

40 years on

Can we imagine a lazy artist? Unfortunately, no longer. These days an artist is a unit of production. We can now look only with nostalgia upon Mladena Stilinovica's painting of 1978. It shows an artist sleeping, with the caption "Artist at work". Then it was an ardent proclamation of Eastern idleness, of doing sweet nothing, emphasising our Eastern-European unproductiveness as opposed, in the spirit of Kazimierz Malewicz, to Western, capitalist toil. Unfortunately, in hindsight, the painting looks more like an ominous prophecy.

By now, even to us, it is clear - this is exactly how an artist works. Sleeping, eating, drinking, smoking, cooking, talking, walking, sitting, travelling. Even in Eastern Europe, an artist cannot laze about. Nay – he has to work four times harder than his Western colleague. He's constantly explaining to everyone that there are artists in Eastern Europe too. He talks about our splendid tradition, he scrupulously passes on the history of art. He displays his work at exhibitions. The moment an artist stops working, he ceases to be an artist. Whether asleep or awake, the work of an artist is extremely hard. With a lack of any kind of physical indicators as to what art - or artistic activity itself - is, the artist is always at work. For to a large degree he has continuously and always to convince everyone that he is an artist. Otherwise, what he creates ceases to have the status of a work of art. Art, rather than melting into life, has become a 24-hour, alienated necessity. It has grown on everyday life like a cancer and consumed it. It is particularly hard for famous and recognised artists. What did Jeff Koons do together with Cicciolina? Did he work hard? When did the working day end at the Warhol Factory? What Tracy Emin does at night we all surely know. Not to mention Sophie Calle. This sad fate the famous artist shares with other celebrities. People who are famous for being famous must continuously fuel interest in themselves. Even when they escape into privacy it is, obviously, particular kind of privacy. Celebrities sell it with the aid of tabloids, artists with the aid of galleries and art museums. "Frieze" and "Parkett" are the "Daily Mirror" of the subtle representatives of the global bourgeoisie.

The economy of art, however, is much more subtle and cannot be reduced to celebrity worship. Gordon Gekko, cult hero of Oliver Stone's film "Wall Street" and author of the famous saying "Greed is good", said, on another occasion: "Money itself isn't lost or made, it's simply transferred, from one perception to another. Like magic. This painting here, I bought it ten years ago for sixty thousand dollars. I could sell it today for six hundred. The illusion has become real, and the more real it becomes, the more desperately they want it. Capitalism at its finest."

Art is a transmitter of perception. A magical medium, a philosopher's stone which causes an increase in the material value of a given object. As everybody knows, the birth of today's system of artistic production took place the moment Marcel Duchamp decided to make a replica of his famous urinal and put it on the gallery circuit. It was almost 60 years after "Fountain" had changed the course of modern art. In fact, thanks to this gesture, history has come full circle, or rather spiral. What Duchamp sold, with the aid of Arturo Schwarz, was a kind of joke, a provocation grown from his personal biography, a legend of ready-made, intensified by innumerable comments and dismissals. The work of art became a concept, and good ideas came to be very much in demand. There appeared the extremely paradoxical figure of the artist as a conceptual craftsman. As it is difficult to imagine the craftsman's art beside the origination of good ideas, the greatest feat came to be convincing everyone that one is an artist. This sat quite interestingly with the twilight of counterculture from which Duchamp escaped from Paris in 1968. In the '70s, surviving yippies transformed into yuppies. Surviving members of the Youth International Party became Young Urban Professionals. The liberation of everyday life was swapped for lifestyle, and material production freely evolved into non-material. In the 1970s, Western economies, devastated by the oil crisis, renounced the gold standard. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher announced the end of Great Society and the welfare state. There began an era of drastic privatisation, development of financial markets and speculation. Accompanying this was a real boom in the art market. The remains of counterculture began to be sold off by galleries and bought by museums. Everyone wanted to cash in on the sale of legends. Sketches, tickets, pieces of paper which once, somewhere, someone had spat on, torn, stuck together again, began to be treated like artefacts. The side effects of artistic processes became (extra)ordinary goods. Of course, painting became fashionable once again, in a successive stage of abstract expressionism. As Hans Haacke said, in the '80s the most important question was what's "in" and what's "out".

Artists work all the time and without a break. The privileged usually call it art, the less privileged, a job on the side. What else, since they work for the more privileged like workhorses, as "ordinary" craftsmen? The physical work, the number of hours spent on a given work, the individual effort put into its creation; this is of no importance, of course. Nay – such material production is surrounded by an aura of contempt. A real artist contemplates, originates and adds his signature. Even if he does do anything, it has no correlation to the artistic value of his work. There is a difference between an artist cooking dinner at home and in a gallery. For that privilege, however, he works hard – constantly convincing everyone that he is an outstanding artist. Interesting in this context is the "skid" and Damien Hirst's outdoing of his own fame. He announced to all and sundry the costs of creating "For the

Love of God”, after which he wanted to sell it for five times the price. Unfortunately, this time it didn’t work out. The trick didn’t come off, the golden rabbit didn’t jump out of the hat. On account of which, like it or not, he was forced to buy his own piece, with the assistance of one of the trust funds in which he is a shareholder. However, there’s nothing bad that can’t turn out well: After several months of hard work of his own, and above all of his “factory”, Damien was able to sell work for a good £100m at auction at Sotheby’s. Then everything became clear – the art market was guilty of alienating the artist from his genius. All this was a prank of the gallery owner, who hadn’t worked hard enough on his reputation to be able to carry the burden of the diamond-encrusted skull.

Unfortunately, as is often the case in life, fame and success comes on the back of whole masses of people, yet their fruits are consumed by the few. Art factory workers, engineers carrying out successive works, camera operators filming them, editors editing them, programmers programming them; this is only the end of the food chain. The ocean of art never sleeps. It is a wonder of global ecology, an ecosystem which, without producing anything, brings in money. A work of art can be worth a thousand times more than its cost of production. In fact, in this way, it’s not so different even from Tommy Hilfiger’s T-shirts, about which Naomi Klein wrote in “No logo”. It’s not important whose hands made them (usually small and in terrible conditions), what’s important is the logo on the label. The cost of production is nothing compared to the marketing costs, and this again bears no relation to the sale price. As the old capitalist principle says: demand as much as people are willing to pay. Similarly in the case of a work of art – it’s not important how it comes into being, what’s important is what’s said about it and who, where is willing to pay how much for it. An artefact is produced in a thousand little communications, in the flow of information between the artist, critic, gallery owner, museologist, curator, writer, philosopher, enthusiast, friend from the pub, exhibition-goers, audience, collector and also the strategic investor. It is nothing more than a patchwork of meanings, a process of social communication, a perceptual conspiracy, a transition from one perception to another. It is the perfect commodity of speculative capitalism. There are no works of art, like there is no money. They don’t exist in themselves, they are a mirror – a mirror in which can be seen the very circulation of non-material artistic production.

The circulation itself never sleeps. It has the same productivity as banks and stock exchanges. The show must go on. Without movement it has no sense; its importance is generated only in motion. Everything which is fixed must dissolve into thin air. Hence the proliferation of various artistic events, the culture of permanent jet lag, work outside of working hours. Dark circles around the eyes as a sign of privilege. Cocainism as an occupational illness. The world of art is the perfect environment for the Weberian Protestant,

this time in the skin of a hedonistic post-capitalist. Overwork as an indicator of success in life, a visible indication of destiny, a sign of love, a kiss of death from the gods of the art-world. In the world of art one works non-stop. Life beyond the hours of work, if they are fixed at all, is filled by dinners, meetings, drinking sessions, openings of exhibitions large and small, more or less prestigious parties and institutions. To exist, you have to be there, if you're not there, you don't exist. Of course, it is best to be in the right places. Hence the majority of information exchanged in the course of exhibition small talk is about where one has been recently, who one talked to and finally what one has seen. At dinners, however, the talk is usually about one's projects, concepts or plans. This is favoured by an intimate business atmosphere. Unfortunately, the only way out of this unpleasant and rather inelegant situation is to invite friends from outside the circle of art - which in any case is a necessity, since the latter are usually not there, as it is their fate that they are always somewhere else. Like marines, they are thrown into successive foreign context, where, with the grace of the parachutist they explain to the locals their own everyday life. It is all the more likely that they themselves are in fact lacking in their own context, and that their everyday life passes by like a train.

For the moment, Eastern Europe is still moving slowly. Only a chosen (growing) few are grabbing hold of these civilisational illnesses. The average representative of the national art scene looks enviously upon those who have made it, who with all their strength strive to achieve mastery in these forms of alienation. With resentment he dreams about the constant travelling, occupational psychosis, private life destroyed along with mucous membranes and liver. Joseph Beuys is turning in his grave, dreaming in deep sleep of disappointed hopes of the third way and his "Polentransport". Let's look once again at Mladena Stilinovic's painting and consider calmly. Is there really no hope left for us? To think of laziness at all one must bring oneself to one more existential effort. The first point of the group therapy program should read: work is a disease. Point Two: there is hope of bearing it. Does it sound the ramblings of a lunatic? It is more a sane answer for insane times. The only hope against complete lunacy is to read in bed Paul Lafargue, Raul Vaneigem and Guy Debord. Let's remind ourselves before sleeping of Lee Lozano and Gustav Metzger and, mumbling into our pillow "Never work", start a permanent, personal general strike. Once in this alpha state, slowly entering the REM phase, let us resign from a career in the field of art. And then, calmly now, give ourselves a proper snooze at last.

By Kuba Szreder