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*How to Provide an Artistic Service:  
An Introduction\**

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In our initial proposal for “Services,” Helmut Draxler and I offered the term “service” to describe what appeared to be a determining feature of what has come to be called “project work.” We wrote:

It appears to us that, related variously to institutional critique, productivist, activist and political documentary traditions as well post-studio, site-specific and/or 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 expending 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 and situations in and outside of cultural institutions;
- the work of presentation and installation;
- the work of public education in and outside of cultural institutions;
- advocacy and other community based work, including organizing, education, documentary production and the creation of alternative structures.

“Providing a service,” in this sense, is neither an intention (such as benefiting society) attributed to particular artists nor a content (such as museum education or security) characterizing a group of works. Rather, we proposed “service provision” to describe the economic condition of project work as well as the nature of the social relations under which it is carried out. On the most basic level we could even claim that the prevalence of practices such as the payment of fees to artists by cultural

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\* This text relates to “Services: Conditions and Relations of Project Oriented Artistic Practice,” an ongoing exhibition and working group organized by Helmut Draxler and Andrea Fraser, which originated at the Kunstraum der Universität Luneburg, January 29 - February 20, 1994. It toured to Stuttgart, Munich, Geneva, Vienna, and Hasselt, Belgium. Participants in the exhibition and working group included Judith Barry, Ute-Meta Bauer, Ulrich Bischoff, Iwona Blazwick, Buro Bert, Susan Cahan, Clegg & Guttman, Stefan Dilleuth, Helmut Draxler, Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, Christian Philipp Muller, Fritz Rahmann, and Fred Wilson.

institutions indicates that the emergence of art as “service provision” is simply an historical fact (a fee is by definition payment for services).

We went on to write:

there seems to be a growing consensus among both artists and curators that the new set of relations [emerging around project work]...needs clarification. While curators are increasingly interested in asking artists to produce work in response to specific existing or constructed situations, the labor necessary to respond to those demands is often not recognized or adequately compensated. Conversely, many curators committed to project development are frustrated by finding themselves in the role of producers for commercial galleries, or a “service department” for artists....

We organized the project “Services” as an occasion to consider some of these practical and material problems, as well as the historical developments which may have contributed to the emergence of artistic service provision, and to provide a forum for discussion of the impact this development has had on the relations among artists, curators and institutions.

As an artist I have a particular interest in all of these questions. My motive for initiating “Services” came from the complications and conflicts I experienced as a result of entering into relations with curators and organizations which were not regulated by accepted standards of professional practice, as well as from the frustration of working full time and for very prestigious exhibitions yet still not being able to make a living.

“Services”—and related activities I was involved in as I prepared the proposal—represented an effort by artists to represent and safeguard their practical and material interests by creating such forums for the discussion of those interests; by collecting information from a range of artists about their preferred working arrangements in order to prepare a set of general guidelines and perhaps a basic contract; by combining to form some sort of association.

What is implied in all of these activities is less a trade-union model of collective bargaining than a professional model of collective self-regulation. Like collective bargaining, this latter model could also, potentially, provide a certain leverage for artists in dealing with cultural institutions and other commissioning organizations, but to achieve this would require a clarification of procedure and, perhaps, the development of a basic methodology in reference to which legitimate needs and demands could be collectively determined. One example would be the question of fees versus sales; the fact that some artists collect a fee from an institution and then sell what is produced undermines the legitimacy of demands for fees. Another example would be how the integrity of project work is conceived: do projects which require a high degree of participation by the institution give the institution some rights to alter or determine the disposition of the work?

As Helmut Draxler and I wrote in our proposal,

. . . resolutions on practical problems often represent political decisions which may impact not only the working conditions of artists but also the function and meaning of their activity.

I am speaking only for myself (and not for the project “Services”) when I say that my interest in all of these organizational activities derived as much from the possibility of art practice developing into a truly self-regulating profession, as from the hope of gaining leverage in dealing with art institutions. Professional self-regulation is a matter of professional ethics as well as professional interests. In our field, it is also a matter of the ethics of cultural practice. And, because of the reach of cultural practice from private homes to public buildings and streets, it is a matter of the ethics of many of the social and subjective relations manifest in and through culture.

Proposing to talk about “How to Provide an Artistic Service” is part of an experiment I want to undertake to see if it’s possible to develop a methodology which could function as a basis for a self-regulating profession of artistic service provision. This experiment will take the form of a book— called “How to Provide an Artistic Service”—the model for which will be handbooks of professional conduct and technique common in other fields... books like *The Psychiatric Interview* or *Organizational Diagnosis* or Freud’s papers on technique, to name three that I have found particularly useful.

What I’m presenting tonight would be something like the introduction to such a book, or the beginnings of an argument for why such a book might be necessary.

In addition to the material concerns motivating the project “Services,” a central question was the potential loss of autonomy consequent to appropriating professional models from other fields—such as contracts and fee structures—as a means of resolving practical problems. Critical acceptance had created a demand for projects within cultural organizations that was clearly not only a demand for particular individual artists. This demand provided for the possibility of acting collectively to determine and defend our interests—particularly economic interests—as well as to consider the history of that kind of action. But it was also clear that this demand, expressed in invitations to undertake projects in response to situations and under conditions explicitly defined by others, represented a threat to artistic autonomy. Designing contracts to safeguard our practical and material interests, or even simply demanding fees in compensation for our services, might further compromise our independence by turning us into functionaries of ‘client’ organizations.

While many of us had taken up, in our work, the positions and activities of curators, gallerists, educators, public relations and employee-management relations consultants, security consultants, architects and exhibition designers, researchers, archivists, etcetera, we certainly did not do so to have our practices reduced to the functions of these professions. What would—should—differentiate our practices from

them is precisely our autonomy. This autonomy is represented, most importantly, in our relative freedom from the functionalization of our activity—that is, from its rationalization in the service of specific interests defined by the individuals or organizations with which we work. Included in this is freedom from the rationalization of the language and forms we use—a freedom which may or may not manifest itself in recognizably ‘aesthetic’ forms. Also included is the freedom of speech and conscience—guaranteed by accepted professional practice—which is supposed to safeguard our right to express critical opinions and engaged in controversial activity.

The logic of the question is pretty clear. We are demanding fees as compensation for work within organizations. Fees are, by definition, payment for services. If we are, then, accepting payment in exchange for our services, does that mean we are serving those who pay us? If not, who are we serving and on what basis are we demanding payment (and should we be demanding payment)? Or, if so, how are we serving them (and what are we serving)?

I would say that these questions are not exclusive to project based practice—defined as a service or not. Project based practice simply makes it necessary to pose them. I would say that we are all always already serving. Studio practice conceals this condition by separating production from the interests it meets and the demands it responds to at its point of material or symbolic consumption. As a service can be defined, in economic terms, as a value which is consumed at the same time it is produced, the service element of project based practice eliminates such separation. An invitation to produce a specific work in response to a specific situation is a very direct demand, the motivating interests of which are often barely concealed and difficult to ignore. I know that if I accept that invitation I will be serving those interests—unless I work very hard to do otherwise.

The interests contained in any demand for art, whether it is expressed in an invitation to undertake a project or not, would make up a very large section of a book on “How to Provide an Artistic Service.” It would begin with the objective character of the demand for art. This would be to counter the subjective experience I believe most artists have of the purely individual nature of demand (addressed to themselves or others); the myth that there’s no demand for art as such, but only for individual artists of particular genius, etcetera, and, in the absence of such artists, the entire contemporary art apparatus would just disappear. Of course, this is not the case. Museums have been built and must be filled. Critics and curators are trained and have an interest in being employed, gallerists must show. Investments have been made and the field must reproduce itself.

This primary demand to supply the reproduction of the field is conditioned by the next level of demand; that invested with interests related to competitive struggles between and among artists, curators, critics, gallerists, etcetera. These struggles to maintain and improve one’s position, one’s professional status vis-a-vis one’s peers; to impose the principle of status, that is, of legitimacy, and the criteria of value by which the position of others will be defined—these struggles are the dynamics through which the field reproduces itself. While influence on cultural institutions is a

primary stake in professional struggles, the demand for art addressed to artists is often also directly related to competition between institutions themselves; competition for funding, for press, for audiences, and all the other indices of influence over the popular and professional perception of legitimate culture and legitimate cultural discourse.

But cultural institutions are not unitary entities. They are composed of different sectors—for example, professional and voluntary—which are themselves in conflict. As a practitioner of so-called institutional critique, I have often been asked, “Well, if you’re so critical, why do they invite you?” It took me some time to realize that I was being invited in by one sector to produce a critique of the other.

Pierre Bourdieu writes:

. . . products developed in the competitive struggles of which . . . [the field] is the site, and which are the source of the incessant changing of these products, meet, without having expressly to seek it, the demand which is shaped in the objectively or subjectively antagonistic relations [that is, competitive struggles] between the different classes or class fractions over material or cultural consumer goods . . .<sup>1</sup>

This is why, he continues,

producers can be totally involved and absorbed in their struggles with other producers, convinced that only specific artistic interests are at stake . . . while remaining unaware of the social functions they fulfill, in the long run, for a particular audience, and without ever ceasing to respond to the expectations of a particular class . . .<sup>2</sup>

Or, one could say, remaining unaware of how they serve in the struggles within classes or between classes and class fractions.

The demand an art work meets when consumed materially by a private art collector, or symbolically by a museum visitor, may thus be conditioned by the struggles constitutive of the field of cultural production—where “supply,” Bourdieu writes, “always exerts an effect of symbolic imposition.” But as far as the interests, the needs, the wants invested in that demand are concerned, the object is indifferent, as the demand itself is subject to perpetual displacement following the course of particular struggles within the field. I would even say that the demand generated by the competition among and between art collectors and museum visitors over the quantity and quality of cultural consumption is itself displaced from another locus, and could just as easily attach itself to another field.

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 230

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

The cynical, debased version of this kind of analysis is that art is no different from any other market in luxury goods. They all serve social competition for status and prestige. But status is not a matter of status symbols, and prestige is not a luxury. The pursuit of prestige is only the dominant form of struggles for legitimacy of which culture is a primary site. The intimate character of the adequacy and competence at stake in these struggles is evident in the anxiety even the most socially dominant person may exhibit when confronted with an institutionally consecrated art work. Nor does one enter into these struggles voluntarily, as if as a result of some form of vanity. Rather they are mandated, for example, by museums which, as public institutions, impose the competencies necessary to comprehend the culture they define as legitimate as a condition of adequacy within the cities or states which support them.

But there are no artists I can think of who could credibly suggest that the functions their works serve have nothing to do with them or their artistic activity, as all artists are called upon to augment these functions for organizations and individuals at openings, dinner parties, press conferences, etcetera . . . They would be right, in any case, to say that they serve no one, if—as Pierre Bourdieu writes—“they serve objectively only because, in all sincerity, they serve their own interests, specific, highly sublimated and euphemized interests . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Am I really serving my own interests? According to the logic of artistic autonomy, we work only for ourselves; for our own satisfaction, for the satisfaction of our own criteria of judgment, subject only to the internal logic of our practice, the demands of our consciences or our drives. It has been my experience that the freedom gained in this form of autonomy is often no more than the basis for self-exploitation. Perhaps it is because the privilege of recognizing ourselves and being recognized in the products of our labor must be purchased (like the “freedom” to labor as such, according to Marx), at the price of surplus labor, generating surplus value, or profit, to be appropriated by another. In our case, it is primarily symbolic profit that we generate. And it is conditioned precisely on the freedom from economic necessity we express in our self-exploitation.

Because we are working for our own satisfaction, our labor is supposed to be its own compensation. It often feels as if all our professional relations are organized as if the entire art apparatus—including cultural institutions and galleries—was established to provide us so generously with the opportunity of fulfilling our exhibitionistic desires in a public presentation. [One can see the kind of labor market we provide with ideological justification by investing in such a representation.]

Subjective freedom, autonomy of conscience and the empowerment of individual will is matched to an inverse degree by economic and social dependence. This dependence is only partly a result of the atomization of artists; the individualism and competition which consigns each producer to conducting her or his business in isolation—if not in a kind of secrecy. Attempts by artists to form associations—some

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

of which are documented here—can only go a short way in alleviating such dependence. It's greater part lies not in relations of distribution but in the mechanisms of the system of belief which produce the value of works of art, and affirm the legitimacy of our activity. The divisions of labor within the field—between production, distribution and reception—are effectively divisions of interest which create the basis for belief in the independent judgment of the quality of works. This system of belief requires the judgment of others whose interests do not coincide with ours, who have no interest in serving us with their evaluations. If curators and dealers appear to be working for artists their judgment loses its appearance of disinterest—and thus its value—and they loose their powers to consecrate and sell. While, under the normal conditions of competition, the judgment by artists of their peers has a high degree of credibility, if those same evaluations appear to be based, rather, on an identification of interests (as has been the case, for example, with cooperative galleries), then they loose this credibility.

This is the contradictory principle of our professional lives: dependence is the condition of our autonomy. We may work for ourselves, for our own satisfaction, responding only to internal demands, following only an internal logic, but in doing to so we forfeit the right to regulate the social and economic conditions of our activity. And in forfeiting the right to regulate our activity according to our professional interests, we also forfeit the ability to determine the meaning and effects of our activity according to our interests as social subjects also subject to the effects of the symbolic system we produce and reproduce. As long as the system of belief on which the status of our activity depends is defined according to a principle of autonomy which bars us from pursuing the production of specific social use value, we are consigned to producing only prestige value.

If we are always already serving, artistic freedom can only consist in determining for ourselves—to the extent that we can—who and how we serve. This is, I think, the only course to a less contradictory principle of autonomy.

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