still requires the work of real people to be mobilised in the process of its fulfilment. While this is undoubtedly true, the individualised position taken here can offer little more than a vague sense of guilty conscience that is inadequate for addressing or at least reflecting on the systemic conditions that make such a situation possible and inevitable.

1.5.4 Alina Lupu

Image redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 1.9 Alina Lupu, *Minimum Wage Dress Code*, performance documentation, 2016–17; © Alina Lupu

Lupu's vantage point is very different to that of Schmieg, as she has worked as a food delivery courier for a number of years after graduating from the Rietveld Academy. Much of her output is concerned with the precarious conditions of art-making and the need for

many artists to sustain their practice or to simply survive by pursuing what is in artistic vernacular generally referred to as 'the money job'. Besides delivery, Lupu (2017: np) has also supported herself through cleaning and restaurant work. She writes:

> A side-job is not an abstraction. It feeds a constant reflection on the conditions of life in a polyphonic neoliberal society. I'm not an artist who just happens to deliver food. They're sides of the same coin. I'm an artist and a food delivery courier, at times an account manager for a software firm that outsources its workforce, a stage designer, a project manager, a web developer, a copywriter etc.

In her practice, this engagement with precarious work has taken the form of *Minimum Wage Dress Code* (2016–17), which is a series of site-specific interventions involving performers equipped with white, unbranded food delivery bags and uniforms, in galleries, at conferences and in public space. Often, food deliveries are ordered as part of the performance, which appear to be redistributed into the unbranded bags and from there shared with the public, as suggested by photographic documentation on the artist's website.[1] *The Recleaning of The Rietveld Pavilion* (2018) is a performance that has been documented in a book, the intervention itself being a re-enactment of an earlier cleaning of the same space by Dutch artist Job Koelewijn in 1992, employing his mother and three aunts. For her part, Lupu hired cleaners through an app, although the project documentation suggests that they were eventually paid in cash.

Lupu's work is interesting in that it cuts across the divisions that separate artistic from other kinds of precarious labours, via the artist's subjective involvement in both. The lived experiences of this double-positioning are reflected on extensively by the artist in a personal, slightly hectoring tone involving detailed descriptions of labour conditions under precarious work regimes and denunciations of widespread expectations for artists to happily self-exploit. Through this, she helps demystify the aura of artistic practice as some kind of rarefied activity by grounding it in the much more mundane kinds of work that many artists are forced to undertake in order to support their practices, which in the contemporary situation often means platform-mediated work. There are obvious echoes here of Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *maintenance art*, as Lupu makes the kinds of labour that are necessary to sustain an artist's practice (and that also provide services such as cleaning or food delivery to arts institutions) the subject of her work.

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[1] theofficeofalinalupu.com

1.5.5 Liz Magic Lazer

Image redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 1.10 Liz Magic Laser, *In Real Life*, 5-channel HD video installation, 90 minutes, custom seating (dimensions variable), 2019; © Liz Magic Lazer

Magic Lazer's *In Real Life* (2019) again involves delegated performance, with the project bringing together a group of online freelancers to collaboratively develop content for a video installation. The project's title hints at the various slippages between the real and the virtual that traverse both the field of digital platform labour and the project's format of choice, reality television. Realised as a 90-minute, 5-channel video installation, *In Real Life* has involved workers on platforms such as Fiverr, Upwork and PeoplePerHour, from Hong Kong, Nigeria, Pakistan and the UK. The videos follow five participants on a 30-day quest of self-improvement with the help of a biohacking coach and a tarot reader, taking a cue from the reality TV trope of the journey of self-transformation. The participants all contributed to the production of the project, employing skills such as script writing, graphic design, voiceover, whiteboard animation and social media content writing.

Putting to one side the rather outlandish idea of subjecting participants to tarot readings, the project certainly carries some interesting aspects, in terms of its long-form collaboration across a wide geographical area, the ways in which participants have been actively contributing to its creation, and through the notion of self-improvement, which at

least implicitly critiques the constant pressure on freelance workers to maximise their capability for competing with others or else perish. *In Real Life* also brings up the question of how this kind of work is viewed differentially across the global division of labour, with workers in low-income countries finding opportunities through platforms that enable them to earn incomes that are sizeable in their local context, while for workers in high-income countries, survival from this kind of work is much more difficult. In addition, the inclusion of a worker from Liverpool who began online gig work during recovery from an accident shows that opportunities for online work can have a significant social benefit for those normally excluded from the workforce. Thus, broadly speaking, the piece is rather affirmative in tone, which can to some extent be justified as the benefits of gig work brought up here are real, and problems such as regular overwork or the extreme power imbalance between workers and customers are addressed at some points as well.

Where the project however does largely fall flat is as a work of art. If artistic practice entails some kind of making strange or unfamiliar the reality that it reflects on, of interrogating its own conditions of production, or of critical distance and reflexivity, there is little of this discernible in *In Real Life*. Instead of the artist appropriating the format of the reality TV show, the format appears to have appropriated the art work here, with little save the 5-screen set-up separating the work from what might be seen in a reality television programme that makes no claim of being a work of art: there is an infomercial-type introduction to online freelancing at the beginning, then individual participants are presented, before the piece follows them on the day-to-day struggles of their work lives and their self-improvement journeys. The artist's creative agency is strangely absent: Magic Laser's own input to the project appears to have been largely to devise the format and then let the process run its course, and this might be part of the reason why the critical aspects of the project have remained underdeveloped.

The projects discussed above provide some indication of different avenues that artist practices have taken when engaging with the field of digital platform labour. Among these, some of the issues that are broached also animate this research project, particularly the ways in which Koblin and the Mattes's have made use of platforms in the production of their work, and Lupu's politicisation of precarities that cut across artistic and other kinds of work. The parameters proposed for this research project in the introduction also indicate what is largely absent from the artist works discussed here: this has to do, first and foremost, with a grounding of the practice in a critical analysis of the politics at play, a concern for the lived experiences of workers, and an ongoing reflection on the position

from which the practice is being carried out in relation to whom it speaks about, for or with. The only artist discussed here whose work purposively engages these issues is Lupu, and in this sense, there certainly are affinities between this project and Lupu's practice. An important distinction is that Lupu speaks from her own subject position, while a central concern in this project lies with the question of how artist practice can develop transversal solidarities in relation to platform-mediated work, and this will be discussed in detail in chapter 5. Prior to this, the following chapter will discuss the methodology as it has evolved throughout this project.

2 Methodology

As is the case with much practice research (Bulley and Şahin 2021: 6; Vincs 2010: 101), this project's methodology has not been determined in its entirety at the outset. Instead, methodological development has been a central aspect of the research process throughout, advancing through iterative, reflexive cycles that have incorporated practice, evaluation, as well as contextual and theoretical research.

Beyond the exigencies of practice research as such, this evolving, exploratory methodology also is apt more generally for investigating an emerging area of work in which unpredictable developments can necessitate adjustments to the research methods employed. This is something implied in the central research question as outlined in the introduction, with its search for ways in which artistic practice can engage with digital platform labour on the levels of representation, critique and solidarity: in essence, what this asks for is a process of testing out various methods through practice, reflecting on what emerges in the process, and drawing methodological conclusions from this which in turn inform further practice. The methodology that has been developed by following this approach involves, firstly, the use of digital labour platforms as a medium for artistic production with a focus on questions of both subjectivity and embodiment, and secondly, work with labour rights activists as a form of artistic counter-production that seeks to undermine art's own position in the capitalist division of labour. The decision to steer the research into these particular directions has itself been inflected by ontological and epistemological considerations that arise from my own position as artist-researcher in relation to my field of investigation, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

2.1 Research questions

In light of this continuously evolving methodology, the set of research questions put forward in the initial proposal for this inquiry can be seen as a point of departure that has helped steer the general direction of travel, subject to testing and revision through practice and reflection as the project progressed. What is interesting in retrospect is to unpack some of the ideas and assumptions contained in this list of questions and to consider the routes along which aspects of the latter were revised, adapted and at times supplanted. These twists and turns are recounted in some detail in the following chapters, while the

present one seeks to evaluate the stakes involved for questions of method specifically. In the original proposal, the research questions were split into two sections, as follows:

Background questions:

How could a distributed workforce whose subjects do not necessarily even experience themselves as being workers represent themselves politically? What possibilities for solidarity or organising are there and how could artistic practice contribute?

Which aspects of the current discourses around liquid labour are useful for understanding the dynamics at play and what serves to obscure rather than expose exploitative relations?

Questions relating to practice:

Which strategies of artistic representation can be used to deal with issues around liquid labour, without falling into the traps of techno-utopianism or defeatist determinism? How can the gap between the represented and the one(s) working on representation be narrowed in such a dispersed field?

What ethical issues need to be addressed when actively participating in liquid labour networks for artistic research and production?

How could artistic work contribute to interventions in the material conditions of liquid labour? What could make such an intervention a work in its own right?

How can the language of neoliberal entrepreneurialism, which underpins the phenomena of liquid labour, be instrumentalised for critical practice? What are the limitations of irony as used in tactical media, and how could the critical impulse of such strategies be invigorated?

The list of issues brought up here includes workers' subjectivity and class consciousness, representation, artistic practice and its relation to solidarity and organising, discourse critique, techno-utopianism and determinism, working across different class positions, the dispersed aspects of platform work, ethics, interventions in material conditions, and irony as a critical strategy. All in all, this is quite a range of potential concerns to be investigated. Eventually, some of these turned out to be more central to the project than others, and in the remainder of this chapter, some of the issues brought up here will be discussed in relation to methodological concerns.

2.2. Research paradigm

The subject of research in this study is, broadly speaking, twofold: on the one hand, artistic investigation is aimed at a social reality, namely digital platform labour. This includes issues such as the labour relations it gives rise to, the machinic structures through which the latter are articulated, and the lived experiences of platform workers. On the other hand, the artist practice that engages with these aspects of platform labour is itself the subject of ongoing analysis. These two components of the research are thus differently articulated in the project's overall research ontology: digital platform labour as a social phenomenon is first and foremost investigated through artist practice. The exegesis in this thesis, on the other hand, takes as its subject of analysis the resulting artefacts and their processes of creation, and from this develops a series of methodological observations and proposals.

The knowledge created in the process can be split along a parallel axis. On the one hand, there is the knowledge embodied in the artefacts, which, as is the case for artworks in general, operates on several levels. In the present case, this includes first of all empirical knowledge related to platform structures and platform workers that is articulated, often in somewhat oblique form, through various aesthetic strategies. Secondly, the extended modes of knowing embodied in artefacts include the processes that have gone into the creation of each work, insights that cross discursive and non-verbal registers which are activated by the affective encounter with the work, and reflexive layers that relate to the situatedness of the work as well as myself as artist-researcher in wider socioeconomic and artistic contexts. On the other hand, the exegesis developed in the thesis puts the artefacts at the centre of a second-order analysis, in which different aesthetic strategies are evaluated in terms of their methodological and political implications.

A number of points follow from these distinctions: first, artist practice, as the primary mode of investigation, is where the two main aspects of the inquiry meet, as the practice is a vehicle for thinking through both the relations of digital platform labour and the implications of mobilising different artistic strategies for an investigation of the latter. Second, the practice has not been concerned with devising creative strategies for visualising the findings of, say, sociological research, but with creating processes and artefacts through which different layers of issues can be put in productive tension with each other: these are issues related to digital platform labour itself, to artistic inquiry as a form of re-

search and to my own positionality in relation to this field. Third, there is a two-way interaction between artist practice and the social, in that the practice on the one hand has explored ways of mobilising art's powers of dealing with ambiguity, contradiction, affect and the like for engaging with a specific social field; while on the other hand, the ways of doing artistic research have been inflected by the exigencies of the social reality that the practice has engaged with. Fourth, on a basic level, a question that has emerged as central to this inquiry is how to practice politics through art more generally, particularly class politics.

2.2.1 Class and positionality

The final item in this list brings into play the issue of class, which has been central to informing many decisions regarding the research design. The notion of class I am employing here is broadly Marxist-realist, according to which class is a social relation that exists as a historically situated social reality which gives rise to structural constraints on the possible agency available to social actors. This conception of class thus emphasises material rather than cultural aspects as primary. As Vivek Chibber (2017: np) explains, the 'cultural turn' in social theory has provided a necessary corrective to earlier overly deterministic notions of class consciousness arising almost of its own accord out of certain class positions. Yet to interpret class as an entirely culturally emergent phenomenon removed from its material base ignores the crucial fact that class relations 'relate to actors' economic viability and, in this capacity, they set the rules for what actors have to do to reproduce themselves'. In other words, the possible routes and means that a person has available to secure their survival give rise to material constraints on the choices available to them in their lives. In Chibber's analysis, culture enters the picture through the ways in which these constraints are articulated through varying cultural formations, yet accounting for the latter cannot simply do away with the underlying structural, material class relation. By extension, subjective models and textures of everyday lived experience are invariably inflected by these structural features of class, which are variously articulated through cultural modulations and the available individual agency. This clearly is no deterministic relation in which one's class position would simply prescribe predetermined ways of thinking or being, but what is acknowledged is that the significant influence that class has on subjectivity and the everyday experience of social agents is undeniable.

From this view of class as a structural social relation follows the necessity of considering my own position as an artist-researcher on a fully-funded PhD scholarship in re-

lation to my field of study. A more detailed analysis of this is developed in chapter 5. For the time being, it can be noted that when following a Marxist analysis that takes into account criteria such as control over the labour process and subsumption under the law of value, the work of an artist-researcher falls within what would be considered middle-class work, while that of the platform workers that my study has been engaging with has definite working-class characteristics. This observation carries consequences for any proposal for identifying a new class subject in the precariat as discussed in chapter 1, and a critical questioning of this through practice has been one of the motivations that let me to embark on this research. While both artist-academics and platform workers are faced with conditions of precarity, it is equally clear that their different class positions give rise to very differently articulated precarities. To give one illustration of this, an artist or academic faced with an unsustainable existence due to precarious working conditions would likely be able to find other paid work that requires a less distinct skillset. Precarity in this case not only relates to the pressures of securing one's means for bare survival, but includes anxiety about being forced to renounce some of one's own class privileges. This statement is not meant to be dismissive of very justified concerns about precarious working conditions in art and academia, yet the difference in available options compared to low-paid platform workers does need to be accounted for, and accounting for these kinds of differences has been crucial in terms of informing the methodological decisions made in this project.

One of the central ways in which these observations regarding class have transpired in the research is through the set of positions that I have sought to take up in relation to my area of research: while on a basic level, the research has sought to transversally intervene across class positions, this can still be articulated in many different ways. In art in particular, the position from which one speaks is inseparable from any knowledge claims that can be made, and the effects of enunciatory location on what is said and how this is said are subject to extensive critique. In a project such as the current one, in which my research has focused on workers whose class position is different to my own, this raises a range of issues related to questions of speaking for, with or nearby to others, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5. For the purposes of methodology, the salient question is how considerations regarding class have led me to adopt particular stances as well as avoid others in the course of the project's development.

2.3 Research directions

2.3.1 Two directions

Taking the centrality of my own position in the work and the structural ineluctability of class into account, the work thus developed in two distinct directions. These could be seen as two separate research paradigms, but another possible view would be to read them as two different approaches towards the same problematic, both of which converge around a shared consideration of ways in which labour politics can be articulated through artist practice, and this allows the strengths and limitations of each to be explored in light of its counterpart. These two approaches are, as has already been outlined, the use of digital platforms as a means to create critical artistic interventions and collaboration with labour rights activists. While each of these two aspects of the practice has taken a very different form to the other, what links them is that they propose ways of critically accounting for the differentials in class position that lie at the heart of this project and putting the contradictions that these differentials give rise to at the centre of methodological considerations.

In the first case, the work that has developed critical uses of platforms for art-making, this has meant self-consciously intervening in platform work—in most instances as an employer, and also as a recalcitrant worker in the case of *Work hard dream big*. Positioning myself as employer has allowed for the articulation of a contradictory position in which I am to some extent participating in the systems that the work that I am producing in the process is critiquing. The work that has been created through this thus inhabits the antitheses at play here without attempting to subsume them: even though I am speaking from a position of solidarity with low-paid platform workers, my own different class position is always present as a subtext that is incorporated into the work. By extension, the work contains an implicit self-critique regarding its possible political agency, in that it can be successful in terms of making contradictions sensible, but faces a much more difficult task when it comes to proposing ways to undermine these. A further intention behind the methods used in this part of the practice has been the development of forms of documentation that speak to the labour relations of platform work in ways that go beyond simply giving voice to the experiences of platform workers as in documentary, journalistic or ethnographic approaches. Instead, I have sought for both the process of creation and the final from to speak to structural issues in platform work. This is why, for example, the

videos in *Workers leaving the cloud factory* are arranged in a grid rather than simply shown in succession, why the images in *Sweat, data and liquid assets* are of body parts and not more relatable facial portraits, and why the fees I paid workers are in the range of what would be paid for other kinds of jobs on offer on the respective platforms. At the same time, this kind of work has limitations in terms of the intentions for intervening in the material conditions of platform work as asked for in the project's original research questions. Working within restrictive platform architectures and under the gaze of platforms' policing of user interactions makes it difficult to, for example, establish any kind of relationship with workers beyond the employment relation that is mediated through the platform.

Thus, the second main direction of the project has been to work directly with labour rights activists, and this is the part of the research in which the question of intervening in labour relations has moved centre stage. Collaborating on the production of activist videos has entailed a very different subject position to the one taken in other aspects of the practice for this project. In this case, I clearly still inhabit a different class position to the workers whose struggles are the subject of the videos, but rather than seeking to incorporate this contradiction into aspects of the work, the objective here has been to undermine the hierarchies of knowledge and power implied in the structural differences between the positions at play here. This has meant adopting a stance that disavows any supposed primacy of art's modes of critique, enunciation or authorship in favour of an open-ended collaboration in which the requirements of workers and activists took centre stage. By extension, this practice has sought to propose and enact a wider critique of art's complicity with the capitalist division between intellectual and manual labour.

2.3.2 Timeline

Artist practice often proceeds through open-ended exploration that is helped along by intuitive hunches and happy accidents, thus the trajectory along which works develop is not always systematic, and making sense of what transpires in the process often involves retrospective reflection and contextualisation, through which new interpretations and connections can come to light. Experimentation and intuition have played a role in the development of this project as well, and as a result the research has not necessarily followed a linear path, but instead evolved along parallel tracks whose discoveries and considerations have fed off each other. The way in which the resulting artefacts are presented in the thesis reflects this: the narrative does not follow a strictly linear timeline; instead,

works are linked according to thematic concerns, while at the same time the gradual shift in emphasis from interventionist to activist work is reflected in the overall chapter structure.

Before the start of my studies, I had already developed some ideas for projects to pursue that were included the original research proposal. These were inflected by artist practices existing at the time that worked with digital labour platforms such as that of Aaron Koblin discussed in chapter 1, with the aim of finding more critical approaches which could also incorporate some input from workers that speaks to their experiences or situations while exceeding straightforwardly documentary approaches. The first few months of the research were then spent on registering accounts with different platforms, researching online fora and discussions related to working on specific platforms, finding additional existing artworks made with labour platforms, testing out initial ideas for projects, and joining public organising meetings for Deliveroo and Uber workers in London.

The very first project that I embarked on was *The convenient & fast way to get things done around critical theory*, for which I paid a TaskRabbit worker to attend a reading group on Marx's *Capital* organised by fellow PhD researchers. This was the first intervention chiefly because the reading group began in late 2016, thus the intervention was conceived and realised in short order but not taken further after the initial meeting for a number of reasons explained in chapter 3. In early 2017 came the first attempt at working with AMT, which took the form of a project titled *Mechanical corpse* that revisited the Surrealists' exquisite corpse game in which a story is written line by line by a series of people, each of whom only sees what the previous person wrote. However, I found that the paid contributions by AMT workers quickly developed the resulting text into exceedingly bland, formulaic territory rather than wild creative explorations. It became evident that rather than pursuing imaginative invention, workers preferred to opt for minimum effort and avoidance of any potentially contentious subject matter, which on reflection is not too surprising given the quick turnaround of jobs needed to generate an income and the ease with which employers can reject submitted tasks without justification on the platform. As a result, this project was not taken further and the collected text not made public. The projects that were developed following this were the Fiverr gig posted for *Work hard dream big* and the videos collected for *Workers leaving the cloud factory*, again using AMT in the latter case. Both of these were met with rather hostile responses from the re-

spective platforms as detailed in chapter 3, which would later form the basis for the development of new works.

In early 2017, I also contacted the IWGB union via email for the purpose of offering my skills to help the union's work in any way I could, and after some email exchanges and phone calls I began filming for the union in the summer. The first project that I became engaged in was never finished; this was meant to be an internal video in which different union branches share the work that they do with each other. This initiative was organised by a temporary union intern who left their position before the project reached completion, and there was no one else available to take the work forward. Similar issues with unfinished projects arose again on a small number of occasions during my work with the union due either to changes in campaign strategy or generally shifting priorities, which meant that there were no union staffers or activists available to work on developing the edit and publishing the final video. Thus, the development of each video has always been dependent on collaboration with union staff or activists. Around the same time, I also began work on a series of union videos supporting a campaign by outsourced staff at Senate House, University of London. This project was managed by the IWGB's press officer at the time, who organised a series of shoots during which we interviewed security guards, receptionists, porters, mailroom workers, branch officials, academics and the like. A total of four videos were produced from this, with the press officer conducting all the interviews and also supervising the video edit. The videos were then published on the IWGB's social media channels during the autumn in support of the union's long-running campaign to bring all staff working at Senate House in-house.

During the autumn, I began picking up the threads from the online projects conducted earlier in the year, by reusing the hostile platform responses that I had received for the creation of new work, in this case commissioning ASMR videos on Fiverr for *Capitalism doesn't love me* and an oil painting of my Fiverr gig screenshot made by Meisheng Oil Painting Manufacture in China for *Work hard dream big*. During further research on Fiverr, I noticed that my offer of doing nothing for the payment of US$5 was far from the only one of this kind posted on the platform, and I began collecting screenshots of other similar gigs that I came across, as a documentation of the micro-resistances that appear on the platform at regular intervals. I also filmed additional IWGB protests, with the collected footage providing cutaway material for future union videos as well as being shared with the union for use in in-house productions.

In early 2018, I developed the superconductr website as an online space that hosts all the works created during this project, based on the superconductor as a conceptual framework that holds the different parts of the practice for this project together by drawing attention to how capitalist power is articulated through the algorithmic liquefaction of labour relations in digital platform labour. I had intended to conduct fieldwork as a food delivery cyclist for some time, but my application for insurance clearance by the University had been held up for months. I eventually received this in the summer and proceeded to register on Uber Eats and started my work on the platform shortly thereafter. As I had only been able to embark on this relatively late in the project and the experience on the job did not inspire any particularly artistic approaches to fieldwork, I decided not to pursue this work for longer than three weeks in total.

In the autumn, I went on to create more videos for the IWGB, and from this point onwards I was given more autonomy in terms of the filming and editing process, provided that the resulting videos fulfilled the requirements of the corresponding campaigns. During this time, I also revisited the offers of doing nothing that I had been researching on Fiverr and began to commission videos made by the respective sellers for *Doing and nothingness*. While the work as a delivery cyclist did not result in any project emerging directly out of the fieldwork, the physical exertion experienced during the job inspired me to begin creating work that focuses on embodiment, with the collection of photographs and short texts for *Sweat, data and liquid assets* being the first.

 Throughout 2019, I continued making videos for a number of IWGB campaigns, while also focusing on disseminating the work created for this project through conferences and exhibitions. New pieces created in 2019 include *Fromage faux frais (of production)* and *Workers laughing alone for money*.

As can be seen from this timeline, work on different aspects of the research occurred in parallel throughout, with a gradual shift in emphasis from interventionist towards activist practice. In this sense, there is not really a moment in which the interventionist strand of the work was abandoned in favour of activist engagement. The two could rather be seen as complementary, as two routes for approaching the set of research questions, each engendering its own kinds of insights and coming with certain limitations. A somewhat more pronounced shift occurred within the interventionist part of the practice when, after working for Uber Eats, I decided to bring embodiment into the centre of my artistic productions after focusing on questions of subjectivity for some time. Again, this shift

should not be interpreted as an abandonment of artistic research into the subjective and ideological constructs at work in digital platforms altogether, but simply as a shift of focus after a sustained engagement with a certain set of questions for a period of time.

2.3.3 Paths not travelled

The attention paid to enunciatory position during the course of this project has meant that I have not pursued research methods that would have involved myself investigating and reflecting on the everyday experience of platform work from a first-person perspective, such as auto-ethnographic approaches, for example. The latter method has been used in sociological research (Heiland 2021; Timko and van Melek 2021) as well as journalistic investigation (Bloodworth 2018) into platform work, but my contention is that while this indubitably can engender important insights in fields that primarily deal with empirical knowledge, its workings cannot simply be transposed to artist practice, particularly in a case in which this would involve speaking from a different class or identity position than my own. With the attention generally paid to enunciative location in artist practice, the main task of artistic auto-ethnographic research in this kind of situation would have been untangling and reflecting on the contradictory position that I would have taken as a paid researcher reflecting on the everyday experience of low-paid gig work, with any reflections on the work itself being overshadowed by the former set of concerns. There also is the question of how much emphasis should be put in artist practice on producing empirical knowledge, when this kind of work is already being done in other fields. The development of strategies for translating empirically gathered data into aesthetic form would be a possible route for addressing this, but this would then raise the question of whether the methods developed for this would speak more to issues relating to the representation of data rather than to the structural conditions of digital platform labour.

Workers' inquiry—a Marxist research strategy in which workers' own knowledge about the labour process, the composition of the working class, possible sites of resistance, etc., is collected in order to build counter-knowledge from the ground up—also is a methodology that has been applied to platform work, with Callum Cant (2019) and the online journal *Notes From Below* being prominent examples. Again, this is a strategy that I did not pursue, in part because accounting for the resulting subject position of being a paid artist-researcher engaged in a workers' inquiry on platform work would have raised questions as to why this inquiry was not undertaken by workers for whom this is their actual job on which they depend for their livelihood. In addition, the initial research ques-

tions were centred around artistic research methods being applied to an investigation of digital platform labour, and like other empirical methods, a workers' inquiry would approach the subject from an opposing, non-artistic direction. Considering the substantial amount of time and commitment that a workers' inquiry requires, this would have had to be carried out right from the outset of the research, in the hope that some of the resulting data could be channeled into some kind of artistic production. While the research eventually led me to arrive at a position at which parts of my practice arose directly out of workers' demands, which is analysed in detail in chapter 5, the research began by testing out various artistic approaches as envisaged in the original research design. In a larger sense, the question of using approaches such as auto-ethnography, workers' inquiry or other empirical research methods also needs to be seen in light of the kinds of knowledge that artist practice deals in: this has less to do with empirical data, but more with aesthetic strategies whose strength lies in such areas as homing in on ambiguities and contradictions, or developing modes of representation that challenge and subvert dominant ones.

That said, I have conducted some labour process research, which in the project overall played the role of providing contextual knowledge that has informed the research, rather than being incorporated directly into clearly identifiable aspects of the artworks produced save one exception, as is explained below. In terms of the platforms that have played a significant role in the research, I was not able to open a worker account on AMT for researching the experience of working through this platform. The reasons for rejecting my application were described as 'proprietary' by Amazon in the email notifying me of this, in one of the examples of opaque communications received from platforms in the course of this research. However, online discussions by AMT users have suggested that Amazon almost exclusively recruit workers from the US and India, presumably for legal and tax reasons. In lieu of this, I have completed some tasks on another clickwork platform, Microworkers, and this in itself did not yield any particular insights about online microwork that were not already being debated in the sociological literature on the topic. On Fiverr, besides the offer of doing nothing posted on the platform for *Work hard dream big*, I have also created a gig on the platform that employs my sound production skills, in this case audio noise reduction. This has been available for purchase on Fiverr for some time; however, due to this being a relatively common service offered on the platform, it failed to receive a purchase order. I have also spent some three weeks working as a food delivery cyclist for Uber Eats as mentioned earlier, which has helped me to gain first-hand experience of the textures of localised gig work. For reasons of myself not doing this work out

of necessity but out of curiosity which brings with it issues of positionality, and because I could not identify aspects of the labour process that would lend themselves to the kinds of interventionist strategies that I was developing at the time, records of this experience are not directly reflected in the artefacts created for this research. The encounter with the sheer amount of perspiration that accompanied this work has entailed has however inspired the shift in focus to embodiment, and particularly the creation of *Fromage faux frais (of production)*, discussed in chapter 4.

2.4 Situated analysis

A proposal for a situated analysis of artist-activist practice is put forward in chapter 5, in the course of reflecting on the location of my collaboration with labour rights activists within the overall project. As is explained in more detail in the chapter, this part of the project put aside many of the tenets generally associated with artist practice such as defined authorship, interpretive open-endedness, critical distance and the like, with the series of videos created in the process fulfilling their intended activist function without any need for validation from the sphere of art. However, taking into account the fact that these videos have been produced as part of an artistic research project opens the discussion to broader considerations on the relations between art and political praxis as well as the social more generally. In chapter 5, this is taken up with reference to themes such as nominalism, the avant-garde, social practice and Arte Útil. What emerges is that none of these movements and practices and their surrounding discourses is able to fully account for the ways in which artist practice has crossed over into political praxis in the case of this project.

Instead, situated analysis is put forward as a proposal for taking stock of this practice by accounting for the effects that positionality has on its politics in relation to the context in which it operates. This is meant to exceed the claims for art's social usefulness or its ability to destabilise fixed categories that are known from social practice art or Arte Útil, and instead problematise art's own role within the systems it purports to critique. Donna Haraway's (1991) notion of *situated knowledges* can provide some helpful pointers in this context. Haraway's text puts forward an analysis of the possibility of rational knowledge claims in a historical context in which accounts of the contingency and constructedness of all knowledge claims appear to make any attempts at arriving at epistemological truth all but impossible. Two points in how she seeks to address this problem

are particularly relevant in the present context: the first is that positioning and partiality are part and parcel of any epistemological claim, and it is only by accounting for these properties that knowledge claims can be made in which their ethical and political positions are accounted for. The second is that positionality is itself open-ended: a critical understanding of knowledge requires an acknowledgement of the fact that no speaker ever occupies only a single enunciative position.

In the context of situated analysis as it is developed for the current project, Harway's observations can be transposed to a critical interrogation of the political claims put forward by various art practices. This seeks to home in on something of a realpolitik of artist practice, by paying close attention to what kinds of politics a practice enacts in relation to the social field that it operates in. That is, practices need to be evaluated in their situatedness, and this situatedness itself needs to be considered in its multiple, often conflicting aspects. In the present case, situatedness has played out in particular along class lines, as elaborated in the account on positionality in section 2.2.1. My position here has involved both being an artist-researcher on a PhD scholarship and an artist-activist who dedicates his time to assisting precarious workers in their struggles for labour rights. In this sense, I am speaking both from a different class perspective and from a position of solidarity that seeks to develop ways of undoing the disparities in privilege that the different class positions at play give rise to. This latter point is a crucial aspect of situated analysis in the way that this is developed here: in this context, it is not enough to simply account for different and partial positions and then consider the work done. Once this first step of the analysis has been conducted, the next step is to identify the effects that one's own positionality has on upholding the structures that are the subject of critique. In relation to art, a salient example lies with how vibrant urban art scenes are being instrumentalised for increasing the value of real estate and gentrification projects. In the case of the present project, this relates to how art's existence as a specialised realm of production in capitalism serves to uphold the division between manual and intellectual labour. Once these contradictory dynamics at work within artistic production have been laid bare, the task is to work towards undoing their problematic aspects, a process that tends to involve letting go of some of the properties, privileges and modes of engagement that artistic work is generally associated with and instead engaging more directly with the political field that the practice is embedded in. This is what has transpired in the course of my work with labour rights activists, as it has in the work of artists turned anti-gentrification activists, both of which are discussed in chapter 5.

2.5 Ethics

The methods for gathering participant consent for this project have had to be adapted to the different kinds of engagement with participants that occurred during various aspects of the practice, not all of which allowed for the use of standard participant information sheets and consent forms. The one exception to this is the meeting of the reading group for *The convenient & fast way to get things done around critical theory*: meeting all reading group participants and the invited TaskRabbit worker in person, as well as the fact that everyone involved including the invited worker arrived with prior experience of academic study, made the process straightforward in this case.

When it comes to the videos created for the IWGB union, I had come to the first filming session with participant information sheets and consent forms at the ready, but the union's press officer who was supervising the shoot expressed strong reservations against using these. The workers to be interviewed all stemmed from migrant backgrounds and some had limited English skills, so presenting them with lengthy forms to read through and sign would have likely driven them to refuse participation in the video shoot. In lieu of written consent, we settled on gathering consent orally on video, with the purpose of the filmed interviews—collecting material for campaign videos that were to be published on the union's social media channels—explained to participants at the time. This method for gathering consent was used for future filming for the IWGB as well.

Working with digital platforms proved particularly restrictive in terms of gathering consent. This is especially the case for clickwork platforms such as AMT, on which workers' identities only appear as a string of random characters and any communication between workers and employers beyond the posted task is strongly discouraged. In addition, the platforms' design and the fast-paced nature of the work mean that including lengthy participant information with a task only creates further effort for already pressurised workers. Thus, I settled for including essential and unambiguous wording with each task, making it clear that submitted materials were to be used for an art project, meaning that they would be published online and shown in galleries. In my AMT tasks, I included my email address with the task information, with the offer for workers to contact me if they had any questions. I suspect that this might have been the reason for the cancellation of my AMT requester account. While Amazon were not forthcoming in terms of which part of their 'Participation Agreement' I fell foul of, my suspicion is that it was the

offer to communicate outside the platform that led to the account closure. Hence, I did not provide my email address in any communications regarding tasks on other platforms such as Microworkers thereafter. Fiverr works slightly differently, in that workers offer services rather than choose pre-given tasks, and these services can be requested by sending a message to the seller in question. I was thus able to explain my intentions for use of the materials that I collected through Fiverr in my initial message to each seller, and because Fiverr has an in-built messaging system, I was able to answer any additional questions after this.

An additional difficulty stems from the fact that, depending on the platform, user accounts as well as message threads can disappear after some time. The online conversation I had with the TaskRabbit worker before our meeting, for example, has been removed from my account on the platform, and there is no way for me to find out whether this person still works on the platform, as workers are not identified on the platform by unique usernames but with their first name and initial. Fiverr does seem to store conversations for longer, but most of the accounts of the users whom I have worked with have disappeared from the platform over time. Fiverr seems to have removed all ASMR offers from its site, and the accounts of the sellers from whom I purchased the videos for *Capitalism doesn't love me* are closed. Similarly, Fiverr deletes offers that propose to sell nothing at regular intervals, thus the accounts I have worked with for *Doing and nothingness* have disappeared over time as well. This is a challenge to keep in mind in terms of any more sustained engagement with workers, even on platforms that allow for communication through internal email systems. The only possible solution to overcome this seems to be to try and gather some contact information from workers in question and hope not to be detected in the process by the platform's disciplinary systems.

3 Is that a sweatshop in your pocket? Neoliberal subjectivities and superconductors[2]

This chapter begins from the premise that there are multiple connections, intersections, overlaps and tensions between economic structures and modes of becoming of subjects: different conceptions of the subject have political implications and in turn give rise to and determine sets of conditions for possible economic relations. Michel Foucault has analysed the intersections between modes of constitution of subjects on one hand and operations of power on the other at length, and probably in more depth than by anyone before him (e.g. Foucault 1982). Towards the end of his life, Foucault ([1978–79] 2009) applied these analyses to the ideas pertinent in neoliberal thought, which was then only at the beginning of its emergence as the newly dominant economic paradigm. There is considerable disagreement among scholars as to what Foucault's own position was towards neoliberal economics (Zamora and Behrent 2016). Nevertheless, his conceptual tools remain invaluable as a point of departure for a critical analysis of the dynamics at work in the production of neoliberal subjectivities.

Neoliberalism is, in broad brushstrokes, the set of economic doctrines that have risen to hegemony since the economic crises of the 1970s, which marked the end of the era of Fordist production. Some of the salient characteristics of neoliberal economics are, according to Foucault ([1978–79] 2009), a strong aversion to state intervention in the capitalist market coupled with a strong bias towards putting in place the conditions of this market through state power, and the subjecting of more and more aspects of life to market logic, ranging from structures that regulate social interaction down to motivations that determine individual decisions. Despite neoliberal ideas coming in for sustained criticism, among others, from the alterglobalisation movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, and more recently in regards to its inability to adequately respond to a public health emergency such as the coronavirus pandemic, neoliberal doctrine has proven to be remarkably resilient, adaptable and capable of feeding off instability in order to entrench its hegemony even further (Klein 2007; Mirowski 2013).

Digital platform labour has emerged within these economic and political parameters, and the forms that labour relations take, the distributions of wealth and power that

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[2] Parts of this chapter and the next have been, in modified form, published in *PARSE Journal*: https://parse-journal.com/article/is-that-a-sweatshop-in-your-pocket-superconductr-disassembles-digital-labour-platforms

are being established, and the kinds of subjectivities that are being mobilised in this field are strongly inflected by the conditions that have been put in place through decades of neoliberal governance. In this context, numerous discursive, subjective and machinic operations have been and are being mobilised, operations which on the one hand serve the purpose of making this emerging state of affairs appear as if it was the perfectly normal, natural order of things, and which on the other hand intensify the neoliberal tendency to subsume increasing aspects of human interaction to market logic, thus putting even temporary respite from a world of incessant competition further out of reach. In digital platform labour, these issues are thrown into particularly sharp relief, and this state of affairs forms the backdrop of the research-practice that this chapter is concerned with.

The questions to be explored are thus concerned with subjectivity under neoliberalism as something that is being produced and which is embedded in a discursive field that serves to, or at least attempts to, produce, normalise and sustain conditions of ever-increasing precarity and competitiveness. In the words of Félix Guattari (quoted in Lazzarato 2014: 8): capitalism 'launches (subjective) models the way the automobile industry launches a new line of cars'. Production of subjectivity needs to be evaluated here as part of a larger machinic apparatus, where the machinic extends beyond technology into social and subjective realms. In digital platform labour, a number of operations are at work that intervene at different levels in the construction of subjects, ranging from communicative actions that promote certain ways of being and of understanding oneself, to machinic (or algorithmic) constructions that create a field of possible actions for subjects. The task at hand is to identify how these operations are inflected by the specific conditions that are at play in digital platform labour, and to devise artistic strategies that can serve to interrogate their workings, propose ways of explicating the dynamics at play from the perspective of labour, and suggest different models of subjectivation that could counter the dominant ones being instituted by capital.

In terms of methodology, the decision was made that the artistic strategies deployed should work directly with the functionalities of existing digital labour platforms, leading to the creation of a series of artistic interventions which use platforms themselves as the medium for producing artworks that propose forms of critical engagement with the same platforms. These interventions have had to be adapted to the different possibilities for interaction offered by each platform and its specific ways of facilitating the buying and selling of labour, and at times have run up against restrictions put in place for the use of a particular platform. Thus, to some extent, the interventions can also be seen as probes for

testing what kinds of critical or resistant flows can be inserted into or extracted from platforms that are highly restricted and closely monitored in terms of their use. Different moments of friction or blockage that have occurred in the process have also provided starting points for further interventions and experiments. The processes that took their course during the creation of each project are as important as the eventual artefacts that have been their outcomes, and the different procedural steps in each project's development are explained in the corresponding online documentation. Any financial transactions that occurred as part of an intervention have been documented including a breakdown of fees paid to workers and deducted by the platform. The intention behind this is to address the material conditions that the creation of each work has been embedded in, acknowledging the fact that this kind of artistic practice does not happen at some remove from the conditions which are the subject of its critique, but instead cannot avoid a certain degree of complicity with the mechanisms it engages with.

The main work on which the analysis in this chapter is based is a project titled *Work hard dream big*, whose life began as an intervention on the platform Fiverr. Before moving on to this discussion, some background on Fiverr will be provided through a case study of one of its advertising campaigns, which functions as a rather conspicuous illustration of some of the subjective models that are mobilised in this field.

3.1 You might be a doer

Image redacted for copyright reasons

Figure 3.1 Fiverr.com advertisement, 2017; © Fiverr

Haughty face, sunken eyes, disheveled hair. The woman is looking straight at the camera, from behind black eyeliner, her jawbones accentuated by stark lighting. The expression on her face carries both exhaustion and determination, a resolve to not be impeded by any obstacle that might cross her path, and obstacles she's faced a few. This is a woman on a mission. She knows what she needs to do and she does it, whatever it takes. She could be a revolutionary, consumed by that discontent that can grow into a collective

outburst and overthrow an existing order; she might be an artist, relishing in her unwavering commitment to surmount any hurdle to realising her vision, her project, inadvertently also embodying the model of being for a new order of work (McRobbie 2001); or she might simply be a doer.

The text and visual outlined above form one of the core images of a poster advertising campaign by the platform Fiverr, where workers offer 'gigs'—jobs to be completed remotely, ranging from creative services to long-distance spiritual healing—for a fee of five US dollars or multiples thereof. The video spot accompanying the poster campaign strikes a similar chord: cut at rapid pace, we see the world from the view of a parade of young upstart entrepreneurs: elbowing her way through a night club crowd to field a call to China from a toilet cubicle; at a meeting of suited office drones in a bland steel-and-glass office, launching a chainsaw attack on a whiteboard; answering a call from a customer while making love ('Woo the customer. Schmooze the customer.' the voiceover intimates just before); facing off with sharks in suits, with death, the 'gurus', the 'trust fund kids', the 'tech bros'. The breathless voiceover intones:

> Promote it. Promote the crap out of it. Cancel the brainstorm. The only one who can do this is you and your power to get shit done. […] Above all, and this is important: do. Because thinking big is still just thinking (Fiverr, 2017b).

What is striking about this campaign is of course in the first instance its misanthropic tone cheerfully glorifying self-abuse, celebrating an existence that basically consists in working yourself to death while loving every second of it, a tone which, in any case, is likely to have been deliberate precisely because of its shock value, its potential to generate controversy and thus increase publicity impact. There also is the fact that this kind of publicity campaign represents yet another case of capitalism absorbing some of its most trenchant critiques and turning them into something of its own, something to be celebrated, harnessed and mobilised. As artist and writer Silvio Lorusso (2017) remarks on this topic, the system has become immune to irony, quoting a friend of his as saying that by now it is impossible to 'tell the difference between tactical media and actual media'. Here we behold Hito Steyerl's (2013) heroic figure of the freelancer as mercenary, completely devoid of the deep irony that permeates Steyerl's writing.

What should perhaps be even more startling is the way in which the campaign has been described by some of the main actors involved in its creation. As Doug Cameron (quoted in Fiverr 2017a: np), CCO of DCX, the advertising agency behind the project, ex-

plains: 'we decided to […] take a more punk rock approach to entrepreneurship, so it'll be more rebellious'. Fiverr founder and CEO Micha Kaufman (2017: np), for his part, celebrates the age of what he calls the 'lean entrepreneur', who is 'asked to do more with less, working longer hours with more competition for the same opportunity'. Thus, the human in the age of Fiverr is a 'Doer': 'we're the ones who get it done. […] We know success is earned not through talk, but through action. […] Keep hustling and keep grinding each day to make it more productive than the last'.

What we are witnessing here is not just a kind of exile from irony, combined with a glib eulogy to a vision of society suffused by breakneck competition to the point of exhaustion. There is another layer here, which consists in the construction of a new kind of subjectivity, or, at the very least, the radicalisation of certain kinds of subjectivities whose construction has been long underway. This subject is one for whom entrepreneurial precarity, economic Darwinism, self-exploitation (which then normalises exploitation of others) are not only perfectly natural, they are celebrated, they are glorified as subversive, as ways of being rebellious. Rebelliousness here would be targeted not against some oppression, but against one's peers, regarded as some kind of undifferentiated rabble whom the real 'Doer' rises above and fails to even notice while chasing the dream of endlessly chasing innumerable underpaid gigs. Furthermore, recurrent injunctions against reflection, against thinking, make it clear that there simply is no time to think when you need to 'get shit done', while this 'getting shit done' is a 'power' in its own right. The subject that emerges from this frenzy of hustling for the sake of it, is, as it were, one of pure affect, or pure drive, pure energy of some sort, flattened into a conduit crisscrossed by different currents: gig streams, earnings streams, personal brand streams, customer feedback streams, usage data streams, etc., each of which is also a source of revenue to be tapped into by whoever controls the platform, the machinic assemblage that each of these streams connects up to and passes through. Here we have, in a nutshell, an economic-subjective assemblage that could be described as a superconductor, more of which later.

3.2 *Work hard dream big*

Online documentation: http://www.superconductr.org/work-hard-dream-big

Figure 3.2 superconductr: *Work hard dream big,* computer screenshot, 2017

Work hard dream big is the first intervention conducted on Fiverr as part of this research. To some extent, this project can be understood as a response to the advertising campaign described above: to put it in this campaign's very own terms, at least in part this project has to do with how to not give a shit about this boundless drive to 'get shit done' that forms one of the core concerns of the campaign, with offering a retort to Fiverr's promotional materials and their glorification of self-exploitation, through correspondingly straightforward means of communication that lay out their position in fairly unambiguous

terms. But this is only some of what is going on here. Beyond the unmistakable gesture of refusal performed here, there are a number of other issues being brought into play, which relate to different aspects of subjectivity that are mobilised through neoliberal regimes of digital platform labour, and different modes of critique that are proposed in response to these. These issues will be examined in more detail below, after an account of what is contained in the image above and what has been involved in its creation.

The image is a screenshot of my first ever 'gig' posted on Fiverr, and the first artefact created as part of this particular intervention. What can be seen in the image is the standard layout with which gigs appear publicly once they have been posted on Fiverr, at least this was the layout used at the time this intervention was created. There is a wider column on the left, containing gig title, photo and description, while the column on the right shows price, delivery time, profile information and social media share buttons.

The process of creating this gig involved first of all registering a user profile on Fiverr, under the name 'Wrkharddreambig'. This was the maximum letter count available for this purpose, which is why one letter had to be deleted from the title of the project when choosing the username. While this was not something planned beforehand but a decision made out of necessity, this operation does evoke the often mangled spelling found in the names of new tech startups, which presumably serves the purpose of being able to secure a simple and recognisable URL for the company website, but which at the same time has become its own stylistic device. This is an instance where the machinic realm, in imposing certain techno-linguistic restrictions or in making certain linguistic transfigurations necessary in order to achieve certain ends such as having a unique and simple URL, can be seen to be intervening directly at the level of language and style. Effects created by machine code, combined with economic considerations, spill over into the realm of semantic representation and become a formative element in certain cultural markers.

The title chosen for the gig itself is 'Do Nothing For 23 Minutes and 2 Seconds'. The 'I Will' that can be seen proceeding this in the image is something that the Fiverr website adds all of its own accord to every listing's title, presumably to encourage a positive, proactive, can-do attitude when devising a gig. Yet the offer proposed here, to be doing nothing whatsoever for a set amount of time, evidently stands in direct contradiction to this creed of compulsory enthusiastic productivity, instead opting for a refusal of participation in the same. Fiverr seem to have taken a similar view, and this offering did

not last particularly long before being removed from public view, as will be described in more detail later. But the service proposed here could also be read differently, acknowledging the fact that this offer of doing nothing contains its own productive potential, even (although not exclusively) on neoliberal terms. To begin, the notion of setting aside time to do nothing evokes contemporary desires and movements for deceleration, for a state of being in the moment, temporarily removed from the stresses wrought by securing one's survival in a world of incessant competition. This longing for respite can be seen as a necessary corollary of living under neoliberalism and has led to the emergence of a market of commodified offerings of self-care, such as meditation or yoga retreats. In relation to this, the service offered in this gig could be interpreted as a temporary withdrawal of the subject in the photograph from the anxieties of working under neoliberal capitalism, thus representing an act of self-care emblematic of the ways in which under neoliberalism even wider socio-economic issues are seen to require individual solutions instead of collective demands for a change in the conditions that have brought about this situation in the first place. On the other hand, this gig could also be understood as an offering to perform this withdrawal from activity in someone else's stead, someone, perhaps, who simply does not manage to allocate enough time to carry this out themselves, but who might expect some benefit from the simple knowledge that another person was entering a state of uninterrupted immobility in lieu of them. It follows that, at least hypothetically, even this extended moment of relief and recovery from stress could be outsourced and sold as a commodity.

The fee of US$5 is the standard fee per gig on Fiverr. Initially, since the founding of the company in 2009 every service sold on Fiverr carried the price tag of $5, but in 2015 the company introduced the possibility for sellers to charge higher rates (Orpaz 2015) after they had been the subject of sustained criticism for driving down prices of professional services (Hüfner 2014). Nevertheless, in the vain hope of perhaps attracting potential buyers through competitive rates, the choice was made to sell this service for the minimum price of $5. The period of time, 23 minutes and 2 seconds, was precisely determined by dividing the prospective net earnings of $5, minus Fiverr and PayPal fees, by the local hourly minimum wage. Choosing a category to post the gig in, 'Business / Other' was chosen in order to classify the offering as a professional service.

The photo used to promote the offer was made, like many a fabled founding milestone of some budding startup which is destined to become part of its future folklore, in my bedroom, with myself as the subject in the image. The cardboard box I can be seen

wearing on my head was lovingly customised with crudely taped-on printouts of images featuring various entrepreneurial slogans, sourced through online searches: 'Mind of an entrepreneur', 'Work smarter not harder', 'I do not need a drill. I need a hole in the wall', etc. One of these slogans that adorns a side of the box not visible in the photo is 'Work hard, dream big', which in its alluringly condensed simplicity was chosen as the title for this project. The t-shirt I am wearing is emblazoned with the famous phrase repeatedly uttered by Hermann Melville's ([1853] 2009) literary character Bartleby, who obstinately refuses to perform any of the work he is assigned by his employer: 'I would prefer not to'. Atop the t-shirt, I chose to wear a smart jacket, to signal membership in the professional, business-oriented class of workers.

Finally, the description accompanying the gig listing reads:

I will do nothing for 23 minutes and 2 seconds. This is equivalent to the amount of time $5 (minus Fiverr and PayPal fees) buy at minimum wage where I live. Video evidence of myself doing nothing for 23 minutes and 2 seconds will be sent to you.

This gig comes with a number of FREE extras:
• FREE: The time it took me to create my profile and this gig
• FREE: Holiday pay
• FREE: Sick pay
• FREE: Editing and uploading video
• FREE: Time and money spent on work uniform.

You ONLY pay for the time I will actually be doing nothing, that's it.

This is the part of the image where a more detailed, and also quite straightforward, critique of conditions prevalent in digital platform labour is put forward. The promise to work for exactly the amount of time covered by the local minimum wage highlights the fact that poor earnings are rife in this field. On the other hand, the exact determination of time allocated to the performance of the task draws on the fact that it is common practice among freelance workers to dedicate however much time is needed to a task, regardless of average hourly earnings. Here, this kind of practice is pre-emptively foreclosed. Finally, the list of 'free extras' performs something akin to the revealing of the obscene underside of the law that forms part of Žižek's (1993) concept of over-identification: the items listed here include many aspects of free labour performed or labour protections covered on a regular basis by workers on digital labour platforms, as well as by freelance workers in general. These are all elements that need to be in place before one can even begin to en-ter the realm of potentially paid work, yet drawing attention to these is antithetical to the

image of the hustling-and-bustling 'Doer', always enthusiastic, available and ready for whatever gig might receive a purchase order.

3.3 The entrepreneur of themselves: Foucault and neoliberal subjectivity

For platforms like Fiverr and others to exist successfully, a number of conditions need to be in place, as outlined in chapter 1. In addition to technological means, there needs to be a sufficiently high population of surplus labour. Platforms need to have access to sufficient amounts of speculative capital to support fast growth aimed at establishing a monopoly position. Beyond these technical and economic prerequisites there exist discursive and ideological regimes which help to normalise and sustain these conditions. Operations of power cut across these different realms and serve to structure a field of possible modes of being and of possible actions. These are the kinds of operations that mobilise subjective assemblages, the mechanisms and regimes of knowledge that determine what makes a person and what ways of being persons can imagine as possible.

One particular mode of subjectivation that has risen to prominence as neoliberalism has taken its hegemonic position is that of the entrepreneur. In digital platform labour, the figure of the entrepreneur comes into play in several distinct ways. There is, to begin with, the heroic figure of the business founder, the innovator who has discovered a real-world problem and has devised a business idea to solve it and make a tidy profit in the process. Secondly, workers on digital platforms are interpellated to conduct themselves as entrepreneurs, working hard and dreaming big, no matter how mind-numbing the tasks at hand or meagre the earnings are. In some instances, and Fiverr's Kaufman represents a good example of this, one can sense the benevolent CEO reaching down to their army of precarious freelancers to bequeath upon them valuable lessons about the virtues of being good in business, adapting and surviving against the competition: 'Is that an office in your pocket?' is the title of an article in which Kaufman (2015) envisages a future of globe-trotting 'nano-preneurs' chasing profits through their mobile phones or tablets while living a life of permanent itinerancy. Thirdly, platforms usually treat their workers as entrepreneurs legally, in order to absolve themselves of any responsibility for adhering to labour laws.

These different shades of the figure of the entrepreneur are present in *Work hard dream big*, but they are contorted and ruptured, presented from a stance that is antagonistic to the rosy image painted of digital platform entrepreneurialism by its evangelists.

The motivational messages that are meant to inspire heroic entrepreneurial deeds are there, but the crude way in which they have been stuck together makes them appear like a chaotic assemblage of contradictory flashes of mental impulses, more evocative of an attack of precarity-induced anxiety than a zen-like state of profit-oriented productivity. The cardboard box covering the subject's head, which these slogans have been applied to, is reminiscent of a balaclava, thus giving the figure a vaguely menacing, threatening aura. While the entrepreneur in the photograph is dressed smart, the text on the t-shirt he is wearing signals an attitude diametrically opposite to the can-do mindset of a self-made entrepreneurial hero. Instead, he is posing as a recalcitrant figure, engaged in a quiet but determined refusal to participate, like Melville's Bartleby from whom the phrase has been borrowed. Finally, the list of free extras in the text below the photograph, while presented as a boon to potential customers purchasing this particular service, in fact spells out the savings digital platforms make by treating their workers as freelancers.

The image thus manifests a number of critiques levelled at what could be described as the ideological apparatus of entrepreneurialism in digital platform labour. An important account of how this apparatus came into being can be found in Foucault's ([1978–79] 2008) lecture series at the Collège de France. In lecture nine, Foucault (220–224) discusses how the writings of neoliberal economists such as Gary Becker from the 1950s to the 1970s made a move against Marxist-related economics. The neoliberals changed the frame of reference from labour as an activity embedded in larger processes and relations of production to the individual worker as a rational economic agent involved in something of a profit-and-loss calculation. In this conception, work, like any other economic transaction in the neoliberal understanding, involves the use of a scarce resource for competing ends. What used to be a wage is, seen from this individualised point of view, an income, an earnings stream, a return on capital. And the capital in this equation is of course, as is now common parlance in the language of capitalist enterprise, *human capital*—the person itself seen as a capital asset. Human capital is a unique form of capital in that it cannot be separated from the person who owns it. In this context, the main question centres around how to deploy one's human capital to achieve the maximum return: the person, the subject, is conceived as an enterprise, whose main concerns would be growing its capital, protecting it from risk, and extracting an income stream from it.

This subject, the neoliberal *homo œconomicus,* is split, as it were, into the different departments of a corporation through being 'an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself [sic] […] being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for

himself the source of [his] earnings' (Foucault [1978–79] 2008: 226), and this split will be revisited in the following chapter in relation to the notion of auto-affective labour. Even private consumption does not escape subsumption into entrepreneurial logic: according to Becker, a person who consumes is in fact a producer, producing their own satisfaction on the basis of the capital at their disposal. The shift underlying this redesign of the subject reflects a major driving force behind the neoliberal project: the shift from exchange to competition, a competition that is presented as pervading all aspects of human and social life. The neoliberal *homo œconomicus*, the subject of interest, investment and competition, is different from the earlier *homo juridicus,* the subject of right:

> Whereas rights exist to be exchanged, […] interest is irreducible and inalienable […]. The state channels flows of interest and desire by making desirable activities inexpensive and undesirable activities costly, counting on the fact that subjects calculate their interests (Read 2009: 29).

The competitive logic at the heart of the neoliberal project subjects every possible decision to the calculation of potential costs incurred against potential gains to be made. As the above quote indicates, this state of all-pervasive competitive calculus is, however, not something that already exists or comes into being out of its own accord. It is something brought into being through a certain form of governmental reason and through action of the state in its neoliberal function as guarantor of the unimpeded operation of the capitalist market.

3.4 (Un)happy auto-mobiles

Interviewer: So why do you want this job?

Well, I've always felt passionately about not starving to death.

Figure 3.3 Anonymous meme, ca. 2017

The governmental reason that moulds subjects in the shape of the neoliberal enterprise is not limited to the realm of government policy; like the Foucauldian notion of power, it acts within the entire social realm down to subjective levels. In relation to labour under neoliberalism, one way in which this plays out is through the premise that work becomes more than just fulfilment of a certain task or function for remuneration; instead, what is expected is full subjective investment into the objectives of the organisation one works for. At the most basic level, whatever one's status in the labour hierarchy, people still go to work in order to avoid material destitution. Yet all kinds of mental and psychological contortions are mobilised in order to make them forget about this reality. In fact, taking account of the *salariat*, the happy employees whose relatively comfortable position in the food chain of capitalist production tends to lead them to identify with the goals of the enterprise more than with their interest as workers, has long proven to be a conundrum for Marxist theory. This is because the latter has a tendency to understand the wage relation, in its most basic form, as an antagonistic stand-off between labour, which depends on capital for their wage, and capital, which depends on labour as a means of production, while the remain-

ing interests of each are diametrically opposed. Happy workers do not fit into this scheme, yet particularly in the neoliberal era the promise of people finding or expressing 'creativity', 'autonomy', 'fulfilment' or 'self-realisation' in their paid employment has become one of the main ideological drives in the process of remodelling the employment relation into one of enthusiastic subjection to the demands of capital.

3.4.1 Willing slaves of capital

Frédéric Lordon (2014) has analysed this process through a critique of the Marxist concept of alienation. For Lordon, the notion of alienation is deeply rooted in a metaphysics of subjectivity that conceives of the subject as an authentic, autonomous ego endowed with a clearly defined free will. Alienation, in the broadest sense, means to be deprived of the expression of one's subjectivity, to be forced to act against one's free will, against one's consent. The difficulties with holding on to this line of argument become readily apparent once one considers the numerous debates on the open-endedness and incompleteness of subjectivity that have taken place during the latter half of the 20th century, as in Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and others. If there is no easily delineated subject, the question of how to establish an authentic free will and thus how to define what constitutes alienation becomes much more difficult, if not impossible, to answer. Lordon mobilises Spinoza's theory of affects for a way out of the impasse. In the Spinozist view, there is no need for criteria such as free will, consent or alienation, because for Spinoza ([1677] 2002: 264), there is no self-contained subject to begin with, only a constantly changing interplay of affects: 'men [sic] are deceived in thinking themselves free, a belief that consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined'. Beyond the subjectivist point of view there lies a kind of materialism of affective flows, where what I experience as my free decision is in fact determined completely by my prior disposition (itself a product of prior affectations) and all the ways I am being affected in that particular moment. Thus whatever action one takes, this always already implies that one has consented to take this action; the main difference, in the Spinozist view, lies with whether this consent is accompanied by happy or sad affects.

If the basic desire of the employee is the desire to avoid hunger (a sad affect), the aim in the neoliberal labour relation is to engender '*intrinsic joyful affects*' (Lordon 2014: 52; original emphasis), and to align employees' desires as completely as possible with a company's master desire, so that the employees 'occupy themselves of their own accord in the service of the capitalist organisation' (53). Lordon calls this ideal form of the em-

ployee the 'joyful auto-mobile' (49), in the sense of something that moves of its own accord. This kind of affective disposition involves multiple displacements from the initial point of the desire to simply survive, or, in Spinoza's ([1677] 2002: 188) terms, to 'persevere in […] being', in which the initial sad affects of working in order not to starve are reinvested with ones of a more joyful disposition. This transformation occurs on several levels: firstly, the acts of getting paid and of spending one's earnings induce intrinsic joyful affects. Beyond this, the affective disposition of the human condition itself is bound to animate persons to actively look for sources of joy even in their submission. According to Spinoza, joyful affects increase a person's power of acting, and thus there is a predisposition to find sources of joy, whatever the circumstances. The main success of the neoliberal project of subjectivity consists, then, in having perfected the instrumentalisation of this chain of affective enchantment to the degree that its workings tend to appear as the perfectly natural order of things.

Lordon writes first and foremost about affective entanglements as they proliferate among employees in corporations. But if one follows Foucault's observations regarding the pervasiveness of the enterprise form in neoliberalism down to the level of subjectivity, it becomes apparent that Lordon's analysis comes even more into its own when applied to the situation workers find themselves in when working through digital labour platforms. In this case, workers are not asked so much to identify with the aims of a particular enterprise as opposed to some other enterprise, but with enterprise as such, in the abstract. It does not matter so much which particular platform one sells one's labour through; the crucial point is to become an enterprise oneself.

3.4.2 *The convenient & fast way to get things done around critical theory*

Online documentation: http://www.superconductr.org/the-convenient-fast-way-to-get-things-done-around-critical-theory

How does this remodelling of the subject as enterprise play out in practice? The theories of Foucault and his interlocutors on neoliberal subjectivity have given rise to empirical research in sociology and psychology on, for example, female classically-trained musicians (Scharff 2016) or YouTube 'autopreneurs' (Ashman, Patterson and Brown 2018). The very first intervention conducted for this research project, titled *The convenient & fast way to*

get things done around critical theory (2016), also can be seen as something of a case study of this, although there is more to be said about it, as will be explored below.

For *The convenient & fast way*, a worker was hired through the platform TaskRabbit to join the first meeting of a reading group on Marx's ([1867] 1976) *Capital volume 1*, organised by a group of PhD candidates at the University of Westminster. TaskRabbit began as an online service for hiring workers for what is generally called 'odd jobs'. Almost any kind of work could be posted, to be bid on by interested workers. By the time that this intervention was conducted, the interface had been streamlined, meaning that there were six work categories, such as 'general handyman' or 'furniture assembly', which one had to choose from. After selecting 'general handyman' and choosing a time and place for the work, a number of profiles of potential workers were shown, and the choice of worker was eventually made mostly based on the hourly rate asked. Within an hour of making the booking, the worker in question emailed to inquire for more details. After explaining the intentions behind the booking and the background of the research, the exact time and place for the meeting and some preparatory tasks were arranged.

On the day, the worker showed up at the arranged venue cheerful and motivated, but it is difficult to reliably ascribe this affective disposition solely to the somewhat unconventional nature of the task at hand. The affective labour of always being positive and enthusiastic is something to be expected from a person whose opportunities to gain future work hinge on receiving an excellent rating from each customer. Once the reading group had convened, the discussion was jovial, and participants showed an interest in consulting the experiences of the worker to inform the debate. At the same time, the dynamic in which one person had been hired to attend the meeting rather than joining simply out of interest was present at the encounter as a pervasive subtext that occasionally rose to the surface through both verbal and non-verbal cues, mannerisms and inflections. Thus, the worker's presence entailed a measure of profound ambiguity: at times an engaged participant in the conversation, at others listening interestedly, always welcome and welcoming, yet also always there as a paid employee. As in Lordon's theory of affective enchantment, the pleasure of joyful subjection for the purpose of receiving a wage becomes difficult to distinguish from other joys, such as that of being party to an interesting discussion.

Rather than as a form of empirical research however, the project was first and foremost intended to be an intervention in the operation of the platform, a move to implant a, however small, insurrectionary charge into its operation as a marketplace for hy-

per-precarious work. This having been achieved, in principle, in the first meeting, the project was not pursued any further. Considering that TaskRabbit pocketed 30% of the worker's earnings and added a 7.5% 'Trust & Support' fee to the advertised rate, it became clear that in the end the main beneficiary from its attempted subversion would be the platform itself. As Boltanski and Chiapello ([1999] 2007) and many others have observed, capitalism has a rapacious appetite for eating up its own critiques and turning a profit in the process, and the situation constructed for this project is no exception to this.

The operation of selecting and hiring a worker who can be summoned with the help of a few mouse clicks and a modest budget has also made somewhat more tangible the operations of the machinic assemblage that connects flows of subjects, data, value and affects. What has been particularly conspicuous in the present case is the interpersonal immediacy of encountering the worker at the other end of this algorithmically mediated transaction, in all their fleshy presence and ready to do one's bidding, only to disperse again once the task at hand has been completed. The embodiment alluded to here will be brought up in chapter 4; for the time being, the discussion will return other issues that have emerged here: the liquefaction of labour relations and the technological assemblages through which labour can be bought and sold with the ease comparable to the conduct of a financial transaction.

3.5 Derivatives, dividuals and machines

The issue of liquidity that has motivated this project at its beginnings is broached by Lordon (2014: 43; original emphasis) when he describes employment relations under neoliberalism as governed by the 'particular master-desire of *financial* capital in the form of *liquidity*', whose ideal consists in transactions that are instantly reversible. This principle of liquidity overflows its initial realm of asset markets and spreads, with capital's master-desire of instant reversibility weighing down on labour relations, which in their ideal form from the view of capital should be 'fluid, reversible, and as easily adjustable as the components of a portfolio of financial assets' (47). While Lordon does not reference digital labour platforms in his writing, his description is incredibly apt for the conditions that the latter put in place. These observations warrant some reflections on the relations of the currently dominant medium for liquefaction of social relations—financialisation and one of its main instruments, the derivative—to conceptions of the fractured subject as *dividual*,

and from this to the ways in which dividuation always exceeds the subjective and crosses into pre-personal and machinic realms.

3.5.1 Derivatives

A derivative, according to the US Department of the Treasury, is 'a financial contract whose value is derived from the performance of underlying market factors, such as interest rates, currency exchange rates, and commodity, credit, and equity prices' (OCC nd: np). Derivatives have a long history in forward contracts that allow for the price of a particular commodity at a specific point in the future to be fixed in advance. As the somewhat abstract definition above suggests however, types and uses of derivatives have proliferated since the 1980s to an extent that makes any straightforward definition impossible. Today, they are, 'in terms of the value of turnover, the largest economic activity in the world' (Bryan and Rafferty 2006: 7).

The main *raison d'être* for derivatives is to manage risk, in the form of contracts between two parties where someone buys someone else's risk. This allows for specific aspects of a commodity, for example the volatility of its price in a particular currency, to be separated out and traded independently, which makes it possible to 'convert the value of assets in one form into assets in another form' (Bryan and Rafferty 2006: 38). Mediated through financial derivatives, all forms of capital anywhere in the world or at any point in the future, are instantly commensurable. According to Dick Bryan and Michael Rafferty (131–132), after the demise of the gold standard, derivatives have come to perform the function of a global commodity money, operating as 'a flexible series of many small "floating" anchors, […] predicated on the notion that there are no "fundamentals"—all asset values […] and prices are forever changing, and in unsystematic ways'. This continuously fluctuating web of mutually determining and counter-determining forces that collide across space and time in unpredictable entanglements conjures up an image reminiscent of the Spinozist interplay of affects—each derivative contract affects and is affected by others, and these derivative affects spill over into the underlying assets, and from there determine the flows of the capitalist master-desire of accumulation and its corollary, the extraction of surplus-value from labour.

Onwards from this, the effects of digital liquefaction and commensurability also spill over into the ways in which different labour-powers are caught up in a global network that commensurates their values, mediated through digital labour platforms. Algorithmi-

cally liquified labour is faced with a continuous extraction of data points that subject it to measurement, analytics and ongoing re-tuning of profitability parameters. This then plays out, as it does in commodity and financial markets mediated by derivatives, as a radicalisation of competitiveness, where the productivity and profitability of individual labours is continually monitored and compared. Effects of this have been discussed in chapter 1, in terms of a driving down of wages to the globally lowest common denominator, the function of customer ratings and other data for the purpose of disciplining workers, or the ways in which conditions, earnings or business models can be changed unilaterally through adjustments to computer code made remotely.

3.5.2 Dividuals

This splintering of the subject into a series of quantifiable features for the purpose of profit extraction is what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2016: 24) calls *predatory dividualism*, in which data collection and analysis is used to 'atomize, partition, qualify, and quantify the individual so as to make highly particular features of the individual subject or actor more important than the person as a whole'. Persons are translated into attributes stored in databases that can be combined in ever-changing ways in order to yield profit-generating analyses, predictions and risk assessments.

The notion of the dividual invoked by Appadurai first appeared in quite a different context in anthropological literature, in particular by Fortes (1973) and Marriott (1976). What these authors observed in non-Western social systems were social modes of being that are based on unstable identities, which are continuously being remade in exchange with and modulation through others. Dividuals 'are in effect partial, volatile, and particular sorts of agents, capable of joining other dividuals in their capacity as kinsmen [sic], traders, enemies, affines, ancestors, or descendants' (Appadurai 2016: 28–29), without any unitary individual subject acting as a ground that would embed these different positions in a unifying substrate. Dividuality is 'the functionality of being in the world that represents the collectivity's creation of a person's singularity' (LiPuma 2016: 43). This conception of the dividual served to historicise and de-naturalise the formerly universal image of modern individualist subjectivity. At around the same time that this discourse redeemed the notion of premodern dividuality, the seeds were laid in a very different social field for the eventual emergence of a significantly different kind of dividual.

Fortes' paper that first introduced the figure of the dividual subject was published two years before Black and Scholes' (1973) 'The pricing of options and financial liabilities', which set out the basic mathematical model that ushered in a new era of financial risk management and made the large-scale mass production of derivative contracts possible. This engendered the eventual re-emergence of the dividual, but in a form that was modelled on a distinctly capitalist sociality. The first to observe this was Deleuze ([1990] 1995): in his 'Postscript on control societies', he outlined changes from disciplinary modes of organising societies known from Foucault's writings to what Deleuze (180; original emphasis) called *societies of control*: 'Individuals become "*dividuals*" and masses become samples, data, markets, or "*banks*"'. In this societal form, money 'is based on floating exchange rates, modulations depending on a code setting sample percentages for various currencies'. Appadurai (2016: 25) picked up from where Deleuze left off, locating the derivative, in its function as the main instrument of financial risk management, at the heart of the capitalist process of dividuation. The once sovereign individual of European modernity has been sliced and segmented into data sets and variables that connect across the web of derivatives, to measure, monitor, adjust and extract value. This form of dividuation engenders an immutable power imbalance, illustrated by Appadurai (30–31; original emphasis) when he delineates the contrast between ritual and financialised dividuation, where in the former 'dividuals […] are the *permanent* elements […] who take the temporary risk of assembling themselves into wholes', while in the latter 'dividuals are *temporary* products of predatory dividuation […] who are put at risk by actors (brokers, traders, managers, analysts) who reserve the right to behave as individuals *in their own interest*'.

3.5.3 *Workers leaving the cloud factory*

Online documentation: http://www.superconductr.org/workers-leaving-the-cloud-factory
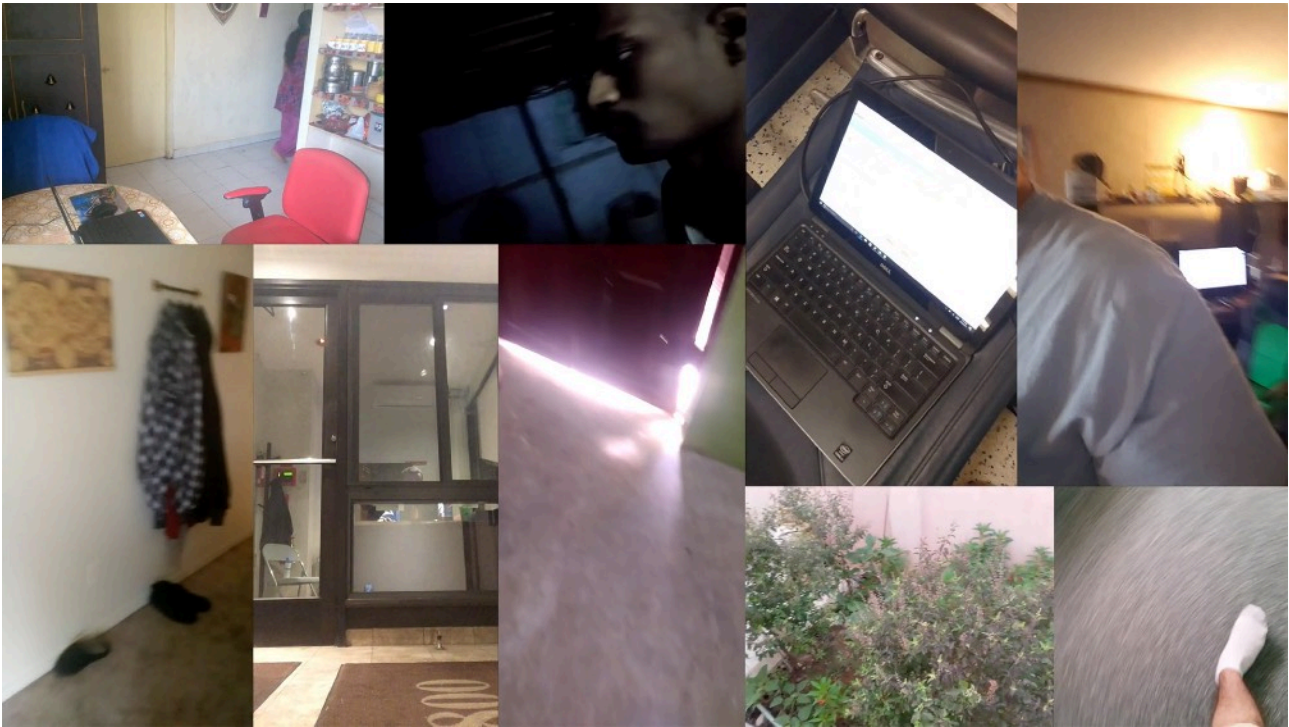
Figure 3.4 superconductr, *Workers leaving the cloud factory,* video still, duration variable, 2017–18

A view of the fragmentation, samples, data or 'banks' of Deleuzian parlance presents itself in *Workers leaving the cloud factory* (2017–18), for which workers on AMT and Microworkers have been paid $2.50 each to film themselves leaving their workplaces. In this video, the screen, divided into subsections each of which shows a clip submitted by an individual worker, is reminiscent of a display at some sort of control room or surveillance camera monitoring booth. This composite image gives rise to a visual representation not just of the workers themselves, but also of the apparatus of control and extraction that dividualises the temporally and spatially dispersed labours that are being called up, monitored down to the second and then discarded again the instant that their usefulness to capital has run its course.

The project continues a long line of works that begins with the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895) and includes Harun Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades* (2006) and Andrew Norman Wilson's *Workers Leaving the Googleplex* (2011). One of the questions that have motivated its development is how to represent a workforce that is dispersed and atomised, humans who are working at their data machines, whose labour can be mobilised with a few lines of code coming from

anywhere in the world. The videos that have been purchased show workers in a range of settings—living rooms, bed rooms, kitchens, an office, a shopping centre, a shop, etc.—attesting to the presence of living, breathing humans that form part of the machinic assemblage, which is precisely what is obscured through the functionality of the platform interface.

The 'crowd' of atomised workers is here reassembled only through on-screen collage, and their separation outside of this is in stark contrast to the bodily proximity of the protagonists in the Lumière brothers' film who leave the factory where they are employed as one workforce. The separation of labours in the case of *Workers leaving the cloud factory* is further accentuated through the way in which even with a number of videos playing simultaneously, the sound track is eerily empty. Chairs creak, fans spin, footsteps scrape the ground, doors open and close—these are the kinds of sounds that register when one is alone. What is also brought to the fore is how the cloud factory is an intensified version of the social factory discussed in chapter 1: it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, extending into workers' homes or other informal spaces, distributing tasks, extracting results, centralising profits.

In the cloud factory as it is depicted here, predatory dividualism operates on several levels. Aesthetically, it is hinted at through the visual grid and the mix of nondescript sounds, which might as well have been picked up by the microphones of a number of surveillance cameras. Beyond what is represented in the video however, there is the actual machinic assemblage of the platform which all these workers are connected to, while being separated from each other in space. Traversing the platform, each of the transactions conducted for this project has been monitored, logged, analysed and monetised, just like any other transaction would have been. In the video, the data extraction and processing machine is only alluded to through the formal arrangement, its precise workings remaining just as opaque to viewers as it is to workers on the platform.

3.5.4 Machinic enslavement

This brings the discussion to the ways in which in digital platform labour the production of subjectivities is entangled with various—social, economic, affective, technological etc.—machines. These intersections are analysed by Maurizio Lazzarato (2014: 8) taking recourse to Guattari and Deleuze's writings to assert that

the central project of capitalist politics consists in the articulation of economic, technological, and social flows with the production of subjectivity in such a way that political economy is identical with 'subjective economy'.

Putting the production of subjectivity at the heart of economic activity as well as at the centre of any conception of an effective emancipatory project, Lazzarato is particularly interested in the aspects of subjectivity that escape semantic representation. Thus, he divides the production of subjectivity into two elements: first, there is *social subjection*, which, still within the realm of language, 'produces and distributes places and roles within and for the social division of labor' (24), in turn producing individuated subjects such as the neoliberal entrepreneur of the self; the second aspect is *machinic enslavement*, which 'occurs via desubjectivation by mobilizing functional and operational, non-representational and asignifying, rather than linguistic and representational, semiotics' (25). Machinic enslavement is the realm of the dividual, where the person is considered 'a gear, a cog, a component part in the "business" and "financial system" assemblages, in the media assemblage, and the "welfare state" assemblage and its collective institutions'. The term *enslavement* was borrowed by Deleuze and Guattari from cybernetics, where it denotes

> the mode of control and regulation ('government') of a technical or social machine such as a factory, business, or communications system […], a mode of command, regulation, and government 'assisted' by technology and, as such, […] a feature specific to capitalism (25–26).

The concept of the machinic necessitates a re-evaluation of theories of the production of desire that have been handed down from Spinoza and discussed by Lordon, among others. While in Spinoza desire is something that emerges through intersubjective relations, Deleuze and Guattari ([1972] 1983: 9) speak of *desiring-machines* which operate as assemblages of connections in which subjective or intersubjective levels no longer have primacy over relations between objects, signs, other assemblages, etc.:

> There is no such thing as either man [sic] or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together. Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.

There is a danger for this kind of open-ended prose to be put to use for the development of positions that offer little more than an enthralment with the limitless possibilities of couplings between different species of machines and a somewhat reductive privileging of desire as the only ground from which any theory of exploitation as well as liberation from

the same must proceed. This in turn tends to give rise to highly speculative theories that under the banner of anti-essentialism lose sight of the material grounding through which any machinic assemblage ultimately articulates itself, which is one of the points that will be raised in chapter 4.

Subjective-machinic assemblages can however also be apprehended in ways that keep in view the concrete lived situations within which the former unfold, and this is one of the central themes around which the artworks discussed in this chapter coalesce in various ways. This still leaves room to examine the profound ambiguities in relation to the location of agency that the workings of these assemblages give rise to, which have made themselves felt particularly through the ways in which platforms' disciplinary apparatuses have responded to some of the interventions conducted for this project. An apt illustration of this lies with the machinic aspects that have come into play in *Work hard dream big* when, three days after posting, the offer was removed from the Fiverr website, with the following message:

Your Gig Is Removed

We appreciate you taking the time to create/update your Gig do nothing for 23 minutes and 2 seconds. Unfortunately we had to remove your Gig.
The reason is:

- It seems your Gig is not appropriate for the Fiverr marketplace. We suggest that you do some research to see what type of Gigs do well and are in demand by our buyers.

We kindly ask that you consider the above suggestions when creating a new Gig. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out at Fiverr Help Center. For more information, please review our Terms of Service.

Thanks,The Fiverr Team

Figure 3.5 superconductr, *Work hard dream big,* computer screenshot, 2017

It is clear that some humans-machines assemblage was involved in selecting this listing for removal, although its precise workings remain opaque: it might have been that an algorithm flagged up the listing, which was then sent to a human for verification, or that all new listings are viewed by a person working in content moderation at an unspecified location and who might themselves be employed through a digital labour platform, with any listings that are unacceptable to the company being removed from public view, accompanied by the sending of a pre-made message. As with Deleuze and Guattari, and Lazzarato's concept of the machinic, it becomes impossible to pinpoint an agency where this particular decision is made or the communication originates; instead, the decision to delete the listing emerges, as it were, from some ambience of 'decision-ness' operated by an opaque humans-machines assemblage.
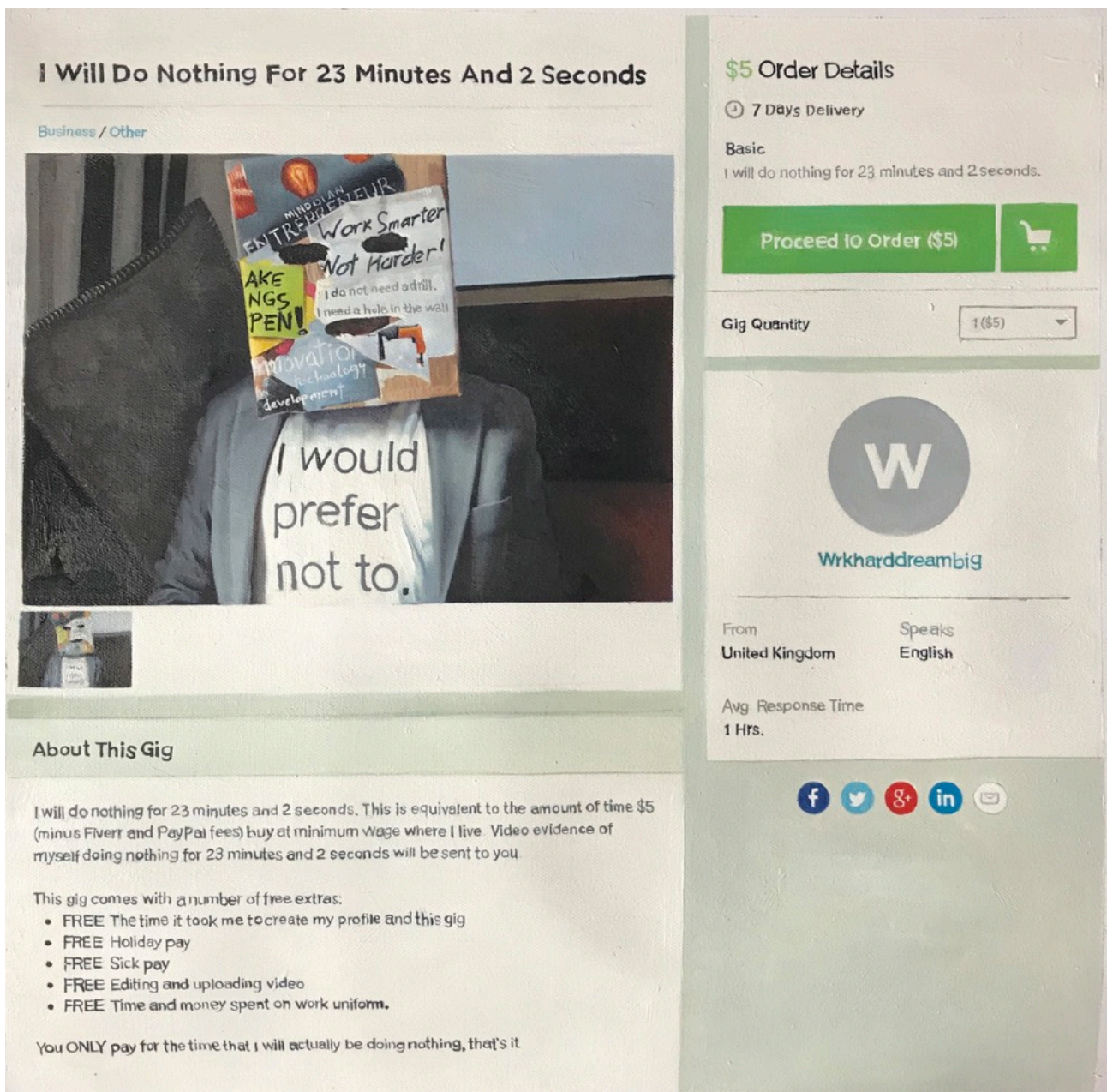
Figure 3.6 superconductr, *Work hard dream big,* oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm, 2017

In response to this censure by the platform, another machinic assemblage was mobilised to reactivate the work in a different modality apart from its original existence, by commissioning an oil painting to be made by Meisheng Oil Painting Manufacture Co. in Xiamen, China. With the simple operations of sending a few emails and two transfers of payments, the labour of an unknown person or persons in China was mobilised who employed their skills to translate the Fiverr listing from screen-based to tangible form, from data points to canvas. By whom or how the painting was realised is unknown; all that is discernible are the traces of the labour of a person that has been called upon as the final stage in a series of human-machinic operations that have been put to work in the development of this project.

3.5.5 *Doing and nothingness*

Online documentation: http://www.superconductr.org/doing-and-nothingness
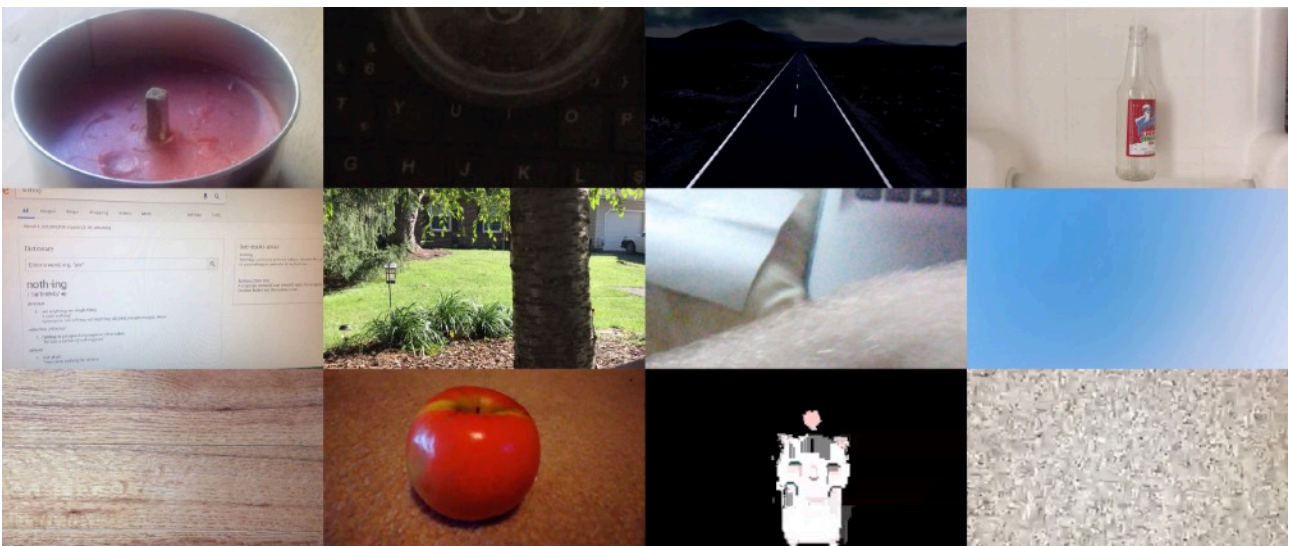
Figure 3.7 superconductr, *Doing and nothingness*, video stills, duration variable, 2017

Another occurrence of friction within Fiverr's machinic assemblage is the point of departure for *Doing and nothingness* (2019), which entails the documentation of recalcitrant and adversarial subjective positions that have inserted themselves into the platform's stream of offers. In a similar vein as with *Work hard dream big*, affective enchantment is here turned on its head (or rather, the right way up) and into oppositional disengagement.

The development of this project stems from the realisation that *Work hard dream big* is by far not the only offer on this platform that proposes to sell a buyer nothing for a payment of $5 (or at times a significantly higher amount). These kinds of postings keep appearing on the platform and ultimately vanish again, presumably after being flagged as

'inappropriate' by Fiverr's internal orderlies. Yet new offers of the same in different varia-tions spring up as older ones are being deleted; the opportunity to buy a custom-made slice of nothing on Fiverr is always present. These acts of micro-refusal linger on the plat-form as moments of protest against the company's official creed of sanguine self-ex-ploitation, at times also as cries for help by those who perceive themselves as unable to identify skills that they could possibly monetise, and also as a somewhat absurdist demonstration of Marx's ([1867] (1976): 197) observation that once the price-form is es-tablished on a social level, potentially anything can be turned into a commodity. From the view of Fiverr itself, these interventions most likely amount to little more than a little extra noise in the system. They are nonetheless interesting as artefacts with which the gap be-tween the official discourse of the platform and the actual experiences of those who con-sider making a living through the latter can be articulated, in often comic and at times earnest, even somewhat tragic ways.

The format chosen for *Doing and nothingness* sought to propose a way of docu-menting these minor resistances through activating them beyond their flat appearance on the screen as brief interruptions in the cascade of ever-new offers by eager service providers. Thus, beyond simply collecting screen grabs of the offers in question, various users who proposed to sell nothing in exchange for $5 have been contacted with the re-quest to create a short video that shows something that represents nothingness to them, while reading out the text that they have included with their posting, as Fiverr requires a minimum number of words as a description for each offering. $5 was to be paid for this through the Fiverr platform by purchasing the gig in question. Not all sellers answered; in general, those who appeared to have created their posting as something of a joke ap-peared to be happier to respond. Some declined to participate, stating that doing so would contradict the stated aims of their offer, which of course is a perfectly reasonable response. Others, on the other hand, agreed. In the videos that have been submitted, the readings are particularly interesting, in their translation into spoken word what initially was text casually input on screen. Thus, in between many instances of sardonic humour, often delivered somewhat theatrically, there also are recitals of random text characters or mind-less repetitions of the same word, as well as earnest thanks for the hoped for receipt of money for nothing that are being read out.

The title of the project pulls a pun on Jean-Paul Sartre's ([1943] 1992) *Being and nothingness*. The substitution of Sartre's *being* for Fiverr's *doing* hints at a sense of exis-tential dread that hounds the 'Doer' of Fiverr parlance and which will be returned to in

chapter 4: do or be faced with nothingness, which in this case is a nothingness of earn-
ings, of being able to secure the means of one's survival.

3.6 Superconductor

The various cycles that make up this part of the project, involving research, the creation of
artworks, reactions from platforms and theoretical reflection, have eventually coalesced
into a new concept that has already been briefly introduced earlier: the superconductor.
This functions as something of a focal lens through which various conceptual currents are
intertwined and diffracted. In physics, superconductivity (often called 'high-temperature
superconductivity') refers to the phenomenon of certain materials exhibiting zero electrical
resistance when cooled below a certain temperature. The borrowing of the term in the
present context of course has little to do with electronic phenomena as such, but with
reasons outlined in the following.

The adoption of this term has been inspired by Foucault's play on the double
meaning of the term 'conduct', in terms of conducting others and conducting oneself.
Putting into play what he calls 'the equivocal nature of the term "conduct"', Foucault
(1982: 789) states: 'to "conduct" is at the same time to "lead" others […] and a way of
behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities'. Here, conduct is interpreted on
the one hand as a way of influencing or determining the actions of others, and on the oth-
er, as a way of acting, which is in itself always subject to influences and determinations
from outside the acting subject. These two meanings of the term 'conduct' are then, as it
were, wrapped up in Foucault's theory of governmentality. According to Thomas Lemke
(2002: 50–51), the notion of government is used by Foucault in the older meaning of the
term, which

> in addition to management by the state or the administration, […] also signified
> problems of self-control, guidance for the family and for children, management of
> the household, directing the soul, and so forth. For this reason, Foucault defines
> government as conduct, or, more precisely, as 'the conduct of conduct' and thus
> as a term that ranges from 'governing the self' to 'governing others'.

Government in the Foucauldian sense, this 'conduct of conduct', as a term encapsulates
what Foucault delineates in his conception of power as it relates to subjectivity. It pro-
vides, in Lemke's (50) words, the 'missing link' between Foucault's interest in sovereignty
on one hand and the subject on the other.

Returning to the issue of the superconductor, there also is another definition to the term 'conduct', which relates to a state of being a medium for some kind of flow, a channel through which certain quantities can pass. This particular mode of conducting and its relevance is a question that Foucault himself did not appear to address. But this kind of conduct perhaps is what should be at the centre of an analysis of power in the context of the entrepreneurial self entangled in the distribution of work through digital platforms, given that we are dealing here with configurations of power that are enacted in flows and on flows, that turn a subject into a source, a target, a conductor of flows which at the same time always already are flows of extraction, of capture, that always end up being routed through some opaque structure where they are harvested, reconfigured and rechannelled. This then brings to the fore a subject of conduction and in conduction, which in its ideal state should provide as little resistance as possible to the flows directed to and through it: a superconductor.

The superconductor thus is a medium for liquidity, the abstract currency of derivatives, dividuals, affects and machinic assemblages. It is caught up in flows, connected to and disconnected from flows in rapid succession, broken apart into channels and streams, recombined and aggregated into bundles of data. The flow represents something of the ideal state of entrepreneurial being in neoliberalism: Be in the flow. *Be* the flow. The 'super' prefix in superconductor indicates zero resistance in its original definition from physics, but at the same time it could also be seen to refer to an excess, a remainder, something that might resist subjugation or quantification, or simply something that lies beyond linguistic representation in a similar vein to the machinic realm in Deleuze and Guattari, and Lazzarato. This then could raise the question of whether there is something there that could potentially be recuperated for a liberatory project, a conductor that is tuned into collective flows, connected to and involved in building cooperative, egalitarian assemblages.

When it comes to the interventions discussed in this chapter, aspects of the superconductor have always been present in various forms, although the concept itself only emerged after an initial series of artistic interventions had been conducted. The process of creation of somewhat disparate works that connect an expansive range of discourses surrounding work, labour organisation, neoliberal economics, technological development, subjectivity and artistic practice has necessitated the development of a framework that could collect these different strands, while being sufficiently open-ended to avoid the dangers of enclosure of thought and practice in too rigid a framework. The notion of the

superconductor is both specific in relating to a delineated set of concerns, and indefinite enough to allow a number of theoretical currents and practical approaches to pass through it and recombine in new ways.

3.6.1 superconductr consulting, innovation, research

Main website: http://www.superconductr.org

The concept of the superconductor also provides a container within which to collect and organise the works and thoughts generated in this research project on a dedicated website. The content on the superconductr website performs a deliberately ambiguous positioning of these outputs. The website itself is presented as if it contains the publicity materials of some organisation: content is split into sections titled *superconductr consulting*, *superconductr innovation* and *superconductr research*. The nature of the organisation itself is left ambiguous; this could be a corporation, a think tank, or perhaps a university department engaged in profit-generating activities. In any case, the naming of these departments broadly implies some sort of organisation involved in neoliberal knowledge production. In effect, the departmental split is used to organise different strands of the research. *superconductr consulting* is the department responsible for theoretical reflections; *superconductr innovation* deals with work that has to do with building and supporting solidarity among workers; *superconductr research*, the largest category thus far, contains artistic research and interventions.

Like the overall presentation of the website, text descriptions on individual pages enact a performance of productive ambiguity. At times there is over-identification with neoliberal and entrepreneurial tropes such as innovation or success through hard work, at others the voice mimics that of a self-help guide aimed at aiding subjective self-optimisation for dealing with the anxieties and ennui inflicted by existence in a competitive marketplace. Often there are matter-of-fact descriptions of processes that have been employed to create work, which at the same time detail the ways in which digital labour platforms have been tested regarding their responses to requests for work that falls outside of their normative uses. Financial transactions and communications involved in the process of creating the interventions documented on the website are accounted for in some detail. Finally, the texts also make frequent reference to sociological theories, art historical referents and philosophical concepts, thus performing a role more closely aligned with what is expected from texts that accompany and describe art works. All

these registers are shifted between imperceptibly; the texts are meant to flow like currents through a superconductor: fragmented, open to multiple directions, resisting any totalising view. superconductr itself also exists as an unspecified quantity. Whenever superconductr is named, the proper name *superconductr* is used; pronouns are never brought into play. This is meant to position superconductr as an entity that escapes any fixed classification or quantification, but that instead exists as a reality or a potentiality that suffuses an entire social realm down to subjective levels, just as the social factory in neoliberal capitalism reaches down into subjective-machinic substrates.

3.7 Findings

The projects discussed in this chapter, in combination with *Capitalism doesn't love me* which will be discussed in the following, make up the initial strand of practice conducted for this project. Situated at the intersection of platform capitalism, subjectivity and the machinic, these interventions have sought to articulate critical positions through using digital labour platforms as a medium for the creation of artworks, and to devise methods in which platforms' own operations can be put to work in oppositional ways, as the first step of methodological development in this project. In relation to the original set of research questions, the works discussed as well as the analysis in this chapter have primarily engaged with proposals to examine existing discourses on liquid labour, to develop strategies of representation that can articulate the conditions of dispersed and atomised workers and to reinvigorate critical strategies for opposing neoliberal ideology, as well as with ethical issues related to working within platform structures.

In a formal sense, the methodology employed here shares some commonalities with that of an artist experimenting with the possibilities that a particular medium offers. What is different in the present case is that the medium itself is a socio-technical apparatus, the digital labour platform, and this draws attention to politics, both the politics embodied by platforms, and the politics developed through practice. This brings to the fore the ethical issues raised by this kind of work, which exceed considerations of research ethics such as those regarding gathering participant consent, by also bringing into play the question of reproducing exploitative labour relations through art. This is an issue that has generated much debate in relation to the work of Santiago Sierra, for example, as mentioned in chapter 1. To a limited extent, the work created in this part of the practice has taken a stance similar to Sierra's, in terms of knowingly inhabiting a position of com-

plicity with the systems that the work critiques, and making the tension that this gives rise to a part of the work. However, this is not all there is to be said here. *Contra* Sierra and the like, one commitment in the creation of these works has been to not simply expose workers as passive victims of exploitation, but instead to devise methods that assign at least some agency to the workers whose contributions make up the main artefacts of particular projects, while also taking a political position that supports the interests of workers vis-à-vis platform capital. Incorporating workers' inputs has also been one of the ways in which these practices have sought to build on and develop earlier critical strategies such as those of tactical media, whose interventions are often premised on the rerouting of existing cultural artefacts with the help of subversive kinds of humour and irony.

Beyond this, the processes that have been mobilised here have revealed moments of friction and blockage in the encounters between artist practice and the functionalities and disciplinary systems of different platforms. These moments have often been the most instructive in terms of foregrounding the ways in which in digital platform labour subjectivities are interpellated, mobilised, dividualised, and the ensuing conducts and data streams are made compliant to the demands of capital, while also exposing sites of potential insubordination. In addition, responses from platforms have been taken up as prompts to develop various projects further and devise ways of repurposing materials gathered in the process for new interventions, giving rise to an iterative process in which series of interventions probe deeper into different aspects of platforms' operations. From these encounters with platforms' disciplinary apparatuses emerge forms of empirical knowledge about the former's internal workings, which in the case of this project is not presented in textual form but refracted through various methods of artistic representation.

The concept of the superconductor has been devised to account for how capitalist power is articulated through the algorithmic liquefaction of labour relations in digital platform labour. In this way, it provides a framework within which the issues discussed thus far can be gathered, while also being open-ended towards further practices as well as new forms of solidarity and resistance that are needed for a challenge to the power relations put in place by labour platforms, and with which the practice discussed in chapter 5 engages more directly.

The practice discussed this far foregrounds immaterial concerns such as subjectivity and ideological constructs, a perspective that to some extent mirrors tech capitalism's own preoccupation with algorithms, data and clouds which serves to obscure the material

realities that any kind of production takes place within, not least the fact that labour is first and foremost an activity of the human body. The next methodological step has thus been to develop practices that make sensible the presence of the labouring body that is connected to the platform assemblage, exploration of which is what the following chapter is concerned with.

4 Precarisation, perspiration, liquids and affects: the persistence of the body

This chapter re-grounds the apparent dematerialisation of the digital in the ineliminable presence of the working body with the help of artworks that focus on bodily sensation as well as excretions, and that revisit the notion of affect which has already made its appearance in chapter 3, as the latter operates transversally across the fields of subjectivity and embodiment. The issues raised by these projects are interrogated with the help of new materialist theory, which emphasises the agency of matter and the open-ended complexity of bodies, and calls attention to the ways in which discursive formations always arise from within the capabilities and constraints of bodies and material processes.

4.1 Bits and atoms: embodied digital platform labour

What can be found out by grounding the relations of production put in place in digital platform labour in the materiality of the labouring body? The latter tends to be obscured through the mediations put in place by digital labour platforms. Workers on AMT or Microworkers can be called up via automated computer code or a standardised online interface. Freelancers on platforms such as Fiverr, Upwork and PeoplePerHour never meet their customers in person but only communicate digitally via the platform interface. Food deliveries, taxi journeys or domestic help can be ordered with a few mouse clicks or taps on a mobile phone via platforms such as Uber, Lyft, Deliveroo or TaskRabbit. In the latter cases, the worker as embodied human being eventually makes their appearance as has been the case in *The convenient & fast way*, still all functions of hiring, payment and feedback are channeled through the platform and thus the abstraction introduced by digital mediation remains overlaid across any interpersonal interaction that might take place.

The labour that is bought and sold in each of these instances still is the activity of embodied humans, and the projects discussed in this section share a concern with questions of how the corporeality of these labours can be made sensible. The theme that ties these projects together is a product of human bodies that carries a wide range of possible connotations that range from heat, nervousness, bodily exertion and exploitative work, to embarrassment, disgust or erotic arousal: sweat.

4.1.1 Sweat to be a winner

> Work, work it
> Work, work to be a winner
> Sweat, work it
> Sweat, sweat to be a winner
>
> I wanna smell you
> Yeah, I wanna smell you
> I wanna smell you, even from far away
> I wanna smell you
> I wanna feel you
> So I can know if you are a winner, baby
>
> Marie Davidson – 'Work It' (2018)

The association of the term *sweat* with work in general, its summoning of a sense of corporeal immediacy, bodily exertion and toil, serves as a reminder of the inescapability of embodied existence as the basis for any kind of work. This use goes back far in history and will be known to anyone familiar with the Genesis and its misogynistic mythology of the origin of human labour. In the 19th century, the term *sweating* acquired significance as a designation of exploitative, underpaid work, often under unsafe and unhealthy conditions, mainly in garment production. Charles Kingsley's ([1850] 2016: np; original emphasis) pamphlet 'Cheap clothes and nasty' is an early example of the use of this term:

> At the honourable shops, the master deals directly with his workmen [sic]; while at the dishonourable ones, the greater part of the work, if not the whole, is let out to contractors, or middle men—'*sweaters*', as their victims significantly call them— who, in their turn, let it out again; […] so that out of the price paid for labour on each article, not only the workmen, but the sweater, and perhaps the sweater's sweater, and a third, and a fourth, and a fifth, have to draw their profit.

Beyond these associations of sweat with work, particularly of a backbreaking and/ or exploitative kind, sweat in its immediate materiality also carries intersubjective qualities and effects, which can be both strongly influenced by social coding as well as operative on more immediate, affective levels. Sweat is an aspect of the obscene functioning of the body—usually suppressed, hidden, and a source of shame if its proliferation across the body bursts out into perceptible overabundance that registers in and potentially overwhelms the senses: visible sweat stains on clothes or the smell of unwashed armpits are two cases in point. At the same time, sweat also functions as a means of non-verbal communication, in which through olfactory signals emotions such as fear or arousal are communicated, intersubjective bonds are established and nurtured, and sensations of at-

traction or repulsion are mobilised. Many of these responses originate at a preconscious, affective level that can trigger intense conscious reactions once the threshold of perceptual awareness has been broached. Sweating is involuntary and is necessary for regulating body temperature; thus sweating has a double function of aiding both temperature regulation and nonverbal communication. Sweating is something that is experienced, in line with other elementary qualities of the human body, almost universally, with the exception of bodies suffering from hypohidrosis, a condition where some or all of the body's sweat glands stop functioning. Taking into consideration the social significations and intersubjective communications outlined here, as well as how fundamental a part of everyday human lived experience sweating is, the phenomenon of sweat appears to remain remarkably undertheorised. The writings in this chapter are not intended to develop an outline for a theoretical framework to fill this gap, but instead dive headlong into the subject matter, as it were, by sweating the artworks under discussion in order to catch a whiff of what they might reveal.

4.1.2 Locating the feeling in your body: *Sweat, data and liquid assets*[3]

Online documentation: http://www.superconductr.org/sweat-data-and-liquid-assets

Sweat, data and liquid assets (2019) has been created through the platform Microworkers, on which a number of workers have been paid US$2.50 each to write a short open-ended text about their embodied experience of microtasking and submit a photograph. Microworkers operates in a similar way to AMT; typical jobs offered on the site include tasks that ask workers to visit websites and conduct web searches, create Gmail accounts, download and test mobile phone apps, write blog posts or comment on YouTube videos, follow accounts on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, and answer surveys, with payments ranging from around 5 cents to US$2.50 per task. All in all, this list suggests that a significant proportion of the work offered on the platform has to do with the strategic manipulation of search results and potentially also spam, but investigation as to what extent this might be the case lies outside the scope of this thesis.

In the prompts for their short written statements for *Sweat, data and liquid assets*, workers were asked to reflect on their experiences of conducting microwork on their

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[3] This project has also been published in *Hyphen Journal*: http://hy-phen.space/journal/issue-1/superconductr-sweat-data-and-liquid-assets

computers or phones, paying attention to which parts of their bodies were currently active, what sensations they were noticing, emotions that they were feeling and where these were located in the body. In addition to the submitted texts, workers were also asked to submit a photograph of a part of their body that they discussed in their writing.

The project seeks to make sensible the corporeal aspect of microwork in a way that exceeds ethnographic documentation. It takes as its focal point the body as an always-present ground for labour of any kind: a body whose useful functions are sold for a period of time, in order to receive a wage that is needed to sustain the continued functioning of this body through purchasing its means of subsistence. In online microwork, only a limited set of bodily capabilities are activated specifically for the performance of labour; at the same time, other corporeal functions keep on operating, in the background, as it were, and attention is drawn back to these latent processes through the questions posed to workers. The focus on verbal descriptions of bodily sensations experienced in the present moment is also reminiscent of certain methods of psychotherapy and the practice of mindfulness, a psychological technique derived from Buddhist tradition that is regularly promoted in business literature as an aid to self-optimisation for maximum work performance. Still, the submissions that have been assembled contain little in terms of articulations of a meditative self-awareness of the body in its totality. The texts are short and fragmentary, and the repetitive iterations of prosaic concerns and observations that they contain evoke a sense of monotony, stress and ennui in the kind of work that anthropologist Mary L. Gray (2016: np) has called the 'digital assembly line'.

The title *Sweat, data and liquid* assets brings into play a number of different referents: the coupling *sweat* and *data* is reminiscent of the phrase *bits and atoms*, while eschewing the latter's minimalist abstraction in favour of a more visceral, suggestive set of terms. According to *Hyperallergic*, 'bits and atoms' is a common trope among tech startups (Bostic 2016); in any case, it was used as a main theme when Uber redesigned their company logo in 2016. As Uber's former CEO Trevor Kalanick (2016: np) wrote at the time: 'we exist in the place where bits and atoms come together. That is Uber. We are not just technology but technology that moves cities and their citizens'. The 'bits and atoms' here are signifiers of how Uber's technology operates transversally across the realm of data processing on the one hand, and urban space and everyday life on the other, while the workers engaged in the process have been airbrushed from the picture. The pairing 'sweat' and 'data', in contrast, homes in on the bodily presence of the worker through reference to excretions of their body. *Liquid assets* is a term borrowed from finance where

it is used to describe any kind of asset that can easily be turned into money, the latter being the most liquid of all assets. This returns the discussion to the term 'liquid labour' and the fungibility that digital platforms introduce into the buying and selling of labour-power. Moreover, both sweat and data are liquid assets in different ways: sweat is a liquid excess of the working body, a material trace of bodily exertion; data are highly malleable and mobile quantities that in their near-instant transmissibility across distances parallel the liquidity of financial transactions, and indeed data processing is an integral part of the machinic infrastructure that facilitates the global liquidity of monetary assets.

Submissions included in the project are from Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, India, Italy, the Philippines, Romania, Serbia, Tanzania, Turkey and Vietnam. Interestingly, while the project's title with its reference to sweat was not communicated to the workers contributing to this project, one respondent nevertheless volunteered a rather visceral account of their body's reaction to stress through excessive sweating. Some of the responses that have been collected are included below.

32184014

microtask is like a normal job to me, and when working on my computer i get occupied with all concentration going to my hands , fingers , brain working non-stop and paying attention to my work. I make good use of my sight in every task i part take considering my fingers are the final work deliverer. most of it I get in to work mood with my hands, eyes(sight) and brains are busy focusing on delivering. The feeling of sweating from the head, to hands and to my finger really captures the stress i have in mind/brain. i think carefully to make work easier and fast as possible. Considering the tension of beating time when you are at the edge of not delivering in time, such situation get me worked up to an extent of now sweating all parts of the body resulting in hands shaking, sweating and not being able to complete a task sometimes. Work mood , stress and fatigue are more on my mind, hands and my eyes . This is due to all my micro tasks are typing based and click/referral links, copying and pasting downloading and uploading, so not much is involved in movement at this point of working stage. I therefore conclude that i get work mood in every task i do.

Figure 4.1 superconductr, *Sweat, data and liquid assets, 32184014*, inkjet print, dimensions variable, 2019

31895800

In completing my works with microtask, I most of the time use my hands to type and also my eyes to read the texts on my phone or computer. My eyes and my hands are the most used body part and i couldn't feel any other part of my body because im concentrated with the work and the things in my brain, organizing what should i do. In doing my tasks I must be active and my thoughts must be positive especially for the tasks that I need to comment on some of the videos on YouTube, i must be open and never let any negative thoughts in my brain. If i feel that the video has a connection with me I say straight what I want to say and I feel that it's from my heart. But, there are others in which i just need to comment that i can't relate to so I just use my head to construct a positive comment and at times i am forced to lie but i just think that it's a part of the job, so i carry on. To wrap up things, I mostly use my sense of touch and sense of sight in doing my task. I must feel optimist and active while doing it. And i use my brain and heart while doing it.

Figure 4.2 superconductr, *Sweat, data and liquid assets, 31895800*, inkjet print, dimensions variable, 2019

my eyes: my are always open im blink for minute my eyes are alwasys search for easy tasks. hands: im lazy to type a words so i just open notepad put some important words and names but needed for some tasks i will type it. fingers: my two or three fingers only working alot of time. my legs: i cant use table for use laptop im sleeping position to take a tasks. my heart: sometimes my heartbeat is increased because lowest time to complete jobs the like time o.40 seconds and lowest number of tasks when i click the task its shows ""all position full" its little im depressed. nose: no works for nose. moods: i just feel very very happy when i get my first payment for 25 dollars. microtasks sometimes give a good feel after complete the tasks and i feel really really worst depressed for your job is declined or rejected its feel me stressfull so i will selected tasks to do it. thats all thank you my personal experience in microtasks

Figure 4.3 superconductr, *Sweat, data and liquid assets, 32198071*, inkjet print, dimensions variable, 2019

31895851

I am an unemployed person who use micro tasks in internet as a source of income. Whenever I start doing a job I usually sit in room take my mobile and start doing jobs. Mostly the main parts of my body that are active during doing these tasks are my eyes, fingers, leg and obviously the brain. If there is time bound job which, for example a 120sec job I will be tensed and my eyes will be mostly open without usual blinking. Also I used to bite my lower lip due to the stress involved. I have observed that my sense of sight will be very active these times and I can proofread each task very effectively than normal times during doing micro jobs. There is a increased pulse rate in my heart during this time because I am stressed. My legs will also be restless in these times. My mood during this time will be usually complexed consisting of various thoughts of myself getting the task accomplished and also the money I am going to get which can sometimes affect the accuracy of my completion of the job. After completing the job, I will usually have a mood of an athlete who complete his race (usually happiness). The photo I am going to include is the way I bite my lower lip during stressful less time micro jobs

2018-11-24 20:03

Figure 4.4 superconductr, *Sweat, data and liquid assets, 32198071*, inkjet print, dimensions variable, 2019

4.1.3 *Fromage faux frais (of production)*

Online documentation: http://www.superconductr.org/fromage-faux-frais-of-production

Figure 4.5 superconductr, *Fromage faux frais (of production)*, cheese made from sweat of food delivery cyclists, glass jar, dimensions variable, 2019

Figure 4.6 superconductr, *Fromage faux frais (of production)*, cheese made from sweat of food delivery cyclists, glass jar, dimensions variable, 2019

Fromage faux frais (of production) (2019) engages with the theme of sweat in a much more immediate and corporeal way. The project involves the collection of sweat samples from cyclists working for food delivery platforms which are then processed into a set of craft cheeses that are exhibited. Sweat here intervenes not only at the level of signification, but forms the material basis for a transformation of milk and bacteria cultures that eventually gives rise to the final product.

When working as a cycle courier, the sweat exuded by the body is an ever-present material trace of the physical exertion that this type of labour involves. The interface that customers use when ordering food, as well as the packaging that the food arrives in, evoke a sprightly clean image, but this cannot erase the fact that the workers whose labour transports the food packages from one place to another exist in messy and, in the words of feminist theorist Margrit Shildrick (1997), 'leaky' bodies, while the strain involved in the work serves to further accentuate these very qualities of the body. Collecting and processing sweat highlights these bodily functions that otherwise are obscured and obscene, repurposing what initially was only an excess produced by the working body without any further use beyond temperature regulation, to create a new material substance that contains germs (in the most literal sense) of the old.

The different significations of cheese make it a very suitable medium for this process of transmogrification. Even in their purely milk-based forms, many types of cheese emit odours that are reminiscent of those of the human body; thus, to some extent, the idea of sweat is already contained in the quality of cheesiness. On the other hand, cheese also is food, this of course being its main social function. In *Fromage faux frais*, there is a circuit set up that extrapolates material from the bodies of workers who are engaged in the labour of delivering food to others with the help of bodily exertion, in which the final result of the process ends up in the shape of food again.

In classical and Marxist political economy, *faux frais de production* is a term for operating expenses, for the costs of doing business that do not contribute directly to commodity production (Marx [1867] 1976: 446–447). The bodily excess of sweat produced during food delivery does not contribute to the service performed as such, yet it also is an unavoidable expenditure of performing precisely this service, thus it could be understood as a corporeal equivalent to the *faux frais de production*. In its material immediacy, this sweat could also be construed as an antithesis to the service performed, as could easily be seen in the hypothetical case of the sweat of a cyclist contaminating the

food that is to be delivered. In this case, the sweat, which is always already present in the act of performing this kind of labour, would transgress its boundaries determined both by cultural and hygienic norms, and thus spoil the entire purpose that this labour had been performed for in the first instance. In *Fromage faux frais*, however, this obscene and disgusting bodily excess of the labouring body is allowed precisely to transgress these boundaries, in order to be transformed into its own source of nourishment, although it needs to be added that cheese made from sweat is not edible, and thus this metamorphosis from waste into nourishment operates here on a metaphorical level. It is however possible to smell the cheese whose scent is overpowered by an unmistakably sweaty note, and this does offer a very visceral encounter with the corporeality of the labouring body.

At the same time, the body is here also virtualised and made absent, as it is in *Sweat, data and liquid assets*, albeit in a different way. In *Fromage faux frais*, the working body is reduced to one of its qualities, the fact that it sweats. Yet despite being reduced and virtualised, the body's corporeality reappears in a newly materialised form, as a kind of essence as it were, one shot through with impurities, sensory experience of which recalls its fleshy and leaky immediacy, in ways that arouse discomfort and disgust.

4.2 New materialisms

The reassertion of bodily presence including its leaky, odorous and bacterial qualities recalls the re-emergence of material concerns at the centre of theoretical debates that has appeared in the context of a sense of inadequacy and exhaustion of certain aspects of postmodern and poststructuralist thought: new urgent problematics require new theoretical tools for analysis and interpretation of the contemporary world. The 'cultural turn' had initially emerged as a necessary corrective to modernist ontologies and epistemologies, by problematising 'any straightforward overture toward matter or material experience as naively representational or naturalistic' (Coole and Frost 2010: 3). But in the contemporary context, these debates have, by and large, exhausted themselves and a reassessment of the position of materiality in relation to discursivity is necessary. Here, Bryant, Srnicek and Harman (2011: 2) find fault with continental philosophy's tendency to view 'discourse, text, culture, consciousness, power, or ideas as what constitutes reality', which manifests itself in 'an aversion to science, a focus on language, culture, and subjectivity to the detriment of material factors [and a] lack of genuine and effective political action' (4). This anti-realist position is seen as inadequate for dealing with 'the looming ecological catastrophe, and the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world (including our own bodies)'. This is the set of problematics that new materialist theory sought to address.

The attention to materiality that animates the projects discussed above can be connected to three interrelated yet distinct themes in the debates that have sought to rediscover a material grounding of thought identified by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010: 6–7): firstly, a post-human ontological reorientation that 'conceives of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency'; secondly, debates on 'a raft of biopolitical and bioethical issues concerning the status of life and of the human'; and finally, 'a critical and nondogmatic reengagement with political economy'.

The first point, regarding the agency of matter, encompasses a terrain that incorporates discussions of recent discoveries in physics and biology that give rise to conceptions of radical contingency, entanglement and self-organising matter that 'feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers' (Barad 2012: 59). In the latter part of this chapter, questions of how matter activates and is activated also find resonance in a revisit of Spinozist theories of affect, this time with a view to affect as an inter- and infrasubjective force between bodies, a form of communication that connects subjects on a pre-

conscious level. What will be proposed as an extension of this, is a speculative theory of an *intra*subjective notion of affect in relation to labour.

Regarding the second point that involves an encounter with questions of biopolitics and bioethics, Coole and Frost (2010: 19), alongside discussions of political and ethical implications of biotechnologies, state the following:

> For new materialists, no adequate political theory can ignore the importance of bodies in situating empirical actors within a material environment of nature, other bodies, and the socioeconomic structures that dictate where and how they find sustenance, satisfy their desires, or obtain the resources necessary for participating in political life. This is in fact something that feminists and class theorists have often insisted upon.

This notion of bodies as on the one hand immersed in larger systems and webs of relations, and on the other hand as sites of a limit where needs and desires arise that cannot be simply wished away through textual analysis, also is a theme that is discussed in new-materialist writings from the field of critical political economy. There is some overlap here, as political economy is listed as a separate third strand of debate by Coole and Frost. Here, the turn to materialism relates to a re-privileging of a concern with situated, embodied life over an enchantment with deterritorialised, immaterial flows.

The encounter between sweat and bacterial cultures in *Fromage faux frais* cuts across these categories, by instigating a reassertion of embodiment as an empirical, sensory presence that is animated and sustained through an agency of matter that has been extracted from a human body and continues its existence outside of it. Sweat is integrated into a process of transformation of living matter, and this matter's metamorphoses keep alive its olfactory qualities that would otherwise dissipate quickly. The fermentation process that lies at the heart of this can thus be seen to also function as a process of documentation: the sweat that was expended by a labouring body there and then is preserved in its sensory presence, and what can be retrieved through this at a later time are the affective registers that are activated by the latter. In this sense, the project operates at an intersection at which the political economies and ecologies of the working body meet a materialist dividualism in which the aspect of a person that is separated out is neither their social role as in pre-modern societies, nor their extractive data functions for capital, but instead a bacterial trace that registers both the body's operating expenses and its leaky, fleshy, affective modes of intersubjectivity.

4.2.1 The corporeal turn in critical political economy

In *Sweat, data and liquid assets*, the political economy of the body is given a different expression, one that highlights the former's capacities, capabilities, discomforts, tics, stresses, annoyances, limitations, desires and needs. The kinds of interests that are attended to here overlap with some of those pursued by theorists associated with a corporeal turn in critical political economy. These writers often begin by expanding the set of criticisms aimed at postmodern thought discussed above: Joseph Fracchia (2005: 57–58; original emphasis) is critical of tendencies to 'dissolve the materiality of the body into a semiotically, symbolically, discursively or culturally constituted mental construct', always treating the body 'as constituted *by* meaning, but not as being in any way constitutive *of* meaning'. John G. Fox (2015: 6) and Ian Bruff (2013: 73–74) take Butler, Foucault and Agamben to task for rendering the body passive, an object on which power is enacted, or one that is 'so plastic as to effectively erase it' (Fox 2015: 6).

Despite these criticisms, the writers under discussion acknowledge that the turn towards social and discursive articulations of embodiment reflected a very real need to 'critique the notion that there is an inherent, "pre-social", human being, with all of the attendant biological determinisms' (Bruff 2013: 69). Indeed, the theories of writers such as Butler, Foucault or Agamben contain important warnings about the potential for legitimising violence meted out on bodies in the name of totalising, essentialising ontologies of human nature. How then can a presence of the human body as irreducible ground for social existence be reintroduced into thought without re-legitimising an oppressive ideological apparatus that serves to repress any articulation of difference?

Bruff's (2013: 79) account focuses on irreducible bodily needs for survival—'the need for food, water, shelter, etc.'—and how these needs form 'the basis for the profoundly unequal social relations which exist in capitalist societies', since they lay at the foundation of the need for workers to sell their bodies on the labour market. Reccia Orzeck's (2007: 500; original emphasis) account starts from Marx's assertion of labour as a necessary condition of human life. Through the particular ways that are developed to satisfy human needs, the body is produced: '*every* mode of production—that is, every *social* formation aimed at reproducing itself—produces bodies particular to it'. The material traces that labour leaves on the body are undeniable:

workers lose limbs, digits, fingernails, eyes; they develop repetitive strain injuries, respiratory diseases, skin diseases, diseases from exposure to asbestos, pesticides, and other hazardous substances (503).

Fracchia's (2005: 39) ambition is to redeem the notion of a 'human nature' against all the dangers of totalising essentialism that easily attach themselves to a term such as this. Invoking an aphorism by Marx (quoted in Fracchia 2005: 43), stating that 'people make their own history, but not always as they please', he builds his account on the German term *Anlagen*, or 'predisposition', which he divides into 'the corporeal capabilities that enable people to make their own history, and the corporeal constraints that prevent them from doing so as they please' (46). This allows Fracchia to propose a reading of the limits and the capabilities of the human body as productive of cultural formations, as the former provide 'the material which humans living in different socio-cultural contexts transform into a corporeally consistent variety of metaphors, symbolic forms and other semiotic artefacts' (52). Thus, Fracchia's analysis reveals not only how human agency is constrained or enabled in its potentials through the capabilities of the human body, but also how these capabilities in themselves are productive of ways of understanding and interpreting the world.

What can be observed in *Sweat, data and liquid assets* in relation to these propositions is how particular capabilities of the human body are being activated and put to use in online microwork: eyes, fingers and brains, for example, are mentioned in many of the project's testimonials. Here, it is particular parts of the body and their useful functions that can be understood as being dividualised, as being separated out and put to work, temporarily becoming part of the machinic assemblage of the platform. For the platform itself, these functions are the only ones whose operation is registered, and only in mediated form through the results submitted for completed tasks. Still, it is fully embodied humans whose labour is being mobilised, and their other bodily functions continue their operations in the background, as it were: sweat, listening, distracted thoughts, nervousness, discomfort, boredom and tense muscles all are corporeal states that are mentioned in the testimonials submitted for the project. These accounts give some indication of the kinds of bodies that are being produced by the humans-machines assemblage of the microwork platform, and research into this area is something that could be extended further by, for example, collecting records of bodily states over longer time periods, or exploring what kinds of cultural formations these bodies give rise to.

4.3 Affects and anxieties

In addition to the recentering of attention on the materiality of the labouring body, the notion of affect is revisited here as the site where embodied experience connects with subjectivity. The concept of *affective labour* emerged from the work of Italian autonomist feminists on reproductive labour from the 1970s onwards. In particular, the discussions surrounding the *Wages for Housework* campaign (Dalla Costa 2019; Fortunati [1981] 1995), effected a re-evaluation of the category of reproductive labour inherited from Marx's political economy. To sum up briefly, for Marx productive labour includes any work that directly produces commodities which are to be sold for a profit. Reproductive labour, on the other hand, involves any work related to creating and sustaining human life and society in general. This includes work in the family and the household, education, care work, etc. The autonomist feminist critiques pointed out that workers' movements traditionally had ignored reproductive labour, a state of affairs that was taken to task, among other things, for its reinforcing of repressive gender roles and devaluation of domestic work. Another important contribution to this lineage of feminist critiques of work under capitalism can be found in Arlie Russell Hochschild's ([1983] 2012) *The managed heart*, in which she coined the term *emotional labour* when writing on the, again gendered, labour of air stewards. She defines this as labour that 'requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (7). While in autonomist critiques, the emotional components of various aspects of gendered work were implied, Hochschild made them explicit.

These strands of thought sought to challenge and expand upon what is counted as labour and in what ways this counting occurs. At the same time, since the 1970s the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production has, particularly in the globally dominant countries, led to a rebalancing of economic primacy from industrial production to service work and production of informational commodities. This has led to the critiques discussed above being taken up by writers such as Lazzarato in his theory of immaterial labour, and Hardt and Negri (2000: 93) in their writings on affective labour. According to the latter, affective labour is one aspect of the broader spectrum of immaterial labour, and, following the feminist sociology of Dorothy E. Smith, they describe it as 'labour in the bodily mode', that is, labour that on one hand includes embodied interpersonal aspects, but whose products are intangible, such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion, as well as the creation of social networks, forms of community. Thus

theories of affective labour refocus the analysis of the interpersonal, communicative aspects of work on what happens between bodies.

4.3.1 Thirty laughs in search of a joke: *Workers laughing alone for money*

Online documentation: http://www.superconductr.org/workers-laughing-alone-for-money

Workers laughing alone for money (2018) sought to engage the affective dispositions produced by the atomisation, precarisation and machinic control put in place by digital labour platforms, through voicing the problematic aspects of the former in a form that is as compelling in its affective immediacy as the highly contrived emotional and affective labours sold for a wage described by Hochschild and others. For this project, workers on the platform Microworkers have been asked to record themselves laughing for approximately one minute. The payment for this was US$1 per worker.

The title of this piece is a play on the meme *Women laughing alone with salad* (Zimmermann 2011), which first appeared on the feminist blog *The Hairpin*, and which has since inspired a number of derivative blogs. *Women laughing alone with salad* was posted as a collection of images showing exactly what the title suggests, without any additional comment. These stock photos show images of women who are brimming with health, happiness and success while lovingly gazing at their requisite bowl of salad. Collected, they illustrate how gender stereotypes are among the coercive elements that are mobilised in the dissemination of the neoliberal imperative for self-optimisation and commodification, where one's body appears as an asset into which one invests (for example, through healthy eating), and from which one can then draw a return. In this respect, *Women laughing alone with salad* could also be understood as a study in what Mark Fisher has called *boring dystopia* (Kiberd 2015), a form of coercion that operates through pervasive dissemination of subliminal disciplinary messages.

But dystopia is not only boring. On the contrary, dystopia can be filled with anxiety and existential dread. For instance, finding oneself in a situation where one is forced to rely on micro-earnings accumulated through continuous completion of micro-jobs online is one such condition that is rather conducive to a close encounter with anxious and dreadful dystopia. Thus, a continuous work on the self is needed to keep this dystopia at bay, and it is this work on the self that I propose to call *auto-affective labour*. Auto-affective labour has to do with the effort of disciplining and motivating oneself, an effort that is

particularly needed and at the same time more daunting when one works alone, separate from others. What is one to do when dystopia sets in while one is working alone at the computer, and there is no time to compose oneself, as every second spent not focused on the task could mean a potential loss of earnings? The response proposed in *Workers laughing alone for money* is to erupt in a spontaneous and desolate burst of lonely laughter.

These extended bursts of laughter recorded for *Workers laughing alone for money* evoke a mantra often found in business self-help literature: 'fake it til you make it'. This injunction is meant to instruct budding entrepreneurs that in order to become successful in business, they need to act in front of potential investors or customers as if the entire business was already up and running, even if in fact it has only barely left the planning stage. The same principle can be applied to auto-affective labour, in the sense that it is possible to induce the subjective experience of an emotion through acting as if one was already feeling that way. Lift up your chin, put on a smile, and you'll feel better already. However, what emerges from *Workers laughing alone for money* is anything but a convincing performance of success or happiness. What is brought to the fore is rather a sense of the irresolvable contradictions that lie at the heart of the kind of auto-affective labour involved in performing precarious piecework. The laughs we are listening to were induced through the payment of US$1 per worker and the conspicuous display of their mimicry of actually experienced happiness is further intensified through their performance having been extended to the duration of a minute. What they perform is closer to a question that Mark Fisher (2016: 12) has proposed in relation to his definition of the eerie: 'Why is there nothing here when there should be something?' The laughter, eerily emptied out of its emotional content, points towards the rupture that just about held at bay in the act of performing auto-affective labour.

4.3.2 Auto-affective labour

Auto-affective labour, then, is thrown into sharp relief through a number of characteristics of digital platform labour, such as the regime of precarity and self-discipline it enforces or the relative isolation in which much of it occurs. Auto-affective labour could be defined as affective labour on the self, as labour that seeks to modulate the affects and corresponding emotions that constitute a subject's own subjectivity. While the operations of this aspect of labour become particularly apparent through an analysis of work mediated through digital platforms, beyond this, auto-affective labour can also be observed as an

important aspect of the production of neoliberal subjectivity in general, which always involves a call to reconstitute the self as enterprise, with every action of a subject determined in the last instance by a profit-and-loss calculation. Auto-affective labour, then, has to do with the effort of disciplining and motivating oneself, with staying focused on the task and achieving maximum productivity.

The term 'auto-affective labour' plays on Jacques Derrida's notion of *auto-affection*, which lies at the heart of his critique of Western metaphysics. Derrida's writings on auto-affection take aim at the immediacy of self-presence experienced in the action of thought, in the hearing-oneself-speak through the voice in one's head, the lived practice of the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum*, which posits the experience of thinking as proof that the thinking I exists. Derrida's critique is aimed precisely at this notion of self-evident self-presence in the interior monologue of thought. At various points, as pointed out by Patricia Tinicento Clough (2000: 192), Derrida ([1967] 1997: 165) refers to this auto-affection as 'giving-oneself-a-presence or a pleasure', 'hearing oneself speak, (289) and also 'auto-fellatio' (Derrida [1972] 1982: 289). What Derrida homes in on is that there is an insurmountable cleavage at work between the I that thinks and the I that observes the act of thinking, and this is where any notion of a unified, self-contained, sovereign ego engaged in the act of thinking becomes untenable.

There is a parallel here to the notion of auto-affective labour, in that the irredeemable split in the self is reproduced in the rift between the internalised functions of, simply put, the boss and the worker, one side performing a disciplining interpellation, the other side being the recipient of this disciplining force, yet both also appearing as functions emerging from within the same subjectivity. As is the case in Derrida's thought, any resolution to this split is out of reach; instead, the two sides face each other in a metastable relation that never resolves into any kind of permanent balance. Instead, a continuous labour is required to ensure that the self has the appropriate affective disposition to allow for the effective performance of the tasks at hand. And the ability to achieve this is of course what is necessary, in the last instance, to secure a sufficient income and thus survival for the subject involved in this process.

4.3.3 How do you deal with rejection?: *Capitalism doesn't love me*

Online documentation: http://www.superconductr.org/capitalism-doesnt-love-me

Figure 4.7 superconductr, *Capitalism doesn't love me,* video still, 2017

Capitalism doesn't love me (2017), a project that has been created earlier than *Workers laughing alone for money* and thus also before the development of the concept of auto-affective labour described above, still lends itself to an analysis through the lens of the latter. Besides this, the project also shares some traits with *Work hard dream big*: both have been created with the help of the Fiverr platform, and both involve a process of iteration based on earlier interventions. The source material for *Capitalism doesn't love me* consists of disciplinary communications received from platforms in the process of creating both *Workers leaving the cloud factory* and *Work hard dream big*: while still collecting videos for the former, I received an email from Amazon stating that my account on Mechanical Turk had been suspended, and shortly thereafter another email informing me that my account had been blocked due to an unspecified violation of AMT's rather vaguely worded Terms of Service. Amazon are notorious for blocking both worker and requester

accounts with very little explanation and very little room for remedy. As already mentioned, Fiverr removed the listing posted for *Work hard dream big* after three days.

Capitalism doesn't love me repurposes these disciplinary messages for the creation of a pair of new videos. The videos have been made by workers on Fiverr who offered to create custom ASMR videos for a fee of $5, and contain ASMR-style readings of said emails. ASMR stands for 'autonomous sensory meridian response', and ASMR videos have the purpose of inducing a spine-tingling state of relaxation and comfort in their viewers and have initially, before the arrival of 'influencer' culture, been mostly created by enthusiasts who distributed them freely on video sharing platforms. Thus the subculture of ASMR videos, at least in its early incarnation, represents a non-commercial alternative to the commodified offers of self-care mentioned in chapter 3. Some time ago, offers for ASMR videos appear to have been banned from Fiverr, presumably in a move to orient the platform more towards professional services before its going public on the stock exchange, in another example of how platforms can wreck workers' potential earnings streams through unilateral changes in policy.

The videos in *Capitalism doesn't love me* contain performances of grotesquely exaggerated moments of self-care through the transformation of impervious messages of rejection into soothing, whispered vocal delivery. Yet there also is something deeply discomforting about these overwrought performances of intimacy and the ways in which they clash with the content of what is being said. Ultimately, the videos fail at fulfilling the purpose that they were ostensibly intended for, and this recalls the notion of auto-affective labour, the split in the subject between a self that desperately tries to stay calm in the face of adversity, and a self that gets fixated precisely on this desperation, serving to destabilise any prospect of real calm to set in.

Capitalism doesn't love me has also found resonance with artist friends of superconductr. A significant proportion of the work of artists consists in submitting proposals and applications for project grants or participation in residency programmes and the like. In tandem with the volume of applications submitted increases the barrage of rejected proposals pounding the artist's inbox like some force of nature. In its intimate and therapeutic performance of the experience of rejection and sense of inadequacy induced by a situation of being curtailed in one's ambitions, *Capitalism doesn't love me* calls forth some of the aspects of insecurity that artists share with other precarious workers. This should however not obscure the fact that the relations between artistic and other forms of pre-

carity are complex and in many ways contradictory, something which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

4.6 Findings

The artworks discussed in this chapter propose ways in which the body's materiality that is obscured behind platform interfaces can been made sensible, by making the body speak in tongues that are foreign to the platform apparatus of profit extraction and optimisation through focusing on its discomforts, its smells and the affects that traverse it and trouble the profitability of whichever subject's life is lived through it. This practice has thus sought to articulate the body in ways that break through the structures that silence it by its abstraction into quantifiable metrics, whose configuration and purpose only serve the designs of those who seek to profit off the work of others.

Methodologically, the pieces discussed here in many ways carry forward threads began in the preceding chapter, which this time are being spun around a more materialist conceptual framework. In relation to the original research questions, issues of representation take centre stage: in the works discussed in the first part of the chapter, this involves an emphasis on developing modes of representation for the labouring body connected to the platform assemblage, either through dividualised fragments that document its sensations and recall the ways in which its labour is turned into data streams, or by preserving aspects of its fleshy materiality in sensory form. The strategies developed for the works discussed later in the chapter draw attention to the affective labour on the self involved in platform work. In terms of research questions, the latter pieces also revisit issues related to existing discourses around liquid labour as well as neoliberal ideology. As is the case with the projects discussed in the previous chapter, the question of ethics is present in this chapter in relation to working against yet within digital labour platforms, with the exception of *Fromage faux frais*, for which the sweat samples have been collected directly from workers and no payments were made in the process.

The images and written accounts in *Sweat, data and liquid assets* probably are the closest that this research project has come to employing empirical research methods. The emphasis with this piece however still lay with devising a process through which structural conditions could be articulated through both the work's form and its content, beyond representations that seek communicate research data in factual form. The thematic preoccupation of the piece also is suggestive of possible future directions for research be-

yond the artistic: while in relation to in-person platform work, some ethnographic research contains accounts of bodily pain and injury experienced by workers in the course of the job (Ravenelle 2019), there does not appear to be much if any research on the embodied realities of online microwork in the existing sociological literature as yet.

Fromage faux frais proposes an imaginative mode of representation for the labouring body. Scientist Christina Agapakis and scent expert Sissel Tolaas possibly are the first to have made cheese from human body liquids for a gallery exhibition (Griffiths 2013), for a project that was primarily concerned with drawing attention to the microbial cultures that live inside the human body. *Fromage faux frais* has sought to move beyond the representation of bodily processes proposed in the former case, by creating a conceptual coupling between food, labour and bodily exertion that is then distilled into olfactory sensuousness. Reflection on the intersections invoked here has connected this project's conceptual scaffolding to new materialist theory. This is an area that has not seen much exploration in research on digital labour to date, with the notable exception of Phoebe Moore's (2017) work, which is not concerned with labour platforms as such but with the use of body tracking technologies at workplaces that give rise to a 'quantified self' whose bodily functions are subjected to continuous surveillance. Again, avenues for possible further research in relation to digital platform labour are being suggested here.

With *Workers laughing alone for money* as well as *Capitalism doesn't love me*, the exploration of negative emotions induced by precarious conditions and the affective labour involved in managing these when working alone have inspired the development of the concept of auto-affective labour, which expands the notion of affective labour to a consideration of labour on the self in the isolation that is part and parcel of much online platform work. This kind of isolation is precisely what practices of solidarity can counteract, but the latter are much more easily realised in localised platform work, in which workers encounter each other in the street. In the following chapter, engaging with these kinds of solidarities will be the focus of the practice under discussion.

A number of the projects evaluated in the present and the preceding chapter also carry a certain sense of humour that usually is coupled with sensations of discomfort, which returns the discussion to the research question on the expansion of existing critical strategies that confront neoliberal ideology. Humour in relation to politics, as in satire, can be a double-edged sword: as much as it plays the role of denigrating the powerful, it can also provide a safe outlet for public anger that might otherwise erupt in more threatening

ways. The strength of practices such as tactical media, with their methods of ironically appropriating the language and symbols of the powerful, lies in the ways in which they have operated in tandem with the cycles of carnivalesque protests of the alterglobalisation movement. At a time when these irreverent celebrations of possible other worlds have for the most part subsided however, ironic approaches carry a danger of the fun being poked at capitalist power being confined to providing the aforementioned safe outlet. The discomfort carried by the humour engendered in a number of the artefacts created for this project is meant to activate a different register: the uncomfortable laughs get stuck in one's throat with no feeling of ease relieving the tension. Through this, what is aimed at here is to make capitalist labour relations appear weird rather than ridiculous, in an echo of a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* that seeks to activate audiences into confronting contradictions in their lives, taking a stand and seeking out ways of living that can prefigure how the world could be otherwise.

Some of the conceptual connections and openings that have been discovered in the course of the research discussed this far—attention to the body in online clickwork, new materialist theory as a method for investigating digital platform labour, auto-affective labour, the superconductor—take leave to some extent from the concerns posed in this study's original research questions. This, I would wager, is a strength rather than a weakness in the context of this project and of artistic research in general: here, exploration, experimentation and the processing of social reality through aesthetic strategies can lead the research into unexpected directions and openings that do not necessarily all need be followed through to their full extent, but which can provide pointers for subsequent investigation.

In the practice discussed up to this point, the solidarity that is called upon in the title of this thesis is made operative for the most part through representational strategies through which platforms are at the same time the subject of the work, the subject of critique and the medium through which the work is realised. While the works created in the process have sought to speak nearby to the interests of workers, there remains a gap between solidarities declared and the manoeuvres of the artist who devises a plot, operates on signifiers, and manipulates possible interpretations, all of the latter having a tendency to take their course at a remove from the everyday concerns of the workers in question. The question of how this gap might be narrowed is central to the practice discussed in the following chapter.

5 Promises, social praxis and art/activism

Critical art practice, as its name suggests, is adept at proposing forms of critique, which in many cases involves taking account of various social issues, theoretical positions and the like, while invariably and concomitantly interrogating art's own conditions of production and distribution. The practices discussed in the preceding chapters have engaged these modes of critique on various levels, through their counter-uses of digital labour platforms and their search for forms of practice that speak in proximity to the position of workers. Critique in this sense however can also come up against a limit: in the present case, this has made itself felt particularly in the ways in which the authorial position taken up here comes with a—however self-conscious—reiteration of the separation between artists and other precarious workers.

The practice discussed in the present chapter has sought to exceed these constraints while also offering something of a critical examination of the practices discussed so far, through a process of direct collaboration with labour activists. The work that has been created in the process, collected under the title *Keep your promises*, consists of a series of activist videos made to support a number of campaigns for the rights and conditions of precarious workers by the IWGB union. With this, the research has crossed over from artist practice into activist praxis, and this move opens up an additional set of questions, questions that give rise to the development of an expanded methodology that can investigate its own conditions of production through practice. What needs to be asked here, to begin with, is how a more direct political engagement can be accounted for as part of a larger project that is, first and foremost, situated in the field of artistic research. This calls for an inquiry that traces the lines of separation as well as points of convergence between these two different modes of encountering and engaging with a given set of socio-political issues—the artistic and the activist modes—both in the project itself and in artist practice more widely.

This takes the discussion into a terrain across which two sets of art-critical debates play out: the first has to do with intersections between art and politics, and particularly the continuous negotiation of the prospect of politicised artistic practices giving up their status as art and collapsing into social praxis, discussion of which is bound up with the dialectic of art's autonomy and heteronomy. The second nexus is centred around issues of labour, particularly the work of the artist and the ways in which this represents an

instance of non-alienated labour that both contains a promise of a supersession of capitalist exploitation on a wider scale, while at the same time partaking in the division between intellectual and manual labour whose aporias it denounces through its very being. Beyond these theoretical questions, what also needs to be articulated is how the direct mode of address put in practice in *Keep your promises* intervenes in the particular configurations of art, labour and capital at the present conjecture, in which what Boltanski and Chiapello ([1999] 2007) have famously called the 'artistic critique' of capitalism has been, by and large, incorporated into capital's very mode of operation and its interpellation of those who work for it. This direct mode of address also brings into play questions related to the ways in which politicised art practice can be relevant to those whose struggles it engages, and which kinds of concerns—artistic or activist—should take precedence in a project in which labour issues take centre stage. In addition to this, the notion of institutional critique is cast in a different light here, as what transpires in *Keep your promises* is not a critique of the institution of art from within its own field of operation; instead, this idea of auto-critique undergoes something of an auto-critique of its own premises. This is made operative with the help of transversal alliances that through practice problematise both the direct interventionism of social practice art and its concern with recovering the 'artistic' in its practices which can leave it blind to its own potentials for co-optation, and calls for a critical repurposing of artistic autonomy that are too quick to dismiss social interventions as extra-artistic and thus without interest to their analyses. These are the issues that will be refracted in the remainder of this chapter through the particular configuration of practices that make up the different parts of this research project and *Keep your promises* in particular.

A number of points can be highlighted here to outline some of the concerns that will be addressed in the following discussion: firstly, each of the works discussed in chapters 3 and 4 has been created around a discrete set of parameters that define a process which in turn has resulted in a final record or outcome whose broad contours, at least, were determined in advance. The work with activists explored in this chapter, on the other hand, has evaded pre-mediated design and the primacy of critical-analytical inquiry, focusing instead on letting the most effective course of action emerge from the very encounters through which this part of the practice took its course. Secondly, the works discussed up to this point have clearly defined authorship; they often include contributions from others, but these contributions operate within set parameters that have been devised at the outset of each process. For the work evaluated in this chapter on the other

hand, authorship is much more ambiguous: working directly with activists has brought with it the requirement to put to one side any intention to assert complete authorial control over either the process or the outcome of the work. Finally, the projects introduced earlier employ modes of engagement that can easily be identified as belonging to the field of artistic research, as they privilege qualities such as detached criticality, self-reflexivity or interpretive multiplicity. The work discussed in this chapter, on the other hand, has had as its outcome a series of videos that are unapologetically activist in both form and content; here it is their usefulness as tools that empower workers vis-à-vis capital that is foregrounded, rather than specifically artistic or aesthetic qualities.

There is thus a tension here between two kinds of practice: one can with relative ease be situated within the broad parameters of critical art, the other has involved itself directly in the social with any concern of how its workings might fold back into the space of art of secondary importance. Contradictory as these two positions may appear when construed in this fashion, the task in this chapter is not to simply present the antinomies between them as accomplished facts, but rather to put their opposing tendencies to work productively. There are a number of levels that are being engaged which warrant further interrogation. To begin with, it is the role of the artist and the status of the artwork that are put into question: What counts as art? What questions emerge when non-art practices, as it were, impinge on the territory of art? How is the separation of art from other areas of life maintained as well as challenged, and what can be discovered by examining existing practices and theories that work across this always shifting, always unstable boundary? Secondly, there is the question of art's social function, its ways of posing critique and of articulating a potential politics, which is, as already mentioned, often framed around the pairing of autonomy and heteronomy, and more recently also around issues such as usefulness. In what ways can and does artist practice articulate a critique of what is and how does it do this differently from activist praxis? In what ways do contemporary artist practices cross over into social praxis, what kinds of antinomies are encountered at this intersection, and how do these problematics reflect on the practice in this research project? Finally, questions arise here about the division between intellectual and manual labour in a broader sense, the ways in which art partakes in this division, but also the utopian potential contained within artist practice to challenge and supersede the same. These questions will be investigated in more detail in the remainder of this chapter, through putting the practice of this research project, and *Keep your promises* specifically, in dialogue with a number theories that seek to account for artist practices that cross into the social. Be-

fore this, however, the practice, or perhaps rather, praxis at hand will be described in some detail.

5.1 *Keep your promises*

Online documentation: http://www.superconductr.org/keep-your-promises

Figure 5.1 superconductr, *Deliveroo – start the Roovolt*, video still, 1 minute 47 seconds, 2019

The video starts with a head shot of a worker filmed in a street outside one of the stereo-typically quirky 'pop-up startup hubs' in which shipping containers host small businesses, eclectically multicultural street-food vendors, bars selling craft beer and the like, in Brixton, South London. The unnamed worker's face is hidden by a *détourned* Deliveroo logo

as he says 'what I don't like is the uncertainty whether you're going to make money or not'. Later on, another worker wearing a helmet, his dark silhouette visible against the background of one of the 'dark kitchens' that prepare meals exclusively for food delivery platforms, adds: 'you have to stay in the cold, and if there's no order you don't get paid'. Further on, a different worker has his head covered with a hoodie and uses a scarf to hide his face, while a colleague next to him has anonymised himself by wearing a helmet: 'people cannot say what they want to say because they don't want to lose their job. That's why some people are like me now, they're covering their face'. Still later, over footage of protests and newspaper clippings that tell of union court battles with Deliveroo, a union organiser's message is: 'fighting together we will win fair pay and better conditions. The sooner you join the Roovolt, the faster this will happen'. These are some moments from the video *Deliveroo – start the Roovolt*, created as part of my work with the IWGB, to support a recruitment drive by the union aimed at workers on the food delivery platform Deliveroo. During the production of this video, I joined street stalls set up by union organisers at spots close to conglomerations of various restaurants in different parts of London, which is where riders tend to congregate as they wait to receive orders through their mobile phones. The union organisers had already established relationships with a number of workers through repeatedly visiting the same spots over a period of time which helped in finding potential interviewees, and while I joined several of these street stalls, all the interviews included in this video were recorded on two occasions. This video is one of a whole series that have been created as part of my work with the IWGB over some three years, and these videos as well as the processes that have gone into their creation are what the analysis in this chapter is concerned with.

The work itself began with an email sent to the IWGB in early 2017 containing the simple offer to help in any way I could, while also clarifying my status as a PhD candidate conducting artistic research in the area of digital platform labour. The IWGB is one of the unions that have become active early on in organising and campaigning for workers on digital labour platforms. As has been outlined in the introduction, the start of this research project more or less coincided with the emergence of self-organised labour struggles by digital platform workers in the localised gig economy, struggles that erupted in the streets of an ever-growing number of cities in Europe, the US and further afield, which saw workers protest against precarisation, unilateral change of payment structures by platforms, as well as issues relating to safety, job security and quality of work. One effect of these struggles was to instil among workers, through the experience of practiced solidarity, the

awareness that it is possible to defend their interests against the emerging corporate titans of platform capitalism, and this in turn led to the formation of new worker organisations or to platform workers establishing links with existing unions. In London, a number of grassroots unions, which had themselves been founded relatively recently out of the struggles of precarious migrant workers, went on to actively get involved in organising striking platform workers, and the IWGB is the largest one of these in terms of overall membership.

The alliance with the IWGB represents the main way through which this project has engaged in direct activist work. The reasoning behind following this route was that in terms of research, it would be more productive to support an already existing grassroots initiative that has abundant know-how of worker organising and a functioning structure, rather than try to devise a solidarity initiative from scratch. I also saw it as important not to instigate a project from the outside, as it were, when there already were self-directed forms of worker organisation in operation. By extension, when I approached the IWGB via email, I was careful not to try and impose some kind of pre-mediated artistic vision onto the union's work. Two main parameters have been guiding my involvement, both informed by the fact that I was collaborating here with workers and activists whose immediate priorities would be quite different to those guiding an artistic research project: one was to approach this extended encounter with an openness to whatever might transpire in the process, and the second to prioritise the requirements of workers and activists before any artistic concerns. Thus, instead of proposing some kind of research-led project in my initial email, I outlined what I thought might be my useful skills, which in this case particularly meant video production. It took some weeks to receive a response, but after a few additional emails and phone calls, an involvement with the union's work began which lasts to this day. In practical terms, my work with the IWGB so far has comprised a number of activities: helping at street stalls—often, one's presence as a friendly supporter can in itself be a boost to morale—joining meetings and protests and, most of all, making videos to support a number of campaigns. During a stint of working for Uber Eats, which I conducted in order to gain some first-hand experience of localised platform work, I also joined the union's Couriers and Logistics branch, which organises delivery workers from different fields.

Questions of trust and reciprocity have taken centre stage in this work. From anecdotal observations, it has become apparent that the IWGB is inundated with requests by journalists and researchers for interviews and research collaborations. General-

ly, union activists are stretched to their limits in their battles with large multinational corporations for fairer treatment of workers and thus have to be selective in terms of which of these requests they engage with. Also, the union has a very active media department and its campaigns are regularly covered across major media outlets, thus there has been little need to propose a strategy that would challenge the ways in which the union's work is represented. Instead, I made my skills available to be employed as and when needed to support the IWGB's activities. All in all, during the time of my PhD study, I have produced videos for campaigns by outsourced cleaners, porters, receptionists and security guards at Senate House, University of London; medical couriers at The Doctors Laboratory; mini-cab drivers in a dispute with Transport for London; kitchen porters at luxury members' club LouLou's; and delivery couriers at both eCourier and Deliveroo. These videos are being collected, in reverse date order, on the project website.

The title under which the videos are consolidated, *Keep your promises*, has been taken from a protest chant featured in the video *University of London – The IWGB & Jeremy Irons guide to reasonable striking*. The 'keep your promises' in the video refers to a pay rise that had been promised to workers but never materialised. I found this statement provocative as a title, for one, because when looked at in its own right, it could be mistaken for an aphorism that might have been taken from some anodyne collection of business self-help or personal development platitudes. More importantly however, it also carries a reminder to explore the full range of questions posed at the outset of this research project, which also contain, as it were, a promise: to work out ways to enact solidarity in practice, beyond research that is confined to the level of elaborating modes of critique. Now, on one level, it could be said that in terms of the latter point, the practice discussed in this chapter has been successful. Promises have been kept, solidarities have been developed, and actions have been taken that have helped increase the power of workers in concrete instances. But since these videos have been created as part of an artistic research project, the more complex question is whether and how this kind of practice could or should fold back into the space of art. This is where the series of questions staked in the introduction to this chapter on the terrain where art meets activism comes into play, questions on the boundaries of the field of art, on the social and political functions of art, and on art's relation to labour. These are the issues that will be addressed in the remainder of this chapter.

5.2 Art and capitalism

The notion of art as it is known today, as a field of creative production whose means are indeterminate, whose relations of production have for the most part escaped real subsumption under capitalist discipline and whose products are sold as commodities and/or funded by stipends, has its origins in the late eighteenth century, around the time of the decline of feudalism and the ascendance of capitalism in Europe. At the time, art emerged as a kind of universal realm of non-purposive creation that superseded what used to be separate arts, through a process of autonomisation of the latter from their earlier social function as support for feudal and religious hierarchies. This separation of art as an autonomous social sphere is thus bound up with the development of the capitalist division of labour.

Through its resistance to real subsumption, art exists as a utopian enclave within capitalism that carries a promise of a supersession of unfree labour (Eagleton 1990), yet its social ineffectuality (Bürger [1974] 1984), its complicity in the division of labour and the sale of its products as commodities (Adorno [1970] 2002) also render this promise mute in practice save for those lucky enough to make a sustainable living out of artistic work. More recently, even art's limited autonomy has been called into question through transformations in the organisation of work as capital was forced by the 'artistic critique' (Boltanski and Chiapello [1999] 2007), aimed at aspects such as hierarchical structures of command and factory discipline, to adopt more open-ended, individualised and collaborative forms of organising work. This in turn has brought art and labour under capitalism closer to each other, as workers are increasingly interpellated to be creative and to invest their subjectivity as a whole in their work, as is exemplified by the ways in which the figure of the artist has been turned into a model for the entrepreneurial subject. At the same time, art has entered into cycles of capitalist valorisation and speculation both as an asset class and as an engine driving other forms of profit extraction such as gentrification (Vishmidt 2019). As a result, art in parts loses its character as being prefigurative of modes of unalienated life and instead takes on its own disciplinary functions.

5.2.1 Art and class

Two contrasting standpoints put forward ways in which artistic work can be related to other kinds of labour. The first of these subsumes artists under the category of 'art work-

ers', a position that, as Julia Bryan-Wilson (2009) points out, stretches back to William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement in the nineteenth century. In its contemporary form, as proposed by the US-based group W.A.G.E., for example, the figure of the art worker takes its cue from the transversal solidarities practiced by the movements of precarious workers and thus often invokes calls for a common cause between all those who are faced with insecure and exploitative working conditions in the sphere of art: this includes construction workers, cleaners and porters at art institutions, gallery assistants, artists, writers, academics on short-term contracts, freelance curators and the like. But the identification of artists with workers also obscures important distinctions between the work that artists do and other kinds of labour under capitalism.

Writers such as Ben Davis (2013), Dave Beech (2015) and Daniel Spaulding (2015) mobilise Marxian economics to point out, among other things, that artists are artisanal producers. When demanding a fee for exhibiting their work, artists are in a similar position to 'someone who owns property and hopes to rent it out' (Davis 2013: 18); artists are making use of labour processes that have not been rationalised by capitalist production; and artists' work is not subject to the law of value which necessitates capitalists to continuously seek to reduce the amount of labour time spent on the production of commodities in order to be able to compete with others. While these clarifications are, in the main, related to the ways in which the production and circulation of artistic commodities differ from those of other commodities under capitalism, this leaves open the question of grant-funded artwork with little to no prospect of generating earnings through sale or paid-for exhibition, a situation which also applies to this university-funded research project. Beech (2019: 62) offers a way of accounting for this by pointing out that grants are not wages, as a wage contract permits the buyer of labour-power 'consumer sovereignty', that is, control over the labour process of the worker whose time is being paid for. This, of course, does not apply to artists who receive a grant. Thus, in the final analysis, although use of a term such as 'art worker' does have polemical value in its prospects as an activist call for action, it also obscures important differences that need to be accounted for, and in this respect, it is beset by similar contradictions to the proposals that present the precariat as a new class subject discussed in chapter 1.

These observations help to clarify the differences between the class position of the artist in a project such as *Keep your promises* and that of the workers whose campaigns have been supported in the course of the work. Later in this chapter, the methodological

implications of these differences will be investigated further. Before this, the practice itself needs to be situated in its conflicted relation to the sphere of art.

5.3 But is it *still* art?

Figure 5.2 superconductr, *5 Hertford Street – kitchen porters*, video still, 1 minute 48 seconds, 2019

The videos created for the IWGB are unambiguous in their purpose as campaign videos. They variously feature interviews with workers, speeches filmed at rallies and other protest footage, as well as title cards that put forward a clear set of criticisms and/or demands, the copy for which was invariably provided by the union. Their creation has entailed varying degrees of direction from union staff or activists: while for the initial set of

videos, union staffers were closely involved in both the interviewing and editing process, I was, with a few exceptions, gradually given much freer rein in the creation and assemblage of materials as the working relationship progressed. Consent for interviews has been given verbally on video after discussion with the union's press officer, who strongly favoured this approach over asking precarious workers with often limited English skills to read and sign lengthy consent forms.

This work has necessitated some adjustments on my part: jump cuts, for example, while much loved by myself, were off-limits, and all edits in interviews had to be smoothed over with cutaways. More generally, the videos were required to follow a certain structure, which in most cases begins by presenting a set of grievances and/or demands in the earlier part, usually communicated through snippets from a number of interviews, and then culminates in a call to action. At the same time, there was some room for creative play, and the most rewarding aspects of this included overlaying Dogme-style handheld camera footage of protests with bold text to create exuberantly brash visual compositions, and revisiting my earlier professional life as an electronic music creator to compose dubstep-influenced rhythms driven along by growling bass lines that were intended to strike fear into the bones of exploitative bosses, as well as making use of my library of sound recordings collected at various protests over the years to source drum band rhythms whose throbbing beats add urgency to the visuals. Over time, the formatting of the videos was gradually adjusted to the requirements of social media content, with a focus on brevity, subtitling for all dialogue, and use of a square frame ratio. These adjustments can be seen developing in the temporal sequence of the videos as they are posted on the superconductr website, with the most recent one at the top.

When transposed into the context of art, the videos that have been created in the course of this collaboration represent something of a limit case that could be summed up by art historian Peter Gorsen's (1981: 258) question posed in relation to practices that exceed the conventions that define what falls into the realm of art proper: 'Ist das noch Kunst?'. This could figuratively be translated into the common idiom 'But is it art?', but the more literal translation 'Is it *still* art?' is more interesting in terms of bringing to the fore the issues at stake here: the latter phrasing sketches the features of a topology in which the art/non-art boundary is not articulated along a clear line of demarcation but instead unfolds into a zone of indistinction, traversed by lines of flight, whose contours expand and contract in different directions in response to practices that challenge established conventions of what art is or should be. There is a dialectical interlocking of inside and

outside at work here, through which either is being articulated through its opposite. When considering a practice such as *Keep your promises* as part of an artistic research project, these dynamics are brought to the fore, particularly in relation to the fact that that these videos are being shown in exhibitions alongside the works discussed in chapters 3 and 4, and thus beyond their initial life as campaign videos they are also being framed as, with, or alongside works that can more easily be read as art. This reframing puts to work the dialectic of inside and outside and gives rise to something of a dual ontology in which these videos exist both in their original purpose as tools for activism and in a secondary capacity as objects for aesthetic contemplation, a dynamic that is also raised by Stephen Wright (2013: 22) in relation to activist art.

5.3.1 Nominalism

An intersection of this kind summons up the extensive debates on how art encounters its others, of which three strands in particular deserve further investigation. The first of these comprises a range of analyses that examine the expansion of the means, ends, subject matters, subject positions, (im)material configurations and justificatory discourses of art. This typically plays out in historiographic accounts that focus on evental breaks such as those instigated by eighteenth-century modernity and modern aesthetics, as in Rancière's (2013: 15–25) aesthetic regime of art; by twentieth-century modernism and the historic avant-garde (Bürger [1974] 1984; Roberts 2007), or by 1960s–70s conceptual art (Osborne 2013).

One such break that is often returned to is the one wrought by Marcel Duchamp's readymades and the nominalist gesture that they enact by which everyday objects (and in later practices by other artists also places, events, time frames, etc.) are transformed into art through the artist's fiat, their decision to designate them as such. Hal Foster (1994: 19) points out one important effect of this gesture when he interprets Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) as an artwork that 'articulates "the enunciative conditions" of the modern art work from without': the artist's act of denominating an everyday, mass-produced object as an artwork makes visible the formal conventions that underlie art's legitimating discourses at its time, through a work that deliberately operates outside these conventions. The first set of questions that have been raised in the introduction of this chapter about *Keep your promises* revisits this scene of the Duchampian readymade and its particular way of articulating the topography of inside/outside and art's enunciative conditions.

In the present case, the nominalist gesture however is more incidental to the work rather than the main content that activates its critical potential, and as a gesture it remains in a suspensive state, as the videos in *Keep your promises* never attempt to fully assume artwork status. Instead, their functioning is closer to what John Roberts (2015: 26) has described as 'a means of "reporting" back to the art world on what has been going on beyond its remit' in relation to contemporary practices that operate in an expanded field that involves non-artistic methods, skills and concerns that are in different ways refracted into the space of art. In other words, it is less the form of the transgression that is of interest here, as this kind of move has already been put into practice many times before and its disruptive effects have become blunted; rather, the specific content that is activated in this shuttling between inside and outside, the practice's relation to labour and to activist praxis, is where the more significant questions can be posed.

5.3.2 The avant-garde

The second incursion on art's autopoietic modes of operation to be discussed is the one carried out by the early-twentieth century avant-gardes of which Duchamp's urinal also forms a part. This can highlight some of the divergences between *Keep your promises* and the projects discussed in earlier chapters. According to Peter Bürger's ([1974] 1984: 42) classic account, it was the historic avant-garde who first recognised art as an institution that 'is divorced from the totality of social activities and comes to confront them abstractly'. According to Bürger, art's status as an enclave of free creation in capitalist society had also brought with it its 'social ineffectuality' (27), and thus the avant-garde programme was aimed at reintegrating 'art into the praxis of life' (22). This meant reclaiming a social function that, somewhat paradoxically, is based in art's very resistance to instrumentalisation. The avant-garde's project, then, was to de-institutionalise art in order to free everyday life from the grip of instrumental reason and make the latter more like art, which would lead to 'the total abolition of the institution that is art' (63). As Bürger goes on to observe, this did not come to fruition: on the contrary, the institution of art has absorbed the avant-garde's irruption and continued its existence more or less unabated since, which indicates the failure and defeat of the avant-garde project. This, however, is one of the points on which Bürger's analysis has come in for significant and not unjustified criticism (Foster 1994; Roberts 2015). *Pace* Bürger, proponents of neo-avant-gardist art have been carrying forward aspects of the avant-garde programme, subject to various revisions and expansions, since the post-war era, and the most interesting manifestations

of these forays work on a re-politicisation of artistic autonomy that articulates complex interplays between non-instrumentality and political commitment (Begg and Vilensky 2007; Buchloh 2000; Léger 2012).

In relation to all this, the artworks discussed in earlier chapters can be seen to directly intervene in everyday life, through their use of platform interfaces and infrastructures which *détourns* the latter's purpose from medium for profit extraction to medium of critical art. In this sense, art enters life but retains some of its autonomous properties, since social contradictions are cast into relief here through strategies that involve estrangement and critical distance. *Keep your promises*, on the other hand, has done away with propositions of autonomy as it is understood in the avant-garde context and instead enacts rather than proposes critiques of inequality and exploitation through direct alignment with labour activism, resulting in artefacts whose main function is to be tools for action. As a result, the avant-garde's notion of autonomy as the principle that separates art from instrumental action is not really operational here, the mediating function of artistic estrangement has been short-circuited in favour of direct communication, and thus the reading of the practice itself as art on the terms of avant-garde autonomy stalls on a foundational level. This avowal of instrumentalisation can however also be read through the prism of more recent practices that articulate the art/non-art relation on a different plane, and these can be broadly assembled under the heading of post-autonomous art.

5.3.3 Post-autonomy

Post-autonomous practices, which include many instances of contemporary social practice and activist art, constitute the third kind of operation across art's threshold to be discussed. One of the recurrent themes in social practice art is its disavowal of artistic autonomy in favour of an embrace of instrumentalisation, of artists' involvement in the particularities of concrete social situations in which an expanded set of non-art skills is mobilised towards real-world ends. What is identified as the 'artistic' aspect of a practice in this context can vary widely—this could include the process of collaboration with a group or community, educational projects or other event programmes, collaboratively produced artefacts, or different forms of documentation of various kinds of temporary projects. The shape that many aspects of this kind of work take can thus easily become more or less indistinguishable from everyday life praxis, and much of it takes place outside arts institutions. From this follows a necessity to evaluate the position that this work takes in relation to art's institutional sphere and its modes of self-validation, which in turn is a question

that confronts *Keep your promises* in its commitment to prioritise activist praxis over artistic concerns.

In the proposals that are developed around this question, there are two broad intersecting lines of thought that put forward ways in which socially committed practices can be understood as art. On the one hand, entropy is celebrated, and the openness of artist practices towards the social is seen as liberating art from the social ineffectuality that is bound up with an insistence on autonomy from social praxis. This is true, with some qualifications, for Gregory Sholette's (2011) account of the 'dark matter' of artistic production or what Roberts (2015) calls art's 'secondary economy', that is, a multitude of creative activities that operate at the margins or entirely outside the sanctioned spaces of the art world proper. Wright (2004: np), who is one of the 'international correspondents' of Tania Bruguera's Arte Útil movement, goes one step further than the preceding two by showing unmitigated support for such a position when he describes art/activist work as having a

> low coefficient of artistic visibility: we see something, but not as art. For without the validating framework of the artworld, art cannot be recognized as such, which is one reason why it is from time to time useful to reterritorialize and assemble it in an art-specific space.

Pablo Helguera (2011: 3) observes that the term *social practice* 'excludes, for the first time, an explicit reference to art-making'. Helguera reads social practice art as being 'located between more conventional art forms and the related disciplines of sociology, politics, and the like' (4), which he sees as a positive, as productive of a tension that must be 'addressed, but not resolved'. Kester (2011: 9–10), writing on projects that involve collaboration between artists and non-artists in site-specific contexts, observes that in this field 'the process of participatory interaction itself is treated as a form of creative praxis', which effects 'a (cyclical) renegotiation of aesthetic autonomy via the permeability that exists between art production and other, adjacent, forms of cultural production and activism'.

All these analyses put their emphasis on practices that never are only, or fully, art, and which in their ambivalent relation to artistic visibility open up a space of critique that allows them to set their aims simultaneously at particular socio-political issues and at the bounding conditions of the institution of art in general. To occupy and hold such a space is important, and this is where the most radical practices that cross art and politics operate today. The works created for this research project also hold such a space, but in di-

vergent ways that are important to distinguish. This is where the second strand of analysis comes in which, at times running in parallel with the first, takes leave from celebrations of open-enedness and ambiguity and instead is concerned with negotiating the contextualisation of post-autonomous work *as* art, with what differentiates this work from, say, social work or activism.

Social practice

The criteria proposed here diverge depending on the school of thought that their proponents are associated with. Social practice theorists tend to emphasise how non-art practices undergo something of an ontological transformation when they are processed through the apparatuses of artistic practice, with the former being imbued with the proclivities towards open-endedness and reflexiveness that are part and parcel of artistic investigation. Helguera (2001: 5), for example, explains that 'socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity'. Helguera is, at the same time, still concerned with drawing up some demarcations. While being careful to leave room for 'art [that] can be deliberately instrumental and intentionally abandon any hopes of self-reflexivity' (35), he draws a boundary where

> if the community makes all the decisions, the artist is operating merely as a service agent. This relationship reduces art practice to yet another form of social welfare, [...] a feel-good action that doesn't truly create a meaningful framework for reflection or critical exchange. (55)

For Kester (2011: 28), the role of collaborative art practice is to frame an exchange between artists and 'political collectivities currently in formation', and to set this exchange 'sufficiently apart from quotidian social interaction to encourage a degree of self-reflection, and calling attention to the exchange itself as creative praxis'. Wright (2005: 121) offers a proposition grounded in praxis itself, which involves 'thinking of art in terms of its specific means (its tools) rather than its specific ends (artworks)'. Speculative and utopian aspects are highlighted by Bruguera (2012: np), when she identifies the artistic in

> the elaboration of a proposal that does not yet exist in the real world, [...] made with the hope and belief that something may be done better. [...] Art is the space in which you behave as if conditions existed for making things you want to happen, happen.

All these proposals share the idea that artistic activity in some way transforms the social or political practices that it encounters, by embedding them in a higher-order activity that

introduces self-reflection, ambiguity, the use of new tools and methods, or speculation into their very core. This does to some extent parallel the historical avant-garde's ambition to recast life through art, but in the contemporary social practice context this transformative potential is focused on localised interventions rather than a programme that aims at a total revolution of everyday life.

Neo-avant-garde

A different route into this problematic is travelled by proponents of a neo-avant-garde current, whose concern is to recuperate a notion of autonomy that can prevail within art's dispersal into social praxis. Rather than observing the different combinations and diffractions that are produced by the commingling of these two domains, here the analysis focuses on the importance of retaining a remainder of autonomy within heteronomy. This insistence on art's intractable resistance to instrumentalisation then gives rise to its utopian potential that allows it to imagine a revolutionary transformation of society as a whole. Roberts (2015: 35) states in this context that

> art praxis […] cannot submit itself completely and under all circumstances to the strategic and tactical exigencies of political praxis, for once this occurs, art praxis must by definition relinquish its speculative and non-identitary functions in the name of radical efficacy, transparent impact and counterhegemonic solidarity.

For Roberts, the lesson of the neo-avant-garde is that for art practice to be politically meaningful it needs to engage in political praxis, but only up to a point. If artists give in to the all-too-easy temptation for completely closing the gap between art and its outside in order to put their work in the service of politics, art's imaginary of how life could be changed fundamentally from the ground up is lost. A precarious balance needs to be negotiated for this potentiality to be preserved, and this is expanded on by Marina Vishmidt (2019: 186) when she, while not explicitly addressing a neo-avant-garde current, invokes a

> dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy that can engender the negativity of art […] to the social existence of art itself as a separate instance. We need, in other words, a dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy that can undermine its own institutional ground or starting point.

The self-undoing project that is invoked here might at first sight appear as mirroring the ways in which the dispersal of art into the social is celebrated by social practice theorists, but for Vishmidt, the crux is to insist on a remainder of autonomy that can give rise to a Hegelian negation of the very conditions that make art's separation from the so-

cial possible, that is, the capitalist division of labour. An analysis along these lines is bound to exceed the modest claims of localised social intervention that animate writings on social practice, in favour of a reinvigoration of the historic avant-garde's totalising critique that, however, has at its centre the antinomies between artistic work and labour under capitalism as the contradiction whose overcoming heralds the undoing of capitalist alienation. This latter point in particular resonates with some of the dynamics at play in *Keep your* promises, albeit in somewhat modified form, and the implications of this will be returned to later.

5.3.4 Instrumentality vs. autonomy

What both social practice and neo-avant-garde theorists share is a commitment to identifying and defending a site of artistic specificity within art's dispersal into social praxis, however different the conclusions that they arrive at. While such a position can be located with relative ease in the projects discussed in earlier chapters, *Keep your promises* does not so readily slide into the proposals elaborated here. Undoubtedly, aspects of the social practice theories that have been discussed can be salvaged, such as the escape from institutional allegiances implicit in the notions of dark matter and art's second economy, the primacy of engagement with the social that is the corollary of Wright's low coefficient of artistic visibility, Helguera's acknowledgement that a deliberate embrace of instrumentality and a relinquishing of self-reflexivity needs to be acknowledged as a possible strategy in artists' work, or Roberts and Vishmidt's proposals for art to prefigure an undoing of the division of labour. Overall, however, neither the transfigurative power of art to defamiliarise social praxis that is extolled by social practice theorists, nor the dialectical defense of a residue of autonomy within heteronomy as the promise of overturning the entire edifice of art under capitalism and with this capitalism itself, can account for a practice that has embraced instrumentality to this extent and that has not sought to introduce any significant measure of self-reflexivity or critical distance into the artefacts that have been produced. But to suggest that a discussion of this work's relevance in relation to artist practice should thus simply be written off, as many of these writers might to be happy to agree on, would ignore a number of additional considerations that can be drawn out of the way in which it sits uneasily positioned between the realms of art, activism and labour.

For one, it could be countered to the discourses on social practice art that in *Keep your promises*, the intention is less for art to defamiliarise the social, but for the social to defamiliarise art; not in the vein of the nominalist interventions discussed earlier, but as a

challenge to residual notions of artist practice as some sort of rarefied activity that can only engage with the social by encasing the latter in a set of quotation marks, as it were. By extension, this can be brought to bear on a modified reading of the arguments that animate neo-avant-gardist reinvigorations of a, however curtailed, autonomy: in *Keep your promises*, artistic autonomy asserts itself through a negation of the proscriptions that seek to prevent art's entropy into social praxis, a negation which is in itself a form of asserting autonomy. A Hegelian figure of negation does indeed make its appearance in some of the writings cited above: Vishmidt (2019), for example, repeatedly calls for a convergence between art's negativity towards social use (its lack of real-world utility) and labour's negativity towards capital (its resistance to exploitation and alienation) as the basis from which an alliance against capital can proceed. While labour's negativity against capital is easily identified in *Keep your promises*, the negativity of art in this case is, in no small part, directed towards art's own airs of transcendence over the exigencies of everyday life. Where does this leave art's negativity towards social use? This is where things get more complicated, as this negativity stands itself negated. The issue of usefulness has recently been posed again forcefully in relation to art (Bruguera 2012; Wright 2005), but for the most part, the direction of travel here has been towards the affirmative. In turn, this is relevant for *Keep your promises*, as the commitment to being useful to the work of activists has been central to the project. In this context, questions arise whether use as a category, beyond the negation of artistic autonomy that it implies, also brings with it other issues, and furthermore, whether there are different ways in which usefulness can be put into practice which would require different conclusions to be drawn as regards their effects. To investigate these issues, the following section will take its cue from the name and the programme of the Arte Útil movement, which proposes that art should recover the social use that it abandoned when its autonomy from social praxis became one of its defining characteristics at the dawn of modernity.

5.4 The use-values of art

Figure 5.3 superconductr, *TDL strike*, video still, 2 minutes 26 seconds, 2019

How has usefulness played out in practice in *Keep your promises*? Beyond the self-evident utility for labour struggles of the videos that have been created in this project, this has throughout the process also involved a certain set of attitudes which coalesced into a habit of making oneself useful: this includes assuming a supportive rather than a dominant position in the collaboration, responding to requests for help as and when they arose rather than attempting to direct the course of the work, and allowing for the form and content of the resulting videos to be determined by activist over artistic concerns. In this

respect, the project has followed rather different trajectories to those that tend to be traced in social practice art in which, as discussed above, artistic practices intervene in the social in order to apply art's transformative powers in concrete situations, and thus a recuperation of something that can be read as art eventually takes precedence in some shape or form. There is nothing wrong with the latter in principle, but it remains important to distinguish between different kinds of uses that are operative in both instances, which is the purpose of this section.

Tania Bruguera's proposition of Arte Útil, or useful art, can serve as a starting point to help outline the parameters of this investigation. Arte Útil exists as something of a movement, complete with a de-facto manifesto that lists eight criteria that a project needs to fulfil to be considered Arte Útil, such as 'propose new uses for art within society; […] use artistic thinking to challenge the field within which it operates; […] have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users' (Asociacion de Arte Útil nd: np); a website that hosts an archive cataloguing numerous works by artists associated with the movement; as well as affiliation with institutions such as the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and the Queens Museum in New York. Bruguera's (quoted in Thompson 2012: 21; original emphasis) well-known quips 'I don't want an art that points at a thing, I want an art that *is* the thing'; and 'it is time to put Duchamp's urinal back in the restroom' serve to highlight Arte Útil's antagonistic stance to the mimetic and representational functions of art, which are seen as detrimental to Arte Útil's emphatic commitment to real-world utility. As Bruguera (2012: np) states, 'For Art Útil, failure is not a possibility. If the project fails, it is not Art Útil'. Arte Útil's privileging of pragmatism is accompanied by an almost commonsensical assumption of the self-evident virtue of artists pursuing work of this kind. After all, if art, in principle, can be anything, then to direct this ontological indeterminacy towards beneficial social ends, and to utilise the funding, skills and support networks available to artists for the same, can easily appear as an unmitigated good. But on closer inspection, the situation is not quite that straightforward. Positioning usefulness as the main objective of artist practice brings up a number of problematics, two of which will be explored further in order to examine the questions brought up by the utilitarian commitments that motivate *Keep your promises*.

5.4.1 Antagonism and co-optation

One objection that raises its head at regular intervals turns on how artists' engagement in the social plays out in practice, in that the ameliorative impulse that motivates this kind of

work can easily be co-opted by state and business actors alike with an interest in concealing the destructive social consequences of their own policies or business practices. Social antagonisms are thus subdued with the help of well-meaning artists who however offer little more than a palliative that leaves the underlying contradictions intact. This is true for neoliberal governments dismantling social protections and then welcoming artists who through project-based work operate as cheaply hired substitutes temporarily filling in some of the gaping cracks left open in social support systems by austerity measures, something that Bishop (2012a: 5) calls 'a form of soft social engineering'. Operating on similar terrain on the side of business are, for example, 'artwashing' initiatives by property developers who hire artists to create works that provide a pacifying outlet for the fading histories and latent creativity of communities that are in the process of being displaced from their living environments by gentrification projects. This set of critiques points right at the heart of one of the main dilemmas that face many socially engaged practices, which is the latter's complicity to varying degrees with the very systems that their praxis seeks to (or claims to seek to) oppose. Still, it needs to be acknowledged that many socially engaged artists at the more activist end of the spectrum are very aware of this problem and actively work to develop ways to resist the pull of co-optation and complicity.

Work that deals with gentrification can provide illustrative examples of both the co-opted and oppositional stances. Stephen Pritchard (2016), for one, provides a critique of a series of artist projects run in the Elephant & Castle area in London, some of which were part-funded by property developers. In these, a group of artists made up of Eva Sajovic, Rebecca Davies and Sarah Butler produced works such as a book featuring ethnographic documentation—photographs and personal stories—of people who were about to be displaced by a large-scale regeneration project that took over the area, or a skills-exchange workshop in which local residents could teach each other creative and other practices. Descriptions of these projects by their makers are infused with terms such as 'place-making', 'communities', 'stakeholders', 'change', 'diversity' and 'resourcefulness', all of which are part and parcel of an idiom whose purpose it is to conceal social conflict under a veneer of interest in and concern for the populations who are at the receiving end of economic injustices perpetrated by the very agents who are funding and supporting the work. This then serves as a humane cover for what in essence are purely profit-driven business practices that uproot people's existences without giving them any meaningful agency in the process. On the other end of the scale can be found Los Angeles-based artist group Ultra-red's *School of Echoes*, which has brought together artists and housing

activists to join forces in the resistance to arts-led gentrification in the city. Here, as in the work on *Keep your promises*, artists collaborate directly with activists, motivated by concerns such as refusing co-optation, interrogating complicity, joining struggles, and reflecting on the need to choose priorities between individualistic artistic careers and the dismantling of oppressive structures (O'Brien, Sanchez Juarez and Marín 2017). The difference with 'artwashing' projects could not be starker, as in the second case artists not only take an oppositional stance towards the systemic violence of profit-driven urban regeneration projects as such, but also critically address art's tendency towards unwitting complicity in the same through the ways in which gentrification processes accelerate once galleries and art spaces move into an area. This kind of bipartite line of attack also plays out in *Keep your promises*, but on a different terrain. In the latter, the work itself provides direct support for labour activists, while through the disavowal of any primacy of artistic concerns that guides the collaboration process, hierarchies between intellectual and manual labour that are reinforced through art's institutional status are being contested as well, as will be returned to later.

5.4.2 Value and reproduction

The second problematic related to usefulness intersects with the first, but the argument here proceeds along more theoretical lines, on a terrain that encompasses Marxist, post-Marxist and feminist accounts related to value and social reproduction. This starts from the observation that usefulness as a category is bound up with the notion of use-value, which can be understood here in two opposing ways. On the one hand, as Larne Abse Gogarty (2017: 118) points out, in Arte Útil and social practice more generally, '"use value" [is] frequently posed as an undisputed moral good, and a category that might be wrested from its socio-economic relation to exchange value within capitalism'. In Marxist theory, value and, by extension, exchange value, price, is what reduces the multitude of qualitatively different labours and objects produced by labour to quantitative magnitudes that enter into comparison through the general equivalent, i.e. money. As a consequence, the entire capitalist edifice of competition, profit extraction and alienation of labour passes through the value-form, which provides the medium through which the former are articulated as concrete social realities. Under the domain of use-value, on the other hand, can be found everything that is flattened out and obscured by the abstraction of value: first and foremost, the materiality, the unique qualities and uses of particular commodities, and beyond this, the qualitative inflection of use-value also points towards the bodily,

social, historical, gendered or racialised aspects of the labour that has gone into their creation. Thus, the contention here is that a privileging of use-value, and usefulness more generally, allows for an escape from the alienating reign of the value-form.

Critical perspectives on use-value however point out that a liberation of use from exchange value, as has also been proposed by traditional socialist perspectives, only sets its aims at one aspect of the value-form and thus leaves intact the ways in which capital has transformed entire production processes in its drive for profit. Thus, even if the market wanes as the mediator of produced use-values in favour of a more equal distribution of the products of labour through the state or other forms of organisation, many of the hierarchies and relations of production, as well as the ways in which humans function as appendages of machinery, remain intact. What this then entails is a continuation of capitalist production in all but name, but under new management. Instead of this, proponents of currents such as value-form theory (Postone 1993) and communisation theory (Endnotes 2010) insist on an abolition of labour as it exists in both capitalist and state socialist forms in favour of a complete reorganisation of the ways in which the needs of social reproduction are met. This imaginary of work liberated from capitalist alienation can also be traced back through art history to a left aesthetic current that weaves its way from Kant via German Romanticism and Hegel through to Marx (Beech 2019; Martin 2009). The salience of art and the aesthetic as a cypher for life freed from the chains of the value-form however also has lost much of its lustre in contemporary conditions that Vishmidt (2019) refers to as the 'speculative mode of production', that is, the current stage of neoliberalism in which the explorative qualities of artistic work have become integrated into capitalist value production through the capture of creativity via 'creative industries' and the instrumentalisation of art in urban regeneration and social pacification projects alike.

Finally, a critique of use-value as it operates in social practice art also brings into play the category of reproductive labour as it has been developed in 1970s Italian Marxist feminism (Dalla Costa 2019; Fortunati [1981] 1995). Here, Abse Gogarty (2017) observes that the kinds of practices that are mobilised in Arte Útil projects tend to fall into the realm of reproductive labour: cooking, childcare, housing, education or support for unemployed populations, and the like. The questions that this raises cross over into the problematic of complicity discussed earlier, when Abse Gogarty points out that these activities often take on functions of social reproduction that have been left by the wayside by a retreating state. At the same time, the projects in question—through an affirmation of notions such as citizenship or civic institutions—display an uncritical attitude towards the oppressive

and exclusionary aspects of the same state, which tend to be meted out particularly on the marginalised populations who find themselves the beneficiaries of social practice art initiatives. Commenting on a project by the Austrian collective WochenKlausur that engaged with unemployed women in Glasgow through the founding of a workers' cooperative, Abse Gogarty (124) remarks that the artists end up in a situation of complicity with the interests of the same state that had abandoned their project's participants, by enabling the latter to 'make themselves less disposable in the eyes of the state and capital—along lines that conform to extremely violent and normative notions of usefulness'. As can be seen from this example and many others, the outwardly useful character of reproductive labour lends itself to co-optation if practices perform reproductive functions without a critique of their wider systemic role, which is precisely something that the debates on reproductive labour sought to initiate.

5.4.3 Situated analysis

These points demonstrate that beneath any calls for artist practice to make itself useful, a range of political effects are in operation that can expand into very different directions. What this calls for is a situated analysis that takes into account whose interests a practice openly and inadvertently serves, as well as the ways in which it succeeds or fails at mounting a critique of the forces that can turn artists into disciplinary agents of social regeneration on the terms of capital and the state. Such an analysis needs to identify moments of complicity and co-optation as they play out across practices as well as in their legitimating discourses, which means that notions of critical distance have to be taken beyond the realm of aesthetics and into politics, to allow for an exposition of the wider systemic entanglements of artist practices and art as a whole. It can hardly be denied that the latter strategy is liable to foreclose some avenues for the speculative open-endedness that is a corollary of art's resistance to instrumentalisation. But if, as in social practice art more broadly or Arte Útil specifically, artists deliberately embrace instrumentality, then the encounter with social praxis can also give rise to new forms of open-endedness, ones that can generate a speculative politics that resists co-optation on several levels. These forms however need to be critically examined and their radical potentials carefully cultivated, in order to avoid the many problems that can arise as a result of an unquestioning adherence to the creed of use.

A number of important aspects should be highlighted regarding how *Keep your promises* intervenes in this set of issues. For one, usefulness has operated here here not

along notions of civic responsibility or citizenship, but has evidently been put to work in opposition to the interests of capital. Thus, while it is important to consider the category of usefulness as it has been defined in relation to Arte Útil, it is equally crucial to distinguish this from how *Keep your promises* has played out in practice. The latter might be better understood within the framework of militant research, in which the uses that research is put to are explicitly counter-hegemonic, and this will be addressed in more detail below. In addition, what is meant above by a speculative politics that resists co-optation can be illustrated by considering the ways in which the project's modes of engagement also lay the ground for a critique of the distinct yet at the same time compromised position of art in the capitalist division of labour as the other of alienated, heteronomous forms of work. This critique is put in practice here through an engagement on equal terms with the resistant potentials of labour, through strategies such as dispersed authorship or the eschewal of any privileging of artistic concerns over those of workers and activists.

5.5 Divisions and un-divisions of labour and research

If the work on *Keep your promises* has been guided by the premise of prioritising activist concerns in shaping the course of the collaboration, an important aspect of this has been an accounting for the different positions that are made operative in a project of this kind—what above has been referred to as situated analysis. This brings up the question of enunciation: the place from which one speaks, about and to whom and how, are all crucial sites through which what is said is modulated in significant ways. This problem of speaking positions has been addressed by writers such as Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) or Linda Alcoff (1991). Both are critical of modes of speaking for and about others: Minh-ha (101) sees this as dwelling 'in the realm of fixed oppositions', while Alcoff is careful to point out that these positions are often necessary in order to articulate political alliances but nonetheless need to be carefully interrogated in terms of the epistemological claims, power relations and responsibilities towards others that they entail. Both writers also propose alternative relationalities through which speech can be articulated. For Minh-ha this is 'speaking nearby or together with'; here the nearness implies a certain affinity and kinship while also acknowledging the never quite complete congruence of different positions. For Alcoff (23), following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'speaking with or to' is the position one should generally aspire to, as this 'allows for the possibility that the oppressed will produce a "countersentence" that can then suggest a new historical narrative'. The differences here are subtle; like Minh-ha, Alcoff acknowledges that differences

in terms of privilege and authority cannot simply be wished away, but her proposal underscores dialogical elements and a more outwardly political commitment to an alignment with the struggles of those whom one's speech engages with.

Approaching the situated analysis of this project by interrogating the position one speaks from brings into play the figure that is located at the root of this entire enterprise: that of the artist-researcher. Artistic research could be seen to avoid some of the pitfalls of more formalised modes of academic inquiry, as the former tends to already come equipped with critical epistemologies and theories of representation. But, as has been shown above, hierarchies between modes of inquiry and enunciation, as well as instrumentalisation of participants can still enter through different crevices. A central concern in *Keep your promises* has been to seek to expose and undo such tendencies, and there are two intersecting paths through which the process of this undoing can be contextualised: one has to do with critiques of the position of research in relation to non-institutionalised forms of knowledge, which has been the subject of debate particularly at the intersection between the social sciences and activism as well as in movements for decolonisation; the second is a reading of how the project has engaged with issues of class and the division between manual and intellectual labour.

5.5.1 Militant research and decolonisation

As a first step towards (dis-)locating the subjective positions assumed in *Keep your promises*, the notion of research as militant praxis can be put to work as something of a prism through which to refract questions on the research process of this project as it has played out in practice and the decentering of the authorial position that has transpired in the process. Militant research proposes an epistemology in which the analytical distance between researcher and research subject is collapsed in favour of a non-hierarchical sense of shared investigation and mutual learning, in which subject positions are contingent, affective entanglements take precedent over theoretical consistency, and the objective is not to arrive at any abstract model but instead to inhabit situated, processual knowledge through praxis and political commitment. In relation to this, the *Militant research handbook* (Bookchin et al. 2013: 4), describes militant research as 'the place where academia and activism meet in the search for new-ways [sic] of acting that lead to new ways of thinking' and, via Native American activist Andrea Smith, quotes a programmatic statement by Julie Vaughn that upends conventional hierarchies of knowledge production: 'You don't think your way into a different way of acting; you act your way into a

different way of thinking'. The Argentinian Colectivo Situaciones (2007: 81) who, on the other hand, work entirely outside of academia, describe research militancy as 'not the name of the experience of someone who does research but that of the production of (an) encounter(s) without subject(s) or, if you prefer, of (an) encounter(s) that produce(s) subject(s)'. Marta Malo de Molina (2006: np; original emphasis) lists a number of characteristics that militant research shares with its predecessors, such as institutional analysis or participatory action research: (1) 'a strong *materialist* inspiration', that is, a commitment to the primacy of concrete reality, action and practice over theory; (2) an emphasis on the body over abstract theory: 'thought is always situated, implicated, taking *a side*'; (3) an awareness 'that all new knowledge production affects and modifies the bodies and subjectivities of those who have participated in the process'; and (4) a priority of 'goals and processes over any kind of formalized method'.

Thus, the knowledge arrived at through militant research is embedded in and committed to supporting activist struggles, is not meant to be codified but *lived*, and brings with it a responsibility to set aside pre-conceived subject positions in order to allow a process of open-ended discovery to unfold, a process whose effects extend down to a remodelling of the subjectivities that are involved. Much of this certainly rings true for the ways in which the artistic research in *Keep your promises* has unfolded, in that its trajectory was determined by an open-ended process that has privileged the requirements of activists over artistic or research concerns, in the ways in which this has engendered a retreat from authorial control in favour of a commitment to practiced solidarity, and through the extent to which this process has foregrounded lived encounters, interpersonal relationships and the development of trust.

Militant research shares common ground with other critical epistemologies such as those of decolonisation, as both assume an antagonistic stance towards established sites and hierarchies of knowledge production, as well as towards conceptions of knowledge as objective property that can be separated from the subjects within which it is situated, the context from which it emerges and the interests of those in whose name it has been created. In her writings on decolonising methodologies, Linda Tuwihai Smith ([1999] 2012: 58) names *distance* as a key concept that links such issues as the figure of the individual as separate from the community, the practice of colonialism as rule from afar, and the presumption of the possibility of objective knowledge removed from its context. The approach suggested by Smith to counter these reifications is what she calls *community research.* Here the focus is on process and the requirement that 'the community itself

makes its own definitions' (129), as well as on the acknowledgement 'that people know and can reflect on their own lives, have questions and priorities of their own, and have skills or sensitivities that can enhance (or undermine) any community based projects' (130). Smith also points out that the input needed for projects of this kind can be enormous for 'impoverished communities or communities under stress' (141). As a consequence, it is important for researchers to ask questions about issues such as who gets to define research problems, whom research is relevant for, what knowledge communities and researchers will gain, what likely positive and negative outcomes will occur, or whom the researcher is accountable to (175–176).

Smith's critique focuses on how indigenous peoples have been and still are being encountered by researchers in highly problematic ways, but the issues raised here are just as relevant for a project in which artistic research engages precarious workers. One important difference that needs to be addressed is a shift of the frame of reference from the relationship between coloniser and colonised to that between artist and worker.

5.5.2 Approaching art and class via decolonising militancy

As has been outlined above, notwithstanding calls for artists to identify themselves as 'art workers', the class position of artists is different to that of waged workers, and accounting for this difference is crucial for being able to articulate the critique of the hierarchy between manual and intellectual labour that *Keep your promises* proposes. This necessitates a reassessment of some of the claims made by proponents of militant research, as issues of class in many ways run counter to the de-centering and deterritorialising aspects emphasised by Colectivo Situaciones in particular. There is a danger with calls for desubjectivations of this kind to bring about a disavowal of pre-existing differences in a research project. Class is determined not by subject positions but by social contradictions that persist outside any collaboration and that serve to frame any collaborative process from the outset. This difference is a central issue that *Keep your promises* negotiates without attempting to subdue it: the solidarities that are activated here deliberately work across the inequities immanent to the division between manual and intellectual labour, with art on one side and precarious workers on the other. There are no pretensions here that a project of this kind could simply overcome this division, but the implied hierarchy between the two sides is upended through giving precedence to the needs of workers. This echoes commitments to the primacy of concrete reality from militant research, as well as Smith's assertion that people have and know their own priorities, and that

communities' agency to arrive at their own definitions is crucial. What this also takes into account is the question of whose interests research serves, and the need to take into consideration the additional pressures research can put on participants: rather than make demands on workers' or activists' time, the practice in *Keep your promises* has served to support the work of the IWGB. Thus, the question of usefulness addressed earlier can be transposed to a different register by substituting notions from militant research such as subjective commitment, priority of goals and processes, and a willingness to take sides, for the category of use.

In addition, the choice to expand beyond the fields of art and academia where the activism of the artistic precariat plays out has been deliberate, with the intention of avoiding the inescapable constraints of self-referentiality that are part and parcel of institutional self-critique. This is not meant to deny the need for critical engagement with art and academia's own relations of production but does seek to propose that a commitment to opposing exploitative labour conditions does not need to stop at the gates of the aforementioned institutions. What is being called upon here is in proximity to Gerald Raunig's (2009) notion of *instituent practice* as something of an institutional critique writ large, which in this case serves to also problematise art's complicity in the capitalist division of labour in a wider, structural sense. This is the terrain on which *Keep your promises* has sought to stake its critical claims, a move which has in turn given rise to the project's ambiguous position in that it is not quite art, but at the same time also refuses to not be art.

There is an additional kind of institutional critique operative here, based on art's position as the exception within capitalism and also on its preferred modes of enunciation. This returns the discussion to the argument above in which the propositions regarding what separates art from other social activities put forward by advocates of both social practice art and the neo-avant-garde have been probed. What needs to be recalled are the contentions that in *Keep your promises* it is the social that defamiliarises art and that autonomy is operative here against the prohibition of art merging with social life. The analysis can be broadened at this point by considering the form and content of the videos that have been made, their direct mode of address and their unapologetic commitment to utility. What has already been discussed are the ways in which these videos never attempt to fully be art and how their process of production has sought to destabilise hierarchies between intellectual and manual labour. To this should now be added an additional negation, this time aimed at how capital, through imbibing the 'artistic critique', has turned an appeal to creativity into one of its own methods of subjugation of labour. *Keep*

your promises defies capital's interpellation to 'be creative' by instead setting its sights on being *effective* in concrete struggles, in which ends justify the means of activism to be given precedence over those of art. This gives rise to a deliberately instrumentalised practice that in turn operates as a practical critique of creative capitalism: art-work that is not artwork emerges here as a model for artistic counter-production.

Moreover, not all labour has been given the privilege to have its toil made more endurable through the incorporation of prospects for creative expression; quite the contrary is the case with many of the most insecure and low-paid jobs. By extension, appeals to creativity or artistic preoccupations such as reflexivity might not find their most receptive audience in workers who are in a position of having to fight to defend basic rights and demand fair treatment. There is thus a danger to be avoided, with artistic research crossing over into working with precarious labour, of workers being cast into the role of extras in a project whose ultimate function turns out to be artistic self-realisation and career advancement. In this respect, *Keep your promises* also puts forward a positive proposition: this is brought about by voicing concerns and demands of workers directly in a form that is functional in real-life struggles, by not treating the artist's position as the locus of privileged knowledge or action, and by allowing workers to have issues communicated on their terms rather than have them refracted through the interpretative apparatus of art. Besides the notions brought in from militant and decolonising research, Shannon Jackson's (2011: 31) highlighting of the infrastructural operations that make performance and collaborative art possible ring true in this context: Jackson maps an aesthetics of the social that acknowledges the fact that support needs to come 'from below' to counteract gravity, the latter of which can be understood in the present case as the pull of precarity and its threat of wreaking devastation on the lives of those with little or no social protection. This returns the discussion to the proposal for an autonomy that problematises art's sense of its own autonomy, which could be encapsulated here in a slightly repurposed statement by artist Andrea Fraser (1994: np): 'If we are always already serving, artistic freedom can only consist in determining for ourselves—to the extent that we can—who and how we serve. This is, I think, the only course to a less contradictory principle of autonomy'.

5.6 Findings

In the work discussed in this chapter, what has emerged through collaborating with labour rights activists on the production of a series of activist videos is a practice that is not art yet refuses not to be art. This is meant to indicate that these videos, while unambiguous in their purpose, content and aesthetics, still lend themselves to being read through the conceptual apparatuses of various forms of art that cross into the social. What has been demonstrated through this, it is hoped, is that the videos that have been created for *Keep your promises* function as more than simply activism in the social field and more than simply documentation or nominalist art when shown in a gallery context. Admittedly, when considered as artefacts in themselves, these interpretations might in fact suggest themselves in the first instance. But the crucial point is that the project proposes a sociality of practice that, as it were, autonomises art from the rigid confines that its conventional readings of autonomy condemn it to, and through this allows for more than a gestural negation of art's complicity in the division of labour under capitalism.

In relation to the original research questions, the practice in *Keep your promises* has brought into play a set of issues that the practices discussed earlier had not managed to address: this part of the project has engaged with questions of political representation, solidarity and organising and ways for artistic practice to contribute to these; of narrowing the gap between the represented and those doing the representation; and of intervention in the material conditions of liquid labour and how this might relate to artist practice.

The fact that none of the referents brought in from art theory and history to inform the discussion in this chapter have been found to adequately account for what transpired in this practice can be seen as a challenge to the discourses surrounding fields such as social practice art or Arte Útil: rather than concerning themselves with how to account for their practices as art, a more productive question might be to ask how these practices speak to the field of art and its legitimating discourses, what blind spots and contradictions come to the fore in art's encounter with the social. This does not preclude reflection on particular artistic means and methods that might have been mobilised and how these can allow for more open-ended forms of engagement with the social. More than this, however, what should be at stake is to ask how a practice might question certain assumptions that art as it exists today is embedded in, in the sense that it is not only art

that defamiliarises the social, but also the encounter with the social that defamiliarises art, as it was put earlier in this chapter. It is true that many of the practices brought up in the earlier discussion take a step in this direction, for example, by renouncing art's resistance to real-world utility. But to abandon the analysis once this has been established leaves open many questions. This is the point at which the notion of situated analysis as it is developed in this thesis comes in: this necessitates paying attention to the structural privileges and effects that the position of artist or artist-researcher carries in a specific context, and then working in a way that is first and foremost concerned with counteracting these inequities. Insights from militant research and decolonising methodologies have been found to be particularly helpful in this context, augmented by an analysis of the difference in class positions at work in this project. What has been found is that aspects such as renunciation of authorship, prioritising of activist concerns, transversal solidarity and the direct mode of address of the resulting videos can serve to destabilise art and the artist's privileged position in the capitalist division of labour.

While the activist approach followed here could be seen as a repudiation of the methods discussed in earlier chapters, a more productive point of view would suggest that the relationship in which the two parts stand to each other is both complementary and antagonistic. In this sense, they could be seen as opposite poles on a spectrum along which many hybrid kinds of practices are possible. One end of this range would then take the form of practices that confine themselves to representational strategies, while at the other end can be found activist praxis that disregards many of the tenets that are generally considered to be part and parcel of art-making. From this follows that notwithstanding the fact that the argument in this chapter has mounted some sustained critiques of many of the presumptions of art as it exists within capitalism, the promises that art carries for a life less ruled by the yoke of instrumentality and profit, and for an openness towards ambiguity and reflexivity are not to be disregarded. This still leaves the field open for practices in which qualities such as open-ended exploration or critical distance take centre stage. In the final instance, the argument in this chapter is thus not meant to be read as a call to abandon art, even in its more representational forms, but rather as an assertion that exclusively working on the latter is not enough if art is to practice any kind of emancipatory politics in relation to concrete, situated social conditions.

Conclusion

This project began with a proposal for exploring ways in which artistic research methods can be mobilised for a critical investigation of digital platform labour and its political economy. The initial research questions were concerned with the representation of a workforce that is dispersed and atomised, with possible transversal solidarities between artists and precarious workers, and with modes of critique that can counter ideological constructs whose function it is to normalise exploitative labour practices. With this, the research sought to address a paucity of critical engagement with class issues in existing artist projects that had engaged with digital platform labour up to this point.

The project's trajectory has followed three distinct but related paths, each of which has given rise to the development of a corresponding methodological framework. The starting point lies with critical practices that interrogate the production of neoliberal subjectivity through a series of interventionist projects that employ digital labour platforms as their artistic medium. This initial framing allowed for the creation of a number of artworks but required expansion in the first instance to account for the fact that both subjectivity and labour exist in and through bodies, and it is precisely this corporeal aspect that is easily obscured behind imaginaries of digital labour, digital networks and the like. Thus the second path of the research-practice shifted its attention to the body, in the spirit of a materialist grounding of labour as an embodied activity. This again was explored by setting in motion the creation of a number of interventionist artworks, while at the same time a third direction of the research took shape that in turn arose as a form of practice-based critique of the preceding two. The latter set out to question premises of critical art practice on a more foundational level by destabilising the implied hierarchies between the intellectual labour of the artist and the manual labour of others, through a collaborative practice in which the demands of workers and activists have been prioritised. These methodological steps have thus advanced through a series of critiques, in which open questions that emerged in one part of the project were answered by the development of a new direction of practice that gave rise to a new methodological framing and a new set of questions. Although much of the work on the different strands has happened in parallel, there has been a gradual shift in emphasis from the former to the latter as the project progressed.

Review of the research

To lay the groundwork for this itinerary, the contextual review in chapter 1 begins by laying out a brief prehistory that charts some of the first appearances of labour as a subject in art under capitalism, early examples of artist unions, and the emergence of post-Fordist production. The following two sections introduce some of the notions around which both labour activism and critical art practices have converged in response to developments under post-Fordism: in particular, the post-*operaist* notions of immaterial labour and the social factory as well as the activism of the precariat are put in context with artistic developments in which interpersonal encounters and project-based work move centre stage. These concepts are then subjected to a number of critiques that in turn inform various parts of the practice discussed in later chapters. After this comes an overview of the many problematic aspects of digital platform labour put forward in the sociological literature, as well as an analysis of a number of artists' works that have engaged with this field in a range of ways. In relation to the latter, what becomes apparent is that the paucity of class-based critique has continued by and large since the beginning of this research, with exception of the work of Alina Lupu among the artists under discussion here.

The methodology developed in the course of this project is examined in chapter 2. This begins with an outline of the initial research questions that motivated this inquiry, followed by an elaboration of the study's research paradigm in its ontological and epistemological aspects, with particular attention paid to the relevance of issues of class and positionality in this context. An outline of the two main strands of the research—critical interventionist work and collaboration with activists—comes next, including a project timeline and an indication of possible avenues for research that were not followed, with reasons given for why this has been the case. The chapter finishes with an explanation of the notion of situated analysis as it has been developed in this project and an outline of the different procedures employed to gain consent from research participants.

The practice-based journey begins in chapter 3, in which different levels on which the construction of neoliberal subjectivity operates in digital platform labour are investigated through a series of artworks, chief of which is the intervention *Work hard dream big* on the platform Fiverr. While this piece in the first instance puts forward a number of critiques of neoliberal governmental reason and its inflections in digital platform work, it also encompasses many of the elements of the initial methodology that has been developed

for this project. This is fourfold: firstly, the practice here consists of interventions that have sought to devise ways of using the existing functionalities of digital labour platforms as media for creating artist works that propose forms of critical engagement with the same platforms. Secondly, these interventions were not always met with the most enthusiastic response from platforms, and moments of friction or blockage have been used as points of departure for further interventions. The third methodological principle has been a critical positioning of the practice that has sought to stay close to the interests of workers, to be unambiguous in its political commitment. Finally, the fourth aspect has been to employ different variants of delegated performance as a practical method. Not all of these methods apply in equal measure to each of the projects discussed in chapter 3, but overall, they have given rise to a framework in which the socio-technical assemblage that defines the area of research, the digital labour platform, is turned into the medium through which the research is being conducted, in tandem with ongoing reflection on the practice and contextualisation with theoretical currents.

The use of delegated performance in this methodology has always encompassed paying the workers involved more or less the standard rate that would be expected on the platform in question. This has, on the one hand, served to acknowledge that notwithstanding declared solidarities, there are important differences between the positions of artist and worker in a project of this kind that need to be accounted for. In addition, a certain measure of complicity with the platform assemblage is unavoidable here: workers are still hired and paid in the same ways they would be for other kinds of work. On the other hand, these delegated performances, in combination with the critical commitment to speaking close to the concerns of workers, have also necessitated considerations regarding how the workers whose labour has been mobilised in the process could be assigned at least some agency in the artworks that emerged from this, as opposed to simply being presented as passive victims of exploitation. Still, the clear division between myself as the artist who devises and carries out these projects, and the workers who contribute their responses to particular tasks invariably persists here. These points highlight an irresolvable tension between solidarity and complicity that has played out in this part of the practice. This tension is interesting in its own right, as paying attention to it allows some of for the power dynamics at work both in this kind of artistic production and in digital platform labour more widely to be articulated, and the works discussed in chapters 3 and 4 have sought to consciously inhabit the contradictions at play here. But this also gives rise to a constraint within which the same dynamic ends up being reiterated over

and over in different variations, and the positions of artist and worker become reified to some extent. This is what *Keep your promises*, the work discussed in chapter 5, sought eventually to break out of.

Returning to chapter 3, the combination of methods developed here has allowed the practice to move across a range of themes related to the production of neoliberal subjectivity in digital platform labour, ranging from subjective entrepreneurial interpellation to outsourcing, dividual and machinic aspects, disciplinary surveillance, and forms of minor resistance that are interjected within platforms' workings. The issues that are brought into view here have been articulated, interpreted, questioned, destabilised through interventionist methods, iterative processes and theoretical investigation. The reflections that have transpired in the process have led to the development of a new concept that transposes Foucault's theory of power to the relations of production in digital platform labour—the superconductor—which now serves as the overall framework under which the research conducted for this project is being collected.

The research in chapter 4 begins from the premise that to focus entirely on a critique of models of subjectivity runs the risk of playing the game of the digital platform on its own terms by prioritising dematerialised aspects at the expense of everything else. What is proposed as a corrective is a refocusing of attention on labour as an embodied practice that materialises as a kind of precipitation from the cloud that is transposed, at least in some instances, into the idiom of the perspiration of the body. In terms of methodology, many aspects developed in the previous chapter have been continued here, with the main adjustment being the re-centering of attention on embodiment. From this, the practice has developed in several directions. Firstly, *Sweat, data and liquid assets* broaches somewhat ethnographic terrain, but with its collection of slightly off-kilter accounts of embodied experiences of microwork and images of parts of the body, the project serves to defamiliarise documentary approaches while at the same time putting forward a counter-narrative to the abstraction enacted by the platform in its concealment of the labouring body. A much cruder rematerialisation of the digital in platform labour transpires in *Fromage faux frais (of production)*, and the visceral discomfort engendered by the idea as much as the physical presence of cheese created from sweat is mobilised here with the aim of unsettling imaginaries of immateriality in the most unequivocal terms. The final two works discussed in the chapter move on to the issue of affect as an embodied experience, in these cases mostly to do with ennui and anxiety, and with the intrasubjective management of the same in precarious work, the ways in which conflicting affects

need to be disciplined within the labouring subject. The peculiar affective immediacy of listening to extended recordings of evidently performed laughter that has been part of the creation of *Workers laughing alone for money* has led the practice to again coalesce into a new concept, that of auto-affective labour, which brings together theories of affective labour with Derrida's notion of *auto-affection*.

Chapter 5 proposes a more radical methodological shift in response to questions that had been left open by the other parts of the practice. This in particular relates to the sense of impasse mentioned earlier by which different projects, despite the array of processes that had been deployed, have remained confined within a dialectic of complicity and solidarity and a reiteration of the differences in position between the artist-researcher and platform workers, leaving any meaningful route towards destabilising the same foreclosed. The shifts in the practice that gave rise to the video series *Keep your promises* sought to address this, through direct collaboration with labour activists, relinquishment of authorial control, and a de-privileging of artistic concerns in favour of interpersonal encounters and practiced solidarity. While this expanded framework has helped to address many of the unresolved issues that beset other strands of the practice, it In turn has thrown open a whole raft of new questions, particularly in relation to how this kind of work operates in the context of an artistic research project. What has had to be avoided here in the first instance has been to simply confine this practice to the realm of the extra-artistic, or conversely to subsume it under the category of art with a simple nominalist gesture. Instead, *Keep your promises* has first been read through the conceptual apparatus of art theory, particularly in relation to art forms that cross the boundary between artist practice and social praxis, and then interpreted in relation to notions of militant and decolonial research, as well as the relations of art and labour under capitalism. In the process, the concept of artistic autonomy has been repurposed to allow for a conception of a practice that is not art, yet at the same time refuses to not be art, with the ultimate aim of undoing art's assumed position as a privileged site of knowledge and interpretation, thus unsettling the hierarchy between intellectual and manual labour that art is inexorably bound up with within capitalism.

Limitations of the research

With its stated intentions of applying artistic research methods to the field of digital platform labour, this project has focused on experimenting, testing out different approaches, reflecting on what transpired in the process and letting this inform future approaches in an iterative development. What the research has not engaged in is empirical information-gathering as such, whether through methods such as participant interviews, auto-ethnography, labour process research or workers' inquiry, with the reasoning behind this decision explained in chapter 2. Instead, emphasis has been placed on devising strategies for creative intervention within platform structures that through their processes of creation and through the resulting artefacts speak to several levels, including subjectivity, embodiment, affect, machinic structures and my own position as artist-researcher in relation to my field of study, while the work with labour rights activists has brought to the fore questions of the relation between artist practice and activist praxis. A different research design could have taken empirical research methods as its starting point, and following this approach could have led to subsequent practice developed based on the gathered information, either by using the data itself as artistic material, or by letting the data inform subsequent approaches to practice. This approach would have carried the potential of overcoming the difficulties of engaging in a sustained way with workers on remote digital platforms encountered during this research.

The interventionist methods employed here also faced limitations in terms of political agency: this kind of work can be successful in terms of making contradictions sensible, but it faces a much more difficult task when it comes to proposing ways of undermining these. With the different kinds of platform architectures and of labour that is being mediated through these, an alternative approach focused on a single platform might allow for sites of contestation to be identified, which could then lead to the development of practical strategies that work towards improving the conditions of workers in concrete instances. This strategy could also be helped by collaboration with software engineers, given the technologically mediated nature of the work, as has occurred, for example, with the development of the browser plugin *Turkopticon* as mentioned in chapter 1.

In the work with labour rights activists, a limitation that the project encountered has been limited enthusiasm for engaging with creative approaches that exceed the direct communication of activist videos. This doubtlessly has to do with the time pressures

faced by precarious workers and activists engaged in fighting for workers' rights and with their prioritising of spending the time that they have available on projects such as short-form videos that have a clear benefit to currently active campaigns. This also raises questions regarding the extent to which artistic pursuits of reflexivity, open-endedness or the discomforting humour employed in some works created as part of this research can engage the everyday lived concerns of precarious workers, questions which have been addressed in the analysis in chapter 5. These contentions notwithstanding, the salient issue in this context might be one of devising imaginative approaches that could speak to both artistic and activist concerns.

Finally, the videos produced for the IWGB were made on a voluntary basis, which was made possible by the research grant that funded this study. This should not obscure the fact that video production is also work, moreover work that is often carried out under conditions of precarious employment.

Wider implications

Besides the particular issues that individual projects have investigated, one of the most interesting aspects of the methodology proposed at the outset have been the different tensions that it has given rise to, between the position of the artist and that of workers, between solidarity and complicity, between subjectivity and embodiment. These fault lines mirror the wider contradictions of labour under capitalism, and forms of critical-analytical practice, as initially proposed, can be useful for exploring these. There is some shared terrain here with sociological and theoretical research that investigates systemic issues, and what artist practice can contribute in addition to investigating problematics with its own tools and modes of enunciation is to hold the contradictions that arise in the process in place and inhabit them in all their affective, anxious, leaky qualities. However, the limitations of such strategies manifest in their inability to propose ways in which these antinomies might be superseded. A whole different set of questions comes to the fore once artist practice leaves the confines of detached criticality and seeks to inhabit the same space as those whom it speaks to, for or with. The contention here is that in such an encounter, through the questions of positions, privileges, sites of knowledge and political commitments that are mobilised, it is not so much art that defamiliarises the social, but first and foremost the social that needs to defamiliarise art, in order to allow art practice not only to reflect on, but to confront through lived praxis, the contradictions inherent

in its own conditions of production. This is what the notion of situated analysis, as it has been developed for this project, has sought to home in on.

What this means is that if artists want to be serious about their political commitments, it might be necessary at times to embrace forms of practice that through their very ontology resist recuperation as specifically artistic endeavours. This is not a call to abandon art altogether and instead occupy the barricades, nor is it meant to advocate for the kind of nominalism in which artists simply declare any activism that they engage in to be art. The non-instrumentality as well as the propensity for open-endedness, ambiguity and reflexiveness that are characteristic of art still can give rise to a space where imaginaries of how society could be otherwise can be constructed. A project such as *Keep your promises* also proposes such an imaginary, and the important point is to assess its workings from the position of an expanded sense of artistic practice that is open to incursions beyond nominally artistic activities, allowing for a critique of art's own antinomies through an encounter with activism.

In relation to working with remote digital labour platforms specifically, the practice has come up against some difficulties when it comes to establishing sustained relationships with workers that could have been developed into proposals for developing collectivities and solidarities, due to the barriers put in place by restrictive platform architectures, the intensive monitoring of all communications conducted through platforms and the draconian and often inscrutable ways in which rules are enforced. Developing work in this direction could benefit from a combination of recruiting participants outside platform structures and an initial orientation of the research towards more empirical methods of information-gathering rather than the interventionist methods pursued in the case of this research.

Future directions

Some of the conceptual tools developed and the directions of research touched upon in parts of this project point towards possible routes for further investigation. This is the case for the notion of situated analysis as discussed in the preceding section. In addition, this includes the figure of the superconductor, which suggests a Foucauldian analysis of power as it plays out through the subjective-machinic assemblages of digital capitalism such as the digital labour platform, augmented by the notion of the dividual as explored in chapter 3. Furthermore, the concept of auto-affective labour calls for investigation of the

intrasubjective aspects of affective labour, the disciplining of affect within the subject, particularly when working in isolation. Finally, the attention paid to embodied experience in online microwork for *Sweat, data and liquid assets* suggests empirical research that could be undertaken in this area, with new materialism as a possible theoretical reference as suggested in chapter 4.

In relation to the research overall and the issues that have been explored throughout this project in relation to artist practice, this project has been described above as operating at two poles between which lies a whole spectrum of other possible practices that combine representational or interventionist with activist modes in myriad ways. Considering how artist practice can engage with precarious labours outside its own sphere, the possibilities are wide open for exploring how these combinations might work out in practice. One possible route for addressing this could be a project that begins with empirical inquiry which in turn informs artist practice, as has been suggested earlier. This would mean first collecting data through methods such as participant interviews, auto-ethnography or workers' inquiry, with subsequent artistic inquiry that takes the data collected in the initial phase as its point of departure. This approach has not been followed in this project for reasons given in chapter 2; still, with a carefully laid out research design and attention paid to issues of positionality, it could yield very interesting results.

A second possibility would be to begin with activist work and gradually take this forward into more open-ended directions, and this is an approach that would suggest itself for a continuation of this project, since the initial step of this process already is well underway in the present case. Since the work with activists in this project has entailed the creation of a number of short-form activist videos, this practice could be expanded on by creating longer-form video work that speaks to more than the immediate concerns of a particular campaign. This could open the research to a practice that addresses questions of political representation at the same time as it explores issues of aesthetic representation.

The relations and tensions between these two kinds of representation in activist video work also lends itself to a comparative study of the approaches taken by practitioners invested in different fields of activity, the fields of art and activism. Questions of where one locates the politics of a practice, of the role played by aesthetic exploration and experimentation, or of an openness towards ambiguity, perhaps even opacity, can be interpreted very differently by practitioners whose primary field of activity is art to those whose

main concern is political activism. Research on existing practices and interviews with practitioners could inform a study in which implicit assumptions operative in either field would be queried, and the identified strengths as well as blind spots of different approaches would be brought into conversation with one another, leading to suggestions for new directions in practice.

The central questions to take forward will be how the non-hierarchical commitments of *Keep your promises* could be extended into a practice that is bound to reintroduce questions of authorship and critical reflexivity to some extent. New methodological proposals will need to be developed for this, and it is likely that new contradictions will make themselves known. The insights gained from the work and reflection on *Keep your promises* will inform new strategies for addressing the latter. For the time being, the only thing that can be said with certainty about the work that needs to be done is this: there's no app for that.

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