

# Labour as Relational Agency: An Autistic Theory of Structural Violence Against Non-Market Work in the Age of AI

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## Abstract

This paper proposes a new ontology of labour that defines work not as the production of marketable output but as relational agency: embodied, self-determined interaction that generates social and ecological reality through resonance. The core thesis is that capitalist economies do not merely neglect non-market forms of labour—such as artistic practice, care work, activism, and deep autistic focus—but structurally attack them, because relational labour destabilises the value regime on which capitalist legitimacy depends. Drawing on methodologies of Artistic Research and neurodivergent cognition, the paper conceptualises autistic, embodied work as a high-resolution mode of system analysis, in which sensing, thinking and acting remain inseparable. Under this model, lived cognition functions as a measurement device rather than a source of bias.

The analysis combines philosophical argument with empirical evidence derived from ten years of autoethnographic field research inside German state institutions and corporate environments. These encounters—which resulted in escalating administrative sanctions, bureaucratic harassment, and legal repression—demonstrate that punishment did not follow refusal to work, but followed precisely when the author’s self-determined labour exposed institutional dysfunction. Rather than representing personal misfortune, these events constitute a dataset revealing a general mechanism: the more a form of labour produces social complexity through resonance rather than through commodifiable output, the more hostile the system response becomes.

The paper argues that the rise of AI and automation amplifies this conflict: since AI can simulate output but not resonance, contemporary labour policy rewards simulation and suppresses relational agency. As a result, societies risk destroying precisely the capacities they require for resilience and democratic self-correction. The paper concludes that a Universal Care Income is not a moral or humanitarian proposal but an epistemic infrastructure that enables relational labour to function as a stabilising intelligence within complex societies.

Keywords: relational labour; structural violence; autistic cognition; artistic research; post-work; automation; Universal Care Income.

## 1. Introduction — The invisible labour crisis

For more than a century, labour in capitalist societies has been defined through a single criterion: the production of monetisable output. Work is recognised only when it generates profit, measurable efficiency, or a market-aligned deliverable. Under this valuation regime, entire domains of human activity—care, social cohesion, artistic experimentation, activist intervention, community building, and the long-form cultivation of culture—are relegated to the status of non-work. They become economically invisible even when they are socially indispensable.

This structural blindness is not an oversight. It is a mechanism of control. The labour market recognises only those actions that can be extracted, priced, and subordinated to external direction. Self-determined work, intrinsically motivated work and relational work—work that operates through resonance rather than through commodified output—lie outside this perimeter and therefore trigger not neutrality but hostility. When the author performed such work across ten years of interactions with state institutions, cultural industries and corporate environments, punishment did not occur in the absence of output, but precisely when work produced social effects without producing profit: exposing corruption, revealing bureaucratic malfunction, or provoking cultural self-reflection. The system responded not to inactivity, but to non-marketable agency.

This reveals a fundamental category error embedded in contemporary labour policy: it conflates work with employment, and contribution with profit extraction. A society organised around this confusion becomes dependent on simulation—on the appearance of productivity—rather than on the generation of social and ecological coherence. This becomes catastrophic in the age of automation. AI can simulate output but cannot generate resonance; it can replicate models but cannot participate in embodied meaning-making. If labour continues to be recognised only when it mirrors machine logic, the most socially valuable forms of work—those that maintain complexity, diversity and democratic resilience—will be repressed as non-work by design.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the ontology of labour underlying this crisis, to show how it produces structural violence against relational work, and to propose a conceptual framework for recognising relational agency as the primary form of labour in complex societies.

## **2. Methodology — Embodied cognition and Artistic Research as field science**

This paper employs a methodology that is unconventional only insofar as dominant scientific traditions are tied to a neurotypical model of cognition. Rather than assuming that knowledge arises from distance, observation and abstraction, the present research is grounded in embodiment, enaction and participation. Cognition is treated as an experiential interface with the world, not as a detached computational operation. This approach aligns with enactivist paradigms in cognitive science, participatory sense-making, and relational epistemologies, but departs from conventional methodology by rejecting the Cartesian separation of knower and known.

Artistic Research provides the structural framework for this methodology. Instead of collecting data from outside a system, the researcher enters the system and creates situations in which structures, norms and power relations become visible through interaction. Experiments take place not in laboratories but in institutions, workplaces and social fields. Theory and practice are folded into one another; hypotheses are enacted, not simulated. In this context, events themselves become data.

The author's role within this method is not anecdotal but instrumental. Because autistic cognition maintains an unusually tight coupling between perception, affect and action, it produces a high-resolution detection of mismatch, coercion and incoherence in social systems. Where neurotypical cognition tends to filter sensory and relational information in order to maintain normative conformity, autistic cognition sustains detailed feedback from environmental dynamics—generating a continuous stream of differences, tensions and violations that can be analysed as systemic signals. Autistic embodiment is therefore not a bias to be compensated for but a measure of structural strain: where neurotypical workers adapt, the autistic worker registers breakdown.

Across ten years of Artistic Research interventions—including engagement with job centres, social courts, cultural institutions, state agencies and corporate environments—the methodology remained constant: to test the boundary between self-determined work and externally commanded employment by performing autonomous, relational labour within systems that demand compliance. Each institutional confrontation was documented not for its personal implications but for its diagnostic value. Sanctions, psychiatric referrals, surveillance and legal retaliation were treated not as unfortunate episodes but as empirical indicators of the system's operating logic.

In this sense, the research does not study oppression from outside; it maps the mechanism of repression by triggering it. The result is a dataset of reactions that reveal how the labour regime responds when confronted with forms of work that produce social resonance rather than monetisable output.

### **3. Theory and Conceptual Framework — Why capitalism must suppress relational labour**

Conventional labour theory, in its capitalist form, assumes that work is valuable when it produces a deliverable that can be assigned a price through the market. Under this framework, value is defined externally, and labour is recognised only when it generates extractable output. This is not merely an empirical observation but an ontological commitment: the system understands labour as a function of commodification, not as a function of contribution.

From this standpoint, capitalism cannot recognise work that is self-determined, relational, or resonant, because such work does not channel agency into extractable form. Its effects—strengthening community ties, enabling culture, increasing collective complexity, exposing institutional failure, or supporting social resilience—are not outputs that can be owned, priced or controlled. Thus, relational labour is not simply economically inconvenient; it is structurally unprocessable within a market ontology.

The more a form of labour generates social reality through resonance rather than profit, the more aggressively capitalist institutions will suppress it. This mechanism is observable at every scale. Workers who perform relational labour inside institutions (care workers, teachers, social workers, artists, activists, and neurodivergent deep workers) are punished for the same reason: they produce effects that the institution cannot extract, metricise or monopolise. Their labour expands the field of meaning, rather than the field of capital.

The author's field research demonstrates the process in real time: institutional backlash did not follow inactivity, but the moment relational labour began to produce systemic consequences—when corruption was revealed, when bureaucratic malfunction was exposed, when authority was challenged through embodied critique. Sanctions did not defend productivity; they defended the boundary of the market-defined ontology of labour.

Capitalism remains stable only when labour is defined as deliverable, price, compliance, replaceability and simulation. Relational labour destabilises this architecture because it reintroduces the world—bodies, ethics, emotions, ecology, and meaning—into the labour process. For the market system, this is not innovation but contamination.

In the age of automation, this tension becomes extreme. AI can simulate deliverables with increasing speed and decreasing cost. If labour is defined by output alone, then the highest-performing worker is the one who behaves most like a machine—predictable, compliant, optimisable. By contrast, relational labour draws value from difference, autonomy and unpredictability—the very qualities that prevent market extraction.

Thus, the violence experienced by the author is not an exception but a diagnostic expression of the current labour ontology. Capitalism must suppress relational labour not because it fails, but because it succeeds in a domain the market cannot own.

### **4. Labour as Relational Agency — Definition and elaboration**

To resolve the structural conflict described above, labour must be defined independently of market valuation. The present paper proposes the following formulation:

Labour is embodied, self-determined world-interaction that generates social and ecological reality through resonance.

This definition rejects three assumptions that have dominated labour theory since the 19th century: that work exists only when it produces output, that value is established by the market, and that contribution must be externally directed rather than internally initiated.

Under relational agency, the purpose of labour is not to produce deliverables, but to stabilise, enrich and complexify shared reality. Labour is measured not by extraction but by effects—effects on relationships, coherence, knowledge, culture, ecology, and collective resilience.

Relational labour therefore has five distinguishing characteristics: embodiment (it is performed through lived presence rather than pure role performance), self-direction (its motivation originates in internal resonance rather than external control), resonance (it creates feedback loops between self and world that expand shared meaning), complexification (it increases the differentiation and interconnectedness of the social fabric), and non-substitutability (it cannot be replicated without the worker's lived specificity).

This model sharply contradicts the market ontology of work. Under commodified labour, bodies must be exchangeable, agency must be transferable, and outcomes must be replicable. Under relational labour, the body is a site of knowledge, the individual is not replaceable, and outcomes are irreducibly situated.

This distinction explains why relational labour cannot be simulated and why attempts at simulation produce counterfeits rather than equivalents. Corporate care protocols, political messaging, algorithmic culture generation and AI-produced community engagement attempt to replace resonance with scripted approximation. These simulations may produce the appearance of relationality, but they do not generate participatory meaning. They do not perform care; they perform the representation of care.

## **5. Evidence from field research — Systemic retaliation against relational labour**

The empirical material analysed in this paper is not presented as autobiography but as a dataset generated through long-term embodied field research. Over a period of ten years, the author performed self-determined, relational labour within institutions that demand externally directed, commodified labour: job centres, cultural funding bodies, state agencies, corporate environments and social courts. The purpose of these interventions was to examine whether self-directed work that produces social contribution without monetisable output can be processed within capitalist labour ontology.

The findings were highly consistent across institutions: as long as the author appeared passive, he was administratively tolerated; when self-determined labour began to produce social impact, interventions occurred; and the interventions escalated in proportion to the impact of the labour.

These interventions took the form of threats of sanctions and benefit cuts, forced psychiatric referrals and pathologising assessments, attempts to revoke or restrict social rights, defamation of labour as non-work or unemployability, legal retaliation and procedural obstruction, and various forms of surveillance and bureaucratic harassment.

Retaliation did not follow inactivity, unemployment or refusal to work. It followed the success of self-determined labour—for example when investigative artistic work exposed misconduct within a public institution, when activist work mobilised community networks and solidarity, when cultural labour challenged dominant narratives about poverty, work and value, or when research undermined institutional authority by revealing structural contradictions.

In each case, the trigger was not lack of output but production of meaning. This confirms the mechanism proposed in the theory section: relational labour is punished precisely when it generates effects that capitalism cannot extract or own.

The dataset shows recurring institutional strategies: delegitimisation (that is not work), diagnostic pathologisation (there must be something wrong with you), economic coercion (sanctions and loss

of basic income), and legal repression (litigation and removal of rights). These are not aberrations but the systemic immune response of a labour regime built on market extraction.

The author's embodied responses—sensory overload, physical stress, hyperfocus, shutdown and collapse during institutional pressure—are therefore not signs of personal dysfunction but indications of system strain. Autistic embodiment reacted precisely where systems demanded simulation rather than resonance. The body became an instrument of detection—a sensor for institutional incoherence.

## **6. The automation trap — Why AI escalates the crisis of labour**

Public discourse assumes that AI and automation threaten employment because machines will replace workers. This framing presupposes that labour is defined by output. If work is the production of deliverables, and AI can produce deliverables faster and cheaper, then the logic is simple: the worker loses.

However, if labour is understood as relational agency, this narrative breaks down. Machines do not threaten labour as such; they threaten the capitalist ontology of labour, which recognises only that which can be priced and extracted. AI therefore does not destabilise work—it destabilises the illusion that labour and output are identical.

This creates the automation trap: the more AI can simulate deliverables, the more labour will be valued only when it can be simulated, and the more workers will be forced to behave like machines. In this trap, the highest-performing worker is not the most intelligent, creative or socially responsive one, but the one who best imitates algorithmic optimisation: predictable, compliant, substitutable, non-relational.

Relational labour—the work of making worlds rather than products—therefore becomes the antithesis of this model. Automation does not eliminate relational work; it criminalises it. Workers who generate contribution through resonance rather than output are treated as anomalies that must be suppressed to preserve the legitimacy of the machine-aligned labour model.

As the author's field research shows, when self-determined labour produced cultural and social consequences that AI could not simulate—exposing institutional failure, enabling social cohesion and generating non-market value—institutions reacted with force. The backlash did not defend productivity; it defended the fiction that value equals monetisable output. From the system's point of view, the problem was not that the work failed but that it succeeded outside the extraction circuit.

AI makes capitalism more efficient at suppressing the forms of labour it cannot own. The crisis of labour is therefore not technological but ontological. Automation does not liberate humans from work; it intensifies pressure to abandon relational agency and accept machine-simulation as the norm. In such a regime, the workers who sustain democracy, complexity and care become unemployable by definition—not because they cannot work, but because they cannot simulate work.

## **7. Predictions and falsifiability — What would prove this theory wrong**

A scientific theory must generate predictions that can, in principle, be disproven. If labour as relational agency is a valid model, then it should produce patterns that are observable, quantifiable and comparable across contexts. Conversely, if these predictions fail, the theory should be revised or rejected.

Prediction 1: the higher the social or ecological contribution of a form of labour, the lower its monetary reward under capitalist labour ontology. This should apply across teaching, care work, cultural production, research, social activism, restorative justice, community building, disability support and open-source development.

Prediction 2: institutional backlash triggers not when relational labour is absent, but when relational labour begins to produce meaningful systemic effects. The system reacts when relational work works, not when it fails.

Prediction 3: the more a form of labour resists simulation by AI or procedural optimisation, the higher the probability of institutional repression, pathologisation or economic coercion. Non-simulable labour correlates with higher precarity.

Prediction 4: the workers who are most valuable for long-term social resilience will be the least employable under market logic.

Prediction 5: societies or institutions that enable self-determined relational labour will demonstrate greater resilience, innovation and social cohesion than those that suppress it, measurable through burnout rates, crisis tolerance, democratic robustness and collective problem-solving capacity.

The theory would be disproven if capitalist labour markets began to monetarily reward work in proportion to its social or ecological contribution, if relational labour that generates systemic benefit were met with institutional support rather than coercion, if workers whose labour cannot be simulated by AI became economically privileged rather than marginalised, or if suppression of relational labour increased social resilience, innovation or democratic stability.

The theory would be strengthened if patterns reported in the field research reappear in other countries, in both neoliberal and state-capitalist systems, across unrelated institutions, and if they increase in severity with the rise of automation.

## **8. Conclusion — A society that rewards simulation over resonance destroys its own intelligence**

If labour is defined as the generation of monetisable output, then work that produces meaning, cohesion and complexity becomes unintelligible to the economic system. Under this regime, care, culture, research, relational agency and embodied autonomy are not merely undervalued; they are treated as threats because they generate forms of value that the market cannot extract, price or control.

Automation intensifies this contradiction by making output cheap and abundant. The more machines simulate productivity, the more humans are required to behave as machines in order to be considered working. In such a system, the highest reward goes not to the most socially valuable worker but to the most replaceable, predictable and compliant one. The labour regime does not evolve; it regresses toward machinic behaviour.

Relational labour—the work of making worlds rather than products—therefore becomes not simply unprofitable but politically subversive. It restores agency to embodied life rather than to capital. It strengthens communities rather than markets. It exposes institutional failure rather than reproducing it. For this reason, the dataset analysed in this paper shows consistent institutional retaliation: systems built on output will react violently when confronted by labour that generates resonance.

A society that rewards simulation over resonance accumulates efficiency at the cost of reality contact. It becomes incapable of correction, empathy, innovation and democratic reflexivity. It optimises its own blindness. In this configuration, the collapse of social resilience is not a possibility but an inevitability.

Recognising labour as relational agency does not solve this crisis; it merely names it. To prevent systemic self-destruction, societies must create structural conditions under which self-determined, embodied work can operate without coercion. This requires forms of economic infrastructure that decouple survival from wage compliance. In this context, a Universal Care Income is not a humanitarian gesture but an epistemic necessity: an investment in the forms of labour that generate the world rather than simulate it.

Labour is not the production of output. Labour is the production of reality. A society that forgets this will cease to be able to sustain one.

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