

# GLADSTONE

Mitch Speed, "Notes on the control of society through art and culture," *ArtReview*, November 1, 2023

## ArtReview

### II Means of Production

Notes on the control of society through art and culture

*by Mitch Speed*





above Mary Cassatt, *The Tea*, c. 1880, oil on canvas, 65 × 92 cm.  
Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

preceding page Joseph Yaeger, *Old long since*, 2022,  
watercolour on gessoed linen, 270 × 190 × 4 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Project Native Informant, London

Last July I found myself on a work trip to Munich, which overlapped with the opening night of the art academy's annual student exhibition. Nursing warm beers from makeshift tiki bars, I soaked up the show's anarchic energy. But afterwards I felt restless. Brimming with optimism, the event also seemed haunted by grim foreknowledge: while many of these students stood on the artworld's doorstep, others were teetering unknowingly at a precipice. All were about to enter a cultural field in which utopian promise is a graspable possibility for the socioeconomically elite, and a fugitive mirage for everyone else.

Cynics may argue that in pointing this out I'm trafficking in the obvious. And they'd have a point. But in repeating this dreary *we've heard it all before* lamentation, they'd also be participating in the pernicious speech-policing that fortifies all forms of inequality, including the artworld's petrification into a wealth ghetto – at least the Global North chunk of it with which I'm acquainted. This essay is an attempt, foolhardy as it may be, to fissure this resignation; to say that the right to the means to produce and enjoy art is inseparable from a society worth living in, and that those who deny the former collaborate in the death of the latter.

Powerful disciplinary mechanisms deter this effort. Writing *Distinction* (1979), his classic work of sociology, Pierre Bourdieu flagged the threat of ostracism that loomed over his project of showing how the ruling class's ability to define standards of good taste helps them to maintain the social-class hierarchy. In talking about how his own upper-class intellectual world partakes in this system, Bourdieu knew he was violating one of his milieu's 'fundamental taboos'. The punishment for breaking taboos is never pretty, social expulsion being the best-case scenario. In the artworld, where there is often little separation between professional and social life, this exclusion can be nearly total.

As an art school undergraduate in Vancouver, I remember witnessing the subtle cruelty of ruling-class taste management. A young man from a nonmetropolitan background had got himself accepted into our school's painting department. He immediately set to work crafting pictures of hockey and baseball players. No one had warned him that such subject matter was off limits in serious art. Lacking the skein of irony that may have granted plausibility to this kind of material, he was mocked behind his back. Then he disappeared.

It was only years later, as we rounded our mid-thirties, that those of us who did get through art school managed to shed the rose-tinted glasses that had shielded us from art's relationship to class. It was no longer possible to ignore the fact that the people making progress were, almost exclusively, those who didn't have to work jobs outside of their studio. While many of us scraped together rent money with wage work or freelance gigs and burned leftover energy on our art or writing, others fully devoted their time to their practices. And not only in studio work, but in a rigorous schedule of socialising, cultivating the relationships that all art careers depend on. Those without private wealth simply couldn't keep up.

Although I'm writing from Berlin, the elite theft of culture doesn't respect international borders any more than the neoliberal capitalist aegis that it serves. In 2018 a British study called PANIC! confirmed that 'the [UK's] cultural and creative sector is marked by significant

exclusions of those from working class social origins'. Only 9 percent of applicants to the Vienna Art Academy come from low-income backgrounds. Of these, only a sliver become students. Why? Unfamiliar with the elite customs, they struggle during the application and interview processes. The Berlin organisation Diversity Arts Culture recently reported that, in addition to discrimination based on race, ethnic background, sex, religion, worldview, disability, age and sexual identity, 'class discrimination occurs in Berlin's cultural sphere and in many other areas of life'.

Addressing the situation in America, the late anthropologist David Graeber didn't mince words. 'A mechanic from Nebraska', he wrote in 2007, 'knows it is highly unlikely that his son or daughter will ever become an Enron [oil] executive, but it is possible... But there is virtually no chance... that his child, no matter how talented, will ever become... a drama critic for *The New York Times*.' Put another way, it is of course possible to build an art career without private wealth, but in the same way that deep-sea diving without an oxygen tank is possible. While a tiny minority manages, everyone else either flees to the surface or drowns.

I am writing from a position of class confusion. My parents had modest upper-working-class jobs, my father a city labourer and my mother a high school student-support worker. As avid readers, they gifted confidence with language to my sister and me. Upon passing away, my schoolteacher grandmother left money – which she had inherited from her brother – earmarked to support us through university. Thanks to this, I've gotten myself into a position where my words are now being published in an internationally distributed art magazine. At the same time, in an artworld where survival increasingly depends on long-term access to family wealth, I now ask myself if I can keep going. It is an uncomfortable fact that freelance critics earn a poverty-level income. To continue writing, I worry, may be to drive down a road leading to a dead end of old-age penury. To even point this out, I'm aware, degrades the aura of glamour that art professionals must cultivate, in a genteel artworld where financial stress is subject matter non grata.

As global wealth has steadily consolidated upwards through the neoliberal era, members of the disappearing middle class also find themselves jettisoned from art. Here's a respondent to the PANIC! survey named Nisha, identified as a British Asian woman from middle-class origins, describing her experience in the cultural field: 'People just think that you have a chip on your shoulder and I hate that. That's why I don't talk about it. I don't want people to think that I have a chip on my shoulder, but I just feel, and I really don't think I'm being paranoid, but I just really feel that the mathematics don't add up.' Put less tactfully, in a cultural field increasingly dominated by the upper crust, the actual financial circumstances that enable careers in culture are willingly obfuscated. Consequently, those lacking family wealth end up feeling gaslit and angry.

In 2011 the artist Andrea Fraser penned a scorching essay called 'L'1% c'est moi', in which she indicated the contemporary artworld's corruption. Therein, she reaffirmed that rightwing populists have garnered much support by redirecting working-class anger towards so-called cultural and intellectual elites. For this reason, to rail against

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elites is now to risk being mistaken for a political reactionary. However, to deny that both conservative and liberal elites exert brutal socioeconomic control over society is to sleepwalk through reality.

For the philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, writing in his 2022 book *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*, elites are simply ‘the advantaged few [who] steer resources and institutions that could serve the many toward their own narrower interests and aims’. It is through this process that the collective right to art has been stolen. The appropriate response is not to demand that these institutions put their money where their mouths are when it comes to practising a version of social justice that incorporates class struggle. At the very least, aggressive and long-term strategies should be developed to support low-income people in the arts. Such an initiative would need to be designed to reach communities of colour that are, in the Global North, radically overrepresented among the socioeconomically dispossessed.

I suspect that not even the anything-goes ethos of today’s contemporary artworld could’ve kept my athlete-painting peer from his fate. These days, ‘low’ cultural themes are perhaps more admissible than ever as content for contemporary art, but only if deployed with the right sensibility. The rhetoric of ‘sensibility’ – as bourgeois a concept as exists – plays a central if understated role in preserving ruling-class hegemony in art. It is a kind of code that allows artists who traffic in potentially low or vulgar subject matter to communicate that they know what they are doing. To borrow a page from Bourdieu’s book, knowing what one is doing in this sense means to communicate that you are not taking full, embodied pleasure in your subject. Instead, your relationship with said material is understood to be rarefied, cerebral, distanced.

What makes this arrangement especially pernicious is the ungraspable nature of how the message of correct sensibility is sent. It cannot be communicated in words, or at least not words alone, but rather in how an artist carries themselves, and above all the company they keep. In this way, the artist attains what Bourdieu called an aura of ‘cultivated naturalness’. This state can only be attained through long-term exposure. And this exposure is available almost exclusively to those born into the correct social stratum.

Conversations about class often return to a complex truth, one that in certain cases also doubles as a comforting refrain: ‘It’s not only about money’. Ken Lum – a first-generation Chinese Canadian-American artist from impoverished working-class roots – has correctly pointed out that these days there exists ‘a certain fluidity between the [middle and upper] classes’. In her recent book *Who does not envy with us is against us: three essays on being working-class* (2023), the Belfast-born writer Maria Fusco explains that she doesn’t ‘believe in social mobility... you are always the same class as the one you grew up in even if your circumstances have radically changed’. It’s a well-made point, but one that meets a strong rebuttal in the ample evidence that class, as much as it is a question of identity and tastes, is also one of money – a point Fusco herself underlines with anecdotes illustrating her fear of wasting food. Introducing the first English edition of *Distinction*, the academic Tony Bennett – paraphrasing Bourdieu – described the situation like this: ‘Class relationships are reproduced as the economic capital associated with professional and management class positions

is converted into forms of cultural capital’. In other words, cashflow is almost always a precondition for accessing elite cultural milieus, not to mention staying in them.

In Germany the financial barrier to art careers is mitigated by the broad absence of tuition fees, and by comparatively nonpredatory student loans. But after graduation, artists from low-income families will encounter formidable hurdles. Almost all artists endure years of unpaid exhibitions before they can hope to attract the attention of curators or gallerists. Those who appear successful, because they show regularly, often earn little to nothing from these exhibitions and must instead rely on other financial resources. Only after enduring this process might artists potentially live from selling and exhibiting their work. This development is never guaranteed, and far from reliable even if it happens.

“The artworld”, Lum said to me during an email exchange, “loves to perpetuate the myth of meritocracy.” As the standard by which almost all arts funding is doled out, and the primary criterion for art-school admission, merit also serves as a cunning pretext for ignoring the elite domination of culture. In his 2019 book, *The Meritocracy Trap*, the lawyer Daniel Markovits conveys this with crystal clarity. Meritocracies began under altruistic auspices – to break the hereditary elite’s grip on university education – but this hegemony was swiftly regained. Rich families alone possess the means to prepare their children to excel in meritocratic competition.

Gassed up by the delusion of meritocracy, arts-granting institutions routinely fail to correct this rigged game. In Berlin, art-stipend applications ignore economic need. Although the city’s rare subsidised studios are technically regulated by an income limit, it is easily worked around: to prove their eligibility, wealthy applicants can simply reference their personal bank balance. Because such people often have their bills paid by trust funds, these numbers may well be lower than those of their struggling peers.

It is easy to imagine that eradicating the working- and disappearing middle-classes’ access to the means of producing and participating in autonomous forms of culture may well contribute to what Markovitz describes as a sense of ‘malevolent resentment’ among these groups. If this explanation seems farfetched, it is only because the artworld has been so thoroughly annexed by the ruling class that we have lost the ability to imagine how it could meaningfully serve anyone else. As Ben Davis writes with pithy brilliance in his 2013 book *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*: ‘A final role for art is the self-replication of ruling-class ideology about art itself – the dominant values given to art serve not only to enact ruling-class values directly, but also to subjugate, within the sphere of the arts, other possible values of art.’

The difficult truth is that a better artworld will likely never exist until neoliberal capitalism is itself brought to an end. In the face of this dilemma, the most sensible course of action would be to abandon the artworld in its current form, and instead dedicate ourselves to the creation of a new one in which the means of creativity and dignity are decoupled from socioeconomic power. Painful though it is to write such a conclusion, I can’t see any other way to build an artworld worthy of the name. ar

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