

Editors Editorial

01/01

Art has something to teach Marxism about the reasons for its great historical failure to understand nationalism, because art proceeds with the understanding that the materiality of representation is not the same thing as the materiality of production. If it were, if the value-process were reducible to the labor-process, or vice versa, then both art and inflation would be impossible.

Duchamp understood this even before Keynes did. Marxists don't like to admit it, but their whole show relies on the gold standard as a way of avoiding the problem of the materiality of representation; because labor can only immediately be the source of value if the medium used to represent value is uncontested. Once the gold standard vanishes, the mediation of value becomes a social question distinct from the social question of labor. And the social question of valuable media is determined, in the last instance, by the jurisdiction of the artist. The suspicion that the nation-state has for art is just the fear of losing its monopoly on the management of valuable material. National Socialism staged exhibitions denouncing degenerate art precisely because their own "national art" – their currency – had degenerated so completely as to become nearly value-less.

This explains the desire for artists to see themselves now as gods, now as slaves. In the first case they command the world because they can inscribe value into anything – think of Picasso paying for meals with scribbles on napkins – or Damian Hirst managing his dot paintings like a central banker. In the second they are workers like any other, happy to slip inside the warmth of a movement that needs more from them than ever. Sometimes solidarity means recognizing that the differences between us are only differences, rather than pretending to be all alike in order to hoard our singular editions for ourselves.

Once it was cliché that businesspeople only wanted to talk about art, while artists only wanted to talk about money. Today the space between these two obsessions feels more precarious than before. Rather than pretending to be slaves, maybe we should ask: What would I want from the free, if I were otherwise?

e-flux journal #70 — february 2016 Editors
Editorial