Art-worlds and values: a retrospective

Malcolm Miles

Art is a blue-chip commodity traded globally as an investment vehicle and a status symbol. It is also an element in cultural tourism, not least in ubiquitous museums of contemporary art acting as high-visibility markers of a district's re-branding. Making art, meanwhile, remains a vocation for many artists known only within their own milieu who rely on multiple and often precarious sources of income. Yet it would be too easy to set up an oppositional dualism of market values and self-expression. Modern art was always both a commodity *and* a vehicle for personal, social and political communication. The difficulty is that art is mediated by an art world – an informal but strong network of private-sector dealers, public-sector curators, collectors, critics, and a few artists who are successful in the art world's terms. This network produces a consensus of which art gains market and public access, and is a modern sub-set of the Establishment, its membership determined not by aristocratic birth but by money and cultural capital. Since the 1990s, however, a few global art brands have gained dominance of the market, while contemporary art has become increasingly collectable. None of this has anything to do with aesthetics but much to do with the conditions of art's production. This in no way denies the experiences of spectators in the art museum, which may be uplifting, but does require a sociological perspective, an investigation of art's relation to other areas of society's production of its values and organisation? In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin asked in his lecture 'The Author as Producer'[1] how writing intervenes in the means of production. I take this as a question valid today in conditions, not of anti-fascism (although the far-Right has returned) but of globalisation. I begin in the 1980s with Howard Becker's sociology of art's production and distribution, *Art Worlds* (1982);[2] I move next to Michael Baxandall's art-historical rejection of individualism in favour of a set of determining factors, or brief, for art, then reconsider Benjamin's text, comparing his example of art-in-society in the Soviet Union to Albert Camus' engagement with workers' theatre in Algiers in the same period. Finally, I look to contemporary art, not as seen in contemporary art museums but as produced by dissident groups who constitute, perhaps, an alternative art world.

Sociology and art worlds

Becker brought a sociological method to the study of art's production and distribution. To use the terms production and distribution, drawn from economics, was to refuse art's aura and mystique, seeing it as a product of social and economic conditions. Art's aura had been undermined in 1936 in Benjamin's essay 'The Artwork in a Time of Technical Reproducibility' (*Das Kunstwerk in Zeitalter seiner techniscen Reproduzierbarkeit*), through new technologies of reproduction in photography and film.[3] This essay was used in art and design education from the 1970s onwards although art's special status remains ingrained as its competitive edge in the art market as art in higher education became radicalised and the market did not – and in my view was not by Street Art in the 2000s, either, when graffiti was re-coded as a collectable category popular in the financial services sector.

The same competitive edge – art outside society – was served, earlier, by the myth of the artist as social incompetent, as in the film *The Horse's Mouth* (Ronald Neame, 1958), based

on a 1944 novel by Joyce Cary.[4] The film depicts artist Gulley Jimson, played by Alec Guinness, whose haphazard progress – working on a houseboat, then in a patron's house where he sells the valuables to fund a wall-painting of the Raising of Lazarus – is advanced when another patron dies and bequeaths his collection of Jimson's work to the nation. It is shown in the Tate Gallery. Finally, Jimson drives a bulldozer into a church in which he has painted the Last Judgement. Artistic vision is set against social integration, the torments of creativity against social codes of behaviour and property. But all is well because Jimson is an artist, however mad and hapless, even self-destructive. The film portrays the artist's social contract as being a dreamer whose dreams are asocial (affirmed by religious imagery), who is inept in any dealings with the world. This is an English view expressing a fear of ideas or culture; but it was ingrained, reappearing in Tony Hancock's portrayal of a disaffected office worker who turns to art in the film *The Rebel* (Robert Day, 1961); he moves to Paris but gains critical acclaim only when someone else's work is mistaken for his own. The myth of the artists' angst was extended by bio-pics on artists from Michelangelo to van Gogh, but Hancock adds a note of scepticism – is his art all his own work (as an individual genius), or a con-trick? Individuality was emphasised by blockbuster exhibitions from the 1960s onwards, lavishly covered in the new colour supplements of weekend broadsheet newspaper, and on television; and the con-trick by cynical journalists, notably Fyfe Robertson on BBC television, always ready to poke fun at modern art. Against this, John Berger's television series *Ways of Seeing* (BBC, 1972) offered a counterblast of sincerity and politicised art history, moving from Benjamin's essay on the artwork to feminist art history, and a critique of Gainsborough in terms of property ownership and class. All this is remote now as the generation of Young British Artists who emerged in the 1990s fuse hype with art to produce instant reputations and market success. Still, cultural stereotypes remain in a society's memory, and a blurring between high art and its coverage in the mass media has produced a composite myth of the artist as both suspect genius and neo-bohemian, inhabiting a city's marginal zones now through gentrification.

Back in 1982, Becker's *Art Worlds* offered a sociological understanding of art contrary to the bohemian myth, insisting that art is *produced* (rather than created) in context of the market, technology, and current social attitudes. Similarly, Janet Wolff wrote in 1983, 'Sociology … presents a challenge to traditional aesthetics.'[5] Wolff charts responses to that challenge as a denial of art's social context; a perhaps justified anxiety as to its reductionism; and a more interesting – to me – reassertion of aesthetic value which, for Wolff, is undermined by its reliance on a canon determined by art historians. Wolff replies to the latter that,

> It is highly problematic to accept this canon uncritically, for, as social science itself makes clear, the art historian who is supposed to have this peculiar, professional access to values is in fact operating within ideologically constructed discourse, and from an ideological position (that is, class0bound, institution-based and biographically influenced). The only thing the social scientist might lack … is a certain training in the languages of art, in iconography, or in other forms of knowledge which inform perception.[6]

Sociology, then, observes that the art world is a sub-set within society in which definitions of art are re-produced by dealers, curators, critics, collectors, artists and, but to a lesser extent, gallery-going publics, making up the art world in Becker's terms Today's art world is global, in art fairs, biennales and museums of contemporary art, but the argument retains currency.

Becker makes several points which may now seem obvious, which I reiterate nonetheless as a basis for discussion. He begins:

> All artistic work … involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. The forms of cooperation may be ephemeral, but often become more or less routine, producing patterns of collective activity we can call an art world. The existence of art worlds, as well as the way their existence affects both the production and consumption of art works, suggests a sociological approach to the arts.[7]

The factors involved in art's production are sedimented in its forms, as are social attitudes in its reception. The way art is perceived is shaped by institutions. On art's distribution, Becker suggests that for most artists,

> Fully developed art worlds … provide distribution systems which integrate artists into their society's economy, bringing art works to publics which appreciate them and will pay enough so that the work can proceed. These distribution systems, like other cooperative activities which make up an art world, can be manned by artists themselves. More commonly, specialised intermediaries do the work. The interests of the intermediaries who operate distribution systems frequently differ from those of the artists whose work they handle.[8]

I would add that the design of art institutions shapes reception: walking through the neo-classical colonnades of the Tate Gallery at Millbank (opened in 1897) instils reverence; and the arrangement of works within it affirms a narrative of art's history. One of Henry Tate's aims as benefactor was to promote British art over foreign competition, for instance.

To draw out a third point, Becker notes the expansion of art worlds since the nineteenth century. His model of the art gallery which houses, 'a dealer … a group of artists … a group of buyers… a critic or critics who help … to build up … a market for the works of the gallery's artists; and a large group of gallery-goers, who attend openings, come to see shows, and generally diffuse interest in the gallery's artists by talking about them,' may be outdated but again emphasises art's social production.[9] Becker adds, 'in complex and highly developed art worlds, specialised professionals – critics and philosophers – create logically organised and philosophically defensible aesthetic systems, and the creation of aesthetic systems can become a major industry in its own right.'[10] Hence a growth in art publishing; and, I would add, in higher education courses on art writing, curating, and so forth, signs of an expanding art world.

Art Worlds broke a number of conventions. Instead of affirming art's aura, Becker reads art as a product of systems of cooperation and competition in a market economy; and observes

that, 'intermediaries … intend to keep the process of production and distribution … orderly and predictable, so that they can continue their operations and thus continue to serve both audiences and artists while profiting themselves.'[11] This may echo Clement Greenberg's idea, in his 1939 essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,'[12] that the purpose of the avant-garde is to keep art moving. Overtaking individual inspiration is art's perpetual innovation, its construction of a mainstream consisting of relentless departures which are immediately reabsorbed. In art, as in white goods and electronics, there is always a new product requiring consumption.

Since the 1980s, the role of cultural intermediaries has expanded as the cultural economy has become an element of immaterial production beside financial services, insurance, public relations, fashion, and advertising. Since the conceptual art of the 1960s, seen by some artists as a refusal of the market, dealers have been instrumental in producing reputations, as befits the immaterial economy. There was also a shift from post-war arts administration in the public interest to arts management on business lines, even in the public sector. Since the 1980s, that is, arts organisations have been required to operate on a business model, seeking new revenue streams to replace declining or more selective public-sector support. In the UK, from 1997, New Labour added a requirement that the arts should address failures in other policy areas by producing employment or improving the image of an inner-city area. When questions were asked about art's efficacy, evidence was lacking. Aims were too vague to be demonstrable; and an army of arts consultants writing bids for lottery funding used elaborate guesswork, like the multiplying factor by which the spin-off benefits of a capital project were predicted. Museum education programmes widened audiences, no doubt, but they did that anyway; in face of failures in housing, education, health or infrastructure, art has no magic bullet while artists tend to be as inept at social work as Gully Jimson at being a member of polite society. The difficulty – profoundly damaging for art – was that artists and small arts organisations saw little choice but to chase finding bodies' agendas. Still, while arts administration morphed into arts management, higher education, already radicalised by Feminism and Post-Colonialism, and using inter-disciplinary approaches, supported other attitudes. For instance, the journal *Block*, edited by art and design historians including Jon Bird and Lisa Tickner at Middlesex University from 1979 to 1989, published critiques beyond the positions of Benjamin (and Theodor Adorno).[13] From the Warburg Institute in London, meanwhile, Baxandall's investigations were published as *Patterns of Intention* (1985), seeing Pablo Picasso's cubism as a product of the Paris art world of the 1910s.[14]

Art as outcome of a brief

Like Becker, Baxandall takes a materialist approach; as an art historian accepts aspects of the canon – Picasso as a major artist - but does so critically, reading art's production in its ideological, social and economic contexts. He adds the idea of what he calls a Charge and a Brief, together determining a work's form, beginning with the design and construction of the Forth Bridge in the 1880s. The Charge is the need to carry a railway north over the Forth; the Brief is based on local factors of geology, the demand for a height enabling ships to pass under, and the strength of winds (after the collapse of the Tay Bridge), technological factors such as the properties and availability of steel, and design of girders, and precedents such as the cantilever (an Eastern type). Then come the abilities of the engineer, Benjamin

Baker, and awareness of contexts to make, 'a three-cornered relationship between the Forth Bridge, an objective task or problem, and … culturally determined possibilities.'[15]

Baker does not *invent* his intention but *receives* it. Baxandall summarises the sequence of his interpretation of the Forth Bridge:

> The sequence began by positing that the object of interest, the Bridge, was a concrete solution to a problem. … In trying to identify it one came first to the general *Charge* … From this one moved on to more specific terms of the problem, which I called the *Brief* … Together Charge and Brief seemed to constitute a *problem* to which we might see the bridge as a solution.[16]

He does not exclude aesthetics: Baker produced an eloquent as well as practicable solution. Baxandall follows his account of the Forth Bridge by his discussion of Picasso's *Portrait of Kahnweiler* (1910, Chicago, Art Institute). The portrait was a, 'purposeful object,' and, 'not necessarily in principle different [from the Forth Bridge]. The differences are of degree and of balance, 'particularly the balance of our interest or our critical priorities.'[17] Baxandall adds, 'the painter's role has been to make marks on a plane surface in such a way that their visual interest is directed to an end. This is less a definition pf painting than a specification of the sort of painting I wish to cover.'[18]Picasso's Brief includes the representation of three-dimensional objects in two dimensions; manipulations of form and colour as oppositional allegiances; and instantaneousness: the painter's, 'moment of experience' which is also the result of lengthy reworking in the studio.[19] Baxandall sets out three creative tensions:

- Flat plane and three-dimension object;
- Form and colour;
- Fictive instantaneousness and sustained engagement.

In addition there is the painter's knowledge of past art:

> The specific terms of the painter's problem are liable to be primarily a specific view of past painting. The same is so of the Charge … [which] resided in the body of previous painting Picasso would have acknowledged … He may or not have conceptualised to himself on what painting is about. One would guess he did now and then, but it is not necessary to us that he should have, and we are not concerned to reconstruct his actual thoughts if he did.

No notes in the margin; no biographical speculation. Many other art historians have taken a similarly non-Romantic view. For instance, Norbert Lynton writes on the work of painter Ken Kiff, '[It] looks very easy. Self-expression: you just open your heart and dip your brush in it. In fact, the demands of true self-expression are infinite and acute if there is something you want to say and you care enough about getting it right.'[20] Lynton uses different categories, relying on an idea of emotiveness, and the *work* of making art, but the result is to eschew notions of spilling the heart on the canvas in favour of a grounded process. Similarly, writing on abstract art in Paris in the 1910s, Virginia Spate cites Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Francis Picabia, and Frank Kupka as conceiving their art, 'as an expression of modern consciousness … influenced by contemporary science, technology, literature, and philosophy as well as by

the actual experience of living in the contemporary world.'[21] That, indeed, was one reason artists gravitated to cities such as Paris, beside the critical mass of artists, critics and dealers constituting the art world of the day.[22]

Baxandall goes a step further in his analysis of Picasso's picture, however, by citing market conditions in Paris in the early 1910s. In particular, a tension between two groups of cubists: Georges Braque and Picasso showing with private dealers; and Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger showing in public Salons. David Cottington also notes this divide, and the expansion of the Paris art world with 17,000 works exhibited in the salons of 1911, beside a growing network of private dealers. He summarises:

> For the growth of the dealer system was not only a response to pressures on the supply side of the art market, but also a function of developments on the demand side. While private galleries needed artists willing to place their work with them …they also needed patrons willing to buy this work. From the mid-1890s buyers began to appear in sufficient numbers to make speculative dealing in, and collection of, contemporary art feasible.[23]

Baxandall reads Picasso's decision to show in private galleries is a condition of his practice, leading him to paint portraits of dealers such as Vollard and Kahnweiler and supporting his development of a new visual language. Dealers affirmed the individualism of their artists, and Guillaume Apollinaire wrote, 'the good artist has a new and individual voice,'[24] that model of the individual was itself socially produced.

The means of production

Since the 1910s, the art world, in Becker's terms, has changed (as it has since the 1980s). As well as the turn from arts administration to arts management in the 1990s, the plethora of small, independently curated galleries which emerged in London, some curated by artists, was dissipated by the arrival of global art outlets and the higher rents which followed inner-city gentrification. Links exist across the public-private divide, when collectors or dealers loan works to a public institution (raising its status), and the consensus of the Contemporary continues; but the number of players has reduced while their status has risen. Against this grain of globalisation a new dissidence has emerged among artists' groups and collectives, their collaboration itself refuting art's individualism.

The tension between artists' groups and the global alliance of corporate and institutional players has led to campaigns such as Liberate Tate and Art Not Oil, linked to the London-based artists' collective Platform. Liberate Tate ceased operation in 2017, but hitherto used non-sanctioned performances art in institutional spaces to draw attention to the global oil industry's use of art institutions to gain respectability. Most members of Liberate Tate were past or present workers in the cultural economy, and their campaign to end Tate's use of oil money was inserted into an institution at the time seeking a radical edge within its brand-image, along with its chic occupation of a redundant industrial building.[25] In 2013, Liberate Tate offered Tate a wind turbine blade, carrying it over the bridge linking Tate Modern to the financial district. Called *The Gift*, the project played on ambivalences: the quintessential modernist object of the white blade was offered to a modernist collection; and carrying it into Tate's turbine hall played on the previous use of the site as a power station. *The Gift*

was declined, not surprisingly since Liberate Tate were not contained by a polite cordon against politics, but only after 8,000 of Tate's members wrote in support of accepting it.[26] Beside affirmative links between public- and private-sector art institutions, then, emerged a dissonance between that alliance and art-work contributing to social and environmental justice. The Charge, in Baxandall's terms, was to end oil sponsorship. The Brief included local factors such as Tate's brand-image, sustainable technology (on the site of a fossil-fuel power station), and the modernist canon based on a relation of form to function. The wit, to add a new element, was to play on that brand-image, exploiting its cracks to draw out a powerful message.

Occupying the means of production

Liberate Tate, then, occupied the means of art's distribution. Their work could be situated in a history of workers' taking over the means of production (factories) in Russia in 1917, and factory occupations in France in 1934 during the Popular Front, and in May 1968 as students occupied universities (and Hornsey School of Art in London); but it is ephemeral, in keeping with much post-1960s performative art practice. I see a parallel here with Benjamin's idea that writing should occupy the means of literary production, articulated to a gathering of Communist writers in Paris in 1934.

Benjamin argued that while writers on the Left described social conditions, it was necessary to insert writing within them: 'the rigid, isolated object (work, novel, book) is of no use whatsoever. It must be inserted into the context of living social relations. … Social relations are … determined by production relations.'[27] Benjamin sets aside literary descriptions of social production and class, to ask what writing's position is within that production. In other words, how writing acts in the production of society. He gives the example of the Soviet writer Sergey Tretyakov's move to the Communist Lighthouse collective farm: 'the operative writer's mission is not to report but to fight; not to assume the spectator's role but to intervene actively.'[28] He lists Tretyakov's tasks there as, 'calling mass meetings; collecting funds for down-payments on tractors; persuading private farmers to join the collective farm; inspecting reading rooms; launching wall newspapers and directing the collective farm's newspaper; reporting to Moscow newspapers; introducing radio, travelling film shows, etc.'[29] This radically widens the task of writing but is problematic, given the famine which followed Stalin's collectivising of agriculture. Nonetheless, the example illustrates a reconstruction of the work of literature in social terms, and Benjamin adds the example of text provided by readers in the Soviet press, collapsing the divide between readers and writers when readers become writers.[30]

Later in the talk, Benjamin refers to photomontage as following the Dada practice of using scraps of material from ordinary life:

> The revolutionary strength of Dadaism lay in testing art for its authenticity. You made still-lifes out of tickets, spools of cotton, cigarette stubs, and mixed them with pictorial elements. You put a frame round the whole thing. And in this way you said to the public look, your picture frame destroys time; the smallest authentic fragment of everyday life says more than painting. … Much of this revolutionary attitude passed into

> photomontage. You need only think of the works of John Heartfield, whose technique made the book jacket into a political instrument.[31]

Today, Dada is assimilated in art history; in 1934, its radicalism was more immediate, its use of collage collapsing the divide between the aesthetic and the everyday.

Esther Leslie comments on Benjamin's example of Tretyakov, 'In the sphere of political aesthetics, transforming the cultural and educational apparatus involves the organisation of writers; workshops, artists' studios and staging popular theatre, as well as the engagement of revolutionary intellectuals in literary programmes and journalism.'[32] Benjamin found a new mode of reception in readers' active interpretation of what they read, stating, 'this element of co-participation, made possible by … technology and technique, determines the revolutionary status of a cultural object.'[33] The lecture was also an intervention in political aesthetics specific to Communist circles, which prioritised class. For Benjamin, literature is political when it engenders new forms of production-consumption, rejecting a model of macro-sequential development for one of interruption in each microcosmic moment. Leslie writes, 'patterns of social existence rely on the mobilisation of the elective affinity between technology and humanity, and art is the realm where this elective affinity can be played out.'[34] Art participates in social change by shifting the categories through which the world is apprehended. Leslie, after Benjamin, citing Heartfield, writes, 'Allegory, film and montage are capable of transmitting a broken vicious misery now, as well as relying on the possibility for critique of that brokenness.'[35]

To give another case, coincidentally but from the same period as Tretyakov's work on the collective farm and Benjamin's talk in Paris, Albert Camus participated in the organisation and practice of popular theatre in Algiers in 1935-1936. Having qualified at an intermediate level in the French-Algerian education system, Camus was part of a white intellectual circle in Algiers. Exempted from military service due to illness, Camus wrote newspaper criticism, worked in theatre, and joined the Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes (CVIA) in 1935. There, he worked in the College du Travail, a workers' educational organisation. Herbert Lottman notes,

> They would find a roster of students assigned to them by the unions, and then go out to scrounge rooms which could be used for classes. Usually they were shabby rooms in run-down neighbourhoods. Camus would come in during classes to give pep talks, clearly enjoying what he was doing. But he could also bewilder working-class students by telling them that true revolution was not a matter of wearing better shoes but of dignity.[36]

Extending the model of the workers' college, Camus and his circle set up Théatre du Travail.

Lottman comments that there is no evidence that this was part of a career strategy; instead, 'all the evidence suggests that it was after adapting and casting, directing and acting in his first plays that he discovered how essential the theatre was to his life.'[37] Among Théatre du Travail's productions were an adaptation by Camus of André Malraux's novel *Le Temps du mépris* (written initially to contribute to a campaign for anti-fascists imprisoned in Germany, and Camus' first play), and *Révolte dans les Asturias*, jointly authored by Camus and three colleagues, written in a house Camus shared overlooking the Bay of Algiers, based on the

proclamation in 1934 of a Workers' and Peasants' Republic in Oviedo (suppressed by the Moroccan and Foreign Legion troops who would later stage the fascist coup). *Révolte dans les Asturias* was banned on the excuse that it was dangerous during an election campaign, which meant that funds collected for the performance were lost; but the play was published as text, additional elements added by Camus, writing in a café, at the last moment. Printed by a sympathiser at 1 Franc per copy, the edition of five hundred sold out in two weeks.

Théatre du Travail's next production was Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, set in a hostel for destitute people, with scenery designed by Pierre-André Emery, who worked with Le Corbusier. Emery used wooden cubes to build up several stage levels, and plywood screens. It was all improvised, but a review observed, 'the beauty of certain scenes to which the play of shadows in silhouettes … lent an air of fantasy.'[38] After this, Camus moved to Radio Alger, and had begun a collection of texts under the title *La Mort hereuse*.[39]

Camus' involvement in Théatre du Travail was brief, since overshadowed by his novels. It was also hectic, improvising both text and staging; and in context, in a colonial setting, of efforts to extend workers' education to the un-enfranchised Arab population. But tensions emerged between Camus and his colleagues as he saw himself as the leading figure, and perhaps there was a latent tension between engagement in workers' theatre and that house overlooking the bay where he wrote looking out across the bay, into the azure. In an irony of history, too, Emery's link to Le Corbusier offers the contradiction that Le Corbusier's plan for the redevelopment of Algiers would have needed a totalitarian regime to be realised (and would have erased most of the Arab quarter, except a few houses to be used as a cultural centre). Still, Camus provides another case of literary engagement, of more lasting impact than Tretyakov's. It was also the situation in which Camus began his first novel, *La Mort hereuse*, a dry run for *L'Etranger* (*The Outsider*.)[40]

Audiences matter, both in a history of radical theatre as a means of encouraging revolt, and, as Becker observes, in completing a work. For Becker, audiences have a fleeting involvement yet they, 'select what will occur as an art work by giving or withholding their participation in an event or their attention to an object, and by attending selectively to what they do attend to.'[41] He continues,

> Remember that the object of our analysis is not the art work as isolated object or event but the entire process through which it is made and remade whenever someone experiences or appreciates it. That gives a special importance to the audience's contribution. From this viewpoint, any work has only those characteristics its observers notice and respond to on any particular occasion. Whatever its physical properties, they do not exist in the experience of people who do not know or care about them. They appear and disappear, depending on what the audience knows how to perceive.[42]

There is some naivety in lending the audience free will as to what they see, actually limited by what distribution systems make available; as Adorno says of the movies: 'the dream industry does not so much fabricate the dreams of customers as introduce the dreams of the suppliers among the people.'[43] Yet there is a valid point: an art work exists when it is apprehended. The lesson is that it is possible to change the conditions of that apprehension.

Art worlds in the 2010s.

To sum up: Becker establishes that art is *produced*. Baxandall elaborates this, coincidentally, in terms of the artist's response to a set of conditions. Benjamin, from Tretyakov, or Camus in workers' theatre, offer two ways in which a writer can intervene in social structures. And in today's globalised art world, its institutions central to urban redevelopment, Liberate Tate offer a means to change perceptions of that art world in an oblique critique of capitalism. All this is far from the growth industry of art's expansion in the immaterial (symbolic) economy, and the adoption of the buzzword Creativity in New Labour's universal social fix.

Robert Hewison writes, 'The hope was that creativity would resolve the ancient problem for the left that hierarchies of taste … are built on unevenly distributed cultural capital … The market would replace heirarchy with a benign pluralism.'[44] But it didn't. Cultural and money capital are closer than ever. But Hewison concludes,

> Cultural capital is not an exclusive commodity that can be traded in the market. It is a public good whose value increases when more people possess it, not fewer. The sole purpose of public policy should be to enlarge it, by making it as freely available as possible to as many people as possible. Cultural capital is the knowledge that is gained from engagement with the arts and heritage; it is the emotional as well as intellectual intelligence developed through access to the imaginative world of the arts and the collective memory of a shared heritage; it is the expressive cultural capability that results.[45]

Yes, but how? Culture cannot be distributed to the masses like bread and circuses, because all publics already have culture (in the anthropological sense), and because such distribution maintains a power relation of giver and (deserving, grateful) receiver. Besides, it cannot be assumed that the art world is benign. Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan (Hewitt+Jordan) write,

> We try to emphasise that art and cultural systems are not benign; they are a significant part of society and are deeply affected by political and ideological agendas. We believe in the possibility of art having some agency in the development and support of democratic systems. The dominance of advanced capital makes it all the more vital to maintain art as a space for thinking and for contesting authority and the prevailing culture.[46]

The systems are, I agree, not benign; but they are presented as nice, intellectually untaxing, and an adjunct to an even nicer consumerism. In this context, a few artists have joined the lists of celebrities (known not for their work but because they are appear in mass media).

Perhaps the point of departure for dissidence today is to draw attention to the overlap of money and cultural capital. On oil's sponsorship of Tate, Mel Evans writes, 'Members, artists and activists who object to the implicit propping up of the oil company by the nation's largest cultural institutions are part of a diverse response to a conversation initiated by the cultural institutions themselves.'[47] Liberate Tate accepted the invitation by adding to the programme (without asking). Citing an art critic who said Liberate Tate's activists should join Occupy, Evans responds, 'his blasting was misplaced: activities challenging corporate power in gallery spaces are part of a diverse range of political arts practice' which intervene in

social and political arenas through, ‘a distinct focus on the practices of art galleries.’[48] The art world is, after all, a sub-set of the wider world, and working in its crevices is a means to critique that wider world’s organisation and values, or the chasm between its organisation and the values of a just society.

Political aesthetics is unwelcome in such sites despite a history of museums as locations of public education. Liberate Tate’s interventions demonstrated that structures presented as neutral are political, in effect evolving an alternative art world. Performative practices were also used by the Carrot Workers’ Collective and Precarious Workers’ Brigade, campaigning against the use of unpaid internships and precarious employment in art institutions.[49] If art is a sector of the economy, changing how one sector operates is to intervene in the means of production (in Benjamin’s terms). Looking at the art world, indeed, reveals its similarity to other aspects of the global financial system.

Bruce Barber accuses, ‘mega art stars, gallerists, collectors, publishers, art critics and art historians’ of participating in a Ponzi (pyramid sales) scheme while, ‘curators are perhaps implicated in the pyramid scheme as equivalent to hedge fund managers levering symbolic capital in the artists and art works they curate … to add actual capital to their own market value as privileged artworld gate keepers.’[50] The Ponzi scheme model might be supported by the manufacture of reputations by art dealers, and their manipulation of the system in dropping some artists and promoting others to senior (more expensive) status. There are, too, networking opportunities through membership of museum boards. The art world is, in a way then, a sub-set of the Establishment, also an informal consensus but of power rather than taste.

This power structure underpins the art world’s ambience of privilege. Gregory Sholette writes,

> When contemplating who runs, or rules, the artworld, let me suggest a pair of contrasting interpretive models or narratives. The first assumes high art to be an institutional structure that is indirectly ruled over by powerful elites whose objectives are ultimately driven less by a love of art or culture, than by the need to maintain their covert, as well as sometimes overt, ideological signals involving the direct economic control of museum boards, the ownership of gatekeeper galleries, but also a more roundabout mode of academic policing … The second … also approaches high culture as an institutional structure. But rather than being ruled-over by the agenda of specific class, state, or business interests … it is instead a self-replicating programme, or set of instructions, that operates across a bandwidth of formal and informal networks, and increasingly within both high and low, or mass, culture. … [It is] a symbolic economy operating with the twin currencies of prestige and cultural capital., two forms of artworld booty that one hopes to harvest for the purposes of career advancement.[51]

I quote Sholette at length because his dual model is convincing. But I think the two forms overlap and shade into one another as power relations are seemingly democratised through culture while in effect re-constructing old divides. Importantly, as Sholette says, the second model reads the art world as a discursive structure or, ‘meta narrative.’[52] After a detailed re-

reading of Carol Duncan's 1983 essay 'Who Runs the Art World?,' Sholette summarises the situation in 2017 in terms of the art world's self-replication: 'Rebellion and riches… make up the 2017 artworld hegemony, which has become so obviously integrated into global capital that it deserves a new moniker: the bare artworld … Claustrophobic, tautological, our bare artworld is our bare artworld is our bare artworld. It emerges in successive and accelerating states of shadowless economic exposure following capital's ever-quickening swerves from crisis to crisis.'[53] A bleak view from North America, six years after Occupy's moment as a DIY new society.

Occupy had no plan. It was ephemeral, and *enacted* the values of an alternative society via direct democracy. Its insurrectionary impetus was precisely that directness, cutting through the webs of market forces. In that way it differed from artistic bohemianism, which tended to serve the market by characterising artists as non-threatening, if controversial, misfits. The problem, however, is how to negotiate a space for the radically new within the dominant society, because there is unlikely to be a 1917-style revolution.

Sholette concludes that the artworld has reverted to a monarchical model in the control of cultural institutions by oligarchs and petro-dollars. He adds, 'But we also see just as clearly that the credits [as in a film] have already finished, and that the artworld's raw relationship with money and power are fully divulged, once and for all. And … visibly present outrage is another cultural force, just as naked, and ceaselessly persistent, a vibrant … agency that … refuses to mutely serve the success of the few.'[54] Coincidentally, Hewitt+Jordan write,

> We usually find ourselves manoeuvering between other people's agendas as a means of attempting to assert our own. This can surprise commissioners, as … it is commonly assumed that artists are there to assist in delivering their policy objectives and are simply happy to get the work and express themselves visually.
>
> We do not see our role as offering cultural cohesion for a largely self-interested, middle-class cultural sector. Far from it, our only course can be to examine and attempt to reveal the inequalities and divisions within cultural systems.[55]

If power produces resistance, Sholette and Hewitt+Jordan instantiate that within cultural production. So does Liberate Tate, and I want to end with one of their projects, *Human Cost* (2011). I cite Evans' description:

> On the first anniversary of the start of the BP Gulf of Mexico disaster … Liberate Tate questioned how to respond to the loss of life incurred by the oil industry. The resulting performance *Human Cost* was a durational piece in the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain: a male performer … undressed and lay naked on the floor in the foetal position, covered in oil poured by two veiled figures … The tender, tragic image of the performance has been seen and shared thousands of times globally.[56]

Human Cost was filled with pathos.[57] It plays effectively on the institution's construction of its public as curious, concerned, chic but critical; and because it is aesthetically eloquent. The image has a beauty which stops you in your tracks. That, allowing for arguments around art as catharsis, or as representing suffering by making it acceptable as beauty, is hope.

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