

Dr. Malcolm Miles



My practice is theory; my work is text. This includes authored books, chapters in edited books, and journal essays. I also edit books and currently a European on-line journal. I regard all writing and editing as creative work, and all work and creation as political.

Rather than trying to explain how I make my work (at one level it is obvious – I read or look, write, then revise as many times as time allows – while at another level it is outside explanation, a process of thinking through the effort to say ... something), I will say a little around a small number of themes.

To preface that: my background is in fine arts, then art history and “the new art history” of the 1970s/80s, debates on art-and-architecture, more recently trans-disciplinary urbanism and environmentalism. I stopped painting around 1984, and began writing shortly after. My best-known book is *Art, Space & the City* (1997), but its successor, *Urban Avant-Gardes*, will be published in 2004. The latter offers an historical and theoretical commentary on the avant-gardes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and selected contemporary practices in which a critical response to culture and society takes a visual or performative form.

Perhaps I should begin there. I see two main difficulties in how the concept of an avant-garde has been formulated: firstly, it tends to rely on a privileged group, such as artists, who both foresee a new society and lead the mass public towards it. This assumes that the masses cannot foresee that change for themselves, but must have the world interpreted. This does not interrupt the structure of power that, presumably, a new society would bring into question. Secondly, the concept tends to assume a progression in time, from yesterday to the new dawn tomorrow. But tomorrow never dawns. A specific form of the difficulty is found in Herbert Marcuse’s lecture “The end of Utopia” in Berlin in 1967, when he sees no exit from the difficulty that the new requires abolition of the old institutions in order to happen, while the awareness which could lead to such abolition is part of the new. The new thus carries the burden of itself creating the pre-conditions for its appearance – an impossibility. These flaws in the concept may help understand why histories of avant-gardes make happier reading for those in power than those seeking to upset it. An alternative approach in relation to both difficulties is suggested by Lefebvre’s idea of moments of presence, by which he means (I think) momentary realisations of liberation within the routines of everyday life. Since, in a sense, the new already exists in such moments, what is required is recognition rather than progression. Or is this a philosophical conceit?

Looking at contemporary practices, the categories that made sense in the 1960s or 1980s no longer offer enough interest. That is, there has been a sequence of departures from the mainstream of studio/gallery-based art, itself in the Modernist tradition of anti-art within and requiring validation by Art. In the 1960s, community arts, street art, and some aspects of conceptualism perhaps, represented a radical refusal – of the art commodity, of the object, of privilege, and so forth – while in the 1980s, some areas of public or site-specific art claimed (in my view often spuriously) to have a role in shaping society. Today non-gallery art seems as institutionalized as gallery art, and radical content is encountered, though not that often, in both, and in areas between art, social research, and environmental activism, in a complex process of triangulation. The agendas are more important, and more interesting, than questions as to whether or not the work is art-work – I don’t think it matters, though those involved are aware of the obligations of funding systems and other modes of validation. As both Mel Chin and PLATFORM have coincidentally argued, ideas can be inserted virus-like into consciousness, and some of these will have unexpected consequences.

So, what are the issues?

1. The aim of capital is to process the planet into profit, the residue of which will be dust. Any change in environmental policy will probably be linked to a reform (I would prefer a revolution but not in the nineteenth-century sense) of the economic system along the lines of sustainability. This goes beyond notions such as sustainable development that retain the economic concept of development, and entail a revision in the affluent society of want as need;
2. Most of our institutions, in art, politics, and knowledge, are the products of industrialization; in a post-industrial era, these

institutions can be expected to mutate. Hence we may not need Art (or art school), though we do need a critical-imaginative approach to the world, which sees that it can be other than the way it is given;

3. Autonomy was the key idea of the modern era and is replaced in the post-modern by an understanding of contingency, this does not mean we allow conditions to simply wash over us – engagement remains our responsibility even though the ways in which we act are proscribed. We are conditioned by our circumstances, but equally, we can intervene in circumstances, nudging them in a direction of social and environmental justice;
4. Cultural work might be thought of as an area of development work, in the sense of development in the non-affluent world that revolves around empowerment.

What do I do? I am not an activist. I sit in my room and write, trying to make sense of what I read and see, offering critical commentaries on the work of others. It is a modest contribution but the one of which I am capable. For the most part, I operate in the spaces of the University, claiming academic freedom. Perhaps the University is the safe house at present, where critique is allowed. Or perhaps that is romantic and naive, and academics are knowledge-producers just as miners are coal-producers. In one way this is the case, because knowledge is historically specific; theory, too, is produced and has no absolute authority – no certainty. I continue, then, to dwell in doubt both as to my own conclusions, and to the conditions of a world in which violence escalates, and joy has always been fleeting.