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Work as World-Binding - Relational Agency Beyond Function

Timothy Speed

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Abstract

The present volume brings together three contributions that pursue a shared theoretical question: what is work under conditions in which technical systems are increasingly able to simulate human performance, and what constitutes the specifically human form of work that structurally resists such simulation. The starting point is the observation that modern societies predominantly define work through output, employment status, or market value. This definition, however, enters into crisis once artificial intelligence becomes capable of formally reproducing ever larger portions of this output.

Against this background, the contributions in this volume develop an ontological redefinition of work. Work is not understood primarily as the production of goods or services, but as a form of embodied, self-determined interaction with the world through which social and ecological reality is stabilized. Central to this perspective is the concept of relational agency: work appears as a practice in which action, responsibility, and world-reference are inseparably intertwined, enabling the emergence of new forms of meaning, knowledge, and social order.

From this standpoint, artificial intelligence is not interpreted as a competitor to human labour in the conventional labour-market sense, but as a structural test case. AI makes visible which aspects of human activity are functionally reproducible and which are not. While many forms of output, decision-making, or innovation can be algorithmically simulated, the form of work that arises from situational responsibility, irreversible temporality, and concrete world-binding remains in principle non-delegable. In this context, particular attention is given to the concept of *Eigenzeit*, which designates the non-externalizable temporal dimension of human action in which decisions, responsibility, and consequences become irreversibly effective.

The volume connects this ontological analysis with an examination of the social conflicts that arise from it. If work is not primarily output production but reality-maintenance and world-binding, those forms of labour that frequently remain invisible within contemporary labour regimes come into focus: artistic practice, care work, activism, critical research, and other forms of self-determined, relational activity. At the same time, these forms of work often encounter institutional resistance, delegitimization, or economic pressure, since they can only partially be integrated into market-based or algorithmically governed models of labour.

The contributions therefore argue that the current transformation of work cannot be understood solely as an economic or technological issue. It concerns the more fundamental question of how societies organize their relationship to reality. If work is defined primarily through simulation, metrics, and interchangeable functions, there is a growing risk that social systems lose their capacity to recognize and correct real problems. In this sense, self-determined

relational work appears not as a marginal phenomenon, but as a central condition for societal learning, democratic reflexivity, and the long-term stability of complex systems.

Keywords: work ontology, relational agency, work-integrated relational agency, world-binding, ontology of labour, concept of work, philosophy of work, autonomous labour, self-determined work, non-market work, relational labour, reality-maintaining labour, simulation labour, labour and artificial intelligence, AI and work, automation and labour, post-work theory, future of work, labour and simulation, Eigenzeit, world-time, irreversible action, world-formation, emergence economy, emergence and work, value and labour, non-delegable action, embodied cognition, enactive cognition, neurodivergent epistemology, autistic cognition, artistic research, structural violence against non-market work, welfare state and labour regimes, algorithmic governance, labour and capitalism, capitalism and care work, universal care income

Contents

Introduction

This volume forms part of Section V – Work and Emergence Economy within the Operatoric Research Corpus.

The question of what work is belongs to the fundamental questions of modern societies. Yet in most economic and political debates it is answered only implicitly. Work usually appears as an activity that takes place within organizations, produces measurable output, and is evaluated through markets or institutional structures. Employment, productivity, and income form the central categories through which work is described and regulated.

This conceptual framework, however, is increasingly coming under pressure. With the rapid development of artificial intelligence and automated systems, it is becoming evident that a

considerable part of what has previously been regarded as work can be formally reproduced. Texts, images, analyses, forecasts, and administrative decisions can now be generated by technical systems without the involvement of a human actor in the traditional sense. In many domains the question is therefore no longer only how work should be organized, but whether the prevailing understanding of work remains viable at all.

The contributions in this volume begin precisely at this point. They proceed from the assumption that the current crisis of work is not primarily the result of technological substitution, but of a deeper conceptual ambiguity. Modern societies have largely equated work with the production of output. Once technical systems become capable of simulating or reproducing this output, however, this definition loses its stability. Activities that previously appeared as indispensable forms of human labour then reveal themselves as functionally replaceable.

Against this background, the three contributions collected here develop an alternative perspective. Work is not understood as the production of output, but as a form of world-binding. It designates the practice in which human action becomes irreversibly connected with real processes and thereby stabilizes social, cultural, or ecological reality. Work in this sense does not appear as an interchangeable activity within a production system, but as a form of embodied interaction in which action, responsibility, and relation to the world coincide.

This perspective also shifts the role of artificial intelligence within the analysis. AI is not treated primarily as an economic competitor to human labour, but as an analytical boundary case. Precisely because AI can generate many forms of output, it becomes visible which dimensions of human activity are functionally reproducible and which remain structurally bound to human action. In particular, those forms of work that arise from situational responsibility, concrete experience, and non-delegable temporality cannot be fully formalized or simulated.

In this context, a category comes into focus that has rarely been addressed in labour sociology and economic theory: the non-externalizable temporality of human action. In several of the following contributions this dimension is described with the concept of *Eigenzeit*. The term refers to that temporal dimension of action in which decisions, risks, and consequences become real and irreversible, and which therefore cannot be fully transferred into processes, rules, or models.

The contributions in this volume pursue these questions from different angles. The first paper develops an ontological redefinition of work as relational agency and analyses why capitalist value regimes structurally tend to marginalize or delegitimize such forms of labour. The second paper examines artificial intelligence as a structural boundary case and shows why work grounded in *Eigenzeit* and non-delegable world-binding cannot in principle be replaced by functional simulation. The third paper connects these theoretical considerations with empirical observations drawn from long-term artistic and social research and analyses the institutional conflicts that arise when self-determined work is practiced within existing labour regimes.

Taken together, the three contributions open a perspective in which work no longer appears primarily as an economic category, but as a fundamental practice through which societies relate to reality. The transformation of work in the age of artificial intelligence therefore represents not only a labour-market challenge. It touches the more fundamental question of how societies

can maintain their capacity to perceive reality, respond to it, and generate new forms of collective order.

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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Work After Simulation
Work-Integrated Relational Agency as a Condition of World-Binding in the Age of AI

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Abstract

This paper clarifies the concept of self-determined work as a *structurally necessary condition of reality-binding* in the context of advanced artificial intelligence. Building on the concept of work-integrated relational agency, which was developed in earlier works as a critique of functionalized labor, it is shown that self-determination was never meant as a normative ideal or ethical preference, but as a prerequisite for work to retain its relation to reality and its capacity for innovation.

The central thesis is that work is not to be understood as activity, task fulfillment, or economic function, but as a form of irreversible, world-binding action in which human Eigenzeit is not delegable. Artificial intelligence does not function here as the cause of the problem, but as a structural test case that makes visible which aspects of work can be functionally replaced—and which, in principle, cannot. While AI can formally simulate decisions, interactions, and innovation processes, it is structurally incapable of performing work-integrated relational agency, since it lacks Eigenzeit, responsibility-binding, and an irreversible relation to the world.

The paper introduces the concept of Eigenzeit as a category previously missing from the debate on work and shows that self-determined work is necessary because only it can effectively bind Eigenzeit to the world. By contrast, heteronomous work reproduces functioning processes but loses its enactment of reality and increasingly generates simulation instead of innovation. The paper thus provides an ontological clarification of the concept of work under conditions of artificial simulation, without resorting to moral, psychological, or labor-market-based argumentations. Against this background, self-determined work is identified as an ontological stability condition of human world-capability in the age of AI—not as an option, but as a structural necessity.

A more in-depth paper on the methodology can be found here:

Speed, T. (2025). Recursive Knowledge Instead of Additive Knowledge Accumulation - On the Epistemic Structure of Embodied, Neurodivergent Research (Version 1). Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18054997

A paper providing an overview of the work can be found here:

Speed, T. (2026). Introduction to an Operator-Based Research Program - World, Work, Value, Consciousness – Structure and Boundary Questions Beyond Representational Models (Corpus

Overview / Survey Paper / Meta Paper) (Version 1). Zenodo.
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1. Self-Determined Work as a Structural Necessity – A Clarification

The concept of self-determined work was not introduced in earlier works as a normative ideal, an ethical demand, or an individual preference, but as a structurally necessary condition of reality-reference and innovation. It was already argued there that under conditions of permanent external control, work loses its relation to the world and increasingly shifts toward the reproduction of its own functional logics. This diagnosis did not target subjective experiences of alienation, but a systemic shift from action to simulation.

In this context, self-determined work does not denote autonomy in the liberal sense, but the minimal condition under which work is more than rule-conforming execution. Work is always human action in the world and therefore remains bound to real enactments even under conditions of strict external control. The decisive difference, however, lies in how this binding comes about.

Where action is fully determined by external targets, metrics, or institutional temporal regimes, human activity is indeed carried out in reality, but its world-carrying dimension is systematically depleted. This diagnosis is not to be understood as alienation in the classical sense—that is, not primarily as a loss of subjective identification or meaningfulness. What is decisive instead is a structural shift in the relation between action and world.

Functional efficiency emerges, but no new world-relation, since action does not arise from its own situational engagement with reality, but is pre-formalized, decomposed, and recursively fed back. Under these conditions, work remains within closed system rationalities: it reproduces existing structures instead of producing real difference. People continue to act in reality, yet their action is no longer the site at which the world is newly bound or transformed. The classical worker is thereby treated as interchangeable or institutionally configured such that interchangeability becomes a structural prerequisite.

Innovation is correspondingly reduced to variation within predefined parameters. New solutions, products, or processes are indeed generated, yet this novelty remains formal, as it does not produce an independent relation to the world. The erosion of world-reference does not occur because people no longer act in reality, but because their action loses its binding, responsible, and temporally irreversible relation to reality.

This thesis was structurally intended from the outset. It referred neither exclusively to individual freedom nor to moral justice, but to the condition under which work can be understood as reality-related action at all. Heteronomous work was not criticized because it is subjectively burdensome, but because it systematically tends to decouple action from its world-carrying consequences. In this sense, self-determination was already early identified as a necessary prerequisite for work not to collapse into mere functional execution.

What nevertheless remained implicit in these early formulations was the operative structure through which this necessity becomes effective. The argument referred to loss of experience, stagnation of innovation, and the increasing dominance of bureaucratic and technical control

logics, without explicitly naming the ontological dimension of this loss. The question of why external control is not only socially problematic but structurally reality-dissolving thus remained open.

This gap can now be specified precisely. The structural necessity of self-determined work does not primarily rest on subjective autonomy, but on a specific form of action in which time, responsibility, and world-reference are inseparably intertwined. This form is referred to in what follows as work-integrated relational agency. Only through this conceptual clarification does it become evident why self-determination is not an optional quality of work, but the condition under which work can perform world-binding at all.

2. Work-Integrated Relational Agency: Structure Instead of Morality

In order to grasp the structural necessity of self-determined work with precision, a conceptual shift is required. The decisive point does not lie in questions of individual autonomy, motivation, or subjective attribution of meaning, but in the form of action itself. This form is referred to in what follows as work-integrated relational agency.

Work-integrated relational agency does not mean social interaction, communicative competence, or an empathetic attitude. The term "relation" does not designate a relationship between persons, but the ontological coupling of action and world. Work, in this sense, is the practice in which human action not only brings about effects in the world, but derives its significance from its irreversible integration into real world processes. Action, responsibility, and world-reference are not separable in this context.

Decisive is the fact that this relation is not established retrospectively. It does not arise through evaluation, reflection, or recognition, but is integrated into the enactment of work itself. Work-integrated relational agency is present where action does not derive its orientation from predefined goal structures, metrics, or control models, but from the concrete, situational engagement with the reality in which it takes place. The world does not function here as a mere environment or resource, but as a resistant point of reference that co-shapes action.

In this respect, work-integrated relational agency differs fundamentally from functionalized work. In functional forms of work, the relation to the world remains external: the world is treated as an input or output space, while the actual action is organized along abstract prescriptions. Action there is indeed real, but its relation to the world is replaceable. It is precisely this replaceability that marks the structural difference. Where action is fully substitutable, it is no longer the bearer of an autonomous world-relation.

By contrast, work-integrated relational agency is not delegable without losing its structure. It can neither be fully formalized nor fully externalized, because its significance does not lie in the result, but in the enactment of the relation itself. Action here is not a means to an end, but the site at which reality is concretely bound, transformed, or brought forth. This binding is not reproducible, as it is tied to the temporal, responsible, and situational singularity of action.

Against this background, it becomes clear why self-determination does not constitute an additional quality of work, but the condition under which work-integrated relational agency is possible at all. Where action is fully externally timed and controlled, relation to the world can

only be simulated. Work does not lose its reality there, but it does lose its capacity to carry the world.

3. Artificial Intelligence as a Negative Foil: Function Without Relation

In the present context, artificial intelligence does not function as the cause of the described shifts, but as a structural negative foil against which the ontological limits of work can be determined with precision. AI makes visible which aspects of human action are functionally replaceable—and which are not. It is precisely in this way that the specific contribution of work-integrated relational agency becomes clear.

AI systems are capable of executing tasks, simulating decisions, recognizing patterns, and optimizing complex processes. They can also generate forms of innovation, for example through the production of new combinations, solutions, or proposals. In all these cases, however, AI operates exclusively within formally defined spaces of possibility. Its operations are fully derivable from models, training data, and optimization goals. The relation to the world remains external.

This externality is not a technical deficiency, but a structural property. AI does not stand in its own irreversible relation to the world, but processes world-relations in abstracted form. It does not act *in* the world, but operates *over representations* of the world. Responsibility, risk, and temporal singularity are not inherent to it, but—if at all—are attributed to it retrospectively. As a result, AI lacks precisely that integrated binding of action and world that characterizes work-integrated relational agency.

Especially in comparison with AI, it becomes evident that functional performance and world-carrying action are not identical. AI can calculate and optimize the consequences of actions without itself being bound to those consequences. It can simulate decisions without standing behind them. In this sense, AI is not capable of action, but of function. Its effectiveness is based on interchangeability and repeatability, not on situational singularity.

This difference has immediate consequences for the concept of work. Wherever human work is organized in such a way that it exhibits the same structural properties as AI—complete formalizability, replaceability, and feedback to external target metrics—it does not lose its relation to the world factually, but structurally. Human action then itself becomes functional execution that is, in principle, substitutable by AI. Not because humans act worse, but because the structure of their action has been emptied.

AI thus does not mark the future of human work, but its limit. It shows that work ends where relational agency is replaced by function. Conversely, it makes visible that those forms of work that are not fully automatable do not remain resistant because they are more complex or emotional, but because they rest on a non-delegable relation between action and world. Work-integrated relational agency thus appears not as a technological residue, but as a structural counter-pole to simulation.

3.1 Eigenzeit Between Work and World-Time

The concept of Eigenzeit used in this paper is to be understood neither in a time-sociological nor in a psychological sense and, in particular, does not denote a natural duration, an individual rhythm, or an appropriate pacing of human processes. Concepts of Eigenzeit that refer to phases of growth, learning cycles, regeneration, or subjective experiences of time address important phenomena, but they operate on a different level of description.

The concept of Eigenzeit employed here is strictly bound to the ontological determination of time as World-Time, as developed in *The End of World-Time*. There, time is not understood as a neutral medium, a parameter, or a continuous background, but as a trace of irreversible loss of possibility that arises exclusively in connection with stabilized world formations. Where no possibility is excluded, time does not exist in this sense; where possibility is irreversibly lost, time emerges as direction, asymmetry, and non-reversibility.

Within this framework, Eigenzeit does not designate a form of time independent of World-Time, but the situated, non-delegable instantiation of World-Time in human action. It is the manner in which World-Time becomes effective in the enactment of work. Eigenzeit is therefore neither subjectively nor biologically primary, but ontologically secondary: it exists only where human action performs real world-binding and, in doing so, irreversibly excludes possibility.

In this sense, Eigenzeit is not the time that a human being needs, but the time that comes into being in action when decision, responsibility, and consequence cannot be externalized. Eigenzeit is not a matter of speed, but of irreversibility. It is not violated when processes are accelerated, but when action is so pre-structured, functionally decomposed, or simulated that no autonomous exclusion of possibility takes place.

This determination distinguishes the concept of Eigenzeit used here from both time-sociological theories of deceleration and psychological models of subjective time. While these aim at protecting human processes from overload, Eigenzeit in the ontological sense concerns the condition of world-binding itself. Where Eigenzeit can no longer become effective in action, what emerges is not merely stress or loss of meaning, but a structural shift from action to simulation.

Against this background, work-integrated relational agency is the practice in which Eigenzeit is realized in the strict sense: as an irreversible enactment within World-Time. Self-determination is not an expression of individual freedom here, but the condition under which this instantiation of World-Time in action is not externalized or neutralized.

4. Eigenzeit as the Carrier of Work-Integrated Relational Agency

The preceding analysis has shown that work-integrated relational agency is characterized by a non-delegable coupling of action and world. In order to understand this coupling structurally, a category is required that has so far been largely absent from the debate on work: Eigenzeit. Without it, it remains unclear why certain forms of work lose their world-carrying function even though they continue to be carried out in reality.

Eigenzeit denotes the temporal dimension of human action in which emergence, responsibility, and world-reference are inseparably intertwined. It is not identical with measurable working time, process time, or efficiency time, but describes that irreversible temporality in which action becomes effective as a singular enactment. Eigenzeit is neither exchangeable, nor accelerable, nor externalizable without losing its structure.

Work-integrated relational agency is possible only because human action carries Eigenzeit. Binding to the world does not arise from the result of work alone, but from the temporally irreversible enactment in which decisions are made, risks are taken, and responsibility is assumed. This temporal singularity is not a subjective experience, but a structural condition of world-binding. Action becomes world-carrying where it cannot be fully anticipated, decomposed, or recursively fed back.

Heteronomous work intervenes precisely at this point. By organizing action along external temporal regimes, target specifications, and evaluation mechanisms, Eigenzeit is not abolished, but functionalized. It is fragmented, standardized, and converted into process time. Action remains real, but loses its temporal coherence. Responsibility is displaced, decisions are pre-structured, and the enactment of work becomes increasingly reversible and interchangeable.

This shift has far-reaching consequences. Where Eigenzeit is no longer an integral component of action, relation to the world can only be simulated. Work then produces functioning processes, but no irreversible world-binding. The temporal structure of action increasingly resembles that of AI systems: efficient, reproducible, optimizable—but without its own time. In this sense, it is not only work that is automated, but human action itself that is temporally emptied.

The introduction of the concept of Eigenzeit makes it possible to precisely identify the structural necessity of self-determined work. Self-determination is necessary because only it protects the temporal enactment of action from complete externalization. It is not an expression of individual freedom, but the condition under which Eigenzeit can remain effective in action. Without self-determination, work is not only alienated, but temporally destroyed.

This makes clear why work-integrated relational agency cannot be replaced by functional equivalents. It rests on a temporality that is neither simulable nor delegable. Eigenzeit is the carrier of that world-binding which constitutes work in the strong sense—and at the same time the point at which the boundary between human action and artificial function runs.

5. Innovation After Simulation: World-Shift Instead of Recombination

The question of innovation constitutes a central test case for the concept of work developed here. In earlier works, it was already argued that innovation systematically erodes under conditions of comprehensive external control. With the analysis of AI and Eigenzeit, it is now possible to determine precisely why this erosion is not accidental, but structural.

In functionalized work contexts, innovation is generally understood as the production of novelty: new products, new processes, new solutions. This form of novelty, however, is fully compatible with formal optimization. It arises through the recombination of existing elements

within predefined spaces of possibility. AI systems are highly innovative in precisely this sense. They generate variation, surprise, and efficiency gains without leaving their own structure.

By contrast, innovation in the sense used here does not merely denote novelty, but world-shift. Innovation occurs where action produces a real difference that cannot be fully derived from existing parameters. Such a difference is not recognizable solely in the result, but in the altered relation between action and world that it brings about. Innovation, in this sense, is not an output, but an event of world-binding.

Work-integrated relational agency is the condition of this form of innovation. Because it carries Eigenzeit, it cannot be fully pre-structured. Decisions are not merely calculated, but made; risks are not merely assessed, but taken; consequences are not merely simulated, but borne in reality. It is precisely this temporal and responsible embedding that enables those deviations which surpass existing structures instead of merely varying them.

Where work is functionalized, innovation necessarily becomes formal. New solutions also emerge there, yet they remain within the logic of the system that produces them. The world is not shifted, but reproduced more efficiently. In this sense, the frequently diagnosed loss of innovation in modern work organizations is not a lack of creativity or motivation, but the result of a temporally and structurally depleted form of action.

AI intensifies this dynamic by realizing recombination at previously unattainable speeds and levels of complexity. This makes visible that innovation understood as the production of novelty is fully automatable. What does not remain automatable is that form of innovation bound to Eigenzeit and responsibility. This form can neither be accelerated nor scaled without losing its structure.

Innovation after simulation is therefore not less important, but qualitatively differently determined. It does not arise from optimization, but from the non-identity of action and system. Work-integrated relational agency is the site at which this non-identity remains effective. It does not protect innovation from technology, but from its reduction to formal novelty. In a working world shaped by AI, innovation will therefore not emerge where processes are perfected, but where human action retains its world-carrying temporality.

6. Self-Determination Reconsidered: A Protective Form of Work-Integrated Relational Agency

Against the background of the preceding analysis, the concept of self-determination can be precisely reclassified. Self-determination here denotes neither individual freedom in the liberal sense nor subjective self-realization. Rather, it is the structural protective form under which work-integrated relational agency can remain possible at all.

Self-determination is necessary because work-integrated relational agency cannot take place under conditions of complete external timing and control. Where action is fully pre-structured by external targets, evaluation mechanisms, or algorithmic control, Eigenzeit is systematically interrupted. Decisions are anticipated, responsibility is fragmented, and the enactment of work loses its temporal coherence. In such constellations, human action remains real, but it loses the form in which it can carry the world.

Self-determination does not protect the subject from imposition, but the structure of action from externalization. It ensures that orientation, decision, and responsibility remain anchored in the enactment of work itself, rather than being retrospectively attributed or functionally replaced. In this sense, self-determination is not an additional quality of work, but the condition under which work does not collapse into mere functional execution.

It is precisely in the context of AI that this protective function becomes visible. AI systems necessarily operate without Eigenzeit and without integrated responsibility. When human work is organized according to the same logic, the structural difference between human action and artificial function disappears. Self-determination therefore does not mark a residual domain of human freedom, but the boundary at which work preserves its ontological difference.

This also shifts the political and social significance of the concept of work. Self-determination is no longer primarily a question of individual rights or job satisfaction, but a stability condition of societal world-capability. Where it is systematically undermined, work loses its binding function—with consequences that cannot be reduced to productivity or employment.

7. Conclusion: Work as World-Carrier After Simulation

The analysis has shown that the concept of work must be redefined in the context of advanced AI. Work can no longer be understood as the mere execution of tasks, as an economic function, or as a replaceable activity. What is decisive is not whether people work, but how their action is structured.

With the concept of work-integrated relational agency, it becomes possible to precisely identify what constitutes work in the strong sense: a non-delegable, temporally irreversible relation between action and world, carried by Eigenzeit and responsibility. In this context, self-determined work is neither an option nor an ideal, but the condition under which this relation can become effective at all.

Artificial intelligence renders this structure visible by showing which forms of work are functionally replaceable—and which are not. The further AI intervenes in work processes, the clearer it becomes that efficiency, novelty, and optimization are not sufficient criteria for world-binding. Work that exhausts itself entirely in formal processes does not lose its reality, but it does lose its capacity to carry reality.

A society that organizes work exclusively in functional terms thereby externalizes its own world-capability. It produces processes, decisions, and innovations without maintaining the temporal and responsible binding from which social orientation emerges. Work after simulation is therefore not less necessary than before, but fundamentally differently determined.

In this sense, work-integrated relational agency does not mark a nostalgic return to pre-modern forms of work, but the minimal condition under which human action, in the age of artificial function, does not itself become simulation. Work thus remains the central site at which the world is not merely administered, but brought forth and carried.

Canonical Conceptual Definitions / These definitions are normative within the scope of this work.

Eigenzeit denotes the non-delegable instantiation of World-Time in human action, in which decision, responsibility, and irreversible world-binding are inseparably intertwined.

Work-integrated relational agency is that form of work in which Eigenzeit remains effective.

Self-determined work designates the structural condition under which this form of work is possible.

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This work operates operatorically rather than discursively; its claims are derived from internal structural invariance rather than from literature synthesis.

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Radical Worker: Autonomous Labour as Reality-Maintaining Practice

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Abstract

This paper develops the theoretical foundations of Radical Worker (first published 2019, new edition 2025), arguing that self-determined work is not merely a political right but a structural requirement for preventing societies from collapsing into simulation. Autonomous labour is defined here as work that arises from internal resonance rather than external command, organised around long-term responsibility to reality rather than short-term deliverables.

Building on the books *Speeds Arbeit / Speed's Work* and *Radical Worker*, the paper distinguishes three dimensions of labour: output-production, reality-maintenance, and simulation. It argues that only self-determined work can perform reality-maintaining labour in complex societies, because only autonomous workers have the structural freedom to correct institutions, preserve diversity, and generate new forms of meaning that are not pre-formatted by market or algorithmic expectations.

By contrast, wage labour under contemporary capitalism is increasingly organised as simulation-management: the production and maintenance of appearances that satisfy metrics, dashboards and bureaucratic expectations without necessarily improving social or ecological reality. Automation and AI intensify this tendency by rewarding behaviours that imitate machine logic and punishing forms of work that cannot be simulated.

Through a combination of theoretical analysis and long-term field research, the paper shows that self-determined workers are structurally targeted by labour markets, welfare bureaucracies and algorithmic governance precisely when their work increases reality-contact. The conclusion is that autonomous labour is not a luxury, hobby, or exception, but civilizational infrastructure. Societies that suppress self-determined work will progressively lose the capacity for correction, democratic reflexivity and ecological survival.

1. Introduction — Why Radical Worker is a distinct field

Radical Worker is written from the position of a long-term unemployed, neurodivergent artist and researcher who has refused to subordinate his work to wage labour while simultaneously working continuously, extensively and publicly. This position is not merely biographical. It is a methodological and theoretical vantage point from which the labour regime of contemporary capitalism becomes legible in a different way.

In Speeds Arbeit / Speed's Work, labour was reconceptualised as relational agency: embodied interaction that generates social and ecological reality through resonance rather than through monetisable output. That work mapped the ontology of labour and described in detail how

capitalist institutions punish relational work because it destabilises the value regime that supports profit extraction.

Radical Worker takes the next step. It does not ask primarily what labour is, but who is allowed to perform it and on what terms. Its central claim is that self-determined work is the only form of labour capable of maintaining reality in complex societies. When labour is reduced to externally commanded output, societies drift into simulation: they maintain appearances of productivity while losing contact with the conditions that make life possible.

The present paper extracts and systematises the theoretical core of Radical Worker and distinguishes it clearly from Labour as Relational Agency. Where the latter focuses on the ontology of labour under capitalism, Radical Worker focuses on autonomy as a structural dimension of work.

Autonomy here does not mean individual lifestyle choice. It means the ability of workers to set their own objects, rhythms and forms in resonance with reality, even when this contradicts institutional command or market demand.

The core question posed in this paper is therefore not whether self-determined work is desirable, fair or personally fulfilling, but whether societies can survive without it. The answer developed in the following sections is negative. Without autonomous labour, complex societies lose their capacity for self-correction and gradually replace reality with internally consistent but externally destructive simulations.

2. Conceptual foundations — Two books, two frames

The argument of Radical Worker is grounded in two book-length works that operate at different levels of abstraction but are structurally linked. *Speeds Arbeit* (German) and *Speed's Work* (English) (ISBN 3819249281 and 3819277358) develop a general theory of labour as relational agency. They describe work as a multi-layered interaction between bodies, environments and structures in which resonance and difference, not output, are the primary dimensions of value. This framework establishes why non-market work such as care, activism and artistic research are not peripheral but central to the maintenance of social reality.

Radical Worker: Vom Recht auf selbstbestimmte Arbeit and *Radical Worker: The Fight for Self-Determined Work* (ISBN 3839104238 and 381926826X) focus on the political, legal and institutional conditions of autonomous labour. They analyse how welfare systems, job centres, cultural funding regimes and corporate structures systematically prevent self-determined work from being recognised as labour, even when it demonstrably generates social value.

Together, these two book pairs form a dual frame. Speeds Arbeit / Speed's Work provides the ontological account: what labour is when it is not reduced to wage output. Radical Worker provides the political-material account: what happens to workers who insist on performing such labour outside wage formats and how institutions respond when confronted with autonomous work that exposes their contradictions.

The present paper sits at the intersection of these two works. It takes the relational concept of labour from *Speeds Arbeit* and combines it with the empirical and strategic insights of *Radical Worker*. The outcome is a theory of autonomous labour as reality-maintaining practice, and an analysis of why such work is not only systematically repressed but structurally indispensable for any society that wishes not to collapse into its own simulations.

3. The core thesis — Autonomous labour generates reality

To understand autonomous labour as reality-maintaining practice, it is necessary to distinguish three kinds of work that often appear mixed in everyday life but are analytically separable: output labour, reality labour and simulation labour.

Output labour is work that is defined by measurable deliverables. Its success criteria are externalised as numbers, products or transactions. It is the dominant form of labour in capitalist economies, where wages are justified by a quantifiable outcome that can be sold or counted.

Reality labour is work that maintains or deepens contact between a society and the conditions of its own existence. It includes investigative journalism, critical research, radical art, community organising, long-term care, ecological repair, and many forms of embodied, relational practice that create feedback between systems and the worlds they inhabit. Reality labour is often slow, conflictual and resistant to metricisation because its effects are distributed over time and space.

Simulation labour is work that maintains the appearance of functioning systems without necessarily engaging their reality. It includes the production of reports no one reads, metrics that proxy but do not track real outcomes, public relations campaigns, performative diversity measures, and bureaucratic routines whose primary function is to reproduce institutional legitimacy. Simulation labour is not automatically malicious. It often arises when institutions lose the ability or willingness to measure their own impact and instead optimise for indicators that can be easily produced.

The central thesis of Radical Worker is that only self-determined work can systematically perform reality labour. Output labour, when fully captured by external command, tends to either ignore reality (as long as targets are met) or treat it as noise. Simulation labour actively replaces reality with indicators and narratives. Autonomous labour, by contrast, is structurally oriented toward reality because its criterion of success is not external validation but internal coherence between experience, world and action.

Self-determined workers decide what matters based on resonance with reality: a felt mismatch between institutional narratives and lived conditions, an ethical discomfort with harm that is being normalised, or an intellectual tension between official models and observed behaviour. They then organise their work around resolving or illuminating this mismatch, even when doing so conflicts with the expectations of employers, funders or bureaucracies. In doing so, they generate feedback that institutions cannot create for themselves without sacrificing their own legitimacy.

If reality labour is structurally tied to autonomy, then suppressing self-determined work does not simply harm individual freedom. It removes a society's capacity to generate reality-contact. That is the core claim of this paper.

4. Structural violence against autonomous workers

If self-determined labour is structurally required for reality maintenance, why is it so aggressively suppressed? The answer lies in the architecture of contemporary labour regimes, which combine market extraction, bureaucratic control and algorithmic optimisation.

Labour markets reward workers who align their behaviour with external demand. Success depends on the ability to deliver outputs that can be priced, monitored and compared. This framework treats autonomy as a risk factor: self-directed workers might choose objects or methods that do not align with profit. As a result, autonomy is tolerated only within tightly prescribed spaces such as elite research, curated art markets or strategically useful innovation units. Even there it is continually pressure-tested against economic performance.

Welfare systems, particularly those operating under workfare or activation regimes, intensify this pressure. They redefine the right to material survival as conditional on compliance with labour market norms. In this configuration, the unemployed person who works autonomously on social reality is treated as deviant, while the person who performs meaningless simulation labour for a wage is recognised as responsible. The function of such systems is not to support contribution but to enforce conformity.

Algorithmic governance adds a further layer. Digital platforms, AI-based decision systems and metric-driven management models reward behaviours that fit predictive patterns and penalise those that do not. Autonomous labour, especially when it confronts institutional narratives, appears as noise or anomaly. It triggers risk flags, compliance audits or reputational countermeasures. The system responds not to the content of the work but to its refusal to be optimised. From the perspective of Radical Worker, this configuration can be summarised as follows: contemporary institutions are structurally aligned with simulation labour and structurally allergic to reality labour. They can process standardised outputs and controllable narratives. They cannot process workers who take reality as their main reference point rather than the institutional script.

For that reason, autonomous workers are commonly pathologised, criminalised, or marginalised even when they demonstrably increase social intelligence. The structural violence against self-determined workers is therefore not accidental. It is the predictable consequence of a system that has bound its survival to the maintenance of appearances rather than to the maintenance of reality.

5. Field evidence — Autonomous work inside hostile systems

The theoretical claims of Radical Worker are grounded in long-term field research conducted through Artistic Research and autonomously organised social experimentation. Over more than a decade, the author engaged with job centres, social courts, cultural institutions,

educational systems, municipal administrations and corporate environments while continuously producing independent work in the fields of art, theory and activism.

This research was not observational in the conventional sense. It did not attempt to neutrally document existing conditions from a distance. Instead, it operated by enacting autonomous labour inside systems that demanded compliance. Letters were written, projects proposed, investigations pursued, collaborations initiated and refusal articulated, always from the position of self-determined work that insisted on being recognised as labour.

The patterns that emerged are consistent. As long as the author behaved in ways that could be interpreted as passive, failed or compliant, institutions remained administratively tolerant. Sanctions, diagnoses and legal threats appeared primarily when autonomous work began to increase reality-contact: when corruption was documented, when policy contradictions were made visible, when the violence of welfare structures was publicly analysed, or when artistic work created pressure for institutional accountability.

These reactions formed a dataset. Different institutions, staffed by different individuals at different times, used strikingly similar strategies: First, delegitimisation: declaring that the work being done was not work at all but personal obsession, hobby, pathology, or private opinion. Second, economic coercion: threatening or implementing benefit cuts, blocking access to funding, or using financial pressure to force compliance with wage labour demands. Third, pathologisation: framing autonomous labour as a symptom of mental illness, personality disorder or social incompetence, often backed by psychiatric instruments ill-suited for neurodivergent cognition. Fourth, legal and bureaucratic retaliation: initiating procedures, filings and proceedings aimed less at resolving issues than at exhausting the worker's energy and time.

From the standpoint of Radical Worker, these are not isolated injustices but expressions of a general mechanism. They show how systems react when confronted with reality labour that they cannot direct, measure or own. The more autonomous work exposes structural contradictions, the more aggressively institutions attempt to suppress it.

The field evidence therefore supports the central claim: in practice, contemporary labour regimes treat the reality-maintaining functions of autonomous labour as a threat to order rather than as a resource for survival.

6. Automation and the collapse of reality contact

Automation and AI are widely discussed as threats to employment, but Radical Worker argues that the deeper threat lies elsewhere. Automation destabilises not work in general, but specifically reality labour. It increases the spread of simulation and intensifies pressure on autonomous workers.

The first mechanism is substitution of output. AI systems can generate texts, images, forecasts and decisions that mimic human output patterns in many domains. This leads institutions to treat any labour that produces comparable outputs as replaceable. Workers are then evaluated by how closely they align with machine performance: speed, consistency, metric performance.

The unique, situated, reality-attentive aspects of human work become secondary or even obstructive.

The second mechanism is optimisation of simulation. When institutions rely on algorithmic indicators as proxies for reality, they increasingly treat indicators as reality. Decision systems are calibrated to historically available data, which already encode structural biases and blind spots. Autonomous labour that attempts to update or correct those blind spots appears as an outlier that cannot be easily incorporated into the models. Instead of adjusting to new reality information, systems double down on the patterns that their algorithms can already process.

The third mechanism is discipline through precarity. As automation increases, official narratives often insist that workers must re-skill, adapt and become more flexible. In practice, this demand translates into further subsumption of autonomy under market norms. The worker who insists on self-determined work is told that they are irresponsible, unrealistic or ungrateful. At the same time, the simulations produced by AI and platform economies are presented as evidence that reality is being managed efficiently.

Under these conditions, autonomous labour becomes the last defence against full-scale simulation drift. It is often only self-determined workers, including many neurodivergent and marginalised individuals, who continue to insist on the difference between a system that looks like it works and a system that actually maintains the conditions of life. They raise alarms about ecological collapse, democratic erosion and social fragmentation at precisely the moment when institutions celebrate their own optimisation.

Radical Worker therefore proposes a reversal of the usual story about automation. AI does not make autonomous workers obsolete. It makes them structurally indispensable and politically vulnerable at the same time. Without them, there is no organised reality labour left. With them, there is continuous conflict with systems oriented toward simulation.

7. **Predictions and falsifiability**

A theory that claims civilizational necessity for a specific form of labour must be testable. Radical Worker therefore formulates a set of predictions that can, in principle, be falsified.

Prediction 1: The higher the degree of autonomy in a worker's practice, the less likely that practice is to be formally recognised and remunerated within wage labour markets, even when its social value is demonstrable.

Prediction 2: The more a self-determined worker increases reality-contact within an institution, the higher the probability of institutional backlash in the form of delegitimisation, economic coercion, pathologisation or legal retaliation.

Prediction 3: As automation and AI saturate a sector, the share of labour classified and rewarded as simulation labour will increase relative to reality labour. Indicators and narratives will come to dominate over corrective feedback from autonomous workers.

Prediction 4: Societies that systematically suppress autonomous labour will show decreasing capacity for democratic self-correction, ecological adaptation and crisis response, even if headline productivity indicators remain stable or increase.

Prediction 5: Conversely, societies that create structural conditions for self-determined work (for example through unconditional basic income, protected time for independent research, or strong support for autonomous art and activism) will show greater resilience under systemic stress, measurable through lower burnout, higher trust and more effective response to complex crises.

The theory would be falsified if we observed labour markets that reward autonomy proportionally to its reality-maintaining contribution, institutions that respond to autonomous critique with structural reform rather than repression, and high-automation societies that sustain ecological and democratic stability while systematically discouraging self-determined work. At present, available empirical evidence points in the opposite direction.

8. Conclusion — Autonomy as civilizational infrastructure

The argument developed in this paper can be summarised in three steps.

First, labour is not reducible to the production of marketable output. There exists a class of work that maintains and deepens reality-contact in complex societies. This reality labour is structurally tied to autonomy because it requires the freedom to follow resonance with the world rather than institutional scripts.

Second, contemporary labour regimes built on market extraction, welfare conditionality and algorithmic optimisation are structurally hostile to such work. They reward simulation labour and punish reality labour. Autonomous workers who insist on orienting their practice toward reality rather than metrics become targets of delegitimisation, coercion and pathologisation.

Third, automation and AI intensify this configuration. They expand the domain of simulation, make output cheap and ubiquitous, and increase pressures on workers to behave like machines. In this environment, self-determined work becomes both more necessary and more endangered. It is necessary because it is the only systematic source of reality-maintaining feedback left. It is endangered because its very existence contradicts the logic of simulation-based governance.

The conclusion of Radical Worker is therefore stark. Self-determined work is not a niche lifestyle, not a romantic ideal, and not a temporary deviation from normal employment. It is civilizational infrastructure. Without autonomous labour, societies cannot maintain the complexity, diversity and reflexivity on which their survival depends. They will continue to optimise themselves into blindness, until external reality imposes corrections in the form of ecological collapse, social breakdown or authoritarian consolidation.

Recognising this does not by itself change institutional behaviour. But it does change the terms of the debate. When self-determined workers demand rights, protections or resources, they are not asking for special treatment. They are asking societies to protect their own reality-maintaining organs. A Universal Care Income, strong protections for independent research and art, and legal recognition of autonomous labour are therefore not luxuries. They are investments in the capacity of a society to remain in contact with the world it inhabits.

If labour is the way a society interacts with reality, then suppressing autonomous labour is equivalent to shutting down its own senses. Radical Worker argues that we are already far along that path. Whether we can turn away from it will depend, among other things, on whether autonomous workers are recognised not as problems to be solved, but as the workers on whom reality itself depends.

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Further publications, papers, and archival materials are available at:

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(The present text constitutes an interface translation into neurotypical academic discourse. This translation functions as an accessibility measure necessitated by dominant linguistic and epistemic conventions. It does not represent the native epistemic form of the research, but a communicative adaptation required for participation in standardized scholarly exchange.)

A more in-depth paper on the methodology can be found here:

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A paper providing an overview of the work can be found here:

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