

MUSEUM
OF
CAPITALISM

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MUSEUM OF CAPITALISM

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SACRAL ART, COURTLY ART, BOURGEOIS ART... AND THEN...

SAYLER / MORRIS

In reviewing twentieth- and early twenty-first-century cultural and art theory, we are struck by the prevalence of the phrase “late capitalism” or some variant of it. As early as 1902 the tantalizing idea emerges that “capitalist” or “bourgeois” society will move through set stages of development, propelled by its own inner logic, and then ultimately will self-immolate. This raises the question of whether such theorists thought they were condemned to a mode of waiting for the promised land of empathetic governance and ecological consciousness or whether they could actively work in ways themselves to hasten the demise of capitalism. We see now that writers and artists who trafficked in the phrase “late capitalism” frequently managed to cannibalize their own optimism with grim ceremony. They were trapped by their own methods and, indeed, their own snobbery.

Take Peter Burger as Exhibit A. He noticed something very important: the erosion, in macro-historical terms, of Western art as a collective enterprise. He mapped it all out. There was Sacral Art, Courtly Art, and then Bourgeois Art, all in a straight-line historical continuum. Art, Burger noticed, used to come forth from the collective and its purpose was to reinforce the

collective, but gradually art ebbed into a solitary act by “genius” producers. This art bolstered the imagined “inner life” of its individual viewers as a form of retreat from the means-ends drudgery of the workaday world, with the concomitant effect of producing unique luxury items, the retail value of which was wholly contingent on aura conjured through marketing techniques.

Whatever the limitations of this hyper-generalized schema, Burger’s enduring insight was to break down our understanding of art into three components: its production, its reception, and its “purpose or function.”¹ His chart looks like this:

	<u>Sacral Art</u>	<u>Courtly Art</u>	<u>Bourgeois Art</u>
Purpose or function	cult object	representational object	portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding
Production	collective craft	individual	individual
Reception	collective (sacral)	collective (sociable)	individual

So we have here a step toward a truly useful political sensibility: the recognition that the present is not a natural state, but rather contingent. The art of 2002 is not the art of 1702, and the art of 1502 is not the art of 502, etc. But how did art get the way it did? And, more beguilingly, what is coming next

1 Why couldn't he decide which it was? Purpose or function? So much stands behind the “or” in this formulation, awaiting a liberation that was to come from a grammar that could not be foreseen. Purpose *in spite of* function. Purpose *despite* function. Purpose *at the depths of* function. Purpose *because of* function.

(to the right of Bourgeois Art in Burger's scheme)?

Burger's inability to imagine an answer to this question himself is symptomatic of the pessimistic fever caused by a "belief" in Historical Determinism. The question boils down to agency. Did thinkers like Burger consider there was any possibility of exerting one's own self in shaping the art of the future rather than merely being subservient to the slowly changing social conditions of the time? Burger and others (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer) sourly ruminated upon the tendency of commercialist society to consume any rebellious act and make it mainstream simply by approving it, and thereby bringing it into the fold, rendering it non-revolutionary.² (As an example Burger pointed to Duchamp's readymades.)

Burger saw art as an institution that depended on its recognized place in society. Art could not change until society changed. So for Burger and others, an artist of "late capitalism" should not bother to reject his or her own autonomy because not only is such an attempt merely doomed to failure, but such a rejection is not even desirable in terms of realizing art's (apparently meager) emancipatory potential. For Burger, politically motivated artists in a late capitalist condition should simply revel in "that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable." This amounts to putting messages into a bottle and wistfully tossing them into the utopian sea. Such a narrow prescription for political art reflected a lack of faith in the agency of cultural producers to change culture (or possibly a latent predilection for an art of which only experts could be the judge).

But why shouldn't artists and cultural producers have some significant influence over how what they make is made (production) and viewed (reception) and even over its purpose in society (function). Does it not simply take a critical mass of practitioners chiseling away

at the old edifices to reshape the city? And why must all eyes be upon the future instead of the past? Couldn't the pendulum swing from its extremity in the individualist/autonomous zone back towards the collective? Can't art have a function beyond critique and utopian imagining, as it apparently did in Burger's scheme? Step one is involving art in the praxis of life. Step two is collectives. Step three is shunning "artistic expression" and the notion of the artist as rebel or outsider. Step four is granting the artist authority as an historian, sociologist, scientist, and/or psychologist.

We have not given this new form of art a name but to fill out Burger's table could look something like this:

Function: to produce empathy and ecological consciousness; to embody knowledge

Production: varied to the point of a collective

Reception: varied to the point of a collective

This picture of the art to come, waiting for its time in the sun, will ultimately be liberating and productive. Burger and his kind's self-inflicted pessimism belongs where it is now, on its pedestal in the Museum of Capitalism.

² But revolutionary potential in this vein could be summarized by the simple phrase "you are what you eat."