

THE VALUE OF THE ART COMMODITY

Twelve theses on human labor, mimetic desire, and aliveness

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The difficulty to know how to calculate the market value of an artwork lies on a simple fact: we don't know where its value comes from. We may accept that art does have value, but we can't find a common ground to explain why an artwork has more value than other. Through twelve theses, which recover Marx's value theory by understanding artworks as commodities, this text provides a response to the question: where does the value of an artwork lie?

Even if Karl Marx's theory of labor value was not developed with the commodity of art in mind, it lends itself to being reapplied in the close consideration of the processes by which value is generated in the field. It is of course difficult for an artwork to shed its commodity status. Indeed, it possesses a unique characteristic by means of which it distinguishes itself from other goods: as a result of the ability to perceive the process by which they were produced, artistic works are permanently loaded with life, and in such a way that the questions of livelihood and the construction of value are inseparable.

The contemporary relevance of Marx's theory of value

Value is a profoundly ambivalent concept. It brings to mind ethical and social ideas of value as well as value judgments and economic values. In the following pages, the concept of the value of a work of art will be taken strictly to refer to the value it has as a commodity, its commodity value, as Karl Marx, though he was thinking of different goods, called it. Yet the commodity has not only a commodity value but also another one called use value – it is split, Marx argues, into an object of utility and a depository of value (Marx, 1990 [1867]). But this use value does not matter for the commodity value or exchange value we are interested in here; the latter abstracts from the former. All that counts for the exchange value is the commodity's quality of being a product of labor. What it will be used for is of no consequence. Now, we all know that Marx did not explicitly apply his theory of the value of labor to the art commodity. Still, I believe it is eminently useful as a backdrop for an attempt to define the specific form of value of the art commodity.¹ For by defining value as human labor “in its congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object” (Marx, 1990 [1867]:142), Marx pointed up not only the object-like trait of value but, more importantly, its ability to condense and immobilize concrete labor. Value, Marx argues, is the site of this transfer – from concrete to abstract human labor. Concrete labor is transformed and, in this transformation, immobilized, as it were, value abstracts from it. Works of art may be described by analogy as objects of various types in which a broad spectrum of human labor is accumulated and then transformed and reformatted in a wide variety of ways; hence my belief that Marx's theory is pertinent to their value dimension. True, as the political scientist Michael Heinrich writes, there has been a turn away from Marx's theory of value since the 1970s, and not entirely without reason; in particular, all sides – from Cornelius Castoriadis to the Régulation school – have cast doubt on his attempt to conceive abstract labor as the substance of value (Heinrich, 2011). Yet however questionable Marx's concept of labor may be – he defined it as physiological exertion – his writings, as Heinrich explains, include a second competing view of what labor is. Labor, in Marx, is also a social entity, and therein lies the contemporary relevance of his theory of value, particularly to the question of value in art. For the art world is a social universe in which mere collaboration and networking – social activities through and through – have turned out to be forms of labor.

Art is of the nature of a commodity

Yet if we work with Marx's theory of value, we also presuppose without further ado the commodity character of art. After all, commodities are,

in Marx, the sites where value crystallizes. Value requires conformance to the commodity form, just as commodities are characterized by their value. So with regard to the question of value, we would have to regard works of art as just another type of commodity. Now, I believe that works of art actually do take on the commodity form at the moment they circulate in the art market, or more precisely, in its various segments, such as the commercial market, the market of knowledge, etc. (Graw, 2010:65). Taken by themselves, they are mere products of labor, neither commodities nor values. But once they are sold at auction or discussed in the framework of a “Manifesta,” once they are exchanged (for money, honoraria, or symbolic recognition), they are transmuted into value-things – which is to say, into commodities. What is revealed in this exchange is the social dimension of these individual works or products of labor, a process that, in Marx’s view, is equivalent to their becoming commodities.

Still, there may of course also be situations, such as when an artist is developing ideas in the studio or a visitor to an exhibition looks at a work, in which the commodity form of art is not at the forefront. Such situations allow other – aesthetic, medium-specific, cognitive – qualities to come to the fore. Yet as we have known since the historic institutional critique of the 1970s, if not earlier, the transition between art and its institutional frameworks is fluid, and so the demands of the market reach into areas that would seem to be far removed from it, such as the studio or the public museum. The agents do not indeed have to submit to these compulsions – for example, artists in their studios may refuse to produce a new work for each art fair and each collector. After all, it is one of the privileges of art that it can take a critical attitude vis-à-vis its commodity character and adopt a variety of measures to counteract it. Yet the critique of the commodity form has also called new forms of commercial exploitation to the scene. For instance, as Alexander Alberro (2003) has shown in a study of the advertising strategies of conceptual art, numerous executives took an interest in that school’s ostensibly valueless ideas. Even the piece of paper on which Sol LeWitt sketched his *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1968) (FIG. 1) is a work of art that conforms to the commodity form and has long been held as such by the Daled Collection, now owned by the MoMA, New York. However much the frequently invoked “dematerialization of art” (Lippard, 1973) may have entailed a symbolic relativization of the commodity form as well, it has never yet made it disappear altogether. And as postwar art – such as Fluxus, conceptual, or performance art – aimed to push back against the commodity character, the commodity form has conversely encroached on the artist’s person; gradually supplanting the work, the artist himself or herself has come to look more and more like a product.

The art commodity is an ideal object of value

So let us assume that works of art, like other products of labor, become, in exchange, commodities that, as Marx might have said, circulate as values. But then we are immediately confronted with the problem that Marx always emphasized the chimerical character of this value or, more precisely, this value-form, which he distinguishes from the “palpable bodily form” (Marx, 1990 [1867]) of the commodity. In other words, the concrete material qualities of an object are irrelevant to its value. Is that also true of the value of the art commodity? Must we regard the form the value of works of art takes as something that comes into being entirely independently of their concrete appearance? Let us recall, first, that value does not equal price. For instance, the value of the materials used to make a work of art may be factored into the calculation of its price, yet it is irrelevant to its value. Marx frequently stressed that the magnitude of value and the price may diverge, that an ‘incongruity’ may exist between the two (Marx, 1990 [1867]). For instance, a product may have a price without having value; consider the certificates customary in conceptual practices in the art world, which contain no immediate human labor, only indirectly referring to it, and yet have a price.

The notion that the particular material qualities of the work of art play into its value would seem at first glance to run counter to Marx’s theory of value, though if we consider the latter more closely, there are hints. Marx, after all, fundamentally tied value to an object, the commodity, and so it seems that this object and its qualities do matter. He defines value as the material realization of human labor, leaving no doubt that it appears in material form, which is to say, that it remains dependent on objects (Marx, 1990 [1867]). No value without material realization, we might frame this process succinctly; so the particular qualities of the object cannot be entirely irrelevant. But as we all know, objects as well as processes of material realization in objects play a central part in the visual arts, and so their domain is no less predestined for value-formation in Marx’s sense. Yet the particular qualities and constitution of the objects influence the value in this social field more than in others – and certainly more than with ordinary commodities – so that their value certainly cannot be conceived as entirely divorced from their “palpable bodily form”. This value, though it shows structural analogies with the commodity value with regard to human labor, nonetheless seems to be constituted differently and of a very peculiar sort.

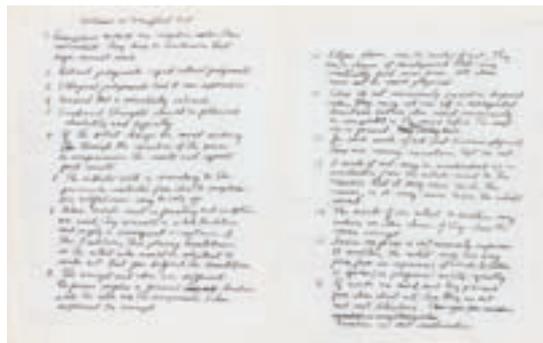


FIG 1 Sol LeWitt.
Sentences on
Conceptual Art, 1968.
Fuente / Source
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(1969).

The immaterial has value, too

One unusual feature is suggested by the basic observation that the simple application of Marx's theory of the object of value to the work of art disregards immaterial practices – from the happening to service art to the relational aesthetics of the 1990s – which have played a growing role in the visual arts since the 1960s. Now, these practices demonstrably have a penchant for realization in physical objects as well, usually producing material evidence in the form of certificates, props, relics, or documentary material. They see to it, in other words, that there is a concrete object to which value may be attached; experience shows that the introduction of such an anchor is beneficial to the process of value-formation. Even the performer in a piece of performance art should be regarded in this perspective as an object or vehicle of value, not least importantly because she embodies human labor. The most impressive illustration of how even immaterial objects may function as objects of value in the visual arts was Yves Klein's empty exhibition at Galerie Iris Clert (*Le Vide*, 1958) (FIG. 2). According to Klein, the empty rooms were meant to enable the experience of an "immaterial pictorial sensitivity" (Graw, 2010:97). What the show proffered were affects and sensitivities for which the picture (the sensitivity was to be "pictorial") indicatively enough remained the defining model. By emphasizing immateriality, Klein mobilized the belief in the transcendence of art, its ability to allow for supersensible experiences, but also demonstrated an intuitive sense of the growing significance of the immaterial in the world of labor. Immaterial labor has always constituted a distinctive share of the work done in the visual arts, if we consider the part that affects, interaction, and communication play in this domain. What must be regarded as Klein's achievement, however, is that he declared the latent immaterial to be the work's true core: a secondary aspect became the main point. Although, as we have seen, the factor 'materiality' plays a fundamental role in Marx's concept of value, the immaterial may be integrated into this conception. This was perhaps first pointed out by the Italian post-Operaists, who used the concept of the 'general intellect' in Marx's famous "Fragment on Machines" in the "Grundrisse zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie" (1857-1859) as a point of departure for a discussion of immaterial labor (Virno, 2003:100). Marx foresaw that the "general social knowledge" would become a "direct force of production" (Marx, 1971 [1857]). Paolo Virno in particular has read the "general intellect" as a collective affective and linguistic faculty that capitalism extracts and that becomes a resource in the post-Fordist society. So it is non-material goods – such as communication – that are elevated to the status of a "queen of productive forces" (Virno, 2003) in this scenario. Relying on Marx as the chief witness to this development would seem to make sense also in light of the fact that he insistently stressed the radical immateriality of the 'value of commodities': "not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values" (Marx, 1990 [1867]:138). So it may also be based on a void, as in Klein.

By extension, the concept of the “abstract labor” that is, according to Marx, the result of the transmutation of individual labor in value and ultimately the crucial substance of value-formation, does not contain a “single atom of materiality,” as Isaak Illich Rubin argued (Orléan, 2011:48). In other words, no physical labor need have been expended, no concrete material used, for value to come into existence. Considered in this light, the art world appears as a social universe in which participants not only produce objects of value in large numbers, but also, and more importantly, incessantly promote the expansion of the concept of ‘human labor.’ For poses, attitudes, or the decision to go on strike – see the case of Lee Lozano – have proven to be no less value-generating forms of human labor. Non-labor, even the refusal to work, may be measured, especially in art, in categories of labor.

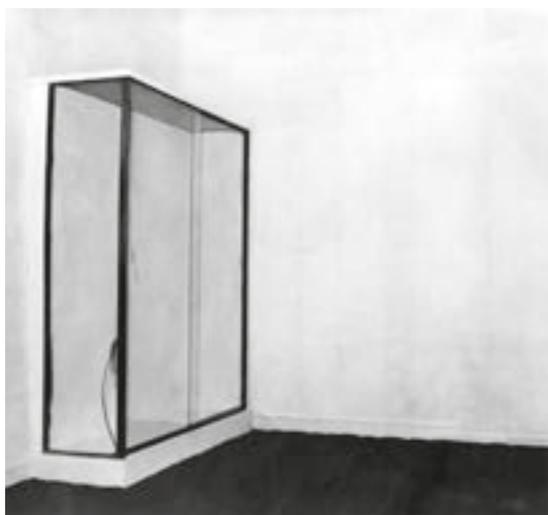


FIG 2 Yves Klein.
Le Vide, 1958.

No value in itself

Yet Marx not only reduced value to ‘human labor’; he moreover declared that value was a social phenomenon. More precisely, we may speak of a relational concept of value in Marx, one that emphasizes the social dimension of value no less than the material realization of human labor it implements.

On the face of it, Marx’s conception of value as a “social relation” (Marx, 1990 [1867]:139) runs counter to a belief that is widespread in the art world in particular: that the value of a thing resides in that thing itself. But according to Marx, no thing, and that also means no work of art, is valuable ‘in itself.’ Even the idea of an “intrinsic value” of the sort the agents in the commercial

art market like to claim for what are called masterworks was rejected by Marx in the very beginning of *Capital* as a “contradiction in terms.”² For if value is constitutively relational and becomes manifest in the “relation of commodity to commodity”, it cannot be intrinsic to things, not even to masterworks. To illustrate the relational nature of value, Marx resorted to an example he used frequently: “the linen expresses its value in the coat”; conversely “the coat serves as the material in which that value is expressed” (Marx, 1990 [1867]:139). The value of the linen may obviously find expression only in relative fashion, in another commodity. One thing, that is to say, signifies the value of the other, indicating that value is not just relational but, what is more, metonymic in nature. Value, in this reading, is always elsewhere. Yet it is also the result of a permanent process of social exchange that never comes to a conclusion. In other words, it presupposes a considerable amount of interaction and cooperation among those engaged in exchange, which explains the large significance of networking and social activities in all fields of society and especially in the art world (Graw, 2010:105). It is precisely because value is built on sand in this world that the conversation about it must never stop. Yet despite this relational nature of value, the art world’s agents – especially, its collectors, gallery operators, and auctioneers – evince a tendency to declare that certain commodities, and certain art commodities in particular, are valuable as such. For example, Tobias Meyer, principal auctioneer of contemporary art at Sotheby’s, recently called Rothko’s “No. 1 Royal Red and Blue” (1954) a “masterpiece” that would stand the test of time as well as the scrutiny of the “global collector.”³ So its value is beyond dispute and resides in the work itself; it cannot be contested by any social action. But how can we explain this power of value to present itself to us as an “objective magnitude” (Orléan, 2011:52) that exists independently of the social agents and their mutual relations?

Art has a special form of value

The relational nature of value presupposes exchange. For such exchange to take place, those engaged in it must abstract from the profound differences between the individual labors. Marx describes this abstraction as a sort of subtraction that is constitutive of value: the latter abstracts from the concrete and individual labor and reduces it to “the same sort of labor, human labor in the abstract” (Marx, 1990 [1867]:128). Yet the resulting specifically social character of labor is “reflected objectively in the value-character of the products of labor” (Heinrich, 2011:214). Put another way, value deceives us as to the social character of labor so that we take to be an objective property of the commodity what is in reality the specifically social dimension of value. This deception, Marx writes, constitutes the fetish

character of the commodity: that it passes off value – a social property – as an objective property (Heinrich, 2011:216). Of course, that raises the question: must the art commodity also be regarded as a fetish in this sense? There are, no doubt, works of art of a distinctly, or perhaps even explicitly manufactured, fetish-like quality; consider, for an obvious example, Jeff Koons's stainless-steel sculptures, from which the traces of individual craftsmanship and production have largely been effaced so that, in analogy with Marx's fetish, they reflect to our eyes the specifically social character of the labor expended to make them as an objective property – and quite literally so (FIG. 3). They carry their value-form to the extreme, we might say.

At the same time, the visual arts have seen many attempts since the 1960s, from process art to institutional critique, to 'make the conditions of production transparent,' to quote a mantra that was frequently recited in this context. In such art, the individual process of production is not concealed but revealed, in a variety of ways. The value of these works, that is to say, is not at all based on the transformation of individual labor into social labor and the subsequent abnegation of that process. On the contrary, these works emphasize the presence of individual labor, which, interestingly, does not diminish their fetishistic character or impair audiences' ability to fetishize them. Unlike the Marxian commodity, the art commodity patently caters to the desire, widespread in the age of self-fulfillment, that such a thing as individual, concrete, and even more unalienated labor, be not just possible, but also contained in the object of value itself. In other words, it holds out the promise, so crucial to the "creative nonconformists" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) of our era, that art is the one domain in which 'free' labor is possible. And indeed, the everyday life of the artist proves less heteronomous than that of someone working in other fields, like the services sector – but it is not therefore autonomous.

Unlike other commodities, moreover, works of art are singularities that only the artist is entitled to manufacture, which affords her the privilege of being a monopolist. There is no true equivalent anywhere else of what she offers for sale. She will therefore take measures to ensure the rarity of her product – such as limiting the circulation of a multiple. Singularity and rarity are factors that contribute to her work's bearing the stamp of her individual labor, even when – like Donald Judd, Frank Stella, or Wade Guyton – she eschews any personal signature style or – like Koons – she commissions the industrial manufacture of her art (though we should note that industrial manufacture of course merely displaces the aspect of alienation from the artist to the worker or assistant, making the artist a capitalist as well as a monopolist). Yet irrespective of the specific way in which an artist avoids the emergence of a personal style, the eschewal of such a style will be regarded as the artist's particular style (Lüthy & Menke, 2006:9).

Yet such strategies may also lead to a reevaluation of individual authorship, as John Roberts has shown in the example of the readymade (Roberts, 2007). The readymade not only incorporates the logic of the commodity, it also allows the productive labor of manufacture workers to take the place of individual artistic labor. Still, even this transfer will be chalked up to the artist's individual labor, because it is he who presents the entry of manufacture labor into the object as art. However numerous and variegated the methods may be with which artists retract, efface, render anonymous, or mechanize their individual labor, they will still be credited with the challenge to authorship that entails. Art, in other words, is the place that restores the honor of individual labor even when it has been obliterated. That makes it a very special kind of commodity.

equivale a alto valor

A lot of work does not equal high value

Labor time, Marx declared, is the measure of the magnitude of value. His example was once again a piece of linen. If its production required only half as much labor as the production of the coat, then, Marx argues, the linen's value is only half the coat's (Marx, 1867). The literature on Marx has rightly criticized this reduction of the magnitude of value to the quantity of labor: it is effectively a regression to the thinking of classical political economy (Heinrich, 2011:218). Marx's measuring 'abstract labor' by the amount of time spent on concrete labor ultimately means that his theory is "not free of substantialist and naturalist entanglements" (Heinrich,

FIG 3 Jeff Koons. Balloon Dog (Yellow), 1944-2000. © Creative Commons



2011:18). And indeed, Marx finds the magnitude of value on something that appears to be objective and quantifiable, the labor time. We might say that value thus loses its abstractness, the abstraction from real relations contained in it, even as that is the property on which Marx placed such great emphasis in his theory of value. The most readily apparent counterexamples to the definition of the magnitude of value on the basis of labor time are those commodities, including art commodities, whose producers expended unusually large or small amounts of time and labor without consequence for the magnitude of value of the products; be it that the artist slaved away night after night to make them, be it that he owes their existence to a fleeting encounter or a spontaneous idea, as in the *objet trouvé*. One work of art that contains a great deal of labor time is not therefore of greater value than another that took virtually no labor to make. It is primarily differences of the magnitude of value that cannot be traced back to the quantity of labor actually expended on the works.

Concerning this, Diederich Diederichsen has proposed an expanded concept of labor time that takes the informal activities the new economy has elevated to the status of a resource into account (Diederichsen, 2012:100). It would indeed seem to make sense that we consider not only the time required to manufacture an object as labor time, but also the time the artist spent at educational institutions, in pubs, in conversation, etc., as scholars who have sketched the history of the 1990s Cologne arts scene have done. Because all these various labor times expended by different people accumulate in the objects of art. Yet it remains the problem of this approach to an expanded concept of labor time that it cannot explain the differences of magnitude of value. An object is not of greater value simply because it contains intense networking activities and experiences of nights on the town. There must obviously be other factors contributing to differences of magnitude of value.

Value as generated by desire

To what extent do those engaged in exchange have the ability to endow certain things with more (or less) value and to influence the process of value-formation? Marx was not interested in the motivations of the 'commodity-owners'; what mattered to him was the structure of social labor that became apparent in value (Heinrich, 2011:206). And indeed, it would seem to be a rather fruitless undertaking to study the motivations of the agents and to examine – to stick to our particular field – the moods and sentiments of collectors or the predilections of theorists in order to understand the specific value-form of art. Yet once we consider these interests on a more abstract level, it becomes clear that differences between magnitudes of value depend on whether and how much desire someone has invested in an object. It was Georg Simmel who made up for

Marx's blind spot and moved the focus to the subject and the object of his or her desire (Simmel, 2004). Instead of completely disregarding the subjective side of the work, as Marx had done, Simmel declared that value was a consequence of the distance separating subject from object. Yet despite the intersubjective character of value, Simmel interprets it as a "judgment" on things that "remains inherent in the subject" (Simmel, 2004:65), a matter that is ultimately subsumed under the subject. Simmel is right: subjects pass value judgments and are thus participants in the process of value-formation. Subjective desire is no doubt required for value to accrue to certain objects. Yet Simmel – due to his voluntaristic perspective – notably also tends to overestimate the subject's value-forming power, and accordingly neglects the extent to which the object is no less involved in the process of value-formation. Following Simmel, André Orléan has accordingly proposed that instead of locating value in the single subject, an individualistic failure to recognize its social dimension, we should conceive it, with Émile Durkheim, as the expression of a strong collective and affective force that transcends the individual (Orléan, 2011). This force, which he calls "*l'affect commun*," is invested in certain objects. It functions mimetically, which is to say, it guides the individual desires of the agents in the same direction by promoting imitation of the observed or presumed desires of others (Orléan, 2012).

At the foundation of value, that is to say, lies a collective desire with a mimetic tendency that confers great value on some things and none at all on others. In the art world in particular, the mimetic character of this desire would seem to be in evidence everywhere: we all know how large numbers of collectors invariably chase after the same names.

So it would seem to make good sense to take this desire into account when addressing the question of value. But in focusing on the "*affect commun*," Orléan, like Simmel before him, tends to neglect the object and its significance to that question. In this scenario, where desire reigns, there is no object that would be eminently predestined, or utterly unsuitable, to value-formation. Desire can seize on any object, no matter its qualities. Yet the art world experience shows that, in certain situations, it does matter what the product (and the persona associated with it) has to offer. If, say, Damien Hirst ever loses his entire credibility among insiders, there will be consequences: his works will be taken back to the auctioneers'. On the other hand, the sphere of the auction market is sometimes especially apt to give the impression that its valuations are completely divorced from the rest of the art world, which is to say, that it forms its own convictions and ignores the views of the critics – works by artists fetch high prices whose artistic relevance, if you ask theorists and historians of art, is actually fairly modest. What remains crucial is that the negotiations over these different magnitudes of value never reach a conclusion, and that critics may influence their volatility, for example, by singling out certain names (like Hirst's) as examples

of the significance of a loss of confidence. The cards are constantly being reshuffled – and that is true of all segments of the art market.

How we produce value for free

As we have seen, value is founded on the capacity for labor; the latter may also be immaterial in nature. Irrespective of how labor power was expended – whether physically, as in Chris Burden, or in the form of an outsourced performative act, as in Tino Sehgal – part of the labor contained in the art commodity will not be remunerated, generating profit for the capitalists (gallery owners, collectors, auction houses, publishers, ‘big’ artists, etc.). Put another way, any work of art contains excess labor that goes unremunerated, enabling the capitalist to extract the surplus value. This surplus value, Marx argues, is “unpaid value” (Marx, 1863:Ch 2). Now, it seems that the opportunities for extraction of such unpaid value have grown considerably in the new economy. That is because, first, this economy, which has been variously described with terms such as ‘post-Fordism,’ ‘cognitive capitalism,’ or ‘network capitalism,’ now also exploits affects, contacts, and communications, which it has discovered as potential sources of additional surplus value. And second, the agents in this economy tend to provide these resources, whose value has risen, for free – for example, via social networks like Facebook. So we are looking at a large amount of literally unpaid labor, and in many cases, the unremunerated laborers even perform it voluntarily. This self-exploitation, they hope, will furnish them with what Bourdieu called ‘symbolic capital’ – recognition and social prestige – which, though it may not be seamlessly convertible into economic categories, will (again: they hope) pay off one day.

Yet even a work of art sold at auction for a high price contains a great deal of unpaid or merely underpaid labor – the labor, for instance, of assistants, interns, gallery associates, haulers, and perhaps also critics and curators. The ideas, interactions, and social activities of the latter are no less contained in the value expressed by the price at auction than their organizational, logistical, or technical services. Yet in comparison to the profits the work of art potentially yields for its creator and his gallerist, the wages these subcontractors receive are a pittance. And surplus value in the form of unpaid labor is also being produced when people like you and me mingle at openings, communicating and disseminating information (Diederichsen, 2012). Our participation in the art world, our mere presence in it, generates surplus value and contributes to ever-rising profit margins elsewhere (Fraser, 2011).

**No value without
aliveness**

Implicit in value, we have seen, is labor power, living labor. Yet value as conceived by Marx also freezes this life that is contained in it, immobilizes it and credits it to the commodity itself. We might say that the commodity deadens the individual labor and at once revives it, brings it to a new (false) life: the labor power that seems to speak from it was expended elsewhere. The art commodity is a different matter: it claims to possess the ability to preserve the individual labor. Instead of being concealed and deadened, that labor is cultivated, forcing and heightening its aliveness or, rather, the impression that it is alive. That is true even of those works in which traces of life are effaced, for example, by means of artificiality, mechanization, or anonymity. Even the eschewal of aliveness is credited to its creator and – consider Wade Guyton’s computer-generated laser prints – ultimately appears to be alive.

But how exactly does aliveness enter into the commodity? In Marx, the commodity – his example was a table – exhibits bizarre behavior the moment it steps forth as a commodity: “It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (Marx, 1990 [1867]:164). Marx obviously ascribes a high degree of agency and self-will to the table transmuted into a commodity – it stands on its head and harbors wayward and nonsensical ideas.

The example of the table-commodity inevitably brings to mind tropes such as autonomy and self-activity, self-directed agency that modern aesthetics has relied on to describe art. We might think that Marx relied on the ideal of the autonomous work of art as a blueprint for his conception of the commodity, especially if we consider that he also described the commodity as “sensible-supersensible” and “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx, 1990 [1867]:163). Works of art, too, may usually be experienced with the senses and are associated with supersensible qualities. They have also inspired theological speculation. Yet where Marx’s commodities serve as nothing more than the “material receptacles” of “the human labor spent in their production,” works of art would seem to be saturated and thoroughly enriched with human labor (or its eschewal, which is ultimately also labor). In the commodity, this animation has receded into a latent state, whereas the work of art as a commodity allows us to experience it in more pronounced and evident form. This more explicit animation and (ostensible) aliveness is why the work of art is the better commodity.

In this perspective, it is surely no accident that ‘aliveness’ has been a central aspiration in the visual arts since the early modern period, both igniting aesthetic debates and guiding aesthetic productions. Alberti already believed that it was the mission of painting to create life and make “absent men present” (Alberti, 1956:63). The Renaissance accordingly blended the figure of the artistic

creator with metaphors of procreation and birth, as though he gave painful birth to his child (Pfisterer, 2005). The production of life and aliveness was elevated to the status of an ideal that painting and sculpture labored to achieve well into the 19th century. We encounter a redefinition and intensification of this aspiration in the historic avant-gardes of the early 20th century, which, as is well known, sought to translate art into life and aimed to literally integrate the realities of life into art, for example in collages. Today, the emphatic reference to life in the avant-gardes appears in a different light, also as a consequence of the intense debate over the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005), which, as we all know, tends to regard life as a resource. Within the confines of art theory, however, the model of an art that opens up toward the reality of life around it still bears positive connotations; for an example in today’s art, consider what is called network painting, whose special quality is allegedly that it visualizes its social networks (Joselit, 2009).

The art commodity as a synthesis of commodity and gift

Yet the Marxian commodity also resembles another object when it comes to its aliveness: the gift as described by Marcel Mauss, which is likewise defined by an aspect of animation.⁴ An anthropologist, Mauss was interested in the question of why archaic rituals of exchange oblige the recipient of a gift to give one in return (Mauss, 1990[1954]). His explanation for this compulsory obligation to make a return gift was that the thing received is not lifeless, that it contains a piece of the giver, of his soul (Mauss, 1990[1954]:42). That is why it has power over the recipient and must not be kept but passed on. Its value, too, is patently owed to a suggestion of animation. Because the gift is regarded as possessed of a soul, it must keep circulating in subsequent acts of exchange. The differences of perspective between them notwithstanding, Mauss and Marx agree that the blending of persons and things is a distinguishing feature of exchange. In the act of exchange, things become subject-like and persons take on the form of objects.

Considered in this light, the art commodity may be read as a synthesis of the Marxian commodity and the Maussian gift. By virtue, most immediately, of the signature it bears, it refers to its author, whence it is enriched, not unlike the gift, with his intentions and perhaps even his ‘soul.’ Yet at the same time, like the Marxian commodity, it represents an accretion of – even more: it is replete with – living labor. Its particular value would thus be its ability to bring not only its creator’s labor capacity, but also his ‘soul,’ his innermost core, into play. It contains the inner life of a person and his creative power and so appears as especially desirable in

the biopolitical scenario Virno describes, which aims at the exploitation of our creative faculties, our lives. Of course, there are other artforms – like film or theatre – that have proven more successful in producing a sense of aliveness, which a busy absorbing life. But the visual arts present the vividness in the form a material (or seemingly immaterial) object which is not always reducible to this aspect.

Value as the blind spot of animism

Both the Marxian commodity economy and the Maussian society exchange are moreover distinguished by the prominent involvement of animistic conceptions: they revolve around a good – be it the commodity, be it the gift – whose value consists in its being a hybrid of the animate and the inanimate. So as Bruno Latour has emphasized, animism, far from being an extra-European mindset of ahistorical “indigenous peoples,” appears at the very center of modern thought (Latour & Franke, 2012). A number of exhibitions and conferences in recent years have examined the matter of animism; their great merit has been to remind us of the central importance of magical thinking in contemporary art. Yet these events have tended to attribute a transgressive potential to animism, as though it were still scandalous, as though embracing it still meant walking on the wild side of modern thinking (Franke & Albers, 2012:7). But the truth is that it is at home at the center of modern thinking – in Marx’s conception of the commodity and Mauss’s conception of the gift. So the assertion that it poses a “lasting provocation” (Franke & Albers, 2012) is fairly pointless. Animism is not provocative; on the contrary, it is directly associated with the dimension of value, which the debate over animism has yet to address. Aspects of the exploitation and marketing of art are virtually absent from the discussion spurred by the current enthusiasm for animate or subject-like works of art, which often invoke Latour’s concept of the ‘actant’ – a hybrid of thing and person. Instead of elevating the actant to the status of a figure of universal applicability, our study of practices in art should distinguish between pictures that appear performatively as quasi-subjects, assemblages that seem subject-like, anthropomorphic ‘figures,’ and other varieties of the animate work of art. We should also explore whether and how the impression of animation and aliveness created in a wide range of ways fundamentally benefits the form of value of these works. It is in the interest of that value that a high degree of aliveness is suggested, which is to say, that the objects seem animate. My point here is not to lament or criticize the intrinsic connection between aliveness and value in art. What merits criticism, however, is the widespread failure of the art world’s agents – be they artists, critics, or quasi-objects – to address this dimension of value in their reflections. **ARQ**

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- 1 Although he did include the products of art and science in the realm of "material production," "in so far as they take the form of things," he did not explicitly give thought to their value. See: Marx (1863:P 1, Ch 4).
- 2 Ibid.: "Hence exchange value appears to be something accidental and purely relative, and consequently an intrinsic value, i.e., an exchange value that is inseparably connected with, inherent in commodities, seems a contradiction in terms." (Marx, 1990 [1867]:126).
- 3 <http://www.sothebys.com/en/departments/contemporary-art/videos.html?bctid=1917824946001&bclid=699981330001>.
- 4 In his discussion of the Marxian commodity, David Graeber has similarly pointed out its close affinity to the Maussian gift, but without focusing on the aspect of animation and aliveness. See: Graeber (2001).

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