

It wasn't until I finished writing this paper that I realized that what I most want from my labor as an artist is utterly conventional. It's the same thing most people want from work—security, both financial and psychological. That shouldn't have come as any surprise to me. Security would be on the minds of most mid-career workers. Of course security of all kinds is hard to come by these days.

In their introduction to this forum, Jessica Stockholder and Joe Scanlan write that “the artist occupies a peculiar place in class structure. Working with our hands we are laborers. And yet, by expending a great amount of time and materials creating ostensibly useless objects, we are wastrels, dilettantes, connoisseurs.” I agree. What kind of security can a wastrel expect? I love the fact that they used the word “wastrel.” Indulge me while I give a definition:

NOUN: 1. A person who spends money or resources wastefully: prodigal, profligate, scattergood, spendthrift, waster. 2. A self-indulgent person who spends time avoiding work or other useful activity: bum, drone, good-for-nothing, idler, layabout, loafer, ne'er-do-well, no-good, slugabed, sluggard. Informal: do-little, do-nothing, lazybones, slug. Slang: slouch.

Hirsch Perlman

A Wastrel's Progress and the Worm's Retreat

Are we that wretched? I don't think so. I don't think Jessica and Joe think so either. But why is wastrel such a good word?

Here's another definition: *anything cast away as bad or useless, as imperfect bricks, china, etc., and another: one who dissipates resources self-indulgently.* Sounds more like Humvee owners or Enron traders.

Artists have lots of competition these days insofar as self-indulgent dissipating of resources is concerned. In the end, I'd have to agree that artists also dissipate resources self-indulgently, but I'd like to think it's only in proportion to what profoundly underutilized resources they themselves are.

Speaking for myself, I suppose that I'm a wastrel. I know I'm underutilized. I'm certain that I'm not the only artist who feels that way. Not too long ago I learned that there is even a name for my special branch of wastrelosity. It was clarified to me in a comment made to me about my work. The comment was personal and anecdotal and thus subject to my projecting all over it, which makes it a perfect example of *dissipating resources self-indulgently.*

In response to or maybe as a way to cap the conversation about why my work wasn't selling more, I was told that “Some artists make art and some artists make kunst. You make kunst.” The first thing I inferred was that the price I was paying for making kunst was fewer sales. But I could tell that it was meant as a sincere compliment. So kunst here is implicitly better than art. Better in what way exactly? For being German? The implication is that somehow kunst is the real thing and that the avant-garde is alive and well. Or art isn't Art. Art is schlock and kunst is real art and for some reason it has something to do with German or Germany or Germans. And I should be relieved and flattered that my work has been so anointed, right?

On a more serious note, the comment did have an effect. I felt powerless in response. This is overstating it, but, if we get still more crass (which I think is bound to happen when considering art and labor), then an equation of sorts arrives: I want to make more money. To do that I would need to stop making kunst and start making art. If I consider this from an utterly cynical point of view, I think: What artist hasn't heard a story about someone suggesting ways to make

more saleable work? What artist hasn't thought about which works sell and which don't? But, in the end, I only know how to make what I make, which, in some cases, wasn't what I thought I was going to make. That process (of having made something that's not entirely what I thought I was making) is where most of the satisfaction is, most of the enjoyment.

The short of it is that I haven't been trying to make *kunst* any more or less than I've been trying to make art. So, although it's a sort of complement, the *kunst*/art distinction misrepresents me. It only represents me economically while pretending to represent me philosophically. The *kunst*/art distinction also describes my work as holding what you might call a "peculiar place in the class structure" even within the art world. Insofar as all artists are "outsiders" to some degree, does my badge of *kunst* make me an outsider among outsiders? Or is it a badge of authenticity, granting me membership status in some inner circle? Would I be more *kunsty* if my work didn't sell at all? You might even say that it only serves some other branch of the art world. Mostly it seems to serve dealers (and maybe some artists) to explain who in the stable sells and who doesn't.

Is there any chance that the *kunst*/art distinction really expresses the mandate of an avant-garde that aspires to provoke change? The *kunst*/art distinction seems more like a conflation of markets, authenticity, and philosophy, where lofty, outdated aspirations for art as a readily accessible revolutionary tool turn into the mundane conclusion that art is a market based primarily on taste and not ideals. A philosophy of aesthetics became a sales chart.

Needless to say, outside the art world, the consequences of thin criticality fronting for economic cynicism renders art's consequences miniscule in comparison every time. An economic philosophy of deregulation turned into a gigantic shell game in the California energy crisis. The philosophy of "security" and the "intelligence" that motivated the first explicitly preemptive war the United States ever waged has more to do with capitalist chicanery than democracy.

Although you would think that school would be the last place you would see those relatively miniscule art-related consequences, I was a casualty of thin criticality fleecing the students who were paying the bills. I resigned from my job (at another school) as a last resort in fighting the strange refusal of one of my bosses to give MFA candidates credit for a graduate seminar I taught on the very subject of criticality. It was his view that I lacked the degrees and publications to teach anything other than studio and critique classes.

The assertion that being published or having a certain degree is a prerequisite to being a thoughtful and critical reader or maker of theory, art, or policy is outdated to say the least. Only a priggish pedant would think that artists learn exclusively from people who have been anointed by degrees or publishers. I thought that the conceptualists had vanquished such stodgy thinking. (Indeed, Christopher Knight's review of the Robert Smithson retrospective begins with the sentence "Robert Smithson did not go to college.")¹ If an art school's graduate program can't represent academic freedom, then isn't it just teaching a rarified kind of marketing? The mix of marketing, branding, and education is unavoidable. It's built into the system from both sides (especially as art schools solicit more and more industry sponsorship). Students are customers and, from the start, they often project some notion of what kind of art their school represents or even wants them to make. That's not necessarily a bad thing, though it

1. Christopher Knight, "A Pop Naturalist," *Los Angeles Times* (September 13, 2004): E1.

makes it nearly impossible for art schools to acknowledge how up for grabs their mandate could or should be. If you go through art school without understanding _____ (fill in anything you assume to be expected of you as an MFA candidate), you will, perhaps, have fewer resources at your disposal, but you won't necessarily be doomed to being a bad artist, critic, curator, or teacher, and others aren't likely to suffer in any tangible way.

Despite whatever degree or critical theory may be deemed essential, there is no one skill all artists need, no particular knowledge, no proven marketing, and least of all—no one particular theory. That profound freedom of being under no obligation to cave to convention or even to be understood, should always start here—at universities, where, for art students and faculty, the luxury of not having to be understood, in most cases, just confuses things.

Contrarily, if you get through law school without understanding the history, procedure, and consequences of law, then your clients will suffer—you will make a bad lawyer. However else you might describe art and its relationship to labor, it's the relative distance from concrete consequences that distinguishes art.

Sometimes the effects of artworks are closer than they seem, sometimes further. A lot of not-knowing comes with the territory. Let me read a couple of interesting examples of communication trading on the privilege of not having to be understood.

that which
is both
known and
unknown
is what
is known

that which
is both
known and
unknown
is not
known
as both
known
and unknown

whatever
is known
is just
known

That's from the artist Ian Wilson's invite card from about twenty years ago to participate in a discussion at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (June, 3 1983). Wilson is known for his books and discussion/performances that endlessly tangle and untangle derivations of the verb "to know."

Here's secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld on February 12, 2002, in a Department of Defense news briefing:

As we know,
There are known knowns.
There are things we know we know.
We also know
There are known unknowns.
That is to say
We know there are some things
We do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns,
The ones we don't know
We don't know.²

The similarity between Rumsfeld and Wilson is, to say the least, humorous and disturbing. And of course, context counts: Rumsfeld's equivocating comes off as arrogance directed at the very proximity to real but unnamed consequences. Wilson's work, as removed as art is, let alone conceptual art, surprised me in its frank and vulnerable attempt at simple understanding.

I was lucky enough to take part in one of Wilson's discussions. It was like playing "I know that you know that I know you know," but for an hour. Imagine someone in the press corps replying to Rumsfeld, "So you're saying that there are known knowns which we know we know and then known unknowns which we know we don't know. . ." and Rumsfeld leading the press corps in a conversation hinging on further derivations of knowing.

In the Wilson discussion I took part in, there really were, on occasion, eureka moments where we knew what we were talking about. We were doing what we were describing—expressing the depths and shallows of knowing and the accompanying vertigo. Can you know what someone else knows about knowing? Sometimes. That discussion was, in those moments, incredibly effective at closing the gap between a work, or even just a sentence, and its consequences.

Whether your practice as an artist consists in sitting at a desk or a director's chair on a set, or leaning over a jackhammer in a quarry, art's uselessness gives the labor involved another special distinction, privilege even, from more conventional labor, which demands an ever more efficient and concrete exchange. In conventional labor, usually, the stakes are immediately spelled out and made binding—I'll pay you so much to do such and such—and it's in the interest of both parties to come to agreeable and mutually beneficial terms. I think what really makes the labor of art-making different from any other labor is that art-making is anything but efficient. Labor is conventionally understood as a means to an end. Art labor folds means and ends together inextricably. Whenever artists give themselves something repetitive and labor-intensive to do—something that might benefit from efficiency—that time they spend working, at least in some portion, consists in talking themselves out of what they're doing and talking themselves back into it again. Conventional labor tells you in advance precisely what your time is worth. Whereas the debates you have with yourself as an artist usually don't have any financial backing. But you can count on these conversations with yourself to enrich the work or at least future works. Regardless of whether it is physical or intellectual—labor is to artists what film is to a photog-

2. U. S. Department of Defense, news transcript, "DoD News Briefing—Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers," avail. online at http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2002/t02122002_r212sdv2.html. My thanks to Lindsay Brant for the formatting.

rapher. Not every picture is the money shot. I'm sure Wilson's discussions were hit and miss. (I won't comment further on Rumsfeld's press-briefing skills.)

Needless to say, when artists give in to the pressure of more efficient markets or despotic school curriculums, they cut out untold possibilities. They're much more likely to make just what they thought they were making, and everyone involved—artist, viewer, curator, collector—is less likely to be surprised.

Mind you, surprise isn't some lofty ideal of avant-gardism or even of progress. Surprise is humbling and modest. T. L. Shaw, a marginal critic in the 1960s and 1970s, who wrote books full of cartoons and boxes and charts and with titles like *Precious Rubbish* and *Hypocrisy about Art*, put it this way:

When you say that you enjoyed an art work for its "truth," you don't really mean that. You mean you enjoyed it for its revealing a truth you weren't previously aware of. What counted was the freeing you of a former state of tiredness.³

And

Explaining why one art work is better than another without mentioning fatigue is like explaining why water turns into ice without mentioning temperature.⁴

It's curious how much Shaw is mixing fatigue, as in *tiredness*, with fatigue, as in *boredom*. Fatigue seems to be the common denominator of literal labor and intellectual work—"desk thinking" as Jessica and Joe framed it.

What keeps Shaw's descriptions modest is that the emphasis is not on enjoyment springing from the power of something absolutely-never-seen-before-new, as much as on humble self-reflection on the former state of tiredness you no longer experience. There's enjoyment in looking at older work and thinking "how in the world did I ever talk myself into that?" In other words, enjoyment comes from a consideration of the means at least as much as the end itself.

Simone Weil, in her book *Gravity and Grace*, brings fatigue and enjoyment one step closer to each other. She says:

Joys parallel to fatigue: tangible joys, eating, resting, the pleasures of Sunday . . . but not money. . . . No poetry concerning the people is authentic if fatigue does not figure in it, and the hunger and thirst which come from fatigue.⁵

That's a beautiful description, I think. Between Shaw and Weil, fatigue, hunger, and thirst are infinitely nuanced metaphors and mundane life experiences—sometimes tangible and sometimes invisible. More often than not, artworks (and representation of all kinds for that matter) stumble over those thresholds—between tangible and invisible, between metaphorical hunger or thirst and real suffering.

Still, at the risk that our works will reveal little more than the provincialism we can't help but bring to being artists, stumbling about with artworks and their interpretation is better than selling your soul. When government lawyers recently wrote legal briefs defining torture as the point of organ failure, it's a wonder they didn't look in the mirror to see their own brain-dead selves sputtering to a stop. If organ failure were a standard for what constituted torture, the effect of

3. Theodore L. Shaw, *Don't Get Taught Art This Way* (Boston: Stuart Publications, 1957), 73.

4. *Ibid.*, 75.

5. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Cranford (1947 trans., 1952; New York: Routledge, 1997) 160.

their definition is making torture invisible. Fatigue, hunger, and thirst are quaint when compared with organ failure.

You'd think art would be completely lost, powerless in the face of governmental desk thinking that far gone. And maybe it is. Or maybe art has ideas of its own about torture. In *Art and Fear*, Paul Virilio condemns contemporary art as being utterly pitiless. While reflecting on the exhibition *Sensation*, he says, "The brutality is no longer so much aimed at warning as at destroying, paving the way for the actual torturing of the viewer, the listener, which will not be long in coming thanks to that cybernetic artefact: the interactive feed-back of virtual reality."⁶ Virilio talks about artworks devolving into what he calls "snuff literature" and "snuff movies," "snuff video," and "snuff dance." Virilio is prone to rhetorical flourish, I think, but he gets at the double bind of art and its effect.

Art and artists long to have measurable effect. As Jane Gallop paraphrased the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, "Every exercise of the imagination is in its way a revenge . . . for what reality denies us."⁷ Currently, I think that's almost all artists can do—fantasize about having more effect, while trying not to be trite or fall into our own absolutisms.

In novelist Haruki Murakami's short story "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo," no one will ever know that Katagiri, an average-guy loan collector, and Frog, a giant frog, together saved Tokyo.⁸ While sitting in Katagiri's living room, Frog calls on Katagiri not to help him fight, but to cheer and support him in his imminent battle with Worm, which will take place directly under Tokyo. Actually, Katagiri shines light on the battle—literally: his role ends up being to hold the lantern to repel Worm and to allow Frog to see Worm. Frog doesn't survive, though he does force Worm back underground. And Katagiri doesn't have one other soul who knows about the epic battle that he helped win. In the end, Katagiri is no longer certain if the battle even took place or if he dreamt it.

Like Katagiri, artists also fight invisible battles with their own imaginations. Not knowing the effect of our labor is most artists' reality. That's what our endeavor denies us. We don't get to know what good we do, if any. We're generally not as modest about not-knowing as Katagiri. We want to know that we're relevant and we want others to confirm it. Artists, whether they admit it or not, want to be celebrated by their peers and by an anonymous public beyond the provincialism of the art world alone. Revenge for our permanent state of ignorance too often comes in the form of overcompensating with megalomania, narcissism, or petty bullying—the darker side of the artist as a wastrel and a dilettante. Or there's the revenge of overdramatizing the significance of a work or an artist, or of their sales, or of the number of people they employ—thus the ever-voracious hunt for the next art star.

Beyond our own personal fantasies of self-importance is another, more important shared civic fantasy, the fantasy that somehow artwork complicates the cultural imagination to good effect despite the cynical market, the uncritical school, and even the Department of Defense. Though we'll never know if any of our work ever really made it so, that fantasy is sweeter revenge.

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6. Paul Virilio, *Art and Fear*, trans. Julie Rose (New York: Continuum, 2003), 37, 56–57.

7. Jane Gallop and Dick Blau, *Living with His Camera* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003), 153.

8. Haruki Murakami, "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo," in *After the Quake: Stories*, trans. Jay Rubin (New York: Knopf, 2003).