

# What's Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere?

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*It appears to us that, related variously to institutional critique, productivist, activist and political documentary traditions as well as post-studio, site-specific and public art activities, the practices currently characterized as "project work" do not necessarily share a thematic, ideological or procedural basis. What they do seem to share is the fact that they all involve the expense of an amount of labor which is either in excess of, or independent of, any specific material production and which cannot be transacted as or along with a product. This labor, which in economic terms would be called service provision (as opposed to goods production), may include:*

- the work of the interpretation or analysis of sites . . . ;*
- the work of presentation and installation . . . ;*
- the work of public education . . . ;*
- advocacy and other community-based work, including organizing education, documentary production and the creation of alternative structures. . . .*

— Helmut Draxler and Andrea Fraser, "Services: A Proposal for an Exhibition and a Topic of Discussion," 1993

*An Artistic Service?*

The project "Services: The Conditions and Relations of Service Provision in Contemporary Project-Oriented Artistic Practice," undertaken at the beginning of 1994, was a response to a specific situation and the largely practical and material concerns that arose as a result of that situation.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of the term "services" as a way of describing certain aspects of contemporary project work was largely strategic. It was not intended to distinguish a particular body of work as new or as a substitute for any of the labels at that time in use, from "institutional

1. The "Services" project, organized by Helmut Draxler and me, opened at the Kunstraum der Universität Lüneburg, at the invitation of Beatrice von Bismarck, Diethelm Stoller, and Ulf Wuggenig. See the introduction to the "Services" discussions on page 117 of this issue for a more detailed description of the project.

critique" to "post-studio art," "site-specific art," "context art," "community-based art," "public art," the more generic "project art," or the even more generic "cultural production." "Services," rather, was intended to identify one aspect of many, but not all, of the practices described with those terms: the status of the work, or labor, of which they consist and the conditions under which that work is undertaken. While most project work does, in the end, take a physical form, the contention of the proposal for "Services" was that, in addition to the work of production, all site or situationally specific projects involve "an amount of labor which is either in excess of, or independent of, any specific material production and which cannot be transacted as . . . a product." The strategic value of using the term "services" to describe that labor was that it provided a basis for identifying the value of that portion of an artist's activity which did not result in a transferable product. Motivating the project "Services" was the conviction that this dimension of contemporary artistic work, as something intangible in an apparatus still dominated by the physical and visible, was going largely unrecognized and uncompensated. But the notion of services also provided the basis for understanding or describing important as well as troubling aspects of the relations these activities appeared to presuppose and imply—relations that seemed to represent a significant shift in the status, meaning, and function of artistic activity.

Attempting to produce a more complete account of the current existence or genealogy of artistic practice as a form of service provision has proved exceedingly difficult.<sup>2</sup> If certain artistic phenomena of the past five years can indeed be considered service provision, according to what definition of that term? The very straightforward assertion of the proposal for "Services"—that all artistic work, or labor, that is not compensated through the sale of a tangible product must be considered a form of service provision—seems clear enough. Too clear, perhaps: the utility of the concept itself—beyond its strategic utility in justifying demands for compensation—seems almost exhausted in that clarity. Stepping beyond this basic definition of a service in the distinction between tangible and intangible products or production thereof, one immediately finds oneself mired in centuries of economic, sociological, and historical debates as to whether services even exist as a distinct form of economic activity. Marx, for one, didn't think that they did. The term quickly evaporates as a structure or framework to be simply applied for strategic, interpretive, and even descriptive use.

And yet services have been important as a theme in art at least since the late 1960s, particularly in performance and feminist art, and as a strategic element since the appropriation of institutional functions in practices of institutional critique. In addition to such strategic appropriation of *service occupations*, the practical or procedural appropriation of service positions has been a central aspect of artistic practice since the Minimalists reduced (or expanded) their roles in the process of art making to (include) those of designers, engineers, managers,

2. The present text was written as the first part of a longer essay that will be published at a later date.

and administrators. The redefinition of art works from physical, material products or goods to *serviceproducts* such as information and intellectual property is one way of understanding the "dematerialization of the art object" ascribed to Conceptual art, as well as important aspects of artistic policies resulting from the critique of the commercial art apparatus, such as the "Artists' Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement" and many of the reforms advocated by the Art Workers Coalition. The introduction of *service functions* in art, and the ethical dimension of the notion of service, are evident in cultural activist and community-based practices. Finally, the emergence of specific, immediate *service relations*, as opposed to the abstracted relations of object production and exchange, can be seen as a consequence of post-studio practices, whether or not they result in a durable or tangible product (and most usually do). A specific site (or better, situation) always also includes a specific set of relations—within the process of site-specific production as well as within the site itself.<sup>3</sup>

The problem with the term "services" is equally apparent from this list of its seemingly appropriate applications: services as a category, considered in its economic, social, or political and ethical dimensions, separately or together, has no particular coherence. There is no consensus in economic or social thought as to what a service is. While the growth of what is generally considered the service sector in the twentieth century and particularly in the postwar period is quantitatively documented, the definitions of that sector, the features that distinguish it from an industrial or "productive" sector, remain fuzzy at best. Similarly, the social character of service occupations, which traverse the service and industrial sectors, however defined, range from corporate management, to the "independent" professions, to the lowest-paid domestic and maintenance work. Services have traditionally been distinguished by their relationship to capital: Adam Smith considered payment for services as a form of final consumption and thus a reduction of capital rather than an investment. Consequently, services were long considered resistant to industrial organization and limited either to individual exchange (as of personal services), or public sector provision (as of the social services responsible for a large part of postwar service sector growth as it is generally defined). Yet the privatization of formerly public (or nonprofit) services, such as

3. The distinction I make here between service positions, service products, service functions, and service relations has been adapted from J. I. Gershuny and I.D. Miles, *The New Service Economy*. Gershuny and Miles distinguish between "service industries," which "cover all those firms and employers whose major final output is some intangible or ephemeral commodity"; "service products"—the intangible or ephemeral commodities themselves—which "are not all necessarily produced by service industries"; "service occupations," which are "present across the whole range of industries, and are involved in 'non-production' activities ranging from data-processing to repair and maintenance, from cleaning and catering to education and health-care"; and "service functions," which "involve individuals in service work" but not necessarily "within the money economy." See Gershuny and Miles, *The New Service Economy* (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 3–4, p. 23. From this framework I have subtracted 'service industries,' which are not my concern here, and added "service relations," a term which I use to describe those aspects of service provision implied by Jean Baptiste Sav's definition of a service as a "product that is consumed at the time of production itself."

health care, and the increasingly industrial organization of both personal services and those traditionally rendered by "independent" professionals, such as doctors in HMOs, has revealed the fallacy of such definitions. These contemporary phenomena can also lay to rest any lingering sympathies for the optimistic predictions of Daniel Bell and others that service sector growth portends the coming of a postindustrial society.<sup>4</sup>

One very general explanation for the heterogeneousness of the category services may be that, given the focus of classical economists, as well as Marx, on industrial production and the accumulation of capital, services were always simply everything else: everything that was not industrially organized; that was not or did not result in a durable, transferable, product; that was not productive of profit—"the domestic servant, the musician, the actor, the painter, the physician, the teacher, and the priest."<sup>5</sup> In a similar way, perhaps, one may only be able to reflect on the presence, in contemporary art, of service products, service positions, service functions, and, above all, service relations on the basis of the difference between these and the character and status of those products, positions, functions, and relations which had hitherto more or less exclusively defined artistic activity. The shift in the character of artistic activity, whether or not the term "service" conclusively describes it, can nevertheless be seen as related to those attributes with which services have traditionally been distinguished from other economic forms: the intangible as opposed to tangible product or production thereof; the position of organizing or mediating the production and circulation of goods; the execution of functions that cannot appear as values independently of their use; and work undertaken in an immediate relation to a client, consumer, or user in which there is little or no physical or temporal distance between production and consumption and in which the use-value produced often involves the user's direct participation.

Considering these definitions, one could conclude that almost every significant attempt by artists of the past thirty years to transform the conditions and relations of their activity, whether through the redefinition of art works or of the competencies required to produce them, has resulted in a tendency toward forms of work (or working) that include an aspect of service provision. If one considers

4. An analysis of Adam Smith's views on services can be found in Jean-Claude Delaunay and Jean Gadrey, *Services in Economic Thought: Three Centuries of Debate* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992). Harry Braverman offers a similar interpretation in *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974). The idea that, because services are somehow resistant to industrial organization and private sector provision, the expansion of the service sector would result in the emergence of a postindustrial society, was advanced by Daniel Bell in *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). The opposite argument had already been made by Ernst Mandel in *Late Capitalism*. According to Mandel, far from "representing a 'post-industrial society,'" the "penetration of capital into the so-called services sector" instead "constitutes *generalized universal industrialization*" (pp. 387–88): "The *private* relationship between the seller of specifically qualified labour power and the spender of private revenues, which still predominated in the nineteenth century and was thoroughly analyzed by Marx, becomes increasingly converted into a *capitalist*,...service business" (*Late Capitalism* [London: Verso, 1972], p. 385).

5. These were "the most usual illustrations" of services in the first half of the nineteenth century, according to Delaunay and Gadrey, *Services in Economic Thought*, pp. 15–16.

services simply as a negative category, a catchall for everything that was not of primary interest to classical economists, such a conclusion might be less far-fetched. However, it would also be meaningless — unless, that is, one considers the emergence of artistic service provision not as an instance of art reflecting or emulating the historical conditions of a "service economy," but rather as resulting from a self-conscious artistic critique of the cultural commodity, of the exploitation of art for economic and symbolic profit, and of the structures of artistic practice and of the artistic field that provide for the creation of that value which is thus appropriated. Whether the shift to service provision, if it has in fact occurred, represents the failure of the critique of the political economy of art, or the realization of at least some of its goals, would remain in question.

The term "services," therefore, may not be particularly useful as an interpretive framework in understanding the impact of economic or historical structures, or even shifts in thematic, procedural, or ethical paradigms. Rather, it is useful, I would say, first, for what it requires: a genealogy of contemporary practices that traces not the visible, visual manifestations of the positions artists represent, but the very positions they construct for themselves and the economic conditions and social relations that those positions presuppose and impose. Second, it is useful for what it emphasizes: that these conditions and relations, at least in the dimensions that distinguish them from commodity production and exchange, entail a conclusive transformation of one of the central characteristics of artistic activity and the artistic field: artistic autonomy. Third, it is useful for what it implies as to the character of this transformation.

*What Does an Artistic Service Serve?  
Supply and Demand or Demand and Supply*

The specific situation that the project "Services" was organized in response to was the emergence of what appeared to be, by 1993, a consistent and durable demand for project work. The particularity of that demand — and that which would render it durable — was that it did not appear to be conditioned simply by the supply offered by a distinct artistic group. As noted in the proposal for "Services," the practices characterized as "project work" did not seem to share a formal, procedural, thematic, or ideological basis. Nor could "project artists" be grouped along generational lines. Furthermore, many "project exhibitions" — exhibitions in which artists were asked to undertake work in response to specific sites and situations — consisted of work largely by artists with no history of situational or post-studio activity. The demand for project work, therefore, seemed to be based rather on something like a need for what it is that projects provide.

This need, if one may call it that, appeared to have a number of different dimensions, depending on the character of the given situation. The demand for community-based projects appeared to be related to a need by publicly funded organizations to satisfy the public service requirements of their funding agencies.

The demand for institutional interventions appeared to be related to a need on the part of museum professionals to engage artists in a kind of collaborative effort at public education and institutional reflection. The demand for projects undertaken in response to specific curatorial concepts could be related to a need on the part of curators and their organizations to induce the "usual suspects" to produce something special in the context of the exponential expansion of contemporary art venues—and thus exhibitions—in the 1980s, as well as of the corps of curators, swelled by the graduates of at least a half dozen new curatorial training programs.

The appearance of this demand for project work had a number of important and troubling implications. It represented a state of affairs in which artists were undertaking projects not only for specific sites and situations, but also within specific relations to organizations and their representatives, curators, and other arts professionals. And it appeared to be the specificity of these relations—more than the physical or temporal specificity of the works themselves—that distinguished these contemporary "projects" from other forms of artistic activity.

The term "services" was introduced, above all, to describe these relations in their economic and social aspects. The emergence of the fee or honorarium as the standard form of compensation for project work appeared to mark less the emergence of a new form of practice than a shift in the character of that practice. Whether or not the result of a project is itself transferable—and most often it is, in some form—a fee is provided, generally, as compensation for that portion of the work which is assumed not to be transferable. Payment of a fee does not usually imply that the organization will own project results. In many cases, sponsoring organizations do not even have collections. When they do, the accessioning of objects resulting from projects usually remains a separate administrative procedure requiring a separate contract. The project fee is payment for the artist's work itself, not for a work of art: it is not an advance on an abstract value to be realized at a future date, but a payment for the final consumption of a value extinguished in some form of immediate use.

Whether or not a project is undertaken at the invitation of a particular organization and compensated with a fee, whether or not it is a contractually defined response to an external demand, projects appear to be distinguishable from the broad range of post-studio practices by the degree to which they are constituted in relationship to externally determined interests or needs. Projects undertake to respond to (and perhaps, but not necessarily, to satisfy) those interests and needs, not through the production of a utility embodied in an object but through the execution of particular functions. These functions were identified in the "Services" proposal as including the work of interpreting, the work of presenting, arranging, and installing, the work of educating, and the work of advocating and organizing.