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Art and the Politics of Eliminating Handicraft

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Abstract

This essay charts the outlines of the historical transition from the artisanal workshop to the artist's studio and the transition from the artisan to the artist, not through the transition from patronage to the art market but through an analysis of the transformation of labour's social division of labour. The essay reassesses the discourses on the artist as genius and the artist as worker through a reinterpretation of the elevation of the Fine Arts above handicraft. This sheds new light, also, on the discourse of deskilling in art. This essay argues that the transition from the artisan to the artist is an effect of the social division of labour in which the knowledge, skills and privileges of the master artisan are distributed among a set of specialists.

Keywords

art – arts – labour – artisan – artist – *studiolo* – *bottega* – industrialisation

In the micropolitics of work, the artist is no longer distinct from the worker, but exemplary of the contemporary condition of work. Sociologists have charted the drift of work towards the activities of the artist, while artists have increasingly perceived themselves as workers. Bojana Kunst, for instance, argues that the artist 'becomes the ideal virtuoso worker of contemporary capitalism'¹ characteristic of post-Fordism. The artist, who between the 1840s and the 1980s appeared to be the living embodiment of a future reconciliation of work and pleasure, now appears to be a paradigmatic post-Fordist worker: precarious, unpaid, incapable of distinguishing between work and life, and so on. Mark Banks, for instance, argues that one of the problems about creative work is that

1 Kunst 2015, p. 31.

it does not appear as work at all.² Sarah Brouillette warns against ‘the vocabulary that makes contemporary labor an aesthetic act of self-exploration, self-expression, and self-realization’.³ Miya Tokumitsu’s critique of the ‘unofficial work mantra for our time’, namely ‘do what you love’, argues that it ‘exposes its adherents to exploitation, justifying unpaid or underpaid work by throwing workers’ motivations back at them’.⁴

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s influential analysis of the new spirit of capitalism, based on changes in management style between the 1960s and 1990s, argues that capitalism itself adopts the rhetorics of creativity, flexibility, improvisation and innovation which had previously appeared to characterise anti-capitalism and art. Managers, therefore, develop ‘skills approximate to those of the artist’, using ‘intuition’ to sniff out opportunities that correspond to ‘their own desires’.⁵ In general, then, we can say that the contemporary politics of work treats the Western Marxist vindication of aesthetic labour as fully recuperated in Post-Fordism. The collapsing of the difference between the artist and the worker in this renovation of the politics of aesthetic labour is part of a larger transformation of the politics of work in which the class politics of labour (as represented in the workers’ movement, socialism, communism and Marxism) is displaced by a micropolitics of work in which class plays little or no part.

The purpose of a Marxist analysis of the politics of labour in art is not to reinstate art as a model of unalienated labour in postcapitalism, as it appeared, for instance, to Hans Robert Jauss,⁶ Adolfo Sánchez Vásquez,⁷ Carol Gould⁸ and Phillip Kain⁹ in the 1970s and 1980s. One of the reasons for this is that the production of contemporary art is no longer characterised exclusively by aesthetic processes of composing, authoring and mark-making. In fact, there is nothing more foreign to contemporary art than the hope placed in aesthetic labour processes exemplified by Harold Rosenberg in the middle of the twentieth century. ‘A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist’,¹⁰ he argued, knowingly contrasting painting with the alienation of the worker from the labour process. The difficulty, today, is to acknowledge

2 Banks 2007.

3 Brouillette 2014, p. 54.

4 Tokumitsu 2015, p. 7.

5 Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 444.

6 Jauss and Heath 1975.

7 Sánchez Vásquez 1973.

8 Gould 1978.

9 Kain 1982.

10 Rosenberg 1952, p. 23.

that the labour processes used in art production are no longer or never were opposed to alienated labour without thereby erasing the historical condition under which art and capitalism became, to some degree, antagonistic to one another.

Western Marxist theories of the culture industry and commodification, which emphasise, albeit exaggeratedly,¹¹ the complicity of art in capitalism, appear to have had more critical traction than theories of art as nonalienated labour, not only because of the rejection of humanism within Marxism since the 1960s but also on account of the concurrent denunciation of theories of art's autonomy in Pop, Minimalism, Land Art and Conceptualism during the transition from modernism to contemporary art. As such, the historical coincidence of the birth of art with the transition from feudalism to capitalism has not gone unnoticed. 'Art as a separate sphere was always possible only in a bourgeois society',¹² Adorno and Horkheimer wrote in 1944. More emphatically, Peter Bürger issued the caution to 'take the historicity of the category of art seriously' given that this 'collective designation of products of the imagination ... presupposes a concept of art that emerges only in the eighteenth century'.¹³ Michael Carter,¹⁴ Luc Ferry¹⁵ and Paul Mattick Jr.¹⁶ develop variations on the same story. Larry Shiner argues that '[fine] art, as we generally understand it, is neither eternal nor ancient but a historical construction of the eighteenth century',¹⁷ the result of 'the replacement of patronage by an art market and a middle-class public',¹⁸ and as part of 'more general relations of power and gender'.¹⁹

While there is more than a grain of truth in each of these narratives of transition, I want to argue that the emphasis on changes that took place in Western Europe in the eighteenth century and the concomitant exaggeration of the alignment of the invention of art with the passage to capitalism,

11 See Beech 2015 for a critique of Western Marxism's commodification theory.

12 Adorno and Horkheimer 1979, p. 157.

13 Bürger and Bürger 1992, p. 5.

14 Carter 1990. He argues, 'when we look at societies which started to become dominated by industrialised methods of production, as Europe was in the 19th century, the making of Art objects starts to be organised and understood in different ways' (p. 51).

15 See Ferry 1993.

16 Mattick 1993. For Mattick, the 'set of social practices we call "art" is a phenomenon of the society that gave itself the name "modern"' (p. 152), which he identifies not only with Baudelaire but also with the rise of the bourgeoisie 'as worthy inheritors of the aristocratic culture of the past' (p. 177).

17 Shiner 2001, p. 307.

18 Shiner 2001, p. 7.

19 Ibid.

underestimates the significance of an earlier stage in the transformation of the artistic mode of production, namely the social division of labour in which the painter or sculptor is first divided off from the tutor, dealer, assistant and manufacturer. If we focus on the social relations of artistic production and in particular the transformation that takes place within artistic production through the emancipation from the guild and the rejection of handicraft and embrace of scholarship, then the relationship between art and capitalism that has been premised on the rise of the art market and the commodification of art will have to be revisited. This means conducting the inquiry into artistic labour outside the studio and beyond the isolated individual artist. My investigation, here, focuses on events that precede the final formation of the author and genius. My aim is not to intervene directly in disputes over the myth of the genius, but to disclose the material conditions under which such a myth arises.

1 On the Genius

Efforts to formulate how art has operated within the dominant social system while appearing to be external to it or critical of it have been fuelled by a battery of emancipatory struggles resulting in the exposure of the artist as a masculinist and colonial trope of independence, as well as recasting art's institutions as inseparable from the power asymmetries at large. Feminist and postcolonial scholars, in particular, have driven the Romantic and modernist discourses of the artist and art's institutions into the reactionary margins of cultural journalism. Indeed, such critical thinking, especially in conjunction with other struggles such as 'wages for housework', has been instrumental in reassigning the artist as worker in opposition to the myth of the artist as genius. The social critique of the genius, or the myth of the artist more generally, operates as the entry point for the politics of labour in art.

'Scholars in literature, the arts, and aesthetics', Joyce Chaplin and Darrin McMahon tell us, 'have in recent decades been more interested in toppling genius as an arbiter of aesthetic distinction, unmasking its ideological character and exposing its myths'.²⁰ The problem, or one of them, is that, as Christine Battersby remarks, 'generations of scholars, creative writers and critics have given a male gender to genius',²¹ and a related set of difficulties to the supposed

²⁰ Chaplin and McMahon (eds.) 2016, p. 5.

²¹ Battersby 1989, p. 2.

impossibility of a female genius²² are attached to the proposition of the ‘genius in bondage.’²³ More generally, in Steve Edwards’s words, ‘the artist genius ... provides a smiling mask for the face of power.’²⁴ And this is why, as Derrida says, the word genius ‘makes us squirm.’²⁵ Indeed, the genius is an objectionable trope of privilege and the critical content it once carried in the eighteenth century cannot be renovated in a *milieu* alert to how ‘lofty European ideals of Enlightenment-based rational progress and emancipation rest on the world-historical phenomena of colonialism, imperialist conquest, and trade in slaves, women, animals, and earth resources.’²⁶

I will focus my attention on the argument that the myth of the artist as genius misrepresents the social production of art. The category of the genius arises in Western Europe during the period of colonial expansion, the global slave trade and the semi-industrialisation of manufacture. My analysis, here, however, does not substitute the myth of the artist with the presumed reality of the worker or commodity producer but inserts the artist and its discourses within a geographical and social dispersal of tasks in an explanation that preserves the critical relationship between art and capitalism as an historical, contingent and contested accomplishment. My intention is not to discredit the critique of the myth of the artist by situating the discourse of genius within the historical context in which it was emblematic of progressive social tendencies. What has been missing from the critical literature on the genius, I want to argue, is an analysis of the social relations of production that gave rise to this mythic account of work. That is to say, rather than disclosing the actual social conditions under which the artist works socially in order to refute the concept of genius, I want to narrate the transformation of the social relations of artistic production as the material basis for artistic labour appearing to conform to the model of the genius.

In her classic and important book, *The Social Production of Art*, Janet Wolff rejected the ‘concept of the artist/author as some kind of asocial being, blessed with genius, waiting for divine inspiration and exempt from all normal rules of

22 Virginia Woolf did not reject the concept of genius but historicised and politicised it. Genius, she says, must have existed among women and the working class throughout history but was always suppressed, under-nourished and would have felt more like a torture to them. Simone de Beauvoir makes a similar point about the impossibility of a female van Gogh.

23 The phrase comes from Ignatius Sancho who, in 1778, discussed the case of the slave poet Phillis Wheatley. For an account of this episode, see Chaplin 2016.

24 Edwards 1999, p. 10.

25 Derrida 2006, p. 4.

26 Braidotti 2013, p. 527.

social intercourse',²⁷ and sought to replace 'the traditional notion of the artist as creator with one of the artist as producer',²⁸ in which 'the concept of creativity is used in a metaphysical and non-historical way'.²⁹ Martha Woodmansee constructs a similar argument with regard to the author as genius which she indexes directly to legislative measures around copyright and intellectual property as a transposition of privileges into rights. Woodmansee develops an analysis of the author as a hybrid of the craftsman and the inspired individual – a pairing that I will revisit below – she conceives of the author as a codeword for a claim to property, whereas I will treat the author, genius and artist as markers within the contested social division of labour.

Edward Young, whose 'Conjectures on Original Composition' in 1759 is the principal eighteenth-century English text on genius, characterised the genius as 'the Power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end'.³⁰ What is more, Schiller confirmed in advance Wolff's concerns about how the concept of genius mystifies the production of art when he wrote that 'genius always remains a mystery to itself'.³¹ Kant, bridging the two positions, said, 'he himself does not know, and hence cannot teach it to anyone else'.³² Re-read with an eye on the politics of labour that were prominent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially as these pertained to the elevation of the Fine Arts and later the differentiation of art from handicraft, Young's words take on a more specific meaning. His conjectures can be read as a discourse on labour, neither as the ultimate affirmation of labour nor as the embryonic refusal of work³³ but as a specific intervention within the Enlightenment's protracted undermining of the guild system.

In my reading, Young is calculated in assigning the genius a place diametrically opposed to the artisan. The magic and mystery, or divinity, projected onto the genius is a capacity constitutively beyond the artisan regulated by the guild. If we think, in absolute terms, that the genius is the labourer who does not labour, a workless worker and an unteachable talent, then the social critique of the genius is fully justified. If, however, the resistance to what

27 Wolff 1981, p. 12.

28 Wolff 1981, p. 137.

29 Wolff 1981, p. 118.

30 Young 1972, p. 341.

31 Schiller 1993, p. 189.

32 Kant 1987, p. 175.

33 See Berardi 2009 and Frayne 2015.

is 'generally reputed [to be] necessary',³⁴ in which rules are 'like crutches'³⁵ (meaning that they are useful to the 'Lame' but 'an Impediment to the Strong') and the capacity of the genius cannot be passed on to an apprentice, is meant to differentiate the artist or poet from the artisan specifically, then the analysis of the discourse of the genius must be resituated within disputes over the relative value of handicraft and the Fine Arts which were the subject of intense disagreement at the time.

If the genius is a mythic figure which presents the hyperbolic image of the independent white, propertied male as a universal exemplar of freedom, it is also simultaneously a mythic trope of labour. Social theorists such as Wolff regard the rupture signified by the artist–genius as discursive or ideological, that is to say as an unwarranted division that props up an elite, rather than a real distinction within the differential field of labour as a result of the changing social division of labour. The genius, and the category of the artist that inherits most of its magic while appearing to abandon its metaphysics, cannot be fully understood, I want to argue, without an analysis of the transition from the artisan to the artist that took place as an anomalous trajectory within the transition from feudalism to capitalism in which the transition from artisan to worker³⁶ is usually taken as the dominant tendency.

2 The Elevation of the Fine Arts

The social analysis of the genius-artist must give way to a broader and more-integrated historical analysis of how artistic labour is transformed in the period between the establishment of the Académie Royale in Absolutist France and the emergence of the gallery system that formed in the nineteenth century and is still in place today. This transition can be grasped, in brief, as a passage between what Kristeller has called the 'modern system of the arts'³⁷ and what Harrison and Cynthia White have called the 'dealer-critic system'.³⁸ It corresponds, roughly, to the transition from patronage to the art market, but I will focus my attention on the transformation of art's mode of production rather than concentrating exclusively on mechanisms of circulation. This is particularly important in addressing the politics of work in artistic labour rather than

34 Young 1972, p. 341.

35 Young 1972, p. 342.

36 See Fitzsimmons 2010.

37 Kristeller 1951.

38 White and White 1993.

confirming the theory of art's commodification. Artistic labour is radically reconstituted during this period, not only insofar as the control over the production of works of art shifts from the patron to the producer but also, and more fundamentally, insofar as the confrontation between the academy and the guild revolutionises art's social relations of production.

The narrative of the transition from patronage to the art market appears to provide the material conditions for the transition from the artisanal production of paintings and sculpture to artistic production for the gallery system, but it is misleading insofar as the transformation of the artistic mode of production begins with the establishment of the academies and the elevation of the Fine Arts, a development which occurs within the tradition of patronage and not against it. Patronage in the arts always existed alongside the guilds and as an exception to their regulations. To speak of a transition from patronage to the art market, therefore, is to homogenise a stratified and contested field and to give precedence to the minority of painters and sculptors who were plucked from the guild system in order to operate within the court or church. It is possible to justify the emphasis on patronage by supposing that, by and large, the best painters and sculptors were those that won patronage and that the majority of painters and sculptors operating within the guild system were jobbing artisans. Apart from the fact that some guild painters and sculptors continued to be regarded as among the best of their day and received royal commissions,³⁹ what is most suspect about identifying the history of art with the history of patronage is that it corresponds precisely to the arguments made by members of the academy during its rivalry with the guild.

The rivalry between court and guild was shaped in Florence, Rome and Venice when the individual's emancipation from the guild for painters and sculptors was legitimated through the establishment of academies. The struggle between court and guild is, arguably, the active social force that Kristeller traces in his account of changing ideas in the early stages of the formation of the modern category of the Fine Arts. Three of the five arts that would be grouped as the Fine Arts in the seventeenth century 'were for the first time clearly separated from the crafts'.⁴⁰ For Kristeller a 'change in theory [Vasari's theory of the *Arti del disegno*] found its institutional expression in 1563 when in Florence ... the painters, sculptors and architects cut their previous connections with the craftsmen's guilds and formed the Academy of Art [*Accademia del Disegno*]'.⁴¹ By the seventeenth century, Rome and Venice retained their

39 Michel 2018, p. 61.

40 Kristeller 1990, p. 182.

41 Ibid.

status, established since the Renaissance, as the leading European cities in matters of painting and sculpture,⁴² but, in accordance with uneven and combined development,⁴³ it was France's attempt to catch up with Italy that went furthest in formulating the new category of Fine Arts.

Kristeller identifies the mature formulation of the Fine Arts as a grouping of arts with Batteux's *The Beaux Arts* in 1746, but events had preceded this theoretical construction. The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture was founded in 1648, albeit initially as a fragile, small and vulnerable institution, but in the century leading up to Batteux's formulation of the 'single principle' that distinguishes the 'Beaux Arts', it had re-established itself as a prestigious institution that could secure privileges for its members and a prestigious reputation for bringing 'together the best French artists in a single body'.⁴⁴ Initially, the primary objective of the Académie was 'to raise the status of painting and sculpture to the rank of liberal arts ... [and] to escape the clutches of the guild'⁴⁵ but it did not entirely replace the guild system. Existing uneasily alongside one another, the Académie and guild were sometimes at loggerheads and sometimes in implicit or explicit partnership, such as the union with the guild in 1651. There was also traffic between them. In particular, the Académie appeared for the most part to draw the best of the painters and sculptors from the guild. As such, the Académie continued to rely on a type of formal or informal apprenticeship as a preliminary stage of education for their students.

'An apprenticeship in handling a pencil and acquiring a good eye, first by copying drawings and engravings and then by drawing from three-dimensional forms, was a condition of admission to the Académie'.⁴⁶ Prior to and outside the academies it was possible to secure patronage that brought emancipation from guild regulations and, in particular, before the founding of the Académie, French painters would bypass the apprentice system by moving to Rome to be trained,⁴⁷ but this was conducted on an individual basis. In the academies, the exception from the guild took on a social basis. Individual painters and sculptors who had worked in the service of patrons were not only exempt from guild regulations but also beyond its protections, hence the academies were formed as a guild for the privileged that operated outside or on the peripheries of the guild system. As well as replicating many of the features of guilds, therefore, the academies explicitly distanced themselves from the guilds and

42 See Haskell 1963.

43 See Davidson 2012.

44 Michel 2018, p. xiii.

45 Michel 2018, p. 131.

46 Michel 2018, p. 243.

47 See White and White 1993, p. 5.

the mechanical arts that they represented. The statutes of 1663–4 use the word ‘pupil’ rather than ‘apprentice’, who were taught by professors (originally, in the Académie, called the *elders* and later known as the *officers*) rather than masters, both of which specifically mark the differentiation from the guilds and the mechanical arts. At the same time, these terminological substitutions assured the association of painting and sculpture with scholarship and the liberal arts. The Académie stressed the importance of regularly scheduled lectures for the same reason.

The differentiation initiated by the ‘shift from an apprenticeship to a pupilage’⁴⁸ was not merely nominal. The emphasis of the Académie on drawing from life and providing lectures on the principles of the arts was calculated to oppose the apprentice system of handicraft on which it depended for its recruits. Under the impression that apprentices merely learned the mechanical techniques of handicraft, the Académie did not teach painting or sculpture at all, partly because it restricted admission to candidates who could demonstrate facility in one of the Fine Arts through the presentation of a ‘reception piece’ and therefore preyed on the apprentice system from which it differentiated itself, but also because it employed professors to give lectures as well as posing the model and supervising the life class. Insofar as the academy system continued to rely on the apprentice system of the guilds for its recruits, students were only required to spend three years in the academy compared with the five or seven-year apprenticeship, in part as an acknowledgement of the years already spent in the workshop or *atelier* of a ‘master’.

The Académie secured a monopoly on life drawing in contrast with the long-standing monopoly on grinding colours that was the privilege of guild members. The *querelle du coloris* in the 1670s, a quarrel over whether to privilege colour or drawing, was perhaps an internal debate over the direction and control of the academy as a struggle over the principles that turned on philosophical questions about truth and beauty, but it was also, in some measure, a coded discourse on the relationship between the Fine Arts and handicraft. Colour, as a substance, was the province of the artisan and therefore the academician appeared to have two methods available for marking a separation from handicraft with regard to colour. Either, colour could be relegated to a low status below drawing and line, or colour could be assigned a new intellectual significance that it did not have for the guilds. Both sides of the quarrel built their arguments on the need to elevate the Académie above the artisan practices of the colour grinders and dyers.

48 Ayres 2014, p. 16.

Katie Scott recounts the allegations of an apparently widespread practice of the ‘unauthorized production of casts by sculptors of the guild after works by sculptors of the Academie’.⁴⁹ Although it is likely that this was exaggerated to confirm the distinction between artisans and Fine Artists, ‘the king’s council issued an act on the 21st June 1676 which prohibited all “bourgeois” sculptors [that is, sculptors of the city of Paris] and others from making and selling casts after works by members of the Academie without permission of the author, on pain of a fine of 1000 livres, plus damages and costs’.⁵⁰ This association of the artisan painter with purely mechanical facility was extended in the next century through the concept of polish and lick which Richard Wrigley, in his study of the use of the term ‘bourgeois’ in art criticism in the late eighteenth century, describes as symptomatic of an ostensive ‘bourgeois sensibility’ that took its pleasures from paintings that displayed ‘merely physical craft, lacking the inventive dignity of true art’.⁵¹

From the perspective of the labour process itself, Christian Michel is right to point out that the first academicians were ‘particularly anxious to defend the distinction [between the academy and the guild] ... because what was asked of them [by their patrons] was no different from what was asked of the guild painters and sculptors’.⁵² This perception of the difference in the quality of their work would have been of considerable importance to the academicians, of course, and they continued a discursive campaign against the artisan painters and sculptors by associating them with nothing more than mechanical techniques and menial preparatory tasks. However, the academicians went further than designating artisans as ‘mechanicks’, they also reconstituted the Fine Arts economically, socially and politically. The academies obtained certain privileges from the state but also imposed on themselves a battery of prohibitions. Together these privileges and prohibitions delineated the Fine Arts principally by elevating them above handicraft, and in doing so defining the scholar-painter and scholar-sculptor in terms that emphatically contrast with the artisan-painter and artisan-sculptor. The Académie forbade its members ‘to open a shop for sale of his works or to exhibit them in the windows of his house’.⁵³ Since the Freemen of the guilds held the right to own a shop, the statute can be read as a victory of the guilds and the admission that the academy could not award such a right to its members.

49 Scott 1998, p. 34.

50 Ibid.

51 Wrigley 1998, p. 137.

52 Michel 2018, p. 132.

53 White and White 1993, p. 13, n. 6.

Although the founding members of the Académie might have had to sacrifice privileges that they had obtained as ‘master’ artisans who had served an apprenticeship, the Académie had privileges of its own. As well as the monopoly on life drawing in France, the Académie enjoyed priority in securing royal commissions, the prohibition on copies of works by academicians, and later, the exemption of its students from joining the militia. The establishment of the Académie Royale ‘emphasized a new conception of the artist: no longer an artisan or a low-caste hawker of wares, he was instead a learned man, a teacher of the high principles of beauty and taste’.⁵⁴ Simply, the Académie was a machine for producing and regulating distinctions. The Academy distinguished itself from the guild in order to secure the distinction of members of the academy from artisans and the distinction of its students from apprentices.

The Academy was not a self-sufficient system. As well as relying on the apprentice system, the atelier system developed within and around the academy itself both to supplement the academy’s own limited scope of education and to provide academic painters and sculptors with their ‘principal source of income’.⁵⁵ In contrast with the apprentice system, in which, after an initial payment on behalf of the apprentice, the ‘master’ was obliged to provide food and lodging for the apprentice,⁵⁶ the academicians drew ‘the bulk of their income’⁵⁷ from their students. As such, only the wealthiest of academicians ‘could afford to dispense with teaching’.⁵⁸ So, whereas artisan painters and sculptors operated within an apprentice system in which the practitioner was also, typically, a teacher, in the academy system the painter and sculptor would combine these two activities *as if* they were separate and specialised. Certainly, making works of art and teaching students had now become two distinct revenue streams.

The Academy distinguished itself from the guild by elevating the Fine Arts above handicraft. The most telling of these measures, perhaps, is the severing of the Académie from commerce. This was not loosened over time but reinforced in 1777 with a statute proclaiming those who ‘wish to open a shop and trade in pictures, drawings, and sculptures by other hands, sell colors, gilding, and other accessories of the arts of painting and sculpture ... shall be required to seek admission to the Community [Guild] of Painter-Sculptors’.⁵⁹ By establishing a social demarcation between the ‘master’ artisan and the academically trained painter and sculptor that associated handicraft with sales, on the one

54 White and White 1993, p. 6.

55 Michel 2018, p. 295.

56 See Ayres 2014 and Fox 2009.

57 Michel 2018, p. 297.

58 Michel 2018, p. 295.

59 Quoted in Michel 2018, p. 112.

hand, and the Fine Arts with virtue, on the other, the Académie inaugurated an antagonism to commercialism that resonates with subsequent strands of the politics of art. Several transformations of the artistic mode of production are bound together in the academic elevation of the Fine Arts above the handicrafts of the guilds. Among them, it prompted the inauguration of the Salons – opportunities for its members to exhibit, sell and advertise themselves to patrons and collectors – in which the commercial transactions between artists and patrons were mediated by the academy itself.

3 The Academic Division of Labour

The academy inaugurated a new social division of labour for art in which teaching was provided outside the workshop by professors in an institution separate from the workplace, collective production within the workshop was replaced with individual production within a studio, and the scholarly painter and sculptor was removed from the commercial activities of the guild artisan's shop. As such, teaching and commerce were no longer integral to artistic production as it was in the artisan workshop but split geographically, socially and economically. At the same time, the salons were held annually or biannually from 1737 until the abolition of the academies during the French Revolution. Exhibitions were foreign to the guild system but economically necessary for the academy system. The Salons located the Fine Arts within the emergent public sphere for the first time, which provided the basis for the national public art museums that brought a new universality to the Fine Arts after the founding of the Louvre. However, the academy, which recast the Fine Artist as a scholarly individual, blocked the breadth of activities that continued to be practised by artisans. In some sense, then, it constituted a palpable reduction of freedom and agency for the scholarly painter and sculptor. Nevertheless, the academy's narrow but elevated conception of formal freedom has fared far better within art's modern institutions than the guild's regulation of real freedoms embedded in the governance of the city.

If the passage from the artisan guild to the modern dealer-critic system is not completed until patronage is replaced with the art market, then the revolution in the artistic mode of production carried out by the academy retains too much fidelity to the Ancien Régime to recast painters and sculptors as isolated individuals exposed to the market for works of art. The academic prohibition on commerce and setting-up shop established one of the conditions for the rise of art dealers insofar as it sealed off the scholar-painter and scholar-sculptor from direct economic transactions but, even though the academy

system established the studio as the principal space of artistic production, its purpose was to provide collective privileges and regulations for painters and sculptors, not to facilitate the transition to *laissez-faire*.

Nevertheless, many of the features of artistic production and its discourses that have been credited to the effects of the art market were already established within the academy. The abiding tension between art and market, for instance, which is often ascribed to Bohemianism,⁶⁰ is inaugurated within the academy not as a form of resistance to an existing art market but as a form of distinction through which the Fine Arts are elevated above the guild workshops of artisans. Also, the modern belief that art cannot be taught is at least partly formed within the academy despite the subsequent belief that the academy was characterised by an overly prescribed system of instruction.

Courbet, in the nineteenth century, famously refused to take on any students of his own. Courbet and the early modernists advocated that the young painter be neither an apprentice nor a student and should neither turn to the tradition of handicraft nor submit to the sterile protocols of the Fine Arts. However, the belief in the impossibility of teaching was one of the few things that the guild and the academy shared. Although 'drawing was not taught there',⁶¹ the Académie was organised around a misperception of the apprenticeship as a merely technical acquisition of skills, referring to artisans pejoratively as 'colour grinders'⁶² and 'hewers of stone',⁶³ whereas the guilds regarded the arts not as skills in the limited sense but as mysteries. And, later, the modernist rejection of the academy was based on the misperception that it gave specific instructions on how to produce works of art.

The leaders of the French Revolution were the first to hold this position. When the revolutionary assembly decreed to close the Académie, it did so on principle that 'all state-run art schools ... should be closed'.⁶⁴ This was no victory for the artisans since the National Assembly dissolved the guilds in March 1791 within a political project that demanded, in Sewell's terms, 'the annihilation of any sense of common interest intermediate between the individual and the nation'.⁶⁵ If many of the practices and rhetorics of the academy survive in modern and contemporary art, is it nonetheless the case that the revolutionary critique of the Académie remains vivid. Indeed, this perception is reflected

60 See Grana 1964.

61 Michel 2018, p. 243.

62 Walsh 2017, p. 40.

63 Druro 2007, p. 96.

64 Michel 2018, p. 200.

65 Sewell 1980, p. 89.

in White and White's description of what they call the 'Academic system' as a disciplinary institution. It consists, they say, of

a persistent network of beliefs, customs, and formal procedures which together form a more-or-less articulated social organization with an acknowledged central purpose ... realised through recruitment, training, continuous indoctrination, a sequential process of appraisal and graded recognition, regularized appropriation of economic support ... a graded system of discipline and punishment, acknowledged machinery for legitimation of adaptation and change, and controlled communication with the social environment.⁶⁶

This Foucauldian depiction reflects the specific situation of the French academies which were more thoroughly 'embedded in the wider structures of the absolutist state'⁶⁷ than their counterparts elsewhere.

Michel argues that the revolutionary critique of the academy 'strongly resembled the critiques leveled by the Académie against the guild'.⁶⁸ It is true that certain tropes which were deployed within the academic assault on handicraft recur in the revolutionary period within arguments against academicism, specifically the pejorative reference to producing works of art by standard formulas. However, the revolutionary critique of the academy does not replay the discursive contrast between the vulgar and liberal arts. What is objectionable about the academy at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth is not that it is menial, manual and mechanical but that its hierarchical structures and scholarly techniques stifled the talent, genius, imagination, invention and taste that it was set up expressly to nurture. The Académie was founded with the purpose of establishing 'freedom for the arts' and the Jacobins and modernists accused the Académie of killing freedom, but for the Académie, the freedom for the arts was understood specifically in terms of the freedoms that were the privilege of the guilds, whereas for the revolutionaries, the modernists and the avant-gardists, freedom was more abstract, individualist, subjective, absolute and universal.

The relationship between the workshop and studio, and the distinction between them, is obscured by the stubborn preference of painters and sculptors since the Renaissance to stage their self-portraits in isolation from their workshops in such a way as to suppress representation of their artisanal activities

66 White and White 1993, p. 2.

67 Harrison, Wood and Gaiger 2000, p. 630.

68 Michel 2018, p. 200.

and the artisanal activities of others. Rembrandt, for instance, whose large three-storey house contained several distinct workshops, depicted himself alone with just his easel and paints. This was a deliberate tactic 'to promote himself and distinguish himself from his contemporaries or rivals'.⁶⁹ Typically, the self-portrait expressed the aspirations of the Fine Arts elevated above the mechanical arts and therefore tended to represent the space of artistic production minus the workshop long before the historical obsolescence of the workshop in the production of works of art. This gives the impression that the studio has a longer history than it does and that the historical transition from the workshop to the studio was accomplished prior to the confrontation between academy and guild and the revolution in the mode of artistic production that resulted from this struggle.

The metamorphosis of artistic production that I am tracing, which was not completed until the eighteenth century, was preceded in the Renaissance by a spatial division that underlined different kinds of labour within the artisanal workshop. Originally, the workshop was not merely a place of work but also a shop that had an opening onto the street and a space behind for producing 'works of art'. Some Renaissance workshops also contained a small private room for the master called a 'scrittoio' or a 'studiolo'. The workshop would also typically be attached to living quarters for the apprentices and artisan day-labourers as well as the home of the 'master'. Although the social relations of production remained artisanal, the partition of the workshop itself into two distinct spaces, the *bottega* and the *studiolo*, is a preliminary event within the history of art's modern mode of production. The *bottega* was a workroom occupied by apprentices and artisan day-labourers. The *studiolo* was a separate space in the same building – perhaps nothing more than a desk, or a small space separated by a curtain – occupied by the master. The *studiolo* had some of the qualities of a study and is depicted in the history of art as a small room resembling 'the miser's counting room'⁷⁰ and the gentleman-scholar's study. Michael Cole and Mary Pardo assert that 'the labors of the workshop ... were very different from the liberal exercises undertaken in the *studiolo*,'⁷¹ and yet, there is evidence that indicates how, in practice, the actual occupancy of the workshop 'tend[ed] to blur such distinctions'.⁷²

More cautiously, we might say, the demarcation of the *studiolo* and the *bottega* provided a space for the 'master' artisan to mark himself off from the

69 Chapman 2005, p. 110.

70 Wood 2005, p. 94.

71 Cole and Pardo (eds.) 2005, p. 19.

72 Ibid.

manual labour of apprentices and journeymen. The *studiolo* represents scholarship, management and commerce. Hence, the spatial division between the *studiolo* and the *bottega* replicated in miniature the hierarchy of work and contemplation that was integral to the division between the mechanical and liberal arts. The *studiolo* marked a new interval within the social relations of the workshop that built on the privileges of the guild and the established hierarchy of master, journeyman and apprentice, as well as contributing to the struggle to include painting and sculpture within the liberal arts.

Economically, however, the spatial division within the artisan workshop marked and masked relations of dependence and exploitation: the *studiolo* depended on the commodity production of the *bottega* even though the apprentices and journeymen working in the *bottega* depended for their livelihood on the master in the *studiolo*. If there were normative pressures on individuals such as Raphael to distance themselves from the manual labour of the *bottega* through drawing designs that were completed by their underlings, there were material and economic counter-pressures that prevented the *studiolo* from being absolutely independent from the *bottega*.

The *studiolo* marked off the liberal elements of conception, design and management from the more manual, mechanical and laborious phases of work, but the division between the *bottega* and *studiolo* occupied an indeterminate place between the mechanical and liberal arts. Indeterminate because painters and sculptors were attempting to move from one to the other and therefore could be regarded as artisans pure and simple, artisans situated at the summit of the mechanical arts, or as artisans operating at the lower threshold of the liberal arts. Retrospectively it appears as if an elite of practitioners in the Renaissance who were exceptions to the guild system anticipated what was to become the standard by which all artists were to be measured, but the transition from the *studiolo* to the studio, and from the great artisan to the artist, could not have taken place without an artistic division of labour that was not present during the Renaissance.

The artist's studio is not an extrapolation of the *studiolo* or the final separation of the *studiolo* from its attachment to the *bottega*. The artist's studio is a place of production, not only a place of scholarship and business. Hence, the studio preserves the social esteem of scholarship and contemplation of the *studiolo* without abandoning completely the handicraft production that went on in the *bottega*. The economic relations marked and masked by the division between the *bottega* and the *studiolo* did not dissolve when, in the nineteenth century, the studio was reconfigured as a space governed by the values of the *studiolo* but incorporating the activities of the *bottega*. Although the artist subsequently would not always work independently, the presence of assistants in

the studio never attained the legitimacy that the presence of apprentices and journeymen had in the *bottega*. The relationship between artists and their assistants, fabricators, technicians and interns which has been raised recently within a politics of artistic labour testifies to the continuation of the economic and normative division between *bottega* and *studiolo* within the studio itself.

Insofar as the *studiolo* was a space of withdrawal from handicraft production, what is lost or repressed in the studio is the *social* production of art. If we view the workshop through the lens of the studio, so to speak, the advent of the studio appears to be little more than a scaling down of operations in which the artisan becomes an isolated artist-genius. However, the Freeman or artisan ‘master’ of the workshop was not merely the producer of works of art but also responsible for the instruction of apprentices, an authorised dealer of materials and products, a shopkeeper and also a member of the regulating body of the arts. Which is to say, the transition from the workshop to the studio is also a transition from the workshop to the gallery and a transition from the workshop to the art school insofar as these other functions of the ‘master’ artisan are originally located within the workshop.

So, perhaps, the transition from the workshop to the studio is better understood as one trajectory within a spatial dispersal of the workshop into a social division of artistic labour across various sites. That is to say, the artisan workshop is the origin of several transitions, not only to the studio but also to the art school, the gallery, the auction house and the factory. Therefore, even when the art market finally establishes itself, it is not completely accurate to speak of the artisan becoming an artist since the range of tasks performed by the artisan were distributed among a variety of new specialists, namely the art dealer, the academy professor, the art critic and the art historian, as well as the artist. Arguably, the perception that the artisan becomes an artist is premised on the modernist bias of the history of art being a history of works of art which are produced originally by artisans and then by artists. That is to say, the guild artisan is misrepresented as another – allegedly inferior – version of the artist, in the way that the modern craftsman and the artist are regarded equally as isolated specialist producers of works of art, albeit within a hierarchy of practices that privileges the artist.

The regulations and constraints of the academy contrast vividly with the image of the artist as a solitary figure, which Caroline Jones, in her book *Machine in the Studio*, characterises in terms of the ‘romance of the studio’,⁷³ and yet the academy was instrumental in the historical passage from the workshop to the studio. Clearly, therefore, it is not the advent of the studio as the

73 Jones 1996, pp. 1–59.

spatial correlate of the production of the Fine Arts that constitutes the social isolation of the artist which the studio has come to connote. Private and individual in certain respects, the artist's studio also belongs to and is one of the sources of a social imaginary of the artist and artistic production. If the painters and sculptors in their *stuidiolos*, centuries later, became vivid prototypes of the Enlightenment, Romantic and modern conceptions of the artist, as well as the worker-poets of the 1830s and 1840s who demonstrated that 'manual laborers were capable of poetry'⁷⁴ by becoming writers when the day's work was done,⁷⁵ then this legacy must be reconstructed not only as a history of a coherent idea but also as a complex and contested confrontation of changing modes of production. Generations of artists since the 1960s who have subjected the studio and its mythologies to critique can be divided into (1) those who complete the severing of the *studiolo* from *bottega* by thinking of their place of work as an office or a study in which conceptual work and design is done, and (2) those who heal the rift between the *bottega* and *studiolo* by identifying artistic practice with engineering, factory work and other kinds of material production. Both, I would argue, misrepresent the social division of labour of artistic production and neglect the extent of the dispersed agency of artistic production and the social reproduction of art that is presupposed by the artist's studio.

The perception of the individual and isolated production of works of art by artists, and retrospectively by artisans, is not the result merely of the spatial metamorphosis of the workshop into a studio but is the product of the social division of artistic labour. Its material basis is, in the first half of the eighteenth century, the expansion of commercial suppliers of paint, pencils, brushes, paper and canvases. Alongside the manufacturing of brushes, pencils, and other supplies, as James Ayres has charted, by 1716 paint was being manufactured by suppliers rather than produced within the workshop by apprentices and assistants. Artisans such as Alexander Emerton, who had served an apprenticeship and was operating as a House Painter when he advertised the sale of colours in 1725 in London, supplied other artisans with paint. Although painters and sculptors had long presented themselves as solitary producers of works of art within the *studiolo*, their social isolation is realised, ironically, through the socialisation of artistic production. Commercial suppliers diminished the need for apprentices to complete the menial work for the 'master' and contributed, therefore, to the real and imagined isolation of the artist in

74 Sewell 1980, p. 236.

75 See Rancière 2012 for an analysis of the worker-poets, and Rancière 1986 for a critique of the myth of the artisan.

the studio but only insofar as the social production of the artisan workshop is replaced with a social division of artistic production now mediated by market transactions. That is to say, materials that had been produced within the workshop were purchased as commodities, and therefore the production of paintings and sculptures was social in a new way in the sense that the manual and menial tasks previously allocated to apprentices in the workshop were now undertaken in places remote from it, and painters in particular appeared to be more removed from handicraft than at any previous time.

By the 1770s Reeves were selling watercolour cakes, and at the same time ready-made prepared canvases were being purchased by painters in standard sizes. The painter comes to occupy a position distinct from the artisan and independent from the industrial worker or entrepreneur, simultaneously resisting industrialisation within the studio and yet also a consequence of it, insofar as mechanisation and industrialisation takes place outside the studio. Importantly, the provision of paint by 'Colourmen' allows Sir Joshua Reynolds and his peers to 'distance themselves from the craft of their art'.⁷⁶ As such, although the activities of the artist within the studio were not subject to mechanisation, industrialisation and commodification, this was only because whenever these processes took place they were ejected from the studio. From the vantage point of the studio, therefore, art retains the hostility to commerce that was established by the academies in opposition to the guilds, but taken as a whole, the transition from the artisan to the artist *via* the scholarly activities of the Fine Arts is not complete until the commercial supply of materials extracts handicraft from the studio.

This breaking up into separate jobs of the tasks that had previously been integrated within the workshop appears, in retrospect, to be a clear sign of the transition from the artisan to the artist, but its contemporary significance was vertical not horizontal (elevated above extant practices, but not superseding them).

4 The Elimination or Displacement of Handicraft

These transformations of the social relations of artistic production have been veiled by inquiries into the act of painting itself, such as deskilling, because the crucial changes are not evident in the labour process but in the isolation of the painter or sculptor as an individual producer who purchases tools and materials from suppliers; the first sign of the effect of industrialisation on artistic

⁷⁶ Ayres 2014, p. 5.

production. Although artistic production is not converted into capitalist commodity production and the artist emerges from the scholarly occupation of the Fine Arts into capitalism not by becoming a wage labourer but by becoming an anomaly to both the old regime and the modern industrial system, art is given its peculiar social ontology through historical processes that appear to be external to it. Art, as it is formed out of the Fine Arts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, defies mechanisation and industrialisation but only by ejecting the mechanised and industrialised aspects of artistic production from the studio. We might even say that the Industrial Revolution is the precondition for the studio even as the artist and the studio is constituted as the spatial exception to everything mechanical and industrial.

When avant-garde artists embrace mechanisation and industrialisation they do not reverse the transition from the workshop to the studio or revert to an affirmation of handicraft even when artists insert themselves into factories or engage in collaborative forms of production. There is no reconciliation with handicraft, the artisan's workshop or craft in Dada, Productivism or Conceptualism but a rejection or negation of art and aesthetic labour. Mechanisation, industrialisation, automation and business appear to be antidotes to art and the aesthetic in the twentieth century. Readymades, paintings produced over the telephone, photomontages and monochrome paintings, or producing art through acts of spilling, finding, instructing, gluing, tracing and erasing, deliberately confronts the presence of handicraft in artworks and artistic labour as if the historical conflict between the guild and the academy had not sufficiently exorcised the presence of the artisan from the artist.

This historical process in which the artisanal production of works of art is divided into several specialist practices allows us to revisit the question of the deskilling of art. Despite being conceived primarily in terms of the degradation of labour under Fordism,⁷⁷ the two main features of deskilling – mechanisation and the division of labour – are already evident in the eighteenth century in the run up to the Industrial Revolution. If the study of art's deskilling is confined to the activities of the studio then, strictly speaking, artists are never subject to the social processes of deskilling. When scholars have inquired into the presence of deskilling within art, therefore, they have focused on the labour processes of artists, in particular the shedding of the obvious remnants of handicraft within the avant-garde tradition, especially those practices associated with Duchamp or Dada and Surrealism more generally.

After the most blatantly artisanal aspects of artistic production had been ousted from the studio, generation after generation of artists unearth countless

77 See Braverman 1998.

traces of handicraft within artistic technique itself. This modern form of critical vigilance, we might say, is the third wave of deskilling in art. In the seventeenth century the scholarly painters and sculptors rejected handicraft as part of the elevation of the Fine Arts, and in the eighteenth century the traditional, time-consuming skilled handicraft jobs of grinding paint, making pencils, and so on were no longer required among the skills of the artist. The third wave of deskilling does not require the transformation of art's social relations of production but, in a sense, thematise what Danielle Child has called the 'hidden hand of the maker' in artistic production. Eliminating handicraft from artworks and artistic technique through procedures such as purchasing commodities and nominating them as artworks can be interpreted as eliminating from artistic production everything but the transactions through which painters and sculptors in the eighteenth century purchased their materials from commercial suppliers.

Deskilling in the twentieth century elevates art above craft through the 'persistent effort to eliminate artisanal competence and other forms of manual virtuosity from the horizon of both artistic production and aesthetic evaluation'.⁷⁸ In one sense, this retreat into the conceptual is the realisation of the ambition of the academy to turn the painter and sculptor into a scholar as well as reinvigorating the resistance to commerce through the so-called 'dematerialisation' of the art object (the production of ideas instead of objects) which had been cancelled or suppressed by the success of modernist art dealers. At the same time, however, it appears to debase art by embracing chance, accident, incompetence, mechanisation, automation, commerce and business. As John Roberts expresses it, the deskilling of art after Duchamp diminishes the technical difference between artistic production and 'general social technique'.⁷⁹ Roberts argues that Duchamp inaugurated a shift away from handicraft and representation in works produced in the early twentieth century that were not fully integrated into the technical procedures of art until the 1960s. Although Roberts refers to Duchamp ushering in 'a discourse on the diffusion of authorship through the social division of labour',⁸⁰ what he had in mind, here, is a division within artistic production between the author and the producer, between conception and manufacture, that presupposes the transition from the artisan to the artist and the social processes of deskilling – mechanisation and the division of labour – have already taken place.

78 Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh and Joselit 2004, p. 531.

79 See Roberts 2007.

80 Roberts 2007, p. 53.

Roberts draws the strongest possible contrast with industrial production by claiming that the labour used in the production of art 'is transformative of its materials in ways that are non-subsumptive and non-heteronomous, thereby allowing the subjectivity of the artist to penetrate the materials of artistic labour'.⁸¹ Consequently, he says, 'the autonomous work of art ... provides a model of emancipated labour'.⁸² This characterisation of the artist's studio plays down the increasing use of assistants, technicians and fabricators and the development of the new studio factories but also the tendency of artists to work collectively, collaboratively and participatorily. What is problematic about Roberts's image of artistic labour as undivided and emancipatory is not only that artists are becoming managers and are increasingly subject to management by curators, funders and other holders of authority over them but also that the alleged autonomy of the artist in the studio is in fact an effect of the mechanisation and industrialisation of the craft elements that had historically occurred within the workshop of the artisan painter and sculptor.

What has been understood as art's deskilling, which I have designated as the third wave of deskilling, might be better understood not as deskilling but as de-aestheticisation. What I mean by this is that the avant garde, especially in its anti-art mode and in Conceptualism, is motivated primarily by the eradication of art from art, which is to say, the signs of art embedded in the technique of artistic production. It is taste, discrimination, sensitivity and aesthetics which are negated when the avant garde systematically rejects artful technique. If deskilling can be disaggregated from de-aestheticisation, then the analysis of deskilling can be reserved for the social processes of mechanisation and the social division of labour, while de-aestheticisation can be reserved for art's negation of art. The advantage of doing so is that the inquiry into art's deskilling, and therefore the inquiry into the relationship between art and the capitalist mode of production, can be resituated as an inquiry into the social division of artistic labour rather than treated as something occurring only within the artist's studio and evident in the character of artworks and the techniques employed by artists.

Artistic labour has served Romantic philosophers, socialists, Marxists and social reformers as a model for free activity (including the freedom from work), the utopian politics of pleasurable work and as the antidote to industrial toil. If the discourse of the relationship between art and labour has recently passed from a major key, in which art is claimed as the essence of all labour, to a minor key, in which art is the testing ground for infinite exploitation, there has been

81 Roberts 2007, p. 87.

82 Roberts 2007, p. 206.

no loosening of their ties. Art has been defined both in contrast to work and as a specific form of labour; work has been defined both as lacking precisely what is taken to be characteristic of art and as the common denominator of art and labour; work has been proposed as the antidote to the romantic myth of the artist, and art has been promoted as the cure for alienated labour. Rather than interrogate the arguments for and against art's emancipation or incorporation into modern disciplines of work, I have attempted, here, to trace the conditions under which artistic labour is formed as distinct from both artisanal and industrial production. My aim in doing this is to open up new lines of inquiry concerning the relationship between artistic labour and the wage system beyond the binary of the affirmation of labour and the denigration of work.

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