

# Let's talk about Class, and Art

**Mike Watson**

## **What we mean when we say we want to talk about social class and art:**

When I first decided to talk about social class in the art world I knew I would face a difficult task. Two years on from that point—when I began organizing a forum on social class held at Open School East and The Royal College, London in December 2015—I am more convinced than ever of the need to address the issue of social class division within the arts, as well as the need for creative discussion to be applied to issues of class in wider society. What follows are some of the difficulties I have identified in talking about social class over the last two years. Many of these points back up experiences in the art world, academia and in my wider life experience. Indeed, class is not really a quantifiable science, which in itself can be a cause of frustration when trying to state to middle or upper class peers the importance of talking about social class and of realigning the class makeup of the arts. Though this should be no deterrent and I would urge working class art professionals to draw on the passion they feel for the subject of class inequality and to bring that passion to bear in conversation with their peers, for whilst not being measurable, that passion is tangible. As such, it is a positivist manifestation of the reality of social class as a materially inscribed fact. Indeed, such passion, emotion, anger or fear has been the motor for the greatest movements in history both for social change and against it. One only has to see the contorted and mean spirited postures and faces of David Cameron and George Osborne in YouTube footage of the two dismantling the mechanisms of social justice to see to what level emotion is crucial to the politics of class, at both ends of the scale.

Moving on to the difficulty in talking about class in the art world: Firstly, I have found that it is generally only the working class who think we need to talk about class; the middle and upper classes treat the subject as little other than a bearable annoyance, a fact of birth, or of history, but nothing one can do anything about. This is clearly carried over into a lack of interest in the political debates which surround issues of wealth inequality. Whilst, to be fair, a good number of middle

and upper class people do hold a broadly leftist political world view, this tends to be channeled via the softening touch of social democratic values, which airbrushes the rough edges of the leftist cause, so that revolution becomes a more palatable adherence to 'social values'. There are two problems here, firstly it is all too easy to talk casually about class: we all have class backgrounds and we all know someone who is richer than us. Consequently, conversations on social class are engaged in with an air of 'oh dear', as participants who are not really underprivileged pose as if they are. Of course, these conversations are not liable to reach any incendiary conclusion, not least as they often take place within the comfy surroundings of a gallery, museum, coffee shop, restaurant or other dinner table. This leads neatly into the second point, which is that the middle-class art practitioner does simply not know what it is like to wonder where the next meal is coming from or how one is going to pay the rent, or run a phone or internet connection or buy a new pair of shoes as the last remaining wearable pair (i.e. without holes in the soles) broke. Therefore, one of the problems with talking about social class in the art world is a woeful ignorance which makes people talk as if they are underprivileged whilst they bask in a level of comfort that means it is unlikely that they'll ever muster the anger to really do anything about their underprivileged position. This problem has been exacerbated by—and is brilliantly, yet unwittingly, conveyed via—the 99% movement, as discussed in *Towards a Conceptual Militancy* (Zero Books, 2016):

“The same syndrome can be seen in the largely ‘gestural’ oppositions to the global economic crisis and its causes. The 99% slogan – ‘we are the 99%’, popularised by the Occupy Wall Street movement – which highlights the vast accumulation of wealth in the hands of an elite 1%, ignores the vast differentiations of wealth amongst the 99% ‘poorest’ people on Earth. This blindness to the privileged position of some of the 99% in comparison to the poorest people within the global whole – and all of the stratifications between – highlights yet another attempt to create distance and ascribe blame. It is a classic case of Nietzschean resentment (or ‘resentment’, whereby the aggrieved re-feel their grievances to the detriment of their ability act to change their position). As Nietzsche argued in *A Genealogy of Morality*, the characterisation of the oppressor as ‘bad’ cannot automatically imply that the oppressed are ‘good’. Yet as applied to the anti-war and anti-finance protest the logic of resentment takes on a different complexion, for even as – for example – the gap between rich and poor grows, class stratifications are arguably far more varied in Western society today than in Nietzsche’s time. We are witnessing a middle-class resentment at both its complicity with and distance from power.” (TACM, pp17-18)

Put simply, the teeth of any potential working class movement are blunted because a great many of the people with an apparent vested interest in class politics are not really working class, are not underprivileged and do not care to start any meaningful course towards societal reform, because they are too comfortable to care. This can be seen in the art world by anyone who is genuinely from a poor background and who

has frequented some of the plethora of endless talks, screenings, dances, poetry readings and now (popularly, as if we needed another ‘trend’) ‘walks’ around political themes held in the name of art. The hands off, ineffectual manner of so many of these events (not naming any, as they involve too many respected colleagues) is enough to make one spit or pull their hair out. If this reaction seems aggressive, just spare a thought for the poor dying refugees that are trying to enter fortress Europe as tens to hundreds of middle class artists, curators and art lovers engage in talks, walks, and dances on ‘borders/Syria/climate change/capitalism/gentrification/etc’ at any given point on any evening of the week across Europe.

The great gulf between what needs to be done and what is being done is in itself enough reason to try to talk not only about class in the art world, but about how the art world’s resources can be used to address class issues in the wider world. Though this needs to be a real discussion on social class in which people appreciate their relative level of comfort or discomfort and open up to a radical restructuring of the labour practices of the art world so that the class structure can become more evenly differentiated. That differentiation is crucial so that the art world can speak with a maximum diversity of voices from across all social backgrounds, all genders, all ethnic groups and all sexual orientations.

This leads nicely to a crucial next point, and that is that conversations on social class in the art world are often interrupted by people who argue that we should be talking about gender, race or sexual orientation instead of class. Whilst one can understand this sentiment as the directed anger of people who are also aggrieved by oppression and intellectually moved to declare their own plight as important, it also sadly derails the leftist project. All too often the well-intentioned practices of identity politics do the work of the ruling class for them by forsaking solidarity in the name of individual grievances. Granted, it is vital that specific maligned groups are represented within the voyage towards a more equal society. In this light, the Black Panthers and the Combahee River Collective are among the most outstanding leftist movements in the recent history of the West. However, they did not specifically aim to supplant a class discourse. Indeed, The Combahee River collective, formed in 1974 by amongst others, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier in order to give a voice to Black women—who felt marginalized both by the anti-racist and working class movements—issued a statement in 1980 in which it was written:

“The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women, we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.”

Often taken as the first group to specifically use the term ‘identity politics’, the Combahee River Collective—named after a military action along the Combahee River in South Carolina undertaken by a female Commander Harriet Tubman in 1863—clearly saw the promotion of black women’s rights as essential to overcoming the shortcomings of the male dominated leftist and black power movements, though, crucially, within interlocking systems of oppression. Now, within that, sometimes one will need to talk about race, and sometimes gender, sexual identity or class. That is to say, within an interlocking system of oppression we need to strengthen the oppressed in all walks of life, so that they can join forces and challenge the ruling elite together. This also means that there will be times when we need to speak simultaneously of all our discontents, but when I’m talking about social class and my own discontents I’d ask that people don’t interrupt me with theirs as if our discontents are mutually exclusive, because they’re not.

Another reason why we shouldn’t posit social class politics in opposition to race, gender or sexual identity issues is that doing so risks leaving working class people of all genders, races and sexual orientations behind whilst potentially promoting only the interests of middle to upper class people from racial minorities, exploited genders or non-normative sexual orientations. One might think here to the figure of Okwui Enwezor, who curated the 2015 Venice Biennale around the theme of Marx’s *Capital*. To be fair, symbolically such an event had enormous potential. Yet Enwezor himself moved with the airs and graces of nobility, and British nobility at that. This was a man schooled in evading questions, who when asked about the Marxist mission in the Guardian, just prior to the Biennale, dropped the ball, answering:

“His programme was to use capitalism to achieve social equality,” says Enwezor. “I don’t think that Marx, had he lived, would have wanted capitalism to end.”<sup>1</sup>

With friends like these one doesn’t need enemies though, above all, this is evidence that class needs talking about openly and seriously in the art world, because until that point is reached political art will just be used to make middle class people feel less guilty and to whitewash (or ‘artwash’) global capital. In fact, we need to address the social makeup of the art world so that the global art world does not become a mere sop to globalization itself. Indeed, if global political art, or political art on a global level is not actually acting in any directly political way, and is only representing politics whilst continuing to operate an unequal system of privilege, it will be used by corporations to whitewash what they are up to whilst giving jobs to bored middle and upper class art enthusiasts. The loser will continue to be the poor.

In this sense, there is a certain responsibility in saying one is a political artist or curator. You cannot just wear the badge of being a political artist, something more has to happen, though it felt that was what Enwezor was doing.

This leads to a next consideration, namely, that the art world is dominated by people from privileged backgrounds who employ a certain code of behavior out of habit, and that this code excludes people who are underprivileged. This can most clearly be seen when an exchange of money or discussion about payments is involved between an institution or privileged individual and someone who is categorically from a poorer background. In some exchanges the poorer person, needing payment, is often seen as vulgar, pushy and, ironically (or perhaps, better put, *disturbingly*), over concerned with money. Indeed, asking that payment be made promptly, and in line with prior agreements, can appear to underscore a lack of love for the work itself, or a lack of concern for art or culture. This accords with the fact that a great many people who work in senior positions in museums, in academia, in galleries, etc., don't actually need their stipends in order to live. This varies from country to country but is certainly the case in Italy (where I live), a country lacking in meritocratic structures. Of course, it is actually the case that the person who is quick to ask a payment is often needing money to get through to the next day, having sacrificed everything to work in the arts.

This basic misunderstanding is linked to a more fundamental misunderstanding of the values of working class people, who are often seen as living rather irresponsibly, hand to mouth, instead of amassing, however slowly, savings. This argument was played out publicly in 2014 in the UK as Tory peer Lady Jenkins argued:

“We have lost a lot of our cookery skills. Poor people do not know how to cook,” before continuing to say, “I had a large bowl of porridge today, which cost 4p. A large bowl of sugary cereals will cost you 25p.”<sup>2</sup>

This not only misses how damaging it would be to eat only cereal all day every day, but the fact that the particular situation of a freelancer in the art world with no savings or no family or other help (often unable to secure a loan or credit card) often means that shopping with any long-term plan in mind is impossible. There is never enough money at hand to do a large weekly shop, whilst the number of hours worked for low pay necessitates quick daily shopping trips in order to buy just enough food to make it to the next low payment from a client. Living in this environment of uncertainty—frequently from childhood, i.e. from birth—of course develops in the individual a tendency to grab when money is there (or is due to be paid), and then a tendency to go on a spending spree when a decent (though still low) amount of money arrives. It also leads to intense resourcefulness on a community level as a kind of unofficial communism arises between friends and family, who lend and give each other a large percentage of their income, regularly and without second thought.

It is coming from this a poor artist or curator enters into the baffling financial and social rites of the art world, with the potential for embarrassment always on hand. Most confusingly, I have found, is the fact that vast amounts of food and drink are often shared, but often with little in the way of friendship being exchanged. In fact, the more lavish the display of hospitality, the stiffer the people are and the less

they seem to want to know anything about their guests. One can appreciate that a certain level of reservedness goes hand in hand with power and wealth. It certainly wouldn't make sense for the wealthy to exclaim surprise at their own hospitality, yet often the food and drink is provided by faceless sponsors, just to be consumed by dour faced art world acolytes, bored of the constant rounds of cocktails. Thus, after we talk in an art space about politics, and maybe go for an art walk, and do a dance on the theme of poverty, we eat food given to us by strangers, drink alcohol and talk on the whole coldly with associates. In these situations, I learned long ago to return to my hotel (if staying away, paid by faceless entities at a museum of art foundation) to eat a kebab, watch football and drink cheap lager (at least knowing it wasn't given to me by a faceless corporation seeking publicity or a proud host throwing a lavish display of personal wealth). And here we see the vast gulf between the spontaneous and uncalculated giving, sharing and celebrating of the working class and the calculated patronage of the powerful.

Against given sensitivities, the question of what social class a person might come from could appear uncouth. Indeed, it is something that only a working-class person would ask in part as they have the generosity of spirit to reciprocate and divulge their own class background, in part as they have nothing to hide or lose. Though above all the question of social class, raised by a working-class person, could be seen as led by resentment and jealousy. However, I could say wholeheartedly that this is not the case for me or any of my politicized working class colleagues in the art world. In fact, conversations never revolve around how much money 'they' have and how much 'we' want. Working class people who want money generally don't work in the arts (with few exceptions). The issue that a leftist has with the rich isn't that they should give more of their money to us, the issue they have is that the rich and powerful place too much emphasis on the importance of gaining and maintaining wealth and power, to the detriment of the enjoyment of life and of the fostering of community. We don't want the money or the power of the rich, we want the rich to stop involving the whole world in their obsession with money, power and greatness (which would appear to be a major principle of Corbynism, and the reason for its success). We want the rich to stop involving the rest of the population in their notion of a deferred gratification and a stiff upper lip, and to stop nullifying the value of art by bringing it under this rubric. Though, above all, we want to talk about social class in the art world as social class stratification and its attendant promise of class mobility—providing one behaves like the upper classes—is the tool by which the powerful spread their love of power and make their perversion our concern.

More than all this we need to talk about class division in the art world as art helps to provide us with the symbolic tools for conveying who we are, and right now those symbolic tools are in the hands of the elite. Though above all we need to leverage the tools of the art world to open a more transparent debate about social class across society, because if we're not careful social class divides—which one could argue underpin every concern from terrorism, to immigration, to climate change to economic crisis—will tear us apart this century just as they did in the last.

Since beginning to talk about social class within the arts, the worlds of art and academia suffered the loss of a cherished figure who gave people from low income backgrounds tremendous hope - Mark Fisher. Beyond simply pointing to the disproportionately middle and upper class composition of the cultural fields, Mark Fisher made it feel that it's ok to be working class in the academic and cultural fields, and that feeling beaten down at times by your peers is a normal reaction to an abnormal environment. At one point, he wrote on social media of the anguish felt at 'coming up against' a social class superior within the university environment. He understood that however hard one tries, the baggage of a life lived struggling to deal with inadequate finances whilst attempting to master strange social conventions will always be to some extent limiting. He understood the feeling when words fail you and muscles tighten so as to make movement and speech awkward in the face of peers raised and schooled for the professional way of life. A feeling confounded by the patronising pity of the bourgeois leftist. And none of this is based on merit. Quite the opposite, in fact: the socially disadvantaged art world or academic worker must perform a gargantuan feat of stamina and mental acuity whilst hiding their broken feelings on a daily basis. Meanwhile, the bourgeois peer play acts for pocket money.

That Mark was subject to long term depression which recurred and ended with him taking his life was a cruel blow for those who joined him in the condemnation of an academic and cultural system that weighs heavily on the energies and health of its most deprived employees. Of course, it would be simple to blame the capitalist and academic system for pushing Mark to the edge, though the point will be made and discounted in equal measure. After all, it is in line with depression as a condition that its sufferers feel victimised and blame others for their state. As such, the logic that the sufferer of depression (or anxiety) need to simply pick themselves up and carry on easily takes hold.

Though in part to dismiss such callousness I would like to reflect via personal anecdote and broader fact on the very real material correlate between the social structure in the cultural and academic fields and stress, anxiety and depression. I would like to do this so that the problem of these conditions can be located in a resolvable exterior which can be changed, thereby drawing upon the hope that Mark brought to the public via his writing and through his actions, not least evidenced in his openness to young academics, students and creative practitioners.

Starting with this latter point I wish to pinpoint a 'closed-door phenomenon' within academia and the arts that operates both in the UK and Italy (the two countries I have most experience of as a student, visiting lecturer, curator, critic and adjunct professor). Put simply, for reasons of culture and history (i.e. due to a rigid class system) one is taught from an early stage in their career that the door (metaphorical but also physical) is closed as a matter of course. Access to academics is by invite and acceptance into circles where successful academics convene is rare. Further, acceptance as 'one of them' (a viable person who understands *what is there to be*

*understood*) is hard won, signaled by a complex system of body and verbal language traits that excludes people who grew up in non-white middle class environments. Indeed, at one of London's (and Europe's) most prestigious graduate schools in philosophy where I studied at some point in the '00s it was the norm for students to be made to feel stupid by professors who knew more than they did. This sensation was tangible and reflected by a number of my student colleagues in what was seen as a Pythonesque situation whereby the guardians of knowledge would zealously protect it even from the people they were obligated to pass it on to. In what would appear to be an inheritance of the private schooling system professors would over time select students they particularly favored for special treatment, encouraging them onto the Ph.D. program and into a career in the same department or another one within the same network. This was the state of the academic left which gave rise to Mark Fisher, though he battled long to get a position himself, having taught until the late part of the '00s in a further education college and only gaining a full-time position at Goldsmiths, University of London, relatively recently. On the way there, his popularity arose largely for his willingness (and perhaps accurately for the necessity) to circumvent the barrier which separated those 'in the know' from the rest.

In part this was due to Mark being an early adopter of internet blogging via his site K-Punk, which correctly identified the fact that the staid and closed form of academia that operated in the UK at that time could not continue. Or, rather, at the least, it couldn't continue as the only sphere for leftist academic debate. The internet enabled geeks and enthusiasts of every variety to 'talk' – or, more commonly, type – endlessly on subjects which might otherwise have caused intense boredom or irritation to their partners, friends or family. This led to an era of blogging in which, for example, new philosophical movements were founded or consolidated online through the interaction of students with academics who were often from outside their own institutions as well as between academics living in different countries and on different continents. Some of the most important academic friendships and feuds of our time were formed and fomented in this environment. Indeed, Speculative Realism, Object-Oriented Philosophy and Object-Oriented Ontology all grew up in this way in a short space of time.

Whilst optimism for the political potential of the internet has waned in many respects (not least as it has been instrumental in the rise of the far right and of the disturbing phenomena of Trump and Brexit) we can't overlook a phenomenon which has allowed students to bridge a gap in tuition by appealing directly to a young generation of blogging tutors from other institutions (such as, notably, the very prolific blogger and philosopher Graham Harman, Mark Fisher and Nina Power). Whilst blogging proved fairly ineffective for tackling the actual problems inherent to the academic system itself, at a structural level it can't be doubted that a new generation owes much to that time of ferment and the openness of a few thinkers unrestrained by social class protocol. The trouble is that so long as a broad class system still prevails there will always be a sensation of superiority and inferiority within academic departments as well as in the cultural field.

Simply, if one is outside the dominant social class in a given field there will always be something that differentiates them from their peers. On the surface this manifests in behavioral traits and in a studied casual yet elegant manner of being that is beyond emulation for any period of time. One either has the affectations of the upper classes or does not, but if they do it's because they were born with them and then further schooled in them. Beneath the surface there is a material aspect. One either has someone holding their back (or considerable savings or a house owned outright) or does not. If one does not have these things life will be more stressful and fitting in with one's upper class peers will be virtually impossible on any sustained level.

Of course, there are token working class people in the arts (Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst), but they are put there specifically to be working class for the entertainment of the wealthy. This is not a path open to many people and not one that can be planned for or deliberately obtained and these few working-class superstars are closer to Wayne Rooney than Peggy Guggenheim. For the rest of us upward mobility is a hamster wheel. One never really arrives where they think they should and the constant thought that 'by now I have done surely enough to rest, to relax, to have the ease of my peers' is always met with disappointment. What's worse is that the need for enterprising young working class cultural practitioners to establish themselves is often exploited. I have worked in an art foundation nearly entirely staffed by unpaid and underpaid labor. At one point during the six-month run of a politically themed exhibition an illegal immigrant worker spent several hours in the attic of the arts foundation bailing out water as it was raining and the roof was broken. Beneath people watched videos on capitalism and climate change. This is for me the best visual metaphor of the art world I have ever seen, only it was real. Everyone in that foundation was bound into compliance with its corrupt functioning by their need to get ahead. This is something repeated throughout the arts and academia and can be seen in the adjunct professor system operative in American universities.

Now, on a physical level sustained stress without relief leads to depression. This is a material reality: life conditions create mental illness. What then, on a scientific basis is the likely fate of a working class academic or arts practitioner who repeatedly finds themselves in the same place despite working harder and achieving more year on year? Clearly the facts speak for themselves.

We need to look out for each other and open doors instead of closing them. We need to fill the halls of academia and the art world with people of diverse backgrounds such that no one feels excluded. In some small way that path has begun.

Let's talk about class, let's do it proudly! Let's talk about what social class I am and what social class you are.

*Mike Watson is an art theorist, critic, and curator based in Italy who is principally focused on the relation between art and politics. He holds a PhD in Philosophy from Goldsmiths College and has curated for Nomas Foundation and at both the 55th and 56th Venice Biennale. In May 2016 he published a book entitled Towards a Conceptual Militancy for ZerO books.*

## References

1 The question actually asked, by correspondent Charlotte Higgins, was “Did not Marx foresee the end of capitalism, inevitably brought down by its internal contradictions?” Full text: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/07/das-kapital-at-venice-biennale-okwui-en-wezor-karl-marx>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/dec/08/poor-cannot-cook-peer-eats-words>