

“9.5 Theses on Art and Class”

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1.0 Class is an issue of fundamental importance for art

1.1 Inasmuch as art is part of and not independent from society, and society is marked by class divisions, these will also affect the functioning and character of the sphere of the visual arts

1.2 Since different classes have different interests, and “art” is affected by these different interests, art has different values depending on from which class standpoint it is approached

1.3 Understanding art means understanding class relations outside the sphere of the visual arts and how they affect that sphere, as well as understanding class relations within the sphere of the visual arts itself

1.4 In general, the idea of the “art world” serves as a way to deflect consideration of both these sets of relations

1.5 The notion of an “art world” implies a sphere that is separate or set aside from the issues of the non-art world (and so separates it from class issues outside that sphere)

1.6 The notion of an “art world” also visualizes the sphere of the visual arts not as a set of conflicting interests, but as a harmonious confluence of professionals with a common interest: “art” (and so denies class relations within that sphere)

1.7 Anxiety about class in the sphere of the visual arts manifests in critiques of the “art market”; however, this is not the same as a critique of class in the sphere of the visual arts; class is an issue that is more fundamental and determinate than the market

1.8 The “art market” is approached differently by different classes; discussing the art market in the absence of understanding class interests serves to obscure the actual forces determining art’s situation

1.9 Since class is a fundamental issue for art, art can’t have any clear idea of its own nature unless it has a clear idea of the interests of different classes

2.0 Today, the ruling class, which is capitalist, dominates the sphere of the visual arts

2.1 It is part of the definition of a ruling class that it controls the material resources of society

2.2 The ruling ideologies, which serve to reproduce this material situation, also represent the interests of the ruling class

2.3 The dominant values given to art, therefore, will be ones that serve the interests of the current ruling class

2.4 Concretely, within the sphere of the contemporary visual arts, the agents whose interests determine the dominant values of art are: large corporations, including auction houses and corporate collectors; art investors, private collectors and patrons; trustees and administrators of large cultural institutions and universities

2.5 One role for art, therefore, is as a luxury good, whose superior craftsmanship or intellectual prestige indicates superior social status

2.6 Another role for art is to serve as financial instrument or tradable repository of value

2.7 Another role for art is as sign of “giving back” to the community, to whitewash ill-gotten gains

2.8 Another role for art is symbolic escape valve for radical impulses, to serve as a place to isolate and contain social energy that runs counter to the dominant ideology

2.9 A final role for art is the self-replication of ruling-class ideology about art itself—the dominant values given to art serve not only to enact ruling-class values directly, but also to subjugate, within the sphere of the arts, other possible values of art

3.0 Though ruling-class ideology is ultimately dominant within the sphere of the arts, the predominant character of this sphere is middle class

3.1 “Middle class” in this context does not indicate income level. It indicates a mode of relating to labor and means of production. “Middle class” here indicates having an individual, self-directed relationship to production, rather than administering and maximizing the profit produced by the labor of others (capitalist class), or selling abstract labor power (working class)

3.2 The position of the professional artist is archetypically middle-class in relation to labor: the dream of being an artist is the dream of making a living off the products of one’s own mental or physical labor while fully being able to control and identify with that labor

3.3 The specific characteristic of the visual arts sphere, therefore, is that it is a sphere in which ruling-class ideology dominates, and yet it is allowed to have an unusually middle-class character (in fact, it is definitionally middle class—the “art world” is defined as the sphere which trades in individual products of creativity rather than mass-produced creativity)

3.4 In part, the middle-class character of the visual arts relates to 2.5-2.8, above. From a ruling-class perspective, it is beneficial to promote the example of middle-class creative labor for a variety of reasons

3.5 Nevertheless, the “middle-class” perspective on the value and role of art is not identical to the ruling-class one; artists have their own way of relating to their labor, and consequently, their own value for “art”

3.6 The middle-class value of art is double-sided: on the one hand, “art” is identified as a profession, as a desirable means of support

3.7 On the other hand, “art” is identified as self-expression, as a manifestation of creative individuality (whether that is expressed through a specific style of craftsmanship, or simply as an original intellectual program; art-theory debates about the importance of the hand of the artist, or “studio” versus “post-studio” production simply displace this more fundamental, structural sense in which the sphere of the visual arts preserves individuality)

3.8 Two permanent contradictions therefore dominate the sphere of the visual arts: The first contradiction is between the fact that the visual arts are dominated by ruling-class values, but defined by a middle-class character

3.9 The second contradiction is internal to the middle-class definition of “art” itself, which is split between notions of art as profession and as vocation, and therefore comes into contradiction with itself at every moment where what an artist wants to express comes into contradiction with the demands of making a living; in a situation where a minority dominates most of society’s resources, this is often

4.0 The sphere of the visual arts has weak relations with the working class

4.1 The working class here is defined as consisting of those laborers who are compelled to sell their labor power as an abstract commodity to make a living, and therefore have no individual stake in their labor

4.2 There are many links to the working class in the visual arts: gallery workers, anonymous fabricators of artistic components, non-professional museum workers, etc. Most artists are themselves employed outside the art world—the dream of having fully realized middle-class status remains aspirational for most people who identify as “artists”

4.3 Still, the form of labor at the heart of the sphere of the visual arts, the production of artworks, remains middle-class—far more so than most other “creative industries”

4.4 One consequence of this predominantly middle-class character is visual arts’ approach to dealing with the social and economic contradictions that it faces: An individualized relation to labor means that middle-class agents tend to conceive of their ability to achieve their political objectives in individualistic terms, with their social power deriving from individual intellectual capacity, personality or rhetoric (it is this reality that is behind the displacement of the discussion about art’s contradictions onto considerations of the “market”—a construct in which free individuals enter into economic relations with one another—rather than “class”—which implies fundamental, opposing group interests)

4.5 On the other hand, because being working class involves being treated as an abstract, interchangeable source of labor, the working class' ability to achieve its objectives much more depends on its ability to organize collectively. This is a form of resistance that is difficult to achieve within the sphere of the arts (all talk of an "artists strike" is satirical, outside a situation like that of the 1930s government art support in the U.S., where artists are employed as a block)

4.6 Because the ruling structure of society is capitalist—i.e. the exploitation of wage labor to maximize profit—the working-class position is actually closer to the core of society's functioning than is the middle class'; middle-class workers have only the ability to shut down their own production, whereas an organized working class can shut down the ruling class' means of production

4.7 The particular character of the working class implies its own outlook on the concept of "art"

4.8 On the one hand, one working-class value of art is determined by the reality of "creative industries," in which creative laborers are employed who have a working-class relation to their creative expression; that is, they produce creative products not as an expression of their individuality, but simply as piecework. Viewed from this angle, "art" is demystified—it is not a uniquely exalted form of expression, but simply one more human process that is the subject of labor

4.9 On the other hand, inasmuch as working-class labor is controlled from above, the ideal of "art" also represents expression that is opposed to the demands of work, as freely determined expression, whether private or political. Viewed from this angle, art is deprofessionalized, and in this sense is actually more "free" than the middle-class ideal of personal-expression-as-career

5.0 The idea of "art" has a basic and general human sense, on which no specific profession or class has a monopoly

5.1 "Art," conceived of as creative expression in general, can be seen as representing a function as basic as exercise or dialogue, and a need only slightly less fundamental than eating or sex ("slightly less fundamental" because the question of creative expression comes after simple survival—you must first secure food before you can think of cuisine)

5.2 Conceived of in this way, every human activity has an artistic component, an aspect under which it can be viewed as "creative"

5.3 However, in any given historical situation, some forms of creative labor are valued over others; some types of labor are considered more exalted, others less so

5.4 Which of the various forms of labor are considered truly "artistic" on their own is determined by the present ruling class, which determines the relations of production, and therefore the character of non-artistic "labor" and the value of "art," and the intersections between them

5.5 However, the general artistic impulse does not simply vanish in the face of its specific historical determinations; insofar as a basic sense of art as creative expression exists, humans naturally have a certain day-to-day creative investment in their labor

5.6 On the other hand, insofar as the general impulse towards creativity is cramped and thwarted by the demands of a specific historical set-up, there exists the impulse to escape these and express freely outside of them

5.7 Because "art," in the sense of general creative expression, is a basic impulse, no class has a monopoly on it; however, the organic worldview of different classes can be closer or farther from expressing the possibilities of its general realization

5.8 Both ruling- and middle-class worldviews preclude the idea of "art" as general human expression: the ruling-class because it defines the value of art according to the interests of a narrow minority; middle-class because its interest is in defining creativity as professional self-expression, which therefore restricts it to creative experts

5.9 A working-class perspective, then, reflects the most organic contemporary conception of generalized creative expression (even if circumstances don't always allow this conception to be developed or expressed)—“art,” in this light, is at once subject to labor just like any other, and that which is opposed to the alienation of the present-day labor process, and is therefore implicitly free of any professional determination (though this aspect, in the present ideological set-up, is often channeled into middle-class creative aspirations—which is one of uses of the “art world” for the ruling class [2.8 and, consequently, 2.9])

6.0 Because art is part of society [1.1], and because no single profession has a monopoly on creative expression [5.0], the values given to art within the sphere of the contemporary visual arts will also be determined in relation to how “creativity” is manifested in other spheres of contemporary society

6.1 “Art” in common parlance has a double meaning: as designating creative activity in general, and as representing work that circulates within a specific tradition and set of institutions; thus, something can be “art” (that is, creative) but not be “Art” (that is, not fit within the visual arts sphere), or something can be “Art” (that is, can be easily classifiable within the sphere of the visual arts), but not be “art” (that is, not be particularly creative)

6.2 Contemporary visual art thus has a paradoxical character: It is a specific creative discipline which arrogates to itself the status of representing “creativity” in general; when someone says that they are professionally an “artist,” they are both trying to indicate that they work within a certain set of traditions and institutions, and implying that their labor has a certain especially creative character

6.3 This overlap stems from the middle-class character of the contemporary visual arts, the middle-class perspective being precisely the one in which one's individual interests overlap with one's professional identity

6.4 However, equally paradoxically, contemporary visual art, as opposed to every other type of creative labor—music, film, acting, graphic design, cake decoration—has no specific medium—that is, no specific form of labor—attached to it; when you say that you are an “artist,” you imply nothing about the specific character of your work (contemporary art, in this way, is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea of creative individuality)

6.5 This lack of definition is in inverse proportion to the extreme hyper-definition of labor in a variety of other contemporary creative industries—video games, film and television all imply amounts of creative labor employed on a massive, impersonal and very specialized level, to greater or lesser degrees

6.6 Because capitalist relations of production are the dominant relations of production, and these other “creative industries” are more fully organized around capitalist production, they also have a more central importance to contemporary society—they are at the center of innovation, investment and public attention on a level with which the sphere of the visual arts cannot by itself compete

6.7 Nevertheless, while it cannot compete with these industries, contemporary art takes on its significance in relation to them—while they represent creativity tailored to capitalist specifications, the sphere of the visual arts generates its cachet precisely as the sphere where individual quality and intellectual independence are preserved (in the same way that politicians avoid talking about the working class by talking endlessly about the importance of the middle class, an exaggerated intellectual significance is given to the importance of the middle-class “art world” to escape the reality of the extent to which contemporary creativity is dominated by capitalist industry)

6.8 The visual arts, in relation to visual culture or culture in general, thus finds itself with few stable paths: It can attempt to merge with these other, fully capitalist creative spheres, but only as a junior partner—it does so only at the cost of giving up its reason for existing as a separate, privileged sphere at all, which is that it represents autonomous creativity not directed by the pure profit motive

6.9 On the other hand, contemporary visual art also faces a dilemma if it does not engage with other, more dominant creative industries; in that case, its audience becomes narrowed to only the very rich and those who have the privilege to have been educated in its traditions, which makes clear the narrow horizon, and thus, lack of freedom within which this supposedly free form of expression maneuvers

7.0 Art criticism, to be relevant, should be based on an analysis of the actual situation of art, and the different values at play, which are related to different class forces [this point simply draws the conclusion, for criticism, of 1.9]

7.1 Art criticism is itself a middle-class discipline, based on norms of individual intellectual expression; since relevant art criticism involves analysis of the actual class situation of art, it involves transcending purely subjective, individual, professional opinion

7.2 However, transcending purely “subjective” criticism does not imply the “objectivity” of art criticism that imposes a philosophical or political program on art; this sort of scholastic art criticism equally implies a middle-class perspective (often one based in the academy), insofar as it advances a purely abstract, intellectual program, and fails to address the actual material situation of the visual arts (e.g. simply insisting that art “be political” without concretely analyzing for whom or to what ends “political art” is directed actually reinforces the framework of individualistic, professional expression)

7.3 Acknowledging that contemporary art has a middle-class character is not the same as denouncing the sphere of the visual arts for “petit bourgeois decadence”; in fact, one must judge art in terms of the contradictory values given to it by competing class interests, which in part means recognizing the sphere of the visual arts as a significant repository of legitimate hopes for self-expression; insofar as contemporary society thwarts or distorts self-expression, the urge to follow one’s own creative path can itself be a political impulse

7.4 However, the middle-class character of the visual arts does mean that that sphere is faced with certain dilemmas [see, for instance, 3.8, 3.9, 6.8, 6.9] that cannot be resolved within that sphere itself as it is currently constituted [4.5, 4.6]; a realistic and effective art criticism starts from this standpoint

7.5 Artistic quality is not something that can be judged independently of questions of class and the present balance of class forces, because different classes have different values for art that imply different criteria of success [see theses 2, 3, 4]

7.6 Insofar as different class influences are at play in the visual arts, an art work is not ever reducible to one meaning; most often, it is a compromise, attempting to resolve a number of different questions into a single artistic formula (a work might, for instance, be executed in a style that is attractive to art collectors, but at the same time attempt to put an original professional signature on it, and at the same time express some type of sincere political solidarity)

7.7 To state that every contemporary work of art will by definition be a product of contemporary society, and thus bear the marks of the contradictions of its actual material situation, does not imply that all art can be reduced to the same problem. Effective art criticism implies having a dynamic analysis of how specific aesthetic values are related to the present balance of class forces, and making a judgment with regard to what factors are playing the most crucial role at any given moment with any given work

7.8 There is an aspect of taste that implies nothing political, and is simply the product of personal experience and history (i.e. there is no contradiction if two people have the same political analysis but different aesthetic preferences). But such judgments are of secondary importance here. “I liked this” is not criticism that is serious, interesting or useful

7.9 Art criticism is not political because it imposes a political framework on contemporary art, but because accurately representing art’s real situation implies understanding the dilemmas of middle-class creative labor in a capitalist world [see 3.8, 3.9], and therefore implies a political critique of that set up

8.0 The relative strength of different values of art within the sphere of the visual arts is the product of a specific balance of class forces; there can be more or less progressive situations for contemporary art, even in a capitalist world, depending on the strengths of these different classes, and what demands they are able to advance

8.1 These demands, to be effective, should be organically connected to actual struggle—they cannot form an abstract program cooked up by a few and imposed as a program for art without any connection to actual movements within that sphere. Nevertheless, some provisional suggestions can be advanced, flowing from the analysis in the preceding theses (all of the following ideas have some support and expression, currently—the trick is to extend such initiatives to the point where they become more than purely symbolic gestures [thus fitting the criteria of 2.8], and are strong enough to actually shift the dominant values of art)

8.2 Above all, private capital has disproportionate influence on the visual arts; therefore, increased government funding for arts institutions can have the effect of reducing the intensity of the contradiction facing the visual arts

8.3 These institutions should be democratically accountable to the communities they serve, so as not to replicate the effect of top-down influence on art through bureaucratic directives; currently existing institutions should be made more democratic; institutions should pay artists they exhibit, rather than exploiting artists' professional aspirations by extracting free work from them

8.4 Art's current definition as a luxury good, or the primary concern of a specific professional sphere, is a problem. Programs should be launched and supported that offer venues for artistic activity that are not necessarily aimed at the rich or already-initiated

8.5 Research and critical projects should be funded that investigate, explore and support, on a large scale, alternative definitions and sites for creativity; "art" is not always produced by or for the market, a fact which should be a fundamental starting point (this involves transcending the "critique of the art market" paradigm, which assumes that the problem is simply making the market more democratic)

8.6 Contemporary art suffers from a narrow audience, and access to art education is largely (and increasingly) determined by income-level and privilege; art education should be defended and made universal (this point itself involves a critique of the notion that art is a luxury)

8.7 There is no reason why the immense quantity of artistic talent that currently exists, unable to find purchase within the cramped confines of the professional "art world," could not be put to work generalizing art education, thereby providing itself with a future audience

8.8 This kind of common identity could form the basis for organizing artists as something more than individual agents, each working on a separate project; it therefore would also lay the foundation for a more organically political character for contemporary art

8.9 Creative expression needs to be redefined: It should not be thought of as a privilege, but as a basic human need. Because creative expression is a basic human need, it should be treated as a right to which everyone is entitled.

9.0 The sphere of the visual arts is an important symbolic site of struggle; however because of its middle-class character, it has relatively little actual effective social power [4.5]

9.1 Achieving the reform objectives of thesis 8, therefore, entails that the sphere of the visual arts transcend itself and purely "art world" concerns; such reforms will be best achieved by linking up with struggles outside of the sphere of the visual arts (for instance, linking the fight for art to the fight for education [8.6])

9.2 Whatever these specific struggles are, it is an organized working class that is best placed to challenge dominant ruling-class relations [4.6], which is the precondition for challenging dominant, ruling-class values of art, and improving the situation of art

9.3 The two working-class values for "art" [4.8, 4.9]—as the subject of normal labor, and as opposed to the demands of day-to-day labor—seem to imply a contradiction; this

contradiction, however, is based on the current economic set-up, in which a ruling-class minority dictates the conditions of work

9.4 This contradiction is transcended in a situation in which laborers democratically control the character of their own labor, and, consequently, the terms of their own leisure; it is only such a situation that offers the potential for the maximum flourishing of human artistic potential

9.5 It is towards such a perspective, which involves changing the material basis of society, that anyone who cares about art should turn; in the absence of such a perspective in the sphere of the visual arts—which, as of now, does not exist in any deep way—art will turn in circles, responding to the same problems without ever arriving at a solution; its situation will remain fraught and contradictory; its full potential unrealizable

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