

Chapter 1 : Theses on Art and Class (ebook) by Ben Davis |

Praise for Theses on Art and Class " Just when it seemed that contemporary art writing and the subject of real-life politics had permanently parted ways, along comes the young New York critic Ben Davis with a book that brings them together.

The rigorous analysis developed by this group identified that artists and art critics are prone to overlook the actuality of class, even whilst using a Marxist lexicon. Rather than clarifying the field of art, as Davis intends, a thorough class analysis should destabilize it. Although Davis is right to suggest that class analysis is largely avoided in contemporary art, his work would benefit from a more thorough art historical grounding, and a greater sensitivity to the social determinations upon his own position as an art critic. Unsurprisingly, the Joannou-Koons double act did not persuade many commentators of its commitment to culture in the public interest. Among the responses to *Skin Fruit* was a show called *class* held in , where Ben Davis first circulated a series of statements explaining contemporary art in class terms. Davis is based in New York: The combination is somewhat unusual; while academic art theory is dominated by a Marxist and post-Marxist lexicon, avowedly Marxist art critics are few and far between. One might easily assume that the practice of art criticism, which is relatively exposed to market pressures, is not suited to explicitly politicised critique. In the United Kingdom, Julian Stallabrass and Dave Beech have developed quite different but equally accessible forms of Marxist art criticism, but these writings accompany other work: The fact that Davis does not seem to have any aspirations to acceptance into the academy is both a point of strength and of weakness: Kim Charnley [final draft] Published in *Historical Materialism* It may be that this success has something to do with the combination of politics, informed commentary on contemporary art, and a non-specialist mode of address. Across these discussions Davis tries to clarify the issues involved in the art world by emphasising the importance of class. He states in thesis 2. As he puts it: It is towards such a perspective, which involves changing the material base of society, that those who care about art should turn. It is unfortunate, however, that across 9. Art professionals, Davis suggests, are prone to exaggerate the revolutionary potential of their field, while disengaging from actual political struggle. Many Marxist critics would agree with this, of course. Gail Day in her book *Dialectical Passions: Negation in post-war Art and Theory* has covered some of this ground. Day demonstrates that Foster and Buchloh tend to base their analyses in accounts of the cultural effects of capitalism that emphasise the progressive subordination of use-value to exchange value. The idea is controversial, of course. For Day, however, Hardt and Negri brought a welcome optimism to debates on the left, whatever its limitations. Davis does not trouble to discriminate between them. In his analysis, theories of immaterial labour have been influential because they obscure the real class identity of art: In short, the Marxism that circulates in contemporary art is carefully adapted to a bourgeois, or petit-bourgeois, frame of reference. Some of the points that Davis makes concerning the class character of artistic labour are valid. This point has been widely remarked by theorists in this area. Unfortunately, this tends to be the conclusion that Davis drifts towards, in his eagerness to provide answers. Of course, this is precisely the lacuna that Hardt and Negri hope to overcome through a speculative revolutionary image of the multitude. In *Literature and Revolution*, first published in , Trotsky provided a precise analysis of the forces that determine the cultural field. Each recognized school of art is a well-paid school. It is headed by mandarins with their many little balls. As a general rule, these mandarins of art develop the methods of their schools to the greatest subtlety, while at the same time they use up their whole supply of powder. Then some objective change, such as political upheaval or social storm, arouses the literary Bohemia, the youth, the geniuses who are of military age, who, cursing the satiated and vulgar bourgeois culture, secretly dream of a few little balls for themselves, and gilded ones, too, if possible. Davis deploys this argument to attack politicised art theory, demanding that it should be more cognizant of its distance from the realities of class struggle. Possessed of an evaluative criterion of such power, he tends toward misjudged critical bravado. The resulting tone is unfortunate: Rather than subsuming politics in art, 10 *Carnevale and Kelsey* , pp. We might ask why clarity is given such a value when the subject of discussion is not revolutionary politics, but art. Contemporary art incubates radicalism

partly because, after conceptual art, it has embraced an autodidactic ethic in regard to theory. Autodidacts often misread, sometimes productively. There is a vast amount of confused or obfuscatory writing around contemporary art, but we might view this as an inevitable effect of informal learning. A degree of impatience with this situation is understandable, but ironically it tends to exacerbate the situation. Intellectual fashion, in art as elsewhere, is part of the compulsive temporality of capitalism. Appeals to the unpolluted springs of revolutionary Marxism, in this case to Trotsky, are important for a reinvigorated Marxist culture, but they need to be questioned carefully. Davis uses Trotsky as an authority in a polemic that makes debate within Marxist aesthetics impossible. In *Literature and Revolution* Trotsky employed a historical materialist analysis to withhold the authority of the party, refusing to promote any of the competing aesthetic factions of the early years of the Soviet Union. He articulated an interest in, but also a distance from, the intense artistic debates about the development of revolutionary culture. Artists were all equally prone to inherit the vestiges of bourgeois ideology. The new cultural order of communism would take many years to emerge, as an organic expression of the construction of a new economy and a new society. Trotsky discriminated between different artistic approaches, but ultimately remained impartial. This is what marks the difference between his work and the later Zhdanovite cultural doctrines. For Trotsky there was more than one way for Marxists to be artists. Often crude stereotypes are used, as in this passage: Although Davis is careful not to give the stereotype of political art his explicit backing, he does not trouble to argue against it. The aim is simply to create a rhetorical space where Davis can discredit the kinds of politicised art and criticism that he Kim Charnley [final draft] Published in *Historical Materialism* At other times, he accuses politicised artists of shirking their political responsibilities. As he states in chapter five: Invariably, the targets of his criticism are practices that sit in the difficult space between art and politics. In these passages of 9. Class analysis, we might say, is the principle that allows Davis to sort out the pluralistic tumult of contemporary art. In a society overwhelmingly dominated by corporations and wage labour, accepting that visual art is middle class in nature also means beginning to see the natural limits of what you can promise for it as a critic or expect of it as an artist. That gives you a more realistic starting point for action. Tellingly, for Davis the art critic is the guide who must step in to explain the difference between art and politics: Muddling the two can only do a disservice to both. Furthermore, it may be that this space of complexity has something to offer struggles to attain political consciousness. Davis is caught between a desire to evoke a poetics of class through contemporary art and a deeply problematic attempt to explain the ambivalence of art with a critical formula. The butt of criticism is a single article, first published in by Greg Sholette and Blake Stimson, which attempts to historicise artist-collectives after , while simultaneously evoking the radical potential of this organisational form. Davis, however, makes no reference to the positions that were explored in the edition of *Third Text*, themed around collaboration, in which this article was first published. Roberts has also noted the utopian politics that surrounds much collaborative art. Acknowledging this 12 Sholette and Stimson , pp. He is, of course, right that art is not a short-cut to revolution: Inciting political consciousness is a complex and uncertain endeavour. This is no reason, however, to argue against art that explores political themes, or even organizational forms. It is incorrect to suggest that engaged artists are diverted from other forms of political work. It is perfectly possible to produce engaged art, or even art criticism, as one modality of political commitment. At the very least, politically- engaged art offers ideas through which a debate might be developed between Marxists. It is strange, therefore, that an influential Marxist critic should expend such energy denouncing artists and theorists who are also on the Left. Gregory Sholette, for example, has written extensively on political art as an archive: On tensions in communisation theory, see Roberts , pp. Davis actually seems to hold a similar view, which suggests he may be picking fights unnecessarily. Near to the beginning of 9. The avant-garde lineage that Davis attacks is precisely where the most searching analyses of the relationship between art and class have been developed. Although Davis acknowledges the symbolic importance of the 15 Sholette , p. A considered treatment of this history would provide a better counter-argument to fashionable theory than mere polemic. In the wave of political activity among artists in the mids, the debates were conscious of the class contradictions in art. The collective formed around the short- lived journal *Red-Herring* wrote in the editorial to their first issue: All of these artists were finding a resolution that they could live with, which did not preclude political

work outside art. Their section of the film shows the two of them in their apartment, simultaneously performing gendered domestic roles and reflecting on them in a voice-over track. The exercise of oppression is more subtle than putting people to sleep in front of a television. Social revolution becomes cultural avant-garding. I remember thinking that artists were class-free: But our art is basically a function of the class in power. The artist Mel Ramsden, in , 18 Popovic Our very own privileges? In which case, who listens? A statement submitted to the Venice Biennale begins:

Chapter 2 : Ben Davis (art critic) - Wikipedia

" Theses on Art and Class" Ben Davis Class is an issue of fundamental importance for art Inasmuch as art is part of and not independent from society, and society is marked by.

The great basic thought that the world is not to be comprehended as a complex of readymade things, but as a complex of processes, in which the things apparently stable no less than their mind images in our heads, the concepts, go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away – has, especially since the time of Hegel, so thoroughly permeated ordinary consciousness that in this generality it is now scarcely ever contradicted. And a fine thing, too! But Engels, being a good sport, lets the enemy have a point or two as well: It was necessary first to examine things before it was possible to examine processes. The past was prologue, however, and we had now no longer any need for the fixed and stable things of the eighteenth century. He would immediately recognize, of course, the phrases that he and Marx had coined so long ago: Almost everything would be familiar – and yet everything would be strange. Where is the history, the development of these concepts? We remain in still in the thrall of fixed and stable ideas, and questions of process are nowhere in sight. His approach, I will show, is crippled by a constant drift toward conceptual essentialization that serves only to ensure that its link to the world remains tenuous. To begin with, there are clearly only three of them: The middle class ideology is more insidious: Does the ruling class really exist in the way that Davis thinks it does? He gives us a few examples of representative ruling-class agents in the art world: After all, universities and even corporations are different; they have competing interests and competing political programs. Likewise, a private art collector is as likely to be a Marxist intellectual on the Upper West Side as a right-wing Harvard MBA with a trophy wife and a villa in Languedoc. It is not simply that this obscures the role of the means of production – to put it in Marxist terms – which are distributed quite unevenly among the various categories of wealthy agents that are involved in the art world. In fact, controlling the means of production is itself a highly problematic idea: Even in American debates about art the battle lines are hardly ever drawn on anything like a simple income basis. Once more Davis offers us a set of examples: This heterogeneity of low-wage or unskilled labor in the art world is only a reflection of its variety in the broader labor market of postindustrial countries as a whole. Such workplaces would provide a well-defined space for political agitation, due in part to the physical proximity of the workers to one another. At issue, in effect, is the question of the possibility of working-class organization itself. Its nature, however, soon subtly changes: The operation is done without argument, which conceals all the attendant problems: Where would one get the yardstick through which to measure it? Government funding for the arts, art education, money for research projects: What could be better for institutionalization, cooptation, and control than barrels of cash dispensed in the name of abstract ideals?

Chapter 3 : 5 Theses on Art and Class by Ben Davis (, Paperback) | eBay

Ben Davis is an art critic and an activist, approaching this critique of art, art markets, art criticism, and their relationship to the present historical stage of capitalism, from an unabashedly Marxist framework.

Chapter 4 : Theses on Art and Class by Ben Davis

Ben Davis, Art Critic and Author of Theses on Art and Class.

Chapter 5 : Materialism and Art-criticism: A Response to Ben Davis™ – Theses on Art and Class

" Theses on Art and Class" by Ben Davis provides a valuable post-Marxist perspective on contemporary art. Mr. Davis is an influential critic and editor whose essays on the relevance of art to the socio-economic struggles of our time are presented here in book form.

Chapter 6 : Theses On Art And Class : Ben Davis :

Theses on Art and Class. seeks to show how a clear understanding of class makes sense of what is at stake in a broad number of contemporary art's most persistent debates, from definitions of political art to the troubled status of "outsider" and street art to the question of how we maintain faith in art itself.

Chapter 7 : Theses on Art and Class and Other Writings | Ben Davis

In Theses on Art and Class, Ben Davis takes on a broad array of contemporary art's most persistent debates: How does creative labor fit into the economy?

Chapter 8 : Theses: Art and Class – Chapters One and Two | Temporary Art Review

Theses on Art and Class seeks to show how a clear understanding of class makes sense of what is at stake in a broad number of contemporary art's most persistent debates, from definitions of political art to the troubled status of "outsider" and street art to the question of how we maintain faith in art itself.