The absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity

Stewart Martin

Art's relation to commodification is an unavoidable and entrenched condition for much of the theory, history and practice of art today; so entrenched, in fact, as to have become implicit and assumed for many. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, considerations of this relation have been marginal to most of what passes academically for the philosophy of art. This is especially so in the Analytical tradition, where art's relations to its formation within capitalist societies is routinely methodologically excluded as an extra-philosophical concern, to be left to economics, sociology or history. The most receptive point of entry for these considerations would seem to be in the elaboration of institutional theories of art and the 'artworld', but these have so far been developed at a level of generality that fails to register the specificity of capitalist forms, such as the commodity.[1] There is the potential for an application of such theories to this end, but, as a mere application, the core philosophical articulation of 'what art is' would remain untouched.

So-called 'continental philosophy' is for the most part little different. While social and historical considerations tend not to be methodologically excluded (at least, not in the same way) and art is seen as far more fundamental to philosophy's core concerns – encouraging broader reflection on its relations and significance – there is nonetheless still little sustained reflection on art's relations to capitalist social forms. The influential philosophy of art that has emerged from phenomenology and existential ontology, for instance, is preoccupied with art's relations to the history of metaphysics or subjectivism, rather than to capitalism in any specific sense. Again, it offers no systematic account of the relation of the artwork to the commodity form.[2] Indeed, this issue remains undeveloped even among many who *have* considered capitalism as a central philosophical problem.[3]

The outstanding exception to this philosophical neglect is the Frankfurt School, particularly in the writing of Benjamin and, in certain more obvious and emphatic respects, Adorno. Their influence is often behind other exceptions that come to mind.[4] Benjamin's and Adorno's work is in many ways distinguished by its philosophical reception of Marx's critique of capitalism, and their development of a novel sense of the philosophy of art is one of its most significant outcomes. This is intensified by their consideration of the concept of art as a form of capitalist modernity. The result is a deep commitment to considering art's relations to the commodity form as a central problem of modern philosophy. Yet this is marginalized in much of the reception of Benjamin and Adorno into academic philosophy that has taken place in recent years. However, even in their own writings this issue often remains obscure, unelaborated and problematic in key respects.

Antinomies of art

As a consequence of this broad philosophical neglect, the theoretical, critical and historical studies of art that *have* taken its relations to capitalism to be fundamental have been situated broadly outside the parameters of academic philosophy. In contrast, the influence of the Frankfurt School has been profound, albeit controversial. Indeed, these controversies have structured this field of studies. This is apparent in debates over the 'culture industry', especially where the notions of art and capitalism are approached in their developed or strong forms, namely, as 'high' or 'autonomous' art and 'high', 'late' or 'developed' capitalism. In other words, where art is valuable in its own terms, and commodification is the dominant mode of social relations. Traversing these now complex disputes is the simple issue of whether autonomous art is a commodity or not; or, in more qualified terms, whether art is an intensification of the commodity form, or a limit to it. It could be stated as basic antagonism or antinomy between two equally compelling proposi-

tions: art is a commodity; art is not a commodity. Various names could be aligned here: William Morris contra Oscar Wilde, perhaps. But this antinomy is perhaps presented more explicitly in post-World War II American art, the confrontations between Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Indeed, the comparison of certain Pop and Minimalist works from the 1960s presents this doubly compelling sense that autonomous art is both a commodity and not a commodity with particular acuteness: look at Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* in contrast to Donald Judd's or Robert Morris's cuboid works. Dan Flavin's sculptural constructions of neon strip lighting condense this antinomy all at once.

The theoretical and historical dynamics of this antinomy can be articulated in terms of conflicting positions. On the one hand, autonomous art appears as the product, effect or symptom of 'high' capitalism: autonomous art effectively comes into being with commodification, which frees certain products from their heteronomous determination by the church, state or other forms of patronage, and, through the indeterminacy of their ultimate buyer, such works acquire an independent sense of their end and value. Autonomous art is thus an ornament of capitalist culture. On the other hand, there is the position that autonomous art is destroyed by developed capitalism. According to this view, the development of commodification as a general principle of society reduces all values to exchange-value, including the value of art, and thereby destroys art's autonomy. Capitalist culture is consequently the death of autonomous art. This conflict may be discerned in the stand-offs familiar in contemporary discussions of art: Debord versus Greenberg, Bürger versus Adorno. However, none of these figures occupies these positions in a straightforward way; indeed, this conflict is internalized by all of them, at least to some extent. Furthermore, the very familiarity with which these oppositions are often presented suggests that this antinomy of autonomous art in capitalist culture has become established as a tension that is integral to the situation and predicament of art theory and practice today. This familiarity has even induced a degree of frustration and boredom with the issue, but this is itself frequently a symptom of intensified internalization. This antinomy is not straightforwardly empirically resolvable, since the very concept of what art is and should be is in the balance. It therefore requires philosophical and political reflection.

Perhaps the principal way in which a resolution of the antinomy has been attempted is teleologically or historically – namely, by claiming that capitalist culture produces and *then* destroys autonomous art. However, this reproduces a further set of conflicts that have become more explicit demarcations within contemporary art theory. This may be seen in the familiar dispute over whether autonomous art has an ideological or a critical function within capitalist culture. Again, we can distinguish opposed positions. On the one side, autonomous art appears as not just a 'product' but an 'ideological product' of capitalist culture. That is, attributing autonomy to art conceals or obscures its constitution within commodity culture, and/or it functions as a compensation for the social pathologies of this culture, rather than providing an alternative to it. Thus, the concept of ideology comes to mediate and resolve the problem of whether art is produced or destroyed by commodification. This critique of the ideological function of autonomous art has encouraged the attempt to elaborate an alternative conception of what art is. Since, if art's autonomy is an illusion, what is real? And what produces its illusoriness? The dominant response to this question has been to dissolve autonomous art into a broader and more encompassing conception of culture and cultural practice, beyond the distinction between 'high art' and 'low art' or 'non-art'. (This was in many ways foundational to Cultural Studies.[5]) However, this produces a further tension between whether this broader sense of culture is seen as an alternative, at least implicitly, to capitalist culture, or just its new formation. (The idea of postmodernism has been fraught with these tensions.[6]) Either way, cultural activity is conceived in some 'post-autonomous', perhaps even 'post-art' form.

In opposition to all this, and in reaction to these problems, there has emerged a salvaging revaluation of art's autonomy from its obscuring and compensatory functions, proposing it as a critical alternative to an expanded capitalist culture. Art's self-determination and withdrawal from social interaction are interpreted as a critique of capitalism's colonization of social life and the forging of a realm apart from capital.[7] However, besides the objections above, this position faces an internal problem: if autonomous art is an exception to capitalism, why and how should art survive? This formulation justifies a certain melancholic solution. The coincidence of the dissolution of autonomous art with the expansion of capitalist culture is claimed to demonstrate the irreduciblity of autonomous art to capitalism, and, while this leads to the concession of art's marginal and even outmoded character within developed capitalism, this does not

disqualify its critical significance.[8] Art's resistance to its commodification is therefore sustained as a lament.

These disputes can be articulated as a question or choice. Should autonomous art be abandoned as an ideology, in favour of some post-autonomous or post-art form of critical practice? Or should it be maintained as a self-consciously anachronistic form, a melancholy critique? However, this increasingly sounds like a dilemma, with both outcomes subject to each other's objections. If the pursuit of some post-autonomous practice is liable to abandon all resistance to capitalist culture, the maintenance of autonomy is no less liable to conservatism or irrelevance. Contemporary art practice and its criticism are frequently found to hesitate here. But this choice has become entrenched in part because it is underpinned by a tacit agreement. Both options effectively agree that autonomous art is essentially outmoded by late capitalist culture; they just disagree about the consequences.

This article is an attempt to rethink this situation and thereby to rethink what a critical philosophy and practice of art might be today. It argues against the teleological resolution, or rather displacement, of the antinomies of autonomous art and commodification outlined above. Its contention is that the entrenched conflicts of contemporary art and cultural theory are a consequence of not fully grasping the essentially contradictory relation of autonomous art and commodification. It tries to show, by way of a detailed analysis of the relationship of the concepts of the commodity form and autonomous art, how autonomous art is *not* outmoded by its commodification, but is rather a contradictory product of it: namely, that autonomous art is both produced by *and* destroyed by capitalist culture, both its ideology *and* its critique. This may appear like an intensified dilemma. But if art's autonomy is a produced, and reproduced, contradiction of developed capitalist culture then it remains a vital form through which this culture can be resisted and criticized. And in times and places where commodification has become a pervasive form of social life, such an immanent critique is essential. Nonetheless, the aim of grasping this antinomy of art and commodification here is not to dissolve it, philosophically, but to comprehend why and how it is coterminous with capitalist culture, and thereby to orient critical practice to this end.

The point of departure for this task is found in Adorno's philosophy of art. This appears unpropitious. While his deep historical significance for these debates recommends him, his polemical identification with the position that autonomous art is outmoded by capitalist culture would appear to limit fatally what can be derived from him. This is partly true, partly untrue. The association of Adorno with this position is not mistaken; however, it needs to be mediated by his insistence on the radical entwinement of autonomous art with its commodity form. This has been widely acknowledged.[9] But its implications have not been pursued as far as they can be. This has tended to freeze considerations of Adorno's relation to the development of capitalist culture in the image of resilient obsolescence. Recently, this has been consolidated by attempts to establish Adorno's essential continuity with post-Kantian aesthetics, particularly Jena Romanticism.[10] This is certainly illuminating, but Adorno's criticisms of Marxism have encouraged many to underestimate how profoundly post-Kantian philosophy of art is transformed, even inverted, by a reception of the conditions of capitalist culture. This underestimation is understandable in so far as it is questionable whether Adorno himself fully appreciated this; certainly he did not fully work out its consequences for reconceiving the philosophy of art. This is the horizon of this article. Its clue is Adorno's speculative proposition that 'the absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity'.[11]

Artwork and commodity

'[T]he absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity' is a singular proposition, appearing only once in Adorno's magnum opus, *Aesthetic Theory*, and seemingly nowhere else. Citation indexes are blind to it, yet it would be difficult to overstate its import. It is familiar to commentators, but not given the foundational significance it warrants.[12] Adorno claimed that *Aesthetic Theory* was not written in a chain of arguments derived from a first principle, but in 'equally weighted, paratactical parts that are arranged around a midpoint that they express through their constellation'.[13] Adorno derived not only his conception of philosophical form but much of his philosophical content from Benjamin's writings, no work more so than *Aesthetic Theory*, which stands paratactically in relation to Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*. Benjamin said of his own project that it was the fetish character of the commodity that stood at its midpoint.[14] It is compelling to see the midpoint of *Aesthetic Theory* in the riddle that 'the absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity'. Whether Adorno intended this or not is less significant than whether it is confirmed by the text, and this is not obvious. But, if what is at stake here is less Adorno's intentions than what he contributes to contemporary criticism, then – according to

the philosophical historiography he himself recommended[15] – we might still consider it a fragment that exceeds the philosophy that conceived it.

The immediate context of Adorno's proposition is an account of the transformation of art's relation to capitalism apparent in Baudelaire's poetry. This is derived from Benjamin, although the precise formulation and elaboration it takes on here are Adorno's. This context gives a meaning to the proposition that is obscured by its decontextualization. It names not only a process by which the artwork converges with the commodity, but also one by which it diverges from it. In this latter sense, it names a novel, homeopathic solution to the problem of how art asserts its own value or autonomy in a society in which all values have become commodified, and thereby heteronomously determined by their exchange-value. ('Autonomous art' translates 'absolute art' in so far as that which is absolute is not determined heteronomously, that is, by anything other than itself.) The solution is neither indifference nor blunt refusal of commodification, which Adorno claims would merely weaken art: 'Baudelaire's poetry was the first to codify that, in the midst of the fully developed commodity society, art can ignore this tendency only at the price of its powerlessness.'[16] The implicit argument here is that, within a society in which commodification is dominant, everything that is external to this commodification becomes marginal, liable to be socially irrelevant or merely yet-to-be-commodified. This predicament recommends an alternative, immanent critique: the generation of art's autonomy from *out of* commodification; the refusal of commodification by a subversive mimesis of it: 'Only by immersing its autonomy in society's *imagerie* can art surmount the heteronomous market. Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated.'[17]

Therefore, we need to grasp the extremely contradictory sense of this claim that 'the absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity'. The idea of the absolute artwork turns out to be far from what its post-Kantian proponents, from Schelling to Novalis, might have anticipated. Rather than an alternative to the world of commodification, it is revealed to be a product of it. 'Pure art', '*l'art pour l'art*', is revealed to be an ideology, a fetish; not just in the general sense that it conceals the social determinations of art, but in the specific sense that it conceals them by virtue of the same logic as that of the fetishized commodity. But in doing so, the artwork insists on itself as something that is autonomous and that therefore cannot be reduced to its commodification. Art establishes its autonomy against commodification, despite being constituted by it. The commodification of the world leaves art increasingly embattled and unable to affirm any content except itself, while, in so reducing itself, it also follows the logic of commodification all the more. Pure art's ignorance of its entwinement with commodification is ideological in so far as it denies or misconceives it. But the objection to capitalism's reduction of everything to exchange-value criticizes the lie, implicit in the commodity, that exchange-value is the only possible value.

We can already see how this conception of autonomous art is distinguished from the typical positions of contemporary cultural and art theory. For Adorno, autonomous art is both a commodity and not, both destroyed by *and* a product of capitalism, both its critique *and* its ideology. The artwork is presented as a contradiction produced by capitalism. Commodification is a condition of possibility of autonomous art as well as a condition of its impossibility. The implication of Adorno's account is that the absolute artwork meets *itself* with the absolute commodity. This is a shocking but illuminating relation of recognition. Methodologically, it suggests that we need to examine the concept of the absolute commodity in order to reveal the concept of the absolute artwork, and vice versa. However, this recognition does not reveal a harmonious resolution, but a contradiction of capitalist culture that is irresolvable in its own terms.[18]

Use and exchange

So, in what precise sense does the absolute artwork meet *itself* with the absolute commodity? And how does the concept of absolute commodity reveal the concept of absolute art? The answers revolve around the suppression of use-value. Just as the autonomous artwork is defined by its independence from any use or purpose outside itself, so is the commodity defined by the independence of its exchange-value from its use-value. The appreciation of the purity of modern art, stripped of any use-value, is matched by the autonomy of the commodity in developed capitalism where, according to Adorno, it is increasingly exchange-value itself that is consumed, rather than its use. They converge in the aesthetic-economic-historical category of 'the new': the sign of art's escape from the commodification of the present, and of the 'aesthetic seal of expanded reproduction'[19] in novelty goods. However, just as the absolute or autonomous artwork is an ideology or fetish – in so far as it conceals the extent to which it is actually the product of social labour, social uses, and their commodification – so too is the absolute

or fetishized commodity – in so far as it also conceals its relation to social labour and use.

> If artworks are in fact absolute commodities in that they are a social product that has rejected every semblance of existing for society, a semblance to which commodities otherwise urgently cling, the determining relation of production, the commodity form, enters the artwork equally with the social force of production and the antagonism between the two.[20]

Marx makes clear that, although the commodity is defined by the independence or autonomy of exchange-value from use-value, this can never be complete since it is use that is ultimately exchanged, and if something ceased to be useable, it would also cease to be exchangeable.[21] Thus, the idea of an 'absolute commodity' – if we are to understand this as a 'pure exchange-value' – is impossible, a contradiction that reveals an inherent limit of the commodity form and, more fundamentally, of the self-valorization of capital. 'The absolute commodity would be free of the ideology inherent in the commodity form, which pretends to exist for another, whereas ironically it is something merely for itself.'[22] Therefore, an artwork's affinity to a commodity does not prevent it from contradicting capital, but rather enables it. This is a dialectical mediation of extremes: the artwork reveals its identity and difference from the commodity at the point of their mutual absolutization.

This emphasis on uselessness may seem a perverse critique of exchange-value, when a more obvious strategy would be to emphasize use-value. However, the latter is subject to the same objection that recommends the immanent critique of capitalism in general. In a developed capitalist society it is questionable whether there are any uses that have not been formed through their exchange-value. Moreover, 'natural' uses tend to become as marginal and powerless as everything else external to commodification, and their affirmation becomes liable to a naive endorsement of their implicitly commodified form. Uses face the same fate as autonomous art. But autonomous art can also salvage use from value. In so far as autonomous art achieves a claim to what is not exchangeable, it becomes the ironic form in which uses can be recovered from their exchangeable form:

> Only what does not submit to [the principle of exchange] acts as the plenipotentiary of what is free from domination; only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value. Artworks are plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity.[23]

We could elaborate this through a parallel between the autonomous artwork as a fetishism of commodities and Freud's account of the dream as a reconfiguration of social norms. Just as the dream suspends the determination of meaning by socially accepted norms, so the fetish suspends the determination of use by exchange, and thereby becomes a source for imagining and enacting an alternative form of use.

In order to understand the precise character of this concept of an absolute commodity and how it contradicts exchange-value, we need to examine the exact form in which the absolute artwork is formed by commodification. This requires an analysis of the 'objectivity' of the commodity and how this is formed through abstraction and fetishism.

Objectivity – abstraction

Adorno's claim that 'the absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity' is produced most immediately in order to codify the objectivity that constitutes modern art:

> The power of [Baudelaire's] work is that it syncopates the overwhelming objectivity of the commodity character – which wipes out any human trace – with the objectivity of the work in itself, anterior to the living subject: the absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity.[24]

The issue of art's objectivity here is that of its autonomy – of whether the artwork is independent of the subject(s) that are its audience or that make it. Implicitly, it is also an issue of whether it is independent of the 'subject' of capital – namely, capital's self-valorization that is enabled through exchange-value. This underpins Adorno's link of the heteronomous determination of the artwork by its audience to its determination by exchange-value. Thus, art's autonomy is not merely conceived at the level of what it presents as its subject-matter, that is, the extent to which it resists mirroring social content. This does not prevent the artwork being a cipher for the intentions of the artist or the audience. There is a symmetry between theories of genius and theories of creative reading, in which the author-genius is effectively dissolved into the audience-genius. In opposition to this, Adorno seeks art's autonomy at the level of the artwork. But, in contrast to traditional conceptions of art's autonomy, this is derived from the objectivity of the commodity.

So, what is the nature of this objectivity? Adorno's elliptical answer is that, what 'wipes out any human trace' in the modern artwork is the 'abstractness' it derives from the commodity form. This leads to two decisive sentences:

> This abstractness has nothing in common with the formal character of older aesthetic norms such as Kant's. On the contrary, it is a provocation, it challenges the illusion that life goes on, and at the same time it is the means for that aesthetic distancing that traditional fantasy no longer achieves.[25]

Adorno's conception of fantasy has already been introduced at this point in the text. It refers to a form of fiction that 'presents something nonexisting as existing'.[26] By contrast: 'New art is so burdened by the weight of the empirical that its pleasure in fiction lapses.' In the context of his argument about generalized commodification, what appears to be at stake here is the need to develop the artwork's autonomy from the commodification of the existing. This undermines fantasy. But if the artwork cannot distance itself from reality in some other way it will not be autonomous and thereby critical. Commodification produces this problem but also a solution: the distancing of the artwork from a commodified world through the abstraction of the commodity form itself.

Adorno is clearly drawing on Marx's account of abstraction, which is pivotal to his account of the commodity. Primarily it is employed to conceptualize the form of labour that constitutes, and is constituted by, exchange-value: 'abstract labour'. All different kinds of labour, producing different kinds of use-values ('concrete labour') are valued within the capitalist mode of production according to the quantification of the 'socially necessary time' it takes to produce these use-values, regardless of the kind of labour involved. Hence, exchange-value is a quantity of labour in the abstract. This underpins the independence of exchange-value from use-value for Marx: 'the exchange relation of commodities is characterized precisely by its *abstraction* from their use-values'.[27] The implication is that the autonomy of art – from both usefulness and social subject matter – is derived from its internalization of abstract labour. This also suggests how its objectivity is independent of 'any human trace', since abstract labour provides the condition of possibility of capital's self-valorization as a 'subject' that is independent of human society or the 'living labour' that produces it. 'Capital is dead labour [*verstorbne Arbeit*]', in Marx's words, 'which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour.'[28] The implication for Adorno's account is that the artwork's objectivity is derived from its internalization of dead labour.

The contrast between this conception of abstraction and Kant's conception of form could not be starker. In Kant's account of aesthetic judgement, the formal quality of artworks, or objects of reflective judgement, is understood in terms of the subject's auto-affection, namely the heightened feeling of its own cognitive powers and their freedom, or, as Kant so resonantly puts it, the subject's 'feeling of life'.[29] This aesthetic or reflective conception of form is fundamental for post-Kantian philosophy as a whole, not just for the philosophy of art; indeed, it contributes to raising art to the supreme philosophical and cultural importance it acquires for German Idealism and Romanticism. Art's quality of being irreducible to what the subject can objectify or know, and therefore of being something in which the subject experiences its own ground, made art essential to attempts to pursue Kant's transcendental idealism beyond its antinomies, especially after Fichte. Famously, art becomes the 'organ' and 'keystone' of philosophy according to Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800). The clue to the relations of subject to object, freedom to nature, unconditioned to conditioned, are subsequently sought in the experience and production of art. Whether these relations are understood 'idealistically', in terms of the complete self-determination of subjectivity (Hegel), or 'romantically', in terms of the limits to this self-determination (Hölderlin and Novalis), art emerges after Kant as the finite presentation of the infinite, a medium of the absolute. The concept of

absolute art hereby becomes central to the philosophy of art after Kant.

Adorno's relation to this tradition is a complex mix of continuity and discontinuity. But in regard to his articulation of the idea of the absolute artwork we can detect a radical transformation. If 'form', with its implication of the subject's feeling of life, is to be displaced by 'abstraction', with its implication of capital's form of value, then we are faced with a disorientating reconfiguration, if not inversion, of ideas. Fundamentally, the proposition at stake here is that the (post-)Kantian philosophy of subjectivity has been transformed into a (post-)Marxist philosophy of capital, the pivot of which is the subjective character of self-valorizing capital. This indicates a series of displacements: the feeling of life is displaced by the feeling of death; the semblance of freedom in art, by the semblance of value; the auto-affection of subjectivity or humanity, by the auto-affection of capital. As a consequence, post-Kantian philosophies of art become perverted and rendered naive in their self-understanding. Note Adorno's description of Baudelaire as 'supremely above late romantic sentimentality'.[30]

The elaboration of this philosophy of capital and its philosophy of art remains to be exhausted by Adorno's critical reception, which needs to be revitalized at a time when it has tended to be occluded, if not suppressed, by attempts to embed Adorno in philosophical traditions that are indifferent to it. This should inform the examination of Adorno's undoubted continuities with post-Kantian philosophies of art. It is certainly true that Adorno's contrast of 'form' with 'abstraction' has affinities with post-Kantian objections to Kant's formalism. Hegel is perhaps the obvious case here, and his influence on Marx is equally clear. It is also important to recognize that, in so far as Adorno detects an 'idealism' in capital, his criticisms may still be understood in terms prefigured by Romantic criticisms of Idealism. Thus, there are ways in which the absolute artwork as absolute commodity presents an 'organ' of capital in which the limits to capital's self-identity are exposed. Moreover, the continuities of Marx's account of abstraction with Kant's transcendental idealism and its influence should not be overlooked.[31] However, classical German philosophy is at best an unconscious philosophy of capital, and once this new philosophical arena is exposed it demands a radical reorientation of the philosophy of art and philosophy in general. Adorno's contribution to this is among his most significant achievements. It is certainly what distinguishes him from persistent forms of late romantic sentimentality. But this reorientation is far from being fully worked out or even envisioned in Adorno's own writings.

Objectivity – fetishism

Adorno's elaboration of an aesthetics of abstraction derived from Marx's account of the value form faces a major problem: abstraction is not aesthetic. Marx goes to great pains to emphasize how value transforms sensuous things into something suprasensible. To mistake value for its sensuous appearance is precisely the illusion of fetishism: 'the commodity-form … [has] absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this.'[32] In relation to Kant's account of form one could say that there is something deeply rationalist about Marx's conception of the abstractness of the value-form. Socially necessary labour time constitutes an a priori law of form (or rather abstraction) but its sensuous manifestation is bound to illusion. However, it is precisely for this reason that Marx's account of fetishism becomes the source for an aesthetics of abstraction, since, if we ask how abstraction does nonetheless take on a sensuous appearance, the answer is given in terms of fetishism. Kant's transcendental aesthetic is effectively reconfigured by Marx's account of the fetishism of commodities.

It is in this way that we find an aesthetic account of the 'objectivity' of the commodity, as a way in which sensuousness has been formed by value. Whereas Marx emphasizes the independence of value from the sensuous appearance of commodities, this ironically produces formulations that can be read as the way abstraction appears: 'as soon as [the table] emerges as a commodity, it changes into a sensuously suprasensuous thing [*ein sinnlich ubersinnliches Ding*].'[33] This suprasensuous appearance of the sensuous produces a semblance character that is analogous to post-Kantian conceptions of the semblance character of the artwork – its finite presentation of the infinite, suggested by its irreducibility to being grasped or delimited, and thereby its affinity to the subject's own freedom from delimitation. But in Marx's account of fetishism it is abstraction or the value-form (and ultimately capital) that is 'the infinite' appearing in the finite. The significance of semblance is thereby inverted, into an affect of not being free. Post-Kantian deliberations on symbolization are reconfigured by the 'social hieroglyphics' generated by the value form.[34] At one point Marx is explicit about how this involves the formation of objectivity: 'A use-value, or useful article, therefore, has value only because abstract human labour is objectified or materialized [*vergegenständlicht oder*

materialisiert] in it.'[35] Adorno does not elaborate this account of objectivity with any precision or explicitness. The decisive comparison he draws between abstraction and form is also absent from his discussion of Kant's concept of objectivity.[36] However, his discussion of fetishism is pervasive and we can reconstruct what is at stake here from his remarks on the fetish character of art.

Adorno's account of the fetishism of autonomous art is articulated through its distinction from two other forms of fetishism: 'magical' fetishes and commodity fetishes. This is not merely a semantic clarification, but a differentiation between three cultural forms. Adorno articulates this historically, but less according to a simple chronology than a structural field, where non-contemporary terms enter into contemporary relations: 'Although the magic fetishes [*magischen Fetische*] are one of the historical roots of art, a fetishistic element remains admixed in artworks, an element that goes beyond commodity fetishism [*Warenfetischismus*].'[37] Thus, art is described as a residual survival of magical fetishism within a modern culture of commodity fetishism. And, although this is not emphasized here, in so far as it is only residually magical, the implication is that the fetishism of art is distinct from the fetishism of magic as well as from the fetishism of commodities.

Aesthetic Theory has very little to say about magical fetishism as such. The most developed account Adorno gives is with Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Here, without actually using the word 'fetishism', an account is developed of 'magic' that we have every reason to believe is effectively an account of fetishism. This is oriented towards the distinction of magic, as 'specific representation', from the discursive logic of 'science' taken in its most generic form as enlightenment rationalism.[38] The central point of this distinction is that magical fetishes involve a form of representation that cannot abstract completely from what it represents – so the representation of a person must have, for instance, the actual hair from that person in order to represent them. Although this extrapolation from hair to person involves a certain abstraction, it is not completed. To use Saussurean terminology, the signifier does not have a purely arbitrary relation to the signified. Adorno and Horkheimer's point here is not to claim that magic is true and the enlightenment untrue, but that magic reveals what is suppressed in enlightenment (their main target here is modern rationalism) and therefore its untruth. Truth is therefore revealed through criticism, as the critical self-reflection of enlightenment. For Adorno and Horkheimer, there is a deep affinity between the development of the enlightenment through non-specific, universal sign systems, and the development of capitalism through the suppression of the specificity of use-value in the universal measure of exchange-value. This is their elaboration of the deep cultural-philosophical import of Marx's critique of political economy. This conflicts with Marx's own more affirmative claims for modern science, which is also apparent in the sympathetic conception of fetishism that Adorno elaborates.

Marx's account of the fetishism of commodities essentially concerns the extent to which the commodity conceals the social constitution of its value, presenting it as the outcome of a social relation between commodities themselves, rather than of the social relation of labour that produces these commodities. Value appears as a *quality* of the 'natural' or sensuous properties of commodities, rather than as a *quantity* of abstract labour or socially necessary labour time. This produces an inversion of the appearance of the subject or producer of value, and its object. Because the labour that produces commodities is private, the constitution of value through the social relation of labour does not appear in the act of production, but in the act of exchange, where it thereby appears as a social relation between commodities. The commodity's value, the object of labour, therefore appears to be labour's subject; and, indeed, it *is* its subject in so far as labour is organized according to the demands of value. '[Value] is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things.'[39] This produces the peculiar form of ideology that is at stake in Marx's account of fetishism, according to which the illusion is not merely a hallucination but the outcome of a real social relation.

> To the producers … the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things.[40]

Two forms of illusion are condensed in Marx's account, the distinction of which is decisive for Adorno's account. One is the attempt to read value out of the sensuous qualities of commodities. This is an illusion of the commodity's sensuousness. The illusion is 'seen through' by knowing that value is not sensuous, but abstract, a quantum of abstract labour time. But seeing through it does not dissolve it, since it is generated by the social relations of private labour. The other illusion, which is both the cause

and the result of the first, is an inversion of subject and object. This is an illusion of the autonomy of the value-form, of the nascent attempt of capital to realize itself, as self-valorizing value, independent of its constitution by living labour. It is an illusion that is seen through by knowing that capital is dependent on labour, but this does not dissolve it; that requires an end to private (wage) labour. The first illusion is a matter of not seeing the abstract nature of value, the condition of possibility of capital, whereas the second illusion concerns not seeing the dependence of capital on living labour, the condition of possibility of capital's immanent limitation and an alternative form of society.

Adorno's account of the autonomous artwork effectively mobilizes the first illusion (fetishism) against the second illusion (the autonomy of capital). The autonomous artwork is an emphatically fetishized commodity, which is to say that it is a sensuous fixation of abstraction, of the value-form, and not *immediately* abstract. This is what remains irrevocably aesthetic about the artwork for Adorno, despite its constitution by the non-aesthetic abstractness of value. It also explains why, for Adorno, the autonomous artwork does not coincide with the idea of art. It is the artwork's sensuousness – more precisely, its abstract or suprasensuous sensuousness – that singularizes it, generates its self-insistence and autonomy, and that thereby contradicts the universalizing logic of exchange-value. It is in this sense that, as in Marx's account of fetishism, the objectivity of the autonomous artwork takes on a subject-like character for Adorno. But it is a singular subject contra the universal subject of capital. And it is through this contradiction that it has a link to an alternative collective subjectivity. The autonomy of the artwork contradicts the autonomy of capital that reduces all singularities to their heteronomous determination:

> The principle of heteronomy [*Füranderessein*], apparently the counterpart of fetishism, is the principle of exchange, and in it domination is masked. Only what does not submit to that principle acts as the plenipotentiary of what is free from domination. … In the context of total semblance, art's semblance of being-in-itself is the mask of truth.[41]

It is a major problem that Adorno does not consider the autonomous or subject-like character of capital in *Aesthetic Theory*, concentrating only on its heteronomous character. We can find some reflections on this in his other writings, but its absence from *Aesthetic Theory* is another decisive limit to Adorno's elaboration of the consequences of this whole issue.

It is striking how Marx's account of the illusion of the sensuous character of value corresponds to Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the magic fetish, just as Marx's account of the abstraction of the value-form, and the autonomy of capital more generally, corresponds to their critique of enlightenment rationalism. This reveals the critical function of fetishism that Adorno proposes in his account of the artwork. The autonomous artwork is akin to the magical fetish in revealing what the autonomy of capital represses: that everything cannot be reduced to exchange-value. This is not to say that the autonomous artwork is simply an archaic remnant, but rather a contradiction produced immanently by capitalism, revealing its limits.

Adorno saw the crisis of modern autonomous art as the result not simply of its internalization of commodification, but of whether the critical proposition of art's autonomy could be sustained once this internalization became explicit:

> Artworks that do not insist fetishistically on their coherence, as if they were the absolute that they are unable to be, are worthless from the start; the survival of art becomes precarious as soon as it becomes conscious of its fetishism and, as has been the case since the middle of the nineteenth century, insists obstinately on it. Art cannot advocate delusion by insisting that otherwise art would not exist. This forces art into an aporia. All that succeeds in going even minutely beyond it is insight into the rationality of its irrationality.[42]

This predicament rings true today. Understanding the dialectic of absolute artwork and absolute commodity provides an insight into the contemporary situation of art. The aporia of fetishism at stake here forces autonomous art into a self-critical dialectic with anti-art, with art's heteronomous determination, in order to avoid asserting its autonomy in a conservative or mythical form. Today art must extract itself from its heteronomous determination to a seemingly unprecedented degree. This dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy was already anticipated by Adorno, but the fixation of his concept of autonomous art in his privileged examples has tended to suppress his diagnosis as these examples have aged.[43] Laments over the decline of autonomous art in the commodification of culture, including Adorno's, need to be confronted with insights into how the autonomous artwork is inherently entwined with commodification. Similarly, the insistence that we have entered some 'post-art' epoch needs to be confronted with the question of whether this should not be recognized as the scene of new forms of art's autonomy? If autonomous art is

an immanent contradiction of the commodity form, it remains an inherent potential within a commodity culture. New forms of commodification need to be examined as the heteronomous scene of new formations of autonomous art; new forms of art need to be examined as the contradictions of new formations of commodification.

Notes

1. The classic figures here are, of course, Arthur C. Danto and George Dickie. See, for instance, Danto's 'The Artworld' (1964) and Dickie's 'The New Institutional Theory of Art' (1983), both in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, eds, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2004. Notably, this anthology does not offer any exceptions to this tendency within analytical aesthetics to disregard or marginalize the question of art's relation to capitalism or the commodity form. The same is true of another recent anthology of analytical aesthetics, Noël Carroll ed., *Theories of Art Today*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2000.
2. See, for instance, Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935–36), in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 139–212, and Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt' (1945) and 'Eye and Mind' (1961), in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1993, pp. 59–75 and 121–49.
3. This remains broadly the case for Deleuze and Guattari's influential 'capitalism and schizophrenia' project – *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) – as well as their writings on art.
4. One can discern this in Lyotard. See his discussions of modern artistic eclecticism as a logic of money in his 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', trans. Régis Durand, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, pp. 71–82. Nonetheless, for Lyotard, capitalism and commodification are not as foundational for the philosophy of art as they tend to be for Adorno and Benjamin.
5. See, for instance, Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (1958), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1961, or *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977.
6. For reflections on the continuous and discontinuous, affirmative and critical, relations of such an expanded conception of culture see Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London and New York, 1991. Obviously, the Frankfurt School's conception of the culture industry and the Situationist International's conception of the society of the spectacle are influential progenitors of this diagnosis of a new, expanded formation of capitalist culture.
7. This commitment to recovering the critical dimension of art's autonomy is shared by the main antagonists of *The Philistinism Controversy*, ed. Dave Beech and John Roberts, Verso, London and New York, 2002. It may also be derived from Krauss's staging of a new understanding of 'medium' against the late capitalist sensibilities mimicked by 'installation art' – see her *'A Voyage on The North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1999.
8. See Bernstein's and Bowie's contributions to *The Philistine Controversy*, which do depart from Beech and Roberts in this melancholy. For a fuller, albeit not uniform, elaboration of this, see Bernstein's *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992; and his *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2006. Another notable instance would be Hal Foster's 'The Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse', in his *Design and Crime*, Verso, London, 2002, pp. 123–43.
9. Perhaps the most well known publication to explore this extensively is Fredric Jameson's *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, Verso, London, 1990. See also John Roberts's survey of commentary on, and criticism of, Adorno, 'After Adorno: Art, Autonomy and Critique', *Historical Materialism* 7, 2000, pp. 221–39.
10. See Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, Manchester University Press, Manchester (1990), 2003; and his *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997. See also the second lecture of Manfred Frank's *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik: Vorlesungen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1989, pp. 25–40.
11. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt (1970), 1995, p. 39; translated by R. Hullot-Kentor as *Aesthetic Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p. 21 (translation altered). See note below for discussion of the translation and philosophical grammar of this proposition.
12. Jameson deals with it in *Late Marxism* (see in particular pp. 167–8), but his account remains superficial. It is absent from Roberts's survey in 'After Adorno: Art, Autonomy and Critique'.
13. Quoted in 'Editor's Afterword' to *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 541; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 364.
14. Benjamin wrote to Scholem that the 'inner construction' of *The Arcades Project* was analogous to his *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*, in that 'the unfolding of a traditional concept will stand at the midpoint. If there it was the concept of *Trauerspiel*, here it is the fetish character of the commodity'. Benjamin to Scholem, 20 May 1935, in Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. V.2, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1982, 1991, p. 1112. For an extensive discussion of this, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1989.
15. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Why Still Philosophy?' (1963), in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* Columbia University Press, New York, 1998, p. 7.
16. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 21.
17. Ibid.
18. This contradictory relation of recognition is not grasped by the existing English translations of Adorno's proposition. Hullot-Kentor has: 'the absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity' (ibid.) Lenhardt has: 'Here the absolute work of art merges with the absolute commodity' (*Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Lenhardt, Routledge, London and New York, 1984, p. 32). Lenhardt modifies Adorno's text, making the phrase into a single sentence and breaking the paragraph after it. This is crude, but has the virtue of emphasizing its significance. The immediate context of Adorno's proposition is to draw attention to an affinity that is otherwise counter-intuitive, and

both translations are justified in this sense. But 'meets' is preferable both idiomatically and philosophically. Adorno's words are: '*das absolute Kunstwerk trifft sich mit der absoluten Ware*.' The reflexive use of *treffen* here might be exaggerated to allow the translation: 'the absolute artwork meets itself with the absolute commodity'. But Adorno could have used '*sich selbst*' if he wanted this sense, and the formulation he chooses is best captured by a simple 'meets'. '*Treffen*' also has meanings of 'to hit', 'to strike', 'to hurt', which resonate with the counter-intuitive and contradictory relation of recognition at stake here. This remains implicit in 'meets', but is lost in 'converges' or 'merges'. This is also lost in Jameson's rendering, 'coincides with' (*Late Marxism*, p. 167). (Thanks to Andrew Fisher and Britta Eickholt for discussion of this point.)

The philosophical grammar at stake here may be seen as a negative version of Hegel's conception of 'philosophical' or 'speculative' propositions in which opposed or non-identical terms are identified. Whereas Hegel's dialectics sought to subordinate contradictions to relations of identity, Adorno's 'negative dialectics' sought to reveal the irresolvability of contradictions in relations of identity, and this is evident when we elaborate the meaning of the proposition that 'the absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity'. The correspondence of Adorno's proposition to Benjamin's characterization of Baudelaire's use of allegory in relation to advertising as a form of recognition is also striking: 'The commodity tries to look itself in the face [*Die Ware sucht sich selbst ins Gesicht zu sehen*].' Benjamin, 'Zentralpark', *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. I.2, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt (1974), 1991, p. 671; trans. Jephcott and Eiland in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–40, Belknap Press, Cambridge MA, 2003, p. 173.

19. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 39; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 21.
20. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 351; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 236.
21. 'In order to become a commodity, the product must be transferred to the other person, for whom it serves as a use-value, through the medium of exchange.… [N]othing can be a value without being an object of utility. 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, *Das Kapital*, vol. 1, *Werke*, vol. 23, Karl Dietz, Berlin, 1962, p. 55; translated by Fowkes as *Capital*, vol. 1, Penguin, London (1976), 1990, p. 131. The limits of the labour theory of value are apparent here. Adorno's revaluation, through the artwork, of the useless and what is not a product of labour is orientated towards exposing these limits.
22. *Ästhetische Theorie* p. 351; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 236.
23. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 337; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 227.
24. 'Sein Werk hat seinen Augenblick daran, daß es die überwältigende Objektivität des Warencharakters, die alle menschlichen Residuen aufsaugt, synkopiert mit der dem lebenden Subjekt vorgängigen Objektivität des Werkes an sich', *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 39; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 21.
25. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 40; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 22.
26. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 36; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 19.
27. *Das Kapital*, p. 51–2; *Capital*, p. 127. Italics added.
28. *Das Kapital*, p. 247; *Capital*, p. 342.
29. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Reclam, Stuttgart, 1963, 1995, p. 68; translated by W.S. Pluhar as *Critique of Judgement*, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1987, p. 44. Kant's use of the concept of form [*Form*] is complex, diffuse and is often used adjectivally rather than as a concept in its own right, but it finds one of its key determinations in Kant's concept of purposiveness [*Zweckmäßigkeit*], which Kant refers to as a translation of *forma finalis*. See *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, p. 94; *Critique of Judgement*, p. 65.
30. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 39; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 21.
31. For an incisive discussion of these continuities that does contribute to a philosophy of capital, see Peter Osborne's 'The Reproach of Abstraction', *Radical Philosophy* 127, September–October 2004, pp. 21–8. This includes discussion of Adorno, but not of the passages at stake here and, in particular, not of Adorno's contrast of 'form' and 'abstraction', which in certain respects is characteristic of the 'reproach' Osborne criticizes.
32. *Das Kapital*, p. 86; *Capital*, p. 165.
33. *Das Kapital*, p. 85; *Capital*, p. 163.
34. *Das Kapital*, p. 88; *Capital*, p. 167.
35. *Das Kapital*, p. 53; *Capital*, p. 129.
36. See sub-sections 'Critique of Kant's Concept of Objectivity' and 'Objectivity and Reification', in *Ästhetische Theorie*, pp. 246–8 and pp. 260–62; *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 165–6 and pp. 174–5, respectively.
37. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 338; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 227.
38. 'Magic is bloody untruth [*blutige Unwahrheit*], but in it domination is not yet disclaimed by transforming itself into a pure truth underlying the world which it enslaves. … Magic implies specific representation. What is done to the spear, the hair, the name of the enemy, is also to befall his person; the sacrificial animal is slain in place of the god. The substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step towards discursive logic. Even though the hind which was offered up for the daughter, the lamb for the firstborn, necessarily still had qualities of its own, it already represented the genus. It manifested the arbitrariness of the specimen. But the sanctity of the *hic et nunc*, the uniqueness of the chosen victim which coincides with its representative status, distinguishes it radically, makes it non-exchangeable even in the exchange. Science puts an end to this. In it there is no specific representation: something which is a sacrificial animal cannot be a god. Representation gives way to universal fungibility.' Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1981, 1997, pp. 25–6; *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, pp. 6–7.
39. *Das Kapital*, p. 86; *Capital*, p. 165 (translation altered).
40. *Das Kapital*, p. 87; *Capital*, pp. 165–6.
41. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 337; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 227.
42. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 338; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 228.
43. See Stewart Martin, 'Anti-Art and Autonomy: Adorno's Theory of Avant-Garde Art', *Constellations*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2000, pp. 197–207; republished in *Theodor Adorno*, 4 vols, ed. Gerard Delanty, Sage, London and New York, 2004, vol. 2, pp. 179–91. For a critical test and extension of Adorno's dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy see Stewart Martin, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', in *Verksted* 8. *ISMS 1. Recuperating Political Radicality: Constructing the Political in Contemporary Art*, ed. Marta Kuzma and Peter Osborne, Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Oslo, 2007, pp. 97–129; reprinted in *Third Text* 87 (vol. 21, no. 4), July 2007, pp. 369–86.