

**The Role Of Work And Play In The Revolution Of Everyday Life**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A critical discussion of positive and negative aspects of work and play in transcending the boredom of contemporary capitalist culture. Applying the theory of the Situationist International, with particular focus on Raoul Vaneigem's 'The Revolution of Everyday Life' with a close reading of Hannah Arendt's 'The Human Condition' and illustrating those ideas with post-revolution Soviet art from 1900 to 1940's and performance work from the 1960's Fluxus group. The argument develops from an illustration of Arendt's distinction between labour and work to attempt to provide new definitions of play and the problems that arise when these actions and processes are documented. The essay concludes with a discussion of productive play and what essential aspects of work and labour can be employed to develop a new, more satisfying daily existence.

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## PART 1 WORK, PLAY AND REVOLUTION

My friends are bored or unhappy a lot of the time, or bored and unhappy. Mostly it can be blamed on work, which is an unwanted constant in most of our lives but is also necessary to be able to have free time in which to play. This is an essay that will not only attempt to define work and play but will also address the problems and potential solutions within them by finding their position in the quality of day to day living. I will be focusing my attention on two main time periods and geographical areas; firstly Soviet Russia following the overthrow of the Tsarist regime in 1917 where the revolution of every day life was facilitated by the development of communism. The other area I will be examining is tied to the workers and student riots of 1968 in Paris but the political and theoretical basis that influenced this event spans a decade before and after this time and is an international trend. It will include discussion on the texts produced by the Situationist International and a critical application of these and other work and play related theories to the Fluxus group of (non) artists who were active throughout the 60's and 70's. Through these various investigations I intend to provide detailed and well illustrated definitions of work and play and the conditions under which they can become revolutionary forces.

### WHAT IS WORK AND PLAY?

To begin to understand the role of work and play it is first necessary to define what work is. In Situationist terms we are discussing something with overwhelmingly negative connotations. The Situationist International where a group of writers, thinkers and active political theoreticians formed from various European avant-garde groups including the Lettrist International and Imaginist Bauhaus. Throughout the 1960's their main output was the journal *Internationale Situationniste*, a publication that collated ideas on urbanism, intervention, agitation and promoted a critical response to Western capitalist society. Although the most famous figurehead of the Situationist International was Guy Debord, who was responsible for the creation the influential text 'Society of the Spectacle' and developed the theory of the derive, other members of the SI also produced extended texts.<sup>1</sup> One such individual was Raoul Vaneigem who was a member of the SI in their infancy and key to some of its underlying theory. Vaneigem was later expelled from the group but not before producing 'The Revolution of Everyday Life', a book that contains ideas and a spirit that will always be affiliated with the more positive elements of the SI. In 'The Revolution of Everyday Life' we find that Vaneigem's description of work is 'forced labour'; a term that describes the job or means of living adopted or thrust upon the modern proletariat,

'From adolescence to retirement each twenty four hour cycle repeats the same shattering bombardment, like bullets hitting a window: mechanical repetition, time-which-is-money, submission to bosses, boredom, exhaustion. From the crushing of youth's energy

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<sup>1</sup> For a full understanding of the formation and development of the Situationist International please refer to Ken Knabb (ed), *Situationist International Anthology*, (Bureau of Public Secrets 1981)

to the gaping wound of old age, life cracks in every direction under the blows of forced labour.<sup>2</sup>

It is this definition of work that rings truest in contemporary society, when we talk about work it is generally a byword for our job. The terminology and images conjured up by the phrase ‘going to work’ have changed little since Vaneigem’s day when the idea of work being a creative or productive use of time is substituted by an immediate reference to the 9 to 5 life. However, Vaneigem fails to expand further on this definition of work. Although he makes a distinction from labour (the action involved in work which carries the negativity of its Latin root ‘to suffer’) ‘productivity’ is a separate phenomena unconnected and even hindered by ‘work’,

‘It is useless to expect even a caricature of creativity from the conveyer belt. Nowadays ambition and love of a job well done are the indelible mark of defeat and of the most mindless submission.’<sup>3</sup>

Vaneigem and the Situationist International appear less concerned with the question of what work actually is than its negative effects on commercial society. This could be due to an assumption on their part that the audience for Situationist theory would already be familiar with Marxism and this familiarity excuses them from contributing their own full definition of work. However, in Hannah Arendt’s text ‘The Human Condition’, published in 1958, around the same time as the Situationist International’s formation, we find that Marx’s definition is itself lacking in clarity for the purpose of a critical analyses of the role of ‘work’. Arendt addresses this by drawing distinctions between labour and work. Firstly we can examine Arendt’s definition of labour, which is an expansion of Adam Smith and Karl Marx’s labour theories,

‘...the distinction between productive and unproductive labour contains, albeit in a prejudicial manner, the more fundamental distinctions between labour and work.’<sup>4</sup>

For Arendt, labour is the action of men as *animal laborans* – the labour of our bodies as opposed to *homo faber*’s activity – the *work* of our hands. Labour is chiefly characterised by its link with the cycle of nature and life. Labour is every effort that we must make in order to survive in the natural world; hunting and gathering food being the most obvious examples. Although it bears close resemblance to Smith’s ‘unproductive labour’ Arendt’s labour is a productive action but the things it produces are consumed almost instantaneously in the life process. Labour leaves no trace or monument to man’s effort other than the fact that he is still alive.

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<sup>2</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, (Rebel Press/Left Bank Books 1994), p. 52. Hereafter referred to as Vaneigem.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. 54

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 87. Hereafter referred to as Arendt.

‘It is indeed the mark of all labouring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of it’s effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends on it.’<sup>5</sup>

Work, on the other hand, always produces things. Work is the effort of fabrication that produces objects that become part of the man-made environment in which we spend our day to day lives, the human artifice. It is the produce of ‘work’ that defines us as humans instead of animals; the objects that we create play a significant role in understanding ourselves,

‘They are mostly, but not exclusively objects for use and they possess the durability Locke needed for the establishment of property, the ‘value’ Adam Smith needed for the exchange market, and they bear testimony to productivity, which Marx believed to be the test of human nature. Their proper use does not cause them to disappear and they give the human artifice the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man.’<sup>6</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that labour and work are not distinguished by their negative or positive connotations. Not all useless, futile suffering is labour and similarly work is not an umbrella term for all productive effort – the key factor that separates work and labour is the permanence and durability of its produce. Of course work and labour are distinguished by other elements such as the use of tools and technology, isolated or collective effort and the means and ends of action but rather than begin an abstract discussion here I hope to illustrate these factors with reference to specific historical activities. In this way we will develop a fuller understanding of the nature of work and also be able to analyse the forms it may take in a revolutionary context.

One of the aims of this essay is to provide, through the investigation into the meaning and role of work, a satisfactory definition of play that allows us to look at it as a revolutionary force. A tempting starting point is to define play as all effort and action that is not work or labour. This is the kind of definition that appears in Arendt’s text,

‘The same trend to level down all serious activities to the status of making a living is manifest in present-day labour theories, which almost unanimously define labour as the opposite of play. As a result, all serious activities, irrespective of their fruits, are called labour, and every activity which is not necessary either for the life of the individual or for the life process of society is subsumed under playfulness.’<sup>7</sup>

However, to arrive at a point where we can discuss the role of play in the revolution of everyday life it will be necessary to formulate an understanding of play as sophisticated as Arendt’s distinctions between work and labour. There are similarities that can be

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 87

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.136

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.127

drawn between work and play (particularly with the ‘non-productive’ aspect of labour) and it will be these comparative aspects that I will focus on rather than settling for a definition of play as what work is not.

## WHAT IS A REVOLUTION OF EVERYDAY LIFE?

Now we have outlined *what* will be covered in the essay I would like to provide some background to *why*, that is, an overview of the current and historic climate that necessitates a ‘revolution of everyday life’. My own interest lies in the boredom and frustration that surrounds the daily life of the worker, a situation that rapidly approaches me. The typical course of action for a young graduate in Leeds is to subsidise the time spent searching for course-related dream career opportunities with any number of characterless and interchangeable call-centre and office administration jobs. The actual work involved in these temporary jobs ranges from the insultingly unskilled to the downright humiliating and unethical. Selling gas over the telephone, data-inputting for mobile phone service providers, taking orders for catalogue and betting companies are all part of a circuit of occupations that thousands of university educated twenty-somethings find themselves caught up in following departure from the education system. Even more depressing is the manner in which the drudgery endured for the better part of the day whilst working in these jobs seeps in to the employee’s ‘free time’ by sucking away the energy and motivation needed for escape. The draining and oppressive nature of doing nothing all day under the watchful eye of a team leader or office manager erodes the will to apply for work that might lead to a better lifestyle. Similarly, workers that find themselves in call centres and offices as stop gaps to erase some student debts before moving on to looking for ‘real work’ find the requisite retail therapy on the weekends destroys saving potential.

Clearly this is neither a localised or modern phenomenon. The Situationist International were identifying and tackling the same problem from the late 50’s and throughout the 1960’s. As mentioned earlier, Raoul Vaneigem identified work or forced labour as one of the main culprits in the restriction of everyday life being lived to its full potential but it is only a facet of consumer society’s passive deception,

‘...the monotony of the images we consume get the upper hand, reflecting the monotony of the action that produces them...There was no VW, only an ideology almost unconnected with automobiles. Flushed with Chivas Regal, whisky of the elite, we savour a strange cocktail of alcohol and class struggle. Nothing surprising anymore, there’s the rub! The monotony of the ideological spectacle makes us aware of the passivity of life.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, p. 25

The problem lies within the detachment and alienation man feels (but fails to identify) in contemporary society. There are fewer and fewer things to relate to, only constructs of things, and less and less objects and people to interact with, only images of objects and roles that we adopt to interact socially. The culmination of this is what the Situationists labelled 'the spectacle', developed by Guy Debord in 1958's 'Society of the Spectacle'. If all of life is mediated through images then a distant helplessness will permeate every action, nothing real can be changed or fabricated because nothing we come into direct contact with is real. This lack of solidity and permanence is the crux to Arendt's criticism of commercial society and her reasoning for the alienation and frustration felt by the worker.

Man as *homo-faber* has the ability to create an entire world around him, it fabricates things from the material found in the natural world. It is in this transformation and therefore domination of nature that *homo-faber* finds a reward in work. Unlike labour, which is a constant fight with the forces of nature where the only outcome is *animal-laboran's* ability to keep his head above water, in work *homo-faber* asserts his power over the whole world. He becomes not only the creator of a human world but, through the destruction of the natural world, master of the conditions he was born into.

'The experience of this violence is the most elemental experience of human strength and, therefore, the very opposite of the painful, exhaustive effort experienced in sheer labour. It can provide self-assurance and satisfaction and even become a source of self confidence throughout life.'<sup>9</sup>

It is insinuated here that work is essential to man's sense of fulfilment in the world, that the ability to fabricate objects and assert them over the natural world is part of happiness. This contrasts the toil and suffering of labour where nature dominates man and highlights the futility of his efforts. The creation of real, lasting things reifies man's place in the world and becomes a reminder that he is both alive and of some importance. However, in commercial society there are increasingly fewer opportunities to fabricate objects that demonstrate this assertion over the world. The 'work of our hands' in contemporary society creates objects that are fed back into the cycle of consumption quicker than we are able to see them. The results of work that were once durable and lasting objects such as cars, tools, appliances, even houses, are now consumed and disposed of at frightening rates. The turnover of commodity objects is so high that the durability of work's produce is no greater than the things produced by labour.

'It consists in treating all use objects as though they were consumer goods, so that a chair or a table is now consumed as rapidly as a dress and a dress used up almost as quickly as food.'<sup>10</sup>

It is from this evidence that Arendt attributes the unhappiness and frustration in modern culture to our acting as a 'society of labourers'. The permanence and utility that

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<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.140

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p.124



characterises work is devoured by consumerism so all that was once ‘productive work’ has now become labour. As a society of labourers the quality of our day-to-day life is at stake; one element is that labour is an essentially privative act that does not sit well with man’s condition as a public and political being.

‘...the animal laborans was permitted to occupy the public realm; and yet, as long as the animal laborans remains in possession of it, there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open.’<sup>11</sup>

The Situationists and Marx discuss this condition in terms of alienation. A problem with the current social climate is that the jobs we occupy propose that we *work* together to create things for a better society but the laborious nature of the work alienates us, through its futility, from the things we create and the people we interact with in that fabrication. It is the discrepancy between what we are led to believe we are ‘working’ for and the fruits of our work that causes the most frustration. Man has the capacity and potential to create lasting and durable things as *homo-faber* but instead spends his day labouring like *animal-laborans* to eventually create nothing of any significance.

The greatest disappointment in the modern world is that if happiness and fulfilment were achievable by giving man the opportunity to create ‘the work of the hands’ as he wanted then the reduction of the working day would lead to a perfect situation. Due to increasing mechanisation and automation man need only labour for a few hours a day and is left with hours of free time in which to indulge his urges to create lasting and durable objects, or ‘working’. However, as Arendt explains the labouring society is conditioned to only understand the laws of consumption, the animal laborans is a consuming being, always trapped in nature’s cycle, and the conditions are no different in the modern world,

‘...the spare time of the animal laborans is never spent in anything but consumption and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites...eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption.’<sup>12</sup>

If the current trend of the transformation of all work into labour continues then the only escape from an alienating and unfulfilling existence must begin by taking control of our daily routine. This brings us to the question of the form a revolution of everyday life should or can take. The intention of this essay is to define everyday life in terms of work and play, those being the two components of daily existence. A revolutionised daily life will be a balanced combination of work and play where both activities are devoid of alienation and frustration. How this situation can be reached can only be revealed through the development of the essay but as a starting point it will be useful to consider the Situationist position and Arendt’s ideas found in ‘The Human Condition.’

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p.134

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p.133

The Situationist solution to the boredom and conditioning nature of consumer culture was based in the creation of moments and spaces of life lived as it should be, or 'situations'. The revolution of everyday life will occur through direct lived experience and the unshackling of conditioning forces, which at present can only exist in moments. The more numerous and regular these moments of lived experience are instigated then the greater the chance for the unmasking of the spectacle becomes, the destruction of commodity culture will be achieved by a process similar to making a thousand pin pricks in a big black curtain. The revolution of everyday life for the Situationists would be life lived as if it were one continuous moment unconcerned with the conditions of the human world. The role of the individual in a Situationist revolution is to live only under his own conditions rather than those forced upon him by nature or others,

'The situation is thus made to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-playing 'public' must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors but rather, in a new sense of the term, 'livers' must steadily increase...we have to multiply poetic subjects and objects.'<sup>13</sup>

In this sense the Situationist revolution would be a merging of art and life. It would inject the 'creativity, spontaneity and poetry'<sup>14</sup> of artistic activity into every element of being. The Situationists ignored or despised art that took the form of permanent, commodified objects that would feed into the spectacle but did see art as an indispensable core element in the initiation of a revolution.

'In this way the old specialisation of art has finally come to an end. There are no more artists because everyone is an artist. The work of art of the future will be the construction of a passionate life.'<sup>15</sup>

Arendt too saw the artists as playing an ideal or exemplary role in society. A discussion of a revolution of everyday life in Arendt's terms would inexorably be linked to the conditions of work and therefore to link Arendt's and Situationist theory implies a revolution of everyday work. A revolution of everyday life would involve the appropriate application of *homo-faber's* abilities to daily existence (rather than the current climate where his potential is wasted in laborious activity). This does not necessarily entail an eradication of all labour, as I intend to investigate, but the correct marriage of fabrication and toil to create a fulfilling balanced lifestyle. Firstly, the current situation where *homo-faber* operates as a society of labourers must be reversed and according to Arendt the one group who are already in this position are artists,

'Whatever we do we are supposed to do for the sake of 'making a living'; such is the verdict of society, and the number of people, especially in professions who might

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<sup>13</sup> Guy Debord, in Kenn Knabb ed, *Situationist International Anthology*, (Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 25

<sup>14</sup> Please refer to whole of Chapter 20 in Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, pp.190-213

<sup>15</sup> Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, p. 202

challenge it, has decreased rapidly. The only exception society is willing to grant is the artist, who, strictly speaking, is the only 'worker' left in a labouring society.<sup>16</sup>

Because the Situationists and Arendt hold the field of art in high regard or at the very least see the potential for revolution within it, I propose to further investigate the themes of this essay in two parts, each focused upon artists' action around the time of revolutionary activity. To illustrate Situationist ideas and evaluate the role of play I will discuss the produce and activities of the Fluxus art group. Firstly though, I would like to discuss the role of work by applying Arendt's text to Soviet constructivism. Through the examination of these two main areas I hope to define a revolution of everyday life as both an escape from old conditions and the creation of new conditions under which we work and play.

## **PART 2 RUSSIAN WORK**

The Bolsheviks overthrow of the Tsarist regime in 1917 provides a suitable starting point for a discussion of work and revolution. Activity and thought in Russia from 1917 was primarily concerned with the growth and development of a society in the unique position of rebirth. Although this period could technically be labelled as post-revolution, the rise of communism and the new Soviet state provides an excellent opportunity for a critical analysis of the role of work in the formation of new lifestyles. Work and labour are synonymous with a Western understanding of communist Russia; the painting retrospectives of Soviet art from this period display countless images of men, women and children happily working alongside heavy machinery in fields, or joyously reaping the rewards of months of hard labour on the collective farm<sup>17</sup>. We are informed that the celebrities and role models of this society were not actors and musicians but miners, factory workers and of course, political leaders. It seems that every young child's dream was to be recognised alongside the Stakhanovites<sup>18</sup> for outstanding work, and to one day shake hands with Stalin. Yet, despite the appeal of work and its omnipresent influence on Soviet society, little has been written regarding the philosophy behind the work ethic adopted by the newly empowered working class. Of course, the rhetoric of the period was full of terms like 'efficiency', 'strength' and 'collective effort' but the nature of this work is overlooked. In this chapter I propose to analyse the various stages of Soviet communist

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<sup>16</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 127

<sup>17</sup> For background reading on this subject please refer to Matthew Cullerne Brown, David Elliott and Aleksandr Siborov, *Soviet Socialist Realist Painting 1930's-1960's*, (Exhibition catalogue 1992)

<sup>18</sup> The Stakhanovites were a group of workers, many of whom were Metro constructors, honoured for their outstanding effort and dedication to work. They became poster boys and women for the working class, often immortalised and made famous in flattering, dynamic portraits including Kotlyarov's *'Portrait of Stakhanov'* (1938). For background reading on this subject please refer to Matthew Cullerne Bown, and Brandon Taylor, *Art of the Soviets*, Manchester University Press 1993).

development in terms of the kind of work employed or suggested by the state and the relevance this has to the quality of life of the collective society. This will involve an application of Arendt's distinction between labour and work (and the various threads routed in its discussion) to the themes and practices of Soviet artists. Like Arendt, the revolutionary Soviets saw the artists' role as an example to the rest of society; they were a group who would design the way of life that the workers would live collectively<sup>19</sup>. In this sense the world and lifestyle of the Soviet artist would be a microcosm for all of society and an experimental stage in the development of communism.

The development of art in Soviet Russia can be viewed in three stages; the pre-revolution avant-garde, the early laboratory experimental stages of constructivism and the later, developed stage of constructivism that birthed productivism. I intend to investigate each of these stages chronologically with particular concentration on Vladimir Tatlin who was responsible for the early experiments in constructivism, and its most ambitious (non) product 'The Monument to the Third International'. Investigation in these areas will allow the discussion of key areas relating to work and revolution including, permanence, utilitarianism and an illustration of the role of means and ends to work, art and labour in Soviet society. Through these discussions I hope to provide a better understanding of both Arendt's writing (by illustrating her ideas in 'The Human Condition') and the role of work and labour in the creation of a new society.

Before the revolution of 1917 and the formation of the constructivist group, the Russian avant-garde artists were experimenting with a new style of painting that raised fundamental questions about the role and necessity for work. The Russian avant-garde were not working in total isolation from the rest of Europe and the issues in art and painting crucial to modernism also applied to the Russians. Painting, a medium once employed for the illustration of religious scenes and capturing of historical events was now being made redundant with the invention of photography. Once stripped of any immediate utility, such as representation, painting became a medium concerned with its own form, it existed with in its own field and in this sense is a form of work that was only 'about' work<sup>20</sup>. The paintings of cubo-futurists and suprematists including Luibov Popova were non-objective experiments in painting for painting's sake<sup>21</sup> and as such are the unadulterated 'work' of Arendt's *homo-faber*. The produce of the Russian avant-garde is essentially functionless, certainly their function is not as apparent as in an illustration of a great battle or portrait of a great leader. By referring to Arendt's thoughts on the produce of *homo-faber* we can discover the role that apparently useless objects play in society. One of the distinctions between work and labour is that *homo-faber's* 'work of the hands' produces objects that have permanence in the world. The accumulation of these objects

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<sup>19</sup> Refer to Christina Lodder, Chapter 3 'Towards a Theoretical Basis: Fusing the Formal and Utilitarian', in, *Russian Constructivism*, (Yale University Press, 1983), pp73-108

<sup>20</sup> Further reading on the effects of modernism and descriptions of modernist painting can begin with T.J Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, (Thomas and Hudson 1984)

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion please refer to Margit Rowell and Angelica Zander Rudenstine, Chapter 2 in, *Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia*, (The Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation, 1981), pp. 32-56

becomes the human artifice in which man can recognise all his achievements. The objects we produce are documentation of our productivity. Furthermore, any object created by *homo-faber* becomes a mirror for man's domination of nature, they show that man is able to use his surroundings as he sees fit, and once these objects are stripped of any use value their dominance of the natural world is the only quality they pronounce to the beholder of that object. It is clear though that both the produce of the Russian avant-garde and of work in general operates on a higher level than that of pure vanity objects. The essential quality of an object created by *homo-faber* lies in its durability and permanence in a world that is constantly moving and births and destroys other objects continuously. Man relies on objects that make up the human artifice to exist as a public being,

'...men, their ever changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table. In other words, against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world.'<sup>22</sup>

Man made objects, whether they have a clear function or not, create a human artifice in which man can hide and momentarily forget about the hostilities of nature. Within this artifice he feels an affinity with other beings that share this artifice. The ability to create objects of permanence distinguishes man from all other life and elevates his status in a world where he is surrounded by immortal nature and immortal gods,

'...mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves. By their capacity for the immortal deed, by their ability to leave non-perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be divine in nature.'<sup>23</sup>

Creating objects, any objects, helps man to escape the conditions of nature, that being his own eventual decay and death. In contrast labour only reinforces nature's control over man. Therefore it can be suggested that one of work's roles is to help man momentarily transcend the suffering of a labouring existence by touching on the immortal. It is here that we can relate Arendt's theory of immortalising work to the Russian avant-garde artists. They were aware of the immortalisation of their work and took advantage of it to document their own innovation and the new conditions that allowed it,

'The intermediate (Russian) futurist generation shared the more transitional view of the 'god-builders': the fear of death, if not death itself could be conquered, and immortality achieved by fame and reputation preserved in the memory of the collective and of future generations. In this way the Russian avant-garde fused the artistic immortality of successful innovation and the political immortality of remembered revolution.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.137

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p.19

<sup>24</sup> Robert Williams, *Artists in Revolution Portraits Of The Russian Avant-Garde, 1905 – 1925*, (The Scholar Press, 1978), p. 20

Death and mortality are natural conditions that the Russian avant-garde were exploring through 'work'. The exploration of man's conditions was expanded in the next stage of Soviet art development to include investigations into the natural environment. It is this period of art experimentation that produced the early experiments that were to become the constructivists' laboratory work. Artists that were part of the avant-garde began to develop their cubist-influenced paintings into three dimensional reliefs and sculptures. One such artist was Vladimir Tatlin who was central to the development of the form and theory of constructivism. Key to Tatlin's work was an investigation of natural forms and the inherent properties of materials<sup>25</sup>. Early experiments in this field resulted in Dadaesque collages of found objects and un-manipulated materials,

'Larinov – the most enterprising of the scandal-makers – quickly took Tatlin's caprice and gave birth to 'plastic rayonism' [Rayism] for the exhibition, tacking together a composition of pieces of wood, plants, rope, coloured paper, bits of cloth, bottles, etc... they nail together absolutely anything.'<sup>26</sup>

Tatlin was also known for his search for the perfect form and interest in the Greek's golden proportions. He believed that everything was constructed from perfect forms found in nature; the cube, the sphere, the cone and so on<sup>27</sup>. In this sense his art became an assemblage of the material on offer in the natural world rather than an art purely concerned with the human artifice. This is an interesting detail when trying to define the type of work the Soviet artists were performing. A distinction between work and labour is that *homo-faber's* action is a transformation and destruction of the natural world; making a table for instance, is the irreversible transformation of nature into part of the man-made world, which destroys the tree in the process. When man merely assembles natural materials to show off their properties rather than manipulating and destroying them by turning them into utilitarian objects is his action still categorised as work? The subordination to nature is certainly a characteristic of labour, as is the lack of permanent transformation of the things it touches. It is unknown whether the artists found this form of work fulfilling but history shows that it was not long before the artists and the state wanted to develop this experimental work into something useable. Art work in Soviet society did not last long as an end in itself.

The result of Tatlin's development from experimentation with natural forms in to utilitarian objects was one of the most ambitious constructions of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; The Monument to the Third International. This architectural structure, conceived and designed by Tatlin, was intended to be the grand result of artistic forms merged with

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<sup>25</sup> refer to Chrisina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, (Yale University Press, 1983), 'Vladimir Tatlin', pp.8-18

<sup>26</sup> E.Adamov, '*Pis'mo iz Moskvy, Kievskaya mysl*', 6 May 1915, p.2; translation taken from Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin*, pp. 6-7, in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, (Yale University Press, 1983), p.18

<sup>27</sup> refer to Chrisina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, (Yale University Press, 1983), 'Vladimir Tatlin', pp.8-18

utilitarian aims<sup>28</sup>. Both a monument and a functioning central administration centre for the Soviet state, it would house the meeting spaces and technology essential to the development of a new society,

‘The monument consists of three great rooms of glass, erected with the help of a complicated system of vertical pillars and spirals. These rooms are placed on top of each other and have different, harmonically corresponding forms. They are able to move at different speeds by means of special mechanism. The lower storey, which is in the form of a cube, rotates on its axis at the speed of one revolution per year. This is intended for legislative assemblies. The next storey, which is in the form of a pyramid, rotates on its axis at the rate of one revolution per month. Here the executive bodies are to meet (the International Executive Committee, the Secretariat and other executive administrative bodies). Finally, the uppermost cylinder, which rotates at the speed of one revolution per day, is reserved for information services: an information office, a newspaper, the issuing of proclamations, pamphlets and manifestos – in short all the means for informing the international proletariat; it will also have a telegraphic office and an apparatus that can project slogans onto a large screen. These can be fitted around the axis of the hemisphere. Radio Masts will rise up over the monument.’<sup>29</sup>

We can deconstruct the qualities of the monument to reveal layers that illustrate Arendt’s writings about work. Firstly, The Monument to the Third International is gigantic and made from strong, long lasting materials. It was designed to be noticed and stay noticed for generations. As a product of *homo-faber’s* ‘work of the hands’ it becomes a permanent reminder of the achievements of man as a constructor. This quality provides a link with Tatlin’s previously mentioned work in the avant-garde where the function of his ‘work’ was to immortalise the present. The ambitious scale of Tatlin’s monument (it was to stand four hundred meters high) abstracts it from its actual functional value and places it in the realm where it is possible to interpret it purely as an object in its own right. The role of the artist in this case is to initiate the fabrication of a thing that will require the full extent of man’s capabilities – to work at the fringe of the humanly possible and then solidify these achievements in a lasting, permanent object. As a monument, Tatlin’s construction is an exercise in documenting the work power and technical innovation of a whole society, and he is quoted as having said that

‘modern technology fully allows for the possibility of constructing such a building.’<sup>30</sup>

This leads us to the second quality of the monument that embodies Arendt’s theories relating to work. Obviously the mechanical requirements and technical difficulty in creating any object that houses three rotating buildings would be immensely problematic. The creation of the Monument would push Soviet technology to the furthest limit and

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<sup>28</sup> refer to Chrisina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, (Yale University Press, 1983), ‘Tatlin’s Monument To The Third International.’, pp. 55-67

<sup>29</sup> N. Punin, ‘Tour de Tatline’, *Veshch*, No.1/2, 1922; reprinted in Andersen, *Vladimir Tatlin*, p.57, in Lodder, *op.cit*, p.61

<sup>30</sup> Tatlin, *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, No.315. 1919. in Lodder, *op.cit*, p. 60

demand incredible engineering innovation. This exploitation of tools and technology is another distinctive feature of *homo-faber* that is critical in the search for fulfilment and placement in the forced conditions of the natural world. The mastery of machines is yet another reminder of our domination over nature and demonstrates that man is able to create and survive within his own automated world. Work in this sense is the process of man proving his own self-sufficiency as he is both master of the natural world and the artifice he creates. However, as Arendt highlights, in the same manner by which man is conditioned by the objects that he creates (as they become the human artifice which he must live in), the tools and technology he creates eventually dominate and condition their users,

‘...if the human condition consists in man’s being a conditioned being for whom everything, given or man-made, immediately becomes a condition of his further existence, then man ‘adjusted’ himself to machines the moment he designed them.’<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the exploitation and reliance upon technology in Tatlin’s monument is in effect sensationalising an element of ‘work’ that can have a destructive impact on man’s productivity. Arendt explains that the use of tools, which separates labour and work, actually limits man’s creativity rather than aids it,

‘In place of both utility and beauty, which are standards of the world, we have come to design products that still fulfil certain ‘basic functions’ but whose shape will be primarily determined by the operations of the machine...the product itself – not only its variations but even the ‘total change to a new product’ – will depend entirely upon the capacity of the machine.’<sup>32</sup>

We can reveal a further layer of by discussing Tatlin’s monument in terms of its function. Its daily operation was to broadcast and televise political messages from the huge screens and radio masts housed at the top of the monument. It was an object that would distribute propaganda. Also, in more abstract terms we can suggest that the aforementioned giant scale and technological showcasing of the monument mean that it is also a physical manifestation of all Soviet potential, and as such the object itself is a piece of propaganda. Its form and the work performed to create it become its function. This is a view that coincides with Tatlin’s original brief for his monument,

‘Tatlin had (decided) that the monument should express dynamism, be dynamic and perform a dynamic function as an agitational and propaganda centre.’<sup>33</sup>

Therefore we can consider the Monument to the Third International as an essentially utilitarian and functional object. The importance of function in all works of art was to become a hallmark of Soviet art and eventually fracture the constructivists in two groups

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<sup>31</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.147

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p.152

<sup>33</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.56



– the new branch of which were hard line utilitarianists who favoured a new ‘production art’<sup>34</sup>. This changed the artist’s role from someone who was the creator of objects for the sake of creating objects (in which the focus was the actual performance of work) , to a creator of elaborate ‘tools’ (where the focus lies upon the potential use of the object created). This is a perfect illustration of the negative ramifications of utilitarianism. It transforms an act that was once an end in itself, into a series of unending, unfulfilling means. When Tatlin designed the Monument to the Third International its success would not be measured on its creation (it was actually never built) but on its effectiveness to distribute propaganda, which in turn is a means to another end. This can be read as a metaphor for all of Soviet society; for the sake of productivity and efficiency, it eradicated the exultant possibilities within work by transforming all of the produce of the worker into a means for some other end. Again, Arendt has written about this in ‘The Human Condition’,

‘Only in so far as fabrication chiefly fabricates use objects does the finished product again become a means, and only in so far as the life process takes hold of things and uses them for its purpose does the productive and limited instrumentality of fabrication change into the limitless instrumentalization of everything that exists.’<sup>35</sup>

To develop this idea we can suggest that utilitarianism actually belittles the role of work in the creation of a new soviet society. The focus was always upon what was made – the produce of work, rather than the process of how it was made – the action of work. The artists and worker were to become the designers and fabricators of a ‘new environment’<sup>36</sup> but the quality of life during this fabrication was largely overlooked, so it is difficult to look at the Soviet revolution in terms of a revolution of everyday life in which *every* moment is important. This is not to say that the Soviets completely ignored the process of work, the constructivists were interested in reducing the specialisation of work and the division of labour by involving the worker in every stage of the making process. Artists were eventually to become ‘artists-workers’ who not only conceived and designed products but also were physically in the factories operating the machines that made them, as suggested by the theoreticians of the time,

‘We want the worker to cease being a mechanical executor of some type of plan unfamiliar to him. He must become a conscious and active participant in the creative process of producing an object’<sup>37</sup>

In this sense the work of the Soviet artist-engineer could have been more fulfilling than the alienation of our present-day specialised work. There would have been more

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<sup>34</sup> refer to Chrisina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, (Yale University Press, 1983), ‘Art in Production’, pp. 101-103

<sup>35</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.157

<sup>36</sup> refer to Chrisina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, (Yale University Press, 1983), ‘Arvatof and Lef’, pp105-108

<sup>37</sup> O.Brik, ‘V poryadke dnya’, in *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve* (Moscow, 1921), p.4, in Lodder, *op.cit*, p.104

responsibility and connection with the end product than in many of our modern administrative and production line jobs. But, in terms of a revolution of everyday life, the nature of Soviet work is flawed by its overbearing concern with utility.

So, as a conclusion to this chapter, by looking at the various works and output of Soviet artists we have illustrated a few of Arendt's key notions on work. It is an action that man is compelled to perform, as the objects he creates through work both reify his achievements and toil and, on a grander scale, serve to immortalise him. This was the action of the Russian avant-garde and early constructivists. Unfortunately, through the action of work, man inadvertently creates his own prison. One form of this prison is the human artifice, an accumulation of all the man made objects he creates in order to prove dominance over nature. This artifice is created so man can live independently of the conditions under which he exists in nature, but the human artifice becomes yet another conditioning environment. The machines and tools *homo-faber* creates eventually limit his creativity and the technology he invents dominates him. The other form of restriction work enforces on life is illustrated by the later era of constructivists where an overwhelming concern with utility prevents any one thing from being appreciated in its own right. This is exemplified by Tatlin's monument, which could have been appreciated as an incredible structure and achievement in itself but its function as a piece of propaganda would always detract from that. Either way, work and the products of work create man's conditions. Similarly, the 'spectacle' that the Situationists blame for the emptiness in consumer society is, in part, an accumulation of artificial objects and interactions that have created an entire human artifice from which we cannot escape.<sup>38</sup> Of course, if man does not create his own conditions then he must live under the conditions of nature, a fact that the Soviets were probably aware of when deciding the role of both worker and artist was to be the decorator and organiser of life<sup>39</sup>.

The role of work in the revolution of everyday life is paradoxical. It is both a necessity for the fulfilment and freedom of existence as it fabricates objects that remain permanent in the world, but it simultaneously creates a conditioning environment. This conditioning environment reduces action and objects to a means to an end, which restricts the freedom and enjoyment of life. A potential solution to this situation lies within the potential to divorce work from utilitarianism. Here we keep the positive aspect of *homo-faber's* 'work of the hands', that being the manufacture of durable objects, and transform its produce and activity into something that exists for its own sake. This type of 'meaningless work' finds its form in contemporary society as hobbies, in much the same way that sport is a form of meaningless labour. In the following section I would like to expand on the importance of games and meaningless work to examine the role of work within play and the role of play within the revolution of everyday life.

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<sup>38</sup> refer to Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (Zone Books New York, 1994)

<sup>39</sup> refer to Chrisina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, (Yale University Press, 1983), 'Art in Production', pp.101-103

### **PART 3 FLUXUS PLAY**

Games are central to our understanding of play – when we play we tend to play games. Children play games to entertain themselves and in doing so develop an understanding of the world. Adults play games in the form of sport and also dedicate a lot of leisure time to watching others play games. Obviously, this kind of passive spectatorship does not itself fall under the definition of play. The Situationists believed that the revolution of everyday life would be the equivalent of transforming man's existence into a game, one that demanded participation and had no clear winner or loser.<sup>40</sup> The elimination of competition in a game removes its utility and as such strengthens its playfulness. One group more than aware of the revolutionary qualities of useless games were the Fluxus artists. Henry Flynt, an artist associated with Fluxus, came close to a definition of this form of play when he invented the term 'brend' in 1963,

'Consider the whole of your life, what you already do, all your doings. Now please exclude everything which is naturally physiologically necessary (or harmful) such as breathing or sleeping (or breaking an arm). From what remains exclude everything which is for the satisfaction of a social demand, a very large area which includes foremost your job, but also care of children, being polite, voting, your haircut, and much else. From what remains exclude everything which is an agency, a 'means', another very large area which overlaps with others to be excluded. From what remains, exclude everything which involves competition. In what remains concentrate on everything done entirely because you just like it as you do it.'<sup>41</sup>

Doing 'what you just like' became a dominant characteristic of the Fluxus group. They are an (art) group with no fixed beginning or end, no fixed geographical location or centre, not even a definitive list of members. The artists and individuals who were associated or associated themselves with Fluxus did so because they just liked. Fluxus, apparently, was not a body of work or set of rules but rather a way of *doing* things that many critics saw as just playing around. Therefore, it is impossible to talk about the role of play in all Fluxus work because the output of Fluxus artists is too diverse to allow generalisation. Rather, I intend to discuss an element within the work of Fluxus artists that appears frequently enough to be considered typical and will help provide a fuller definition of 'play'.

George Macuinias is popularly known as the central figure in Fluxus; in as much as he was the only person concerned with labelling and documenting work of Fluxus artists. He

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<sup>40</sup> refer to Guy Debord, 'Toward a Situationist International' in, '*Situationist International Anthology*', (Bureau of Public Secrets 1981), pp.22-25

<sup>41</sup> Henry Flynt in, Christine Stiles, 'Between Water and Stone', in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, (Walker Art Centre, 1993), p.72. Hereafter referred to as *In the Spirit of Fluxus*

was responsible for organising the first Fluxfest in 1962 in Wiesbaden and was subsequently responsible for the organisation and execution of the Fluxus yearbooks and Fluxboxes that remain one of the few lasting objects from Fluxus activity in the 60's and 70's. There is a certain irony that so much of Fluxus' identity is attributed to Macuinas when, in essence, his attempts to solidify and control Fluxus as an art movement were at odds with most of the ideas of the artists involved in it. However, my starting point for a discussion of play in Flux-terms is from an interview between Larry Miller and George Macuinas. In the interview Macuinas identifies some key concepts that, for him, characterise Fluxus. Like the art of the Soviet avant-garde, concreteism is at the heart of Fluxus; the realisation that art can work with its own qualities, a painting can be about painting and music can be about music, instead of referring to something outside of itself or being illusionary. From this interest in the concrete arises a direct link with Dada that provoked Fluxus activity to be pigeonholed as 'neo-Dadaist'. The source of most Fluxus thinking is Duchamp's use of the ready-made,

'GM: Well, the ready-made is the most concrete thing. Cannot be more concrete than the ready-made.

LM: Because it is what it is.

GM: Right, so that's extreme concrete. There's no illusion about it, it's not abstract. Most concrete is the ready-made. Now, Duchamp thought mainly about ready-made objects. John Cage extended it to ready-made sound. George Brecht extended it furthermore.. well, together with Ben Vautier.. into ready-made actions.'<sup>42</sup>

It was Cage's philosophy of music and sound that is often cited as the theory that informed Fluxus performance. Many artists that became involved in Fluxus attended John Cage's experimental music classes in which the idea that music could incorporate 'non-musical' sounds was developed. Cage demonstrated that music was not reliant upon tempo, key or rhythm and could be experienced anywhere at any time. Music was not exclusively defined by the player but could also be defined by the listener. In many pieces, such as *4'33''* and *0'00''* the fabrication of any sound is substituted by the performer framing (in the former) or amplifying (in the latter) everyday sounds:

'*0'00''*... is nothing but the continuation of one's daily work, whatever it is, providing its not selfish, but is the fulfilment of an obligation to other people, done with contact microphones, without any notion of concert or theatre or the public, but simply continuing one's daily work, now coming out through loudspeakers.'<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ken Friedman ed, *The Fluxus Reader*, (Academy Editions, 1998), p.191. Hereafter referred to as *The Fluxus Reader*

<sup>43</sup> John Cage, quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988),pp. 69-70, in Douglas Kahn, 'The Latest: Fluxus and Music', in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, p.106

In this case the artist is no longer acting as *homo-faber* because he is not concerned with fabricating – the artist has become someone who simply notices and points out elements of the world (both natural and man-made) instead of someone who strives to dominate it. However, the artist is not playing a passive role; despite its incidental character, the action of noticing becomes the work, it is an active observation. This is a point I would like to return to and explore in more detail. Beforehand it will be helpful to discuss the manner in which the sound based work of John Cage developed in to the full performance events that typify most of the Fluxus output in the early 60's. After Cage had opened up the definition of music to include all sounds the next step taken by his students was to expand this to include the actions that create these sounds,

'One day in school, while I was performing our improvisational music, I got tired of loud and rich sounds. I started tossing a bunch of keys to the ceiling to make an ostinato, with its faint sound. And while I kept doing it, I began to look at my performance objectively as a whole, and I noticed that I was performing an action of tossing keys, not playing keys to make a sound. This was the turning point, when I became concerned with action music or events.'<sup>44</sup>

In this instance the area defined by the artist is expanded to include not only the 'useful' sound-making element of the action but also the 'meaningless' or incidental part. This acceptance of actions without means can be found also in many of George Brecht's events, and is key to the work's playfulness. A good example is Brecht's 'Incidental Music' where the actions of the performer are essentially purposeless; they are simply a means with no intentional or predictable end. The performance is executed for the sake of the performance and the product, 'art', or 'music' is almost a byproduct,

### **INCIDENTAL MUSIC (1961)**

Three dried peas or beans are dropped one after another, onto the keyboard. Each such seed remaining on the keyboard and is attached to the key or keys nearest it with a single piece of pressure-sensitive tape.<sup>45</sup>

Once the term 'music' had been applied to these performances in their entirety the need for an audible sound was questioned; Fluxus music could take the form of making a salad (Alison Knowles)<sup>46</sup> or drawing a line (La Monte Young)<sup>47</sup>. The term 'music' was still

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<sup>44</sup> Mieko Shiomi in, *The Fluxus Reader*, p.110

<sup>45</sup> George Brecht, *Water Yam* (1963) (Brussels and Hamburg: Edition Lebeer Hossmann, 1986), in Douglas Kahn, 'The Latest: Fluxus and Music', in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, p.105

<sup>46</sup> Alison Knowles 'Proposition', first performed on 21 October 1962 at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London, repr. in David T Doris, 'Zen Vaudeville' in, *The Fluxus Reader*, p.107

<sup>47</sup> La Monte Young 'Composition #10 1960: 'Draw a straight line and follow it.', repr. in David T Doris, 'Zen Vaudeville' in, *The Fluxus Reader*, p.121

applied or used in reference to these events because the important element is the perception of the audience. Sound and music are inescapable to the functioning human, as Cage pointed out - our ears are always open. So, the audience is meant to be open to every element of a Fluxus event in the same way you listen to every instrument and sound in a piece of music.

Fluxus events and music tended to exploit the beauty of simple, everyday things by altering the viewer's perception of them. Once every sound or action becomes music, and anyone that carries out an action is the performer of music, it follows that normal, everyday tasks such as walking, take on a new significance,

## **THEATRE MUSIC**

### **Keep Walking Intently<sup>48</sup>**

Another tendency in Fluxus events was to make use of natural processes and objects from the natural world. Instead of manipulating or changing them in some way, Fluxus artists would change the audience's perception of the process or object. Brecht's *Drip Music* (1959) makes us focus on the natural action of water,

## **DRIP MUSIC (DRIP EVENT)**

**For single or multiple performance.**

**A source of dripping water and an empty vessel are arranged so that the water falls into a vessel<sup>49</sup>**

When looking at Fluxus performance such as this in terms of work and play it is important to remember that this exploitation of nature, rather than its manipulation, contradicts the wants of *homo-faber*. Instead of fabricating or changing processes and in so asserting man's domination of nature, the Fluxus artist makes nothing. The relationship between the performer and nature is neither dominating nor submissive; a lot of Fluxus art is about noticing and appreciating a natural occurrence in an active way. A piece like drip music is more than mere spectatorship, Brecht has created a situation where the natural action of dripping reveals itself as a significant and noteworthy

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<sup>48</sup> Tokenise Kosygin circa 1964, in David T Doris, 'Zen Vaudeville', in Ken Friedman ed, *The Fluxus Reader*, p.110

<sup>49</sup> George Brecht, Drip Music 1959, Repr. In Ken Fiedman ed, *The Fluxus Performance Workbook*, special edn. of *El Djarida* magazine (Trondheim, Norway: Guttorm Nordo, 1990), p.13, in Douglas Kahn, 'The Latest: Fluxus and Music', in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, p. 110

occurrence. Brecht is not making a dominating gesture, like work, or one that is prompted by physical necessity, like labour. The symbiotic relationship with nature, where artist and the subject of art stand on equal terms, distinguishes 'play' as an action separate from work and labour.

The Fluxus artists referred to the revelation of a thing through a process as 'exemplative work'; a term attributed by Dick Higgins. In exemplative work, the idea or concept behind an action only becomes fully clear once the action has been set in motion or performed. Ken Friedman mentions that not all Fluxus artwork is exemplativist but 'those pieces which are exemplative are in some way closer to the ideal than those which are not.'<sup>50</sup> Exemplativism is an excellent illustration of the Fluxus attitude toward performing for its own sake. Exemplative work is a means without ends, or at the very least, a means where the ends are not fixed. This theory is embodied in improvised music, which played a large role in the work of Nam June Paik. In 1978 Paik, alongside sometimes Fluxus associate Joseph Beuys, performed '*In memoriam of George Macuinias*'<sup>51</sup>. The piece consists of 74 minutes of improvised music performed on two pianos with two vocals. Although a piano based improvisation would appear to be a very conventional framework for a Fluxus performance, it touches on many attributes that characterise Fluxus work. A good improvisation is an action without a predisposed idea of the outcome, the framework is in place in the form of the instruments or objects to be used but the direction the performance may take is open at all times. The directions taken by '*In memoriam of George Macuinias*' are a result of Paik and Beuys playing off each other and reacting to the both their own, and the other's actions. There are sections of atonal mess and intense quiet but the piece remains a constant reaction between the two artists to the situation they are simultaneously creating and watching unfold in front of them. In this sense the improvisation is the pinnacle of what we may define as 'play'. It is an action without intentionality or preconceived utility. Whether the music will be soothing, sad, upbeat, confrontational and so on, is only revealed in the actual playing; its function is a result of it's undertaking.

Furthermore Paik and Beuys' performance is an instance of the Fluxus artist's attempt to heighten perception. Due to the length and relentlessness of the playing, '*In memoriam of George Macuinias*' creates a state of immersion for its audience to enter. The music performed by Paik and Beuys is constant in its form, in that there are no breaks, but is also constantly changing and non-repetitive. The effect on the viewer is that of a slow losing of self. At the same time as being incredibly focused on the actual movements of the player's hands and voice, as an audience member one becomes more aware of the surroundings and environment; the concentration required to keep focused on the performance begins to dissolve the boundaries between what is and what is not the work. The result of this immersion is that we begin to look at the event in its entirety in a new way; Paik and Beuys' 'playing' is the instigator for a revolution in perception. Therefore, the revolutionary potential of play lays in its ability to make us appreciate new, unseen

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<sup>50</sup> Ken Friedman, *The Fluxus Reader*, p.250

<sup>51</sup> I was fortunate enough to see a video documentation of this performance entitled '*In memoriam of George Macuinias*' as part of a Nam June Paik installation in Musee d'art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg on 15 December 2004.

qualities in each moment experienced in everyday life. Cage recognised this revolutionary quality in music and performance,

‘As a vehicle of signification, this approach could ‘open the minds of the people who make them or listened to them to other possibilities than they had previously considered... To widen their experience; particularly to undermine the making of value-judgements.’<sup>52</sup>

In many cases Fluxus events literally involved their entire surroundings and environment. Like Allan Kaprow’s ‘happenings’ of the early 60’s in America, Fluxus artists sought to transform an entire area of social exchange. The Fluxus festival that toured Europe in the 60’s took over entire towns, in part due to the sensational press response to their avant-garde performances. In 1996 Roskilde played host to a Fluxus festival thirty years after its first. Eric Andersen’s description of events highlights the ambitious nature of the festival and the effect it would have on every aspect of the town and people that visited it,

‘Of main importance was to occupy the town... the performances became the traffic. They moved in different directions through the streets and lanes. Made stops on squares, in churches, convents, shops and parks. They met, crossed each other to part again. Mountain climbers scrambled up buildings and towers while the audience dragged themselves up the hill in 200 wheelchairs. Men were handcuffed by WPC’s and nurses took blood samples. A lamb was slaughtered every hour. Flocks of sheep were herded by resolute dogs. A baby was born. The audience walked past spaces of sound as guardsmen, bagpipes, building machinery, traffic accidents and the emergency services conducted complicated scores with fire and water. Around midnight 40 parachutists jumped with blinking blue lights attached to their helmets resembling falling stars. The effect was that of the sky itself falling down over Roskilde.’<sup>53</sup>

The artists involved in the organisation of this festival managed to create a temporary situation where every action or happening was performed in the spirit of play. All the events throughout the festival were carried out, not for a utilitarian end, but to be incredible things in their own right. For the festival period, the people involved were living an alternative existence, as if existing in a giant playground. It is at this point we are able to introduce the writings of the Situationist International. To put the festival at Roskilde into a revolutionary context we can refer to the early Situationist manifestos,

‘Our central idea is that of the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.’<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> John Cage in, *The Fluxus Reader*, p.96

<sup>53</sup> Eric Andersen, (n.d) ‘What is ....?’, *performance-festival-odense.dk*[online], available: <http://performance-festival-odense.dk/pfo01/whatis.html>, [accessed 16 April 2005]. See Appendix 1.

<sup>54</sup> Guy Debord, *op.cit*, p.22



It is easily imaginable that for the three days that the festival ran, every moment would have consisted of a 'superior passional quality', every action took on a new significance and every object perceived in a new light. However, the Situationists failed to outline or exemplify the qualities of a constructed situation that would be necessary for a revolution of everyday life. The primary function of the created situation would be to destroy the spectacle by forcing individuals in that situation to have an active role<sup>55</sup>. There may be some discrepancy between what the Situationists perceived to be an ideal situation and the type of environment created by Fluxus artists at their festivals. Although Roskilde became an all-encompassing situation it, like most Fluxus performance, still maintained a divide between audience and performer.

'The role played by a passive or merely bit-playing 'public' must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather in a new sense of the term, 'livers', must steadily increase.'<sup>56</sup>

The audience of a Fluxus concert or event may become a participant in the work but they are never playing at the same level as the creator of the situation: the artist is the creator of the framework that the audience is then invited to operate within. The revolutionary quality of the Fluxus concert may lie in the lasting effects it has on its spectators once returning to everyday life. If the audience is willing to transfer the level of perception achieved at the festival to the working day then it transforms those mundane, normal situations into a more fulfilling experience altogether.

Similarly, the spectator at a Fluxus concert or event may be inspired to create their own version of Fluxus work in new surroundings, outlined by them. Pieces like George Brecht's '*Three telephone events*<sup>57</sup>' and Alison Knowles '*Proposition*<sup>58</sup>' are examples of Fluxus work that can be reinterpreted and performed by anyone in their daily living. They open up the possibility of becoming the artist to the audience through the simplicity of the action required to perform the work; Brecht's telephone events covers every eventuality when a telephone rings and Knowles' proposition is simply 'make a salad'. This brings us one step closer to the Situationist ideal where everyone becomes an artist; a crucial strategy in the abolition of Arendt's 'society of labourers'.

However, the Fluxus embracement of play and performance is not without its problems, one being that, in many cases its action leaves no physical trace or document. The actual performance of Fluxus work is primarily unproductive. It is not an action that is concerned with making anything durable to serve as a utility object or immortalise its creator. Fluxus may improve the quality of everyday life by stripping actions of the utility that masks their natural 'goodness', but in doing so it is unable to produce anything that sustains that life. Macuinas was practically the only figure in Fluxus who tackled this

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<sup>55</sup> refer to Guy Debord, 'Toward a Situationist International' in, '*Situationist International Anthology*', (Bureau of Public Secrets 1981), pp.22-25

<sup>56</sup> Guy Debord, *op.cit*, p.25

<sup>57</sup> repr. in David T Doris, 'Zen Vaudeville' in, *The Fluxus Reader*, p.97

<sup>58</sup> first performed on 21 October 1962 at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London, repr. in David T Doris, 'Zen Vaudeville' in, *The Fluxus Reader*, p.107

problem and this is one of the reasons he has become its most identifiable personality. For Macuinas, Fluxus was always designed to take the form of objects,

‘GM: Meanwhile we thought, well, we’ll do concerts, that’s easier than publishing... the idea was to do concerts as a promotional trick for selling whatever we were going to publish or produce.’<sup>59</sup>

These realised themselves as the two Fluxus yearboxes (themselves a collection of objects and written matter) and also the written documentation of Fluxus performance, which took the form of instruction cards, such as George Brecht’s *Water Yam* box set. Furthermore, Macuinas was responsible for the creation of various other artefacts ranging from mail order multiples to the collective housing for artists that eventually became the SoHo area. It could be suggested that, employing Arendt’s definition, Macuinas was the only true ‘worker’ within the Fluxus movement. Not only did he collect and distribute the objects created by Fluxus artists, in many instances he realised the artists ideas as objects and films on their behalf. The question that arises when applying this definition of work and non-work to performance is whether or not the documentation of the performance (be it in text or recorded form) is altogether separate ‘work’ than the performance of that piece. To clarify this idea I would like to use one of Brecht’s *Water Yam* events as an example,

### **Turn on a radio**

#### **At the first sound, turn it off.**<sup>60</sup>

Do the qualities of this event as a written instruction have any relation to the actual action of performing the piece? Personally, I have never attempted to perform this event, nor have I seen or heard it being performed, so, for me, Brecht’s ‘work’ remains merely as a small offset printed card that I saw exhibited in Straousburg. Arendt addresses this problematic relation between work and cognition, in ‘The Human Condition’,

‘...reification and materialisation, without which no thought can become a tangible thing, is always paid for, and that the price is life itself: it is always the “dead letter” in which the “living spirit” must survive, a deadness from which it can be rescued only when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it, although this resurrection of the dead shares with all living things that it, too, will die again.’<sup>61</sup>

The ramification for play is that without any form of work, play will fade from existence. Documenting Fluxus performance as written scores provides the opportunity for that action to be performed an infinite number of times, and that it will survive in the same way as an object produced by *homo-faber* would. Additionally, it means that such an

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<sup>59</sup> George Macuinas in, *The Fluxus Reader*, p.187

<sup>60</sup> This was an art work that I saw first hand exhibited alongside the Nam June Paik installation at Musee d’art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg on 15 December 2004. refer to note 45 for publishing details.

<sup>61</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.169

action is free to be reinterpreted by an infinite amount of performers and therefore take on new forms and meanings throughout time. This keeps the action of playing relevant to the context in which it is performed; instead of becoming a dusty document of a passed society the Fluxus game can be played in any new environment. In doing so, it heightens the perception of its performer and audience to that new situation. In the final section of this essay I would like to develop this relation between work and play, discussing the possibilities of 'productive play' and the role this would have in the revolution of everyday life.

#### **PART 4 GOOD WORK AND PRODUCTIVE PLAY**

To begin the concluding section I would like to begin with a summary of the negative qualities of work and labour that have arisen from the investigation of their role in the revolution of everyday life. The main problem with work is that it is an action solely concerned with its produce and as such is only judged on its results. To have worked hard is the equivalent of having created a great object or a great number of things. This is the only way in which the action of work can reify itself in the world. The nature of work is quantitative rather than qualitative meaning that the most productive society or, more rightly, the hardest working society will unavoidably have the most number of objects to prove it. It is here that the destructive and restrictive effects of work manifest themselves. Firstly, work constantly destroys the natural world and burns up resources because it is a process of transformation. In order to create lasting, durable objects that withstand nature, the source material must be changed irreversibly. For example, stacking wooden blocks to form a tower is indeed the work of *homo-faber* and is not a destructive action. However, to ensure the durability of that tower the blocks must be joined together to form a new permanent object. Without the durability of its produce work becomes labour, so work always consumes the elements it utilises, otherwise it is not work.

Furthermore, the creation of objects becomes a conditioning force. The multitude of things that we, as *homo-faber* are driven to produce, collectively form an artificial environment to which we must adjust. Every object created and machine invented adds to the human artifice and, although it is the result of man's escape from the conditions of nature, it is also responsible for the new rules and daily struggle man lives under. A simple example of this is the envious nostalgia felt for the hunter-gatherer's significantly shorter working day, when commencing an eight hour day sat in front of a computer. Work's most despicable characteristic though, is its ability to transform a world of objects and actions into a series of means. In work nothing is evaluated on its own merits; everything must be utilised for the fabrication and realisation of an end product, which in turn will also be used to serve another purpose. Work's utilitarianism prevents it from becoming an action in itself, it exists only as a series of objects. Work's success is measured on what it leaves behind, not what it is, and in the present day's climate of insatiable consumerism, it leaves behind less and less.

Of course, in Arendt's terms, work without lasting produce is labour; an eternal battle with nature to keep bread on the table. Labour has a submissive relationship to nature, every action defined as labouring is a reaction to the necessities of living under our conditions. However, now that we exist in the human artifice, our conditions have become man-made so the labourer is submissive to both nature and himself. This is a sorry situation. At least in the natural world the resources consumed in labour (wheat for making bread, fields for agriculture) were eventually fed back into natural world, creating a cycle. In the human artifice the consumed object, now useless, is buried underground or burned.

Paradoxically, it is the cyclical nature of labouring that makes it essential to the human condition. Arendt explains that without life's imperfections and restrictions there would be no room for fulfilment in everyday life,

'Man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won over in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity.'<sup>62</sup>

Labour is an infinite number of struggles between man and his conditions that occur in such quick and constant succession that they take on the character of everyday life. The labouring individual may be caught in a thousand battles a day but mere survival of the day is testament to a thousand victories. Labour is not an attempt to dominate nature permanently, like work, but a continuous call and response much like games and play.

Similarly, there are areas of work that are play-like and also areas of work that satisfy the needs of man left unfulfilled by labour and play. As exemplified by Macuinas' role in Fluxus, without any form of work there is no opportunity for a document of playing to survive, and be relived by another participant. Work, rightly or wrongly, seeks to immortalise man's action but this need not be an immortalisation of man's work. Through the 'dead letter', written scores, language and instructions work is able to transcribe play and ensure its survival. Work may also immortalise play in a more accurate way than the passing down of folk-stories through generations.

Sadly, herein lay work's revolutionary limitations. Although it may serve to solidify the result of a process, as an action work is too concerned with utility to be considered a 'real', ideal state of living. There is no contentment in work because it always looks beyond itself. Play, on the other hand, can be defined as a heightened perception of the *now*. As demonstrated by Fluxus performance, a playful rather than work-like art results in an audience paying fresh attention to stale actions and objects. Play instils revolutionary qualities into everything it comes into contact with. If work is the (futile) search for the immortalising object then play is the revelation of the eternal moment. Play produces little in comparison to work but in some sense doesn't need to produce any more. Whilst work only perceives the use potential of the thing it is creating or working with directly, play opens up perception of potential use in all existing things.

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid*, p.121

In spite of this, it is difficult to deny the inherent passivity of this kind of play when compared to the continuous activity of work and labour. Many of the benefits of play are accidental and therefore, never guaranteed to be felt. Nevertheless the Situationists saw the revolution of everyday life as only possible through the expansion and development of these playful, eternalising moments,

‘Due to its marginal existence in relation to the oppressive reality of work, play is often regarded as fictitious. But the work of the situationists is precisely the preparation of ludic possibilities to come. One can thus attempt to neglect the S.I to the degree that one easily recognises a few aspects of a great game. ‘Nevertheless’ says Huizinger ‘as we have already pointed out, the consciousness of play being ‘only a pretend’ does not in any way prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness.’<sup>63</sup>

The role of play in a revolution in Situationist terms is very active. As well as revolutionising everyday life through the heightening of perception, the Situationists believe that play can actually create new conditions for man. It is in this area that the notion of ‘productive play’ must be realised. In a utopian society nobody works – both in the sense that there is no forced labour or jobs, and also in the terms of *homo-faber’s* fabrication of the human artifice. An ideal society for the Situationists does not differ too greatly from ancient Greece, therefore what we are left with, assuming slavery is not an option in the revolution of everyday life, is a dilemma regarding *essential* work and how it is completed. Post-Situationist writer Bob Black addresses this dilemma in his essay ‘The Abolition of Work’. No doubt, influenced by Raoul Vaneigem’s description in ‘the Revolution of Everyday Life’ of a nail smiths competition<sup>64</sup>, Black presents a theory of injecting play into work and simultaneously exploiting play’s productive potential,

‘The secret of turning work into play, as Charles Fourier demonstrated, is to arrange useful activities to take advantage of whatever it is that at various times we enjoy doing...

Activities that appeal to some people don’t always appeal to others, but everyone at least potentially has a variety of interests and an interest in variety... Small children who notoriously relish wallowing in filth could be organized in ‘little hordes’ to clean toilets and empty the garbage, with medals awarded to the outstanding’<sup>65</sup>

Of course, Bob Black’s vision is almost dreamlike in its utopianism and would require a near impossible upheaval of social and political systems, certainly if it were to happen in

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<sup>63</sup> S.I, Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play, *Internationale Situationniste #1* (June 1958) [online], available:<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/play.html>, [accessed 16 April 2005]

<sup>64</sup> refer to Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, p.54

<sup>65</sup> Bob Black, ‘The Abolition of Work’ in, *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays*[online], (Loompanics Unlimited 1985), available: <http://www.zpub.com/notes/black.html>, [accessed 16 April 2005], p.9

our lifetime. However, it does raise a crucial issue in the possibility of productive play, that being the ability to take advantage of individual skill. The concept of innate talent or god-given skill, like genius, obviously does not sit well with any of the writing in this essay and it is not my intention to rely on them now. However, it cannot be denied that the skills that many do not possess are present and honed in others through that individual's practice. The most obvious examples would be the ability to master a sport or play a musical instrument.

It is debatable whether the objective to improve one's skill turns an action that would otherwise be defined as play into a utilitarian activity, and it can be reduced to a question of intent. Whether a musical instrument is played so the performer improves playing or if it is simply played for the enjoyment of playing is both the responsibility of the performer and is reliant on social conditions. Still, an area where this action is more playful is improvisation as demonstrated by Paik and Beuy's piano performance. Improvisation removes the repeatable nature of practicing or attempting to master a certain performance. Every action is performed solely to experience its immediate result rather than to improve on a past performance of that action. Improvisation, like play, is only concerned with moments, and as such provides an opportunity to experience the eternal. Furthermore, it has the potential for accidental productivity, which means it fulfils work's primary function without its restricting and destructive effects. By returning once more to concretism the productive potential of play can be identified,

'George Brecht, two years before the publication of Watts' essay, appraised the role of dance in the work of Jackson Pollock, noting that the most remarkable aspects of Pollock's work happened beyond the artist's ability, conscious or unconscious as it may be, , to assert total control over his materials. Unconscious production, or better, 'improvisation', is still a form of control, a framing, a function of the interiorisation and mastery of a set of learned skills and familiar materials. For the experienced artist such as Pollock, or Watts' master photographer, skills have been internalised to the point where production becomes naturalised, becomes 'second nature', as it were; as such, the works produced by the artist occur with the apparent effortlessness and certainty of natural force. In a sense, this is indeed the 'Zen' of the arts.'<sup>66</sup>

This 'mindless' production should be the ultimate, final stage in the revolution of everyday life, for its very existence demonstrates that we are able to produce objects without intent and also, therefore, the potential means for survival. In each stage of labour, work and play there is a condition or impetus for man to change his behaviour; the *animal-laborans* is unhappy with the alienating futility of labour so creates objects and, in turn, the human artifice. The working *homo-faber* discovers that not only is the human artifice equally as alienating as the natural world but that, additionally, everything that exists within it is reduced to a series of unfulfilling means. These are the conditions of present day society from which we can look beyond to a utopian society of 'players' envisioned by the Situationists and the Fluxus group.

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<sup>66</sup> David T Doris, *The Fluxus Reader*, p.117

Sadly, this utopian society remains beyond reach due in part because it appears to lack the capacity for productivity that the modern world functions upon. However, with enough playing and practice of playing, the necessary skills to advance from *animal-laborans* can be internalised and the little human artifice actually necessary to survival, created by accident. Like the accidental but essential productivity of the hippy ideal of free love, man is able to live a fulfilling and engaging, playful existence whilst simultaneously ensuring his and other's survival.

However, within this final stage of man as a productive player it is possible to predict his downfall. When all production is dependant on non-intentional actions there must be an indiscriminate acceptance of everything that is produced. In the same way *animal-laborans* accepts the conditions of nature and *homo-faber* must accept his own intentionally created conditions (as exemplified by the Soviet revolution) the man who lives his life as an eternal game must accept the 'natural' conditions of that game and live without want of change, like *animal-laborans*. The revolution of everyday life lays within the acceptance of those conditions produced by play, and that these conditions do not suffocate or dominate the 'livers' but demand a cyclical relationship, similar to that the Buddhists share with nature.

Of course, this is based on the presumption that man will lead a happier life once unburdened of domination and suffering . This in itself is questionable, Arendt explains that part of the human condition is a predisposition towards toil; everyone loves to complain about work.

'On its most elementary level the 'toil and trouble' of obtaining and the pleasures of 'incorporating' the necessities of life are so closely bound together in the biological life cycle, whose recurrent rhythm conditions human life in its unique and uni-linear movement, that the perfect elimination of the pain and effort of labour would not only rob biological life of its most natural pleasures but deprive the specifically human life of its very liveliness and vitality. The human condition is such that pain and effort are not just symptoms which can be removed without changing life itself; they are rather the modes in which life itself, together with the necessity to which it is bound, make itself felt. For mortals, the easy life of the gods' would be a lifeless life.'<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.120

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