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Art and Value:
Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical,
Neoclassical and Marxist Economics
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On Art and "Real Subsumption"

Sarah Brouillette

Narration of the relentless commodification of culture and the growing power of cultural markets so extensive they absorb and kill off any sort of autonomous aesthetic activity has become commonplace. Responses to this story range on a spectrum: one can be bemused, blasé, or outraged about what it portends; or one can claim, as Dave Beech does in *Art and Value*, an integrally non-economic quality of the artwork's making that, regardless of its formal or thematic concerns, excludes it from total identity with the commodity.

Beech maintains that art's unusual relation to capitalism has been obscured by the focus of Western Marxism since the 1920s on the idea of art's increasing commodification, absorption into the culture industry, or even real subsumption by capital, wherein art's modicum of autonomy from capital is cancelled by the reduction of every intention to the maximization of advantage and sales, and by the turning of any critical purpose into nothing but a marketable spectacle. For Beech this tradition, while of course not without merit, has unfortunately served to distract from the fundamentally economic question of whether art's production conforms to the capitalist mode. Theorists have exhaustively charted the influence of capitalist social relations on art's themes and forms. They have considered artists' reactions to their works being turned into reproducible commodities, marketed, stored as relatively safe investments, et cetera. They have studied the extent of the determination of the cultural superstructure by the material base of capitalist social relations. At times

they have risked identifying the operations of “the market” with capitalism as such. What our understanding of art’s relation to capitalism requires, then, is basic insight into the uniqueness of the ways in which works of art are actually made.

For Beech, it is only in studying artistic production that we perforce discover whether “art embodies the social relations in which the capitalist subjugates production through the ownership of the means of production and the payment of wages to purchase labor power” (9). What arises from his attention to this question is the argument that art is, in fact, economically exceptional within the capitalist mode of production. This is true because the worker does not accept a wage in compensation for her role in the production of a commodity, but rather sells the product itself (to a gallery or a collector for instance); it is true because the artist does not act as a capitalist engaging in the exploitation of labor to accumulate surplus; and it is true because external limitations on replication or iteration in production make the artwork irreproducible, setting it apart even from “petty production.”

There are, Beech writes, “non-economic” constraints placed on art’s production which mean that artworks cannot be replicated as most commodities are. Artworks are “inseparable from how and when they are produced”; even if an artist makes two apparently identical pieces, they retain some separateness from one another by virtue of their sequence in time (359). In essence, for Beech, because artists work on making unique objects which cannot be reproduced in their original form, the price of those works is not indexed to the average socially necessary labor time constitutive of value under capitalism. A coffee table book featuring paintings by Vincent Van Gogh is a capitalist commodity to which such measures are relevant; an original painting by Van Gogh is not, no matter how its price rises with the sale of postcards and books and tea towels and refrigerator magnets.

You may be thinking quite rightly that this argument applies only to a very small roster of those things that people can take or have taken to be art. Beech does not suggest that anything to which his analysis is technically inapplicable — Roberto Bolaño’s 2666, say, or Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Il fiore delle Mille e una notte* — must never be considered art or art-like. Beech has no desire to define art per se. It is just that the focus of his treatment is the kind of art that is economically exceptional in a very particular way. His insights can be applied rigorously only to works of irreproducible fine art. This delimitation of emphasis is essential to his task as he defines it.

What I want to detail here, though, is how a more dialectical emphasis would amplify the importance of his insights without undermining the focus on economically exceptional production that is his core contribution. Beech describes artworks as in important ways “non-economic,” but what if we were to argue rather that artworks are not “non-economic” so much as defined fundamentally by their unusual relation to the economic sphere? Instead of anchoring analysis only in the conditions of production exclusive to unique fine art, we could also claim that, well beyond such works, much of what aesthetic production is — from what we can for simplicity’s

sake call its content or message, to claims for its ontological distinction from other kinds of expression — emerges in some way from the shifting but ultimately stably unusual position of many aesthetic practices vis-à-vis the capitalist dominant.

In Daniel Spaulding’s terms, the category of art itself entails the distinction between things which, like a Van Gogh painting, “escape the law of value,” and things which, however aesthetically pleasing or considered, like a framed print picked up at Ikea, obey instead the laws of capitalist rationalization.¹ Artists (and not just visual artists, but poets and musicians and TV writers) often understand their work as motivated by things other than or opposed to the desire for acclaim or financial reward. There are artistic movements motivated by a will to explore the threat of becoming just like other commodities. Artists are permitted unusual license in articulating their dispositions against capitalism. These phenomena can all be said to follow from, relate to, and/or mediate the fact that there are artists — accompanied by inducements to identification with artists — who are by definition simply not regular productive laborers who sell their capacity to work for a wage, and nor are they capitalists employing productive laborers. There is a whole world of aesthetic practice and experience that stems from and relates closely to the *ideals of irreducibility* that are only materialized in the relatively unique cases Beech considers.

In this light, also, we see that the fact of art’s association with uniqueness and irreproducibility — a fact that Beech’s work continues and deepens — is one that emerged historically in relation to capitalism’s dominant tendencies. So while aspects of art may indeed be “non-economic,” it is just as true that the emergence of the category of art, and the privileged place held for aesthetic autonomy within that category, cannot be separated from the emergence of capitalism, in that it only becomes possible to conceive of art as an autonomous and “self-consistent” set of practices vis-à-vis what Spaulding describes as “a different logic,” namely, the logic of capitalist value production.² Far from representing a pure non-capitalist other, the production of art exists in an uneasy and conflicted relationship with the capitalist value form, and that unease will remain in force so long as capitalism itself does.³ I suggest then, building on Spaulding’s take, that whereas Beech emphasizes fine art as non-economic, we might broaden that inquiry to conceive aesthetic activity of various kinds as trapped in a definitively problematic relation to the production of capitalist value.

This broadening would I think only strengthen Beech’s welcome insistence that art can never be “really subsumed” by capital, where “real subsumption” signals the technological rationalization of every process involved in the production of commodities with the aim of maximizing profits by decreasing socially necessary labor time, the very measure that artistic production evades. Nicholas Brown has recently written that:

What differentiates Adorno's culture industry from the self-representation of our contemporary moment is that the art-commodity now has no other. Fredric Jameson... simply says, matter-of-factly, that "What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally." From this everything follows.⁴

We need to pause over the political-economic particulars of this "integration." Brown claims that the pressure for a work to be extensively distributed has fundamentally restructured the production process itself, such that the culture available to us is culture made in the light of the reality of its inevitable incorporation. In contrast, Beech's point is that an artist's willingness to suit consumers is not relevant to the question of whether his or her art has been subsumed. The creation of saleable singular art objects differs fundamentally from the production of commodities via labor that is formally or really subsumed to varying degrees and whose ultimate purpose is the accumulation of surplus value.

Beech writes importantly that "as we posit subsumption in general rather than the subsumption of labor by capital then, it appears to me, the mechanism by which capitalism takes hold of society is lost" (17). In other words, Beech's argument rests on a particular understanding not just of the making of art but of the foundational machinations of capitalism. What do we know about what capitalism is because we know art is not strictly speaking a capitalist commodity? Beech's image of capitalist relations is profoundly not one of a generalized "social factory" wherein once extra-economic social activities have become themselves a new wellspring of value. It is not one in which everything is subsumed by capital rendering our social relations and aesthetic habits its manifestations and engines. For Beech the realities of art's production, so tightly connected to its fashioning as self-legislating and autonomous, make it a model of this ongoing non-instrumental behavior, which is more common than we often imagine. No development in commercial markets for art has fundamentally challenged this situation.

Here I cannot help but note there is a great deal of support for Beech's approach in Marx's oeuvre, though the support I have in mind suggests once more a broadening that is consonant rather than coincident with his particular focus on the making of discrete works of visual art. At times Marx argued that capitalist production "is hostile to certain branches of spiritual production, for example, art and poetry," and he positioned the unproductive nature of the making of art against bourgeois economists' tendency to overemphasize and overvalue productivity and to assume that everything is ultimately useful to the economy and to the production of wealth.⁵ He wrote that these economists "are so dominated by their fixed bourgeois ideas that they would think they were insulting Aristotle or Julius Caesar if they called them 'unproductive laborers'."⁶ He famously claimed that John Milton, who was paid £5 for *Paradise Lost*, was an unproductive laborer, while "the writer who turns out stuff for

his publisher in factory style” is, in contrast, a productive one. He elaborates that, like a silkworm producing silk, “Milton produced *Paradise Lost* for the same reason,” that is, “as an activity of his nature.”⁷

When Marx describes Milton as engaged in “an activity of his nature,” he does not mean that the art work articulates the pristine, original, self-grounding individual interiority imagined by bourgeois aesthetic theory. Consider his remark that Raphael, for example, “was conditioned by the technical advances made in art before his time, by the organization of society, by the division of labor in the locality in which he lived, and — finally — by the division of labor in all the countries with which that locality stood in communication.”⁸ The artist’s “nature” is thus an expression of his existence as a *zoon politicon*, meaning a creature “which can individuate itself only in society.”⁹ The human consciousness which art exhibits is always everywhere conditioned by material relations. It is thoroughly embedded and social, even in its apparent indivisibility and uniqueness, which are, as we have seen, determined by a particular history of social and aesthetic forms. It is simply that the material relations that define art’s production differ in important ways from those that tie the laborer to the capitalist so characteristically. This difference, and not any special qualities of the artist, is what makes art practice a foil to the alienating abstractions of labor for a wage.

Art and culture are in this light precisely not the singular achievements of given expressive individual consciousnesses who see themselves in certain lights, but rather the products of practices that are materially, concretely, importantly distinct from capitalist norms. In other words, art is not a realm of free-floating ideas but a form of praxis thoroughly shaped by the artist’s relatively unusual material existence and by the social relations that define her experience. The making of art and engagement with art are distinct but never wholly autonomous, never free from social determination, and so never cut off ideologically and ideationally from capitalism. These practices are in turn some of the many means, all only *potentially and contextually* effective, by which people can become conscious of the nature of their social existence and “fight it out” — that is, engage the defining struggle to realize or manifest something other than capitalism.¹⁰

When Marx describes capitalism as inimical to art, he does not mean merely that the production of art cannot be organized in accordance with the law of value. It matters also that labor under capitalism is understood as a threat to whatever artistic features our work might exhibit. He writes that the “economic relation” between capitalist and worker develops in proportionate relation to labor itself losing “*its character of art*.”¹¹ What he means here specifically is that the ends of labor, or the nature of the task and product to which the labor is applied, becomes an irrelevance. In S.S. Praver’s argument, Marx considered the loss within the wage-commodity nexus of work’s artistic character — its concrete specificity, its lack of generalizability — as definitive of modern wage labor. He in turn saw artistic creation “as the type of

labor to which all others aspire; the type of labor in which the individual can realize and develop his potentialities.”¹² The making abstract of labor, its transformation of workers into nothing but a calculable force of production, is of course constitutive of capitalism, and the process is taken to its extreme when the worker is replaced by a machine — a replacement Marx describes as confronting the worker “in a brutal fashion obvious to his senses” as capital assimilates labor into itself.¹³ This assimilation cannot happen in the production of art, as we have seen, because the work of art cannot be precisely reproduced by waged labor.

The productive labor defining capitalism depends upon the worker’s insecurity and desperation. She is dependent on wages for survival, and at work uses techniques and tools that appear entirely alien to her so as to produce commodities to which she similarly bears no obvious relation. It is easy to see why the making of art — performed with tools one has invested in oneself, toward creating a product apparently embodying one’s own ends — throws into such sharp relief the productive labor which rarely entails the “play of [one’s] own mental and physical power.”¹⁴ Art is one thing — not the only thing — that occasions a superior relation to one’s effort and to the products of one’s effort. This point has been hugely influential for subsequent Marxist approaches to art and aesthetics, though they have perhaps focused too exclusively on high-artistic manifestations of this superior relation. For Lukács, in György Markus’s terms, the best art was “the living example of the possibility of a non-reified relation to reality”; and for Adorno, similarly, genuine works of art were “plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity.”¹⁵

In *Art and Value*, Beech by no means rejects this tradition. Indeed he joins it, but in a very particular way, by adding to it a substantial account of the unique nature of the artist’s process. “Art’s exceptionalism is not an economic argument for art’s autonomy,” Beech writes, but — and this is an important but — “autonomy appears to have a material basis in the economics of artistic production” (27, 274). In other words claims to autonomy from capital have a basis in material realities — realities not exclusive to artists, and which according to Beech precede art’s unique formal concerns and artists’ self-fashioning. Contrast Brown’s claim that a “plausible claim to autonomy” is “the precondition for any [anti-market] politics at all,” and that to make this claim we need to “return to immanent critique, to the notion of self-legislating form; in other words, to the conception of literature formulated by the German Romantics at the turn of the 19th century.”¹⁶ Contrarily, Beech’s understanding of the nature of capitalist value production makes art one of many clarifying foils to its dominance. He is not interested in art’s self-understanding or philosophy, except as those follow from certain truths of art’s making. Brown’s more idealist and perhaps aestheticist position is that if we credit certain tendencies in art’s self-imagining we will be able to hold art *in particular* up as a bulwark against a capitalist dominance that is getting thicker and worse as it subsumes into itself everything that was once

non-economic.

In Beech’s account, subsumption is not a category relevant to art’s making, and the nature of art’s production is still usefully, generatively posed against the capitalist dominant. In the broader terms I recommend above — not fine art but aesthetic practices, not non-economic status but the reality of being trapped in negative relation to capitalist value — aesthetic praxis, or intentional sensuous expression in art works and art-like objects, can still be understood as one form of the kind of activity that is not afforded to people forced to depend on wages to reproduce themselves and their social worlds. What is more, the implication of Marx’s observation about labor losing all of its artistic character, and about art remaining distinct from the law of value, is that the making of art is an activity that should be available to all people rather than just to that special singular Milton. Indeed, Marx writes explicitly that this making is something denied them, given that “concentration of artistic talent in single, unique individuals and... suppression of such talent among the masses is a consequence of the division of labor.”¹⁷ Beech echoes this insight in the conclusion to his study, writing that “Nothing can really revolutionize art except a complete transformation of the preconditions for participation in art, particularly the emancipation of the culturally excluded” (369).

It will be useful to attend to this crucial ambiguity or indeed dialectical character of the term “revolution” in Beech and in Marx more broadly. The more common claim remains one-sided, finding in art the ceaseless revolutions *in* production indexed to creeping commodification, real subsumption, market incorporation, or any number of cognate phenomena stemming from the ostensible rise in its importance to the economy as a whole. For the reasons I have outlined, Beech rejects such claims, underscoring art’s frozen character within capital, still awaiting the revolution *against* production which might set it again in motion. The claims nonetheless remain; what Beech does not do is significantly historicize them. I don’t have the space here to do so, either (or the completed research, frankly). I will just risk speculating that subsumption claims may be usefully understood as connected symptomatically to the broader consensus around art’s increasing economic protagonism — a consensus which reflects culture-based efforts to respond to the decline in real accumulation since the early 1970s. Beech does not discuss this decline, perhaps because in the last parts of his book he wants to argue that the fact that art is a foundationally non-economic good grounds state support for it. Recognizing a thoroughgoing crisis in profitability would make austerity seem like something of a permanent state and perhaps turn claims for extending arts funding into wishful thinking. Whatever the case, arts funding is unlikely to inch us much closer to the ultimate goal Beech’s work ably clarifies: transforming general social conditions such that the opportunity to do work that is not productive of value for capitalism would be a general rather than unique condition.¹⁸

Notes

1. Daniel Spaulding, "A Clarification on Art and Value," *Mute* (28 May 2015). <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/art-value-and-freedom-fetish-o>
2. Spaulding, "A Clarification."
3. See "A Clarification," and also Daniel Spaulding, "Value-form and Avant-Garde," *Mute* (27 Mar 2014). <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/value-form-and-avant-garde>
4. Nicholas Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption under Capital," *non-site* (13 March 2012). <http://nonsite.org/editorial/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital>
5. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968) Ch. 04. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/cho4.htm>
6. *ibid.*
7. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976) 1044.
8. Qtd. in S. S. Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976) 114
9. Karl Marx, "'Introduction' to the *Grundrisse*," *Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carve (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 129.
10. Karl Marx, Preface, *Critique of Political Economy* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1976) xx.
11. Prawer, *World Literature* 291.
12. *ibid.*
13. *World Literature* 324.
14. Marx, qtd. in *World Literature* 313.
15. György Markus, "Walter Benjamin or: The Commodity as Phantasmagoria," *New German Critique* 83 (Spring-Summer 2001) 5, and Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 310.
16. Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption."
17. Qtd. in *World Literature* 113.
18. My thanks to Joshua Clover for helping me to write this piece and think through my conclusions.