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**Creative Accountancy: the Supposed Contradiction
between Art and Commodification**

“The books guiding the world today are not novels and poetry, but those of accountants.”¹

subjective, creative, spontaneous life-affirmation of commodification in general, the

between the autonomous subjectivity of use value and the standardising objectivity of exchange value.¹⁴ Unfortunately the discontinuity of the emerging category of Fine Art from other commodities created a weakn

The Cult of Art Mystique in the Laboratory of Dialectical Critique

If this seems reasonably uncontroversial it is worth pondering how often the aporetic nature of commodification is exaggerated and misunderstood, nowhere more so than in relation to Art. Ever since the bifurcation of Fine Art and “unfine” commodities in Smith’s time, the notion that there is an inherent “market irrationality” in Art has become almost common sense. Though it would seem the height of aestheticist naivety to claim that this irrationality is fundamentally antagonistic to exchange value it is remarkable how our knowing winks or casual shrugs about the Art market always come with a caveat about *some* “priceless” element of Art, whether this be the ineffable remainder of *différance* or merely the indeterminacy of creative self-expression. Even the most rigorous theorists of commodification have found their scalpels of critique rusted with awe when it comes to the subject of Art.

Though famously depicting a communist end to the alienating exclusivity of Art,²³ Marx himself was never able to integrate Art into his commodity analysis, largely leaving its “disproportionality” to under-theorised ruminations that basically recycled Romantic mystique.²⁴ Louis Althusser, who had no qualms about extending his vigorous structuralism over the top of the mystifying subjectivism of Genius,²⁵ still believed in a fundamental “internal distancing” of Art from the ideological effect emanating from commodification and “State apparatuses.”²⁶ But nowhere is the mythos of an unreifiable essence of Art more telling than in one of the dourest exponents of the “melancholy science,”²⁷ for Theodor Adorno’s work is also ostensibly the most rigorous dialectical critique of the relationship between Art and commodification.

It is not as if Adorno was unaware of the fact that Art “is inextricably entwined with rationalization...[:]”²⁸ “As long as art takes the form of works, it is

essentially things, objectified in accordance with a law of form.”²⁹ Indeed he comes down heavily on those who would treat Art as an “enduring abstract essence”³⁰ and thus mystify its production: “What is wrong with the aesthetics of genius is that it denies the importance of the moment of making or fabrication (*téchne*), overemphasizing the aspect of art’s absolutely primordial status and viewing art as *natura naturans*.”³¹ More importantly this fetishism of subjectivity is seen as a direct outcome of reification—the illusory preservation of spontaneity to cover the tracks of assembly-line routinisation: “Radical reification produces its own pretence of immediacy and intimacy.”³² If this were not enough, Adorno even goes so far as to regard Art as an analogue of the processes of commodification, both in terms of never-ending novelty³³ and a fundamental otiosity that is equated with the way a commodity only exists for exchange value.³⁴ Indeed there are moments when Adorno admits that there is more than just an analogous relationship: “Offering art for sale on a market...is not some perverse use of art but simply a logical consequence of art’s participation in productive relations.”³⁵ Thus, “it becomes impossible to criticize the culture industry without criticizing art at the same time.”³⁶ On the strength of this, one can only agree with Fredric Jameson’s assessment that Adorno’s dialectical critique of Art is as strong as the rest of his work and that it “challenges the conception and ideal of philosophical aesthetics.”³⁷

Yet even while celebrating this critique Jameson is forced to admit that Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* is based on the assumption that everyone knows what Art is.³⁸ This would seem to run counter to the explicit anti-absolutism of this work: “The concept of art balks at being defined.... Nor can the nature of art be ascertained by going back to the origin of art in order to find some fundamental and primary layer that supports everything else.”³⁹ Yet having placed these admirable warning signs

around the ontology of Art Adorno does not really unpack the definitional difficulty except to note general effusiveness and, indeed, uses this conceptual amorphousness to draw a veil over an assumption shared with Althusser: that there is “true” and “authentic” Art.⁴⁰

For an avowed critic of “the jargon of authenticity,”⁴¹ this belief in the truth of Art cannot be proffered without caveats and Adorno is thus at pains to stress that “True art challenges its own essence, thereby heightening the sense of uncertainty that dwells in the artist.”⁴² Yet an essence, no matter how partial, compromised, or uncertain is still an essence. Rather than making the dialectical components of Art equal partners, Adorno plumps for a mere Aristotelian revision of the Platonic hierarchy of form and manifestation, where form remains as the ontological core but manifestation becomes an indissoluble, though still secondary, aspect.⁴³ Adorno may defend his veridical conception of Art by claiming that “truth exists only as a product of historical becoming”⁴⁴—but *which* truth is the one that has emerged from the “historical becoming” of Art, the one avowed by the bourgeois aesthetic ideology of autonomous expression, or the one avowed by the daily commodification of Art?

Adorno’s invocation of “essence and appearance”⁴⁵ parallels a contrast he shares with Althusser between “knowledge” and “pleasure,”⁴⁶ where the latter is the domain of utility, instrumentalism, materiality and all that is compatible with the logic of the commodity, and the former is not. If there is any doubt about the constitutive nature of this divide for Art Adorno spells out the consequences clearly: “What ordinary language and conformist aesthetics have termed enjoyment of art... has probably never existed and will probably never exist.”⁴⁷ To Adorno “true Art” has no use value, providing none of the easy sensual charms of mere entertainment and thus exhibiting a “haughty refusal to be serviceable to anything or anybody.”⁴⁸

all annihilated these dependencies along with the memory of its fall from grace.”⁵⁶

These mystical prelapsarian overtones are based in Adorno’s own reification of Art as an autonomous essence of subjectivity⁵⁷ that encounters sociality and materiality as alien but inevitable (in our flawed world) impositions.⁵⁸

Without lingering too churlishly on the professed “materialism” of Adorno’s aesthetics⁵⁹ it is perhaps not surprising that neither the phenomenology of “true Art” nor the actual workings of commodity production is examined in any detail under his theological narrative. Did Adorno experience Kafka through a unique manuscript, Schoenberg and Beckett through personal, unpaid performances? Adorno

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cultural economy drained of media (as simulacra of communication) and bleached of meaning, like the skeletal remains of dead cattle under the withering desert sun in all those faded westerns.”

Arts and Statecraft

Yet the surplus of meaning that retards the commodification of Art objects is not just left to evaporate as waste. A common solution is to have this surplus bought by the State to maintain the integrity of supposedly “non-commodifiable” Art and the fetishised bourgeois values they represent—to maintain its sacred core without challenging the profanity of capitalism. This includes the actual State purchase of Art for public galleries (and more mundane government buildings), grants for Artists and Art publications, regular State-sponsored prizes, subsidised Art schools, stipulated air-time for Art programmes on public broadcasting and certain exemptions for Art from regulations governing communication,⁷¹ all of which are aimed not simply to preserve Art, but to preserve its mystique and sense of autonomy. Yet at the same time such government patronage gives Art a para-commodity status and props up and stimulates the “private” Art market. It also institutionalises an “Art world” of rules and legitimation⁷² bounded by the *quid pro quo* of the Art bureaucracy to increase control—the networks of “rights and responsibilities” built up between Artists and government agencies turn the former into *de facto* bureaucrats—while sanctifying autonomy.

To see this as a challenge to capitalism is, to put it mildly, rather short-sighted; despite the fact that elements of the ruling class will always complain about money spent on “useless” Art, they will never totally deny government funding to the Arts, just to those elements that seem overtly to threaten their extreme bourgeois

views (whether that be heteronormativity or just Protestant workerism). A good example here was the 1989 attack by the conservative Republican senator, Jesse Helms, against the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the American federal government agency responsible for grants to Artists. The accusation was that this agency was wasting tax-payers' money supporting homosexual "pornography" like the work of the late photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, though rather than demand the abolition of the NEA Helms merely advocated that standards of "decency" be part of the process of awarding grants.⁷³ Though Bourdieu and Haacke⁷⁴ make much of the subsequent (failed) attempt to abolish the NEA in 1993, what should be seen as remarkable is that any State support of Art existed, and continues to exist, at all, under populist *laissez*

On the one hand this arrangement is patronage, as acknowledged by Martorella⁸² who, with disarming candour, compared it favourably to the aristocratic patronage of the tyrannical de Medicis. Donations are often framed in terms of “corporate citizenship”⁸³ which, translated from Kushner’s economese of “stakeholder management rationality,” is the general sense of patrician responsibility to the larger social structures, however “irrational” they may appear in terms of immediate profit. At the same time this is sponsorship, in the modern sense of commercial advertising, for the sake of public relations or brand recognition, a relationship much more in keeping with valorisation and commodification. Whether it be restrained “prestige marketing” to the 0 Tw

there must also be a knowledge and “appreciation” of this sacred bourgeois realm and its surplus of meaning. Certainly such knowledge can, to some degree, be bought through the hiring of Art experts and, more directly, in the actual purchase of Art *bestowing* cultural capital. However Art is not so easily rendered to the absolute whims of the purse, a good example being former entrepreneur Alan Bond’s purchase of Van Gogh’s *Iris*, where this acquisition did little to dispel the image of a vulgar parvenu trying to purchase elite credibility.⁹³ It is this cultural capital which acts as the re-territorialising brake on the potential disintegration of Art under the centrifugal force of its myriad forms. Just as tariffs give some stability and regulation to trade flows, so the exclusivity of cultural capital functions to slow the exchange of Art down to a rate that differentiates it from the terminal velocity of other commodities.

While the abstract norms of the Art market do much to secure its borders, the material particularities of each Art medium have important consequences for the experience of commodification. On the one hand, in this age of ephemeral information commodities which allow for increased velocity of exchange, the Art object’s “object” status, which must be maintained for the sake of authenticity, creates a striation that mediates exchange. This works to preserve the differentiation of the market for paintings and the “plastic” Arts. Indeed in terms of the latter the “object-ness” of sculptures and three-dimensional installation pieces is such as to prohibitively mediate exchange, even for the specialised Art market.⁹⁴ However, for those forms, like literature and music, whose artefactual status is less secure, this restriction to commodification starts to erode. These forms leave themselves open to the “mechanical reproduction” Benjamin⁹⁵ saw withering the aura of Art by virtue of performative immanence, in the case of music, and the pre-eminence of content over form (or at least the pre-eminence of “style” as form), in the case of literature. These

properties create a vulnerability to the mass duplication of recording and printing technology that, though slightly mitigated by the privileging of live performance or rare editions, inevitably erodes the value of uniqueness.⁹⁶ In this case it is only the discernment and taste of cultural capital, as a mode of consumption, which maintains some privileged market presence and prevents these Art forms from sluicing straight through to the mass entertainment mill.

The Culture Industry

Yet even at this apparent core of commodification—Adorno’s much maligned “culture industry” where the heat and pressure of reification should break down any aura of irreducibility—the sophisticated handling of Artistic commodification does not end. Corporate cultural production cannot and, despite jeremiads to the contrary, will not dispel all traces of autonomous production and excess signification: “even in conglomerated culture, some of the constituent mediums may retain traces of their previous autonomy and of properties not entirely assimilated.”⁹⁷

To reiterate Ryan’s inclusive definition of Art as that which is “specifically signifying in character,”⁹⁸ it is important to note that any differentiation between popular culture and High Art is primarily a function of the shifting, fluid contradictions between the urge to commodify and the need to preserve a semblance of sacred inalienability. Indeed elements of such “inalienability” are an inescapable part of cultural commodification, even at the “entertainment” end of the spectrum.

album there must be some difference from the previous album. Planned obsolescence, which is vital to high product turnover, cannot be achieved with cultural commodities

complex layers of this particular commodification but also to mistake the dynamics that mediate commodification as negating reification.

Indeed the undoubted subjective instability of Art, far from threatening the capitalist productive apparatus, or even being something to be overcome and negotiated, can be seen as a vital, though complex, ally in the advance of the commodity regime: “The bourgeois form of rationality has always needed irrational supplements, in order to maintain itself. . . . Such irrationality in the midst of the rational is the working atmosphere of authenticity.”¹⁰¹ Though Adorno could not bring himself to admit the total complicity of Art irrationality he was well aware how important the foundational mythos of spontaneous freedom was to a bourgeois hegemony ostensibly based on principles of liberty and democracy. The eighteenth-century schism between aesthetics and economics was as much to preserve a domain of “irrational” subjective freedom¹⁰² from the commodity calculus as it was to preserve this calculus from the contradiction of “irrational” use value. Yet the phenomenological absurdity of this division has not exposed the ideological absurdity of freedom in a world dominated by technocratic rationality. The subjective aporias of Art commodification become the legitimating “authentification” of the commodity process itself as they “prove” how compatible the irrational use value of Art is to the exchange value of the market in a way that Smith was too cautious to propose. That this “irrationality” never totally exceeds the rationality of exchange value gives the lie to this cosy marriage of human subjectivity and market objectivity, but as long as Art remains an uncontested cipher for such subjectivity it will never be exposed.

Notes

¹ Rolland Munro, “Zero and Literature: Introduction” (*Journal for Cultural Research* 8.2, 2004), 99.

² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984 [1970]), 26.

³ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963 [1958]), 55.

⁴ Though attempts have been made to neutralise the loaded conceptual baggage of Art by re-conceptualising it as a lower-case general category for the “enormous array of social activities which are wholly or in part specifically signifying in character” (Bill Ryan, *Making Capital from Culture: The Corporate Form of Capitalist Cultural Production* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992], 10), such functionalism can never totally elide *Art* as the term for the mystical bourgeois values and products of the “creative genius.” The upper case designation used by me is to prevent such an elision. This does not contradict Ryan’s definition per se, which I use for an inclusive definition of Art including popular culture; it merely reinforces the social stakes of the level of Art signification.

⁵ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 304.

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 34; D. W. Hamlyn, *The Penguin History of Western Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 207.

⁷ Guillory, 305.

⁸ Hamlyn, 168-170; Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1961]), 178-179.

⁹ Hamlyn, 190 and 199.

¹⁰ John Armstrong, *The Secret Power of Beauty: Why happiness is in the eye of the beholder* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 120. The process whereby differing individual passions become unified in taste is not detailed by Hume except as a natural, consensual deference to those with a greater acuity of sense and delicacy of imagination, an acuity of which even a “peasant or Indian” has a primal vestige (David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” in John W. Lenz, ed., *Of the Standard of Taste And Other Essays* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965], 14). Individual difference thus becomes hierarchical, though, like the idealised bourgeois civil society, it is a hierarchy of natural talent rather than aristocratic privilege.

¹¹ Hamlyn, 218.

¹² Aesthetics, as the science of sense-perception, was actually birthed from within a German rationalism that was relatively independent of British empiricism; indeed it started from the opposite polarity of abstract reason. In fact the term *aesthe* 0 Twp(r)-2(aD7(e)-3(016-2(aD7i/P <<12(d4(f))JTJ -0.006 Tc d4(JTJ 7

¹⁹ Even Bewes, who is very conscious of deconstructive subtleties, claims that “reification is fast approaching the stage of totality; probably it arrived there long ago” (Timothy Bewes, *Reification or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* [London: Verso, 2002], 266-267).

²⁰ Graham Cassano, “Reification, Resistance, and Ironic Empiricism in Georg Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money*” (*Rethinking Marxism* 17.4, 2005), 580; Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-

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⁴² Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 2.

⁴³ Hamlyn, 61. This is also Hegel's dialectic, where the Absolute Idea of Art is kept from totally floating away into the Platonic ether by the ontological necessity of sensual appearance, but where this appearance is still 'deceptive' and 'fleeting' (G. W. F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* (London: Penguin Books, 1993 [1886]), 10-11. Adorno's own latent Platonism bubbles to the surface when he approvingly invokes Plato to maintain that "what is objectively and intrinsically untrue cannot also be subjectively good and true for human beings" (Adorno, *Culture*, 105).

⁴⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 321.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 83, emphasis added. Actualising these resistant spiritual elements can only be done in dialectical unison with objectified form (*Ibid.*, 79), yet we have already mentioned the hierarchical nature of this dialectic and, in any case, we are still waiting for the revolutionary actualisation.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 26, emphasis added.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁷ It is worth noting how often Art is depicted as if it was an autonomous thing: "Art responds to the loss of certainty...." (*Ibid.*, 24); "art emancipated itself from cuisine and pornography...." (*Ibid.*, 18)

⁵⁸ "Art...is different from empirical reality" (*Ibid.*, 3).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁰ For example, in defence of the conventional spectatorial form of Beckett's plays that divides consumers (audience) and producers (performers): "[theatre] productions that do away with curtains are trying to achieve the impossible by means of a cheap trick" (*Ibid.*, 121). Perhaps more telling is the way Adorno admits that Art needs the rationality of "the newest administrative standards...[and cannot] possibly oppose this *en bloc*" (Adorno, *Culture*, 121). Here administrative rationality is conflated with a kind of "natural organisation."

⁶¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 336.

⁶² Raymond Williams locates the origin of the concept of Art directly *within* the modern rationalisation process that separated and reified various skills (Williams, *Keywords*, 40-41). For a good analysis of the fundamental difference between ancient *ars*, "primitive" sacred objects and our modern "Art" see Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 19-27 and 270-273. Both provide far better materialist histories of Art than Adorno's tale of a transhistorical essence waiting to purify itself.

⁶³ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 324.

⁶⁴ Adorno, *Culture*, 100-101.

⁶⁵ Many Artists who shared the same "High Art" status and autonomy of production as Kafka, Beckett and Schoenberg are condemned for their proximity or similarity to mass culture (Adorno, *Culture*, 80; Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981 (1967)], 150). I will use "Culture Industry" more specifically to describe the studios, publishing houses and record companies associated with popular culture.

⁶⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 24.

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973 [1955]), 215. This "aura" is all that aids a reificatory distance between ourselves and the objects we create and consume, much like a religious feeling of awe: "The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us" (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999], 447).

⁶⁸ Though this use value is, in essence, the same as Bourdieu's concept of symbolic value/capital it perhaps better distinguishes the symbolism of Art from the symbolism of advertising copy or street signs, though these are not mutually exclusive. Indeed I mark the "instrumentalism of communication" as "supposed" in recognition of the excessive signification (*différance*) of all communication, though Art's excess is distinct in being socially sanctioned.

⁶⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, 219.

⁷⁰ Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein, *Data Trash: the Theory of the Virtual Class* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 30.

⁷¹ For example the American Supreme Court exemption of Art from obscenity laws (Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange* [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995], 7).

⁷² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 287.

⁷³ Bourdieu and Haacke, 2-5. It is not an insignificant point that the law Helms helped pass to institute these standards was ruled unconstitutional by a Federal District Court judge (Bourdieu and Haacke, 6 n4): the judicial antibodies of the State rushing to counter overzealous moral reterritorialisation and reinforce the sacred autonomy of Art.

⁷⁴ Bourdieu and Haacke, 5 n3.

⁷⁵ Likewise in Britain under Thatcher, where contempt for the “middle class titillation” of Art was often expressly voiced and substantial cuts were made to the Art budget (Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson, *The Age of Insecurity* [London: Verso, 1999], 109, 148; Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000], 14), and yet Art “welfare” continued, with over a billion tax pounds spent on the Arts in the late eighties (Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* [London: Michael Joseph, 1994], 508).

⁷⁶ Peter Ray, “Determined to be Different: Social Constructionism and Homosexuality” in Suke Wolton, ed., *Marxism, Mysticism and Modern Theory* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 146.

⁷⁷ Rosanne Martorella, “Art and Business” [EMC no3.723 0 0.3020.04]

