

# METHOD OR MOUTHTALK?

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It is important to be aware of the means by which artists have been manipulated as well as the means by which they attempt to manipulate the commonly held myths about art and the external social and political forces that shape art. Without such conscious realization, the artist remains a pawn of those who dictate their role in the system while they themselves become dictators of the cultural forms of a society for the purposes of investment and posterity. This discourse should serve as a base for the rerouting of artistic practice in human affairs.

In our dialogue we have attempted to raise important issues in the form of an argument; the argument to be pursued and amended as we learn more about how to understand the problem of art. While not covered in this short paper, it might be noted *mutatis mutandis* that similar problems exist in the social sciences. At this point, the article has different voices, the problem of the different backgrounds of the participants.<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT IS ART?

In a way, this question is both central and at the same time potentially misleading. As a cultural or social category defining a status or merit, it defines the limits of acceptable 'Art' in our society. As a guide to an understanding of human expression, it can in various guises mask the myriad forms that such expressions take. Given that all definitions essentially imply limits, it is essential that the question of 'what art is' not be reduced to formal or logical examinations of any set of arbitrary diacritica. For us, the question implies that 'art' is not necessarily a category or simply a thing but an activity rooted in its social context and circumstances.

Instead of attempting to locate a meaning or use of a word or concept outside of a practice, what seems important is to emphasize the *activity* rather than the result. Only when seen as a socially rooted activity will we be addressing all the richness that diversity in performance brings to any given form of human expression.

It is tempting to engage the problem as formalist critics and aesthetic philosophers. For them, if it is not entirely clear 'what art is', it is eminently clear 'what is art'. Essentially the problem of defining art is reduced to a methodology of mouthtalk<sup>2</sup> where it is not so much what is said but who is saying it. The definition of 'what art is' becomes not so much an attempt to describe and understand an important (and universal) domain of human activity but a form of bestowing status in which the problem of human expression is mystified.

Critics and philosophers have led us to believe that the value of an artwork comes from its potential to evoke emotion, to exhibit aesthetic qualities, or to portray a reality. At the same time, these critics define art as autonomous, with a meta-language of its own.<sup>3</sup> By a combination of these attributes, a form of expression and its product can thus be labelled 'art'. Art by this definition is alienated from its sociology<sup>4</sup> and from its context. What become important are the formal elements purified of their meaning, their context and their roots. Supposedly, we are left with the pure 'artistic' experience. By the use of such a formal, unspecified, and essentially unrooted language, critics and those who control the arts can arbitrarily define what is and is not 'art', which is why they know 'what is art' and not 'what art is'.

Yet, the problem remains how we know something is 'art'? By reducing the definition of 'art' to a formal meta-language, things and their underlying social activity are separated by an artificial set of categories. In fact, critical to those who use such a meta-language in evaluating a work of art is their supposed neutrality in terms of the very social process by which either the art or these critical standards are produced. Effectively, formal standards are deemed to have more intellectual clarity and force, precisely because they are without social content. Standards without any social referent by which they can be tested are *ipso facto*, arbitrary. What we are being told implicitly is that the very strength of formalist standards lies in their arbitrary nature. The idea that art is an autonomous form, bound by a traditional meta-language, is a misleading dogma which contributes to the proliferation of esoteric formalisms, empty of meaningful content; a definition without parameters. As a guide to understanding human phenomena, it should be absurd. It tells us neither how we can know intersubjectively what 'art' is or where it begins and ends. As a result, critics can seriously argue about the status as art of the Brillo boxes that Andy Warhol silk screened; or they can feel it is necessary to be polled to decide whether Watts Tower even deserves the sobriquet 'folk art'. It would be laughable if it were not for its insidiousness. How these works have been used, what meaning they have for various groups of people and why critics are chosen to be judges goes unquestioned.

By defining 'art' in this way, the art work is removed, alienated and isolated from its process, its effect and ultimately its power. Art, through its associations with such notions must, by the force of the argument, become primarily concerned with art-as-art, not as activity. Art is thus isolated, alienated and as such becomes capable of either pure formalisms (Stella) or expressions of this alienation (deKooning). As such it is embraced as pure and cleansed but, as Barthes points out,<sup>5</sup> powerless. Its concerns become the world of art, its goal, autonomy. Work is defined as 'for its own sake'; more important, the formal definition not only delineates a cognitive

domain, it creates its own sociology. By creating pure standards, the formalist creates a pure sociology. Something must tell the formalist a product is 'art'. If it is not in terms of what *is*, it must be rooted in *who* says it is, or *where* it is. The context is defined (although never stated) and that is what makes it art. The *illusion* of autonomy creates the actuality of a bondage rooted in mystification. For example, rarely, if ever, is a work of art discussed in terms of its cash value. But there is a covert relationship between that which is praised for its uniqueness and the obvious marketability implied therein. If artists must live and eat and they must do 'art' to survive, is there any wonder about the emphasis on esoterica, uniqueness, 'avant-chic'? What 'art' becomes in such a situation is what 'art' is today, the plaything of those who control society; a product for the ruling class. Such definitions by removing art from its activity, create the very hegemony that artists yearn to escape: while substituting a status over which neither artists nor their products have any control.

Given these problems it becomes essential to ask, do we emphasize the 'thing' or the totality of the human activity involved? For us, it seems essential to begin with the latter, if only because art is activity rooted in a sociology even if defined formally. Art cannot escape history, nor the complex relations in which it finds itself. It can be denied that such relations exist, and the illusion of autonomy created, but as we have argued, only at the cost of mystification and the loss of meaning mystification connotes. It is true for art as it is for all things.

If formalist definitions have failed to accurately delineate the study of art, how should such a study be defined? Certainly it is not with distinctions which define the art of one group as 'art' and another as commercial, folk, or non-art. Decisions about art should be based on the particular role the activity plays in human expression, its particular domain as metaphor and expression in a bounded form. This necessitates at least two dimensions to begin with. First, as expression, as form, art is a relation to human labor and creation, i.e. its history. Second, art is a social activity, rooted in language and, as all langu-

age, rooted in its social conditions. It is a *thing-in-relation*. A discussion of 'what art is' is also about 'how art is', 'why art is' as part of the process by which we create our world and are created by it.

Art cannot be understood as a problem *sui generis*. The problem is part of the understanding of all human activity but like all human activity has its particular domains. As a result, art must be understood as a part of all cultures and groups with a diversity of forms, functions, places and roles. Its study must encompass all its forms whether valued or not; its meaning and success based on its sociology and not purely its formal characteristics. It is neither context-free nor independent. It is one of many human activities and, like all activities, must be understood in its relations to all human activity.

#### WHAT CONSTITUTES AN ARTISTIC ENTERPRISE?

What distinguishes one activity from another such that one is deemed 'worthy' of preservation and another ignored appears to be a question of the standards by which that activity is judged and the qualifications of the person(s) doing the judging. In a capitalist system it seems obvious that some activities (or their results) are considered more 'valuable'—in a market sense—than others. Bricklayers may produce numerous exciting relationships when arranging bricks, the form of which may appear similar to minimal sculpture of the 60's, yet they never sell their work on those grounds (be the price more or less than that of the minimal sculptor). Nor do we appear to confuse the two works. What then differentiates the two if in fact their end products are visually similar? If the mason were to locate the bricks at the Guggenheim, the product would be considered art. It must have been a curious sight for a tile layer to see Carl Andre's metal squares, similar in size and location to the real flooring already installed at the Whitney or the Modern, or the electrician's amazement over any excitement generated by Flavin's fluorescent tubes. Without its special context and the entourage of people who fabricate an evaluation it's just a floor or a light fixture, not art. Art is more than its end product. If the products appear similar and yet society

proclaims differences with regard to value, preservation, reverence, etc. then we must look elsewhere for the rationale behind that distinction. A brief review of the processes seems in order. For such an analysis we might sketch two scenarios; 1) a retired salesman who diligently paints from a photo of an urban street, and 2) Richard Estes depicting a downtown street. How do we differentiate Richard Estes from the salesman? Also, how do we differentiate Estes, the illustrator, from Estes, the painter? Both Estes and our salesman apply paint to a canvas in an effort to portray a prearranged subject. Are the two activities the same? Is only the status of the final product different? If we assume that the answer to the first question is 'yes', then we are left with the assumption that the determinants of what is and what is not art are based on some set of arbitrary, formal criteria. What differentiates the products are a measure of worth, not a delineation of the processes involved, i.e. a subjective evaluation. What remains unanswered is why we can distinguish Duchamp's typewriter from another typewriter, or a Campbell's soup can from *the* Campbell's soup can. Are the works of earth artists really unlike the jobs done by the Army Corps of Engineers? Both forms idolize man's ability to shape the environment to place a formal imprint by man on nature—an homage to man's ability to change the natural ecology. Both leave unquestioned the social cost of such domination. Now, if the end product appears to be like other processes—how do we determine an artistic enterprise from one that is not? Formalist critics and even radical artists solve this problem by applying credibility to the context through which the activity of 'art' is performed and exhibited i.e. galleries and museums and the network of people who comprise the art system. Effectively, what makes one art and one not art is the definition which makes the distinction and the particular socio-political relationships which give these formalist definitions their credibility. The problem of what is art is reduced to the problem of *who controls its definition*, not what it is as a set of parallel human activities. In the above examples, artistic expression is present in all the products described. Artistic *status*—which

is not art—is ascribed to only some. A study of art and the attempt to understand it as a human activity is thereby mystified. What we are directed to is a study of only particular forms. As a result, the study of art becomes fetishized and self-perpetuating. What we should be studying in our attempt to understand art is 1) art as a set of parallel activities with different forms and contents, 2) the social system which underlies any definition of art.

If we are to accept the need for a contextual base, in which to root a definition of art, the artistic activity must be seen in relation to its social imbeddedness and the particulars of given groups. However, the activities are not only social. They manifest themselves in metaphorical languages which necessitate levels of comprehension based on the same prerequisites as other languages. Essentially the study of art cannot be removed from its sociology. What needs to be understood are the diverse means art has used to realize a structuring of the world in metaphorical form.

In order to take advantage of such diversity of forms and contents which art is both capable of and has produced, those concerned with understanding art must become conscious of: 1) how social/political and economic forces shape art, 2) how artists' biases affect the shape of art, 3) how the general public has been and can be involved in the process of art, 4) how art is organized as a social and political phenomena, 5) how various definitions of art affect its role and 6) how art is and may be rooted in social activity. (Does it have to be for-its-own sake?) While these are only some of the questions that must be answered, it seems clear that any understanding of art must be historical, cultural and social.

#### SHOULD ART BE DEFINED BY ITS END PRODUCT?

The socially-learned definition of art as a "product of beauty, implying a personal, un-analyzable creative force that transmits and raises the art (object) beyond a skill . . ." <sup>6</sup> has resulted in the promulgation of a myth. The notion that the artist creates mysteriously, in isolation, alienated from the larger culture has furthered the already problematic gap between the art activity and the larger popu-

lation. This gap is the result of the basic structure of our social and political institutions which force the art activity to be patronized and its products to be captured by the wealthy. The problems resulting from a definition which sees art as an end product manifest themselves strongly when we become aware of the means by which the exhibition of such products as products in galleries and museums transform the art activity from a potentially genuine cultural effort into an elitist endeavor whose products are viewed and eventually possessed by only a small portion of the culture. A decision to study the art activity through its residue in the form of end products reduces and narrows the real potential to see artists as people, citizens of a culture, who for whatever peculiar reasons employ metaphorical languages in order to expose the attitudes, criticisms of contradictions of a particular view of reality at any given time.

Indeed artists get side-tracked, first through restrictive education and later through the efforts of the power structure to view art works as valuable entities whose existence is independent of other things, acts, events. When an art work is viewed in a larger context, the emphasis automatically shifts from the artist's personal conception of reality as manifested primarily in a product (event) as an end in itself to an investigation of those forces which shape the artists' views of reality. Further, by transforming art from a product to an activity, the importance of standards which define the products as art lose their force. All things as relations to metaphorical expression in a bounded form become a part of art no matter what their use or final location may be. By removing art from its definition as product the concern becomes more what it means and what it does rather than what it is.

#### HAS ART ALWAYS BEEN A FUNCTIONARY OF THE POWER STRUCTURE?

The problem is essentially historical but at the same time a function of the definition we assign to the category 'art'. Historically, not all societies have had power structures. In fact, throughout most of human history societies have had neither classes based on differential access to production and resources nor

a cultural system based on the hegemony of one class or social system over other classes or systems. Band and tribal societies are defined by the absence of such structures.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, it may be validly claimed that almost all societies have had activities and products that we could (and should) categorize as art. To that extent, it may simply be stated that throughout history 'art' has rarely been either associated with or under the control of a ruling class. Even in class based societies 'art' has existed outside of the mainstream or control of dominant classes.<sup>8</sup> All classes and groups have had art of their own and both activities and things with clear artistic content and form.

Yet within the domain of art as a self-conscious and formal social and cognitive domain the problem of art and its relation to a ruling or dominant class still remains. Here, the problem is primarily, as we have shown, a definition which denies the critical import of sociology. 'Art' as a self-conscious, categorically autonomous form with a particular meta-language deemed to be separate and isolated from other socio-political functions, may be said to have rarely if ever existed outside the domain of the dominant class. Such art that has existed outside the hegemony of the dominant class is normally categorized not as art but as some sub-genera of artistic form which might be labelled 'primitive', 'commercial', 'black', 'working class'<sup>9</sup> or other form of 'art'. Art here is, by definition, the art of the dominant class; the class in control of the museums, the universities, the media which today assigns objects with the status 'art'.

We have said that at one critical level the problem of the position of art in society is definitional. Yet the very problem of definition which seems to remove art from its sociology is at its root only possible in particular social systems ie. class based systems. More, it is only credible and supportable when encapsulated in capitalism. Thus we are not surprised by the relationship between formalism and the creation of the autonomous and fragmented status of art in modern capitalist society. Nor are we surprised by the uniqueness of this relation to modern capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

A self-defined, autonomous art categorically separated from other uses and functions in which the product and the creator of that product are described in terms of 'their-own-sake' necessitates particular political-economic relationships for its support. These in turn, we shall see, are a part of a particular sociology which in turn defines the art that it produces—or at least that which falls under the rubric and social practice which categorizes art. At the base of any *such art-for-arts-sake* is an economic system in which not all members of the society must *produce* for the support, survival and reproduction of that society. Said another way, such an art form demands that some produce surplus products which are expropriated for the support of those who do not produce. More, it assumes a political economy in which there is both a way of deciding how this product is to be appropriated and how value is to be assigned to non-productive activities such that they may be supported and rewarded. Logically it is possible to have such systems whereby those whose product has been expropriated would decide on its use by others. However, in such societies the value of things would have to be also defined by their social use and exchange effectively based on social utility. In such societies therefore an 'art' could not exist where it is defined precisely in terms of some abstract value. 'Art' could not be either autonomous or worthy by a measure which emphasizes its separation from social utility and its importance because of its-own-sake. Where things are given worth in terms of their use, measures of that worth must be both concrete and rooted in a social practice.

Where measures of worth are separated from the process of social use and production, where the worth of things are not a function of the production involved and where some live off the productive surplus created by others ie. control that surplus production, we have a class based society. In such societies it becomes logically and politically not only expedient but imperative to separate worth from both social utility and the productive system. Justification and legitimization for those who do not produce the surplus supporting the society must be found and the nature of

worth isolated from both social utility and production, precisely because those who control production are themselves non productive. Since production and the labor put into it are expropriated by those who do not produce, the product and by extension all things must be divorced from their social basis and given a false autonomy. This is essential because the value things have is primarily the labor used to produce them while their use and control in class societies is divorced from that labor. Thus, things must be viewed as separate and autonomous, and their value based on a system of categories which hides the process that created them. As such, things must be fetishized as things-in-themselves. In class based societies i.e. capitalism, where the appropriation of things is based on a concept of a free individual in a free market, where exchange value replaces use value and labor value must produce a surplus value, things must be mystified as autonomous and free; as things-in-themselves. Thus we get a series of contradictions in which things are free yet related, autonomous yet having value—value being a relation. In order to mediate this contradiction and at the same time to justify its exploitative use of people as well as measure labor and its results outside of the process by which it is created, things and people are commoditized.

While both the history and relations of capitalism are clearly more complex and hidden, these relations are critical to an understanding of art in capitalism. First and foremost, artists do by necessity live off the surplus value produced by others. Secondly they do not receive this value as an exchange of use values but as a series of commodities based on exchange value. As the products of those who labor are essentially expropriated by those who control the labor process, artists must receive most of their rewards from the dominant class. Thus artists exchange their products for the expropriated products of others. In such a situation, the artists' product must be equalized to other products; must be assigned a value in the exchange; must be commoditized. As we said, the critical mode in exchange value is neither the labor that went into it nor the use to which it is put. Rather its value ad-

heres as a commodity. In such a situation, for art to have worth it must have exchange value. As a result it must be removed from its context and assigned a series of arbitrary relations which will guarantee its value; thus such criteria which separate art from its activity, which like cherries demands that it be boxed, stored and sold.

Art as part of capitalism must be reduced to an autonomous product like all things. It must be a function of a value. The autonomy that it receives is effectively illusory for its autonomy is rooted precisely in the conditions and structures of the society which it claims to transcend. More, such an art form demands that it be supported and in so doing becomes part of the domain of the dominant class i.e. the class with the resources to either control its use or its manufacture. The more costly it is, the more it needs support and the more it becomes encapsulated by the dominant class. For this class, their interests demand that things be alienated and commoditized. Thus, the formal notions of art become the handmaiden of a class society, not its anti-thesis.

What we are positing is that art for its own sake is anything but that. To the degree that artists demand an artificial autonomy and art is defined formally, it will remain within the purview of the dominant class. It defines and is defined by specific contexts; yet at the same time able to transcend these contexts. Art is found in all societies as an active expressive element. People clearly relate to art, particularly an art that relates or addresses their needs, feelings and problems. No matter how commoditized art is it can and does exhibit meanings, contents, forms that actively express human concerns and as such is used, acted upon and effective. But to the extent that art defines an artificial autonomy based on its own meta-language it removes itself from people—or most people—and accepts a commoditized value and status at the expense of effect and communication. This does not mean that there will be no art. People produce art whether autonomously or not. People produce art for themselves, as an activity within the larger spectrum of their lives, as part of their productive activities, as a part of their everyday non-autonomous lives. To not label

it art is simply to create a false value and demand encapsulation by those whose interests demand things-in-themselves.

In answer to our question; art has not been fundamentally nor historically within the complete hegemony of a dominant class. Nor has it always demanded an illusory autonomy. Only when it is for its own sake does it demand relations with the dominant class for its support. If this is true, it becomes imperative that radical artists concern themselves not with the art of the dominant class as a commoditized form. It demands a critique of this art and the position it takes, it demands examination of why this art often succeeds in spite of its own self definition. Most important it demands an understanding of art produced by people as activity rooted in their daily lives, and as a use value not alienated nor autonomous; not separate and distinct but as an active part related to life as a complex and social phenomenon. It demands a critique of society as well as art. For it is in society that art will change, not as art-in-itself.

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## NOTES

1. *WHY ARE AN ARTIST AND A SOCIAL SCIENTIST ATTEMPTING TO COLLABORATE?* The idea of a dialogue between an artist and a social scientist is presented here, in an admittedly early stage, as an effort to expose the relationships between the activity of art and its social imbeddedness. This question and answer format was used in an attempt to initiate discussion that would discover those overlapping points of contact which could be investigated in further depth at a later date. An exchange between members of two disciplines should bring into focus the relevance of all those artifacts, activities and

'aesthetics' of everyday life which the artist has been trained to ignore for the most part, or to glorify indiscriminantly.

2. Among many social scientists, 'mouthtalk' refers to concepts in which words describe other words without a meaningful content.

3. Autonomy refers to a conception of art as a form independent of its social/context. While formalists may admit that the social context exists at some prior level, the art product is valued as a form about itself which exists for its own sake and whose understanding is based in an independent meta-language. For an insightful discussion of what this meta-language is and how it works, see Henri Lefebvre's *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. Harper and Row, 1968.

4. By sociology is meant the process of art as a social product and its self-critical understanding as such a product. As Goldmann points out, to separate art from its role as a social phenomenon either creating or viewing it, is essentially to remove it from its sociology and as a result creates a form of mystification (cf. *Philosophy and Human Sciences*, Cape, 1969). More important, a thing is not only what it is, but also how we understand it, i.e., its sociology.

5. For a discussion of the mystified and powerless role of art in modern western society, see Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*. Cape, 1972.

6. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. 1971. G&C Merriam Co.

7. Sahlis, Marshall. *Tribesmen*. Prentice Hall, 1968.  
Krader, Lawrence. *The Formation of the State*. Prentice Hall, 1968.

8. It may be noted here that many art critics and historians might argue that this is only valid if we classify these in terms of non-traditional art objects. As we have argued, this is precisely the problem with such critics and historians and their self proclaimed 'art'.

9. These terms may appear to be inconsistent. Certainly formalist critics would see them as such. For us, what is critical is the differentiation of artistic forms by the use of amendments to the category, art. Eventually, all, if not equal, are similar in their sub-genera status. Moreover, we do not necessarily hold that all are of equal importance or worth, but they are all artistic forms (cf. Barthes).

10. See Gimpel, Jean *The Cult of Art*. Stein & Day, 1969.