

## what are we doing when we are working

notions of work, production, labour, beauty production, beauty labour, queerness, unproduction, non-reproduction, free information, anti-capitalism.

*“To live labor is to negotiate the extended processes of reproducing ourselves and others. To live labor is to engage the material conditions that traverse personhood and thinghood. To live labor is to attend to the forces, resonances, and energies that intertwine the affects and objects of everyday life.”*

-Joshua Lubin-Levy and Aliza Shvarts, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 2016 Vol. 26

### NOTES:

1. in this paper i use terms like ‘work’ and ‘fierceness’ in their definition inside of the specifics of the culture of gay black men in america. this is not a culture that i am a part of, but these terms are things that i am curious about as they seem to actively negate colonial or capitalist notions of what working and fierceness mean.
2. i have made the choice not to capitalize i’s or the beginnings of sentences in an attempt to un-focus notions of self and the importance of the primary. i have kept proper names capitalized in respect to the regards of their carriers.

this paper aims to deconstruct the individual and collective body’s relationship to work in the context of performance. what is work? how does performance shift concepts of work? how can we use performance work to de-commodify art? what is work that has no visible effect? what is it doing? what is work in relationship to effort? are they the same?

i will deconstruct these questions through the work of Miguel Gutierrez and Drag Ball performers, while comparing the ways that they are re-working “working,” to the ways that

bodies of authority (governmental, religious) have used movement as a means to control the workforce.

#### STRUCTURE:

1. *when i went to a miguel guteirrez show*
2. *the ways that the body is treated in a capitalist structure*
3. *where working is*
4. *what are we doing when we are working*
5. *un-conclave*
6. *manifestare*

#### *when i went to a miguel guteirrez show*

i recently saw a work called "Sadona" by Miguel Gutierrez. it was late at night, in a part of philadelphia that i hadn't previously been to. i was a little nervous but everyone interesting was going and i'd heard a lot about him so there i was. i don't know what i was expecting, somehow after hearing about him the first time it seemed as though he was dead and only living in legend. i guess i was expecting a trancelike performance culminating in some queer euphoric dance party in which everybody fucked or something which is what i heard happened in paris. either that or this "deep aerobics" that i kept hearing about. imagine my surprise when, he turned out to be both real *and* alive, and walked on stage saying "tonight i will be performing a work called *Sadonna* which just stands for 'Sad Madonna'" *sad Madonna?* i thought. *that's it? they're just going to perform sad Madonna songs as their whole show?* this line of thinking however was merely the yet un-dissected

effect of capitalism on viewership, enforcing the notion that everything performed must be original, beautiful, and commodifiable. well, Miguel and the Slutinos started singing and goddamn, it was really only sad Madonna songs, but it was also trancelike and euphoric, and i was blown away. it was yes; original, beautiful, funny, unoriginal, tragic, and enthralling all at the same time. why did i think that the international dance scene and a bar that sells pbr for 2 dollars were mutually exclusive? this show that was performed in paris could also be performed at a bar in which a porta-potty was one of the restrooms? and it also seemed perfectly suited for both environments? how did i not realize that my expectations were built on false distinctions of 'high' and 'low', distinctions brought on by value systems which enforce hierarchies in which relative fame excludes small venues? the work felt both mobile and intimate, as Kris Lee (UArts alum 2019) responded by yelling beautiful profanities from behind the audience. this work didn't feel economically or emotionally exclusive. it felt as though i, and everyone, were being granted access. this is something that i have been concerned with recently, as i feel that more things and places should be more available to more people. this is not to say however everyone should cater all spaces to be of use by everyone, but rather that i am interested in producing work that is free/available. on Miguel's website almost all of his writings and performances are available to be seen for free. making these performances public reads to me as an anti-capitalist action, because he is making working material available un-contingent upon modes of monetary exchange. as i am curious about the ways that performance works in and against capitalism, Miguel's work excites me to the possibilities of un-capitalist performance.

*the ways that the body is treated in a capitalist structure*

what i am looking at through the lens of capitalism is the ways in which political and religious systems treat and demand the body. in Increase Mather's text as a puritanical clergyman in Boston, MA, in the 1680's, he writes on the value of dance as it relates to puritan ideals: "It is granted, that Pyrrhical or Polemical Saltation: i.e. where men vault in their Armour, to shew their strength and activity, may be of use" (Mather in Marks 31). it is important to note the "be of use" aspect of this sentence as *use* implies a functionality of production. it is also important to note that "men" are the focus point of this activity, impressing patriarchal view of the male body as being strong, armoured, and of reproductive "use." this same idea is central to the Ted Shawn work *Labor Symphony*, which uses male bodies to depict actions of human and mechanical work (Shawn). like Mathers, Shawn also had religious motives, evolving his work from the ideals of muscular christianity which proposed that christian men should have "patriotic duty, discipline, self-sacrifice, manliness," and supported "the moral and physical beauty of athleticism" (Wikipedia). these religious and political values also translate into the economy of productive work. ideas of usefulness and proficiency for particularly the male body were championed by both Mathers and Shawn and here serve as representatives of dancing as preparing bodies for work or displaying bodies in work. this treatment of the body in work relates to capitalism in that it champions the body's use in the line of production.

*where working is*

recent history has given rise to another notion of the word 'work', or 'werk', which contrasts the ways that the straight white patriarchy and capitalist systems use work, and bodies in work. the term 'work' originating either in the illegal drag Balls of the early 1900's or in the later revive of Balls in the late 1900's, arose from black gay drag culture as a term meaning "having done something very very right, either by design or by accident" (Stabbe, Gutierrez). the reason that i'm interested in the term 'work' in the context of life and performance is because it reimagines the idea of working outside of a capitalist notion as a means of production. when someone is 'working' in the performative context they are not producing capital but rather enacting, without capital, a notion of beauty or 'fierceness' that is not contingent upon product or monetary exchange but rather an upswelling of some un-commodifiable resource that every person has the possibility of containing outside of systematic regards. in *Paris is Burning*, a documentary by Jennie Livingston which makes available interviews with Ball performers in the 1980's, Dorian Corey says: "because everyone couldn't be a Las Vegas showgirl they made categories for everybody- [...] so there was more involvement" (Paris is Burning). what i read her to be saying, is that drag performance provided a platform for people to work and be successful outside of the system that was denying them access. with this information i venture that either purposefully or by happenstance, the community of marginalized queer people of color that birthed the Ball scene and originated the use of the term 'work' as an affirmational term unattached to production, were creating a new counter-notion of what work could be. this counter-notion confronts traditional colonist ideas of the ways that bodies, particularly the oppressed and marginalized bodies of people of color should, or do, work. if traditional

ideas of work mean effort resulting in product, or completing a task efficiently, this alteration of work without tangible product or traditional pathways of efficiency serves to undo structures of capitalism.

*what are we doing when we are working*

these two differing concepts of work (productive, and affirmational) coincide with the two different meanings of the word 'performance.' one way meaning "carrying out an action" and another being "a public entertainment" (Mirriam Webster). i want to demarcate the way i am using the word "performance" as: *the of performer in relation to audience*, rather than a capitalist notion of performance as: *a term used to describe the value and efficiency of an object within a system of production*. this makes me interested in ways of "performing poorly" in the eyes of capitalist exchange, or enacting work that doesn't produce any "capital" (Marx).

i feel as though Miguel accesses this in *A Succession of Four Failures* (2014). even in the title he announces that he will be performing failure, which is a performative action almost never *intended* by the performer, especially in regards to the production of product. in the blurb below the video (which is free to watch on vimeo) he writes that he "wrote the text for the piece when he got to the venue," an unprecedented unpreparedness that performers rarely have the confidence to employ (Gutierrez (10.)). the thing is that it works phenomenally. in these actions of "failure" there is a genuine sort of beauty produced that would only arise in this manner. it is a beauty that fucks capitalism in the ass. and capitalism, too overcome with pleasure for words, doesn't know how to respond.

*un-conclave*

i believe that the artists included here (Miguel, Ball performers) work in contrast to certain ways that dance has been prohibited or used as a device of control. they evaluate and re-work the ways that male sexed bodies have both treated and been treated by and for systems of power. this work is certainly not easy, even though it is working outside of capital production. it is still work in the understanding of work as highly involved and effortful, even if that effort doesn't produce the same product as production labor. in the study hall following *School For Temporary Liveness*, while discussing the work of nora chipaumire, Song Tucker said that "when we party and bullshit we are working" (Tucker). this opened my eyes to the ways in which people who have been marginalized, and commodified by the mechanisms of capitalism have been, and continue to be working to un-do the inhumane ways that they have historically been forced into working.

*manifestare*

i want to make work that doesn't produce product.

i want to make things that are valuable *and* free

i want to unwork.

i want to work in a positive means and end.

i love working, my body thinks it is euphoric.

i want to keep criticizing work, and the systems which enforce it.

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