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Sharon Loudén, ed.

The Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life

Bristol, UK: Intellect Ltd, 2017. 404 pp.; 40 color ills. Paperback
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Both frank and richly detailed, Sharon Loudén's broad collection contains forty concrete accounts, fascinating autobiographies in miniature, from artists describing the various ingenious means by which they strive to sustain "a creative life." There are vital insights here, but often they beg further elaboration.

Admittedly, Loudén concedes a "hands-off" editorial approach, allowing contributors to speak with their own voices. Nevertheless, attempts are made to bind these accounts together in the book's five short, somewhat more theoretical commentaries: a preface, a foreword, and three conclusions. Here the book could have gone further: by pushing these accounts to divulge their commonalities, or by drawing critical import from across the assorted miscellany. Without this, it remains unclear how much the book really lives up to its stated goal, namely that the experiences contained therein inform the production of new, more emancipatory social relations. A shared aspiration toward such social transformations sustains the following constructive, I hope, observations.

The book's title implicitly echoes *The Author as Producer* (1934) by the well-known Marxist and critic Walter Benjamin. Yet beyond these suggestive and promising beginnings—and a comparable heterogeneity—the contributions share little of Benjamin's underlying method. His famous musing decries the false dichotomy between the "heroic," autonomous artists of the bourgeoisie and politically committed artists, arguing that the two stand in dialectical relation: instead of asking what attitude a work takes toward relations of production, one should ask how the work itself fits *within* them, he claims. The point is not to make critical work, but to make work critically, as the saying goes.

As Benjamin states, works carrying useful political intent might still end up as entertainment, supporting existing social relations they purport to critique. One can even make poverty an object of enjoyment, he notes, "thereby shirking from the most important task of the present day writer: to recognize how poor he is and how poor he has to be in order to start again at the beginning." Ostensibly, this is precisely what *The Artist as Culture Producer: Living and Sustaining a Creative Life* attempts. There is indeed a strong inquiring and emancipatory sentiment, both in the texts themselves and their editorial handling. The thoughtful introspection on the utility and contradictions of contemporary social practice found in Edgar Arceneaux's account is one example; likewise the contribution of Tim Doud and Zoë Charlton, on the challenging necessity of more expansively conceiving the term *artists*, of pushing the contradictory normativity of current institutional and pedagogical frames.

Yes, the book's editorial sets its face against the "hero artist," that exclusionary bourgeois cliché beyond which Benjamin saw the author—or, one might extrapolate, the artist—as producer. Yet Loudén's espoused rejection of art as a separate, autonomous undertaking largely functions here by replacing "art" with the term "culture." Advocating this specialist pseudo-artistic status—"culture producer"—still implies a certain vanguardism akin to that the book purports to dismiss. Indeed, perhaps this move is better understood as simply a more elaborate dialectical reiteration of the "hero artist" within the context of a more advanced capitalist production: like production itself, the role of avant-garde artist is further socialized—"art" becomes "culture," "artists" are more expansively defined—yet they still serve a comparable ideological function, that is, reproducing favorable configurations of capitalist subjectivities and social relations.

Might not the products of these "culture producers" still incline toward the economic imperatives of the dominant system of production, just as much as Art (with a capital "A") had done previously? If artists are better understood as culture producers, whose culture are they producing? Whose interests does that culture serve?

While an increasingly inclusive definition of "artist" may be welcome, a more fundamental questioning of what this social role entails remains necessary. Could not the reproduction of a responsible, entrepreneurial, and flexible labor force be as much an affirmation of contemporary capitalist values as the assertion of some idealized and autonomous liberal humanist subjectivity was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? As Claire Bishop has argued, social practice artists might be just as much functionaries of capitalist ideology as those working

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in more traditional media, for example, through their systematic integration into neoliberal gentrification agendas. Indeed, perhaps even more so. Crucially, this is not to write off such practices, but rather to caution against any over-enthusiasm regarding their emancipatory potential.

And yet, in Hrag Vartanian's foreword at least, but as also implied by Loudén herself, this is a book that claims to explore the potential of such artistic production to *challenge* capitalist social relations. Given the above, where might such a challenge be found?

A more generous reading casts *The Artist as Culture Producer* as a form of critical auto-sociology, such as Marx himself precipitated via his "Worker's Enquiry" for *La Revue Socialiste* (1880), something later theoretically developed by Johnson-Forest Tendency in the United States, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France, *Quaderni Rossi*, in Italy, and *Teoría y Práctica* in Spain. It is a tendency also evident in what Kathie Sarachild once called the "scientific method" of feminist consciousness-raising groups, or in Latin American *testimonio*—the firsthand literature of the oppressed. At its best, Loudén's collection approaches this, in the form of a critical auto-sociological inquiry by artists, for artists, into their own working conditions.

Thus, ironically, the book's real contribution might arise through a kind of sublation of its aforementioned "vanguardism": namely, the claim that artists are "canaries in the coal mine," reflecting capitalism's fraught response to its long crisis of profitability, what the commentators such as Chen Tamir perceive as a crisis of secular liberalism. The gathered testimonies sense this, but mostly do not yet seek to conceptualize it, historically or materially. Accounts such as Julia Kunin's, for example, embrace a political identity but do not fully link the documented individual precariousness with its flipside: the rise in securitized censorship and declines in social funding decried elsewhere in the book. Nevertheless, such glimpses remain the book's most important offering, a kind of *testimonio* for a society where artist equals entrepreneur and everyone is encouraged to become a creator and curator of social "content." In this sense the more expansive definition of "artist" can perhaps be transformative after all; artists *can* speak of and from society in a more Lukácsian sense, not apart from it, testifying to certain realities of shifting class composition. It is here that the significance of such a collection lies.

Hints of this are evident in the accounts of Norberto Roldan, Carrie Moyer, Khaled Sabsabi, or Steve Lambert, for example. However, it is perhaps William Powhida who goes farthest in this regard, explaining how he came to collective struggle through a critical political-economic perspective on the art "world" (that is, art industry).

Nevertheless, despite such moments, complaints of overwork and precariousness in the collected testimonies are too often glossed over with the mythical compensation of "experience": a form of "human capital" that does predictably little to pay the rent or put food on the table. The resulting condition, juggling multiple insecure jobs and responsibilities with unremunerated work and individualized investments, is rarely critiqued. Instead an entrepreneurial pride often masks how such experiences speak to wider systemic conditions, or presuppose certain existing social relations.

While this blind spot could in itself be a useful clue for mapping the state of play, making the next step requires a further push. Having recognized artists as direct and indirect producers of value—Carron Little's account is a case in point—the *The Artist as Culture Producer* falters with regard to the necessity of artists organizing to take back their production for themselves and society.

Such organizing, as Benjamin understood, would then articulate itself in the material culture artists produce, in turn reproducing and supporting wider contours of struggle: "that simultaneity with certain other producers who earlier seemed scarcely to concern [them]," as Benjamin puts it. Given the assertion that artists are producers, only when artists organize *as and with* their fellow producers can their projects for social change go beyond the ameliorative, linking with those in more integral sectors of production and together producing something truly transformative. Yet, in the end, Loudén's central intuition is not far off: this is not simply a job for abstract analyses—from Loudén, the other commentators, or indeed, a reviewer such as myself—but crucially for the artists themselves. Reflections upon our own material conditions, such as those on offer here, will be fundamental in that process.

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