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SOCIAL WORKS

The Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art

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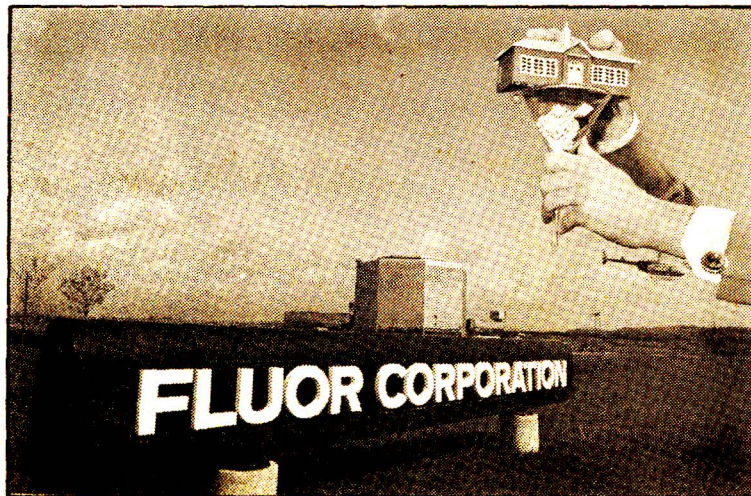
ALLAN SEKULA

Artists and writers who move toward an openly political cultural practice need to educate themselves out of their own professional elitism and narrowness of concern. A theoretical grasp of modernism and its pitfalls might be useful in this regard. The problem of modernist closure, of an "immanent critique" which, failing to logically overcome the paradigm within which it begins, ultimately reduces every practice to a formalism, is larger than any one intellectual discipline and yet infects them all. Modernist practice is organized professionally and shielded by a bogus ideology of neutrality. (Even academic thuggeries like Dr. Milton Friedman's overtly instrumentalist "free market" economics employ the neutrality gambit.) In political-economic terms, modernism stems from the fundamental division of "mental" and "manual" labor under advanced capitalism. The former is further specialized and accorded certain privileges, as well as a managerial relation to the latter, which is fragmented and degraded. An ideology of separation, of petit bourgeois upward aspiration, induces the intellectual worker to view the "working class" with superiority, cynicism, contempt, and glimmers of fear. Artists, despite their romanticism and propensity for slumming, are no exception.

The ideological confusions of current art, euphemistically labeled a "healthy pluralism" by art promoters, stem from the collapsed authority of the modernist paradigm. "Pure" artistic modernism collapses because it is ultimately a self-annihilating project, narrowing the field of art's concerns with scientific rigor, dead-ending in alternating appeals to taste, science and metaphysics. Over the past five years, a rather cynical and self-referential mannerism, partially based on Pop art, has rolled out of this cul-de-sac. Some people call this phenomenon "post-modernism." (Already, a so-called "political art" has been used as an end-game modernist bludgeon, as a chic vanguardism, by artists who suffer from a very real isolation from larger social issues. This would be bad

enough if it weren't for the fact that the art-promotional system converts everything it handles into "fashion," while dishing out a good quantity of liberal obfuscation.) These developments demonstrate that the only necessary rigor in a commodified cultural environment is that of incessant artistic self-promotion. Here elite culture becomes a parasitical "mannerist" representation of mass culture, a private-party sideshow, with its own photojournalism, gossip column reviews, promoters, celebrity pantheon, and narcissistic stellar-bound performers. The charisma of the art star is subject to an overdeveloped bureaucratism. Careers are "managed." Innovation is regularized, adjusted to the demands of the market. Modernism, per se, (as well as the lingering ghost of bohemianism) is transformed into farce, into a professionalism based on academic appointments, periodic exposure, lofty real estate speculation in the former factory districts of decaying cities, massive state funding, jet travel, and increasingly ostentatious corporate patronage of the arts. This last development represents an attempt by monopoly capital to "humanize" its image for the middle-managerial and professional subclasses (the vicarious consumers of high culture, the museum audience) in the face of an escalating legitimization crisis. High art is rapidly becoming a specialized colony of the monopoly capitalist media.

Political domination, especially in the advanced capitalist countries and the more developed neo-colonies, depends on an exaggerated symbolic apparatus, on pedagogy and spectacle, on the authoritarian monologues of school and mass media. These are the main agents of working-class obedience and docility; these are the main promoters of phony consumer options, of "lifestyle," and increasingly, of political reaction, nihilism, and sadomasochism. Any effective political art will have to be grounded in work *against* these institutions. We need a political economy, a sociology, and a nonformalist semiotics of media. We need to comprehend advertising as the fundamental discourse of capitalism, exposing the link between the



Headquarters, petroleum engineering firm, Orange County, California
from Allan Sekula, *School is a Factory*, 1979

language of manufactured needs and commodity fetishism. From this basis, a critical representational art, an art that points openly to the social world and to possibilities of concrete social transformation, could develop. But we will also have to work toward a redefined *pragmatics*, toward modes of address based on a dialogical pedagogy, and toward a different and significantly wider notion of audience, one that engages with ongoing progressive struggles against the established order. Without a coherent oppositional politics, though, an oppositional culture remains tentative and isolated. Obviously, a great deal needs to be done.

"On Opposition" is excerpted from a longer article, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," *Massachusetts Review*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, Winter 1978

School is a Factory

If business and industry could not draw upon a large reservoir of educated manpower, they would be handicapped in every phase of their operations. American education does a job for business and industry.

Frank Abrams, ex-head of GM

College graduates have no more control over the kinds of jobs available to them or the kinds of lives they lead than other workers have over the structure of the job market Powerlessness—the class-determined inability to define the direction of their own lives—is the social link joining college-educated workers to the more traditional sectors of the proletariat.

David Smith, *Who Rules the Universities?*, 1974

The initial version of this work consists of twenty-six black and white photographs, with interspersed texts and diagrams. An audiotape, twenty minutes long, accompanies this material. The tape begins with disco music, *Staying Alive* by the BeeGees, and ends with a near-catatonic version of

Summertime Blues performed by the Flying Lizards. The music is intended to be mechanically seductive, then, through repetition, grating and obnoxious while communicating a lyricism of impotent narcissism and deadened rage. The intermediary material of the tape falls into three parts, punctuated with the loud clicking of an alarm clock. The first segment delivers a monotonous, but angry monologue on "a sanitary landscape," on "factories disguised as parks," and ends with an address to the viewers of the exhibition in a commanding, authoritarian double-binding voice: "Learn to earn, work, don't work, play, don't play. Everyone is looking at you, no one is looking at you..." The segment that follows is a nasal reading of the top twenty employing corporations and state-sector agencies in Orange County, California. The last vocal segment is a reading from *Who Rules the Universities?* by David Smith, a passage describing the contradiction that holds between college students and trustees, the latter being, most frequently, the heads of corporations whose labor needs are served by the school system.

This exhibition was first realized in the photo gallery of Orange Coast College, Costa Mesa, California. The gallery there is also a foyer to a darkroom area, and serves as both workspace and social hang-out for photography students. The work addresses the general problems of higher education under advanced capitalism and the specificity of a space devoted to an illusory aura of the "creative act" while serving, on an everyday basis, as a training ground for the routinized techniques of the advertising industry and other sectors of mass culture. The contradiction here is between the myth of genius, of Culture, and the reality of the commercial artist as a detail worker of desire.

From 1977 to 1979 I taught the history of photography at Orange Coast, as one of many part-time "underlaborers" of the community college system. My students were predominantly white and working class.

A further version of this work is being planned for an inner-city junior college.



Administrative offices, community college, Orange County, California
from Allan Sekula, *School is a Factory*, 1979