

Boris Groys
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Duchamp, or
The Artist's Two
Bodies**

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e-flux journal #19 — october 2010 **Boris Groys
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At the turn of the twentieth century, art entered a new era of artistic mass production. Whereas the previous age was an era of artistic mass consumption, in our present time the situation has changed, and there are two primary developments that have led to this change. The first is the emergence of new technical means for producing and distributing images, and the second is a shift in our understanding of art, a change in the rules we use for identifying what is and what is not art.

Let us begin with the second development. Today, we do not identify an artwork primarily as an object produced by the manual work of an individual artist in such a way that the traces of this work remain visible or, at least, identifiable in the body of the artwork itself. During the nineteenth century, painting and sculpture were seen as extensions of the artist's body, as evoking the presence of this body even following the artist's death. In this sense, artist's work was not regarded as "alienated" work – in contrast to the alienated, industrial labor that does not presuppose any traceable connection between the producer's body and the industrial product. Since at least Duchamp and his use of the readymade, this situation has changed drastically. And the main change lies not so much in the presentation of industrially produced objects as artworks, as in a new possibility that opened for the artist, to not only produce artworks in an alienated, quasi-industrial manner, but also to allow these artworks to maintain an appearance of being industrially produced. And it is here that artists as different as Andy Warhol and Donald Judd can serve as examples of post-Duchampian art. The direct connection between the body of the artist and the body of the artworks was severed. The artworks were no longer considered to maintain the warmth of the artist's body, even when the artist's own corpse became cold. On the contrary, the author (artist) was already proclaimed dead during his or her lifetime, and the "organic" character of the artwork was interpreted as an ideological illusion. As a consequence, while we assume the violent dismemberment of a living, organic body to be a crime, the fragmentation of an artwork that is already a corpse – or, even better, an industrially produced object or machine – does not constitute a crime; rather, it is welcome.

And that is precisely what hundreds of millions of people around the world do every day in the context of contemporary media. As masses of people have become well informed about advanced art production through biennials, triennials, Documentas, and related coverage, they have come to use media in the same way as artists. Contemporary means of

communication and social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter offer global populations the ability to present their photos, videos, and texts in ways that cannot be distinguished from any post-Conceptualist artwork. And contemporary design offers the same populations a means of shaping and experiencing their apartments or workplaces as artistic installations. At the same time, the digital “content” or “products” that these millions of people present each day has no direct relation to their bodies; it is as “alienated” from them as any other contemporary artwork, and this means that it can be easily fragmented and reused in different contexts. And indeed, sampling by way of “copy and paste” is the most standard, most widespread practice on the internet. And it is here that one finds a direct connection between the quasi-industrial practices of post-Duchampian art and contemporary practices used on the internet – a place where even those who do not know or appreciate contemporary artistic installations, performances, or environments will employ the same forms of sampling on which those art practices are based. (And here we find an analogy to Benjamin’s interpretation of the public’s readiness to accept montage in cinema as having been expressed by a rejection of the same approach in painting).

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allegedly opened the way to a “post-Fordist” society of universal creativity free from hard work and exploitation. In addition to this, the Duchampian readymade strategy seems to undermine the rights of intellectual private property – abolishing the privilege of authorship and delivering art and culture to unrestricted public use. Duchamp’s use of readymades can be understood as a revolution in art that is analogous to a communist revolution in politics. Both revolutions aim at the confiscation and collectivization of private property, whether “real” or symbolic. And in this sense one can say that certain contemporary art and internet practices now play the role of (symbolic) communist collectivizations in the midst of a capitalist economy. One finds a situation reminiscent of Romantic art at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe, when ideological reactions and political restorations dominated political life. Following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, Europe arrived at a period of relative stability and peace in which the age of political transformation and ideological conflict seemed to have finally been overcome. The homogeneous political and economic order based on economic growth, technological progress, and political stagnation seemed to announce the end of history, and the Romantic artistic movement that emerged throughout the European continent became one in which utopias were dreamed, revolutionary traumas were remembered, and alternative ways of living were proposed. Today, the art scene has become a place of emancipatory projects, participatory practices, and radical political attitudes, but also a place in which the social catastrophes and disappointments of the revolutionary twentieth century are remembered. And the specific neo-Romantic and neo-communist makeup of contemporary culture is, as is often the case, especially well diagnosed by its enemies. Thus Jaron Lanier’s influential book *You Are Not a Gadget* speaks about the “digital Maoism” and “hive mind” that dominate contemporary virtual space, ruining the principle of intellectual private property and ultimately lowering the standards and leading to the potential demise of culture as such.¹

Thus what we have here does not concern the liberation of labor, but rather the liberation from labor – at least from its manual, “oppressive” aspects. But to what degree is such a project realistic? Is liberation from labor even possible? Indeed, contemporary art confronts the traditional Marxist theory of value production with a difficult question: if the “original” value of a product reflects the accumulation of work in this product, then how can a readymade acquire additional value as an artwork – notwithstanding



Guided tour at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, 1966.

Now, many have considered this erasure of work in and through contemporary artistic practice to have been a liberation from work in general. The artist becomes a bearer and protagonist of “ideas,” “concepts,” or “projects,” rather than a subject of hard work, whether alienated or non-alienated work. Accordingly, the digitalized, virtual space of the internet has produced phantom concepts of “immaterial work” and “immaterial workers” that have

the fact that the artist does not seem to have invested any additional work in it? It is in this sense that the post-Duchampian conception of art beyond labor seems to constitute the most effective counter-example to the Marxist theory of value – as an example of “pure,” “immaterial” creativity that transcends all traditional conceptions of value production as resulting from manual labor. It seems that, in this case, the artist’s decision to offer a certain object as an artwork, and an art institution’s decision to accept this object as an artwork, suffice to produce a valuable art commodity – without involving any manual labor. And the expansion of this seemingly immaterial art practice into the whole economy by means of the internet has produced the illusion that a post-Duchampian liberation from labor through “immaterial” creativity – and not the Marxist liberation of labor – opens the way to a new utopia of creative multitudes. The only necessary precondition for this opening, however, seems to be a critique of institutions that contain and frustrate the creativity of floating multitudes through their politics of selective inclusion and exclusion.

However, here we must deal with a certain confusion with respect to the notion of “the institution.” Especially within the framework of

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“institutional critique,” art institutions are mostly considered to be power structures defining what is included or excluded from public view. Thus art institutions are analyzed mostly in “idealist,” non-materialist terms, whereas, in materialist terms, art institutions present themselves rather as buildings, spaces, storage facilities, and so forth, requiring an amount of manual work in order to be built, maintained, and used. So one can say that the rejection of “non-alienated” work has placed the post-Duchampian artist back in the position of using alienated, manual work to transfer certain material objects from the outside of art spaces to the inside, or vice versa. The pure immaterial creativity reveals itself here as pure fiction, as the old-fashioned, non-alienated artistic work is merely substituted by the alienated, manual work of transporting objects. And post-Duchampian art-beyond-labor reveals itself, in fact, as the triumph of alienated “abstract” labor over non-alienated “creative” work. It is this alienated labor of transporting objects combined with the labor invested in the construction and maintenance of art spaces that ultimately produces artistic value under the conditions of post-Duchampian art. The Duchampian revolution leads not to the liberation of the artist



Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Imponderabilia*, 1977, performance, 90 min., Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna Bologna, © Marina Abramović. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

from work, but to his or her proletarianization via alienated construction and transportation work. In fact, contemporary art institutions no longer need an artist as a traditional producer. Rather, today the artist is more often hired for a certain period of time as a worker to realize this or that institutional project. On the other hand, commercially successful artists such as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst long ago converted themselves into entrepreneurs.

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Jeff Koons' design for collector Dakis Joannou's personal yacht.

The economy of the internet demonstrates this economy of post-Duchampian art even for an external spectator. The internet is in fact no more than a modified telephone network, a means of transporting electric signals. As such, it is not “immaterial,” but thoroughly material. If certain communication lines are not laid, if certain gadgets are not produced, or if telephone access is not installed and paid, then there is simply no internet and no virtual space. To use traditional Marxist terms, one can say that the big communication and information technology corporations control the material basis of the internet and the means of producing of virtual reality: its hardware. In this way, the internet provides us with an interesting combination of capitalist hardware and communist software. Hundreds of millions of so-called “content producers” place their content on the internet without receiving any compensation, with the content produced not so much by the intellectual work of generating ideas as by the manual labor of operating the keyboard. And the profits are appropriated by the corporations controlling the material means of virtual production.

The decisive step in the proletarianization and exploitation of intellectual and artistic work came, of course, in the emergence of Google. Google's search engine operates by fragmenting individual texts into a non-differentiated mass of verbal garbage: each individual text traditionally held together by its author's intention is dissolved, with individual sentences then fished out and recombined with other floating sentences allegedly having the same “topic.” Of

course, the unifying power of authorial intention had already been undermined in recent philosophy, most notably by Derridean deconstruction. And indeed, this deconstruction already effectuated a symbolic confiscation and collectivization of individual texts, removing them from authorial control and delivering them into the bottomless garbage pit of anonymous, subjectless “writing.” It was a gesture that initially appeared emancipatory for being somehow synchronized with certain communist, collectivist dreams. Yet while Google now realizes the deconstructionist program of collectivizing writing, it seems to do little else. There is, however, a difference between deconstruction and googling: deconstruction was understood by Derrida in purely “idealistic” terms as an infinite, and thus uncontrollable practice, whereas Google's search algorithms are not infinite, but finite and material – subjected to corporate appropriation, control, and manipulation. The removal of authorial, intentional, ideological control over writing has not led to its liberation. Rather, in the context of the internet, writing has become subject to a different kind of control through hardware and corporate software, through the material conditions of the production and distribution of writing. In other words, by completely eliminating the possibility of artistic, cultural work as authorial, non-alienated work, the internet completes the process of proletarianizing work that began in the nineteenth century. The artist here becomes an alienated worker no different than any other in contemporary production processes.

But then a question arises. What happened to the artist's body when the labor of art production became alienated labor? The answer is simple: the artist's body itself became a readymade. Foucault has already drawn our attention to the fact that alienated work produces the worker's body alongside the industrial products; the worker's body is disciplined and simultaneously exposed to external surveillance, a phenomenon famously characterized by Foucault as “panopticism.”² As a result, this alienated industrial work cannot be understood solely in terms of its external productivity – it must necessarily take into account the fact that this work also produces the worker's own body as a reliable gadget, as an “objectified” instrument of alienated, industrialized work. And this can even be seen as the main achievement of modernity, as these modernized bodies now populate contemporary bureaucratic, administrative, and cultural spaces in which seemingly nothing material is produced beyond these bodies themselves. One can now argue that it is precisely this modernized,

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updated working body that contemporary art uses as a readymade. However, the contemporary artist does not need to enter a factory or administrative office to find such a body. Under the current conditions of alienated artistic work, the artist will find such a body to already be his or her own.

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Gillian Wearing, *Everything in life...*, 1992-1993, from the series *Signs that say what you want them to say and not signs that say what someone else wants you to say*, color coupler prints.

Indeed, in performance art, video, photography, and so forth, the artist's body increasingly became the focus of contemporary art in recent decades. And one can say that the artist today has become increasingly concerned with the exposure of his or her body as a working body – through the gaze of a spectator or a camera that recreates the panoptic exposure to which working bodies in a factory or office are submitted. An example of the exposure of such a working body can be found in Marina Abramović's exhibition "The Artist Is Present" at MoMA in New York in 2010. Each day of the exhibition, Abramović sat throughout the working hours of the museum in MoMA's atrium,

maintaining the same pose. In this way, Abramović recreated the situation of an office worker whose primary occupation is to sit at the same place each day to be observed by his or her superiors, regardless of what is done beyond that. And we can say that Abramović's performance was a perfect illustration of Foucault's notion that the production of the working body is the main effect of modernized, alienated work. Precisely by not actively performing any tasks throughout the time she was present, Abramović thematized the incredible discipline, endurance, and physical effort required to simply remain present at a workplace from the beginning of the working day to its end. At the same time, Abramović's body was subjected to the same regime of exposure as all of MoMA's artworks – hanging on the walls or staying in their places throughout the working hours of the museum. And just as we generally assume that these paintings and sculptures do not change places or disappear when they are not exposed to the visitor's gaze or when the museum is closed, we tend to imagine that Abramović's immobilized body will remain forever in the museum, immortalized alongside the museum's other works. In this sense, "The Artist Is Present" creates an image of a living corpse as the only perspective on immortality that our civilization is capable of offering its citizens.

The effect of immortality is only strengthened by the fact that this performance is a recreation/repetition of a performance Abramović did with Ulay in her younger years, in which they sat opposite each other throughout the working hours of an exhibition space. In "The Artist Is Present," Ulay's place opposite Abramović could be taken by any visitor. This substitution demonstrated how the working body of the artist disconnects – through the alienated, "abstract" character of modern work – from his or her own natural, mortal body. The working body of the artist can be substituted with any other body that is ready and able to perform the same work of self-exposure. Thus, in the main, retrospective part of the exhibition, the earlier performances by Marina and Ulay were repeated/reproduced in two different forms: through video documentation and through the naked bodies of hired actors. Here again the nakedness of these bodies was more important than their particular shape, or even their gender (in one instance, due to practical considerations, Ulay was represented by a woman). There are many who speak about the spectacular nature of contemporary art. But in a certain sense, contemporary art effectuates the reversal of the spectacle found in theater or cinema, among other examples. In the theater, the actor's body

also presents itself as immortal as it passes through various metamorphic processes, transforming itself into the bodies of others as it plays different roles. In contemporary art, the working body of the artist, on the contrary, accumulates different roles (as in the case of Cindy Sherman), or, as with Abramović, different living bodies. The artist's working body is simultaneously self-identical and interchangeable because it is a body of alienated, abstract labor. In his famous book *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Ernst Kantorowicz illustrates the historical problem posed by the figure of the king assuming two bodies simultaneously: one natural, mortal body, and another official, institutional, exchangeable, immortal body. Analogously, one can say that when the artist exposes his or her body, it is the second, working body that becomes exposed. And at the moment of this exposure, this working body also reveals the value of labor accumulated in the art institution (according to Kantorowicz, medieval historians have spoken of "corporations").³ In general, when visiting a museum, we do not realize the amount of work necessary to keep paintings hanging on walls or statues in their places. But this effort becomes immediately visible when a visitor is confronted with Abramović's body; the invisible physical effort of keeping the human body in the same position for a long time produces a "thing" – a readymade – that arrests the attention of visitors and allows them to contemplate Abramović's body for hours.

One may think that only the working bodies of contemporary celebrities are exposed to the public gaze. However, even the most average, "normal" everyday people now permanently document their own working bodies by means of photography, video, websites, and so forth. And on top of that, contemporary everyday life is exposed not only to institutional surveillance, but also to a constantly expanding sphere of media coverage. Innumerable sitcoms inundating television screens around the world expose us to the working bodies of doctors, peasants, fishermen, presidents, movie stars, factory workers, mafia killers, gravediggers, and even to zombies and vampires. It is precisely this ubiquity and universality of the working body and its representation that makes it especially interesting for art. Even if the primary, natural bodies of our contemporaries are different, and their secondary working bodies are interchangeable. And it is precisely this interchangeability that unites the artist with his or her audience. The artist today shares art with the public just as he or she once shared it with religion or politics. To be an artist has ceased to

be an exclusive fate; instead, it has become characteristic of society as a whole on its most intimate, everyday, bodily level. And here the artist finds another opportunity to advance a universalist claim – as an insight into the duplicity and ambiguity of the artist's own two bodies.

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See Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

2

See Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

3

Ernst H Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3.

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