

## The Aesthetics of Effort

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How might we gauge effort in the visual arts? What value does it have? Or rather, what *kind* of value does it have? To get at some tentative answers to these questions, we would do well to set the visual arts aside for the moment and to ask what kind of value does effort alone imply? What is effort? What does it mean? What does it *look* like? And last but not least—for this is often the place accorded any question of ethics—we should ask what *good* is it?

If we're interested in the kinds of value that attach to the notion of effort, we need to stick with this question of kinds: Does effort have moral value?—as when we note that someone has made a “good effort” at something, in which case “effort” stands in for the failure of achievement. The effort itself “deserves,” as one would say, “recognition.” Given win, place or show, a “good effort” will only ever be accorded the latter two. Of course winners put in a good effort, but when you win, no one notices how hard you worked; they only notice that you've won. Effort is of value only when winning isn't an option, which is why effort is also the province of practice. If you do not put in the effort when practicing, then winning, or achievement, is often wholly out of the question. A “good effort” is for the practice field, but it's cold consolation on game day. Outside of competition, effort is an end unto itself. It gains autonomy, as we like to say, which means it is a means without ends. Effort, in other words, is a form of pure expenditure. We'll come get back to this.

Does effort have economic value? Certainly. But when we speak of effort in economic terms we normally call it by a different name, and that is “labor.” But labor and effort are not the same thing. Labor is an abstraction, a measurement, one of the conceptual variables, alongside

the commodity, that enters into the equations of Capital. Effort is something else: it is at once an organ and evidence of labor. We might say that it is labor's outward face, its skin, the way that labor appears in the world as the process of laboring.

It may be argued that not effort but the commodity serves as labor's outward appearance, and this would not be wholly wrong. In Marxist terms the commodity is a storehouse for the surplus value created by what we call alienated or productive labor. Effort, on the other hand, functions as the sign of a surplus value that is created by nonalienated or unproductive labor, by which it is art's continued privilege to be characterized.

Here it is worth asking: Why is effort a productive or necessary category to consider in addition to, or separately from, labor? One reason is that addressing effort gets us out from underneath of the theoretically bankrupt concept of 'craft', which certain critics have attempted to revive as of late for what is seen as its inherent political status as a gendered and so marginalized mode of creative activity that somehow subverts or resists capitalism's accelerated circuits of consumer exchange.<sup>1</sup> The problem here, of course, is that this blinkered notion of craft is wholly undialectical, insofar as it cannot, or chooses not, to see craft's very resurgence as a function of the nostalgia prepared by this acceleration itself.

This leads to a second reason to consider effort alone: as an abstraction, labor is a function of time, whereas effort, to the extent that it is made visible, to the extent that it becomes, as I will want to say, *legible*, within the commodity object or within the process of production, is decidedly *spatial*. Effort traffics in the world like an image or sign. Though it is of course inextricable from the labor that subtends it, effort registers as a value in excess of that which is supplied by labor alone; and that value, I want to suggest, is fundamentally *aesthetic*.

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<sup>1</sup> See most recently Julia Bryan-Wilson, "The Politics of Craft," *Modern Painters* (February, 2008).

Now, before moving forward, I would like to couch what I am calling the aesthetics of effort within a larger set of problems which I believe are germane to the “age of the market.”<sup>2</sup> One of the things I believe this phrase implies is a shift in what we might as well call contemporary art’s “public.” What we take to be the increasing visibility of contemporary art, due to its professionalization and ever more spectacular displays on the sides of both production and consumption, requires someone for it to be increasingly visible to; and this requires an equally expanded notion of art’s public. To cut to the chase, then, it is this expanded public, and its associated conditions of visibility, to which what I am calling the aesthetics of effort responds.

Leo Steinberg took a hard look at similar conditions of visibility in his 1962 essay, “Contemporary Art and the Plight of the Public.”<sup>3</sup> There it was Steinberg’s undeniable claim that the most vocal, because the most engaged, critics of contemporary art are its artists, a claim he illustrates with reference not to a contemporary anecdote, but rather to Signac’s famous response to Matisse’s *Joie de Vivre* (1905)—“It’s as if he [Matisse] is asking us to eat [chalk and wax]”— as well as to Matisse’s own response to the *Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), which he called “Picasso’s hoax.” What is important for Steinberg is that these critics are not academic painters, but the avant-garde, which leads him to comment that: “Any man becomes academic by virtue of, or with respect to, what he rejects” (4). Steinberg goes on to suggest that such “academization” is ongoing in the present—that is, Steinberg’s present, the late-’50s and early ’60s—and it demands that, and this is Steinberg again, “we...drop this useless, mythical

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<sup>2</sup> This phrase is borrowed from the panel for which this paper was prepared: “Painting and Critique in the Age of the Market,” organized by Christopher K. Ho and Peter Rostofsky for the College Art Association annual conference and held on February 20, 2008. The author would like to take this opportunity to thank the organizers for the invitation and opportunity to air these ideas in a public setting.

<sup>3</sup> Leo Steinberg, “Contemporary Art and The Plight of the Public,” in *Other Criteria* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962).

distinction between—on one side—creative, forward-looking individuals whom we call artists, and—on the other side—a sullen, anonymous, uncomprehending mass, whom we call the public” (5).

I do not believe I would be risking too much in stating that Steinberg’s directive remains a fairly indigestible one today. But what we should note is that Steinberg’s concept of a public is *functional* insofar as it refers to no specific group or embodiment but rather to a stance. That public’s “plight,” however, remains stable, insofar as it refers to, and this is Steinberg again, “the shock of discomfort, or the bewilderment or the anger or the boredom which some people always feel, and all people sometimes feel, when confronted with an unfamiliar style” (5). What is more, this discomfort is ongoing; it is “chronic and endemic,” this “perpetual anxiety” which has become our “normal condition” (6).

The impetus behind Steinberg’s defense of the public was of course his own first encounter with the work of Jasper Johns. Upon seeing Johns’ first solo show in 1958, Steinberg writes: “My own first reaction was normal. I disliked the show, and would gladly have thought it a bore. Yet it depressed me and I wasn’t sure why. Then I began to recognize in myself all the classical symptoms of a philistine’s reaction to modern art. I was angry at the artist, as if he had



invited me to a meal, only to serve something uneatable, like [chalk and wax]. I was irritated at some of my friends for pretending to like it—but with an uneasy suspicion that perhaps they did like it, so that I was really mad at myself for being so dull, and at the whole situation for showing me up” (12). For Steinberg, Johns sacrificed the imagination, the representational possibilities of

painting, its promise of transfiguration, of ‘this into that’, which, he reminds us, is not dissimilar from what Baudelaire had thought of both Ingres and Courbet. But drawing upon these observations, Steinberg concludes that “it is in the nature of contemporary art to present itself as a bad risk” (16).

Returning now to the question of effort, what I want to suggest is that much of our contemporary art has become quite self-conscious about this “bad risk,” and that what I am calling the “aesthetics of effort”—in particular its different intensities and modes of legibility—is how this self-consciousness is coming to be made manifest in contemporary art today.

So, faced with the loss of one or another ideological commitment—be it modernism, anti-aestheticism, ideological criticism, avant-gardism, naïve politicism, rear-garde academicism, etc.—contemporary art is in some sense left exposed to the ebbs and flows of a marketplace for which artistic value—Aesthetic? Historic? Discursive?—is largely indeterminate. It is within this value vacuum of sorts that effort, as an aesthetic value inextricably connected to labor, and so to economic value and to the value form as such, begins to exert no uncertain pressure upon contemporary artistic enterprises.



How else to explain work such as Ingrid Calame's tracings from the LA River and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Carlos Amoraes' swarm of paper moths: *Black Cloud* (2007), recently on view at Yvonne Lambert in New York, or Tara Donovan's profusion of tape-rings now up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, *Untitled (Mylar)* (2007), three works

which stand as exemplary indexical, iconic and symbolic modes of a kind of high-effort signification. Again I want to emphasize that this attendance to effort has little to do with any question of authorship; it does not matter whether these artists did the *work* themselves or whether it was done by assistants or other contracted labor. The “who?” in this scenario is of little importance. What is important is that effort is rendered *legible* in each of these cases through of an obsessive level of repetition, one that remains distinctly distanced from mechanical production or reproduction. (This last point is crucial given effort’s link to labor, which distinguishes it from older arguments for repetition, or seriality, as a critical appropriation of, and reflection upon, the language of a burgeoning consumer culture.<sup>4</sup>)

But what I have just described as gestures of high-effort signification need not only appear as instances of obsessive repetition. Such effort is rendered legible within an equally obsessive *mimetic* impulse, one that continues to reprise the very traditional artistic strategy of material translation. On this side of things we find Chris Gilmore's *Astin Martin DB5* (2006), a full recreation in cardboard of James Bond's truly tricked-out roadster from the movie *Goldfinger*, which is only the most recent in a series of similar exercises where the source material appears far less iconic, for example in *Bicycle* (2003), *Guitar* (2005), and *Wheelchair* (2005). In the same vein, but more self-reflexively, David Ersser's show at




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<sup>4</sup> On this point see in particular Hal Foster, “The Crux of Minimalism,” in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996).

Roebing Hall this past fall, *Nothing But Heavy Duty* recreated entirely out of balsa wood the artist's studio-cum-woodshop, replete with power tools, table saw, extension cords, a folding ladder and other assorted items, detritus and materials stock.

These are genuine feats of material mastery which depend entirely upon the translation of some complex thing, or a heterogeneous collection of things, into a single material, which itself is chosen for the qualified ease of its manipulation and the relative instability of that material's composition, i.e. its ephemerality. It's worth noting that figures such as Chris



Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg easily fall in with this company, even though the artists claim that their favored blue and green polystyrene is selected at least in part for the effortlessness with which it may be manipulated. That is to say, Hanson and Sonnenberg claim to be less interested in the viewer's apprehension of the magnitude of their endeavor—i.e. in the legibility of their 'efforts'—than in the signifying potential of their constructs.

Of course, the legibility of 'effort' is nothing if not dialectical. For in what other way are we to understand the offerings of artists such as Gedi Sibony or Ian Pedigo?—works which ask how few moves one can make and still render the work of art legible as such. Here materials are equally important, though not for their pliability nor ephemerality, but for their utter evacuation of content, an evacuation which leaves neither a purity of form nor a registration of formlessness.



With this we find ourselves on the low-effort end of the spectrum, and in the interest of forging a kind of symmetry, I would make the argument that Sibony and Pedigo share in the mimetic impulse that drives artists such as Gilmore and Ersser. Only here the mimesis does not require some specific object for source material; rather, Sibony and Pedigo work with (or within) the obsolescence of art's conventional mediums: in most cases "sculpture" for Sibony; "painting" for Pedigo. Each artist attempts to imitate something of those mediums, conventionally understood, without allowing the work to cross that boundary whence it simply becomes what it sets out to copy. In other words, Sibony makes work that *looks* like sculpture but fails in some sense to *stand* as sculpture, even though there is no question that it stands as art. The same could be said for Pedigo's work, which no doubt resonates with all of the contradictions held taught within Clement Greenberg's old adage about a tacked-up canvas already existing as a picture.

Of course what these adventures at the low-effort end of the spectrum demand is some sort of tarrying with the readymade, about which I have been rather willfully silent until now. For it would seem logical to ask: Is not Duchamp's founding gesture, nomination, or enunciation of the readymade, as well as its echoes down through the twentieth century—John Cage's *4'33"* (1952); Robert Rauschenberg's *This is a Portrait of Iris Clert if I Say So* (1961); most Conceptual Art—something tantamount to effort's zero-degree? Perhaps not. Taking a cue from John Robert's recent study of the dialectics of "skill and deskillling in art after the readymade," Duchamp's great contribution was to open up the category of artistic labor not only to the problem of intellectual labor but also to the conditions of productive labor in general. In this, the readymade functions by what Robert's calls "copying without copying," where an object of productive labor is translated into an object of artistic labor, without the material object itself



changing at all.<sup>5</sup> The act of nomination thus becomes the apotheosis of intellectual labor, which is rather *artistic labor's* zero degree coupled with effort's total erasure.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Duchamp did not have anything to contribute to the aesthetics of effort. What else are the *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913) than early exercises in low-effort aesthetics? With this work we are not yet at the unassisted readymade because there is as yet some



legibility to the effort involved, even if that effort only entails the dropping of a one-meter length of string from the height of one meter. So encased on their plates, translated into tracing curves, labeled and boxed, what the *Stoppages* point us toward is exactly that limit case which will be reached when the unassisted readymade first confronts the problem of materials and the concept of matter in Carl Andre's art—which is to say, they point us toward the problem of process art as the initiation of effort as an autonomous aesthetic category.

But for the artists so engaged with process, the latter's privileging was simply a strategy by which to overcome the tyranny of ends over means, and the temporality that a more traditional kind of object production (a.k.a. minimalism) had embodied and which Georg Lukacs famously diagnosed as reification.<sup>6</sup> So, for Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris,



<sup>5</sup> John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> "The contemplative stance adopted toward a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e., a perfectly closed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world: It reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space... Thus time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things' (the reified, mechanically objectified 'performance' of the worker, wholly separated from his total human personality): in short, it becomes space." Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 88-89.

art could become a *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* (1969-70); and for Richard Serra, it could manifest itself as *Tearing Lead from 1:00 to 1:47* (1968) or as *Splashing* (1969). The problem with process, of course, was that it simply flipped the means/ends dichotomy on its head and so left exposed the delicate underbelly of artistic ‘means’ itself, which could then go on to suffer ever greater reifications (of which something like Matthew Barney’s *Drawing Restraint* series offers a particularly pathological case).

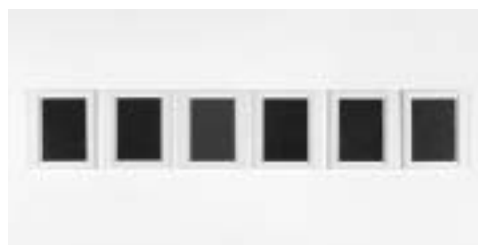
I am still missing one combination within this rather crude matrix of the aesthetics of effort that I have been sketching so far, and that is the low effort instance of an obsessively repetitious sort. Here I am tempted to do the readymade one better and suggest that the goods we are looking for are necessarily *goods* themselves—which is to say *commodities* as such, and ones of an artistically self-conscious sort. For could we not conceive of Marcel Dzama’s salt and pepper shakers, or Jeff Koons’ *Balloon Dog*, or Yoshitomo Nara’s drinking glasses as obsessively repeated works of art for which any and all effort, via the logic of mass production, has been rendered completely illegible? These works exceed the logic of Roberts’ “copying without copying” insofar as they enter the circuits of exchange without passing through the nominating and re-presenting strategies that underwrite most contemporary art today and so serve to realign art with alienated or productive labor—i.e. as design.



Now, our matrix so complete, I should note that I am not happy with it. For one thing, the opposition between high and low effort is not accompanied by a similarly structural opposition between *repetition* and *mimesis*. These formal categories offered themselves to me inasmuch as they characterized much of the work that is presented today, and they seemed to

suggest at least a somewhat productive way of delimiting different modes and legibilities of effort within contemporary art. Most glaringly, this lack of opposition forecloses the possibility of that second order “exfoliation” of the matrix, whereby each pair of oppositions is able to locate hitherto seemingly disparate predicates, practices and subject positions. As a way out, rather than attempting to find the proper strict formal categories, one could imagine a tripartite division for which repetition and mimesis would be replaced by the Piercian modes of signification which I mentioned earlier; but this begins to beg the question of the schema’s usefulness in the first place.

So rather than jettisoning this device, I would like to hold onto it for just a moment longer by suggesting that there is one artist whose work appears to take up residence within the matrix as a whole, and in so doing, renders it visible, or rather *legible*, if you will, in a way that exceeds the feeble bounds I have marked out for it. That artist, of course, is Martin Creed. Think of the now iconic *Work No. 227 (The Lights Going On And Off)* (2000; also *No. 127* from 1995), which must surely stand next to Cage’s *4’33”* as the visual equivalent of the near erasure of effort. Would it be perverse to suggest, however, that *Work No. 227* occupies the low-effort mimetic pole, given that it imitates the “performative gesture” itself—of Duchamp, of Cage; which is to say, of the readymade itself now rendered wholly conventional as “copying without copying”? *Work No. 557* (2006) jumps to the exact opposite pole of high-effort repetition by offering a series of standard A4 sheets



methodically filled in by individually legible strokes of black magic marker. As if to scoff at these extremes, however, *Work No. 503* (2006) and *Work No. 600* (2006) reconceive shitting and vomiting as essential forms of—Effortful? Effortless?—production. Here we come back to that

notion of effort as condition of pure expenditure: the absolute primal conditions by which someone can be said to *make* anything at all. And these two—what do we call them?...Actions?—occupy simultaneously the low and high effort ends of the spectrum, as various clips from Creed’s *Sick Film* (2006) so clearly demonstrate: In the ‘trailer’ for the film, we witness a young woman enter from left side of the screen, execute a playful about face, and proceed to stick her fingers down her throat. But to no avail. After a couple of repeated attempts, she giggles a bit out of embarrassment, gets down on her knees to facilitate the process, and continues—all the while emitting gagging sounds and spitting out the saliva being generated from having her hand in her mouth. In other words, the young woman makes quite an effort, but ultimately does not succeed.



Not to dwell too long on these less than savory contributions, I trust that even these limited numbers of examples also make plain how Creed has self-consciously reconceived the artistic *oeuvre* itself as the manifestation of so much *work*: the ultimate gesture of accumulation, a lifetime’s worth of efforts, which, of course, Creed has now taken to reprising in his *Variety Show* performances, those entertaining reminders of all that he has *done*, lest it all become a little too illegible.