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APRIL 2008

State of the Union

GREGORY SHOLETTE ON ARTISTIC LABOR



Strike by the Professional and Administrative Staff Association of the Museum of Modern Art, supported by the Art Workers' Coalition, outside the Museum of Modern Art, New York, August 30, 1971. Photo: Jan van Raay.

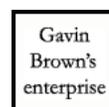
BEFORE AN ARTWORK can be exhibited, before it represents or refuses to represent anything, before it can be dealt, sold, or collected, there come research and planning, gathering tools, purchasing materials, and even alerting networks. Whether the outcome is an object, document, gesture, or performance, it is, obviously, the result of labor. When Nicolas Bourriaud describes an artwork as "a dot on a line," it is this indivisibility of labor and result that he seeks to capture. But it is not the "line" that museums and collectors covet—it is the "dot," perhaps most appropriately envisioned as a red sticker. In this near-feral market, the artwork has increasingly become the focus, which probably explains why so little attention is paid to the conditions of artistic labor, even among artists themselves.

This was not always the case. Contrary to the oft-cited canard that artists are too independent to work together, the United States has a substantial history of artistic guilds, unions, associations, and collectives, many of which began in the Depression of the 1930s. While some half-million painters, printmakers, muralists, and sculptors found employment through work-relief programs managed by the Federal Art Project (FAP; a unit of the Works Progress Administration), many sought better pay and greater job security and challenged race-based discrimination through their own independently organized groups. In 1935, the Harlem Artists Guild pressured the local FAP to hire more African-American artists not only as muralists but also as project supervisors. One year later, artist Stuart Davis and other members of the Communist Party launched the American Artists' Congress, which agitated for a permanent federal arts work program and proposed that museums pay rental fees to artists (a demand echoed thirty years later by the Art Workers' Coalition). One member, painter Yasuo Kuniyoshi, later presided over the Artists' Equity Association (AEA), which was established during the conservative years of postwar "normalization," when radicals were purged from unions, women were fired from factories, and artists began to abandon picket lines for their studios. The AEA later split into two organizations, both of which continue to press for artists' legal rights and for ethical business practices among dealers.

It was not until the years of the "Great Refusal," as Herbert Marcuse described the '60s and '70s, that artists again took up militant self-organizing, often identifying with a blue-collar workforce already coming under pressure to accept pension cuts and disband unions. In January 1969, a group of artists and critics that included Vassilakis Takis from Greece, Hans Haacke from Germany, Wen-Ying Tsai from China, and Tom Lloyd, Willoughby Sharp, and John Perreault from the United States established the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC). The coalition quickly drew several hundred people to its open-door meetings, among them familiar names such as Carl Andre, Benny Andrews, Gregory Battcock, Lee Lozano, and Lucy Lippard. At first, the AWC functioned much like a trade union. It treated museums, their boards, and their top administrators as if they constituted a managerial front for the interests of the commercial art world. The group presented a list of thirteen demands to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1969 (the following year, these were boiled down to nine and addressed to "art museums in general"). Among the reforms called for was a royalties system by which collectors would pay artists a percentage of profits from the resale of their work. The AWC also proposed the creation of a trust fund that would provide living artists "stipends, health insurance, help for artists' dependents and other social benefits"; a levy on the sale of work by dead artists



links



would ensure the fund's endowment. The coalition also demanded that museums "should be open on two evenings until midnight and admission should be free at all times." Before it disbanded in 1971, the group actively protested US military involvement in Southeast Asia, supported striking staff at MoMA, and called on museums to set aside exhibition space for women, minorities, and artists with no gallery representation. However, it is the insistence on free-admission hours that remains the AWC's one concrete, lasting achievement.

That said, it is not without irony that artists, critics, and intellectuals—then as now a relatively privileged group both economically and in terms of education—would identify themselves as workers at a time when traditional brick-and-mortar industries were disappearing from the very urban centers where artists concentrated; low-cost housing, unprecedented income parity, and the social safety net of the now-extinct liberal welfare state also made political organizing less of a threat to one's livelihood. But as we well know, the conservative "revolution" of Reagan and Thatcher soon followed. After experimenting with ideas, politics, unions, and other not-so-marketable practices, artists began to paint again. As critic Craig Owens commented at the time, East Village artists of the '80s surrendered themselves "to the means-end rationality of the marketplace," while mimicking the subaltern culture they were helping to displace. Nevertheless, some artists continued to self-organize for greater equity at a time of rapid defunding of the public sphere through targeted cuts in nonmilitary state expenditures. Calls for economic justice were most explicit in the Guerrilla Girls' agitprop street campaigns, but collectives such as Carnival Knowledge, Group Material, Political Art Documentation/Distribution, Paper Tiger Television, and Gran Fury, to name only a few, helped make manifest an otherwise hidden force of social production that was not visible to most in the art world. In some cases, this missing cultural mass included nonprofessionals such as street artists, political activists, and even porn stars.

This collapsing of formal and informal modes of cultural production has since inched steadily closer to the mainstream art world. Which, of course, raises the question: What constitutes artistic production when artists abandon traditional craft skills to include the work of amateurs, incorporate mass-produced images and objects, or outsource the making of the work itself? Marx believed that artistic production is the inevitable outcome of an artistic nature, but the introduction of collage, montage, productivism, appropriation, Conceptual art, and, most of all, the readymade has greatly upset this tidy assessment. The de-skilling of art has its corollary in the rise of digital technologies that allow even laptop-toting preteens to turn out sophisticated-looking aesthetic products.

Further complicating the current status of artistic production is the 180-degree shift in the profile of the artist, from marginal outcast to a fetish figure for the "creative," networked economy. Cultural critics from Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello to Brian Holmes have analyzed how '90s-era business managers and policy makers absorbed the desire for autonomy writ large by the artistic demands of '60s counterculture to transform the workplace into a softer, less hierarchical, and ultimately more flexible form of social control. The new spirit of capitalism calls on all of us to think like an artist: *outside the box*.



Guerrilla Girls, *Women in America Earn Only 2/3 of What Men Do*, 1985, offset print on paper, 17 x 22".

Yet despite this alleged upgrade in status, the majority of artists continue to lead a precarious existence, especially in those countries where the state has ceased to mediate between the well-being of the working population and the needs of the corporate sector. Widespread de-regulation has certainly increased prosperity for a few, but it provides no substantial "trickle-down" advantage for the many—not in China, India, Eastern Europe, the United Kingdom, or the United States, and not within the contemporary art world, a notoriously unregulated market. Even relatively successful artists must cope with constantly shifting employment, global transit (from biennial to fair to biennial), and tireless networking and self-promotion, which may be the real reason artists are hailed as the prototype of the knowledge proletariat.

If even those artists at the top end of the food chain struggle for more equitable treatment, then what becomes of the invisible tens of thousands whose production seems more or less superfluous? On graduation from art school, the newly minted artist enters a world of unaffordable health care, studio space pushed to the margins by gentrification, a scarcity of full-time teaching positions, and part-time adjunct work that is typically bereft of benefits and lean on wages. All these factors have contributed to poverty rates among artists in the US that, according to sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger, are "higher than those for all other professional and technical workers." And yet the siren song of the information economy insists that you, too, can prosper from your inner creativity, perhaps helping to explain why enrollment in art schools continues to increase, duly augmenting the oversupply of labor that art historian Carol Duncan perceptively described as "the normal condition of the art market." But while a glut of artists is nothing new, remember that art is one economy where excess product does not lower prices; it only lowers labor costs. A recent study by the RAND Corporation reveals the widening gap between the few who do succeed and the many not sharing in the tumescent wealth of today's global art world. This may relate to another labor stratification in the art world that separates "thinkers" from "makers"—the former tend to employ the latter, typically graduates of schools where nonconceptual skills such as painting, printing, welding, and casting are still emphasized.

The artist as laborer has become the artist as entrepreneur—a free agent, like other "creative" workers, scrambling to wind up on the right side of the ever-widening have/have-not divide. Accordingly, like workers in other fields made precarious by deregulation, most artists in search of greater financial security are now bypassing collective organizing for private market mechanisms such as Artist Pension Trust (APT). Created

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in 2004—by technology entrepreneur Moti Shniberg, Dan Galai (onetime accomplice of the late economist Milton Friedman, father of Reaganomics), and David A. Ross (former SF MoMA and Whitney Museum of American Art director, and soon to head a New York branch of London's Albion Gallery)—APT has opened offices not only in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Berlin but also in the budding art-market centers of Dubai, Mumbai, Beijing, and Mexico City. The fund's goal is to collateralize the chronic insecurity of art professionals by enlisting artists—generally those who have already achieved a certain level of market success—to invest some of their work “alongside a community of select artists, thereby providing a uniquely diversified, alternative income stream.” In theory, it will take only a few superstars to emerge from this cluster of investors for all the shareholders to enhance their economic security. Sounding more like an old-fashioned WPA reformer than a neoliberal entrepreneur, Ross insists APT is “a way to take advantage of the capitalistic nature of the market and mix in a healthy dose of socialism to create a hybrid form.” But real autonomy depends on organizing not only the workers in the office but also those on the loading docks—consider the economic significance of those artists who invisibly help make the art world work; no doubt New Deal artists, as well as those of the Great Society, grasped this. Perhaps by gleaning what is most useful from the past, artists today can produce their own collective security. They have much to gain and nothing to lose except their own precarity.

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— *Gregory Sholette*

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