Use Value and the Contemporary Work of Art

Freeing Art from the Present Technocratic Framework

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According to John Byrne, who works at the School of Art and Design in Liverpool, autonomy in art is by no means a given any more, but a socially constructed and produced possibility that constantly must be fought for. Using Marx's distinctions between 'work' and 'labour', and 'use value' and 'exchange value', he investigates the role and significance that art could have in the 'smooth, mirror-like surface of global capital'.

Since the world was gripped by the banking crisis of 2007, the internal logic that underpinned the globalized neoliberal economy has continued to implode under the weight of its own contradiction. The inability of a deregulated multinational economy to look after itself is plain for all to see – as is the lie that economic deregulation would guarantee a fairer distribution of wealth. Yet no viable alternative to this system has been allowed to emerge – the rich get richer, the debt gets bigger, the middle classes continue to lose their influence and the poor foot the bill. In November 2011, new 'technocratic' governments were imposed on Greece and Italy by a European Union in financial crisis. The hope seems to be that 'sensible' and 'apolitical' solutions can be found before the collapse of the single European currency finally pushes the global economy over the brink of the abyss. All of this drama has, of course, caused a series of systemic shifts and ruptures within the once comfortable world of contemporary art. Furthermore, these shifts and ruptures have not simply been caused by the substantial withdrawal of public funding over recent years in countries such as the UK and the Netherlands. As the Dutch situation shows, there is a change in the public's conception of contemporary art. What was once generally accepted as a necessary and functioning component of a progressive and self-reflexive society is now treated with distrust and disdain. Furthermore, within a newly emerging form of populist politics, parties of both left and right have shown a willingness to use the suspicion now surrounding contemporary art as a tool for political gain.[1]

At the crux of these debates remains the complex issue of art's alleged autonomy. While the European tradition of art's self-referential and self-contained aesthetic autonomy has long since been debunked as an ideological fantasy, its legacy still haunts the production, distribution and consumption of contemporary art. Perhaps more importantly, art's alleged autonomy is now often confused with more general uses of the term to describe a type of economic freedom, or more accurately agency, which is held to be the ideological cornerstone of globalized neoliberal economics. An example of this can be found in the 'Big Society' election pledge that the current UK Prime Minister David Cameron made in 2010. The idea of the Big Society was to give further autonomy to citizens in the governance of their own lives – by encouraging the breakdown of government offices and councils into

independent small businesses and by allowing communities to establish their own 'self-help' charities. In reality, such rhetoric provides little more than a gloss over new forms of centralized capital deregulation which continue to erode the power and rights of under-represented and vulnerable individuals. And yet the proximity of such rhetoric to the emancipatory dreams of the historical avant-gardes is striking; it is this proximity of language, between the utopianism of avant-garde rhetoric and the systematic instrumentalization of neoliberal discourse, that is the key problem that we must all now confront. Artists, critics, theorists, curators, gallerists and museologists alike are faced with the task of pinpointing 'just what it is that makes art special' in a world where contemporary art has long since become indistinguishable from all other forms of popular culture and mass media.

However, due to the legacy of the high art/low life divide, by which art in the bourgeois epoch was defined by its alleged superiority to kitsch, many critical, curatorial and evaluative methodologies still depend upon the a priori assumption that art somehow occupies a different kind of critical space. Artists, we are still too often told, just see things differently from the rest of us. While this lingering anachronism may still sell blockbuster shows and coffee-table biographies, its danger is twofold. On the one hand it denies the critical proximity and interdependence of contemporary art practice to the production of meaning within society. On the other, it also propagates and popularizes another key habitual assumption – that art's autonomy is something of a given. When these two key assumptions begin to get mixed up in the call for art's autonomy to be financially protected by the state, the neoliberal response is clear – what better way is there to prove art's autonomy than by its financial survival within the cut and thrust of the open market? However, the current situation facing the production and distribution of meaningful contemporary art is much more complex than this. Art's autonomy is not simply a given, it is a condition that has to be continually fought over and struggled for in an era of globalized neoliberalism – and this struggle is the precondition for the production of contemporary art if its meaning is still to have any political consequence.

Complicity

Contemporary art, if it is to be of any use at all, has to do more than simply contribute financially to the emergent tourism and leisure industries – it has to help us identify the cracks, fissures and ambiguities within the rhetoric of similarity and certitude that are currently provided for us by transnational capital in decline. The use value of contemporary art in this sense would seem to remain at least partially utilitarian; in the best traditions of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century avant-gardes we need art and artists to help us re-think ourselves in a moment of crisis. The problem with this, of course, is that neither art, nor the self-proclaimed job of the artist, is anything special any more. Ever since Warhol replaced the self-referentiality of the painterly surface with the self-referential celebration of his own image, the job of art changed. If art's 'artness' had previously resided in a functionless preoccupation with its own separate and remote world, it is now firmly situated within the functional operations of commercial culture. Warhol's work in film and early video, the grooming of his superstars, his work with the Velvet Undergound and the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, the founding of Interview magazine, his MTV series and, perhaps most of all, his constant longing for the glitz and glamour of Hollywood, provide a Rosetta Stone for analysing the shifting role of art within an all-encompassing society of image. In the age of self-image and self-aestheticization, a world in which the continual manicure of appearance has become interchangeable with the search for self-identity, the qualitative evaluation of art has become interchangeable with the quantitative evaluation of popularity, celebrity, visitor figures and auction-house sales.

This new proximity of art to everyday life, once the messianic dream of the historical avant-gardes, has made it increasingly difficult for artists and art institutions alike to distinguish their output from more instrumentalized forms of corporate entertainment, advertising and

leisure service. To make matters more complicated, the working methods of artists are now shared and understood by the majority of people who go to look at art in galleries or assist artists in the production of their work. The issue is not that art has become a philosophical question, as Danto argued, simply because it is impossible to tell art apart from other everyday objects on a purely visual basis.[2] Nor is it, as Claire Bishop has argued, that a division is opening up between the ethical and aesthetic role and function of art in our society – where ethics, seen as little more than the artists imperative to do good, is pitted against an aesthetic that offers imaginary asylum for political dissent.[3] Instead, the problem for contemporary art is that artists have become implicated within and complicit with the very regimes of capitalization they try to resist – like everybody else. Art now shares the very procedures that neoliberal economies have deployed to produce the false freedoms of the creative economies. As the artist Liam Gillick has put it: 'The accusation . . . is that artists are at best the ultimate freelance knowledge workers and at worst barely capable of distinguishing themselves from the consuming desire to work at all times, neurotic people who deploy a series of practices that coincide quite neatly with the requirements of neoliberal, predatory, continually mutating capitalism of the every moment. Artists are people who behave, communicate and innovate in the same manner as those who spend their days trying to capitalize every moment and exchange of daily life. They offer no alternative to this.'[4]

Use Value and Exchange Value

This proximity of contemporary artistic work to the labour patterns of audiences for art has quite explicit consequences for any possible theorizations of artistic autonomy. At the most basic level, the action of deciding to become an artist doesn't make that much of a difference now in terms of how one might live out a lifestyle or construct a livelihood. The idea of the free, self-determining Bohemian – most succinctly characterized by the image of the artist with a folding easel strapped to his back who is greeting a collector in Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet – has long since given way to the image of the artist attached to her laptop, mobile phone in hand, inquiring about a recent residency or funding application while waiting for the latest video edit to render. On a more sophisticated level, the post-structuralist shift away from a relatively fixed Enlightenment concept of the historical subject in the 1960s and 1970s, and its subsequent conceptual replacement by more fluid theories of a social body contingent upon process, has long since allowed for a radical re-think of the possible terms and conditions of autonomy within capitalist culture. According to Franco Berardi, autonomy can now be seen as 'the self-regulation of the social body in its independence and in its interaction with the disciplinary norm'.[5] However, the corollary to this less idiosyncratic and personalized notion of autonomy in the social sphere has been the concomitant processes of industrialized deregulation that has spread across the globe since the Regan/Thatcher era.

For Berardi, the historical demand of workers for freedom from industrial constraints has been answered by the 'flexibilisation and the fractalisation of labour'.[6] This has taken the shape of the freeing up of enterprise from the juridical role of the state, cutbacks in social spending, the dismantling of social protections, de-taxation, industrial downsizing and the outsourcing of production. The result of this process, Berardi argues, has been a growth in recombinant labour (flexible forms of labour that are no longer closely connected to particular industrial processes and can be easily moved from one place to the other) and the 'fragmentation of time-activity'. The labourer has become an 'interchangeable producer of micro-fragments', and for Berardi, it is now the cell phone that 'is the tool that best defines the relationship between the fractal worker and recombinant capital'. In this scenario the self-organization of cognitive labour seems to offer the only plausible form of resistance in a world in which the utopia of Enlightenment reason has failed. It is 'the dissemination of self-organized knowledge', Berardi argues, that 'can create a social framework containing infinite autonomous and self-reliant worlds'.

The dominance of neoliberal capitalism over the last decades has eroded our sense of community though the continual promotion of competition and individual needs, but the recent mobilization of resistance against power (from the protests of the Arab Spring, the anti-capital occupations of financial zones such as Wall Street, and even the inchoate and 'politically incorrect' commodity riots in the UK) all point towards the re-emergence of a social body that has been lost. In the light of this, the job of artists or poets for Berardi is to free words, language and concepts from their daily form, to release their meaning from an increasingly instrumentalized, technocratic and abstract chain of conformity – a chain of conformity that has torn language away from its roots in the social production of identity – and to re-imagine a place 'where we can again be lovers'. [7]

To posit the work or job of the artist or poet firmly within the reconstruction and reconstitution of a living common socius in this way – and to pit this against the reduction and abstraction of language into a technocratic framework for the propagation of commodified individuals – is a manoeuvre that traces its roots back to the separation that Marx attempted to make in Das Kapital between use value and commodity or exchange value. As Fredric Jameson has recently reminded us, Marx was keen to bracket use value off from exchange value in any consideration of the commodity form. Marx argued that use value did not matter one jot to the capitalist who wished to sell commodities – that the capitalist would only ever consider use value in so far as it could assist the profitable sale of units. This argument belied a more fundamental and metaphysical distinction, which underpinned much of Marx's thought, between Quality and Quantity on one hand and Body and Mind (or Soul) on the other. As James points out, Marx tended to equate Quality with the Body and physicality – as a positive term in the materialist sense – and Quantity with the vagaries of the Mind or Soul – in a negative and idealist sense. For Jameson: 'Use value is therefore quality; it is the life of the body, of existential or phenomenological experience, of the consumption of physical products, but also the very texture of physical work and physical time . . . Quality is human time itself, whether in labor or in the life outside of labor; and it is this deep existential constant that justifies that Utopian strain in Marxism which anticipates the transformation of work into aesthetic activity (from Ruskin to Morris, from Marcuse to Paulo Virno's notion of virtuosity), a tradition somewhat different from the Hegelian delight in activity and the more orthodox celebration of work or productivity as a central human drive.' [8]

In this sense, it is also interesting to remember that this distinction frequently underpinned Marx's use of the term work – as the form of labour that creates use value and therefore quality – and his use of the term labour – as an indication of a commodifiable capacity that can be bought by the capitalist and used to produce exchange value and quantity. In this sense, the use value of art is intimately linked with the kind of work that the work of art has now become; it is the work of Berardi's poets, the work of those who try to rescue the vagaries and uncertainties of socially produced meaning from the rigid frameworks of consensus and conformity, the struggle to exploit and make sense of minute cracks and fissures that currently seem to be opening up in the smooth, mirror-like surface of global capital.

The Constant Search for Meaningful Art

But what kind of role can art really play in the reconstitution of a socially autonomous body? How can artists, curators, critics and intellectuals usefully contribute to the development of a constantly shifting network of micro self-reliance and resistance? How can we even begin to consider opening up the cracks and fissures that are emerging in the surface of globalized neoliberal capital? And what, if any, are the meaningful strategies for releasing the vagaries of language from the straightjacket of capital? Perhaps one way to begin thinking these questions though was recently offered by Tania Bruguera when, in January 2011, she initiated the 'Useful Art Association'. For Bruguera, the production of

Useful Art is an activity that attempts to confront the hierarchies that have developed between different kinds of audiences. This activity also necessitates an exploration of the divisions that have opened up between the languages of art and the historical avant-garde on one hand, and the more immanent languages of politics, science and other disciplines on the other. As such, Bruguera tends to associate Useful Art with projects that are capable of generating and sustaining a range of critical relationships over an extended period of time. For Bruguera 'Useful Art aims to transform some aspects of society through the implementation of art, transcending symbolic representation or metaphor and proposing with their activity some solutions for deficits in reality'.[9] An example of this approach can be found in Bruguera's own project The Immigrant Movement International, which is a one-year-long artist initiated social movement. The project consists of operating 'a flexible community space in the multinational and transnational neighborhood of Corona, Queens'.[10] Bruguera is working alongside residents, activits, policymakers, politicians, artists and international communities to tackle issues around the representation of immigrants in our society and culture. In this way, The Immigrant Workers International uses art to re-address the social production and discourses of identification that tell us who is or what it means to be an immigrant, and what it may mean to be a citizen of the world.

If artistic autonomy is no longer a given but rather a socially constructed and produced possibility, then it is something that has to be continually struggled over and worked for. This struggle, this work to open up spaces of critical autonomy within the instrumentalizing constraints of a neoliberal economy, then becomes both the kind of work that is now the work of art and also the use value of that work. Admittedly, it is still quite difficult to think of use value and work as being part of the project of contemporary art, let alone its central tenet or a means by which to identify and evaluate its potential or worth. After all, isn't the most obvious way to defeat the commodification of art to make a supremely useless work? However, what I propose here is precisely a rethinking of utility that abandons entrenched oppositions between utility and non-utility as if they were simply antinomies, relegating use value to applied art whereas art's 'artness' is made to depend upon the condition of its non-utility.

One project that is relevant here is Grizedale Art's ongoing attempt to re-imagine and reclaim the nineteenth-century English radical John Ruskin. Over the last decade, Grizedale Arts have sustained and developed a highly unique and cutting-edge commissioning programme by simply asking artists what kinds of things they would do if they decided to make themselves useful. Here, the emphasis is no longer on the production of tangible art objects but rather on the production of ideas, solutions and new knowledge.[11] While Ruskin is usually seen as a conservative figure, and commonly held to be emblematic of all things Victorian and backward-looking, Grizedale is keen to resuscitate his role as an activist in early workers' education movements or 'Mechanics Institutes' as they were called (where art played an integral and integrated role in a rounded and multidisciplinary approach to learning and improvement). In this way, through an active and imaginative recycling of a previously fixed history, Grizedale Arts is attempting to release the use value that resides in the anachronistic social radicalism of John Ruskin's work – as opposed to the contemporary exchange value of his work which results, more often than not, from the continual revalidation of his more conservative opinions.

To ask the question 'what kind of work is the work of art?' is an attempt to identify how artists, critics, curators, writers, radicals, etcetera are attempting to open up spaces of critical autonomy, however short lived these may be, within the current confines of a globalized neoliberal economy. It is an attempt, therefore, to reopen a territory within which the complex relationships between arts' ethical and aesthetic functions can be understood as complex forms of interaction and, as such, analysed more clearly within the age of the global image. It is, perhaps, the only way we can now imagine any future for a meaningful art.

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Footnotes

1. This shift in opinion has been recently illustrated by the difficulties engulfing the Van Abbemuseum. In October 2011 the local Social Democratic Party in Eindhoven effectively put the Director of the Van Abbemuseum, Charles Esche, on trial. The charge was that hospitality, progressive thinking, commissioning new works, the production of engaging contemporary art shows and, finally, a dialogical and inclusive curatorial process were both un-Dutch and unprofitable.
2. Arthur C. Danto's famous adage 'Art After the End of Art' refers not to the end of art as such, but to a Hegelian notion that art has entered a new phase in which it has become a philosophical question. See for Example Arthur C. Danto, *Art After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
3. See Claire Bishop's article 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', *Artforum*, February 2006, 179-185.
4. Liam Gillick, 'The Good of Work', *e-flux Journal* 16, 05 2010, www.e-flux.com.
5. Franco Berardi, 'What is the Meaning of Autonomy Today', eipcp.net.
6. All other quotations in this paragraph: ibid.
7. I refer here to Berardi's contribution to the Autonomy Symposium, 9 October 2011.
8. Frederic Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London/New York: Verso, 2011), 19-20.
9. www.taniabruguera.com.
10. Ibid.
11. www.grizedalearts.org.

Tags

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