

Cock and Bull Culture

culture■ politics■ academia■ alternatives

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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}

culture

Susanne Kappeler has described culture as we know it as patriarchy's self-image, and important features of this self-image are, for example, the aesthetic domains of art and literature. ~~These aesthetic domains are disconnected from reality through a boundary between reality and art.~~

concludes, with some hesitation and yet forcefully enough: "Aesthetics, I say, 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, these seem indeed to be a basic gesture of the modernist aesthetic, from Flaubert to Roland Barthes and other poststructuralists. What Christa Wolf calls reality would certainly have to include~~

~~self-interest.~~ In the Kantian tradition, the aesthetic has no object or effect other than the satisfaction of taste, and all other concerns are excluded as contaminants. For the present topic, the ~~significant~~ issue is the impossibility of a sense of responsibility to any audience ~~other than that related to the Romantic figure of the artist as utterly alone, not subject to any, and insusceptible within bourgeois social order, and, finally, uncomfortable in his position in the folklore of advanced capitalism: this figure lies behind the unsympathetic, class-culture view of the average artist as a kook and a misfit, or at best a lucky (because unpredictably successful) freak,~~ reinforcing the confinement of a positive relation to high art to the socially elite, specialized audience.

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. ~~Artists with working-class audiences or who other-~~

addressed the relationship between art and its audiences. Modern artistic production is typically private production. Artists generate work as independent producers, rarely commissioned, living more often by teaching than by sales. The work that is produced is not made for an audience, but for a market. The market exchange to unknown private consumers is mediated by the operations of cultural managers, museum curators, critics, exhibition organizers and Arts Council officers who attempt to shape a public image of the living culture. Art lacks an audience in the sense of a special group who interacts with the meanings and values being circulated in this form of social exchange mediated by objects.

ing people at the community level. Right now individualism still implies decreasing social involvement, and it will continue to do so as long as we conceive of culture only as an arena for individuals to achieve their private ends. This has been the self-serving thesis generated by capitalism: that the general welfare is best served by individuals motivated by profit in a competitive environment. But exclusivity, it turns out, is the great enemy of community. At this point, the

The democratic impulse of the Women's Movement undermines the fantasy of the artist as genius, decrying its elitist pretensions and revealing its mystification of the real conditions which facilitate the success of a select few from select class, racial and gender groups. In her essay 'Why have there been No Great Women Artists?' (1971) the American art historian Linda Nochlin exploded the myth of the genius by showing how recurring conventions in artists' biographies shore up the notion that true greatness will always find its recognition. And since genius will always win in the end, those who do not make it are proven to be inevitably second rate, ~~not geniuses, not true artists.~~ Linda Nochlin showed the power of social and economic conventions in determining who is able to produce art and gain renown. The myth of the artistic genius 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 a classed and gender-divided society, this idea of the artist is a veil for the inequalities which sustain its elites.

being splintered. Thus the nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-option, commodification, and the "wrong" kind of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture. ~~Again, the problem is not the desire to differentiate between forms of high art and degraded forms of mass culture and its options. The problem is rather the persistent gendering as a defining of that which is degraded.~~

~~major lines of the critical of differentiation, as a means of higher and scores of reproduction of 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.~~

~~the perceived male and female idiosyncrasy. She concludes with two significant points: first, that most of us have been taught to believe that art is never "bad" for anyone, nor does it ever have anything to do with oppression, and, second, that the sanctified concept of art as "True, Good, and Beautiful is born of the aspirations of those who are empowered to shape culture."~~

Aring Klowe has recently maintained, this notion of a culture of excellence is no longer acceptable on historical grounds; indeed, by virtue of its exclusivity and its contempt for the social reality within which it exists, the proposition itself advocates cultural barbarism.

it point). Meanwhile, art that simply rejects the conventional is no less subject to conventionality. Such art is characteristically expressive of its own artifice. ~~Art that wishes to be a masterpiece, yet what effect is it mediated by? not from the viewer, etc.? What effect is it in the end? even bad painting becomes 'Bad Painting'.~~

~~artists and their patrons in 1930s.~~ "[The artist's] frequently asserted antagonism to organized society does not bring him into conflict with his patrons, since they share his contempt for the 'public' and are indifferent to practical social life."

institutions in their own right. 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, ~~as a sign to any art school in North America will quickly reveal. And not only academic, but marketable, with "documentation" serving as the token of exchange, substituting for the real thing in a cynical duplication of the latter capitalist marketplace.~~

Art is not a free autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual, "influenced" by previous artists and more vaguely and superficially by "social forces," but rather . . . occurs in a social situation, is an integral element of social structure, and is mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator and artist as he-man or social outcast.

between social classes over who determines "truth." In our society the contradictions between the claims made for art and the actualities of its production and distribution are abundantly clear. 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, high art is patently exclusionary in its appeal, culturally relative in its concerns, and indissolubly wedded to big money and "upper class" life in general.

po litics

...Culture is an integral part of politics.

It is my conviction that 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.

function at all? This can be specified crudely thus: the desire for political effectivity for art cannot be realised exclusively in terms of the art world. Yet 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. There has to be an intervention generated from a social space. 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. The intervention must at the same time have the effect of exposing the art world as a social space, breaking down the notion of art as above or separate from society and its political struggles.

art: The Modernist myth of the artist assumes that s/he stands outside social structures and is therefore free to express universal experience without prejudice or limitations." In Europe and this country, however, "universal vision" is too often equivalent to white, middle-class, male perception. Omission is one of the mechanisms by which fine art reinforces the values and beliefs of the powerful and suppresses the experience of others.

It can be meaningfully claimed that virtually the entire society is part of the art audience, but in making that claim we should be aware of what we are saying. The widest audience is made up of onlookers—people outside the group generally meant by the term "audience." They know of high culture mostly through rumor and report. The vast majority of people in the traditional working class are in this group, as are people in most office, technical, and service jobs: they were probably taught the "value" of high art in school and retain a certain churchly feeling about art but have little real relation to it. Yet their knowledge of the bare lineaments of high culture plays a part in underlining the seeming naturalness of class distinctions—that is, in maintaining capitalist social order—for the transcendental loftiness that is attributed to art artifacts seems attached as well to those who "understand" and own them, the actual audience. It helps keep people in their place to know that they intrinsically do not qualify to participate in high culture.

via cultural institutions? But when the 19th and early 20th centuries conjured up the threat of the masses "rattling at the gate," to quote Hall, and lamented the concomitant decline of culture and civilization (which mass culture was invariably accused of causing), there was yet another hidden subject. In the age of nascent socialism and the first major women's movement in Europe, the masses knocking at the gate were also women, knocking at the gate of a male-dominated culture. It is indeed striking to observe how the political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities.

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. Hence the defenders of the bourgeois world do not speak today of its capitalist content but of its democratic form, though this form is cracking at every joint.

different location in relation to the mode of production. The working class is potentially revolutionary because it is indispensable to the capitalist economy, not because it is marginal to it. In the same way women are central—not marginal—to the process of reproduction. It is precisely because the ruling order cannot maintain the status quo without the continued exploitation and oppression of these groups that it seeks to mask their central economic role by marginalizing them on the cultural, ideological and political levels. The paradox of the position of women and the working class is that they are at one and the same time central and marginal(ized). In the case of the intelligentsia, whether avant-garde artists or psychoanalysts, it may well be the case that their role under late capitalism is truly peripheral in the sense that they have no crucial function in the economic order, much like the Lumpenproletariat Brecht idealized

that criticism could and should be value free. In other words, the single argument is that art criticism fulfills its purpose best when it keeps its place, when it confines itself to the elucidation and evaluation of high art. In this way, art and art criticism form a mutually supportive closed circuit, cloistered from the exigencies of social reality. By denying criticism 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 alternate forms of criticism, but also masking the real political service their own criticism provides both through noninterference and through the promotion of prevailing values. Any purported failure of criticism is then only its failure to

a huge Gulf between the two. The Exxon and Rockefeller men suavely offered facts, figures, and descriptions of their expanding underwriting of art. The woman from NEA was positive but cautious: the federal art budget wasn't running much ahead of inflation. The audience shared her pleasure over the fact that President Carter's budgetary stringency hadn't affected the arts, and everyone refrained from mentioning what did feel that ax: social services and aid to cities. But the gallery director suddenly sketched a picture of slashes in state

A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats.

(for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also 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.

at the heart of the social. 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, including representations of gender, class, and race. Such designations are inevitably hierarchical in the manner by which they privilege one element over another, in the ways 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.

Feminist art practices are political, then, because of the relations they do, or do not, sustain to dominant discourses and modes of representation. 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.

questions of domination and resistance to politics. 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 political struggle.

academia

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 including the national papers which cover the visual arts. 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 or the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Whitechapel Gallery in London, 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.²¹ The accepted modalities of art making that these interlocking institutions circulate are limited and impoverished.²² But they are hegemonic. Not only do they produce the dominant ideas of high culture but this set of attitudes subordinates all others and makes them relative to it. What cannot be accommodated, however, within these definitions, presenting a serious challenge to them, can be, and often is dismissed as not art at all (see 1

Another traditionally established idea accepted by Beuys is that, not only does the artist act outside conventional behaviour (artist as James Dean), but that the artwork acts outside the conventional realms of understanding (art is not there to be understood and all that). The reliance of an art practice on metaphysical propositions produces a self-defined system whose parameters are circular (enclosed). These hermetic, contingent ideologies are completely devoid of clout. Theology might help out though.

The institution functions as a collector of such hermetically sealed packages (sorry, practices), which it can safely display side by side without fear of ideological contamination. ● 2

The cult of expertise and professionalism, for example, 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 specialty only, and to use the word first given wide social approbation by Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public* — "insiders," people (usually men) who are endowed with the special privilege of knowing how things really work and, more important, of being close to power.¹ 3

standards of the male culture." Indeed Brode called for a reexamination of 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?" 4

With regard to individual practice, it is easy to see that many of the artists in question have found themselves occupying, successively, different places within the expanded field. 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 the domain of sculpture obviously derives from the modernist demand for the purity and separateness of the various mediums (and thus the necessary specialization of a practitioner within a given medium). But what appears as eclectic from one point of view 5

and sometimes sociology and politics. During the last twenty years, there has been a gradual recognition that forcing artists to choose between rigidly defined mediums and roles, or between art world and "real" world, is a classic way of keeping everybody in their places. Divisiveness through division of labor—still reflected in remaining taboos against the interdisciplinary—is a vestige of early-sixties, Greenbergian formalism, in which the medium was clausrophobically 6

objectified. Separation, simplicity, silent norms of pertinence: this is one depoliticizing strain of considerable force, since it is capitalized on by professions, institutions, discourses and a massively reinforced consistency of specialized fields. One corollary of this is the proliferating orthodoxy of separate fields. "I'm sorry I can't understand this—I'm a literary critic, not a sociologist." 7

It is frequent criticism of Beuys that follows: "Art can't change anything, so if you care about politics you should be a politician instead of an artist." (This plays in tandem with another act called, "It's not art, it's sociology.") Next comes "Social-change art is rendered useless when co-opted by exhibitions and sales within the mainstream art world." 8

The lie of official culture is that society-invested art is sullied, deficient in its conception, deformed in its gestation, brutalized 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 re-thinking of all the facets of the production of art within culture. The 9

10 The current political environment, moreover, does not favor critical practices in any media, and it seems reasonable to predict that the photographo-

alternatives ?

How might artists and other cultural workers abrogate the gospel of genius, isolation, and formalist concerns? Once we even think to pose the question of how to construct an audience, we are confronted by questions that intervene.¹⁰ We must, for example, ask ourselves what the point of our art is (despite the injunction against this). For ~~Isadora Duncan, Dancé, lived, danced,~~

The resulting experiments with art spaces and with art forms which resisted commodity exchange on the market—body art, art as idea, process art, land art and so forth, were limited in their effectivity because of a lack of any analysis of art as an institutional practice. ~~If institutions such as museums, galleries, owners' homes are not seen as contexts of use which intervene after the discrete moment of private creation, artists could waver away at dreams of making a pure art, uncontaminated by its exploitation in the market place, or dreams of an art which can withstand incorporation and act officially from within the system by virtue of the artist's intention for it to do so. The radically~~

We have nearly come to the point where transgression is a given. Site-specific works do not automatically disrupt our notion of context, and alternative spaces seem nearly the norm. This latter case is instructive, for when the modern museum retreated from contemporary practice, it largely passed the function of accreditation on to alternative spaces—the very function *against* which these spaces were established. Today ephemeral art works are common, 3

social partnership or resale. Some artists attempted to contradict the commodity status of art by making work that seemed unsalable or that was multiply reproducible. Some began doing "performance" art.¹⁷ But in the succeeding years, the scores of new commercial galleries that opened, and the older ones that reoriented themselves (*just opening up space in zone and so on*), to cash in on the boom in the art market provided potent reminders of how closely art has remained tied to commodity production.

17. 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 specialized entity within culture. *Feminists moved away from the stress on composition and transcendence symbolized by Duchamp's readiness to the formalism of the Dadaist anti-art idea.* There was little overt politicization of the idea of art or much attention to the role of art within class society. And except for a sector of the organized 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.

Moreover, if the workings of the art marketplace demonstrate anything at all, it is its capacity to assimilate, absorb, neutralize and commodify virtually any practice at all. Finally, 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 as a condition, after all, of simple survival.

As for co-optation, the more sophisticated ~~modern~~ artists become, the more they are able to make art that works on several levels. They can make specific artworks for specific audiences and situations, or they can try to have ~~their cake and eat it too~~, with one work affecting art audiences one way and general audiences another. They will 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 neutralize. And it is often quite effective when seen within the very citadels of power it criticizes. 7

the art world to the social relations of which it is a constitutive element.

Activist art is, above all, 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*. For example, Suzanne Lacy's feminist dinner/organizing/performance/media events culminate in recognizable "art pieces," but in fact the real work includes the yearlong organizing and workshops that led up to it, as well as film and documentation that may follow. These considerations have led 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, posterage. The most impressive contributions to current activist art 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.

question, 'What is feminist art?'. There is no such entity; no homogeneous movement defined by characteristic style, favoured media or typical subject-matter. There are instead feminist artistic practices which cannot be comprehended by the standard procedures and protocols of modernist art history and criticism which depend upon isolating aesthetic considerations such as style or media. The somewhat clumsy phrase 'feminist artistic practices' is employed to shift our attention from the conventional ways we consume works of art as *objects* and stress the conditions of production of art as a matter of texts, events, representations whose effects and meanings depend upon their conditions of reception - where, by whom, against the background of what inherited conventions and expectations. In a paper given at the

11 Much ^{of this} ~~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. While ~~straddling~~

involuntarily detached, self-contained act. Once relationship is given greater priority, art embodies 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*.

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. The

16. ~~lions-people-as-artists, but not in their artwork.~~ Mainstream or potentially mainstream artists are likely to be wary of group activity, which is often seen as weakening individual expression and damaging careers. Though there is little enthusiasm for, or knowledge about, art activism in this milieu, there is genuine, if occasional, support for good causes.

15 Feminist art, for instance, cannot be posed in terms of cultural categories, typologies or even certain insular forms of textual analysis, precisely because it entails assessment of political interventions, campaigns and commitments as well as artistic strategies.

Modernists are likely to have trouble with this, having committed themselves to the notion of art for art's sake. Art that has its roots, conversely, 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 toward the making of products—that it is difficult not to marginalize or subtly discount achievements that manifest less control, and point to new values and goals. But what is attractive

There are many issues now on the agenda of art making which are the direct result of feminism – questions of sexual difference, gender relations and sexuality and power. ~~There are other areas to which feminism has made a particular contribution of a current trend in body art, one such is the example:~~ But the goal of feminism is not to be incorporated as a new-ism to add richness to the pluralism popularly labelled Post-modernism. Its base is a mass movement of women for radical social change ~~and this makes it a revolutionary force.~~ For this reason feminist interventions encounter more than the polite disdain of the establishment. They are resisted with hostility, repression, censorship and ridicule. The women involved are subject to personal abuse and criticism mostly from the men whose 'hegemony' is threatened by the fact that women are beginning to articulate another common sense.

The extent to which feminism has altered art-historical studies is difficult to determine, largely due to the concurrent influence of Postmodern and deconstructive thought in which second-generation feminism is also involved. However, as we have seen, since feminism is not a self-contained methodology, but a world view, its impact is at once harder to trace and ultimately more significant. It does not impose itself on art and history as a canonic manifesto or a closed system, which pretends to delineate the validity and invalidity of the art of the past and the present, but instead offers a vibrant and ongoing critique of art and culture. It goes beyond attention to women's issues to embrace a totally new consideration of the production and evaluation of art and the role of the artist.

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