

JOY FOR EVER

HOW TO USE ART TO CHANGE THE WORLD AND ITS PRICE IN THE MARKET

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ART

For John Ruskin, art and craft were both fundamentally social practices. This doesn't mean to say that individuals don't make things, or get absorbed in the making of things, it simply means that art objects and artifacts, as well as being made by somebody, are also usually made for someone, for a purpose, and within a social context. However, during Ruskin's lifetime, the Industrial Revolution brought about radical changes in the way things were made, who they were made for, and how they were circulated. As factories began to use machines that were capable of mass production, and exact copies of objects could be made cheaply for sale around the world, workers began to be employed for their labour rather than their skill. This also meant that workers, as well as factory owners and the consumers of their products, all became more detached from the object they were producing and selling. As commodities, whether they were pots, pans, pens, rolls of wallpaper, chairs, tables, shirts, dresses or whatever, became cheaper and more available to buy, the chances were that no one individual worker (or even a small group of workers) had made them from start to finish.

In 1824, Manchester Art Gallery opened during the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, when the UK became the 'workshop of the world' and Manchester became its prototype industrial hub. And we also know that it was in Manchester, during *The Art Treasures Exhibition of Great Britain* of 1857, that Ruskin delivered his public talks *The Political Economy of Art,*

or, A Joy For Ever (and Its Price in the Market). It was during these talks that Ruskin went beyond his ideas of local and personal uses of art – as a means for citizens to rethink and remake their roles in society – and began to propose that museums, galleries, private collectors and governments alike have a social, moral and ethical responsibility to use collections of art treasures for the common good. In 1860, Ruskin went on to publish his book *Unto this Last*, in which he began to map out some of his ideas for how art, craft, making and social ownership could help us rethink our relationships to the world, our environment and each other. Famously, this book inspired writer, social campaigner and politician Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) to rethink how a new and decolonized India could emerge from activities of community and social making.

More recently, making, participation and community are back on the social and political agenda – as evidenced by the recent UK government statement that art and craft can be prescribed by doctors to improve mental health and well-being. But how would we, and museums and galleries such as the Whitworth, really like to use art as a means to rethink ourselves and our relations to the world and each other? The Whitworth would like to invite you to think about these ideas, to take a seat and to look at Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, and to help us think these questions through. After all, as Ruskin himself said, there is no greater wealth than life.

Written by John Byrne, Reader in The Uses of Art at Liverpool John Moores University and Director of 'The Uses of Art Lab' which forms part of Liverpool School of Art and Designs ART LABS Research Centre.

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ART AND SOCIAL MAKING

Until quite recently, John Ruskin was often seen as a neo-conservative or reactionary figure, vainly hoping to hold back the tides of progress and industry through a belief in handcraft and tradition. But there is more to it than this. Scratch a little beneath the surface and you find a more complex (and often contradictory) Ruskin; somebody who believed deeply that making, owning and sharing art should be social. He also believed that art, making and creativity should be at the very core of our education and society. Because of this, Ruskin also worried about the impact that the Industrial Revolution was having on the environment as well as on our taste. Above all, Ruskin was somebody who was not convinced by the emerging idea that art was useless, something simply to be appreciated on its own terms, in isolation from the society and the community who produced it.

During the Industrial Revolution art, as we know it or knew it to be, changed forever. Prior to this period art had always been a more integrated form of craft. With the advent of mass production techniques such as photography, as well as new global systems for circulating images in newspapers, books and magazines, art and artists needed a new role. And it is at this point that we see the emergence of the 'avant-garde' artist, an outsider able to show us how the world really is through the production of their increasingly abstract art works. Now, on one hand,

there is nothing wrong with this. But John Ruskin also saw the possibility that 'art for art's sake', as it became to be known, would lose all connection with the real site and conditions of its production.

For Ruskin, art should retain its social use and purpose, and not be removed from it. Because of this, Ruskin argued that all citizens should be given the opportunity to make art themselves, as a means to develop their skills and their relationship to the world around them – so that life doesn't simply become a dizzying circulation of mass-produced objects which we can only buy when we can afford them, with little or no knowledge of who made them, where and why. Instead, Ruskin was interested in how people could use drawing, the study of nature, the skill of arts and crafts, and the ownership of their own labour as a means to rethink the way they lived together. Quite literally, Ruskin believed that the activity of making pots together could lead to collaborative and communal changes in broader society.

Keeping this in mind, the Whitworth would like to invite you to simply think twice about what art is or could be. And how it might be used differently by you, and others like you. Could we all, including museums like the Whitworth, use art as productive tools for social change and the common good? And if so, how could we go about this?

Written by John Byrne, Reader in The Uses of Art at Liverpool John Moores University and Director of 'The Uses of Art Lab' which forms part of Liverpool School of Art and Design's ART LABS Research Centre.

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THE ARCHITECTURE OF POLITICS

One of the key reasons why John Ruskin struggled so much with the idea of 'art for art's sake' - the idea that art should occupy its own world, always remaining at one remove from society - is that he wanted art to be political. This doesn't mean that Ruskin thought paintings should depict allegories of political life - though he clearly believed art should involve itself in debates about moral and ethical virtue - it means that Ruskin thought art, and more precisely the making and doing of art, was in itself a social and political act. Not only did he believe that making pots would return an ownership of labour to men and women who increasingly spent their lives in the monotonous drudgery of factory and mill work, he thought that art could sit at the centre of a new educational and political system.

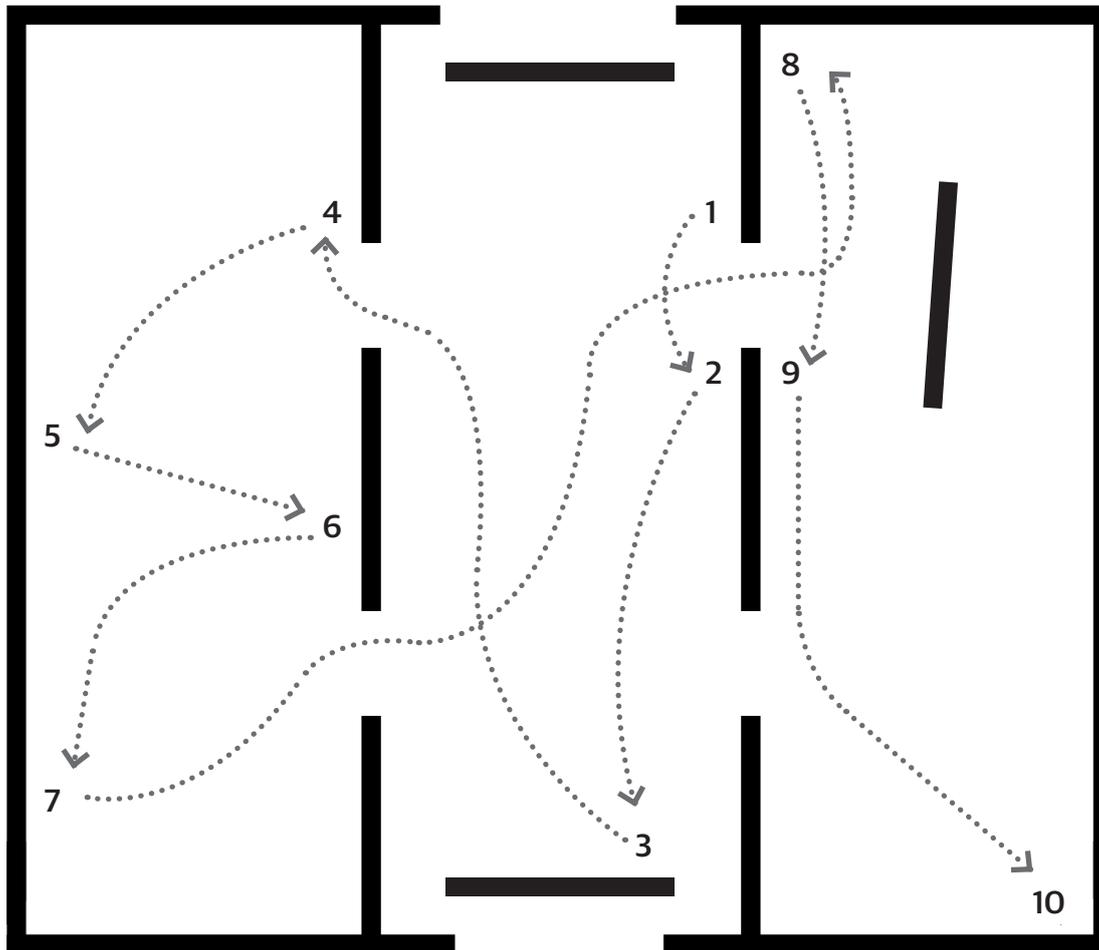
Central to this idea of political art, for Ruskin, was the idea of good governance. Ruskin frequently used the metaphor of the home, the household and the judicious housewife as a means to offer us ways of thinking beyond the impositions of government from afar and from above. He also used metaphors of the small, the local, the ready-to-hand and the achievable as a way to reject the dominant political and economic ideas of the time. For Ruskin, the idea of 'Laissez-Faire' economics and politics - where everyone was out for themselves, guided by an invisible hand of the economy - was morally and ethically bankrupt. Instead, Ruskin sought to put the little community back into Victorian ideas of the big society.

These ideas of small-scale management and artful living are becoming widespread again. When we look toward our own constitutional crisis, brought on by political infighting over Brexit, most of us feel detached and alienated from our process of government and power. With no suitable political alternatives on the horizon, many are turning again to the ideas of small-scale making and doing as a means to wrest back some sense of self-organization and empowerment. And this is where the relationship of aesthetics and politics, in a Ruskinian sense, re-emerges. Ruskin preferred the medieval architecture of the Gothic to the geometrical precision of the High Renaissance - and this was not simply for nostalgia's sake. Instead, Ruskin saw in the Gothic a human scale, one that resided in its imperfections, its struggles and its communal/collective beauty. This way of making architecture, for Ruskin, was superior to the 'one size fits all' solution of Renaissance architecture, governed, as it was, by a non-human scale (and a belief that abstract rules of geometry and mathematics would deliver uncompromising beauty). Once more, the Whitworth would like to invite you to take the opportunity of Ruskin's 200th anniversary and to think with us again about the relationships between art, politics and society on a more meaningful and personal scale, and to share with us some thoughts on how we might use the museum, and its collections, to imagine ourselves differently.

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Exhibition floor plan

Ground Floor



Social Making

Economics

Politics

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 Uptaquias veritempero volupti | 6 Tincti net venihillorio |
| 2 Scillan dellab int | 7 Ommolo |
| 3 Remporum et fuga | 8 Ventibus dolentius pa |
| 4 Ilat quas pa | 9 Quiatorias excearchicia |
| 5 Dolupta | 10 Nem latuarep |