

AESTHETICS OF EQUIVALENCE

Art in Capitalism

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AESTHETICS OF EQUIVALENCE. AN INTRODUCTION

Simon Baier and Markus Klammer

How does contemporary artistic production reflect on the economic structures of capitalism? This is the basic question this book aims to address. Art and economy are entangled in multiple ways: Works of art are related to economic conditions since they are themselves commodities.¹ They may also represent and document specific effects or mechanisms of the economy by means of content.² Or, these mechanisms may be highlighted on the level of form pertaining to the artworks' technological make-up or their aesthetic properties. The methodological focus of the book builds on these perspectives and extends beyond them in order to elucidate specific interrelations between the artworld and economy: It summons theoretical and art historical approaches analyzing the artworks' technologies, materialities and aesthetic conventions – the ways in which they are produced, distributed, viewed and received – as testimonies of their economic and ideological conditions.³ Artworks are thus understood as symptoms of the current traits of capitalism as much as they are considered as actors in their own right, not only within the artworld but within the social sphere as such.

The volume asks how various forms of artistic work today accentuate structural changes in value production, accumulation and financial speculation. It claims that new models and roles of the artist can be related to fundamental changes human labor undergoes in the present economy, which is increasingly based on automatized and computerized production cycles.⁴ Accordingly, aesthetic dimensions are not viewed as external to economic structures. On the contrary, the book takes the production of the aesthetic as a field in which the abstract rule of equivalence – and

by the same token economic exchange *tout court* – can be sensorily experienced. The artwork is thus explicated as an epistemic tool the analysis of which can lead to a critique of the fundamental formations of today's economy, its excesses and limits.

Such a methodical approach is based on the conviction that transformations in the material and formal structures of the arts are tied to sociological, political and economic disruptions in societies at large. The changes in artistic production achieved by various movements of conceptualism throughout the 1960s and 1970s are a crucial point of departure for the papers in this volume.⁵ The devaluation of the material object in conceptual art – and with it of traditional artistic manual skills – as secondary in comparison to a newly defined primacy of concepts, linguistic proposals or mathematical algorithms can not only be connected, in a Marxian reading, to the rift between use value and exchange value in the commodity form – the second term increasingly dominating the first.⁶ More specifically, the primacy of knowledge-based conceptual strategies in contemporary art may also be linked to particular developments in the global economy.

After World War II, the latter has emerged more and more as a post-industrial one – chiefly in the Global North –, the production and distribution of information assuming a primal role in the overall creation of economic value.⁷ The transformation from an industrial society to an information society is necessarily based on the development of digital technology, which in many respects – not only via computerized forms of financial speculation – changed the social and economic role of manual labor.⁸ Yet, the evolution of digital technology also transformed image production, storage and distribution in fundamental ways.⁹ The digitally enabled circulation of images, which maximized the promises of analog photography, and the flow of economic exchange values must therefore be understood as two sides of the same coin.¹⁰

The aesthetic dimensions of representation and value production are indissolubly tied to certain economic conditions. They must be analyzed as complements elucidating one another.¹¹ As much as the global economy today is structured around a new valorization of information – along with the gradual debasement of manual labor –, contemporary aesthetic production can be conceived as post-conceptual.¹² This does not mean that manual labor and the production of material objects have become irrelevant or have altogether disappeared – far from it. What needs to be acknowledged, rather, is the global restructuring of the role material objects, manual labor and traditional skills adopt in the production of artistic and economic value. Since these developments do not only take contradictory, asynchronic paths on a planetary scale, but also have significant postcolonial dimensions, art history must consider the resulting rifts and conflicts as well. The re-appropriation of local traditions within a global landscape and the re-emergence of manual skills in artistic production are important facets of the current post-conceptual and post-industrial condition, which makes questions of global justice and a critique of modernity's ideational frame more pressing than ever.¹³

The papers collected in this volume do not outline an »aesthetics of equivalence« in the guise of a unified philosophical system. Rather, they represent individual accounts which tackle the topic from various historical, systematic and hermeneutic angles – some of them foregrounding the analysis and criticism of specific artists and artworks, some focusing on particular avantgarde lineages, some intertwining Marxian and post-Marxian economic theories with problems of self-valorization and flexibilization of artistic work, some discussing the economic metaphors connected to (artistic) mediums like photography and sculpture and their rapidly changing technological make-up or metaphors linked to digital video installations

characteristic of what Rosalind Krauss termed the »post-medium condition« of contemporary art.¹⁴

While the historical emphasis of the book is on the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st – from the neo-avant-gardes to the immediate present –, the authors share a common debt to an Adornian tradition, broadly speaking. At its base is the Marxian analysis of exchange value as a principle which subsumes the qualitatively different to an abstract law of equivalence, dominating – at least in advanced capitalist societies – not only economic relations *stricto sensu* but social relations as such. According to Theodor W. Adorno, this dominance can be understood as a certain form of the »identifying principle of thought«.¹⁵

»The barter principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Barter is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no barter; it is through barter that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total.«¹⁶

Yet, as Adorno continues in *Negative Dialectics*, the capitalist rule of equivalence must not be abstractly negated – this would lead to a relapse into brutal forms of »direct appropriation«.¹⁷ Instead, the inherent rationality of the principle of equivalence has to be acknowledged in a dialectical fashion, »as ideology, of course, but also as a promise«.¹⁸ This promise is itself dialectical: It aims at a critique of economic or quantitative equivalence, insisting on the unequalness of the equal with regard to different use values but also with regard to the fundamentally unjust conditions of wage labor under capitalism. At the same time, it aims at the recognition of the equalness of the unequal, not in quantitative but in qualitative terms.

This equalness of the unequal is not to be mistaken for a purely formal postulate of equality as it pertains to the legal sphere. In Adorno's analysis, the law does not contradict the principle of equivalence operative in the economic realm, but rather perpetuates it since both the economy and the law are instances of the identifying principle of thought.

»Law is the primal phenomenon of irrational rationality. In law the formal principle of equivalence becomes the norm; everyone is treated alike. An equality in which differences perish secretly serves to promote inequality; it becomes the myth that survives amidst an only seemingly demythologized mankind. For the sake of an unbroken systematic, the legal norms cut short what is not covered, every specific experience that has not been shaped in advance [...].«¹⁹

Instead, for Adorno, the equalness of the unequal is realized and can be apprehended aesthetically – albeit in a precarious and imaginary fashion. It is in the field of the arts that »the uncoerced yet ever fragile reconciliation of the one and the multiplicitous«²⁰ takes place, the unequal being acknowledged in its very non-identity and difference, a »joining of the disjoint«.²¹ In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno defines the artwork as a »nonviolent integration of what diverges«.²² It »transcends the antagonisms of existence without perpetrating the deception that they no longer exist.«²³ While the papers in this volume share Adorno's dialectical stance, they are – with due confidence – opting for irreconcilability and difference emerging – inevitably – in a field of global equivalence.

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Notes

- ¹ See Dave Beech, *Art and Postcapitalism. Aesthetic Labour, Automation and Value Production*, Chicago 2019; see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London and New York 2002.
- ² See Sabine Breitwieser, ed., *Allan Sekula. Performance under Working Conditions*, exh. cat., Wien: Generali Foundation, Ostfildern-Ruit 2003; see Nina Möntmann, ed., *Brave New Work. A Reader on Harun Farocki's Film »A New Product«*, Köln 2014.
- ³ On the relationship between an artwork's technological base and its aesthetic procedures see Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film. Enlarged Edition*, Cambridge, MA and London 1979, pp. 101–118.
- ⁴ See Danielle Child, *Working Aesthetics. Labour, Art and Capitalism*, London 2019; see Antonio Negri, »Metamorphoses. Art and Immaterial Labour«, in: id., *Art and Multitude. Nine Letters on Art, Followed by Metamorphoses. Art and Immaterial Labour*, Cambridge and Malden, MA 2011, pp. 101–123.
- ⁵ See Benjamin Buchloh, »Conceptual Art 1962–1969. From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions«, in: *October* 55, Winter 1990, pp. 105–143.
- ⁶ See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea. Art in The Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London 1999.
- ⁷ See Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society. A Venture in Social Forecasting*, New York 1973; see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis 1984.
- ⁸ See Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone. Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, Chicago and London 2005; see Möntmann, ed., *Brave New Work*.
- ⁹ See Estelle Blaschke, *Banking on Images. The Bettmann Archive and Corbis*, Leipzig 2016.
- ¹⁰ See David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton 2013; see Peter Osborne, »Photography in an Expanding Field. Distributive Unity and Dominant Form«, in: David Green, ed., *Where is the Photograph?*, Brighton 2003, pp. 63–70.
- ¹¹ See Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, Cambridge, MA 2003; see Hito Steyerl, »Is a Museum a Factory«, in: *e-flux journal* 7, 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/07/61390/is-a-museum-a-factory> [August 4, 2023].
- ¹² See Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, London and New York 2013; see id., *The Postconceptual Condition. Critical Essays*, New York 2018.
- ¹³ See David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt. Art in Globalization*, Cambridge, MA 2020.
- ¹⁴ See Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea*.
- ¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, New York and London 2007, p. 147.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 146.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 309.
- ²⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 162
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 190.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.

PRINCIPLES OF EQUIVALENCE. ART AND ECONOMIC THEORY IN THE LONG 1960s

Sophie Cras

In 1954, Robert Filliou, a graduate of the University of California in Los Angeles, resigned from his job as an economist for the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA) to embrace a new bohemian existence in Europe as an artist and poet. Despite his radical drop out, the artist never ceased to call himself an economist. From the mid-1960s to the end of his life, he claimed to have been working on »The Principles of Poetical Economy«, principles of utmost importance – »the keys to my work«, he wrote in 1971.¹ Filliou did not perceive any contradiction between his practice as an artist and his renewed ambition as an economist. He even argued that his true expertise in the matter was acquired not before, but after the end of his academic and professional training in economics, when he faced the precarious material conditions of living as an artist. Upon quitting his job, he wrote, »I soon entered a period of destitution that, besides being the greatest adventure I have lived, – and still do – turned out to be the most practical experience in basic economic mechanisms a man might wish to have.«² Central among Filliou's economic teaching was »The Principle of Equivalence«,³ a proposition developed in various statements and artworks which aimed to form the basis of a new »theory of value, upon which to build a much-needed new economic model.«⁴

Filliou's case was not as isolated as might seem. In fact, the late 1950s through the 1970s witnessed a number of attempts by European artists to elaborate and defend their own alternative theory of value. Filliou's »Principles« were never written down

under the form of a complete, coherent volume. They can be traced down to bits and pieces of largely obscure writings, lectures, experimental videos and deliberately makeshift works.⁵ But other artists did formalize their economic thinking in conferences and essays such as Yves Klein (1959), Jean Dubuffet (1968), Pierre Klossowski (1970) and later Joseph Beuys (1978).⁶ Some even wrote actual economics treatises, mimicking the genre's established conventions, such as Asger Jorn's *Critique de la politique économique* (1960) or Isidore Isou's *Théorie nucléaire de la monnaie et de la banque* (1966).⁷ All claimed that art might be the best observatory for economic knowledge and aspired nothing less than to renew the discipline of economics entirely. Isidore Isou, for instance, thought his system would provoke »a major upheaval, a fundamental transformation of the world's monetary system and banking structure.«⁸ Whether they had a university education in economics, built their theoretical conception of art in dialogue with economists or repudiated any affiliation with them, they argued that their status as artists conferred them equal legitimacy on the matter as authorized experts. As in the case of Filliou, at the heart of their investigation was the fundamental question of value and the possible equation of values – equivalence. At a time when the international monetary and trade structures were being thoroughly redefined, they thought their position as artists offered them incomparable insights on standards of exchange.

What follows is a discussion of these artists' attempts to elaborate new theories of value and alternative standards of exchange in discursive and visual forms. In the first section, I provide a historical perspective and intellectual genealogy for such attempts, and I question the very nature of these knowledge claims about the economy made by non-economists. The second section focuses more closely on the long 1960s and examines some of these theories of value in the light of the critical re-reading of Marx's writings, so prevalent at the time. The

third section relates the economic history of the period, which witnessed the end of the international monetary system of Bretton Wood based on the gold-exchange standard, to these artists' quest for new standards of exchange.

Artists' Knowledge Claims about the Economy in Historical Perspective

In 1872, John Ruskin started the preface of his *Six Essays on the Elements of Political Economy* with a bold and rather unexpected remark:

»The following pages contain, I believe, the first accurate analysis of the laws of Political Economy which has been published in England. Many treatises, within their scope, correct, have appeared in contradiction of the views popularly received; but no exhaustive examination of the subject was possible to any person unacquainted with the value of the products of the highest industries, commonly called the *Fine Arts*; and no one acquainted with the nature of those industries has, so far as I know, attempted, or even approached, the task.«⁹

Himself a fine watercolorist and preeminent art critic – he became the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at the University of Oxford in 1869 –, Ruskin also wrote extensively on economic and social issues, in both interpretive and normative perspectives.¹⁰ As his preliminary statement demonstrates, he saw a decisive continuity between his expertise in art and of economics. This was due to a shared central concept in both fields: value. His experience of art, he claimed, provided him with a unique appreciation of the relationship between intrinsic value and exchange value, whereas »the modern political economists

have been, without exception, incapable of apprehending the nature of intrinsic value at all.«¹¹ Ruskin explained that his »singular advantage« in the field of economics came from »some lessons [he] accidentally received« in the course of his art historical studies. One of such lessons was seeing pictures by Tintoretto, »the most precious articles of wealth in Europe«, abandoned to the rising waters of Venice as if they were worthless, while at the same time the trade of vulgar color lithographs was booming in Paris. Whether reasoning in terms of supply and demand or in terms of labor value, economists would invariably conclude to the superiority of the latter over the former:

»[T]he city of Paris naturally supposed itself, and on all hitherto believed or stated principles of political economy, was, infinitely richer in the possession of a large number of these lithographic stones, (not to speak of countless oil pictures and marble carvings of similar character), than Venice in the possession of those rags of mildewed canvas, flaunting in the south wind and its salt rain.«¹²

As an art critic, though, Ruskin knew the opposite to be true. Therefore, he would not find words hard enough to express his contempt for the »vulgar« and »dull« economists blinded by their »pseudo-science« and incapable of taking into account the intrinsic value of human products.¹³

Admittedly, the growing specialization and mathematical formalization of the discipline of economics made such far-reaching intellectual figures as Ruskin, simultaneously claiming authority on such different fields, increasingly rare in the following century. However, several historical cases attest to the passages between seemingly opposed spheres. More than half a century before Filliou, in 1896, Wassily Kandinsky dropped out from his professorship in political economy and statistics at the University of Dorpat – today Tartu, Estonia – to

enroll as an art student in Munich. The historian Olga Medvedkova has convincingly argued that the artist's persistent interest in the question of value and his fundamental contribution to the theorization of abstraction are grounded in his early work on the history of economic thought.¹⁴ To take a more recent example, the performance artist Tino Sehgal also studied political economy before turning to contemporary dance, which cannot fail to inform his practice, characterized by the refusal of objects and material traces left by the work of art and its economic transaction.

Reverse circulations can also be found. In 1968, the German artist Charlotte Posenenske ceased all activities in the art world to turn to academic studies in the field of economic sociology. Before that, she had been developing a radically innovative art practice often compared to minimalism. She designed geometric sculptural units with an industrial look that she assembled in different ways, as evolving spatial structures. Each standard unit was conceived to allow serial production in a workshop. Posenenske's interests as an artist informed her subsequent work as a sociologist of labor. Her master's thesis, co-authored with her partner Burkhard Brunn, was published in 1979 under the title *Vorgabezeit und Arbeitswert, Interessenkritik an der Methodenkonstruktion. Leistungsgradschätzen, Systeme vorbestimmter Zeiten, analytische Arbeitsbewertung*.¹⁵ It reads as a critical review of the methods of measuring the time needed to carry out different gestures on an assembly line and the resulting modes of remuneration for workers. The attention Posenenske had devoted, as an artist, to industrial design, the body at work and the division of tasks found an actual translation into the scientific field of labor studies.¹⁶

If circulations do exist between careers of artists and economists, if artists can make knowledge claims about the economy, then what kind of knowledge is that?¹⁷ Is it truly equivalent to the expert knowledge of the recognized specialists in the field?

Robert Filliou never relied on his technical training as an economist to claim any expertise in the field – quite the contrary. The mathematical formulas that pepper his discursive and performative interventions are deliberately riddled with errors and absurdities. Theoretical influences are not altogether absent, but the artist is wary of economics as a scientific discipline: »I prefer the anarchistic or ›non-scientific‹ socialist tradition. (Fourier, etc...)«, he wrote.¹⁸ As he recalled on many occasions, his principles were not inspired by the reading of various authors but by the daily experience of the material conditions of survival of artists – »lessons accidentally received«, as Ruskin had phrased it. The artistic economy, with its constraints, successes and failures, appeared to Filliou as the best laboratory to study the economy in general. He wrote: »I thought it would be interesting to know how artists make money, and how they spend it. It is from this modest beginning that some of the ideas I expressed [...] were developed.«¹⁹

This rejection of expertise in favor of a »lay knowledge«,²⁰ constituted in practice and possibly expressed in unconventional forms, is common to the artists studied here, most of whom never received any formal training in economics. This is not to say that they were not proficient readers of economists, but their chosen familiarity tended to privilege a genealogy of non-conformist authors. Half a century after inspiring artists such as William Morris, Ruskin was still a fundamental reference for the Situationist Asger Jorn.²¹ Charles Fourier was also a prominent figure for this generation, celebrated by André Breton before Robert Filliou and Pierre Klossowski.²² As for Joseph Beuys, he acknowledged his debt to the early 20th-century philosopher, economist and social reformer Rudolf Steiner and his disciple Wilhelm Schmundt, with whom he collaborated in Achberg.²³ Isidore Isou's countless readings include all the illustrious names of classical and contemporary economics, from Adam Smith to John Maynard Keynes and Colin Grant Clark.

But authors like Isou also give prominence to more eccentric figures such as Georg Friedrich Knapp, the founder and promoter of an unorthodox monetary theory known as »Chartalism«. Most importantly, perhaps, there is a tremendous influence of Georges Bataille and his *Collège de Sociologie* (1937-39)²⁴ on artists concerned with economics in the second half of the 20th century – in terms of themes, vocabulary and above all method. As Bataille put it in his preface to *La part maudite* (1949):

»For some years, being obliged on occasion to answer the question »What are you working on«, I was embarrassed to have to say: »A work of political economy« [...]. Indeed, I had to add that the book I was writing (which I am now publishing) did not consider the facts the way qualified economists do, that I had a point of view from which a human sacrifice, the construction of a church or the gift of a jewel were no less interesting than the sale of wheat [...]. Moreover, neither psychology nor, in general, philosophy can be considered free of this primary question of economy. Even what can be said of art, of literature, of poetry has an essential connection with the movement I study [...].«²⁵

Common to these artists and intellectuals is the claim for a form of knowledge not held by the rigidities and specialization of scientific discourse, yet entitled to confront it on equal ground in public debate. This aspiration surfaces clearly in a discussion with Joseph Beuys opposing three economists in 1984. The artist was invited to debate the economic and monetary theories he had elaborated since the 1970s, in the course of various artistic, educational and political events.²⁶ In response to Werner Ehrlicher, Professor of Financial Sciences at Freiburg University, who said he refused »to consider the statement [his interlocutor Beuys, S.C.] just made to be scientific«, the artist replied: »I did not say that what I'm presenting here is science.

I'm talking rather about the extended concept of art, about the creativity principle, about the creative being in every person!«²⁷ It is »a finding that emerges from my laboratory, my studio«, he added.²⁸ Enjoined by another participant, the banker Johann Philipp von Bethmann, to determine whether this constitutes »opinions about money or knowledge about money«, Beuys responded unambiguously:

»Of course we have to express knowledge about money, very precise knowledge with clear boundaries, knowledge which can be proven and verified through experience, checked by human thought! Of course! Did you notice how the supposed specialists always suggest I lack academic rigor (laughter, applause) because I'm meant to remain an artist in the old-fashioned sense of the word«²⁹

Beuys's provocative assertion should not be misunderstood as a mere confusion between what pertains to, respectively, artistic practice and scientific research. Artists who actually crossed the professional spheres of art and economy, such as John Ruskin, Wassily Kandinsky, Robert Filliou or Charlotte Posenenske, were quite clear about the fundamentally distinct nature of their activities in each.³⁰ What they were contesting was the confiscation of knowledge production by experts. They believed non-economists could make knowledge claims about the economy. They even argued that, as artists, they had a »singular advantage« over economists, to borrow Ruskin's term. The following section will inquire why, by exploring in greater depth some alternative theories of value and equivalence developed in the European artistic scene of the long 1960s.

New Theories of Value and Equivalence

Asger Jorn's *Critique de la politique économique* was published in 1960 by the Situationist International, the leftist political and cultural organization he co-founded with Guy Debord in 1957.³¹ The essay builds on a critique of Marx's theory of the value form of commodities developed in *Das Kapital*. In Marx's view, only the quantitative principle of exchange value allows to establish an equivalence between things that are, by nature (as qualities or use values), different and incommensurable. In order that »20 yards of linen = 1 coat or = 10 lb. tea«,³² to take up Marx's example, linen and tea must be related to one another as commodities sharing one common principle. This common principle, he argues, is the measure of human labor socially incorporated in their production. Jorn's essay goes back to Marx's famous formula C–M–C (Commodity–Money–Commodity), which summarizes the capacity of money to act as the universal equivalent to any commodity in its exchange value form.³³ According to Jorn, this formula would be »simply static and useless if one disregarded the passage of quality into quantity and vice versa«, that is to say, the way commodities adopt their alternative forms of use value (quality) and exchange value (quantity). He explains:

»The market value of objects of use lies not in their quality but in their difference in quality, that is, their variability. Thus the exchange value of two commodities is not their equivalence but their difference in price, a purely quantitative difference. If everything had the same price, price would not exist. The exchange value is the change of price, or its variability. The day when all prices are fixed, the market becomes worthless and the commodity ceases to exist.«³⁴

Jorn then argues that »value and process are one and the same thing.« He proposes a new definition of value as the quantity of a differencing in quality – the equivalent form of unequivalence, so to speak. As a process of differencing, »[v]alue is therefore always either surplus value (liberation of value), or devalorization (loss of value). The fixing of value in an object as identical reproduction is its neutralization, its transformation into quality – or its reification.«³⁵ Jorn's emphasis on reification seems to have been, at least in part, a strategic move. In July 1959, Debord wrote to his friend Jorn, who was actively working on his *Critique*, then presented as a study on »the theory of value and its application to culture«:

»If your brochure presents a critique of Goldmann who touches on the same theme as yours – and if possible the critique of the book by Lukács [*History and Class Consciousness* (1923), S.C.] that you can read in German (Lukács is becoming very fashionable here) – it would be in any case a useful element to your presentation. But of course if you come to agree with Goldmann's conceptions, this would be very positive, at least for our relationship with the Parisian intelligentsia.«³⁶

No matter how opportunist some of his references might be, at the heart of Jorn's thinking is a conception of value as process, variation and discrepancy. On this basis, he accuses both capitalism and socialism of seeking a permanent economic equilibrium where standardized products meet uniform demand. According to Jorn, both systems aim at »socializing« commodities to make them all equivalent, following the model of the one universal commodity: money. They thus welcome the advent of »the perfect form, the valueless form, the constant without becoming.«³⁷ In contrast, Jorn argues for value creation through change and risk-taking experiments, whether by val-

orization or devalorization since both involve process, that is, value. Art is central in recovering value as process, because art, he writes, »is an invitation to expend energy, with no specific purpose other than the one that the viewer can bring to it.«³⁸ For Jorn, art involves both destructive and creative impulses; it feeds on a discrepancy between unpredictable supply and irrational demand. It can therefore serve as a model to rethink value in radical terms.

Jorn's conception of value as change and discrepancy – as opposed to »equivalence« associated with inertia and reification – is echoed by many artists gravitating around the same social circles in the 1960s, such as Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio or Dubuffet.³⁹ It also resonates in Robert Filliou's own »Principle of Equivalence«. Like Jorn, though with a very different rhetoric, Filliou's thinking is grounded in a critical reconsideration of Marx's theory: »I mean Marx tackled this in his first work: the theory of value, could we develop the theory of value?«, he asked.⁴⁰ Filliou pursued a theory of value that would avoid Marx's hypothesis that things can be put in equivalence (and therefore exchanged) only in their exchange value form – that is to say as commodities sharing a certain quantity of a common measuring unit – as opposed to things endowed with diverse and irreducible qualities. This idea guided the elaboration of what he called »The Principle of Equivalence«, which culminates in a simple proposition: »That is to say I proposed in terms of Permanent Creation its equivalent whether a work is well made, badly made or not made.«⁴¹ Paradoxically, Filliou's »Principle of Equivalence« is therefore a refusal to compare. It implies acknowledging irreducible differences, without value judgment. This principle of non-comparison is illustrated in a video entitled *Grâce à Fourier*, realized in 1979-80 in Montreal.⁴² It features the artist himself, accompanied by his daughter Marcelle and the Canadian artists Monty Cantsin, Jean-Claude

Gauthier and Richard Martel, playing with apples. The artist explained in a 1981 interview:

»It's based on that story you know, where you have an apple cut in half, but with two unequal parts for two people like us. One of them helps himself first and takes the bigger one, so the other one grumbles. The first one says: ›Why are you sad, why are you grumbling?‹ ›But because you took the big piece.‹ ›But what would you have done if you had taken the first one?‹ ›I would have taken the small one.‹ ›You would have taken the small one, but you have the small one, so you should be happy.‹ I maintain that if we could solve this paradox, we would really understand the principles of poetical economy.«⁴³

This paradox, known to economists under the name of »interdependence of indifference curves«, is a phenomenon by which the care for someone else's well-being interferes with one's own, provoking unexpected decisions, incoherent with the principle of a *homo economicus* rationally maximizing his own satisfaction. Here, Filliou hopes to suggest that solidarity can transform our evaluation of goods and bring about a system of »non-comparison« in which »more« is not necessarily more valuable than »less.« On this basis, the artist elaborated what he called the »True Exchange Rate« (T.E.R.). The T.E.R. is a tool for establishing equivalence based on a new common principle, which unlike that of classical economics, is not connected to homogenization and quantification. Filliou claimed: »[W]e all have the same differences – what we have in common is our differences. From now on I propose to call T.E.R. (True Exchange Rate) the exchange that goes on that is based upon our differences.«⁴⁴ With T.E.R., exchange is no longer based on an evaluation of the quantity of an abstract measuring unit – »a socially average unit of labour-power«,⁴⁵ according to Marx –

contained in the different commodities in order to reach a situation of equilibrium. On the contrary, exchange will be deemed *fair* if the irreducible differences between the terms of the exchange are judged equally enriching. »And that to arrive at an optimum situation in society«, the artist infers, »we should have a situation where the difference in one over the difference of the other one equals zero.«⁴⁶

One interesting property of Filliou's »Principle of Equivalence«, which meets Jorn's conception, is that it is not static but dynamic: It is a generative principle. This productive power is demonstrated by one of Filliou's most famous artworks, entitled *Principe d'équivalence: bien fait, mal fait, pas fait* (1968), a work now in the collection of the Centre Pompidou. The work is based on a protocol which involves exploring one basic concept (a red sock in a wooden box) in three different options: a red sock well arranged in a box of satisfactory proportions and finish (»well-made«); a red sock placed upside down in a box (»badly-made«); and an empty box with the inscription »Red Sock« (»not-made«). The three boxes are affixed on a wooden board, situated on the extreme left of the installation as a whole. They become the starting point of new iterations. Indeed, if this first demonstration of »The Principle of Equivalence«, with its three options, is considered »well-made«, then it must be possible to decline it in »badly-made« and »not-made« versions. This is what Filliou sets out to do in his installation, on the one hand by substituting red socks with their cut-out shapes in red felt and by building defective boxes (»badly made«) and on the other hand by arranging a bare wooden board, simple bearing a stamp »Principle of equivalence – not made.« The three boards, joined with hooks, are placed to the right of the first one. This new demonstration, however, can now also be considered as »well-made«, which leads Filliou to realize two other versions (»badly-made« and »not-made«) of the same set, next to the first one. *Principe d'équivalence* creates the conditions for

a sequence tending towards infinity, the first five stages of which are realized in the work as »an infinitesimal part of what my series could have been if I had not chosen to stop«, according to Filliou.⁴⁷

The mathematical progression generated by »The Principle of Equivalence« produces results which are both unique and infinite. They require that the artist should display ever-renewed creativity in the realm of the »badly-made«. On several occasions, in his texts and videos, Filliou playfully calculated – often with errors – the 25 or 100 first terms of the geometric sequence, which is formalized as such: $U_{n+1} = 3 \times U_n$. He thus intended to show that »The Principle of Equivalence« would soon lead him to spatially and temporally expand his artworks to such dimensions that they would reach those of the world itself.⁴⁸ This is why, he argued, »The Principle of Equivalence« is a principle of growth insuring the »Permanent Creation of the Universe«.⁴⁹

Alternative Standards of Exchange

The artists' quests for new theories of value and equivalence developed in a context of a historical redefinition of standards of exchange. Through the early 1970s, the post-war years were governed by the international monetary system negotiated at the 1944 conference of Bretton Woods. The system was hybrid. While gold remained the official monetary standard, most countries actually fixed their exchange rates in relation to the U.S. dollar, which was itself exchangeable against gold. From its inception and until the demise of this system in 1971, the inflationary climate of these decades of reconstruction and high growth continuously challenged the nations' ability to maintain their rates of conversion. The consequences of the »tutelage of gold«⁵⁰ on domestic economies were a matter of

constant discussion. Far from being understood as a purely technical issue, monetary standards and exchange rates were widely debated in the press. While some denounced the pressure and constraints imposed upon public policy by a system grounded in monetary and metallic reserves, others considered with panic the perspective of an economy deprived of material anchorage and given limits.⁵¹ This discourse infused the writings of artists and intellectuals of the time.

In his 1966 treatise, Isidore Isou castigated central banks for being

»trapped in past conceptions, in which the distribution of liquidity was contingent upon the availability of gold or other deposits exchangeable in precious metal, thus hindering these institutions from providing enough money supply for full employment and economic expansion.«⁵²

He advocated the abolition of gold reserves and an expansive monetary policy based on a planned allocation of credit determined by representatives of the industries, youth associations and »creators« (by which he understood artists and scientists).

Joseph Beuys's system, formalized a decade later, even more radically conceived of money as a legal instrument of regulation between production and consumption which should be democratically managed by a reformed central bank. Beuys dismissed the »concepts of barter economy.«⁵³ In our modern, fully integrated economies, he argued, it is impossible to objectively determine the contribution of one given individual's labor to the production of a commodity (here Beuys meets the conclusions of Brunn and Posenenske evoked earlier). We should therefore cease to link wages and profits to labor value and stop assuming a natural equivalence between production and consumption of commodities through monetary circulation. »Money was no longer part of the world of economic val-

ues, in which it had previously served as the universal medium of exchange», Beuys wrote.⁵⁴ To him, wages and productive investments should be determined by democratic choices and not by free market mechanisms. The central bank should be in charge of allocating directed credits on the production side, thanks to the nationalization of the profits generated on the consumption side. In this system, money is a pure legal instrument of equilibrium between production and consumption, managed by the central bank in the name of collective interest.

Writing in 1959, Yves Klein proved more attached to the barter system Beuys would later oppose. He rejected fiduciary money as an intellectual construction, pleading for a return to »the intrinsic value of matter«:

»I refuse both reserves and currencies: accumulated wealth of past splendors, yet perilous mortgage on present structures. No need any more of these costly intermediaries whose facticity widens the gap between the quality of the values at hand and their intellectual apprehension. Let's stick to reality, and, beneath a pure system of representation, let's turn more simply toward an acceptance of the intrinsic value of matter, essentially residing in the notion of quality.«⁵⁵

Nevertheless, in the same 1959 manuscript, he discarded the gold standard in favor of an »art standard«, which he conceived of as essentially immaterial and quantitatively unlimited. He suggested that »every corporation [should] be required to hand over for safekeeping in the vaults of the central bank, previously emptied of all metal deposits, the masterpiece of [its] profession. These masterpieces, thus gathered together, will materialize the basic spiritual guidance of the country.«⁵⁶ This selection of the best artifacts should be »stable – though not closed« and act productively as a »permanent example, catalyzer of latent power.«⁵⁷ Only such a new standard, Klein thought,

would »make it possible finally to lay the foundations of a fundamentally sound barter system protected from short-term quantitative variations.«⁵⁸

Comparing art to a monetary standard was not uncommon in the 1960s when the contemporary art market was experiencing an unprecedented boom: »We have so many standards«, Marcel Duchamp thus told an interviewer in 1963, »the gold standard, the platinum standard, and now the burlap standard. It's surprising that a piece of cloth, a piece of burlap on a stretcher with a few nails, can bring such prices.«⁵⁹ From the author of a sophisticated artwork on the topic, *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-14), this comparison should not be understood as a mere turn of phrase. The protocol of Duchamp's work is well-known, first sketched by the artist in a note titled »l'Idée de la Fabrication« in his so-called *Box of 1914* (1913-14), now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art:⁶⁰ A straight horizontal thread of one meter in length is dropped from a height of one meter. The procedure was carried out three times with three different threads. Each of the threads was then affixed to a strip of canvas in the exact position decided by the hazard of the fall. The three sinuous lines produced were subsequently raised to the rank of new standards by the artist, objectified in three wooden templates. In the *Vogue* interview fifty years later, Duchamp once again evoked the idea of the artwork as standard – this time metaphorically –, underlining the expansion of commerce, which had brought art more than ever into the realm of quantitative evaluation and monetary equivalence. But he was also pointing to what essentially brings an artistic masterpiece and any standard (such as gold) conceptually close. Economically unproductive, devoid of any use except conservation, unique but destined for imitation and reproduction, both are endorsed with a value that claims universality while betraying its own arbitrariness. Both owe their special status among their peers – masterworks over other artistic productions, gold over other

metals – to a collective social choice that André Orléan describes as the result of mimetic desires within a community.⁶¹

The idea of an art standard, through which all artworks could be measured and compared, is humorously explored by Robert Filliou in an artist's book entitled *Livre-étalon* (*Standard-Book*), published in 1981. It consists of a single strip of paper folded into an accordion. Each page is marked with a number from 1 to 19. It thus operates both as a book and as a graduated ruler, allowing it to literally measure any artwork. A short text on the two back covers of the folded leaflet – in French and English, respectively – announces that »all literature – past, present and future – can be objectively evaluated at last, thanks to the STANDARD-BOOK which alone ensures the faultless measurement and impartial assessment of printed matter(s).« The French version reads: »toute littérature – passée, présente et à venir – peut être objectivement évaluée, enfin, grâce au LIVRE-ETALON qui seul permet de mesurer infailliblement les œuvres et d'indiquer impartialement leur (r)apport.« Filliou thus conflates Duchamp's invention of a new ruler template and his later metaphoric assimilation of artworks with monetary values. The *Livre-étalon* brings together standards of measurement and standards of evaluation and exchange. The ironical nature of this endeavor, though, is quite clear in the emphatic advertising tone of the text. It is accentuated by the puns introduced in the original French: The English word »impartial« is rendered as »impartiellement«, a neologism merging »impartial« (»impartial«) and »partiellement« (»partially«). The French »(r)apport« mixes »apport« (»contribution«) and »rapport« (»relation«).⁶² As explained above, according to Filliou's »Principle of Equivalence«, we should not compare absolute »contributions«, but put into equivalence the differential »relations« between incomparable things.

On August 15, 1971, President Richard Nixon unilaterally decided to put an end to the international convertibility of the

dollar into gold, thereby terminating the era of the gold standard. From then on, national currencies were said to be »freely floating«, fully determined by their calculated exchange rates relative to each other and not by one common external principle, gold. The philosopher Jean-Joseph Goux wrote in retrospect that the abandonment of the gold standard in 1971 was »a decisive upheaval in the regime of signs and their relation to reality.« It was »not only an economic decision, but a semiotic one, and so to speak a metaphysical one.«⁶³ It can be argued that this conceptual revolution was anticipated by artists and thinkers – as much as by economists – in the preceding decade and continued to be worked out in the years that followed. Speculations about alternative standards of exchange were part of this historical process.

In 1970, the writer and artist Pierre Klossowski published his essay »La Monnaie vivante«, which instantly became highly influential for a generation of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and presumably Jean-Joseph Goux as well.⁶⁴ Klossowski's book borrows its title from a fable, a counter-utopia narrated in the final chapter of the book, which starts as follows: »Imagine, for a moment, an apparently impossible regression: to a phase in industrial production where producers are able to demand objects of sensation from consumers as a form of payment. These objects would be living beings.«⁶⁵ Klossowski goes on to describe what such a society would be like that uses human beings as a currency. He then adds: »In fact, what we are describing here already exists.«⁶⁶ Indeed, the thesis of the book is that the entire economy is based on libidinal forces inhabiting individuals. According to Klossowski, such impulses are both responsible for the industrial production of objects of use (»utensils«) – through the socialization of desires organized by capitalism – and for the marginalized production of useless objects (»simulacra«), including deviant cultural, sexual or artistic practices. For Klossowski, the capitalist social

order and its margins are equally a product of sexual impulses, which tend to »create their own repression, as well as the means of breaking the repression.«⁶⁷

In light of the many contributions mentioned above, from Jorn to Isou, from Klein to Dubuffet, Beuys and Filliou, Klossowski's proposition to substitute the monetary standard with a radically different one – human beings – appears as part of a lineage, a historical quest by artists for alternative systems of exchange and equivalence. For all their differences and even antagonism, these propositions had one thing in common, beside their shared intellectual and historical ground: All assumed that art and artists had a decisive role to play in economic matter. Whether they assumed that all citizens should be artists (Beuys), that »Permanent Creation« was the model of any ecological or economic production (Filliou), that creators should control an all-mighty planning central bank (Isou), that art should operate as a counter-value (Jorn) or that it should act as a new standard of value (Klein), artists tended to claim a prominent or idealized role for their own ranks in revolutionary economic plans. Gallizio wrote: »Only a population of artists can survive guided by its genius minorities; the creators of beliefs.«⁶⁸ This explains why, as outlined in the first section of this essay, avantgardists like Gallizio believed themselves to be best suited to argue with economists on equal, if not superior, footing. What they were suggesting was in fact a reversal of the Marxist concepts of base and superstructure, granting culture the founding power over economics, rather than the other way around. In Dubuffet's words:

»There is hardly any distinction to be made between the social order and the cultural order, both are of the same stuff. And it is not, as many people lightly think, that culture is a department of the social order, but it is on the contrary the social order that is a department of culture – an extension of

culture's principles on the particular (very particular) ground of rules guiding social rapports. Hence, it follows that we cannot modify the social order (except in an entirely illusory and inoperative manner) without first modifying culture, from which it emanates.«⁶⁹

Though Klossowski agrees that the social (economic) order and the cultural order are »of the same stuff« – for him, they are the complementary symptoms of the same basic libidinal impulse –, contrary to other artists of his generation he refrains from granting art and artists any exceptional or dominant position in this economic order. It is also what makes him far more pessimistic than his peers about artists' capacity to overturn economic conceptions and practices of value and exchange.

In this paper, I have shown that the mutual encounter of art and economics in the second half of the 20th century revolves around the shared notions of value and equivalence, which allow circulations between both spheres. In Western European post-war art circles, a number of artists even went so far as to take up their pens and elaborate their own alternative theories on the matter. They conceived of art as a small-scale laboratory for economics in general and claimed that the practical knowledge built in this laboratory can somehow be transferred to the highly professionalized field of knowledge that economics was then becoming. In reaction to Marx's conception of equivalence – rejected as quantifying, homogenizing and static –, they pleaded for a conception of value as differential, dynamic and irreducible. At a historical period when international standards of exchange were overturned, they metaphorically, playfully or very seriously devised alternative standards and exchange rates.

Artists' economic theories may be discarded as mere flights of fancy, to be remembered alongside other oddities in the history of heterodox economic thought. Sure enough, many pro-

tagonists were pretending to reserve the best bit of their reinvented economic systems for themselves. The temptation was strong to make the artist the architect, the guide and even the prophet of a new economic dirigisme, whose hegemonic ambitions are sometimes frightening. But in retrospect, these theories of value and equivalence also shed new light on both artistic and economic knowledge and practice of the period. They offer fresh insight into the audacity and confidence of the late avantgardes, who refused established areas of expertise and specialization and provoked economists on their own terrain.

Notes

¹ Robert Filliou, »Filliou«, in: *Opus International* 22, 1971, p. 20.

² Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, Köln 1970, p. 49 (spelling corrected from the original).

³ See Robert Filliou, »The Propositions and Principles of ROBERT FILLIOU«, in: *Centerfold* 2/2&3, 1978, n.p.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵ See in particular Hank Bull, ed., *Robert Filliou, From Political to Poetical Economy*, exh. cat., Vancouver, B.C.: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver 1995.

⁶ See Yves Klein, »Esquisse et grandes lignes du système économique de la révolution bleue«, in: id., *Le dépassement de la problématique de l'art et autres écrits*, ed. by Marie-Anne Sichère and Didier Semin, Paris 2003, pp. 99–101; see Jean Dubuffet, *Asphyxiante culture*, Paris 1968; Pierre Klossowski, *La monnaie vivante*, Paris 1970; see Joseph Beuys, »Aufruf zur Alternative«, in: *Frankfurter Rundschau* 288, December 23, 1978, n.p.

⁷ See Asger Jorn, *Critique de la politique économique, suivi de La Lutte finale*, Paris 1960; see Isidore Isou, *La Théorie nucléaire de la monnaie et de la banque, la carte copernicienne opposée à la carte ptoléméique de la monnaie et de la banque, réforme du système monétaire, épuration ou reconversion des dirigeants et des responsables des banques*, Paris 1966.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹ John Ruskin, »Munera Pulveris. Six Essays on the Elements of Political Economy« [1872], in: id., *The Works of John Ruskin, vol. 17: Unto This Last; Munera Pulveris; Time and Tide. With Other Writings on Political Economy, 1860–1873*, ed. by Edward T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London and New York 1905, p. 181.

¹⁰ See Annabel Wharton, »John Ruskin. Ethics in Economics«, in: *History of Political Economy*, 43/2, 2011, pp. 309–314; see Stuart Eagles, *After Ruskin. The Social and Political Legacies of a Victorian Prophet, 1870–1920*, Oxford 2011.

¹¹ Ruskin, *Munera Pulveris*, p. 185 (emphasis in the original).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹³ See *ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁴ See Olga Medvedkova, *Kandinsky, ou, la critique des critiques. Écrits russes de Kandinsky (1899–1911)*, Dijon 2014, pp. 21–30.

¹⁵ See Burkhard Brunn and Charlotte Posenenske, *Vorgabezeit und Arbeitswert. Interessenkritik an der Methodenkonstruktion, Leistungsgradschätzen, Systeme vorbestimmter Zeiten, analytische Arbeitsbewertung*, Frankfurt am Main 1979; the title's English translation used by Burkhard Brunn reads: *Time Allocation and the Value of Labor, A Critique of Method Construction: Performance Estimates, Time Allocation Systems, Analytical Labor Valuation*.

¹⁶ See Renate Wiehager and Burkhard Brunn, eds., *Charlotte Posenenske: 1930–1985*, Ostfildern 2009; see Daniel Spaulding, *Unworking Posenenske*, in: Jessica Morgan and Alexis Lowry, eds., *Charlotte Posenenske. Work in Progress*, exh. cat., New York: Dia Art Foundation, New York and London 2019, pp. 162–177.

¹⁷ The ideas presented in the next three paragraphs have been explored in a different and preliminary form in Sophie Cras, »Artistes en économistes«, in: *Revue de l'art* 206, April 2019, pp. 75–84.

¹⁸ Filliou, *Teaching and Learning*, p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁰ Brian Wynne, »May the Sheep Safely Graze? A Reflexive View of the Expert-Lay Knowledge Divide«, in: Scott Lash, Bronislaw Szerszynski and Brian Wynne, eds., *Risk, Environment and Modernity. Towards a New Ecology*, London 1998, pp. 44–83.

- ²¹ See Lawrence Goldman, *From Art to Politics. John Ruskin and William Morris*, London 2005; John Blewitt, ed., *William Morris and John Ruskin. A New Road on Which the World Should Travel*, London 2019.
- ²² See André Breton, *Ôde à Charles Fourier*, Paris 1947.
- ²³ See Ulrich Rösch, *We Are the Revolution! Rudolf Steiner, Joseph Beuys and the Threefold Social Impulse*, Forest Row 2013.
- ²⁴ See Denis Hollier, ed., *Le Collège de sociologie. 1937-1939*, Paris 1995; see Stephan Moebius, *Die Zauberlehrlinge. Soziologiegeschichte des Collège de Sociologie (1937-1939)*, Köln 2018.
- ²⁵ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share. An Essay on General Economy*, [1949], New York 1988, pp. 9–10.
- ²⁶ See in particular Christel Sauer, ed., *Joseph Beuys und das Kapital. Vier Vorträge zum Verständnis von Joseph Beuys und seiner Rauminstallation »Das Kapital Raum 1970-77« in den Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, ergänzt durch Erläuterungen von Joseph Beuys und seinen »Aufruf zur Alternative«*, Schaffhausen 1988.
- ²⁷ Ulrich Rösch, ed., *What Is Money? A Discussion. Joseph Beuys with Johann Philipp von Bethmann, Hans Binswanger, Werner Ehrlicher and Rainer Willert*, Forest Row 2010, p. 29.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33–34.
- ³⁰ See for example Burkhard Brunn's unpublished statement addressed to the author, 2020.
- ³¹ Jorn's text was initially published in French by the Situationist International as Asger Jorn, *Critique de la politique économique, suivi de La Lutte finale*, Paris 1960; The Danish manuscript, later extensively revised, has been translated into English as Asger Jorn, »Critique of political economy«, in: id., *The Natural Order and Other Texts*, ed. by Peter Shield, Burlington, VT 2002, pp. 121–146; also see Karen Kurczynski, »Art and Devalorisation. Asger Jorn's Theory of Value«, in: Sam Ladkin, Robert McKay and Emile Bojesen, eds., *Against Value in the Arts and Education*, London 2016; also see Sophie Cras, *The Artist as Economist. Art and Capitalism in the 1960s*, New Haven, CT 2019, pp. 50–61.
- ³² See Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, London 1976, p. 155.
- ³³ See *ibid.*, pp. 247–257.
- ³⁴ Jorn, *Critique*, p. 10.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ³⁶ Guy Debord, »To Jorn, 11 July [19]59«, in: id., *Correspondence. The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957-August 1960)*, trans. Stuart Kendall and John McHale, Los Angeles 2009, p. 264.
- ³⁷ Jorn, *Critique*, p. 17.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ³⁹ The Situationist artist Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio wrote for example: »The new, conceived with the risk of infinite fantasy, procured from free energies that man will use in the melting down of the gold value, meant as the frozen energy from the ignoble banking system that is now decomposing. [...] From now on time will only be an emotive value, a new currency of shock, and will be based on sudden shifts from moments of creative life and extremely rare moments of boredom.« (Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio, *Manifesto of Industrial Painting. For an Applicable Unitary Art*, in: id., *Pinot Gallizio. Il Laboratorio della scrittura / The Laboratory of Writing*, ed. by Giorgina Bertolino, Francesca Comisso and Maria Teresa Roberto, Milano 2005, pp. 171–172); Dubuffet wrote in 1968: »Which means that, let's not say the value (let's avoid this pernicious word), but let's say the valence of a work of art is in a relationship: a relationship (of contestation)

with the culture of the moment.« (Jean Dubuffet, »Asphyxiating Culture« [1968], in: id., *Asphyxiating Culture and Other Writings*, trans. Carol Volk, New York 1988, p. 81).

⁴⁰ Filliou, »The Propositions and Principles of ROBERT FILLIOU«, n.p.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Robert Filliou, *Video-Universecity. Grâce à Fourier*, 1979-80, color video, 30 min.

⁴³ Interview with Robert Filliou by Jacques Donguy (March 25, 1981), republished in: *Robert Filliou*, exh. cat., Paris: Musée National d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1991, p. 122.

⁴⁴ Filliou, »The Propositions and Principles of ROBERT FILLIOU«, n.p.

⁴⁵ Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, p. 129.

⁴⁶ Filliou, »The Propositions and Principles of ROBERT FILLIOU«, n.p.; Filliou's »Principle of Equivalence« is not unrelated to the metaphysical model coined »flat ontology«, shared by such thinkers as Bruno Latour or Philippe Descola. Flat ontology refuses any hierarchy between beings, whether human or non-human, animate or inanimate, real or imagined. This equivalence is not achieved through the postulate that they have something in common, however. On the contrary, flat ontology implies that essentially heterogeneous beings can relate to one another and reciprocally affect one another without the mediation of some shared principle that would allow them to exist on the same plane of existence; see Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks. Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Melbourne 2009, esp. pp. 207–211.

⁴⁷ Filliou, *Filliou*, p. 23; for another materialization of the five first terms of *Principe d'équivalence*, in the medium of video, see Robert Filliou, *Telepathic Music no.7*, color video, 15 min 29 sec (production, camera, light and sound: Kate Craig); available as DVD: *Robert Filliou. From Political to Poetical Economy, 1977–79, vol 1*, ed. by Western Front Society and the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver 2006.

⁴⁸ See for example Robert Filliou, *And so on end so soon*, 1977, color video, 30 min 35 sec (production, camera, light and sound: Kate Craig); available as DVD: *Robert Filliou. From Political to Poetical Economy, 1977–79, vol. 2*, ed. by Western Front Society and the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver 2006.

⁴⁹ See Filliou, »The Propositions and Principles of ROBERT FILLIOU«, n.p.

⁵⁰ I borrow this expression, which was widely used in the press, from the economist Jacques Rueff, one of the great defenders of the gold standard in the 1950s and 1960s; see Rueff, *L'Âge de l'inflation*, Paris 1967, p. 100.

⁵¹ For a general understanding of the Bretton Woods system, see Naomi Lamoreaux and Ian Shapiro, eds., *The Bretton Woods Agreements. Together with Scholarly Commentaries and Essential Historical Documents*, New Haven, CT 2019; on the role of gold in monetary debates and practices, see Eric Monnet, Damien Puy, »Do old habits die hard? Central banks and the Bretton Woods gold puzzle«, in: *Journal of International Economics* 127, 2020, pp. 1–20.

⁵² Isou, *La Théorie nucléaire de la monnaie*, p. 3 (author's translation).

⁵³ Joseph Beuys, »Appeal for an Alternative«, reprinted in: id., *Appeal by Joseph Beuys*, trans. B. E. Kleer, Düsseldorf 1979, n.p.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Klein, »Esquisse et grandes lignes«, pp. 99–100 (author's translation).

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 100 (author's translation).

⁵⁷ Ibid. (author's translation).

⁵⁸ Ibid (author's translation); see my discussion in Cras, *The Artist as Economist*, pp. 31–33.

⁵⁹ William Seitz, »What's Happened to Art. An Interview with Marcel Duchamp on Present Consequences of New York's 1913 Armory Show«, in: *Vogue*, February 1963, p. 129.

⁶⁰ See Herbert Molderings, *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance. Art as Experiment*, New York 2010, pp. 1–5.

⁶¹ See André Orléan, *The Empire of Value. A New Foundation for Economics*, Cambridge, MA 2014, pp. 50–61.

⁶² The English version does not replicate this specific pun.

⁶³ Jean-Joseph Goux, *Frivolité de la Valeur. Essai sur l'imaginaire du capitalisme*, Paris 2000, p. 149 (author's translation).

⁶⁴ See Daniel W. Smith's introduction in the book's English translation: Pierre Klossowski, *Living Currency. Followed by Sade and Fourier*, ed. by Vernon W. Cisney, Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith, London and New York 2017, pp. 1–3.

⁶⁵ Klossowski, *Living Currency*, pp. 72–73.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

⁶⁸ Gallizio, *Pinot Gallizio. Il Laboratorio*, p. 173.

⁶⁹ Dubuffet, *Asphyxiating Culture*, p. 82.

MATERIAL AND EQUIVALENCE IN CHARLES RAY*

Markus Klammer

I.

When regarding the early- and mid-career productions of Chicago-born sculptor Charles Ray from the early 1970s to the early 1990s, he seems like an artist grappling with two major challenges to the autonomy not only of his own emerging works but of late modern artistic production per se: first, the challenge of so-called »Minimal Art« using more or less simple, industrially-produced and serially-arranged objects to effect a certain phenomenological awareness in the beholders of their own perceptual processes and the latter's progression in time – thus reducing the artworks to mere props of heightened self-awareness; and second, the challenge of a consumer society treating artworks as commodities of a rarefied kind and artists as their specialized providers under the rule of a universal equivalence through which »non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical«,¹ to quote Theodor W. Adorno from *Negative Dialectics*. In this vein, John Kelsey assesses:

»These [early- and mid-career, M.K.] works involve themselves in the common space of minimalism and shopping malls in order to play to and against our assumptions about both, improvising unexpected transformations within the familiar geometries of modernist abstraction and postwar consumer society.«²

The artistic strategy predominant in these works can be characterized as a mimicry, sometimes the literal incorporation, of

heteronomous elements in the artwork itself and employing them – in a seemingly paradoxical way – as the »material« or »medium« through which the very autonomy of the artwork is constituted. As Adorno has it in his *Aesthetic Theory* in the section »Toward a Theory of the Artwork«: »Aesthetic spontaneity is vouchsafed by its relation to extra-aesthetic reality: It is the determinate opposition to reality by way of adaptation to it.«³ I would like to argue that there is an equivalence at work in Ray's sculptures that differs substantially from the equivalence described in the first paragraph – imposing »on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total«⁴ –, a subtle equivalence which does not collapse the opposing sides into mere identity, but preserves them in their difference and establishes them as autonomous and at the same time relational entities, as »things that are equal and yet unequal«.⁵

Consider the work $32 \times 33 \times 35 = 34 \times 33 \times 35$ (1989) made of sheet aluminum. At first sight, it may look like some minimalist box, probably a cube, with the upper face removed.⁶ Guided by the knowledge of the exact dimensions (in inches) given in the work's title, one could then try to effectively see the small difference in length of the box's edges – which is in fact a cuboid and not a cube – and to appreciate them in perception. At the same time, the title and the work are more complicated than this. The title does not only present us with the measurement of the cuboid's edges. Rather, it constitutes an equation positing the equivalence of the left-hand and the right-hand side, an equivalence that is *formally* postulated by the equals sign, but that is *mathematically* incorrect as the first terms on both sides of the equation – unlike the second and the third terms – are not identical but differ by two inches. This difference indicates that »[t]he inside dimensions of this box are five centimeters [i.e., two inches, M.K.] deeper than the outside dimensions«,⁷ the cuboid being set exactly two inches into the ground. What the equation expresses is not a relation of the sculpture to the

beholder but an internal relation within the aesthetic object itself, a seemingly paradoxical relation of its oddly matte material on the outside to the volume of space it contains.⁸

In a later essay published in 2018, Ray will speak of »space« as the sculptor's primary »material«.⁹ The term »material« here designates an artistic medium as a set of technical and aesthetic conventions and possibilities¹⁰ and not a specific physical substance, a material in the literal sense. The structure of Ray's 1989 box then articulates the difference between a literalist understanding of »material« and an understanding of »material« as medium. The latter is very much in line with Adorno's concept of »material« in the *Aesthetic Theory* as a historical sedimentation of »technique«.¹¹

»Space is the sculptor's primary medium, a fact so obvious that it is easy overlooked. Rather than work toward an understanding of how a sculpture both creates and occupies space, we tend to focus on the comprehension of the subject matter and on the material qualities of the work of art.«¹²

Consider *Shelf*, a sculpture by Ray dating from 1981, one of a series of six sculptures in total with a comparable conceptual make-up or »armature« as Ray himself puts it.¹³ The artist describes the work in a laconic statement: »My head is painted with the same gray paint as the objects on the shelf.«¹⁴ Today the work only exists in the guise of photographic documentation. Historically it was realized at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in the fall of 1981 for the duration of three days, more precisely »from Thursday to Saturday, every half hour, between 1 p.m. and 5 p.m.«¹⁵ Provided with this information, it is tempting to think of *Shelf* as a performative artwork transgressing the boundaries of sculpture into the realm of a more or less theatrical display of the artist's body. According to Ray, however, *Shelf* is not so much about the becoming per-

formative of sculpture than about his, the artist's, body becoming a genuinely sculptural element. »Like a sawhorse, chair, plank, or other prop or clamp I saw through and envisioned myself within the structure. I thought of the work as sculpture with my alive body within the work rather than a performance within a theatrical structure.«¹⁶ By being painted in the same opaque neutral color as the shelf and the three objects on it – presumably a jerrycan, a toolbox and a planter – the artist's head is characterized as sculptural material. The grey conveys an impression of density. I see it as an allusion to the color of clay as primordial sculptural matter. The artist's head is reified as an element of sculpture, this being underlined by a pun hidden in the work's title: shelf – self. The head is rendered as an equivalent – both materially and as a thing on a shelf – to its neighboring objects. And yet the seemingly »natural« color and texture of the remaining body parts from neck to toe indicate a difference, an unequalness of the equal. As for other artists in the 1980s like Haim Steinbach, Jeff Koons or Katharina Fritsch, the shelf can be understood as alluding to a fundamentally capitalist mode of displaying commodities, highlighting their equivalence in the glaring light of exchange value through the very form of the display itself. Ray's shelf may be considered an equivalent to the shelves in the shopping malls Kelsey refers to, relegating the artist's head with all its projects and designs to the status of commodities. Yet Ray's shelf is a sparse, modest one, reminiscent of the shelves in a workshop or in an artist's studio, thereby referring to an autonomous space of production, devising an implicit »theory« of sculpture as the transformation of heteronomous elements – even the artist's body and metonymically his work – into an autonomous organization of sculptural material.

2.

The 1990s saw Ray introducing mannequins as equivalents of the human body in his sculptures, while the overtly abstract, geometric elements – in dialogue both with Anthony Caro's art and broader minimalist idioms – that had characterized his earlier work were pushed to the side. It is with the mannequins that Ray's sculptural practice of »remaking something that already exists«¹⁷ started – often industrially produced, sometimes natural objects –, culminating in works like *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997), *Tractor* (2005), *Hinoki* (2007) and *Father Figure* (2007).¹⁸

What interested him about the mannequins – as Ray stated retrospectively in 2022 – was not their uncanny potential as »Doppelgänger« possibly coming alive, which his fellow Los Angeles resident Mike Kelley explored at the same time, but their »conventionality« as standardized types in the framework of what Ray calls »consumer society« or the »cultural industry«.¹⁹ From 1990 to 1993, the mannequins became Ray's preferred sculptural material: in the literal sense that he used and adapted industrially-produced mannequins in his sculptures – instead of his own body as he did before – and resorted to mannequin-making techniques himself in works like *Fall '91* (1992), *Oh Charley, Charley, Charley...* (1992) and *Family Romance* (1993), but even more so in the sense of »material« as »artistic medium«. For Ray, the mannequins are connected to a pervasive late capitalist experience of equivalence:

»I started thinking about the American experience of shopping at these big anchor stores in American malls – Carson's, Sears, etc. The experience is super democratic. All of the items are almost the same price. Everything is elevated to the same level. A handbag, a dress, women's underwear, a fishing

pole, a car battery all exist in an equilibrium. The shopping experience is very hallucinogenic.«²⁰

Self-Portrait (1990) can be understood as an »assisted ready-made« in the sense of Marcel Duchamp. Ray used a generic »low-end mannequin«²¹ by Sears & Roebuck,²² a few centimeters taller than himself, removed the head and had the mannequin company produce a new one in his own image, taking care, however, to remove any features that were too distinctive of his individual physiognomy. He then clad the mannequin in his »favorite sailing outfit«.²³ »I dressed it in the way I dressed at the time but in all new clothes.«²⁴ While *Shelf* employs the artist's very body as sculptural material in a literal – both reifying and autonomizing – sense, *Self-Portrait* tries to toe the line between the generic rendering of a type – as individual equivalent to some general class – and the representation of a singular individual. The singular traits are worn down to a degree where they are hardly recognizable as belonging to a specific person, although having seen the artist's face in person or on a photograph may aid in the act of recognition. Note that the sculpture's title does not give a proper name, but only designates a genre, *Self-Portrait*. The clothes, the glasses, the hat may seem to individuate the figure, but then they are all new and can easily be seen as exemplifying a specific style, pairing casualness with a certain strictness. They are all sculptural material both in the literal sense and in the sense of medium.

The figure's gestures are awkward. It seems to hover slightly above rather than to stand on its base, a flat, circular pane of glass. And like all of Ray's mannequins featuring glass bases, it extends at least part of a shoe over the edge of the pane and into the real space of the gallery room. I do not want to say that this gesture, or rather, simulated gesture puts the figure on an equal footing with the beholder, but it hints at the possibility of a shared space between the sculpture and the beholder and the

possibility of the sculpture not only being the artist's body's equivalent but also equivalent to its beholders' bodies. In what sense? Although the facial features are somewhat ambiguous in terms of gender, the mannequin certainly represents a white, well-off person with plenty of leisure time at their disposal. The equivalence to the beholders then can only partially consist in a relation of similarity between the members of a certain group of people and a certain type embodied in the mannequin – although empirically this may have been and still may be the case.²⁵

Structurally, it is the relation of a shared *dissimilarity* between the artwork and each and every one of its beholders that accounts for their equivalence. On the one hand, the sculpture and its beholders, as physical beings, share the same floor, the same literal plane of existence. They are both situated in space. Yet, on the other hand, this plane is already part of the artwork itself. »As Caro defined it, the floor is not what a sculpture sits upon, it is the last element of the sculpture itself. In my case, perhaps it is the first element.«²⁶ Like their antetypes in the sphere of commodities, Ray's mannequins never make eye contact. The abstracted facial features of *Self-Portrait*, its generic look, its hovering stance isolate it in an aesthetic realm tinged with a kind of restrained melancholy and subdued sadness.²⁷ With reference to both Immanuel Kant and Adorno, I want to say that this melancholy and sadness are not mere subjective sensations but aesthetic feelings corresponding to the sculpture's uneasy and awkward form of autonomy. This is Ray, once again speaking in retrospect, stressing the sculpture's autonomy: »While the work is titled *Self-Portrait* and it oddly holds my awkward gesture and generalized head, it is really not a sculpture of me; it is the sculpture of a mannequin.«²⁸ So, what the artist does here is equate the sculpture's referent – a mannequin, not a person according to Ray – with its material – clearly a mannequin.

3.

In Ray's oeuvre so far, we encountered (1) with regard to $32 \times 33 \times 35 = 34 \times 33 \times 35$, a notion of the sculpture's material in the literal sense as a specific physical substance, articulating a relation of equivalence and, at the same time, difference to »space« as sculpture's »primary material«, now in the sense of an artistic medium; (2) the artist's body as an equivalent of sculptural material in the literal sense in *Shelf*; and (3) in consideration of *Self-Portrait*, mannequins as equivalents to the artist's body as equivalents to sculptural material both in the literal sense and in the sense of an artistic medium; but also mannequins as nonequal equivalents of the actual beholders' bodies. In all these cases, the various relations of equivalence are bound to a certain idea of the commodity form in late capitalism as »super democratic« – in Ray's words – and as a pervasive obligation imposed on the whole world »to become identical, to become total« – in Adorno's words. And in all these cases, the sculptures articulate these relations of equivalence as relations of equivalence and nonequivalence at the same time, insisting on an uneasy and awkward form of autonomy.

This uneasiness and awkwardness are still felt in the first of four major sculptures completed between 1997 and 2007 in which Ray – temporarily – moves away from the human body as protagonist of his art, *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997). The other three are *Tractor* (2005), *Hinoki* (2007) and *Father Figure* (2007), an over-life-size sculpture in painted solid steel of »a toy tractor with a figure that was, in essence, inseparable from the tractor«. ²⁹

Unpainted Sculpture is actually »painted with a grayish primer that gives the sculpture a strangely unmetallic, almost immaterial character«, ³⁰ as Michael Fried states in an essay from 2011. We are dealing with the more or less exact replica of a »crashed Pontiac Grand AM car«, ³¹ according to Annalisa Rimmaudo's »Catalog of Works, 1971–2021«, an appendix to the recent exhi-

bition catalog on Ray by the Centre Pompidou, »a death wreck«,³² as Ray himself details, recounting his fascination with the idea of the car wreck as an equivalent to the dead driver's absent body or »ghost«.³³ After buying the wreck, the artist disassembled it with the help of his assistants, stripping it down to its individual outer and inner parts. Molds were made of each of the parts, which were then recast in fiberglass, fitted together and painted, a laborious process demanding over a year of collective work.³⁴

»My idea was to duplicate every dent and crumple and aspect of the car's destruction by taking molds piece by piece. Fender, tire, door, interior and exterior were slowly disassembled, cataloged and molded. I made fiberglass duplicates from all these molded parts.«³⁵

In the course of the work, Ray lost touch with the original theatrical intuition of a death wreck haunted by its ghost and became more and more preoccupied with the technical and formal implications of his sculpture. Not least because the cast fiberglass parts were slightly bulkier than the original ones and did not fit together as seamlessly as they were meant to.

Unpainted Sculpture has significant implications for the topic of material and equivalence in Ray's oeuvre:

A. The sculpture articulates an equivalence, yet difference between an industrially-produced object – the Pontiac Grand AM – and its replica made in a more or less traditional workshop or studio style by way of molding, a technique deeply linked to the history of sculpture as an artistic medium.

B. In contrast to the crashed Pontiac Grand AM, all the individual parts of the sculpture are homogeneously made of one material, fiberglass, whose uniformity is made explicit in the grey paint. In their material sameness, all the sculpture's parts are equivalent, they are »elevated to the same level«.³⁶

C. The sculpture – at least ideally – consists of one single matter, a fact that renders it useless as a car in functional terms. Even though all the car parts have been minutely replicated in fiberglass, they do not interact in a purposeful way. Their material sameness and their solidity obstruct their functioning as a car. But at the same time, the sculpture's material unifies it, makes it not just a mereological whole, a complete sum of its parts, which is an important idea to Ray,³⁷ but makes it one autonomous form – a heightened autonomy, as the Pontiac Grand AM has not been artistically composed in any meaningful sense, but has been designed for the specific purpose of being a car. On an iconographic level, the uselessness and autonomy of the sculpture are stressed by the heavily damaged state of the car. The accident has forever fixed the car as an industrially produced, generic item in the haecceity of a singular object. The grey paint is reminiscent of the primer of new cars still in the line of production, not having yet received their final chromatic coating. It bestows a sense of newness and becoming on the wreck.

D. The procedure of meticulously casting every part endows *Unpainted Sculpture* with a variety of distinct surface textures, from the smooth »metal« sheets of the body to the mesh of the radiator grill, to the rugged pattern of the tires, to the woven cloth of the seats and the coarse carpet of the floor. The uniform color and material sameness heighten the individuality and specificity of these textures and the different ways they interact with the surrounding space.

E. Interior and exterior of *Unpainted Sculpture* are in close correspondence. There are no windowpanes. The warped lines and plains of the bodywork, especially at the front and on the left side of the car, articulate one flowing space. The car emerges as a topological object with a continuous inside and outside. This, once again, is underlined by color and material sameness.

F. Although it was cast piece by piece from its model, almost like a three-dimensional photographic scan, *Unpainted Sculpture* has an abstract tone to it. I will not emphasize color and material sameness again but point to certain elements representing glass or mirrors. In the sculpture, these elements are neither transparent nor reflective. Instead, they are matte and grey and solid like the rest of the car, distinguishing themselves only through the relief of their cracks.

G. The fact of the artwork's being painted (even twice) while being called *Unpainted Sculpture* might be seen as a moment of contradiction, even falsehood, as the artist seems to deliberately deceive its beholders. It may be deemed doubly false in the light of a certain modernist imperative of »truth to materials« since the coat of paint veils the actual appearance of the fiberglass's surface.

In response to these conjectures, several things need to be said: First, Ray places himself in the tradition of British modernist sculptor Anthony Caro. Caro's paradigmatic works of the early 1960s are painted and their specific color, together with their being placed directly on the ground, is an important element of their aesthetic structure.³⁸

Second, the color coating must not be understood as concealing but as explicating the material sameness of each and every part of Ray's car, expressing mereological wholeness as aesthetic unity. On a lesser note, the usual yellowish color of unpainted fiberglass is not entirely dissimilar to the actual grey of the sculpture's paint.

Third, and most importantly, Ray's sculptures are accompanied by detailed »production narratives« that the artist himself recounts in his interviews and relates in his essays. They are published in his catalogs as part of the artworks' description and, in condensed form, they are used for the explanatory texts on the gallery walls during exhibitions. Unsurprisingly, the production narratives have also found their way into art-histor-

ical literature on Ray and in fact, they have deeply informed not only the vast majority of this literature but also its most interesting contributions. Ray's production narratives contain a host of various information: what the artist's first intuitions and ideas were with regard to the sculptures' subject matter, material and form; how these ideas came about, how they changed and evolved over time; what Ray considered to be the core aesthetic problem – or »armature« as he calls it in a materialist fashion – of a certain sculpture; and finally, how the sculpture was made, down to the individual steps of its production based on a carefully orchestrated division of labor in the artist's studio, dead ends and blind alleys included.

Ray's production narratives must be taken with a grain of salt. Not all their accounts can be verified and some of them are probably fictitious. Yet, the production narratives form an integral part of Ray's artworks. They are meant to be known to their beholders and Ray goes to great lengths to ensure as much. Make no mistake, Ray is by no means a conceptual artist, but he clearly regards the production narratives linked to his sculptures as unequal equivalents to the here and now of their being, to their presence in the gallery or museum space. The production narratives make explicit the historical time of conceptual work and production that is sedimented in the sculptures' material presence – guiding the beholders' eyes and pointing their thoughts to a structurally absolute past that cannot be directly perceived but whose social, technological and aesthetic fabric of actions and decisions, of »intentions« – to quote a central concept in Fried's reading of Ray – is objectified in the sculptures at hand. This is not to say that the sculptures can be linked to their production narratives as effects can be linked to their causes. Rather, it is the difference-in-equivalence between the works and the narratives that matters.

Coming back to *Unpainted Sculpture's* use of color, an excerpt of its production narrative mounted on a wall at the 2015

Charles Ray exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago reads as follows:

»Once it was assembled, the sculpture was covered with two uniform coats of matte grey paint, a color – like the body-shop primer normally found underneath a high-gloss finish – that clarifies the form and lends the sculpture a quality of disinterestedness, flatness, and silence. The misleading ›unpainted‹ in the title refers to the artist's decision not to render the sculpture as a polychrome object that would more realistically mimic its source.«³⁹

4.

Here is a version of the production narrative of *Tractor*, accomplished in 2005, a work that, like *Unpainted Sculpture*, took a considerable amount of time to complete.⁴⁰ *Tractor* shares the fundamental artistic concerns of *Unpainted Sculpture* and can be understood as a follow-up in many ways: It represents an industrially-produced, yet dilapidated, obsolete object. It consists of one single material: aluminum. All its parts were cast bit by bit and then reassembled. There is no clear distinction between the inside and the outside: *Tractor* is all parts and surfaces. The sculpture meticulously replicates a fundamentally *functional* structure, an agricultural machine, yet at the same time, its material oneness renders it useless. Finally, the sculpture's autonomy and aesthetic unity are ensured by its material homogeneity. The latter is emphasized by the sheer weight of the piece, 885 kilograms, which is recorded in Rimmaudo's »Catalog of Works« as an integral part of the work's description.⁴¹

»I started working on *Tractor* while I was still at work on *Hinoki*. It began when I was trying to sculpt a jungle gym, and

I kept running into genre problems. The jungle gym was the first civic space I encountered as a boy, but whenever I tried to replicate its form, this child's vision of social space would elude me [...]. I struggled. I attempted to sculpt the ground around the monkey bars, to no avail. At a certain point, I recalled playing on an old broken-down tractor as a boy. In that distant memory, I found my jungle gym. I tried to sculpt the tractor from memory. Later I found a broken-down tractor in a backyard in the San Fernando Valley. It had blown a rod in 1961 and never left the yard. People had attempted to cut it apart but gave up long ago. It slowly deteriorated, as did the neighborhood where I discovered it. Kids played on it, and there it sat for some forty years until I bought it for five hundred dollars and towed it back to my studio. I took it apart piece by piece. Inside and out. *Ten assistants sculpted the parts in clay by studying the real ones in front of them.* Molds were taken, waxes were made, and I cast the tractor part by part in aluminum. Somewhere along the way my intensity shifted as the sculpture transformed from a jungle gym into a transparent philosophical object. On the one hand, I wanted the viewer to be able to look into it and understand the extent to which it was a representation; but, on the other, I was worried that the hand that sculpted the piece would be all too apparent. With this concern, I assigned different assistants to work on different parts. There were tight, detail-oriented people and others who were lazy; there were people with a soft focus and still others whose modeling had a wonderful sense of poetry to it. Interestingly, these differences disappeared when the object was assembled. I came to realize that an industrial object needs to have a gestalt far stronger than any of its constituent parts. I think of this sculpture as a tractor in heaven. I would like to rename it *Philosophical object*.⁴²

With regard to *Tractor*, I would like to highlight the relation between the material oneness of its parts – they are all cast in solid aluminum – and the different »styles« or »hands« that can be discovered in the particular treatment of the individual parts showing slightly different degrees of truth-to-the-prototype or, conversely, abstraction. Importantly, there is one additional step in the production process as compared to *Unpainted Sculpture*: the modeling of the individual parts by hand in clay. Viewed from a distance, *Tractor*'s material unity overrides the details of the different hands. It is this *one* metallic object signaling its presence like the gleaming statue of a Greek deity whose »white marble or polished bronze [...] could strike the eye from afar«,⁴³ as Richard Neer puts it. But viewed up close, slightly different styles or vernaculars of reproduction are revealed, which are linked by the artist to certain individual tempers and predominant moods of his assistants.⁴⁴ This is not to contradict Neer's assessment that »Ray's recent works tend to disperse affective involvement into broader armatures«⁴⁵ But it is clear that the dispersion of the individual styles into the material oneness of the object is a function of physical distance from the object, at least for an actual beholder in the gallery space, and that a close-up scrutiny – which *Tractor* explicitly invites – reveals a cornucopia of small differences in the handling of the material in the process of reproduction. The aesthetic experience of *Tractor* then is an experience of non-identity, an experience of the unequal equality among *Tractor*'s individual parts – and between the parts and the sculpture as a whole. It is this non-identity that makes *Tractor* a »philosophical object«.

5.

Hinoki (2007) is named after the material it is made of. In Japanese, the term »hinoki« means »cypress wood«. Within the set

of replicas of existing objects in Ray's oeuvre, *Hinoki* stands out, being the replica neither of a particular human body nor of a technical object, but of a natural one, a fallen oak tree with a hollow core. There is, of course, a production narrative: Ray had discovered the fallen tree somewhere near the central coast of California, embedded in a field of grass, sunken into the ground, already in a state of decay. For several years, he tried to buy the log, but was repeatedly turned down by the owners. The narrative continues as follows, as rendered by Fried:

»So Ray one day drove to the field with a truck, some men, and a saw, and cut up the log and hauled the pieces – some as large as a table, others, including hunks of bark, quite small – away to his studio. [...] Eventually he decided to have the log remade in wood by a team of expert craftsmen in Japan, one normally occupied in recarving traditional Japanese sculptures, Buddhas and the like, when they had to be replaced.

This involved making silicone molds with plaster mother molds and casting the log in fiberglass, both inside parts and outside parts. Then the ›log‹ was fitted back together, at which stage Ray built a large saw that could cut it into pieces again. He cut it into five barrels, which in turn were mounted on steel panels that allowed the barrels to be reassembled so that the original form would lock into place. These were then shipped to Osaka and the work began of using that form as the model for carving the new log barrel by barrel *in laminated blocks of cypress wood or hinoki*. The separateness of the barrels enabled the carvers (a team of perhaps seven in all under the master carver Yuboku Mukoyoshi) to study the interior grain patterns, which Ray cared about deeply. Over the next years the carvers finished the inside of the log and then laminated the barrel forms together and worked on the exterior. The carving of the whole piece took about five years,

during which time Ray visited the workshop every two and a half or three months, spending roughly a week there on each visit studying the remade log's progress to date and talking with the carvers.«⁴⁶

As can easily be gleaned from these lines, *Hinoki's* fundamental artistic principles are closely related to the principles of *Unpainted Sculpture* and, *a fortiori*, *Tractor*, especially with regard to the handmadeness of the log and the multi-stage process of (re-)production: including the disassembly of the original log into individual parts via sharp cuts, making molds from the parts and recasting them in fiberglass, cutting the fiberglass log into barrels, shipping them to Osaka, finally carving the sculpture in laminated blocks of cypress wood. The hinoki or cypress constitutes a »material shift«⁴⁷ – in Ray's own words – from the original »material«, so to speak, of the natural log's oak. Yet, naturally grown oak is not simply replaced by naturally grown *hinoki* but by cypress that has already undergone several industrial transformations in the form of linear cuts and reassembly in the process of lamination.

These cut lines can clearly be seen in the two bases supporting *Hinoki*, which are of the same laminated cypress as the rest of the sculpture. The bases must be regarded not as *parerga* but as integral elements of the sculpture. They display *Hinoki's* material in its industrial quality, in its quality as »Rohmaterial«, »raw material«, a material already »filtered through labour«,⁴⁸ to use Karl Marx's term from the chapter on »The Labour Process and the Valorization Process« in *Capital Volume I*.

While *Hinoki* could be mistaken for a natural object from a distance, close scrutiny reveals its madeness. As in *Tractor*, the specific distance from the object in the viewing process plays a crucial role. Viewed up close, *Hinoki's* surface is modeled by myriad nicks, drill holes and irregular cuts of every sort, the traces of the craftsmen's work during several years.⁴⁹ According

to Fried, *Hinoki* thus represents an object »saturated with intentionality«,⁵⁰ »an ontologically extremely dense intentional artifact«,⁵¹ »concentrated intentionality«. ⁵²

Besides Ray's artistic intentionality and the craftsmen's skilled intentionality, a technological or functional type of intentionality is also highlighted in the sculpture. Apart from the craftsmen's particular chisel marks, knife marks and drill marks, there are also linear seams in *Hinoki*:

A. Seams perpendicular to the log's main axis and not so obvious to the eye indicate the borders of the individual barrels from which the final piece has been assembled. In certain lighting conditions, subtle differences of color between the individual barrels can be perceived as well.

B. Once the cut lines have been observed in *Hinoki*'s laminated bases, close looking will reveal them in the main trunk, indicating an industrially produced difference in the »raw material«. This unequalness is confirmed by different wood grains on both sides of the individual cut lines in the trunk. Yet, the overall texture of the craftsmen's marks goes entirely against these differences of grains, making them almost disappear, overriding the display of functional intentionality with a demonstration of subjective spirit, in the Adornian sense, that at the same time creates an impression of naturalness.⁵³ In an excessively literal, both learned and kitschy fashion, Ray himself refers to the air passing through *Hinoki*'s inner chamber as »*pneuma*«, ancient Greek for »spirit« or »breath«. ⁵⁴

»I thought of *pneuma*, which is the Greek word for breath. The notion hit me almost like a rheological event: *Pneuma*, or air, could be the armature, pushing back against all this other pressure – the UV light and wind and rain and bugs – that was compressing the log down into the earth. I thought, I'll make a pneumatic structure.«⁵⁵

C. That said, there is a conspicuous, almost exaggerated indication of functional intentionality in *Hinoki* as well, namely the clear cut resulting in a more or less planar surface – as from some kind of saw – that demarcates one end of the single branch detached from *Hinoki*'s main corpus and lying directly on the ground. This cut evokes the practical necessity, related in the production narrative, of cutting up the original log to transport it to the artist's studio as a model for *Hinoki*.

With *Hinoki*, the demonstration of various types of intentionality does not destroy aesthetic experience as in Kant's famous example in the *Third Critique* of the nightingale's song that is revealed to have been produced by a fellow hidden in the bushes »with a reed or a pipe in his mouth«.⁵⁶ It is rather heightened as an experience of difference between natural objects having been shaped by various natural forces on the one hand and artistic artifacts on the other hand. This is Fried, once again:

»As if the weight or density of so much concentrated intentionality functions as an ontological counterforce to Ray's original empathic sense of the years of sun, rain, and ultra-violet radiation that had hammered down on the original log – ›the pressure was just incredible,‹ he once said to me —and in another five or ten years might well have driven it to the point of collapse.«⁵⁷

And yet, this comparison puzzles me. There seems to be an undertone of the artwork having a vicarious function, even a salvaging one with regard to the natural object, which had to be dismantled and destroyed to produce the artwork in the first place. This undertone somewhat contradicts the idea of an equivalence-in-difference between *Hinoki* – the artwork – and the original log, tipping the balance in favor of the artwork.

At root there seems to be an almost romanticist idea of art doing nature's work. This idea, however, is balanced with the

idea of natural forces acting on and within the artwork's material itself. When Ray imagines *Hinoki's* future decay, he sees it as somewhat parallel to the slow decay of its fallen antetype:

»When I asked Mr. Mukoyoshi about the wood and how it would behave over time, he told me that the cypress would be fine for four hundred years, then go into crisis; after two hundred years of splitting and cracking, it would slowly decline for another four hundred years. I realized then that the wood, like the original log, had a life of its own, and I was finally able to let my project go and hopefully breathe life into the world that surrounds it.«⁵⁸

The narrative projects a perfect symmetry in duration between the unscathed state of the artwork and its decline. It envisions a future world when the person of the artist is long gone and the artwork in its very materiality has »a life of its own«.⁵⁹ The status of the artwork as a quasi-natural object, however, is guaranteed by its being saturated with intentions as they are recounted and confirmed in the narrative. Ray's production narratives do not only convey a history of the artwork's material, they are themselves tied to an instance of subjectivity which can only superficially be equated with the artist's person and which – though it may well help individual beholders relate to the artworks and feel near to them⁶⁰ – is not an actual interlocutor. This instance may be adequately characterized as a form of late modern rationality, an »unhappy rationality« realizing nature as the »raw material« of its products and at the same time yearning for dissolution in these very products.

Yet, such contradiction need not be tragic and doomed, according to Ray: There is a lighthearted, shrewdly melancholic and even humorous tone to his production narratives.

Notes

* The author would like to thank Bigna Guyer, Malika Maskarinec, Wacyl Azzouz and Alexey Weißmüller as well as Michael Kaysen, Rachel Sabino and Jay Dandy from The Art Institute of Chicago.

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, New York and London 2007, p. 146.

² John Kelsey, »Field and Factory«, in: *Charles Ray*, exh. cat., New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York 2009, p. 60.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London and New York 2002, p. 193.

⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 146.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ One work that lends itself to comparison is Donald Judd's *Untitled* (1972) in the collection of the Tate Gallery. It is a cuboid (91,6 x 155,5 x 178,2 cm) made of four vertical copper plates and an aluminum plate bearing a cadmium red varnish at the bottom. The box has no top so that a beholder can see a red glow reflected by the inside faces of the copper plates. Thus, the difference between the box's interior space and the outside gallery space is dramatized in a spectacular way, appealing to the beholder to distinguish between the actual color of the copper plates and the reflections of red light upon them.

⁷ Charles Ray, »Plates«, in: Lars Nittve and Ulrika Levén, eds., *Charles Ray*, exh. cat., Malmö: Rooseum – Center for Contemporary Art, London: ICA, Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, Zürich: Kunsthalle Zürich, Malmö 1994, p. 46.

⁸ On a similar kind of internal relation in the art of painting, that of »literal shape« and »depicted shape«, see Michael Fried, »Shape as Form. Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons«, in: id., *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews*, Chicago and London 1998, pp. 77–99.

⁹ See Charles Ray: »How Many Sculptures Can You Fit in a Room?« [2018], in: *Charles Ray*, exh. cat., Paris: Centre Pompidou and Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection, Paris 2022, p. 151; see *ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁰ This is a core aspect of Stanley Cavell's notion of »automatism«; see Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, Cambridge, MA and London 1979, pp. 101–118.

¹¹ See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 166; The notion of »material« in Adorno comprises both technological and aesthetic procedures. Importantly, the philosopher reminds us that »material« is not only a sedimentation of technique but »at the same time sedimented subject« (*ibid.*).

¹² See Charles Ray: »A Four-Dimensional Being Writes Poetry on a Field with Sculptures« [2006], in: *Charles Ray*, exh. cat., Paris: Centre Pompidou and Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection, Paris 2022, p. 140.

¹³ On Ray's notion of »armature« see Charles Ray, »1000 Words. Charles Ray Talks about *Hinoki*«, in: *Artforum* 46, September 2007, p. 439; see Charles Ray, »Conversation. Michael Fried and Charles Ray«, in: *Charles Ray*, exh. cat., New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York 2009, p. 49; see Charles Ray, »Sculpture in a Cultural Space. Charles Ray in Conversation with Hal Foster«, in: *Charles Ray. Figure Ground*, exh. cat., New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Haven and London 2022, pp. 43–44; see Michael Fried, »Charles Ray's Figurative Sculptures«, in: Bernhard Mendes Bürgi and James Rondeau, eds., *Charles Ray. Sculpture, 1997–2014*, exh. cat., Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, Ostfildern 2014, p. 19.

¹⁴ Charles Ray, »Plates«, p. 37.

¹⁵ Annalisa Rimmaudo, »Catalog of Works, 1971–2021«, in: *Charles Ray*, exh. cat., Paris: Centre Pompidou and Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection, Paris 2022, p. 174

¹⁶ Charles Ray: »The Intentions of Sculpture. Interview with Charles Ray, by Caroline Bourgeois«, in: *Charles Ray*, exh. cat., Centre Pompidou and Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection, Paris 2022, p. 25.

¹⁷ Michael Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws. Sala, Ray, Marioni, Gordon*, New Haven and London 2011, p. 98.

¹⁸ The principal part of this article will focus on works dealing with the problem of »remaking something that already exists«. To be sure, Ray's figurative sculpture after 2003, starting with *Aluminum Girl*, is very much occupied with that problem. This is evident already at the level of production: Usually, Ray uses specific individuals as models for his sculptures. Their appearances are minutely recorded via photographs, 3-D scans or body molds, which then serve to produce clay models. Nevertheless, my emphasis will be on the remaking of *industrially produced* objects in Ray's oeuvre, mannequins included. An obvious exception will be *Hinoki*, whose antetype is a fallen tree.

¹⁹ See Ray, »The Intentions of Sculpture«, pp. 28–29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² See Paul Schimmel, »Beside One's Self«, in: *Charles Ray*, exh. cat., Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and Zurich 1998, p. 83.

²³ Kelly Baum, »Patterns«, p. 18.

²⁴ Ray, »The Intentions of Sculpture«, p. 27.

²⁵ Other than *Self Portrait*, Ray's later sculpture *Huck and Jim* (2014) directly addresses topics of equality and difference in connection with »race« and racism; see James Rondeau, »Alternative Americana. Two Public Sculptures by Charles Ray«, in: Bernhard Mendes Bürgi and id., eds., *Charles Ray. Sculpture, 1997–2014*, exh. cat., Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, Ostfildern 2014, pp. 76–103; see Kelly Baum, »Patterns«, in: *Charles Ray. Figure Ground*, exh. cat., New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Haven and London 2022, pp. 24–29.

²⁶ Ray, »The Intentions of Sculpture«, p. 36; Ray here specifically refers to his work *The New Beetle* (2006).

²⁷ The dialectics of his sculptures sharing the same space with their beholders and of being isolated in an aesthetic realm Ray calls »embedment«. On a related, yet differently nuanced take on »embedment«, see Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, pp. 91–120; see Fried, »Charles Ray's Figurative Sculptures«, p. 16.

²⁸ Ray, »The Intentions of Sculpture«, p. 27.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁰ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, p. 99.

³¹ Rimmaudo, »Catalog of Works, 1971–2021«, p. 184.

³² Ray, »The Intentions of Sculpture«, p. 31.

³³ See *ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 31.

³⁵ Charles Ray, »Catalogue. Texts by Charles Ray«, in: Bernhard Mendes Bürgi and James Rondeau, eds., *Charles Ray. Sculpture, 1997–2014*, exh. cat., Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, Ostfildern 2014, p. 106.

³⁶ Ray, »The Intentions of Sculpture«, p. 27.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 33–34; see Ray, »How Many Sculptures Can You Fit in a Room?«, p. 153.

³⁸ On Caro's use of color, see Michael Fried: »Anthony Caro«, in: id., *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews*, Chicago and London 1998, pp. 273–274: »As for Caro's color, [...] it is the natural concomitant of his aspirations toward openness and weightlessness – modalities which are of no special value in their own right, but which alone make possible the construction of expressive gestures that are not simply »abstracted from« those of figurative art.« While »openness« and a certain gestural quality play an

important role in *Unpainted Sculpture*, »weightlessness« is too strong a term to describe the piece.

³⁹ The wall text was digitally photographed on site by the author of this essay in June 2015.

⁴⁰ The sculpture was produced in an edition of three plus one artist's proof.

⁴¹ See Rimmaudo, »Catalog of Works, 1971–2021«, p. 185; In the catalog, precise indications of weight are also given for *Unpainted Sculpture*, *Hinoki* and *Father Figure*, as for most of Ray's figurative sculpture after 1997. On a compositional level, *Tractor's* aesthetic unity is even affirmed by the radiator grill's spatial detachment from the rest of the piece. A similar strategy – probably going back to Caro's sculptures of the 1960s – can be observed in *Hinoki*, where a smaller branch is detached from the main trunk. On the problem of »physical connection« in Caro's *Prairie* (1967), see Michael Fried, »Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro«, in: id., *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews*, Chicago and London 1998, pp. 180–184.

⁴² Charles Ray, »Tractor«, in: *Charles Ray*, exh. cat., New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York 2009, p. 30 (emphasis added).

⁴³ Richard Neer, »Tumbling into Time«, in: Bernhard Mendes Bürgi and James Rondeau, eds., *Charles Ray. Sculpture, 1997–2014*, exh. cat., Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, Ostfildern 2014, p. 69.

⁴⁴ See Ray, »The Intentions of Sculpture«, p. 34.

⁴⁵ Neer, »Tumbling into Time«, p. 73.

⁴⁶ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, p. 95 (emphasis added).

⁴⁷ Charles Ray, »Conversation. Michael Fried and Charles Ray«, p. 46.

⁴⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, London 1976, p. 287.

⁴⁹ A slightly grotesque, almost comical instance of *Hinoki's* madeness is the little bough reminiscent of a roebuck's antlers that has been conspicuously grafted onto the main log. It is situated at the one end of the sculpture where three massive holes open up tunnels into the interior. But not only the bough's shape sticks out, the circular seam where it meets the trunk is clearly visible and its surface treatment and color are different from those of its surroundings. In a Freudian sense, you could call it a »prosthesis« or a »partial object«.

⁵⁰ See Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, p. 102. It is important not to understand »intentionality« in a psychological manner as a set of more or less conscious, purely subjective intentions, aiming at particular goals, but as *purposefulness as such*. It makes no difference if the latter is consciously pursued by a particular individual like the artist or not. And neither does it make a difference if *specific* purposes are completely lacking.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 103.

⁵² Ibid; Pace Neer, I see a stronger continuity in Ray's oeuvre before and after 1997 than he does.

⁵³ Adorno's post-Hegelian notion of »spirit« is not to be mistaken for the psychological concept of the particular mind of an individual. Rather, it designates subjectivity as such; see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 113: »However much art is marked and potentiated by universal alienation, it is least alienated insofar as everything in it passes through spirit – is humanized – without force. [...] No matter how much spirit may exert domination in art, its objectivation frees it from the aims of domination. [...] Through spiritualization, the radical domination of nature – its own – art corrects the domination of nature as the domination of an other.«

⁵⁴ Note that *Hinoki's* inside walls are crafted with the same care as its outside walls.

⁵⁵ Ray, »1000 Words. Charles Ray Talks about *Hinoki*«, p. 439.

⁵⁶ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Cambridge 2002, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, p. 103.

⁵⁸ Charles Ray, »If a tree falls in a meadow and I'm the only one there, does anyone else see it?«, in: *Log. Charles Ray*, New York 2009, n.p.

⁵⁹ Jackson Pollock's famous statement in the first and final issue of *Possibilities*, reiterated in Hans Namuth's film *Jackson Pollock 51* (1951), comes to mind: »I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own.« (Jackson Pollock, »My Painting«, in: *Possibilities. An Occasional Review* 1, Winter 1947-48, p. 79); With Pollock, the idea of the painting's »life of its own« is strongly tied to the automatisms, in the Cavellian sense, of his dripping method and the artist's heroic trust in these very automatisms.

⁶⁰ I am grateful to Elias Wagner for this important observation.

STILLING THE FLOW? TEMPORALITY AND DIGITALITY IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE*

Peter Osborne

»In this situation [in which information technologies
not only subvert writing but engulf it and carry it off
along with so-called Man<], we are left only with
reminiscences, that is to say, with stories.«

Friedrich A. Kittler, Preface, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 1985

What is photography becoming? In particular, how have recent social and technological changes in the conditions of image production, distribution and consumption effected the temporality of the photographic image? More specifically, what are the temporal dynamics of the photographically derived digital image, or the »distributed image«, as I have called it elsewhere?¹ To what extent can we maintain the idea of a distinctively »photographic« temporality under these conditions? Conversely, to what extent has the photographic dissolved, ontologically, into the generalized flow of data out of which its images are made, as an increasingly pervasive narrative would have it?

There is a strong yet uncanny sense amongst theorists of photography that something has happened to photography, that it has already happened, but because it is still not understood to its fullest extent, and is still happening, that it has also somehow not yet completely happened; that there is thus still hope for another way, or at least, another way of relating to what is happening, another way of living with and practicing photography within »the flow«.² This is part of a broader, generational sense that information is engulfing us, in a process

that is at once definitive (perhaps even catastrophic) yet at the same time strangely perennial and thus in a certain sense suspended. The process thus seems to harbor, in the rhythm of its renewals, the abstract possibility of another path. Not just the path of withdrawal, a quasi-monastic withdrawal and self-disciplinary constraint («taking a break» from social media, undergoing »data detoxification«), or the path of return, returns to analog technologies (reinvesting the old as the new), but a path leading to other ways of relating to images that are less unilaterally determined by a combination of economic compulsion and technological form. The struggle over the informational imaginary that is being conducted here is primarily a struggle with the idea of »the flow« – the flow of data and the flow of images, imagined predominantly as a single alternating current; a struggle that stems from a felt need for its arrest, or at least its temporal modification in some way. This is a possibility that challenges the ontological presumptions of the idea of the flow itself.

To address these issues, it is useful to approach some of the recent literature on the current state of photography from the standpoint of the media philosophy of the 1980s, which both over- and under-anticipated the current situation, in different respects.

New Data World

1980s German media philosophy anticipated the current situation, first, in its technical form and, second, in the alternatively pop-technologically utopian and dystopian forms of its political coding. »A future society that synthesizes electronic images«, Flusser wrote at the outset of *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, »will be a fabulous society«, »a dialogic, telematic society of image producers and image collectors«. It will be a society

of freedom. Flusser saw the possible other side of this, of course – what he called »the totalitarian society of image receivers and administrators« – but that appeared to him as a danger to be combatted, rather than the mode of realization of the telematic society that it has actually become.³ Kittler's realism, on the other hand, was more resigned when he wrote that »in today's alleged media pluralism [...] anything goes provided it does not disturb the assumption of global dominance by Silicon Valley.«⁴

Both of what Flusser thought were divergent trends (»the totalitarian society of image receivers and administrators« and »a dialogic, telematic society of image producers and image collectors«) are realized today in an integrally contradictory system, within which the former is dominant; the latter, compensatory and legitimating. These media philosophies clear-sightedly anticipated technical form and its political possibilities; what they failed to anticipate was their relations to social-economic form: the extraordinary »opening up of popular image production to capital accumulation«⁵ that has occurred via the valorization of information in globalized marketing, which nation-states appear powerless to regulate – half-hearted proposals for corporate self-regulation and minuscule digital-transaction taxes notwithstanding. But what of the consequences for photography of this combination of increasingly automated digitalized image capture and potentially infinitely open circuits of distribution, with consumption patterns determined by algorithmically self-reproducing patterns of data production, such that all consumption becomes immediately production of a new informational commodity, in the form of information about the act of consumption itself? This is a world in which, tendentially, all communication (digitally mediated sociality) becomes a type of inadvertent commodity-production at an individual level, which is constantly being aggregated/accumulated and processed into massive sets of meta-data.

Three by-no-means new but nonetheless still important points seem relevant here: One relates to time, one relates to social form, and the third relates to art. They have been usefully summarized by John Roberts in his book *Photography and its Violations*.

A. Time: There is a clear disjunction between the temporal forms of the old idea of the photograph and digitalized photographic image production. In particular, the naturalized flow of digitalized data and images, participation in which has become a condition of so many social relations, creates a diffusability and mutability of the image that produces an »accelerating and self-forgetting temporality«. This contradicts the received idea of the photograph as »the place where the flow of nonsymbolic ›information‹ stops and critical exchange begins«. It blocks the conventional role of the photograph of bringing »a reflective stillness to the contingencies of a passing scene«. The photograph's »existential proximity to the world« – its indexicality – is thus increasingly registered less in the content of the image than in the often rapidly image-obliterating act of its exchange.⁶

B. Sociality: Exchange of images has increasingly become a basic form of communicability: not exchange of commodified images, but exchange of images as the *production* of information-commodities. As Roberts argues, photography's »art of movement«, its relation to the »flow of life«, has shifted away from the anonymous photographer's relations to the street (Dziga Vertov) or to the road (Robert Frank) – to public or civic spaces more broadly – towards the shared, microsocial movements between »known individuals«, maintaining myriad small social networks via cell-phone screens, the relationship to which is embodied in the hand movement of the scroll.⁷ Meanwhile, the street has become a space of surveillance; a surveillance that both the social forms of media (friending, following, liking, etc.) and the dependence of image-exchange on patented

corporate products has extended into the microsocial realm itself; and indeed, via the selfie and other forms of posting, into an often self-corroding form of self-surveillance. The temporality of these modes of sociality is very different from that previously associated and valued as »photographic«, with its dependence on the outdated dual and separable technologies of image capture and manifestation. There has thus been an erosion of the whole nexus of technological and institutional arrangements that tied photography to the social document, for most of the 20th century. As Roberts puts it: »With its instant powers of diffusion and its immediate retrieval and miniaturization of the image (its rapid switch from big to small and vice versa), digitalization essentially destroys the *to-be-looked-at-ness* of the *discrete* photodocument [...].«⁸ In reaction, having previously moved away from the 19th-century codings of its dual relations to art and science, photography has increasingly turned to the institutional space of art as a space of solace for the attentive consideration of individual images.

C. Art: The photographic art-document may in this sense be seen as the custodian of a cognitive delay in its preservation of a space for reflective stillness that was once taken to be the inherent property of the photograph itself. However, while this might work for individual photographs, and individual photographers, it lacks the generalized cultural force of the photojournalism and reportage within which photography was grounded for most of the 20th century, and which has been replaced by social media. Furthermore, the temporality of the inevitably aestheticized art-document is different:

»It breaks with much of the critical temporal language associated with photography's appropriation of cinema. Gone is the notion of the photograph as an act of interruption, displacement, interrogation, rearticulation – of generalized movement and cognitive disruption, the avant-garde lan-

guage of denaturalization – to be replaced by the photograph as the site of ›glacial‹ contemplation [...] .«⁹

This new *aesthetic* detemporalization is as naturalizing, in its own way, as the imagistic atemporality of the so-called »post-photographic«, or better, »new-photographic« image in its everyday uses.

Furthermore, the more pervasive the everyday production and exchange of photography via phones and online, the greater the »photographization« of everyday vision, the less possible it is to use photography in an art context in ways that go beyond (1) citational usages of such practices, (2) a search for a critical differential in the use of old or outmoded photographic technologies that take us back to »the photograph«, (3) a related, possibly nostalgic, and often moralistic emphasis on documentary function, which is frequently and paradoxically accompanied by a classicizing aesthetic, or (4) post-production compositions that are often considered »painterly« (Jeff Wall: back to the 19th-century debates on photography and painting), but are often more like advertising design. This is the fate of some of the work by Andreas Gursky, for example.¹⁰

Such is the current situation of photography as received by some recent photographic criticism. To grasp this situation at a greater theoretical depth, we need to articulate three sets of terms, in both their internal relations and the relations into which they enter with each other when configured around the problem of the photographically derived digital or distributed image:

A. Ontology – historical ontology – social ontology – political ontology

B. Photography – photograph – photographic image

C. Flow – equivalence – circuit

Historical Ontology of the Photographic Image

A. Ontology – historical ontology – social ontology – political ontology: »Ontology« is a word that trade publishers do not like, as they think it jargon. »Historical ontology« is a term that philosophers do not like, because they think it a contradiction in terms. If it is historical, it is about determinate change, so it cannot be ontological, the argument goes, since being itself as such is unchanging, even when construed temporally as pure becoming or even as historicity. From the standpoint of critical theory, on the other hand, historical ontology is one of the few phrases within which »ontology« becomes speakable, albeit with anxious reservations.¹¹ So let me quote Ian Hacking, the Anglo-Foucauldian philosopher of science, from the opening pages of his collection of essays entitled *Historical Ontology*: »»Historical ontology« is not, at first sight, a happy phrase, and yet, [...] if we are concerned with the coming into being of the very possibility of some objects, what is that if not historical?«¹² *The coming into being of the very possibility of some objects*: What else is this but what is at stake in the current transformations of photography – despite the awkwardness of the term »objects« here? However, such an ontology – historical ontology of photography – is not thereby, in the currently fashionable phrase, »political ontology«, as proposed by, for example, Ariella Azoulay in *Civil Imagination. A Political Ontology of Photography*, which ontologizes the argument of her previous book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. »[T]he ontology of the photograph«, Azoulay declares, »is, fundamentally, political.«¹³ These books are powerful, broadly Arendtian arguments for a political function of photography, yet the ontologization of these arguments negates the historical character of politics itself in the act of grounding its openness in a general idea of »the civil«, derived from a broadly Heideggerian conception of being-with-others. »A civil discourse«, Azoulay writes, »is one that suspends the

point of view of governmental power and the nationalist characteristics that enable it to divide the governed from one another and to set its factions against one another.«¹⁴ It is connected to photography insofar as photography's ontology is taken to be that of politics itself, defined here, exclusively, in a generically civil manner as »an ontology of the many, operating in public, in motion [...] bound to the manner in which human beings exist – look, talk, act – with one another, and *with objects*.«¹⁵ Yet is this suspension of power and division not actually, in a certain way, a disavowal of politics itself?¹⁶

Historical ontology, on the other hand, grounds existence in the temporalities of historically specific forms of social being, by virtue of which social beings become historical beings or acquire a historical existence in the first place. Historical ontology of photography, as a shifting set of technologically articulated social forms of image production, is grounded in techno-scientific relations to nature, rather than the civil as such, which, in its Arendtian sense, remains an ambiguous category, reimagining the structure of a pre-modern political philosophy within the modern. These temporalities make politics possible, but the politics that they make possible are not thereby themselves ontological. Rather, it is the specific forms of openness of social temporalities to politically contradictory forms and practices, under determinate and changing historical conditions, that sets the terms of politics as such.¹⁷ In this regard, the politics of photography today is situated less in the shrinking civic space of citizenry, as Azoulay maintains, than in the reappropriation of the archive as the now »organizing commodity-condition of image and text« alike, lying in wait for all images, »particularly those – the majority – that receive no sustained circulation.«¹⁸ Under these conditions, »political ontology« functions, as so often elsewhere, as a theoretical means of avoiding recognition of the crushing historical weight of capitalist social relations within the present: the corporate privatization of the archive.

B. Photography – photograph – photographic image: The point here is that photography is a historical system, a rapidly socially and geo-politically expanding system, of ever greater psychic intensity or subjective affect. Its previously imagined ontological unity was secured primarily via its metonymic modeling on the individual photograph; but that form of unity was always imaginary.¹⁹ As a social form it is historical, and hence it can only ever possess a temporary distributive unity produced by its retrospective totalization from the standpoint of a particular situated present. This is the logical form of unity of all historical concepts.²⁰ In this respect, the individual photograph, in its spatio-temporal singularity (albeit imagistic reproducibility) is not only a ghostly residue of the past (indexically), it is also the image of photography's own past. Rarely are photographs shown today in isolation as individual images, rather than in relational groups or rapidly passing functional contexts. The phrase »photographic image« registers this ambiguous state between photography in its received senses and digital imagery in general, to whose general condition photographic images increasingly approximate. It is true, as Kittler recognized, that »the general digitalization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media«, at the level of their material substrata. However, it does not follow from this that, as he also thought, »a total media link on a digital basis will erase the very concept of medium«,²¹ since, as a concept grasping a complex social practice »medium« resists physicalist reduction. In fact, ironically, the ontological positivity of »mediums as arts« was already fundamentally eroded, prior to digitalization, in a quite different way, via the destruction of the institutional systems of authority that policed the regulation of artistic practices during what we know as »the sixties«. The post-medium condition is as much a social as a technical condition: a contradictory social condition of simultaneous tendentially increasing nominalism, or individualism, and massification.

Kittler thought that »sound and image, voice and text are reduced to surface effects«, functioning as no more than »interface« for consumers.²² However, these different interfaces themselves become media to the extent that they acquire the material and social stability of authorized systems of reproduction. Kittler's media world is a world of processes without practices. The flow of data and the flow of images are not identical, even when the latter has its material condition in the former. Practices of image production may increasingly depend upon the processing of data, but the logic of practices and the logic of data processing are not the same. Digital image production is always an articulation of these two logics; an articulation that takes place, in capitalist societies, within the overarching structural economic and social logics of capital accumulation. The naturalistic imaging of those logics by Marx in the late 19th century, as the »second nature« of the value form, prefigures something of the information theory of the 1940s, which underlay the German media philosophies of the 1980s and continues to structure the popular imagination of »data« today. The digital photographic image, we might say, is located at a junction between the political economy of equivalence and the flow of data. This is a junction that the techno-economic determinism of the popular imagination – adopting the standpoint of capital's own, abstractly systemic perspective – views through a naturalization of equivalence (the fetishism of commodity values) and the flow (always part of a metaphysics of nature) alike, in the reduction of digital images to the (commodifiable but not necessarily commodified) data from which they derive.

C. Flow – equivalence – circuit: Insofar as »the flow« presents itself within recent discourses on digitalization as an ontological term for thinking the mutual ground of the flow of data and the flow of images, it returns us, philosophically, to Heraclitus's proposition, »All things flow«, at the beginning of the 5th cen-

ture BCE, the deep source of Whitehead's more recent concept of »process«.²³ The concept of flow continues to function, most fundamentally, at the level of claims about being, what is, or its functional substitutes. The cultural force of its current uses in different domains – physics, communication theory, genetics, sociology, software design, politics; it is everywhere – derives from the purported ontological depth that underlies this variety. In the idea of the flow the very idea of being is dissolved into and displaced by the idea of time. *Flow is an ontological image of time.* Furthermore, as Heraclitus's famous fragment regarding the river into which one cannot step twice indicates, this was, at source, an image of nature: the river. And it remains so. Indeed, the prevalent image of the latest cultural-technology of flow – online »streaming« – still derives from the very same, crudely naturalistic imagistic source: the stream.

This naturalization of time is ideological in the same way in which all philosophical naturalisms have functioned ideologically since the emergence of the modern concept of history in the 18th century, in that it represses or covers over social and historical differentiations. As such, it represses or covers over the qualitative distinctiveness of social being and historical time (the new) alike. In this respect, recent technological reinforcements of the image of flow as the ontological image of time have reached almost hysterical ideological heights, in proclaiming themselves to be new. There is nonetheless a truth to this situation, as there is to ideology in general: namely, its expression of the powerlessness of currently constituted social subjects to reappropriate these processes to the practices that constitute them, or to dissipate the illusion of their character as what Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (following Martin Luther) called »second nature«.²⁴

»Equivalence« and »flow«, on the one hand, and »circuit«, »circulation«, »cycle« (»Kreislau«, »Umlauf«, »Zirkulation«, »Zyklus«) – aspects of the temporalization of the circle (»Kreis«)

– on the other, are terms that are central to Volumes 1 and 2 of Marx's *Capital*, respectively. Equivalence is the quantitative basis of commodity exchange in capitalist societies and hence stands at the core of the commodity form. In *Volume 1* of *Capital*, entitled *The Process of Production of Capital*, commodity exchange is an exchange of equivalents or equal values. While »flow« (»das Fließen«) and the related term »flux« (»der Fluss« – a word for measuring the flow of a liquid; now also data) appear as part of a set of terms describing the linear aspect of the temporality of capital accumulation, along with »succession«, »continuity«, »movement«, »process«, »interval« and related terms. All of these terms evoke an Aristotelian conception of physical time, which naturalizes the experience of capitalism as one of subjection to an objective structural process: subjection to the movements of the value form, or subjection to value as the value formation of subjectivity.²⁵

Circularity or the circuit, on the other hand, is the temporal shape of the structure of reproduction, in *Capital Volume 2. The Process of Circulation of Capital*. This is a process that Marx breaks down into the relations between three distinct circuits in the first part of *Volume 2*: of money capital (Chapter 1), productive capital (Chapter 2) and commodity capital (Chapter 3), respectively, before treating »The Reproduction and Circulation of the Total Social Capital« (the title of Part 3) independently, as a whole. The wider *Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole* (»Der Gesamtprozess«) – the title of *Capital Volume 3* – subsequently appears as a systematically articulated set of connections between various processes of exchange (equivalence) and production (flow) which capital undergoes in its various circuits of »metamorphoses«, in that apparently mysterious process of »self-expansion« otherwise known as accumulation.

The difference of the circuits of the »metamorphoses« of the functional forms of capital from the flow or the flux is that the circuits return to their starting point (quantitatively enriched or

depleted, $M-M'$, as profit or loss), while the flow of value moves forward, indefinitely, entropically, until subjected to the »reflux« (»Rückfluss«) of circulation – feedback – otherwise known as reinvestment. It is a distinctive feature of Marx's analysis of capital that it combines these three forms – of equivalence, flow and circuit – as potentially contradictory and crisis-ridden tendencies, whereby blockages (»under-consumption«) or floods (»over-production«) in the process of circulation become threats to the maintenance of the flow itself. The theory of the process of circulation is itself a theory of crisis.²⁶

From the standpoint of the critical photographic tradition, epitomized here by Roberts, the possibility of the continuation of photography presents itself, increasingly melancholically, as the (thwarted) problem of how to still – to interrupt, temporarily to arrest – the flow; or at least, how to think about and understand such a temporary arrest; how to articulate, or rearticulate, the structure of its experience. But what if the technical conditions of image production are no longer politically amenable to this Benjaminian binary of temporal continuity and cut, duration and ephemeral eternity? What if the moment of stillness is not so much a gateway into another metaphysical space of experience, as something more like a paused moment in a circuit of expanded reproduction? A pause, the meaning of which is not determined in an avant-garde fashion as interruption, but as the condition of a transformed production? What if the value of distributed images derives as much from what they can provoke into production, as where they come from (indexically); not as informational commodities, providing data about the preferences of senders and receivers, but as conditions for the production of new objects, images and practices? After all, is this not the meaning of Benjamin's own productivist concept of historical reception as the afterlife of the object?²⁷

This leads me to a concluding hypothesis about the status of the photograph as a »still«, which I repurpose from Roland

Barthes' 1970 essay, »Third Meaning. Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills«, taking my cue from, but transforming the argument of, Rosalind Krauss's reactive response to her melancholy recognition of the reality of the »post-medium condition«, in her 1999 essay »Reinventing the Medium«. ²⁸ I do this not in order to further Krauss's idiosyncratic thought – about an individualistic »reinvention« of the category of the medium (via James Coleman's slide-shows), which is in denial of the reality to which it responds – but rather in order to displace the theoretical form upon which it relies (Roland Barthes' account of a »third meaning«) from her location of it in Coleman's alleged »invention« of a new medium to the condition of photography and the photographic image as such. What this means is the transformation of the photograph into »the still« – a category which is itself transformed by the replacement of its original context, the film (hence the still as the definition of the »filmic«), by the data flow.

Stills

The hypothesis is simple: namely, that under the condition of the digitalized social flow of images photography loses its prior ontological status as a medium, but rather than becoming ontologically reduced to the materiality of digitalized data, it takes on instead the ontological and semiotic status of a production of »stills«, in the technical-semiotic sense of the term coined by Barthes to refer to a carrier of an obscure »third meaning« (beyond signification and significance). These are stills that derive their meaning as stills not from their extraction from the narrative continuity of the flow of images (canonically, the film) – carrying with them a diegetic horizon derived from such an extraction – but rather from their status as »the *inside* of the fragment«. ²⁹

»[T]he still is not a sample«, Barthes wrote, »but a quotation [...]: at once parodic and disseminatory.« The still is the fragment, not of the flow from which it has been »stilled«, but, of »a second text *whose existence never exceeds the fragment* [...].«³⁰ This is Barthes' semiotic variant of philosophical Romanticism – his first photographic metaphysics, before the melancholy theology of indexicality in *Camera Lucida*. It is this »presence of a second, diegetic text that does not exceed the fragment itself« that animates the photographic image as still after what Rosalind Krauss acknowledged as the »undeniable fact« of the »obsolescence« of photography as a medium.³¹ There is an ontological reversal here of the primacy of the photograph within the technology of film: The data flow has material primacy over the photographic image as still, yet in its social-ontological or historical-existential aspects, the still image escapes the logic of the data of which it is made, to achieve a peculiar self-sufficiency which nonetheless (unlike the simple photograph or the figurative painting) contains a diegetic horizon in »the possibilities of configuration« of the elements in the image itself.³²

Where then does this leave the medium-specific conception and practice of photography promoted by, for example, Jeff Wall, as a *métier* or specific field of expertise, occupying its own, enduringly insulated artistic zone of photographic positivity, in a structurally bifurcated field of contemporary art?³³ Rather than having a self-sufficient artistic positivity, we might suggest, such a melancholy »shadow-medium« functions instead primarily to reinstitute the conditions of its own negation. Both its own »shadow« meaning and the artistic and technological modernity of what has followed – the becoming »a still« of the photographic image – are thereby constantly evoked, in their difference from »the photograph«, as markers of the differential character of historical time itself.

Notes

* Prior to its delivery as a Forum Lecture at the Department of Art History, University of Basel, 30 October 2019, earlier versions of parts of this text were presented to the »(No-On) Photography« conference at the Düsseldorf Photo Festival, Hochschule Düsseldorf/Düsseldorf University of Applied Science, 24 February 2018, and to a plenary session of the 21st International Congress of Aesthetics, »Possible Worlds of Contemporary Aesthetics. Aesthetics Between History, Geography and Media«, University of Belgrade, 23 July 2019. I am grateful to Mareike Foecking for the invitation to the Düsseldorf event, which provided the occasion for me to return to this topic. This essay was first published in Peter Osborne, *Crisis as Form*, London and New York 2022.

¹ Peter Osborne, »The Distributed Image« [2014–15], in: id., *The Postconceptual Condition. Critical Essays*, London and New York 2018, pp. 135–145.

² For prevalence of »the flow« as a cultural condition, see Boris Groys, »Entering the Flow«, in: id., *In the Flow*, London and New York 2016, pp. 9–22; Groys's gaze is characteristically cosmically detached. The phenomenological aspects of his account remain strictly descriptive.

³ See Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* [1985], trans. Nancy Ann Roth, Minneapolis 2011, pp. 4–6.

⁴ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* [1986], trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford 1999, p. xi.

⁵ John Roberts, *Photography and its Violations*, New York and Chichester 2014, p. 95.

⁶ See *ibid.*, pp. 94–99.

⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106 (emphasis added).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁰ I am thinking, in particular, of Andreas Gursky's *Engadin I* (1995) (something of a literalization of the metaphor of »glacial« contemplation) and *Les Mées* (2016), an image of fields of solar panels covering the hills of the French province of that name, with the Alps touristically perched in the background. The earlier *The Aletsch Glacier* (1990) does not so much invite »glacial contemplation« than present itself as a mimesis – a reframing – of the Romantic sublime.

¹¹ See Theodor W. Adorno, »The Actuality of Philosophy« [1931] in: *Telos* 31, 1977, pp. 120–133, p. 128. Adorno's self-declared »ontological reorientation of the philosophy of history«, he maintained, was nonetheless »not ›historical ontology‹«, but rather »a dialectical overcoming of the usual antithesis of nature and history«; see Theodor W. Adorno, »The Idea of Natural History« [1932], trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, in: *Telos*, no. 60, pp. 111–125, esp. pp. 111, 117; Furthermore, insofar as dialectical logic itself might be considered ontological (as it was by Hegel), it was for Adorno no more than »the ontology of a false condition«; see Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, London 1973; p. 11 (translation amended: »die Ontologie des falschen Zustandes«); for Adorno's inclusion of »historical ontology« in his growing phobia about the terminology of ontology derived from the affirmative (anti-historical) ideological function of ontology in Martin Heidegger's work, see Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* [1964], trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will, London 2002; The subtitle omitted from the English edition is *On German Ideology*. Today's »object-oriented ontology«, one might say, represents a continuation of this general anti-historical (hence naturalizing) ideological function under the newly internationalized theoretical conditions of a reaction against the supposedly untrammelled constructivism of French post-structuralisms. Once again, history is repressed by ontology.

¹² Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, Cambridge, MA and London 2002, pp. 1–2.

¹³ Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination. A Political Ontology of Photography*, London and New York 2012, p. 14; see also Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York 2008.

¹⁴ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p. 2.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁶ In France, political ontology is a left-Heideggerian genre. However, the point above applies equally to Jean-Luc Nancy's »communist« variant of ontological affirmation as it does to Hannah Arendt's liberal-communitarian democratic ontology; as indeed to Heidegger's own early philosophical fascism; see Jean-Luc Nancy, »La Comparution/The Compareance. From the Existence of »Communism« to the Community of »Existence««, trans. Tracey B. Strong, in: *Political Theory* 20/3, 1993, pp. 371–398; In contrast, and in contrast to some of their followers (and the reception of their thought in Italy, in particular), Deleuze and Guattari avoid the phrase »political ontology« since for them »before being, there is politics«; see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis 1987, p. 203 (translation amended: »*Avant l'être, il y a la politique.*«); However, whether this formulation avoids or deepens the problem is a moot point.

¹⁷ See Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time. Modernity and Avant-Garde* [1995], London and New York 2011.

¹⁸ Roberts, *Photography and its Violations*, p. 113; see also Boris Groys, »Art in the Age of Biopolitics. From Artwork to Art Documentation«, in: id., *Art Power*, London and New York 2008, pp. 53–64; see also Peter Osborne, »Archive as Afterlife and Life of Art«, in: id., *The Postconceptual Condition*, pp. 123–131.

¹⁹ See the passages on »The historical ontology of the photographic image« in: Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, London and New York 2000, pp. 33–46; see also Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All. Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London and New York 2013, pp. 123–125.

²⁰ For the logical distinction between »distributive« and »collective« forms of unity, derived from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and its application to photography, see the chapter »Photographic Ontology, Infinite Exchange« in: Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, pp. 117–131.

²¹ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, pp. 1–2.

²² Ibid., p. 1.

²³ »Mathematical physics translates the saying of Heraclitus, »All things flow«, into its own language. It then becomes, All things are vectors.« (Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology. The Gifford Lectures, 1927–28*, New York 1978, p. 309).

²⁴ Hegel's discussion of second nature appears within the section on »habit« at the end of the first sub-section of »Subjective Mind«, in the *Philosophy of Mind* in the *Encyclopaedia*: »Anthropology. The Soul«: »Habit has rightly been called a second nature; nature, because it is an immediate being of the soul; a second nature, because it is an immediacy posited by the soul, incorporating and moulding the bodiliness that pertains to the determinations of feeling as such and to the determinacies of representation and of the will in so far as they are embodied [...].« (Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace and Arnold V. Miller, revised with and introduction by Michael J. Inwood, Oxford 2007, p. 131, §410).

²⁵ See Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, London 1976.

²⁶ See Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume Two*, trans. David Fernbach, London 1978, final sections of Chapters 15, 16 and 20; see Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume Three*, trans. David Fernbach, London 1981, Chapters 25–34.

²⁷ See Walter Benjamin, »Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian« [1937], in: id., *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA 2002, pp. 260–302.

²⁸ Rosalind Krauss, »Reinventing the Medium«, in: *Critical Inquiry*, 25, 1999, pp. 289–305; The recognition itself comes earlier, in Krauss's 1992 Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture on Marcel Broodthaers; see Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea. Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London, 1999.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, »Third Meaning. Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills« [1970], in: id., *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, Glasgow 1977, p. 67.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Krauss, »Reinventing the Medium«, p. 289.

³² See Barthes, »Third Meaning«, p. 66.

³³ See Jeff Wall, »Depiction, Object, Event«, in: *Afterall*, 16, 2007, pp. 5–17.

LIQUIDITY. THE AESTHETICS OF AN ECONOMIC CATEGORY

Simon Baier

I.

Liquidity as a trope encompasses at least two different semantic fields: On the one hand, the Latin term »liquidus« – in English »liquid« or »flowing« – denotes a state of matter. From the 17th century onward, however, it also refers to an economic status: A company, a bank or a private individual for example have liquidity if they are able to make payments on time. They are able to meet obligations when they come due. For this to be possible, so-called »liquid funds« such as cash must be available. The concept of liquidity thus indicates a connection between natural conditions – understood as purely material processes – and economic ones. Yet such economic structures of value creation are considered to go beyond purely material states. Or, to put it another way: One could also interpret this leap from a material to an economic level as the genesis of a »second nature«. In Marx, the differentiation between first and second nature appears as the opposition of the »natural form« and the »value form« of commodities: »Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values [»Wertgegenständlichkeit« in the German original, S.B.]; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects.«¹ Liquidity as a material state, which is perceptible to the senses and thus an »aesthetic« phenomenon in a Kantian reading, and liquidity as an economic status are therefore to be considered two separate things. And yet, the image of flow or flux clearly governs Marx's take on the process of capital accumulation. Capital accumulation as flow can either progress entropically as a flow that is as smooth as pos-

sible or – through re-investment as feedback – lead in the end to a closed cycle. It seems that in order to grasp the second nature of the economic state, the material flow of matter must be deployed as an image. The image mediates between the two otherwise separate spheres. It plays the game of »as if« and thereby reconnects a purely material aspect of human affairs with the realm of the economic.

I would like to use this double articulation of the »liquid« to ask how and if in the course of modernism an aesthetics of liquidity can be defined as a form of mediation, a mediation between the materiality and form of the artwork on the one hand and the economy as a process of value creation on the other. I will follow this question along with the help of an approximately 30-minute-long video installation by Hito Steyerl entitled *Liquidity Inc.* dating from 2014. To begin with, I will focus on the structure of the video solely, leaving aside its complex installational properties, which vary between different exhibitions. I will come back to these at the end of the essay.

The video itself starts out with a quote from martial artist Bruce Lee. Lee asks of the addressed subjects to »be water« and »to become water«. On the one hand, these quotes call for an ideal of absolute adaptability but also of resilience. Both characteristics are related to human subjects. Liquidity is thus meant to be literally embodied. This is a first and crucial dimension of the liquid. On the other hand, in Lee's quotes the liquid is also connected to a certain formal feature: formlessness. For a contemporary subject to become resilient and strong, armed against all adversities in the world, it has to relinquish any specific shape or form. The liquid is therefore tied to a specific ideal of renouncing all types of figurations that could lead to an ultimate subjection by means of identification. And yet within the montage of the video, the aesthetic ideal of formlessness, articulated via the voice of Bruce Lee, is not related to water as a natural element but to its visual CGI rendering.

The structure of digital technology, which enables the calculation of images and thereby their simulation, is the framework within which formlessness on the one hand and nature on the other are made visible in the video. Analogous to the second nature of economic flux, the visual representation of nature – as suggested at the beginning of the video – is only accessible via its digital simulation and not as an immediate presence. Water is thus not made visible by indexical means – as it would be via analog photography or film. Its digital simulation does not need the visible world as its primary cause.² Steyerl's video starts out with the creation of a virtual vector space: Step by step, a blank monochrome screen is defined as a space in which water gradually appears against a blue sky. After its completion – when the digital flow of water has been set in motion –, the title of the work is shown on the screen: *Liquidity Inc.* points to a possible form of business, an »incorporation« of liquidity, anticipating the possible economic dimension of the flow as a process of exchange and as a value creation process through the accumulation of capital. Within the video's narration, *Liquidity Inc.* designates a specific, though fictional company as a hub of capital accumulation. To become water – as it is asked at the very beginning of the video of the subject and its organic body – is related to two different means of achieving it: digital technology as a possible extension of the self and its lifeworld and the economic corporation as a second means to extend the self.

But the video's title also refers to artistic production itself, which is shown here as a special form of creative entrepreneurship. Artistic entrepreneurship must act with the help of smart forms of branding to assert itself on the global art market. The work's title therefore is also a logo that heightens its visibility, online and on site. It points to the contemporary imperative that a work of art – and its artists – must invent a special form of flow or the possibility of flow, not only to be seen, but also to

create a continuous growth in visibility on a global scale via search engines and social media. In this regard, the structure of Steyerl's work might be able to operate on both levels – as a video installation traveling globally but also via video stills, installation shots and short clips of the video distributed online. Martial arts, entrepreneurship, digital technology and fine arts thus form an alliance. They are placed on a level of equivalence which enables their mutual exchange.

After the opening credits, the video begins to tell the story of financial analyst Jacob Wood who was sacked during the 2008 financial crisis and – as a result of the crisis – became a commentator at kickboxing competitions. The video's narration thus suggests – along the lines of its title – a connection between the ideal of an adaptable and resilient subject and the ideal of capital accumulation as flux. To be more precise, the structurally occurring crises within capitalist accumulation demand of human subjects an ever-increasing fluidity, especially when it comes to planning one's life or when it comes to the development of expertise or skills. The flow of exchange and the fluid subject, who is forced to reside within this second nature in its struggle for survival, are both confronted with recurring crises which seem to happen naturally.

In the video, these crises are compared to natural flows of water which at times take on the form of catastrophes, like floods or tsunamis. A masked weather commentator talks about market developments in the guise of a comical weather forecast and thereby links economic forms of flux back to forces of nature. The form of economic crisis in particular is tied to excessive forms of water flows destroying human environments. In this way – at least on a speculative level – the gap between a first and a second nature of flows appears to be erased. The trope of liquidity allows the second nature of economic flow to be compared with the first nature of flow as a planetary »climate« primarily made possible by water. The

montage of different contexts and semantic fields of fluidity and flux thereby suggests that the second nature of economy exploits first nature and uses it as a tacit resource. In this sense, the weather as a continuous form of crisis that appears to cause a series of natural disasters is to be seen as an effect of capitalist accumulation itself. The natural situation – the planetary climate crisis – and the economic climate are no longer linked only by metaphors or metonymic relations. They materially interpenetrate and directly condition each other to indicate a collapse between natural history and human history.³

2.

For the moment, I don't want to further explicate these implicit theses the video construes on a visual level. Rather, I would like to pursue the concept of fluidity itself as a specific relation between material, technology and form in Steyerl's work of art and relate it to the history and theory of modernism. And I would like to show how the »liquid« or »liquefaction« is always connected in a certain way with an economic dimension of art. For this purpose, I will come back to the first opening minutes of the video.

After Bruce Lee, taking the role of the philosopher or at least the role of a life coach, initially gave out the basic rules for a successful art of living in difficult times – to become water – water itself begins to talk in the video: »I am the water« is projected against the background of a CGI-rendered moving surface of endless waves. Analogous to Steyerl's *Factory of the Sun* (2015), in which sunlight is introduced as a cosmic force which, on the one hand, produces life itself and, on the other hand, can at the same time be channeled infinitely into economic circles of accumulation, here water is articulated as a natural element that – even before we can choose to »become water« – already permeates all

spheres of life, even against our will. In *Factory of the Sun*, Steyerl quite clearly follows George Bataille's dictum that sunlight should be considered an excessive force constituting a general economy of which the capitalist economy is only a small part.⁴ Capitalism's endeavor to channel the whole of sunlight into a complete feedback cycle of reinvestment might be bound to fail. In the video, sunlight nonetheless figures as an infinite natural resource for a capitalist expansion aiming to permeate every cell of the body. Sunlight appears as not finite, and in analogy, capitalist expansion can be projected as possibly endless as well.

In *Liquidity Inc.*, the fiction of an endless resource of nature, exceeding every human perspective and thereby every form of human intention, is already an important feature. In the voice-over, water is described as an extraterrestrial element that in a prehistoric past colonized the planet and not only provides the material base of human bodies, but is indispensable for the technological infrastructures supporting these bodies, be it water pipes or touch screens. For Steyerl, the liquid itself as fundamentally formless is necessary to constitute and maintain all forms of life on the planet and human life in particular. It is defined as a force that is inside the subject, but at the same time exceeds the subject and its intentionality: It is an objective force to which the subject must surrender instead of controlling it. After Jacob Wood – the former financial analyst become commentator at kickboxing competitions – has written by hand Bruce Lee's dictum – »BECOME WATER« – on a notepad of the fictional firm *Liquidity Inc.*, it is in the next moment erased by a digital image of a water surface washing over the written text. The aim to maintain oneself as a subject – and with it to maintain oneself as a body – is tied here to a paradoxical force that destroys the body's possibilities of inscription and thereby its means of marking out specific intentions. Liquefaction itself takes control by means of digital technology, in the end dissolving the touchable materiality of the paper itself.

The finite format of the paper blurs with the simulation of liquid and disappears within the seemingly infinite new support of a digital image field. I would like to suggest that this function of the liquid refers to a specific tradition within the history of modernism that could be connected to what Clement Greenberg once called »Post Painterly Abstraction«.⁵ In his catalog text for the exhibition of the same name at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1964, Greenberg argued for a new tendency in painting that, as he claims, might be connected to Heinrich Wölfflin's category of the painterly the latter had outlined in his book *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (1915). Famously, Wölfflin asserts that Western art history should be understood as a history of an alternation of styles spiraling forward between polar opposites such as the linear and the painterly.⁶ In his essay, Greenberg surprisingly characterizes abstract expressionism as a rather classical form of painting and relates it to linearity and closed forms, as Wölfflin does with regard to Renaissance painting. What might come after abstract expressionism must therefore be analogous to what Wölfflin defined as the Baroque. »Post Painterly Abstraction« is defined by Greenberg – in distinction to abstract expressionism – by a specific »openness«. The new »post-painterly« style of painting stands out with certain techniques of liquid paint application that Greenberg connects above all with Helen Frankenthaler's »soakings [...] of paint«,⁷ along with Sam Francis's »liquifying touch«.⁸ According to Greenberg, Frankenthaler's liquefaction exceeds Jackson Pollock's drippings, because the critic deems the application of paint in Frankenthaler's case as completely detached from the intentions of a subject. The soakings of paint make the painting itself, as he writes, »anonymous«.⁹ Since it is anonymous, it is no longer a possible expression of an unconscious – and it thereby escapes the traps of surrealism – which according to Greenberg is still tied to the problem of narration. The color

gradient and thus the artwork's overall form is largely given over to the flow of the paint itself, which Frankenthaler confines to a limited format only after the painting process is done. If we relate Frankenthaler's pictorial form to Marx's economic descriptions of flow, then her strategy appears as deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, color is submitted to an entropic process; on the other hand, Frankenthaler's flow of color is ultimately enclosed in a »tableau form«, a limited work destined to circulate as a commodity on the art market.

Within the history of the neo-avantgardes in the United States, these post-painterly abstractions and their pictorial forms of the liquid subsequently led to various types of what could be called »post-medium abstractions«. Against this background, Robert Smithson's *Glue Pour* (1969), a photograph of a can of glue poured out on a heap of earth, can be read as an extremization of the entropic function of the formlessness of the liquid, already present in Frankenthaler's stains. In contrast to Smithson's position, a systemic confinement of the liquid in closed cycles was articulated around the same time. Think of Hans Haacke's different forms of installed water cycles as in *Circulation* (1969) or Mierle Laderman Ukeles's performances of *Maintenance Art* as in the famous *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (1973) and *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside* (1973), in which the liquid finds a new use value for the cleaning of an institution, in this case the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Within the history of modernism, the liquid as material and process can thus be regarded as a symptom of the dissolution of the artwork as a singular and closed-off object in a post-medium condition. It is tied to the formless, attacking the specificity of certain mediums by specific figurations of flow. Such flows of liquids contradict the image of an intentional subject who is able to control the production of forms. And yet, at the very same time – and Haacke's and Laderman Ukeles's positions are taken here as a symptom for the

second part of this dialectal process – the liquid and its flows also stand for a possible integration of the work of art in infra-structural processes of maintenance and feedback loops of systemic control. The liquid in the post-medium condition, I would like to argue, holds an ambivalent position on the level of materiality, of form and of processes, a position oscillating between anonymous dissolution and systemic integration, between entropic loss and integral utilization within a new environmental.

3.

If one analyzes Steyerl's installation *Liquidity Inc.* against the background of these traditions, it becomes clear that the liquid needs to be read in a twofold fashion: On the one hand, it stands for the outside of form – understood as an intentional form that can be related to a subject. And as such, it also stands for the outside of a specific artistic format, like the tableau form of painting. On the other hand, when it comes to Steyerl's video, the liquid is not articulated as a transgressive force per se which could be aligned with nature. In the video, the polar contrast between entropic dissolution and systemic circulation indicated by the liquid is precisely resolved by the digital simulation of liquid, which is calculated and calculable, yet constantly produces visual forms of dissolution. Here, crisis and calculation – as in the field of economics – are not opposites but structurally interwoven. For Steyerl, formlessness – as an abstract dissolution of limited figures or as the actual effect of a flood catastrophe – symbolizes a crisis of both: economic processes of capital accumulation and digital technology. Water certainly appears abundantly in Steyerl's video as a representational effect of digital simulation. But liquefaction is also what digital technology achieves on a structural level. In many instances,

the video images are shown as malleable material for digital manipulation. At one point, the shape of a drinking glass is continuously distorted and warped, as if the water inside of it liquified the solidity of its container. In other instances, the digital images are continuously superimposed, stretched, compressed or interspersed with digital water bubbles dilating and blurring the screen of representation. Steyerl's images combine and interweave different contexts and situations. They morph into one another, foregoing the means of montage in a classical sense. They rather glide into each other. The digital production tools articulate the surface of the video image as something soft: It warps back and forth; the surface builds up and recedes. Such digital liquefaction of the image clearly goes beyond the mere rendering of water surfaces. It also suggests a possible circulation of the images through different formats and platforms.¹⁰ Digital masses of water flow into documentary images, allegorically indicating the fluid status of images in Steyerl's video as a whole. Different types of screens appear in *Liquidity Inc.*: There are of course old-fashioned TV sets, featuring in different environments. And of course, TV is referred to by the weather forecast or the sports reportage on kickboxing events. But there are also the surfaces of iPads and smartphones. As framing structures within the video image, they initiate a variety of mise-en-abymes. Like the TV sets, they act not only as interfaces in the literal sense but as links connecting different narratives and motives: Images depicted on such screens can overflow the entire video space from within a particular device. By these images, different semantic contexts are merged, for example when a flat screen with the clip of a hurricane is pasted into the background of a kickboxing competition. Characters from certain sections of the video – like a masked weatherman – migrate through other sections and scenes. Steyerl uses hashtags dispersed throughout the video to insinuate the possibility that the images shown may be linked to social media.

The images in *Liquidity Inc.* are therefore not only images that depict different kinds of liquids. They are also images that in and by themselves appear to be malleable and manipulable. They can be channeled through different formats and wander through a variety of contexts and infrastructures. In addition, this flux of images may also befall the subjects within the narration. The video's main protagonist – James Wood – is identified as a migrating subject. The Vietnamese Wood was adopted as a child by Americans during the Vietnam War. In Steyerl's narrative, this story of migration extends to the economic crisis of 2008, which forced Wood to change his professional environment and his economic status. Migration is thereby articulated in a twofold way: It can deracinate subjects from their culture or even their families. But it can also cut them off from their expertise and skills. It sometimes brings them to the brink of breakdown since it forces the subjects to continuously reinvent their identities. In this way, the subjects of the video are placed in an analog position to the structure of the images, which are also constitutively unstable, always in motion, changing their framings and contexts.

Steyerl's video thus articulates the idea of a »liquid subject«. This idea has three main implications: A. It designates a subject who disposes of a certain capital and is therefore able to make payments due. B. It designates a subject who in the struggle on the social stage shows itself to be as flexible and fluid as possible in order not to be knocked out or beaten, like the loser in a boxing competition. C. In Steyerl's video, subjects are treated as images of themselves, or rather as a multitude of images. They are doubled, multiplied and dispersed throughout the work. They become distributed into different scenarios within the narrative. This condition entails an imperative: Any subject should be in as many places as possible simultaneously in order to achieve a maximum of presence. The economic imperative of flexibility thereby implies a digital imperative with regard to *the flux of subjects as images*.

But doesn't this imply that the video must make this claim for itself, if it is taken as a subject? The fluid work of art under the conditions of the immediate present, then, is not simply one that deploys real fluids, as has been the case from the post-painterly tradition to the intermedia use of fluids in the post-medium condition. Instead, a genuinely liquid work of art under digital conditions must re-articulate the figure of flow in terms of information theory, the flow of matter being reconceived as a flow data. Secondly, such a work of art must determine this flow of data as a possible means to accumulate economic value. Not only does every flow of data – in order to actually take place – need energy and money, it is also bound to accumulate money so that new forms of informational flux can be initiated. The flow of information as digital data is therefore connected to an economic sphere. The formless work of art, which takes on the imperative articulated at the outset of *Liquidity Inc.* by Bruce Lee, cannot simply »become water« or use liquid substances in literal terms. Rather, it must be able to flow through a series of digital platforms. It must deploy and initiate digital *and* economic varieties of flow.¹¹ To be sure, as forms of a second nature, these varieties of flow are never completely to be severed from the material or energetic resources of a first nature. These two forms of nature – as two forms of flow – can never be completely disentangled or conceptualized as entirely separate realms.

4.

When applying the imperative of digital and economic flow directly to *Liquidity Inc.*, one needs to acknowledge that the work is shown in a static installation format in an institutional context. By its very nature, the installation appears to be exempt from the kind of digital flux between formats that Steyerl's

video itself enacts. Rather, the installation's topological structure – since it is tied to a specific site of exhibition – articulates the video as belonging to a class of images for which immobility – and not mobility – implies an accumulation of value.¹² The poles of flux and immobility then can be related to the two main means of artistic production deployed by Steyerl as an artist: digital technology and the form of installation.

That the post-medium condition of art – with the reign of installation as the major artistic form – should be linked to the implementation of digital technology, is a fundamental problem of art history, to which Rosalind Krauss made significant contributions. Krauss understood the post-medium condition as a universal horizon for the production and reception of art by the end of the 20th century. For Krauss, an important factor why art has become subjected to a post-medium condition is precisely the development of computer technology. Since it is the computer as a medium that can absorb and simulate all other media, digital technology marks the beginning of a new paradigm for artistic production and its reflection. Krauss states that digital technology is not just one new medium within a historical succession of the development of new media. It throws all other mediums into a different and new situation of obsolescence: »[I]t is precisely the onset of higher orders of technology – ›robot, computer‹ – which allows us, by rendering older techniques outmoded, to grasp the inner complexity of the mediums those techniques support.«¹³ This rather short and elliptic statement has far-reaching consequences for what could be thought of as critical art within the post-medium condition. On the one hand, by this very token, digital technology is conceptualized as fatal. Its constant development makes older techniques obsolete. But this process does not occur in the way as for example, photography impacted painting in the 19th and early 20th century. Digital technology is not simply another, more advanced way of producing images. It rather

articulates a structural divide between itself and all other artistic techniques used and reflected upon before. According to Krauss, the advent of digital technology opens a mode of both retrospective and utopian reflection with regard to outmoded techniques and media. In Krauss's view, digital technology itself is exempt from such a mode of reflection. Yet, the operative mode of digital technology can clearly be related to other forms of analog art. Following conceptual art's separation between an idea – usually rendered in a form of language – and its possible execution in different contexts, times and materials, digital technology radicalizes the dissemination of the work of art through different platforms and in different formats. According to Krauss, the conceptual work of art does not stay the same in its various realizations. It rather becomes different continuously. Krauss points to this fact of conceptual art as a fundamental precondition for the post-medium-condition of art.¹⁴ Similar to digital technology, conceptual art de-articulates the singularity and material specificity of each work of art, which becomes a secondary form of appearance with regard to a primary form of »idea«. Digital technology as a possibility for an unimpeded flow of artworks and images in general is ultimately just an extension of what conceptual art has already brought about in the realm of the analog: In conceptual art, everything visible is already articulated by way of an instruction – a concept, a code or an algorithm. Thus, everything which can be sensually experienced becomes interchangeable and ultimately »secondary«.

By way of Marcel Broodthaers's work, Krauss argues that the submission of the arts – which in their modernist configuration typically insist on the plurality and specificity of sensory perceptions – to the singularity of conceptual art marks also its subjection to the law of economic exchange, abstract equivalence and commodification.¹⁵ Therefore, the argument about a post-medium condition can be linked to the topos of liquidity:

The idea of an artwork that is as liquid as possible implies a particular form of experience that no longer addresses specific sensory complexities, but recognizes them as interchangeable with respect to an underlying structure. The exchangeability of sensual concreteness in the work of art can thus be paralleled with the function of exchange value in relation to concrete goods and their specific use value.

As I already laid out, Krauss maintains that the radical extension of this structure by digital technology can only be countered by a backward look at obsolete technologies and outmoded mediums of art, which reveals their inner complexity. With digital technology, inner complexity is replaced by an external complexity developing in time and across sites and spaces.¹⁶ Digital technology is therefore not a specific means which can be found and analyzed within a work of art as a material object. Rather, it remains external to its material specificity as a particular thing. What is more, it continuously de-articulates this specificity in time and space. It makes the work of art different each time. In Krauss's perspective, such a technology cannot be reflected by a singular work of art. It is thereby excluded from a modernist view on art. By this very fact, digital technology forces modernist art to stay within the limits of traditional media, and in the end, it also forces it to forsake digital technology itself, since any form of self-reflection would be impossible within its radical self-differing logic.

In Krauss's view, this development is structurally tied to another phenomenon within artistic practice since the 1960s and 1970s whose development is synchronous with the rise of conceptual art and the implementation of computer technology: installation art. Installation as an artistic form could therefore be termed a mirror phenomenon of digitally produced art with its absolute adaptability in terms of formats and platforms: According to Krauss's often cited condemnation, the »international fashion of installation and intermedia work« is deeply

»complicit with a globalization of the image in the service of capital«. ¹⁷ But on what grounds can installation art be seen as complicit with an economization of the image on a global scale? Could it not be argued that installation as an artistic form is rather distinct from the digital flux of images? Does it not even constitute its opposite – since it could be seen as site-specific, immobile, slow and resistant to exchange?

This might be true of some of its forms. But at least Krauss – and we will see that, following up on this, also Steyerl – has something else in mind. As it is often the case, installations operate in-between media. But in the end, this is not the main problem which makes them complicit to digital technology and the rule of economic equivalence. Installations don't need to be stable, site-specific or immobile. On the contrary, today we witness a very flexible form of installation art which shows itself adaptable to highly different exhibition contexts. So, one could argue that many installations today are not obstacles to the norm of globally traveling shows but stand for an art that serves institutions in a completely different way than paintings or sculptures do. Instead of following the traditional model of a museum – building up and showing a collection that outlines specific developments in the history of artistic production –, the model of installation can be formalized as a specific possibility of producing intensities of experience. ¹⁸ Typically, contemporary installations fill whole exhibition spaces. By this very fact, they tend to escape subjection to a historical narrative contextualizing an individual artwork by means of other works within an exhibition. Moreover, installations are often resistant to different types of explanatory framing like wall texts. They produce an immersive space providing in and of itself a total frame of reference. Spectacular installations serve museums in a different way than a stable and permanent collection of objects when it comes to the question of how such institutions can succeed economically as enterprises in a globalized market.

These installations are designed to attract a maximum number of viewers who expect to be surprised each time anew. As a contemporary form of the production of intensities, the installation can be linked to the museum under economic pressure, being coerced to attract a continuous stream of visitors. Installations rarely solidify into permanent ones which cannot be removed.¹⁹ Permanent or site-specific installations are nothing but an exception from the rule. In distinction to the mobile tableau form of painting, invented for the museum during modernity, the installation form produces difference within each particular exhibition context. It responds to the context. It is not autonomous from it.

5.

Steyerl's video clearly corresponds to the function of contemporary installations within the global network of museums. And it does so on different levels. As much as the video remains identical throughout its different installations, and as much as the video itself defies its insertion into the digital forms of distribution reflected in its narration and structure, the installation shows itself as highly adaptable. The size and the placement of the video screen are flexible. Sometimes it is hung against a wall, sometimes it can be walked around and looked at from behind. In some cases, the walls of the installation are painted blue, in other cases, quasi-monochromes of blue gymnastics mats are installed as fillers on the otherwise too wide and empty walls. These adaptations help the installation to theatrically conquer the surrounding space as a whole. In front of the screen, a heap of beanbags is scattered – prompting the viewers to sit on them, effortlessly interweaving technology and subject, the private and the public, but also work and leisure by placing the subject in the horizontal.²⁰ The beanbags are

situated on a curved surface, which – by the help of a scaffold – mimics an ascending wave. The structure clearly references the seating of movie theaters. At the same time, it takes up central motives of the video, like oceanic water movements and economic graphs. But it also refers to the context of martial arts training by way of the gymnastics mats it is composed of. Thus, the actual space of the installation is articulated as an extension of the video's virtual one. The gymnastics mats identify the viewing area – usually a room for aesthetic experience – as a kind of training ground, analogous to the gyms and fighting cages in the video. The aesthetic experience in the exhibition space is thus articulated as fundamentally related to the social battleground projected in the video, where resilience and flexibility are key. The exact shape and height of the viewing platform differ in each installation. The platform is determined as a variable part of the work. It is dependent on the structure of globally traveling shows and the international shipment of works. Like the subjects in the video, the work as a migrant object is meant to perform successfully in all these changing, variable situations. The scaffolding poles of the wave shape are clearly visible, marking it as temporary and provisional. The work is on the move, trying to gain visibility and presence beyond the singular instant of its current exhibition. Every place the installation appears is only a precarious stop where neither the viewer nor the artwork can stay for too long if they want to keep up a certain level of productivity in economic terms. Lying down or being installed is nothing but a short recreational interlude hinting at the challenges ahead.

That the work as an installation allegorically shows itself to be in motion must therefore not be read as a simple opportunistic act. *Liquidity Inc.* rather aligns itself with the subjects in the video as well as with the subjects it welcomes as recipients. This alignment is not triumphant but fragile and always on the verge of collapse. The work's means of installation are not to be seen

as the outcome of merely aesthetic decisions. Rather, these means are made transparent as practically necessary or even forced. They are simply required by the institutional context. Fulfilling the imperative of liquidity does not necessarily accrue real market value. Such a view would certainly be naïve. What matters is the contribution of a highly adaptive work of art to the economic survival of its contexts. At the same time, the economic endangerment of a standstill as it is shown in the video points to a real economic endangerment of the installation itself and its performance as a successful work of art.

Two-thirds into the video's narrative, the actual economic base of its production process is indicated, though it remains unclear whether this hint is fictional or not. Suddenly, a message by Steyerl to e-flux editor Brian Kuan Wood appears on the screen. It details the fact that Steyerl is unable to keep up with the speed required in the art world's production process. She cannot meet an exhibition deadline, apparently because of psychological problems. This in turn leads to funding problems for the CGI rendering of the water's surface. Since there are no experts for CGI renderings available at short notice, the only feasible solution presenting itself is the use of online tutorials to acquire the ability to render digital water surfaces by oneself. Economic pressure enforces the acquisition of new skills. The video's montage of textual fragments from Steyerl's online conversations links this process to the idea of »building a raft«: »why would you build a raft? we never discussed this!« In order to save oneself – and the realization of the artwork –, one has to be open to the idea of continuously transforming oneself as a subject. Being a subject is understood here as being a carrier of expertise and skills. A subject is the possibility to do and make all kinds of things, in all possible ways. This is its freedom. And this freedom is linked by Steyerl to an economic pressure forcing its realization.

The wave on which the viewers are paradoxically stranded can therefore not only be read as a fatalistic lounge from which

they may watch the video and its protagonist's struggles within the vortices of capitalism – exemplary for their own ones –, the wave is also an allegorical life raft. Analogous to James Wood's forced changes of skills, identities and environments, born out of many crises, another subject named Wood – Brian Kuan Wood – becomes a CGI crack through another, albeit smaller, economic crisis. As an artistic subcontractor free of charge, the editor of a digital art magazine is now well on the way to accomplish a digital visualization of water surfaces.²¹ The digital and the installational are articulated here as contemporary dispositifs of artistic production which do not require specifically artistic ways of making and doing art. Rather, they delineate total set-ups of production to which in principle any subject can have access. They are inclusive and absolutely un-specific. Within the video's narrative, the economic connects different working environments – the art world, martial arts, entrepreneurship and digital technology. But it also inscribes itself into the production process of the video on a factographic level. It enacts a transformation of its very producers, their skills and opportunities. Instead of lamenting the liquidation of art in a digitally produced installation for a global culture industry, the installation presents a utopian view, albeit a disillusioned one: It outlines a universal subject of post-digital creation. Its freedom might be completely alienated, yet, this subject, in time, can do and make everything, without necessarily becoming anybody.

Notes

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, London 1976, p. 138.

² I am referring here to the structural distinction between analog forms of representation and digital forms of simulation, as it has been developed by Friedrich Kittler; see Friedrich Kittler, »Fiktion und Simulation«, in: *Philosophien der neuen Technologie*, ed. by ARS ELECTRONICA, Berlin 1989, pp. 57–80.

³ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, »The Climate of History. Four Theses«, in: id., *The Crisis of Civilization. Exploring Global and Planetary Histories*, Oxford/New Delhi 2018, pp. 187–190.

⁴ See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share. An Essay on General Economy*, New York 1988.

⁵ The essay is reprinted in: Clement Greenberg, »Post Painterly Abstraction«, in: id., *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, London 1993, pp. 192–197.

⁶ See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, Basel 1948, pp. 11–48.

⁷ Greenberg, »Post Painterly Abstraction«, p. 195.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton, NY 2013, pp. 55–84.

¹¹ Alexander Alberro criticized Conceptual Art's ideology to escape capitalist economy as a decoy which masks its own subjugation to a post-industrial regime of the accumulation of value; see Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, Cambridge, MA, pp. 6–25.

¹² Hito Steyerl herself made the distinction between »rich« and »poor images«. The first ones would limit their circulation; see Hito Steyerl, »In Defense of the Poor Image«, in: *e-flux journal* 10, 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image> [May 10, 2023].

¹³ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea. Art in The Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London 1999, p. 53.

¹⁴ See ibid., p. 52.

¹⁵ See ibid., p. 21.

¹⁶ David Joselit reverses Krauss's critique into an affirmative view on the subject. The better a work of art can circulate in and adapt to different channels of distribution, the better it might be able to act as an agent of a global image diplomacy in the name of democracy and justice; see Joselit, *After Art*.

¹⁷ Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea*, p. 56.

¹⁸ See Rosalind Krauss, »The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalist Museum«, in: *October* 154, Autumn 1990, p. 4.

¹⁹ The artist Donald Judd saw this as the primal quality of installation art in general and his own works in particular, which he termed »permanent installations«.

²⁰ See Pamela M. Lee, »Lying in the Gallery«, in: *October* 176, Spring 2021, pp. 53–72.

²¹ The video's narration doesn't make it entirely clear if the subject in question is actually Brian Kuan Wood or some other of Steyerl's correspondents. For my argument, this is a detail of minor importance.

ART, VALUE, SUBJECTS, REASONS. SOME ASPECTS OF SPECULATION AS PRODUCTION

Marina Vishmidt

In this essay, I will be providing, in a certain sense, a »ghost chapter« from my book *Speculation as a Mode of Production. Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital*.¹ Although not straightforwardly compensatory for its lack in the book itself, the nomination of the essay as a missing chapter has to do with the methodological character of the reflections that follow, at least in part, and the absence of a concerted thinking about methodology in the book. The recognition of this absence could be said to be more definitive than the attempt to fill it, a tentativeness that partakes of intentionality as well as contingency. Here I would be happy enough to nod along with Theodor W. Adorno who warns already in the preface to *Negative Dialectics*: »The procedure will be justified, not based on reasons. To the best of his [sic] ability the author means to put his cards on the table – which is by no means the same as playing the game.«²

Background, or, Introduction. Speculative / Broken Reading

I'll begin with the background or an orientation for the conceptual matrix of the book. Central here is what is meant by the speculative dialectic, or how Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel handles the concept of speculation. For this, I will take a detour via the philosopher of literature Werner Hamacher, whose formulation of the »speculative proposition« proved alluring to me in the years that contained the book's writing and research.

The »speculative proposition« is a technique employed by Hegel in his philosophical writing and is analyzed in depth by Hamacher in his book *Pleroma. Reading in Hegel*.³ It casts the experience of reading writing such as Hegel's that is written in the key of the speculative dialectic as a kind of loop, constructed in such a way that the reader must perform the movements of the speculative dialectic (negation of negation, for example) as an aspect of her reading experience, the *how* as well as the *what* of reading, evoking the subject-object dialectic already alive in the concepts. Getting to the end she realizes she will have to return to the beginning, in light of the conceptual trajectory the proposition has led her on, so she has to revise each notion she has encountered in light of all the ones that came after. (The link to the spiral structure of Karl Marx's version of the dialectical method will be explored later.) Hegel says that »[t]his movement which constitutes what formerly the proof was supposed to accomplish, is the dialectical movement of the proposition itself.«⁴ Thus, the conditions for comprehension posited at the beginning of a proposition are undermined by the dynamic of the proposition, so that those conditions are no longer there by the end and have to be revised on the basis of what has happened in the meantime. The speculative proposition destroys the presuppositions of »reading for the content«. How? It is recursive, meaning that form and the content are transformed by one another, in line with the porosity between subject and object in this process. The reading shatters and reconstitutes the reader, or, the subject of reading, but also in the grammatical sense of »subject«, as in »subject of the proposition«. It destabilizes the static and linear relationship between the subject and predicate both grammatically and epistemologically. However, the »simple«, or initial reading persists as residue within the speculative reading; the reading is afflicted by the splitting within its own presupposition, just as for Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, the »I« is afflicted

by the splitting introduced in it by time – the difference between past, present and future – by time which cuts through the presupposition of a unified subject synthesizing the world as the fabric of the transparent relation between subject and object that supplies the basis of Immanuel Kant's model of subjectivity.⁵ This self-subverting dramaturgy of reading is thus structured by a kind of determinism at the heart of which is total contingency: The speculative proposition constantly poses and withdraws meaning, but all the withdrawn meanings pile up, probably in an ungainly fashion, and their interactions are unforeseeable. This is correspondingly a recursive structure, in that the narrative of the proposition as it initially appears is an unstable one and is in danger of forming a new narrative while you are still reading and trying to grasp it, as an unnoticed element suddenly becomes definitive and starts to shift or even obliterate the premises you took as a point of departure. This constitutes, incidentally, the critical negativity of recursion, with the finality of negativity and the openness of contingency seen here as tensely linked rather than opposed. The looping-back on itself of the process of following a conceptual itinerary in time de-naturalizes the time of reading, which is rendered thick and aberrant, prone to jolts and stoppages. It renders form and content indistinct, as they both become material premises of construction. A reflexive temporality in a text aligns with recursion as an ongoing erasure of the presuppositions of writing (and reading), a performed negation and construction in the register of speculation, which amounts to a material critique of the real by the constant drawing-out of its intrinsic contingency. »Material« here should be taken as referring to the contingency of language and grammar in the event of sentence construction, as well as to the semiotic process it instigates. The materiality of social relations would here be mediated by the specific form taken by both the language and the activities of reading and writing it.

Materialist Method, Abstract Accretions

Now moving on to how speculation appears in Marx, we can observe initially that Marx displaces the legacy of speculative idealism, while preserving its dynamic principles, which he contrasts to the static nature of »crude materialism« (18th- and 19th-century scientific positivism uninterested in history or social relations, just in some entity called »matter«, and which could be usefully compared to some variants of contemporary »new materialism«). Thus, he moves from a speculative to a materialist method of dialectics and gives a sketch of the dialectical method in the *Grundrisse* notebooks of the late 1850s. Like Hegel, he rejects the idea of there being anything like immediacy; everything is mediated; you can never start from zero or exclude the observer from the observed; mediation is primary. In the 1857 introduction to the *Grundrisse*, we get a section that programmatically lays out the »method of political economy« he intends to follow in his work, in which this emphasis on mediation is established methodologically.⁶ How? By revising the relationship obtaining between the abstract and the concrete in any method of empirical and theoretical inquiry. If it is generally supposed that you start with the concrete as an object of analysis – say, a particular population, a particular industry, and then use that as material to develop a more abstract analysis that generalizes out from those specific cases into more universally applicable rules or laws – Marx says no, this is misleading because the concrete can actually be an abstraction, or, we can also say, an »assumption« that is capable of masquerading as something concrete as long as its historical, social and economic relations are left out of the picture. So, »a population« as a point of departure, in Marx's example, doesn't tell you anything until you are able to describe how it is stratified, to take some examples, through class, or race, gender, sexuality or migration status. These categories of stratification

themselves need to be broken down into their actual modes of operation, i.e., how those stratifications work in practice in reproducing that society, through forms like the wage, access to money, education, differential values assigned to different lives, etc.

So, the dialectical method basically consists of starting with simple abstractions that initially seem scientific and concrete – such as population – and breaking them down into their components until you have the resources to describe something concretely. As Marx says, »the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse«. ⁷ Thus, we see that the concrete is a destination and not a point of departure *conceptually*, even if in observation, or empirically, you do start from something concrete – but only apparently so – you need to be able to call on a conceptual apparatus to analyze and reconstruct your »object« in all its complexity and contingency, which is what enables you to grasp it as concrete.

Marx is concerned with distinguishing this proposition from Hegel's speculative dialectical method, for which the concrete can only ever be the concrete in thought, as a product of thought, rather than a dialectical term in the movement between the abstract and concrete, as it is for Marx. (There are of course interpretations that would contest this verdict on Hegel). The movement from the abstract, or simple, to the concrete, or complex, may or may not express, may or may not follow an actual historical development. The relation between analytic categories has to be established with reference to how they actually operate in contemporary society, which may or may not reflect their historical order of emergence. The example that Marx gives here is that land has always been important for agriculture and all forms of state power, but the financialized rent of land is a particular capitalist form. Thus, first we need to understand capital as a social relation in order to

understand ground rent, even if we are trying to understand »just« the economy of land ownership and nothing else about a particular society or historical period.

Typically in historical materialist criticism and theory the advantage of this method is that it demonstrates that there are no simple categories (»simple«, as in »without presuppositions«) that can be used as lenses to examine a specific case or context. All categories of analysis have social and historical content and are not objective, and the idea of objectivity should be included in that. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison write well about this in their book on the emergence of objectivity as the hallmark of something called »the scientific method« in Western modernity,⁸ and Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding on situated knowledges offer earlier and vital contributions.⁹ Consequently, the idea of labor *as such*, or money *as such*, any institution *as such*, only makes sense from the standpoint of a certain kind of complex and differentiated society. Marx writes: »As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone.«¹⁰ His example here is that work which is done for a wage can be any kind of work and is not connected with someone's specific rank or status in society – this is characteristic of modern capitalist societies. »Abstract labor« goes from being a category of analysis to emerging as a concrete reality.

There is still what may be called a »speculative moment« – at the end of the introduction, in a sequence of notes to self, Marx writes as item 7: »*This conception appears as necessary development.* But legitimization of chance. How. (Of freedom also, among other things.) (Influence of means of communication. World history has not always existed; history as world history a result).«¹¹ In other words, the most basic objects and frames of analysis are products of specific, located, historical develop-

ment – yet contingency also has a large role to play, both in the determination of objects of analysis and in the method. In this, the »speculative proposition« I started out with as an emblem of how the speculative dialectic works does reappear in a fashion, as for Marx the process always involves going back and revising an earlier stage. One starts from the abstract to arrive at the concrete, but then with the knowledge gained in that process you can go back and revise your abstract categories, and then you can get a step further in your piecemeal approach to the concrete. So, it's always a spiral movement, or maybe one step forward, two steps back. You always have to revise your point of origin in light of where the journey has taken you. Such a principle of recursion of course cannot be restricted to an account of the materialist dialectic, given its prominence in computer science, engineering and many other disciplines.

Marx ends this discussion with some reflections on the relationship between art forms and technological and social forms. The example he uses is how ancient cultural products such as Greek mythology resonate in the present. This focus on the historical and thus contingent conditions of cultural, artistic and institutional forms – a focus which requires a certain kind of experimental totalization that a phrase like »cognitive mapping« evokes¹² – is one that is pivotal to my own work.

So, now we have begun to see how the speculative method of critical thinking, as outlined in the work of Hegel and Marx, is inflected differently there, given the determining role of the historical, the economic and political in Marx's weaving of the speculative method into the »dialectical method« (movement from the abstract to the concrete, and onwards in a spiral...). More recently, arenas of the speculative such as speculative fiction or speculative finance have intervened in the rather abstruse debates about speculation in philosophy, and here there are also methodological implications that touch on questions of knowledge, action and collectivity. The rest of the essay

will thus consider the question of method as a »way of proceeding« which could not in any sense be considered innocent, objective or functional but always as unfolding in a context situated and determined by politics and power, likewise by aesthetics and its singularities. This is to prevent the kinds of limitations we invite by staying simply with the »critical« as the horizon of method. That way we risk idealist closure, splitting the material from the performative in a too schematic way. Thus, to remain connected to the real, which is to say, to remain interested in the question of change, method must commit to the speculative.

The inquiry as developed in my recent book – and which can of course develop further from there, given that the material collected in it is quite old by now (from around a decade to just a couple of years) – acts as an unfolding of ongoing research into speculation as it materializes in different contexts and as different strategies promoting an orientation towards the future and a suspension of the present. I am concerned with elaborating a »negativity« within speculation which can give a political dimension – which is to say, a dimension that centers antagonism and contestation – to the total open-endedness and idealism that the notion of »speculation« usually evokes, and its overdetermination by the discourses and the social influence of finance. The reason for choosing the formulation »speculation as a mode of production« for the book's title is that it unites the two senses of speculation that I work with there – the speculative practices of art on the one hand, and financial speculation as an intensification of capital's intrinsic tendency for future-oriented growth. While speculative thought is a constant feature of art, particularly in critical practices which relate to the conditions of their own production as material – which I will unpack further down – »financial speculation« can be more broadly defined as the self-expanding, or self-valorizing, dynamic of capital in its concept as well as its practice. This is

the tendency that is highlighted in the type of Marxian inquiry known as »value form analysis«, which would approach speculation as social *form*, which is to say, a regularity whose reproduction constitutes one of the features of a capitalist society as such, where form and content diverge, or at least exist in complicated relation to one another. Financialization as a social form rather than the specific subset of capital which can be named as »the financial industry« is thus the approach I take, although that more industry-specific focus is not excluded throughout. My primary interest has been to analyze how such speculation both aligns itself with the »open-ended speculation« of thinking and art, but ultimately stabilizes itself on other levels of the system geared to generate private profit. This is the level of technical and ideological instruments such as derivatives, government bonds, and »human capital«, no less than the intensified exploitation and extraction of surplus-value from the global to the genetic scale, instruments which need to be placed in the register of neo-coloniality that they make possible.

Thus »speculation as a mode of production« refers to the open-ended processes of art and conceptual thought as well as the socio-economic dominance of processes of the increase of value in capitalism. It is something that another approach might wish to label »ideology«. We should note that these two trajectories are not as insulated from one another as the phrasing might suggest. The neoliberal era has witnessed the subjective qualities of creativity, flexibility and innovation becoming the objective factors of workplace productivity, while objective productivity itself shifts to the indeterminacy and risk associated with sectors such as »creative finance« and property speculation as the key centers of capital accumulation unable to find good returns in industrial production, certainly in much of the West and North. What has often been discussed as »financialization« highlights the establishment of these speculative processes as the core logic of capital accumulation that

sets the operative terms for all the others. This is reflected in the social field in the institutionalization of speculative processes (such as »risk«) in governance, education, work and welfare. The exploitation of risk (or risk-based exploitation) as the cornerstone of social reproduction in this period in the most neoliberally governed states and financialized economies, such as the ones in the places where I have spent most of my life, the US and the UK, can be evidenced through any number of empirical studies and policy documents, but my concern was rather to draw a parallel between contemporary capital and contemporary art as they come to constitute the poles of a society structured by speculation, as it is reflected in social practices as diverse as systems of welfare provision, the constitution of the self and the image of work.

The subjective drive to speculation as the generation of »new ideas« *per se* becomes codified as »creativity« in the neoliberal labor market. As a consequence, creativity becomes, paradoxically, a characteristic of abstract labor, which was Marx's generic category for the social institution of wage labor in a capitalist society, »abstract«, because most labor relationships end up being indifferent to the content of the labor and are mainly used for acquiring money to live – or, if you are a capitalist or entrepreneur, to accumulate, or speculate with. I argue that such a shift heralds the conversion of the fetishized creativity of art into a pre-eminent instance of speculation as a mode of production, since art becomes no longer just a commodity in the market or a gratuitous activity but increasingly a tool of socialization into the speculative mode and an accessory to the re-valorization of land and the displacement of populations, as in the well-known link between art venues and gentrification. It thus takes on a new instrumentality relative to the dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy assigned to art by Marxist critics such as Adorno. At the same time, this is an instrumentality which in turn speculates *with* the autonomy and cre-

ative freedom assigned specifically to art in an unfree society in order to ground both its ethical claims and its financial value, depending on the context.

As I outline in the book, the core structural analogy between art and money is that each of them constitutes an instance of self-valorizing value, insofar as both are kinds of social mediation that are anchored in a self-referential, recursive or reflexive circuit of valorization. Critical value in art is generated from transactions within its semantic domain, much as in speculative finance – or »fictitious capital«, in Marx's terms¹³ – money generates more money through transactions internal to financial markets, avoiding the sphere of production as it is usually understood altogether. This homology between art and money that I am drawing, one which reveals both art and money as marked by the nebulousness and reflexivity of value claims, has been picked up by artists who collide so-called »critical value« with »capital value« in works exploring the social and formal correspondences between works of art and money. Max Haiven is a colleague who has done excellent work in cataloguing and theorizing these kinds of practices in his recent book *Art After Money, Money After Art*.¹⁴ But this discussion of a homology is intended as well to illuminate another pole of art's relation to the real abstraction of the capital relation, one which is constituted by the parallels between artistic subjectivity and a self-motivated and creative labor force increasingly encouraged to see itself as an investment, i.e., to model itself on the endless productivity of capital rather than labor, specifically a financialized capital which expands by means of (managed) risk.

One aspect of this is the re-casting of labor as »human capital«, a shift that serves to eliminate labor as a different and potentially antagonistic pole in the capital-labor relation. Labor also experiences itself as capital in its direct relationship to the financial system through the privatization of social reproduction. This, briefly, is the subsumption of what at one time,

and in some places, particularly in the West and North, were key public assets such as pensions, housing and education into credit markets – public provision founded on social solidarity being replaced by commodified market assets founded on self-investment. Thus, I was proposing that speculation as a mode of production implies a becoming-speculative of reproduction as well. This is where art becomes salient, as already noted, in its ability to project forms of community and sociality, whether ideally or participatively, that purport to re-socialize the subject of human capital and »ask questions« in times of political standstill or reaction, as is increasingly the case now. Art's ability to add imaginative value to places and situations lends an emancipatory glow to labor and material conditions that have grown ever more exploitative, opaque and unalterable, and to its subjects, who seek to »add value« to themselves as creative commodities in the labor market (in perverse continuity with Marxian understandings of the »peculiar« commodity of labor-power as the only one capable of »adding value« to raw materials and machines).

With art undergoing a dissemination over the last forty or more years into social practices, policy frameworks and economic activities often quite far from its legacy modernist domain, it is »instrumentalized« or gets nearer to »use value«, departing from its formal, or even structural, correspondence to pure exchange value (in Adorno's terms, art is the »absolute commodity«, absolute because the autonomous artwork is in principle without use value, unlike most other commodities which can still legitimate their existence through their usefulness). At the same time, its constitutive other in modernity – wage-labor – comes to be situated more and more under the aegis of a creativity to be elicited and managed, or, in perhaps more contemporary terms, creative entrepreneurship, with use values increasingly eclipsed by the »exchange values« of capacities and potentials rather than products, and wages frequently

deferred or canceled in favor of »experience«. This emphasizes the ambiguity of the seeming self-evidence of use values in a society itself dominated by the form of value as money, and the ongoing structural proximity of art and capital in their common definition by exchange value, despite, or even more firmly because of, a tendential emphasis on the use value of art by some of its more optimistic proponents. This use value may be completely intertwined with exchange value, as in arts-led property development, or it may be deemed indirectly useful if targeted at »problem« communities – boosting economic participation, entrepreneurial habits and social cohesion. Here, art and labor, creativity and training, emancipation and coloniality become harder and harder to tell apart. The growing proximity between art and labor starts to emerge as a zone of indistinction, signaling a re-shaping of labor by capital in its own mutable and restless image, and importantly, a naturalization of its injustices as reflected in the »hustle culture« of creative milieus on social media. Art, with its problematic relationship to use value, emerges as a disciplinary apparatus able to differentiate between human capital which can and cannot be valorized, between those who can identify with their creative and speculative capital and those who cannot. This seems to call for a reconsideration of the role of use value as such, the role of the use value of labor for capital in its speculative mode of production and, correspondingly, of the strategies that might serve to displace or negate capital's power.

The book is thus concerned with developing art's speculative ontology as a repository for cognitive and sensuous energies which are capable both of conforming to and exceeding the constraints of »really existing speculation« as outlined above. Art mediates and is mediated by the forces of speculative capital; its capacity to be »socially« speculative emerges in processes of dis-identification, exacerbation and singularization. Concomitantly, the institutional autonomy of art – what

Adorno called the »aesthetic relations of production«¹⁵ – is both symptomatic of and antagonistic to the autonomization of financialized capital from everyday life. It may even be suggested that the speculative identity between art and capital, which has so far been sketched, is not only speculative because as yet »unproven«, but speculative in the sense of the difference between speculation in the positive and speculation in the negative: »[W]hat makes speculative identity speculative, rather than merely abstract, is its continued reliance on the experience of difference«, as Simon Jarvis writes.¹⁶

»Difference« here maps onto the non-identity that Adorno sustains as a repudiation of the violence of conceptual thought. And so, the principle of my inquiry into speculation as a mode of production is to hold in view the double character of art as a »social fact«,¹⁷ both as an »absolute commodity« and as a potential scenario of non-labor which opens the field to speculative practices of thought, individuation and collectivity. With the hypothesis that there is a speculative identity between art and capital, a contrary proposition emerges: This speculative identity is a non-identity, insofar as identity thinking must be thought against itself, and yet thought cannot help but identify. This antagonism rooted in the speculative itself is something that I explore through an engagement with the *labor* of speculation as the current of determinate negativity in the ostensibly open-ended and »disinterested« activity of speculative thought, which I then extend to the speculative practices of art and finance.

This kind of negativity that represents the labor in and of thought is a theme Adorno derives from Hegel and discusses substantively in his *Hegel. Three Studies*.¹⁸ A condensed indication for our present purposes shows that, in Hegel, spirit, rather than occupying one side of a split between the material and the abstract, instead (implicitly) founds itself upon the existence of social labor; a move which is also recognized by Marx in his

assessment of what remains vital in philosophical idealism. Thus, speculative philosophy, inasmuch as it has a dialectical form, is animated by a labor of the negative which does not consist purely of the antagonism of concepts overcoming one another, but is also inscribed with the negativity of thought's separation from material labor. However, the fact that this labor is universalized as spirit means, for Adorno, that Hegel was cognizant of labor as a social relationship, as the social »objectivity« of labor in the abstract, or, labor in its commodified and socially »synthetic« form, rather than as any particular activity. Thus, for Adorno, spirit must be defined as labor first and foremost, in all philosophy, not only in Hegel: Thought must be defined through what it lives off. He writes:

»[W]hat the transcendental synthesis was after could not be separated from its connection with labor. The systematically regulated activity of reason turns labor inward; the burdensomeness and coerciveness of outwardly directed labor has perpetuated itself in the reflective, modeling efforts that knowledge directs toward its ›object‹, efforts that are again required for the progressive domination of nature.«¹⁹

Thought envisions itself as an agency separate from its materials and processes them much as labor does in relation to the objectivity of nature. As Alfred Schmidt has noted, labor in fact represents the idealist, subjective counterpart to the objectivity of the natural, material world.²⁰ »[T]he strains and toils of the concept are not metaphorical«, Adorno writes.²¹ »[I]f spirit is to be real, then its labor is certainly real.«²² Importantly, the self-consistency of spirit expels or cancels labor even as it derives from it, much as the »automatic subject« of capital is trapped in an illusion of self-valorization, or just as financialized capital strives to repress labor in its equations and paradigms of value extraction. This is a trajectory that I pick up

through the work of Christopher J. Arthur, whose book *The New Dialectic* presents an analysis of capital as a relation between antagonistic logical and material principles having no independent existence outside this relation: a process of exploitation in which capital must negate the labor that generates it, and where labor negates capital from the inside even as it generates it – he calls this »counterproductive labor«.²³

The negativity of speculation is labor, since labor is tied to the desire which drives the »restlessness«, as Jean-Luc Nancy terms it, of the speculative dialectic as it negates each state to become other and otherwise.²⁴ For Adorno, however, Hegel does not live up to the significance of this discovery about spirit and labor and tries to present spirit as self-sufficient (absolute) rather than a conditional outcome of social labor that is itself conditioned by history and power – and nature. It will fall to Deleuze to revisit the notion of speculation as a site of hard labor, with his suggestion that »something forces us to think« in *Difference and Repetition*.²⁵

An emphasis on the labor of speculation on a conceptual and critical level can also help us to avoid a politics of representation which is solely oriented towards de-mystification: eager to find the actual labor in every commodity (as with the principle of fair trade) and the empirical commodity in every artwork (art as just a commodity like any other). The alternative method I am proposing is already signaled by the insistence on seeing speculation as not just ideal but as productive, and it also poses a resistance to the closures of identity by means of speculative thought which always returns to the experience of non-identity and thus to the alterity and the futurity that should underlie and motivate every practice of critique. This has to be a critique that receives its orientation from non-identity and hence strives to remain speculative at the level of concepts and structure of its arguments, no less than its material – in the recursive fashion of the »speculative proposition« outlined earlier. This method-

ology takes as its axiom the proposition that materialist thinking cannot proceed very far without metaphysical speculation if it hopes to exceed the simple ratification of what currently exists. Hegel's epigram on the real rationality of a rational reality captures the necessity of speculation to make sense of a real which does not cohere arbitrarily and will not be suspended without the specific historical mediations that a speculative methodology of critique can make tangible.

Notes

- ¹ See Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production. Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital*, Leiden and Boston 2018.
- ² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, New York and London 2007, p. xix.
- ³ See Werner Hamacher, *Pleroma. Reading Hegel*, Stanford, CA 1998, pp. 1–81.
- ⁴ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Oxford and New York 1977, pp. 39–40.
- ⁵ See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, London and New York 1994, pp. 85–91.
- ⁶ See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, London 1973, pp. 81–111.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 101.
- ⁸ See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, New York 2007.
- ⁹ See Donna J. Haraway, »Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective«, in: id., *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, New York 1991, pp. 183–201; see Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Ithaca 1986.
- ¹⁰ See Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 104.
- ¹¹ Ibid. p. 109.
- ¹² See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham 1991, pp. 51–54, pp. 297–418.
- ¹³ See Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 659.
- ¹⁴ See Max Haiven, *Art After Money, Money After Art. Creative Strategies Against Financialization*, London and Toronto 2018.
- ¹⁵ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London and New York 2002, pp. 5, 308.
- ¹⁶ Simon Jarvis, *Adorno. A Critical Introduction*, New York 1998, pp. 169–70.
- ¹⁷ See Lucien Goldmann and Theodor W. Adorno, »To Describe, Understand and Explain«, in: Lucien Goldmann, *Cultural Creation in Modern Society*, Oxford 1977, pp. 133–134.
- ¹⁸ See Theodor W. Adorno: *Hegel. Three Studies*, Cambridge, MA and London 1993.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 20–21.
- ²⁰ See Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, London 1971, p. 115.
- ²¹ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 1993, p. 21.
- ²² Ibid., p. 22.
- ²³ See Christopher J. Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital*, Leiden and Boston 2004, pp. 53–54.
- ²⁴ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, Minneapolis 2002.
- ²⁵ See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. xvi.

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