

## **Rethinking the artistic imagination: from formalistic ‘innovation’ to productive potential for social and political change**

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The dominant contemporary understandings of art are underpinned by the well-established assumption that art is a space in which limits are boundless, with works such as Duchamp’s ‘Fountain’ invoked to support the argument that art is anything that one wants it to be. However, this emphasis on expanding the category of art has conversely restricted the transformative potential of art. A key consequence has been, somewhat ironically, for earlier, elitist paradigms such as those advocated by Clement Greenberg to be reproduced in new ways. In particular, the supposed limitless nature of contemporary art masks a formalism which presents a relatively one-sided understanding of art.

Instead of the form-heavy focus on ‘innovation’, the artistic imagination needs to be rethought in favour of a renewed focus on the productive potential of art. Returning especially to Walter Benjamin’s classic essays on the author as producer and art in the age of mechanical reproduction, we argue for a conception of art that moves away from preoccupations which emphasise the formal (re)arrangements of the object. While this may superficially seem close to approaches such as the radical aesthetics perspective, our position is founded upon the notion that a discussion of art ought to have at its core an awareness of what it is doing rather than what it is. This more materialist conception of art gives us considerably greater possibilities for understanding how art can contribute to wider processes of social and political change, and we present a re-interpretation of ‘Fountain’ in order to make our case.

## Introduction

A key development in recent decades has been the emergence of ‘contemporary art’, a plurality of movements in the production of art which go beyond both the modernist legacy and a temporal definition of ‘contemporary’ as something produced within our lifetime(s). There has not been a full break with either modernism or the temporal, though, meaning that ‘contemporary art’ is in a complicated relationship with both. Indeed, one of the core characteristics of contemporary art is viewed to be its pluralism, ranging from the rethinking of traditional forms of visual culture such as painting (e.g. Pop Art) to the introduction of new sites for art to inhabit (e.g. international art biennales) to the use of interpersonal relations as a ‘new’ material to produce an artwork (relational aesthetics) to new conceptual developments aiding our understanding of new and old forms of visual culture (e.g. Conceptual Art).

Associated with the rise to prominence of contemporary art has been the emergence of attempts to understand art in light of these new developments. Debates about the function and purpose of art have a long history, and are seemingly never-ending. Nevertheless, recent decades have been witness to the consolidation of a dominant set of understandings of art. For example, taking inspiration from the multi-faceted nature of contemporary art, there is now a well-established assumption that art is a space in which limits are boundless. Iconic (and iconoclastic) works such as Duchamp’s ‘Fountain’ (1917) are often invoked to support the argument that art is anything that one wants it to be. However, the emphasis on expanding the category of art has conversely restricted the transformative potential of art, by way of how such an expansion has been executed. This is significant, because a key claim of dominant contemporary understandings of art is that breaking the shackles imposed by traditional, narrow approaches to art enables it to contribute to wider processes of social and political change.

We acknowledge that contemporary understandings of art are as multi-faceted as the contemporary art with which they are associated. Nevertheless, there are numerous common denominators, including the aforementioned assumption that art can be anything it wants to be and, crucially, *in what way* art’s potential is portrayed as limitless. Principally, our argument is that art’s potential is viewed as limitless primarily through innovation in the form

it takes, leading to a focus on (re)arrangements of the object. While there is much to commend the manifold attempts to expand the category of art, it leaves us in the slightly curious situation whereby the transformative potential of art has actually been restricted by the terms of engagement with the issue. To be clear, we acknowledge that there are differences between the plurality of contemporary approaches to art, for example with some understandings arguing that a form-heavy focus is exactly what is required. Nevertheless, we maintain that the dominant thrust is towards form rather than content, meaning that the differences between various perspectives are of degree rather than of kind. Additionally, this has significant consequences for art's ability to contribute to wider processes of social and political change, because 'innovation' is primarily confined to what art *is* rather than what it is *doing*.

While not wishing to do away with the innovations in form that are such a strong component of contemporary art, we instead argue for a rebalancing of the relationship between form and content when considering art. More specifically, there needs to be a renewed focus on the *productive potential* of art. Returning especially to Walter Benjamin's classic essays on the author as producer and art in the age of mechanical reproduction, we argue for a conception of art that moves away from preoccupations which emphasise the formal (re)arrangements of the object. This more materialist conception of art gives us considerably greater possibilities for understanding how art can contribute to wider processes of social and political change. Hence, we ought to reflect on and rethink the artistic imagination in favour of a less form-centred understanding of art.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section outlines the main set of claims made by dominant contemporary understandings of art, using Duchamp's 'Fountain' as an exemplar. Next, we critique these claims, focusing on the relatively one-sided, formalistic understanding of art which they mask. Subsequently, we move to the articulation of our own perspective. First, we discuss the artist as producer, returning to Walter Benjamin's classic essays in the process. Second, we develop an understanding of art's productive potential which presents a re-interpretation of 'Fountain' to help make our case. Finally, we conclude by summarising the main points of the paper while also pointing to the broader implications of our argument, one of which is discussions of the ontology of art.

## The claims of contemporary art

Duchamp's 'Fountain', a Ready-Made - in the form of a urinal and signed with his pseudonym, R. Mutt is written into the history of art as a moment of affirming the ontology of art. Often described as an incitement of 'what art can be'; this is a discussion of both taste and function, principally, does the artwork have fine enough qualities to *be* art? And how does it function *as* art? This reading of Duchamp suggests that his nomination of 'what art is?', a factory-produced urinal, is extended from a consideration of an artwork exceeding skill and craft, thus overriding the loaded customary question pertaining to quality. 'But is it art?' is transferred to 'what is art?'

Peter Bürger in his 1974 book, 'The Theory of the Avant-garde' says

'When Duchamp puts his signature on a mass-produced, randomly chosen object and sends them to art exhibits, this provocation of art presupposes a concept of what art is: the fact that he signs the Ready-Mades contains a clear allusion to the category 'work'. (Berger (1987): 56)

Duchamp's act reveals what is typically acceptable as art exposing the socially constructed nature of art as well as shifting the emphasis from individual natural craft and skill to (collective) interpretation.

It is arguable that the urinal is a randomly chosen object, Duchamp may not have anticipated the impact of his chosen object but 'Fountain' operates on a number of registers, too many to suggest Duchamp's selection was by chance. Duchamp changes the object by displaying it contrarily; what would usually have been attached to the wall perpendicularly is used as a base. The relationship between the title 'Fountain' and the object urinal is not just metaphorical (piss spills upward like a fountain, in its new arrangement laid on its back it really would actually be a fountain of piss) but refers to the visual shape of the object so this undoes the idea of a pun.

He continues,

'The idea of the nature of art as developed since the Renaissance – the individual creation of unique works – is thus provocatively called into question.' (ibid)

However for Bürger the work of the avant-garde is soon recuperated into the institution, he sees no way out for those artists aligned to the historical avant-garde, and goes as far as saying,

'To formulate more pointedly: the neo-avant-garde institutes the avant-garde as art

and thus negates genuinely avant-garde intentions.’ (ibid: 57)

The problem with Bürger’s account is that he continues to imagine art as it has always been, he reproduces the sedimentated idea of art, this statement suggests that he too looks to artists to provide some kind of individual answers or resolve to the issue of arts autonomy; it is in this way he expects artists to act independently or at least take on the apparatus of the art world alone. For Bürger, Duchamp (and Kaprow after him,) is single handedly expected to tackle the problem of art, its historians, its patrons, its audiences, its galleries as well as the museums. Although Bürger credits Duchamp with an attempt at a change of category from ‘art’ to ‘work’ (ibid), he neglects to formulate art as a methodology and reverts to expecting the avant-garde to progress art as a category on their own. The social construction of art needs to be rearranged for the avant-garde to shift things and surely Bürger has some role to play in this transformation beyond contemplation and record.

Duchamp’s Ready-Mades are acknowledged as a moment in the trajectory of art that brings us to think, albeit popularly, that art can be anything we want it to be. More complex readings of ‘Fountain’ evoke a semiological account of the work suggesting that Duchamp explores the meanings associated with a specific object then alters these values with a process of selection, titling and siting. For example by choosing an existing mass produced object, bottle rack, calling it ‘Hedgehog’ and placing it in the gallery, (an incongruous place for that object), this process amounts to new meanings. However this formation overlooks the action in the production of an artwork (and its going public) and therefore misses out on the social relations and material consequences of the Ready- Made.

This shortcutting of Duchamp’s Ready-Mades enables the art world to utilize artists to steer the ‘logical’ trajectory of modern art. The overriding activity of Duchamp is summed up as innovational in that it is articulated as part of a response to the question of arts ontology rather than exploring the productive potential of art. In this way ‘Fountain’ is kept firmly within the category of art when it is discussed. Of course Bürger describes it as an ‘attack [that made] art recognizable as an institution and also revealed its (relative) inefficacy in bourgeois society as its principle.’ (ibid) But he nevertheless states that ‘the attack on art as an institution has failed’. (ibid) . See also Gail Day’s work ‘Theories of the Avant –garde’ on the problems of Bürger’s account for artists concerned with reinvigorating the relationship between art and politics.

## The formalism of ‘innovation’

Innovation continues to be celebrated in the production of art for example in Rosalind Krauss’ seminal 1979 essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*. Here innovation is expressed as ‘expansion’ – enlarging the ‘field’ of art and opening it to other formations is considered to be a response to categorization; a breaking out of the categories Painting and Sculpture (as famously constituted by Greenberg) but is this simply a matter of modernization? (at the time Krauss is keen to put Greenberg’s type of ‘modernism’ behind her and is writing for October magazine).

Krauss’ ‘expansions’ are tolerable enough in that they clarify sculpture’s position in comparison to say the category of painting at a particular moment in history, (this are mere details what about the social function of art?). However, the drawback of her idea is that it is still locked into the internal logic of formalist art; it works to increase the amount of formal considerations and constituents of art rather than transforming the practice of art, its additive as opposed to transformative. In this way she in fact maintains Greenberg’s logic outlined most emphatically in his essay *Modernist Painting*, (1960), in which he says,

‘What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself.’ (Greenberg: 1960??)

Hence Greenberg’s belief that a painting must be made up of what it is made up of and nothing else is thus modified by Krauss for sculpture. Krauss’ asserts that the category of sculpture must (in fact, the innovation here) be made up of more things than we first thought it was made up of, accordingly Krauss extends sculpture by addressing sculpture’s relationship to architecture and landscape; which once again we could consider an extension of arts ontology or the question of ‘what can we consider as art?’. Krauss extensions are not in relation to social or political content (or consequence) but in relation to space, function, scale and physical site. One of the errors Krauss makes is to overlook the importance of both the object as prop and the body in sculpture; she leaves out both the consequence of the object

as a prop and the body for active exchange and in doing so she neglects the ‘material conditions of art’ within this conjecture.

What is more there seems to be a collapse between historians studying the ontology of art and artist’s doing and making art. As Krauss is said to have developed her idea for this essay from a quote by the sculptor Robert Morris, who says,

‘the field provides both for an expanded but finite set of related positions for a given artist to occupy and explore, and for an organization of work that is not directed by the conditions of a particular medium’. (Morris, Rendell (2006: 41))

Morris is addressing the idea (by the art world/ critics/ apparatus etc.) that an artist is expected to develop a recognizable style usually associated with a specific medium or material engagement. Thus he acknowledges that the consequences of understanding the field of art as expanded; the development of an artwork does not have to fulfill these formal and material preoccupations (conditions of a particular medium) but can be founded on the artists enquiry into what is the social function of art. Certainly this statement can be misunderstood but the evidence of this is in Robert Morris’ artwork. Example of Morris’s work – Slides?

Instead of considering what constitutes the category of art, sculpture in particular, as Krauss’ does in her 1979, essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, let us think about art by considering its social and material conditions. That is to say that as well as taking into account the actual method, terms, determinants, matter, materials, technologies, skills and types of labour and artworks *socially we also bring into question the* social organization of art. Namely arts mediations for the reproduction of society or in other words art’s contribution to the way we want to live.

A social productive way of ‘expanding’ art is by transforming the apparatus of art. However this cannot be achieved by the artist or individual artwork alone notwithstanding that this recounts the idea of autonomy that most of the second wave of avant garde artists were attempting to address (see Kaprow etc.); to reconfigure arts methods, processes, various institutional, physical and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures. Art today should be about moving ‘things’ around in the world, putting your body where it matters and sticking your neck out.

In 2005 Dave Beech, in conversation with Charles Landry (author of 'The Creative City'), made it quite clear what artists think about the term creative, he says 'Within contemporary art the word 'creative' is kind of taboo; its treated as something kind of stupid, the word creative is almost like a myth word that you use as a cover up. So if you don't want to actually explain what you do, you say you made a 'creative' decision.' (Hewitt & Jordan 2005)

Beech goes on to say that, 'in fact the one positive thing that modernism achieved was that at least artists aren't talked about as 'creative' anymore.' (ibid). For sure, I agree, Beech is right up to a point; 'creative' is off-limits for any 'serious' artist within the discourse of contemporary art production, but 'creativity' as well as 'innovation' are still terms that are kicked about by others when describing and interpreting art.

The use of the words 'creative' and 'innovative' are not only limited to the uninitiated; when used, as a result of naivety as in the case of academics from sociology or human geography they are bothersome but no way near as dangerous as in the use of art history, visual culture and art theory. Even if we include the increasing use of qualitative evaluation methods of participatory art practices by sociologists to help prove the function of art for society (this is in the main for good citizenship and well being) this still doesn't affect the way we understand the core production and dissemination of contemporary art. (Example REF?)

Of course these words when used as a descriptive account don't seem that risky but once they operate as an expectation of art, a sedimented prospect of how we imagine art to be then we find ourselves with an agreed socially constructed arrangement of art that determines the type of art that is advanced.

In Peter Osborne's recent book, *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, (2013) he argues for contemporary art as a postconceptual art, exciting though it is to have a theory of art proclaimed and advocated in relationship to the critical aspects of art practice he nevertheless relies on an existing on-going ontology of art (as Bürger establishes with his interpretation of Fountain) to arrive at this claim. He reasons that it is the rejection of modern art (by artists), the refutation of the 'discipline/ category determined' approach to making art (as advocated by Greenberg) that develops into 'conceptual art' – thus conceptual art was a response to the constraint of specific disciplines within art (Painting and Sculpture) and a move towards an art that was led by ideas and not by skill and material. Therefore, for Osborne conceptual art is understood as a further shift of constituents; a move from the inclusion of more materials, things and objects as in Krauss to a dematerialisation,



contemporary art is driven by concepts and ideas (Osborne). Osborne puts the emphasis on form (and arts ontology) by suggesting it is the artist engagement with the former aspects of art that drive the new approaches to art practice, in this way producing a linear trajectory of art. The concern he is that he overlooks the intention of a group of artists (and within some of those artists categorized as conceptual) whose preoccupation was with the social production of art producing artworks that consider audiences, spectators, onlookers, art publics, issues of subjectivity, art as publishing and opinion formation. The use of the body as a material for the production of artworks does not dematerialise the artwork but in fact it re-materializes the artwork.

To summarise our argument thus far, we have outlined the core claims made by dominant contemporary understandings of art before moving to critique them. Principally, we have shown that these understandings have much to commend them, most notably for their ambition for art, in itself and also for its contribution to wider processes of social and political change. Moreover, a discussion of the form taken by the artwork in question, and the possibilities for art to take other (new) forms, is a necessary component of any approach to art's function and purpose. Unfortunately, a key consequence of the focus on the expansion of the category of art primarily through the form it takes is the constraints this places on the transformative potential of art. The multiplying of forms that could be taken by artworks is not in itself a negative development, in either the art practices themselves or the understandings of art that they are associated with. Nevertheless, it leads to a neglect of the content of the artwork, with the artist's role restricted primarily to formal (re)arrangements of the object.

As such, the 'innovation' trope found in dominant contemporary understandings of art masks a formalism which presents a relatively one-sided understanding of art. This means that while form-heavy accounts of art have certainly become richer and more diverse in the past decades, they are still operating on the same plane as traditional, narrower approaches such as those advocated by Greenberg. To invoke another metaphor, there is an overly strong emphasis on the innovative trees compared to the formalist wood they are part of. This has three knock-on effects worthy of note. Firstly, the traditional notion of art as a privileged, autonomous terrain in society is retained and in some ways reinforced, because there is a dizzying array of ways in which art is portrayed, even if the underlying content might overlap across the different forms it takes. Secondly, the emphasis on innovation of form produces a

tendency to continue with the traditional ‘great individual’ understanding of artworks, whereby the insurgent artist (such as Damian Hirst) or the exhibition curator acting as the conductor of an orchestra of forms are lauded for their efforts in breaking the mould. Thirdly and finally, even seemingly different, more radical approaches such as those affiliated with the ‘relational aesthetics/art’ perspective are limited in what they can achieve, because their focus on collaboration and the whole social picture leads to a fixation on *process* rather than *product*, thus downplaying what art can *do* compared to what art *is*.

There is not the space in the course of one paper to outline in all detail the alternative approach that we advocate. Therefore, below we discuss the principles that are at stake in returning to a more even balance between form and content that is made possible by a renewed focus on the productive potential of art. Principally, we do this in two ways: initially, via Walter Benjamin’s classic essays on the author as producer and art in the age of mechanical reproduction; later, through a re-interpretation of ‘Fountain’ utilising the benefits generated by adopting a more materialist conception of art.

## **The artist as producer**

In his 1934 address to the Institute for the Study of Fascism (INFA) entitled ‘Author as producer’ (Benjamin 1970), Walter Benjamin points out that the consequences of engaging solely with the technical and formal innovation of an artwork results in maintaining and restoring the world as it is – the artist must themselves be understood as a ‘producer’ located within the production process; no longer autonomous to, or apart from, the relations of production and the ongoing construction of capitalism. Instead of supplying material to the existing cultural apparatus – material that can be used to maintain and reproduce itself – the political artist’s task is to work to adapt the dominant social structures. Benjamin’s analysis stresses the distinction between artworks that ‘supply a productive apparatus without changing it’ (1970) and works that call forth a new apparatus.

Both the text and the title ‘Author as producer’ have motivated a range of interpretations from artists, writers and thinkers. Dictionary descriptions of ‘author’ and ‘producer’ include ‘writer’ as well as ‘a person responsible for the artistic direction of a play’; indeed the one definition that author and producer both share is ‘creator’ (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*

2012 [1989]). Yet, by claiming that an ‘author’ should be considered as a ‘producer’, Benjamin is not suggesting that a ‘creator’ is simply a ‘creator’. Conversely, through the arrangement of the two words he further separates their meanings – by suggesting that one protagonist turns into another he underlines that there is a significant difference between them. This deed of titling confirms Benjamin’s main aim for the text – through the act of writing he *transforms* the author into a producer.

And when he uses the term ‘producer’ he refers to the individual having the means to produce and reproduce their own conditions of existence. For certain, Benjamin’s producer is a long way from the unencumbered author/creator.

Roland Barthes also explores the function of the author in his essay ‘The death of the author’ (Barthes 1967), in which Barthes analyses the way in which meaning is produced and understood through the construction of a work of literature or an artifact. Barthes is of course engaged with the logic of communication through semiological measures: essentially Barthes is interested in *how* meaning is produced; what he calls the ‘text’. Barthes proposes that meaning is constructed *in* the relationship between the viewer, the context and the object or artifact; it is through this triangulation of points that a ‘reading’ or a ‘text’ is produced. For Barthes, meaning in the artwork is activated by knowledge from outside of it, thus a new ‘text’ is produced and the artwork is released from its responsibility of containing all the facets of content. The upshot of this is that the artwork is released from its customary position within the reading of meaning. Does this indicate the death of the author? Is the author necessarily dead or are they, more precisely, reordered? The resulting ‘text’, in which the author plays a part, is certainly alive and it continues to be produced and renewed through the engagement of the onlooker and the changing context in which it is viewed.

These two essays are often cited as having a relationship to each other, presumably through their exploration of authorship and its consequence for production. Barthes is concerned with the production of meaning, freeing the artwork from the author’s logic, allowing it to be transformed in each new (re)arrangement of viewer, history and context. In this way, Barthes allows the work of art to be autonomous from the intent of its author, separating the identity of the author from the meaning in the artwork and thus relegating the importance of the author within the process of artistic production. Benjamin’s concern is with the author’s agency; he believes that the author has some autonomy in shaping which readings are more likely than others, but does not seek a return to the nineteenth-century notion of an omniscient, self-possessed author. Benjamin explores how the production of artworks through a particular type of authorship can enable us to alter the way we live.

Barthes' theory of authorship allows us to understand the things we produce differently, to explore how we know these things and what they mean to us. Benjamin demands us to produce ourselves differently and inquires into how the formation of artworks can help us to do this. Barthes asks 'what is it [formed] of?', encouraging the forming of a new 'text' which is independent from the author and owned by the viewer. Benjamin enquires 'what is it doing?' and further, 'how does the author's action alter the existing social apparatus?' To ask what it is the author is doing, where has the author come from and who do they think they are, is to question the elitism of *every* single author; not in the sense of their control over the meaning of any particular artifact but, more pertinently, in their power to effect our everyday lives through the construction of cultural ideals.

There is no doubt that Barthes liberates the artwork from its autonomy in terms of multiple readings and in this way contributes to the displacement of autonomous artifacts, but through this liberation the agency of the author is lost. Benjamin's more materialist conception of art makes it possible to consider art practices as embodying the potential to contribute to wider processes of social and political change through the actions of people.

### **Art's productive potential**

Furthermore Bürger's account of Duchamp's 'Fountain', does not describe or interrogate the social context of its production nor does it acknowledge the temporal nature of the work. To consider 'Fountain' as a prop, intervention or action the situation has to be further explained. The Society of Independent Artists rejected 'Fountain' from its first annual exhibition in 1917. The Society of Independent Artists was an association of American artists founded in 1916 and based in New York. The aim of the society was to hold annual exhibitions based on the principles of French Société des Artistes Indépendants - 'no jury, no prizes'. Artists paid \$5 for the annual membership and \$1 to enter an artwork, which guaranteed its inclusion in the annual exhibition. Directors of the Society included among others Walter Arensberg, John Covert, Marcel Duchamp, Katherine Sophie Dreier Albert Gleizes and Man Ray. The first show in 1917 displayed 2,000 pieces from artists around the world and was hung alphabetically. Duchamp resigned as a director in 1917.

Duchamp's action pointed out that the exhibition was not truly *open*, that art was full of unsaid expectations— Duchamp had revealed that there was an underlying matter of taste and

expectation of what constituted an artwork.

The urinal in this version of events is no longer an object but a prop; embodied by Duchamp it becomes active and pushes at the apparatus, there are material consequences of the prop+act in this context. 'Fountain' is not an object to be contemplated but understood as an action / engagement in the world.

What happens if we transpose 'author' with 'people'? Let us say we *all* aspire to be the sort of producer that Benjamin demands from his 'author'. But can we 'produce' without necessarily being an author? Protest is an example of a kind of social production that doesn't require authorship; sure, there are instigators of a demonstration, however, protest is enabled through collective production not through singular invention. Protest is an act of resistance to the dominant social plan and if production *is* the means with which to produce and reproduce our own conditions of existence, then protest is production.

## **Conclusion**

1. Reject innovation as the method of art (stacked up and as a straight line in modernism then various in PS / PM and the temporal dispersed thus pluralistic) the PS's think by changing the temporal they make a difference but we are still stuck with the innovative (formal) progression its now just less straight in its formation.

2. We present function as a method of art: what is it doing, how, why etc. Thus I want to make texts (reject interpretation of visual / formal / symbolic) and I want to act and embassy them)

2a. Arts ontology - promotes the, what art is? What does Peter Osborne (PO) do with this issue and is this the point of his work – PO = historical ontology, what sort of ontology do we (MJ & IB) want? And if we are right about this as a problem for art do we need to re- order the paper?

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