



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY  
HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

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**OLD FACTORIES, NEW  
STAKHANOVITES: MOSCOW  
CONTEMPORARY ART-CENTRES  
AS WORKPLACES**

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: HUMANITIES  
WP BRP 138/HUM/2016

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## **OLD FACTORIES, NEW STAKHANOVITES: MOSCOW CONTEMPORARY ART-CENTRES AS WORKPLACES**<sup>2</sup>

In the past 20 years, the increasing number of papers in cultural studies, sociology of the arts and industrial sociology has been focused on creative/cultural workers. They critically reconsidered the over-optimistic view on creative workforce presented earlier the cultural economists as R. Florida, C. Landry and others. However, there are still many topics, which remain understudied. First, most of the studies were focused on free-lancers, short contract and self-employed workers and still exclude those who are employed full-time or strongly tied with an institutional organization. Furthermore, while much research has been devoted to the UK, other regions or global concerns have gained little attention. This paper aims to bridge abovementioned gap at least partly by presenting an empirical case of full-time workers in Moscow art-centres, based on 20 in-depth interviews and 20 observations at the workplaces and public events of these centres.

JEL Classification: Z1

Keywords: creative labour, cultural workers, art-centres, art-managers, Russia, Moscow

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<sup>2</sup>The article was prepared within the framework of the Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2016 (grant № 116-02-0013) and supported within the framework of a subsidy granted to the HSE by the Government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Program.

## **Introduction**

Despite the increasing number of studies devoted to creative/cultural workers, there are still many topics, which remain understudied. First, previous research experience has been largely focused on self-employed and contract professionals, and in many cases excluded other categories of cultural workers, i.e. those who are employed full-time or strongly tied with an institutional organization (in visual arts - art-managers, institutional curators, workers of museum/gallery archives, pr-support and so on). Secondly, the current wave of studies was devoted mostly to the UK on a very specific stage – so called ‘golden age’ of New Labour’s cultural policy, which now is over. Third, labour regimes in cultural organizations and projects are rarely considered as the result of collective activity, where cultural producers design the workplace together by establishing formal rules and informal practices, creating hierarchies, organizational structures, defining the boundaries of working and non-working space and time. The empirical research presented here attempts to bridge this gap partly by introducing cultural institutions’ employees of Moscow as creative workers. Therefore, the main questions raised in the study are: what features does creative labour have in institutional environment different from UK and North America? Do full-time creative workers have better working conditions than free-lancers and self-employed ones? What characteristics do new art centres in Moscow have as workplaces?

In the last two decades, an academic debate on creative labour has been developing rapidly. This was facilitated by a number of factors. On the one hand, creative professionals became a more remarkable and ‘exemplary’ group within the context of ‘brave new world of work’ (Beck, 2000). Ulrich Beck showed radical changes of work in post-industrial society. According to Beck, there structures of industrial labour cracked down due to globalization and technological progress, the way of life is no longer tied to a profession once elected and long-term contracts are replaced by flexible forms of employment. Although further research showed the limitations of these changes, a critical view of Beck (and other theorists of the end of work), allowed to draw more attention on non-standard employment, such as creative work. On the other hand, creative professionals are considered in connection with the urban development policy of Great Britain and North America where the concept of ‘creative industries’ and ‘creative city’ proves to be decisive spreading later throughout the world. ‘Creative economy’ found the most large-scale implementation in the UK cultural policy under the New Labour government. For the first time for many years, the New Labour decided on big reforms in the sphere of culture, which greatly influenced the dispositions

in British art field. In particular, because of the proposed reforms, visual arts became a core of 'creative industries' - an umbrella term that united the media, heritage, IT, sports and other areas, which were considered as a promising segment of the national economy (Caves, 2000; Oakley, 2004). These changes brought substantial money flow and new resources to the British art world, however, together with new opportunities, government programmes provide the art world with new criteria of artistic value – marketability. Art should bring not only immediate profit (that is hardly possible) but is aimed at bringing profits in a long term (Hewison, 2015). Looking at art in a new light - as the industry, the campaign developers could not address the issues of labour force, so already at the level of policy documents the labour agenda in culture emerged.

However, both cultural policy documents analysts and empirical researchers criticized the overly optimistic view on creative workforce, although as Angela McRobbie notes they weren't heard by the campaign promoters declared as that of artists' pioneers of the new economy (McRobbie 2011). Numerous ethnographic studies reveal inequalities and new types of exploitation existing in this sphere, thus, the majority of papers cover issues of precariousness, informality and high level of segregation in creative industries. Precariousness, a fickle, unstable employment is rooted in the model of cultural production, adopted in advanced capitalism: first, neoliberal system of creative industries promotes autonomy, relying primarily on the self-employed and short-term projects (Gill 2011). Menger (1999), using the example of the French art market, describes a similar process: the market has grown, due to the fact that the contracts were becoming shorter and shorter, so that the number of hired increased significantly. Secondly, features of networked creativity and the high atomization of cultural production were associated with the peculiarities of the British cultural scene of the 1990s as shown by McRobbie through the example of rave culture (2002). Third, the uncertainty was associated with the values of this work – the ideas of freedom and self-expression (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). Another problem is informality in working relations, starting with the hiring procedure which often leads to the matter of 'entrepreneurial nature' and blurring boundaries between work and other spheres of life (for example, parties and other networking events) (Neff et al., 2005; Aranda, Vidokle 2011; Forkert 2010; Gill, Pratt, 2008). Informality also leads to easier ways of exclusions based on social characteristics such as race or age, or gender (see Conor et al., 2015). Here it is appropriate to note the nature of non-stepped creative careers and the idea of the 'big breakthrough' (Taylor and Littleton, 2012) inspiring creative professionals to pursue their career. The situation in the UK is also special in this sense because of the glamorized media representation of creative workers, pictured as scandalous stars and eccentric millionaires – such as Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst, and other Young British Artists.

Creative labour has almost been unstudied in the Russian and post-Soviet context, although cultural production in Russia has some unique features distinctive from neoliberal creative/cultural industries in the UK. Particularly, the development of creative industries is not so far among the priorities of the state policy. This term is employed mostly only by experts and researchers (see, for example Gnedovskii 2005 mentioning activities of independent agency called Institute for Cultural Policy, promoting creative industries approach in Russia), this concept is referred to in policy documents, in particular the recent 'Principles of the State Cultural Policy' (2014), however the approach of creative industries is not a practical tool for regulation of the cultural policy, but only the one among the concepts of the traditional 'preservation of cultural heritage' and the 'spiritual sphere' (p.8).

Despite the fact that at the level of federal cultural policy creative industries have not been developed, the experience of the West European culture institution building was valuable for other agents: in the case of Moscow, it inspired many private initiatives in contemporary art. Ideologically and institutionally, these initiatives differed both from state institutions still retained features of the Soviet organization of cultural production, as well as representatives from the organizations from Moscow art scene of the 1990s, focused on a fairly narrow circle of professionals.

There are only few studies devoted to creative labour in Russia. In particular, Abramova (2012) held 15 interviews with Moscow artists and art curators which were published on the portal polit.ru. In her notes on the results of the project, Abramova mentions considerable informality of the labour relations, the difficulties in solidarization and autonomization of cultural workers. Notwithstanding that this study is important for understanding of creative labour in Russia, it seems necessary to mention some of its limitations: firstly, this study considers the point of view of creative workers who have become figures with a certain level of publicity that can considerably differ their situation from those who still do not possess such resources; secondly, most of the subject of this study can independently chose a free-lance employment with a fairly stable job conditions that is characterized of just a small group of cultural workers.

## **New, sexy and international: Moscow cultural centres of 2000s**

Below are results of empirical research, conducted in Moscow in April-October 2016. The research included 20 in-depth interviews with full-time employees of art centers (the study covered 10 institutions), 20 sessions of observation in offices and public events in the art-centres. Research guide contained questions on education, career trajectories, work organization (in particular, the research participants were asked to draw organization structure of the art-centre), everyday labour routines of the workers.

In the second half of the 2000s there are several private cultural institutions appeared in Moscow, supported by the representatives of big business. For example, in 2008, Roman Abramovich (this year - №12 the Russian Forbes list) and Dasha Zhukova became the founders of the Museum of Modern Art 'Garage' (then - contemporary culture center), located in the Bahmetevsky garage; in 2007 Roman Trotsenko (the adviser of 'Rosneft' president) and his wife Sofia opened Center for Contemporary Art 'Winzavod' in a former brewery; 'Strelka' Institute of Media and Design was launched in 2009 in the courtyard of the factory 'Red October' supported by Alexander Mamut (N38 in the Russian Forbes list).

A specificity of Moscow art-centres should be indicate here based on comparison with other Russian cases. For example, in the second half of the 2000s new private institutions opened in St. Petersburg as well. They also used the former industrial and non-residential buildings (for example, the empty 19th-century mansions, located in the city center). However, in contrast to Moscow's initiatives Petersburg cultural institutions were founded by young creative entrepreneurs who have far less financial resources. Second, the difference can be seen in relation of city administration to new initiatives: in Moscow, private cultural institutions have found greater support, their development conceptually coincided with the 'creative' urban policies pursued by Sergei Kapkov, unlike in St. Petersburg, where the new non-governmental initiatives were ignored by the city administration (for more details see Kuleva 2014).

New non-governmental art venues saw themselves in contrast with the existing traditions of cultural production, presented by state museums, and focused primarily on foreign experience. For example, Strelka Institute on their website describes its work through the concept of change: 'Strelka was founded in 2009 to change the cultural and physical landscapes of Russian cities. The Institute promotes positive changes and creates new ideas and values through its educational activities. Strelka provides brand new learning opportunities, while the City remains at the centre of the Institute's research programme' (Institute for a social city..., 2016). Internationalization is manifested not only in ideas for the creation of these institutions, but in their practices: education at the Institute is in English language, many teachers - foreign experts, starting with Rem Koolhaas,

the first program director. Garage MoCA shares as a call to the global experience and orientation to the future. ‘What’s interesting about the Garage, its run by post-soviet generation, the people who were born in the 80s or even in the 90s. Garage is really a product of that generation, a new way of thinking of culture, a new way of thinking on culture and what contemporary can be to society’, - Kate Fowle, chief curator argues in a video on Garage new building. Her colleague, curator Snezhana Krasteva adds: ‘Victor Misiano made a very interesting description on Garage. He said it’s the only place in Moscow where he feels belonging to some international context but he still can speak Russian’.

Being a kind of portal, linking global art world and local urban scene, Moscow art-centers have become not only a place for high culture practices (exhibition attendance), but offer a wide repertoire of leisure activities in and around the cultural institutions: interactive educational programs, tours and walks, restaurants and shops , bicycles and rollers, outdoor games. Of great importance in the creation of these transitional zones is environmental design. The design not only makes the site attractive to visitors, but also ring-fences it from other urban areas and publics. These features don’t only contribute to the attractiveness of the design and the high status of the new art centers as places to visit, but also as workplaces. Another participant of Garage video presentation, a designer says: *‘I remember for the first time I visited Garage, I said to myself – oh, that is a place where I should be. This is a place where I should live and die’*. An attitude to an art centre as not only place of work, but as a long-term habitat, where life (or even death!) takes place, builds other principles of employment choice. As shown by empirical data, environmental design, the aesthetic quality of the products have become one of the strongest motivations for employment in one of the art centers for many participants of my research, as well as to continue work there, despite many difficulties they face:

*‘I still like the place as a visitor, we do work good of quality’* (female, art-manager).

*‘I think that [the art-centre] is a the coolest place in Moscow. So that why I'm here (laughs) No, no, to tell you the truth, we went to exhibitions and I really liked it here, there was a very cool project exhibited’* (female, project coordinator).

*‘Important people from all around the world come here and can tell you about new approaches and thinks. And their attitude to ... its something like a miracle, just WOW! That’s a source of my pride and loyalty’* (female, deputy director).

International researchers of creative work, also celebrate love, fascination of creatives with their work, but these feelings rather addressed to the industry as a whole, or the nature of the work that they perform, and less focused on specific workplace.

## **‘As grass grows’: organizational structures and creativity**

Young contemporary art organization in transition from Soviet cultural monopoly to market economy has not yet formed standards of cultural production. In this sense, creative work organization is an issue of negotiations and experiments, an ideological battlefield where both neo-liberal creative entrepreneurialism and principals of Soviet bureaucratic cultural work organization together with heroization of work (and celebration for the new Stakhanovite) can be met there.

The majority of research participants also stressed on the importance of Western cultural institutions for Moscow art-centres drawing the lines of comparison between them and London or New-York (eg: ‘Well, we are obviously Russian Tate then’, says a keeper, female), however institutional isomorphism primarily applies to the aesthetic and status (as in the example above), imitation. The organizational side of the cultural production though is very different from the Western model. Three characteristics of organizational structures of art-centres can be distinguished: organizational flexibility; a high level of informality; hybrid nature, connectedness with the traditions of cultural production of the previous generation.

So, despite the fair majority of the interviewees also emphasized the focus on the experience of Western cultural institutions (eg: ‘Well, we are obviously Russian Tate then’, says a keeper, female), isomorphism largely applies to the aesthetic and status (as in the example above), imitation of them. The organizational side of the cultural production is very different from the Western model. Three characteristics of organizational structures can be distinguished here: organizational flexibility, a high level of informality, hybrid/mix with the traditions of cultural production of the previous generation.

***Organizational flexibility.*** As mentioned above, the missions of new art-centres go far beyond just the production of culture: in particular, the interviewees mentioned education of wider public, an increase of tolerance level in Moscow, archiving and studying the history of Russian contemporary art, local art community development among their goals.

With such a variety of purposes, it is difficult to define those of the departments / employees of art centers, which carry out basic or, on the contrary, additional functions. The hierarchy between departments often is to change or challenged:

*'Haven't you heard? Pr-department is the main one here. They're our f\*\*\*ing bosses'* (discussion of exhibitions and events plan, observation, April 2016).

Development of new departments of working groups, usually happens quickly enough, the whole horizon of organizational planning is no more than three years, and this process is highly uncertain: as noted by one of the interviewees' 'the institution grows like grass grows' (female, curator).

**Informality.** The flexibility of the organizational structure enhances the workflow informality that characterizes many areas of activity of art centers:

*'My department arranged informally. That's nothing on paper about it, It's just a logical division of labour'* (curator, female)

Thus, the curator of the above example is de facto head of the department (which is not disputed by anyone, including the director of the art center), but she is officially part of another department. Path dependency, as well as the personal characteristics of the workers, their informal relationship (friendship) affects the production. It's reflexed at the drawings of organizational structures presented by the interviewees during the interviews. For example, all the departments of one of the centres report directly to the director, without the personal approval of which even non-significant matters can't be solved. Other schemes contained not only the direct ways of work organization (who reports to whom), but dashes, 'trails', which can be used as well.

**Hybrid nature of work organization.** Despite the desire to do culture 'in a new way' that cultural workers expressed in both in collected interviews and official sources, new art centers can't avoid dialogue with the Soviet type of cultural production. On the one hand this is symbolic dialogue: the majority of interviewees got art history education in Russian universities, training in which hasn't changed significantly in the post-Soviet era. In addition, not only official Soviet culture influenced contemporary cultural production, but traditions of non-official art as well. In particular, their conductors may be many representatives of underground art, now occupied leading positions in new art-centres. The following features can be listed as typical underground cultural production: high degree of informality, importance of social capital and denial of inscribed status, denial of industrial conception of art (art is something different from work), adventurism (the ability to dare the impossible, but ambitious goal), glorification of artistic labour. On the other

hand, practices also inherited from Soviet cultural production find the place in new art-centres. For instance, huge amount of paper work leading to bureaucratization of culture:

*'We are here to please Alexandra Ivanovna. It's not a part of our structure, however I should spend a week everytime to register the project by signing 4 documents'* (female, art-manager).

The most art centers in my sampling are located in former Soviet factories, and inherited their specific material conditions of production. Moreover, in one of the cases, the employees of a former factory, including the director, became workers of an art-centre. In this case, as shown by interviews and observations symbiosis of two working modes takes place: the employees of the 'factory' have retained their previous mode of operation, starting early in the morning and finishing the day at the beginning of the working day of 'creative department'.

## **Immaterial and invisible? Labour routines of creative workers in Moscow art-centres**

In this paragraph, I will focus on the individual labour regimes and working conditions, framed by the above-described features of Moscow cultural institutions. The institutions workers face many working difficulties typical for creative industries. In particular, despite they receive a monthly salary, workers are often forced to remain at work additional hours that are not paid. It can be as extended working days, and work on the weekends. At the same time, the beginning of the working day is subject for a strict regulation: in particular, for delays workers can receive a fine or other disciplinary action.

Employees are controlled not only in a 'top-down way', but even tougher by themselves: employees accumulate personal responsibility around a product created by art center, identifying their own success and the activities of the institution. In addition, great importance is the moral aspect of labour:

*'We have criteria in addition to the business qualities, we call it the [the art-centre]-match. It will be difficult to work ... if you .... well ... I would say that it's just a bunch of very good people here, because in such a rhythm in which we operate, it is very difficult to work for the person career'*. (deputy director, female).

It's supposed 'good person' doesn't fight for his/her working rights, by pointing out on differences between written contract and work in practice, and, then, rebelling against the shock-work principle. Those workers 'drop out':

*'They (employees who say no - . MK) leave the job, not because I dismiss them, but because they simply drop out. The reason I say that is selfregulating system is it does not mean that you have to do it, but when you have a nice team, you can not, you do not want to say no ... '(deputy director, female).*

The principle of 'soft enforcement', which, in the words of interviewees, 'noone is forcing nobody' may also describe a relationship with their environment.

*'You need to hate you work, I know it. However I can't resist the charm of environment. Some nice feelings are awaken' (female, librarian)*

*'- What is your working day like?*

*- I'm here, at the bar, drinking coffee and talking to some nice people.*

*- That looks very attractive!*

*- That's the thing! That looks very attractive! That's the secret of [the art-centre] - it all looks very attractive. The only little detail I do it 16 hours on daily basis' (female, deputy director).*

On the one hand, the research participants feel themselves 'seduced' by design, superior architectural environment, an ability to recognize themselves as a part of an ambitious and unique project. On the other hand, many employees of art centers talked about an imposed trendy lifestyle, which they do not always want to follow, neither have financial opportunities to fit in with. Consider the example of the above quotation: many employees of one of the art centers have no other option but to work in the cafe: the office is too small for all the members of staff. Another similar example: lunch at the trendy cafes and restaurants during the lunch break is not always connected to lifestyle, but rather to infrastructural opportunities – there are no other cafes in the walking distance from rearranged art centers.

Employees of the art centers go through similar risks to other creative workers, however in contrast with artists and designers, musicians, that kind of workers do not usually get public recognition as a reward for poor working conditions. For example, there're not credited on the art-centres websites and wall-texts on the exhibition (usually only artist and main curator is listed there). Employees can remain anonymous within the organization ( 'Our director does not know

what I suggested the idea of this project,' say keeper, woman). Access to the tasks collectively perceived as creative and bohemian appropriate way, also have only a very small number of employees. A manager of an art-centre retells a conversation with her boss, curator talking:

*'C'mon, why are you so serious? Come to the studio, lets hang out, - [curator] said, I replied: 'hey, I need to work. As my boss you should know it' (female, art-manager).*

In particular, as we see in this example, 'hanging out', 'chat' is part of the routine work of the curator, while his subordinate feels responsible for the implementation of more mundane tasks associated with the different rhythm of work.

## **Conclusion**

The main objective of this paper is to bridge the gap between multiple forms of creative work, observed empirically, and a few presented in an existing debate: previous research has been largely focused on self-employed and contract professionals, and still almost ignores the perspective of full-time cultural workers (in case of visual art: art-managers, institutional curators, workers of museum/gallery archives, pr-support and so on). As a case study, I chose new Moscow art-centers opened in the refurbished Soviet factories in 2000s (10 organizations were included in this research). I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with cultural workers employed full-time and 20 observation in the offices and exhibition areas of the art-centres. According to preliminary result of the project full-time employees of the art-centres have many common features with other creatives (self-exploitation, blurring of work and leisure activities, low pay) and some unique characteristics as the increase in personal responsibility and self-identification with the organization. The study also revealed that despite the fact that creative professionals involved in the practice of cultural shock work are really 'new' - young and enthusiastic, cultural production factories, though have been refurbished, still have a lot of similarities with the Soviet organization of cultural work. Another result of the study is related to insufficient capacity of workers to change or affect the workplace regulation. The results of work of most of them are alienated because in the general sense are not independent creative products as artwork or curated exhibition.

At first glance, work of cultural institutions employees seems to be more privileged and secured than free-lancers and self-employed ones, but in this case one of the main rewards of creative work, the artistic recognition is missing. Despite the workers treat the collective work as

their personal one, put a lot of resources in it, institutions do not pay them back by de-personalizing the obtained cultural goods.

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