

HAS YOUR LICENSE EXPIRED?

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What is the nature of your work? What is its relation to other work?

Such questions reflect the dilemma currently engaging you artists seeking 'cultural change', as, for example in the New York forum *Artists Meeting for Cultural Change*. Has it been the professional characteristics of your work, (or rather, the work-role you've adopted) which has imposed limitations on the forms your social/cultural relations have been able to take? Or has an *a priori* self-identification as *artist* effectively precluded your potential for significant social/cultural change (regardless of reflexive illusions of change in your *sociality*—your 'social relations' with other artists).

It's indicative of the confusion of present circumstances that you artists are using the word 'work' to mean many things: the 'work' means either the object, the manifestation of concept, or the range of various activities of labour/production (from thinking . . . to making . . . to designing . . . to directing), or the comprehensive sense of *oeuvre*, life-work.

What makes questions concerning the nature of your work 'awkward' is that you've evaded the recognition that the real nature of your work can only be revealed by its relation to *other work*. This lack of clarity is further compounded by your adoption of the label of artist as 'cultural worker', and concomitant notions of artists' identification with the working class.

1. Artist's work, 'creative' work, 'intellectual' work: why do we accept making art as more 'naturally' *work* than we do say, play, or speculation, (the traditional Aristotlean characteristics of *leisure*)? Making art has been

professionalised and institutionalised to an historically unique degree, and as the distinguishing feature of High Culture it exists as an integral part of Capitalist superstructure. Its practice is highly valued as an index of individualism, and its products are used as vehicles of propaganda. These are certainly *work-like* functions (among others, like exchange-value speculation, and the reification of consumption). But it's also the 'normal', the street-level acceptance of art-work as work which has magnified its pervasive and socially inflexible effect.

We take for granted that play, and speculation (and recreation) fall within the realm of leisure. But we find that leisure has been professionalised and institutionalised to a similar degree, that it sits firmly as a massive speculative and entrepreneurial sector of capitalist economies, that its 'stars' are sanctified as cult-figures, and that they and their paradigmatic forms are used as pawns for international diplomacy. It is no coincidence. The factors of control are the same: If Art and Leisure are thus so markedly similar, why does the distinction between art-as-work, i.e. culture, and leisure-as-not-work persist?

2. There seem to be all *kinds* of leisure, inventive ways we find to use our spare time, capacities which *all* people have in common, and which in the case of artists has expanded to become their work-role. And further, it's argued that this 'heightening' of creative capacities forges the link between artists' work and the common experience of leisure.

There are some members of this society (the service and academic professions, the self-employed, 'housewives', artists, etc.) who have, it seems, a much greater control over

the use of their time than others and, one assumes, a correspondingly greater access to leisure. But does self-determination of work-time make a real difference? Even these self-determined individuals are subject to a universal clock-watching, the 'automatic' division of self into use-value equivalents. And when an individual's time is considered divisible into 'work' and 'free time' fractions, when the *value* of that free time is defined by its use-potential, (value *sold* in work, value *bought* in leisure) then the rationalisation of compensation for labour as freedom-in-leisure is a conspicuous fallacy. If this can be seen to be the case in advanced capitalist societies—even as a persuasive model for voluntary servitude—how is it that such a condition has become acceptable as a way of life, even 'the good life'? If we recognise that leisure, thus determined by the values of the labour market, has suffered a kind of devaluation in relation to its supposed (mythical) value, then the Dow Jones of artists' work (thus defined) has also dropped . . .

3. The myth of freedom-accessible-through-leisure is implicitly disseminated through schooling and social conditioning (enculturation): it is pervasive in liberal-bourgeois rationality, and is gratified/exploited by the 'leisure industry'. Hence the common acceptance of a monetary-equivalent for free time, and the (obviously) concomitant notion of the *consumption* of leisure.

The myth of freedom-accessible-in-culture is more elusive, having (supposedly) greater *intrinsic* (esoteric?) value: it's the *sophisticated* arm of the consciousness industry, being stratified and regulated in its upper reaches by those with vested economic interests or entrepreneurial expertise.

Underwriting the social power of leisure-culture institutions is the liberal view of the 'free individual' as the prime-agent and producer of items of cultural value. Which is precisely why in this society, where Liberty is an inalienable Right, when the quality of the moments of freedom enjoyed by any individual *is held to be in doubt*, that the sustenance of a Model Free Man can be seen to exert a necessary regulatory and reassuring (pacifying) force. It is the awareness of this

(merely) symbolic role which artists play in the scenario of capitalist hegemony which is the source of their collective *angst*.

4. To go deeper: the distinctions maintained between 'leisure' and 'culture' are motivated primarily by the needs of two sections of this society: (i) the ruling class, who through its control of High Culture reproduces its power for its own imperialist ends, through its ownership of 'mass' culture implementing its hegemony over the bounds of freedom/consciousness (and its means of expression), and (ii) the needs of the petty-bourgeoisie, to demonstrate their ascension from mere consumption of leisure to the consumption of culture. When the manifest experience of these needs do not reinforce the class relations which obtain, the historical fragility of High Culture used as an instrument of class power becomes apparent. That is, its need to embody certain transcendental values is so that it continues to be gratifying to the petty-bourgeoisie and ruling class alike. While it appears that such disjunctions (the failure to reinforce class relations) do occur, and frequently, it is a measure of the effective superstructural function in the cultural sphere that these occurrences are mediated and smoothed, and that the control of the ruling class over the economic base is firmly maintained through its mystificatory manipulation of 'reality'.

(That artists *live within* these disjunctions of High Culture is indicative of their dislocation as an historically determined social section, separate from the real economic base.) And let us recognise that the reflexive illusion of a base/superstructural analysis of the cultural sphere giving credence to claims to identity with the productive base, *simply because* work in that sphere produces 'things', is ludicrous.)

5. We're hardened to the deterministic relationship between those petty-bourgeois aspirations which surface in the consumer's role in Culture, and its interpretative media—the *aides de camp* of the cultured elite. We're aware that they treasure their utopian models of the 'artist as honest worker'. But within a wider body of literature that takes an overtly ideologically informed critical relation to culture, one also finds ready advocacy for the no-

WHY WE ARE MORE INTERESTED IN YOU THAN YOUR ART-WORK

We are thrown together because the social organization of our labor doesn't match the real conditions of our social interchange. You want to work, you want your work to be integrated into the things you are working for. But how is it possible to discuss work when all the real issues coalesce around the social relations of working?

The social divisions of production generate social 'programs' which are self-perpetuating but not self-superseding. These mediate between (social) form and (social) content — between 'society' and us. Form logically underwrites 'society's' insurance policy. Form is 'society's' instrument for determining social meaning. So can we begin to leave culture out? Cultural meaning is just a superstructural manifestation of social form-as-content; cultural art forms are determined by their historical-embeddedness in the dominant social strata. There are no pure forms or neutral forms. The touted autonomy of forms is a function of dividing going-on into separate spheres, such as 'discourse' and 'action'.

So, how is it possible to go on? And, more complexly, how is it possible to learn-and-teach going-on without (i) giving our concrete tasks a programmatic character, or (ii) establishing the rules for correct consumption/appropriation of the products of our discourse-action complex?

For all of us, the bone of contention comes down to the nature of possible concrete tasks (projects). And, as importantly, our constructed relation to these tasks. We can't develop a shopping-list for the nature of 'good work'. That is asking the wrong question. But there is a programmatic relation which is possible — content that is necessary and correct. Form is merely the structure of response to a particular social event. There is no basis for a permanent relation to form. We have to treat form as strategic and forget about it in order to get to a point of talking about correct content.

The celebration of 'plurality' of cultural forms is just liberal diversification/diversion of the worst kind. It is the base of control — plurality never means democracy but hierarchy — the ontological regimentation of 'contents'. We have to see it clearly as a problem of reproduction, not of reflection. What is the use if the product reflects a socialist awareness but reproduces the form of capitalism? Form fixes content.

Our ideological space is shot through with historically embedded cultural disarray. If we look at the work we do as constituting historically linked, continuous points of reference that index onto all our theories and practices and index us into 'progress', 'imagination' and 'creativity', then our relationships will revolve around work and will be externalized, self-mirroring shopping-list reality.

In contrast, our social interchange engenders the ideological space for dialectical work but — this dialectical work is not art. Our revolutionized social relations are not subject-matter of 'revolutionary formalizations'.

(Position paper presented by Ian Burn and Mayo Thompson to Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, December 21st, 1975)

tion of the artist as the model free man.

Harold Rosenberg stretches a point to ascribe the idea to Marx: "The artist is the only figure in this society who is able *not to be alienated*, because he works directly with the materials of his own experience and transforms them. Marx therefore conceives the artist as the model free man of the future". (*Discovering the Present*, University of Chicago Press, 1973, p. 19). Marx's early conception of communism has been read as being fundamentally *aesthetic* in character, via the process of *disalienation*, wherein "the rich man profoundly endowed of all his senses . . . is simultaneously the human being in need of a totality of human life-activities", (*Marx and Engels: Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*). From this quotation, R. C. Tucker is lead to conclude: "In Marx's view, the relationship of the new man to nature—that is to his own anthropological nature—

will be that of the artist". (R.C. Tucker: *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, Cambridge University Press, 1961, p. 158).

So there it is, you're getting it both ways, as Sunday worker and weekday artist, and it becomes all too easy to see this kind of wishful attribution as your *real nature*. "Ah yes, that's us, the *real working class*"!

It becomes necessary to ask: *whose* artist, *whose* class? And where, as the perpetrators of the distinction between culture and leisure, between expensive and free creativity, and the latter's total devaluation via 'mass' culture, must artists owe their allegiance and social responsibility? Artistic license, poetic license, class license . . . perhaps it's time to check whether it's about to expire . . .

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