

Labour, work and play: action in fine art practice

Neil Maycroft
History of Art & Material Culture
Lincoln School of Art & Design
University of Lincoln
e-mail: nmaycroft@lincoln.ac.uk

This was first published as 'Labour, work and play: action in fine art practice' in *The Labour of Art*. Lincoln, The Beehive Press 2005.

Introduction

These notes draw particularly on the ideas of Daniel Willis, as expressed in his book *The Emerald City and Other Essays on the Architectural Imagination*, (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1999), concerning the nature of different productive and unproductive forms of activity. Specifically, the demarcation of such activities in terms of the categories of labour and work are used as a basis for interrogating some forms of creative practice. One particular characteristic of both labour and work is found in its objective and subjective organization of time. These notes question those practitioners who produce ‘works’ of art by the means of labouring productive action, including its particular organization of time.

Labour, work and play

According to Daniel Willis

If we are to understand the nature of practices such as building and caring for a house, preparing for a festival, tending a garden, decorating a Christmas tree, or proudly polishing one’s automobile, we must restore the distinction between ‘labour’ and ‘work’ that has been lost since the advent of industrialization. We must look more closely at activities such as these, in which we are likely to develop emotional and imaginative attachments to things, and to care for them to a degree that belies their use or exchange value (Willis 1999: 240).

According to Willis, Hannah Arendt noted that as opposed to ‘work’, ‘labour’ does not designate a finished object, product or durable object. The focus is more on the activities making up the process of producing something rather than on the finished object. The judgment, autonomy and end-focused rationale found in work is missing from labour. Hence, in Willis’s approach (and somewhat confusingly for those of us coming from a sociology background), labour is associated with what others have called work, that is, what we may call imposed, non-autonomous productive actions; in common parlance ‘going to work’. For Willis this should be ‘going to labour’. Willis continues:

As opposed to the laborer, the human fabricator (*homo faber*) works not in response to necessity, but in order to construct a ‘world’. In other words, the activity of work has not just a practical goal, but also an imaginative one. Beyond their immediate utility, human artifacts help to organize and structure our existence (Willis 1999: 241).

For Arendt this means that the artefacts themselves should aim towards permanence, stability and durability. However, for Willis it is the durability and stability of the imaginary world produced that is significant. For example, a gardener or chef does not produce through work particularly durable artefacts (though they do constitute a significant material world) but they do produce sustained and durable imaginative worlds.

If we allow the lack of durability, the perishability, or biological necessity of something we produce to determine that it has been the result of labour instead of work, then the activities of many of our most skillful makers would be mistakenly excluded from the province of work (Willis: ibid).

Again, drawing upon the ideas of Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1958), Willis goes on to consider other characteristics of productive activity, arguing for example, that repetitive rhythmic motions were likely to be an indicator of labour because they were characteristic of machines and the accommodation of people to machine production. However, we find such repetitive actions in work as well as labour such that all usually work contains periods of labour (routine preparation of materials, the use of machinery and so on) and, conversely most labour contains elements of work.

Following Willis, can go on to construct a general classification of activity and consider some more content. As a rough shorthand we can characterize these three actions thus: Labour corresponds to unimaginative productive activity, work to imaginative productive activity (this includes playful labour or productive play) and, play corresponds to deliberately unproductive imaginative/physical activity (Figure 1).

According to Willis labour may be intensely productive in short bursts but its monotony, and lack of sustainability make it less productive overall

<u>'Total' Labour</u>	<u>Intermediates</u>	<u>'Total' Work</u>	<u>Intermediates</u>	<u>'Total' Play</u>
Unimaginative	Playful labour, labour within work	Highly imaginative	Productive play, sports, games, labouring work	Optimum imagination
Productive		Optimum productivity		Non-productive
Efficiency as an end in itself		Efficiency not the overriding concern		Inefficient
Predictability as paramount		Predictability not paramount		Predictability eschewed
Imposed		Self-directed		Self-directed
Non-autonomous		Autonomous		Autonomous
Boring/uncomfortable		Satisfying		Pleasureable
Unsustainable		Sustainable		Unsustainable
Alienates body and mind		De-alienates body and mind		'Frees' body and mind
<u>Ultimately</u> Totally administered labour, manual and mental		<u>Ultimately</u> Self-realisation		<u>Ultimately</u> Nihilistic chaos
<u>Time</u>		<u>Time</u>		<u>Time</u>
Meaningless productive time		Meaningful productive time		Meaningful unproductive time

Figure 1: Willis's 'spectrum' of imaginative versus productive activities - adapted

than work. Work only can be sustained for long periods. Moreover, play is unsustainable due to its lack of productivity though one who plays is more free than one who works because of works focus on necessity,

‘...the uniqueness of work lies in its ability to trope cleverly the necessity of production into an imaginative undertaking that creates a world (Willis 1999: 244).

Hence, work and play can both ‘make’ and ‘make up’ a world, that is, ‘produce’ both a materially and imaginatively significant realm, whereas labour can only make a world, it cannot make one up. The imaginative necessity that guides the productive action of work and the unproductive action of play is absent from labour.

‘Because labour cannot both make and make up a world, it can be tolerated or justified only by virtue of its outcome -what it physically produces... Labour can be measured solely in terms of its output and efficiency (244).

History shows us that at many times and in many places those who control labour and labourers have deployed all manner of resources and techniques in order to prevent labourers from playing or from attempting to turn labour into work through the exercise of imagination. Those who labour are generally ‘not free to consider ‘indeterminate concepts’, to imagine and weigh outcomes, or to exercise the judgement necessary for ethical judgement’ (Willis 247).

Time in labour, work and play

Willis goes on to consider the experience, organisation and quality of time associated with his spectrum of actions. Labour is co-ordinated by and helps to constitute the linear, homogeneous measured time of the clock. It is also oblivious to cyclical time with its close association with natural rhythms; hunger, sleep, night and day, the passage of the seasons and so on. This linear, labour time is resonant with the technical, efficiency determinants of commodity production - ‘time is money’.

Conversely, the time of work and play is both quantitatively and qualitatively different. Quantitatively it differs because,

As opposed to the universal time of labour, work time and play time are ‘fulfilled’ or ‘autonomous’ times. Time spent at these activities cannot be measured by clocks or judged by its production alone, for, in the case of play, there are no tangible products, and, in the case of work, the value attributed to the endeavor must account for both the product and the positive feelings engendered in its making. Because they create a world, work time and play time create their own variable and unpredictable times, fictive times that have only an intransitive relationship with universal clock time’ (Willis 1999: 248).

Subjectively, the character of time in work and play is also different from that of labour. It is a commonplace that those involved in play, for example, a football match, express surprise that the clock measured duration of the game feels so out of ‘sync’ with the time subjectively experienced by those playing.¹ This is often even more marked during work activities as, unlike timed play, these periods may be open-ended and ‘timed’ predominantly in relation to the attending to cyclical rhythms - hunger, tiredness, the need to visit the toilet, falling darkness and so on. And, of course, all workers work at a different rate such that, unlike in labour, there can be no overarching time or shared time frame for the completion of all work activities.²

In a sense these times should not be seen as subjective at all. They may differ, overlap and be distinct from person to person, activity to activity but, they are best seen as created from the activities themselves, that is, they are ‘real’ times which could form the basis of measurement systems (though this would be difficult). More importantly, these other created work times illustrate that measured ‘clock’ time is not a natural phenomenon corresponding to actual events which structure it. Indeed, international measures of time have been constructed to coincide with this system (eg, the expulsion of a certain amount of radiation from a particular radioactive atomic nucleus is what defines the second). Such clock time is not even existentially related to series

¹Those who willingly play an organised game clearly submit themselves to the time of the game and consequently a certain amount of clock watching is evident especially in competitive games.

²As educators of various workers (artists, designers, craftspeople) we continually attempt to get them to submit their working practices to the times characteristic of labour, something they may have to do when in the ‘real’ world.

of natural rhythms which form the basis for other temporal schemas and which still persist overlaid upon industrial society, for example, the siesta.

Such ‘immeasurable’ times Willis contrasts to the time of leisure which he argues is locked into the same temporal logic as labour rather than work or play. Leisure time,

is the mirror image of labour time: meaningless unproductive time, instead of meaningless productive time. Leisure time does not challenge our modern conceptualization of time as money; leisure time, like labour time, is fleeting time that must be spent (Willis 1999: 250).

So, according to Willis (Figure 2):

- Labour corresponds to meaningless productive time - measured time
- Work corresponds to meaningful productive time - immeasurable time
- Play corresponds to meaningful unproductive time - immeasurable time:

Action/Content	Labour	Work	Play
Productivity	Productive	Productive	Unproductive
Time	Measured	Immeasurable	Immeasurable
Meaningfulness	Meaningless	Meaningful	Meaningful

Figure 2: Action and time - adapted from Willis

And, we can add, that leisure corresponds to meaningless unproductive time - measured time

Hence, leisure does not easily fit onto Willis’s spectrum, it will not go to the left of work as here activities are more meaningless but also productive. It will not fit to the right of work as here activities would be expected to be more meaningful though less productive. We can offer an alternative ‘mapping’ (Figure 3, *apologies for poor quality*).

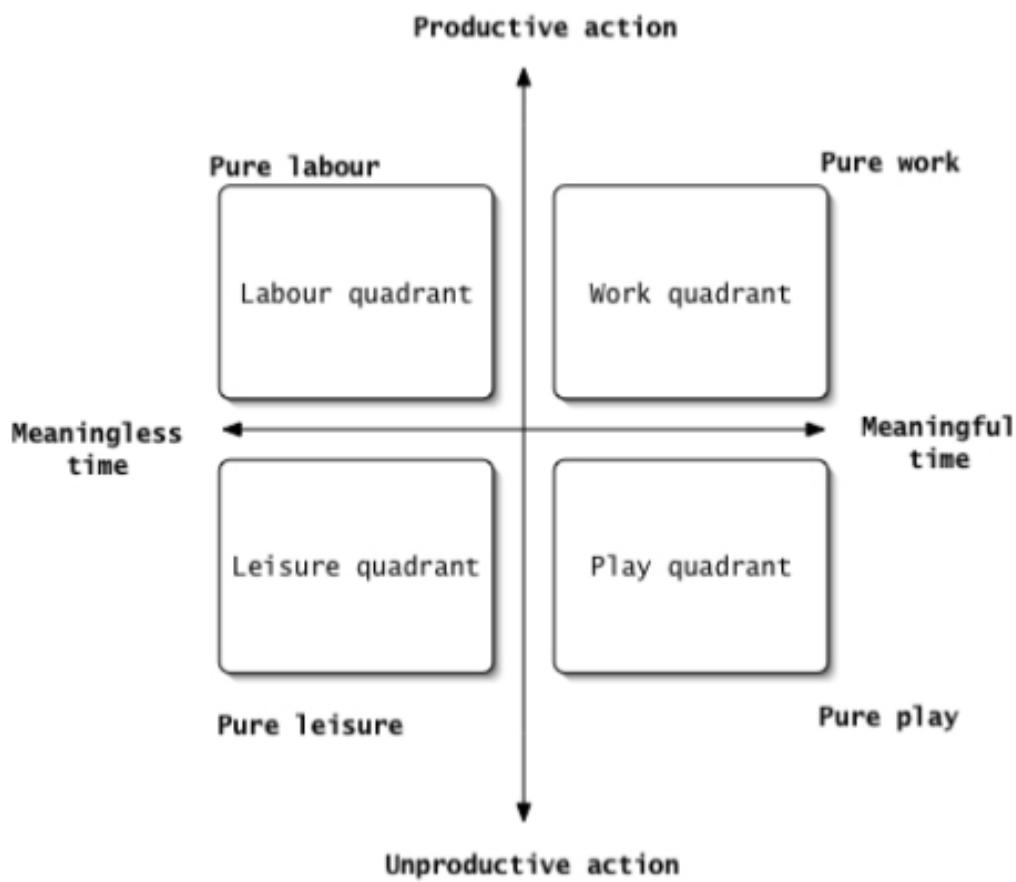


Figure 3: Mapping labour, work and leisure

The designations of ‘pure’ play, ‘pure’ labour etc, merit comment as, in reality, it must be conceded that it is difficult to define what these may mean.

Pure labour: totally, physically and intellectually controlled productive activity. This is actually unlikely to be very sustainable. Even slavery, concentration camp forced labour and the like cannot successfully totally control the imagination as this runs the risk of depriving the labourer of the myriad judgements that must be made within the labour process, including the loss of the simple initiative needed to remain safe. However, much labour does approach this limit and many employers do their upmost to push labourers as close to this edge as possible.

Pure work: sustainable, enjoyable work defined by immeasurable time, absorption and self-fulfilment. Even here, necessity, especially biologically, and tasks characterised by linear time, are likely to draw the worker back to labour concerns. This would be more so for designers than for artists as designers are already working within a framework highly coloured by the imperatives of labour.

Pure play: again, unsustainable due to biological necessity or attenuated by its rule/norm bound character. Willful self and other-directed destructive nihilism is likely to slide into chaos.

Pure leisure: probably does not exist in reality but the passive, forced entertainment of Dystopian culture, mass rallies and, for some critics, television would fit here, as would much of the ‘programmed’ leisure identified by some critical social theorists.

Artists and creative practice

Artists are placed both by Arendt and Willis in the work quadrant though they are not the only workers left in societies such as ours, many craftspeople and other artisans could be included. Indeed, part of the general cultural dissatisfaction and cultural experimentation observable over the last decade or so has had as one aim, sometimes its central aim, the transformation of labour into work and the defence of work against pressures to transform it into labour.

According to Willis:

. . . artists are most likely to reject the usual compensations offered by an economic system that rewards laboring more than work, in favor of less measurable returns (Willis 1999: 251).

Willis then makes a very interesting comment concerning the nature of artistic production and that which is produced from such creative, production action;

We should also recognize that one of the attributes of art, one ‘blessing’ bestowed on the products of the artist’s work, is also the ability to create ‘worlds’. In this way the work of art mirrors the work on art that produces it. Each of them -the fulfilling productive activity and the product with which we actively engage to find fulfillment- have the ability to create world where time deviates from universal clock time. This kind of temporal disruption (which is similar to that of the festival) can therefore be utilized to identify the presence of art. Once we have recognized this fact, we can begin to employ it as a means of art criticism (Willis: *ibid*).

Here, we get to the gist of the matter for the subject of action in fine art practice: Willis offer us a way to think about the products of artistic practice in relation to the type of action which produced them. The emphasis is not the nature of the artistic ‘product’ nor is it on the status of the artist themselves nor on the ‘naming’ of art by either the artist or any other cultural intermediary between artist and the audience. Consider, for example, art that seeks to recreate the activity of labour as the means by which the product of art is created, and, of course, the product itself. If we follow the above reasoning then we may acknowledge:

- 1) That the product of labour can make a world but not make up a world such that art-like products produced through the productive activity of labour are just that, art-like and not art. We would recognize that mass produced art (mechanically and digitally) would belong in this category, the postcard is not the original painting.
- 2) Art is the result of work and the product of art work both makes a world and makes up a world. Though, of course, not all work results in

art though it does result in a similar ‘product’ both materially (sometimes, sometimes not) and imaginatively significant and durable. The art event, for example, may leave no material traces but can still be seen significantly and imaginatively durable.

So far so good perhaps but what about ‘art’ that produces both a product which is the same as the product of labour as well as producing it through the activity of labour rather than that of work? The first questions that occur to me are:

1) Why make ‘art’ which replicates the products of labour, i.e. that which does not make up another world, transcend, or offer an alternative?

2) Why produce such ‘art’ through the activity of labour rather than work? We could argue that the productive activity of labour whose outcome is a product that makes a world but does not make up a world is not only not art but is the antithesis of art. Does not using labour means, including the measured, meaningless temporality of labour, to produce an outcome simply collapse back into the imperatives of labour without examining them? If we accept this then certain implications follow:

That such labour-driven ‘art’ is not art at all, either in terms of process or product. If, on the other hand, such outcomes are art then what is going on to produce them is not actually labour but a facsimile of labour; its is really work masquerading as labour. This raises the question of its effectiveness in drawing attention to the reality of labour as a process or to the products of labour. According to Willis:

Whenever artists and musicians are paid by the hour, brush stroke or note, when novelist or poets are compensated by the line or word, we witness the corruption that occurs whenever fulfilling activities are portrayed as commodities... Artists that are paid for the products of their work have not necessarily ‘sold out’. However, any artist or worker who allows her efforts to be minutely quantified, either by measuring her time or some other aspect of her output, will be tempted to distort her work to fit the particular quantification method (Willis 1999: 252).

The ‘churning out’ of paintings that simply represent the world as it is already made up, rather than making up a world of its own, may fit here,

especially so if the artist has an annual contract with a gallery to produce a certain number of paintings a year according to a fixed time schedule. The artist may turn themselves into a one-person production line, adopt the rhythms of linear clock time and so on. Alternatively, they may employ others to produce the art for them. Not following the model of the apprentice learning through daily contact with the master thus acquiring, developing and nurturing the work of art but, rather as an often absent 'entrepreneur' or employer of waged labourers.

We can consider some other interesting ideas if we argue that those who 'labour' to produce art are not really labouring at all but are working. We may look for evidence of this. The environment of production: is an artist producing art in a gallery perhaps such that the appearance of labouring can be seen to be part of a performance. If so, and despite the artists protestations, what we are witnessing is work producing a facsimile of labour. It is not labour itself. The overall organization of time: is it art/work time or is it labour time? We may also consider the local organization of time; does the artist control their own labour time, e.g. 'knocking off' when they want, obeying the need to respond to cyclical biological necessity and so on. If so, then, again, we are witnessing the time of work superimposed on a representation of the time of labour. We can consider the larger cultural framework in relation to the activity being presented. The labouring may well be meaningful overall to the artist as there is a significant end point, a conscious project, a made up world in mind, an overall self-consciousness concerning the meaning of the activity and the exercise of fine judgements within the productive activity itself. We can also look for the other compensations including public interest or adulation, monetary compensation in excess of that expected for labour and so on. All of these would tend to support the view that what an audience in this context (another significant, though, here, unexplored, facet in the definition of different kinds of productive action) is witnessing is work and the production of art rather than the labour and the production of commodities. Conversely, if we step into the workshop, or factory, of the artist-entrepreneur and witness paid employees, imposed schedules, linear clock-time, surveillance, serial production and so on, we may well be tempted to conclude that what we are seeing is labour not work and that the end result is not art but the commodity masquerading as art.

References

- Arendt. H, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1958.
Willis. D, *The Emerald City and Other Essays on the Architectural Imagination*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1999.