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Dieter Roelstraete

The Business: On the Unbearable Lightness of Art

Ô Paresse, mère des arts et des nobles vertus, sois le baume des angoisses humaines!

—Paul Lafargue, *Le droit à la paresse*, 1880

Full disclosure: I grew up the son of an artist, and after more than ten years in the business, I feel it is about time I finally wrote about it. For although this reluctant resolution may simply be motivated by the mundane tragedy of my own private aging, it has become increasingly clear to me in recent years that much of my current thinking about art was shaped rather decisively (if *very* indirectly) by that filial experience, and much of the conjecture I am seeking to flesh out in this essay is directly influenced by my first encounters with art —encounters which first took place and shape in front of my father’s modest but well-balanced library, in his ateliers (he must have moved house every two years or so for a whole damned decade), at the opening receptions for the many group shows he was in, throughout the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s, in villages, towns and cities scattered across the Flemish plains. It is not important to know, for now, what kind of art Stefaan Roelstraete made back then (and continues to make to this day, in fact), but it is important to know that this art was *heavy*—stone, steel, and glass were his materials of choice for most of the period I am referring to here (again, roughly the 1980s—the age of Anselm Kiefer, the age of New British Sculpture). It was also *big*, and on occasion even hazardous: long, slender columns of steel with lots of sharp edges and thick pieces of broken glass sticking out of their capitals—handling these cumbersome monstrosities was no laughing matter, and the many scars on my father’s hands, arms, legs, and feet are stoic, worn reminders of

the risks I naively assumed, for the longest time, to be integral to the artist's trade. (Other work I was aware of at the time, other than the classics of modern painting, were big sculptures and installations by Anthony Caro, Donald Judd, Henry Moore, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, and the like.) Needless to say, I also assumed that art was what an artist actually *did*, and did *him- or herself*—I don't think I ever heard my father utter the word "assistant" once in his whole life (much less *studio* assistant).¹ Which of course meant that, considering the work's aforementioned scale and weight, I was regularly recruited to help him install his art (less often after I managed to break an expensive, exquisitely polished pane of glass). Art was that awkward, heavy, occasionally dangerous thing, the actual making of which ("production" was not part of our vocabulary at the time, much less "practice") more often than not required considerable physical effort—how often did I think to myself: Why doesn't he make installations in *paper*? Using post-its or some such? Or if scale is the thing—why not rope and thread? I did not know of Fred Sandback's existence at the time, but I would have happily encouraged my father to perhaps explore that aesthetic instead—it would have made both our lives quite a bit more comfortable. This, then, constitutes perhaps my oldest criticism in and of art, the juvenile consideration that marks my very beginnings as an art critic: why not make it *lighter*?²

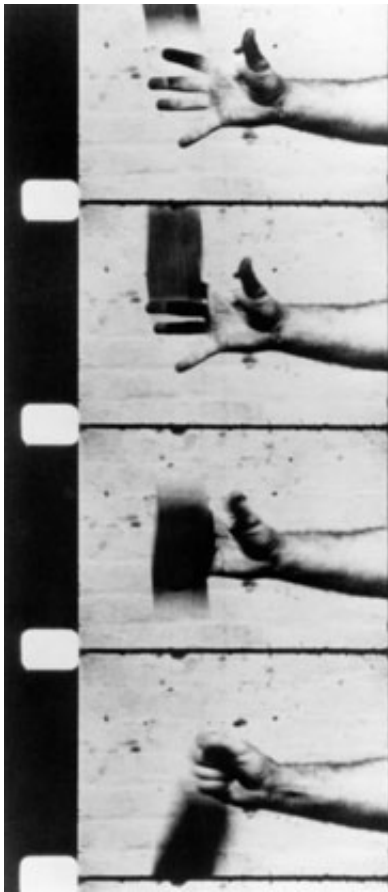


Andrei Tarkovsky on the set of his movie *The Mirror*.

A quarter century on, I have come to look upon the ubiquitous requirement of "lightness" in contemporary art—lightness of all kinds: lightness of touch, lightness of materials, lightness of execution, lightness of *concept*—in radically different, certainly less sympathetic terms; indeed, it is precisely the unbearable lightness of much current art, its snooty cultivation of that graceful effortlessness that is the supposed hallmark of true genius, that is much more likely to irk my critical instinct these days. ("Really, that's *it*?"

“Just a little more effort, please!”) Although I am obviously not interested in making a case for the restoration of “weight,” both of the literal and metaphorical variety (as in “weightiness”), as the central determining category of artistic excellence, I do have an interest in the critical reevaluation of one of weight’s corollaries, that dirty word named work—i.e., the *effort* that is required of the handling of weight, not just physically of course (thinking, as long as it is thinking hard, thinking weighty thoughts, is also work), yet also, unambiguously, physically.

The concept of work has been at the forefront of much critical debate in art in recent years, and art “work” in particular, the activity engaged in by art “workers” (now more commonly referred to as “cultural producers”—a less politically charged equivalent), has become a rallying point for the broad discussion of “labor” in the post-Fordist global economy.³ Not only are art “practice” and various art “activities” held up as paradigms of a new typology of production and productivity in contemporary creative capitalism, but the figure of the artist himself has now become the linchpin of a new culture of entrepreneurship and management that is predicated, in part, upon the precept that work is everywhere and nowhere at the same time; that we are always working and never at work; that life, work, and—in the artist’s case—art can no longer be distinguished from each other in any meaningful sense. (That’s one utopian promise fulfilled.) Cultural producers in the broad sense certainly constitute the vanguard of this seismic shift because if anything characterizes the self-image of artist, critic, and curator alike—and one could of course also add the arts administrator, art teacher, gallerist, studio assistant, and so forth to this ever-expanding art-world family—it is the shared assertion that we are always working, indeed that “we are working too much.” What we mean, of course, is that *we are busy*, and what we really mean when we are referring to the art business, whether as a peculiar province of “showbiz” or not, is quite literally this oceanic sensation of *always being busy*. The experience is a familiar one, certainly to everyone now reading these very lines on their smartphones on the way to “work” (attention!: you are working already): as a writer, I am quite often too busy to write, and as a curator I am quite often too busy to curate. (Back when I used to teach, every now and then, I very often also felt that I was really too busy to teach—apologies, former students.) And just as clearly, one can tell from looking at so much art “made” today, it seems that many artists are also too busy to really “make” art. They work alright, just like I do, but not really—what we “do” is quite simply something else.⁴ Indeed, more often than not, an essay (like this one, in fact) is written on a Saturday afternoon; key curatorial work is done on consecutive nights out, taking artists out for dinners and drinks, after hours, “after work”; crucial steps in an art project are undertaken on Sunday, on Shabbat, on Jum’ah. (Logically so perhaps, as ideas, as they say, do not have thirty-eight hour work weeks—but still, an obvious pattern quickly arises: ideas have a way of arising outside the institutionalized world of work.) All of this is made both possible and acceptable (not to mention, more troublingly, desirable) because of our implicit allegiance to the old utopian ideal, so crucial to avant-garde ideology, of the dissolution of art into life, which is itself one of the basic tenets of the socialist vision of a laborless society, a world in which everyone will be free to pursue happiness in a creative fashion modeled, ultimately, after the ideal of art and artishood. (Entry into the art world is conditional upon our swearing allegiance to this idyll, i.e., upon our accepting the fact that what we will be “doing” the rest of our lives will be something other than work.) But the unrelenting business of the art world is also enabled by its structural reliance on various social networks, on the creative repurposing of human relations as artistic material and/or artistic content, of “relating” as a line of work (that of the it’s-not-what-you-know-it’s-who-you-know variety): you may be thinking you are enjoying some elevated dinner conversation, but you are actually working; you may be thinking you are working, but you are actually just enjoying your dinner—whichever way you want it, you are always *busy*.⁵

Richard Serra, *Hand Catching Lead*, 1968.

What are the various forms of being busy that we identify with work, or engage in while working—while *thinking* we are working? Emailing of course, as well as texting and speaking to each other on the phone, and all that has become part and parcel of this industrial-strength “ecstasy of communication”: checking emails, reading and writing emails, deleting emails, arranging email folders, replying, forwarding, copying—two or three hours a day at least. Surfing the net—uploading and downloading, *searching*. (Why are the tools we use to perform all these tasks never just called *find* engines? Precisely because searching, not finding, is the point, and so much more time is inevitably wasted in the process—another cog in the machine of modern talking that has taken on the guise of an aesthetic strategy, an artistic gesture: after all, isn’t searching idealized as the essence of all art?) Booking trips of course, always booking trips, for there can be no contemporary art without travel, without constant motion: looking for hotels, looking for cheap flights, looking for good connections, the possibility, perhaps, to stay an extra day to take in one more city on whatever trip it is we are about to undertake—and perennially comparing our suggested itineraries. *Planning* these trips, our various engagements and commitments, and keeping our calendars in sync and up to date. *Meeting*: planning to meet, meeting to plan. Administering—keeping track—staying in touch. Drawing up a preliminary budget. (This may involve thinking about the assistant you’re about to hire, potentially the first of many—until an assistant must be hired to assist the other assistants.) And because all of this is done in the studio or in the office as much as at home—it is another structural feature of the contemporary art world, of course, that these demarcations no longer matter much anyway—the following are mixed into the dizzying maelstrom of general business: arranging for either a cat- or babysitter—subletting—keeping a watch on three different bank accounts—

indeed, getting one’s taxes in order!—thinking about going to the gym—keeping an eye on one’s diet—catching up on reading, some of which will doubtlessly feed into an as-of-yet-unknown project—Skyping with your mom. In short, as the immortal Travis Bickle put it in *Taxi Driver*, “getting organized” (one never “is” organized). Indeed, who in his or her right mind would have time still, in this never-subsiding gale of faintly art-related activity, to *work*—make that artwork, curate that exhibition, teach that course, write that piece? Managing one’s career, administering one’s project, or just running one’s life⁶—that’s what an overwhelming amount, indeed the vast majority, of work-like activity revolves around these days, as opposed to actual artistic, cultural, or intellectual production—and claiming that managing one’s career and/or administering one’s project is now an art form or a type of artistic production in its own right does not alter the fundamental imbalance that I take to be the root cause of the unbearable lightness of so much current art.⁷ (By the way: it is to the expanded field of career administration and project management that, after art’s vaunted deskilling in the post-Duchampian era, the wondrous workings of skill have migrated; skill has far from disappeared, on the contrary—but it has become a “clerical” issue rather than an artistic one.⁸ The skilled administrator and the deskilled artist are essentially different sides of the same coin. Or in other words still: it takes a particular type of skill to “sell” the very notion of deskilling.) That unbearable lightheadedness and exasperating slightness that leads one to think, shamefully (for we accept, of course, that hard work does not equal good art), upon a particularly empty gallery: *that’s it?* Indeed, the origins of our current art-world-wide infatuation with the twinned rhetoric of effortlessness and weightlessness—with fleeting gestures and passing glances, minimalist elegance (sold to us as the acme of restraint) and understated subtlety, with the ephemeral

and the ethereal, the nimble artifice of a tasteful, pseudo-aristocratic nonchalance—may have a much cruder economic cast than we may be willing to admit: all these mannerist stratagems and artful celebrations of effortlessness may well be the result of (or worse still, merely covering up) a simple lack of time, focus, and energy for making “work.” It is not so much that we are working too much, we are just plain busy—too busy, in fact, to work. And that, clearly, is plain to see in much of what passes for legitimate artistic activity today—indeed, its supreme artistic achievement may well lie in the sheer panache with which it is able to get away with it all. “That’s it?” “That’s it.” “Oh, okay.”

Of course, we should note here that the cult of lightness, litness, and slightness in art also has a *social* quality, and here too the embattled concept of the nobility of work plays a crucial role: the rejection of, or resistance to, work, and the concomitant glamorization of effortlessness, are little more than contemporary updates of the concept of genius (which, it turns out, we were much too quick to dismiss as historically exhausted). Having to work hard for it basically means you’re no genius, and one of the definitions of genius, at least in the artistic realm, is clearly connected to the notion of a naturally given talent that casually transcends the humdrum world of work: effort is the cumbersome path left to those poor schmucks to whom the leisurely royal road of genius will remain forever closed. Not surprisingly, then, the unbearable lightness of current art is often couched in the retrograde bourgeois language of *taste*—of something so tastefully installed, for instance, that only pure talent (i.e., genius) can account for it, so blessedly free of the lowly, compromising taint of work does it appear.⁹ Here, art and work emerge as near opposites in fact, mutually exclusive along the very same lines that, in the olden days, used to define working class and leisure class alike—and we do not need to wade too far into the social history of art to be reminded of the artist’s exemplarily ambiguous position between these complimentary regimes, an ambivalence replicated in today’s valuation of business (in the sense of being busy) over work (in the sense of both working, or *having* to work, and *making* work).¹⁰ The good of business, the bad of work: such is the Manichean principle that governs today’s unbearable lightness of art.



Structures Inflatable, *Inflatable Structures*, Paris 1968.

Epilogue

Shortly after jotting down the first few thoughts that gave rise to this essay, with its pained youthful memories of the heavy load of art, I had the pleasure of overseeing the installation of the first exhibition at my new institutional home in Chicago, a survey show of the work of London-based Polish artist Goshka Macuga. Leaving aside her (important) work in collage, Macuga is not known for the modest scale on which her research-intensive, context-specific works are executed. Her installations and sculptures are big, heavy, and unwieldy; quite a few of her works have come about through collaborations of varying intensities, and their installation more often than not requires the tightly coordinated help of a dozen expert hands. For reasons that need not detain us here, during the two-week installation period, I was visited every now and then by familiar misgivings: Why not make it *lighter*? Why not, in the winged words of Burt Bacharach, make it easy on ourselves? Why not give in, for once, to the siren call of weightlessness? The short answer, of course (and perhaps the short answer is all we'll ever need), is given in the sheer depth of satisfaction afforded by seeing the show come together and open in time exactly like we had always planned—the good of work delivered. Art truly is what the artist *does*, and what we, by *doing* ourselves, help her do. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to really *do* what we are mostly just content to think and leave at that deeply unsatisfactory stage, as little more than a bag of lazily shaped, half-assed thoughts.¹¹

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