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## **The Aesthetic Subject and the Politics of Speculative Labor**

Marina Vishmidt

“I have a good conscience; I've written thousands of slips of paper. In the sense of this responsibility – work, conscience, fulfilment of duty – I'm no worse a worker than anyone who has built a road.” [Darboven 2009: 106]

“A contradiction of all autonomous art is the concealment of the labour that went into it, but in high capitalism, with the complete hegemony of exchange value and with the contradictions arising out of that hegemony, autonomous art becomes both problematic and programmatic at the same time.” [Adorno 2005: 72]

### **Introduction**

The rationale of this chapter is to outline the connection between the contradictions of the social development of artistic labour in capitalism and the formation of the aesthetic subject in modernity as the displacement of labour from the category of art, bringing it into closer affiliation with the speculative forms of capital valorisation. I will start with a brief survey of how artists have approached and appropriated the politics of labour, following the role of labour within artistic practices in a historiographical and analytic key. Then we will see how the speculative category of real subsumption can function in a discussion of artistic production, allowing us to trace the emergence of the aesthetic subject as a displacement of labour and a reification of an oppositional space – though not necessarily an antagonistic one – to the social relations of capital accumulation and the society of work. This is a space of autonomy that, however, has significant affinity to the 'autonomisation' of capital from labour. Whereas capital and art once confronted each other as heteronomy and autonomy, now they seem to share a certain utopian vision of an 'automatic subject' that can valorise itself indefinitely. This affinity of course has certain limitations – art can at best be a flattering self-image of capital, which is actuated by profit and is thus as far as can be from the core aesthetic principle of 'purposiveness without a purpose'.

Crucial to the determination of how the dialectic between autonomy and heteronomy for art is displaced in the present is the status of the concept of 'real subsumption'. 'Real subsumption' plays a central role in accounts of the restructuring of the valorisation processes of capital and their relation to labour as it has developed over time. While we can start by thinking about how artistic production has been differentially 'really subsumed' by the industrializing circuits of art markets, fairs, biennials, urban branding strategies, or even education and social services, this should be situated as part of a broader trend. The annexation of art by 'culture' and 'culture' by the economy has been seen as a symptom of the 'seizure' of previously 'untouched' areas of subjectivity and social life by the valorisation process, or, conversely, the socialization of capital in cultural consumption. Processes such as these have been theorized in terms of the periodisation of phases of capital accumulation and of the relation between capital and labour within them. [Endnotes 2010: 140]

The developmental tendency, then, for the relation between capital and labour is that labour not only appears more and more, but is experienced as, a moment of capital. This registers both in the objective parameters of reproduction mediated by financial rather than welfare state institutions and in the subjective parameters of "human capital" ideology. Some theorists have also suggested that debt represents a concrete instance of the change in the class relation wrought by financialization. Insofar as debt has the effect of individualizing the subject's relation to capital – whereas the wage once served as a common basis for struggle – it disguises the capital relation of exploitation as "self-investment." [Federici 2012] Thus, the term "human capital" is hardly an ideological vector pure and simple; it simply describes the structural condition of workers in the era of financialization.

The status of class antagonism in this era of "self-investment" also undergoes a significant change – labour can no longer be affirmed as a positive counter-pole in a vision of a non- or post-capitalist future. We now need to construct an account of capital formation "from the inside out," that is to say, when capital is presupposed at the affective and operative level of the individual subject insofar as she constitutes a free individual, rather than a worker or any other socially determined role.

To do this, we will need to revisit the autonomy/heteronomy nexus as it has played out in the emergence of the artistic subject as both the emblematic and oppositional figure of modernity, internalizing the abstraction of the capital relation as the innermost truth of its existence in the world. Beyond the “death of art” (Hegel), the artistic (“creative”) subject takes on the self-expanding dynamism of the 'automatic subject' of capital and is advanced as a role model for all labour. At the same time, the artistic subject marks the division of social labour which produces art and labor as socially, and even ontologically, distinct institutions. It could even be said that it is precisely through the dissolution of the artwork into the field of wider social relations (social, participatory, relational and “invisible” forms of art) that the recuperation of this dissolution as individual artistic capital is upheld most forcefully, with the artist emerging as both a de-skilled “service worker” and manager and curator of social creativity or the “general intellect.”[Fraser 1997: 111-16; Buchloh 1990: 105-43; Mattin 2011: 284-307] The artist as both not-worker and utopian model of labour which mediates these shifts in productive relations serves as an analogue of capital's boundless creativity and transformative agency, even or especially in times of crisis and decline, when this figure takes on oppositional contents within forms which remain very much the same. In this sense, the challenges to art's autonomy which have themselves solidified into an orthodoxy in the past three or four decades have by and large accommodated themselves to the results of these challenges, that is, a conception of artistic practices and artistic institutions that are more and more defined by the heteronomy of the market.

Artistic autonomy thus becomes a style, a form of “taste” that positions art as a refined consumption of objects and social relations, whose relationship to art's heteronomous conditions of existence must be disavowed. These disavowals can take the form of registering unjust material conditions on a discursive level while reproducing them in the practico-inert everyday of the institution. The conservatism which generates these disavowals is often framed as a pragmatic defence of art's independence and ability to nourish its socially utopian potentials, a stance which underpins many

recent defences of the “bourgeois art institution” from the depredations of the market. The artist, meanwhile, seems to retain a commitment to autonomy as a professional standard, though it is now mediated by the character masks of the manager, the researcher, or ethnographer. This quick typology of the objective parameters of how autonomy appears in the field of art today centers on the figure of the artist as a figure exempt from the relations of exploitation that obtain elsewhere in society. The artist is a figure who can be “autonomous” because she belongs to a productive structure that allows her to appropriate and produce cultural material as the expression of her subjectivity rather than for profit or survival. She is beyond the capital relation; she has the enviably protean nature of capital itself – as close as “human capital” can get to the idyllic state capital imagines for itself as an entity unencumbered by labour, regulation or deflating asset prices. In this way, the formal autonomy of the artist aligns with the “automatism” of capital as engine of accumulation and self-valorization that both includes and expels “alien” labour.

The autonomy of art arises with the autonomy of capital as a central phenomenon of modern experience. It invents a category of social relation which is not one, a social relation of exemption – aesthetic judgement or “taste.”[kant ref] This forms a central thread of what I call “speculation as a mode of production” because it is through aesthetic judgement that we can come to perceive more clearly the oppositionality of art in its separation from labour and use-value, an oppositionality very different to the negativity posed by labor, in its character as the “enemy within” for capital, with a subversive content predicated on its affirmation of use over exchange. But it may be precisely this under-determined form of social negativity belonging to art which becomes pivotal when that antagonism is dissolved by the re-structuring of the relations between capital and labor, when the ascendancy of finance sees the very “use-value” of labor put into question by its main consumer, capital.

Concomitantly with the loss of definition for labor, art assumes a new economic centrality as its

indeterminacy is put to work in the more “speculative” modes of accumulation. This encompasses both the market and the public institutions of art, although the socially reproductive role assumed by the latter is increasingly de-stabilized as the legitimation art supplies for speculative capital is “de-leveraged” through austerity programs.

### **Is Art Working?**

For an adequate understanding of the role of labour in current artistic production, the idea of the artist as a manager, an engineer of social processes which she may capitalize, needs to be thought in conjunction with the increasingly pervasive politicization of the artist as a worker: a notion with many historical antecedents which cannot be explored fully here. The question here would be what happens when labour becomes not just a thematic or image for artistic production, but when artistic production is re-imagined as itself a form of labour, and the kinds of political forms this produces. Artists and cultural workers assuming the organizational forms and demands of the labour movement such as fair pay and equitable working conditions can be briefly encapsulated in the history of Artists Unions in the U.K. and U.S in the 1970s, the Art Workers Coalition in New York in the late '60s – mid-70s, as well as current groups such as W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) and the PWB (Precarious Workers Brigade). There is also a sub-rosa tradition of artists 'withdrawing' their labour, such as the Art Strikes initiated by, respectively, the Art Workers Coalition (1970), Gustav Metzger (1977-1980) and Stewart Home (1990-93).

There are many paradoxes thrown up by re-defining artistic production as wage-labor (however the wage is calculated). One of these might be that the division of social labour that produces the artist as a separate kind of “non-professional” professional cannot be reconciled with a simple agreement that art be valued through the same metrics as all other kinds of work, particularly when capitalist work across the board is being rendered precarious, contingent and self-realizing for everyone on the classically reactionary model of the autonomous (starving) artist. Yet this fragile homology

between artistic labour and labour in general does furnish the political core of initiatives by artists and cultural workers to organize on the traditional lines of labour politics. These initiatives seem to multiply at a time when artistic production increasingly does not result in object commodities, but in 'services'. As Hito Steyerl writes, what that means is that such services are instantly commodified themselves. [Steyerl 2011] But are they? While remaining art? Here we can recall Marx's comment about labour which does not produce use-values: "If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value." [Marx 1990: 131] If it was use-value producing labor, it wouldn't be art; and, come to think of it, a great variety of waged labor these days hardly produces use-values either.

Aware of the thorny conceptual and practical issues besieging the task of quantifying artistic labor, a group like W.A.G.E. focuses their campaign on the distribution of resources in public institutions. Dealing with technologies such as contracts, budgets, and certificates of good practice (and wielding the threat of sanctions from funders) WAGE is programmatically challenging the mystification of artistic labour as an 'investment' which may recompense its maker in the future. They set out to break the cultural tie between artists and (financial) speculators by re-positioning artists as workers: a gesture of another kind of speculation, that is, speculating about a state of the world different from what it is.

This bears directly on the relationship of art-making to speculation as a form of production. Besides artistic work – whether it is recognized as 'labor' or not - unpaid labor in the cultural sector (typically internships, as well as the more humdrum self-exploitation characteristic of this work) is paradigmatic of speculation as a mode of production since this kind of labour is presented as a speculative investment in one's human capital, with its hallmarks of affective excess, self-management, and submissive auto-valorization. However, it should not be disregarded that the prominence of unpaid labor in the cultural sector is more than anything else pointing to the larger

de-valorization of labour in the economy: that is, it is very much an index of a structural problem of dwindling resources and aggravated social inequality.

The strategy of organizing around the means of compensation for artists and cultural producers reveals a number of paradoxes when seen through the filter of labor politics. The artistic mode of production is so mystified and individualized that labor regulation could indeed only be performed by a much more omnipotent state than we are ever likely to have, and even that would hardly touch on the opaque and unregulated primary and secondary art markets. W.A.G.E. proposes a form of certification or voluntary code of best practice that arts institutions can sign up to, indicating their commitment to pay cultural producers properly. What this misses is first, that an unregulated market like the sphere of art production and mediation does not voluntarily self-police and second, that art institutions operate within a capitalist social space whose iron law is that the rewards of the powerful few come at the expense of the weak many; a structural fact not amenable to moral pressure. The professionals at the lowest rung of the ladder are unpaid so that institutions can function on inadequate budgets; artists don't receive fees so that there's more money to pay salaries to administrators to fund-raise from wealthy donors. If one of the distinguishing features of art production is that – by and large – it is not organized through the same structures as nor accessible to the same forms of measure as other kinds of labour, then it is difficult to see how the political forms of labour organization can play more than a metaphorical role in pointing out certain social injustices of this kind within the institution of art. [Passero and van den Berg 2011: 174-5] Further, this kind of pointing will swiftly need to point to itself, as the expansion of the art world, however unequal the distribution of its rewards, is a symptom of extreme wealth inequality, a symptom of vast amounts of money being accumulated and invested in e.g. the art market and not e.g. in social reproduction.[Fraser 2011: 114-127] Additionally, as John Roberts and Gregory Sholette have written, art increasingly functions as a sink for disguised un- and underemployment, as statistically larger numbers of people try, with varying degrees of success, to monetize their free creative



activity in a hostile economic landscape. [Sholette 2010; Roberts 2011]

Besides the paradoxes from the side of labour and the commodity, there are also paradoxes to be found on the side of art. If what is most characteristic of progressive art since Modernism is to desire the end of art, to dissolve into life, then re-defining art as wage-labor fits into that tradition, while continuing to insist on the cultural exception that determines a price for it as far as the state and market are concerned – and to accept the power of capital, which ensures the existence of divisions of labor and classes which defines the whole social existence of art in its current form. As already noted, this move can mean that the real class divisions that underpin the maintenance of regimes of paid and unpaid labor, mental and manual labor, art work and 'shit work', are obscured. Also, the move of construing art as labor reduces art to one of its dimensions, namely what it shares with all capitalist work: the commodity form. A labor politics of art boils down artistic production to the 'absolute commodity' Theodor Adorno speaks about Adorno 2007: 28; Martin 2007: 15-25] or to abstract social labor in its generality, vitiating the critical inflection art still possesses as “the antithesis of that which is the case.” [Adorno 2007: 159]

However, raising the issue of the links between art and labor in the speculative mode of production can have other, equally if not more urgent, critical and political consequences. Art's role in social reproduction – the “concealment” of labor Adorno mentions in our epigraph – is problematized when this role is re-defined as labor, that is, as production. This is also the lesson of the 1970s feminist Wages for Housework movement, and indeed any instance when a social relation accepted as natural and exceptional to the laws of market exchange is re-defined as labor, thus alienated, and alienable: political. It is not only a matter of recognition: once the disregarded is revealed as fundamental, like unwaged labor for the system of waged exploitation, the relations in that field can be configured anew. On the terrain of art, probably still the most elegant and symptomatically precise gesture of this kind was the feminist conceptual artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles'

“Maintenance Art Manifesto” and artwork. Laderman Ukeles dramatized the nominalist protocols of Conceptual Art when she performed domestic labour as an artwork, what she called “Maintenance Art.” [Lippard 1979: 20-21] Ukeles would bustle around exhibits with a duster and cleaning fluid, wash the steps of the museum, and hound the administrative staff out of their offices on her cleaning rounds. The point was that the work of maintenance made all other kinds of work possible – waged labour, artwork, even “the revolution.” In proposing a world in which “maintenance” activities were just as legitimately a part of the art as the objects or even the more ephemeral propositions or documentations that announced conceptual art, she was suspending the division of symbolic and physical labour that ensured work and art remained matter and anti-matter, autonomy without a taint of heteronomy. If the daily uncompensated labor performed mainly by women in the household could migrate to the museum and seek legitimacy as art, then it was no longer self-evident that this labour was any less “creative” than the kinds of activity hitherto enshrined as art, and no less public than socially necessary wage-labor. It could even be said that her work synthesized the political stakes of identifying with “work” at that time (late 1960s and early 1970s) for art and for the feminist movement, since identifying with work was a way of reaching for some sort of political collective agency (and, inversely, the political stakes of upgrading housework to artwork). The debates around art's relationship to work sounded very similar to the domestic labor debates; both were seen as taking place outside the social contract of waged labor. This was correct on one level, a descriptive one. Yet both feminism and radical cultural politics like the Art Workers Coalition drew their strength from either disproving this premise or mining the marginality for political effect. [Lippard ref]

As one of the driving forces of Wages for Housework, the Marxist feminist scholar and activist Silvia Federici, wrote in 1984:

Yet, the demand for wages for housework was crucial from many viewpoints. First it recognized that housework is work—the work of producing and reproducing the

workforce—and in this way it exposed the enormous amount of unpaid labor that goes on unchallenged and unseen in this society. [Federici 2012: 56]

As soon as an activity, and the identity of those who perform it, is alienated in this way, its stability as a social relation is suspended. In the field of cultural production, it allows the question to be posed of what it is about the organization of society that impels some to work for no money whatsoever because the alternatives seem even worse. Considered in a purely formal manner, it is here that the question of “self-abolition” – of the proletariat, of social existence under the category “woman” or “homosexual” or “black” – also becomes a question for artistic labor. This returns us to the decomposition of the class relation discussed in the first part of this chapter. The relations between the negativity of labor for capital and the political affirmation of labor within capital can be seen in analogy to art's heteronomy and autonomy. Art cannot affirm itself as art within the relations of capital – its autonomy - without using that autonomy to disclose the horizon of its own erasure, whether that means merging with life (heteronomy) or wider social transformation (overcoming the autonomy/heteronomy contradiction). It is clear that the analogy between the self-abolition of art and the self-abolition of the proletariat, or other forms of social self-abolition, is questionable at a greater level of concretion, which would bring into focus the class relations of art and its “exceptionality.” However, there is the formal correspondence in the relation of art to capital and unpaid domestic work to capital that looks like a relation of the 'supplement', that which is necessary but must be depicted as incidental. The constitutive exception, whether it is reproductive labour in the home or the unquantifiable reproductive labour of the cultural worker or the serviceable artist: the “under-laborer” who is the condition of possibility of the system's ability to reproduce itself as a whole, the “work” that must disappear in order for “the work” to appear, whether that work is the waged worker or the art installation. A further question here would be how the participatory, post-conceptual and relational art practices of the past several decades have sought to internalize and exhibit this 'work' as part of 'the work' that emerges thereby.

How does the social relation of capital mobilize and valorize the desire to be “not-labor” that is the founding moment of art in the capitalist modernity? How does the artist emerge as a subjectivity which allegorises the real abstraction of capital, equating ceaseless flux, change and competition with personal and social freedom? At the same time, this alignment generates a negativity which seeks its content in opposition to capital's rule, if not always to its logic, as the above indicates. As Adorno sketched it half a century ago: art de-functionalizes subjectivities but only as an exception which proves (even if it on occasion contaminates) the rule. Art is where the use-value that legitimates social production in a capitalist society elsewhere are suspended. Such a suspension of use value is performed within the limits set by the accumulation needs of capital, within and beyond the workplace. It can be contended that it is precisely art's micro-alienation from productive labour and commodity relations that in the age of creative work, creative industries and creative cities, acts to socialize capital on the macro-level, fulfilling art's oft-cited role of being “the commodity that sells all others.” Thus, the affect of emancipation and critique that comprises the “surplus value” of art in this schema is not simply or merely ideological, but wholly structural, flourishing as it does in an era of seemingly indefinite capitalist crisis.

Concomitantly, we might look at how art practices and art parameters have globally become aligned with the restructuring of labor into ever more arbitrary, placeless, transient and performative modes of generating value, including even the value of its non-reproduction. By “non-reproduction” here, I refer to brakes put on expanded social reproduction by debt in the case of labor (and capital), or, in the case of art, its self-referential continuation beyond and by means of, its own exhaustion and ambiguity. So here we can approach real subsumption as the restructuring by direct integration into capital of arenas of social life that had been principally, though contestably, separate instances from value accumulation – social reproduction as the consumption of use-values, art as the production of useless or “higher” values. This heralds a loss of mediation on the one hand and its proliferation on the other, when capital's mediations – financial and managerial mechanisms – expand into and

reshape in their own image instances of relative autonomy where this autonomy has recently become a barrier for further accumulation, a barrier that comes to seem ever more intolerable in periods of crisis. Thus the separation of art and labor, premised on the self-consistent identity of each, is transformed by real subsumption, with the decomposition of the sites and senses of work on the one hand, and the untenability of proper places and pursuits for art on the other. Hence, the politics stemming from each also – use versus exchange in the traditional iterations of labor politics, and the criticality of useless art against reigning use-values in social reality – themselves are hollowed out by the rationalization that come with real subsumption. This was already the case in the previous global socio-economic crisis, the one which heralded the onset of the “neoliberal” era. In the speculative mode of production that has prevailed since then, art's attempts to model or embody greater social utility itself relied on a vast expansion of debt-financed social spending and culture-led urban development. A vast array of types of 'social speculation' pursued by means of contemporary art thus claimed critical purchase in the midst of this abundance, inequitable as it was. The current crisis punctuates, though it cannot be said to introduce a sharp break into, the self-understanding of such practices. The kinds of supportive infrastructures that social practice art has dedicated itself to prototyping in recent years seem objectively more urgent than ever, now joined to an invigorated activist and collectivist impulse in the wake of Occupy. But if the respective erosions of art and labor come as symptoms of a crisis, can there be a contestational as well as a palliative reflection on the current situation, and can those struggles also potentially disclose a re-composition, precisely around the crisis of “value” that the social forms of art and labor manifest in their own ways?

Here, we must be careful to distinguish art's relationship to real subsumption from the claim that art itself is really subsumed; or, stated otherwise, art's conceptual or “imaginary” subsumption and the real subsumption determining labour must be held apart if we are to track how art and labour converge and diverge in the recent period of capital accumulation, and the shift in the mechanisms

of subsumption this has brought with it. If we refer to the exegesis given by Marx of the category of subsumption (in its formal and real variants), it will be clear that the production process of art, as discussed in the previous chapter, is not subsumed at all, neither really nor formally. I have previously discussed this in terms of art having a relationship to the value-form while itself not being determined by the law of value; it is this condition of difference which allows it to have a relationship to the social instance that is thus determined, namely abstract labour and its concrete articulations. And this, in turn, is what allows us to really situate art within the speculative mode of production as 'speculative labour'. As John Roberts writes in a recent essay:

Artistic praxis certainly plays a part in the accumulation of capital, through opening itself up to interdisciplinary and environmental forms of situatedness - as I have said. But as speculative labour art lies outside of the value process: most artists, most of the time, don't have to work harder and faster in order to produce a range of prototypes to a given template and to a deadline.[Roberts 2012]

My hypothesis is that art's non-compatibility with the category of real subsumption is clear when the category applied to the characteristic production processes of art, and that this is important for reading the specific political potential of art in the speculative mode of production and in capital in general, with regard especially to its relationship to general "social technique," as Roberts also writes. However, if we refer instead to the broader application of real subsumption that has been outlined so far in this chapter, it is equally clear that we can discuss art as pivotal – again, due to its specificity as a "non-labour" - to real subsumption seen as a tendential process of capital investing the whole of social reproduction with its value imperatives.

### **The Specialist of Non-Specialism**

Let us stay with the category of real subsumption as a shorthand for describing the socialization of capital through mediations outside of the direct site of the wage-relation – the sphere to which Marx originally applied the term – in accord with contemporary theorists in the Italian post-Autonomia

current, but also other contemporary Marxist currents such as the communitarian theorists. “Real subsumption” can be broadly conflated with “speculation as a mode of production” according to the preceding definitions I have given this term, insofar as real subsumption in these two currents is often used to designate the absorption of affect and subjectivity into the capital relation; or, to be more exact, the remoulding by capital of how this subjectivity is produced. In order to trace how the subject of contemporary work is modified by this kind of real subsumption into the subject of “human capital” and how that connects to the subject of artistic labour, we need to specify what kind of subjectivity was created in the division of social labour under capital between those who go to work and those who make art.

Following on from the general lens that has been established through the concept of real subsumption, I would now like to focus more closely on the production of artistic subjectivity within it, as its constitutive exception. In artistic subjectivity, (which is more properly called “aesthetic subjectivity” to encompass the viewer/consumer as well as the producer of art, also since the classic philosophies of the aesthetic such as those of Kant or Hegel are more concerned with the viewer), the subject of labour is transformed into the subject of judgement.

What follows from this? At first it seems as if we are presented with the artist as a conservative figure, where the direct relation to the world or with social reality entered into by the worker is replaced by a mediated one which is purely reactive; the artist as empty, abstract subject who takes no position and who evaluates the world rather than changes it. Alternatively, we can see the artist as a radical figure, whose formal relationship to the world is free from the mediations and power hierarchies imposed on the worker, as well as the entrenched understanding of reality imposed by repetitive alienated labor. This latter is the artist as the abstract subject of unconditioned freedom who gains a critical purchase on the world due to her (productive) alienation from its utilitarian reason. As we track the generalization of the abstraction of value as pure creative subjectivity in the

current moment as speculative mode of production, we can return to the earliest moments of their contact to understand what has changed. To what extent was the splitting of the subject of aesthetics from the subject of productive labour, inseparable from the development of culture in modernity, already a reaction to the grip of abstract value on social relations? In other words, what are the subjective grounds for the split between autonomy and heteronomy which makes art possible in capitalist modernity?

Giorgio Agamben has recently located the production of subjectivity as pure abstraction in the figure of the artist – recoded into the “man of taste,” thus, as indicated above, crossing between the making and the appreciation of art. He offers an exploratory genealogy of the subject of aesthetics primarily with reference to Hegel's philosophy of art. To risk an as yet-unfounded leap, what he discovers at the root of this genealogy is the demand for self-annulment, a Hegelian imperative of sublation. Can this be placed alongside the communist revolutionary principle of the 'negation of all that exists' and the self-abolition of the proletariat, as noted earlier? That which is nothing but its relation to capital can only overcome this condition by annihilating the relation itself. For this, there must be a moment of alienation, where what is most concrete is transformed into the most incidental and contingent [Agamben 1999: 35]

For Hegel, the more reflexivity art develops, that is, the closer art gets to philosophy, the more it renders itself redundant, its proper sphere of activity becoming merely to illustrate, using its own means, the philosophical endpoints which overdetermine the very possibility of its continuation as art.[Kosuth 1969/1991: 13-32] Art can only realize itself by disappearing. For Agamben here, following Hegel, art as a specific kind of production of a specific kind of object is also liable to vanish on attaining to the condition of absolute freedom. It becomes simply discernment or taste, a capacity for selection. The subjectivity of the artist only registers as the measure of its own emptiness; or, as the power to choose from “indifferent prosaic objectivity” and render the selection



a proof or example of this subjectivity at work, a purely gratuitous act. However, when we look at the thematic of such a “self-abolition” for art in Adorno, we encounter a more relational concept, one whose horizon is materialist rather than metaphysical:

Art and artworks are perishable, not simply because by their heteronomy they are dependent, but because right into the smallest detail of their autonomy, which sanctions the socially determined splitting off of spirit by the division of labor, they are not only art but something foreign and opposed to it. Admixed with art's own concept is the ferment of its own abolition. [Adorno 2007: 5]

With reference to the proposition that what is most characteristic of art in our period is to desire the end of art, be that in the axiomatic manner of Hegel, or in the performative blurrings between art and labour in present-day work, art and social action alike, [Rancière 2002, 2004, 2009, et.al.] it seems that this can also become a transcendental parameter, a criterion, a normative command. The wish for the end of art can become, or rather has long since become, the primary principle of its continuation. As Agamben notes, this end is in fact the beginning of autonomous art. This is testified by the role of criticality as mark of seriousness and ambition in art as it is currently produced and taught, even if the ubiquity of such criticality opens itself to charges that it “adds value” to an otherwise consistently conservative sphere of discourse and practice. For Adorno, the “foreignness” of art to the reality principle, the very fact that a society based on exchange-value could find no use for it but to sell and collect it, was already a sign that its autonomy was potentially realizable: art could help bring about a world in which it no longer existed as the legitimating exception to the rule of value over the social and natural world. However, it may be that Agamben's point is more relevant in an era when it is artistic subjectivity that has been discovered to have a use-value all across the social field, a use-value historically derived from art's refusal to be art in the era that coincided with Adorno's later years and has lasted into the present.

The content of artistic subjectivity is then its form, the form which emerges from the split with wage-labour which creates the possibility of “art itself.”. The contingent, or “inessential,” is the primary characteristic of the artist's subjectivity since it is via this that she develops the singularity of apprehension, or “taste,” which makes of her consciousness a productive form for any content it might encounter, and enables her to transform this content by means of the singularity she has cultivated. Production is a moment of consumption, and vice versa. As the truth of artistic subjectivity is found in this detachment, contingency colours its relationship to the world in (at least) two ways: the artist's autonomy and the autonomy of her production is founded in this detachment. It is at once utterly dependent on this detachment for its (non-)identity, and at the same time retains an agnostic attitude towards it, disavowing dependence and reifying detachment as the non-specialized specialism that distinguishes art in the social division of labour. Its scepticism towards content – here for “content” one might speak of constituted social reality, or heteronomy– allows it to approach it as form, thus acceding to its demands without taking them seriously, as long as there is a possibility of continuing to reproduce oneself as an artistic subject within this heteronomy; on the other hand, it occludes the form-determination of this reality, that is, by the historically specific form of value which has engendered precisely these objective contents, and delivered them to the faculty of judgement at the core of artistic subjectivity and artistic labor.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have proposed a constellation – with pretensions to a narrative – between the concept of real subsumption in Marxian theory, and the place of art in social reproduction. I have further tried to develop what is distinctive about aesthetic subjectivity as it comes to represent the central character in speculation as a mode of production, once this latter concept has been articulated with real subsumption as the re-shaping by capital of the processes of social reproduction as well as production and consequently the role art is called upon to play. Art as a form of “speculative labor” comes both to serve as the model for all kinds of work while providing

a distinctive and desirable prototype of liberated – non-capitalist – labor which can either be antagonistic or conciliatory. These are two outcomes whose premises are not determined by the concept of art itself but precisely by what “role it is called upon to play.” The “politics” of speculative labour, then, inhere both in this and in the detachment of art from use-value and useful labour, which can only be attained in their capitalist modalities to the same degree that art and labour can only be irreconcilable in capital, however “speculative” this capital may become in its operations.

We know that capital tends to externalize its costs, and that unwaged and unmeasured labor is not only the source of value for it (the process transpiring in paid work which expands across the whole of society with gendered and raced division of paid and unpaid labor, work and non-work) but the central mystification that traps people in compulsory activity as an expression of autonomy. The critical, as well as positivist, division between production and reproduction in art and in other kinds of labour can obscure this systemic tendency, and end up calling for an economic recognition that would measure and support both equally, or revalue one at the expense of the other, ignoring that it is in the interests of profit as a *social* as well as, or rather than, an economic relation to keep them apart only to bring them together, that is, to eliminate payment across the board and replace it with a speculative approach to one's own activity as (possible) commodity more like that of the artist.

Therefore, bringing a feminist analysis of reproduction to art, reminding us of its formal symmetry with the pure form of value and thus with capital, is only a first step: to show what it excludes. We need to take the further step, though one that was often left implicit in the historical instances of reproduction politics in the feminist movement, such as Wages for Housework. That step would have to be a destructive one: a challenge to the wage-relation that homogenizes all activity with money, a challenge to the division of labour that produces art - art as a refusal of work that ends up sustaining the rule of exploitation as exception, and which itself increasingly is organized according to an industrialized, customer-facing model. If, as Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, “only what is

useless can stand in for the stunted use value,” then it is the distorted and attenuated form of art's autonomy as a *speculative intransigence to the existing*, including work, that can be the source of its political powers. And yet, identifying with work, especially with the disregarded and disposable subjects of that work, can indeed be the first step for such a politics of artistic inquiry and making, since capitalist work is structurally the antithesis of capitalist art, even if practically they sit on the same continuum.