Cock and Bull Culture

culture ■ politics ■ academia ■ alternatives
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.
culture

Susanne Kappeler has described culture as we know it as primarily self-image, and important features of this self-image are, for example, the aesthetic domain of art and literature. These aesthetic traditions or artworks are valued in their contexts and are often seen as the basis for identity formation and self-fulfillment. 

concludes, with some hesitation, are perhaps forcefully enough: "Aesthetics, I say, like philosophy and science, is invented so much that, to enable us to get closer to reality as for the purpose of warding it off, of protecting against it." Writing something off, protecting against something else, is a central feature of the modernist aesthetic, from Platonism to Baudelaire and later poststructuralists. What John Dewey says reality would certainly have to inherent.

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 Kantian, the aesthetic is the object, the object of a moral obligation, and is the realm of the artist as the work of art. In this perspective, art is biographical, social, and, finally, necessarily aesthetic. The aesthetic is the fullness of advanced capitalism that follows and the philosophical shift of modernism offered the Invention of the "euthanasia of art" and the "death of the author" by Barthes, each of which is defined by the confirmation of a specific relation to high art or the aesthetic of specialized dilation.

In the United States, the dominant high-art discourse, as by, say, the 1940s on has disintegrated at all forms of oppositional critique, 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. Addressing the working class, students-at-large and citizens.

addressed the relationship between art and society. 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 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, editors, and Art 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.

The democratic impulse of the Women's Movement undermines the fantasy of the artist as genius, decries 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 explored the myth of the genius by showing how recurring conventions in artists' biographies shored 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. And the myth of the genius serves to rationalize 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.

be gepreisicht. 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. Art, otherwise, must not be turned into a commodity, into a form of high culture or into forms of mass culture. This is the origin of the so-called "avant-garde". The problem is that the modernist aesthetic is not that of which the artist is aware.

In this context, the idea 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.

In her essay "The Myth of the Artist as Genius," (1971) 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 desocialize 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.

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--End--
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.

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. 

Artists are not the organizers by which the powerful subvert 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 lookers—people outside the group generally count 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 offices, technical, and service jobs; they were probably taught the "value" of high art in school and remain a certain curiously feeling about art but have little real relation to it. Yet their knowledge of the basic framework of high culture plays a part in underlining the seeming naturalism of class distinctions—that is, in maintaining capitalist social order—for the transcendental loneliness that is attributed to art products seems attuned as well to those who 'understand' and own them, the actual audience. It helps keep people in their place to know that they intentionally do not qualify to participate in high culture.

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, 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.

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 Lumpenbourgeoisie Brecht idealized.

The most self-conscious and reflective of the psychoanalysts say that the single argument is that art criticism fulfills its purpose best when it keeps its place, when it confines itself to the justification and evaluation of high art. In this way, art and art criticism form a mutually supportive closed circuit, disrobed 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 social unconscious, self-righteously rejecting alternate forms of criticism, but also masking the real political service their own criticism provides both through nonintervention and through the promotion of prevailing values.

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.

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.

And while no one would deny that advertisements purposefully embody the ideological presentations 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.

Politics is not merely a matter of content nor of commitment of the producers. Political effectiveness is the product of an intervention in a specific network of discourses and conditions of production and consumption.
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 art periodicals 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 Independent Group, 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 give us the notion of 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. The accepted modalities of art making that these interlocking institutions circulate are limited and impoverished. But they are hegemonic. Not only do they produce the dominant ideas of high culture but this set of attitudes subordinates all other 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...)

Another traditionally established idea 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). Thishermetic, insistent ideologies are completely devoid of (con)text. Thought must help out though. The institution functions as a collector of such hermetically sealed packages (sorry, practices), which can safely display side by side without fear of ideological contamination.

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—so the word first gave rise to—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.

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 critic is 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

Separation, simplicity, silent norms of pertinence: this is one de-politicizing 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."

Nothing here about the practice of art. "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-chance art is rendered useless when co-opted by exhibitions and sales within the mainstream art world.

The lie of official culture is that society-invested art is solicited, defaced 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. So what is...
How might artists and other cultural workers alongside the gospel of genre, isolation, and formalism concern? Once we even think to pose the questions of how to construct an audience, we are confronted by questions that intervene. We must, for example, ask ourselves what the point of our art is (despite the injunction against this). For example, the formalist, the modernist, the critic...

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, instead, we consider the politics and the historical distribution of power, wealth, and influence, we may understand thexford how the discreet language of modernist art arrived, artists could worry daily, the structural functioning of the commodity form, the exploitation of the market-place, the dreams of art which have withdrawn into a radical position against and across from within, the system by virtue of which the artists estranged from art and become the radically...

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

social formations of culture. Some artists attempted to connect the commodity status of art by making work that seemed disposable or that was multiply reproducible. Some began doing "performance" art. But in the succeeding years, the new sites of commodified gatherings that opened, and the older ones that reinvented themselves, the-...to rush in on the boom in the art market provided potent reminders of how closely art has remained tied to commodity production.

Moreover, if the workings of the marketplaces demonstrate anything at all, it is its capacity to assimilate, absorb, neutralize and commodify virtually any practice at all: sex work, post-growth, gynocratic, post-autonomous, and autonomous work are all commodified symbols of a commodified culture. It is this vital content of the idea of art in much current theory of art within class society, and serves for a range of the organized feminism. It remains widely even among audiences with less art education. Finally, the fact that the feminization of work reification or commodifications was barely ever seriously considered results much about the operation of commodity...

As for co-operation, the more sophisticated, even from one work affecting audiences one way and general audiences another. They will try to do so without surrendering complexity, or aesthetic integrity, and without being assimilated into or manipulated by the dominant culture. Art that is not confined to a single context under the control of market and ranking-class taste is much harder to neutralize. And it is often quite effective when seen within the very clichés of power it criticizes...

What empowers such interventions must be the location of art and its institutions 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 (the art-gallerie/teatre) and others. Thus, instead of the short-circuited critiques from within Modernism which none the less had useful reifications, a feminist materialist practice is founded outside the art world, but indexes 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 the context of non-art. For example, Suzanne Lacy's feminist dinner organizing/performance/media events culminating in recyclable "art pieces," but in fact the real work includes the yearly 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 non-being handed down into the creative process, do activities usually considered separate from community work, meetings, graphic design, posterizing. The most impressive contributions to current activist art are those that provide not only new images and new forms of communications in the avant-garde tradition, but also delve down and move out into social life itself, through long-term activism...

question—"What is feminist art?" There is no such entity; no homogenous movement defined by characteristic style, favored 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 construct works of art as objects and stress the conditions of production of art as a matter of texts, events, others, whose effects and meanings depend upon their conditions of reception, where, by whom, against the background of what inherited conventions and expectations. In other words, it is the...

Much of the work is collaborative or participatory and its meaning is directly derived from its use-value to a particular community. The need of the community provides aura with both outlets and boundaries. Whether including or excluding, if self-conscious. 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, at present, participation more than aesthetic 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 line between work and life. Maintaining 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...

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. Dataset...macro...

There are many issues now on the agenda of art making which are the direct result of feminism—questions of sexual difference, gender relations, power, sexuality, powerlessness, etc. For example, "The Women's Movement is a movement of women for radical social change and..."

The extent to which feminism has altered art-historical studies is difficult to determine, largely due to the concurrent influence of Postmodernist art and 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 emphasize...
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14) 14 e) - p348
15) 8 - p79 (Mary Kelly)
16) 4 - p76
17) 8 - p80
18) 2 - p356-7
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   C) ‘Last Exit Painting’ - Thomas Lawson.

   D) ‘Lookers, Buyers, Dealers and Makers: Thoughts on Audience’ - Martha Rosler.


15. Susan Sontag: ON PHOTOGRAPHY (Allen Lane, 1978)

FOOTNOTES:

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1) 9 - p57