The Workers of Society – the Artist, the Housewife and the Nun

A Feminist Marxist Analysis on the Intersections of Art, Care Work and Social Struggles

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INTRODUCTION

Motivation: an account of situated knowledges

I am writing this thesis from the subject position of an art workers’ organiser, reflecting on my experiences in struggles against precarious working conditions in the visual arts sector. Rooted in my political engagement as an art worker, activist and feminist, this thesis aims to revisit an episode of mobilisation that politicised a spectrum of art practitioners in Tallinn and Estonia during 2009–2011. This cycle of struggle played out as a collective process of self-organisation, addressing issues related to unpaid labour and lack of social guarantees in contemporary art sphere. In the frame of this thesis, I am interested in critically re-evaluating the art workers’ movement in Tallinn from intersectional feminist Marxist perspective.

I have a variety of reasons for revisiting a process that already ended three years ago. First of all, I believe that this short-lived episode of politicisation represents a significant event in the contemporary art history of Estonia. However, in the heat of the mobilisation process, very few written documents were produced about the political aims, strategies and activities of the movement. To some extent, my thesis aims to fill that gap by discussing some key issues that held a central place in our struggle. Furthermore, my thesis also departs from the desire to conceptualise the art workers’ movement in Tallinn from an international perspective. By situating this experience into the context of political theories and practices that have bundled around the notion of precarious labour, I want to claim a place for this local, frail, and perhaps marginal struggle within the narratives of contemporary art and social movements at the beginning of 21st century. This aspiration partly stems from my long-term experience of working in a peripheral Eastern European context that often falls outside the scope of attention when art and/or social histories are written in Western academia. In addition to that, I also believe that a broad contextualisation of the art workers’ movement in Tallinn helps to accentuate its significance in the local context, and, vice versa, that the way I am framing this account of a locally oriented struggle contributes to the transnational, even if mostly Western, debates about strategies of resistance against precarious labour.

To write about the art workers’ movement in Tallinn from an intersectional feminist perspective is not a self-evident approach. In fact, during the period when the organising process took place, the aspect of gender was rarely addressed, similarly to other power differentials that are rooted in the experience of difference, such as ethnicity/nationality, sexuality, disability or class. On the contrary, when defending the social and economic
interests of freelance art workers, the movement adopted a very universal language, scandalising the exploitation of unpaid labour as a phenomenon that affects every artist participating in exhibition practice, and addressing the accessibility problems that art workers face in relation to the social security system as an issue that affects all art practitioners equally, independently from whether they raise children, live with chronic illnesses or disabilities, or occupy a disadvantaged position in the art sphere and/or general job market due to their nationality. This adoption of a universal mode of address resonates with Joan Acker’s analysis on how work is conceived as an abstract category that is assumed to be gender neutral and disembodied (Acker 1990: 149). Acker argues that the notion of a disembodied individual is not only the underlying assumption within workplace logic where the idea of an abstract worker is modelled after a male body who is dedicated to his full-time job, but, referring to Carole Pateman, she adds that also the liberal democratic concept of a universal citizen, who represents anyone and everyone, is a political fiction that is based on an abstraction that omits (gender) difference or embodied experience and yet is constructed from the male body (1990: 150-151).

Keeping the critical remarks from Joan Acker in mind, I also want to outline a personal journey of how I arrived at the point of writing about art workers’ struggles from intersectional feminist perspective. The art workers’ movement in Tallinn had already faded away when I first had a chance to attend a Precarious Workers Brigade assembly in London in 2012. The Brigade is one of the most visible mobilisation platforms of precarious art and cultural workers in the international art scene, and the art workers’ movement in Tallinn had been following their practice with keen interest. Meeting Precarious Workers Brigade as a collective struck me for two reasons. I was surprised to see that it is almost exclusively a group of women and I hadn’t expected to meet a collective that is predominantly comprised of migrants. Around that time I also came in touch with the members of W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and Greater Economy) from New York, another collective that had recently constituted around issues of unpaid labour and precarious working conditions within the art field. I was surprised to hear that, initially, the main mobilisation ground for W.A.G.E. had been the lesbian and queer-feminist scene in New York. However, despite the fact that both of these initiatives are crowded with women who apparently share strong queer/feminist engagements, following their practice from distance had left me with the impression that their struggles had also adopted a rather universal mode of address.

This contradiction has intrigued me since then. On the one hand, it pointed my attention to the fact that the core group of the art workers’ movement in Tallinn had also been
dominated by women, even if the collective at large was rather mixed in terms of gender identification (however, less so in terms of national or sexual identities). On the other hand, and perhaps even more evocatively, it resonated with my own political biography. During the time that I was involved in the art workers’ struggle in Tallinn, I was also active in queer/feminist and LGBT contexts. Both of these experiences laid the foundation for my ongoing relationship with radical social movements and activism. However, at that time, each phantasy of bringing those two political struggles into interaction ran against the limits of my imagination. Searching for possibilities to overcome this apparent isolation of art workers’ struggles and feminist politics forms the red thread of this thesis.

The story of nuns: a narrative tool for connecting art workers’ struggles, precarious labour and gender

I am using a very particular narratological instrument in order to build up the case of my study. Throughout the analytical part of my thesis, I will be referring to an article that was published in Estonian daily newspaper Postimees in April 2011 (Tamm 2011, see appendix 1). The article was reporting on the problems that nuns of Pühtitsa convent were facing in relation to health insurance. This newspaper report caught some attention within the art workers’ movement, coinciding with two concerns that were topical at the time. Firstly, the trouble of nuns resonated with the difficulties that art workers were experiencing in relation to social security system. Secondly, in the collective process of mapping these difficulties, art workers had been speculating about the potential of forming alliances with other groups in society who are affected by similar problems.

To find the core problems of the Estonian health insurance system formulated in a newspaper article about nuns signified an unexpected encounter. However, recalling the moment when this article was briefly discussed among a few colleagues at the beginning of an art workers’ assembly, I must admit that it was done with humorous irony. In my activities as a public spokesperson addressing the precarious situation of art workers in Estonia, I have sometimes used this unconventional example as a storytelling device evoking comic relief. Nonetheless, in this thesis, I would like to tease out the full potential that the story of nuns represents. Partly, I will use this story as a vehicle that transports information about the local particularities of the social security system in Estonia and, thus, allows me to contextualise the art workers’ struggle in its local dimensions. Moreover, and even more essentially, I am using the reference to nuns as an entry point into the discussion about the entanglements of precarious labour and gender. In my analysis, the story of nuns functions as a collision point
that connects and accentuates re-occurring motifs within discourses of art, precarious labour and care/domestic work.

**Aims and research questions**

The objective of this thesis is to establish connections between art workers’ struggles against precarious labour, and feminist Marxist politics. On the one hand, I am interested in critically re-evaluating the art workers’ movement in Tallinn from a feminist Marxist perspective. On the other hand, I am thinking of this thesis as a contribution to a broader discussion on the relations of gender and precarious labour, which is informed by activist experiences derived from a particular local struggle. Furthermore, I also think of this thesis as an input to a marginal but growing debate in feminist Marxist theory focusing on the proximity of art and care work.

My analysis is circled around following questions: What do art workers, nuns and care workers have in common? How can these commonalities be conceptualised from the perspective of autonomist feminist Marxism? How would such conceptualisation open up intersectional and/or transversal perspectives for social movements struggling against precariousness?

**Theoretical framework and key resources**

The dominant theoretical framework of my thesis is derived from (post-)operaist theory and practice. Operaism is a strand of Marxist thinking that originates from the Italian workers’ movement *operaismo*. The operaist movement constituted itself at the time of intense factory struggles in late 1960s and 1970s and was centred around the Marxist approach of underlining the political importance of waged labour as a means of organising society (Federici 2012b: 7). In addition to that, the operaist movement stressed the centrality of workers’ autonomy in relation to capital, state and the organised workers’ movement, such as trade unions (Wright 2005: 10). In the international context, the operaist thinking is also known as autonomist Marxism.

Post-operaist theory is a continuation of autonomist Marxist tradition, conceptualising workers’ struggles in post-fordist capitalism where the factory floor cannot be conceived as the primary site of struggle any more. Its most prominent representatives are political thinkers such as Antonio Negri, Franco Berardi, Silvia Federici, Maurizio Lazzarato and Paolo Virno who were all active in the operaist movement, and, in some cases, forced into exile because of the fierce state repressions that cracked down radical Italian social movements in late 1970s.
One of the key concepts within post-operaist theory is the notion of precarious labour. This concept refers to the new class composition that has developed in the (post)industrial Western countries, resulting from the neoliberal changes taking place in the labour market where more and more workers are subjected to temporary and flexible working relations, as well as social insecurity (Federici 2006, Lazzarato 1996). Furthermore, post-operaist theory addresses new forms of immaterial, cognitive and affective labour as components of post-fordist capitalism (Lazzarato 1996, Raunig 2007b).

In my thesis, the notion of precarious labour forms a core concept in the light of which I am addressing issues around art workers’ struggles and feminist politics. In the course of my analysis, I will be primarily dwelling on three impulses originating from debates on precarious labour. First of all, my approach is informed by theoretical insights and resistive practices developed within the social movements that began mobilising against the growing dominance of precarious working conditions at the turn of the 21st century. Here, I take particular interest in the EuroMayDay movement which first emerged in Italy in 2001 and quickly transformed into a transnational attempt to organise precarious workers (Raunig 2007b). In addition to that, my experience within the context of social movements is largely shaped by struggles taking place specifically in the realm of art and culture.

Secondly, and without aiming to dedicate too much attention to this aspect in the analytical part of my thesis, I would like to underline the immense resonance that the concept of precarious labour has found within the sphere of visual arts. This intense interest is apparently a consequence of precarious working conditions dominating the art sector. However, it has also produced some rather self-absorbed debates whether the flexible, mobile and professionally over-identified art workers could be identified as the “avant-garde” of precarious workers. The theoretical background of this trend can largely be traced back to the book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello which attributes the revolt against full-time employment, from which neoliberal economy is supposedly drawing inspiration, to the tradition of “artistic critique” (1999: 419-420). Whereas the efforts to define artistic labour as a prototype for working conditions in post-fordist capitalism are perhaps not completely unsubstantiated, they also deserve critical interrogation. In fact, the fundamental political ethos of this thesis is oriented at relativising and deconstructing the understanding of precarious labour within the art field as something unique. In this undertaking, I have been influenced by writings of Maurizio Lazzarato, Gerald Raunig and the Edu-factory collective who are all nourishing close ties with struggles rooted in the sphere of art, culture or cognitive
labour, and therefore, articulate their critique from within the cultural sector (Lazzarato 2007, Raunig 2007b, The Edu-factory Collective 2009).

Thirdly, and most essentially, I am taking my theoretical point of departure from autonomist feminist Marxist theory and practice. Here I am heavily relying on the writings of Silvia Federici, one of the very few internationally known autonomist feminist authors, who has been influential in both operaist and post-operaist contexts. From the generation of theorists and activists who founded the feminist wing of operaist movement in Italy in the 1970s, Silvia Federici is likely to represent the most prominent voice criticising the (male) post-operaist “star” authors for ignoring the analytical input that autonomist feminist Marxism has contributed to the workers’ struggles in the second half of the 20th century. This critique has evolved around the accusation that the apparent novelty attributed to precarious labour within the context of post-fordist capitalism, particularly from the perspective post-operaist theory, bypasses one the most crucial arguments of feminist Marxist thought, namely that women’s relationship to waged labour has historically been precarious (Federici 2006). Furthermore, as an author who has been working in postcolonial contexts for many years, Federici has also critically scrutinised the Eurocentrist dimensions of post-operaist theory. In this regard, she identifies the continuum between the technological development in global North, exemplified by the computerisation and immaterialisation of work, and the underdevelopment in global South, where the material conditions for immaterial capitalism are being created at the price of expropriating and pauperising local working populations, who are, for example, digging coltan for Western computer workers in Congo (ibid).

Taking a lead from Federici’s remarks on what has been ignored in prominent post-operaist writings on precarious labour, my analysis on the commonalities of art workers’ struggles and feminist politics is largely based on the re-articulation of autonomist feminist Marxist thinking from the 1970s. This includes specifically the legacy of Wages for Housework campaign, founded in 1972 in Padua to connect feminist activists from different parts of the world, which set a radical and revolutionary agenda for transnational feminist Marxist politics both in theory and practice. In this context, it should also be noted that as much as the recent rediscovery of Silvia Federici’s writings in Euro-American context is welcome and important – for example, her collected essays ranging over the last four decades have recently been published in English (2012b) and German (2012a) –, it is very unfortunate that the historical writings of some of her most significant contemporaries and comrades, such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa or Leopoldina Fortunati, are much more difficult to access for audiences who do not read Italian. Therefore, the fact that my references to the autonomist
feminist Marxist thinking from the 1970s are predominantly focused on Federici’s writings, is connected to my limited access to the literature originating from this time. However, in addition to her historical writings, Federici’s recent work also forms a reference point for this thesis.

**Previous research**

Having mapped out my key interests in relation to post-operaist theory, I will now summarise the existing research that is located in the triangle between social movements, art workers’ struggles and feminist politics. This summary is marked by own situatedness in art workers’ struggles, and, therefore, prioritises research that originates from art contexts.

As suggested earlier, there has been a wave of emerging art workers’ collectives addressing issues related to precarious labour within the recent years. This cycle of mobilisation has been accompanied by an intensified interest in the historical legacy of art workers’ struggles. New research into the histories of art workers’ mobilisation has been particularly rich in the context of USA, re-articulating significant moments from national art history (Bryan-Wilson 2009, Sholette 2011, Temporary Services 2009). However, feminist approaches only form singular chapters in those publications, most notably in Julia Bryan-Wilson’s writings on the history of Art Workers’ Coalition (2009).

Feminist engagement with precarious labour relations and the challenges that these impose on the question of organising, has been more fruitful in the European contexts. This engagement has been largely oriented towards theoretical reflections on the gendered nature of precarious labour within the realm of cognitive work (Kuster & Lorenz 2007, Power 2009, von Osten 2011). Political work resulting from these reflections has sometimes taken the form of artistic research. An outstanding example of such research is Kleines Postfordistisches Drama [Small Post-Fordist Drama], a collective comprised of feminist theorists and art workers Brigitta Kuster, Isabell Lorey, Marion von Osten and Katja Reichard, who carried out a militant research project that took inspiration from the workers’ questionnaires developed within the Italian operaist movement. Transposing these questions into the context of art and cultural labour at the beginning of 21st century, the project resulted with a film and some texts (Kleines Postfordistisches Drama 2007), but was apparently not attempting to mobilise a struggle. Another feminist collective that has gained wide attention in the art field, is the Madrid-based Precarias a la Deriva whose practice is perhaps closest to the political ethos of this thesis. Founded during the time of general strike in Spain in 2001, this initiative brought together a heterogeneous spectrum of women who engaged in a collective process of naming
their working realities, formulating commonalities in precarious existence, and searching for collective forms of agency in the fragmented and discontinuous terrain of precarious labour (Precarias a la Deriva 2011: 37-48). However, the practice of Precarias a la Deriva was foregrounding issues of care work, whereas questions related to art and cultural labour were not in their primary focus.

A specific interest in theorising the intersection of art, care work and struggles against precariousness is a relatively new and marginal trend within feminist Marxist writing. The proximity between art and care work has been suggested in recent writings of Hito Steyerl who addresses similarities in the volume of unpaid work characteristic to both fields (2010). Marina Vishmidt has analysed the commonalities between art and care work from the perspective of autonomist feminist Marxist theory, associating the status of art work with the ambiguous position of domestic work by showing how both of these fall outside the wage-labour relations and, therefore, prototype working conditions in post-fordist capitalism (2010). Some of the key threads of this thesis take inspiration from Vishmidt’s writing. Starting from a similar question, I will, however, take a slightly different path of analysis, and make some extra efforts in fleshing out the potentialities of conceptualising the realms of art and care as “sites that anticipate non-capitalist and post-capitalist practices” (Vishmidt 2010: 59) – an intriguing political perspective that Vishmidt poses but barely elaborates in her writing. Some rare theorising about the anti-capitalist dimensions of art and care workers’ struggles can be found in the work of Manuela Zechner (2013a, 2013b). Zechner is a member of Precarious Workers Brigade and the initiator of a web archive documenting radical collective practices of care.1 Her research is thus informed by both perspectives, and focuses around the overarching theme of self-organised collective practices constituting counter-strategies to precariousness and neoliberal capitalism. Nonetheless, her interest occurs strongly inclined towards militancy in terms of care practices within activist contexts, perhaps indicating a symptomatic shift within feminist activist biographies that have departed from art workers’ struggles and keep moving towards a more transversal understanding of radical politics, leaving the insistence on the particularities of art world behind.

Materials to use

The analytical part of this thesis is predominantly founded on three sources: the newspaper article on nuns (Tamm 2011), the writings of Silvia Federici (2006, 2012a, 2012b) and my activist experiences originating from the art workers’ movement in Tallinn. In order

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1 See radicalcollectivecare.blogspot.com.
to contextualise and develop my analysis, I will refer to the theoretical approaches that I have outlined in previous sections, as well as to further relevant literature.

In this section, I want to map out some aspects related to the activist and auto
ethnographic dimensions of this thesis, namely the materials at my disposal documenting the art workers’ struggle in Tallinn. As already mentioned in the introduction, very few written traces have remained from this struggle. There are only three publicly accessible sources that contextualise and document the art workers’ movement in Tallinn (Mürk, Soomre, Triisberg 2011, Triisberg 2011a, Triisberg 2013). One of these sources is a collectively produced insert in the Estonian cultural newspaper *Sirp* (Mürk, Soomre, Triisberg 2011) that captures a moment which, as it now occurs in retrospect, already represented the beginning of the end stage of our organising process. Nevertheless, this is perhaps also an advantage of this newspaper issue, as it offers a concise overview of the problems, strategies and challenges that were articulated within the movement. The other two texts have been written by me individually, indicating the dominance of my interpretations in the process of framing this particular struggle.

Complementing the three aforementioned texts, I am also using sources that are not publicly accessible. Symptomatically to the digital age of political organising, a substantial part of the discussions within art workers’ movement in Tallinn took place online in a Google Groups mailing list. This mailing list was founded in May 2010, initially counting approximately 20-30 members, and has been virtually inactive since January 2012, when the number of subscribers had grown to 103. The main mobilisation ground of the movement was located in Tallinn, however, over time, some art workers from other cities in Estonia also subscribed to the mailing list.

In addition to the extensive online discussions documented in the virtual archive of the art workers’ mailing list, this platform also includes some protocols of the assemblies that were regularly taking place particularly in spring 2010. Nonetheless, only a few meetings were properly documented and not every topic discussed at the assemblies found a continuation in the online discussions. Therefore, the archive of the art workers’ mailing list is not a sufficient source for constructing an exhaustive historical account of the organising process in Tallinn. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, this is also not my objective. Nevertheless, in spite of narrowing my analysis to a limited selection of key issues that formed the core of the art workers’ struggle in Tallinn, I am partly relying on personal recollections. This is particularly the case when I am referring to my participation in the working group on social guarantees that was called together by the Estonian Ministry of
Culture in spring 2011, and was very poorly protocolled even for the purposes of internal communication. Moreover, this principle also applies when I am reflecting on experiences that originate from my observations and encounters with activist initiatives within the international art context. However, since a detailed analysis of the developments and positions that were articulated within the art workers’ organising process in Tallinn exceeds the limits of this thesis, I have tried to restrain my analysis to key issues that have been addressed in publicly available reflections of this movement. Where possible, I am referencing meeting protocols that I have retrieved from the archive of the art workers’ mailing list. I am not referencing online conversations from this mailing list, because it would require a more differentiated discussion than the scope of this thesis provides.

**Methodologies and methods**

The methodological approach applied in this thesis can be situated into the broad context of feminist cultural studies. The discipline of cultural studies is often characterised both, as a particularly rich and synergetic field where different methodological approaches are combined (Lykke 2010: 27), and as a discipline that lacks strong methodological base (During 2005: 34). In this field of tension, I tend to agree with interpretations that see strength in the use of diverse methodologies which transgress disciplinary borders. Moreover, as an art worker who prefers to think about cultural practice in militant terms, I also share the interventionist ethos that is central in the conception of cultural studies as a political project and a “critical practice with political force” (During 2005: 38).

One of the most essential methodological approaches framing this thesis originates from the context of social movements, rather than academic research. Here I am referring to the practices of militant research/ workers’ inquiry/joint research. Often treated as synonymous, their genealogy refers to the method of *con-ricerca*, developed within the Italian workers’ movement in the 1960s (Foltin 2006). The notion of workers’ inquiry, however, can also be traced back to the questionnaire that Karl Marx developed in 1880 (Marx 1997/1880). Militant research is a tool for knowledge production from below which is intertwined with the process of political organising. It is an analytical method for producing collecting knowledge that can be used in political struggles, and at the same time, serves the purpose of awareness raising and mobilisation that accompany the process of producing such knowledge. This also suggests that militant research is a collective practice which escapes the researcher/subject dichotomy that is characteristic for canonical academic research (Colectivo Situaciones 2006, Ross 2013: 9).
When I am referring to the art workers’ movement in Tallinn, I am heavily relying on the collective knowledge that was produced according to the principles of militant research. This included a dual process of both mapping the precarious working conditions within the visual art sector, as well as politicising ourselves through the experience of analysing these conditions. Additionally, this process also required a close inspection of legislative frameworks relating to cultural funding, labour rights and social security system in Estonia. In familiarising ourselves with existing policy and legislative documents, examining the principles of tax system or scrutinising the differences between various types of work contracts, we were doing research that can be conceptualised as policy analysis. Despite the fact that this analysis was performed without following methodological guidelines, I want to underline its proximity to the “what’s the problem representation” (WPR) approach developed by Bacchi and Evelyne (2010). This approach is oriented towards critically interrogating hidden assumptions within policy proposals and assessing how these underlying implications affect ways how policies represent, produce or deny social problems (Bacchi and Evelyne 2010: 115-117). The analytical part of my thesis is partially constructed in reference to the findings from the collective policy analysis process in Tallinn, however, conducting a WPR study in full scope is not my priority here.

Since I am writing this thesis as an individual and not as a member of militant research collective, my methodological approach also carries strong elements of auto-ethnographic research. This is a contested method within academic writing, defined as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis 2004: xix). As an approach that acknowledges and welcomes subjectivity in researcher’s relationship and/or influence towards their research (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2010), its validity and reliability have often been attacked from the perspective of positivist understandings of the epistemological foundations of academic writing (Doloriert, Sambrook 2011: 535-539). Nevertheless, and not only because my approach is rooted in collective experience, I do believe that its validity can be argued particularly from the perspective of feminist epistemology and ethics which attribute major significance to embodied and situated knowledges (Haraway 1990: 190, Lykke 2010: 159, Rich 1986: 219).

Furthermore, I want to underline that my approach is located in the border zone between militant research and auto-ethnography. As much as my reflections on the art workers’ movement in Tallinn (and elsewhere) include elements of participant observation, a method considered to be the hallmark of anthropology (Aull Davies 2008: 67), or eyewitness accounts, a storytelling tool attributed particularly to auto-ethnography (Ellis, Adams,
Bochner 2010), I entered the art workers’ movement in Tallinn as an activist rather than an ethnographer. Andrew Ross differentiates these two approaches by arguing that militant research is based on participation by conviction, a position where the researcher shares the aims, strategies and experiences of their comrades because of the personal commitment in a political project, and not simply for the purpose of collecting data (Ross 2013: 8). This is certainly accurate in my case as well, however, it also means that my “field notes” have not been systematically collected or documented and are, therefore, subjected to a general suspicion of inaccuracy and subjectivity.

In order to flesh out the collision of “research, writing, story-telling and method,” suggested in the definition of auto-ethnographic research offered by Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2010), I also want to refer to Laurel Richardson’s conception of writing as a “method of inquiry” which is defined as a process of discovery and analysis (2000: 516). When I am re-visiting the process of art workers’ organising in Tallinn from an auto-ethnographic perspective, it is somewhat unclear to me whether the reflection on this struggle is the primary object of my research (as I am indeed interested in documenting and historicising this particular cycle of struggle), or a method of formulating knowledge upon which a critical analysis can be built (as I am also interested in re-evaluating this struggle from feminist Marxist perspective), or a device of storytelling which allows me approach the ultimate destination point of my analysis (as I am also very interested in autonomist feminist Marxist imaginaries of radical social change). This shifting boundary between research, method and story-telling is linked with the process of writing as a mode of discovery, as conceptualised by Richardson. Aiming to converge and proximate episodes of geographically and temporally isolated social struggles, such as the art workers’ movement and Wages for Housework campaign, I am only able to perform this task in the modality of writing.

My methodological approach also privileges the mode of “diffractive reading,” a thinking technology that has been most prominently conceptualised and practised by Donna Haraway, Karen Barad and Iris van der Tuin (Haraway 2000, Barad 2007, van der Tuin 2011). Haraway describes diffraction as a counter-strategy to reflection (Haraway 2000: 104), thus challenging the dominant optical metaphor used within critical thinking, and offering an alternative to it. Whereas reflexive methodology refers to the procedure of mirroring, focusing attention on the relationship between objects and their representation (Barad 2007: 86), diffractive analysis is preoccupied with producing new patterns in the world (Haraway 1997: 268), just like the optical effect of diffraction creates continuous patterns of interference. Nina Lykke notes that diffraction is a particularly useful tool for analysing complex processes of
social change which require a dynamic technique of foregrounding and backgrounding the researched data (Lykke 2010: 155). In my analysis, I am using the newspaper article on nuns as an entry point into diffractive reading, from which I proceed by continuously making new patterns emerge in the course of my analysis. Here, I am also inspired by Marilyn Strathern’s suggestion that “it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas with” (Strathern 1992: 10).

In line with Barad’s concept of creating “entanglements,” or configuring connections between entities that do not appear adjacent in space and time (Barad 2007: 74), I am trying to bring several strands of political thinking and practice into interaction. My political aim in this process is to tease out the lessons that contemporary social movements struggling against precarious working conditions can learn from the stories that the history of feminist politics has to tell.

I will conclude this overview of methodological approaches with a short remark on how I relate to the concept of intersectionality. When formulating my research questions through the agenda of articulating entanglements between precarious labour and gender, I am using a very broad definition of intersectionality as methodological and theoretical approach for theorising intersections of gender and other sociocultural categorisations (Lykke 2010: 50). In parallel, I am also referring to the neighbouring concept of transversality that originates from the political thinking of Félix Guattari (1984). In differentiating these concepts, I agree with the argumentation of Manuela Zechner who identifies the key difference in modes of framing identity and subjectivity (Zechner 2013b: 62). While intersectionality focuses on specific compositions of social identities as they are embodied by individuals or social groups, the concept of transversality implies that identities are abandoned and transgressed in favour of new subjectivities and becomings that make new dimensions of the common emerge (2013b: 63-64). Thus, when the concept of intersectionality suggests that identities are not to be seen as isolated, the concept of transversality is, in my understanding, more premised towards theorising the intersections of social dynamics, movements and struggles. Therefore, when it comes to autonomist feminist Marxist imaginaries of social change, I prefer using the notion of transversality.

**Ethical considerations**

The ethical foundation of my analysis is largely informed by feminist conception of “situated knowledges” which is notably theorised by Donna Haraway (1991: 183-201). Questioning positivist notions of objectivity, which deny the location, embodiment and partial perspective of researchers, Haraway calls for critical practice that acknowledges and
addresses these aspects (1991: 191). For Haraway, the concept of situated knowledges
denotes a feminist version of objectivity that recognises its own partiality (1990: 190). The
production of situated knowledges is connected to issues of accountability and responsibility,
underlining the relation between the validity of knowledge claims and their localisability
(1991: 191). Haraway’s view on feminist epistemology is paralleled by the writings of
Adrienne Rich whose concept of “politics of location” also accentuates the ethics of
locatedness (Rich 1986: 219). Referring to Haraway and Barad, Nina Lykke identifies two
methodological principles that are essential in the production of situated knowledges, defined
as “siting” and “sighting” (Lykke 2010: 151-152). These two principles operate as tools for
marking the boundaries of partial perspectives for which feminist researchers can take
accountability. Siting implies the demand that the researchers reflect upon their position in
time, space, body and history, while sighting involves the act of making visible the research
procedures and its effects (ibid).

In the introductory parts of this thesis, I have already dedicated a considerable amount
of attention to the process of siting myself as an art worker, activist and militant researcher, as
well as elaborating on the theoretical and methodological frameworks from which I look upon
my research project. Here, I would like to outline one more tension field which indicates the
partiality of my perspective. This tension field is connected to the particular position that I
held within the art workers’ movement in Tallinn. Belonging to the relatively small core
group of this initiative, I have been actively engaged not only in defining and shaping its aims
and strategies, but also in the process of historicising and contextualising its position within
local and international, theoretical, artistic and activist contexts. In that respect, it must be
mentioned that linking the issues and problems articulated within art workers’ movement to
post-operaist thinking, or historical and contemporary modalities of radical social movements,
or feminist Marxist politics (which is a new perspective that I am aiming to develop in this
thesis) has somewhat been my obsession, originating from my interest in radical theory and
activism. Apparently, I was not completely alone with these ideas, otherwise the struggle
against precarious working conditions in Tallinn couldn’t have taken a collective form.
However, it is fairly possible that some art workers who took part in this collective process –
and here I am not solely referring to the “silent subscribers” in the Google Groups mailing list
who never attended assemblies or spoke up in online conversations, but perhaps occasionally
signed an open letter or petition produced by the “core” group – are still not familiar with the
concept of precarious labour, or would describe this cycle of self-organisation that took place
in Tallinn as a lobbying activity initiated by a small group of like-minded friends and
colleagues, rather than as a social struggle or movement. Moreover, I also have to say that my post-operaist visions on how the art workers’ struggle should be defined and designed, often received sceptical resonance from my comrades. Conversely, I was often sceptical about the ideas proposed by others, which, nevertheless, rarely stopped me from participating in undertakings that were collectively developed, as I happened to be one of the tireless engines in this collective. In short, I would describe my position within the art workers’ movement both as a central and a marginal one. The ethical dilemma that is implied in this complex and fluid subject position, is related to the risk of using my “street-credibility” as a key figure within this collective process, for establishing a narrative which privileges perspectives that virtually occupied a marginal position within the art workers’ struggle in Tallinn. However, I also want to stress that it is important for me to revisit this struggle from the political perspective that I am most affiliated with – even if it is for the sake of setting a frame that can be contested and challenged in the future.

ANALYSIS

Framing art and care: a labour of love and devotion?

In order to enter the mode of diffractive reading, I will start my analysis with extracting a pattern from the newspaper article on nuns (Tamm 2011). I will define this pattern through the notion of devotion, accentuated as a significant feature that characterises the subjectivity of nuns. In the newspaper article, the notion of devotion is invoked to explain the particular position of nuns in relation to wage-labour relations and social security system. It is underlined that the relationship between the nuns and the convent is not regulated by work contracts, because the purpose of living in the convent is not framed by a pursuit of financial income – rather than satisfying personal needs, the nuns are bound to their devotion towards god and prayer (ibid). By referring to the constitutive principles of the health insurance system in Estonia, the article then proceeds to explain how this unconventional position outside labour relations has ramifications on the health insurance status of the nuns. Aiming to search for commonalities between the social situation of nuns, art and care workers, I will begin my analysis by demonstrating how the notion of devotion also holds a central position in the discourses around art and care work.
The figure of selflessly devoted artist in relation to the economy of art

In relation to art work, it is important to address the notion of devotion within the historical context of modern art which remains a dominant framework for conceptualising art practices until today. The sphere of modern art with its particular set of ideas and institutions was largely formed in the nineteenth century and linked to the rise of the bourgeoisie class in Europe. Manifesting the economic wealth of this new class included the creation of new spaces dedicated to the presentation and consumption of art, such as art galleries. These new art institutions facilitated the dissociation of art from the state and religious institutions (Bradley 2007: 9-10). The result of this process was that the role of artists in society was no longer limited to the status of servant vis-à-vis their religious or aristocratic patrons. It was now expanded by the possibility to create art for art’s sake, to work autonomously, according to artistic “vision” and “inspiration.” Thus, the rise of bourgeoisie class contributed substantially to the production of economic conditions that would set the stage for the figure of artist who is selflessly devoted to creative practice – an ideal that descends from the periods of Renaissance and Romanticism, as Hans Abbing maps in his book Why Are Artists Poor? (Abbing 2002: 26).

Abbing’s book is a useful resource for exploring commonplace assumptions that link the concept of devotion to the practice of visual arts. In his critical inquiry about the “exceptional economy of art” he browses through a variety of topoi that indicate the co-existence of modern as well as pre-modern features in contemporary conceptions of art. For example, he refers to the understanding of art as something authentic and sacred, offering a romantic alternative to the routine of everyday lives (2002: 27); or as a superfluous luxury good with little use value but high prestige (2002: 27-28), or as something innovative and rebellious, challenging social canons and taboos (2002: 29), or as something magical, provoking intense illusions and sublime experiences in its audiences (2002: 29). Abbing argues that all of those beliefs ascribe a gatekeeper role to the artists, positioning them as a separate caste of people who control and protect art, keeping intruders at distance (2002: 30). Furthermore, beliefs about the sacred and remote nature of art are also intertwined with the idea of artistic talent as a gift which needs sacrifice and absolute devotion from its bearers; or which places the primary motivation of artists in the realm of compulsion; or creates a clear distinction between artistic quality and the economic conditions of its production, assuming a complete independence between these two factors (2002: 31).

It is precisely the latter dimension that forms the primary interest of Abbing. As an economist and practiseing artist, he is mostly interested in the economic ramifications resulting
from the social imaginary of selflessly devoted artist. In his book, he explores the paradox why so many art workers continue to work in the field where they cannot make a living. According to Abbing, standard economics cannot explain this phenomenon. In order to understand the economic principles of the art sphere, non-monetary awards such as self-realisation, recognition and social standing must also be taken into consideration (2002: 82).

Therefore, Abbing proposes to look at the art economy as a dual economy which is connected to an asymmetric value-system. On the one hand, art economy operates in the market sphere, where monetary gains and profits are made. However, the orientation towards the market stands for a low status in the value-system, resulting in the rejection, denial and concealment of commercial activities. On the other hand, art economy depends on an exceptional amount of gifts, such as donations, state subsidies, tax exemptions or social benefits, which have a substantially higher status in the dominant value-system. The orientation towards gift economy indicates a good reputation for art practitioners. The central thesis of Abbing states that it is precisely the high value associated with the gift sphere that constitutes the exceptionality of art economy (2002: 40-48).

Following Abbing’s argumentation, it is thus evident that the figure of a selflessly devoted artist is connected to the prevailing value-system in the art sphere. As I argued above, the genealogy of this figure is closely linked to the history of modern art and the emergence of l’art pour l’art discourse that granted artists with an unprecedented amount of autonomy. But it is also important to note that the conception of art as an activity separated from the rest of social life is a double-edged sword. As Hans Abbing has shown, it is precisely the belief system about art as something remote, sacred and magical that contributes to the denial of economy in the arts, as well as to the persistence of the assumption that artists are predominantly motivated by their passion and devotion, taking little interest in economic security.

The figure of loving housewife in relation to capitalist economy

Feminist activists and theorists in the 1970s were engaged in efforts to expand the Marxist analysis of capital-labour relations beyond its classical topos of the factory. As Silvia Federici has noted in retrospective to the Wages for Housework campaign, this undertaking resulted in the re-conceptualisation of the notion of class struggle (Federici 2012b: 6). In addition to the male industrial proletariat, the protagonists of this struggle were now also identified among the wage-less workers, such as the proletarian housewives whose work reality is centred around “the kitchen, the bedroom and the home” (Federici 2012b: 8).
Thus, one important theme in feminist Marxist politics of the 1970s was focused on contesting the naturalisation of domestic work as a realm of women’s biological destiny. For example, Silvia Federici’s *Wages Against Housework* from 1975, a text which formulates the political aims of Wages for Housework campaign, dedicates special attention to this issue. In this text, she states that it is precisely the unwaged condition of housework that has reinforced the common assumption that housework is not work and, therefore, prevents women from struggling against it (2012b/1975a: 16). She then continues to argue that by denying housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love, “capital has killed many birds with one stone” (2012b/1975a: 17). The naturalisation of domestic work as an attribute of female physique and personality, or “an internal need,” not only allows capital to make profits out of women’s unpaid reproductive labour, but also guarantees that instead of refusing such exploitation, women have internalised the desire to perform as good housewives (ibid).

The ambivalent relationship between women’s love, work and struggle is further articulated in the almost poetic introduction lines to *Wages Against Housework* where housework is framed as a particular combination of physical, emotional and sexual labour that is disguised under the notions of love and devotion:

> They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work. They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism. Every miscarriage is a work accident. Homosexuality and heterosexuality are both working conditions… but homosexuality is worker’s control over production, not the end of work. More smiles? More money. Nothing will be so powerful in destroying the healing virtues of a smile. Neuroses, suicides, desexualisation: occupational diseases of the housewife. (Federici 2012b/1975a: 15)

By revealing the hidden social labour that has been masked under the disguise of women’s supposedly innate affiliation with tasks related to care and reproduction, the feminist Marxist theory of the 1970s argued that the domestic work of women is not a personal service that resides outside the capital. On the contrary, women’s housework was conceptualised as a key resource of capitalist accumulation that produces and reproduces labour power (Federici 2006), “giving birth to, raising, disciplining, and servicing the worker for production” (Dalla Costa & James 1972: 11). Following this assertion, the daily, endless, prosaic activities of washing laundry, wiping children’s asses and mending husband’s shirts that apparently produce nothing were identified as productive work. At the same time, it made evident that the unpaid reproductive labour of women is not socially recognised in the same way as other types of work in capitalist societies, such as through wage, work contracts and regulations (Vishmidt 2010: 54).
In the previous pages I have discussed how the narratives about love and devotion form a crucial dimension in discourses on art and care work. I have argued my case by highlighting significant episodes in the history of modern art and feminist politics, focusing on moments that have been essential in the process of either making or breaking those narratives. With this discussion, I have been aiming to reach a point where I can establish a commonality between art practitioners, care/domestic workers… and nuns. I will now formulate this commonality in the thesis that these “labourers of devotion” are socially not recognised as workers. In the following section, I will continue my analysis by discussing the ambiguity between waged and unwaged work, using the issue of social security as an exemplification of this ambivalence.

**No taxes, no health insurance: the connection between unwaged work and social security**

In this section, I will take another clue from the newspaper article reporting on nuns. Focusing my analysis on the particular example of health insurance system in Estonia, I will discuss the causality between unwaged work and lack of social security. By mapping out the similarities between the situation of nuns and art workers, I will point to the blind-spots in the legal system of Estonia and show how these were addressed in the process of art workers’ organising in Tallinn.

**Health care system in Estonia and the case of nuns**

The health care system in Estonia is funded by the tax contributions of the working population which are administered by the Health Insurance Fund. The website of the Health Insurance Fund declares that health insurance system in Estonia is based on the principle of solidarity (Eesti Haigekassa). This means that the Fund covers health care costs for each working individual independently from their tax contribution, and that the tax contributions of working population also cover the expenses for health care services provided to the persons who have no work-related income (ibid). These unwaged social groups are listed as subjects of “special case” in §6 of the Social Tax Act which includes, for example, pensioners, children, students and registered unemployed persons, among others (Sotsiaalmaksuseadus 2000: §6).

The newspaper article on the situation of nuns reports on their earlier attempts to advocate for the inclusion of convent residents in §6 of the Social Tax Act (Tamm 2011).
However, instead of being officially recognised as a special case in this legislative document, a different type of exception had been created for the nuns on technocratic level. The government decided to allocate financial support for the convent, so that this could register the convent residents as employees and pay social taxes for them in the same way as any other employer would do (ibid). This is a very significant move from political perspective. It means that even if the health insurance of the nuns is covered from tax money, they are not legally recognised as subjects of the solidarity principle who are itemised in §6 of the Social Tax Act. By allocating tax money to the convent, the principle of solidarity was apparently enacted, even though in an oblique manner. Paradoxically, by performing this act of solidarity, a contribution-based relationship between the nuns and the social security system was created.

**The position of art workers in relation to tax system**

In the frame of the art workers’ organising process in Tallinn, the issue of health insurance formed one of the core problems (Mürk, Soomre, Triisberg 2011). As freelance art workers who are subjected to vast amounts of unpaid labour and/or scarce and irregular incomes, we quickly realised that the information provided on the website of the Health Insurance Fund is not quite accurate. The health care system in Estonia is not completely based on the principle of solidarity. It is a combination of principles of solidarity and contribution. This is also the reason why the newspaper article on nuns touched a nerve among the art workers. It provided a perfect example of persons who fall between two chairs in this system.

As freelancing art workers, we would often find ourselves in a similar kind of limbo. For example, in some cases, we would receive government grants through the institutions of art funding system. These grants are completely exempted from taxes and, therefore, entirely isolated from the social security system. In many cases, we would get paid for selling the copyright of our work, for example, when exhibiting an art work or publishing an article. We would then sign a License Agreement which is taxable but exempted from social taxes. These are, as explained above, precisely the taxes that regulate access to the social security system. In less frequent cases, we would get paid according to proper work contracts (of which there are also different types in Estonia). However, even in such instances the access to social security is not automatically guaranteed. The Social Tax Act establishes a minimum of social tax contribution (Sotsiaalmaksuseadus 2000: §2). This needs to be exceeded in order to be

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2 There is one exception to this rule, the “support for creative activity” subsidy allocated according to the principles stated in the Creative Persons and Artistic Associations Act. I will return to this example later in this thesis.
eligible for social benefits such as health insurance. In the cultural field, where wages tend to be very low, this minimum limit is often not reached.

In very rare cases, when freelance cultural workers are subject to work contracts that grant access to social security, the problem arises in connection to the irregularity and temporariness of these working relationships. Depending on the duration of the contract, it is quite usual to fall in and out of the security system in a cyclic manner. This irregularity has its immediate effects on the health insurance status, whereas the consequences for other social guarantees such as future pension benefits are less rapid, though not less aggravating. All in all, it is very typical for freelance art and cultural workers to have combined incomes. These are not only a mixture of taxable and non-taxable incomes, but also include social-tax-obligatory incomes from different employers. However, the existing tax calculation system in Estonia is not sophisticated enough to deal with such complexity. For example, I have had periods in my life where my monthly or annual contribution of social taxes has exceeded the minimum limit that is necessary for gaining access to social security system. Nevertheless, this hasn’t changed my excluded status from this system, because my tax contributions have been scattered over different employers. The task of registering workers as beneficiaries of social security system is relegated to individual employers and not to the Estonian Tax and Custom Board that keeps track of all incomes. Therefore, there is also no mechanism that would sum up tax contributions that are simultaneously channelled into the tax collection system from different employers.

The ambivalence between privilege and exclusion

As I have shown above, there are many ways how the incomes of freelance art workers fall outside the classical wage-labour relations. I would now like to argue that this phenomenon can be traced back to the concept of artistic autonomy, the origins of which I described earlier. Despite that the institutional and economic composition of the art sphere has changed considerably in the last centuries, the idea of artistic freedom has maintained an essential place in European societies, forming a guiding principle in a wide spectrum of legal documents, such as state constitutions, cultural policy regulations, etc. In fact, during the prosperity era in Europe that followed the World War II, the task of protecting artistic freedom was largely delegated to the state. Cultural policies in the European welfare societies

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3 To bring an example among many possible ones: the “freedom of the arts” principle is stated in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights which was proclaimed in 2000.
came to be dominated by the idea that artists and artistic work are beneficial to the society and should be supported by public funds (Duelung 1992: 120).

In many ways, the publicly supported art funding system puts art and cultural workers in a privileged situation, making them eligible for grants and state subsidies, tax reductions and special social security arrangements. However, despite all the differences that characterise cultural and social policies relating to cultural workers in various European countries, the socioeconomic status of art workers is generally described as precarious (European Parliament 2006: 6). Drawing my conclusions from the empirical examples offered above, I would argue that the poor socioeconomic conditions of art workers are connected to the combined nature of artistic incomes. Because freelance art workers are regularly jumping ships between the “gift sphere” and the “market sphere,” their status in the sphere of labour occurs to be fluid as well. In the situation where wage is the dividing line between work and non-work, and social security systems compute benefits on the basis of waged employment, art workers are not only deprived from basic socio-economic rights, but also tend to fall outside the category of “workers.”

In relation to the health insurance system in Estonia, the nuns and the art workers share a similar position of ambiguity. As nun Filareta expressly stressed in her statement quoted in newspaper Postimees, the nuns do not identify as workers of the convent (Tamm 2011). However, the outcome of the agreement between the convent and the government imposed that the nuns were registered at the Health Insurance Fund as if they were waged workers. The majority of freelance art practitioners, on the contrary, would describe their artistic activities as work. However, the government-supported cultural funding system, from which art workers heavily depend, often imposes income models resulting with the situation where the social security system regards them as if they were not waged workers. As I have shown in this section, both scenarios reveal a blind-spot in the health insurance system of Estonia, explicating how the solidarity-based system reaches its limits when faced with the working poor who fall outside the orthodox conceptions of wage-labour relations.

**Parallels between unpaid reproductive labour and art work**

I will conclude the argumentation in this section by invoking a parallel with feminist Marxist analysis on unpaid reproductive labour. Firstly, it is important to underline that the two cases I have exemplified above, are neither specific to the particular legislative system in Estonia nor exceptions that only affect narrow occupational groups such as art and cultural workers or the clergy. In societies where the relationship between waged labour and social
security is organised according to similar principles as I have elaborated on the example of 
Estonia, the reproductive sector is also affected from analogical consequences. Silvia Federici 
has summed up this issue in a witty formulation, commenting that, paradoxically, “the more 
women care for others the less care they receive in turn,” because they devote less time to 
waged employment which determines access to social security benefits Federici (2012b/2009: 
123).

Furthermore, I want to stress that the problems I have mapped out on the example of 
the health insurance system in Estonia, support and confirm the fundamental argument within 
feminist Marxist thought – namely that wage is not just a pay-check but a political means of 
organising society (Federici 2012b: 7). To struggle for wage in sectors where work is not 
socially recognised as such – like Wages for Housework campaign was doing in the 1970s – 
is, therefore, not simply about formulating one demand among others, but also about 
establishing a political perspective that opens a new ground for social struggle (Federici 
2012b/1975c: 30).

In order to set the stage for discussing feminist political imaginaries in relation to 
(new) social struggles, I will now make a detour into the art workers’ organising process in 
Tallinn. Focusing on the notion of “art workers” I will analyse how the identity as workers 
was shaped and articulated in this process.

**Becoming art workers: a process of disidentfication**

Looking back at the art workers’ movement in Tallinn from the distance of three 
years, there are not too many achievements to declare. In spite of some minor legislative 
changes that have been introduced in Estonia in the recent years – and which can partly be 
associated to the pressure that the art workers’ movement exerted –, the working conditions in 
the art sector haven’t changed much. Nonetheless, the art workers’ movement produced a 
much deeper imprint on discursive level, changing the attitudes how artistic labour is 
discussed in public sphere. Thus, the self-organisation process in Tallinn was largely centred 
on awareness-raising, whereas the adoption of the term “art workers” came to hold a central 
place in this project. I will now briefly contextualise the notion of art workers in its local, 
international and historical dimensions, and will then continue my discussion by referring to 
the concept of “disidentification” by José Esteban Muñoz (1999).
The notion of art workers as a mobilisation device

The process of self-organisation among art practitioners in Tallinn was triggered by an exhibition that was held in Tallinn Art Hall in winter 2009/2010. The exhibition Blue-Collar Blues, curated by Andres Härm, was coined as a critical reaction against the new labour legislation in Estonia which had been set in force earlier that year in order to flexibilise the labour market (Härm 2009). Within the informal circles of the art field, the exhibition was followed by a heated debate, focusing predominantly on the fact that many artists didn’t get paid for producing their work (Triisberg 2011a). Whilst critically scrutinising the neoliberal changes in the world of labour, the exhibition failed to address the economic conditions of its own production. This obvious contradiction became a catalyst for a wider polemic which resulted in a cycle of assemblies in 2010 and 2011. The context, from which this movement emerged, also set the major tone for its agenda, focusing primarily on the material conditions of exhibition making and the practice of exploiting the unpaid work of artists (Triisberg 2011a). However, since broader issues related to social security were also addressed, the movement mobilised a wider spectrum of art practitioners. The term “art workers” was taken into use as a signifier that enabled to transgress the singular occupational identifications within the art sector.

At the time of 2010, the term “art worker,” or kunstöötaja, was a neologism in Estonian language (Triisberg 2011a). Derived from English, its origins are often traced back to United States, where both artists and critics began to identify themselves as art workers in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Bryan-Wilson 2009: 1). The adoption of this term formed an essential dimension in the formation of Art Workers’ Coalition in USA, which is one of the most well-known examples of art workers’ mobilisation in the history of contemporary art. However, as Julia Bryan-Wilson notes in her book dedicated to the history of Art Workers’ Coalition, the term was not completely new in late 1960s – it had also been in use by Arts and Crafts movement in England in late 19th century (2009: 14), as well as by the Mexican muralists in the 1920s (2009: 27).

Mainly referencing the practices of self-organisation from 1970s, the notion of art workers has recently witnessed a certain revival in the Western art world. As an art workers’ organiser and curator, I am founding this statement on my personal experience of having witnessed the emergence (and in some cases also the subsequent decay) of initiatives such as Precarious Workers Brigade in London, W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and Greater Economy) in New York, May Congress in Moscow, Campaign Against Zero Wage in Prague, Reko collective in Stockholm, the international ArtLeaks platform, or many others. These are self-
organised initiatives addressing precarious working conditions in the art sector, employing the term “art workers,” and often taking inspiration from the Art Workers’ Coalition in their forms of organisation.

In her account on the history of Art Workers’ Coalition, Julia Bryan-Wilson discusses the oxymoronic nature of the term “art worker,” noting that, under capitalism, art also functions as the “outside” to labour, as a “a non-utilitarian or non-productive activity against which the mundane work is defined, a leisure-time pursuit of self-expression, or a utopian alternative to the deadening effects of capitalism” (Bryan-Wilson 2009: 27). Therefore, and also drawing on my previous discussion on the figure of selflessly devoted artist, I want to analyse the term “art worker” in reference to the concept of “disidentification” which is defined by José Esteban Muñoz as a political position located between identification and counter-identification, as a strategy that works both “on and against the dominant ideology” (Muñoz 1999: 11). In order to demonstrate how this concept is relevant for discussing the self-identification of art workers in Tallinn, I will highlight some essential dimensions that framed the discussions about art and work in Estonia.

*Art workers as a strategy of counter-identification*

In my interpretation, the self-identification as art workers in the context of Estonia indicated a dissociation from two assumptions dominating the commonplace conceptions of the economy of art – the belief that art making is a hobby that serves the purpose of self-expression and is not supposed to be a source of stable income, and the somewhat contrasting idea that art practitioners are entrepreneurs who are selling their products in the market. The latter idea had recently gained considerable momentum on cultural policy making level. A few years prior to the constitution of the art workers’ movement, the Ministry of Culture, governed by the neoliberal Reform Party, had actively started to promote and support creative industries (Eesti Kultuuriministeerium), thus encouraging the commercialisation of cultural practices. However, when searching dialogue with the policy making level, the art workers’ movement pointed their attention towards a very particular articulation of the emerging “culturepreneur” discourse, criticising its emblematic contradictions on the example of the Creative Persons and Artistic Associations Act, a legislation affecting specifically freelance cultural workers.

The Creative Persons and Artistic Associations Act was introduced in 2004, as response to a prior cycle of cultural workers’ advocacy work addressing the difficulties that freelance cultural workers face in relation to social security. As an incomplete remedy to their
situation, the legislation introduced the measure of granting funding for artistic associations who then can allocate “support for creative activity” for cultural workers (defined as “creative persons” in the legislation) who do not receive income (Loovisikute ja loomeliitude seadus 2004: §16). In other words, this support is a variant of unemployment subsidy, offering income and health insurance coverage for cultural workers whose chances of receiving regular unemployment benefits are slim because they rarely pay social taxes. In its essence, the “support for creative activity” is based on a similar technocratic procedure that was applied in the case of nuns – allocating extra funding for convents or artistic associations, instead of redefining the §6 of the Social Tax Act. Perhaps the crucial difference from nuns was manifested in the initial version of this legislation, which coupled the eligibility for creative support with the requirement that the beneficiaries are registered as self-employed entrepreneurs. From the perspective of art workers’ movement, this requirement seemed absurd not only because it created a paradoxical situation where unemployed or wage-less workers need to become entrepreneurs in order to receive state subsidy (Mürk, Soomre, Triisberg 2011), but also because this requirement occurred as a symptomatic feature of neoliberal discourse dominating the cultural policy. Persons registered as self-employed entrepreneurs (defined as “sole proprietors” in the English version of the Social Tax Act) are required to make quarterly advance payments of social taxes (Sotsiaalmaksuseadus 2000: §9) which then guarantee their access to social security system. Without asking how the income for paying these taxes is generated, the suggestion that freelance cultural workers should register as entrepreneurs, in order to gain access to social security system, indicated a desire to erase the problems of an entire social group from the administrative domain of the state apparatus by simply “jumping” statistical categories. Resisting this pressure of becoming entrepreneurs in the newly invented economic sector of creative industries, the counter-identification as “art workers” emphasised the art practitioners’ subjectivity as workers.

Furthermore, the art workers also had an issue to take with popular conceptions about the nature of artistic labour. In order to contest the wide-spread assumption that art is a non-utilitarian activity practised by a group of “bohemians” whose desire for self-expression neglects economic security, the art workers in Tallinn were inspired by post-operaist notion of “immortal labour.” Most famously conceptualised by Maurizio Lazzarato, immaterial labour

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4 To provide a brief comparison: the maximum time-frame of receiving creative support is limited to 12 months and the monthly payments are computed according to minimum wage (340 euros in 2014). The regular unemployment allowance is limited to 9 months with monthly payments in the amount of 112 euros. In both cases, beneficiaries of the subsidy are additionally covered with health insurance.

5 In the revised version of Creative Persons and Artistic Association Act from 2013, this requirement was cancelled, partly in reaction to the critique articulated by the art workers’ movement.
is defined as a type of work that does not produce physical commodities but informational and cultural contents of the commodity (1996). Thus, immaterial work describes activities that are normally not recognised as work, highlighting specifically the affective and communicative modalities of post-fordist labour (ibid). In the art workers’ movement, the notion of immaterial labour was recognised as a useful tool for conceptualising the particularities of creative and cognitive labour. In the light of this concept, it was possible to demonstrate how the activities of reading books, visiting exhibitions and socialising at conferences or exhibition openings are not leisure-time activities, as they are perhaps intuitively perceived in conventional conceptions of work. Instead, the concept of immaterial labour allowed re-signify activities, such as reading or socialising, as central aspects of creative working process which is essentially a cognitive and communicative type of labour, founded on the activities of assembling, re-arranging and mediating knowledge.

Keeping in mind that the notion of immaterial labour is first and foremost a critical concept, its meaning is evidently not limited to offering a positive definition for activities that are commonly seen as the opposite of work. The art workers in Tallinn also appropriated this concept in order to scrutinise the precarious dimensions of cognitive work. To mention only a small selection of issues that were discussed in that context, I will highlight examples that carry strong resemblance to the modalities of care work: the indistinct borderline between formal and informal work relations, the excessive commitment and personal investment, the spatial and temporal limitlessness of workplace and work hours. To reconceptualise these blurry boundaries between work and non-work as corner pillars of immaterial labour, constituted another element in art workers’ strategy of counter-identification, aimed at challenging the dominant ideology that denies to art workers their status as workers.

When conceptualising the process of disidentification, José Esteban Muñoz notes that it is a reworking of subject positions which does not annul the contradictory elements of any identity (Muñoz 1999: 12). Thus, disidentification is not only to be discussed in terms of counter-identification, but as a strategy of working both “on and against” (Muñoz 1999: 11). Relating this dialectical process to the self-identification as art workers, I will now emphasise its affirmative dimensions by outlining two political possibilities implied in the identification as workers. If the self-identification as art workers would have been solely founded on active non-identification against the dominant modes of conceptualising artists’ role in society, one of its potential consequences would have been a complete identification as workers. In the process of organising against precarious working conditions, such identification would then have required that collective agency is searched by forming alliances with other precarious
workers in society, and practised by targeting general social policies and labour rights. This didn’t happen. Rather than addressing the conflicts in neoliberal labour market at large, the art workers preferred to demand improvements in the particular sector of cultural work (Triisberg 2011a). This was done by conceptualising the economy of art as an exceptional one, and thus, demanding exceptional conditions in relation to social policies. For example, instead of demanding health insurance as a universal right, this issue was problematised solely from the perspective of “professional” cultural workers, even though it is not specific to cultural sector. In doing this, the art workers conformed to the dominant conception of artists’ unique status in society, mobilising their efforts towards increasing privileges that had already been established in policy documents such as Creative Persons and Artistic Associations Act, rather than questioning or challenging the ways how these policies produce the subjectivity of freelance art practitioners as a social group that does not quite fit to the category of working population.

Having formulated some critique towards the modes of address that the art workers in Tallinn adopted, when locating themselves in the ambivalent zone between “precarious workers” and “professional art practitioners,” I will now shift my focus on questions of organising. By referring to the dilemmas that the art workers’ movement faced in that context, I will describe how the challenge of organising precarious workers has been framed in post-operaist theory and practice. I will then conclude my analysis by referring to the concatenations of feminist Marxist politics and contemporary political imaginaries of transversal social struggles.

The workers of society: transversal struggles in the social factory

Trade unions and the challenge of organising

One of the first action plans that emerged in the process of art workers’ mobilisation in Tallinn was the idea to form a trade union. This ambition was indicated in the name that the initiative adopted at the very first assembly – Eesti Kaasaegse Kunsti Liit (Estonian Union of Contemporary Art) (Mürk, Soomre, Triisberg 2011). However, the mailing list founded a few months later carried the name KKL (Kaasaegse Kunsti Liit, or Union of Contemporary Art), evicting the adjective referring to nationality. In order to elaborate the context from which this name emerged, it is important to explain the “inside joke” that the initial proposal was transporting. An organisation called Eesti Kaasaegse Kunsti Liit would have carried the acronym EKKL, representing another instance in the process of hijacking the names of
existing art institutions by adding an extra K for *kaasaegne* (contemporary). In 2006, for example, EKKM, Eesti Kaasaegse Kunsti Muuseum (Estonian Museum of Contemporary Art) had been established as a counter-institution defining itself against EKM, Eesti Kunstimuuseum (Art Museum of Estonia) (Triisberg 2011b: 134). Following the same logic, EKKL would have been formed as a counter-organisation to EKL, Eesti Kunstnike Liit (Estonian Artists’ Association) which is an umbrella organisation uniting several associations of artists and art historians. Similar organisations also exist in other cultural sectors and their legal definition is provided in the Creative Persons and Artistic Associations Act, differing from the definition of trade unions in many aspects.

The organising process in Tallinn never took the shape of formally establishing a trade union or new artistic association. This was largely due to the fact that Estonian Artists’ Association already existed, even if its passivity in defending the social and economic rights of art practitioners caused a great deal of frustration among the younger generation of art workers mobilising under the umbrella of Union of Contemporary Art. The debate on two competing strategies of either forming a new organisation or joining the existing one, in order to change it from inside, formed an ongoing debate in the assemblies and the mailing list conversations of the movement (Triisberg 2011a). Nonetheless, in addition to the pragmatic considerations on the futility of doubling the work of an already existing organisation, it is important to stress that there were other, and more structural, reasons why the organising process in Tallinn couldn’t result with the establishment of trade union. For example, in May 2010, the core group of the self-organised art workers’ movement met with the head of the Estonian Trade Union Federation and learned an important lesson in civil education – in order to find political agency in the trade unionist approach of practising collective wage negotiations, one needs an employer (Kaasaegse Kunsti Liit 2010). But then, a complicated question emerged: Where to localise a collective struggle in the fragmented working reality which is characterised by individualisation and constant rotation of workplaces and employers?

**Spaces of struggle in the social factory**

A re-occurring motif within post-operaist theory is centred on the spatial dimensions of workers’ struggles (Hardt & Negri 2000, Raunig 2013, The Edu-factory Collective 2009). This interest for rethinking spaces of struggle is perhaps best explained from the perspective of dispersion that is characteristic to modes of production in post-fordist capitalism. Whereas the operaist cycle of workers’ struggles was preoccupied with the notion of autonomy, aiming
to resist the subjectivation mechanisms implicated in capitalist organisation of factory work, post-operaist theory is faced with the challenging task of finding new locations from which such struggles could emerge. In the fordist organisation of factory work, the mobilisation of struggles was apparently easier – it was the factory floor itself that offered such platform for hundreds or thousands of workers, assembled physically in the same space on daily basis, and being economically subjected to identical working conditions. As Gerald Raunig has pointed out, the fordist factory was an exemplary site of condensation – not only condensing the time and space of production, but also resistance (Raunig 2013: 17). But if it is true that the factory has lost its central role in capitalist production, as post-operaist theory claims, where could the condensation of precarious workers and their struggles take place?

In the light of feminist Marxist conceptualisation of reproductive work as the key resource of capitalist accumulation (Federici 2006), the challenge of organising dispersed workers is apparently not new. In their efforts to expand the location of working class struggle beyond its privileged site of the factory, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James called out in 1972: “If we fail to grasp that precisely this family is the very pillar of the capitalist organisation of work /…/ then we will be moving in a limping revolution /…/” (Dalla Costa & James 1972: 19). In terms of spatial metaphoric, this call corresponded with the newly developed concept of “social factory” that emerged in operaist theory in the 1970s. This concept, however, does not originate directly from feminist thinking, but is closely associated with authors such as Romano Alquati, Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri and other regular contributors to the journal Quaderni Rossi (Wright 2005: 167). Coupled with the figure of operaio sociale, the “socialised worker,” it denotes a stage in capitalist development where “social relations become moments of the relations of production, and the whole society becomes an articulation of production. In short, all of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over all of society” (Tronti 1962, cited in Cleaver 1992: 137). When suggesting the immanence of capital to all social relations, the concept of social factory resonates with feminist efforts to conceptualise fordist mode of production as a social system that reaches far beyond the walls of factory, also including the unwaged workers of the capitalist society.

Re-articulating the challenges of feminist politics from the 1970s, the militant research collective Precarias a la Deriva speculates on the possibility of mobilising dispersed precarious workers for a strike (Precarias a la Deriva 2011: 115-122). Contending that strike has been the most powerful political strategy in the history of workers’ struggles, they remind major difficulties that feminist activists confronted when trying to mobilise domestic workers
for strikes (2011: 116). This aspiration proved virtually impossible – women refused to interrupt their care activities, because it would have affected the well-being of the persons they cared for (ibid). Reasoning on this experience, Precarias a la Deriva conclude that strike in the care sector can only be thought it metaphorical terms (ibid). They then suggest that the idea of care strike should be thought as a provocation, as the activity of interrupting the social order that renders care activities invisible and denies their status as work (ibid).

There is a prominent example in contemporary social movements that strongly alludes to this proposition – the transnational EuroMayDay movement that started mobilising precarious workers in the beginning of 21st century, forming transversal alliances between a multitude of social groups, such as migrants and sans-papier’s, workers in education and culture, domestic and care workers, political activists and unemployed people, as well as a wide spectrum of service workers whose work realities are described with neologisms such as chain-workers, call-workers, or temp-workers (Lazzarato 2007). Responding to the apparent impossibility to employ classical trade unionist methods of struggle in the realm of precarious labour, EuroMayDay has experimented with the potentialities of stretching these struggles beyond the singular labour sectors by placing the issue of precarious labour “in the middle of attention,” as Precarias a la Deriva has suggested (Precarias a la Deriva 2011: 16). Framing the concept of precarious labour both as an analytical category and a battle cry, the most visible part of EuroMayDay movement has been centred on organising annual demonstrations on the 1st of May, renewing and re-signifying practices of resistance that are connected to the International Workers’ Day (Raunig 2007b). When taking the issue of precarious labour out into the streets, the EuroMayDay movement has somewhat hijacked the day of celebration that has historically “belonged” to the trade unions, while at the same time offering a site of condensation for social groups who fall outside the social representation of trade unions.6

Another interesting approach of reinventing spaces and forms of struggle in postfordist capitalism originates from the Edu-factory collective, which is rooted in the homonymous transnational mailing list focusing on university transformations, knowledge production and forms of conflict. Setting up the hypothesis “What was once the factory is now the university,” the Edu-factory collective uses this metaphor in order to analyse knowledge as a central resource and productive instrument within contemporary capitalism (The Edu-factory Collective 2009: 3). From this perspective, the university is seen as an institution where not only the commodity of knowledge is manufactured and traded, but also

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6 While EuroMayDay demonstrations are still organised in some cities, the heyday of this movement is largely over by now. The most intense cycle of transnational EuroMayDay mobilisation took place in the second half of the last decade.
as a site where the labour power of knowledge workers is being reproduced (2009: 2-3) – a line of argumentation that resembles feminist Marxist conceptualisation of family and home as sites where both value is produced and labour power reproduced. Also keeping in mind that the university is perhaps one the few remaining spaces where a remarkable physical condensation of cognitive workers takes place in space and time (Raunig 2013: 17), the Edu-factory collective speculates about the possibilities to organise within the university as if it were a factory (The Edu-factory Collective 2009: 3). Conceptualising university as the frontline of social conflict within contemporary knowledge-oriented capitalism, the Edu-factory mailing list has played a significant role in concatenating and exhilarating an intense cycle of student struggles that peaked around 2009-2011. In the context of Europe, its most widely mediatised moments were perhaps the occupation of the art academy in Vienna in 2009, or the protests against education cuts in UK in 2010.

**Women, art practitioners, precarious workers – the workers of society**

In spring 2011, after a recent government change following the latest parliamentary elections in Estonia, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs called together a working group that was supposed to elaborate proposals for legislative change relating to the social security of freelance cultural workers. The main attention of this working group was pointed on questions of health insurance. I participated in that working group in summer 2011, contributing with my knowledge on social security models offered for cultural workers in various European countries. In frequent cases, the models I proposed as examples of good practices were disregarded with the argument that in a country of 1.3 million of inhabitants where the estimated number of professional freelance cultural workers does not exceed a few thousand persons, the establishment of artist social security funds, such as the Künstlersozialkasse in Germany, or Künstler-Sozialversicherungsfonds in Austria, is not worth the effort and the financial cost of their development. Instead, it was sometimes argued, predominantly with humour, that it would be easier to change the §6 of the Social Tax Act, and to include cultural workers into the list of social groups who are treated according to the principle of solidarity.

From the perspective of the art workers’ movement, this proposal was very far from being a joke. In fact, while searching for potential sites in which workers’ struggles in the art field could be localised, the movement had identified a number of indications suggesting that it is precisely the society that constitutes the workplace of freelance art practitioners. When

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7 Resulting from the discussions in the working group, some minor revisions were introduced to the Creative Persons and Artistic Associations Act in 2013.

8 A reliable statistical data on the number of freelance cultural workers is missing until today in Estonia.
tracing the flows of money circulating in the art field, it became evident that the income composition of art workers is largely scattered over institutions that operate on state funding, including exhibition houses, museums, educational facilities, state-funded cultural media, and public foundations from which art workers apply directly for grants and project funding. Furthermore, a close inspection of the distribution of financial resources in the art field revealed that even if art practitioners’ work relations to those particular institutions are intermittent, fluid and discontinuous, the relationship to public funding remains constant. Thus, drawing a logical conclusion from this evidence, it was tempting to argue that the art workers had already been hired by the society, and paid from the resources that the society puts on public disposal through the tax collection system administrated by the state. Moreover, further arguments for such viewpoint are embedded in the liberal conception of art as a phenomenon that is needed in society and should therefore be supported by public funds – which is companion rhetoric to the discourse of modern art, as I have argued above.

Alluding to this line of argumentation from the art workers’ movement, I would now like to interlink the political imaginaries that bring together historical radical feminist efforts to identify unwaged reproductive labour as productive and the social movements mobilising against precariousness in the beginning of 21st century. It is interesting that one of the very few universal demands formulated by the EuroMayDay movement was the claim for basic income, a concept which has a substantial genealogy within the feminist strands of Marxism, such as the Wages for Housework campaign. Whereas Wages for Housework didn’t express the demand for basic income in identical formulation, this political perspective was implied in autonomist feminist Marxist claims that the struggle of unwaged domestic workers must not be trivialised as a request for the pay-check (Federici 2012b/1975c: 30). Neither was the Wages for Housework campaign, as Silvia Federici underlines, oriented at demanding access to conventional wage-labour relations: quite the opposite, it was based on the understanding that women were already part of such relations (2012b/1975c: 37). In spite of striving for the recognition of women’s hidden social labour through wage, winning a wage was not considered to be the revolutionary goal (2012b/1975c: 39). Rather than that, demanding a wage was considered as revolutionary strategy, one that undermines the role that is assigned to women in the capitalist division of labour (2012/1975c: 39).

Similarly, when contemporary social movements demand a basic income, this demand is founded on the understanding that capitalism is dependent on forms of work that are intermittent, unpaid and precarious (Federici 2006). Precarious workers mobilising in the EuroMayDay movement were not demanding jobs, but payment for the fact that capitalism
needs them to work in unwaged and precarious conditions, making money “out of our cooking, smiling and fucking” (Federici 2012b/1975a: 19), as feminist Marxists have aptly described the nature of value-production in the social factory. Thus, rather than seeking admission into the conventional wage-labour relations, the demand for basic income is essentially a more radical one, calling for the re-organisation of capitalist social relations at large. But here again, the radical dimension of basic income is not constituted in “struggle for capital” (Federici 2012b/1975c: 29), but in “struggle against capital” (ibid). This difference between for and against is the crucial element that distinguishes operaist and post-operaist struggles from the trade unionist politics of wage negotiations. Furthermore, it is the conceptual nucleus of the political perspective that autonomist Marxism has to offer for workers who strive for autonomy from both the capital and the state.

Art workers’ struggles, health insurance and care revolution

The art workers’ movement in Tallinn was apparently not among the most radical ones in the kaleidoscope of contemporary social movements mobilising against precarity. Rather than thinking about autonomy in post-operaist terms, the art workers remained situated in the modern discourse of artistic autonomy, which first emerged in the context of 19th century when the rising bourgeois class manifested its economic power by establishing art institutions that offered artists a new sphere in which to work (Bradley 2007: 9). Irrespective of the fact that, in Europe, the mission of protecting and nurturing the autonomy of art has largely been delegated to the state, particularly in the post-war era (Duelung 1992: 120), the modern freedom of artists remains to be bound and dependent from the institutions that support it, and, which, are embedded in the larger economic and political system (Bradley 2007: 9). When claiming to be workers whose workplace is the society, the art workers tried to negotiate the conditions of such support, confronting cultural institutions, state administration and general publics in this process. In that sense, and despite the fact that the organising process in Tallinn never led to the formation of a trade union, the art workers’ movement in Tallinn strived to act in a trade unionist manner, searching for conceptual sites where a wage conflict could be located.

Considering the vast amount of attention that I have dedicated to art workers’ troubled attempts to gain health insurance coverage, I would now like to conclude this thesis by invoking an affinity between art workers’ attempts to redefine the §6 of the Estonian Social Tax Act – a paragraph that succinctly describes the distribution of waged and unwaged labour in Western capitalist societies –, and a feminist political imaginary that is being developed at
this very moment in the social movements that are mobilising under the slogan “Carevolution!” Politically originating from the autonomist feminist spectrum of radical thinking, these movements strive to anchor the foundation of non-capitalist politics in the sphere of care. This partly alludes with ideas that were developed by the Socialist Patients’ Collective in the 1970s, viewing illness as a condition created by capitalism and the sick as a revolutionary class who can be radicalised for struggle against oppression by “turning illness into a weapon” (SPK 1972). What is implicated in this concept is the idea that virtually everyone experiences the condition of being ill at some stage of their lives and, thus, can develop a revolutionary subjectivity. In a similar manner, the care movements depart from the assumption that human existence is defined by caring for others and being cared for by them. Therefore, the dependencies and interdependencies of caring are not only discussed as a potential starting point for mobilising mass resistance against the neoliberal destruction of solidary social security principles exercised by contemporary states (in and outside the global North), but also as a foundation for self-organisation and commoning, for developing care practices that are independent from the state and the capital (Gruppe Kitchen Politics 2014). Thus, considering the Tallinn art workers’ movement’s preoccupation with the issue of health care – unless it wouldn’t have disintegrated by now, it could have well found a foothold in transversal and radical anti-capitalist politics by joining the care revolution. This is what I would like to imagine.

To set up potential affinities between art workers’ struggles and radical feminist social movements – even if mostly in retrospect and largely on paper – has marked my mode of diffractive reading throughout this thesis. In juxtaposing the art workers’ struggle in Tallinn with bits and parts from the history of autonomist feminist Marxist politics and the present-day of radical social movements, I have been seeking to discover new alleys and allies for art workers’ struggles. When traversing through potential pathways that the art workers’ movement in Tallinn never entered but could have done, I have highlighted journeys that we, precarious (art) workers, can take in the future. By exploring radical imaginaries of social change that are constructed from the subject position of unwaged workers, I have been striving to identify potential comrades to bring along in that adventure... perhaps anchi suore, even the nuns.
3. Concluding remarks: two or three perspectives for non-capitalist future

This thesis has been largely striving to configure entanglements between various episodes of workers’ struggles mobilising against unwaged and precarious working conditions. By performing a diffractive reading on a newspaper article reporting on the health insurance status of nuns in Estonia, I have extracted patterns and motifs that allowed me to accentuate the commonalities between art and care work. I have addressed these commonalities by comparing narratives about love and devotion implicated in popular discourses on art and care, discussing the ambivalent relationship between waged and unwaged labour, showing how art and care workers fall outside conventional wage-labour relations, and demonstrating the consequences of such liminal position from the perspective of social security. Arguing that the dominant commonality between art and care workers can be summarised in their shared status as workers who are socially not recognised as such, I have mapped out theoretical and activist efforts within feminist politics and visual art sector that have been engaged in the struggle to redefine art and domestic/care work as work that deserves to be acknowledged and remunerated. In this context, I have foregrounded my attention towards accentuating and contextualising social struggles originating from art sector, supporting my analysis with auto-ethnographic reflections on my own activist involvement in such struggles in Tallinn.

Furthermore, I have placed the debates around unwaged work within art and care sector into the context of autonomist Marxist thinking, in order to link and inter-relate models of social struggles that are constructed from the experience of unwaged and precarious workers. Here, I have mobilised my efforts towards making feminist interventions into autonomist Marxist discourses on precarious labour, resistive practices and social change. By exploring entanglements between precarious working conditions in the diffuse factory of neoliberal economy, and women’s historically precarious and marginal position in wage-labour relations, I have outlined the feminist genealogies of precarious labour. When thinking through these genealogies, I have sought to identify continuities between autonomist feminist Marxist politics from the 1970s and contemporary social movements struggling against precariousness. In configuring these continuities, I have demonstrated how the Marxist feminist conception of care and domestic work as a realm of hidden social labour offers a starting point, and a revolutionary perspective, for imagining and localising transversal anti-capitalist struggles in neoliberal Western societies where the capitalist exploitation of workers has expanded its reach, dismissing the centrality of workplaces such as factory floor or office desk, and massively entering the “historical domain” of women: the pinholes of society in
homes and social relations, where value is captured from everyday activities of cooking, smiling or fucking, and life itself is turned into a site of production.

For readers who are familiar with feminist Marxist thinking, the perspective of social change that I am re-invoking in the light of this tradition is presumably not new. However, as an art worker and activist who has been politicised within the relatively male-dominated discourse of post-operaist theory and practice, finding a feminist foothold in this discourse only recently, I am well familiar with the historical amnesia that marginalises the contributions of autonomist feminist politics within post-Marxist contexts. Therefore, this thesis stems from a perception that the project of articulating continuities between precarious labour and gender holds some political urgency in present times. My contribution to this project has largely taken the form of stepping into the gaps that I have identified as absent or insufficient areas of reflection relating to the overlaps and entanglements at the collision point of precarious labour, art, gender and social struggles. I have been theorising these gaps by using a broad variety of tools and knowledges that are at my disposal as art worker, activist and feminist. This fluid and multiple subject position has allowed me to configure proximities between realms that are somewhat considered in isolation from each other.

What is left to say after offering a revolutionary perspective? Perhaps only: Precarious workers unite and take action! And then? There is a broad field of academic, militant and “lived” research, focusing on existing ideas and practices of non- or post-capitalist modes of life. The heterogeneity of such practices indicates that the autonomist feminist notion of revolution is not a Leninist one, aimed at “one-dimensional takeover of state power” (Raunig 2007a: 28). As Gerald Raunig implies in his book focusing on revolutionary practices at the intersection of art and social struggles, the remodelled conception of revolution favoured within post-operaist theory can be summarised with Antonio Negri’s triad definition which combines components of daily insurrection, continuous resistance and constituent power (2007a: 46). This micro-political approach on revolutionary practice resonates with Negri’s analysis of power mechanisms in global capitalism where power has no centre, being everywhere and nowhere at the same time, thus implying that resistance must also be located in every place and context (Hardt & Negri 2000: 208-214). To take this insight seriously and to imagine art and home, or precarious and immaterial social labour, as sites where post-capitalist practices can be localised, like I have suggested in this thesis, would thus require an ongoing commitment in radical imagination, a continuous re-invention of resistive and constituent practices. To conclude this thesis, I will now briefly map out some approaches that
are already engaged with this task, pointing to the direction which could be taken in further feminist projects of research and activism.

Engendering new political imaginaries for economic transformation forms the key dimension in the work of feminist economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham. Striving to articulate “a politics of possibilities,” they insist on inventing a new economic language which would displace the capital-centric discourse from hegemonic position in our lives (Gibson-Graham 2006: 57). In addition to that, Gibson-Graham underline that in order to fulfil the desire for other economies and other worlds, we need to make ourselves “a condition of possibility for their emergence” (2006: 7). This requires a daily rehearsal of re-educating and convincing our bodies and intellects to adopt fundamentally different attitudes that establish new affective relations to the world (ibid). Committed to creating visibility for such practices, Gibson-Graham have been engaged with extensive research in the broad range of existing community economies and economic alternatives.

The visionary work of feminist Marxist theorist Frigga Haug is engaged with imagining social change that is based on the redistribution of labour time. She proposes a four-in-one compass for egalitarian society where each individual would equally share their time between waged labour, reproductive labour, personal interests and political work (Haug 2011: 23). Largely departing from the political realities of Germany, she uses this compass in order to imagine a good life, where the time dedicated to waged labour has been reduced to half, the concept of labour has been expanded in order to include reproductive work, and the guarantee of basic income ensures a universal right for work and life (2011: 74).

To end this discussion with a personal note, I will accentuate one more aspect relating to my own political biography. Following my interests in radical social movements, feminist politics and anti-capitalist practices, I have found a home in the context of radical house collectives in Leipzig. There is particularly one collective that has inspired many impulses articulated in this thesis. Belonging to the very first generation of house collectives that have been recently established in Leipzig in a wave-like manner, the A und V collective has held a unique position in this development. Predominantly initiated by women, and mothers, who hold a strong foot in art and cultural contexts, the A und V has been actively defending feminist perspectives in the network of neighbouring houses, addressing issues of reproductive and care work in relation to radical practices. Hence, the anarcho-commonist house communities in Leipzig are strongly founded on feminist politics. Moreover, I want to stress that, while biographically originating from the art sphere, the A und V collective has taken a different path towards struggling against precarious living conditions. It is a path that
goes far beyond the boundaries of the art field, relating to wider issues of housing, care, collectivity and social change. To choose such a path resonates with feminist Marxist appeal, suggesting that if life itself that has turned into a site of production in post-fordist capitalism (Precarias a la Deriva 2011: 127), it must be imagined as a site of resistance.

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Appendix 1. The nuns of Pühtitsa are appealing to the state for health insurance

[ Estonian original: Pühtitsa nunnad paluvad riigilt ravikindlustust]

Translation by Airi Triisberg

The convent sisters of Pühtitsa appealed to the president with their concern about the health insurance of the sisters. The letter that made a detour until arriving to the Ministry of Interior Affairs states that the subsidy which has been allocated for covering the health insurance costs only suffices until the month of July.

In order to guarantee health insurance for the nuns, the convent needs 72 660 euros per year. However, this year only 41 680 euros have been allocated from the state budget, thus sufficing until July.

In her appeal, the deputy elder of the convent, nun Filareta, refers to the fact that in 2004, the government led by Juhan Parts approved the revision draft for Health Insurance Act which would have included convent sisters among students, soldiers and other such persons whose health insurance is guaranteed by the state. This would have implied an annual expense of approximately 100 000 Estonian crowns [6410 euros – A.T.] for the state budget. Unfortunately, this proposal never became a law and after the change of government in March 2005 this question was already approached from a different light.

“As suggested by the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the convent had to register the sisters at the Health Insurance Fund as persons who are working at the convent according to a work contract, and to pay a social tax for each person in the amount that is assigned for minimum wage. In order to compensate the convent for these expenses, the convent was granted with a subsidy of 3 5000 000 Estonian crowns [224 358 euros – A.T.] from the state budget. The given subsidy guaranteed health insurance for the nuns for two years,” writes Filareta.

The convent sisters are not regular workers

The elder of the convent points out that in situations where the employer pays the amount of social taxes that are required by the law, and thus guarantees the health insurance for the employee, the worker not only gains a right for free medical care, but also for financial support during the periods of temporary incapacity to work. “The convent has never asked the state for a health insurance in such amplitude,” she comments.
“It is of vital necessity for the convent that the convent sisters would feel protected while residing in Estonia, and that they would have access to free medical care as it is provided by Health Insurance Fund in cases of necessity,” it is noted in the letter.

“The nuns are not connected to the convent through work, service or any other contracts. In the legal sense that is established in Employment Contracts Act, they do not receive a salary and they have never asked the Health Insurance Fund for the payment of compensations related to temporary incapacity to work leave. This is precisely what distinguishes the status of convent sisters from other persons,” claims nun Filareta.

She also points out that the purpose of the lives of convent residents is not to gain profit or to satisfy personal wishes and needs, but to serve God, to pray for the souls of all people living on the earth, and their own.

The incomes of the convent are comprised of voluntary donations, money that is paid for religious procedures, sales of candles and religious literature, etc. With this money, the convent maintains all the buildings that are owned and given to convent’s use by the state of Estonia, including sacral buildings. From this money, also all needs of nuns are covered, and, according to their possibilities, the convent offers help for people in need.

The elder of the convent also points out that many European countries guarantee the health insurance for convent residents from state budget.

The circle of people covered by health insurance cannot be extended

The president forwarded the convent sisters’ appeal to the prime minister, and the advisor of the government forwarded it to the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Hanno Pevkur, the minister of social affairs, on his part, asked for help from the minister of interior affairs, proposing to pay a subsidy for the convent. Pevkur assumes that the appeal formulated in the letter is about granting the convent sisters with the status of persons who are equated with health insured persons, in order to relieve the convent from the obligation to pay social tax for the sisters.

“We understand the concern that is expressed in the letter, and agree that for economic reasons, the convent cannot pay social taxes from their own financial resources that are largely comprised of voluntary donations and mostly swallowed by the expense of maintaining state-owned sacral buildlings,” Pevkur concedes. However, he is also notes that considering the scarcity of health insurance related resources, he cannot see a possibility extend the circle of people who are equated with the status of health insured persons.
According to the principle of equal treatment, this mustn’t include only the convent sisters of Pühtitsa, but a considerably broader bulk of the clergy.

Therefore, the minister of social affairs sees the only possibility in continuing the payment of state subsidy for Pühtitsa convent, asking the Ministry of Social Affairs to find resources for this subsidy, as the latter is responsible for administering religious affairs.

**Cannot support in full extent**

The minister of regional affairs, Siim Kiisler stated to Postimees.ee that the Ministry of Interior Affairs has allocated money for the health insurance of monks and nuns each year. “Due to the limitations of the state budget, it is unfortunately not possible to support the applications in full extent. At the same time, we managed to maintain this sum in the difficult times of budget cuts, and, according to our possibilities, have increased the amounts from year to year,” Kiisler said.

Apart from the 66 nuns of the Pühtitsa convent, subsidies are also granted to other nuns and monks residing in Estonia, covering the health insurance of ten nuns in the Pirita convent of Bridgettine order, three nuns in Skriita Öörikuli, one nun from the Orthodox Church, and one monk from the Buddhist congregation.

This year, the state has allocated 51 130 euros (800 370 crowns) for this purpose, from which Pühtitsa convent received 41 680 euros according to the principle of proportionality.

In 2008 the state allocated 300 000 crowns [19230 euros – A.T.] for the health insurance of monks and nuns, in 2009 and 2010 the annual amount was 500 000 crowns [32050 euros – A.T.].
The Workers of Society – the Artist, the Housewife and the Nun. A Feminist Marxist Analysis on the Intersections of Art, Care Work and Social Struggles

Abstract

What do art workers, nuns and care workers have in common? How can these commonalities be conceptualised from the perspective of feminist Marxism? How would such conceptualisation open up intersectional and transversal perspectives for social movements struggling against precariousness? Departing from an auto-ethnographic account on activist experiences originating from the art workers’ movement in Tallinn, this thesis aims to theorise the intersection of precarious labour and gender. By using the thinking technology of diffractive reading, it places the debates around unwaged labour within art and care sector into the context of autonomist Marxist thinking. Furthermore, affinities and entanglements between feminist politics and the struggles of precarious workers are configured and imagined, in order to interlink and converge spatially and temporally isolated resistive practices that are constructed from the experience of unwaged and precarious workers.

Keywords
Art workers, domestic and care work, precarious labour, social struggles, autonomist feminist Marxism.