

## Art and Emancipation

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# Art and Emancipation

*By*

John Roberts



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*Kim Charnley*

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## Preface

This book brings together a wide range of work produced in the new millennium, incorporating published material in journals, book collections, and museum publications as well as unpublished conference and guest lecture papers; as such it gives a representative overview of my thinking on the relations between art and philosophy, and politics and culture, during this period. In this respect it develops and refines some of the themes of my other writings published since the late 1990s: the critical status of art after conceptualism, the question of skill and deskilling in art, the amateur and the 'collective artist', the avant-garde and anti-historicism, realism and the image, artistic agency and non-identity, art and negation. Accordingly, it covers – across various theoretical registers – a number of the problems that art after conceptual art has had to confront, faced with art's longstanding relationship to market and institution, the commodity form and mass culture; problems, that, in a substantive sense, remain constitutive of art's limits and possibilities under the antinomies of technological and social 'progress', modernity and the concept of the 'new'.

Some of my responses to these problems may appear unfamiliar or discordant or both, but the realities of the problems that I address are, nevertheless, long-standing. Indeed, they stretch back to Hegel and German idealism's sense that what is worth defending in art in light of the emerging conflictual forces of modernity is precisely art's capacity to escape, undermine or shift the constraints of its own inherited predicates in response to the heteronomous, delimiting conditions of this modernity. That is, art achieves its highest function, in Hegel's sense, by being other than mere distraction, leisure, practical outcome, or academic doxa. On this basis it grounds its sense of possibility and its relationship to the future – and consequently its understanding of artistic value – from the same place as the realm of philosophy itself: namely the *unconditioned* force and identity of its predicates. In other words, art's self-defining function is to face up to those instrumental and heteronomous forces that continually threatens its autonomy as *poeisis* (truth-in-making), through insisting on art's unfinished character. Consequently, in order to defy what conventionally might be made of art or expected of it as a matter of self-definition under the pressures of market, institution and the commodity form, art has to act on its given conditions and externalities of production and reception in order to find out what it 'might be' as opposed to what it contingently 'is'. I fully hold to this position, as an emancipatory horizon in art, despite all the current countervailing forces that would suggest otherwise.

Yet we should be clear here this is not a version of classical modernism, in which the logic of the new supersedes, chronologically, the attachments of the old. Challenging the predicates of previous art today – when art is unable to depose the authority of previous art simply through its absolute negation – is to defend a very different notion of *poiesis* than ‘formal development’. Thus, if I continue to defend a notion of *poiesis* which is derived from the motile language of German idealism and the historic avant-garde, this is not an avant-garde that sees the new as an augur of the glorious oblivion of times past and, therefore, revels in the relentless futurist destruction and supersession of the old; this is because there is no radical order of the new in art, no Great Negation, that can provide a systematic set of formal predicates for a new art as the basis of a new world of values and meaning *tout court*. Art cannot remake the world through art’s difference from other art alone, as is increasingly clear from the hubristic attachments of art in the twentieth century to the modern as a transcendent value. For as soon as these predicates of the new are in place and are symbolically defined as the gateway to the Future, the future as a new symbolic order looks increasingly less secure as it recedes from us, insofar as the revaluation of all values through art cannot escape the contemporary’s own impending supersession and sublation, given that the future soon becomes the future past; indeed, *poiesis* in these terms easily becomes *telos*, in as much as the arrival of the present-becoming-future falls into a reification of this impending future as the self-fulfilling development of the recent past.

Hence, under present conditions we may ask the new in art to be unlike the old – as a matter of art’s exit from those forces that would define present art in the image of past art – but this exit is not the creation of the new through the uniform destruction of the recent past, whose innovations guarantee the direction that all serious art should take in the present on the pain of artists’ falling into academicism and the old-new. In other words, the production of the new in art can no longer attach newness to the future as a unifiable call to break with the past without suffering from extreme bathos, certainly post the relativisation of all ‘isms’ since the 1980s, and, by extension, and more crucially, the underlying crisis of art itself in the twentieth century. This is where the anti-historicist futurity of the early Soviet avant-garde importantly comes into play, as a way of avoiding linear-historicist accounts of the futurist-new.

When – as in Soviet Constructivism – art seeks an exit from art as a condition of art’s emancipation from the capitalist division of labour and by definition bourgeois culture’s restrictive understanding of creativity, the new, after late modernist, postmodernist and formal-futurist accounts of art, is compelled to establish – in the spirit of a renewed anti-historicism – a very different sense of technique and temporality in relation to the future and the modern. The

new in art is carried by the promise of the exit from the capitalist division of labour into a realm in which *real* innovation in art lies not in its formal negation of past achievements, but in the *general dispersal and availability of artistic technique for the many*, irrespective of professional training; that is, newness is no longer swept along by the sole prospect of innovation *in* art – innovation, that is, confined principally to professional artistic tradition – but as the general transformation of art beyond its formal capture by the capitalist division of labour.

The new, in other words, is defined by the exoteric horizon of art's relationship to the repressed 'radical needs' of workers and others whose creativity is unmet by the social division of labour. But this radical transformation in the social value of art, is, of course, not specific to the utopic horizons of the avant-garde in the modern period; the Romantic anti-capitalisms of William Morris and John Ruskin both insist on how the production and reception of art under bourgeois hegemony fails to meet the creative and spiritual needs of workers (beyond, that is, the empty replication of bourgeois taste). But whereas this Romantic anti-capitalism is attached to expanding a given and exemplary repertoire of aesthetic skill and taste to all, the early revolutionary avant-garde proposed the deconstruction of art under bourgeois society as the *constitutive reordering of art's social ontology*: that is, Constructivism, Productivism and Surrealism all judged 'art' to be a contribution to a new realm of liberatory technique, in which the reified identities of artist and worker, artistic labour and productive labour, aesthetic life and non-aesthetic life, were to be dissolved in the intersection of artistic technique and general social technique. As such, the undeveloped radical needs of workers were not to be met by the mimicking of the exemplary character of the best of past art – the renewed humanist option – but by the reconstitution of art itself under a model of generalised creativity. In short: in these terms the new is that which is secured by the dismantling of the division of labour, and the release of universal creative needs.

But what does art actually do in the capitalist interregnum? If there is no working place outside of the capitalist division labour, then where might the intellectual claims of universal creative needs be situated here and now? Two positions suggest themselves. Firstly a 'post-autonomist' position and, secondly, an 'autonomist' one.

The 'post-autonomist' position rejects the claims for the autonomy of art altogether by turning prefiguratively towards art's assimilation into social technique, that is, by submitting itself to those social use-values that already shape the production of the visual as part of the cultural industries and the 'capitalist project': art-as-design, art-as-corporate digitalisation, art-as-architecture, art-as-environmental regeneration. The socialisation of art is, therefore, under

these market conditions, able to find a pragmatic place for its outcomes. The 'autonomist' position, conversely, remains committed to the negative and disaffirmative possibilities of art's languages of critique given art's residual yet profound *inefficiency* as a form of labour power and subsumption under the value form. This involves, accordingly a very different sense of freedom and use-value in art. Under the capitalist division of labour, for art to submit itself to the 'capitalist project', despite its would-be creation of social use-values, deepens its embeddedness in the division of labour and the wage-form. Which means that even if art attains, by way of its social functionality, an attentive 'audience', the outcomes and horizons of this process are always determined by the means-end rationale of the 'capitalist project' and by extension the accumulation process. Such a process, therefore, suppresses the disaffirmative autonomy of art: its residual negation of the value form as a condition of its autonomy. Consequently, my view is that art must defend its (relative) freedom from the value form, precisely because as a form of free labour, in the spirit of Hegel, the alternative means jeopardising art's radical 'uselessness', or more precisely its useful 'useless' position within the division of labour. It, therefore, cannot attach itself *prematurely* to a post-art and post-autonomous account of art as social practice under the capitalist 'project form' without grievously submitting itself to a capitalist logic.

The emancipatory struggle, accordingly, is to define post-art *through* the negation of productive labour, not in submission to it, or in alliance with it. However, this does not mean I am defending a late compensatory turn to modernist aesthetics, that is, advocating some notion of aestheticist withdrawal or indeterminacy. Rather, the continuing struggle for art's non-compliance with productive labour will be conducted on the terrain of post-autonomist technique itself (socially engaged art, participatory practice, adisciplinary research, network culture, etc). For the struggle of the new as autonomy is a struggle for meaning *from out of* those heteronomous conditions that art now, necessarily, emerges. And these conditions are invariably those of post-art art.

In this light my argument, across these chapters, is that art and art theory and the new are confronted with two sets of historical conditions.

The new is no less compelled to think difference, in formal-material terms, but these terms are socially embedded in a critique of the division of labour and the reified categories of social experience. In this sense, the production of the new in art is not in *advance of past art*, so to speak, but, more precisely, *in advance* of the capitalist conditions under which the universal use-values of art as shared technique are suppressed. Hence, the call for the new as a break with the past has to be a process of *constructive* negation of the modern from within the social division of labour. This involves not just a dissociation

of artistic technique from the pressures of art's subsumption under productive labour and the 'capitalist project' – most obviously – but from the idea of new technology as the means by which the new is to be defined under art's post-art condition. In other words, one of the critical functions of art today is to provide a set of temporal resources and strategies that breaks with the accelerationist dynamic of the social division of labour. And one of the most symbolically and practically efficacious ways of doing this is to re-enter the *past itself as the site of the new*, that is, a space that releases the hidden, oblique, repressed energies of the past into the present as a means of 'working through' what capitalist reason expels in the name of progress and the new-as-the-same. In this sense, there is no stable correlation between the new and progress understood as a release from the past. This means that the possibility and function of the new-as-working-through looks two ways simultaneously: firstly, to the past as a source of the new as the overlooked – that which lays underused and thought in futures past – and, secondly, to the notion of the present as exhibiting a transformative social dynamic and sense of the future that – under these terms – is very different from the simplistic notion of *futurism* as the harbinger of a new world.

Thus, to return to post-capitalist claims of art: the art we know and are familiar with now or from the recent and distant past may, indeed, have little or no viability under another social and political system. It may indeed appear burdened with its past achievements and grandeur. But, in whatever ways this legacy is assimilated or adapted, the judgements and assessment of the past will be taken up as part of the general process of defining what kind of art will be viable, purposeful and pleasurable under the new system. For it will be the collective *realities* of the needs of the new system that will define what is required of a new art and the art of the past, and not the abstract evaluation of cultural inheritance. The new art, after having exited the old division of labour, may indeed look like bits of the old art – even reconfiguring its forms and concepts – but those who make it and judge it will take the measure of what they do from their own needs and desires, needs and desires accordingly very different from the needs and desires of what were once known as the interests of professional artists and the modern movement. But to free art from the social division of labour and the idea of the professional is not the generalisation of 'free expression'. This is the mantra of anti-philosophy that tends to secrete itself in all emancipatory programmes where the critique of cultural power, hierarchy and division is called for; as if freedom and creativity was coextensive with the release of repressed *feelings*. For if art necessarily loses its professional designation as art here, this does not mean that the re-definition of the social function and reach of art is no more than a generalised expansion of

self-expressive craft; this would not amount to 'cultural emancipation' but to a recidivist folk art made palatable for radical subjective sentiment.

The continuing struggle for art's autonomy under mature capitalism, then, is not a distraction or an unwarranted luxury in the light of art's emancipatory horizon, but, rather, part of a wider political and cultural struggle. This is because the autonomy of art remains the terrain upon which the struggle for post-capitalist autonomy is to be carried out, if post-art is not to regress to the status of folk art and the cultural industries 'project'. Negation, subtraction, non-compliance and withdrawal, therefore, continue to remain constitutive of the conceptual possibilities and new constructive horizons of art today and the foreseeable future. For what art continues to accomplish now as 'experimental practice' – as a negation of the means-end and instrumental rationality of capitalism – is fundamental to what the content of post-art as autonomous practice, unconstrained by instrumental rationality, might be.

In this respect, I have divided the material in this book into what I consider to be the five key categories under which my work has engaged with the unforgiving tasks of modernity, critique and emancipation: Value, Technique, Praxis, Image and History. Obviously, in many instances, these categories overlap, and as such are functionally interdependent; nevertheless for the purposes of clarity I have kept them apart, in order to foreground, methodologically at least, what individuated forces continue to define the critical horizons of art and social practice.

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## 1 Value

'Labour. Emancipation and the Critique of Craft-Skill'; a shorter version of this text, was published in *The Journal of Modern Craft* Volume, Issue 2 July 2012. Reproduced with the permission of Taylor & Francis.

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'Art and Deskillings', *Historical Materialism*, Vol 18, No 2, 2010

'The 'Incomplete' Commodity: Art, Value and Value-Form Theory', published as 'Art, Value, and Value-Form Theory', in *The Value of Critique: Exploring the Interrelations of Value, Critique, and Artistic Labour*, eds., Isabelle Graw and Christoph Menke, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2019

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## 2 Technique

'The Amateur's Retort', published in the catalogue for the exhibition, *Amateurs* curated by Ralph Rugoff, CCA Wattis Institute San Francisco, 2008

'The Practice of Failure', *Cabinet*, No 5, 2001

'Trickster: Performativity and Critique in Rod Dickinson's Crop-Circles', published in a shorter version as 'Trickster', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol 22, No 1, 1999

'Roy Bhaskar, Critical Realism and Cultural Theory', published as 'A Philosophical Memoir: Notes on Bhaskar, Realism and Cultural Theory', *Journal of Critical Realism*, Vol 15, No 2, 2016. Reproduced with the permission of Taylor & Francis.

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'Writerly Artists: Conceptual Art, Bildung and the Intellectual Division of Labour', published in a shorter version, *Rab-Rab: Journal for Political and Formal Inquiries in Art*, No 1, 2014

'The 'Black Debt': Art & Language's Writing', *Art & Language: Writings*, Lisson Gallery/distributoc4tro, London and Madrid, 2005



### 3 Praxis

'Productivism and Its Contradictions', *Third Text*, Vol 23, No 100, 2009. A shorter version was also published in 'What is the Use of Art?', *Chto Delat*, No 25, 2009. Reproduced with the permission of Taylor & Francis.

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'Art, Neoliberalism and the Fate of the Commons', *The Art of Direct Action: Social Sculpture and Beyond*, eds., Karen van den Berg, Cara M. Jordan and Phillip Kleinmichel, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2019

'Art, 'Enclave Theory' and the Communist Imaginary', *Third Text*, 'Art, Praxis and the Community to Come', Special Issue, ed., John Roberts, Vol 23, No 99, 2009. Reproduced with the permission of Taylor & Francis.

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### 4 Image

'The Political Economy of the Image', *Philosophy of Photography*, Vol 6, No 1–2, 2015

'Realism, Alter-Realism and the Question of Legibility', published, in a shorter version, in *Kunst und Politik: Jahrbuch Der Guernica-Gesellschaft*, eds., Norbert Schneider and Alexandra Axtmann, Band 16, V & R Press, Karlsruhe, 2014

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'Philosophy, Culture, Image: Rancière's Constructivism', *Philosophy of Photography*, Vol 1. No 1, 2010

## 5 History

'Memory, History, Mnemotechnics', published in catalogue for exhibition, *The Lining of Forgetting: Internal and External Memory in Art*, curated by Xandra Eden, Weatherspoon Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2008

'Dialectic and Post-Hegelian Dialectic (Again): Žižek, Bhaskar, Badiou', *Journal of Critical Realism*, Vol 12, No 1, 2013. Reproduced with the permission of Taylor & Francis.

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'Art and the Politics of Time-as-Substance', *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics*, ed., Randy Martin, Routledge, London and New York, 2015. Reproduced with the permission of Taylor & Francis.

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## 6 Value

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'Art After Deskillling' (University of Wolverhampton, 12/11/2008; Middlesex University, London, 18/11/2008; Aarhus University, 27/11/2008; Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, 23/7/2009)

'The "Incomplete" Commodity: Art, Value and Value-Form Theory' (Conference, 'The Value of Critique', Institut für Kunstkritik, Frankfurt-am-Main, 19/1/2017)

'After and Crisis of Value: Some Further Reflections on Skill and Deskillling', (Städelschule, Frankfurt-am-Main, 18/1/2017; Symposium, 'Fabrication and Disintegration in Contemporary Art,' Schaulager, Newmünchenstein, 8/9/2017)

'Notes on Craft: Marcel Duchamp, Bernard Leach and the Vessel Tradition' (Zeppelin Universität, Friedrichshafen, 27/3/2013)

## 7 Technique

'Writerly Artists: Conceptual Art, *Bildung* and the Intellectual Division of Labour' ('History as a Class Act', College Arts Association (CAA), Boston, 25/2/2006; Workshop, 'Index of the Subject', Kunstpavillon, Künstlerhaus Büchsenhausen, Innsbruck, 13/6/2014)

## 8 Praxis

'After Moscow Conceptualism' (Conference, 'Essays in the History of Modernity', Victoria Foundation [V-A-C], Moscow, 23/9/2015)

'Art After Art in the Expanded Field' (Cochrane Theatre, Central St. Martin's, London, 7/2/2011)

'Art Neoliberalism and the Fate of the Commons' (Conference, 'What Do We Have in Common(s)?', Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1/12/2013; Conference, "'No Radical Art Actions Are Going to Help Here": Political Violence and Militant Aesthetics After Socialism', Yale University, New Haven, 18/4/2015; Conference, 'Phantasm and Politics', HAU (Hebbel am Ufer), Berlin, 26/5/2015; Conference, 'From Social Sculpture to Art-Related Action', Zeppelin Universität, Friedrichshafen, 29/10, 2016; and Conference, 'Community Regeneration & Public Art', Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing, 26/11, 2018)

'Postconceptualism and anti-pathos' (Conference, 'La condition postconceptuelle (2). De l'art contemporain', University of Paris 8, 12/8/2016)

'Race, Black Modernism and the Critique of Identity' ('Rasheed Araeen: A Symposium', Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 12/1/2019)

## 9 Image

'Political Economy of the Image' (Conference, 'Critical Theory, Film and Media: Where is Frankfurt Now?', Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt-am-Main, 22/8/2014; University of Edinburgh, 29/11/2014; Conference, '21st Century Photography', Central St. Martin's, London, 6/6/2015)

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- 'After Lefebvre: The Everyday, the Image and Cultural Theory' (Conference, 'Ordinary/Everyday/Quotidian', York University, 29/9/2013, Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, 12/7/2014)

## 10 History

- 'On Error: Hegel and Spinoza' (Seminar 'Error/L'Erreur', discussion with Jean-Jacques Lecercle, Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, 15/12/2012; American University, Beirut, 24/5/2013)
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