

# Deskilling in art and the problem of ideology

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Deskilling is a social process specific to the capitalist mode of production. When artisans of various kinds – masters, journeymen, apprentices – organized themselves through the guilds, there was nothing to be gained from deskilling. When skilled workers became wage-labourers, however, then their capitalist employers imposed deskilling through the technical division of labour, mechanisation and automation because the conversion of skilled workers into unskilled workers reduced wages and diminished the knowledge and power of wage labourers over the work they performed.

Deskilling in art, however, is another matter. It is not imposed by the same social forces and, economically, deskilling in art is so different from deskilling in industry that it hardly justifies the same name. So, in this paper, I will explore the question through the prism of ideology, albeit a rather eccentric reading of ideology. But first, a few words of caution about ideology in this context.

I am not going to add my voice to the declaration of what has come to be known as the ideology of work<sup>1</sup> or the problem with work<sup>2</sup>. Nor will I claim that the discourse on deskilling in art is ideological in any of the most common senses<sup>3</sup>, as false consciousness<sup>4</sup>, politically motivated illusion, systematically distorted communication, class consciousness<sup>5</sup> or a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group<sup>6</sup>. Nor is my purpose to argue that the original definition of ideology in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels is sound and the problem with ideology arises only by subsequent deviations and revisions, nor again to provide a more satisfactory theory of ideology – to solve all the problems that have been raised about ideology as a theory. Instead, I will approach deskilling in art by re-examining **the problem of ideology**<sup>7</sup>.

I will isolate a specific line of inquiry within the literature on ideology that I believe is pertinent and useful in understanding key features of the discourse on deskilling in art. I will do this by re-read-



<sup>1</sup> See P. D. Anthony, *The Ideology of Work*, London 1977.

<sup>2</sup> See K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Durham [North Carolina] 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Particularly, I am not interested in what we might call vulgar ideology critique. By this I mean the deployment of the concept of ideology to connect ideas to social relations (to material production) in a reductive way that establishes the connection between ideology and politics too cheaply. It is as if these theories of ideology want to read social relations directly off ideas. They try to explain concepts like God and beauty as representing the worldview of those in power. By providing an entirely political explanation of ideology, the question of ideology dissolves to nothing. This is why so much ideology critique is dismissive of ideology and is interested solely in the reality behind appearances.

<sup>4</sup> We would not need the theory of ideology at all if ideas such as God and beauty were true, but, we need to say, in the same breath, that if these ideas were simply false, then the theory of ideology would be an unnecessarily long-winded way of saying so. The logical analysis of a statement is satisfied by determining whether a statement is true or false but the ideological analysis of a statement examines the social life of it, delving into its causes, motivations and consequences as well as its complicity with power, its social function and its role within institutions.

<sup>5</sup> É. Balibar (*The Philosophy of Marx*, London 2007 [1993], p. 48) is correct when he says: “Marx did not produce a theory of ‘class consciousness’ here [this idea does not appear anywhere in Marx’s writing], in the sense of a system of ideas which might be said, consciously or unconsciously, to express the ‘aims’ of a partic-



ular class. He produced, rather, a theory of the class character of consciousness, i.e. of the limits of its intellectual horizon which reflect or reproduce the limits to communication imposed by the division of society into classes (or nations, etc.)”.

<sup>6</sup> T. Eagleton (*Ideology: An Introduction*, London 1994) identifies 17 different definitions of ideology in circulation.

<sup>7</sup> I mean this in three related senses. First, as a noun, the problem of ideology is the question of ideology proposed for study by the social sciences. Second, as an adjective, the problem of ideology is the troublesome character of ideology theory as a tool for social science, i.e. its failure to answer the question that it is intended to address. And third, my own proposal for thinking about ideology, derived from *The German Ideology* rather than the sociological (or etc.) study of, say, discourse and power, will no doubt be seen by advocates of established theories of ideology as itself a problem rather than a solution.

<sup>8</sup> Oddly, although this text is the source of the Marxist theory of ideology, over the period since its publication almost a 100 years ago it has been valued principally for supplying a theory of “historical materialism” or is regarded as the most explicit discussion of philosophy in Marx’s own writings. I will return to the texts of *The German Ideology* instead only for what it says about the concept of ideology.

<sup>9</sup> It was first published as a book in the 1920s from unpublished and incomplete manuscripts and notes. At first it was not clear why Marx and Engels abandoned these writings and there was some speculation that the texts that make up *The German Ideology* were seen by their authors as failures or as transitional between two stages of their intellectual development. However, G. Golowina (*Das Projekt der Vierteljahrsschrift von 1845/1846: Zu den ursprünglichen Publikationsplänen der Manuskripte der Deutschen Ideologie*, „Marx–Engels–Jahrbuch”, Vol. 3 [1980]) discovered in 1990 that the various sections of *The German Ideology* were written as separate articles for a planned quarterly journal to be edited by Marx, Engels and M. Hess. The unnamed journal, which was only abandoned because its financial backers pulled out, was intended to publish provocative and polemical critiques of contemporary revolutionary theory.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of ideology in *The German Ideology* is not fit to serve as a tool for the social sciences in the analysis of what has come to be known as ideology in theoretical developments from M. Weber and K. Manheim to G. Lukács, from M. Lerner to M. Douglas and J. Wolff, from A. Gramsci to S. Hall and Ch. Mouffe, or from R. Barthes to J. Baudrillard and S. Žižek, or finally from L. Althusser and M. Foucault to P. Bourdieu, T. Bennett and C. Duncan. By locating my re-reading of *The German*

*ing The German Ideology*<sup>8</sup>. Admittedly, the work was not designed to be read as a book on ideology<sup>9</sup>. What Marx and Engels wrote about ideology in Brussels in 1845 and 1846 were polemical articles against Left Hegelianism (Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, Max Stirner and David Strauss)<sup>10</sup>. And I will limit the scope of ideology to the narrow frame in which Marx and Engels accused the Young Hegelians of being “ideologues”. It is not that I want to prepare the grounds for me to accuse the theorists of deskilling in art of being “ideologues” but rather that the arguments that accompany these polemical attacks shed light on how the relationship between art and skill can be reassessed.

Ideology becomes an urgent problem for Marx and Engels in the mid-1840s because they are striving to extricate themselves from the milieu of radical intellectuals to which they had recently belonged. The “ideologues” of the 1840s, according to Marx and Engels, were leftwing critical philosophers. Marx and Engels were not alone in taking aim at their more moderate political allies<sup>11</sup>. However, it is fair to say that Marx and Engels placed the communist critique of non-revolutionary leftist thinking on an entirely new footing.

There are two possible opening sections to the *German Ideology*. Both, however, start with a similar confrontation with the Young Hegelians. The conventional opening section begins with an assessment of the achievements of the “German ideologists”, described as “an unparalleled revolution [...] beside which the French Revolution was child’s play”. They add that “in the three years 1842–45 more of the past was swept away in Germany than at other times in three centuries” before revealing that this has all “taken place in the realm of pure thought”<sup>12</sup>.

The alternative opening, proposed by Terrell Carver and Daniel Blank which corresponds to Part 2 of the standard publication, begins with sarcastic references to The Holy Family of philosophers and theologians and the comments that a) “the ‘liberation’ of man does not get a single step further when they have dissolved philosophy, theology, substance & all that foolery into ‘self-consciousness’”<sup>13</sup> and b) “it is not possible to achieve actual liberation other than in the actual world & with actual means”<sup>14</sup>.

The polemical point contained in these initial assertions is repeated in the statement that it is “not criticism but revolution [that] is the driving force of history”<sup>15</sup>. This, in effect, is their conclusion, but Marx and Engels go on to explain, step by step, the nature of the problem of ideology and the nature of its negation, i.e. the character of what today we might call **ideology critique**.

First, they say, “the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men”<sup>16</sup>. They explain:

Since, according to their fantasy, the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations<sup>17</sup>.

And they conclude:

The Young Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly “world-shattering” statements, are the staunchest conservatives [because] they are only fighting against “phrases” [...] [by] opposing other phrases, and they are in no way combating the real existing world<sup>18</sup>.

What I want to underline here, is that the starting point for a theory of ideology by Marx and Engels in the 1840s is the opposition between theoretical revolution and actual revolution. Ideology is theorized here not as a longwinded way of designating truth and falsity but, as we will see, is explained by Marx and Engels as an effect of the division of between mental and manual labour that results in ideas being separated off from and elevated above the material circumstances that give rise to them.

Consequently, not only are revolutions in philosophy confused with real revolutions but also, and more urgently, ideology consists of “the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships [or] the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas”. So, when “we detach the ideas of the ruling class from the ruling class” they “increasingly take on the form of universality”. Therefore, on the one hand, “Viewed apart from real history”, Marx and Engels say, “these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever”<sup>19</sup>. And yet, on the other hand, these abstractions appear to have a value all of their own specifically when they are viewed apart from real history. In my reading, it is this apartness that is the signature of ideology.

The apartness of ideology, which is based on the apartness of mental production from material production, allows “consciousness [to] really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it **really** represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of ‘pure’ theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc.”<sup>20</sup>.

Marx and Engels comprehensively confront the apartness of ideology first by complaining that “It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings”<sup>21</sup> (note: this reinsertion of ideas into the material circumstances of their production is the first step of **ideology critique**). Subsequently, they propose that all “mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, meta-



*Ideology* in the specific and immediate circumstances that Marx and Engels faced at the time, I understand that the terrain of ideology shrinks dramatically. In place of generic theories of ideology that refer to a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or ideas that legitimate a dominant political power, or more specific but no less overarching theories of ideology as systematically distorted communication or the conjuncture of discourse and power, my scope will reflect the fact that Marx and Engels developed the theory of ideology specifically to confront the most revolutionary philosophers of their day.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, The First Communist Banquet, held in Paris in 1840, organised by J.-J. Pillot, Th. Dezamy, Dutilloy and C. Homberg, specifically denied admission to Socialists (see *Before Marx: Socialism and Communism in France, 1830-48*, Ed. P. Corcoran, London 1983, p. 72)

<sup>12</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, [in:] *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 5, Transl. C. Dutt, W. Lough, C.P. Magill, Moscow 1976, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> T. Carver, D. Blank, *Marx and Engel's "German Ideology" Manuscripts: Presentation and Analysis of the "Feuerbach Chapter"*, New York 2014, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30. As well as reinserting ideas into the social and material circumstances to which they belong, ideology critique transforms the content of ideas themselves. The first example of this that Marx and Engels give concerns the substitution of the abstract and universal idea of Man (and related ideas that refer to the ideal properties of man) with reference to “definite individuals” by which they mean “individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people’s imagination, but as they really are; i.e. as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, pre-suppositions and conditions independent of their will”.



<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> Marx and Engels' characterisation of the upside-down character of ideology should not be applied willy-nilly to all and every definition of ideology that has arisen since. What is vital to understand, here, is not that Marx and Engels have identified some reputedly permanent feature of what we call ideology but that it serves, in a number of ways, to distinguish Marx and Engels from the ideologues.

<sup>27</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

physics, etc. [...] are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these"<sup>22</sup>.

Ideas and consciousness, which are introduced as the "pure thought" of the ideologues, are reintroduced in a new formulation: "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life". Initially, ideas are "the direct efflux of [the] material behavior [of actual living human beings]", but later, even though ideas are separated off from material behavior through the division of labour, "consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence", because "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life"<sup>23</sup>.

The aim is not to replace talk of abstractions with talk only of individuals, but to investigate the historical and social conditions that make both (abstractions and individuals) possible. In other words, rather than opposing abstractions (philosophical Idealism) with concrete particularities (philosophical materialism), Marx and Engels call for a new kind of materialism "proceeding from the material production of life as such, & grasping the form of social interaction connected with that mode of production".

Ideology critique, here, requires a specific kind of inversion. This is made plain when they say: "In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, we ascend from earth to heaven"<sup>24</sup>. It is in this specific context that ideology is characterized for the first time as an inverted image of the world.

If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process<sup>25</sup>.

This analogy<sup>26</sup> is best understood in the context of the confrontation with German Idealism. The mechanism of the camera-obscura is not proof that the theory of ideology propounds a mechanistic relationship between ideas and the material world but is used figuratively to express two things. First, that the Young Hegelians' prioritization of ideas over reality can and must be inverted; and second, that any distortions resulting from the emphasis on "pure theory" by these philosophers are not to be attributed to thought alone but, like the camera obscura, can be traced back to material circumstances.

The two meanings of the camera obscura analogy point in two directions. First, it explains how the division of labour results not only in the separation of ideas and reality but also in the overstatement of the former and the neglect of the latter. Second, it proposes that all "phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process"<sup>27</sup>. Hence, ideology still expresses something about the world from which it attempts to separate itself.

From this Marx and Engels conclude:

Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology [...] have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking<sup>28</sup>.

It is this series of inversions that the camera obscura analogy was meant to elucidate. It takes on its strongest connotation, perhaps, in the claim that the Young Hegelians have substituted the revolution of ideas for real revolutionary activity.

Having explained that ideology is a product of the division between intellectual and manual labour, however, what needs to be explained next is the social basis of revolutionary ideas and ideology critique. This question leads ineluctably to the controversy around the statement that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”<sup>29</sup>. But, in my reading, this remark does not reveal its full meaning until we twin it with the statement that the “existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular period presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class”<sup>30</sup>. By identifying the material basis of “revolutionary ideas” Marx and Engels indicate the material difference between the Young Hegelians and themselves, which is to say that the critique of the Left-Hegelians is rooted materially in the revolutionary movement of the proletariat, “from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness, which may, of course, arise among the other classes too through the contemplation of the situation of this class”<sup>31</sup>.

Apartness, which corresponds in some ways to Jameson estranged<sup>32</sup> image of ideology as “a kind of floating and psychological world view, a kind of subjective picture of things already by definition unrelated to the external world itself”<sup>33</sup> is ideological only if it is also grounded, albeit in ways that often go unnoticed. The apartness of ideology is a feature of it being “upside-down” insofar as it is embedded in the social reality from which it is palpably disembedded. And so, I need to refine my earlier statement that apartness is the signature of ideology. Ideology is characterized by its apartness, inversion and embeddedness.

Ideology, therefore, is described in terms of phantoms and the descent from heaven because these great abstractions rise above lived experience. Ideology separates ideas from real history and estranges ideologues from real historical activity. And, because of this, the critique of ideology must reconnect ideas with real history and convert the philosopher into a revolutionary. In my reading of *The German Ideology*, therefore, ideology is not “false consciousness” and ideology critique does not reveal the reality behind appearances but traces the social life of ideas in which the most abstract thought derives its content and value from the world to which it belongs<sup>34</sup>.



<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36–37.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59. Rather than test this assertion against various empirical examples in which common ideas rise from below or how the hegemony of the dominant class is secured partly by expressing an affinity with the culture, values and lived experience of the masses (which correspond to sociological definitions of ideology), I want to interpret this idea within the specific argument that Marx and Engels were developing in the 1840s.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 52

<sup>32</sup> Apartness is related to estrangement and alienation, which Marx had given a new basis in labour in 1844, and also fetishism, which he will bring into play several years later with reference to the perception of value in the commodity. In all these cases, inversion and illusion (or deception) are active and constitutive, as is abstraction and formal equivalence, and they all involve the simultaneous expression and concealment of what, at this stage Marx and Engels are calling “real history”.

<sup>33</sup> F. Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, New Jersey 1971, p. 182.

<sup>34</sup> It examines exactly how appearances feature within the reproduction of reality itself and detects the way that real social relations are played out in the statements, images and acts that we employ, including the way that abstract ideas are set off from everyday life by the division between manual and mental labour. My approach agrees with H. A. Baker Jr. (*Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Culture: A Vernacular Theory*, Chicago 1984, p. 25), who said: “Rather than an ideological model yielding a new ‘positivism’, what interests me is a form of thought that grounds Afro-American discourse in concrete, material situations”.





<sup>35</sup> R. Scruton, *The Craftsman* by Richard Sennett, „The Sunday Times” 2008, no. of 10 February, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-craftsman-by-richard-sennett-z2qqhdpv5dx> (access date: 4.03.2021).

<sup>36</sup> T. De Duve *Kant After Duchamp*, Cambridge [Mass.], 1996, p. 148

<sup>37</sup> For a more nuanced and satisfactory outline of the historical relationship between photography and painting see S. Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2006, pp. 40-66.

My purpose is not use *The German Ideology* as a formula for identifying which theories of deskilling are ideological and which are not. Rather I regard these investigations from the 1840s as a prompt a) to be alert to theories of deskilling in art that disembled it not only from material intercourse and material activity and from the forces of production and relations of production which give rise to it, and b) to pursue the question of deskilling in art into a study of the material, social and historical condition of the social division of artistic labour.

Having said that, I will begin with the most ideological theory of deskilling that I know. Roger Scruton claims:

Originality and “doing your own thing” have replaced obedience and perfection as the standards to live up to, and this is everywhere to be observed in the deskilling of modern societies and in the marginalisation of those who truly know their job, and know it as something more interesting than themselves<sup>35</sup>.

Note that Scruton points the finger at individual workers and their attitudes and values, or lack of them, rather than to the structural conditions under which skill has been under threat in every sector of production since industrialization began. His conservative mourning of the loss of skill in modernity therefore puts no blame for the waning of craft skills on the owners, bosses and bureaucrats of Fordism and Taylorism.

My next example, by contrast, puts a strong emphasis on the significance of changes in the forces of production for the rise of deskilling in art. Thierry de Duve says:

Mechanization and division of labor have replaced the craftsman in most of his social and economic functions, so why would they spare the painter? Indeed, to cite but the most blatant specific impact of industrialization on painting, from the moment photography was invented, painters had lost their job as purveyors of resembling images. Their skill had lost its social utility<sup>36</sup>.

This account needs to be credited with turning the reader’s attention towards social forces of change in order to understand deskilling in art but once we do this, it seems to me, the explanation loses some of its power.

Two features stand out. First, this account is technologically determinist insofar as technological developments are treated as an independent variable rather than as being shaped by social forces. Second, this account relies on a liberal model of supply and demand in which the result of the confrontation between new technology and old skills appears to be decided by market demand as an independent variable rather than understanding how new needs are produced, for instance, or how markets are differentiated (photography at one price, paintings at another). Also, the example of photography as a threat to the painter is a cliché but is inaccurate<sup>37</sup>.

More importantly, the casual remark: “so why would they spare the painter?” demonstrates Duve’s failure to investigate the specific circumstances of the artist within the division of labour. Briefly put, since deskilling is not the universal effect of mechanization and automation (industrialization increased the volume of work for independent artisans, managers become planners, computer programmers become new artisans, etc.), it is a mistake to expect all activities will necessarily be deskilled simply as a result of taking place within a modern society.

Caroline A. Jones approaches a similar question with an emphasis on the bodily execution of labour. She describes Frank Stella’s early paintings in terms of his posture and the discipline of his actions. Stella associated himself simultaneously with management and the worker, calling himself an “executive artist” and adopting “the house painter’s technique and tools”. Jones describes Stella’s technique as “exacting labor, as in housepainting or skilled assembly-line work”<sup>38</sup>. Jones, therefore, sees Stella as a skilled rather than a deskilled worker. Nevertheless, the example is instructive because painting straight lines using masking tape cannot be said to be skilled in comparison with almost all previous painting in the history of art, and yet, strictly speaking, it is not an example of deskilling because house painting has not been mechanised or automated and house painters have not had their work transformed by the scientific management.

I will now turn to an example that has become a canonic reference for debates on deskilling in art. Benjamin Buchloh is regarded by Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss and others as the source of the idea that deskilling consists of the “persistent effort to eliminate artisanal competence and other forms of manual virtuosity from the horizon of both artistic production and aesthetic evaluation”<sup>39</sup>. Buchloh said: “the strategy of deskilling responds first of all to the cult of gesture and of the artist’s hand in Abstract Expressionism”<sup>40</sup>, although (he has also said) it is “operative in [...] the entire generation of post-Minimal and Conceptual artists as much as in that of the earlier avant-garde movements”<sup>41</sup>.

This formulation of the idea of deskilling in art plays down the social processes of the technical division of labour, mechanization and automation imposed on waged labour in order to reformulate deskilling modelled on Clement Greenberg’s concept of modern art’s self-critical project. Whether this account disembeds ideas from concrete circumstances or embeds ideas within the specific material circumstances of art, it certainly assumes that primacy of art’s own history over social, political and economic history.

Ian Burn, who Buchloh quotes in his essay, introduced the term “deskilling” to art theory when reflecting on the art of the 1960s. He derives the idea of deskilling directly from Harry Braverman. “Each of the early 1960s styles”, Burn writes, “was marked by a tendency to shift significant decision-making away from the process of produc-



<sup>38</sup> C. A. Jones *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*, Chicago, 1996, p. 127.

<sup>39</sup> H. Foster [et al.], *Art Since 1900*, New York 2004, p. 531.

<sup>40</sup> B. Buchloh, *Art is Not About Skill: Benjamin Buchloh Interviews Lawrence Weiner On His Sensual Approach to Conceptual Art*, [http://www.artspace.com/magazine/art\\_101/book\\_report/art-is-not-about-skill-benjamin-buchloh-interviews-lawrence-weiner-on-his-sensual-approach-to-54588](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/book_report/art-is-not-about-skill-benjamin-buchloh-interviews-lawrence-weiner-on-his-sensual-approach-to-54588) (access date: 6.03.2021). Buchloh’s account of deskilling responded to the militant deskilling of artists in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, from Minimalism and Pop to Conceptualism, the scripto-visual and institution critique who, for the most part, regarded artistic skill principally as a repository of authority, mastery and exchange-value. The public perception of the critique of skill was unsympathetic as is evidenced in two prominent public storms at the time, one in response to the so-called “pile of bricks” sculpture by C. Andre when it was purchased by the Tate Gallery in London, and the exhibition of M. Kelly’s *Post Partum Document* which irked the media for its display of dirty nappies.

<sup>41</sup> *Idem*, Hans Haacke: *Memory and Instrumental Reason*, “Art in America” 1988, No. 2, p. 101.



<sup>42</sup> I. Burn, *The Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (or the memoirs of an ex-conceptual artist)*, [in:] *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Ed. A. Alberro, B. Stimson, Cambridge [Massachusetts] 1999, p. 394.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 394-395.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 395.

<sup>45</sup> C. Bishop, *Unhappy Days in the Art World? De-skilling Theater, Re-skilling Performance*, <http://brooklynrail.org/2011/12/art/unhappy-days-in-the-art-worldde-skilling-theater-re-skilling-performance> (access date: 6.03.2021).

tion to the conception, planning, design and form of presentation”<sup>42</sup>. Burn also recognized that in the 1960s “the physical execution often was not carried out by the artist, who instead could adopt a supervisory role”<sup>43</sup>.

Whereas deskilling in industry is the result of the technical division of labour, mechanization and automation imposed to increase productivity and profit, Burn explains that deskilling in art in the 1960s was the result of a new relationship to the skilled labour of those who were paid to make the artworks for artists. “This mode of production”, he said, “encouraged artists to devalue not just traditional skills but the acquisition of any skills demanding a disciplined period of training”<sup>44</sup>. Burn’s reference to deskilling associates the artist with the wage labourer but his observation that the artist became a supervisor suggests, instead, an association with management.

Incidentally, Claire Bishop summarises this argument accurately in her application of the idea of deskilling to contemporary performance art. She adds that “deskilling denotes the conscious rejection of one’s disciplinary training and its traditional competences. Crucially, one has to have acquired this training in order to reject it”<sup>45</sup>. With this definition she completes the migration of the idea of deskilling from capitalist industry to art, cutting it off from any reference to the confrontation between workers and management. Bishop is right to point out that artists do not risk their livelihood or status in the divestment from skill and she expresses the scandal of art’s suppression of skill. However, this situation described by Bishop only appears paradoxical if the art school is over-identified with the acquisition of skill rather than admitting that the politics of skill in art is played out in the art school itself as a rivalry between departments (Fine Art versus graphics, illustration, fashion, architecture and so on) and in the competition between different activities within the art school itself, often represented by sub-divisions of its space (technical workshops, the studio, the library, the lecture theatre, the seminar room and, more recently, the canteen). These local divisions often idealise divisions in the wider context in which art, craft, academia, industry, commerce and domestic life relate to one another.

I want to suggest that until very recently the discourse on deskilling has not fully appreciated the significance of the social division of labour in understanding art’s peculiar relationship to skill. So, when Burn argued that “skills are not merely manual dexterity but forms of knowledge”, he concealed the division between intellectual and manual labour that is integral to deskilling. Buchloh, also, denies it by claiming that each anti-aesthetic technique “demands new skills”, and Michael Corris diminishes the division through a compensatory logic in which artists who reject “the store of practical know-how” nevertheless “gained another set of skills” namely the intellectual skills native to philosophy, linguistics, sociology and so on that constituted “the new fields of knowledge that the conceptual artist drew



upon". However, the claim that artists reskilled by becoming adept at "theory" is a misrepresentation of the drift from manual to intellectual activity.

Danielle Child reflects on the discourse of deskilling around post-Minimalist and post-Conceptualist art by throwing light on the changing patterns of the social production of art during this period. Deskilling in art, she argues, coincides with the emergence of the employment of technically adept assistants within the studio, the engagement of freelance contracted fabricators in their own workshops and on site, and the use of art fabrication firms such as Lippincott Inc. and Carlson and Co.<sup>46</sup> What is called deskilling in art, therefore, might be better understood as the **displacement** of skill in art both from the artist to paid fabricators and from the studio to various other locations.

This emphasis on the division of labour in which the skills of artistic labour are outsourced to fabricators transforms the concept of deskilling in art but it needs to be reinserted into the broader terms of the division of labour. John Roberts provides the strongest basis for this when he says deskilling is characterized by a fundamental contradiction in which "the deskilling of productive labour"<sup>47</sup> takes place alongside the development of "higher levels of technical and scientific knowledge incorporated into the production process overall"<sup>48</sup>. Roberts explains, this is because the capitalist mode of production is characterized by a division of labour in which "skills are subject to an increasing polarization between workers and management"<sup>49</sup>.

Like Burn, Roberts recognizes that deskilling in art is a parallel development rather than an instance of capitalist deskilling but unlike Burn Roberts does not stress the transformation of the artist from maker to supervisor. Deskilling in art is not characterized therefore by an increasing polarization between workers and management. Rather, for Roberts, the analysis of deskilling in art turns on "seeing artistic form in relation to the social and intellectual division of labour"<sup>50</sup> which he pursues through an innovative theory of the expansion of artistic technique to absorb the entire gamut of "general social technique"<sup>51</sup>.

Central to the reconfiguration of artistic labour that he charts is the "general separation of artistic work from artistic authorship"<sup>52</sup>. This observation resonates with Child's account of the displacement of skill in art but while Roberts acknowledges the displacement of skill in capitalist deskilling, from the class of workers to the rationalization and control of production by owners and managers, he restricts the question of deskilling in art to an examination of activities in the studio rather than across the various spaces in which artworks are fabricated or manufactured. This, it seems to me, is a mistake, as is the way that Roberts develops this argument through an inquiry into the use of the hand in productive labour and artistic labour. Isn't there something ideological about an argument that diverts the analysis of the effects of the actual social division of labour into a study of human activity per se?<sup>53</sup>



<sup>46</sup> D. Child, *Working Aesthetics: Labour, Art and Capitalism*, London 2018.

<sup>47</sup> J. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Ready-made*, London 2007, p. 82. Incidentally, Roberts makes an error here. It is not only "productive labour" that is deskilled. All waged labour is deskilled, including "un-productive labour", which even though it does not give a return on investment but is paid out of revenue, nevertheless comes under the control of the employer and is subject to mechanisation, division of labour and so on.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 82–83.

<sup>50</sup> J. Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Ready-made*, London 2007, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>53</sup> It is instructive to contrast Roberts' references to the hand with A. Sohn-Rethel's repeated references to "the head and the hand" in his classic study of intellectual and manual labour.



<sup>54</sup> What is often casually referred to as the birth of capitalism or the transition from feudalism to capitalism is more accurately the process by which the capitalist mode of production rises from being a minor and subordinate mode of production in feudalism to being the dominant mode of production.

<sup>55</sup> **D. Beech**, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*, Leiden 2015.

<sup>56</sup> **Idem**, *Art and Labour: On the Hostility to Handicraft, Aesthetic Labour and the Politics of Work in Art*, Leiden 2020.

<sup>57</sup> The master artisan combined in one person the activities of the skilled worker, shopkeeper, teacher, employer, trade official, bearer of privileges, etc.

Art's deskilling resembles the changes imposed on industrial labour by capitalist management but the technical and social division of labour in art was not brought about by the real subsumption of the artist's labour under capital and in the absence of incentives for increases in productivity. And yet, the advent of capitalism<sup>54</sup> does not leave artistic production as it was. As I have demonstrated in my book *Art and Value*<sup>55</sup>, art is not a relic of feudal handicraft that survives within capitalism nor does its survival prove that it is transmuted into commodity production. And in my recent book *Art and Labour*<sup>56</sup> I outline how artists in the 18th and 19th centuries defied mechanisation and industrialization and preserved the studio as a space of autonomy largely by ejecting the newly mechanised and industrialised aspects of artistic production from the studio into various spaces of commercial spaces occupied by suppliers and artisans.

The transformation of the social relations of artistic production during the Industrial Revolution have been veiled by inquiries into the activity of artists in the studio. This needs to be changed because the historical transformation is not evident in the labour process itself. We need to look beyond the studio in order to understand how previously integrated activities within the handicraft workshop come to be dispersed geographically. Not only did the production of brushes, paper, paint, pencils and so on drift away from the studio into manufactories (so that artists now purchased tools and materials from suppliers – which is the first sign of the effect of industrialisation on artistic production), but also many other “reproductive” activities that once took place within the handicraft workshop of painters and sculptors now take place in the gallery, the art school, the museum, the publishing house and the university.

The elevation of art above craft and industry, longed for in art's declarations of nobility, were finally achieved only when the handicraft elements necessary in the production of works of art were drained out of the studio by mechanization, commercialization and the division of labour. This social process has not been well understood within the literature on the transition from patronage to the art market or the transition from the artisanal workshop to the artist's studio. In place of these linear developments, I propose that we consider the disintegration of a range of activities within the guild workshop<sup>57</sup> into the modern division of artistic labour that separates the artist from the dealer, critic, professor, supplier (of art materials), assistant, technician, and fabricator.

Deskilling has not occurred in the field of art but the perception of art's deskilling is very strong. What makes the discourse of deskilling in art so misleading and damaging is that it focuses principally or exclusively on the activities of the artist rather than the many paid and unpaid workers who produce works of art through direct and indirect relations to the artist. From our brief examination of *The German Ideology* we can at least say that this emphasis on the individual rather than the social relations is very familiar.

If, as we have seen, deskillling in labour history refers to the elimination of skill in industry through processes of mechanisation, automation and the technical division of labour, deskillling is a misnomer in art. Instead, skill did not disappear in art; rather, it was displaced from the artist to commercial suppliers, assistants, technicians and fabricators. This is why the idea of deskillling in art should be replaced with the idea of the displacement of skill in art.

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#### Słowa kluczowe

ideologia, *deskillling*, dzieło, marksizm, podział pracy

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#### Keywords

ideology, deskillling, work, Marxism, division of labour

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**Summary**

**DAVE BEECH (University of the Arts, London) / Deskillling in art and the problem of ideology**

Debates on deskillling in art are scrutinised through a narrow theory of ideology derived exclusively from Karl Marx's and Friedrich's Engel's *The German Ideology*. This close reading puts a strong emphasis on the critical value of interpreting ideas through an analysis of the social relations that give rise to them. This provides a model for rethinking the idea of deskillling in art not through an examination of the concrete labour of artists but through a reconstruction of the social division of labour in which skill is displaced from the artist to various other workers.