Self-Help, Inc.
Makeover Culture in American Life

Micki McGee
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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
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2005
For François and Mikaila
At the heart of this project is the notion that no one, try as they may, can invent themselves. The same might be said of just about any undertaking: very little, if anything, that gets done gets done alone. But the acknowledgments pages of first books are tricky: one can imagine the trajectory of assistance arching backward in time toward kindergarten teachers. While early childhood educators are always an influence, I will try to focus on those individuals and institutions that made specific contributions to this book, or to the thinking that shaped it. As a consequence, these thanks will be necessarily incomplete.

A generous circle of friends has sustained me in the writing of this project. Two women in particular—Carrie Sakai and Jeanne Newhouse—have made the invaluable contribution of reminding me, again and again, that what I have to say matters. Without that, one wouldn’t even bother to start such a project. Once started, Allison Barlow and Anne Bergeron helped me sustain my momentum. In addition to providing regular doses of encouragement, each directed me toward consulting work that kept the wolves at bay without requiring that I put this project aside completely. Allison also volunteered to read the very first predraft from start to finish—an act of heroism if ever there was one—and shepherded the manuscript to its
publisher. It wouldn’t have happened without her. Diane Pacom offered her insights into the thesis-writing process and regular emergency telephone consultations. Joline Blais and Nancy Graham read the very earliest drafts of the writing that evolved into this project and asked all the right questions, chief among them Nancy’s: “What’s so great about productivity?” My friendship with Chris Ford has grown with this project, and the project grew through her thinking, as she challenged me to think more fluidly about the relationship of individual development to social and political transformation. David Martz has provided years of e-mailed comic relief. And Karl Willers has urged me onward. Through it all, my friendship with Hillel Schwartz has been a source of inspiration, advice, and fun, as well as delightful self-help cartoons, tips on the latest cultural history literature, and excellent punning.

Several individuals fostered my earliest consideration of these ideas. Judy DeVoss, Dick Dunlap, Larry Price, and Becky Price at the University of California, Santa Barbara, were the people who first suggested the question of life as work of art. Mary Linn Hughes, for many years a collaborator and co-conspirator in various art and life ventures, searched out antiquarian books, such as Living the Creative Life and The Need for Art in Life, that furthered my consideration of this topic. Sherry Millner and Ernest Larsen’s healthy skepticism about the value of careers of any kind has been an ongoing source of inspiration. The artists, critics, and teachers Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler, Marge Dean, Newton and Helen Harrison, Fred Lonidier, Allan Kaprow, David Antin, Eleanor Antin, Jean Viala, and Jean Marie Allaux fostered my thinking at earlier, more germinal moments.

Friends, teachers, and colleagues at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where this project had its first iteration as a doctoral thesis, have provided remarkable support. The members of my dissertation committee—Stuart Ewen, Catherine Silver, Barbara Katz Rothman, and Robert R. Alford—each brought their own special qualities to the project. Through his work, Stuart Ewen has been an inspiration. While self-improvement books claim to change people’s lives, my experience is that books such as Stuart’s are much more likely to have that sort of impact. An early reading of his Captains of Consciousness certainly changed mine. Catherine Silver has been, in so many ways, a touchstone for my work at the Graduate Center, encouraging me at times when I could quite easily have given up, asking the right questions, and reminding me to think of a dissertation as a book draft. She was right: that’s what it can be. Barbara
Katz Rothman has reminded me again and again how important it is for women scholars to write and to teach in their own voices—whole, complete, and embodied voices. And the recently departed Bob Alford taught me about a kind of collegiality I could never have imagined: an exchange of ideas and insights that proved conclusively that the best work is never done in isolation. His legendary Logics of Inquiry seminar provided the setting for many of the most fruitful conversations that informed this research. My fellow “logicians of inquiry” in Bob’s seminar—among them Randall Doane, Ariel Ducey, Lorna Mason, Jennifer Smith, and Betsy Wissinger—offered suggestions, insights, and support. Camaraderie is key to accomplishing anything; their support was vital. Stanley Aronowitz, in many a sidebar conversation, has cajoled and provoked me into finishing this project, as well as provided valuable dialogue on the nature of immaterial labor. Neil McLaughlin offered detailed comments on the manuscript and shared his work on Eric Fromm; both were most helpful.

My colleagues at New York University have provided ongoing support. George Yúdice, first at the Graduate Center and later at New York University, has been a friend, a teacher, and, more recently, a colleague who has supported me and this project in countless ways. The Privatization of Culture Seminar that he convened with Vera Zolberg through New York University and at the New School University provided a collegial space for dialogue and sustenance. Toby Miller has provided support and encouragement and invited my participation in his lively intellectual community. The John W. Draper Interdisciplinary Master’s Program in Humanities and Social Thought at New York University has offered me an institutional home for this project in its transformation from thesis to book. My colleagues there—among them Robin Nagle, Riaz Khan, Amy Ninetto, and especially Shireen Patell and Amy Ninetto in the “grotto”—have provided unwavering support. Special thanks go to Amy who read the page proofs with care, helping to eliminate many of the bugs. Frederick Ulfers’s seminar on Nietzsche was filled with epiphanies for me. Chris Crowe at Bobst Library facilitated my ongoing research between academic appointments. Karen Jewett, Kathleen Hulley, and Bassam Abed, at the School of Continuing and Professional Studies, afforded me the opportunity to teach a course called “Success in the American Imagination,” where I first floated many of the ideas elaborated here. My co-conspirators at the NYU Chapter of the American Association of University Professors—including Kathleen Hull, Andrew Ross, Anna McCarthy, Solo J. Dowuona-Hammond, Arvind Rajagopal, Stephen Duncombe, and
the late Francis Tenywa—have been models of the benefits of thinking and acting collectively.

Some of my research on self-improvement culture was first published elsewhere. Work on *The Artist’s Way* (elaborated in chapter 4 here) was initially presented at a February 2000 conference on developments in the arts and culture industries hosted by Erasmus University in Rotterdam, and subsequently published in the anthology *Trends and Strategies in the Arts and Culture Industries*. My thanks go to the organizers of that conference, in particular Susanne Janssen and Karlijn Ernst. My consideration of the general category of self-help literature, labor management, and theories of victimization (taken up in the conclusion and appendix) were first explored in an article that Randy Martin and Toby Miller invited me to contribute to *Social Text* 70. I want to thank them both, as well as Michele Sharon-Glassford and the *Social Text* Editorial Collective for their support of that work. Much of the research on artists as ideal workers that appears in chapter 4 was first presented at the 2001 meeting of the American Sociological Association, where Joy Charlton chaired the session on occupations and professions. I want to thank her for her comments and encouragement at that early stage.

During the early development of this project I was fortunate to be able to subsidize my writing with consulting work for a variety of national cultural and youth development organizations. One client, Girls Incorporated, deserves particular thanks for their flexibility while I juggled the multiple demands of research, writing, consulting, and new motherhood. Colleagues and friends at this organization—especially Heather Johnston-Nicholson, Jackie McCaffrey, Linda Haynes, and Jenny Lindstrom—were unusually responsive to my need to schedule writing time.

Others have not only offered their support; they’ve also taken out their checkbooks, literally or figuratively, to make this work possible. A Dissertation Year Fellowship in 1998–99 from the Graduate School of the City University of New York supported research costs, as well as time for thinking and writing. A summer residency at Blue Mountain Center in August 1997 and a miniresidency in 2004 made the initial and final readings for this project a lakeside pleasure and provided the inspired and inspiring company of Mel Rosenthal, Bobbie Perry-Mapp, Janet Zweig, Joseph Goldstein, Leslie Nuchow, Maggie Dubris, Laura and Neil Seldman, David Morris, and Eileen Myles. Harriet Barlow, Ben Strader, and the rest of the Blue Mountain staff created exactly the kind of quiet retreat that makes reflection pos-
sible. Back in New York City, Avec Incorporated provided an affordable office space in lower Manhattan. My parents, Dan and Pauli McGee, added their support, freeing me from taking on additional consulting work that might have stalled the project’s completion.

Dedi Felman, my editor at Oxford University Press, has shepherded me through the publication process, urged me on to vital revisions when writer’s fatigue had begun to set in, and believed wholeheartedly in the value of this project. She recruited a marvelous cast of reader-reviewers, including Arlie Russell Hochschild, Nina Eliasoph, Vicki Smith, and Toby Miller, all of whom provided fine-grained comments and generous suggestions that have enriched the project. Arlie’s thoughtful comments suggested the consideration of social movement theory that emerges in the book’s conclusion. Their comments have only enriched this project; any shortcomings herein are my own. Kim Robinson, Jessica Ryan, and Michele Bove, also at Oxford University Press, played key roles in making the book possible. Conversations and correspondence with Christine Whelan, who has been preparing a dissertation on self-help literature, have offered welcome provocations and empirical insights.

Practical support for research and writing comes in other forms as well. If Anthony Trollope famously had his “groom” attending to that critical cup of morning coffee, mothers have their childcare providers, Manhattan residents their mini-storage watchmen, and computer users their data recovery experts. Joan Perineau, Maria Elena Modica, and the children’s Aid Society—Greenwich Village Center provided the kind of childcare that makes it possible to lose oneself in a project like this one. Victor Smith, at the ministorage where I kept my unwieldy collection of self-help books and research files, urged me on whenever I appeared to pull files or books: “Maggie, when ya gonna finish that book?” The friendly folks at Tekserve worked their magic to rescue my manuscript from a hard drive destroyed in the power surges and outages that followed the events of September 11, 2001. Steven Tamarin, Lauren Marcus, Lauren Gorman, Roy Boorady, Steven Forrest, and Todd Bresnick helped keep me well in body and mind. And my sister Danielle offered her frequent telephonic counsel and support. Thanks to all of them.

Finally, most of all, there are two others to thank—the two with whom I share my daily life—François Alacoque and our daughter Mikaila. They’ve lived with this project, the absences it’s created and opportunities it’s provided. This is for them, and for the living reality of a world where all you can be is all you can be and all you can be is enough.
[T]he serious artist is himself in much trouble,

and could well do with some intellectual and
cultural aid from a social science made sprightly
by the sociological imagination.

—C. Wright Mills
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