

Living in the Error: On Art and Precarity.

Željka Aleksić

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The term “fabrication error” refers to defects during the manufacturing process that result in damaged, broken, or partially incomplete products. But if we consider this term within a social framework, what does **an error** indicate? A deviation from which standard or specification in society? Which social norm is considered a ‘deficiency’ or ‘imperfection’? Or, whose ‘calculated value’ differs from their ‘true value’? Could “the fabrication errors” be embodied by certain individuals whose labor is commodified?

Does the error signify a deviation from the idealized subject of the neoliberal system? Who is this idealized subject? A white, European, middle-class male citizen with an able body? Can those excluded from this social group - the non-citizen workers, who are deprived of political rights - be considered ‘system errors’ or exceptions that, paradoxically, operate as fundamental elements of the political and economic order?

In a speech on race, gender, cleaning, and capitalism, Françoise Vergès refers to “the economy of exhaustion”, which manifests a vicious cycle: The Western military-industrial complex pollutes the Global South, devastating its lands and bodies through war and exploitation. Migrants and refugees flee to the West, becoming the invisible labor force of the care and cleaning industries, while being racialized, gendered, and exhausted.

Vergès also distinguishes between “the performing body” and “the exhausted body”. The former — the male, neoliberal body — can travel freely, work at high speeds, and sleep less, thanks to the invisible work of the exhausted that fuels his energy. The latter is the feminized body of the migrant care worker, who produces the clean and civilized West through her precarious labor.

This vulnerable figure extends to a wider social group known as the precariat, which differs from the traditional proletariat. Labor rights do not protect this new class; they are not eligible for non-wage resources such as paid holidays or pensions. It is a large group that includes the ‘leftovers’ of the old working class, whose rights are increasingly restricted by neoliberal policies; the displaced -migrants and refugees - whose labor rights are limited by their residency status; and the young, educated individuals, who have to deal with the stress of contract-based, short-term work, unlike their parents, who held stable nine-to-five jobs with a lifelong, adequate income.

In her artistic practice, Željka Aleksić concentrates on the notion of precarity, based on her autobiographical experience. As a freelance artist, a ‘third country national’ and a female careworker, she embodies multiple figures of the precariat within her own identity.

Her exhibition, *Fabrication Error*, depicts a story familiar to many migrant cultural workers who came to Europe on a student visa. Coming from a so-called third country, they must deal with complex bureaucracies and harsh economic conditions. Limited political and labor rights and the constant fear of losing residency status cause psychological stress, often leaving individuals anxious, frustrated, and burned out.

Migrant cultural workers are vulnerable in a similar way to other migrant workers, such as cleaners, nannies, nurses, etc. Many also work in the care and cleaning industries. When visa status is tied to economic standing or a specific employer, these individuals become even more susceptible to exploitation.

Unlike migrant care workers, cultural workers are often considered 'over-qualified' for the jobs they apply for. They are caught in a vicious circle created by the visa regime; considered 'too qualified' for so-called 'dirty jobs', but lacking the work permit and language skills to be accepted into the local cultural scene. Unlike the 'post-migrant artist', often mentioned in the cultural discourse to emphasize 'interculturality' and 'diversity', they lack political representation. Political invisibility, economic struggle, infantilisation, and devaluation are among their fundamental challenges.

A migrant artist's time is fragmented; they must rush to meet deadlines, remain enrolled at a university to maintain their residency permit, attend exhibition openings to build a network, sell artworks, self-promote, and master the local language - all while working in an exploitative, underpaid part-time job. When applying for grants, they often face age and nationality restrictions, and are expected to complete their studies on time, even though the race they are forced to run lacks equal conditions.

What is an error? Is a disabled body, a sick body, an aging body, a trans body, a fat body, a body of color — a body whose borders are drawn by nationality, gender, and race — an error? An error is defined as the difference between an observed or calculated value and the true value of something. Who determines the value of the artist? Which criteria or standards are predefined, and what is the price the artist has to pay to fit into those standards?

Using an analogy, Željka Aleksić compares the manufacturing processes in factories to how art academies shape their students' vision. Is the artwork the product, and is the artist the worker? A fabrication error is a small mistake that reduces a product's quality and perceived value. The artist's identity, their sense of belonging, and the social, economic, and cultural context they live in all influence the work they create. Is it possible for an immigrant artist to succeed in the Western political space and design a flawless 'product'? Or is the error — the imperfection — a symptom of authenticity and sincerity in the artwork?

In the series "Carpal Drawings", the artist performs drawings while wearing a special device for electro-simulation, which she normally uses to treat the Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS), a condition that causes inflammation and damage in the nerves in her wrists. It often leads to pain, numbness, and loss of mobility. She was diagnosed with this condition in 2019, which was caused by the repetitive movements in her previous job as a cleaning worker. The vibrations of the electro-simulation device distort the process of drawing, leaving space for unexpected traces.

Željka Aleksić transforms her painful experience into expressive drawings, connecting her artistic practice with her exhausted body. She defines the act of drawing as a therapeutic practice that reclaims her body from the pain that defines her existence. This position is similar to many migrant artists, who find the resilience and emotional resources to maintain their physical and mental stability through their creative practice. Art is not only a way of political expression, but it is also a coping mechanism for daily stress.

The syndrome is named after the carpal tunnel, the narrow passageway that is located in the wrist, covering the median nerve. The nerves and the tunnel are strong metaphors for the migrant artist's journey to Europe. Similar to the distorted lines in her drawings, the artist uses thread and silicone in her installations to create an analogy with the roadlines and nerves. Nerves circulate inside the worker's hands, while migrant guestworkers circulate between their homelands and Europe.

Her sculptural piece, *Foreign Worker's Bag*, tells a personal story about women's invisible labor. Narrating the experiences of three generations of women, Aleksić connects her own story with those of her mother and grandmother. The length of the threads corresponds to the distance she travels during a typical workday—27.7 km. The enmeshed threads inside the plastic bag, commonly used by migrant guest workers, evoke the exploitative conditions that migrant women face. The artwork becomes an embodiment of the artist's body and her memories.

Aleksić's project invites the viewer into a critical dialogue on labor, identity, migration, and artistic production, reclaiming the visibility of the precarious labor of women who have to work far from their homelands.

D. Güvensoy, 22.04.2025