

Labor Education and Labor Art: The Hidden Potential of Knowing for the Left Hand

Peter H. Sawchuk

Abstract

Approaches to education, knowledge and aesthetics are reviewed in order to discuss the role of art in union member education, distinguishing between *insurgent art* linked to oppositional political projects and dominant forms of *Art Proper*. Art is observed in terms of both production and consumption, drawing on psychologist Jerome Bruner's notion of knowing for the "right" and "left" hand and cultural-historical approaches to learning. It is argued that labor-based art is an important mediator for expanding labor education and activist development. To illustrate the ideas, a brief case study of a union-based arts production with school custodians in Canada is outlined.

For all one's conviction that the world should be open to knowing, there are certain forms of knowledge that one fears. So it is with the subject of art.

—Jerome Bruner (1962, 59)

In a book written over four decades ago entitled *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand*, Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner begins with a metaphor that I borrow here to start a discussion of what art has to offer labor education. The metaphor is rooted in the symbols of the right and left hands as two different types of knowing. The right hand is seen as a symbol of planned action, order, rationality, laws, and science. The left hand is a symbol of the dreamer, intuition, passion, and, Bruner adds, art. Bruner continues to say that the two hands, in fact, need each other; if the two are separated the full development of knowledge will be limited, and so will our ability to understand the processes that underlie it. Here I will add that this separation does not help our thinking about the future of labor education, either.

For the right hand, knowing is the stuff of organized science. It has dominated our lives—as children and as adults—for centuries, for good and bad. As workers, we have seen scientific technologies such as steam, electricity, mechanization, computers, and even social technologies such as “scientific management” take increasingly important roles in our lives. This type of knowledge is also central to educational practice within and beyond the labor movement. Here we could stress that rigid pedagogy of the right hand dominates the left, and that rational and accountable educational outcomes take privilege over building deep commitments, developing feelings of solidarity, or instilling passion for social justice. Knowing for the right hand is more easily identified and demonstrated; not so with knowing for the left hand, which revolves around imagination, gut feelings for perceiving things differently, and intuition for right actions—even when they seem based on “irrational” commitments to principles. Few documented discussions are devoted to the left hand; left hand knowledge is presumed to “just happen.”

Outside certain pockets of analysis on organizing, the labor movement tends to take the left hand for granted. In labor education, the left hand may receive a lack of attention in part because it doesn’t seem to fit into a planned program very well. Learning outcomes of the right hand (e.g., administering grievances, strategizing collective bargaining, demonstrating knowledge of health and safety laws) in many ways necessarily take center stage. While I maintain that we need to continue to develop collective bargaining skills, etc., in this article I argue that we must think seriously about knowing for the left hand as well. Indeed, whereas knowing for the right hand seems to sit comfortably in a classroom, we must look within and beyond the classroom to find where knowing for the left hand is at home.

Though rarely documented, it is difficult to overestimate, in my view, the importance of this dimension of learning in the historical gains that labor movements worldwide have achieved. Although some unionists might say that increased wages, legally recognized voices in the workplace, and collective bargaining are central achievements of the labor movement, on a broader level we can argue that the most powerful educational accomplishment—perhaps what lies at the heart of what many of us try to do—is the development of passion and the belief—might we even say faith?—in solidarity and social justice. What remains a major challenge for labor movements and labor education is not so much how to train activists, but rather how they develop the passion and commitment that fuels them to continue, and how they developed the passion that caused them to emerge in the first place. On this question, an awareness and understanding of knowing for the left hand may be crucial. As one of the most progressive thinkers on Canadian labor education said, “The

labor movement wasn't built based on a feasibility study" (Martin 1995). In fact, I've yet to meet a fellow union activist who was born of the comparative wage/benefits advantage of unionism.

So, as labor educators and labor education researchers, we might say that knowing for the left hand is essential, but where have we discussed it? How would we know it if we saw it? Where have we taken it seriously enough to document it? How deeply do we allow the ideas we have about it to penetrate what we and our organizations do? And, are there some ideas out there that can help us address such questions?

As a way of focusing on these issues, below I explore knowing for the left hand in terms of labor arts. I argue that art has the potential to speak to this type of knowledge. I will look at the production of art, the consumption of art, and the possibilities objectified within the art product, or artifact, itself. To connect art and what's called the "art experience" to labor education, I draw lightly on Cultural Historical Activity Theory, a specific theory of learning and approach to development established in the 1920s and 30s by young Marxist psychologists Lev Vygotsky, Alexei Leont'ev, and Alexander Luria (see Sawchuk 2003; Livingstone and Sawchuk 2004; Sawchuk, Duarte and Elhammoumi 2005). The approach was first made widely available to western audiences in 1962 in a book, not coincidentally, introduced by Jerome Bruner.

To summarize my intent for the article, below I argue that labor-based art is a key tool for addressing knowing for the left hand within an expanded idea of labor education practice, that labor art may be one of the only forms of "curriculum" suitable to this task. I cover theory here, but the goal of the article is not theory development since most of what I discuss is not new (and in fact some of it is quite old). Rather, the aim is to combine ideas that have not been in contact with each other before in the labor movement to set the stage for further research and application. Through my discussion of art criticism and aesthetics as well as educational theory, I try to make the case for *why* art is important to labor, highlighting the contribution of knowing for the left hand toward expanding union activism. By discussing labor arts historically, by reviewing a specific form of labor arts project with school custodians in Canada, and by analyzing arts consumption, I also try to start a discussion of *how* labor can use art more effectively. This is, above all, a sincere effort to re-invigorate the imagination of labor education researchers and practitioners, to bring new ideas to help us rethink what's been done in the past, what's currently being done, and how it can be done better.

Art and Unions: A Context for the Argument

In common sense thinking, culture refers to the lofty realm of high-brow paintings, poetry, and music. This thinking is in fact reflected in the field of aesthetics that first emerged in the late 1700s and was defined as the philosophical “science of the senses” (Battersby 1991, 35). It was specifically concerned with the values and practices of *high culture*, a certain type of *art experience* and the form this experience takes when it is communicated. But the term “art” has had many faces: on the one hand, there was the medieval university’s version of the “liberal arts” (grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) and, on the other, were the “seven muses” (history, poetry, comedy, tragedy, music, dance, astronomy). Intermixed were distinctions between artists and artisans (skilled workers). But in the twentieth century, thinking expanded about both the terms art and culture. Now “culture” is often perceived as a “way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity in general [related to the] process of intellectual and aesthetic development” (Williams 1983, 89-90). When we think of art and culture in this way, we must consider Raymond Williams’ remark that perhaps the greatest *cultural* achievement of the working-class has been the creation of the labor movement (see McIlroy and Westwood 1993): a cultural achievement, according to Williams, because it has been vital for the positive development and articulation of distinctive working-class experiences and worldview. With notable exceptions, such as the ones I outline below, cultural activities are among the elements of union life most often ignored for their *educational* value, activities represented through the various forms of labor art. In this article, I define labor art as the multiple forms of expression (visual, musical, dramatic, spoken word, literary), produced and consumed from the *standpoint* of the diverse working-class.

However, it is impossible to begin an article like this without first registering basic examples of artistic efforts of unions, unionists, and associated “fellow travelers” who’ve aligned themselves with labor at various points, despite the fact that such examples were only rarely thought of explicitly in educational terms. Take, for example, the long history of publicly recognized artists who have associated their work with organized labor and radical “popular front” politics. Some of the most prominent of these are Pablo Picasso, Bertolt Brecht, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Woody Guthrie, Charles and Pete Seeger, Charlie Chaplin, Upton Sinclair, and John Dos Passos (Denning 1998). Perhaps more important for an understanding of the organizational role of art in the labor movement, however, are international examples of labor arts initiatives including the Art and Working Life program (Australia), the Bread and Roses program (U.S.),

Mayfest events in Glasgow (UK), as well as the formalized governmental and/or labor-based cultural programs in countries like Sweden or, most recently, the U.K. (see Tusa 2001). In the United States, New Deal initiatives such as the Federal Theatre Project (O'Connor 1973; O'Connor and Brown 19781), interwoven with one of the most influential strike waves in American history, were at the center of the progressive Age of the CIO (1930-40s) so often held as a golden era of union development in North America.

In my own country, the less famous Frederick Taylor by all accounts was the first painter to formally exhibit in a union hall, showing at the International Association of Machinists hall in Montréal in 1944. The works of many Canadian writers addressed themes of work, life, and politics from a working-class standpoint. These would include the works of Gabrielle Roy, Ted Allen, Irene Baird, Donald Durkin, and Canadian auto worker activist/writer Ron Dickson, as well as the spoken-word performances of the various Mayworks Festivals in Canada such as Toronto's Woman Talk events. Also, consider visual arts, including sculpture and photography—for example, those organized by the Working Image exhibits in Canada, and the ongoing work of filmmakers such as the Edmonton Labour Council's Don Bouzek. Paintings, such as those of United Steelworker activist Charlie Stimac or Carl Wesley Jean (Canadian Union of Public Employees), might be mentioned. Also, dance (e.g., the work of dancer/choreographer and International Brotherhood of Boilermakers activist Tom Brouillette), and drama (e.g., the work of the Queer Artists Union Collective). Finally, it should be obvious that music has been and continues to be central to worker perspectives on work and life in Canada and elsewhere, from the wide influences of the Dust Bowl ballads of American labor-folk tradition, jazz, and the blues, to more contemporary punk and hip-hop radicals. Glaring in its absence in recorded documentation and systematic thought, however, is the use of art for labor education.

According to Beveridge and Johnston (1999), in Canada one of the most important early organized attempts at uniting arts, labor action, and education was seen in the 1950s in Sudbury, Ontario (cf. Steedman, Buse, and Suschnigg 1995; also see Taylor 2001 for further examples). Emerging from the Industrial Workers of the World is a union tradition expressed through the radical International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, led by men like Wier Reid (hired as recreational director for Mine Mill in 1952), who produced an arts-based cultural environment that taught and mobilized workers in the fourteen-thousand-member local 598. Later, unions such as the United Steelworkers of America, most directly through the establishment of *Going Public: The Steelworkers Communication Policy* in 1985, formally adopted arts policies with these issues in mind. The educational value of these

activities cannot be disputed; they led workers to better understand their work and society and enhanced their visions of both. Indeed, it is no coincidence that some of the most ferocious forms of worker resistance and solidarity in Canada were manifested by locals such as Mine Mill 598 and others who developed sophisticated cultural/educational programs.

Cataloguing a list of examples may be necessary for context, but it partially evades the question of the linkage between learning and art. In order to establish the meaning, purposes, and potential of labor art in these terms, it might be best to start more simply with a concept that understandably preoccupies workers: that is, the idea of “work.” In principle, the labor arts can provide some of the most engaging sources of learning about work and working life, though on the surface there may be reason to think that they’re not well suited to the task. American cultural historian Michael Denning wrote “[w]ork itself resists representation . . . Stories, after all, come from travels, adventures, romances, holidays, events: interruptions of the daily grind” (1998, 244). In contrast, however, Taylor (1988) writes that although the complex of work seems to defy analysis, the “[n]ovelists and imaginative writers have done rather better than psychologists and sociologists in describing [it]” (206).

In a recent analysis, Worthen (2004) discusses worker’s writing and shows that such art can be understood as an element of the union movement and representation; art can transform workers and help them overcome the barriers they face in trying to make sense of the “daily grind.” She demonstrates that work, which Denning says resists representation, is better understood for what it is (i.e., learning for the right hand) as well as for what it might someday become (i.e., knowing for the left hand) when it is refracted through the prism of the union movement and activism. Thus, as Raymond Williams understood, cultural expressions from the labor movement, creative writing in Worthen’s case, allow us to understand work and class under capitalism. Why should this be the case?

Good art by its very nature can represent complex and contradictory social reality in the shock of a moment—what’s called in aesthetics theory the “unity” of expression—that often proves elusive to other forms of communication. It does so by combining and evoking a host of feelings and experiences in a single instance of perception. Whether through sight or sound, such a process draws on and builds knowing for the left hand. The labor arts do this from a working-class standpoint. The issue of *standpoint* is key; although the standpoint from which art is produced—for whom, why, and how—cannot completely explain a work of art; it is nevertheless vital (Vyotsky 1971; Bourdieu 1996).

Clearly, in educational terms, art can offer a powerful, immediate, gut-level awareness of a complex social reality eclipsed by few other means. However, at this point, there are virtually no studies or accounts of the educational influence of art on activists, the rank-and-file unionists, or the working-class more broadly. Therefore, we can only put forth a solid working hypothesis: though art is not conventionally thought of as “labor education,” the production and consumption of art that expresses workers’ perspectives offers a vital form of learning with unique powers to mobilize and inform, specifically in terms of knowing for the left hand that Jerome Bruner outlines. To respond to this hypothesis, however, we need a theory of education equal to the task.

A Theory of Education for the Use of Labor Art

In *Faust*, the German writer Goethe wrote, “Gray is all theory; green grows the golden tree of life.” Does this mean that we needn’t bother with theories? Does theory figure in what early British working-class cultural studies scholars like Clarke, Critcher, and Johnson (1979) called “really useful knowledge”? Theory can not iron your pants, cook your meals, and, for people other than academics, it can not pay your bills. On the other hand, theories, frameworks, models or any other systematic, evidence-based approaches to understanding and acting in the world are the bases of sound planning and, they provide the bases for targeting resources, particularly under conditions of scarcity and conflict. If you accept these facts, we must say that theory matters in the labor movement.

Now we can ask: In the context of building capacity in our movement, what theories of education are available to us as labor educators? In a word, plenty.² Lots of theories are useful, but of course some are more useful than others from a working-class perspective. Educational researchers in North America concerned with theories of learning and the union movement, such as Helena Worthen (e.g., Worthen 2001; 2004; Worthen and Berry 2002), D’Arcy Martin (see Gairey et al. 2004), David Livingstone, and me (Sawchuk 2003; Livingstone and Sawchuk 2004), have been arguing that one of the most powerful theories of education and learning for the labor movement is the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). This theory defines learning not simply as a cognitive act. Instead, it sees learning as a cycle of collective, tool-mediated activities where what is conventionally thought of as learning is both its by-product and currency. Most important, it is a cultural and historical, rather than a strictly psychological, approach to learning, and it causes us to ask fundamentally different questions about how learning works. Artifact-mediation is central to this approach. According to CHAT, all human

action is undertaken through the use of artifacts including physical tools and technologies, symbolic tools such as language, and social technologies such as organizational rules and divisions of labor. In other words, our development is mediated by the people and things that surround us. Of course, artifacts, like all tools, were made with specific purposes in mind (albeit these purposes evolve). They are historical and they help us do some things better than others. People create artifacts under particular social and economic conditions, and in turn artifacts establish the means through which people think, imagine, and act in the world—resulting in learning and change. We could say that artifacts softly govern our human freedoms to learn and to grow: people make history but not simply as we choose.

The concepts of CHAT and artifact-mediation will be new to most readers. To ground the ideas in a labor example, think about the factory piece-rate sheet and collective agreement as artifacts, as Worthen (2001) did in her analysis of garment work. It is easy to see that each of these artifacts, in conjunction with a host of others, has been produced by a whole history of class struggle. Each artifact mediates the actions of workers, supervisors, and management in the workplace, but since each also contains a distinct history of wins and losses, each artifact affords certain types of learning while inhibiting others. The work and learning mediated by the piece-rate sheet (as opposed to the collective agreement) is based on a foundation with no legal dispute resolution and, more fundamentally, reasserts the pitting of individual workers against management. Learning, depending on which artifact mediates the action, takes distinct directions that often clash: “productivity and wages that are broadly guaranteed by the contract [are] continuously strained by the manipulation of the potentials of the piece rate system” (42). But, in fact, Worthen’s analysis shows that these artifacts provide a different curriculum for the learning that workers and union representatives undertake: a curriculum dominated, as her case shows, by the piece-rate sheet. This results in:

ceaseless re-negotiation of the details of the pay system, as rates are changed, jobs are changed, and workers are moved from job to job, as the shop managers try to press labor costs lower and workers and union representatives try to keep rates steady and increase earnings by pushing productivity... What [workers and union representatives] spent time resolving were the direct consequence of either manipulations of the piece rate system by the employer or work disturbances that resulted in loss of wages under the piece rate system. (Worthen 2001, 9-11)

In this analysis, we begin to imagine an entire framework of not only action and response but ongoing learning and change as well. Thus, CHAT establishes

that the world of artifacts that surround us deeply shapes learning. Does this suggest that these artifacts, like some iron law, *determine* exactly what workers, supervisors, and management do? Of course not. But, they do *shape* the possibilities and either narrow or broaden the chance of workers imagining and achieving something different.

Mainstream theories of learning (so mainstream in fact that we don't even think of them as theories) maintain that individuals are simply free to learn or not. Learning is a matter of cognitive capacity, mental schema, and information processing that begins and ends with the individual. These theories are ratified by the imposition of the classroom where the world is outside and learning is inside, and social context is part of the background rather than an interactive element. Simply put, there is nothing inherently social, political, or historical about it.

In contrast, CHAT offers a robust means of analyzing learning in action within and beyond the classroom by taking seriously the role of artifacts, such as art, that shape it. Sociologist Bruno Latour says, "technology is society made durable." And, for me, this suggests that in order to keep the wins we've earned as a movement, we must make them "durable" by solidifying them in artifacts. We do this well in legal structures and the collective bargaining process: knowing for the right hand. I think we can do this better in terms of knowing for the left hand through art. This includes bringing labor art into our courses, but it also involves thinking about how arts production projects as well as the consumption of art can be thought of as labor education.

The Production and Consumption of Art as Labor Education

[Art] is a significant aspect of cultural reality, and one which gives expression to, and trains and transforms, the imagination, a vital cognitive capacity (Bakhurst 2001, 188).

"Feminist" art, "disability" art, "ethnic" art, and, of course, "labor" art share a distinctive quality in relation to what can be called "Art Proper": they are linked to *oppositional* political projects. Here we might note, for example, the shift that certain commercialized hip-hop music has taken toward mainstream consumer culture (e.g., Gilroy 2000; Dyson 2001; Murray 2004), a process that may be currently eroding the music's oppositional political project.³ Any form of art is, in principle, open to interpretation for conservative or radical purposes, but we should also note that Art Proper is defined not only by the highbrow, aesthetic claim that it speaks to universal human themes of beauty, but also that it constitutes a system of exchange value in terms of costs: of original art, a symphony ticket, or opera season memberships.

To understand the importance of this linkage to exchange value, consider John Berger's (1977) example of the famous drawing, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist*. Berger explains that after a collector reportedly offered two and half million British pounds to buy it, this relatively obscure work was transformed in terms of its "universal aesthetic value"—a transformation that Berger says was "ultimately dependent upon [its] market value." He says this represents "the final empty claim for the continuing values of an oligarchic and undemocratic culture" (Berger 1977, 23). But, lest we forget, Art Proper also involves the recognition of a particular social standpoint. In this case it is the standpoint of the buyer, the collector, and the powerful: this too involves an articulated political project,⁴ but one that is dominant rather than oppositional.

The labor arts, at their best, combine production and consumption to socially transform capitalism by giving voice to working-class standpoints, including their gendered and racial dimensions. Good labor art makes durable the victories of knowing for the left hand: victories of feeling, commitment, heartache, and inspiration that are central to the labor movement. "Made durable" also means that labor can build upon these victories; this social, historical cycle is really the learning process from a CHAT perspective. In the CHAT educational theory, artifacts mediate learning through a cycle described as the "instrumentation" and reinstrumentation of activity (Engeström 2000, 150-166), which through time leads to individual and group development.

To understand more deeply the relationship between labor art, artifacts, and labor education, I will outline a case that came to my attention in 2002 when I encountered artist/activists Karl Beveridge and Carole Condé working closely with Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) local 474 (school custodians) on a project entitled "Class Maintenance."⁵ Beveridge and Condé conducted what academic literature might call a "participatory action research" project.⁶ This type of project features both researcher and the researched participating as equals in defining the issues and doing something about them. This approach argues that outside experts may bring important techniques and knowledge to the table, but ultimately they cannot, on their own, understand the problem, let alone solve it. In terms of the Class Maintenance project, the goals were to work with custodians to represent, in visual form, their lives, work, and struggles—frequently known only to them. This meant meeting with workers over an extended period and having small groups of custodians talk about their work and even act out their work-related problems. Ideas for the visual art were generated directly from recordings of these sessions. A sample of the images that were created can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1

As a form of art grounded firmly in a labor community, this work is exemplar. For both the artists and workers, the active co-production of art was a significant learning experience that energized individual workers and, through them, local 474. It helped them “make durable” their own experience of the problem of cutbacks in public education. These visual artifacts take on, in ways that only the fusion of artist and worker could generate, the issues of privatization, cuts to public education, and the reduction of education to a mere economic instrument. One can look for—indeed may be drawn to look for—the clues to these issues in the images (e.g., the graffiti in Figure 2 shows the word “learning” with the “L” crossed out) of these experiences.

More than this, the art expresses for the workers/artists “left hand” knowledge. It makes durable, for example, the desire for dignity and meaning in work. Or, it expresses some of the hidden value of custodial work: building relationships with students, serving as a teaching and helping adult, and showing students that the condition of the school depends on everyone’s efforts in caring for the space as in a community. It is not surprising that these expressions show that custodians are committed to their work. In sum, the images establish a “feeling,” a sense of the overall contribution that custodians make, as well as a vision of possibilities for better schools and better workplaces. In the context of capitalism, where workers are mostly seen as part of someone else’s human resource infrastructure, these powerful political sentiments are interwoven at the most basic, gut-level of human relationships and the working life of custodians. The fact that some, perhaps even many, North American school custodians do not feel this way about their work proves the educational power of this type of labor art-based project.



Figure 2

In a participatory action project, the division of labor is collaborative, with a refusal to separate the planning and execution functions. The artifacts themselves convey this in a certain shock of perception. Through these processes, important questions can be asked about a different future—a potential unique to the insurgent arts. Imagine the effects on the conversations of custodian union locals in your district were art like this to go up near their workplace. To consider such effects is to look beyond the process of production toward the consumption of art.

Like most fields of study, aesthetics and cultural studies historically comprise a variety of subgroups that I will not outline here. As interesting as they may be, they rarely speak to the educational and learning dimensions of art. In this article, I want to re-interpret art as a learning process, and for this we can turn again to Bruner and his analysis, which bridges the psychology of learning with the “art experience” in aesthetics theory. We can think about how the viewing of CUPE 474 artifacts relates to what Bruner (1962) calls the four achievements of the artistic consumption.

First, potent art “connects experiences” by containing many possibilities in a single image. Local 474 art begins with the possibility for enormous damage caused by cuts to public education and privatization. The images express ideas of open-ended possibilities from several intertwined factors: the demonstration of the enormous but hidden value of custodial work for our children, the threat of its loss from our schools and community, and the desire for recognition of the value of blue-collar contributions.

Second, as labor educators know, the active involvement of people in the learning process defines the success or failure of any educational effort. Art is no different. Bruner says, in fact, that the consumer’s active effort to overcome the “ambiguity” (i.e., the various possibilities) contained in an image

is the heart of art appreciation. For learning to occur, the visual artifact must, in effect, compel and assist (or rather mediate) thinking. As the quote from Bakhurst that opens this section indicates, art shapes the capacity for imagination. In this case, it trains the imagination to ask questions about the role of specific workers in the workplace and the conditions they face.

On Bakhurst's point, we can compare the Class Maintenance images with examples of Art Proper (Figures 3 and 4, from Berger 1977). What possibilities are opened by these traditional images? These paintings are highly valued, analyzed, and discussed as important examples of a particular period and artistic form. What feelings do they most readily seem to produce? To answer this, first we must imagine the audience for such work. The pieces tend to trigger (by design via a particular process of commission and production⁷) a ratification of power (e.g., of the early global entrepreneurs in Figure 3) or a sense of pity (while alleviating guilt) for the "obviously" simple-minded young fishmonger (Figure 4), who is, after all, rough but happy.⁸



Figure 3

The Ambassadors, by Hans Holbein the Younger.
By permission of the National Gallery, London



Figure 4

A Young Fisherboy of Scheveningen, ascribed to Frans Hals
By permission of the National Gallery of Ireland

Third, according to Bruner, art merges two mental processes: desire and stream of consciousness. In their fusion, these processes produce unique effects that contribute to the artistic experience in shaping motivation. Consider the local 474 images. Do you remember being helped by a custodian at your school when you were growing up? Are you a custodian, or is your friend, or one of your parents? Is your activism energized by the critique of neo-liberalism inherent in the images? Are chances better that you will attend that school board meeting in your district when the budget is being reviewed? All these questions are about learning and the mediation of even further activity and learning. Again, compare this experience with the desire and stream of consciousness inherent in the images 3 and 4 (Art Proper). What impulses to action, if any, do they seem to urge?

Finally, Bruner confirms that, despite the many claims of mainstream aesthetics theory to the contrary, Art Proper is not a universal mode of communication at all. It is instead a particularistic one. Art becomes universal only to the degree that those consuming art share life circumstances represented or channeled by the image, context of consumption, and the (labor) process

of its creation. “Class-based” meanings in art (we can add “gendered” or “racialized” as well) are generated, as Berger (1977) argues, only if the types of social and economic relations contained within the image can be brought into relationship with those we ourselves experience as *classed*, *gendered*, and *racialized* people. In this sense, labor art and May Day festivals make a great deal of sense, not because workers lack capacity to appreciate “real” art, but because of the unique life experience we have *as diverse working-class peoples*. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu studied different “levels” of class culture and art appreciation as measured, for example, by which social classes tend to visit museums and galleries the most. Such levels often emerge, however, from the type of art that is produced and publicly shown: art that, in working-class terms, often makes no sense.

At this point in our analysis of learning/art appreciation, however, we move beyond Bruner by noting that the ruling class has an interest in emphasizing art of a certain type. Subordinate classes, genders, or races, if represented at all, are represented from the standpoint of the dominant group (white, elite, heterosexual, male). We can think of the happy fishmonger above, or we can think of the commercial elements of the hip-hop music industry based on caricatured images of young, violent, misogynistic, urban, working-class black men as *seen through the eyes* of a white suburban, middle-class paying consumer. Art Proper generates the kind of learning and art experience that Bruner describes for the ruling classes because it represents *their* world view; this is art that most deeply fuses *their* desires and *their* own, class-based “stream of consciousness.” Art Proper, created from the perspective of the ruling class, inherently affirms the romance of privilege, and in so doing makes what should be a plurality of artistic tastes into a hierarchical system of “distinction” (again, see Bourdieu 1984), where some tastes are not only different, but better than others.

For all their insight, Bourdieu, Berger, or Bruner did not discuss the processes of art production and consumption embedded in the places where people come together, as in the labor movement, to share and develop knowledge based on a positive sense of their own social standpoints, which are ignored, denied, or denigrated elsewhere. Such processes are an alternative system of naming the world around us including our place in it. Such processes are essential—via a knowing for the left hand—for imagining, developing passion, and committing to alternative futures instead of those handed down to us.

Unfortunately, at this point there is no script for turning art consumption in everyday life into labor education. Thus, it makes sense to use *our* imaginations. Can labor educators think of ways to use art to make the

commute into work “educational”? How about oral history? Most activists I know say that stories, sometimes ones they lived themselves, penetrated them to the core and turned them toward activism. Can story-telling, oral poetry, or music be brought to homes, car radios, or iPods? Labor educators, in this sense, would plan, distribute, and circulate artifacts and, in turn, tie in programs for action and campaigns to activate learning. “Knowing for the right hand,” such as writing, making music, or producing oral history can help. History clearly shows that when any art form honestly reflects the reality of workers, tells the story of workers, workers take notice. Does a big, blank wall or billboard face the parking lot of your union hall or workplace? Labor murals—both their production and consumption—can be the easiest way to start the conversations that matter in a union local, especially when members (with or without the help of professional artists like Beveridge and Condé) plan and create the art themselves. Does your local participate in May Day events? Just planning and producing music or theatre is educational, never mind the rippling effects when the art goes public at May Day events. If the topics matter, workers listen; when workers listen they talk to others; that’s labor education with reach. And, the mother of all labor education opportunities: what roles do labor educators, labor artists, and labor art play in recording, archiving, and creating learning opportunities from strikes, campaigns, and festivals? Did somebody say videography? A strike that fails to result in labor art should be viewed as a mortal sin.

Conclusions for Starting a New Conversation

Hearts starve as well as bodies, Give us bread, but give us roses. When workers develop collective strength, many outsiders assume that the driving force is wages—bread...To the degree that the labour movement has survived and thrived, it has been on issues of equity, dignity, fairness, the broader social vision—the roses. Without that vision, it is harder to imagine an alternative... (Beveridge and Johnston, 1999, ix)

“Bread and roses,” “knowing for the right and the left hand”: these two metaphors, I think, fit each other well. They represent a unity at the heart of union learning as well as potent insurgent art. These ideas are essential to the labor education process but, to date, our knowledge of how to apply them is underdeveloped.

I have argued that, for integrating “knowing for the left hand,” we must incorporate critical, democratic, and humanized arts production processes into educational cycles through which the product can express the standpoint and ideals of labor and, in turn, mediate future goals, passion, and imagination.

This, I argue, is an important building block for activism. It can be accomplished to certain levels in union courses but art, as a curriculum to develop knowing for the left hand, is perhaps most at home in special projects such as the one undertaken by CUPE local 474 and in the world of everyday life. Labor educators (and labor leaders smart enough to allow them to expand their work) must develop new techniques and reclaim those from the past to expand our capacities. Combining labor education and labor art may be central to stimulating learning for the left hand, the type of learning that has the potential to harness imagination and passion for the emergence of new activists.

Art that expresses the conditions, struggles, and victories of workers is essential. It makes our past efforts durable because it allows us to pass them on, to use them over and over again. However, art of any kind, passively consumed as mere wallpaper, background noise, or entertainment to pass the time is unlikely to result in the kind of learning that is needed for the labor movement. My point is that learning only happens when the consumer/learner is active in the process. Engagement in the making of art, as Beveridge and Condé's method required, is one way to ensure this. But whenever people take up art—use art as a tool to *mediate* future action—the byproduct is learning and change. This reflects a type of *knowing* that includes, perhaps even forefronts, the *left hand*.

Notes

- 1 See also the cases, with more mixed results, of the U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts and Works Progress Administration (Park and Markowitz 1984).
- 2 See both Sawchuk (2003) and Sawchuk (2006, 68-82) for a critical review of learning theory.
- 3 Noting that there are both commercial and radical elements of the hip-hop scene, the latter is understood as a social movement complete with sectarian divisions that those in the labor movement may recognize.
- 4 A good example among several that document the open political project of Art Proper and its clash with popular and, in some cases, what I've called "insurgent art" can be found in De Hart Mathews (1976) as well as the superior, previously cited work by Denning (1998).
- 5 See <http://www.workingimage.ca>.
- 6 For a recent summary of this type of research and see "Starting with Workers and Researching the Hard Way" (Livingstone and Sawchuk 2004), Chapter

- 1) as well as Sawchuk 2000.
- 7 A labor process through which destitute painters, like Frans Hals the artist who painted the image in Figure 4, were forced to sing (or paint, as the case may be) for their supper or face debtor's prison.
 - 8 In the conventions of seventeenth-century European art, "respectable"-subjects never showed their teeth.

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