

**The Body Under Capitalism:
To what extent has the dichotomy between the body and the workforce
intensified since the inception of the performance art movement?**

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Fine Art Critical Practice

2020/21

University of Brighton

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Introduction

The relationship between the body and labour has been explored within the art world, particularly through the medium of performance since the 1960s. The dichotomy within a piece of work, especially a work that claims to be anti-capitalist or anti-commodification, is created when the medium used, the body, is the same as the one commodified under capitalism. According to Marx, ‘labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity’, and thus the use of the human body in other forms of labour, such as in creating an artwork, is in and of itself a commodity too.¹ A key component of performance in the 1960s and '70s was ‘to serve as an alternative to the work of art as commodity’, but how could this be so, taking into account the previous Marxist reference?² We have thus found ourselves a paradox; the very thing used to rid art of commodity, the human body, becomes the most commodifiable thing within the workforce. This dichotomy has taken many forms since the 1960s, such as artists taking up non-art jobs (sometimes in the aim of research and sometimes because of economic necessity), a mass of hired performers emulating a workforce, and the documentation of existing workforces.

As capitalism has evolved, so has the relationship between the body and the workforce. The art market, labour and indeed our bodies are not the same as when the performance movement began. While many of the issues addressed share common veins (political unrest, objectification, exploitation and commodification) the fact that a medium so intrinsic to a movement that happened over fifty years ago is still in action today attests to both its potency, and the intensity of the issues it addresses. What is it about the use of the body that has remained effective in conveying such a variety of contexts? How has this medium evolved, just as society has? And can it be argued that the dichotomy between the body and the workforce has become more intense as time has gone on, climaxing in its recent depictions? In the following exploration, I will be looking at five artists, dating from Stuart Brisley to Mika Rottenberg, and the ways in which these artists have used the body to explore its use under capitalism, as well as focusing on the varying ethical practices within which such pieces have been made. By comparing the body’s use in artworks made fifty years ago to contemporary artworks, I will address the questions above and establish how the body’s use under capitalism has intensified.

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, Reprint, (London: Penguin Classics, [1967] 2014), 332.

² Philip Auslander, “Going with the Flow: Performance Art and Mass Culture,” *The Drama Review* 33.2 (1989), 119.

‘Qu’est-ce que l’art? Prostitution.’

The 1960s saw the inception of the performance art movement, in many respects borne out of the work of Allan Kaprow’s ‘Happenings’.³ According to Linda Frye Burnham, founder of the *High Performance* magazine, ‘performance surfaced [...] in response to the ‘60s art market boom, providing artists with something to sell which had nothing to do with objects.’⁴ Performance artists were looking to diverge from the art market’s commodification, and thus, finding no solace from this market in objects, turned to their own bodies as medium, performance in essence answering ‘a need to bring the human figure back into art.’⁵ While in its pioneering era performance art ‘was to serve as an alternative to the work of art as commodity’, some critics would argue its most key element to be that ‘all performance art [...] evidenced a deconstructive intent.’^{6 7} “Deconstructive of what?” might be the following question. The answer is twofold; on the one hand, the immaterial form of performance could be said to be destructive of the art market. Alternatively, on an arguably grander scale, the use of the body is deconstructive of capitalism in its current form. The following chapter will take a look at two artists, Stuart Brisley and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who represent different facets of the body’s use both within the art world and under capitalism.

³ Kirstie Beaven, “Performance Art: The Happening,” *Tate Online* [n.d].

⁴ Linda Frye Burnham, “‘High Performance,’ Performance Art, and Me,” *The Drama Review* 30.1 (1986), 20.

⁵ Burnham, “‘High Performance,’ Performance Art, and Me”, 20.

⁶ Auslander, “Going with the Flow”, 119.

⁷ Jeanie Forte, “Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism,” *Theatre Journal* 40.2 (1988), 217.



Figure 1. Stuart Brisley. *Artist as Whore*. Documentation of Performance. 1972. <http://www.stuartbrisley.com>



Figure 2. Stuart Brisley. *Poly Wheel*. 212 Chairs Circle. Hille Furniture Factory. 1970. <http://www.stuartbrisley.com>

Stuart Brisley

Stuart Brisley, referred to as the ‘godfather of British performance art’, explored the relationship between artistic practice and labour through the medium of the body.⁸ In his 1972 performance *Artist as Whore*, Brisley explores the position of an artist ‘as a complicit partner in the marketplace.’⁹ As can be seen in Figure 1, *Artist as Whore* consisted of the artist on a bed, wearing ‘a dirty looking white shirt with some faded stains on it’, a pair of jeans with ‘the crotch area liberally stained from red to brownish black’ and the artist’s head ‘painted a mid grey tone’, which had the effect of ‘reducing the naturalism of the figure’.¹⁰ *Artist as Whore* contained scenes of ‘bodily activity’, such as ‘slow, intimate’ actions, seduction and incontinence.¹¹ The juxtaposition of these raw bodily functions, the sensual and the repulsive, represent capitalism’s farce of seduction beneath which lies the defilement imposed on workers, linking to Marxist theory of Alienation, within which ‘the division of labour caused workers to become degraded or dehumanized’.¹² The title of this work conjures a memory of Baudelaire’s answer to the nature of art: ‘Qu’est-ce que l’art? Prostitution.’ (‘What is art? Prostitution.’)¹³ The comparison between artist and sex worker is palpable, seeing as artists use their bodies to create pleasure for others, but have been misrepresented and exploited for their talents throughout history. As Julia Bryan-Wilson explores in “Dirty Commerce, Art Work and Sex Work”, ‘sex acts performed for money are associated with artistic exchange.’¹⁴ She goes on to draw the parallel directly to performance artist, ‘the prostitute, like the performance artist who generates no salable object [...] encapsulates the instability of the commodity object and the uncertainty of forms of worthwhile labour’.¹⁵ The relationship between performer and sex worker has often become somewhat indistinguishable, such as in the work of Karen Finley. Jeanie Forte described Finley’s work, likely *Yams Up my Grannie’s Ass (1986)*, as becoming ‘re-inscribed in the fetishistic process associated with strip-tease or live sex’.^{16 17} The role of sex worker within the workforce is not to be ignored, it being anecdotally referred to as ‘the oldest profession’, perhaps only bested by artists.¹⁸ *Artist as Whore* thus encompasses both the liberation and the subjugation of both sex work and performance. Sex, originally a process of

⁸ “Stuart Brisley Biography,” *Stuart Brisley Website* [n.d.]

⁹ “Artist as Whore 1972,” *Stuart Brisley Website* [n.d.]

¹⁰ “Artist as Whore 1972.”

¹¹ “Artist as Whore 1972.”

¹² E.G West, “The Political Economy of Alienation: Karl Marx and Adam Smith,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 21.1 (1969), 1.

¹³ Charles Baudelaire, *Fusées*, (Édition du groupe: “Ebooks libres et gratuits.”/ Edition of the group: “Free and free ebooks”, 2003), 5.

¹⁴ Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s,” *Documents of Contemporary Art: WORK*, ed. Friederike Sigler (Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery/ MIT Press, 2017), 35.

¹⁵ Bryan-Wilson, “Dirty Commerce,” 37.

¹⁶ “Karen Finley/ Yams Up My Grannie’s Ass,” *LACE: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions* [n.d.]

¹⁷ Forte, “Women’s Performance Art”, 234.

¹⁸ Nicholas Wilson, “The World’s Oldest Profession? Employment-Age Profiles from the Transactional Sex Market,” *IZA Journal of Labour Policy* 9.1 (2019), 1.

(re)production within which a commodity (the human body) was created, has been appropriated for fun, leisure, exploration and work, this being reflective of art, which is no longer necessarily about creating something, but a means of exploration. However, this is juxtaposed with what is often the reality of sex work, and work as a whole, in which the working class have nothing to sell aside from their own labour and body, the alienation of a worker from themselves resulting in humiliation and self-defilement. The body thus becomes the tool capitalism uses, both to liberate and subjugate workers.

Stuart Brisley worked within the Artist Placement Group (APG) in 1970.¹⁹ Claire Bishop describes his placement in the chapter ‘Incidental People: APG and Community Arts’ of her book *Artificial Hells*, saying that:

Brisley, who chose to work on the shop floor of Hille Furniture factory, proceeded with his placement in a manner that will sound familiar to any artist working site-responsively today: the main task was social (earning trust) rather than realising a sculptural object.²⁰

Brisley approached the placement in quite a different way than the other members of the APG, perhaps owing to his simultaneously working in a teaching job. Brisley focused his attention not on those in the management positions but on the workers on the factory floor, evidenced in his asking the workers how they would like the production line to be improved and painting machinery the colours of their favourite football teams.²¹ The workers and Brisley collaboratively created a sculptural ‘circle’ of chairs, shown in Figure 2, that served as ‘a syndromic sign of the factory line itself’, which, while not the central focus of his stay, furthered the mutual trust between Brisley and the workers.²² The discordance between Brisley’s approach and the founders of the APG’s intentions is in part what ‘had the effect of distancing Brisley politically from APG’s efforts,’ according to Bishop.²³ While Brisley himself identifies as a Socialist, the founders of the APG, Barbara Steveni and John Latham, are quoted as ‘having no knowledge of Marx’ according to Marxist critic Peter Fuller.²⁴ That a group of artists entered into a workplace with no knowledge of the social implications of such an action is profoundly indictive of the dichotomy between the body and the workforce. An artist’s presence as an external agent, in many ways fetishizing the labour of these workers for use within their art practice, will intensify the already intrinsic sense of alienation a worker will have from the outside world, becoming a commodity of spectatorship.

¹⁹ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (London: Verso, 2012), 167.

²⁰ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 167.

²¹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 167.

²² Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 167.

²³ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 168.

²⁴ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 170.

Brisley used his platform as a performance artist to explore the needs of workers, while it transpired that the Artist Placement Group was more focused on ‘their contractual promise not to harm the host companies.’²⁵ A question thus arises: how can you perform the needs of a worker without harming the company, when so much that a company gains is directly relational to the harm of its workers?

²⁵ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 170.



Figure 3. Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Washing/ Tracks/ Maintenance: Outside*. Documentation of Performance. Wadsworth Atheneum. 1973. <http://tohumagazine.com>



Figure 4. Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Touch Sanitation*. Documentation. New York. 1979. <https://feldmangallery.com>

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

While Stuart Brisley's exploration of the dichotomy between the body and labour was potent, there are other contexts that are influential to this relationship. Mierle Laderman Ukeles addressed the intersection of the art world and labour, but her performance work is actually threefold. Not only is the labour of a maintenance worker explored, but the labour and maintenance specific to child care, Laderman being a mother who had recently 'returned to work'.²⁶ Laderman relates that 'as a woman, as a mother, I was connected to most people in the world – the whole entire world of maintenance workers.'²⁷ In 1973 Laderman created her seminal work *Washing/ Tracks/ Maintenance: Outside*.²⁸ As depicted in Figure 3, Laderman cleans the front of the Wadsworth Museum, using water and diapers, indicative of the relationship between maintenance labour and childcare, this same body 'caring' and 'maintaining' these concrete steps as did the same for her children.²⁹ Laderman explored this relationship four years prior to its execution in her 'Manifesto for Maintenance art', citing the fact that while 'maintenance jobs = minimum wage', in contrast 'housewives = no pay', this reflecting the Marxist view that 'capitalism requires the family [...] even as it undermines it'.^{30 31} While Marx claims that 'wage labourers [...] are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live', housewives are essentially charitable volunteers.³² Slavoj Žižek quantifies this when describing free labour (charity) as 'the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation.' The body is thus exploited for free, one step beyond the paradox of commodification, and into the reality that capitalism benefits from free labour.³³

Later in the 1970s, Laderman worked directly with maintenance workers, creating the beginnings of her *Touch Sanitation* project, as well as her ongoing collaboration with the New York Department of Sanitation.³⁴ Much like Stuart Brisley's work with the Hille Furniture Factory, Laderman's focus was on the workers within the Sanitation Department, in reference to her then decade old Manifesto 'after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?'³⁵

²⁶ "Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Cleaning the museum: Maintenance Art," *Khan Academy Website* [n.d]

²⁷ Tom Finkelpearl and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Mierle Laderman Ukeles In Conversation with Tom Finkelpearl," *Documents of Contemporary Art: WORK*, ed. Friederike Sigler (Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery/ MIT Press, 2017), 66.

²⁸ "Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Cleaning the museum: Maintenance Art."

²⁹ "Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Cleaning the museum: Maintenance Art."

³⁰ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969: Proposal for an Exhibition 'CARE'," (1969), 2.

³¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, (Alresford: Zero Books, 2009), 33.

³² Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 322.

³³ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Sideways Reflections*, (London: Profile, 2008), 19.

³⁴ Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "On Touch Sanitation," *Documents of Contemporary Art: WORK*, ed. Friederike Sigler (Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery/ MIT Press, 2017), 207.

³⁵ Ukeles, "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969," 1.

Laderman recalls ‘on 24 July 1979, I started shaking hands with the first of all New York City’s 8,500 sanitation men and officers’, or as she defines them, ‘sanmen’.³⁶ Laderman’s choice to not only meet but create physicality with these men, as can be seen in Figure 4, attests to the use of body in both work and art. Laderman has extended her body, as female, as mother and as artist toward those who labour in her subject matter daily. She has also spoken of the physical labour of the ‘sanmen’, in reference to human’s cognitive dissonance when it comes to waste disposal and the reality that ‘there’s a human being who has to lift it, haul it, get injured because of it, [...] dispose of it’.³⁷ Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* explored this use of the body and its mental implications, when it asserts that ‘unendingly monotonous activity [...] is as harmful to the mind as to the body.’³⁸ Laderman’s work was an exploration not only of the Department of Sanitation, but of herself in relation to this department, the role our bodies play in the labour of others. She acknowledges that while she ‘finished on 26 June 1980’, ‘they didn’t.’³⁹

³⁶ Ukeles, “On Touch Sanitation,” 207.

³⁷ Ukeles, “On Touch Sanitation,” 207.

³⁸ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan, rev. Dirk J. Struik, (Moscow: Progress, 1959) 8.

³⁹ Ukeles, “On Touch Sanitation,” 208.

Summary

Both Stuart Brisley and Mierle Laderman Ukeles have evidenced a use of the body in relation to labour. To varying degrees, these artists, purposefully or not, “gave it away for free”, to the dismay of the business adage. Laderman’s critique of the underappreciation of the housewife, seen in *Washing/ Tracks/ Maintenance: Outside*, can be seen as a reflection of capitalism’s underappreciation for its workers. This is exacerbated by the reality that, while a worker’s wage does not equate the physical work they put in, a housewife is expected to be satiated by nothing at all, aside from the emotional pleasure of raising a child and keeping a house. Brisley’s *Artist as Whore* encompasses the antithesis of “giving it away for free”, while also exposing the exploitation artists and worker alike must endure. In his Hille Furniture Factory placement, Brisley seems acutely aware of his privilege when faced with a factory of workers, but attempts to use this privilege for their benefit. However, it cannot be ignored that in “giving it away for free”, Brisley has in essence underbid another worker. Of course, this may underpin Brisley’s political differences with the Artist Placement Group and his reason for departure. But do artists who enter into fields of work acknowledge their position as an external agent; while the artists return their bodies to the studio, and retire that body as worker in order to reflect on what has transpired, as Laderman attests, the workers cannot do the same.

As the 1970s drew to a close, so too did the pioneering era of performance art. Linda Frye Burnham describes this eras end as performance art being ‘either dead or so defiled that [the artists] want nothing more to do with it, and storm back to painting.’⁴⁰ However, Philip Auslander, writer of many critical studies of performance art, contested this idea in the late 1980s, writing that while ‘performance in the late '60s and early '70s [...] was to serve as an alternative to the work of art as commodity; many current performance artists happily embrace the commodified world of mass entertainment.’⁴¹ Auslander is here claiming that rather than performance art “dying”, the medium adapted, in many ways this adaptation reflecting the changing labour conditions of this period. Marxist economist Christian Marazzi theorises that ‘the switch from Fordism to post-Fordism can be given a very specific date: October 6, 1979.’⁴² While the performance movement is associated primarily with the 1960s and '70s, therefore, the use of the body did not cease here, going on to adapt and embrace many other artistic mediums, as well as having its own use adapted within the changing conditions of labour.

⁴⁰ Burnham, “‘High Performance,’ Performance Art, and Me,” 18.

⁴¹ Auslander, “Going with the Flow”, 119.

⁴² Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 33.

‘Readily Commodifiable Bodies.’

As I have previously explored, the role of the body within art under capitalism has evolved, just as both artistic mediums and capitalist industry has. According to Bojana Kunst, the changing nature of the art world is ‘closely connected to the changes in contemporary capitalism and the entry of post-Fordist ways of production into the centre of contemporary production.’⁴³ The last two decades have in many ways seen the most significant developments, particularly considering the escalating precarity in work environments, as well as the use of “outsourced” labour, which is essentially the exploitation of underprivileged women. We have also seen a return to the use of the body as a vessel for addressing social issues within art, similar to the performance art’s use of the body that dominated the 1960s and ’70s, but adapted to addressing the aforementioned labour practices, such as in the work of Mika Rottenberg. Significant too to this era is the return of many iconic performance artists of the pioneering era to the forefront, such as Marina Abramović, but this has brought its own challenges to the nature of the medium of performance. Questions around “reperformance” and “delegated performance” arise, reflecting the ethical issues of modern capitalism. Artists can use the reflective nature of art to criticise societal norms, such as Santiago Sierra’s controversial representations. In the following chapter, I want to explore the recent depictions of the dichotomy between the body and the workforce, how it has intensified since the inception of the performance medium in the 1960s and ’70s, and how ‘the artistic institutions of the contemporary world’ have become ‘related closely to capitalism.’⁴⁴ Indeed, the art world may have become the very thing it has worked so hard to diverge from: a model of the capitalist system.

⁴³ Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism*, (Alresford: Zero Books, 2015), 44.

⁴⁴ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 44.



Figure 5. Mika Rottenberg. Still from *NoNoseKnows*. Video Installation. 22 Minutes. 2015. <https://www.icaboston.org>



Figure 6. Mika Rottenberg. Still from *NoNoseKnows*. Video Installation. 22 Minutes. 2015. <https://curatingthecontemporary.org>

Mika Rottenberg

When considering contemporary production methods, it is clear that the body is not used by capitalism in the same way it once was. One only has to look as far as the beginning of this essay to see how bodies have traditionally been used to create profit. This structure has evolved within western society, however, with modern industrial practices under post-Fordism focusing now on commodifying employees' cognitive capabilities, known as 'cognitive capitalism' whereby 'knowledge becomes a commodity.'⁴⁵ However, I would suggest this to be a deflection; while we believe the body's use under capitalism has diverged since we transitioned to a post-Fordist structure, it has in fact only moved out of sight and out of mind for the general public, to overseas "sweat shops". This move abroad has been documented by Mika Rottenberg, whose 'surrealist' depictions of the exploitation of female workers has been described as 'more realistic than most Realism.'⁴⁶ In her 2015 video installation *NoNoseKnows*, Rottenberg depicts the women working in a pearl-making facility in China and its female Caucasian supervisor.⁴⁷ The supervisor resides in a room above the work floor, establishing the hierarchy, and sits surrounded by piling plates of food, shelves filled with flowers that she periodically smells, wafted by a fan operated by a worker below. This has the effect of swelling and extending her nose, shown in Figure 5, and the side-effect of a sneeze that produces plates of food. Rottenberg juxtaposes real documentation of the pearl-making facility with the satirical depiction the supervisory woman, who does little supervising at all, and whose scenes were filmed in a set in New York.⁴⁸ While the previously explored work by Mierle Laderman Ukeles examined the gap between traditional female work (housework) and male dominated industries, the depiction of a female supervisor raises its own issues of modern Feminism, the supervisors career success literally built on the backs of the women "below" her. In this video, the female workers use their body to fulfil nauseating tasks, seen in Figure 6, that translate into western society as "luxury items" (pearls). The separation of the supervisor from the workers, as well as the workers disassociation from both the product produced and their fellow workers, creates a sense of alienation, which Marxism defines as 'the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to things, to social institutions and thereby also [...] to oneself.'⁴⁹ Jonathan Beller, whose essay 'Rottenberg Pearls' examines *NoNoseKnows*, describes this process as capitalist production, 'having separated people from the land and from one another, [...] now ramifies bodies by isolating, separating

⁴⁵ Gerald Raunig, "The University-Factory as a Site of Reterritorialization," *Documents of Contemporary Art: WORK*, ed. Friederike Sigler (Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery/ MIT Press, 2017), 151.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Beller, "Rottenberg Pearls," *Documents of Contemporary Art: WORK*, ed. Friederike Sigler (Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery/ MIT Press, 2017), 42.

⁴⁷ "NoNoseKnows (50 Kilos variant)," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Website* [n.d.]

⁴⁸ "NoNoseKnows (50 Kilos variant)."

⁴⁹ Jaeggi Rahel and Alan E. Smith, *Alienation*, ed. Frederick Neuhouser (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) 3.

and specializing human capacities and senses and putting them to work.’⁵⁰ What Beller describes as the ‘proletarianization of the senses (the putting of the senses to work for capital)’ is in many ways another facet of the dichotomy between the body and the workforce.⁵¹ This is another way in which labourers’ bodies and senses are used, under nauseating circumstances, to create a product so far out of reach of the ones making it, who are expected to endure these circumstances for the wage of basic human rights.

The alienation between worker and product extends further when taking into account that the product being made, pearls, is separated from the workers both in terms of its monetary value and its final physical location. Beller continues to describe that ‘the condition for the emergence of Rottenberg’s work is not only third-world labour and non-normative female bodies [...] but the moneyed, glamorous, well-heeled and indeed well-pearled world of the rich man’s art market.’⁵² The product in question is not just the pearls, however, and there is something to be said of Rottenberg’s involvement in this process of creating both pearls and art. As Jonathan Beller attests, ‘as commodities produced under conditions of globalization, Rottenberg’s own works partake of the same disturbing incorporation and sublation of the labour of global South woman as does [...] nearly all commodities today’.⁵³ Mika Rottenberg herself believes in ‘treating [the body] as the means of production’ even while claiming that under capitalism ‘everything is commodified, like your parts of your body, your soul, your smile, everything can be sold’.^{54 55} According to Rottenberg, therefore, the body of her hired performers and the workers she films are both the means of production and a commodity, which in many ways absolves her involvement in the production of the artwork, this being confirmed in her belief that while ‘so much of video art was that the artist was part of it’, she ‘wanted to be removed from that.’⁵⁶ While Rottenberg might believe that she has merely documented the production of outsourced labour, she has in actuality outsourced the use of a body within art to the women in this workplace, the pearls produced being consumed by the western consumers in much the same way as the art made is consumed by the western audiences. *NoNoseKnows* thus becomes its own exploitative commodity, using the bodies of a workforce to perform their own exploitation, manufactured abroad and shipped to the consumerist western culture.

⁵⁰ Beller, “Rottenberg Pearls,” 42.

⁵¹ Beller, “Rottenberg Pearls,” 41.

⁵² Beller, “Rottenberg Pearls,” 42-43.

⁵³ Beller, “Rottenberg Pearls,” 42.

⁵⁴ “Mika Rottenberg Interview: Social Surrealism,” Louisiana Channel. 5 Sept 2017. Youtube.

⁵⁵ “Interview Mika Rottenberg,” Palais de Tokyo. 5 July 2016. Youtube.

⁵⁶ “Mika Rottenberg: 'History is controlled by great artists — and maybe horrible people',” Washington Post. 30 October 2018. Youtube.



Figure 7. Santiago Sierra. *Eight People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*. Documentation of Events. 1996-2000.
<https://www.santiago-sierra.com>



Figure 8. Christoph Schlingensief. *Please Love Austria*. Documentation of Event. Vienna 2000.
<https://www.spikeartmagazine.com>

Santiago Sierra

Santiago Sierra is one of the most critiqued artists in his use of delegation to non-artist participants, and has been accused of being ‘unethical, exploitative [and] authoritarian’.⁵⁷ He is also one of the most open in conversation with this debate, using the criticism as a way to broach the subjects of capitalism and labour, both key references within his work. In an interview with Teresa Margolles, Sierra rebuts the critique, sarcastically remarking that ‘when you put your name on the work it seems that you’re held responsible for the capitalist system itself.’⁵⁸ His works *Eight People Paid to Be in Cardboard Boxes (1998)* and *Six People Who Are not Allowed to Be Paid for Sitting in Cardboard Boxes (2000)* both include what their titles suggest, participants sitting for four hours a day in cardboard boxes, depicted in Figure 7. Within these artworks some participants are paid, as in the 1998 example, and some not, as in 2000 where German law forbade the participants from being paid.⁵⁹ These works have come under fire for ‘using and exploiting underprivileged people’, who are asylum seekers, homeless or in other ways vulnerable, ‘with the intention of making a profit by selling their effort as artworks and [...] endowing it with value beyond the actual cost of materials and labour.’⁶⁰ However, Sierra again refutes the claims of exploitation, infamously stating that ‘they criticized me because I had people *sitting* for four hours a day, but they didn’t realize that a little further up the hallway the guard spends eight hours a day on his feet’, exposing the gallery-goers peripheral blindness to the staff of a gallery.⁶¹ However, I find his rebuttals of criticism jarring, and his justification of his work limited. Sierra claims that his works are unduly criticised in relation to the capitalist system, but why does one negate the other? When the capitalist system exploits workers on a large scale, why is creating a microcosm of that exploitation any less exploitative than the system it is emulating? If the bourgeoisie class and the governments that protect its position are to be held responsible for the oppressive nature of its industry, then surely an artist who recreates these systems, even if it is intended as a reflective criticism, should too be held to account.

While an artwork might have intended political connotations, it is actually the production and ethics of this work that should be taken as the political points of departure. This is supported by Bojana Kunst who, when summarizing the beliefs of Walter Benjamin’s *The Author as Producer*, writes that ‘art is only political in the manner in which it observes the conditions of its own production [...] it is aware of the production relationships within which it is generated and works towards emancipating

⁵⁷ Andrés David Montenegro Rosero, “Radical (Dis)Identification,” *Third Text* 29.6 (2015), 490.

⁵⁸ Teresa Margolles and Santiago Sierra, “Santiago Sierra,” *Documents of Contemporary Art: WORK*, ed. Friederike Sigler (Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery/ MIT Press, 2017), 178.

⁵⁹ Stefan Heidenreich, “Santiago Sierra,” *Frieze Website*, 03 March 2001.

⁶⁰ Rosero, “Radical (Dis)Identification,” 490.

⁶¹ Margolles and Sierra, “Santiago Sierra,” 178.

these conditions'.⁶² It is worth pondering on the effectiveness of these pieces in 'emancipating these conditions'. Christoph Schlingensief's comparative work *Please Love Austria*, in which the artist locked up asylum seekers in a concentration camp-like container in the middle of Vienna, was critiqued in a similar way to Sierra's work.⁶³ However, Schlingensief engaged directly with the far right politics his work was aimed at critiquing, appearing on Austrian TV with a member of the FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) and engaging with the piece's audience, as shown in Figure 8.⁶⁴ Sierra's work is disengaged in comparison; when responding to the criticism of his exploitation, rather than justifying his piece in terms of the wider social issues, he rebukes the gallery goers for not noticing the security guard's labour, which does little to engage with a call for social change. Sierra's work is a prime example of how the dichotomy between the body and the workforce has intensified in contemporary art, both intentionally and unintentionally. It exposes both the continued exploitation of vulnerable people in its intended context, and the exploitative nature of the contemporary art market in its subtext, through its use of controversial subject matter with no substantial reverberations. Santiago Sierra's *Eight People Paid to Be in Cardboard Boxes* and *Six People Who Are not Allowed to Be Paid for Sitting in Cardboard Boxes* are two "political" works that critique the capitalist system, even while emulating it. The result, therefore, even while intended as a critique, is further exploitation.

⁶² Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 14.

⁶³ Heidenreich, "Santiago Sierra."

⁶⁴ Matthias Lilienthal and Anselm Franke, "Exhibition Histories: "Please Love Austria," *Spike Art Magazine Website*, Issue. 56, Summer 2018.



Figure 9. Vanessa Beecroft. *Untitled (for Parkett no. 56)*. Performance. Museum of Modern Art, New York. 1999.
<https://www.moma.org>



Figure 10. Marina Abramović. *Nude With Skeleton*. Reperformance. Documentation of Los Angeles Museum Gala. 2010.
<https://www.afterall.org>

Marina Abramović

This essay began with the pioneering era of performance art, and so it might seem paradoxical to leave one of the pioneering artists to the last moment. While Marina Abramović is synonymous with the beginning of the performance art movement, her recent work is more applicable to the theme of this essay, encompassing the intersection of the body and capitalism. Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces* utilised delegated performers to enact "reperformances". These '36 "re-performers"', essentially the 'medium' of this piece, were 'specifically hired because of their impressive strengths and capabilities.'

⁶⁵ The work consisted of five appropriated performances from artists such as Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys and Valie Export, as well as two of her own works. ⁶⁶ These become documentation of the originals as well as works of art in their own right. As Jessica Santone explores in her essay 'Marina Abramović's "Seven Easy Pieces": Critical Documentation Strategies for Preserving Art's History', this type of documentation was 'iconic in its continued reproduction', in contrast with documentation through photography, which didn't represent the 'essentially body-based actions that Abramović understood to be at the heart of these six works.'⁶⁷ In the essay 'Performance Art as Capital Commodity: Marina Abramović's Use of Re-Performance', Maia Nikitovich describes the hired workers in *Seven Easy Pieces*, expressing that 'the sheer number of them renders them somewhat faceless.'⁶⁸ This echoes what Stewart Martin said of Vanessa Beecroft's work in his 'Critique of [Nicolas Bourriaud's] Relational Aesthetics', describing Beecroft's hired performers as 'mass ornament of readily commodifiable bodies', which is evident in Figure 9. ⁶⁹ A 'mass' of 'commodifiable bodies' is synonymous with a workforce, and so in both Beecroft and Abramović's work in hiring these people, they have created not only a performance but a group of workers. This creation becomes intensely problematic when considering the conditions of labour, Nikitovich describing Abramović's as 'inhumane employment conditions.'⁷⁰ Abramović has then become what so many artists work to expose, a callous and capitalistic employer. To further the relationship between this work and Marxist critique, Nikitovich critically exposes that, though it was the hired performers who enabled the work to exist, 'it is Abramović who receives any lasting credit', just as the business owner has a claim on the products produced by his employees. ⁷¹ In his introduction to Marx's 'Das Kapital', Serge L. Levitsky paraphrases the Marxist reflection of Abramović's 'lasting credit', explaining that:

⁶⁵Maia Nikitovich, "Performance Art as Capital Commodity: Marina Abramović's Use of Re- Performance," *Academia* (2012), 4.

⁶⁶ Jessica Santone, "Marina Abramović's "Seven Easy Pieces": Critical Documentation Strategies for Preserving Art's History," *The MIT Press* 41.2 (2008), 148.

⁶⁷ Santone, "Marina Abramović's 'Seven Easy Pieces'," 148.

⁶⁸ Nikitovich, "Performance Art as Capital Commodity," 4.

⁶⁹ Stewart Martin, "Critique of Relational Aesthetics," *Third Text* 21.4 (2007) 380.

⁷⁰ Nikitovich, "Performance Art as Capital Commodity," 5.

⁷¹ Nikitovich, "Performance Art as Capital Commodity," 5.

Marx pictures a social class (the "workers" or proletariat) which is capable of, and does, produce more wealth ("value") than it actually enjoys, and another class (the "bourgeoisie" or the "capitalists") which appropriates the residue ("surplus value") by virtue of its possession of the means of production.⁷²

Abramović's 'means of production' are perhaps a modernised version of the Marxist idea, no longer money and supplies (though of these she is sufficient) but connections within the art world, repour and notoriety, which under modern capitalism can be seen as the equivalent to wealth. This has the effect of intensifying the body's relationship to capitalism, the value these hired performers produce by means of their body being appropriated by Abramović, and, in turn, inducting Abramović into the position of the bourgeoisie.

The intensity did not cease in 2005. In 2010, Abramović utilised delegated performance once again in the recreation of her 2002 work *Nude with Skeleton*, this time for the Los Angeles Museum Gala in which patrons paid between \$25,000 and \$100,000 for a seat.⁷³ The work required 'delegated' performers to lay naked on a table with a skeleton on top of them, surrounded by dining celebrities, as depicted in Figure 10. This fetishistic spectatorship echoes the voyeuristic element of the Artist Placement Group as previously explored, established artists and figures gawping at the bodies of exploited workers rather than aiding them. For this piece 'over 800 people applied, of which "only" 200 were invited to audition', evidence of the instability of modern capitalism, especially for those in the creative industry.⁷⁴ However, despite these numbers suggesting that there were many eager collaborators, 'some of those auditioning declined to collaborate subsequently.'⁷⁵ After the event, a letter was constructed by art critic Douglas Crimp and artists Taisha Paggett and Yvonne Rainer, that 'criticised the collaboration conditions at the event and denoted them as exploitative.'⁷⁶ The letter in part reads:

Ms Abramović is so wedded to her original vision that she [...] [doesn't] see the egregious associations for the performers who, though willing, will be exploited nonetheless. Their desperate voluntarism says something about the generally exploitative conditions of the art world such that people are willing to become decorative table ornaments installed by a celebrity

⁷²Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Introduction by Serge L. Levitsky (Washington, D.C: Regnery, 2009), 3.

⁷³ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 38.

⁷⁴ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 38.

⁷⁵ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 38.

⁷⁶ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 38.

artist in the hopes of somehow breaking into show biz themselves. And at sub-minimal wages for the performers, the event is economic exploitation as well, verging on criminality.⁷⁷

The exploitative parallel between *Seven Easy Pieces* and the reperformance of *Nude with Skeletons* is indicative of Abramović's attitude towards delegated performers; in both cases Abramović has been described as exploitative, and in the five years between the performances no fair labour practices were developed, evidencing Abramović's willing complacency and complicity.

The parameters within which Abramović hires workers is not the only exploitative element of her performances, however. Abramović uses what she describes as 'performance modes', both for herself when performing, as well as instructing her hired performers to do so.⁷⁸ One of these performers, Sarah Wookey, recalls that in the face of 'potential physical or verbal harassment while performing' she was expected to ignore it 'by staying in what Abramović refers to as "performance mode"'.⁷⁹ In her book *Artist at Work*, Bojana Kunst argues that 'the establishment of performance modes [...] can be thought of as performing human and subjective powers: these powers are at the centre of contemporary post-Fordist production.'⁸⁰ What Abramović describes as 'performance mode' is essentially the everyday use of the body of a worker, her being so far removed from the issues of the working class that she believes she invented such positions. Foucault explored this idea, when saying that 'discipline [is] installed through the imposition of rigid body postures', these 'body postures' essentially being Abramović's 'performance mode', and furthering Kunst's idea that 'in today's capitalism, we work in the manner that Abramović calls performance mode.'^{81 82} As we explored in both Mika Rottenberg and Santiago Sierra's work, the representations of the capitalist structure purposefully created by artists sometimes play more into the exploitative industry than the artist may have intended, but this can be accredited to the artist engaging too closely with their own subject matter. However, when representing a capitalist structure wasn't the artist's foremost intention, as with Abramović, their piece becoming a microcosm of capitalism is even more problematic.

⁷⁷ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 38.

⁷⁸ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 39.

⁷⁹ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 39.

⁸⁰ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 41-42.

⁸¹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 23.

⁸² Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 42.

Summary

As evidenced in the above exploration, the way in which the body is used within contemporary art has diverged significantly from that of the beginning of the performance art movement. As Kunst explores, ‘the interesting status of the performer’s work [...] can be closely associated with the changes of work in contemporary capitalism.’⁸³ The introduction of delegated performances, seen in the work of each of the artists discussed in this chapter has had an impact on the way art functions, but it is no new theme to capitalism. The delegation of production to other labourers is a direct reference to capitalist industry. But even if the pioneering artists of performance had also emulated this exploitation, the current portrayals of the body within art would maintain the intensity it has, particularly due to capitalism itself intensifying. The precarity of the workplace in modern western culture has led all, but especially the young and those in creative industries, to lack stability. Artists involvement in this, such as Marina Abramović’s disregard for employees standards and autonomy, reveals the hypocrisy of modern art practice, particularly in the case of performance, that was in many ways built on a divergence from the exploitative art market. The working class body is now used in different ways to benefit the ruling class, demonstrated by the monopolisation of their mind and soul, along with their bodies. Artists’ inability to directly engage with their subject matters outside of an institutional setting, such as in the case of Santiago Sierra, evidences the fact that the art world has become not only a documenter of exploitation, but a catalyst of it. And while the artists explored previously may retort such criticisms, believing, as did Abramović, that their criticisers were ‘failing to see the [...] ironical stance’ of the artworks, the body ‘cannot be thought about without [its] social and political contexts’.⁸⁴⁸⁵ The body can’t ‘exist as isolated art material because [it is] deeply intertwined with numerous social and economic processes.’⁸⁶ The body cannot escape politicisation, as much as artist/employer and worker alike might hope it could.

⁸³ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 40.

⁸⁴ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 40.

⁸⁵ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 42.

⁸⁶ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 42.

Conclusion

The works of Stuart Brisley and Mierle Laderman Ukeles in the pioneering era of performance art compared with contemporary working artists such as Mika Rottenberg, Santiago Sierra, and Marina Abramović have given a broad scope of how the body has been used within art, as well as what impact this has had on the relationship between the body and capitalism. The use of the body within art has intensified over the past fifty years, just as capitalism itself has, Bojana Kunst verifying this when saying that ‘the need for political art has never been at the foreground to the extent it is now’.⁸⁷ Comparing performance and artworks using the body from contemporary artists to artists working fifty years ago verifies this intensity, as the issues addressed in the 1960s and '70s are not only unresolved, but have in fact intensified. Mark Fisher explores this idea in *Capitalist Realism*, observing that while ‘in the 1960s and '70s, capitalism had to face the problem of how to contain and absorb energies from outside’, in late stage capitalism it ‘has the opposite problem; having all-too successfully incorporated externality, how can it function without an outside it can colonize and appropriate?’⁸⁸ While labour, capitalism and the exploitation of workers was once a subject matter for artists to explore, such as Stuart Brisley in his *Hille Furniture* placement and Mierle Laderman Ukeles in her *Touch Sanitation* and *Washing/ Tracks/ Maintenance: Outside* works, it has since become a much more intrinsic controversy for artists, such as in Santiago Sierra’s *Eight People Paid to sit in Cardboard Boxes* and Mika Rottenberg’s *NoNoseKnows. Artist as whore* depicted the relationship between artist and (sex) worker, but this relationship has since become entirely indistinguishable; those now depicted in performances *are* hired labourers. Artists no longer simply work alongside workers, as in the case of Brisley and Laderman, but paradoxically employ workers for use within an artwork to address the theme of labour, and are thus no longer ‘external agents’ that can return to the gallery, but instead employers maintaining a capitalist structure. While recognition within the arts is something many of the pioneering performance artists would have appreciated, it is the fame of now renowned performance artists such as Marina Abramović that has justified their exploitation of other artists. As workplaces have become more precarious, being an artist, a job that was already precarious, now has added levels of intensity, which is exacerbated when that instability is exploited by, of all people, a fellow artist. The body, being capitalism’s most useful commodity, is reappropriated for use within an artist’s practice, which, when being reclaimed by the artist themselves is a sign of liberation. However, when the artist appropriates the use of another’s body through the process of delegation, the parallel with the structure of capitalism becomes stronger. The pressure on the artist to be held to an equal, if not higher, standard than the political system is undue, as Carrie Lambert-Beatty encompasses when describing ‘our recurring dream

⁸⁷ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 7.

⁸⁸ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 8.

that what the world of politics won't give us, the art world will.' ⁸⁹ The dichotomy between the body and the workforce has indeed intensified since the 1960s. It has done so because capitalism, the art world, and all that these encompass has likewise intensified. It is now not enough for an artist to be anti-capitalist, or to make works exposing the exploitations of class structures, since 'the art of today is no longer capable of ridiculing its patrons'. ⁹⁰ This is owing to the fact that if they succeed in exposing these capitalistic patrons within the art world, they have still failed, 'since to succeed would only mean that you were the new meat on which the system could feed.' ⁹¹

It is futile for artists today to address anti-capitalism, finding themselves in a paradox: wanting to deconstruct the system through the art world requires one to become a part of it, being a part of it makes you a hypocrite, not being a part of it means doing nothing, and doing nothing means it continues. Thus, art has imitated exploitation in the way it is said to imitate life; it has taken inspiration from the capitalist structure it is within.

⁸⁹ Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Against Performance Art," *Artforum International* 48.9 (2010), 1.

⁹⁰ Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 47.

⁹¹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 9.

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