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ARTISTIC COMPROMISE

WHAT IS SELLING OUT? The idea that an artist could betray their own principles, or perhaps abandon something intrinsic to art itself, is an anxiety-inducing proposition for any serious artist. At the same time, it's no secret that art's conditions of visibility are heavily dependent on wealthy gentrifiers, arms dealers, and political conservatives who moonlight as collectors, board members, and philanthropists.¹ Andrea Fraser notes that these plutocratic conditions collapse "patronage and governance," allowing the ultra-rich an outsized impact on artistic production and circulation.² When all facets of artistic discourse are channelled through risk-averse institutions dependent on the disposable income of the capitalist upper class or the austerity funds of the colonial state, the descriptor *art* comes to feel synonymous with the *art market*. But what can be done about this anxiety? Rather than repressing the often-dissonant relationship between art and commerce, I want to explore how "artistic compromise" is not reduced to the navigation of practical and professional demands, but is in fact a primary driving force behind new thought and material explorations.

Selling out implies that artistic autonomy is lost by deferring to commercial pressures. And yet, it is often the case that responding to market forces results in a greater degree of "autonomy." A

successful career begets more time to produce work and more opportunities to exhibit. Undoubtedly one's artistic vision is influenced by the necessity to meet market demands or funding criteria; but arguably an artistic vision can also be affected by a lack of time and material. It's true that, for those who do not possess generational wealth, the choice may feel like an ultimatum between treating one's practice like a business or a hobby. There is no denying that commercial interests often conflict with artistic visions, but is there really any precedent for true autonomy? Theorist Marina Vishmidt describes a fundamental contradiction in art's form and content, whereby art is "supposed to take a sceptical or even hostile stance to [...] the power of money and the power of the state" all the while being "sustained materially by the social arrangements it is supposed to negate ideally."³ If this is the case, then where did the distinction between art and economic power begin?

In *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, Hans Abbing notes that the separation of art from commerce was a relatively short-lived period of modern art.⁴ Modern art as a whole can be characterized by its dissociation from religious life and ritualistic purposes, increasingly identifying as a distinct activity in its own right. But art's distance from religion is simultaneously art's availability to the market. The wealthy patronage, spectacular commissions, and well-staffed studios that characterized the 17th and 18th century art world were eventually succeeded by a focus on individual production and *l'art pour l'art* in the late 19th century. Abbing argues that this shift was partially catalyzed by industrial technologies that made art materials more broadly available to individuals. For instance, the mass-production of premixed paints allowed an artist to paint outside a studio, *en plein air*, ultimately giving rise to Impressionism and subsequent movements.⁵ But we also know that the role of markets in commissioning and distributing art—a role formerly assumed by the church—was taken on

by governments and academic institutions. For instance, during the Cold War, the CIA funded Abstract Expressionist exhibitions and publications as representative of American intellectual and commercial freedom.⁶ During this same time period, the term “selling out” became commonplace, originating within the emerging labour union movement and gaining traction within jazz discourse to describe black artists that catered to white audiences.⁷ “Around 1980, along with developments in capitalism, attitudes and practices changed again. First, marketing and next cultural entrepreneurship by art-companies become common. [...] Artworks and the art products of art-companies also change in content, with higher sales as the outcome.”⁸ It is clear that art has regained its highly commercialized standing as an asset class: international art fairs and blue-chip gallery campuses abound. And yet, as Vishmidt points out, the matter is somewhat confused by the prevalence of so-called non-profit institutions, neoliberal funding bodies, and academic curricula idealizing artistic autonomy while incurring ever more student debt. Ultimately, the value of art (and even its political goodness) has always been guaranteed by various arms of the dominant power structure, like the state, the market, and the church. Abbing argues that this dissonance is actually inherent to art’s symbolic value, and is upheld “by lowering the labor cost of the weakest parties”:⁹

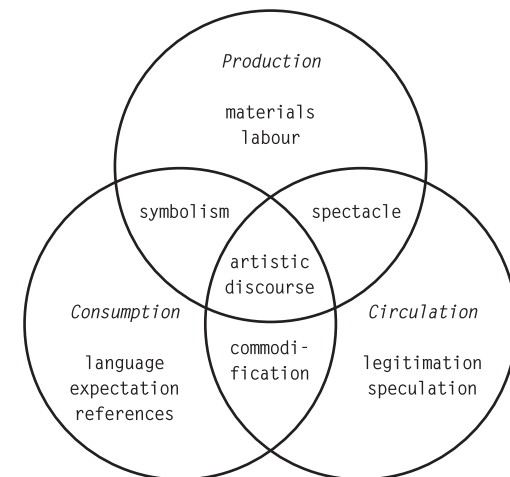
When there is excess supply of art offered by creative artists, it is inevitable that many of them experience hardship and feel that they have “failed”. Also many leave the arts disillusioned. Hardship and failure in the arts are essential for the existence and maintenance of the high symbolic value of art, that is, the exceptional prestige of art in society. If artists are so dedicated that they are willing to be poor and possibly fail, something very precious must be at stake.¹⁰

The conditions of art are predominantly shaped by forces

beyond the artist’s control because they are identical with the conditions of society at large. This begs us to reconsider what is meant by artistic autonomy. Because overt compromises with economic circumstances are an intrinsic aspect of both artistic discourse and artistic practice, perhaps we can think of compromise less as a moral glitch and more as a fundamental aspect of art-making. By attending to the many kinds of compromises that mark artistic practice, we can better articulate where an artist’s agency actually lies, and therefore how their political responsibilities might be considered in real rather than ideal terms.

Art and economic pressures

An artist’s relationship to the economy—and the kinds of external pressures that influence one’s practice—may best be explored by considering the economy as three interconnected spheres comprising production, consumption, and circulation. In a more artistic sense, these spheres represent the domains of artists, the public, and art institutions, respectively. This line of thinking allows us to consider compromise as a propulsive force necessary to realizing an artistic vision, and not simply as an anxiety that haunts our navigation of art and capitalist society.



1. Production



The sphere of production is the realm of the artist, and therefore concerns what pressures are encountered in the actual production of an artwork. This can be considered in relation to an artist's means: what kind of studio space can they afford, how much time do they have outside of a day job or family obligations, and what kinds of materials are available to not only produce work but also to be spent in experimentation and failure. It is obvious, I think, that navigating these factors produces very different kinds of practice—the production of any artwork, if it is to move from an artistic vision into actuality, must establish a working relationship to these conditions. A vision that exceeds these conditions will require active efforts to secure the necessary resources; the practice will need to incorporate entrepreneurial elements. This sphere also describes what materials are accessible to an artist. We can think in terms of economic supply chains: does an artist use readily-available materials? Or do they have to

fabricate or commission raw elements of a work? Does an artist obtain their materials by purchasing them, ready to go off the shelf? Are they intentional in selecting components of their work, or are these elements scavenged and encountered contingently? These questions were central to movements like *Arte Povera*, wherein commonplace materials and found objects were invested with symbolic power as indices of socio-political conditions. All of these forms and circumstances undoubtedly affect how a work is actualized.

However, if these forms remain unconscious, then perhaps it is not so clear how they end up affecting the decisions an artist makes in realizing their vision. We should consider another aspect of materials: their capacities. What can a material do, what can it be forced to do, what limits does it possess, how does it behave in disparate contexts, and how might experimentation or expertise change these capacities? Any new material or application will be unruly and difficult to control. The artist may attempt to guide this material in pursuit of their vision, but lack of familiarity often ends up producing very different results, and the vision must accommodate if it is to be actualized at all. In some instances, these unruly behaviours are prized as symptoms of natural agency or unfolding processes, and their unexpectedness is what makes them meaningful. Even a skilled artist handling their favourite materials might discover previously unknown capacities or difficulties. These material capacities ultimately shape the resulting work—the initial sketch, mock-up, and final product can vary greatly as the artist works with and against their materials. Sometimes work completely changes direction in the middle of production. Rarely is the finished work a 1:1 translation of the original intent.

If compromise can be understood as an exchange or sacrifice, wherein one principle is pursued at the cost of others, then perhaps attending to the sphere of production allows us to grasp

the fundamental principle of artistic practice: the making of an artwork. This is the principle around which all other compromises are oriented. What must be done in order to make art? What time limits must be respected, what materials are available, what tweaks are necessary? When art can look like anything, when no convention or rule of craft is ubiquitous, the possibilities seem unlimited. But nonetheless limits exist outside of this aesthetic infinitude. Basic economic requirements like time and materials must be balanced with respect to an artist's vision—inevitably the artist expresses their economic circumstances through the production of their work.

2. Consumption



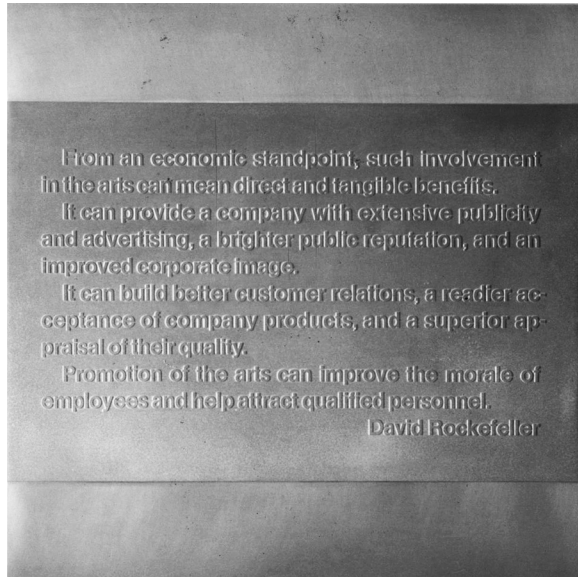
Consumption tends to be synonymous with purchasing, but it's important to note that the consumption of art is not limited to acquisitions. An artwork's use-value (that which is consumed) is aesthetic, conceptual, and abstract. Sometimes hearing a description of an artwork is enough to find meaning in it—one does not need to own or even physically encounter the work for it to function artistically. Rather, the predominant modes of consumption concern an artwork's legibility. Many of these

are unconscious, such as the artist's cultural context, the symbols and metaphors they might make use of, and the shared references held by both artist and audience. Here we can consider Mladen Stilinović's famous proclamation that "an artist who cannot speak English is no artist." If an artist wishes their work to have an effect other than "confusing" or "alienating" (that is, effects that tend to elicit neglect rather than contemplation), they will have to use shared languages and recognizable subject matter in order to bridge the gap between their intentions and the audience's interpretations. Furthermore, if an artist desires any kind of audience, they will have to be aware of their expectations—what is recognizable to the viewer as art? Where is it displayed, how is it shown? In many cases these conventions are taken for granted. But in some instances an artist will rally against convention, expanding and dissociating standard formats or genre tropes. In the same vein, artworks that issue moral protests or express political beliefs will only read as legible if the viewer possesses a compatible moral compass.

Still, even if an artist makes every effort to produce legible work steered toward a particular meaning (even going so far as to use focus groups, as do big budget film productions), the audience will ultimately interpret the work according to extant aesthetic trends and their own individual circumstances. We must not forget that just as artists produce work within their means, so do audiences consume work on the basis of what they can afford. The questions from earlier are applicable here, modified slightly: can a viewer afford the free time or ticket price to see the work? Is there adequate documentation online, is it accompanied by didactic information, and at what level of complexity? What political circumstances are shared by the artist and viewer? What anecdotal symbolisms can be inferred within the work—even if an artist did not intend them? Does the audience encounter the work spontaneously, incidentally, or only after prolonged and

active research? And so on. These questions are not necessarily compromises the artist actively makes with the audience, but instead represent compromises between what an artist intends for a work to mean and how an audience perceives meaning within it. Both artist and audience participate in a dialectic, the synthesis of which is the artwork's meaning.

3. Circulation



In economic terms, the sphere of circulation is the realm of advertising and bureaucracy, affecting what is legible, what is desirable, and therefore what is valuable. This is the part of the market concerned with marketing, and it is in this sphere that an artwork is legitimated as art. A work can be technically precise or conceptually rich, but neither of these characteristics guarantee its status as art. Vishmidt argues that post-modern conditions—such as globalization and the deemphasis of technical skill—gave

rise to a kind of art that was not self-evident, and therefore required curatorial nomination to distinguish important art from the irrelevant. “The judgment ‘this is art’ thus migrated from an object to the subject, which ensured that the power—or the autonomy—of the art institution as the verifier of this art grew.”¹¹ In the sphere of circulation, the question of compromise takes on an explicitly political edge. Because art can look like anything and anything can look like art, gatekeepers are necessitated to differentiate art from non-art. Why? Because value is indexed by exclusivity. For instance, artworks make excellent assets because of their uniqueness, the singular style of the artist, and the specificity of their provenance. How? The criteria by which this differentiation occurs are complex and multivalent, involving intense negotiation amongst curators, gallerists, advisors, and collectors in order to mutually shore up value in their respective arenas. Simply put, artists are not equal collaborators in this arrangement—they are interchangeable, and therefore must compete amongst themselves in order to appeal to the bureaucrats. As Fraser articulates: “What defines labor as such is not the production of a commodity or even a ‘useful effect’ [...] but rather the production of value that is appropriated by another as profit. What our modern myths of artistic production have effaced is [...] that the professional artist, like other laborers, works not only for his or her satisfaction, but for the enrichment of others.”¹² That is, artworks are not counted as art on their own merit—if such a thing could be said to exist—they are only counted if the work demonstrably benefits the institution of art.

Given that the mandate of all art institutions (what Abbing calls “art-businesses”)—private and non-profit alike—is first and foremost their own perpetuation, and given that their perpetuation is dependent on moneyed collectors purchasing from and donating to these institutions, it can be argued that the collector class is the primary audience for institutional art.

Culture trickles down. Indeed, the tendency for contemporary art to easily fetch five- and six-figure prices (even when produced by emerging artists) ensures that only a specific kind of collector can effectively engage with art. This price range is already out of the grasp of most museums, even as price becomes synonymous with the work's importance or social relevance. These conditions necessitate art institutions become intertwined with the ultra-rich regardless of the unethical and outright oppressive practices that produce their wealth.

The considerations raised in the sphere of consumption apply here, specifically with regards to the subjectivity of the predominately white and exclusively wealthy collector class. These subjective desires represent the economic exigencies most commonly implied by selling out. Before investing, a collector must consider: will the work appreciate in value over time? Is it archival? Does it circulate easily? How does this work benefit my public image? Will the artist continue producing work like this, or is their practice unpredictable? Did they attend a prestigious school? How long is their CV? Can I justify the work's purchase as a business expense, can I donate it for a tax receipt? Of course, in acquiring an artwork, a collector also legitimates the artwork, adding to its provenance, thus reducing the risk of investment *by* investing in it. In many instances, signs of prestige are self-reinforcing.

The 17th century art world was similarly influenced by the tastes of those who possessed wealth and power—the most influential work of this time was also the most spectacular. Perhaps framing things in this way allows us to see that the commercialization of art is not really a conflict of interest as much as it is a constitutive element that cannot be neglected. Intrinsic, albeit downplayed: unlike Renaissance-era workshops, where masters had several and sometimes dozens of apprentice—assistants, and where the expenditure of labour in painting, tapestry,

or sculpture was self-evident in the material itself, today's art studios are opaque. From the perspective of their output, any number of readymades or trash—assemblages could be produced by individual artists or well-staffed studios alike. Think of the practices of Danh Vo or Carol Bove. A young artist may compare themselves to established artists—not aware of their many assistants and administrators—and think of the effort of fabrication, but not necessarily the labour of logistics and circulation. This circumstance is no different from anything in capitalist society at large, but the tendency is to focus on the artistic genius and their singular vision rather than the artistic director who relies on several teams of people (often other artists).

It is in the sphere of circulation that we come to recognize the limits of artistic compromise, inasmuch as compromise implies that the artist still has agency in where their work ends up or with whom it becomes associated. Given the systemic integration of power and elite interests within the art world, it seems we cannot really hold individual artists accountable for how their work circulates, and therefore “selling out” is reduced from a politic to moral rhetoric. Indeed, much of the contemporary discourse around creative practices centres on the need for artists to be paid, to be supported, so that they might continue delivering content. Furthermore, we might point to anti-commercial works of the historical avant-garde that circulate on secondary markets, selling for unimaginable sums of money. Apparently the compromise with commercial forces exists before the artwork is made and continues long after the artist dies.

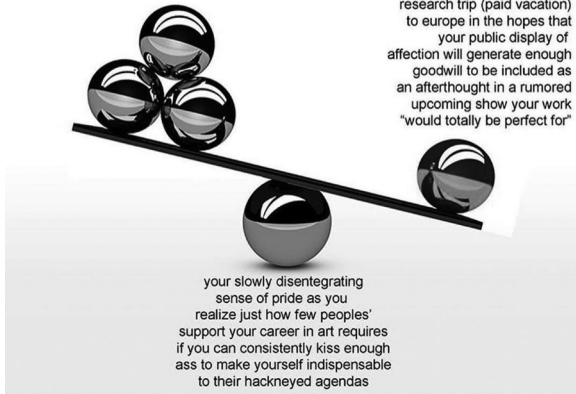
And yet, it is incredibly rare for an artist—no matter how skilled, how thoughtful, how ambitious—to find success within this system. In order to approach the question of selling out without fatalism or resignation, it is necessary to rewrite the terms of artistic success.

Compromising

your sinking suspicion that curators are little more than well dressed social climbing event planners whose outsized role as gatekeepers in the art world serves as an insult to artists' intelligence/well-documented ability to organize exhibitions of and between one another without turning an organizational task into a cult of celebrity

automatically liking and commenting "yess!! omg have fun LOL" on every photo from a museum curator's research trip (paid vacation) to europe in the hopes that your public display of affection will generate enough goodwill to be included as an afterthought in a rumored upcoming show your work "would totally be perfect for"

your slowly disintegrating sense of pride as you realize just how few peoples' support your career in art requires if you can consistently kiss enough ass to make yourself indispensable to their hackneyed agendas



Even if artists are not equal participants within an art world indebted to the ultra-rich—a point averred by Abbing and Fraser—it is true that artists have access to their own means of circulating work without precluding contributions to a greater artistic discourse. Consider the Salon des Refusés, the artist-led societies Spiral or the Gutai group, and the publications *Third Text* or *Internationale situationniste*. Throughout the 20th century, it was common for artists to form their own groups, showing each other's work within communal spaces or self-published periodicals. As collectives, they produced, circulated, and consumed their own work. Contemporary formats, like apartment galleries, studio collectives, and social media, offer artists agency in circulating their work and building local discourses, too. But the compromise here is not only a matter of how much time should be spent marketing oneself or building infrastructure around artwork versus how much time can be spent making art. In

“Power Relations within Existing Art Institutions”, Adrian Piper asks:

If an artist's primary responsibility really is just to 'make the stuff', rather than to control its critical and material destiny as well, why should the political subject matter of the 'stuff' he happens to make count as evidence of his political credibility? If artists are not to be held responsible for the consequences of their own creative authority, it is hard to see why they should be recognized as socially and politically responsible agents at all.¹³

If the notion of audience is taken for granted, surely it defaults to normative metrics of success like fame and sales price, necessitating the reproduction of capitalist metrics and status quo gatekeeping. Furthermore, there tends to be a conflation of an artwork's political efficacy with its visibility. That is, politics in art are pursued according to a kind of proselytizing logic, raising consciousness about political issues by reaching a broad audience. Such an audience is facilitated by normative forms of success, and therefore capitulation is seen as a necessary part of making political art. Under this guise, art's political functionality is reduced to propagandizing without regard for what audiences (art fair VIPs? museum donors? legacy media advertisers?) are being reached, however broadly. Speculative attempts to capitulate to collector subjectivity only occasionally result in sales—the more common effect is the concretization of this subjectivity in artistic discourse, further laundering the reputations of the oligarchs who patronize art institutions. Many artists nonetheless orient their practices to appeal to this subjectivity because to do otherwise, we are told, is self-sabotage.

Art (in the most abstract, diachronic sense) is consistently imbricated within power structures that benefit from its status as a luxury commodity, asset class, tax haven, and propaganda. It is

in the interest of art institutions to limit a work's critical capacity to its content, focusing solely on the matter of production. To consider its form inevitably implicates all aspects of its circulation, and therefore the institution's own political complicity.¹⁴ Instead, we can focus on the actual conditions of art-making and viewing: the ways in which artists navigate supply chains, the means by which they make the work legible, and the avenues through which they reach their audience. All of these activities necessitate compromising with forces beyond the artist's control. The danger lies not in the exercise of imperfect control, but in the assumption that artistic integrity is only relevant to the production of a work and does not extend to its consumption and circulation. In the preceding discussion, I have attempted to outline some of the lines of inquiry that might orient us to these really-existing conditions. Piper gives these questions of production and consumption a political edge:

For politically effective art requires, at the very least, an understanding of the audience it is most politically effective for an artist to address, of the internal, socioeconomic dynamics of that audience, of what it is most politically effective to communicate to that audience, and of what media would be most effectively utilized to that end. These requirements are extremely difficult to satisfy, and it is harder still to know whether one has done so or not. But what can be said, at least, is that it is much harder to ascertain which audience it is in fact most politically effective for one to address, when one has a strong, unexamined—because purportedly innocuous—attachment to that audience or audiences that are most likely to confer upon one the professional or aesthetic approval that every artist needs.¹⁵

Being mindful of the compromises made in the spheres of production and consumption, I think, allows one to avoid succumbing to compromises in the sphere of circulation. It

is important to recognize the lack of agency that undergirds processes of art-making, as the abandonment of ideals simultaneously highlights where that agency actually exists. Compromise need not be understood as synonymous with selling out or unethical practices. Instead, I would advocate for artists to embrace economic contingencies as a way of making work relevant to their own circumstances, responsive to their own audiences, with the materials that are at hand. For some this is glaringly obvious; for others such a proposition requires a great deal of unlearning. Artists do not have to indulge the capitalist upper class (and thus compete amongst themselves for lost ideals) if they can find a way to make work according to their already-existing political conditions—even if it means abandoning dreams of making artworks that cost more than average salaries. The means by which an artwork circulates are as important, and as indeterminate, as the means by which it is produced.

An artwork is afforded additional layers of meaning and complexity when we consider artistic compromise as inevitable and multivalent rather than something to be repressed in the name of artistic genius or institutional neutrality. It is often a motivating force, a set of limitations that an artist must respond to in order for the work to be actualized. There are many different kinds of economic exigencies that influence an artwork—both in the sense of its production as well as its reception. When we consider compromise, we not only gain a new understanding of how materials operate artistically, we also highlight political circumstances as an intrinsic rather than contingent aspect of art-making. In this light, we can attend to the navigation of limits, the creativity of imperfect control, and the collaborative production of meaning. These are the forces that drive an artist toward the unforeseen.

Notes

1. Hannah Black, Ciarán Finlayson, Tobi Haslett, "The Tear Gas Biennial," *Artforum*, 17 July 2019
2. Lauren Fournier, "Your Board Supports Trump: A Conversation with Andrea Fraser," *Canadian Art*, 29 November 2018
3. Marina Vishmidt, "What Do We Mean By 'Autonomy' and 'Reproduction'?" in *Reproducing Autonomy* (London: Mute Publishing, 2016), 37
4. Hans Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)
5. We may yet see a subsequent de-emphasis of commercial practices as the dominant materials of artistic discourse shift away from space- and resource-intensive analogue forms (sculpture, painting) to lightweight digital ones (programming, rendering)
6. Frances Stonor Saunders, "Modern art was CIA 'weapon'," *The Independent*, 22 October 1995
7. Franz Nicolay, "The history of calling artists sell-outs," *Slate*, 28 July 2017
8. Abbing, *The Social Economy of Art*, 2019.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Vishmidt, "What Do We Mean By 'Autonomy' and 'Reproduction'?" 42
12. Andrea Fraser, "Creativity = Capital?" in *The Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 32
13. Adrian Piper, "Power Relations in Existing Art Institutions" in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume 2: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 83
14. "The Tear Gas Biennial." "The art world imagines itself as a limited sphere of intellectual and aesthetic inquiry, where what matters, first and foremost, are inclusion, representation, and discussion. This ignores art's ongoing transformation into yet another arm of the culture industry, for which, as in other industries, the matters of chief importance are production and circulation."
15. Piper, "Power Relations in Existing Art Institutions," 83-84

Images

1. Marisa Merz, *Untitled*, 1966, wire mesh and hemp, 60 x 23 in. (152 x 58 cm)
2. Mladen Stilinovic, *An Artist Who Doesn't Speak English is Not an Artist*, 1992, acrylic on artificial silk, 38 x 55 in. (98 x 139 cm)
3. Hans Haacke, *On Social Grease*, 1975, photoengraved magnesium plates mounted on aluminum, 30 x 30 in. (76 x 76 cm)
4. Brad Troemel, instagram post, 27 March 2019