

Mapping Artistic Labour in Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?*

Ed Graham

Sheila Heti's 2012 novel *How Should a Person Be?* (*HSPB*) details and reflects on the process of the novel's own construction as artwork and thus raises questions around artistic labour. This paper is interested in the questions the novel raises about the gendered dynamic of labour within contemporary, popular artistic production like memoir-fiction. The relationship between art, gender, and labour is present in a number of different ways in *HSPB*; the novel explores the idea of the artist as entrepreneur of herself, taking a term used by Michel Foucault; in addition, through the novel's prominent images of waste and ugliness, we can map present crises of social reproduction, or what Nancy Fraser terms "the social-reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism,"¹ within the text. I argue that it is important to hold together both the figurations of neoliberal personhood and crises of social reproduction when reading the novel. Reading the artwork strictly in terms of a Foucauldian narrative of neoliberal governmentality and subjectivation limits an understanding of the broader political unconscious of capitalism in the period of Long Crisis that underpins artistic production.

HSPB is an autobiographical account of Sheila Heti's struggle to write a play she has been commissioned, a struggle that feeds into the novel's broader existential questions of "how a person should be." The narrator's anxiety and exhaustion about what distinguishes herself as an "I," about how to "build" her soul,² to obtain the quality of fame without actually being famous, is inseparable from the labour of producing art: "I had spent so much time trying to make the play I was writing—and my self into an object of beauty. It was exhausting and all that I knew."³

While the existential struggle of creating art is certainly nothing new, it is interesting how Sheila's difficulties are contrasted with the simplicity and fulfilment she obtains working in a hair salon: "The days I spent at home, working on my play, were miserable days; I longed to be at the salon,"⁴ a source of comfort in both its simplicity and in its fulfillment of her "serving instincts—[her]desire to uplift humanity."⁵ Artistic creation is framed according to the logic of labour and the libidinal satisfaction of creating a finished product: "*Beauty is balance—yes!* As much in a haircut, as in a work of art, as in a human being."⁶ The triangulation of labour, art, and personhood speaks to their inseparability in Sheila's world, and throughout the novel, the degree of satisfaction and exhaustion of one is always measured against another.

Art and personhood as career or creation of a finalized product, and the blurring between aesthetics and labour: such recurring themes speak to the broader infiltration of the economic into everyday human activity.⁷ In conjunction with the increased supervision of the state by the market, rather than the market by the state, Foucault argues the historical moment of neoliberalism provides "the possibility of giving a strictly economic interpretation of a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic."⁸ That is, the advent of neoliberal society and its rationalization and marketization of individual behaviour correlatively implies, as Thomas Lemke states in his gloss on Foucault's writing about neoliberal governmentality, that economics no longer merely "delineate[s] [an] area of human existence, but essentially includes all forms of human action and behaviour."⁹ This behaviour is marked by the individual's capacity to be their own capital, producer, and the source of their own earnings—to be an entrepreneur of themselves.

Foucault's idea of the becoming-economic of personhood gives some insight into the relationship between labour, art, and personhood in Heti's novel. The entrepreneurial self, as formulated by Foucault, entails self-managerial techniques, such as the maintaining of one's CV,

the development of human relationships, and inter-personal skills. The competitive, entrepreneurial ethos is so institutionalized that individuals are required to “exist in a state of constant readiness,”¹⁰ with labour and private life becoming inseparable. Very early on, we can see both the gendered and economic dimension of Sheila’s artistic exhaustion. Sheila is commissioned to write a play that “has to be about women,”¹¹ which she accepts because she needs the money, despite claiming not to know “what women had to say to one another, or how a woman might affect another,”¹² given how her marriage makes her “concerned only with men, her husband in particular.”¹³ The oppressive weight of Sheila’s marriage and the extent to which it prevents her from writing a play truly about female friendship is framed in economic terms: after one day witnessing a bride well-up during the words “for richer and for poorer,” Sheila cannot avoid imitating these tears after hearing those words on her own wedding day, an event that makes her forever uncertain about whether her marriage “could truly be called mine.”¹⁴ The weight of a society in which human relations are framed in economic terms bears on her capacity to produce an artwork about her own life.

Rather than write a “feminist” play marred by her marriage, Sheila details the construction of a “novel” around her friendship with Margaux the painter. Foucault’s methodology not only shows how this artwork is constructed against the backdrop of this economic framing of the personal, but also how it displays elements of resistance. For Foucault, as alluded to above, analyzing power under neoliberalism requires taking subjectivity as the point of departure.¹⁵ Recognizing the limitations of seeing power merely as the disciplining of bodies and the subjection of individuals through disciplinary institutions, as he argued in his earlier work,¹⁶ Foucault later argues neoliberalism operates at micro-levels of subjectivity in the construction of the entrepreneurial self.¹⁷ Governmentality, a set of techniques that manage and govern behaviour and

conduct at every level, a “rationality immanent to the micro-powers, whatever the level of analysis being considered (parent-child relation, individual-public power, population-medicine, and so on)”¹⁸ becomes a more useful method for analyzing the relationship between the economic and the everyday under neoliberalism. This emphasis on the governing of conduct thus entails, for Foucault, recognition of the active and self-forming, rather than the merely docile, components of subjectivity. He claims:

We should not understand the exercise of power as pure violence or strict coercion. Power consists in complex relations: these relations involve a set of rational techniques, and the efficiency of those techniques is due to a subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies.¹⁹

In his later years, Foucault spent more time articulating this idea of self-formation. Providing a genealogy of subjectivity, showing how, beginning in antiquity, societies have always shown a dimension of the ethical relationship of the self to the self, writings like *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* centre on subjectivity and self-care as sites of struggle. Power necessarily entails resistance, and the theory of governmentality is important in not only drawing attention to the subtler ways individuals are coerced, but also in opening up possibilities for meaningful resistance, for thinking beyond our everyday existence as economic-actors.

Again, *HSPB* details the process of its own construction as an artwork; specifically, the process of building a novel through recording conversations between two female friends. We can here see traces of Foucault’s idea of subject-formation through an aestheticizing of one’s existence, through viewing the self as a work of art, drawing on the Nietzschean idea that one should “create one’s life by giving style to it through long practice and daily work.”²⁰ There is a similar feminist conception of subject-formation in how Sheila resists both, on the one hand, her analyst’s advice that she needs to withstand suffering and give herself to life, and on the other, the image of the withdrawn, celibate artist. The novel portrays a female character marked by neither neoliberal

affirmation nor ascetic renunciation; the flipside of an artist marred by entrepreneurial subjectivation is the construction of life as artwork against biopolitical standards of normalization.

In the aforementioned scene, Sheila's analyst tells her that her inability to stick to her play shows her lack of "concern for making a living . . . with working to the end and winding up with something solid,"²¹ in response to the telling of a dream in which Sheila continuously fails to stay on an airplane long enough to reach its destination. Interestingly, in one instance, Sheila abandons the flight and lands amongst the garbage of a recycling centre. If we continue with our Foucauldian reading, the trash is symbolic of Sheila's art as a kind of construction in excess of the neoliberal framework. Trash, shit, waste, and ugliness are recurring images in *How Should a Person Be?* There is the centrality of the ugly painting competition between Margaux and Sholem, the ugliness of the novel's conversational tone, the juxtaposition of the loftiness with crass humour; for example, "We are all specks of dirt, all on this earth at the same time. . . . We live in an age of some really great blow-job artists."²² Finally, Sheila describes the ultimate act of writing the novel: "Now it was time to write. I went into my studio and thought about everything I had, all the trash and the shit inside me. And I started throwing the trash and throwing the shit, and the castle began to emerge."²³ Aesthetic ugliness is, in this reading, Sheila's resistance to the entrepreneurial pressure to create a clean, finished artistic product.

However, what might be missed out when reading ugliness in this way? Rather than viewing aesthetic excess and ugliness as positive ruptures from neoliberal subjectivation, we might instead view waste and ugliness *negatively*, as pointing to what is unsaid in the novel's account of the artist as labourer. How might these images prompt us to consider the relationship between art and labour, between personhood and the economic in broader, more historical terms than those laid out by Foucault? What does Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism leave unsaid?

Foucault's theory of neoliberalism and governmentality asks us to pay more attention to human behaviour as a form of rationality, and so to labour in more concrete terms. Foucault's deliberate shift away from the Marxist conception of labour as abstract process, however, pays no attention to the hidden unpaid work that goes into reproducing labour and thus sustaining capital. Defined as social reproduction, this dimension is appropriated by capital in order to drive accumulation, and the classic examples are the "feminized" spheres of housework and care, without which there would be no healthy workforce to sustain production. Nancy Fraser argues that such "non-economic" social reproductive activities "form one of its [capitalism's] background conditions of possibility," and that other background conditions include "the availability of nature as a source of 'productive inputs' and a 'sink' for production's waste."²⁴ Fraser's historical account of how capitalism, beset by deep-seated contradictions, must destabilize its conditions of possibility by appropriating ever more unpaid work whenever accumulation slows down, shows that capitalism feeds off all forms of life to sustain itself.

Fraser's analysis is germane for the present discussion, particularly in how she charts the crisis of social reproduction under neoliberalism. In the post-WW2, Fordist, state-managed period of capitalism, social reproduction was internalized within public provision of health care, schooling, childcare, pensions, etc., essentially kept at bay from economic production through the welfare state. This internalization of social reproduction has an economic function to sustain capitalism in the long-term, and is thus necessarily unable to fulfil all social needs properly.

In the beginnings of so-called neoliberalism in the 1970s and 80s, a new regime of globalized, financial capitalism emerges that "promotes state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare, while recruiting women into paid workforce—externalizing carework onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it."²⁵ Interestingly, Fraser sees this

arise out of a combination of economic stagnation, whereby capital must appropriate and exploit social reproduction by externalizing it and therefore commodifying it more, alongside feminist movements that, rightly, demand more representation in the workplace, outside of the social reproductive unit of the family. The price of this, however, is that social reproduction is no longer provided for by the state—individuals and communities bear the burden of care, all within a system where real wages are reduced and the number of hours of paid work per household needed to support a family rises.²⁶

Finance capital's increased drive to appropriate unpaid work for accumulation, in the period of Long Crisis from 1973, can be seen in the micro-managerial entrepreneurial-self sketched above, the constant maintaining of interpersonal and affective labour. As well, there is the increasing monetization of artistic production, another factor to which *HSPB* makes frequent reference. As Kathi Weeks puts it:

The list of the modes of work that employers profit from but do not compensate us for arguably expands in post-Fordist economies. These include not only all the labor of enabling the present workforce to go to work each day or night and raising new generations of workers, but also most of the educational achievements, communication skills, social networks, cultural forms, and affective capacities that workers are expected to cultivate and that employers do not pay for.²⁷

Looking beneath the surface of governmentality and subject-formation when reading Heti's commentary on the relation between art and ugliness means taking the contradiction between economic production and social reproduction, rather than power, as the starting-point for reading this text. We must try to consider the relationship between waste as aesthetic, as narrated in Heti's text, and the reconfiguration and redistribution of gendered social reproduction in the period of neoliberalism. Work today is still deeply hierarchized with respect to gender; women are still burdened with responsibilities of care and nurturing in everyday life and discourse yet not sufficiently remunerated or socially protected.

Further, as Roswitha Scholz argues, the integration of more women into the workforce has displaced a lot of care-work, for well-situated women, onto underpaid, non-unionized migrant workers.²⁸ The framework provided by social reproduction theory therefore takes its object as the realm of exploitation, which Foucault, in focusing on power and domination, tends to neglect. Following Fredric Jameson and Carolyn Lesjak, we can adopt the critical lens of exploitation contra domination when reading a literary text such as *HSPB*.²⁹ Adopting such a perspective would locate the political unconscious of Sheila-as-artist-as-entrepreneur in the progressive externalization of social reproduction since the 1970s. The waste and ugliness so central to her artistic labour allegorizes such social depletion, where individuals are ejected from the welfare state and care-work is displaced onto underpaid migrants who themselves require care-work. However, Heti's novel can only gesture at these broad structural transformations through, for instance, the aforementioned dream where she lands in a recycling centre. Individuals who survive through such informal means, having been ejected from the formal wage, can only be figured *unconsciously* as the grim underside to the cultural imaginary of the entrepreneurial self. For Michael Denning, writing in the context of wageless life more broadly, images of wasted lives, that align those outside the wage with images of garbage, are often deceptively concrete and unhelpful.³⁰

However, we might, as a final thought, hold together, dialectically, the twin images of entrepreneurial artistic production with that of those fallen outside of the wage as site of social reproduction. This is by no means to claim that Sheila's precarious existence as an artistic labourer is on the same level as that of migrant reproductive labour. However, we can perhaps speculate on links between the two and affirm a kind of non-identity between such forms of life outside the wage-relation. In this sense, the novel may point us to the conclusion that struggles in the future

will likely emerge from alliances between different groups within the various spheres of social reproduction.

Notes

¹ Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” *New Left Review* 100 (2016): 99.

² Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?* (New York: Picador, 2008), 2.

³ Heti, *How Should a Person Be?*, 13.

⁴ Heti, 54.

⁵ Heti, 54.

⁶ Heti, 55. Emphasis in original.

⁷ See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, eds. Michel Senellart, François Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁸ Foucault, *Biopolitics*, 219.

⁹ Thomas Lemke, “‘The Birth of Biopolitics’: Michel Foucault’s Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality,” *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (2001): 198.

¹⁰ (Southwood 15) Ivor Southwood, *Non-Stop Inertia* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2011): 15.

¹¹ Heti, 41.

¹² Heti, 41.

¹³ Heti, 41.

¹⁴ Heti, 23.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity & Truth*, eds. Paul Rainbow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997).

¹⁶ See for example Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995).

¹⁷ Foucault, *Biopolitics*.

¹⁸ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, eds. Michel Senellart, François Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 389.

¹⁹ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 155.

²⁰ Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity & Truth*, 262.

²¹ Heti, 82.

²² Heti, 3.

²³ Heti, 277.

²⁴ Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care," 101.

²⁵ Fraser, 112.

²⁶ Fraser, 112.

²⁷ Kathi Weeks and Anna Curcio, "Social Reproduction, Neoliberal Crisis, and the Problem with Work: A Conversation with Kathi Weeks," Viewpoint Magazine, October 31, 2015,

<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/social-reproduction-neoliberal-crisis-and-the-problem-with-work-a-conversation-with-kathi-weeks/>.

²⁸ Roswitha Scholz, "Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without the Body" *Mediations* 27, no. 2 (2009): 9.

²⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One*, Verso, 2011; Carolyn Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically." *Criticism*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2013): 264.

³⁰ Michael Denning, "Wageless Life," *New Left Review* no. 66 (2010): 96.