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## Everyone's an artist? Class, precarity, and the distribution of creative labor

*Natalie Morningstar*

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*Abstract:* This article examines the endurance of traditional class labels among precarious workers in post-recession Dublin. It argues that tensions remain between creatives and non-creatives due to: (1) divergent class concepts, (2) a lack of social engagement, and (3) unequal access to economic, social, and cultural capital, which creatives mobilize to protect some highly vocational artistic labor. It is thus not a shared experience of the same kind of precarious exploitation that unites the precariat but a trap held in common, whereby self-actualization through labor is construed as a route to freedom. Drawing on Karl Marx's theory of emancipation, I suggest that attempts to redress precarization should focus on undermining this encroachment of work into life, which I argue results in exploitation and alienation for all precarious workers.

*Keywords:* art, class, creativity, labor, precariat, value, vocation, time

### **Distinguishing forms of precarious labor**

A visual artist in his early thirties, Aaron was a graphic artist by training but had recently embarked on a career move: out of the arts sector and into the more lucrative world of freelance advertising. By the spring of 2017, he was undertaking work for a corporation in the docklands, the financial and tech hub in Dublin, Ireland. As he told it, his work was uninspiring and his employment contract temporary, but the job paid reasonably well. Aaron still produced his own artwork on the side, however, and he spent spare time frequenting arts events around the city.

I met Aaron at an exhibition north of the river Liffey. The artist's work presented a biting

critique of gentrification in Dublin, and one of the corporate entities targeted was the one Aaron freelanced for during the week: a property investor well known for involvement in controversial regenerations during and after the recession. These had drawn public ire for prioritizing monumental constructions and artworks over provisioning much needed social and affordable housing.

After the show, the artist and attendees moved on to a pub down the road. There, I sat next to Aaron. As the evening progressed, our conversation inclined toward a discussion of the contradictions he felt characterized his creative work. Throughout, it was clear that he found it difficult to balance two sentiments. On the one



hand, he felt complicit in contributing to the financial success of an entity involved in exclusionary processes of redevelopment, packaged in the language of creativity. Indeed, he was unabashedly critical of the advertising work he did—calling it “asinine” and “absolutely mindless.” On the other hand, he felt he needed to maximize his earnings on short-term contracts so that he could elsewhere protect more fulfilling artistic work. His tone was good-natured but defensive: “People say I’ve ‘sold out,’ but I’m part of the precariat.” Aaron was caught between two different experiences of privilege and exploitation, and the concept of precaritization offered a claim for making sense of this predicament. In fact, precarity was becoming an increasingly important concept in his life. Aaron had recently enrolled in a European network of creatives who offered social and professional resources for workers flitting from project to project. But the contradictions of his class position continued to dog him. So, when he used the word “precariat” unprompted, I pressed him. “That’s not a word you hear everyone use.” “Absolutely,” he agreed, “it describes so many people, but so many people have no idea what it means.” He then relayed an encounter that he felt typified this.

Some months previously, Aaron was employed by a creative start-up, one of several backed by funding schemes geared to kickstart economic growth after 2008. One evening he stayed late with a colleague, Dan, and the cleaner. The cleaner was doing her rounds at the end of the day as the two designers busied themselves at their desks. As the cleaner made to leave, Dan quipped that she had forgotten to empty the bin under his workstation. This she did, as Aaron and Dan continued working. No words were exchanged, but Aaron remembers feeling distinctly uncomfortable. After the cleaner left the building, he remonstrated his colleague: “Be nice to her, she’s a precarious worker.” Looking bemused, Dan asked, “A *what?*” “You know . . . She has employment precarity.” At this point Dan began laughing. “Oh! I thought you meant she was physically unstable—like she couldn’t stand up straight!”

A few things should stand out in this exchange and my conversation with Aaron afterward. First, while precarity was a significant category for Aaron, his fellow creative worker seemed to neither have encountered the word before nor be convinced it described a familiar employment predicament. Second, it was a word Aaron used to describe himself and a cleaner, with whom he had distant relations. Whether the cleaner might have used this word to describe herself was not broached. In fact, while this was something Aaron regretted, no words were exchanged between the creatives and the cleaner tidying up after them.

### **Creative self-actualization, labor, and class**

This article theorizes creative precarious labor by drawing together two related bodies of anthropological and interdisciplinary work: on class and precarity, and on creative labor, time and value. It argues that the “precariat” is a particularly compelling class concept for young, progressive creatives from self-described middle-class backgrounds, as it offers a productive category for describing the contradictions characteristic of their class position, labor, and political subjectivity. It both describes the “status frustration” (Standing 2011: 16) these educated young people experience and optimistically indexes the possibility of solidarity with other non-creative precarious laborers, a possibility that is especially attractive to disenchanting, young leftists like Aaron.

However, the degree to which creatives and other members of the precariat mutually identify as part of a class “for itself” (Terry 1975: 92) is mitigated by two factors. First, there is a tendency among creatives to value working-class and post-industrial aesthetics without necessarily pursuing social relations with people in historically working-class neighborhoods. People in these neighborhoods are often unfamiliar with the precariat concept. Moreover, these neighborhoods are targeted by regeneration

schemes that create jobs for creatives—however unstable and low-paid—and replace public provisions, like social housing, with creative enterprises and public-private partnerships. This leads to the perception that the state prioritizes the self-actualization (Menger 1999) of the children of the middle class over the protection of public provisions for non-creatives. That artists are not at fault for this, hardly benefit from these processes, and are vocally critical of them is less important to non-creatives than perceived uneven access to creative fulfillment through work and the lack of social engagement between the two groups.

Second, despite variation within the creative precariat, creatives that survive the precarity of the industry often benefit from better networks of economic, social, and cultural capital, which they mobilize to protect a hallowed form of artistic labor. Vocational artistic labor exhibits three characteristics that make it desirable to creatives and non-creatives alike: it is nonroutine, and artists retain a degree of executive control over their labor time and the labor time of others, delivering some creative autonomy (Roberts 2010: 87). These features distinguish artistic labor from other precarious work, including some creative work, which can be routine—in Aaron's words, "mindless." This article therefore distinguishes between creative and artistic labor. Creative labor is defined expansively enough to include a range of professional cultural producers, from architects and designers, to performing artists, to advertisers, and both routine and nonroutine forms of creative work (Gill and Pratt 2008: 2). Some but not all creative labor is artistic labor. This article argues that it is autonomous, nonroutine artistic labor that workers imagine when seduced by the promise of creative fulfillment through work, an experience that is unevenly distributed across the precariat.

Taken together, the above factors draw our attention to an issue perhaps less frequently emphasized in the literature on creative precarious labor: the factors that generate resentment and division within the precariat. In my case, an

ethnographic examination of these reveals that resentment stems from the shared value placed on self-actualization through labor as a route to freedom, with artistic labor imagined as paradigmatic. In this sense, this article's central contribution is to offer an ethnographic description of the perceived differences between creative and non-creative members of the precariat, which my interlocutors continue to demarcate using the old symbolic class categories, "working class" and "middle class."

More than this, this article mines this case for solutions. Drawing on neo-Marxist art theory, Italian *operaismo* (workerism), and feminist critiques of creative labor, I argue that it is not precarious labor so much as the inordinate value placed on self-actualization through labor that could form the foundation of efforts to redress precarity. In other words, we might view the fact that the precariat concept is more attractive to young creatives like Aaron as beside the point. Drawing on Karl Marx's theory of emancipation—the possibility of refusing one's laboring role—I suggest that this case offers evidence that it is not freedom through self-actualization, but emancipation through the refusal of self-actualization, that poses a threat to contemporary capitalism.

### **A fractured precariat**

The increased precaritization of the global workforce has garnered significant attention in the anthropology of class and labor. After optimistic declarations of the death of class in the 1990s (Burawoy 2002), it has reemerged with a vengeance (Sanchez 2018a). This has been a result of the combined observations that the language of class continues to be used by our interlocutors (Kalb and Mollona 2018) and anthropologists (Gusterson 2017) and that class distinctions increasingly appear not so much in retreat but refigured (Savage et al. 2013). However, a pressing question in this literature is how to theorize the relationship between class and precarious labor after the decline of the Ford-

ist compact. Answering this question involves not only describing and responding to tensions within the precariat (Hardt and Negri 2019) but also attempting to theorize the relationship between the precariat, class subjectivity, time, and value (Gill and Pratt 2008).

Anthropological approaches to this problem have built on Marxist foundations in the anthropological study of class and the cultural turn across the social sciences. Classic Marxist anthropologists were interested in whether class was a universally applicable concept (Bloch 1975), as well as how a class becomes “‘for itself,’ conscious of itself and capable of collective decision and action” (Terry 1975: 92). This second question can be seen as part of a broader shift. Aided by thinkers like Edward Thompson and Pierre Bourdieu, class would increasingly be framed as a subjective experience (Kalb 2015: 4)—“a relationship, and not a thing” (Thompson [1963] 1980: 10). More than this, Bourdieu’s work ([1979] 1984) would describe how class distinctions are a matter of not only economic and social hierarchies but also subjective judgments of taste.

With the rise of precaritization, these strands of thinking have resurfaced. One response to precaritization has been to argue that old symbolic distinctions between the working and middle classes have been eroded by the global creep of precarity. Precarity, for these writers, is not only a description of a novel class category but also a call to action. Riding the tide of similar calls in workerist activism and intellectual critique (Gill and Pratt 2008), Guy Standing’s writings make both the merits and practical challenges of this approach clear. For him, the precariat is a concept intended to galvanize workers who share an increasingly widespread experience of atypical labor. From the disaffected, young, educated child of middle-class parents, to the migrant floating between temporary contracts, to the middle-aged man laid off from what was meant to be secure manufacturing employment, “all share a sense that their labor is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure)” (Standing 2011: 22–23).

Yet the precariat concept has been critiqued for the ways it understates divisions that endure across different types of precarious exploitation. These critiques have centered on the classic Marxist anthropological questions discussed above: whether our critical categories run up against limitations outside Euro-America, and the question of how a class becomes “for itself” (Terry 1975: 92). As many have noted, the rise of precarity in the Global North signals an experience of “relative precarity” for a small segment of the global population, who reaped the benefits of the Fordist exception (Bremner 2013; Lazar and Sanchez 2019; Munck 2013; Sanchez 2018b). This position has been echoed in interdisciplinary literature, where attention has been drawn to the fact that the Fordist exception relied on exploitative domestic labor and exploitative labor in the colonies (Alacovska and Gill 2019; Mitropoulos 2005; B. Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Scully 2016). In this way, these critiques pay homage to a longer tradition in neo-Marxist critique that casts precarity as endemic to capitalist labor relations, with rising precaritization in the Global North and across historical class divides framed as simply an especially conspicuous, recent example of this fact (Gill and Pratt 2008; Lazzarato 2009; D. Neilson 2015).

In line with the above critiques, this article argues that the precariat is an attractive class concept to certain workers in the Global North, including my interlocutors. They find in the precariat a compelling class concept as it describes both their “status frustration” (Standing 2011: 16) as an experience of intergenerational “relative precarity” (Sanchez 2018b), and hopefully casts their experience of precarity as a problem held in common with other precarious workers. However, the dividing lines that anthropologists and others have detailed within the precariat endure, and we can track these ethnographically. In my case, divisions between creatives and non-creatives boil down to the tendency for creatives to aestheticize the working class from afar, and their access to higher levels of economic, social, and cultural capital, which they can mobilize to protect some vocational artistic

labor. Artists retain an executive function, often managing their labor time and the labor time of others, and a degree of creative autonomy, even as they experience self-exploitation and alienation. These features of artistic labor distinguish it from non-creative precarious labor and routine creative precarious labor. Both creatives and non-creatives value this kind of labor, whether or not they are familiar with the concept of the precariat. The older class categories “working class” and “middle class” are used to describe uneven access to this pedestalled form of artistic labor.

However, this article describes these divisions and mines them for solutions. To do so, I draw on three literatures: Marxist art historical accounts of artistic labor and the politics of creativity; Italian workerist critiques of labor, value, and time; and feminist critiques of creative precarious labor. I argue that the perceived divisions between creative and non-creative precarious workers are a result of the exalted status granted by all precarious workers to creative self-actualization through labor as a route to freedom. The allure of this idea explains the specific forms of self-exploitation experienced by creative workers and the resentment expressed by non-creatives. The last feeds the perception that these two groups do not share political economic interests.

### Reclaiming creativity from work

This understanding of self-actualization through labor as the route to freedom is by no means new. However, as is well established, it is radicalized under contemporary capitalism. Italian workerist thought explains this process well. A core argument in this literature is that alienation is not so much a matter of the relationship between laborers and the product of their labor, but “the relationship between human time and capitalist value” (Berardi 2009: 22). Alienation occurs when time itself is subject to the value-form. This logic has been accelerated by what Franco Berardi calls “semicapitalism” as “the mind, language and creativity” function

increasingly as the “primary tools for the production of value” (Berardi 2009: 21). Putting the mind and creativity to work thus opens up new frontiers for the exploitation of labor time, as all thought and creative action are subsumed as sites of value-creation. It is this weaponization of the “soul” that brought about a decisive shift, from 1977 onward, whereby workers went from “fleeing work to identifying with it” (Berardi 2009: 12). What is distinctive about contemporary capitalism is that the refusal of work that animated 1968 had been integrated into capitalist labor relations in the form of the incitement to “be creative” (McRobbie 2018). As Berardi writes, “through the incitement of my special creative and intellectual powers, I experience work as the segment of my social life in which I am most free, most capable of realizing my desires: most *myself*” (Berardi 2009: 14).

As art theorist John Roberts (2012) argues, then, contemporary capitalism shares with feudalism and communism an ideology of work that situates “integrated creativity” as a route to self-fulfillment. Freedom is thought to occur where work satisfies the drive for creative self-actualization, through the honing of a craft skill or a total identification with one’s laboring role. However, this understanding of integrated creativity as a route to freedom was critiqued by Marx, who preferred to use the word emancipation to emphasize the importance of the worker’s ability to “disidentify with his role” (Roberts 2012: 142). This leads Roberts to argue that emancipation can only occur when creativity is “laid to rest” (146), when the worker gains sufficient “control over time” (142), and the incitement to be creative loses its grip.

Significant strands of artistic and political critique in the twentieth century have been concerned with undermining the allure of integrated creativity and self-actualization through work. However, what I want to draw attention to here is how the ambiguities in artistic labor since Duchamp have created the conditions of possibility for a paradox in artistic labor. As Roberts (2010) argues, Marcel Duchamp and the “readymade” signal a key shift in artistic

labor and production. The role of the artist becomes less to hone craft skills or be able to meet the “expressive demands” (Roberts 2010: 83) of a genre, rather, it becomes about “the intellectual demands of recontextualizing extant objects” (83). From this point onward, art is decisively rent from craft. Moreover, “the artist exchanges inherited artistical skills for an executive role . . . a conceptualizing role, directing the labor and technical accomplishments of others” (84). Ideally, the artist’s “appropriation of the labor of others” (85) functions as a provocation to traditional notions of artistic creativity, prestige and authorship; elevates the ordinary; and cuts across older aesthetic regimes (Rancière 2013) that distinguish between the sensible and the intelligible, and manual and immaterial labor (Lazzarato 2008). However, it also delivers to the artist intellectual autonomy and an executive function in the labor process.

The result is that “the artist confronted with the perceived deskilling in modern culture does not suffer the same creative denigration as the productive laborer” (Roberts 2010: 87). Both lose “artisanal skills” and experience intense “alienation” but “there is no comparable loss of artistic autonomy” (87). Thus, from Duchamp onward, artists have experienced deskilling and alienation alongside other workers while retaining an executive function in a nonroutine labor process and some creative autonomy. These features of their work draw desire and resentment across the precariat and distinguish artistic from other creative and non-creative labor. They also present a paradox, as it is these aspects of their work that appear central to the forms of artistic critique dominant since Duchamp. In other words, to be a critical artist is to value the managerial and autonomous features of artistic labor. This paradox incentivizes creative self-exploitation and contributes to the perception that artists are benefactors of privileged labor.

These factors are compounded by the fact that autonomy has been central to dominant strands of feminist critique, so that for many women, to be feminist is to live what Ulrich Beck calls a “life of one’s own” (McRobbie 2018: 2). As femi-

nist critics of creative labor have demonstrated, the incitement to be creative is gendered, as it is especially women who see in the “invitation to discover one’s own capabilities, to embark on a voyage of self-discovery” (15) a route to feminist emancipation. Yet this incitement also results in an aggressive encroachment of work into life, with work treated as a labor of love, almost “akin to a romantic relationship” (3)—one that curtails other kinds of relationships and occludes ongoing sexism in the creative industries (Gill 2002). In this sense, the incitement to be creative more effectively compels young women to relinquish time to their laboring lives and especially exacerbates for women the forms of alienation the workerists critique.

In what follows, I draw these threads together in an analysis of the relationship between creative precarious labor and class in contemporary Ireland and further afield. First, I relay ethnographic encounters between self-described “middle-class” creatives and “working-class” non-creatives in gentrifying neighborhoods. All of these interlocutors are precariously employed. Creatives moving into gentrifying neighborhoods are targets of suspicion when they do not pursue active social relations, seen to be the dominant marker of being working-class. Conversely, artists think of class as a matter of aesthetics and patterns of consumption, often aestheticizing the working class from afar.

I then explore artists’ networks of economic, social, and cultural capital. As I reveal, despite unstable and low income, artists can access networks of capital unavailable to other precarious workers. They mobilize these to protect forms of vocational artistic labor that shelter the non-routine labor, executive function, and creative autonomy discussed above. This is true even as especially female creatives self-exploit, treating labor as the route to freedom and self-fulfillment. As I reveal, however, it is the idealization of artistic labor that we find at the root of both creative self-exploitation and the resentment expressed by non-creatives. What unites the precariat, then, is not the same kind of precarious exploitation, but a trap shared in common:

the encroachment of work into life is cast as a route to freedom.

### **Class, place, and active social relations**

While in Dublin, I spent nine months living on a public-private row next to a recently demolished social housing estate. The demolition of this estate, which I call Mount Stephens, displaced all but 1 percent of the original residents. The estate was also targeted by several regenerations under the aegis of the “creative city” model, meaning the area had seen a spike in capital investment and creative enterprises, and a reduction in social housing and community infrastructure. Instead, buoyed by funding schemes designed to spur economic growth, legions of young creatives were deployed to take up temporary work in pop-up studios, galleries, and start-ups. Shortly before I moved into the neighborhood, a museum and artist’s residency had been built overlooking the razed flats.

In Ireland, these tensions are linked to broader economic transformations in the last three decades. Before the 1990s, Ireland was often characterized as a poor, socially conservative, European backwater that had undergone only partial industrialization and suffered high levels of labor emigration (Breen et al. 1990). In the 1990s, however, the Irish state embarked on a project of market-led reform. A combination of tax exemptions, public-private partnerships, and lenient zoning regulations were engineered to attract Foreign Direct Investment from multinationals seeking to manufacture and distribute goods to a European market at low cost (Bartley and Kitchin 2007). This period witnessed the rise of “culture-led” and “creative city” models of urban development, which would be central to the state’s response to the 2008 recession (Bayliss 2004; Lawton et al. 2010). These place the preservation and creation of cultural attractions at the heart of urban planning, targeting blighted neighborhoods with regenerations pitched at an upwardly mobile, educated consumer base (Paddison and Miles 2005; Pratt 2008).

I lived with a woman I call Anne, and it was from her that I became acquainted with these and other issues that arose in relation to the regeneration in Mount Stephens. She was involved in heated debates with the regeneration board, and like other locals, expressed intense distrust of the Dublin City Council, politicians, and private developers. When I arrived, rumors circulated that the estate had been demolished because it would spoil the view from a major cultural attraction north of the site. Both Anne and her husband, Kevin, were in their fifties and had grown up in the neighborhood, and both were employed on an atypical basis. Kevin was a bricklayer, but since the recession, had worked intermittent short-term jobs, rendering his schedule and income unpredictable. Anne spent mornings and evenings ferrying local children to and from school, feeding them, minding them, and helping with their lessons. In both cases, they mobilized social networks to find quasi-informal work for themselves and others. Anne and Kevin also paid a Lithuanian woman they knew, and who had spent several years on a social housing wait list, to clean the house and rented their spare bedroom—to people like me.

In certain respects, then, they fit the precariat mold and knew others who did from working-class and migrant backgrounds. Nevertheless, I never heard Kevin or Anne use the language of precaritization. Indeed, neither felt much united them with the creatives trickling into the area, who were more frequently the subject of benign derision than political idealism. More significant to them were their long-standing relationships with local residents, with whom they worked and socialized on a daily basis, and the memory of the neighborhood as a place working-class people had forged a sense of community, often against startling odds. Indeed, the problem for many was not just precarious employment that fleetingly fulfilled their creative capacity, but a lack of employment prospects altogether. Yet after years of asking for support, local residents had watched municipal funding shunted to arts spaces, young creatives, and upwardly mobile renters, with whom they

did not always have easy relations, and whose presence would increase the cost of living. This appeared to locals like Anne and Kevin as evidence that they were accorded less social value than creatives, who seemed to secure support for short-term creative projects that superficially bestowed on an area a sense of vibrancy, leaving underlying structural deficiencies unaddressed.

### **Aestheticization of the working class**

It was into this context that creatives would enter. In the spring of 2017, I paid a visit to the site of another social housing demolition. The estate, which I call Roslin Cross, had attracted attention following several failed regenerations and for the controversial forced evacuation and dereliction of the flats. At the time, the flats were mostly vacant and the site partially cleared. They were also within reach of a growing cohort of young artists and creatives renting in the historically working-class neighborhoods south of Roslin Cross. Marion and Kate counted themselves in this number. Two young designers with an interest in urban planning, they were in temporary creative employment after multiple unpaid internships undertaken after their Master's degrees. Kate was also a talented photographer, a pursuit she maintained outside her working hours. After we met at a performance venue, and they learned about my research, they would kindly show me around the city on weekend afternoons. One Saturday, they suggested we walk through the gentrifying neighborhoods south of Roslin Cross, past a series of ambitious redevelopments, before visiting the estate. We met at a bakery a short walk from the flats, Kate with a camera slung over her shoulder.

After setting off, we wound through a series of residential streets, past rows of two-story, brick terraced houses, Kate snapping the occasional photo. After a fifteen-minute amble, we approached Roslin Cross. Ringed by a brick wall and spiked metal fencing, only a handful of buildings remained standing; several windows were boarded up or burned out, and a few

cars were left parked in the lot. As we walked through the site, the conversation lulled, and Kate capped and shifted her camera out of view. A group of boys were taking advantage of the open space, riding their bikes raucously through the dirt and destroying the rubbish left behind by the partial demolition. Taking notice of three out-of-place wanderers, they started tailing us from a safe but conspicuous distance. We sped up, and they herded us off the lot. When we reached the main street, they peeled off laughing, and Marion and Kate, noticeably discomfited, ducked into a pub, where some friends of theirs planned to join us.

Marion and Kate expressed nuanced views of their relations with neighbors in gentrifying areas. As their discomfort attested, they were aware of the strangeness of venturing into the estate to witness its dereliction—which they did in large part for my benefit. Marion was also from a 'working-class' neighborhood but had secured creative employment, which she felt made her lifestyle and networks now 'middle-class.' Yet this encounter was also reflective of an issue often discussed among young, progressive producers and consumers of art. Though creatives did not always sustain relationships with working-class people, they would consume working-class objects and aesthetics. The working class was thus treated as an object of political idealism even as it was held at a distance. Artists regularly worked in or frequented social hotspots in the city in stylized old manufacturing facilities with industrial-chic aesthetics. They dressed in up-market workwear, designed to mimic the manufacturing laborer's uniform. Vintage Adidas tracksuits were also common at a time when one frequently stumbled across pubs with signs denying entry to those unironically wearing a tracksuit. If we consider the legacy of Duchamp detailed above, we might understand this as an expression of artistic criticism, an abstract display of sympathy with the non-artistic worker, whose labor the modernists sought to elevate. Yet it was also the case that a hollowed-out reproduction of working-class aesthetics could be pursued without non-creatives being integrated

into or enjoying the benefits of the artistic labor process. Duchamp's utopic flattening of artistic versus non-artistic labor would thus sometimes cede to a detached "stylization of life" (Bourdieu [1979] 1984), which conferred on artists a degree of distinction.

When creatives encountered locals in working-class areas, this tendency to aestheticize from afar clashed with the reality of social tension between the groups. Ronan, a spoken word artist in his midtwenties from a self-described middle-class background, was open about this:

There definitely is a fetishization of working-class identity or culture, but generally an unwillingness to engage with working-class communities, to actually have any sort of meaningful dialogue with the communities who have been living in these areas for generations before artists moved in . . . art in Ireland, very much including the arts community, exhibits huge levels of classicism . . . a lot of people who work in the arts have huge levels of economic privilege . . . and would be educated, have parents who support them . . . There is a real suspicion toward people from less economically privileged positions.

Ciarán felt these tensions could be traced to different perceptions of the primary indicators of class. One of only two of my forty core artist interlocutors from a self-described working-class background, Ciarán was also the first in his family to secure a Master's degree. Critiquing the reduction of class to an aesthetic, Ciarán commented, "I kind of wonder what people think the working class is. I have a real problem with that. It's conflicted in my own family—we argue over that." In the end, he felt it was primarily about "values of inclusion . . . That you could care for other people, who aren't responsible for your financial burdens or your immediate familial situations." The working class, then, was not an image to be consumed but an active and contested experience, one that required forging social relationships. It was for this reason that

interlocutors from working-class neighborhoods emphasized the importance of a historical family attachment to place, and proximity to social housing estates in particular, in ongoing class distinctions. To approach the working class as an aesthetic or a badge of distinction thus served to evidence that creatives had failed to engage with the lives of their neighbors.

### **Art, value, and labor time**

Relations between artists and locals in working-class areas were thus often distanced or tense, and for reasons related to different class concepts. Yet these tensions were also linked to another perceived divide between creatives and non-creatives. Both incoming creatives and locals in gentrifying neighborhoods were keenly aware that because creative labor was accorded rhetorical value by dominant development models, creatives were able to mobilize networks of capital—however unstable and unpredictable—to protect some highly vocational artistic labor. This artistic labor was treated as distinct from—and more liberating and authentic than—other forms of monotonous creative and non-creative work.

This was true even as creatives experienced real and measurable economic hardship. As is well established, with the rise of culture-led and creative city development models, creative labor has been radically exploited to generate immaterial value, even as creatives do not often enjoy significant financial returns or employment security (Bain and McLean 2013; Gill and Pratt 2008; McRobbie 2018). Indeed, in a survey of the Irish arts sector in 2010, the Arts Council reported that the average worker in 2008 had earnings of approximately 1.4 times the average income of Irish artists, who also inordinately held second and third jobs (McAndrew and McKimm 2010: 152). Artists' earnings have, moreover, declined over recent decades, even as other sectors have seen a rise in average remuneration (McAndrew and McKimm 2010: 12). These features are characteristic of the ar-

tistic labor sector globally: even accounting for fluctuations in national labor markets, artists earn significantly less than others with similar educational attainment and work multiple jobs (Menger 1999).

However, artists' economic struggles cannot be understood independent from the cultural capital to which they have access or independent from the peculiar relationship between artistic labor and value. Indeed, artists are "almost three times as likely as the average worker to have a third-level degree or higher" (McAndrew and McKimm 2010: 7), and it is for this reason that they experience "status frustration": they have "a relatively high level of formal education" but to support their artwork, have to accept second and third jobs that "have a status or income beneath what they believe accord with their qualifications" (Standing 2011: 16). What is more, unlike in other sectors, the products of artistic labor are vulnerable to unique fluctuations in value. Artists deliver a service that is definitionally difficult to value with wages: their "income, which reflects whether their works are in demand (that is, whether they are sold and at what price), does not derive from a quantity of working time at a given wage rate" (Menger 1999: 552). Rather, as Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) observed, it is a function of the distinction attached to the artist and his/her work, which is subject to fluctuations in aesthetic sensibilities and to the artist's cultural and social capital. As a result of this vexed relationship between artistic labor and value, artistic labor is resistant to the logics of the value-form. It is therefore difficult to supervise the artist's labor time, meaning the artist's labor is often self-managed and nonroutine. As Roberts (2012) argues, this—in tandem with the modernist role of the artist as intellectual producer—means the artist retains an executive role and creative autonomy.

Artists were keenly aware of these contradictions. Even as they struggled with economic uncertainty, they were able to mobilize distributed economic capital, social networks, and cultural distinction to maintain what they described as middle-class lifestyles and protect forms of ped-

estalled artistic labor. Artists almost universally had parents or a spouse who supported them (McAndrew and McKimm 2010). Maureen, a dance artist in her thirties, described her situation as follows:

I earn anywhere between 8 and 15 grand a year . . . But to a certain extent, I'm fine. I drink flat whites in cafés. I go to the theater a lot. It's something we talk about a lot, the sociology of this sector, which is incredibly middle-class . . . privileged . . . We travel a lot because we're touring, and we get to have a flexible life . . . At the same time, nobody's having kids, nobody has health insurance . . . a pension . . . When things seriously go wrong, we would be really screwed . . . But I can't get the dole because I live with my partner, and he earns too much money.

Indeed, some went so far as to say they would not be in the sector at all without these networks of dependency, which were described as a function of being "middle-class." As Alex, an artist in her midtwenties, noted: "If I didn't have the class position that I do, which is upper-middle class . . . It wouldn't have been an option for me to go a whole summer making a show instead of working . . . you can only be an artist in Dublin if you have parents you can live with until you are self-sustaining." The result was that even in the absence of employment security, artists did not suffer a loss of overall symbolic class status. This was true even as their creative work exacerbated dependency on kin and their symbolically middle-class standing hardly compensated for other losses. Indeed, Angela McRobbie has described how this "middle-classification" of creative laborers comes bearing hidden perils for women in particular (2018: 11). If we consider that approximately 80 percent of my artist interlocutors were female, the irony of this dependency becomes clear: their work appeared to offer a path to flexibility and privilege, and yet increased dependency on often male spouses, yielded meager earnings, and robbed creatives

of social safety nets, often straining relationships and rendering motherhood implausible.

### **Self-actualization and artistic labor**

Nevertheless, creatives continued to protect artistic labor, and this is because of the great value placed on this highly vocational form of creative labor. Indeed, a peculiarity of artistic labor is that the economic precarity of the sector is often refigured as evidence of the authenticity of the artist. Artists routinely described their work as a “calling” or “a labor of love,” one that justified, and even required, sacrificing monetary success—an account echoed in survey data on Irish artists (McAndrew and McKimm 2010). As Pierre-Michel Menger notes, this concept of artistic labor as existing outside of conventional labor relies on “a basic distinction between labor as a routine and alienating activity and work as a nonroutine pursuit” (1999: 558)—with artistic labor occupying what Louis Hyde ([1983] 2006) described as a protected value sphere. Because of this, artists would use terms like “young professional” and “sell out” to pejoratively describe artists who sought more lucrative but routine creative jobs, turning too little time and energy to vocational artistic labor. This work was thought to deliver to artists control over some amount of highly protected labor time, as well as the intellectual freedom to direct projects, enlisting their and others’ labor to bring artistic projects to completion.

It is this ability to enjoy executive control over nonroutine labor time while experiencing creative autonomy that people in working-class neighborhoods often feel they do not enjoy. In this respect, the ongoing use of the traditional symbolic labels “middle class” and “working class” indicates whether one is able to orient some labor time to vocational artistic labor. This fact was reflected in conversations I had with neighbors in Mount Stevens, for whom this specific kind of creative labor was often discussed as a desirable but distant luxury. In the spring of 2017, I attended a gathering of

local activists on International Women’s Day, hosted in the new arts space overlooking the demolished flats. There, a local housing activist I call Mary gave a welcome speech, in which she echoed the familiar working-class call for “bread and butter” with the suffragettes’ call for “bread and roses”—for not only bare life. Commenting on the gathering, Mary praised “all the creativity in the room” and the importance of art to “a life well lived.” Thus, the difference was not that self-described working-class people in these neighborhoods did not value the creative self-actualization artistic labor was thought to facilitate. It was that they were less likely to enjoy it. Crucially, too, creative fulfillment was thought of as accessible through employment, and where creative fulfillment is not achieved through employment, work is described as a loss of valuable time. As a neighbor, Lucy, put it:

With employment you have loads of time for creativity . . . if you can be creative and self-productive there’s a lot you can do. It feeds your mind . . . If you are worried about where you get your next paycheck, or where you’ll get food, the thought of being creative goes out the window. There’s something about not having jobs. There’s just a potential you shut off . . . I think that’s one of the problems of capitalism is that there is so much wasted time for us. We’re like rabbits hunting greyhounds.

In this regard, this case demonstrates that an ideology of labor that gives pride of place to creative gratification through work and control over labor time is no longer characteristic only of the children of the professional-managerial class but has come to exert enormous sway over all precarious workers (Rosenblatt 2013: 296–298).

### **From freedom to emancipation from labor**

This article has argued that we can understand ongoing divisions within the precariat as directly

related to perceived uneven access to certain forms of highly vocational, autonomous creative labor, which continues to be demarcated using traditional symbolic class categories. As I have argued, the precariously employed creative emerges as a person characterized by the following features, which distinguish him or her from other members of the precariat: They are able to mobilize diffuse networks of economic, social, and cultural capital to protect symbolically “middle-class” lifestyles and forms of pedestalled artistic labor. When engaged in artistic labor, they retain executive control over a nonroutine labor process and theirs and others’ labor time, as well as creative autonomy, even as they experience economic instability and alienation. Crucially, then, the attractions of artistic labor are a trap—salves that soften the blow of an increasing encroachment of work into life, and an intense contraction of life outside work. This process is particularly acute for young women, who see these features of work as not just a route to freedom through self-actualization, but as a feminist critique of traditional domestic and labor hierarchies. This is something of a false promise, as in an ironic twist, this approach to work often leaves these women dependent on spouses and parents and unable to become mothers.

Yet this article has also demonstrated that the idealization of artistic labor holds sway over non-creatives. Thus, creative self-actualization through labor is an equally effective carrot dangled in front of all precarious workers. That some young creatives grasp it—however fleetingly, and in however narrow a segment of their laboring lives—does not necessarily result in satisfaction. Yet this does not keep it from functioning as an extremely tantalizing ideal, one these creatives are seen to have privileged access to by non-creatives, who have also imbibed the same ideological view that sees self-actualization through work as the route to freedom and human fulfillment. Uneven access to it thus still maps onto what are imagined dividing lines between the children of the working and middle classes and those engaged in non-creative versus

creative precarious labor. This article has thus demonstrated that different kinds of exploitation across the precariat hold the potential to contribute to theorizing novel class formations.

More than this, I suggest that our response to the problem of precaritization should focus less on emphasizing a shared experience of precaritization and more on unsettling the belief in the potential for creative self-actualization through work to function as a route to freedom. Indeed, as Lazzarato has noted, a key characteristic of societies of security is the use of freedom as a tool of governance, particularly in our laboring lives. In response to this problem, I take a cue from Roberts (2010) and suggest we enliven Marx’s theory of emancipation from labor—the notion that freedom can only occur when one gains sufficient control over labor time to be able to refuse one’s laboring role. That the precariat has not shifted from a class in the making to a mass class has less to do with whether all members of the precariat are galvanized by this word than to the ongoing, depoliticizing enchantments of creative self-actualization through labor, an ideal shared by creative and non-creative members of the precariat alike. The distinctive problem for the precariat is a general inability to divert time away from labor, for a range of creative pursuits, which we must imagine more expansively than just “artistry”—including, indeed, the maintenance of intimate relationships and the manifold other forms of creative work that go into building not a “life of one’s own” but a “life well lived.” It is the politicization of this problem that should lie at the heart of any attempt to redress precaritization.

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