

Art After Deskilling*

John Roberts

University of Wolverhampton
jorob128@aol.com

Abstract

The absence of would-be palpable skills in contemporary and modern art has become a commonplace of both conservative and radical art-criticism. Indeed, these criticisms have tended to define where the critic stands in relation to the critique of authorship and the limits of 'expression' at the centre of the modernist experience. In this article, I am less interested in why these criticisms take the form they do – this is a matter for ideology-critique and the sociology of criticism and audiences – than in the analysis of the radical transformation of conceptions in artistic skill and craft in the modern period. This will necessitate a focus on modernism and the avant-garde, and after, as it comes into alignment with, and retreat from, the modern forces of production and means of reproduction. Much, of course, has been written within the histories of modernism, and the histories of art since, on this process of confrontation and exchange – that is, between modern art's perceived hard-won autonomy and the increasing alienation of the artist, and the reification of art under the new social and technological conditions of advanced capitalist competition – little, however, has been written on the transformed conditions and understanding of labour in the artwork itself (with the partial exception of Adorno). This is because so little art-history and art-criticism – certainly since the 1960s – has been framed explicitly within a labour-theory of culture: in what ways do artists labour, and how are these forms of labour indexed to art's relationship to the development of general social technique (the advanced level of technology and science as it expressed in the technical conditions of social reproducibility)? In this article, I look at the modern and contemporary dynamics of this question.

Keywords

Skill, deskilling, avant-garde, modernism, readymade, productive labour, artistic labour, value, autonomy, negation, asociality

The idea that there is an absence of discernible skill in contemporary art is something of a commonplace. Indeed, attacks on the skill of the modern artist

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have accompanied the emergence of art in the modern period from Jacques-Louis David onward, and, as such, are indivisible from the origins of modernism as such. In this article, I am less interested in why this should be so – that is a matter for ideological critique and the sociology of audiences – than in the analysis of the radical transformation of conceptions in artistic skill and craft in the modern period. This will necessitate a focus on modernism and the avant-garde, and after, as it comes into alignment with, and retreat from, the modern forces of production and means of reproduction. Much, of course, has been written within the histories of modernism, and the histories of art since, on this process of confrontation and exchange, that is, between modern art's perceived hard-won autonomy and the increasing alienation of the artist, and the reification of art under the new social and technological conditions of advanced capitalist competition. Little, however, has been written on the transformed conditions and understanding of labour in the artwork itself.¹ This is because so little art-history and art-criticism – certainly since the 1960s – has been framed explicitly within a labour-theory of culture: in what ways do artists labour, and how are these forms of labour indexed to art's relationship to the development of general social technique (the advanced level of technology and science as it is expressed in the technical conditions of social reproducibility)? The notion of art as embedded in a prevailing set of technical and social relations – and that art reproduces, subverts or resists – was particularly acute as an issue in the second half of nineteenth century in Europe. This is because the new capitalist social conditions challenged advanced artists to think of themselves as newly modern outside of the prevailing and long-standing academic institutional arrangements, and therefore, as engaged in defining themselves as other to what was seen as holding the artist back technically: a bourgeois academy and culture harnessed to modes of *retardataire* production that fundamentally *de*-subjectivised art and as such *de*-linked its forms from the appearances of the contemporary world. In this sense, late nineteenth-century European capitalism does not just provide 'new modern subjects' for the artist, but, crucially, transforms the *affective* space in which artists produce their work – how artists materially constitute the problem of representation – and, as such, how their works are received, transforming the questions of artistic value itself. As advanced modernist artists seek to define and resist what they see as their threatened or marginal cultural status, the priority – the *modernist* priority – becomes: *how, with what materials, and to what ends* does the artist labour?

1. The exception being Theodor Adorno. See Adorno 1984. See also Roberts 2007b.

We see this affective and technical shift paradigmatically in the crisis around painterly craft in French modernism between 1848 and 1880. Both Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet open up painting to new forms of painterly affect that were at odds with the academy and salon. Both artists embraced, in different registers, a ‘semi-disorganised’ pictorialism, the representation of diverse themes and non-bourgeois types, and an indifference to the coherent modelling of form and the production of convincing illusion. Indeed, Courbet and Manet were soon castigated for what was taken to be their formal inchoateness, and lack of technique or *facilité*.² In Manet’s case, much was made of what appeared to be the incorrigible awkwardness or mis-positioning of his figures, and in the case, famously, of *Olympia* (1863), of allowing a proletarian figure – a naked prostitute – to directly address the bourgeois (male) spectator.³ For the academic critics of Courbet and Manet, there was good reason for these criticisms: Courbet and Manet’s major pictures were, when compared with official canons of taste and aesthetic propriety, undoubtedly ugly, technically deflationary and fragmented. But, of course, few writers and commentators in the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s theorised why this was the case, because few were able to grasp the emerging connection between the development of new forms and technical effects in painting and the demand that art distinguish its interests from those of its patrons, be they state or private. In other words, this is the moment – as artists begin to define their interests in open opposition to the academy and salon – when a gap opens up between art as a bourgeois *profession* – like law or medicine – and its nascent, undefined, unofficial social role as a critic of bourgeois culture.⁴ Artists were faced with a crucial choice, then: to continue to throw their lot in with the official culture and its traditional (although weakening) forms of patronage – and, as a consequence, see their art suffer – or work independently in alliance with the newly-emergent private market for art, in order to defend and continue the possibility of the achievements of the past. But, in making

2. For an extended discussion of modernism and *facilité*, see Roberts 2008.

3. See Clark 1984.

4. The critical function of art, of course, does not begin with modernism – even during the Renaissance, the highpoint of state-patronage, artists used art to challenge the authority of their clients. But these moments were invariably moments of individual honour – of hurt pride and revenge – and not attached to a critique of the state or its artistic institutions. Indeed, it would have been incomprehensible for any artist to criticise his patrons on these grounds; for the making of art and of its meanings was a direct extension of the power bequeathed to the artist by those who ruled. With the rise of capitalism, and the emergence of an independent market for art and, as such, the emergence of the independent professionalisation of the artist (a professionalism at odds with the academy and with state-patronage), this direct transmission-belt between ruler and artist is broken.

this break in order to defend the achievements of the past, modernist artists realised they could not rely *on* the achievements of the past. Indeed, artists realised that the emergence of the modern in art required that artists distance themselves from, or revoke, the sureties of artistic tradition.

Consequently, for the first time, artists who sought to define themselves as modern were presented with an unprecedented challenge: in order to defend art and its future, the artist had to first distinguish himself or herself from what the official culture *does to art* in the name of value, quality and tradition (that is, invariably, reduce it to a form of decoration, a social irrelevance, or a self-aggrandising adjunct of the artist and client's social status). Crucial to this modernising move, therefore, is a sense that the inherited languages of academic painting (broadly neo-classicising) are languages of authority and stability, and, as such, inadequate to the representation of new forms of artistic subjectivity demanded by a newly-industrialising, capitalist culture; as Baudelaire was to suggest, in one of the first critical recognitions of this as an emerging problem for art, the need for a new kind of painting – a 'painting of modern life' as he called it⁵ – is profoundly at odds with the would-be harmonising spirit, equitable social bonds and idealising charm of classical culture. Accordingly, the great requirement of the modernising artist of this period is the exteriorisation of affect: how do I paint convincing images that express the truth of what it is like to live under these new conditions? As a result, painterly technique becomes a highly contentious matter in the bid for non-academic status and value; technique, it is asserted, is not a neutral skill, something transmittable down the ages, but, rather, historically contingent, and therefore inseparable from the demands of artistic subjectivity and the artist's *mode of vision*. Questioning inherited technique then became a means of questioning the link between academic technique and form in official or salon-painting.

One writer and philosopher during the latter part of the modernist revolution who recognises that art is on a new course is Friedrich Nietzsche. Writing in the 1870s, in his collection *Untimely Meditations*, he argues that the attacks on modern art produce a monumentalism of the past that blocks off the problems, divisions and hiatuses of the present. Because the 'contemporary is not yet monumental, [modern art] seems to them [the official guardians of culture] unnecessary, unattractive and lacking in the authority conferred by history'.⁶ The purported defence of tradition against 'relativism' is not so much a defence of quality, as an attack on art *tout court*. 'They

5. Baudelaire 1981.

6. Nietzsche 1997, p. 72.

are connoisseurs of art because they would like to do away with art altogether', he declares.⁷ Now, there are clear affinities between Nietzsche here and Baudelaire's writing on the 'painting of modern life': both seek to define art in an active and futural sense. But what Nietzsche introduces is something more profound: the recognition that, under the dissociation of art and artist from the stability and assurances of tradition, the artist has to struggle to assert himself in defiance of tradition. As such, the determining framework of art is of necessity that of negation – of past art, of artistic tradition itself. The modern artist does not just inherit and transform tradition, but is compelled to shatter it, blast it apart, remake it, and as such remake it again. This introduces into the domain of art and art-theory a new relationship between the production of artistic form and artistic judgement. If the transmission of artistic technique is not stable, and, as such, subject to adaptation and reinscription, then artistic form is not able to be assessed from any normative standpoint. Indeed, a reversal of judgement takes place: rather than the spectator adjudicating a work on the grounds of how well it matches or surpasses inherited technique, the assessment of value is based on how well the work, in its creation of new forms, withdraws from, and adulterates, inherited technique. In this sense, Courbet and Manet's negation of inherited technique introduces into modernist painting what we might call a *deflationary logic*, that was to stretch to Picasso and on to Jackson Pollock. The inherited techniques and forms of naturalism and realism are submitted to a radical process of denaturalisation, abstraction and formalisation.

This is the familiar grand narrative of modernism from 1850 to 1950, in which the 'making of the new', in Nietzsche's vision, testifies to the continuous unfolding of painterly achievement and technical reassessment. Moving through Courbet, Manet, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Derain, Picasso, Braque, Miro, Frankenthaler, Rothko and Pollock, modernist painting demonstrates an extraordinary capacity for immanent self-definition and formal transformation. But, confined to painting, this model of negation is itself haunted by its own, and more fundamental negation: namely, the rejection of art's confinement to painterly form and painterly technique as such. Indeed, the confinement of the 'making of the new' to painting begins to break down by the time of cubism and of Picasso's and Braque's paper-collages. For, in the shift from the painterly proto-cubism of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) to the cubist paper-collages of the 1910s we see the beginning of the deflation of painterly modernist deflation itself. Thus, when Picasso and Braque introduced collaged elements into the space of painting in, respectively, *Glass, Guitar and*

7. Ibid.

Newspaper (1912) and *Le Quotidien* (1913), the content of modernist negation in art changes; by incorporating found mass-printed materials such as newspaper-mastheads, into these paper-collages, the deflationary logic of modernist anti-classicism is for the first time positioned *against* painting. That is, the introduction of non-painterly elements into the space of painting places modernism's strategies of negation in opposition to the aesthetic self-containment of painting. As a result, artistic deflation becomes embodied in a radical re-orientation and expansion of artistic skill: the introduction of the readymade into painting links negation for the first time to the development of non-artistic techniques, such as collage and assemblage. In turn, the measure of artistic competence shifts from the distribution of painterly marks to the positioning, arranging and conjunction of pre-given elements and prefabricated forms. Now, this compositional shift is very familiar from the histories of modernism.⁸ But what is rarely commented upon is the cultural character of this shift.

With the move to a deflationary logic *outside* of painting, the competence of the artist also changes. By breaking and interrupting the surface of the painting – by reaching *into* the space of painting – the artist signals that painting is now historically 'in the way' of art's technical demands, so to speak. That is, what Picasso and Braque introduce in their paper-collages is the notion that paintings – and therefore art – can be made and accomplished without carrying through painting as an *aesthetically-bounded totality*. Paintings can be made of alien, non-painterly, non-artistic things, and consequently can be made with very little labour. Or, rather, painting can easily incorporate non-painterly things without failing as paintings, or as autonomous aesthetic objects.

This objectification of art's deflationary logic in the form of the introduction of the readymade into the artwork is what represents the great seismic shift of twentieth-century art. Modernist art's negations are now directed not just at destabilising the genres and conventions of painting, but demolishing the formal hierarchy in which painting is itself positioned and embedded.⁹ Art's negations are now located in tension with, and in opposition to, the tradition of painting itself.

It is Marcel Duchamp, of course, who is the first artist to systematise this shift through the readymade, providing the ground-rules for the deflationary strategies of twentieth-century art. In *Bottlerack* (1914), *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915) and *Fountain* (1917) – what he referred to as 'unassisted'

8. See, for example, Krauss 1986.

9. For a discussion of the relations between modernist painting and the readymade, see De Duve 1996 and Joselit 1998.

readymades – he places the readymade outside of the supportive frame of the painting. In this respect, he locates artistic meaning in the act of deliberation. By locating meaning in the aesthetically-chosen found object (that is, the object of artistic discrimination) the artist is no longer bound to the expressive demands of covering a given surface or modelling a given material, but, rather, to the intellectual demands of re-contextualising extant objects in order to change their sign-value. Thus, what is important about Duchamp's early readymades is that they reorder the way hand and eye have, traditionally, determined the form and content of art. The Duchampian readymade disperses the hand and eye to a world of signifiers and materials that require forms of mapping, superimposition and coordination. 'It is a kind of rendezvous', Duchamp said of this function of the readymade.¹⁰ The immediate outcome of this shift is that the deflationary content of art is subject to the thoroughgoing dismantling of the metaphysics of the hand, of handicraft, of the handmade. If the post-cubist painter is compelled to place something into the space of the painting in order to render that space more believable as a painting, the Duchampian artist is free to place any object in any art context (or non-art context) without relying on the organisational discipline of the expressive hand. The production of meaning as the act of placing and arranging becomes fundamentally *indeterminate* in this sense: any readymade, anywhere might have meaning.

Thus, if, in the post-cubist painting, hand and eye are no longer constrained by the dictates of bringing coherence to an orderly progression of mark-making, in the work of the Duchampian artist, this freedom is limitless. This means that the readymade's deflationary logic invites more than a critique of painting's circumscribed sense of artistic craft. Duchampian deflation stands not simply as a negation of the status of painting, but as an actual *extension* of the artist's skills and competences. As Duchamp's notion of the 'rendezvous' suggests, the superimposition and reorganisation of extant forms and materials opens up the category of art to non-artistic technical skills from other cultural, cognitive, practical and theoretical domains: film, photography, architecture, literature, philosophy and science. Indeed, if art is a site of many different disciplines, materials, and theoretical frameworks, art can be made quite literally from *anything*.

Essentially, the Duchampian deflation of painting is the point where modernism's 'make it new' is brought into conjunction with a wider set of historical pressures: the requirement of art to enter the modern division of labour, and align itself with the transformed technical base of twentieth-century mass-production and reproduction. In this sense, in the passage from

10. Duchamp 1975, p. 32.

painting to the readymade, the artist exchanges inherited artisanal skills for an executive role (the directing and organisation of forms and materials produced by others) or a technical role (the use or manipulation of a given technology, as in photography) or, of course, both. As a result, the artist is no longer beholden to actually physically produce her work at all; indeed, in moving from the artisanal to the machino-technical, the artist is able to devolve the work to others, perhaps submitting plans or ideas to specialist technicians for them to execute, or working in collaboration with other artists and technicians as part of an extended division of labour (as in the printing of photographs). But, in 1923, this is precisely what Laszlo Moholy-Nagy did when he ordered three, enamel-covered steel plates from a Berlin sign-factory, which he then duly exhibited under his own name. Known as the 'telephone-pictures', he dictated his instructions for their production over the phone to a foreman, using, as his wife Sibyl Moholy-Nagy writes, a 'color chart and an order blank of graph paper to specify the location of form elements and their exact hue'.¹¹ In these terms, the artistic act here functions as a form of surrogacy: the artist adopts a conceptualising role, directing the labour and technical accomplishments of others, without actually directly manipulating any materials himself.

There is, of course, nothing historically novel in art about art's place in an extended division of labour. In the pre-Renaissance and Renaissance workshop-system, the workshop-master hired apprentices and wage-labourers to collectively produce works in the name of the workshop, and later in the name of the independent artist.¹² But, under modernism and the avant-garde, and

11. Moholy-Nagy 1969, p. 31.

12. Cennini 1954. This anonymous collective production was mitigated in the workshop by the encouragement of the all-round development of the apprentice and the trained craftsman. In the fourteenth, fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries, the workshop-artisan had to be skilled in a wide variety of painterly, carving, woodworking and metalworking skills, from casting medals and constructing caskets and chests to painting in tempera and painting frescoes. With the mercantile and ecclesiastical rise of Florence and Rome and the birth of the large private commission, in conjunction with the development of a new model of the artist based on the importance of the concept of drawing from life (to distinguish it from the artisan's working-to-order), this wide skill-base breaks down. That is, with the arrival of the independent artist and the model of *disegno* – the close working from the particulars of nature, by the artist – the workshop has to adapt to the demands of the individual artist rather than the workshop-master's multiple tasks. The result is that the old workshop skill-base is divested of its collective integrity (the apprentices finishing various tasks and completing different processes for the workshop-master as interdependent parts of creative whole), to be given over in support of the 'revealed creation' of the independent artist who, increasingly, is commissioned by court and ecclesiastical authorities, in his own right as an artist, and as such where and when possible seeks to complete the majority of the work himself, and without tutoring apprentices in the process. The diversified skill-base of the workshop, then, becomes subordinate to the commercial dictates of the

the general subordination of craft to general social technique under capitalism, an ideological reversal takes place. Art's place in the social division of labour is increasingly exercised as a critique of the social and cultural division that distances art from 'mere' technique and 'mere' craft. That is, art's place within the social division of labour is no longer the thing that art desires to escape from in the name of the 'revealed creation' of the independent artist, but, is, rather, the site of art's democratic horizons and indebtedness to the collective labour of others. This is because, as I outlined in my introduction, the artist is increasingly forced to measure her own creativity and skills up against her diminished social status under the new market- and social conditions, thereby bringing the ideology of 'revealed creativity' under some kind of critical scrutiny. Indeed, by opening up a gap between the prevailing skills of the academy and the salon, and the need for new skills, this distinction becomes constitutive of how the artist negotiates this loss. That is, certain skills and effects become identifiable *with* inherited cultural power (such as unnecessary ornateness and intricacy, and metaphysical atmospherics and vagaries) and others with an exemplary distance *from* this power (clarity and directness of form and social relationships and an 'unfinished' quality). It is not surprising, therefore, that these 'democratic' effects becomes associated with various anti-bourgeois and progressive functions. Consequently, subsequent to the rejection of received *facilité* in early French modernism, there is an increasing identification between the artistic labour demanded of the representation of 'modern life' and the perceived straightforwardness and honesty of ordinary manual labour,¹³ which, after the Russian avant-garde, becomes a flood, as the artist adopts the democratic identity of the technician as a political and self-conscious act.

Duchamp's 'unassisted' readymades and Moholy-Nagy's 'telephone- – paintings' appropriation of the labour of others, therefore, are a direct provocation to traditional notions of artistic creativity weakened by the artist's loss of social position. By transparently presenting the labour of others as their 'own', Duchamp and Moholy-Nagy deliberately downgrade their own authorial status as artists. And this, precisely, is what was meant in the 1920s and 1930s by the designation 'artist-as-technician'. As one part of an extensive intellectual and technical division of labour, the skills of the artist are held to be of no more significance or value than those possessed by the labourers and

independent artist of exemplary distinction, transforming the workshop-apprentice, eventually, into a studio wage-labourer.

13. For a discussion of this identification in relation to the photographs of Eugène Atget, who was working in Paris directly in the aftermath of this French modernist critique of *facilité*, see Nesbit 1993.

technicians who produce the materials for the work's completion.¹⁴ In fact, although the artist-as-technician and actual technician enter the production process at different points, they share a similar range of skills; they simply bring a different set of accomplishments to the process. This erosion of the distinction here between intellectual labour and manual labour, the creativity of the artist, and the routinised work of the labourer, then, represents more than a fantasy of egalitarianism on the part of artists, it proposes an actual shift in artistic practice. Moholy-Nagy and Duchamp are two of the many artists in the first decades of the twentieth century who, in rejecting the expressive-artisanal model of art, wanted a different account of what art might *do*, what the artist might *become*, and whom the work of art might be destined *for*.

This shift from the artisanal to the executive, nominative, and immaterial in art is the point where the post-Renaissance definition of artistic creativity as the autonomous and expressive rendition of craft-skill is finally destroyed; the deflation of painterly technique in modernist painting from 1850 to 1915 is, in this sense, an internal prefiguration of this crisis. In this respect, it is possible to trace the emergence of the modern artist under capitalism as comparable to the loss of the artisan and 'integral' creativity of labour within the labour-process. The rise of the post-artisanal labourer, through workshop, automated factory and office, parallels the decline of artisanal skill in artistic production; and this, of course, is what both Marx and William Morris generalise as being the overwhelming destiny of human capacities under capitalism: namely capitalism's general diminishment of all-round human creative powers in the interest of narrowly-defined categories of productive labour and free creativity; and, concomitantly, this is why Morris was so interested in the pre-Renaissance medieval workshop as a model of socialised creativity, given the ways in which it brought the possibility of freely-directed creative work into alignment with production.

But, if artistic labour and productive labour are subject to the extension and refinement of the social division of labour, and, in turn, the objectivity of general social technique, this does not mean that the demise of the artisanal in art is reducible to the process of deskilling in productive labour. Indeed, 'deskilling' in art is very different from deskilling in the factory and office. This is because, as Marx also insists, art is not subject to the law of value and therefore to the real subsumption of labour. Some artists may fall under the disciplinary régime of the law of value – working harder, faster; subject to re-routinisation and technical division – that is, those that are engaged in the

14. In his early years in New York, Duchamp participated in a discussion-group on art and labour, mostly influenced by the writings of Max Stirner. See Antliff 2001.

production of mass-produced artistic products, but the majority of artists are not, insofar as they are engaged in the production of *non-reproducible* forms.¹⁵ This means that the artist confronted with the perceived deskilling in modern culture does not suffer the same creative denigration as the productive labourer. Whereas the productive labourer experiences an overall loss of autonomy as a consequence of her subordination to the capitalist's control over the labour-process, the artist, as absent from the disciplinary régime of the value-form, does not.¹⁶ Despite the artist's would-be loss of all-around artisanal skills and the enforcement of her social alienation, there is no comparable loss of artistic *autonomy*; other skills directed towards self-motivated and creative ends fill the gap. In other words, the demise of traditional artistic skills is not the result of a coercive process of control and division, which like the value-form, strips autonomy *out of* the production-process.

Now, this is not to say that the objects and events that artists produce are not commodities, but, rather, that the artwork's status as a commodity is not strictly subject to the price-calculation of the law of value. As I.I. Rubin notes: the economist 'L. Lyubimov is completely right when he subsumes the value of a product of a highly qualified laborer under the law of value. But he cannot deny the fact of the monopoly in relation to the individual price of unreproducible objects.'¹⁷ This is why, in the final analysis, Marx makes a fundamental distinction between artistic production and productive labour: certain forms of creative labour are excluded from the law of value because their forms cannot be reproduced *through* socialised labour, and, as such, they remain resistant to, indeed excluded from, the routinisations of the labour-process.¹⁸

Marx does not discuss the distinction between deskilling in productive labour and deskilling in art, as a consequence of art's relative absence from the law of value, because new forms of autonomy in art were not yet visible. Neither Marx nor Morris anticipated the massive technical transformation of art that was to occur after 1910; in this respect, both Marx and Morris appear, from our twenty-first-century vantage-point, as oddly premodern in their cultural reflections, particularly Morris. Yet, in *Capital*, in the early sections on the discussion of value and passing reflections on artistic labour, there is an implicit revolutionising sense that the future struggle for workers' autonomy is through the *adaptation* of technique, not its abandonment, despite the subordination of general social technique to capital. Reading very much

15. Marx 1969.

16. For an extended discussion of this distinction, see Roberts 2007a.

17. Rubin 1972, p. 166.

18. Marx 1970.

against the artisanal humanism and pastoralism of the classical Marxism of the time,¹⁹ this, essentially, is what Walter Benjamin sees in Marx, in his reconfiguration of the question of skill, artistic production and labour in the ‘Author as Producer’. Emboldened by the Russian Revolution, and, as such, the sense that the repossession of traditional artisanal skills was utterly irrelevant to the emancipatory class-dynamic of the Revolution, Benjamin’s insistence on the forging of a new identity for the artist out of the critical insertion of the artist into the new technical relations of the relations of production is a defence of the possible new sources of autonomy *within* the demands of general social technique. The new artist becomes a model for the new worker, and the new worker in his or her machino-technical proficiency becomes, potentially, a new artist. In this sense, there is no nostalgia for lost skills, artisanal creative all-roundedness, or any other humanist shibboleth regarding the release of the ‘essential creativity of the masses’; in fact, for Benjamin, such things actually get in the way of the pursuit of new forms of autonomy and knowledge.²⁰

Consequently, there is a way of linking Benjamin’s cultural position with later debates on ‘deskilling’ in labour-process theory, particularly Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974).²¹ Like Benjamin, Braverman

19. This is not to say that there are elements of Marx’s earlier artisanal humanism and pastoralism from the 1844 ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’ in *Capital*, but this perspective is increasingly subjected to the progressive function of socialised labour, as socialised labour becomes a defining part of Marx’s conception of human emancipation and the development of human needs. This is why, in reading *Capital* as a critique of political economy, we need to be careful to read the critique of abstraction (abstract labour) as double-coded with regard to skill and craft: abstract labour is the thing that both destroys all-roundedness as an exemplar of socialised, collective production, but also stands to liberate all-roundedness from its chronic technical and conceptual inflexibility (in the medieval workshop) through splitting the producer away from the need to subordinate all of his creative labours to the performance of a multitude of routine tasks, perfectly reproducible by machines. There is something monstrous about the need for the liberated labourer to recover a multitudinous dexterity as an ideal expression of creative autonomy, as if our emancipation as labourers were bound up with the development of ourselves as multi-tasking *Krafmeister*s. That is, the meeting between a transformed labour-process and a transformed conception of art in any postcapitalist or communist future, must also allow the disdain for labour, be it necessary labour or creative and intellectual labour. Looking, reading, sharing simple accomplishments might be all we want or need, after the ‘specialist’ and intellectually-invested activity and sensuous transformations of our necessary labour is done. The retaining or development of a craft-base in any emancipated model of labour, then, must allow space for ‘unproductive’ and distracted labour. Indeed, this is part of a more substantive debate about whether communism will be more ‘complex’ (or more complexly varied) than capitalism, or at, an important level, release us in our daily affairs from the demands of complexity.

20. Benjamin 1981.

21. Braverman 1998.

is concerned to defend the *advanced* technical and intellectual role of the worker in the relations of production, in conditions where, historically, the level overall of material and intellectual skill within the working class is in decline. Certain skilled technical workers (and ‘knowledge’-workers today) may benefit from the general rise in scientific and technical knowledge under capitalism; the working class as a whole does not.

The mass of workers gain nothing from the fact that the decline in their command over the labour-process is more than compensated for by the increasing command on the part of managers and engineers. On the contrary, not only does their skill fall in an absolute sense (in that they lose craft and traditional abilities without gaining new abilities to compensate for the loss), but it also falls in a *relative* sense. The more science is incorporated into the labour-process, the less the worker understands of the process.²²

In this light, Braverman’s work is crucial in setting workers’ struggle over the erosion of productive labour-skills within a wider social and historical setting. Certain workers within certain sectors may win back craft-skills, just as new skills in certain sectors may be forged out of transformations in the technical division of labour, but, overall, the level of technical skill embodied in the labour of the productive and unproductive worker has been radically diminished. Today, for instance, the greater percentage of newly-created ‘knowledge’-jobs are largely routine and highly-monitored. Indeed, this sense of class-dispossession actually goes far deeper than Braverman suggests, into the heart of the sexual division of labour. As Ursula Huws argues – in an extension of Braverman’s deskilling thesis – that, with the extensive socialisation of labour in the household from the seventeenth century onwards, women have suffered a ‘double deskilling’: from within the labour-process, and in exclusion from the unsocialised productivity and creativity of the household. In the seventeenth century, all participants in the running of the household

would have had an understanding of the total process and a high general knowledge of such things as cooking, curing meat, preserving methods, preparation of medical remedies, textiles, brewing, the manufacturing of candles and soap, the caring of animals and so on.²³

Yet, importantly for Braverman, this radical dispossession is not an invitation to link the emancipation of the working class with the restoration of this world of unsocialised skills (certainly, we should not forget the seventeenth-century unsocialised household was not a haven of women’s freedom). On the

22. Braverman 1998, p. 295.

23. Huws 2003, p. 69.

contrary, the development of the forces of production, and the advances in general social technique, increases the revolutionary demand that working-class emancipation is inseparable from the ‘return of requisite technical skill to the mass of workers’, at a level and in a form in which such skills exert direct control over the labour-process.²⁴ How this actually has an impact upon the dissolution of the value-form and the release of the autonomy and creativity of the worker is less clear in Braverman.²⁵ But, without this massive sense of working-class dispossession, the revolutionary transformation and repossession of skills within the labour-process *at an advanced level* is made anodyne.

In this respect, the deflation of the expressive-artisanal model is part of a larger political narrative of negation at the beginning of the twentieth century: the drive of the historic avant-gardes (1917–39) during and after the Russian Revolution to finally depose artistic skill from its artisanal myths and fealties, and release new forms of artistic production from out of the new relations of production. That the tradition of high-modernist painting continued to produce work of value during this period, then, does not alter the fact that, after cubist-collage, after Duchamp’s ‘unassisted’ readymades and Moholy-Nagy’s ‘telephone-paintings’, after the concept of artistic surrogacy and authorship-at-distance, after the assimilation of photography into art, after Soviet constructivism and productivism, and the general transformation of the artist into a technician, the technical base of art is irredeemably changed.

24. Braverman 1998, p. 308.

25. This article is not the place for an extended discussion of recent debates on the value-form, that is for another time, however, suffice it to say though, one of the misplaced assumptions of much of the recent writing on the law of value and the value-process is that the critique of the value-form is somehow internal to political economy alone. For instance Kicillof and Starosta in their critique of I.I. Rubin (Kicillof and Starosta 2007) fail to acknowledge the cultural context in which Rubin wrote his *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value* in 1927–8. Rubin’s tendency to confine the law of value to the exchange-process is a conservative and economic addendum to what had been an extensive and rich debate on value and labour within the avant-garde from 1920 to 1928, a debate that had an impact well beyond the artistic production itself. As Boris Arvatov, the leading productivist theorist, asked at the time: in what ways might artistic labour presage and model emancipated labour, and, as such, in what ways might artistic praxis transform the labour-process itself within and outside the factory? (Arvatov 1972.) Indeed, the Soviet factory was for a while (even under the extended factory-discipline of the NEP with its officious red managers), not only a site of extended debate on the labour-process, but also a place of social-artistic experimentation (Gough 2007). Thus, if the value-form debate has indeed become academicised, divorcing itself from ‘political action’ (Kicillof and Starosta 2007), this is partially as a result of its separation from cultural and artistic questions. The recent debate on Chris Arthur’s theory of value in *Historical Materialism* (viz. the critique of Arthur’s Rubinesque separation of exchange and production) is a further indication of this. Thus, if there is a pressing requirement to link the debate on value to political action, there is an equally pressing requirement to link the value-debate and politics to the emancipatory functions of artistic labour (Roberts 2007b and 2009).

Artistic skill is no longer confined to the manipulation of a given medium within a tradition of discretely crafted works, but is the cross-disciplinary outcome of an ensemble of technical and intellectual skills, embedded in the general division of labour. And, as such, this technical repositioning of art engages and directs a wider process of deflation within this period: the general move towards defining art as a form of *cultural practice* and, therefore, as something that has a direct and possibly transformative presence in the world (as opposed to a contemplative or decorative one). With the massive disinvestment of art from the confines of singular authorship, and from auratic forms of production and spectatorship associated with painting, mechanical production and interdisciplinarity become the motor of art's passage *into* the everyday and collective experience. No longer confined solely to the gallery-wall or to the painterly frame, avant-garde art moves to embed itself, across a variety of social locations, in the material and symbolic fabric of the world. Constructivism, of course, is central to this transformation.²⁶ The singular-discrete artistic object is dissolved into the functional demands of material transformation of the built environment (architecture, public monuments, propaganda, design). Art-object, art-event and social process coincide. Or, at least, they did in theory. Of course, the heightened expectations of this social role for art were soon curtailed and destroyed by the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and fascism in Europe. By the mid-1930s, the great avant-garde experiment was in retreat, replaced by various forms of artisanal nostalgia. But what remained undefeated was the new cultural and technical dialectic that this period established, and that the new postwar-institutions, under new political conditions, have been compelled to address: the long-range dissolution of art into general social technique (that is, the unification of technology, technique and artistic form).

Since the 1960s, we have seen the deflation of the expressive-artisanal model of artistic skill played out in a number of registers. Conceptual art, post-conceptual photography and text, the appropriationist art of the 1980s, down to relational aesthetics, and the re-emergence of many forms of social functionalism today, all revive and repossess in various ways the notion of the artist as technician, as surrogate, as operator. Indeed, we say might say that the recrudescence of high-modernist painting between 1945 and 1985 – exemplified by the achievements of Gerhard Richter – represents a rupture within a broader historical pattern. Although the historic avant-garde as a social and cultural formation is at an end, avant-garde strategies and forms

26. For a discussion of constructivism and productivism and the avant-garde debate on the redefinition of artistic labour, see Margolin 1997 and Gough 2005.

remain integral – in socially constrained ways, obviously – to how art defines its contemporaneity and critical function.²⁷ Thus, the repeated attacks on postconceptualism, generally, in the 1980s and 1990s – for pursuing art to a point of inexorable technical and artisanal collapse – are a misrepresentation of the historical evidence. What we see is not a terminal decline of artistic skill, but the re-positioning of the notion of skill within a deeper dialectic: the necessary *interrelationship* between (received) skill, deskilling and *re*-skilling. Technical skill is not something that has been stripped out of art through surrogacy and technological reproduction, but is redefined through the emergence of art, since the 1920s, as a generic form of conceptualisation.

Since the late 1960s, this has also had a profound effect on the sexual division of intellectual labour in art. In the early 1970s, in the wake of the women's movement, one of the direct beneficiaries of the crisis of the artisanal-expressive model were women-artists who rejected painting on the grounds that its histories and expressive protocols inhibited women's artistic access to the representation and structuring of their own lives and experience. In this, conceptualisation offered a significant opportunity for women-artists to reflect on sexual difference, gender and femininity, without expectation. Thus, following Duchamp and Moholy-Nagy, a new generation of women-artists in the early seventies, were able to create compelling, assiduous, exacting, anomalous post-painterly forms that embodied distinctive thought-experiments. This is best represented during this period by Mary Kelly's influential *Postpartum Document* (1973–9), a sequence of panels consisting of hand-written and typed texts, images and objects, tracing and examining the relationship between Kelly and her newly-born son and, as such, his emerging subjectivity. What is distinctive about *Postpartum Document* is twofold: its resolute anti-pictorialism in its depiction of motherhood and domestic labour – the fact that neither the mother nor child's body is figuratively represented – and its resolute, uncompromising intellectualism, that is, its explicit identification of women's authorship with demonstrable theoretical skills.

The general implication of this move (and similar ones) is that skill is definable through the quality of this process of conceptualisation and the intellectual acuity the artist brings to art's material or immaterial forms, and not simply through evidence of the artist's own mastery of a range of technical processes challenging – in this case – women-artists' traditional identification as producers with certain inherited feminine craft-processes. As such, conceptualisation serves to split the judgement of a work's skilfulness from the fetishistic evaluation of technical skills. The artist may choose to be a master

27. See Roberts 2007b.

of a given technical process – the manipulation of digital photographs, for instance, or weaving – but this does not determine our judgement of the artist's skill overall.

Yet, in noting the emergent conceptualisation of art, we should not confuse the new art with the disciplines of intellectual and theoretical production itself, such as science or philosophy. The emergence of art from its historical-artisanal base into the realm of material conceptualisation is not evidence of a unilinear, if uneven, process of art's reskilling, as if art has revived itself by talking on the languages of science. Art may have become a practice of conceptualisation, but this does not mean that it takes over the positivistic, deductive, and research-programme requirements of scientific investigation. This is because the dialectic of skill, deskilling and reskilling is first and foremost an expression of art's alienated and reified place in the totality of the social relations of capitalist culture. Art may have freed itself from its artisanal bonds, and taken on a conceptual and interdisciplinary identity, but it is also necessary to defend its interests as art against its systematic misuse, assimilation and containment by the culture as a whole. In these terms, we need to see the dialectic of skill, deskilling and reskilling as still very-much embedded in the modernist dialectic of negation that I discussed above. That is, we need to see how the relationship between skill, deskilling and re-skilling is driven by the need for art to assert and define its autonomy as art in the face of these constraints. In this sense, we need to draw up again the question of autonomy and negation in relation to the notion of the 'new', or 'making it new'.

In this respect, Theodor Adorno's theory of autonomy still has exemplary use-value for understanding the situation we are in.²⁸ Let us recall what Adorno has to say on the issue. For Adorno, autonomy in art is defined as a social relation between art's production and reception. In order to delineate itself as modern, it is imperative that art define itself against those institutional arrangements, social circumstances and traditions in which it *finds itself*. Therefore, there can be no critical future for art without this experience of disjunction with the traditions and institutions that have brought art into being. That is, the dynamic content of art continues to be mediated by its own reflection on the very category of art itself. As such, what drives this process is the very 'asociality' of art under capitalism, the fact that, for art to remain art (rather than transform itself into architectural design, fashion or social theory *tout court*), it must experience itself as being 'out of joint' both with its official place in the world and its own traditions. Thus, we should be clear here about what I mean by 'asociality'. Asociality is not to be confused with its idealist

28. Adorno 1984.

designation in Kant. For Kant, the ‘asocial sociability of men’ – the nature-determined tendency of humans to generate a state of constant mutual resistance – is that which threatens the dissolution of society, and, as such, is innate to humans and human relations.²⁹ Here, ‘asociality’ is, rather, the contingent and shifting space of art’s non-identity and resistance within the heteronomous field of its social and institutional operation. Accordingly, it is identifiable with the notion of autonomy as the *produced* function of art’s heteronomous emergence under commodity-relations. New forms of commodification are the heteronomous site of new forms of autonomy.³⁰ In this respect, ‘asociality’ is certainly worth saving for a theory of negation in art and culture, in the face of any (anti-Hegelian) social ontology that would overplay ‘positive real alternatives’ in the current period, as in István Mészáros.³¹ Consequently, without this drive to autonomy out of the conditions of heteronomy (that is, the emergence of art as something ‘other’ in respect of the conditions which call it into being), art would cease to exist as a tradition of aesthetic and intellectual achievement, and, more importantly, as a means of resistance to capitalist exchange-value. This is why such a tradition of negation continues to produce work of value and quality, despite the demise of the original avant-garde and the dispersal and assimilation of modernism, and despite art’s constant submission to the demands of entertainment and commerce and institutional legitimation and approbation. Art is irreducible to its own histories and institutional arrangements because art is that which *starts* from a position of negation. In fact, art’s development and its social constraints are precisely *interdependent*.

Under commodity-culture, the alienation of art and the renewal of art are interwoven with the history of modernism and the modern, and therefore, negation, far from being that which damns art to decline and dissolution, is the very ground of modern art’s unfolding and reinvention. This means, in turn, that the cognitive demands of the ‘new’ and art’s openness to new meaning are not in *themselves* in a state of desuetude. For, if this were so, it would imply that, at some previous point, the alienated conditions of art’s production and reception were somehow more perspicacious than the alienated conditions of art’s production now or yesterday. On these grounds – in order to defend art against the critics of its technical dissolution – we should look for quality and value in periods of relative social stability. This is plainly absurd. In fact, the negations of art are continually able to reanimate themselves because the negations of art are ‘inexhaustible’ so long as asociality remains the

29. Kant 2001.

30. Martin 2007.

31. Mészáros 2008.

necessary dynamic of art's production, and human beings are capable of finding meaning in this dynamism. To presume otherwise is to believe that asociality is simply a discrete effect of art – the result of what artists *claim* to feel and experience – and not the basis upon which the conditions of art, irrespective of the particular ideologies professed by artists, are produced and enter social relations. Art's negations, therefore, are not something that touch lightly on art, come and go, as if they were a decorative dusting of snow, but, on the contrary, that which actually secures art's conditions of visibility and autonomy, and, as such, give shape to art's unfolding.

So, art's traditions of negation persist, because negation persists, and, if this is so, then the dialectic of skill, deskilling and re-skilling becomes the very means whereby this dynamic expresses itself. That is, reflections *on* skill (as a withdrawal from received skills), as much as the development of new skills become part of the restless, ever-vigilant positioning of art's critical relationship to its own traditions of intellectual and cultural formation and administration.

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