Chapter 4
The Only Place Where One Can Feel Connected to an International Context and Still Speak Russian: Hybrid Creative Work in Post-Soviet Contemporary Art Institutions

Margarita I. Kuleva

Abstract This chapter focuses on the hybrid creative labor of managers in Moscow-based contemporary art institutions. The Russian context is of interest because its young contemporary art market is still transitioning from the Soviet cultural monopoly to an open-market economy, and it, therefore, lacks established standards of cultural production, especially in the case of institutional organizations. The research examines Moscow's new private centers and contemporary art museums, which were founded in the late 2000s. Conceived as Russian versions of the Tate or Guggenheim, these institutions offer workers and their visitors the unique experience of belonging to the international art world in the center of Moscow. In this context, creative work organization is filled with negotiations and experiments, forming an ideological battlefield where both neoliberal creative entrepreneurialism and the Soviet heroization of work, such as praise for the new Stakhanovites, can be encountered. This chapter is based on a 2016 ethnographic study composed of 25 in-depth interviews with full-time cultural workers and 20 observation visits by the researcher to the art centers' offices and exhibition areas.

Keywords Art centers · Art managers · Creative labor · Cultural workers · Hybrid · Moscow · Russia

4.1 Introduction

In recent decades, the global structural position of culture and creativity has changed dramatically. First, when transitioning to a postindustrial society, knowledge-based industries, such as culture and art, science and education, and information

M. I. Kuleva (✉)
National Research University Higher School of Economics, Centre for German and European Studies St Petersburg State University and Bielefeld University, St Petersburg, Russia

technologies, come to the fore of global and local economies. Creativity has been recognized as a full-fledged industry at the national level (departments of creative industries were first opened in Britain, then in other countries) as well as the global, including in the latest edition of the *International Standard of Industrial Classification* (a list of existing industries provided by the United Nations). As a result of the sector's increased attention, investment, prestige, and economic growth, the sphere of culture and creativity has begun to face new challenges. These include the hardships of the neoliberal industrialization of culture, the commodification of creative outputs, and the application of market criteria in evaluating the success of art, its creators, and cultural organizations. This issue was explored by the research strand known as creative labor studies, which emerged in the second half of the 1990s and in the 2000s (e.g., McRobbie 2002, 2018; Gill 2002, 2010; Gill and Pratt 2008; Taylor and Littleton 2012; Oakley 2014; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010, 2015; Conor et al. 2015).

These studies critically cover the issues caused by the transformed and sped-up markets of creative labor and production. However, they also leave some gaps: they present the rather specific experiences of creative sectors in the large cities of Western Europe and North America (the so-called cultural capitals) as universal, and they focus on the individual experience of creative workers who are characterized as atomized free agents of the new economy. In this way, critical creative labor studies fail to contribute to the de-Westernization and decolonization of research on the production of culture and new forms of labor, but more importantly, they raise the following research question: how do the features of non-Western cultural production systems frame the conditions of creative work?

To answer this question, I offer Moscow's new privately funded art centers as extreme cases (Seawright and Gerring 2008).[1] In the second half of the 2000s, several private cultural institutions simultaneously appeared in Moscow, all supported by big businesses. In 2007, Roman Trotsenko, adviser to the president of PJSC Rosneft Oil Company and his wife, Sofia, opened the Winzavod Centre for Contemporary Art in a former brewery. In 2008, Dasha Zhukova and Roman Abramovich, eleventh on the Russian *Forbes* 2018 list of Russia's richest people, founded the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, which was then a contemporary culture center and is located in the Bakhmetevsky Garage. In 2009, Alexander Mamut, fortieth on the *Russian Forbes* list, supported the launch of the Strelka Institute of Media and Design in the courtyard of the Red October factory. Meritocratic neoliberal principles formed the basis of their ideological opposition to the previous system of cultural production. Their ambitious attempts to express this opposition can be seen in the new Tate Moderns and MoMAs (Museums of Modern Art) they have created along the Moskva River.

---

[1]Some of the conclusions drawn is this chapter were presented in Kuleva (2018). Turning the Pushkin Museum into a "Russian Tate": Informal creative labour in a transitional cultural economy (the case of privately funded Moscow art centers). *International Journal of Cultural Studies*.

This chapter investigates the space and function occupied by informal hybrid creative labor in the shifting cultural economy. It is expected to contribute to the debate on creative labor in the following ways: I track how multiple international agents, not just cultural policy alone, frame the conditions and ethos of cultural production; as I consider these agents competing for cultural hegemony in this chapter's context, I define these regimes of work as "hybrid"; and I see privately funded institutions as especially prominent examples of this complexity, as state control is limited in this arena (although still present), which gives visibility to other stakeholders.

4.2 Methodology

The research is founded on a Moscow-focused ethnographic study. As mentioned above, specific cultural venues were selected as the objects of my study in order to better understand cultural labor in changing creative economies in general and in Russia in particular. The fact that they are privately funded sets them apart from most of Russia's cultural institutions. These organizations are not financed or operated according to grassroots principles, and they, therefore, possess enough capital to achieve ambitious goals. As a result, their labor organization is less rigid than that of public sector institutions, which are coached in conservative bureaucratic structures, or in self-sustained private institutions—so-called self-organization—because of a lack of resources. The selected institutions constitute an extreme case as defined in the field of quantitative studies:

> [A]n extreme value is understood here as an observation that lies far away from the mean of a given distribution; that is to say, it is unusual. If most cases are positive along a given dimension, then a negative case constitutes an extreme case' (Seawright and Gerring 2008: 301).

For the second stage, I selected 10 of Moscow's largest private cultural institutions working in visual arts. The research consisted of 20 in-depth interviews with private sector employees. Two main criteria were applied to the selection process: first, the employees were mainly employed full time; second, as I selected two interviewees per institution, they had to be from different departments and occupy different levels of authority (e.g., junior and senior). The research guide required interviewees to respond to questions about the quality of their on-the-job learning process, their career trajectory, day-to-day routines, and the organization of the workplace (for the latter, interviewees were required to sketch out the management structure of the art center they worked at). I also conducted 20 observational sessions in offices and at public events held at the art centers. Due to differing levels of access, the observations varied in terms of their content and level of observer participation.

Regarding the issue of accessibility in the field, half of the institutions (five) were accessed via my personal connections. I then used snowball sampling to approach the remaining half. In two instances, I had to interact with employees via official

channels, and the quality of communication reflected this. Interviewees who had been accessed via personal connections felt more comfortable sharing thoughts and concerns, as they might with a colleague. Interviewees with whom I was newly acquainted naturally kept a more formal distance. In terms of observations, I was taken on a guided tour of the newly discovered institutions, while in a few of the better known, I was able to play an active part in the workspace during the observations, and this took the shape of working alongside interviewees in the office, staying in the center overnight, and helping with the installation of new displays.

The follow-up data collection continued through 2017–2018. It consisted of a series of less formal observations conducted during my visits to the aforementioned institutions. Additionally, I kept track of the institutions' media and press materials and all conversations with study participants.

4.3   New, Sexy, and International: Moscow's Private Cultural Centers in the 2000s

In Moscow, the new private sector art centers that emerged in the second half of the 2000s stood in contrast to the traditions set by state museums, choosing to emphasize foreign rather than domestic experiences. For example, on the Strelka Institute's website, it describes its work on the concept of change:

> In 2009, Strelka was founded with the aim of reshaping Russia's metropolitan landscape, both culturally and physically. Strelka's educational initiatives push for positive change and new sets of ideas and values. These fresh educational opportunities are run by the institute, while it continues to maintain the City at the heart of its overall research program (Institute for a Social City 2016).

Newly founded institutions present the concept of internationalization in their ideas and practices: classes and lectures are given in English and much of the teaching staff is made up of foreign experts, such as Rem Koolhaas, the first program director. Garage Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) promotes future-orientated work and global experiences: "Garage is a special place since it is managed by the post-Soviet generation, born in the 80s and 90s. In fact, as a whole, Garage captured the fresh mentality of that generation when it comes to culture, and managed to find new ways of putting the ideas of our time into effect in the society around us" said Kate Fowle, chief curator, in a video about their new building.[2] Her colleague, Snezhana Krastevam, added, "[the curator] Viktor Misiano described Garage in a fascinating way—he said it's the only place in Moscow where he feels one can exist and belong in an international context while still speaking Russian."

---

[2]Garage Museum of Contemporary Art Opens June 12th! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2l_Ma6J6b1o. Accessed 17 March 2020.

Moscow's art centers exist as portals, connecting their local urban setting to the art of the wider, international world. These centers exhibit both high culture as well as an array of cultural leisure pursuits, such as interactive classes and lectures, tours and walks, restaurants and shops, bicycling and roller-skating, and outdoor activities. The design and layout of the centers are crucial parts of these transitional zones, since they clearly separate the centers from other urban areas and the general public, reinforcing their high status as places to be visited. The art centers' well-designed environments also attract employees. A designer taking part in a Garage video presentation said: "I remember when I first visited Garage. I said to myself, 'Oh, this is somewhere I should be. This is somewhere I should live and die.'"[3] This approach to art centers, as more than workplaces—as living spaces hosting life (or even death!)—has knock-on effects for the other criteria used when workers decide on places of employment. Despite the many difficulties faced by the research participants, the interview and observation data showed that the makeup of the workspace and the esthetic quality of the work it produced were among the main reasons employees might continue working at a particular art center. Indeed, the interviewees said they enjoyed attending the exhibitions as visitors ("[This is] the coolest place in Moscow," a project administrator laughed. "That is why I'm here."). Therefore, it can be concluded that employees share a feeling of belonging and are proud of contributing to ambitious projects that amaze international guests, including important experts. As said one female deputy director, "Important people from all over the world come here . . . it's like a miracle, just wow! This is where my pride and loyalty come from."

Researchers who focus on creative work internationally have also remarked on the passion and interest that creative workers employ in their projects; however, these sentiments are typically less concerned with specific industry trends or projects than with a given workplace itself. The interviewees too also pointed out the global agenda of these institutions. First, these workplaces answer a demand for cosmopolitanism, striking a balance between the old system of cultural production, on which their educations focused, and international institutions found abroad, for which they do not feel sufficiently experienced to work. Second, the art centers offer their employees a sense of belonging to the wider, international art world. The belonging has been largely romanticized, and in certain cases, art and media stars serve as the embodiment of this engagement. As one of the study participants explained, the rushing of an intoxicated Woody Allen to a private viewing offered her an experience of internationalization.

---

[3]Garage Museum of Contemporary Art Opens June 12th! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2l_Ma6J6b1o. Accessed 17 March 2020.

4.4   Open Calls and the New *Blat*

This section is devoted to the hybrid recruitment practices of the new art centers. Since Moscow's MoCAs follow the principles of meritocracy, open calls are their main recruitment instrument. They include temporary fellowships, small grants, and full-time jobs. Here, meritocratic recruitment principles go hand in hand with inherited informal procedures. For instance, as Ledeneva (1998) wrote in her book on *blat*,[4] although institutional conditions have changed, the practices themselves are still in use: "informal contacts still remain primary where money is not accepted as a mean of exchange—that is, at the upper level, where there are much corruption and nepotism, or at the very bottom level, where informal networks are used to tackle scarcity" (Ledeneva 1998: 180). Surprisingly, old Soviet practices of service and goods exchange, such as *blat,* have found a place not only in general post-Soviet society but in this rather specific environment as well. One individual who works for a fund contended:

> Yes, we do open calls, but it doesn't make much sense: there is only a small number of specialists who can carry out higher quality research in Moscow. We are especially interested in projects on [historical] museology. [Tell me] where I [can] find any specialists of that kind, and I would be happy to support them. Unfortunately, there aren't any. This was also truth . . . when I did the Young Artists Awards [for the Moscow Art Center]. Of course, I was receiving loads of rubbish [applications] from all over. I had to do a fair amount of preparatory work to develop better applications. I knew a few interesting artists, but their initial applications weren't strong enough, or the concept was boring. We would collaborate to expand on the ideas and then they would apply (male artist and curator).

This demonstrates a more complicated mixture of recruitment techniques: a curator is willing to discard the principles of an open call, not in order to provide *blat* to his friends or relatives and snatch some profit for himself, but to make the project happen and improve the quality of the works presented. Nevertheless, the curator relies on a network of personal contacts, making allowances for people he knows while failing to do so for people he does not. Despite these methods clearly having their roots in the modus operandi of the previous generation of museums, they are far from incongruent with a neoliberal meritocratic approach.

It should also be noted that these open calls, while well-publicized and frequently posted on all the researched institutions' websites, are not required when advertising vacancies and openings and thus can always give way to their informal analogues:

> If you look at the top of our institution, you will see that there are actually a lot of people who were not particularly engaged in contemporary art but were close to certain circles (*tusovka*). [As for] how they are working [and] what their salaries are like, that is a completely different matter (female keeper).

As in the previous instance, it is possible to interpret this in two ways. One is that this is a reworking of *blat*—the founders of a cultural institution hire their friends for

---

[4]*Blat* can be defined as a form of corruption in the Soviet Union based on the informal exchange of services, connections, and goods.

a top position even though they do not have relevant work experience. Another interpretation is that, if one considers that professional competence in Russia's contemporary art world has not yet fully matured and educational institutions have not fully adapted, then the principle of trust is a definite factor of hiring. Research has explored this from a Western perspective as well (e.g., Wreyford 2015).

4.5   Mundane Work and (in)Visibility

The subjects of focus in this section are personal work timetables and working conditions, and these are examined within the framework of the aforementioned characteristics of a Muscovite cultural institution's work environment.

Employees are not only controlled by a formalized, hierarchical management structure but also by a stricter sense of self-regulation: they take individual responsibility for a product and equate their professional success with that of the art institution. This unformalized characteristic of their work is highly significant:

> We have additional criteria that act in tandem with professional qualities, which we call "the [art centre] match." "I'd just sat that we have a very good group of people here because the style and tempo of work does not easily facilitate efforts to advance your personal career (deputy director, female).

As such, a supposed good employee does not fight for working rights because those rights do not indicate the disparity between the written contract and the actual work. Rebelling against the shock-work principle may then come as a result. In this case, such employees would drop out:

> They quit and leave, not because I dismiss them but simply because they drop out. That is why I say this is a self-regulating system because you do not have [to fire someone], but when you have a nice team, you cannot, you would not want to refuse the workload (deputy director, female).

As such, it is more often unspoken rather than spoken rules that define the working environment. Peer recognition is invaluable and even defines whether someone works passionately, or merely fulfills the professional obligations of the job. "No one is forcing anybody" is the soft enforcement mantra that dictates the relationships between workers and their creative environments. To this regard, below is an illustrative excerpt from an interview I conducted (my questions in italics) with two creative professionals:

> I know I shouldn't like my work, but I just can't resist the charm of the place. It gives you a nice feeling (female librarian).
>   *What is a working day like for you?*
>   I'm here at the bar drinking coffee and chatting to people.
>   *It looks very nice.*
>   That's the thing! It all looks very nice! That's the secret [of the art center]—it all looks very nice. The only little add-on is that, on a daily basis, I work like this for 16 hours (female deputy director)

Interviewees were seduced by the esthetic layout, quality architecture, and self-recognition that they were part of a bold and exceptional project. However, in opposition to this, many employees mentioned a trendy lifestyle imposed on them regardless of whether they desired it (even though they might have been able to afford it). Bearing in mind the above exchange, working in an art center cafe is not always an esthetic choice but a scenario imposed by a lack of office space. Likewise, eating at these trendy venues was often not a lifestyle choice but necessitated by a lack of options.

The risks experienced by art center employees are akin to those of a typical creative industry worker. The disparity appears when these workers are not credited in the same way as artists, designers, and musicians. There is a lack of public recognition and therefore a lack of compensation for their poor working conditions. One clear example can be found in the texts on the walls of exhibitions; creative workers are rarely credited for writing these, whereas the artist and sometimes head curator are acknowledged for their work. These employees remain nameless and are conceived of as part of the organization rather than as individuals. "Our director does not even know that I was the one who suggested the idea for this project," said a female curator. Projects and exercises that are generally seen as creatively expressive and stimulating are reserved for only a select few.

Meanwhile, activities such as hanging out and having a chat are part of a curator's workday, while their juniors have to pick up the everyday tasks and therefore operate at a very different tempo in the same environment. Tasks that could be classed as creative are far from open to all. Because of this, many interviewees took on extra, voluntary work that was well beyond the scope of their contracts. As a result, despite receiving a regular salary, creative workers undertake significant additional work that is effectively free labor. To wit, a female art manager relayed a conversation with her curator boss: "Hey, how come you're being so serious? Come hang out in the studio," said [the curator]. I replied, "Hey, I've got work to get on with. You're my boss—you should know that."

4.6   The Pyramid Model: Visibility, Pay, and Creativity

The contemporary art world and creative industries, in general, are known for their high degree of social inequality: while a tiny minority of the artistic community shares most of the visibility and cultural and economic capital, the rest is excluded (Cattani and Ferriani 2008; Bull 2011). However, this observation is primarily based on studies of the art market's free agents, such as artists, and the role of the institution is rarely considered. In the following section, I use my data to develop a hierarchical model—a pyramid—that shows how resources of visibility, pay, and creativity are spread among art center employees. It should be noted, however, that a worker's responsibilities are not fixed; for example, additional work is sometimes required on top of existing duties. Some additional tasks are rewarded with supplementary payment, while others are not. Visible, recognized forms of work are intertwined

Table 4.1 The creativity pyramid

	Pay	Visibility	Creativity
Curator/director	+	+	+
An external (contractor)	−	+	+
An occasional creative	−/+	−	+
A technician	+	−	−
An intern	−	−	−

with forms that are effectively invisible, i.e., they were never mentioned in the contract. Another feature of this pyramid is its unsteadiness: while its foundation (the lower stratum) and peak (art center CEOs) are relatively stable, the levels in between are volatile. From this point of view, the pyramid is reminiscent of the sandpile metaphor put forward by Giuffre: "career ladders in the art world are not so much ladders as they are sandpiles. The movement of actors within the field changes the shape of the field" (Giuffre 1999: 829).

Thus, the pyramid's ranks are not only slippery and unstable but highly dependent on the moves of other actors. The classification of creative workers' positions presented below is, therefore, closer to a Weberian-ideal-type system (Weber 2011) than a strict typology. Before presenting the pyramid, I offer definitions of the positions within it (Table 4.1).

Curator/director: This peak position consists of formal work that is considered creative, and the name of the person holding the position is usually known. A curator is, for example, responsible for the conception of new exhibitions. This kind of work is a rarity—in each institution studied, not more than five to 10 people worked on such projects. These high-profile creative professionals often represent the institution in the media.

External: This position was added to balance the existing classification, although high-profile external collaborators are beyond the actual scope of this chapter. Indeed, while externals are not involved in financial exchange as institutional employees, they do impact the hierarchy of prestige and visibility. Additionally, they are potential human resources for curators/directors.

Occasional creative: The second-best opportunity is informal labor that is considered creative. This could take the form of a manager or coordinator who undertakes some research for a new exhibition. This work is usually performed in addition to the responsibilities that this person already formally has. This work is anonymous and unpaid.

Technician: Formal, and according to the interviewees, noncreative work has a lower status, as all full-time employees already perform this kind of work.

Intern: Informal noncreative work, usually described as "help," is left for interns and volunteers. Commonly, this position is the lowest level of the pyramid.

4.7 Conclusion

The main objective of this chapter was to explore the specificity of creative labor in the hybrid conditions of the new Moscow Guggenheims or Tates. I employed an extreme-case strategy by taking new nongovernmental art centers as empirical subjects because such institutions oppose the traditions of cultural production in Russia, especially methods such as informal recruitment or nepotism ("*semeistvennost*" in Russian). However, public and private assertions of this kind are undermined by this study's discovery of continued methods of informal recruitment, organization establishment, and workflow organization, with either striking or faint similarities to those of the Soviet and post-Soviet state museums. New institutions discursively counterpose themselves against the previous generation of cultural producers, even though their practices have roots in unreformed higher education bodies and institutions as well as methods passed on from older colleagues. However, the Soviet-style informality of working practices was not the only workplace system exposed at the studied art centers: there was also a tendency for many to be organized like startups despite their sizes. This disparity underlines the supposition that cultural institutions are still transitioning.

References

Bull M (2011) The two economies of world art. In: Harris J (ed) Globalization and contemporary art. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, pp 179–190

Cattani G, Ferriani S (2008) A core/periphery perspective on individual creative performance: social networks and cinematic achievements in the Hollywood film industry. Organ Sci 19 (6):824–844

Conor B, Gill R, Taylor S (2015) Gender and creative labour. Sociol Rev 63:1–22

Gill R (2002) Cool, creative and egalitarian? Exploring gender in project-based new media work in Europe. Inf Commun Soc 5(1):70–89

Gill R (2010) 'Life is a pitch': managing the self in new media work. In: Deuze M (ed) Managing Media Work. Sage, Thousand-Oaks, CA, pp 249–262

Gill R, Pratt A (2008) In the social factory?: immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work. Theory Cult Soc 25(7–8):1–30

Giuffre K (1999) Sandpiles of opportunity: success in the art world. Soc Forces 77(3):815–832

Hesmondhalgh D, Baker S (2010) 'A very complicated version of freedom': conditions and experiences of creative labour in three cultural industries. Poetics 38(1):4–20

Hesmondhalgh D, Baker S (2015) Sex, gender and work segregation in the cultural industries. Sociol Rev 63(1_suppl):23–36

Institute for a Social City (2016) http://www.strelka.com/en/idea. Accessed 15 Oct 2019

Garage Museum of Contemporary Art Opens June 12th (2015) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2l_Ma6J6b1o. Accessed 10 Nov 2019

Kuleva M (2018) Cultural administrators as creative workers: the case of public and non-governmental cultural institutions in St. Petersburg. J Cult Stud 32(5):727–746

Ledeneva AV (1998) Russia's economy of Favours: blat, networking and informal exchange. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

McRobbie A (2002) Clubs to companies: notes on the decline of political culture in speeded up creative worlds. Cult Stud 16(4):516–531

McRobbie A (2018) Be creative: making a living in the new culture industries. Polity Press, Cambridge

Oakley K (2014) Good work? Rethinking cultural entrepreneurship. In: Bilton C, Cummings S (eds) Handbook of management and creativity. Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, pp 145–159

Seawright J, Gerring J (2008) Case selection techniques in case study research: a menu of qualitative and quantitative options. Polit Res Q 61(2):294–308

Taylor S, Littleton K (2012) Contemporary identities of creativity and creative work. Ashgate, Farnham

Weber M (2011) Methodology of social sciences. Transaction Publishers, Brunswick

Wreyford N (2015) Birds of a feather: informal recruitment practices and gendered outcomes for screenwriting work in the UK film industry. Sociol Rev 63(1_suppl):84–96

Dr. Margarita Kuleva (PhD in Sociology) is a senior lecturer in sociology at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg. Since September 2018 she also works as chair of the Department of Design and Contemporary at the same university. She held a position of a research fellow of the Centre for German and European Studies, St. Petersburg State University, and Bielefeld University. Kuleva has collaborated as a researcher and curator with a number of Russian and international cultural institutions, including Manifesta Biennale, Goethe Institute, and New Holland St. Petersburg. One of her main research interests is creative labor. In 2012–2016, she studied post-Soviet creativity, looking at the example of the careers and professional identities of young cultural workers in the hybrid cultural economy in Russia. Some findings from these studies are presented in recent journal publications, for example, *Cultural Studies* (2018).