

## The Routine Art II

Alistair Rider

Recently I learned of a dissident artist who lived in Moscow during the 1970s. The Russian photographer Sergei Petrov, who remembers him vividly, recounted his practice to me, although unfortunately he can no longer recall his last name. Viktor, according to Petrov, kept beside his bed an easel and blank canvas. Each morning he would rise and begin dabbing at the surface with a brush moistened only with water. The resulting image remained for as long as the duck cloth stayed wet, although inevitably it would not take long before the surface would dry out, erasing his picture. Each morning the canvas would look as fresh as the day before, and each morning Viktor would indulge in his daily pleasure, unencumbered by any lasting marks of his earlier activities.

During these years Petrov was a professional photographer of artworks, and so he took it for granted that, in principle, all art deserved to be documented for the benefit of posterity. He did not think twice about asking Viktor whether he might record the beautiful, ephemeral images that he was creating, and it came as quite a surprise when his request was firmly declined. Viktor wanted no trace of his art to enter into the wider world. This conscientious refusal made a lasting impression on the photographer, who, with time, recognised Viktor's stance as an astute response to the political situation in which he, along with other dissident artists, found himself. Viktor had identified a means by which he could continue to pursue his chosen life as an artist without any outside interference. By reducing his art to a mere procedure, he left nothing that could be claimed by the state. According to this logic, even to make work that confronted the repressive political situation would be undesirable. Petrov pointed out to me that the Soviet regime needed its enemies as much as it required its loyal comrades, and so it was better to have no relationship with the establishment than to initiate one on negative terms.<sup>1</sup>

The chances for finding out more about Viktor are probably non-existent. But if he had never existed then I genuinely would have wanted to invent him, because his outlook on art, as well as the life that he adopts, conforms almost perfectly to an important approach to making art that has emerged during the last sixty or so years, and which I want to explore in this short article. For the sake of a name, I shall call it 'routine art'. All categories are troublesome, and I confess that I don't like the term very much. It sounds too much like a movement, whereas I want to point towards something more nebulous. I see routine art as a tendency, or a phenomenon: nothing more institutionalized than that.

Routine art arises when the activity of an artist becomes as significant as any completed work that they might produce. For many centuries people who had a sensibility for art were largely concerned with the visual properties of the finished 'masterpiece', and could discern no artistic qualities in the plans, designs and preparatory sketches that were a necessary part of their creation. In 1831 Honoré de Balzac wrote a short story, known in English as *The Unknown Masterpiece*, about a fictional painter in the seventeenth century called Frenhofer.<sup>2</sup> The novel tells of how, for the last ten years, he had been attempting to paint a courtesan of exceptional beauty, but without success. When a younger painter, Poussin, learns of this,

---

<sup>1</sup> Sergei Petrov discussed Viktor with me in British Columbia, May 2015, and I would like to express my thanks to him for sharing his recollections.

<sup>2</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: New York Review Books, 2001).

such is his esteem for the older artist that he offers his girlfriend to Frenhofer as a model, and the latter accepts. But when Poussin visits Frenhofer in his studio to admire the results of his decade-long efforts, he is startled to find that he can make out practically nothing on the canvas other than thick, dense swirls of paint. The tale concludes with Frenhofer destroying his painting and dying in the ensuing studio fire, consumed with shame at his lack of progress. It is a perspective that could not contrast more dramatically with that of Viktor's. Frenhofer deems his daily, painterly exertions valueless because the outcome appeared to count for nothing artistically, whereas Viktor considered it a disaster that anyone might mistake his work for a permanent, finished object.

However, within a few decades of the publication of *The Unknown Masterpiece*, alternative models of artistic creativity were beginning to be aired. The art historian Gabriele Guercio has suggested, for instance, that Gustave Courbet's enormous canvas *The Painter's Studio* from 1855 presents a quite different perception of the form that creativity can take.<sup>3</sup> Courbet presents his studio as crowded by his friends on the right, and, on the left, by a host of ordinary people: both groups represent his ideal audience. In the centre, the artist sits on a chair before an easel, at work on a landscape scene. A nude female model and a young boy look on admiringly. However, Courbet is intentionally ambiguous about the spatial divisions between the image on the canvas and the figures beside him, which gives the impression that the artist's creation, his life and his companions all occupy the same realm. In this painting it is no longer quite so obvious where the markers of artistic achievement are supposed to lie. The work in progress on the easel is no longer the sole outlet of Courbet's creativity. Instead *The Painter's Studio* celebrates a kind of living creativity that is integral to the artist's life in a much broader sense. Courbet presents himself as engaged in an ongoing process. He appears to be insisting that his sense of individuality and genius arises through the activity of making art as well as via his social interactions. The source of creativity is the life of the artist, and the canvases that he completes are only significant for actualizing this essential quality of human nature.

Only a few years before, the young Karl Marx, along with his friend Friedrich Engels, had begun to formulate a new social vision that was premised on the conviction that creativity was innate in everyone, yet was being stifled by the ways in which labour was categorized and distributed within modern society. Rather than accepting as inevitable the belief that artistic talent was restricted to just a handful of privileged individuals, they imagined a wholesale reorganization of society, so that there were no longer painters as such, but 'at most people who engage in painting among other activities.'<sup>4</sup> This vision of a world in which career artists simply wither away might seem remote. But it is worth bearing in mind that their democratic belief in a general and innate creativity now represents a viewpoint that is so commonplace that it almost has become a truism. Over the intervening years, our understanding of creativity has expanded well beyond the perception that it can only be manifested in narrowly designated areas of activity. In other words, artisanal skill is no longer integral to our conception of what art is. For instance, Carl Andre once said that the difference between artists and non-artists was certainly not talent. He, after all, had premised his entire career on making sculptures by placing regular-shaped, liftable objects on gallery floors, which can hardly be said to be a specialist technique. What distinguishes the artist

---

<sup>3</sup> Gabriele Guercio, 'The Form of the Indistinct: Picasso and the Rise of "Generic Creativity"', *Res* 63-4 (Spring-Autumn 2013), p. 146-48.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology, Part I*, ed. C.J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), p. 109.

from the non-artist was, in his opinion, much more basic. It was merely a matter of ‘desire’.<sup>5</sup> By implication, artists become artists not because they are superior to other people, but because they have learned to cherish the creativity of their acts, and have chosen to pursue this professionally. This is a viewpoint that is essentially universally embraced nowadays by all participants in the contemporary art world, from artists, to critics, curators and art educators. Advanced, experimental contemporary art may be valued not for its craft-based techniques, but mostly it is celebrated for more abstract qualities, such as its perceptiveness, intelligence, or capacity to provoke.

Few artists from the last century have championed a modern, protean conception of creativity with greater success than Pablo Picasso. He moved between art media with alarming regularity, and vehemently refused to maintain a recognizably consistent form to any aspect of his art. This created the impression that there was no end to the manifestations of his creative genius: he could turn his hand to anything. ‘I am a painter without a style’, he insisted towards the end of his life. ‘Style is something that locks the painter into the same vision, the same technique, the same formula, during years and years, sometimes during one’s whole lifetime... You see me here, and yet I am already changed. I’m already elsewhere. I’m never fixed and that’s why I have no style.’<sup>6</sup> But Picasso was hardly an isolated voice. In the early 1960s Andy Warhol also insisted on the importance of allowing artists the freedom to experiment widely. He even mused that switching between styles was part of the ‘whole new scene’.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this was soon to be the case in Italy, where artists like Michelangelo Pistoletto and Pino Pascali began producing bodies of work that were disconcertingly varied in both form and style. They too refused to be typecast by their creations. ‘After every action, I step to one side, and proceed in a different direction from the direction formulated by my object’, affirmed Pistoletto.<sup>8</sup> Pascali similarly abjured the signature style, on the grounds that he associated this with a self-image that had become predetermined and ossified. Creative subjectivity was for him an entity that ought to remain forever open and unfixated. ‘To auto-destruct and re-create oneself in a different mould so as never to be the same again, to refuse to be identical because one doesn’t want to be so – why not?’<sup>9</sup> Conceived in this sense, artistic creativity is presented as a restless, unbound and mobile energy that always exceeds its manifestation in a single work of art.

Of course, it would be misleading to imply that all artists have wanted to maximize the stylistic range of their output. Not everyone was committed to pursuing an experimental and wildly free-ranging conception of creativity to the same extent as either Picasso or Pascali. Another significant group of twentieth-century artists abandoned the idea of having a personal style for reasons that were altogether different. These artists, whom we might loosely describe as the constructivists, took their orientation from modern science and technology, and framed their activities as complementary to the intellectual enquiries of modern engineers and mathematicians. For them, creativity was placed at the service not of subjectivity, but objectivity, as they researched the impersonal laws of function and form.

---

<sup>5</sup> Carl Andre, ‘Eight Statements’, *Art in America* (July-August 1975), p.75

<sup>6</sup> Dore Ashton, ed., *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views* (New York, 1972), pp. 95-96.

<sup>7</sup> Andy Warhol, Interview with Gene Swenson [1963], in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory: 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 731.

<sup>8</sup> Michelangelo Pistoletto, ‘Famous Last Words’, in *A Minus Artist* (Florence: Hopefulmonster, 1988), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> *Pino Pascali*, exhibition catalogue, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Muller, Otterlo, 1991, p. 14.

This orientation often meant that they produced art in series, with each individual painting or sculpture dependent for its meaning on the status of their evolving investigations. The parameters of their larger project consequently assume a considerable importance, in that any one artwork has to be understood as manifesting the latest stage in their research. Władysław Strzemiński is a case in point. Between around 1922 and 1936 he pursued a medium-specific theory of painting that he termed 'Unism', and the abstract paintings that he produced during these years are presented as the exemplification of this philosophy. In 1924 he explicitly stated that the ambition of the serious artist should be to develop a 'system', one that should be tested and improved over time. This, furthermore, was not an endeavour that one artist could achieve alone, and so he advocated for collaboration and mutual support between artists.<sup>10</sup> Art works by constructivists can often appear to share a recognizable, homogenous style, but it is worth remembering that this was never actively pursued in the interests of personal expression. Nor did they necessarily restrict themselves to any one medium, and frequently moved freely between the fine and applied arts. The ambition was to place creativity in the services of universal, rational science, for the benefit of the collective, and not the individual. Indeed, such was the versatility of the generic conception of creativity that it could be oriented in such different directions: towards protean, subjective experimentation, or towards the objectivity of science.

The idea that painters, sculptors, architects and graphic designers should all dedicate themselves to the development of a comprehensive system for the arts reflects Strzemiński's commitment to a utopian modernism that was particular to the inter-war years. But his inclination to describe art as an ongoing programme still sounds surprisingly familiar. The terms are open-ended, and reflect the much wider tendency to refer to artistic pursuits in ways that are ever more general and non-specific. Since the 1960s the word that has been used most commonly by art-world professionals to refer to artists' ongoing activities is the principle of the 'project'. Under the right circumstances, almost anything nowadays can be described as one. Artists, as well as non-artists, can 'have' a project, and when you say that you are 'doing a project with x', you are giving nothing away about the exact terms of the collaboration that might be involved. Nor does a project necessarily have to designate a specific outcome or end point; in fact the word implies an acceptance of the possibility that nothing at all will be accomplished. What is strongly indicated, however, is that the undertaking (whatever it is) will necessarily come to an end, since no project is ever supposed to last forever. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have noted, the transitory, flexible nature that lies behind it reflects the prerogatives of the volatile, modern-day labour environment. A premium is set on multiplying connections and extending networks, and workers navigate the risks of the market by equipping themselves with a range of skill-sets.<sup>11</sup> What they described as the 'nominal grammar' of the project, which implies nothing more specific than 'being active', or 'having something in the pipeline', is therefore ideally suited for describing our professional identities in these current times.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, it is widely accepted that the modern, generic conception of creativity bears a number of correlations with the ways in which capitalism has transformed all facets of work and leisure. At the end of the nineteenth century the American Frederick Taylor pioneered a new

---

<sup>10</sup> Władysław Strzemiński, 'B = 2; to read' (1924); cited in Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 129.

<sup>11</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 311-312.

<sup>12</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 110.

principle of ‘scientific management’ which involved increasing the efficiency of a workforce by analyzing every aspect of the labour process and then scrupulously retraining the workers in how to complete their allotted tasks.<sup>13</sup> These policies were widely adopted by industrialized nations during the early decades of the twentieth century. It resulted in a much tighter regulation of labour practices and it stripped workforces of the entitlement to think independently or creatively. Employees with intimate and accumulated knowledge of trade skills were denied the entitlement to pursue their initiative. Gradually they were replaced with a more generic type of worker with only limited and specific training, who would be rewarded merely for compliance and ‘service’. This phenomenon is commonly known as deskilling, and since the 1980s the term has also been used to describe the voluntary deprofessionalization that many artists have pursued.<sup>14</sup> From the 1960s onwards, artists often distanced themselves actively from the specialist training that they had acquired. For example, Bruce Nauman confided to an interviewer in 1971 that although he had studied painting at university (he got his MFA in 1966), he would have no idea how to begin to make one anymore.<sup>15</sup> In the intervening years he had come to recognize that art could be ‘more of an activity and less of a product’, and the pursuits that he preferred to categorize and document as his art tended to be spectacularly banal.<sup>16</sup> Watching Nauman’s crude videos of repetitively striding about or bouncing a rubber ball in his studio can be taxing. But his art is, arguably, not without a critical dimension. His refusal to supply art audiences with traditional indices of artistic accomplishment could well be said to pastiche the dehumanizing ramifications of the widespread disregard for manual skill and craft knowledge among the wider workforce.<sup>17</sup>

I began to become interested in artists who first started to maintain a dogmatic and self-imposed consistency in their activities several years ago. Since the 1960s there have been a fair number who have worked away with greater or lesser degrees of recognition in several different countries. It is not sufficiently widespread to term it a trend, but there are enough examples for it to be a phenomenon that is at least recognizable, albeit one that has attracted very little commentary. These, like Viktor, are the individuals I want to describe as embracing the art of routine. Their persistence and stylistic single-mindedness, which is undoubtedly a defining feature of their working procedures, might initially appear timid when compared to their contemporaries who were deliberately wide-ranging and experimental in

---

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Taylor’s influence on factory management, see Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), pp. 85-123.

<sup>14</sup> The first to use this term in relation to artists’ training was the Australian artist Ian Burn, in his essay ‘The Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (The Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist)’, *Art & Text* (Fall 1989), pp. 49-65.

<sup>15</sup> Willoughby Sharp ‘Interview with Bruce Nauman’, *Avalanche* 2 (Winter 1971), p. 25. Naumann’s art training at UC Davis is discussed in Anne M. Wagner’s article, ‘Nauman’s Body of Sculpture’, *October* 120 (Spring 2007), pp. 53-70.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Wallace and Russell Keizere, ‘Bruce Nauman Interviewed’, *Vanguard* 8 (February 1978), p. 18; cited in MaryJo Marks, ‘Seeing through the Studio: Bruce Nauman’, in Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice (eds), *The Fall of the Studio: Artists at Work* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2009), p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> This is the argument espoused by MaryJo Marks in her article ‘Seeing through the Studio: Bruce Nauman’, pp. 94-117. For an alternative analysis of the ramifications of deskilling, see John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007).

their pursuits. Yet this is only a superficial difference. These individuals also intertwine personhood within the parameters of creativity in ways that frequently make it difficult to distinguish between their work as artists and their identity as individuals. They could not pursue lives as artists without acknowledging the wider, generic conception of creativity that has become so ubiquitous. Nor is it possible to disassociate their conception of art as an ongoing activity from the wider debates concerning artistic deskilling. The matter that concerns me is what they accomplish through what we might describe as their oppositionless opposition – their strategic persistence. If they might be said to fashion a sense of selfhood through their activity, then what is specific about its nature?

I am thinking, for instance, of artists such as Roman Opałka, who chose in 1965 to paint every number from one up to infinity for the duration of his life. By the time he died in 2011, he had covered 233 identically proportioned canvases (196 x 135cm) with minute digits, all meticulously and regularly spaced, which reached up to around 5.6 million. For him, this forty-six year long project constituted a single work, and served as a reflection on the experience, common to us all, of simply living through time.

The artist Emese Benczúr also presents the timeframe of her life as the subject matter of one of her works, which she began in 2007 and plans to continue for the remainder of her days. It is titled *Should I live to be a hundred*, and consists of reels of machine-embroidered clothing labels, on which are printed the words 'DAY BY DAY'. Once a day, she sews the words 'I THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE' underneath this phrase, and has carefully ensured that she has a sufficient supply of reels of tape to last until her hundredth birthday.

In the early 1970s the fluxus artist Alison Knowles used to eat lunch daily at Riss Restaurant, at 242 Eighth Avenue, New York. Inspired by her routine, she decided that she should use her meal as the basis of a work, which she called *Identical Lunch*. It takes the form of an event score, and involves consuming 'a tunafish sandwich on wheat grass toast with lettuce and butter, no mayo, and a large glass of buttermilk or a cup of soup'.<sup>18</sup> Over the years she has invited many friends to participate in this work, and she continues to perform *Identical Lunch* in various locations. It is a work that blurs the dividing line between art and an ordinary, everyday ritual. Because the lunch remains consistent, Knowles encourages the impression that she always eats the same things each day, and consequently she invites us to infer that the artwork embraces every midday meal that she has ever consumed. This may not be completely accurate, although it is true that Knowles deliberately confuses any easy distinction between her preferences as a person and the properties of the work.

Because routine art involves an activity carried out by a self on a self, it always possesses an ethical dimension. Sometimes, this can be openly activist in its orientation, as when Mierle Laderman Ukeles affirmed her commitment to present as art a range of mundane domestic activities, which, conventionally, have been designated as women's work. In a famous performance piece from 1973, she systematically cleaned the public spaces of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford for the duration of her exhibition. She was openly demonstrating a maintenance task that she had to do daily, but which was unacknowledged by society. Had she herself not performed the cleaning of the galleries, then the work would have assumed an entirely different inflection: its impact stems from the fact that she does it herself.

---

<sup>18</sup> Alison Knowles, *Journal of the Identical Lunch* (New York, 1971).

In the case of the performance artist Tehching Hsieh the allusions to social issues are less explicit, yet nonetheless present. Between 1978 and 1985 he completed five performances that each lasted for an entire year. They ranged from sealing himself in solitary confinement for twelve months; punching a time clock in his studio every hour, on the hour, for 365 days without a break; living outdoors throughout all four seasons; remaining tied to a friend around the waist with a short length of rope without ever intentionally touching, and, finally, living for a year under the premise that art simply did not exist, neither as a discussion topic, nor as a subject to read about, nor as a gallery to visit. These works are not heroic exercises in endurance for its own sake, yet they do explore the capacity of a human being merely to keep going, even under extraordinary constraints. It does not take too much imagination to recognise how these strictly disciplined performances might invite reflection on the lives and experiences of those who, unlike Hsieh, are coerced by circumstances that are entirely beyond their control.

Even artists' projects that assume more moderate routines, and which, like Viktor's, might not appear to make any direct reference to wider society, deserve to be understood as possessing an ethical dimension. I am thinking, for instance, of artists such as Peter Dreher, who, since 1974, has consistently depicted in acrylic paints the same empty water glass against a white background under identical light conditions and from the same perspective. Each of the thousands of canvases that he has produced over the course of the decades might be said to be the outcome of a sustained, meditative exercise involving a kind of viewing that attempts to see the glass, the light, and the table as if for the very first time.

Dreher's is a programme that easily could appear solipsistic. But it involves an element of self-constancy and perseverance, which, in itself, is admirable. In *Oneself as Another* the philosopher Paul Ricoeur probes what we mean when we talk of a person's character. Clearly our bodies alone do not provide us with one, because they change dramatically over the course of our lifetimes. Character, he reasons, depends more on intangible attributes that enable an individual to be recognised as being the same person over time. Ricoeur is especially concerned with the ways in which our qualities are shaped and stabilized by the internalization of particular values. This leads him to suggest that we remain loyal to these values in the same way that we are faithful to a promise.<sup>19</sup> Our wishes might change, but we refuse to follow them, out of a sense of duty to a deeper conviction. Ricoeur is well aware that this description might make it sound as if we are all able to affirm what we 'stand for' with an easy self-assurance. But he is also alert to the fact that we never make promises merely for our own benefit: they are always directed towards another person. For this reason, thinking about our sense of self is impossible without considering our responsibilities to others. 'Who am I', he asks, 'so inconsistent, that *notwithstanding* you count on me?'<sup>20</sup> Once we recognise our responsibility to the expectations of others, he argues, we can appreciate how self-constancy does not necessarily lead to pride, but to a sense of modesty.

An artist like Viktor might appear indifferent to his society, and entirely absorbed in his personal routine. But his faithfulness to himself is nonetheless an affirmation of the world, even when there happened to be nobody there to witness it.

---

<sup>19</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 123.

<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 168.