

ONE

Art and Class

It was an article in the *New York Times* in December 2009—art fair season in Miami—that touched off the chain of thoughts that led me to assemble my ideas on art and class in a systematic way. Damien Cave's profile of Brooklyn artist William Powhida tracked him as he moved around the aisles of Art Basel Miami Beach, the annual stew of art commerce and excess in balmy Florida, recording Powhida's reactions to the spectacle as he went. It struck me as a strangely poignant snapshot of that particular troubled moment in art history, describing an artist trapped somewhere between longing and disgust. "A lot of us go back and forth about wanting to destroy this model, and wanting to support it," Powhida said.¹

If people cared what he had to say, it was because of *How the New Museum Committed Suicide with Banality*, an outraged and off-the-wall drawing produced for the cover of the *Brooklyn Rail* earlier that year. Powhida had used this platform to vent his anger at the New Museum for agreeing to host a show of the personal art collection of titanically wealthy Greek businessman Dakis Joannou. Rather than being curated by a member of the institution's staff, the show was to be assembled by Jeff Koons, an American artist known for shiny neo-pop objects who also happened to have been the best man at Joannou's wedding. The widespread perception was that the New Museum, which had begun life as a lively alternative institution, had sold its birthright for a mess of pottage.

In his drawing, Powhida weighed in like an Internet-age Daumier: the curators, collectors, artists, and art dealers associated with the New Museum were caricatured, their incestuous interpersonal connections mapped out and set alongside quotes from pundits who had weighed in on the matter and commentary from Powhida himself. *How the New Museum Committed Suicide with Banality* became something of a touchstone, pushing Powhida into the role of social commentator within the New York art scene. The slew of moralizing denunciations about the Joannou show took me a bit by surprise—

the influence of the wealthy on art was, after all, not particularly new, as American as Solomon R. Guggenheim and J. Paul Getty. I found the outrage inspired by the New Museum show salutary but trivial. In 2009, there were bigger problems in the world.

The minor revelation in Cave's profile was the glimpse it gave into the background that informed Powhida's art-world satires (for the occasion of that year's Art Basel Miami Beach, he created a drawing called *Art Basel Miami Beach Hooverville*, depicting the art fair as a teeming Depression-era shantytown). "Mr. Powhida is not comfortable in this world," wrote Cave. "He was reared in upstate New York by a single mother who paid the bills with a government job, and he has earned his own living for the past decade as an art teacher in some of the toughest public high schools in Brooklyn. He said his artwork brought in only about \$50,000 over the past three years, and that he was still repaying his undergraduate loans from Syracuse University."² Those fleeting biographical details hit home for me what should have been an obvious point: Powhida's satire of art's institutional politics drew its outrage from experiences rooted outside that sphere, even if this outrage was channeled into something that felt, to me, fairly inside baseball; to understand the cathartic snark of the work, you had to grasp something about the situation of the contemporary artist, about the promises an art career held out and failed to deliver.

In an article summing up the controversy, I suggested that Powhida curate a response to *Skin Fruit*—the vaguely leering title of the Koons-curated New Museum spectacle—and in the spring of 2010, the gallerist Ed Winkleman invited Powhida and another artist, Jennifer Dalton, to curate just such a response show at his small outpost on the westernmost reaches of Chelsea. They conceived of it as a kind of freewheeling workshop or brainstorming session, with anyone who wanted to take part in the discussion about money's impact on art invited to do so. It was called "#class."

Scanning the proposed contributions to the event's program in advance, I was struck by how many of them seemed to be jokes or simply off topic (for example, a debate between artists and dealers staged as a game of Battleship, or a performance for which everyone entering the gallery was photographed as if they were a celebrity). It seemed to me that artists were struggling—and failing—to find a language with which to engage with the topic of artists' economic position. I wrote the short pamphlet *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* over the course of a weekend as my contribution to the show. During the opening, I passed out copies and taped the text to Winkleman's front door. A few weeks later, I returned to participate in a discussion of the text with Powhida and Dalton, which attracted an eager though eclectic crowd (including one clownish commentator from the conservative *New*

Criterion magazine, who suggested that the problem with contemporary art was that government art subsidies were too lavish). Yet, as with most debates about art and politics or art and the economy, the conversation felt strangely centerless, as if we were all searching for a common framework upon which to draw.

Years later, the feeling that the game is rigged, which gave birth to the New Museum controversy, has only sharpened. The air of decadence has become so claustrophobic that even pundits not particularly known for their radicalism find it intolerable. In mid-2012, Sarah Thornton, author of a breezy bestselling piece of sociology, *Seven Days in the Art World*, and art beat reporter for the *Economist*, penned an extraordinary text entitled "Top 10 Reasons NOT to Write about the Art Market," announcing that she was abandoning coverage of the market altogether. Her list of reasons included, "The most interesting stories are libelous" and "oligarchs and dictators are not cool."³ Dave Hickey, a critic once known for his rollicking critique of anti-market sanctimony, also announced that he wanted out, mainly because he was disgusted by the dominance of the superrich. "Art editors and critics—people like me—have become a courtier class," he remarked. "All we do is wander around the palace and advise very rich people. It's not worth my time."⁴

Even Charles Saatchi—the advertising mogul at least partly responsible for the rise of both neoliberal doyenne Margaret Thatcher (through his "Labour Isn't Working" campaign) and art-market darling Damien Hirst (through his art collecting)—recoiled in horror from what the art scene had become. "Being an art buyer these days is comprehensively and indisputably vulgar," he wrote. "It is the sport of the Eurotrashy, Hedge-fundy Hamptonites; of trendy oligarchs and oiligarchs; and of art dealers with masturbatory levels of self-regard."⁵ Responding to these tantrums, the radical critic Julian Stallabrass attacked Hickey and Saatchi only for seeming to hold out the possibility that contemporary art might be anything more exalted: "If works of art are vulgar and empty, why should people be any more upset by that than by, say, garish packaging on supermarket shelves?" Stallabrass actually seemed to suggest that critics abandon writing about fine art altogether and focus instead on what people were sharing on Facebook.⁶

He can do that if he likes, but I think he may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. For my part, I'm not quite ready to give up on the entire world of art all at once. Since I nevertheless accept the dire state of the situation, what this debate proves to me is that if you are going to have any way to interact with contemporary art positively, you need some theory that is more nuanced than that on offer. In my head, I keep coming back to that discussion at Winkleman Gallery—we are still struggling to find a language with which to engage with the topic of artists' economic position. And the theory of the

classed nature of artistic labor from my Theses, I continue to hope, is the missing piece that might provide the resources for a more constructive critique.

"A Rehash of Marxist Ideology"

Of course, complaints about art and money are not new. Long before the New Museum dustup, anxiety about the art market's impact on contemporary art had been gathering steam, as had the sense that the theory to understand it was lacking. "We don't have a way to talk about the market," the critic Jerry Saltz wrote in the *Village Voice* in 2006. "There is no effective 'Theory of the Market' that isn't just a rehash of Marxist ideology. There's no new philosophy to help us address the problem of the way the market is affecting the production and presentation of art, although people are trying."⁷

The swipe at "Marxist ideology" made me cringe—but I had to sympathize with where Saltz was coming from. For people not embedded in contemporary art, who have only the outside picture of auctions and galas, it is difficult to explain how deep-rooted is the belief in art-making's inherent righteousness and radicalism among the cognoscenti. For decades, various strains of Marxist-inspired cultural theory have been, if not the mainstream, then somewhere in the region of the mainstream for art criticism, touted not just by wild-eyed outsiders but by establishment tastemakers. In general, these have left behind a sour aftertaste on account of their self-righteous political abstraction on the one hand and their seeming inability to give account of the pleasures of art-making on the other.

Some of these excesses are inherited from the critical theory pioneered by the so-called Frankfurt School. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer famously elaborated the idea of the "culture industry," painting a bleak picture of the psychic consequences of the commodification of aesthetics by capitalism in Hollywood (the objects of their condemnation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* include Orson Welles and Mickey Rooney, which seems quaint now).⁸ For Adorno, repulsion toward popular culture was the flip side of an anguished passion for the more difficult efflorescences of modern art, which he argued—drawing on the rhetoric of Marxist dialectics—held out hope for some kind of experience that wasn't subordinated to the instrumentalized logic of capitalism: "A successful work of art is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure."⁹

Where does class fit in here? Even for Martin Jay, one of the Frankfurt School's more enthusiastic chroniclers, the theories of Adorno and the school around him "expressed a growing loss of confidence, which Marxists had

traditionally felt, in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat."¹⁰ In effect, in Adorno's aesthetic theory an engagement with the working class's struggle against capital was displaced onto an investment in the artist's struggle with the baleful effects of commodification. For later artists and writers, this template provided a way to give outsized social importance to debates about modern and postmodern art that would otherwise have seemed technical and obscure. The result was a widely influential form of cultural criticism that claimed the mantle of Marxist radicalism but lacked any interest in the most vital concern of Marxism: class struggle.

Adorno was writing in the shadow of World War II, against the backdrop of murderous states waging total warfare, marshaling their populations via intensive propaganda. His views were shaped by this experience, as well as by his exposure during his sojourn in the United States to its seemingly monolithic consumer culture, with workers in his view bought off and sated by mindless entertainment. This historical context definitively colored his perspective on culture under capitalism. It is also a thing of the past. Since the 1970s, both the economy and its relation to the state have been decisively transformed, as neoliberalism pulverized old certainties about the social contract. You would, therefore, expect some kind of reevaluation of Marxism's take on culture and its relation to capitalism. And so there has been.

If the proletariat fades into the background for Adorno, a prominent recent type of Marxist-inflected art criticism has taken a different tack, actually identifying contemporary artists with the proletariat tout court. Artists may not be laborers in the traditional sense, but (so the argument goes) creativity itself has now become a dominant form of "immaterial labor" in our post-industrial economy, as the stable world of factory labor has been replaced by the more mercurial realities of a service economy. Michael Hardt, for instance, has argued flat out that "some of the qualities of artistic production . . . are becoming hegemonic and transforming other labor processes."¹¹ The economy is now based around manufacturing knowledge and experiences, which in turn makes it creative through and through.

Instead of artists being proletarianized, Hardt and his co-thinkers in effect hold that the entire proletariat has been aestheticized: "[artists] increasingly share labour conditions with a wide array of workers in the biopolitical economy."¹² Bizarrely, the struggles of visual artists are collapsed together with the experiences of a whole motley range of other types of intellectual and service workers—scientists, financial analysts, nurses, and Walmart greeters are mentioned in the same breath—and accorded more or less equal political potential. Any sense of what makes the specific form of labor performed by contemporary artists unique is lost in the miasma of a nebulously conceived postindustrial economy based on "immaterial labor."

Neither of these seems a particularly promising way of approaching the relationship of art to the economy. But the point here should be that these are examples of botched uses of Marxist analysis, not the real deal. "Marxism," after all, is a plastic term. It has meant many different things to many different people—from the revolutionary romanticism of Arts and Crafts guru William Morris to the bowdlerized, totalitarian ideologies associated with Stalin and Mao and the soggy, apolitical abstractions taught in the halls of academia. Setting such false interpretations aside and returning to the underexplored Marxist idea of class still promises to do what no new "Theory of the Market" does.

"The Basic Reason that Classes Exist in the First Place"

Mainstream discussion of class starts and ends with the idea that one's class is synonymous with how much money one has. To say that someone is "working class" is to say that they come from a humble background. A mainstream publication like the *Economist* has employed a technical definition of "middle class" that encompasses anyone whose income is one-third disposable.¹³ Many sociologists talk of class as a cultural question, as if the difference between being middle class and working class were a matter of education or social background.

Such ways of looking at the question have their merits—income and culture are, of course, very important. However, as Michael Zweig notes in his book *The Working Class Majority*, they fail to get at the heart of the matter. "The working class does have different income, status, and lifestyles from those of the middle class and capitalist class," Zweig writes. "But if we leave the matter there, we miss the basic reason that classes exist in the first place."¹⁴

Defining class purely as a matter of income or wealth results in several obvious difficulties. A goal of workers organizing together in a union, for instance, is for them to raise their standard of living. If class were simply a matter of how much money you took home at the end of the week, then it would seem that the more successful the working class was at organizing to get a bigger share of the products of its labor, then the more it would actually cease to be the working class. Viewing class struggle strictly through the lens of wealth versus poverty also seriously narrows our understanding of the stakes: the dignity of working conditions, guarantees of steady employment, the right to grievance, and the intensity of the working day are all classic concerns of working-class struggle—and all of them are about more than the number on a paycheck.

At the same time, certain members of society who would intuitively seem to fit our definition of "middle class," upon consideration, turn out to be not necessarily better off than their working-class kin. Think of small business

owners. Family shops or restaurants often have the proprietor or her family members doing a large portion of the work themselves, pushing themselves to work long hours for little compensation besides the reward of keeping the enterprise going. Peasant farmers, one of the enduring examples of the petite bourgeoisie, are often dirt poor.

What, then, is a more productive way to think about class? The paradoxes listed above resolve themselves if you accept that class position relates not to how much one happens to be paid but to the kind of labor one does and how this labor relates to the economy. The working class is distinguished from the middle class not by how its members have more modest houses or watch different TV shows but by the level of authority they have over the conditions of their own work. Working-class people, in this definition, share a special characteristic: they have to sell their labor power as an abstract thing in order to earn a wage. As for the middle class, here is Zweig's rough definition: "It includes professional people, small business owners, and managers and supervisors who have authority over others at work. . . . Instead of seeing them as people with middling income, we will see them as people with middling authority."¹⁵ (I'm using Zweig because of the clarity of his explanation, but actually this is a fundamental aspect of how Marxists see the world.)¹⁶

What, then, distinguishes middle-class business owners from out-and-out capitalists? While popular outrage justly dwells on the lavish bonuses of bankers and the lifestyles of the megarich, the factor that makes a capitalist a capitalist is also not a question of wealth or income—if a CEO proclaims that he is going to work for one dollar a year, that does not suddenly mean that he has been thrown into the working class; he has obviously not sacrificed his authority. Greed is part of what greases the wheels of the capitalist system, but there are people who are simply ideological evangelists for the good of the free market (this is, in fact, the classical meaning of "liberalism").

Zweig explains the difference between middle-class business owners and capitalists as relating to whether or not the owner works alongside her employees.¹⁷ I think, however, that we can be even more precise. Marx defines the capitalist as being one who acts as "capital personified," as the agent who carries out capitalism's logic. In volume 1 of *Capital*, he makes a surprising remark: the ideal image of the capitalist is not the lavish-spending libertine, but the "miser," that is, someone who hoards profits for future investment rather than spending them on himself.¹⁸

Marx's formula for capital is M-C-M', by which he meant that a quantity of money (M) becomes capital when it is invested in the production of a commodity (C), which is then sold again for more money (M'), in order to begin the cycle again on an expanded level. Ultimately, he remarks, in its purest form the capitalist mindset is represented by the formula M-M'. The

specific form of business involved (the C, the form of commodity involved in the process) ceases to seem important; all that matters is that investments return profits so that the cycle can be started once more.¹⁹ A capitalist, therefore, is not just someone who has a say in how a business is run, but someone whose motivation is to run a business for the sake of profit.

That may sound quite general, but in fact it represents a mindset very different than that of the average small business owner. As a 2011 Brookings Institution study puts it, "most small businesses have little desire to grow big or to innovate in any observable way." Instead, the authors write, surveys indicate that such people as "skilled craftsmen, lawyers, real estate agents, doctors, small shopkeepers, and restaurateurs" are motivated more by "nonpecuniary" factors such as "being one's own boss, having flexibility of hours, etc."²⁰ Consequently, a fairly clear line of demarcation exists between middle-class and capitalist mentalities: middle-class agents are focused on their own needs or simply maintaining their autonomy; capitalist business people act in the name of profit, as "capital personified."

As an example, Zweig mentions the family doctor, a traditional representative of the middle class. Organized around private practices, doctors have had a great deal of independence and freedom. But as more and more doctors work for large health-care conglomerates, their position has changed, dragging the medical profession toward the working class. Conversely, if a doctor's personal practice grows to the point where she is more concerned with administering the labor of others and maximizing the profit of the whole enterprise in the name of competition, then she has ceased to function as a middle-class agent and become a full-on representative of capital.

As Zweig writes, "classes are not simply boxes or static categories into which we pigeonhole people." They are by their nature "a bit messy"—and indeed the particular class composition of any given professional sphere is dynamic and in constant evolution.²¹

"A Different Order of Freedom"

How does this schema apply to the visual arts sphere? More than most other creative spheres—or most contemporary "industries," period—the production of visual art is tied to the middle-class form of labor. In fact, I'd put this point in a stronger way still: the contemporary artist is the representative of middle-class creative labor par excellence.

Artists function as their own creative franchises, and are expected to have their own creative signatures or styles. Uniqueness and independence of mind are selling points when it comes to art—values that are antithetical to what is expected of ordinary workers, who must take direction and are

epitaphs designers

treated as ever more disposable (evidence is scant that the neoliberal economy, whatever its claims to celebrate creativity, has freed the average worker from these pressures). People decide to become artists—and continue to identify as artists, despite the limited prospects for success—for exactly the kind of "nonpecuniary" benefits that animate the other middle-class professionals the Brookings Institution paper mentions: the opportunity to make money doing something in which they are personally invested; freedom from the grind of an office job or more regimented forms of work; the belief that they have found a "calling" that is uniquely their own.²²

In 2011, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) identified 2.1 million "artists" living in the United States.²³ However, of this total, considerably fewer than one in ten were "fine artists."²⁴ About 10 percent of these so-called creative laborers worked in architecture and about 17 percent in the performing arts. By far the largest portion of creative laborers—close to 40 percent—were classified as "designers" of various kinds ("graphic, commercial, and industrial designers, fashion designers, floral designers, interior designers, merchandise displayers, and set and exhibit designers").

Consequently, most of the workers in the "creative economy" of the United States are not artists in the sense we are familiar with from the visual arts sphere, creating unique art objects to be sold through galleries or seen in museums. Their working conditions are quite distinct. Industrial designers working for manufacturers or merchandise displayers working for department stores do indeed use creativity in their jobs. However, all but a lucky few superstars have no personal claim on the products of their creativity and must produce according to very specific corporate mandates. Designer Norman Potter's attempt to draw a distinction between the procedures of art and design is still illustrative here:

Some of [the] procedures [of design] will be familiar to painters and sculptors, and certainly to filmmakers; but for them the work will have a more inward character in its origins. Thus a painter's first responsibility is to the truth of his own vision, even though that vision may (or maybe always does) change as his work proceeds. He may be involved with contractual responsibilities, but not to the same extent as is a designer, whose decisions will be crucially affected by them. The designer works with and for other people: ultimately this may be true of the fine-artist, but in the actual working procedure a designer's formative decisions have a different order of freedom.²⁵

The two modes of thinking that Potter lays out may blur together at a thousand points—as Zweig says, the issue is "a bit messy." But the distinction is not a mere intellectual construction; it rests on something real. The opposition between art and design here is above all a difference between two different class-based notions of creative labor.

*- designers are working class
- artists are middle class*

"You Do Realize What You're Doing to Your People, Right?"

As anyone who has ever turned on a TV during a political election cycle knows, the mythical middle class plays a role in American discourse completely out of proportion with the realities of life in the United States of America. One definition of the American Dream is, of course, owning your own business and becoming an entrepreneur. Yet such rhetoric obscures the reality of the economic situation.

"By every measure of small-business employment, the United States has among the world's smallest small-business sectors (as a proportion of total national employment)," one recent study concludes.²⁶ More people in the United States work for large enterprises than for small firms. Politicians' ritualistic invocation of the magical "middle class" is both a way of acknowledging the realities of the mass of working people by addressing "the little guy" and of deflecting attention from these very realities by eliding the working class.

Something similar happens when we talk about the "creative industries" in the way that the NEA does, lumping together visual art, which is created relatively autonomously, with the work produced by workers hired by large corporations and media companies. The term "artist" has connotations of freedom and personal satisfaction that can be used to obscure real relationships of exploitation when it is overgeneralized to apply to any type of labor that is deemed remotely creative. (An infamous example comes from the early days of Hollywood, when executives consciously encouraged actors, cinematographers, directors, and writers to identify their work "as skilled artistry rather than labor" in an effort to stave off a wave of unionization hitting their industry.²⁷)

Yet it remains crucial to stress that the difference between these modes of creative labor is not simply a matter of how we choose to define what we do; it is connected to how different types of labor actually operate. To illustrate this point, let's look at a few case studies, comparing the issues faced by different kinds of creative laborers.

Visual artists have a level of independence that other creative workers don't. This fact does not mean that they live in some paradise free of exploitation, however. In recent years, the New York group Working Artists in the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) has drawn attention to how artists are often expected to create work for free for their own museum exhibitions, thus making professional success a kind of poisoned chalice, entailing escalating expenses without the guarantee of any solid reward.

A 1973 letter from the experimental filmmaker Hollis Frampton to Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) curator Donald Richie has served W.A.G.E. as a kind of manifesto on artists' historical struggle to be paid for their work.

Having been offered a retrospective of his films but told that it would be "all for love and honor" and that "no money is included at all," Frampton listed the numerous people with whom he had worked or with whom he would work in the process of creating and showing his art—from the film manufacturer and processing lab personnel to projectionists and security guards—and asked why they should be paid for their work while he was not:

I, in my singular person, by making this work, have already generated wealth for scores of people. Multiply that by as many other working artists as you can think of. Ask yourself whether my lab, for instance, would print my work for "love and honor." If I asked them, and they took my questions seriously, I should expect to have it explained to me, ever so gently, that human beings expect compensation for their work. The reason is simply that it enables them to continue doing what they do.

But it seems that, while all these others are to be paid for their part in a show that could not have taken place without me, nonetheless, I, the artist, am not to be paid.

And in fact it seems that there is no way to pay an artist for his work as an artist. I have taught, lectured, written, worked as a technician . . . and for all these collateral activities, I have been paid, have been compensated for my work. But as an artist I have been paid only on the rarest of occasions.²⁸

Such concerns are not just a matter of pride. Frampton cites the case of legendary avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren, who died at age forty-four in circumstances of extreme need despite having been celebrated for her pathbreaking contributions to cinema. In her final years, she was literally reduced to begging for money to complete her work. "I leave it to your surmise whether her life might have been prolonged by a few bucks."²⁹

The issues of compensation that Frampton outlines remain today. In 2012, W.A.G.E. released a survey of close to one thousand New York artists, showing that "the majority (58.4 percent) of respondents did not receive any form of payment, compensation, or reimbursement for their participation [in shows at museums or nonprofits], including the coverage of any expenses."³⁰ According to the group, small organizations were about 10 percent more likely to pay a fee than larger ones—enough of a difference to suggest that the lack of compensation was not purely a matter of budgetary constraints but also of an institutional culture where the opportunity to show work is expected to be reward enough.³¹

A state of affairs that simultaneously celebrates art and devalues it is bound to provoke some angst. Returning to the orienting example of Frampton's letter, however, it bears mentioning that there is a difference between his labor as an artist and the labor of the other workers he mentions as benefiting from his work. In fact, the difference is encoded in the nature of the dispute

itself: MoMA's security guards and projectionists cannot decide whether or not they want to perform their roles, at least not if they want to keep their jobs; Frampton, on the other hand, retains the autonomy to say no, and can therefore bargain for better terms (whether or not he is in a position to win them). This is partly because, as he himself stated, he dedicated himself independently to creating the work in question ("the irreducible point is that I have made the work, have commissioned it of myself, under no obligation of any sort to please anyone"³²), which therefore exists and belongs to him whether or not a museum chooses to show it. Stripped of the specifically artistic rhetoric, therefore, Frampton's position appears to be less that of a worker demanding a wage and more that of someone who owns property and hopes to rent it out. Indeed, it was a rental fee for his films, along with compensation for any expenses to him incurred doing the show, that Frampton ultimately demanded in his letter.

Perhaps it goes without saying that matters are hardly better when one descends into the more directly commercial world of galleries, though few of the stories about artists' disputes with their representation ever see the light of day. In 2011, however, the artist Dana Melamed filed a complaint against her New York gallery, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art. Among other things, Melamed claimed that the gallery had sold close to \$150,000 in art at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2009 but had given her only \$10,000 (contractually she was owed half); that the gallery had sold a number of her works at a discount without her permission; and that when she tried to recover her works from the gallery, in the words of the complaint, the "Defendants did not return Plaintiff's art works to her but threatened to remove Plaintiff's art work from the State of New York and to dispose it 'on the street.'" Ultimately, the case was settled in Melamed's favor in 2012.

"It's very common, and that's the problem," she said later, when interviewed about the suit. "From what I hear from other artists, it's very rare that they get paid on time."³³ This humiliating state of affairs is the reality of life even as a modestly successful artist, and the incident was widely taken as a cautionary tale about how artists need more legal protections.³⁴

For the purposes of our comparison, though, some points about the specific character of Melamed's dispute are worth emphasizing. First of all, the issue did not arise at the point of the production of the artworks in question but rather from how they were circulated and sold. Second, the relationship between artist and gallery owner is explicitly conceived of, and even codified in law, as being akin to that between two business owners, with Melamed, as a producer, entering into a consignment agreement with the gallery to provide her with a service: marketing the work and brokering sales. Unlike in the case of a worker hired to produce an object for an employer, who can then sell the

resulting product for whatever he deems necessary to turn a profit, Melamed's grievance rests on a visual artist's putative right to continue to have a say over the products of her labor, even when they are out of her hands.

The issue of visual artists' rights over their works, even after sale, has been of historical importance, from the struggles over intellectual property that ignited the Art Workers' Coalition in New York in the late 1960s³⁵ to contemporary debates over whether artists deserve "resale royalties" for works sold on the secondary market.³⁶ Yet—and here is the important point, since we are talking about art and class—this kind of intimate connection with the products of one's labor is *exactly* what working-class people are denied by definition as a result of the quid pro quo that forms the central dynamic of a capitalist economy: trading your labor power for a wage. In fact, Marx's description of working-class "alienation" reads as a direct reversal of the characteristics ascribed to artistic labor (that is, that it may be pursued for personal satisfaction as well as monetary reward, or that it reflects some personal vision or investment): "The worker . . . is only himself when he does not work, and in his work he feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home."³⁷

Having looked at issues faced by visual artists, now let us consider some examples of disputes from another realm of the "creative economy" to see what the properly "alienated" form of creative labor looks like.

The production of software is one of the key examples offered by post-industrial theorists to prove that we have entered a new economy based on "immaterial labor"³⁸; video gaming has grown to be the single largest arm of the entertainment world, surpassing the Hollywood giants that gave Adorno nightmares.³⁹ Countless numbers of talented computer engineers are drawn into the orbit of the video game industry because of the cachet of working in a dynamic and creative field. In 2004, an anguished blog post by the anonymous fiancée of one engineer at Electronic Arts (EA)—a company that has become a Fortune 500 behemoth in part by cannibalizing scores of independent game studios—described labor conditions where seven-day workweeks had gone from being an exception, used during "crunch" periods when completing a game, to mandatory, with no comp time, sick days, or overtime being offered. Management hid behind an exemption to California labor law for skilled "specialty" workers; complaints about physical and mental exhaustion by programmers were met with the refrain, "If they don't like it, they can work someplace else." The anonymous "EA Spouse" concluded her blog post:

If I could get EA CEO Larry Probst on the phone, there are a few things I would ask him. "What's your salary?" would be merely a point of curiosity. The main thing I want to know is, Larry: you do realize what you're doing to your people, right? And you do realize that they ARE people, with physical limits, emotional

lives, and families, right? Voices and talents and senses of humor and all that? That when you keep our husbands and wives and children in the office for ninety hours a week, sending them home exhausted and numb and frustrated with their lives, it's not just them you're hurting, but everyone around them, everyone who loves them? When you make your profit calculations and your cost analyses, you know that a great measure of that cost is being paid in raw human dignity, right? Right?⁴⁰

The post touched off widespread outrage in the developer community and led to several successful class-action lawsuits. In one, EA programmer Leander Hasty (revealed to be the significant other of Erin Hoffman, also known as the "EA Spouse") stated that while they are classified as skilled laborers, he and his fellow programmers "do not perform work that is original or creative and have no management responsibilities and are seldom allowed to use their own judgment." In essence, for these computer programmers, the new creative economy had come to look very much like an old-fashioned Fordist assembly line, as one industry watcher put it.⁴¹

Another case: In 2012, a new push began to unionize the several hundred visual effects and animation artists at Sony Imageworks. A union drive had overwhelmingly been voted down almost a decade before, but in the interim benefits for the non-union animators had drastically eroded, even as the department became more central to Sony's operations, churning out multiple blockbusters. "No one seemed to want to admit that those benefits could all be taken away at a moment's notice," the animators attempting to organize their workplace told one industry website, "and they all eventually were."⁴² Company policy appeared to be to dodge, as much as possible, the burden of offering any serious retirement or health benefits, consigning workers to permanent freelance status.

When a website dedicated to female professionals wrote a particularly sycophantic profile of Sony executive Michelle Raimo Kouyate, stressing how she maintained great work-life balance ("don't even try to tell Michelle that her rich home life—part of which unfolds at her family's vacation home in West Africa—needs come at the expense of her career"⁴³), an anonymous Imageworks employee offered an angry rejoinder on the union's blog: "How do I care for my family without health insurance, sick days or vacation days while working mandatory twelve hour days, six days a week for months on end? Is the value of my children or even myself less than others?" For the author, the answer to ending this sorry state of affairs was the answer that working-class people have always turned to: "I think we can work towards all of these goals, by organizing."⁴⁴

EA computer programmers and Sony animators may not fit our stereotypical definition of what the "working class" looks like. Many differences

separate the kind of labor they do from the textile workers of Marx's day or the autoworkers of the 1930s. But their struggles have much more in common with these classical images of the "alienated" working class than they do with those of the contemporary artists represented in the W.A.G.E. survey. Both groups are subjected to plenty of indignity and injustice—but this doesn't mean that the issues they face are the same, any more than apples and oranges are the same because they are both fruit.

"Cut Up into Two Persons"

"I think what's confusing," said Jennifer Dalton during that long-ago discussion of my *Theses* at Winkleman Gallery, "is that you say that artists are middle class, but we feel working class. We feel replaceable."

The issue of class has moral overtones. If politicians endlessly pay homage to the "middle class" as a way of painting a magical picture of the American economy as an even playing field where we can all potentially realize ourselves, struggling artists may claim the idea of themselves as "working class" partly as a way of putting a name on their own embattled condition and piercing stereotypes that all artists are well-to-do dandies. As the example of Melamed shows, even successful artists routinely have to fight in order to claim what should be theirs. Even more importantly, inasmuch as the vast majority of contemporary artists do not actually make a living through their art but get by through a variety of other jobs, they are in actual fact members of the working class.

The theory that contemporary art is characteristically middle class may sound dismissive, as if it were a way of saying that artists' grievances aren't as significant as those faced by "real" workers. This is far from the case. It might be important to remember, therefore, that the reason Marxists look to the working class is not moral. Marx and Engels's attachment to the working class was definitely not just a modified version of the biblical promise that "the meek shall inherit the Earth" or that "the last shall be first."

Rather, it was their contention that the working class was exploited, but also uniquely positioned to be a revolutionary agent in a capitalist society. Capitalists had become the dominant class; capitalism had created a vastly productive, interconnected world economy (albeit one that ran on truly shortsighted logic and inequality); and the working class had a special relationship to maintaining this system. That is, workers collectively do the work that makes this sprawling system function and it therefore needs them on an ongoing basis, day in and day out. This fact gives them special power. Among other things, it gives them a unique weapon, the strike, which no other group can claim. By simply uniting and making a collective decision not to work, the working class can wield tremendous power.

different issues - why is it important to keep with one class from another?

only a small minority is middle class (makes a living from art)

It has become fashionable among aesthetic theorists invested in “immaterial labor” as a new capitalist norm to assume that Marx and Engels’s faith in the proletariat was misplaced. It used to be that pundits would argue that workers in the United States were too comfortable, too bought off by capitalism. These days, it is more common to argue the reverse, that the working class under conditions of globalization and neoliberalism has become too unstable, too decomposed to ever have hope of political solidarity or united action. Marxism, we are told, is applicable only to old-fashioned factory workers—a condition of labor in nineteenth-century Europe that no longer holds under contemporary technological capitalism. Adam Turl has neatly summed up the host of distortions that underlie these various theories:

What most post-industrial concepts have in common . . . is that they narrowly identify the working class as industrial workers, rather than the class of wage workers as a whole, which also includes white-collar workers, service workers, transportation workers, and so on. They also mistakenly associate the relative decline in the number of industrial workers with their declining social weight in the economy, when rising productivity in industry actually increases the potential power of industrial workers even if their relative numbers might diminish. Finally, post-industrial theory tends to conflate the decline in labor parties, trade unions, and other forms of traditional working-class organizations—the product of several decades of neoliberal attacks—with structural changes that they argue render the class less powerful, or even powerless.

The Marxist concept of the working class is far more dynamic. While employers utilize structural shifts—deregulation, industrial decline in one region, and so on—to weaken working-class organization and lower labor costs, these changes are not permanent barriers to working-class struggle. On the contrary, they guarantee that the working class will be compelled to resist. The revival of such resistance is a political and organizational question rather than a structural one. Marxism locates within capitalism—driven to accumulate capital through the expropriation of surplus value—the class whose labor turns the wheels of production, however shaped, and therefore possesses the power to transform it. The working class, though its structure has changed dramatically over time, still possesses the centrality and power attributed to it by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels when they wrote the *Communist Manifesto*.⁴⁵

In other words, economic and political theories that dwell on an insurmountable new “postindustrial” condition suffer from a faulty theory of class, no less than the aesthetic theories we looked at earlier. Yet nothing in this theory says that other classes or social groups don’t have real grievances or participate in social struggle. The unemployed, students, and others can and do play decisive political roles. What the Marxist emphasis on the working class does indicate is the pragmatic reality that, in a capitalist world, the working class has a form of social power and a key role to play that these other

faulty theory of class

groups don’t, and that politics rooted in these other groups will have an in-built limit in the absence of a connection with an organized working class because systematic change requires some systematic way to challenge power. As the *Manifesto* states (rather sternly) of the middle class:

The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history. If by chance they are revolutionary, they are so only in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat, they thus defend not their present, but their future interests, they desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat.⁴⁶

fuzzy re middle class lower middle class and bourgeoisie

For middle-class agents to become effectively political involves them decisively breaking with the biases associated with their own class, because in a society where the relationship between capitalist and worker is the most important one, the middle class occupies a vacillating center position. Marx himself writes, in *Theories of Surplus Value*, that a member of the petite bourgeoisie “is cut up into two persons. . . . As owner of the means of production he is a capitalist; as a labourer he is his own wage-labourer.”⁴⁷ Among professional artists or those who aspire to be professional artists, it is this characteristically middle-class split that explains the seemingly paradoxical political temperament that observers often find, with artists pulled between egalitarianism and meritocracy, caught between what they have to gain from class struggle and what they have to lose.⁴⁸ Lucy Lippard captures this contradiction beautifully in “The Pink Glass Swan,” her classic essay about artists and class:

Looking at and “appreciating” art in [the twentieth century] has been understood as an instrument (or at best a result) of upward social mobility, in which owning art is the ultimate step. Making art is at the bottom of the scale. This is the only legitimate reason to see artists as so many artists see themselves—as “workers.” At the same time, artists/makers tend to feel misunderstood and, as creators, innately superior to the buyers/owners. The innermost circle of the art-world class system thereby replaces the rulers with the creators, and the contemporary artist in the big city (read New York) is a schizophrenic creature. S/he is persistently working “up” to be accepted, not only by other artists, but also by the hierarchy that exhibits, writes about, and buys her/his work. At the same time s/he is often ideologically working “down” in an attempt to identify with the workers outside of the art context and to overthrow the rulers in the name of art.⁴⁹

Among other things, such an internally divided temperament accounts for the historical difficulty in organizing artists into any sort of coherent political formation. Visual artists, in fact, are not unlike the peasants Marx memorably described in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as being

x

“formed by the simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes.”⁵⁰ Peasants’ lives were rooted in the form of small property; their collective interests didn’t fuse into anything greater but merely formed an aggregation of individual units, making them politically weak though numerically vast.

Contemporary artists—highly educated, concentrated in urban centers where they often interact professionally, and moreover thrown back into the working class because of the capricious nature of the art market—are generally much more naturally radical than the peasantry that formed the backbone of reaction in France. Their conditions are similar, however, in that as artists their collective labor doesn’t really add up to anything larger and is not related to any larger institution that they could take control of collectively. Artists merely form a collection of individualities, of individual franchises jostling to distinguish themselves from one another.

The upshot is that visual artists’ middle-class position is not merely a limit on their relation to larger social struggle but also on their ability to organize to transform *their own* conditions. Attempts to organize artists to address inequality have generally run aground on a simple but crucial issue: what institution is there to which they could relate in order to make collective demands? What power do they have besides moral authority? As Carl Andre, once an advocate of identifying radical art with blue-collar labor, said in 1979 when asked to join in a global “artist strike” against the system, “From whom would artists be withholding their art if they did go on strike? Alas, from no one but themselves.”⁵¹

Still, this reality doesn’t mean that artists’ protests cannot have a real and vital impact. In some ways, you could even say that the very unattached nature of artistic struggle gives it a certain mercurial power that can help serve as a detonator for wider change. To return to the example of the Art Workers’ Coalition, after forming in the late sixties to take on a wide range of issues affecting artists—from MoMA’s silence on the war in Vietnam to the museum’s “black-mail” of painters into donating work to its collection⁵²—it collapsed after a few short years, undone by its wildly eclectic nature and endless squabbling. However, in the meantime, its highly visible pickets and outspoken protests at MoMA played a role in inspiring the museum’s workers to unionize.⁵³

Consequences and Contradictions

At the end of this long journey, what has been gained by clarifying the class dynamics of contemporary artistic labor?

Among other things, clearly mapping the relation of art and class helps to sharpen our understanding of what continues to make visual art unique and

therefore aids our understanding of what makes it interesting. Whatever the twists and turns of art-making in its “post-conceptual,” “post-studio,” “relational” era, visual art still remains rooted in a notion of labor that puts it at a right angle to the way work is experienced in much of the rest of our capitalist world. Visual art still holds the allure of being basically a middle-class field, where personal agency and professional ambition overlap. Such an admission saves you to some degree from the Manichean position of seeing art as either commercial and corrupt or noncommercial and pure (à la Stallabrass).

But there’s something else. A clear idea of class can also give a sense of the real stakes of art, providing a much-needed dose of realism. Even the best art theory can make fantastically overblown claims (Adorno’s notion of art as consciousness’s last tortured stand against capitalism or Hardt’s idea of art as a model for postindustrial “immaterial labor” in general). Art theory, in other words, suffers from an overinflated sense of its own importance. In a society overwhelmingly dominated by corporations and wage labor, accepting that visual art is middle class in nature also means beginning to see the natural limits of what you can promise for it as a critic or expect of it as an artist. That gives you a more realistic starting point for action.

I wrote earlier that the theory of class might provide the missing center of the debate about art. But in some ways, I confess, I think of it as decentering. Very intelligent people used to believe fervently that the heavens revolved around the Earth, a model inherited from a superannuated past and maintained by adding greater and greater layers of useless intellectual refinement as new phenomena were observed. For artists and critics, accepting the middle-class definition of artistic labor might be something like the shift away from the geocentric cosmology. It might allow them to cut through casuistic arguments and provide a much more reliable model for understanding the motion of the “art world” as it sails through the cultural firmament.

What is lost may be the mystified but comforting sense of self-importance that comes with believing that you are at the center of the universe. What is gained in return, however, will be a more scientific understanding of the forces that actually govern that universe—and that is worth the trade.

Do I accept
that art is
a middle class
profession?

more realistic
was idealistic

true