

THE CIRCUIT OF AUTHORSHIP AND THE PROSTHETIC IMAGINATION
(ATTACHED HANDS AND DETACHED HANDS)

Surrogacy is not identical to authorship-by-prosthetics, but prosthetics is certainly a form of surrogacy. Indeed, prosthetics might be construed as being the means by which surrogacy is embodied technically in art. But, as we have seen in our discussion of the readymade and the avant-garde, the technical embodiment of labour in prosthetic devices and in machines has tended to be appropriated by early avant-garde artists in the name of a dialectic of deskilling. Avant-garde artists were not at all interested in the ways that technology might extend a range of conventional skills, but in letting technology stand in for such skills. Hence the place of photography, for instance, in the avant-garde, is a history of the unambiguous and radical displacement of fine art craft; the defence of the photograph as a ready-made is concerned precisely with the prosthetic *eradication* of craft-based skills. This invites a more nuanced understanding of prosthetics in art than is normally held to – the notion that authorship is prosthetic or not according to whether the artist is using or not using a piece of equipment, or operating or not operating some mechanical or technological device.

Prosthetics, rather, is the name we might give to the relations between the *attached* hand of the artist and the *attached* hands of non-studio labour (in their relations with technology) and the *detached* hand of the artist in its role as executor. The attached hand and the detached hand as they operate across the divide between artistic labour and non-artistic labour, thus, oppose each other as part of the dialectic of skill and deskilling. Consequently, the 'circuit of return to authorship' involves different relations of attachment and detachment depending on the nature of the work. For instance in the case of Moholy-Nagy's 'telephone paintings' the circuit of authorship might be represented in the following way: detached hand (the call into the factory; the reading out of the instructions), is followed by attached hand (the labour of the factory workers), followed by detached hand (Moholy-Nagy's authorial re-presentation of the enamel paintings as readymades). Equally an artist may only provide one moment of detach-

ment, so to speak, as Carl Andre did in ordering his bricks for *Equivalent VIII* (1967). After the initial call to the brickworks Andre had no further involvement in the material organization of the work. When the sculpture is shown the bricks are placed by gallery assistants on the floor following his written instructions. Prosthetics, therefore, is as much about the relationship between the artist's hand and anonymous labour as it is a description of the attachment of the hand to technology in authorship. And, as such, it is best thought of as a theory about where the artist's hands touch or do not touch the object or objects of authorship, and, therefore, about the absence or presence of the place of the attached hand of non-studio labour in this process.

The relations between the detached hand and the attached hand as they define the 'circuit of return in surrogate authorship' are at the centre of avant-garde practice from the 1920s onwards. Once the readymade enters the relations of art's production the attached hand is suddenly in a relationship of intimacy with the detached hand. This leads to a rapid opening up of the prosthetic imagination, in which the gap between meaning in art and mimetic expressivism is exulted in, and transformed into a place of rich experimentation. However, if the composite-artist, the miscegenating-artist, the surrogate-artist, the collective-artist step forward into this place as avatars of art's reskilling, the detached hand's intimacy with general social technique also channels what is the other driving force of the prosthetic imagination in this period: the equalization of technique as an expression of cultural democracy. All the expanded circuits and relations of authorship I have so far discussed cohere around one important question: if artistic authorship is a category that is not embedded in innate skill, but is the result of learning as part of collective intellect and shared labour, then, in short, anyone can be an artist. And, moreover, perhaps more pointedly, everyone will be an artist.

To this effect the critique of authorship since the 1920s has been accompanied not just by various identifications with productive workers on the part of artists, but with an openness to the democratic aspirations of amateurs and popular enthusiasts. From Duchamp through the Constructivists and Productivists, and through to the Surrealists, the avant-garde has drawn from the democratic imaginary of those who try and fail the test of professional cultural assimilation. This tradition of identification with the culturally unassimilated, indeed, runs through both modernism and the avant-garde from the 1860s through to the 1960s, and still determines the

anti-bourgeois reflexes of art today. Both traditions have drawn from the notion of the amateur as someone who in his or her failure to assimilate culturally stands outside of or athwart bourgeois cultural authority and status. But the amateur is no singular figure or force, he or she represents a number of different cultural tendencies which modernism and the avant-garde have incorporated. In this light amateurism can be split into two broad categories which largely follow the split between modernism and the avant-garde: the notion of the amateur-technician and amateur scientist – as inscribed in the vast expansion of amateur photographic practice and natural-scientific work from the 1920s – and the amateur as eccentric, ‘primitive’, *idiot savant*, best represented of course by the art of the insane.²³ From the 1860s to the Russian revolution modernist subjectivism favoured the latter; from the Russian revolution through to the late 1930s, the avant-garde favoured the former. This division is not strict. Surrealism’s interest in automatic and collective authorship owed a major debt to mesmerism, spiritualism and the occult, just as many later modernist painters (Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline) saw themselves as manual workers of sorts, and affected a proletarian style.²⁴ Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between these traditions in relation to how the labour of the amateur, in particular the amateur artist, is identified, and what this might mean for notions of artistic authorship and cultural democracy. For the avant-garde the amateur is the ally of the productive worker, insofar as his appropriation of photography for his own ends, for example, places the worker-as-amateur-photographer and amateur-photographer-as-worker at the forefront of the cultural means of production. As Dorothea Lange, who worked for the Farm Security Administration photo-archive in the 1930s, puts it: ‘Documentary photography invites and needs participation by amateurs as well as by professionals. Only through the interested work of amateurs who choose themes and follow them can documentation by the camera of our age and our complex society be intimate, pervasive, and adequate.’²⁵ This is why the worker-photographer was central to the political imagination of the early avant-garde, perhaps more so than any other cultural or artistic figure, as was reflected in Benjamin’s writing.²⁶ Modernist subjectivism, on the other hand, invests in the amateur as someone who fails to see what is artistically appropriate, with the result that their work produces a kind of mistranslation or mis-seeing of what is culturally approved. This might take the form, for instance, of an over-eagerness to be seen as technically skilful by replicating what are perceived

as the most technically advanced aspects of contemporary art, which results in a strange and affected concoction of effects. The amateur's inability to stabilize his object of desire (to be taken seriously as an artist) is identified metonymically, therefore, as being similar to the subjective drive in modernism to resist prevailing and professional accounts of good taste and skill. He is thereby redeemed from the disdain of academic judgement and the stigma of failing to achieve critical self-consciousness. Modernists may act as professional artists, but they perform their work as aspirational amateurs, forever mistranslating their object of desire. The amateur then is a lowly figure in different ways in these two traditions. On the one hand, for the avant-garde, he is someone who in gaining access to the modern means of cultural reproduction represents the narrowing of the skills between artist and non-artist; and on the other hand, for modernist subjectivism, he is someone who, in his exsanguinousness, is a model of resistance to professional protocol. There is an assumption, then, in the avant-garde that general social technique provides a space in which artist and non-artist, professional and amateur, come together in order to reshape the dynamics of authorship. Who is an author, and on what terms, once general social technique is in place? In modernist subjectivism, in contrast, there is an assumption that professional authorship and the authorship of the amateur will never meet, and, consequently, will always be engaged in a necessary dance of mutual exclusion. In this sense, in the avant-garde the amateur is assimilated, along with the decentred skills of the professional artist, into the sphere of general social technique. In modernist subjectivism he is identified as an exemplar of counter-cultural negation.

The identity of the amateur in modernism is thus closer to the notion of the self-taught artist, now the generally accepted term for most folk-artists ('outsider' artist being rightly thought of as socially demeaning). This is an art which is untrained, largely provincial and working-class or peasant in origins, and driven by powerful psychological and therapeutic needs. In this its self-identity and value derive from its expulsion of the forms, signs and skills of prevailing professional accounts of art. As such, the autochthonous artist is admired precisely because he or she fails or resists all accounts of dominant cultural inclusion. Indeed, the would-be 'sincerity' and psychological 'honesty' of the work provides an authentic counter to the reflexivity of high-culture. But despite the formal overlap between the modernist account of the amateur and self-taught on the grounds of their

shared 'primitivism', self-taught art in these terms is not strictly amateur at all, given its unwillingness, or inability, to enter the advanced technical relations of art. Self-taught artists are invariably naive-painters (or rather untrained artists trained in the conventions of painterly naïveté), they are not photographers, filmmakers or 'installation-artists'. This is because self-taught art calls forth, and reinforces, the retardation of the technical relations of art as the necessary means by which the authentic claims of self-taught art are to be staged. Amateur art on the other hand, because it has a notional relationship to technically advanced practice (albeit in a spirit of mistranslated copying), has a working relationship to general social technique. Self-taught art, therefore, for all its espousal of popular values, does not provide a democratic point of entry for the transformation of the relations between artist and non-artist, professional and non-professional. In its fetishization of retarded craft it is ultimately opposed to the self-development of the non-professional or occasional artist and to the development of collective intellect. This is reflected in the vast financial speculation in self-taught art (tied as it is to the fact that the value of the art is always codified through the biography of the artist-as-victim) at the expense of the art's possible place in a transformative model of culture.²⁷

The amateur, then, *contra* the self-taught or naive artist, is one of the ways in which the avant-garde artist mediates the equalization of artistic technique under general social technique. The amateur, in this sense, is a new kind of artist lying in waiting, the artist who will be borne out of general social technique's erosion of the division between professional artist and non-professional artist. The amateur on the 'way up' and the professional artist on the 'way down' meet under the auspices of deskilling. In this way the amateur-as-artist is the destinal form of the artist-as-amateur. But if the amateur – as failed or dutiful aspirant artist – mediates the democratic drive of general social technique, it is the amateur's companion, the non-artist as collaborator, who determines the form that this democratic drive actually takes in the early avant-garde and after. This expands our understanding of the circuit of return to authorship in surrogacy, and collective authorship. Surrogate authorship is not simply that which returns to the author, but is the means by which the relationship between artists and non-artists and the relationship between non-artists and artists is transformed.

THE NON-ARTIST AS COLLABORATOR

The non-artist as collaborator is either the labourer whose labour is incorporated into the circuit of authorship unknowingly (as in Duchamp) or deliberately and knowingly as in Moholy-Nagy. The latter – the Constructivist model *par excellence* – can, as such, be divided between two different circuits of inclusion. Between labour which is hired and subject to executive decision (as in Moholy-Nagy's own 'telephone paintings') and labour which is directly collaborative and democratically organized. This is largely the model of Soviet Productivism, and left Constructivism in the 1920s. Thus when the Constructivist Osip Brik and others advocated in 1921 that artists should get involved in 'real practical work in production',²⁸ he was insisting that the circuit of authorship should be opened up to include workers as non-artistic collaborators. The objective of this inclusion being, in clear contradistinction to Gastev and the mechanists, that the worker 'must become a conscious and active participant in the creative process of producing an object'.²⁹ Here the non-artistic collaborator 'completes' the circuit of authorship as the artist enters production by removing the distinction between artist and worker. As the First Working Group of Constructivists puts it: 'before the Revolution – slave work; at present – the liberation of work; and after the final victory of the proletariat – the possibility of exultant work'.³⁰ For Alexsei Gan in *Konstruktivism* (1922), the eradication of the distinction between the factory worker and the artist was essential to the development of communism.³¹

This completion of the artist in the worker, and the worker in the artist, represents the expanded liberatory content of surrogate authorship in this period. The non-artist as collaborator becomes the figure who brings authorship out of subjectivism into collective intellect. Aesthetic thinking is made a subsumptive category rather than presumptive one. As I have argued, this is already evident in Duchamp's readymades. In Constructivism and Productivism, however, this thinking becomes more than a *corrective* model of good practice, it becomes the basis for the very transformation of the social form of art and labour and therefore the *ideal horizon* of praxis. Hence if the early avant-garde has a critique of productive labour (of its instrumentalities and repetitions) it does not see aesthetic thinking as opposed to the objectivity of socialized labour. On the contrary, the critique of productive labour in avant-garde practice is

addressed – across various kinds of thinking and forms – to the restructuring of socialized labour. The circuit of return to the author in surrogate authorship, and the artistic surrogacy of the non-artist, hence, are part of a larger emancipatory circuit: the possibility of self-realization as a constitutive part of the universal release of human labour from the constraints of socialized labour. The early avant-garde's reflections on authorship, and labour in the artwork, then, are no less an account of how the complex labour of artistic labour challenges the drive to simple labour at the point of production. This is why when we look beneath the formal and ideological differences between Duchamp and Moholy-Nagy, and the Constructivist and Productivist theorists, we can see something larger historically in their work: a preoccupation with the circuits of authorship beyond the monadic author. Despite the different accounts of the circuits of authorship across the divide between artist and non-artist, artistic labour and productive labour in the early avant-garde, they provide a shared understanding of the social limits of Cartesian modernism. Modernist subjectivism's defence of artistic authorship *all the way down* has to be carried over into *technique* and socialized authorship for it to prevail, that is, for aesthetic self-transformation to be more than a disembodied defence of the 'aesthetic life' and the verities of self-taught authenticity. And it is this mode of address, with its destinal sense of the essential spectrality of the artist, that, despite the gulf in historical and social circumstances from the original avant-garde, continues to haunt contemporary art's reflections on authorship.

