

Good work

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"I only work with my friends," she once said during an office conversation whose topic I don't recall. However, her affirmation continued to echo, provoking a sensation that I couldn't nail down because it felt both right and wrong. In other words, her statement suggested that labor and time could be utilized in a way that would promise an end to work, because work would not be perceived as such if it were friendship. I was caught in her example, slightly confused. If friendship turned into work, questions as to how to quantify, evaluate and remunerate a work performance would become problematic because friendship is also generosity. How does one measure and judge the efficiency of hanging out together for example, a typical friend activity? Feeling trapped in her sentence brought forth an uneasy sense of fading stupidity. Perhaps, my aversion to 9 to 5 jobs was not entirely justified, perhaps, what I considered to be major freedom was simply more work in disguise. As we accomplished it with friends, and the contained 9 to 5 work schedule pervaded the rest of the day, I was working all the time.

Work and Belief

In order to clarify the dubious equation of labor and friendship, one should begin with a questioning of the nature of work. In this case, work relied on a shared set of interests, references and preoccupations. Working with art was a way of shaping the flow of the everyday and the way it looks, so we could set up a bar or make an exhibition in a public garden. In this sense, work came close to a belief and was often associated with desire rather than obligation. And it was not a privileged choice, as I often contended with other friends, not more



than any other work. Ultimately, all professional choices were guided by belief (in money, power, altruism etc.). This belief however, sustained itself on immaterial values-not that this feature is specific to the field of cultural and artistic production, as the art sphere is primarily known for the market it can generate. The underlying question however, is what principles and beliefs guide your actions.

She had refused a delicious offer somewhere in a big institution because she wanted to stay in her city.

He said that it was painful to pour that much energy and time in the magazine but that he had no choice.

He never had written a CV and was short on money by the end the month although he always had a bill folded in four equal parts to fit his leather purse.

There might be issues of recognition and success within the implausible art world and system, local and international. Still, something remains excessive to the logic of immediate self-interest. Something that may be identified as idealist, and one day, turn into disillusionment and bitterness, or not. It comes close to what André Breton describes in his book *Arcanum 17* written in 1944, in light of Surrealism and its failed attempts to subvert the real.

"There is, in fact, no more barefaced lie than the one that consists in asserting, even- and above all- when faced with an irretrievable situation, that rebellion is good for nothing. Rebellion is its own justification, completely independent of the chance it has to modify the state of affairs that gives rise to it." ¹

Work, when read through this romantic understanding of subversion, channels desire and establishes a direct connection with the self (there is no separation between what I do and who I am). In fact, commonly, such activity is not envisioned as "work" although it involves production. Stemming from an individual desire, its value can't be simply determined through a professional currency.

In this positive affirmation-of desire over obligation- exists a haunting belief that we are doing the right thing and that what we do is "good". Good in the sense that it opposes what is considered bad (the market, the "miserable priests" in Breton's text). The outcome of this type of "work" is that it often acts against its main purpose, to generate (material) profit. Rebellion, when judged through standards of efficiency, is "good for nothing" Breton says, this "good for nothing" is what is to be valued. Aside from Breton's avant-garde rhetoric,

¹ André Breton, *Arcanum 17* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2004).



working with art from a stand that is "not for profit" confuses the contractual operations of retribution, value and work, as the values that are believed in are not immediately translatable or reducible to "work".

"We believe of our friends that they are good men"²

If work meant believing in a shared project, a common good that drew us together, how did friendship fit in this equation? Were our "good" intentioned feelings driven by the same belief in "good work"? Does the coming together of work equal to the togetherness expressed in friendship? How to negotiate and reconcile the economy present in these peculiar affects, believing (in work) and love (for friends)? Could they be collapsed as in her affirmation?

I particularly liked her because she does inspire me good. Good in reference to peace and companionship, of looking over each other while sharing intense thoughts. What she gives me and what I can give her back is time for reflection, where judgment is set aside because there is time to bring down the images that regulate the way we appear, the way we speak and the words we choose. Time to forget style and be vulnerable.

Friendship, similar to the work being addressed, also presents an economy of loss, as true friendships are the ones that are able to set aside self-interest for the good of the other, to move beyond one's self towards the "other self".

In his Book on Friendship, Aristotle distinguishes between three kinds of friendships; first the ones that are useful, second, pleasurable and last the ones that are "good" per se and do not serve a purpose. The third kind is the most honorable one since the interest lies in the person and not in what could be gained from that person. Such friendship is possible because it leans on "good" regarded here as a virtue, a premise for good and altruistic friendships. The good in this kind of friendship is not circumstantial; it is intrinsic to the person, therefore, its outcome is necessarily good.

According to Aristotle's logic, there is no possible disjunction between both, since there isn't any difference between a good person and the guiding good of belief, an idea and its embodiment. Aristotle states that if there is friendship there is no need for justice ("...and when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just, they need friendship as well."³). And if we were truly friends, there would be no need of work. The conflict or rather the paradox in work and friendship is that there would be no work if friendship were truly friendship. And work would not be considered work if it were truly good.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³ Idem.

But how then distinguish what is good per se from what is good for us, since the good that defines "good friendship" is also linked to the singularity of friendship. Not anybody could give me the same "good", only her. The same question would apply for "good work", how to distinguish what is good per se (belief) and good for me (self-interest). This confusion emerges when what we do as friends starts qualifying and is apprehended as work, that is to say, when our beliefs and our affective relations are assigned an exchangeable value and have to respond to specific demands. Our friendship then, as well as our belief, time and energy had to reconcile to a new logic and economy. Was it possible to systematize work when based on affective relations? What would be lost or gained in this transition? These questions, for the time being, will remain unanswered.

Her affirmation continued to resonate as both right and wrong; driven by self-interest and utterly disinterested, paradoxical just as friendship. Affection, efforts, beliefs and scarce money were weaved into the economy we had to be negotiating everyday, according to singular situations. It required the creation of new and contingent formulas, dependent on individual projects and encounters.