

JOY FOR EVER

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

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 artworks. 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?

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