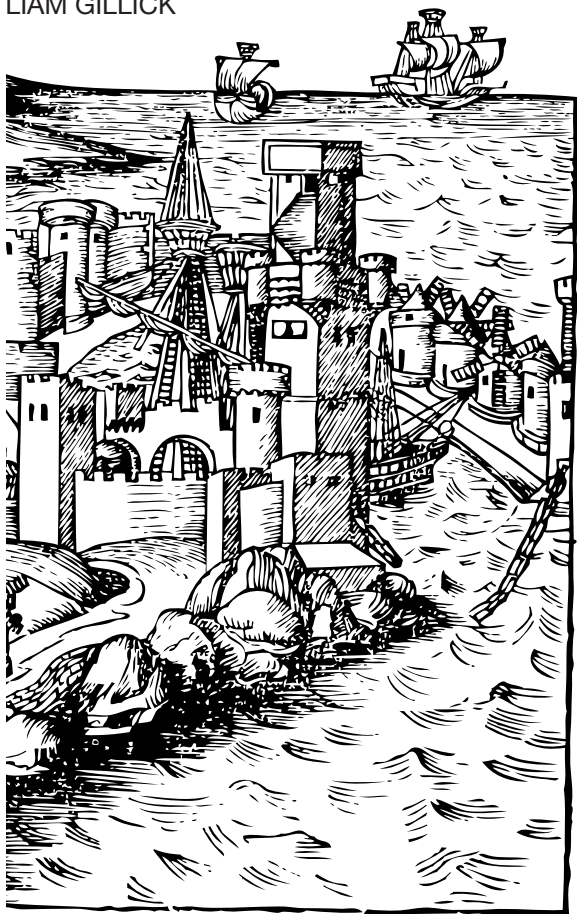


WHY WORK?
LIAM GILLICK



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ARTSPACE
AUCKLAND

DOING NOTHING

Art is a history of doing nothing and a long tale of useful action. It is always a fetishisation of decision and indecision – with each mark, structure and engagement. The challenge made within the context of this talks series to contemporary practitioners – or current artists – a term I will use as contemporary art no longer accounts for what is being made – is connected to what we have all become rather than what we might propose, represent or fail to achieve. The challenge made is that artists today, whether they like it or not have fallen into a trap that is pre-determined by their existence within a regime that is centred on a rampant capitalisation of the mind.

The accusation is that artists are at best the ultimate freelance knowledge workers and at worst barely capable of distinguishing themselves from the consuming desire to work at all times, neurotic people who deploy a series of practices that coincide quite neatly with the requirements of neo-liberal, predatory, continually mutating capitalism of the every moment. Artists are people who behave, communicate and

innovate in the same manner as those who spend their days trying to capitalise every moment and exchange of daily life. They offer no alternative.

The notion of artists as implicated figures has a long history, located in varied historical attempts to resolve the desire to examine high culture as a philosophical marker with the unresolvable problem that the notional culture examined is always out of sync with the function of a high cultural projection. Meaning the accusation that we are functioning within a milieu that is dominated by predatory neo-liberalism is based on a spurious projection of high cultural function in the first instance, that cannot account for the tensions in art that remain – the struggle for collectivity within a context that requires a recognition of difference. Theories of immaterial labour – an awareness of the informational aspect of the commodity and the cultural content of the commodity – have been a profound influence on the starting point of current artists, offering an awareness of the accusation framed by doubts and consciousnesses that forms the base of the work. As a result the question “What is the good of work?” is the heart of the work – it

is not a symptom or accidental proximity. It accounts for the doubts and confusions that exist and explains why there seem to be moments of stress and collapse within any current art structure. These moments of critical crisis are an expression of resistance to the structure – a constant restructuring in response to the desire to avoid work within a realm of permanently unrewarding work.

The question “Why work?” rather than “What is the good of work?” aligns dynamic current art with its critical potential. The fact that it is superficially hard to determine observable differences between the daily routines and operations of a new knowledge-worker and an artist is precisely because art functions in a close parallel track to the structures that it is critiquing.

It requires precise and close observation of the production processes involved in order to differentiate between knowledge workers and current artists. If the question “Why work?” is the original question of current art – then in order to counter the accusation that artists are in thrall to processes of capitalisation that are beyond them it is necessary to look at a number of key issues

around control. And address them in a fragmented way. The following negotiation of these key issues is necessary in order to replace a critical mirror with a window.





LEISURE

So what happened to the promise of leisure? Maybe this is what art can offer us now – a thing to use or reflect upon in a zone of permanent future leisure – as the “arts” as an instrumentalised deployment becomes a more refined and defined capitalised zone. Never geared towards artists alone but instead directed towards the population in general as a way of rationalising and explaining away innovations within the workplace as part of a matrix of doubt and difference. Artists here are viewed as content providers for the leisure zone rather than exemplary of it or in a critical relationship with it – terminally cast as outsiders who are nevertheless providing exemplary lifestyle models by their very nature. Yet the existence of a leisure promise is not synchronized with artistic production. Modes of leisure have been adopted by artists as a way to openly counter notions of labor as sites of dignity and innovation and in order to critique, mock or parody the notion of an artistic life as a role-play within the leisure zone. The withdrawal of labour or the establishment of structures where intentions and results are uneven are all markers that

go beyond the promise of post-labour that was always nothing more than the projection of a neurotic non-state.

So are we left with the possibility of the good artist who fulfills the critical criteria? The artist who works – sort of permanently – and always finds a way to account for him or herself within an ever-hungry context that demands more and more interpretation. It's not leisure but its not really work.

Within this sub-set we have to engage in a careful process of categorisation, meaning that we have to look at the methodological groupings that emerge within the art context rather than what is produced.

One answer over the past few years was the formation of communities of practice forming new leisure/work modes. For artists are often creating new life in opposition to life-styles. A complete reorganisation of relationships where relationships themselves may become the subject of the work and discursive models of practice become the founding principle rather than a result or product. On the opposite extreme there is deliberate self-enforced isolation and a concurrent

lack of accountability, used as a structural game within a context where notional support structures are mutable and dynamic. The two main tangents of current art both attempt to release us from the accusation. Restructuring life (ways to work) and withdrawing from life (ways to free work).

Categorisations of art in this case can superficially appear to mirror attitudes to work. It is quite appropriate for artists to co-opt working models and turn them to their own ends. From the factory to the bar or even the notion of the artists studio as specific sites of production that either ape or mimic established daily structures or deliberately avoid and deny them. Categorisations of art are not limited to what is produced but are connected more deeply to how things might be produced. It is the requirement to understand a focus on production rather than consumption (including the new formalism of responsible didactic criticism) that unlocks art's potential and permits a recasting of the accusation.





DEADLINES

A marker for the accusation is the creation of your own deadlines versus the apparent creation of acquired deadlines. The notion of a deadline is a crucial applied structure that links the accused with the flexible knowledge worker. Deadlines increase exponentially and are created by the producer as much as they are applied. A possession of consciousness of the constructed deadline permits engagement and disengagement in order to create a zone of semi-autonomy.

Working for a long time with only some deadlines is a prerogative of the artist and the occasional worker who functions within a job description of unbearable tedium but hard won rights over employment. It is the tension between the notion of applied flexibility and a critique of flexibility that permits a projection of potential.

Observing versus living is the most profound difference here. The notion of endlessly observing rather than taking part links the artist with the ethnographer and the alien. It is this continual flow between states of engagement and disengagement that

provides the potential. It is in this gap that we can understand “why is produced” rather than “what is produced”.

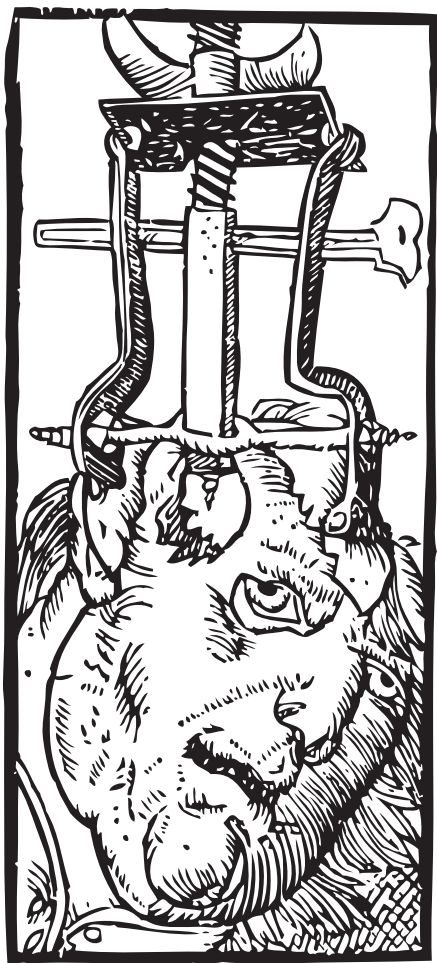
Relationship with others is crucial. The constant daily casting of roles – alone together – alone together over and over again. For artists do not operate in isolation. And artists can only function in complete isolation. The acquisition or rejection of relationships is a crucial marker in art production that defines an artistic practice over and above a super specific knowledge producing activity peppered with deadlines. Meaning that the entry of the artist into the apparently undifferentiated territory of infinite flexibility is made critical by a recognition of a series of encounters, borders, humps and diversions.

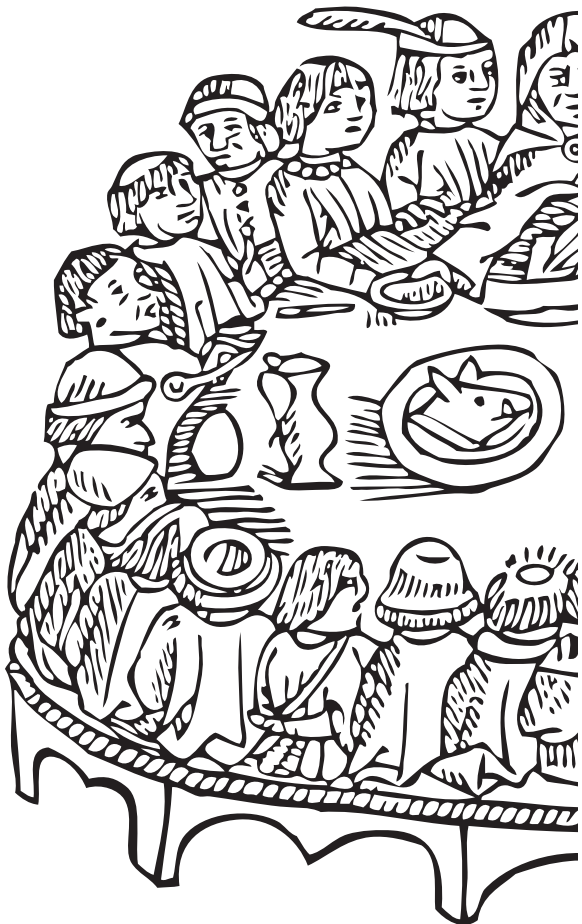




ETHICAL BARRIERS

The identification of ethical barriers emerges when making art under the stressed circumstances of the accusation. Circumstances and subjects appear as moral zombies – undead and relentless victims - which artists reject or accept in tension with the creation or rejection of ethical barriers. Ethics are not stable, easy to reach, feed or kill off. Under these stressed circumstances there is an assumption that art extends memory forwards and backwards. In other words, art is not necessarily synchronized to the present. What appears to be a methodology linked to present works is an illusion. Art deploys flexibility in order to account for the moral zombie – navigate the terrain of ethical mutability. Art extends and reduces memory using tools that were only developed to shorten memory – i.e. capitalise the near future and recent past. As there are no limits to work there are also no limits to not working. The idea that artists find a way to work is a defining characteristic of current art. But one that always takes place as a setting for post-labour anxieties and the creation and dismantling of ethical barriers.





RESEARCH OR DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE

Research and reading as activities are not accounted for in the accusatory model. Artists working in research mode as a primary method of production are assumed to be the “good” workers. To research in a directed way and then present this as a final work is not a leisure pursuit.

But accounting for things and relationships in the world leads to displaced work - the creation of structural subjects. There is a sense in which all new art made accounts for all the other work made. This awareness is not necessarily accompanied by full knowledge of all the other work but a sense that there are all the other works.

Even in documentary work there is a sense of questioning the nature of art as well as creating didactic structures or the replacement of a super-self-conscious and worn-out fourth estate. The pursuit of documentary strategies is also a critique of the flow and capitalist logic that is applied to the commodification of art.

This leads us to the equation - just another

citizen in the room 'v' everything I do is a special perspective on the specificity of others. At the heart of this artistic persona is the assertion of citizenship combined with an invitation to view the extraordinary ordinary.

It makes the biographical a locus for meaning. As art became more specific, the biographical became both more generic and more special. A way to present the specific in a form that would encourage more specificities and more difference. Art now is an assertion of difference not an assertion of flexibility. Artists function in micro-communities of discourse that are logical and contingent within their own contexts. These are often generation related. Current artists are caught within generational boundaries.

The notion that artists are a perfect analogue for the flexible entrepreneurial class is a generational concept that merely masks a lack of differentiation in observation of practice and the devastating fact that art is in a permanent battle with what came just before. That is the good of work. Replacing the models of the recent past with better ones.





WITHDRAWAL OR LIMITATION BEYOND THE COMMODITY

The notion of withdrawal of production or limiting production is the key to decoding the anxiety about work. One of the enduring powers of art and devices used by the contemporary artist to consolidate specificity once they have attained a degree of recognition is a withdrawal of labour or a limiting of supply. Doing the opposite – i.e. operating freely, openly and on demand is viewed as a problem within the gallery structure and resists the simple commodification of art. This shift to production consciousness by current artists and away from reception consciousness by contemporary artists is a form of active withdrawal.

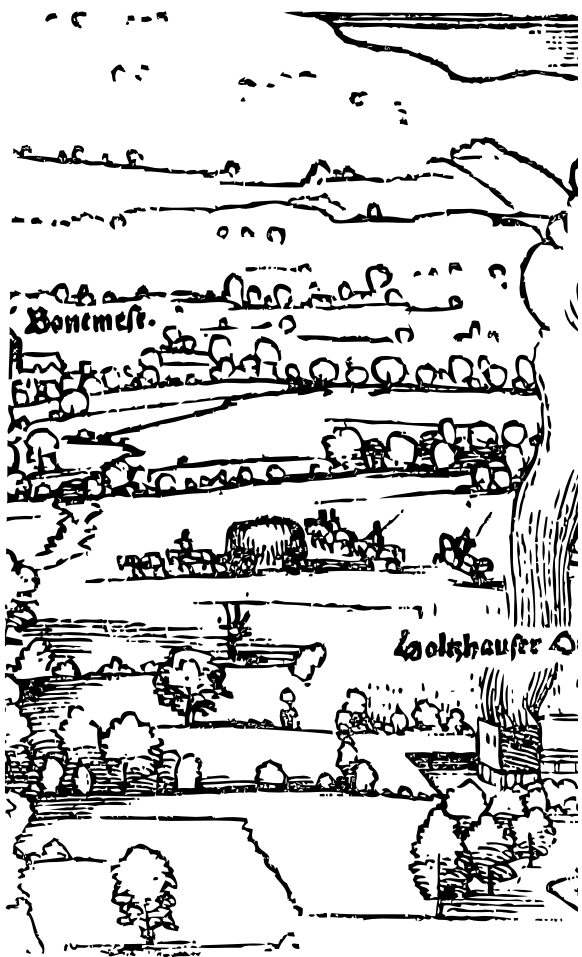
This notion of withdrawal can be understood in relation to the following. Are there answers or questions in the work? This is central to the defence against the accusation. A post-modern understanding is that the current artist asks questions of the viewer while standing beside them. It is this sense of art as something that asks questions of the viewer that is misunderstood in the

knowledge worker accusation. The shift of position from confrontation to proximity is a category shift in practice. Within the realm of the knowledge worker the new consumer is always activated and treated as a discriminating individual who can be marketed directly – spoken to face to face. Documentary practice moves the user and the producer alongside each other. The exhaustion created by the continual capitalization of the recent past and the near future is based upon a sense in which the knowledge worker is trying to account for every differentiation, whereas the artist is producing every differentiation alongside the recipient of the work.

This is linked to a play with control over the moment of completion. The moment of judgment is not exclusive to an exterior field in the case of current art. This sense of control or denial is the zone of autonomy within a regime of excessive differences.

The documentary is permanently working off other fields. And gives the potential of being arrested while thinking about art. This is not possible while working as a knowledge worker.





A BETTER LIFE

Current work undermines a sense or possibility of infinite leisure. Infinite leisure is only one form of religiously based utopia. A nightmare full of virgins and mansions. Will there be dogs? Oh I hope there are dogs! To be a clerk would be heaven for some people. A breakdown of the barriers between work, life and art via direct action is a rather more rewarding potential. Art appears to be result based but it is generally action and occupation based. It is towards something. It reaches out. It only has meaning within a context and that context will always determine what activities might be necessary to improve the context.

This leaves us explaining everything in a total communication anxiety about differentiation. Art viewed as a generalised terrain of collectivity and difference operates within a regime of anxiety that is merely a reflection of multiple apparently contradictory moments of differentiations chiming simultaneously. Anxieties about too many artists, over production, lack of ability to determine quality are all ideologically motivated statements that defer to a defeated series

of authorities who would prefer either the attainment of a neo-utopian consensus, a market consensus, or at least the regime of a “big other” consensus. All of these things are attacked and are permanently defeated within current art. Otherwise things will default towards authority and control. The entropic quality of arts structural and critical trajectory is its resistance.

For the relation between the development of creative tools for decentralised production and art production are also a historical coincidence. It is necessary to look at what is produced only through the primary defensive mesh against predatory capitalisation – its structural approaches to tools that may well have been developed for other purposes.

Art is not a zone of autonomy. It does not create structures that are exceptional or perceivable outside the context. Therefore current art will always create a sequence of problems for the known context. One of those context sets is the undifferentiated flexible knowledge worker who operates in permanent anxiety in the midst of a muddling of work and leisure. Art both points at this

figure and operates alongside them as an experiential phantom of the context.

Art is a place where the rules of engagement are open to question. The knowledge worker also appears to challenge rules of engagement but can only do so within the production of a software or a set of new fragmented relationships. The artist can create alienated relationships without all these intricacies.

A different sense of “super-self-conscious” commodity awareness is at the core of current art’s desire to come close to the context. Projection and speculation are the tools reclaimed in order to power this super self-conscious commodity awareness. Artists project into the near future and the recent past in order to expose and render transparent new commodity relations. The surplus value that is art is not limited to its supposed novelty value but is embedded in its function as a system of awareness.

Art is a series of scenarios/presentations that create new spaces for thought and critical speculation. The creation of new time locations and shifted time structures

actually creates new critical zones where we might find spaces of differentiation from the knowledge community. For it is not that art is merely a mirror of a series of new subjective worlds. It is an ethical equation where assumptions about function and value in society can be operated upon. There is no art of any significance in the last forty years that does not include this as a base level differentiating notion.

The idea of the “first work” or the development of ideas is not towards the total production of all work in the future any longer. This creates anxiety within the culture in general and leads a search towards analogous structures that also appear to temporarily function with contingent projection.

A sense of constant returns to ideas or structures by choice rather than intuition is this aspect of contemporary art that defies the logic of capital. The notion that an artist is obsessed by a structure or an idea context is sometimes self-perpetuated. The apparent work is no more than a foil or mask to a longer deferral of decision-making. The art becomes a semi-autonomous aspect of lived

experience for the artist as much as the viewer.

Working alone but in a group is a contradiction at the heart of current art practice. It is always an activated decision to give up the individual autonomy of the artistic persona towards working together. Within the flexible knowledge community the assertion of individual practice has always to be subsumed within the teamworked moments of idea sharing.

Art as a life changing statement is always a specific decision that is connected to entering moments of judgment that cannot be controlled exclusively by the artist but are also operated upon by all other artists. The them and us is me and us and us and us and them and them.

Not thinking about art while making art is different to not thinking while preparing a PowerPoint on the plane. Of course I am working even when it looks as if I am not working. And even if I am not working and it looks as if I am not working I still might claim to be working and wait for you to work out what objective signifiers actually point

towards any moment of value or work.
This is the game of current art.

Art production/work methods are not temporally linked or balanced because the idea of managing time is not a key component or personal or objective profit motive for artists. Unless they decide that such behaviour is actually part of the work itself.

The assumption that there is a “they” or “them”, is part of the problem in understanding how artists function within society. Artists are also “they” or “them” who have made a specific decision to operate within an exceptional zone that does not necessarily produce anything exceptional. For adherence to a high-cultural life is a negotiated concept within the current art context.

This critical community is subject and audience simultaneously. Therefore we have the situation where an artist will propose a problem and then position it just out of reach precisely in order to test the potential for an autonomy of practice.

Reporting the strange in the daily – that which cannot be accounted for is at the heart of artistic practices yet not for purposes that can be described outside of the work itself. And still, working less can result in producing more. The rate of idea production within art is inconsistent – which is a deliberate result of the way art is produced and how it can become precise and other – even while it too flounders and proudly reports back to us within the self-patrolled compound masquerading as progressive group think-tank.

At the beginning of Dear Diary, Nani Moretti says:

“Why all? Why this fixation with us “all” being sold out and co-opted!” “You shouted awful, violent slogans. Now you’ve gotten ugly”, the characters say in the film he watching full of depressed sell-out nostalgia from the perspective of success and authority. “I shouted the right slogans and I’m a splendid 40 year old.” “Even in a society more decent than this one, I will only feel in tune with a minority of people. I believe in people but I just don’t believe in the majority of people. I will always be in tune with a

minority of people.”

This is easy for an artist to say and hard for
and a knowledge worker to understand.

Maybe somewhere here we find a space to
actually find real antagonism and difference
rather than just questions of taste or
manners.

PUBLISHED BY ARTSPACE
ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION
POST-OFFICE
MAY 14 - JUNE 26, 2010
AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

THANKS TO MARIA LIND, SIMON CRITCHLEY AND GIANNI VATTIMO

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ISBN 978-0-473-16950

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WHY WORK?

First presented in New York as part of the Goethe Institut Wyoming Building series WHAT IS THE GOOD OF WORK? organised by Maria Lind, Director of the Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies and Simon Critchley, Chair of Philosophy at the New School. This short text comprises the presentation made by artist, Liam Gillick - who responded to Lind and Critchley alongside Professor Gianni Vattimo on January 30, 2010.

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