We say: a work of art.

by Pat Hoffie

THROUGHOUT HISTORY INTERPRETATIONS of the exact work an artist is responsible for have changed dramatically. And yet what audiences expect from art and from artists may not have changed as much as theories about art and its relationship to work have. Audiences like to see an artist’s skill, but they also like to see an artwork which looks as though it has come into being of its own volition.

‘It’s a work of art.’ It’s as if the active subject of art is capable of producing that something – that ‘it’– into being. Then what, we might wonder, would the artist’s role be in this kind of process? An aide? A witness? A conduit perhaps? And if so, where would the artist’s work lie?

It’s been an old chestnut at least since Plato’s time. In the present era questions about the kind of work involved in making art resurface in tertiary institutions the world over. The extent to which the processes of making art are capable of being corralled within the perimeters of traditional approaches to ‘research’ has been one such discussion.

That particular question hasn’t posed any difficulties to justify. However, in terms of expecting that research contributes to ‘new knowledge’, the more elusive aspects of the processes of artmaking are – and should be – difficult to shackle to metrics and templates.

Just as well: if that were possible there’s a good chance we would become adept at producing lots of outputs that looked ‘suspiciously like art’ but that failed to inspire or cajole or soothe or interrupt or critically interrogate our everyday assumptions. We would be adept at producing lots of non-risk-taking outcomes that weren’t, in Plato’s terms, capable of being ‘dangerous’.

Such questions have remained central to considerations about how best to foster healthy communities and societies, institutions and governments. Although interpretations of Plato’s response to both the role of the artist and the potential work of artwork have been famously diverse and intriguingly contradictory, the fact that the subject of art and artists occupied so much of his attention has made his thinking of ongoing interest in considerations about the ‘problem’ of artwork, art’s work and the work of art.

Perhaps most famously of all, Plato decreed that art should be kept outside his plan for an ideal Republic – at the very least, he decreed, the arts would have to be very strictly censored. Inspired reductiveness might be used to argue that there are at least three reasons for Plato’s ambivalent views on the relationship of art to work:

1. The first might be explained by reasoning that Plato’s commitment to the possibility of an ideal world governed by the power of rational thinking could not tolerate the inclusion of the unsupervisable thinking of art. Art, with its work practices sailing close to those of entertainment and/or serendipity, seemed too dangerous. Its capacity for exciting responses and passions was too threatening. The possibility of artwork working to incite alternatives was too volatile for the equilibrium Plato thought was necessary for the ideal state.

2. Another reason may have been that Plato was a kind of work-snob. According to William Morris, Plato lived at a time when the physical labour necessary to make artistic production was held as inferior to the intellectual arts. Morris describes it as a time when ‘all handicrafts were looked down on with contempt, and what of art went with them was kept in the strictest subjection to the intellectual arts, which were the work of the free citizens in other words of a privileged oligarchy.’

3. A third reason – keeping in mind the fact that the rider about the reductive nature of the argument has already been flagged – could have stemmed from the fact that Plato once fancied himself as a bit of an artist, like another utopiast, Adolf Hitler. It’s said that he had originally focused on being a poet until he made the mistake of comparing what he produced to that of Homer. Later on, disappointed with what he perceived to be his shortcomings as an artist, he shifted his heroes and Socrates inspired
his decision to become a philosopher. Whether Plato’s subsequent proposal that his ideal polis could not accommodate poets or playwrights or artists had anything at all to do with sour grapes or not is a moot point, but there is little doubt that both this reason and reason 2 are grounded in Plato’s conviction that the role of the artist as a worker is important to the outcome of the artwork.

It’s easy enough to get cranky at Plato’s views on art if you’re an artist: his duplicitous attitude to art, his bolshy points of view about keeping artists out of his invented perfect little world and his continuing changes of opinion on where art comes from offer no cut and dried opinions.

Cranky or not, there’s one clear reason why an artist – any artist – might choose conditional compliance with Plato’s positions, no matter how contrary or how difficult they are to pin down: Plato took art seriously. He took it seriously enough to propose banning it. He had the intellect to understand that it had the power to change responses and shift opinions. He comprehended the extent of influence the senses and the body have on the mind. He had total respect for its ‘bigness’.

So where does this leave the contemporary artist and ‘the work thing’? The gap between the territory of focused, outcome-directed effort and action and a territory that might depend on more circuitous, difficult-to-define skills, like the skills needed to follow a hunch; or to rely on intuition; or maybe to ‘listen to the direction the work wants to take’; or perhaps even to wait for some kind of inspiration from beyond the control of the rational mind and the skilled hand.

More specifically how does that work thing fit into the funding organisations’ (be they academic, bureaucratic or private) managed expectations? In his essay Re-valuing the Artist in the New World Order David Pledger describes the reduced myopia of contemporary conditions that have diminished our recognition of the important role of artists and the work of art:

Managerialism sees itself as the antidote to chaos, irrationality, disorder, and incompleteness, essential elements in this alchemy. More like a mineral than a gas, art is hard to contain, process and control. The managerial approach to art or ‘the arts’ generates outputs that, while appearing suspiciously like art on the surface, have been neutered in order to fall in line with the controlled and ordered completeness demanded by the managerial polis. The results lie far from the kind of art that might be powerful enough to be deemed a threat by Plato (or Hitler). Instead, the current manifestations of the polis demand managerial work-loads on the artist that are so heavy that the work of making art is forced into whatever time is left in the margins. Pledger writes,

In this way the artist reflects an image that the arts agency can recognise and organise within its own mechanistic view of the world. For their part, the artist is introduced to the world of accountability and regulation, which, through sheer weight, sidelines their artistic practice and endeavour – a direct consequence and goal of managerialism as artistic expression is idiomatic to democracy.

At this point it’s worth returning to the question about what the work of art should be in terms of our own Republic. In order to make decisions about why we should or should not continue to value art, how can we judge whether a work of art works?

Some of the forms of work contemporary art engages occur when it reflects and challenges and soothes. Or when it consoles and disturbs. Or when it contradicts and confirms or jars and abrades and reinforces and reminds us of things we may have been on the point of forgetting (like that fact about its bigness). All these verbs suggest that someone or something is acted upon.

The relation of art to work and what is accepted as the work of the artist has undergone a series of changes throughout history. But a common thread throughout analyses has linked art’s role as central to communal, social and political life. In the late nineteenth century, written in the shadow of the impact of industrialisation on economic and social as well as cultural outcomes, William Morris’ Art and Labour is a passionate treaty that describes art in terms of
…beauty produced by the labour of man both mental and bodily, the expression of the interest man takes in the life of man upon the earth with all its surroundings, in other words the human pleasure of life is what I mean by art.4

Morris acknowledged the importance of both physical as well as conceptual work to the making of art. He celebrated art’s role as being something that was for everyman, and, as a good socialist, had no patience for the kind of art that was intended only for ‘the amusement namely of idle fine gentlemen and ladies.’ Morris’ belief that art could only be produced through a process of ‘happy, reasonable, honoured labour’ put the role of art as central to his envisioning of a better society.

This conviction that art must reflect its place within the context of social, political and cultural relations continued in the work of Georg Lukacs and Walter Benjamin, the latter of whose 1936 essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction5 pushed further at understanding the blurring of divisions between technological, political and creative development so that the audience or viewer could be recognised as an integral element in establishing the meaning of the work.

According to Maurizio Lazzarato, the growth of the kind of ‘responsible’ audience predicted by Benjamin had mutated and transformed into a kind of ‘mass intellectual’ by the 1970s, a decade defined by him as a time during which ideas about the kind of labour involved in creative production were completely overhauled. In his 1996 essay Immaterial Labor Lazzarato talks about the harnessing of intellectual labour to the norms of late capitalist production, and the accompanying dissolve of the borders between ‘material and immaterial labour’.

So those who inhabit that rarified zone where the air is thinnest, who slip in and out of the sleek passages between the ‘creative industries’ and management, can now flag their newly created status through all the requisite signals of ‘style’. What is needed most in late capitalism is the spin necessary to keep the wheels in motion – to control the desire of work for work’s sake so that it’s even more addictive than Jordan Belfort’s appetite for Quaaludes, cocaine, sex and money itself.6

Lazzarato describes the ‘worker’s’ transformation from one associated with manual or material labour to one who, of necessity, must be activated at all levels of subjectivity. The ‘immaterial labour’ demanded from the worker by management of the contemporary polis has all the surface gloss of ‘creativity’. Just do a tally of the buzz-words bandied around for the last post-industrial decade or two: creative futures; creative industries (industries?!!); creative communities; creative commons and so on. Lazzarato warned in 1996,

The management mandate to ‘become subjects of communication’ threatens to be even more totalitarian than the earlier rigid division between mental and manual labor (ideas and execution), because capitalism seeks to involve even the worker's personality and subjectivity within the production of value.7

The social cooperation essential to late capitalism is totally dependent on a cycle of continuous innovation, communication and consumption generated by the capacity to identify, imagine, articulate and image ongoing desire in the form of style, needs and tastes. Artists are well skilled in the immaterial labour demanded of such cycles.

So although it may seem, on a surface level, that artists have not only shoved their way past Plato and made their way in to the contemporary polis, but have also taken it over, pause for thought may be due: Lazzarato describes the co-opting of late-capitalist production as having broken down all the potential for opposition and diversity. This suggests that the kind of ‘works of art’ described by Plato - those works that remain dangerous through their critical otherness – still resist co-option.

Although Lazzarato resists any easy re-mystification of the creative process, he reserves a conviction in the strong potential of immaterial labour to adopt autonomous, contradictory and critically responsive systems of production that are beyond the cooperative incorporation of late capitalism. These
‘aesthetic/ideological models’ of production offer small-scale and mobile methods of production that enable them to be nimble, self-transformational and responsive to new contexts and audiences, and that therefore can enable them to thrive as guerrilla units of self-sustaining practice.

When the artist is involved in making art, they are not always in control of the direction of work; at times they are ‘listening’ to the artwork itself, or perhaps ‘letting it have its head’ in a way that may not have looked like a valid process of work to earlier approaches to defining labour. At other times they may be ‘speaking’ to an audience through the work, and at other moments the audience is ‘speaking back’ to her through their responses, reactions, critical feedback. You could say that the ‘work’ of the art oozes through between the nodes in this process of interactive flows which, through its interactive nature, builds a system of transformational and contingent social networks: without any of those nodes – the artist, the artwork, the audience – the work disappears.

Artists talk to each other of their ‘art practice’ – as if it’s a training – something that’s a preparation, even though the term also refers to the outcomes (when it’s used as a noun) as well as the process (when it’s used as a verb). It’s a term that artists don’t stop using at any particular point of their development as artists. They’re always engaging in art practice. It’s as if that training could be a state of perpetual preparation, as if the training is itself a kind of work that prepares for the work that might happen if and when the art takes over.

This praxis involves a preparedness to mix it with the messy business of handling stuff, to the business of communication, inventiveness and the capacity to know when to change direction and when to simply stand back in order to allow other forces and flows to take over. According to Hannah Arendt, this capacity to ‘engage in active praxis is what makes us uniquely human’; it’s a way of fostering a polis that involves participatory action and participatory labour – both material and immaterial. As such, art practice has offered and continues to offer alternative pathways that have tunnelled through and beyond the walls of all kinds of political utopias throughout history – whether those imagined by creative genius or those controlled by bureaucratic elitism or managerialist incorporation.

The various kinds of relationships of art to labour are central to the way we evaluate art. In a kind of balancing act, skill and serendipity weave in and out of a process where the work involved is a form of play. This indeterminacy is part of art’s allure both as a practice/process, and in terms of its invitations to its viewers to be participants – to be part of bringing the art work into being. And, most importantly, it’s important to remember that art is a very particular kind of work, one that has been recognised and acknowledged and respected by thinkers not as a means to a more easily identifiable end, but as a big, untidy absolutely essential kind of work that is crucial to understanding humanity.

1. William Morris, 1884, *Art and Labour*

2. David Pledger *Re-valuing the artist in the New World Order*, Currency House, Sydney, p. 10

3. David Pledger *Re-valuing the artist in the New World Order*, Currency House, Sydney, p. 18

4. William Morris, 1884, *Art and Labour*

5. Walter Benjamin, 1936, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

6. Jordan Belfort’s memoirs provided the basis for the script for the 2013 movie *The Wolf of Wall Street*, directed by Martin Scorsese in which Leonardo DiCaprio played the role of Belfort.


8. Hannah Arendt, 1958, *The Human Condition*