



Moochers, dreamers, wasters, vagabonds and doodlers: the art of sloth and reverie as oppositional (in)activities

A pamphlet countering the hegemonic ethical imperatives of usefulness in contemporary art.

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January 2018

Artists (and critical citizens) arise! Resist pandering to the orthodoxies of perpetual economic growth and rampant productivism! Reclaim the cultures of slowness and sloth! Exercise the right to do nothing, the 'right to be lazy', as a post-work political act of refusal! Resist and demand the right to roam aimlessly, dream and doodle endlessly and expend time in useless (pleasurable) (in)activity!

But is it useful art? The ethical imperative

The mantra, 'art for art's sake', is anathema in the contemporary artworld and contemplative and affect-orientated practices frequently attract critical scorn.

Fundamentally, as Nato Thompson (*Living as Form, Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*) has noted, we no longer ask is it art but is it *useful* art? Creating art which is socially useful has become an ethical imperative. Such art has always been rooted in the specific critical political and economic contexts of its own time from the demand for 'art for a purpose' by the Artists International Association in the 1930s, to Jean-Paul Sartre's advocacy of the 'committed artist' in postwar Europe, through to the emergence of Tania Bruguera's *Arte Util* in the global financial and humanitarian crises of the 2000s.

Since the 1990s, the shift towards practices that engage with, and in, real social interaction has been considerable, accompanied by an orientation towards the ethical in what has been termed our 'post-political' age. In 2006, Claire Bishop's identification of 'the social turn' ('The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum*, February 2006) generated a whole train of critiques and debates (Grant Kester, Tom Finkelpearl, et al). Pablo Helguera's *Education for Socially Engaged Art: a materials and techniques handbook* (2011) encapsulates this ideological shift, noting 'socially engaged art, as a category of practice is still a working construct' with socially useful art variously identified as 'relational', community, collaborative, participative, dialogic and public, finally coming to the term 'social practice' more recently as a

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Countering the hegemony of useful art

Admirable and essential as this is, there are a host of problems and questions to pose around this kind of socially useful art activism, characterized by Boris Groys (and many others) as a phenomenon of our time.

‘Art activists do not want to merely criticize the art system or the general political and social conditions under which this system functions. Rather, they want to change these conditions by means of art, not so much inside the art system but outside it, in reality itself ...Art activists do want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place – but at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists. And this is the point where theoretical, political and even purely practical problems arise...’ Boris Groys (2014) ‘On Art Activism’ <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/>

There have been critics of the ‘usefulness’ of this kind of work: Alastair Hudson (Grizedale Arts), Sam Thorne (now Director of NC) and others in email correspondence on the *On Curating* website, map thoughts on how the canonization and recuperation of this kind of activist practice by art institutions has become a strategy to disable and defuse its potential political power. They comment on the ‘gentrification’ of social practice and the need to be wary of artists *performing* radicality. More specifically, Ellen Feiss (‘What is Useful? The paradox of rights in Tania Bruguera’s ‘Useful Art’, 2012) argues that Bruguera’s work universalizes rights and this serves to conceal and facilitate existing power hierarchies. A standard criticism of IMI would be that it addresses an oversimplified subject position, masking the inherent privilege of an international artist-migrant.

Dreamers and doodlers

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788) provides a bridge between two ‘useless’ activities already discussed: wandering and dreaming. Rousseau was exiled and imprisoned for his writings about freedom and autonomy. In later life, at the age of 70 years, he wrote a series of meditations, philosophical ruminations on walking, published as *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (written 1776-78, published 1782). Walk 5 describes the two months’ exile Rousseau spent on the Isle St Pierre, Brenne in Switzerland as the happiest time of his life. Notably, he said the source of his happiness was *farniente*: French for idleness from the Italian, *fare* and *niente*, literally, to do nothing. Rousseau describes many hours spent stretched out drifting in a boat in the middle of the lake, a time of dreaminess, imagination, an idyllic environment of idle pleasure. In her book *Wanderlust, A Cultural History of Walking* (2001), Rebecca Solnit writes about thinking and walking, describing Rousseau’s walks as ‘unstructured associative thinking’, sparking a whole set of thoughts on walking and its links with philosophy, walking becomes an improvisational act, with no purpose, wandering aimlessly, getting lost, daydreaming.

In his study, *The Poetics of Reverie* (1960), Gaston Bachelard writes, ‘Cosmic reverie situates us in a world and not in a society. It possesses a sort of stability or tranquility. It is a state. It helps us escape time’. The neo-liberal economies of global capital do not allow a lot of time for cosmic reverie or the opportunity to daydream. I was ill recently and spent a day prone, looking out of the attic window, and realised that I could not do anything useful at all. I did nothing much. I picked up a pencil and doodled. I allowed time to pass, in an immersive act

growth, profit and economic excess has been challenged by recent social movements and alternative economic systems from Serge Latouche's *décroissance* (degrowth) movement in the 1970s through to the 'slow' movement, Occupy, collaborative consumption and the share economy. Current calls for a universal wage for *no* productive work highlight that it is possible to counter the demands of capital in the interests and spirit of mutuality, as an act of 'commoning'.

Moochers and wasters

The recognition of the 'problem of work' which Weeks explores in relation to the productivist paradigm of neo-liberalism, leads me to moochers, dreamers, wasters and vagabonds. *Moocher* (local Sheffield pronunciation rhymes it with *poacher*) is the slang descriptor given to those who never really wanted work – refusers of work – in the local colliery villages around Sheffield where I grew up. The moocher would have a feather in his hat, a sprig of grass in the mouth, wandering aimlessly around the fields, eschewing the underground heat and blackness below: a loafer, a free spirit resisting the tyranny and alienation of wage-labour. Workers have always found surreptitious ways to avoid work and to impede the use of their labour for profit. In the *Practices of Everyday Life* (1980/1984), Michel de Certeau writes about French workers' use of *la perruque*, 'poaching' time from the boss and committing minor acts of 'sabotage'. My father worked all his life in steelworks on 'hot work' as a master springmaker, yet, eschewing any notion of working-class 'respectability', his chief aspiration was to become a vagabond, to go 'on the tramp', to get rid of all possessions and spend his life mooching. He yearned for a simple itinerant life (harking back to his own family rag-and-bone tradition) a kind of making-do 'bare life' existence.

Vagrancy and autonomous vagabondage

Of course, there is a danger in romanticizing 'worklessness' and itinerant workforces: migrant labour is exploited by global capital and is a production of neo-liberal economies. Generally, worklessness and poverty are not choices, worklessness means *imposed* poverty.

That said, historically, various cultural and religious traditions have involved the refusal of work and the taking on of 'voluntary poverty'. In the 15th century, the Zen Master Ikiyo renounced all his possessions and spent fifty years wandering as a vagabond. Raoul Vaneigem's book *The Movement of the Free Spirit* (1994) documents the extensive history of religious and non-religious sects in Europe (eg Beguines and Beghards) through the middle ages from 13th to 16th centuries, many of which practised voluntary poverty. It is interesting to note that Vaneigem argues that, besides sexual licentiousness, the renunciation of possessions and property and also their *refusal of work*, led to them being persecuted as outcasts, tortured and burned as heretics.

Fast-forwarding to the earlier part of the 20th century, itinerant drifters, bums and hobos who rode the rails in the US are documented in *Rebel Voices, an International Workers of the World anthology* (see J L Kornbluh on IWW essays, poems, speeches, songs in this anthology originally published 1964, republished 2011). Now, there is no doubt that low wages and poverty conditions forced millions to drift from East to West. Hopping freight cars, 'riding the rattlers' was highly dangerous: between 1901 to 1905, 24,000 were killed and 25,000 injured. But Kornbluh documents a slightly different perspective – whereas the authorities pictured migrants as

pathetic, diseased and ‘tortured by unrealized dreams that haunt the soul’, Rexford Tugwell (‘Casual of the Woods’, *Survey* 44, July 3 1920: 472) noted that there is evidence and testimony that, as IWW documents said, their situation was degrading but migrants themselves were not degraded. On the contrary, he argues, migrants had no respect for law and also frequently celebrated their own ‘freedom’ to roam, epitomized in *Hallelujah I’m a bum*, the famous ‘hobo’ song which was a parody of Salvation Army gospel hymn.

In an article for *Solidarity* (21 Nov 1914), the author wrote that the nomadic worker of the West embodied the spirit of the IWW. With their outspoken contempt for bourgeois society, they were held up as admirable exemplars of an iconoclastic doctrine: their anomalous position – half slave, half vagabond-adventurer – left them infinitely less servile than their fellow workers in the East.

For me, there is something of this autonomous free spirit, in the figure of Mona, the central figure created by Agnes Varda in her 1985 film, *Vagabond*. Mona defiantly refuses to work, or does it badly, embraces poverty and lives in a nomadic state of wandering, but she does so as a kind of reclamation of autonomy. Varda’s Mona rejects relationships and embraces singlehood. Her circumstances are enigmatic. Mona is a determined drifter who refuses to be productive. Given the opportunity to farm potatoes, instead, as one commentator puts it ‘she lounges in a caravan, like a deflated tyre’. Rather than having fallen through society’s cracks, she rejects society itself. Her death is sad but not bleak. Paradoxically, it is an elegy to an autonomous young woman with an extraordinary determination to wander, eschew usefulness and to resist exploitation for profit through alienated labour.

In the face of the orthodoxy of such seemingly useful art, is politically and socially engaged art the *only* practice of value? Is the only art that does nothing, no art? Should artists cease producing art and call an art strike? Gustav Metzger called one in the 1974; Stewart Home tried again in the 1990s. In the face of a torrent of production and productivism, is there a place for *useless* art, for inactivity?

Challenging capital’s creed of usefulness

In 1880, Paul Lafargue (Karl Marx’s son-in-law) wrote his polemic essay ‘The Right to be Lazy’ (1883) challenging liberal, conservative, Christian and socialist ideas about the necessity and primacy of work, seeing it as the enslavement of existence. He argued that laziness and creativity were linked and were vital sources of human progress. In *The Problem with Work, Feminism, Marxism, Anti-work, Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (2011) Kathi Weeks refers to Lafargue’s ideas when she writes about the Italian autonomist Marxist notion – the ‘refusal of work’ (Virno and Hardt in Weeks, 2011: 97) – and the call *not* for a liberation of work but a liberation *from* work. Lafargue disdained the ‘capitalist creed of usefulness’, claiming that ‘once the worker’s day has been reduced to three hours, workers can begin to ‘practice the virtues of laziness.’ As Weeks notes, this is not a renunciation of work *tout court* but a refusal of work as the necessary centre of social life, as a means of access to the rights and claims of citizenship and a refusal of the necessity of capitalist control of production. The challenge is to a mode of life which is subordinated to work and to the capitalist paradigms of productivity, productivism and imperative of usefulness. That said, the relentless demand for

reverie, daydreaming and doodling. The artist, Amanda Ravetz writes about the activity of intense drawing as a 'space of reverie', about its capacity to invoke a state of heightened awareness, a rare state of improvisational playfulness ('Sipping Water: Reverie and Improvisation', *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, 2012). To lose the time and space for cosmic reverie, diminishes us as human beings.

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generally favoured term (eg see Shannon Jackson's *Social Practice, Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, 2011). For Helguera, this avoids both the evocation of the modernist artist as 'illuminated visionary' and the postmodern artist as 'self-conscious critical being'. Instead, it democratizes the construct and makes the artist into an individual whose speciality is working with and in society, challenging the art market and essentially occupying a position which is at odds with the capitalist infrastructure.

Tania Bruguera epitomizes the kind of socially engaged artist that Thompson and Helguera favour. Her politically motivated performance practice explores the relationship between art, activism, and social change in works that examine the social effects of political and economic power. By creating proposals and aesthetic models for others to use and adapt, she defines herself as an initiator rather than an author, collaborating with multiple institutions as well as many individuals so that the full realization of her artwork occurs when others adopt and perpetuate it. Her *Arte Util* - literally, useful art - is a kind of tool through which she proposes solutions to socio-political problems through the implementation of art through long-term projects that include a community center and a political party for immigrants. In a recent interview in *Art Monthly* (October 2016) Bruguera talked about how Immigrant Movement International (IMI) has become self-sustaining as a party and campaign. Significantly, she insists we must question the purpose of art and concludes that it should be about resisting commodification and the hegemony of the market, becoming a citizen artist and making art institutions truly civic.