

Lately in a wreck of a Californian ship, one of the passengers fastened a belt about him with two hundred pounds of gold in it, with which he was found afterwards at the bottom. Now, as he was sinking – had he the gold? or had the gold him?'

John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*

John Ruskin was a perceptive man. As an art critic, he was the first to see the power of J. M. W. Turner's late, nearly abstract paintings of steam and surf. As an architectural historian, he stood in the vanguard of the reappraisal of the Gothic style; he was also one of the first architectural preservationists, and always insisted that restoring a building too completely was tantamount to destroying it. Ruskin was a legendary teacher, and on one celebrated occasion marched a squad of Oxford undergraduates out to mend a road and thereby learn something about the value of hard work. He was even an accomplished geologist; rocks were among his chief preoccupations.

There is one discipline, however, that Ruskin completely failed to understand: economics. This was not for lack of trying. One of his most resonant writings – the thunderous manifesto *Unto This Last*, published in 1860 – is intended as a riposte to the emergent science of 'political economy', as it was called in the nineteenth century. But while Ruskin's righteous fury is certainly compelling, there is no point pretending that his logic stands up to scrutiny. His first mistake was in his choice of enemies. He vigorously attacked the likes of David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill, whose theories of wages and trade were influential at the time, and have remained so since. What infuriated Ruskin was their contention that individual profit-seeking is necessary to create general prosperity. He insisted that wealth was a zero-sum game: 'the art of becoming "rich," in the common sense, is not absolutely nor finally the art of accumulating much money for ourselves, but also of contriving that our neighbours shall have less.'² This is of course untrue. Within any multi-party system of exchange, your neighbour's money might well be crucial to your own investment. Ruskin seems to have missed the most elementary law of capitalism: given sufficient growth, competition and mutual gain are not only compatible, but mutually reinforcing. To put it bluntly, Ricardo and Mill were right, and he was wrong.

It would take a better economist than myself to systematically dismantle Ruskin's speculations on the subject, but really, the details are not the point. For what outlived him was not his theoretical clarity, but his moral outrage. His ideas on economy may have been simplistic, but they were also, in a positive sense, simple: easy to grasp and hold on to. So, for example, although William Morris

was a disciple of both Ruskin and Karl Marx, he worried that he would never fully understand the latter's masterwork *Capital*, while he could sign on unhesitatingly to Ruskin's passionate ethical defence of the worker. Some decades later, when Mahatma Gandhi encountered *Unto This Last*, it so stirred him that he was unable to sleep. He immediately translated it into Gujarati, hoping that it might serve as a template for social relations in a post-colonial India. (It was later translated back into English, in a beautifully concise paraphrase which, for the contemporary reader, may be something of an improvement on the original.³)

Today, in an atmosphere of general anxiety about the workings of the economy, it is not surprising that Ruskin should have a renewed appeal. His little aphorism about the Californian gold-hunter, quoted at the head of this essay, seems all too apt for our recessionary times, as does its none-too-subtle moral. When we conceive of wealth in individualistic, asocial terms – like a belt of money, secreted away from view – we are not only being possessive; we are also inadvertently possessed. In all of Ruskin's writings, it is these homiletic moments that are most effective: where he abandons the economic broad view, and instead writes narrowly about personal responsibility. He may not have understood the general principles of wealth, but he had profound insights into the psychology of work, and being worked for:

*No man ever knew, or can know, what will be the ultimate result to himself, or to others, of any given line of conduct. But every man may know, and most of us do know, what is a just and unjust act. [...] I have said balances of justice, meaning, in the term justice, to include affection, – such affection as one man owes to another. All right relations between master and operative, and all their best interests, ultimately depend on these.*⁴

Again and again in *Unto This Last*, Ruskin returns to the idea of 'affection' as the key to social justice – a concept that he seems to have adapted from the medieval concept of fealty, or allegiance.⁵ He insists that all economic relations should have an emotional basis. This, of course, runs counter to our expectations about professional conduct in modern life. We know that an employer and a worker have responsibilities to one another, but we rely on contracts and regulatory laws to enforce them. Conversely, we have all experienced the building of friendships within a workplace, but our tendency is to regard these sympathies as extraneous to our real jobs. Ruskin wanted us to invert this way of thinking and consider our business relationships in the same way that we regard our familial obligations. 'Supposing the master of a manufactory saw it right, or were by any chance obliged, to place his own son in the position of an ordinary workman', he wrote, 'as he would then treat his son, he is bound always to treat every one of his men. This is the only effective, true, or practical *rule* which can be given on this point of political economy.'⁶

This brings us to the matter at hand: what is the relevance of Ruskin's text to the practice of contemporary art? An easy answer would be to align his concept of quasi-familial 'affection' with the concept of relational aesthetics, as promulgated by Nicolas Bourriaud: the dismantling and re-imagining of social bonds through communitarian art events.⁷ But in fact, Ruskin's ideas sit uneasily alongside this radically open-ended, come-what-may attitude.⁸ Like most Victorian writers on art, he believed in an isometry between ethical and aesthetic registers. Far from arguing that this combined responsibility could be shared, he insisted that art must have the virtues of craftsmanship, which for him was the combination of aesthetic vision and moral rigour. This idea is explored more fully elsewhere in Ruskin's voluminous writings (notably in the influential chapter 'The Nature of Gothic' from *The Stones of Venice*), but it does appear at a key moment in *Unto This Last*, in a passage about morality and work: 'Under the term "skill" I mean to include the united force of experience, intellect, and passion in their operation on manual labour: and under the term "passion" to include the entire range and agency of the moral feelings; [...] the incommunicable emotion and imagination which are the first and mightiest sources of all value in art.'⁹

As Ruskin argued, skill is the variable within practice that allows artists to control the means of their own production and thus shape the autonomy (and for that matter, the contingency) of their own activities in relation to the surrounding social fabric. Of course, he was writing at a formative stage in the development of industrialisation, a moment when it was easy to feel that the free exercise of craftsmanship was under threat. Specialisation, mechanisation and workplace regulation all militated against the 'passionate' model of labour that he held dear. Today, we are fully acclimated to that process and are perhaps coming out the other side of it – into a different phase, which is often called 'post-Fordist'. Conventional forms of productive work are increasingly replaced by 'actions' which leave no material trace of themselves whatsoever. As a consequence, we have moved on considerably from Ruskin's sense of what skill means. Repetitive, alienated labour is doubtless still the norm for many in the global economy, but increasingly workers are called upon to acquire adaptive, non-manual skills, which permit them to move quickly from one task to another.

It is striking to compare *Unto This Last* with the writings of the contemporary Italian political philosopher Paolo Virno, who also founds his theory on skill (he uses the term 'virtuosity') but writes at the opposite end of the arc of modern capitalism. Virno notes that workplace virtuosity is no longer a matter of technical specialisation, but rather adaptability and socialisation. 'Nowadays', he writes, 'workers learn [their] abilities by living in a big city, by gaining aesthetic experiences, having social relationships, creating networks: all things workers learn specifically outside the workplace'.¹⁰ Amazingly, Ruskin himself seems to

have intuited this shift; at the end of *Unto This Last*, he mused: ‘suppose some day it should turn out that “mere” thought was in itself a recommendable object of production, and that all Material production was only a step towards this more precious Immaterial one?’¹¹ This of course is precisely what has come to pass, as we deal with the combined legacies of Conceptual Art, the ‘experience economy’ and the radical dematerialisation afforded by the virtual.

The theorist and historian John Roberts offers an important set of tools for understanding the impact of these transformations on art in his book *The Intangibilities of Form*. He shows that the inception of apparently anti-materialist tactics, such as Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades or the completely outsourced artwork (like the abstract paintings, enamel on steel, that Lázsló Moholy-Nagy reputedly ordered up over the telephone), involve not only the stripping away of traditional artisanship – ‘deskilling’ – but also the invention of new artistic processes, which Roberts terms ‘reskilling’.¹² The artist still functions as a ‘producer’, but perhaps in the same sense that the word is used in the film industry. The context for creativity may no longer be the work, but rather the way of working. For example, multiple productive modes can exist within a single artwork: recourse to artisanal making (skill), purely critical or negative actions (deskilling), and strategic reinventions of the artistic profession itself (reskilling). As Roberts points out, Duchamp himself could be seen as operating in this tripartite fashion, as in his ‘assisted ready-mades’ which incorporated both handmade and found objects, and also were presented and re-presented through photography, text and other forms of mediation.

It is not only in Duchamp’s idiosyncratic gamesmanship that one can see modernist experimentation within the skill/deskilling/reskilling triangle. Among the important touchstones are the Constructivists’ attempts to bind together craft, art and industry; the late, artisanally-inflected architecture of Le Corbusier; and Minimalist sculptures made by (uncredited) shop fabricators.¹³ More than ever, contemporary artists today are continuing the exploration of this terrain, whether outsourcing their labour to faraway sites in Asia, transforming art galleries into miniature factories, staging impromptu collaborative craft projects, or constructing elaborate mash-ups of the handmade and the ready-made. Displaced production and distributed authorship are increasingly the norm for art, not the exception. The challenge is to retain an ethical compass within this rough-and-tumble situation. Often, this means that artists adopt precisely the affective relation to labour that Ruskin had in mind (and that means their own labour, to be sure, but also that provided to them by others).¹⁴ He would not have believed it, but unbridled capitalism has created precisely the artistic milieu where his ideas can find new purchase. It may be that, as Virno writes, ‘immoderate’ art is necessary in our equally immoderate times. But just because

artists can bring enormous, spectacular artworks into being through acts of creative bureaucracy doesn’t mean that they should – or that they can slough off the ethical burden that attends every artistic act.

So what, in the end, is Ruskin’s enduring legacy? It is not, surely, what those following in his footsteps, or those of Morris and Gandhi, often take it to be: that we need to return to a life of crafty self-sufficiency, in which the howling complexities of capitalism are shut out as firmly as possible.¹⁵ If anything, a sensitive reading of *Unto This Last* suggests precisely the opposite: that our job, whether we are artists, critics, or workers of some other kind, is to reflect on the productive reality in which we find ourselves and reproduce what we see in a more ‘affective’ way. Too often, craft is taken as a means of dropping out of modernity.¹⁶ But Ruskin would not want us to retreat – not to a commune, nor a pottery studio, nor a knitting circle. He would want us to engage. In many ways, we inhabit a moment that is not only post-Fordist and post-modern, but also post-Ruskinian. Many of his pieties now ring false. But at least one of his ideas has never been more pertinent. Rather than dissolving the ties that bind us to one another through unpredictable artistic chemistry, we need to articulate the productive relations that already exist between us, and hold on ever more tightly.

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1. John Ruskin, *Unto This Last and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 155–228: 210.
2. *Ibid.*: 182.
3. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Unto This Last. A Paraphrase*, transl. from Gujarati by Valji Govindji Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1956); a download is available from: <http://www.cincinatitemple.com/downloads/untothislast>
4. Ruskin: 169.
5. In early modern England, all interdependent economic relations – like those between a landowner and a tenant – would have been understood as a sort of ‘friendship’. See Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580–1680* (London: Routledge, 1993).
6. Ruskin: 179.
7. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Presses du Réel, 2002).
8. Claire Bishop noted acutely in her definitive take-down of Bourriaud that it is all well and good to regard the exhibition space as a laboratory, construction site or art factory; but ‘what the viewer is supposed to garner from such an “experience” of creativity, which is essentially institutionalized studio activity, is often unclear’. Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, *October* 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 51–79: 52.
9. Ruskin: 196–7.
10. Sonia Lavaert and Pascal Gielen, ‘The Dismasure of Art: An Interview with Paolo Virno’, in *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, ed. Pascal Gielen and Paul de Bruyne (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2009). See also Paolo Virno, ‘Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus’, in *Radical Thought in Italy*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
11. Ruskin: 197.
12. John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007). See also Louis Kaplan, ‘The Telephone Paintings: Hanging Up Moholy’, *Leonardo* 26/2 (1993), pp. 165–8.
13. Though explicit discussion of this matter in art history is rare, several authors have considered outsourcing in Minimalist sculpture. See Anna C. Chave, ‘Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power’, *Arts* 64 (January 1990), pp. 44–63; Michelle Kuo, ‘Industrial Revolution: The History of Fabrication’, *Artforum* 46/2 (October 2007), pp. 306–15; and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
14. See Johanna Drucker, ‘Affectivity and Entropy: Production Aesthetics in Contemporary Sculpture’, in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, ed. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004).
15. On this point see Edward S. Cooke, Jr., ‘The Long Shadow of William Morris: Paradigmatic Problems of Twentieth-Century American Furniture’, in *American Furniture* (Milwaukee: Chipstone Foundation/University Press of New England, 2003); excerpted in Glenn Adamson, *The Craft Reader* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010).
16. On this ‘pastoral’ impulse see my own *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg Publishers/V&A Publishing, 2007).