

## THRIVING CULTURAL DESTINATION

A couple of years ago I began to see graphics on the back of DASH buses advertising something called “The Freelancers Union.” For a moment I was excited by the idea that I could finally rejoin a union despite the fact that I was an independent contractor. However, this was a coping mechanism: under neoliberal capitalism, we suspend our awareness of contradiction so that we can rationalize our lives. Nevertheless, my mind carried out this fantasy to its end—and to an irreconcilable contradiction: what would a general strike look like?

Later I discovered an old friend of mine had become a member of the Freelancers Union. He was a window dresser who bounced from one big sportswear company to the next, setting up displays and merchandising systems across the United States. My conversation with him confirmed my suspicions about the freelancers union. The only collective bargaining that they engaged in was with healthcare providers to negotiate group rates. Any political action takes the form of lobbying or competing with major corporations for the attention of politicians in hopes of pushing through mandates that would improve working conditions for independent contractors. In the case that this lobbying were successful, it would serve to further naturalize casual labor and integrate it into our very conception of life.

The Freelancers Union is the answer to a demand and a desire. Both stem from a surplus of labor and an irrational distribution of capital and labor. The Freelancers Union offers a temporary bad solution to a crisis that ultimately stems from irreconcilable contradiction and makes the irrational appear rational. Its existence depends solely on this irreconcilable contradiction and it must endorse the mechanism that produces surplus labor in order to preserve itself.

In the art industry, there is an unprecedented quantity of surplus labor. The art educational-industrial complex produces an alarming amount of labor for which there is simply no demand. Many young artists also enter into competition with unheard of debt. Those who are lucky enough to have benefactors can enjoy “the right to be lazy,” but most find themselves forced to hastily sell their labor at competitive costs to the art industry: museums, galleries, or other established artists. In fact, teaching is a great way for established artists to selectively harvest and pipeline fresh labor into a studio/factory. Some artists meet the demand for creative labor in the fashion/advertising/design industries which are not so different from the art industry at all if one is honest about it. Others work outside their vocation not “lucky” enough to land in a “creative” atmosphere.

This state of overproduction has changed the division of labor within the art industry in more specific ways, too. Most apparent is the emerging role of the curator within the contemporary framework of production, which is, as with the Freelancers Union, the result of both a demand and a desire that are intertwined. This desire screams out into the deafening noise of a saturated market spanning all frequencies. One might imagine a scene from a zombie or disaster flick where the protagonist pauses to assist a victim and is immediately overwhelmed by a flash mob and eaten alive. Only in this situation, the protagonist is protected by a magical forcefield. Whereas once there was perhaps a willingness to be organized, there is now a powerful will. Artists line up for studio visits, and curators find themselves overbooked and unable to take in all the requests. When these visits happen, curators function as middle-men or mediators between artists and the art representatives, private galleries, and public institutions they hope to reach. An artist takes this opportunity to present their labor (research, ideas, etc.) to a curator as distilled or crystallized information, which the curator graciously accepts.

This relationship can work in reverse as well, especially outside the studio at the site of lectures, panels, etc., but it is usually a very controlled and strategic release, and definitely not a surrender, which could devastate a career as an academic, curator, or critic, all of which play on their own field with its own rules to which artists are increasingly subjugated. Curators realize the parameters of their labor—in the spaces that intersect in the production of art and the theorization of art, and the art-industrial-apparatus increasingly imposes on them its idea of tact through professionalization, disciplinarity, and aesthetic acculturation.

We have witnessed in the last several decades the massive multiplication of MFA programs across the country and the globe, and now we are witnessing the explosion of curatorial programs as a result of this multiplication and a logical extension of a capitalist pyramid scheme. The curator today has at his/her disposal an immense resource of artist labor to pull from. If we can say that most painters walk into their studios thinking, “how can I make a painting?,” and most sculptors/photographers etc. enter their studio or hit the streets with camera in hand or attend a lecture asking their own medium specific version of the question, we can say that most curators walk into artists studios thinking “how can I make a show?” The most common way of making a show is to create a theme or theorem. This strategy is often already decided upon before the question “how can I make a show?” comes up. It is predetermined or assumed in a way that is implicit to the question. The curator will harvest information and then either use it to create a theorem (we might even say in some cases a vanity theorem) or, theorem already in mind, fit the artists work into a proof that stand behind the theorem as a group show. So the question, “how do I make a show?” is really a matter what information can be plugged into a proof.

In this scenario, individual works are atomized and stand in equal relation to the shows theorem. The relations between works are mediated by the theorem, much the same way as the relations between exhausted workers at a happy hour are mediated by a basketball game or the 5 o'clock news on a ceiling-mounted television set. Rarely are works in a group show allowed to interact and produce meaning or offer space for productive imagination and rarely are attendants encouraged to use the works in that way. Curators may suggest questions (select problems) and leave them unanswered as part of their theorem, but for the most part what happens to work in these group shows is the magical transformation of their use-value into exchange-value. The theorem or theme determines the content of the artworks, but then also forces a bad community among the artworks where they are made to repeat the same content (i.e., “performativity”), but just from a new perspective. From show to show, would-be citizens of the art community are reduced to consumers of marketable theorems that compete in a contest of novelty. Within each show, their interactions with the work echoes into space: like, don't like, good, bad, etc. This, of course, is like having a choice in Wal-Mart between ten different toilet bowl scrubbers and their packaging.

To pin all of the responsibility on curators here for delivering to a market would be extremely misguided and wrong. Throughout the art industry there is a strong disdain for “work” at the site of reception of art. I recall that throughout my art education there was a taboo on anything “didactic.” During critiques, both students and educators could shut a conversation down by saying “its so didactic.” At the same time, Dave Hickey was receiving a “genius grant” for complaining that Andy Warhol's work was in danger of being lost to critical examination of his project—not that a “genius grant” means anything. I bring this experience up because it points to a deeply problematic romanticization of non-work that is seen as a way to frustrate capitalism (instrumentalization) but in reality is totally complicit with it. This romanticization stems from a bad reading of progressive marxist thought (Adorno for example) and a desire to have ones cake and eat it to so to speak. It is not about non-work, but rather the renegotiation of what constitutes work and the conception of alternative forms of work. Perhaps art workers would benefit from a closer examination of the fashion/advertising/design industry. While this industry is held up as an antithesis that validates this idea of non-work, it is renegotiating labor and extracting use value in extremely progressive ways. There is something to be learned there, the basis for a strategy other than the reappropriation of fashion/advertising/design industries' methods perhaps.

In any case, this will involve work. Work is where use value manifests itself, and it needn't be unpleasurable. Reading is a form of work, as well as really watching a film, or experiencing art. Until 1945 or so, the modernist avant-garde attempted to re-align our thinking in terms of social need as a lash back to the end of the long bourgeois century. Although this avant-garde cannot be recuperated, use-value can.

The market is a cunning thing. We are watching it expand to account for clothing that is unwearable, architecture that is unlivable, and design objects that are unusable. We might even say that a new market is developing for “critical” art that demands refusal, critique, and intervention, but we would be misspoken because what the market actually demands an image of those phenomenon. By image I mean to suggest the literal production and circulation of work as such, but also the specter of critique that the idea of these works create. Many young artists offer these images of critique with no hesitation, organizing friendly, sanctioned critique usually in collaboration with the institutions they are supposedly critiquing or by re-enacting historical neo avant-garde strategies (sometimes literally redoing works from 30 to 40 years ago [first time is a tragedy, etc.]) wrapped in wit.

In a group show situation, curators tend likewise to produce an image out of the participants and/or works in the show. Perhaps we can use these terms somewhat interchangeably in this context: Image, Theme, Theorem. All of these terms highlight what is really going on, the transformation of use value into exchange value, the making of an irrational amount of surplus comprehensible or coherent. Could we avoid this pit by facilitating new relations between works in a group show and between those works and the conventions of the group show and allowing them to generate a theme, a center created by the tension of the periphery? Maybe the theme or result of group interaction could be named or designated afterwards, but I think at best, we must say it cannot occur even then. If it happened art would end since it would become comprehensible (absorbed in the existing state of things). Perhaps a good show should have use value and still fail to articulate a theme.

None of the material or concerns expressed in this piece of writing is new or original. A lot of these ideas come from ongoing dialogues with friends and existing texts. Some lines are taken literally word for word from others.

Dedicated to Nicole LaRose