

# The Intangibilities of Form

## John Roberts

*The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*  
John Roberts

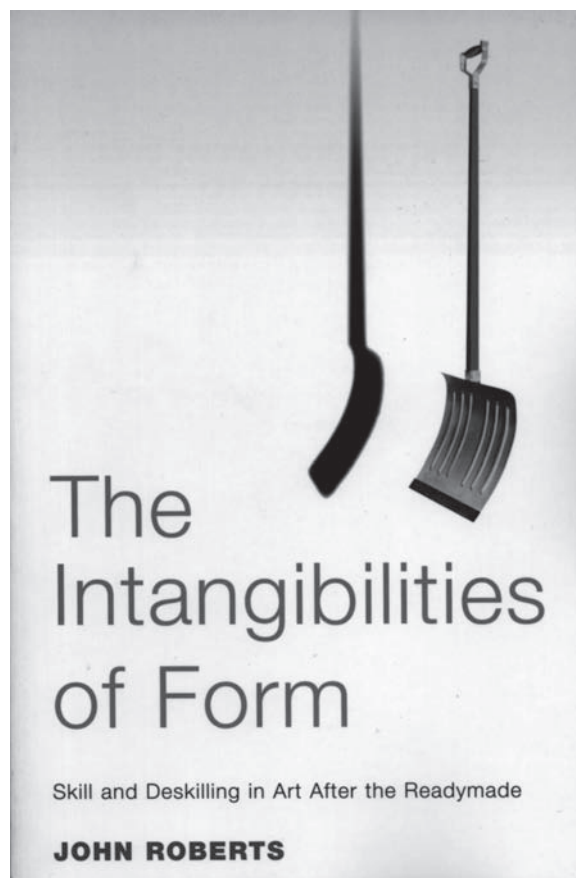
Verso, London, UK, 2007  
ISBN/ISSN: 1844671631

### Preface

This book elaborates a labour theory of culture as a model for explaining the dynamics of avant-garde art and the modern expansion of the circuits of artistic authorship. In this the writing involves less a discussion about specific artworks (or their interpretation), than an analysis of the kinds of labour contained in artworks, as a reflection on a wider debate about artistic labour and productive and non-productive labour and the limits and possibilities of authorship. Why is it that artistic labour is taken to be an exemplary form of human activity and, as such, is judged by some writers to be the basis for the emancipation of all labour? How have productive labour and non-productive labour impacted on the production of avant-garde art challenging traditional accounts of aesthetic value and expression? Adorno's critique of aesthetic theory charted a similar philosophical terrain in the 1960s, but in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) specific categories of labour were never made expressly visible in relation to the visual artwork, just as the relations between productive labour and artistic labour were kept at a distance. In *The Intangibilities of Form*, I have made these relations explicit, by insisting that it is impossible to explain the ideals of the early avant-garde without stressing the overwhelming importance artists have placed on *how* they have laboured, in contradistinction to, or identification with, how they perceived others (non-artists) labouring.

For the early avant-garde – as much as for the post-Second World War neo-avant-gardes down to the present – the identification or misidentification with various forms of productive and non-productive labour has determined what kind of function and use-values art might best possess in order to secure its critical identity or autonomy. This process is reflected from the 1920s onwards, of course, in the increasing withdrawal of the notion of artistic value from the mimetic capacity of the expressive hand in painting and sculpture. With the rise of the readymade there emerged an irreconcilable displacement of the link between handcraft and skill. This initiated a huge explosion in revolutionary thinking about the social form of art beyond the artisanal production of the conventional studio. As the artisanal became dissociated from the category of art, authorship came more and more to incorporate both the *non-artistic hands of others* and the development of mechanical/technical and executive artistic skills. Indeed, the use of non-artistic labour in the form of delegated work or the incorporation of productive labour in the form of the readymade defines the broader political horizons of the early avant-garde: the dissolution of the division between intellectual labour and manual labour as the basis for the future dissolution of art into social praxis. For example, Productivism emphasized the assimilation of the worker into the artist and the artist into the worker in order to transform the alienated character of both, just as Constructivism stressed the importance of the need for the artist to incorporate the technical results of productive labour into artistic practice if art was to find a place beyond its own alienated aestheticism.

This displacement or dispersal of the artist's hand into forms of heteronomous labour is the radical disjunction at the heart of modern practice after the readymade, and, as such, is what distinguishes the modern from the pre-modern: the fact that at the point of the dissolution of its traditional forms art invites both productive and non-productive labour into its realm as a means of



reflecting on the conditions of both art and labour under capitalist relations. The introduction of the readymade into art, in this respect, represents the impact of a more fundamental set of cultural changes: the increasing interaction between artistic skills and the social relations and material forms of technology (artistic *technik*) under the increasing incorporation of technology and science into production (general social technique). This raises an important methodological question: what kind of theory of authorship do we want after the displacement of the author from the centre of his or her artisanal labours in the twentieth century? One in which the decentred author is returned to art history merely 'intertextualised' within a history of artistic styles, or, one in which artistic authorship as an 'open ensemble of competences and skills' is grounded in the division of labour and the *dialectic of skill-deskilling-reskilling*? This distinction is crucial because, despite the general cultural assimilation of the avant-garde and acceptance of the readymade in contemporary practice, there is much intellectual confusion about what constitutes skill in art after the readymade and the critique of productive labour and art in the early avant-garde. If today there is a notional acceptance that the readymade, and later Conceptual art, have irreversibly changed the value of what artists do, there is little understanding about why – on the basis of the alignment between artistic technique and general social technique – this is the case, and therefore, a limited understanding of why deskilling in art after the readymade does not represent an *absolute* loss of artistic sensuousness.

General social technique – as the dominant framework of art's technological reproducibility and distribution – subordinates handcraft to technique; in this it follows the law of the real subsumption of labour. Yet, because art is not wholly subject to the law of value (to the discipline of the technical division of labour and necessary labour time), the subordination of handcraft to technique does not result in the stripping out of skill from art in the same way sensuous artisanal skills have been stripped out of productive labour since the nineteenth century. The absence or presence of skill in art, therefore, is not derivable from a model of handcraft *as such*, because art does not experience an incremental process of deskilling which leaves producers at a lower level of capability than previously attained, otherwise we would only be able to designate certain kinds of

handcrafted objects as art. Deskilling in art, rather, is the name we might give to the *equalization of artistic technique after art enters the realm of general social technique*. In other words, deskilling is what happens when the expressive unity of hand and eye is *overridden* by the conditions of social and technological reproducibility; it is not a value judgement about what is or what is not skilful according to normative criteria about art as painterly or sculptural craft. Accordingly, the split between artistic labour and the conventional craft-based signs of authorship which follows from this split, necessarily links artistic skill in late capitalist culture to a conception of artistic labour as immaterial production. *Artistic skills find their application in the demonstration of conceptual acuity, not in the execution of forms of expressive mimeticism*.

However, this immaterial definition of artistic labour is not reducible to a practice of speculative 'thinking' as if art was simply cognate with scientific and philosophical discourse or the Beauty of Spontaneous Ideas – the mistake made by some early advocates of Conceptual art and the mistake made by much digital and telematic art theory today. The readymade may have stripped art of its artisanal content, but this does not mean that art is now a practice without the hands of the artist and without craft. On the contrary, art's emancipatory possibilities lie in how the hand is put to work *within*, and by, general social technique (and therefore in relation to the techniques of copying and reproducibility), and not through the subordination of the hand to such techniques. This is because the hand still remains key to the 'aesthetic re-education' and emancipation of productive and non-productive labour. This is why I stress the importance of the emergent totipotentiality or multifunctionality of the hand in artistic labour in contrast to the operative hand in productive and non-productive labour. As the mediator of *best practice*, the emergent totipotentiality of the hand remains central to the social destruction of the real subsumption of labour and the technical division of labour in any post-capitalist system. Without the qualitative transformation of the relations of production the hands of productive and non-productive labourers will continue to be subordinate to the machine, even when machines are taken into collective ownership – as the history of Stalinism amply demonstrates.

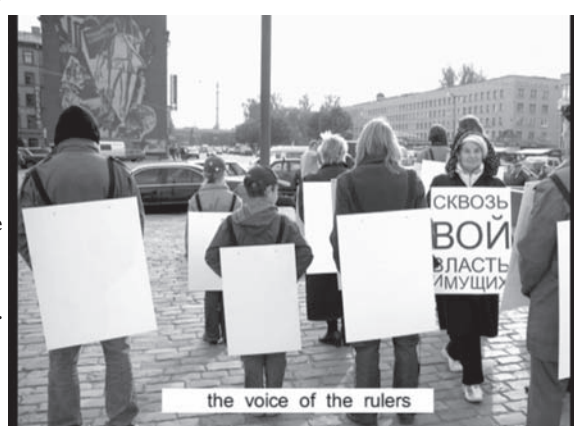
This argument seems to me to be in keeping with the central emancipatory thrust of Marx's *Capital* and the anti-technist wing of the Marxist tradition: the necessity for an aesthetic critique of the value-form. But the agency of the emancipatory content of emergent totipotentiality is not another name for the 'aesthetic'. That is, the agency of this emancipation is not secured simply through an imposition of aesthetic labour onto heteronomous, productive labour. This is a form of art-led idealism, inherent to many kinds of aestheticized politics, on both the left and right. Autonomy, rather, has to enter the realm of heteronomous labour through heteronomous labour's (workers') own collective agency. It is only when productive and non-productive labourers refuse to labour – and, as a result, the value-form is dissolved, thereby opening up a self-reflective space for 'aesthetic-thinking' – that the emergent totipotentiality of artistic labour will truly be able to enter productive relations and be able to transform the heteronomous conditions of labour and everyday praxis. In this way, by emphasizing the production of art within a dialectic of skill and deskilling the defence of artistic value is divested of its common confusion with traditional forms of painterly and sculptural sensuousness. Indeed, the virtue of the dialectic of skill and deskilling in thinking about art after the readymade and Conceptual art is that the problems of making and talking about art are grounded in the indivisibility of technical issues and social questions. This is

why there is such a general air of melancholia in much contemporary art criticism and art history, radical or otherwise (Benjamin Buchloh, T.J. Clark, Thierry de Duve, Hal Foster), because there is an overwhelming attachment in this writing to loss of affect in front of the artwork at the expense of any deeper understanding of the technical conditions of modern and contemporary practice. This book refuses this melancholia – at the same time as refusing any of its plaintive or affirmative ‘others’ – by insisting on the interrelation of skill and deskilling (or what I call the craft of reproducibility as opposed to say, craft *and* reproducibility), before we can embark on a discussion of value. This distinction is the difference between seeing art history and cultural theory as disciplines where artistic practice is theorized primarily in relation to the social histories of ‘expression’ and ‘style’, with all the concomitant problems of historicism, and seeing artistic form in relation to the social and intellectual division of labour. Consequently, this book establishes another topology for modern and contemporary art: one in which artworks, after the readymade and the craft of reproducibility, become focal-points for the redefinition of skill within a socially expanded understanding of the circuits of authorship. My primary concern in *The Intangibilities of Form*, therefore, is with the process of deskilling and reskilling as it bears on the exchange and collaboration between artistic labour and non-artistic labour, artistic hands and non-artistic hands.

In the introduction [*Replicants and Cartesians*], I explore artistic technique and general social technique in relation to the issues of reproduction, reproducibility and copying. I then expand on this in a discussion of Duchamp, the readymade and the commodity, Duchamp’s work providing an important range of reflections on artistic labour and authorship. On the basis of Duchamp’s reading of his early unassisted or stand-alone readymades as sites of ‘rendezvous’ between conflictual or opposed concepts (such as complex labour and simple labour, artistic labour and productive labour), we are able to examine how his work opened up new circuits of authorship to the artist. This reading of Duchamp as a theorist of artistic labour differentiates my position from much of the new Duchampian scholarship, with its emphasis on Duchamp as an artist of consumption. In my reading Duchamp is always an artist of production.

The second half of the book examines the expansion of art’s circuits of authorship after the readymade has been internalized, so to speak, as ‘first practice’ in art after the 1960s and the rise of Conceptual art. In this respect this half of the book offers a more generalized picture of where artistic labour and non-artistic labour are conjoined in post-Conceptual and contemporary practice, and what distinguishes the labour of the contemporary neo-avant-garde artwork from the early avant-garde artwork. What function does the dialectic of deskilling and reskilling perform in art after the immaterial transformations of productive and non-productive labour and the expansion of intellectual labour in art? What are the dynamics between art and general social technique today in conditions of the age of the hyper-museum? Is there an actual convergence between the immaterial skills of post-Conceptual art practice and the immaterial labour of some sectors of the new economy? And, if so, how does this form of the skilling–deskilling dialectic equate with the circuits of authorship developed in the early avant-garde? These are substantive questions, particularly as classical notions of autonomy in art have come under further scrutiny in the epoch of art’s digital temporalization and post-visual transformation into social technique.

In short *The Intangibility of Form* reinstates the dialectic of deskilling–reskilling in art as a way of explaining why the question of authorship has been so fundamental to avant-garde art and neo-avant-garde in the twentieth century. For, without addressing this dialectic the avant-garde remains incomprehensible as a revolutionary critique of both art and productive labour. The first part of this revolutionary critique is, no doubt, more believable today than the latter part, given the present utopianism of the aesthetic critique of productive labour. But, nevertheless, the emancipatory horizons of this critique continue



Right: *Angry Sandwichpeople or In Praise of Dialectics* (2005), video stills, Chto delat? (Tsaplya, Oleynikov and Vilensky). [chtodelat.org](http://chtodelat.org)

Opposite page: Chto Delat? newspaper 03-27 ‘Great Method’ to take away at their ‘Chronicles of Perestroika’ (2009) installation at the 11 Istanbul Biennale and part of the Chto Delat project ‘Experiences of Perestroika. What does it mean to lose?’ (2008-2009).

to assert themselves in both political philosophy and artistic practice. This makes my claims for the centrality of the deskilling–reskilling dialectic less obdurate than might first appear. For even in a period of extraordinary corporate control of culture, and the heightened efflorescence of the capitalist sensorium, the effects of this critique continue to form the political horizons of artistic practice in all kinds of public and subterranean ways. Art’s critique of political economy shapes the content of practices in many surprising directions and in many surprising places. As such, *The Intangibility of Form* is not only concerned with recovering a history of the hidden labours of the artwork, but also with setting this history in the context of the critical demands of the moment.

### Introduction: Replicants and Cartesians

In the 1980s the debate on simulacra, copying, surrogacy and authenticity dominated Anglo-American art discourse. There was a widespread assumption that claims to subjective expression and aesthetic originality on the part of the artist were a myth, a delusional hangover from the Cartesian fantasy of the ‘inner self’ as an authentic expressive self. Since the 1920s and the social claims of the early avant-garde the continual expansion of technology into art’s relations of production made it increasingly difficult to equate normative value in art with such claims. Touch and manual dexterity had lost their place as markers of artistic taste and authority. As such, the artist was no longer seen as a self-confirming ‘creator’, but as a synthesizer and manipulator of extant signs

and objects. What largely united these earlier anti-Cartesian moves was a theory of montage as social praxis. Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann, all saw themselves, essentially, as artistic *constructors* and *fabricators*. As Hausmann declared: ‘We call this process photomontage because it embodied our refusal to play the role of artist. We regarded ourselves as engineers, and our work as construction: we assembled [in French: *monteur*] our work, like a fitter.’<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, this, in turn, was taken to be part of a deeper historical shift in the subjectivity of the artist: the dissolution of the creative *singularity* of the (male) artist. The post-generated *monteur* was now merely an ensemble of techniques, functions and competences. In the 1980s much critical art and much art theory under the banners of postmodernism and post-structuralism was produced within this framework.

Today this sense of a ‘paradigm shift’ is the commonplace stuff of postmodern history and theories of the ‘end of modernism’, taught in art schools and art history and cultural studies departments in Europe and North America. Where once the expressive skills of the (male) artist were existentially inflated, now they are deconstructively deflated. Indeed, the critique of authorship is now the template of contemporary neo-Conceptual art and post-object aesthetics from Glasgow to Manila. Yet, despite this would-be theoretical displacement of the artist from the privileged scene of his or her production, the issues of simulacra, copying, surrogacy, virtuality and the readymade remain largely one-dimensional in art theory and contemporary

cultural theory. This is because the theoretical moment of the debate on authorship in the 1980s has come down to us through a discourse of apocalyptic anti-humanism, unnuanced anti-aestheticism and undialectical social categories. The effect is to reduce the critique of authorship either to the 'end-game' reproduction of preexisting artistic moments or styles, or to an eclecticized intertextuality. As a consequence the critical agency of the artist's labour has become diminished or flattened out, as if the critique of authorship was equivalent to the end of representation, the end of art, the end of meaning, and the end of subjectivity. But, unfortunately, this simplistic historical elision is what has usually stood for thinking in art schools and cultural studies departments in the 1980s and 1990s, dominated as they were by versions of post-structuralist simulation theory and deconstructionism.

Yet, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, strong claims for the 'post-expressive' artist as a kind of art-replicant (exemplified, in particular, by the hyper-simulationist Sherrie Levine) have largely subsided. The end of artistic subjectivity and authenticity, once associated with simulationist kinds of art, no longer seems so radical or meaningful as the crisis over uniqueness has become quiescent in the wake of the increasing acceptance of a 'soft' intertextual model of creativity within many leading teaching institutions and museums.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there is a broad realization amongst a new generation of artists confronted with the realities of the studio and beyond – rather than the comforts of the seminar room – that the tasks of representation and artistic form don't end simply because they are assumed, theoretically, to have ended. As such, hyper-simulationism has come to be seen less as the ideological impeachment of all other art, than an end-game *style* akin to 1970s monochrome painting, which is why Levine herself soon retreated from the extreme implications of her work. In many respects the problems facing the hyper-simulationists and 'extreme appropriationists' were no different from those experienced by certain Conceptual artists in the early 1970s hooked on the nomination of non-artistic entities and realia as art: by transforming a contingent critical move into a grand repetitive strategy the critique of authorship became dogmatic and naturalized.

Nevertheless, questions of appropriation, copying, replication, simulation, and so on, have become the necessary terrain on which art after Conceptual art continues to pursue its sceptical skills. There is no value (or critique of value) in art without these forms of scrutiny. Indeed, since the high point of 'appropriationist art' in the early 1980s, a generation of artists have taken this as a 'given' and have largely internalized some notion of the artist as technician, monteur, ideas-manager, constructor, etc. This is why, despite the recurrence of various defences of 'aesthetics', the humanist exaltation of 'self-expression' continues to be theoretically marginalised – at least in the leading academic and cultural institutions, to the rancour of cultural conservatives and leftist philosophers of aesthetics alike. Furthermore, the notion of the artist as a monteur in the broad sense is now one of the key moves identifiable with the dissolution of the boundaries between fashion, style and art in our consumerist-led culture. Many younger artists see their identity as linked to the execution of tasks across formal, cultural and spatial boundaries. Commitment to one method of production or form of distribution, one set of cognitive materials, one outlook, is decried. One of the consequences of this is the emergence of a historically novel tension between a received (and depoliticized) older notion of the avant-garde critique of authorship, and the reinvention of the artist as creative entrepreneur (under the increased glare of celebrity culture).<sup>3</sup> This produces an intense conflict of ideologies: the artist's identity may be deconstructed under the impact of the social relations of advanced art, but it is simultaneously *reconstructed* as an enchanted image under the reified forms of the mass media. The idea of the artist as an ensemble of functions, becomes a set of multitasking *career opportunities*.<sup>4</sup>

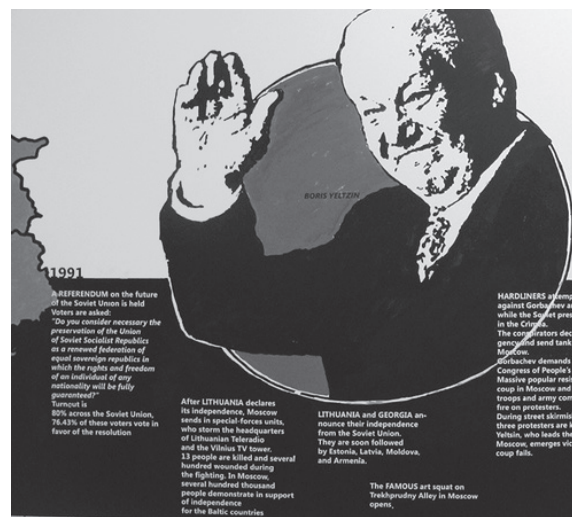
But of, course, at the level of political economy, this novel situation for the artist is not so novel as

to be historically anomalous. Rather, it is further evidence of how the laws of exchange operate on art in the epoch of its technological expansion and diversification. The acceptance of some aspects of the critique of authorship in early avant-garde art and Conceptual art in current art has become the means whereby the new administration of art has *reinvented* itself in order to secure its access to the new, entrepreneurial, technologically driven culture and to new areas of cultural capital. In the absence of the pressures of the traditional artistic and cultural hierarchies, artists are freed up – indeed encouraged – to become curators and critics, and curators are freed up to be artists and critics, in ways that benefit the multiple commercial ventures of the mass distribution of art. Just as workers involved in immaterial labour are encouraged – or forced – to be multitasking, modern artists are encouraged to think of themselves as active as artists beyond the 'limited' point of production, because, it is claimed, artists need to think of themselves as directly engaged in the mediation of the meanings of their work.

But if this multitasking defines the shift of the social identity of the artist from someone who 'externalizes' his or her self from a position of repressed marginalization, to someone who works openly within a complex division of labour (in the way a designer might for example), it is not the darker side of the critique of authorship, or an understanding of the place of artistic labour within the social totality, that is emphasized. As a model of the artist-as-entrepreneur the notion of the artist as an ensemble of functions turns largely on the pursuit of market opportunities. The militant, destabilizing, uncomfortable aspects of the critique of authorship have been written out of the reckoning, or treated in a cursory and peripheral fashion. This is because, by identifying 'appropriation' and artistic 'hybridity' with the end of the avant-garde, and by linking multitasking with a benign pluralism of forms, the effects of cultural and social division that precede and shape the labour of signification – the materiality of signification – are comfortably disavowed. The allegorical complexities of the intentions and competences that underwrite the critique of authorship – in fact sustain its logic of negation – have been dissolved into a cultural studies model of semiotic consanguinity. Hence we have a situation in which the informal aspects of Conceptual art are now being replicated as a neo-avant-garde, but with little sense of the troubling negation of the social world that shaped the early avant-garde's and early Conceptual art's critique of the category of art. This has led, overwhelmingly, to a critique of authorship without the discomforts of ideology critique and the critique of the capitalist value-form, as if attacking the myth of self-expression was in and of itself a critical strategy. Indeed, the deconstructionist attack on authorship as an intertextual version of *bricolage*, is perfectly compatible with the most conservative views on what artists should now do to define themselves as modern.

Nevertheless, the critique of this benign pluralism is not an argument for the revocation of the original avant-garde or the recovery of a 'lost' Conceptual art. To critique contemporary neo-avant-gardism is not to think of the 'neo' as an inevitable falling away of art from the achievements and commitments of the past. On the contrary, the 'neo' is the necessary space in which the afterlives of art and theory continue to be *reinscribed* with new and living content. As such we need to examine just what the 'neo' of contemporary neo-avant-garde actually comprises, before we can make a judgement about its criticality.

What I am proposing in this book is a model of the 'post-expressivist' artist which actually takes on the challenges of expression and representation that now confront the artist of the new millennium. This means retheorizing what we mean by the artist as critic and representer in a world of proliferating doubles, proxies, simulations, etc. For what is increasingly clear (beyond the recent moments of the radical negation of authorship in Conceptual art and critical postmodernism) is the need for a model of the artist which is *unambiguously* post-Cartesian, that is, a model of artistic subjectivity which refuses the bipolar model of interiority and



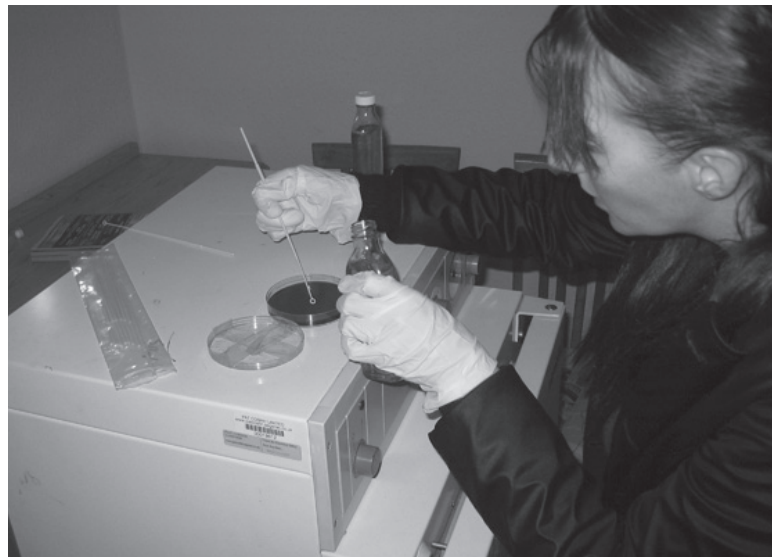
exteriority on which modernist and anti-modernist models of the artist are usually based.

In the 1960s the opposition between interiority and exteriority in art took the form of the familiar conflict between modernism (as an expanded sense of art's expressiveness and affectivity) and social realism (as an expanded sense of art's claims on ethical witness and social truth). In the 1980s, this reemerged in the form of a conflict between neo-expressionism and a photographically expanded neo-Conceptual art practice. Today, however, the taking up of a position on either side of the 'interiority' or 'exteriority' debate is inert, if not dead; there is no 'expressiveness' to be won through painting-as-painting, just as there is no social truth to be secured through photography (or even photography and text) as photography. This is why the weak pluralist intertextuality of



of replication: for example, genetic engineering, the new cosmology, theories of Artificial Intelligence and so on. For, it is the impact of these new sciences on general social technique – on the conditions of the technical reproduction of social and cultural forms – that gives us further insight into the material realities of iteration and the copy in late capitalism, and therefore, also defines those points where ‘replicant-thinking’ in art and ‘replicant-theory’ in science come into possible creative alignment. In these sciences the copy is the constitutive means by which the reproduction of difference in any given system is produced and reproduced. The upshot being that the copy is not that which fails the status of novelty, or that which lacks authenticity, but the thing *out of which* claims for novelty – what drifts or mutates the identity of the antecedent – is produced.<sup>10</sup>

Since the 1930s when Walter Benjamin was the first to theorize the conditions of technological reproduction in its modern cultural forms, the supersession of the artisanal in modern life defined the expectations for new forms of art and marked out the new forms of experience emergent from this art. If Benjamin was highly optimistic about these forms and experiences, we at least understand from his work an important historical truth: *art and general social technique does not stand still*. Indeed, Benjamin’s writing presaged a vast transformation in the content of artistic and social *technik* in the second half of the twentieth century. Since the 1930s the realities of image reproduction and artistic surrogacy or authorship-at-distance have represented the high ground upon which debates on value in art have been fought out. In fact seventy years on we can now see that the debates on the readymade, on photography, on post-object aesthetics have been the phenomenal forms of a much deeper and more profound response to art’s place in the social division of labour. Not only does capitalism strip the artisan of his or her means of production and status, it also strips the artist of his or her traditional ‘all round’ skills. Under advanced capitalism, therefore debates on modernism, the avant-garde and postmodernism have been principally about rethinking and reinscribing the skills of the artist into these transformed conditions. The contemporary critique of authorship is no more nor less the theoretical expression of these long-term changes. But today the remnants of any nostalgia for the artisanal which once hung over the early twentieth-century debate have long vanished, as consciousness of the copy in our daily technological practices has dismantled notions of expressive and formal uniqueness. The implications for art from this are indisputable. Art is not just a series of unique inheritable objects produced by diligent individualized handcraft, but also the outcome of a set of shared iterative skills, temporal forms and collective relations. In this its forms are dispersible, expandable and endlessly reproducible. Yet discussions of skill, deskilling and reskilling in art are barely broached in contemporary art theory.<sup>11</sup> Too much theory and history, in fact, filters its sense of art’s futurity from a narcissistic mourning of art’s would-be lost affective qualities and possibilities. As a result the interpretative disciplines can hardly keep up with the social, cognitive and cultural forces that are now bearing down on the category of art. But, if mourning for the lost object has become a substitute for its dialectical appropriation, this does not mean that dialectics itself should lose sight of what is empty, repressive or diminished in the iterative culture of our time. To reposition artistic technique in relation to replicant thinking and general social technique is not an attempt to provide art with a set of functional use-values borrowed unmediated from science, as if the solution to the alienated social form of art was art’s greater openness to scientific method and technology *per se*. This is the fundamental problem with complexity theory, and cultural theory influenced by it, which map, in an enfeebled way, a bioscientific model of mutation on to cultural practice and social agency, as if art was a *self-replicating* intellectual system free of cultural and social division.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the fundamental issue remains: how might the autonomy of artistic technique be a condition of general social technique, and of use-values external to the realm of art?



Left: *Marching Plague* (2006), Critical Art Ensemble. Filmed on location on the Isle of Lewis, presents a critique of UK-US bioweapons research. It centres on the recreation of secret sea trials conducted by the UK government in the 1950s.

This book, consequently, is an attempt to draw a different kind of map of the culture of art at the beginning of the twenty-first century: one that treats artistic technique as subordinate to, but also reflective on, general social technique as a consequence of the contradictions and divisions internal to both artistic labour and technology. In this the categories of deskilling and reskilling, as I have stressed in the Preface, play a major part in the book’s analysis of art’s relationship to *technik*. For the production of value in modern art is inconceivable without the idea of the critique and the reworking of notions of skill and technical competence. The very interrelationship between artistic technique and general social technique is predicated upon this. Indeed, it is on the basis of this relationship that the complex labours of art – its ‘intangibilities of form’ – have been constituted and reconstituted during the twentieth century.

I want to begin, therefore, by looking at what is the founding event of the critique of value and the modern dialectic of skill and deskilling in twentieth century art: the readymade. For it is the readymade, above all else, that is key to understanding the development of the modern conditions of reproducibility in art and art’s relationship to general social technique. With the readymade we are, at once, in the realm of artistic labour and productive labour, art’s autonomy and post-autonomy, novelty and the copy.

#### Notes

1. Raoul Hausmann, quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*. Thames and Hudson, London, 1997, p.118.
2. See for example, Peter Noever, ed., *The Discursive Museum*, MAK and Hatje Cantz Publishers, Vienna, 2001; Gavin Wade, ed., *Curating in the 21st Century*, The New Art Gallery Walsall and the University of Wolverhampton 2000; and Sarah Cook, Beryl Graham and Sarah Martin, eds., *Curating New Media, Baltic*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2002.
3. This also works in the opposite direction. The dispersal of ‘artistic technique’ across disciplinary boundaries has clearly been appropriated as a model of ‘good practice’ and ‘open’ management in some of the creative and new services industries. For a discussion of the impact of ‘artistic critique’ on capital accumulation and the new workplace see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London and New York, 2005, and Eve Chiapello, ‘The “Artistic Critique” of Management and Capitalism: Evolution and Co-optation’, in John Roberts and Stephen Wright, eds., *Third Text*, special issue on ‘Collaboration’, No. 71, Vol. 18, Issue No.6, Nov-Dec 2004 (see Chapter 6).
4. Tracey Emin’s career is a perfect example of this: from neo-Conceptual marginalia to designer of smart bags for the luxury luggage maker Longchamp.
5. See in particular Valentin Voloshinov, *Marxism and*

*the Philosophy of Language*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1986.

6. See Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*, Zone Books, New York, 1996.
7. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Reclam, Stuttgart, 2004, pp.194-7.
8. See Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities... or The End of the Social*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston, Semiotext(e), New York, 1983.
9. See Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman, Semiotext(e), New York, 1991.
10. Genetic engineering instates this process clearly. Cloning – Cell Nuclear Replacement – is the infinite reproduction of the same as the ‘new’. That is, cloning is not the *exact* reproduction of the prototype in physiology or consciousness (just as twins born within seconds of each other are not exactly identical). The genome may be reproducible but the behaviour and individual characteristics of human beings are not. As John Harris puts it: ‘Autonomy, as we know from monozygotic twins, is unaffected by close similarity of bodily form and matching genome. The “indeterminability of the individual with respect to external human will” will remain unaffected by cloning.’ (*On Cloning*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p.49). In other words clones are *unique* copies: although a series of cloned sheep have the same somatic form as their prototype, they each will develop internally differentiated neural pathways on the basis of their separate and individuated experience of the world, just like non-cloned sheep.
11. Where it has, it has borrowed its models from the biological, neurological and other physical sciences. One such model is the neurocomputational account of consciousness in the new neurobiology, for example, Paul M. Churchland’s work. As he argues in *The Engine of Reason, the Seat of the Soul: A Philosophical Journey into the Brain* (MIT, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1995), his aim is to bring a ‘broad range of human artistic endeavour comfortably into the fold of a neurocomputational account of human cognition’ (p.298). He calls this the creative deployment and development or ‘recurrent manipulation’ (p.279) of prototypes. Creativity resides in those people who are skilful at recurrent manipulation, that is, those who are sufficiently learned that they are able to build up a large repertoire of prototypes. When this repertoire is in place humans are in a position to produce new and novel applications of these prototypes by virtue of ‘our built-in capacity for *vector completion* or filling in the gaps’ (p.280).
12. On complexity theory, see, for example, Fritjof Capra, *The Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living*, Flamingo, London, 2003. See also, Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2000.