

Cock and Bull Culture, Rachael Harris

The lie of official culture is that society-invested art is sullied; deficient in its conception, deformed in its gestation, brutalised by the conditions of its birth, and abused in its lifetime. To rescue ourselves from this damaging fiction surely requires a new emancipation from market relations, and it demands a rethinking of all the facets of the production of art within culture^{AC9}

Susan Kappeler has described culture as we know it as 'patriarchy's self-image',^{C1} a concave speculum reflecting the rigid phallogocentric systems within which we all function and which directs all activities and productivities into its centre. Important features of this self-image are, for example, the aesthetic domains of art and literature,^{C1} which comfortably co-exist alongside the rest of established cultural activities, all closely allied to the predominant political and economic systems, historical and scientific fields, and religious and social structures. She concludes with some hesitation and yet forcefully enough: 'Aesthetics, like philosophy and science, is invented not so much to enable us to get closer to reality as for the purpose of warding it off, of protecting against it'. Warding something off, protecting against something out there seems indeed to be a basic gesture of the modernist aesthetic^{C2}, which centralises and categorises, defines and delineates, includes and excludes, which invents failure in order to clarify success, and that calls its singular viewpoint on 'reality' an 'objective' one. What Christa Woolf calls reality would certainly have to include^{C2} that and those beyond these limited, illegitimate and self-regulating boundaries that reflect inwards, denying the vision of those outside. Inward-looking. Me, myself, I. The cult of the individual. *Self-culture*

In the Kantian tradition, the aesthetic has no object other than the satisfaction of taste, and all other concerns are excluded as contaminants. For the present topic, the signal issue is the impossibility of a sense of responsibility to any audience, a ban that was related to the Romantic figure of the artist as utterly alone, perhaps a rebel, unassailable within bourgeois social order, and, finally, uncomfortable within *his* (?) own existence.^{C3} (Self-indulgent, self-absorbed, self-important, self-interested, self-seeking, self-laudatory, self-profiting, and self-satisfied) In the folklore of advanced capitalism this figure lies behind the unsympathetic mass-culture view of the average artist as a kook and a misfit, or at best a lucky (because financially successful) fraud, reinforcing the confinement of a positive relationship to high art to the socially elite, specialised audience.^{C3} This view has been perpetuated in the U.K. by the near oligarchical structures within art practice, criticism and history which have consistently rejected and excluded the vast range of possible alternatives in favour of a

system that is unquestioningly self-referential and consequently extremely limited. In the United States, the dominant high-art discourse from, say, the 1940s on has distorted the history of all forms of oppositional culture, whether explicitly part of a revolutionary project or not, into one grand form-conscious trend, with a relentless inattention to the formative influences of larger society and, thus, of the audience.^{C4} This trend is not limited to discourse alone but extends into all aspects of art practice and theory. Modern artistic production is typically private production,^{C5} reinforcing the traditional view of the artist as isolated genius, responsible and responsive to little apart from his/her own creative impulses and the demands of a potentially lucrative but fickle market.

Unfortunately, a 'privatised' structure in art production results in the handing over of responsibility to a select few who, usually through birth, business or bullshit, manage to place themselves at the top of the decision-making pile. The current conditions of artistic production in Great Britain are dominated by the major institutions such as the Arts Council and the Tate Gallery, art publishing, art education and the art press. These comprise one of a set of interlocking art worlds which involve the commercial galleries and dealerships, the quasi-independent organisations such as the Museum of Modern Art at Oxford, the regional art centres and galleries funded in part by Regional Arts Associations and also the fringe groups and artists organisations. It is the discourses and practices produced across these institutions that define what is socially produced and ratified as 'art', i.e. that selection from the quantity of works made and sold which are taken to constitute significant high culture.^{AC1} Thus, these cultural managers not only operate as mediators in the market exchange to unknown private consumers but also attempt to manipulate and control the public image of the living culture,^{C5} as epitomised by Julian Spalding (director of the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Galleries in Glasgow) who, when discussing the merits of 'The Great British Art Show' (which he curated) over the 'British Art Show' which immediately preceded it, does so entirely within his own terms of reference. On the British Art Show – "I was annoyed. I was appalled. I didn't like it being young. I thought this isn't good enough. *People like myself* have a responsibility to select the *best(?)* of what *they're* going to select...so what eventually I did was to say, well, this is what I would've done and then let people have a choice" a statement which seems to indicate an ego of alarmingly megalomaniacal proportions. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that the 'people's choice' is conveniently contained within the boundaries of a rather small group of artists and works that was officially predetermined by the powers that be. The justification presumably being that the audience (apparently alongside some less 'mature' cultural 'specialists') is unqualified and ill-equipped to assess art and its modes of production. The stereotype of the public as philistine (the 'I don't know much about it but I know what I like' syndrome) is played in tandem with the equally nauseating artist as anti-hero, struggling with artworks that defy the conventional realms of understanding ('art is not there to be understood' and all that),^{AC2}

and both are brandished aloft whenever cultural hegemony is threatened, thus the 'right' to evaluate art practice is retained by those 'in the know'.

The cult of expertise and professionalism has so restricted our scope of vision that a positive (as opposed to an implicit or passive) doctrine of non-interference among fields has set in. This doctrine has it that the general public is best left ignorant, and the most crucial policy questions affecting human existence are best left to "experts", specialists who talk about their speciality only, people (usually men) who are endowed with the special privilege of knowing how things really work and, more important, of being close to power.^{AC3} However, we must realise that the cultural codes we live by, the orders of discourse we follow, all manners of representation – are not natural and secure, but are arbitrary and historically determined; they are, therefore, subject to critique and revision. Moreover, being critically formulated, such systems and discourses are governed by the biases of any critical process and, in assuming the authority to enact distinctions, initiate their own limitations and exclusions based on particular interests.^{C10} While cultural myth actively claims that art is a human universal – transcending its historical moment and the other conditions of its making, and above all the class of its makers and patrons; and that it is the highest expression of spiritual and metaphysical truth;^{C8} and that it is never 'bad' for anyone; nor does it have anything to do with oppression; the fact of the matter is that the sanctified concept of art as 'True, Good and Beautiful' is born of the aspirations of those who are empowered to shape culture.^{C11} Those who are in the privileged position of deciding what is selected or rejected, what is 'Good' or 'Bad' art, indeed, of deciding what art actually is or isn't. Omission is one of the mechanisms by which fine art reinforces the values and beliefs of the powerful and suppresses the experience of others.^{P4}

On close examination this notion of a culture of excellence is no longer acceptable on historical (or moral) grounds; indeed, by virtue of its exclusivity and its contempt for the social reality within which it exists, the proposition itself advocates cultural barbarism.^{C12} When viewed from this perspective it becomes imperative to reexamine the basis upon which works of art are judged to be 'good' or 'bad'. What are the critics values? Where do these values come from? Whose life experiences do they represent? And, finally, are those life experiences and values necessarily the only ones out of which art may come?^{AC4} Any ruling class which feels threatened tries to hide the *content* of its class domination and to present its struggle to save an outdated *form* of society as a struggle for something 'eternal', unassailable and common to all values.^{P7} In Europe and the United States, however, "universal vision" is too often equivalent to white, middle-class, male perception.^{P4}

This 'art-myth' of 'Eternal/Universal Truth' serves to desocialise the production of art, to disguise the facts of privilege and convention which regulate access to training and advancement. A product of

classed and gender-divided society, this idea of art is a veil for the inequalities which sustain its elites.^{C7} So, what of those echelons of society that sit on the lower rungs of the cultural ladder or those that haven't even got a foot on it. As with other societal, political or economic structures that function within capitalist social order, the 'non-specialists' knowledge of the bare lineaments of high culture plays a part in underling the seeming naturalness of class distinctions – for the transcendental loftiness that is attributed to art artifacts seems attached as well to those who 'understand' and own them. It helps keep people in their place to know that they intrinsically do not qualify to participate in high culture.^{P5} In the same way that the working class have traditionally been placed on the outskirts of the arena of cultural 'expertise', women, ethnic minorities and non-western cultures have also found themselves occupying a marginalised position. The old adage that art practice and criticism are, and should always be, apolitical is also no longer acceptable, by denying them an interest or leverage in social, economic or political structures (particularly those in which art circulates), these arguments act as a kind of moral smokescreen, self-righteously rejecting alternative forms of practice and criticism, but also masking the real political service their own provides both through non-interference and through the promotion of prevailing values.^{P9}

Thus, however much it is denied, it is clear that culture does play an integral role in the political arena.^{P1} This is made manifest on many different levels; as discussed above, culture works very effectively to make invisible and even 'impossible' the actual *affiliations* that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force, on the other.^{P2} On an equally insidious level, the very production of images and artifacts serves as a base support for existing social structures. A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to anesthetize the injuries of class, race and sex.^{P11} The production of images actually furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself. The narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumption requires the unlimited production and consumption of images.^{P12} And while no one would deny that advertisements purposefully embody the ideological projections of the particular class whose interests they perpetuate, the point is that all cultural representations function this way. Such designations are inevitably hierarchical in the manner by which they privilege one element over another, in the ways in which they direct and dominate. Therefore, it is not that representations possess an inherent ideological content, but that they carry out an ideological function in determining the production of meaning.^{P13} As long as cultural practice remains confined within its own boundaries of self-definition it will continue to bolster and maintain the status quo. What are often termed 'alternative' art practices are actually doing little to alter the existing structures that permeate

contemporary culture. Art that simply rejects the conventional is no less subject to conventionality^{C13} despite its revolutionary posturings. Politics is not merely a matter of content nor of commitment of the producer. Political effectivity is the product of an intervention in a specific network of discourses and conditions of production and consumption.^{P14} Ultimately, the desire for political effectivity for art cannot be realised exclusively in terms of the art-world,^{P3} yet, if culture is no longer detached from the social formation but understood as a crucial area of the production of values, beliefs, identities, ways of living, the practices which comprise it can become a legitimate area for new political struggle.^{P15} Meanwhile, we must bear in mind that much activity that was once considered potentially subversive, mostly because it held out the promise of an art that could not be made into a commodity, is now as thoroughly academic as painting and sculpture. And not only academic, but marketable, with 'documentation' serving as the token of exchange.^{C15}

One of the problems with academia is its inherent dogmatism, its obsession with specialisation and segregation, evidenced by the aforementioned cult of the 'expert' which denies access to those deemed outwith its exalted realms and hinders interaction among disciplines for those within. With regard to art practice, divisiveness through disciplines has been seriously questioned in recent years and artists have begun to find themselves occupying, successively, different places within this expanded field of practice. And though the experience of the field suggests that this continual relocation of one's energies is entirely logical, an art criticism still in the thrall of a modernist ethos has been largely suspicious of such movement, calling it eclectic. This suspicion of a career that moves continually and erratically beyond, between, and out of the recognised domains obviously derives from the modernist demand for the purity and separateness of the various mediums (and thus the necessary specialisation of a practitioner within a given medium).^{AC5}

This attitude is reflected on a broader scale in the relation of the arts to other academic practices. The proliferating orthodoxy of separate fields results in such blinkered statements as: "I'm sorry I can't understand this – I'm a literary critic, not a sociologist",^{AC7} "Art can't change anything, so if you care about politics you should be a politician instead of an artist"; or the simple "It's not art – it's education; or administration; or philosophy; or psychology; etc.etc."^{AC8}

So, how might artists and other cultural workers abrogate the gospel of genius, isolation, separatism and formalist concerns?^{AL1} Over the last 20 years artists have attempted to contradict the commodity status of art by making work that seemed unsalable or that was multiply reproducible,^{AL4} but the resulting experiments with art spaces and with art forms such as performance art, body art, art as idea, land art, process art, etc. were limited in their effectivity because of a lack of any analysis of art as an institutional practice.^{AL2} The rejection was of art's commodity status and its consequent

vulnerability to market domination far more than of the ideology of art as a specialised entity within culture. There was little overt politicisation of the idea of art or much attention to the role of art within class society. And except for a sector of the organised feminists, few artists really went after audiences with less art education. Finally, the fact that the formation of true *work collectives* or collaborations was hardly ever seriously considered reveals much about the retention of *auteurship*.^{AL5} Consequently, the institutions were able to respond, with scores of new commercial galleries being opened and the older ones reorienting themselves to cash in on the boom in the art market, providing potent reminders of how closely art has remained tied to commodity production.^{AL4} Moreover, if the workings of the art marketplace demonstrate anything at all, it is its capacity to assimilate, absorb, neutralise and commodify virtually any practice at all.^{AL6} We have nearly come to the point where transgression is a given. Site-specific works do not automatically disrupt our notion of context, ephemeral works and alternative spaces seem nearly the norm.^{AL3} If institutions such as museums, galleries, owners homes are merely seen as *contexts* of use which intervene after the discrete moment of private creation, artists can worry away at dreams of making a purer art, uncontaminated by its exploitation in the marketplace, or dreams of an art which can withstand incorporation and act critically from within the system by virtue of the artists intention for it to do so.^{AL2} Understandably, many artists find it difficult to avoid making those adjustments and accommodations that will permit their work to be more readily accepted by the market: a condition, after all, of simple survival.^{AL6} However, problematic as it appears to be, genuinely alternative practice need not necessarily consign artists to a bleak future of self-imposed poverty. Clearly recognising the inadequacies and shortcomings of the existing systems should rather enable them to develop a practice that can function in a more informed and constructive way, whether within or outwith them. To make forays and interventions into the art world while recognising its place in a continuum with other social, ideological, political and economic practices. The question is not, to be or not to be in the gallery, but rather what relationships can be established (and exposed) between this institutional site of social struggle and others.^{AL8} Utilising art practice to find and make connections between institutions and ideologies and also beyond that to a basic level of establishing relationships between individuals and groups within society. For instance, when art practice becomes more process-oriented it has to take into consideration not only the formal mechanisms within art itself, but also how it will reach its context and audience and WHY. These considerations can lead to a radically different approach to artmaking. Tactics, or strategies of communication and distribution, enter into the creative process, as do activities usually considered separate from it, such as community work, meetings, graphic design, posterings. Some of the most impressive contributions to current art practice are those that provide not only new images and new forms of communication (in the avant-garde tradition), but also

delve down and move out into social life itself, through long term activities.^{AL9} Much of this work is collaborative or participatory and its meaning is directly derived from its use-value to a particular community. The needs of a community provide artists with both outlets and boundaries.^{AL11} If relationship is given greater priority, art can embody more aliveness and collaboration; partnership necessitates a willingness to understand art in more living terms. It may even come to be seen, not as the solitary process it has been since the Renaissance, but as *something we do with others*.^{AL12} Unfortunately, mainstream or potentially mainstream artists are likely to be wary of group activity (which is often seen as weakening individual expression and damaging careers)^{AL14} as are those dyed-in-the-wool modernists who have committed themselves to the notion of art for art's sake.^{AL16} Mythologies weak in the empathic dimension, such as aesthetics, tend to impose neutrality and distance. But stressing participation more than aesthetics does not mean aesthetics is unimportant, only that there is another significant goal: Achieving mutuality and co-creativity in some real and visible sense.^{AL13}

Art that has its roots in community and partnership, challenges the principle of autonomous, rational – that is to say, professional – control. We live so much in an ethos of professionalism – which keeps us bound to individualistic modes of thought and directed towards the making of products – that it is difficult not to marginalise or subtly discount achievements that manifest less control, and point to new values and goals.^{AL16}

As artists become more sophisticated, the more they are able to make art that works of several levels. They can make specific artworks for specific audiences and situations, or they can try to have one work that affects art audiences one way and general audiences another. They should try to do so without sacrificing complexity or aesthetic integrity, and without being assimilated into and manipulated by the dominant culture. Art that is not confined to a single context under the control of market and ruling-class taste is much harder to neutralise. And it is often quite effective when seen within the very citadels of power it criticises.^{AL7} It is inevitable, perhaps even desirable, that art practices have to maintain a relation to the art world in order to be accredited as art, to be effective as that specific form of social operation. Yet there has to be an intervention generated from a *social* space. Ultimately, this means being aware of the social nature of cultural activity, and, yet conscious of the larger social issues of which cultural activity is but a part. Interventions must at the same time have the effect of exposing the art world as a social space, and in the long term this will entail a breaking down of the notion of art as above or separate from society and its political struggles.^{P3}

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