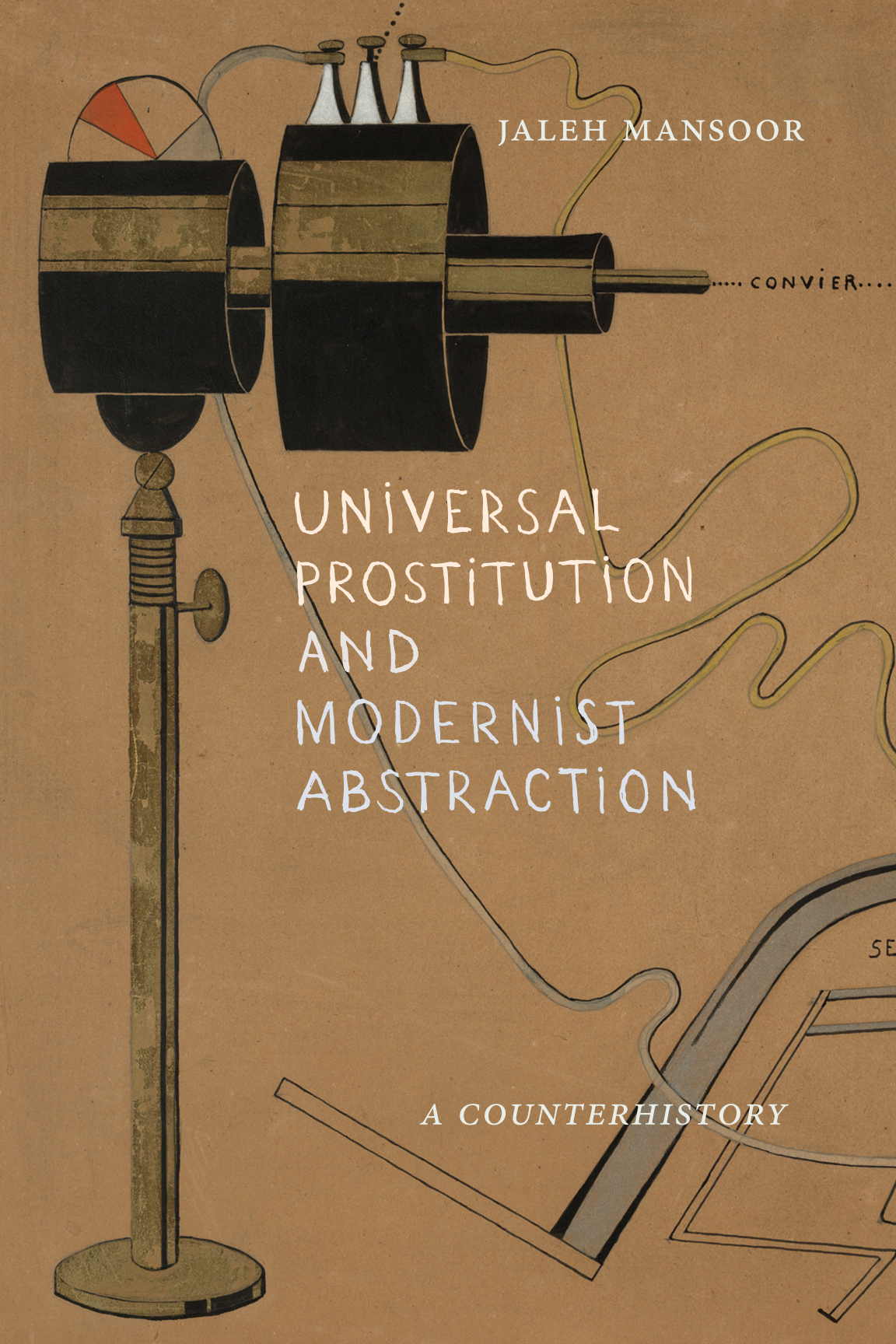




JALEH MANSOOR

UNIVERSAL
PROSTITUTION
AND
MODERNIST
ABSTRACTION

A COUNTERHISTORY

Universal Prostitution and Modernist Abstraction



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Universal Prostitution and Modernist Abstraction

A COUNTERHISTORY

JALEH MANSOOR

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To the Young-Girl of whatever gender: Rise up! Know your values!
And for M, singular in your art of creating freedom.

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PREFACE

Ordinarily, the objects in front of one's perception and the field in which they appear, "things as they are," are understood to be concrete. That which is concretely tangible is real. This field and its apperceived objects are taken for reality.

What we see before us in everyday life is as natural as flowers. *Bouquet II*, a bouquet of flowers in a glass vase on a pedestal, is one such object. It was arranged by Dutch artists Willem de Rooij and Jeroen de Rijke in 2003 to summon nature itself and to out-speed the mimetic verisimilitude expected of Dutch still-life painting, which had been historically linked to memento mori, an allegorical reminder of death's imminence in everyday life. By presenting live flowers as an apparently unmediated thing in itself, the work seems to make a bold claim to the field of the real—commonly understood as empirically present objects. But after a moment of luxuriating in the flowers' fragrance and vital color, the viewer might realize the degree to which a strange reversal takes place. The bouquet flips metaphysical categories around to stand them on their feet in the space of another reality.

The artists' choice of blooms summons a living history of flowers in analogy to European cycles of accumulation, mustering the way in which tulips were extracted from western Asia and initially functioned as a form of currency acceptable for payment, so invested was their immediate material value. The bouquet joins tulips, bred through centuries to generate new subspecies such as "French tulips," with other genera culled from Dutch-occupied lands, such as orchids and certain rose varieties. The flowers act as symbol of sensuous accumulation as such. All are equally seductive and fragile. Part of the tension of the piece derives from the recognition that this sensuous composition invokes the ponderous historicity of colonial dispossession in capital's second major cycle of accumulation, the Dutch cycle of the seventeenth century, but are ephemeral and short-lived in the fact of their

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current embodiment.¹ Conjugating transient natural resources with fluid finance, sensual opulence expressed as currency might be identified as the work's primary referent.

Flowers wither and decay, their brief life set in contrast to the persisting capacity of capital itself. Yet in the grand scheme of historical time, so do cycles of accumulation, leaving bewilderment on the part of social relations abandoned by capital flight.

And while material fragility attendant on economic crisis once signaled a sea change in the geopolitics of accumulation and in the civil sector built to mediate it, now, in the fifth century of the Anthropocene, it suggests the precarity of global life itself, and of the delicate interdependence of the natural world in which we as a species are embedded. We, the viewer, are suddenly set into identification with the piece for reasons other than the consciousness of natural death evoked by traditional memento mori. That we are currently, collectively, as biopolitically contingent as flora suddenly strikes through thinking the piece as silently yet effectively as the bouquet's material fragrance. Produced by the same forms of wealth that are historically and socially generated, and yet just as "natural," we are equally determined by a man-made climate that make species death quite possible in capital's race to the bottom of resource extraction. We are as tenuously contingent on our own conjugation with value extraction as the flowers, accelerating and ratcheting our mortal contingency on time itself. The memory of flowers as a historical vehicle for financial exchange precipitates the self-reflexive recognition that we too are nodes in similar circuits, that much of our time is spent organizing ourselves as vehicles for material exchanges that enable our own brief lives. As workers earning a living and consumers who consume resources to stay alive, we are conduits in material paths of exchange, selling our labor time and purchasing that which keeps us vital.

Bouquet II rallies not just the memory of cultural symbolizations of the concrete reality of death in traditional Dutch painting, or the actual circulation and accumulation of currency for which the flowers historically acted as vehicle, but also that other language of flowers drawn from the domain of eros. "It is to flowers in general, and not to any specific flower, that one is tempted to attribute the strange privilege of revealing the presence of love," as surrealist Georges Bataille noted in "The Language of Flowers."² Bataille is quick to toss these flowers-as-metaphorical-eros into an equally metaphorical "puddle of liquid manure" in order to perform the operation for which he is best known, attacking idealism by locating the base and low within the symbolism of beauty.³ At heart is the transposition from low to

high, and equally of high to low, in which meaning switches places as though gliding through a semiotic fluidity in which transpositions move like a gentle tide against fixed reference.

But this “multiplicity of reference” set into play by *Bouquet II* as a kind of instant art history lesson and reminder of polysemy signals yet another perceptual economy, one foundational to and yet occluded by modernism: the anonymous and abstract labor-time that by the second decade of the twentieth century made traditional representation impossible by changing the very fabric of the reality to be represented, and at a faster pace than mimetic correlation could ever hope to keep pace with. Lived experience no longer afforded a grasp of the social field necessary to the most basic encounters and exchanges. A new metabolic of everyday life required a new means of articulation. Received representational forms lost any referential capacity in the face of seismic social change wrought by an accelerating economic metabolic known as real or concrete abstraction, the elaboration of second nature by labor-power. That which we have come to know as “aesthetic abstraction” or nonrepresentational art in the culture sector is one indicator of a crisis in representation.

I offer two paths into the forms of articulation that the entwinement of concrete and aesthetic abstraction begins to generate, and of which the contemporary Dutch artists’ *Bouquet* is but one allegory.

This book is about that which is everywhere and therefore nowhere, like the very air in a room, an element containing every other facet of life and yet impossible to finally contain and objectify, much less symbolize: abstract social relations. What could the rarefied place of art, of aesthetic abstraction, tell us about everyday social abstraction? I wrote this book in conversation with Rosalind Krauss’s *The Optical Unconscious* on the one hand and T. J. Clark’s *Farewell to an Idea* on the other. Both of those art history classics are about abstract art. Both books try to address what it is that abstract art mediates in the absence of fixed reference after late nineteenth-century Impressionist painting. Both are about invisibility in relation to consciousness. *The Optical Unconscious* locates an invisible and opaque field under the modernist episteme of self-reflexivity. Krauss characterizes this field as an all but impenetrable place that nonetheless motivates instance after instance of artistic breakthrough from the work of Marcel Duchamp to that of Eva Hesse. That hidden place of motivation for Krauss is desire, which erupts into the pictorial field through any number of indexes. By contrast, Clark set the same discursive parameters, that around modernism, into a reflection of modern social dynamics reticulated through the question of collective

subjectivity. Clark sees as epochal (Modernism) a time where social relations became increasingly determined by invisible class dynamics. Here, the figure of the prostitute is the very signal of modernity's social structure. Both books looked to aesthetic practices across the period known as modernism to trace their understanding of social modernity at large.

How, if at all, did these books forge a conversation? Their intersection meets in the artwork they both address, if not in their respective arguments. A conversation surfaces, vividly to me, around the question they hold in common and yet both defer. How could we locate a place where unconscious compulsions and social determinations meet, insofar as this question binds Marxism and psychoanalysis across any number of fields? That intersection strikes me as thematized in the artworks they both privilege again and again. For one, it might describe any hundreds if not thousands of paintings either thematizing prostitution or idealizing the working model in the form of the classical nude; it might also describe the Duchampian ready-made central to psychoanalytic accounts of modernism. But it marks a blindsighted intersection in the discourse.

One term for this problem, the embodied mediation between labor, capital and desire, prostitution, often serves as metaphor or allegory in the humanities. But it qualifies modernity in a specific way: it begins to signal an ontology emergent in lived, historical time for a range of activities that do not, strictly speaking, involve sex. The term *prostitution* ceases to be literal but at the same time is anything but allegorical. Flickering between a description and a metaphor, this term almost stands in for a form of mediation that has gone unseen, an open secret of Modernism.

Within the space of modernist culture, prostitution comes to stand as a kind of shorthand for real abstraction in social space across any number of contexts. Real abstraction is everywhere and nowhere, invisibly mediating social relations in the interests of value accumulation, organizing human lives in the service of surplus, through the sale of labor-power. Modern art signals an unconscious forged in the perceptual mediation of a more fundamental and unrepresentable transformation, that of concrete individual labor-become-abstract value.

The two paths I advance by way of introduction answer both Clark's and Krauss's books. The first introduction takes abstraction as a problem for epistemology and therefore for aesthetic knowledge. Looking at struggles to articulate the way that capital had made the world itself abstract, I locate those writers and artists, beginning with Karl Marx, who have tried to describe an emergent second nature. While *Bouquet II*'s presentation of flowers

and Bataille's writing on flowers both circumscribe a *seeming* nature that in fact operates as a vehicle for everything from erotic reverie to industry and cash, an emergent discourse tries to locate abstraction in everyday life at the intersection of embodiment and impersonal economic forces.

In the constellation of meanings reopened by Rooij and Rijke's *Bouquet II*, a polyvalence made all the more playful and frustrating by sly deference to a "real," as though the flower's metonymy for "nature" could establish any final grounding, one stable question inheres: Why is eros in any form of symbolization permeable to the question of currency? Money is, after all, anything but embodied and specific. Why are the artists' choice of flowers not just any flowers, which for Bataille are indiscriminately erotic, but specific to the historical memory of early modern Dutch money? From metaphors of sexual pleasure to conduits of capital, the flowers accompany the voyage of inexplicable and seemingly alchemical transformations across imaginary and material terrain. But how does one referential destination merge with its antonym so swiftly? If money is the representation of value—and value the representation of labor, as Diane Elson and other theorists of the value-form have noted—how does desire, affiliated with the pleasure principle and therefore anathema to the discipline of productive exertion measured by time, come to enter the set of variables conjugable in the circuit of references opened by the flowers?⁴ How does the representation of labor yield so easily to the symbolization of erotic attraction? Why would a vehicle for value work a double shift as the image of free drives and inclinations, above all an erotic orientation? Why does art become a way of probing the connection between sex and work, held in tense relation and at once sublimated and heightened in a still common cultural mystification of sex which lends itself to bourgeois morals that are ultimately indifferent to anything outside the property relation and yet which offer continual titillation?

Marxist philosopher Jason Read notes that "money becomes the general equivalent of desire."⁵ Reading Spinoza, who "considers money as primarily indexed to desire" with Marx in order to probe the connection between the symbolic and material understanding of work, Read's explanation is immediately material. Money is "indexed to desire" because it can procure any embodied joy or pleasure. It is a vehicle that affords transport in a material dimension. What dimension do the flowers take us on a metaphorical ride toward, symbolic or real? And why are these material and metaphorical registers so structurally entwined as to seem indivisible?

Universal prostitution, the hybrid term introduced by Marx in 1844, as much as the eponymous artwork from 1916–17 by Dada artist Francis Picabia that

lends this book its title, and finally this book itself, are all three a query into the “general equivalent of desire.” If money, born of labor, is the index of desire, how does it crosses registers so fluidly? How does anonymous labor-time, valorized in transaction and fetishized in beautiful yet troubling objects, come to be confused with sensual life itself? If the value-form circulates through changing forms, how does money come to be the general equivalent of desire as much as of value? To what extent are classical metaphors of eros, from flowers to bodies, subsumed under the logic of the transaction rather than the lure of sex, of pleasure, of bodies or anything external to the tautology of the value-form?

As I argue in the introductions to follow, art had prefigured the way in which abstract labor—anonymous, commodified, and yet coursing in its myriad forms throughout capital’s network of circulation—had rewritten nature itself. From Georges Seurat’s painting to de Rooij’s postconceptualism, the problem of figuring the new metabolic, of everyday life referred to as modernity, demanded new forms of articulation, new media, new concepts. This book tries to probe that metaphysic.

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Introduction 1

Toward a Materialist Formalism

It is no controversy that the term *abstraction* summons the memory of abstract painting and any number of aesthetic experiments across media at the turn of the last century. *Abstraction* recalls the once urgent and tacitly politicized exploration of nonreferential mediations of new and often estranging sense perception generated by modernity and a newly emergent social ecology of material survival. At their origins, variations on this exploration of aesthetic abstraction—from Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin to Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and Clement Greenberg, among many others—were attuned to facture and material process as a degree zero from which to constitute an artwork appropriately attentive to modernity, and therefore historicist in its sensitivity to contemporary materials and methods. In this implicitly political and leftist constellation of aesthetic thinking at its most current, the work's material articulation would of necessity *index*, if not represent, the dynamism of the material transformation of everyday life at an ontological level under capital.¹ This is to say that aesthetic abstraction seemed to signal a major shift in the way culture incorporated and in turn inscribed social reality: we might describe this transformation as one from a regime of representation to one of abstraction. It was as though the capacity of representation had dissolved under the increasing abstraction—estrangement, displacement, anonymity, and fragmentation—of everyday life, as though representation were historically foreclosed after seismic rupture at the molecular level of daily life sparked by a new metabolic of production and consumption.

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This kind of sensitivity to history at the level of *form*, of an impressionability and articulation susceptible to new modalities of perception and apprehension, preoccupied writers who acknowledged that history introduces not just new objects and technological inventions but ways of seeing, sensing, and knowing. These relationships internalized and responded to changes in the social field. As Rosalind Krauss writes, “Cultural production [is] the impossible attempt to construct an imaginary space with which to work out unbearable contradictions produced within the real field of history.”² Earlier, Adorno had argued for the inevitable social kernel at the heart of even the most abstract cultural mediations: “There is no material content, no formal category of artistic creation, however mysteriously changed and unknown to itself, which did not originate from the empirical reality from which it breaks,” reminding us that so-called autonomy is not only always provisional but also nested in a “totality,” against a social and historical horizon.³ If autonomy ever meant anything, it was art’s ability to turn away not from social entanglements but instead from an all-consuming market. At stake was the horizon itself—that shifting and contingent “totality”—or at least a way to somehow figure it, however much the cultural work might remain irreducible or opaque to it. As Adorno noted, the “mysterious transmission” that the artist or culture worker generates may not be transparent or legible to that producer themselves but nonetheless remains part of an empirical reality, however seemingly ineffable. For his part, Greenberg openly avowed the umbilical cord of gold that tethered artists to the social system via the patron and the institution.⁴ Key here was the way in which the work could be possible *despite*, not because of, its inscription into and fugitive escape from “gold” in the circuits of production, circulation, and reception.

And yet Piet Mondrian’s resolution to the structural contradiction of flatness and depth, and of resonance against rationality in *New York City* (1942) (figure I1.1), that quintessential paradigm of painterly abstract modernism, suggests that the principle of the aesthetic mediation of impossible social contradiction, as Krauss might say, in the form of “aporetic braiding” is not recognized in the discourse as a formal allegory of a utopian collective social form. Rather, it is seen as an arrogant bid for aesthetic autonomy, a purely aesthetic sovereignty indifferent to social relations.⁵ In other words, a model for progressive optical dynamics, one that accomplishes the seemingly impossible—a convincing negation of figure and ground, facture and depicted space—to disarticulate a received traditional spatial orientation to the real world is misunderstood as independent of that world. In this paradox, common to most art historical discourse, the notion of autonomy is willfully

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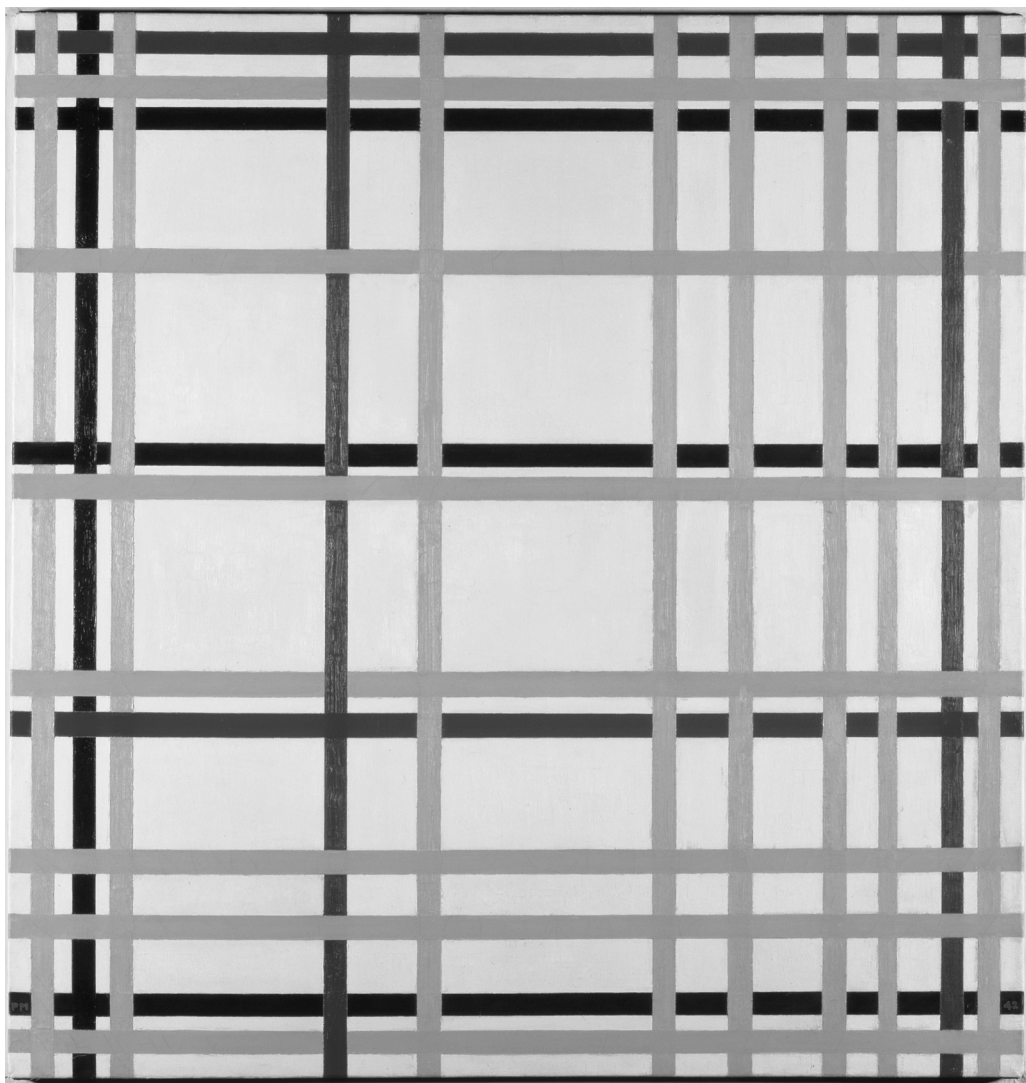


Fig. I1.1 Piet Mondrian, *New York City*, 1942. © CNAC/MNAM, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

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misunderstood to mean that the work is ahistorical, apolitical, and disinterested in the contradictions of the real social field through which it might offer a guide, however much open to idealist formal interpretation.

It is thereby reduced to the very logic of the fetish it wrestled against in its manifest dialectical *resistance* to the reduction of human experience to the extraction of surplus value in the everyday capitalist lifeworld. But this book is not the place to argue against travesty in the doxa whereby an artwork is either an illustration of something in this world or a self-contained alien world. Instead, another form of abstraction insinuates itself *under* that discourse.

What gets lost is that the modernists who write about aesthetic abstraction took politics to be the very framework of *any* emergent debate about art's capacities, and its relevance.⁶ Taking as a given the Enlightenment imperative that aesthetics is a form of intellectual query both equal and other to science, as well as a dialectical critique of that very same Enlightenment, modernist aesthetics aspired to a kind of purposive purposelessness that functions all the more politically for being *other* to the rationalized and instrumental field of calculated rigidity.

If anything, were we to shelve the absurdism of most denunciations of the discourse of autonomy on the grounds of apoliticism, we might notice that most of these writers could be more accurately accused of explicitly bracketing their discursive query away from the complexity of an *economic* field. If they could be said to have avoided anything, it would be not the political sphere but the hidden abode of production and equally occluded market, which at once neutralizes and replicates social divisions across political ideologies. That zone was kept discreetly out of sight and mind, all the better to present it as a sublimated contradiction in culture and in art. One word that did, however, begin to probe this other economic sphere might be *reification*.

In her explanation of the socially forged cogito undergirding modern vision, Krauss points out that the problem of reification is a given, a constituted and constitutive function of perception that is contemporaneous and correlative, even causal, to capitalism's self-replication through circuits of value. But this causality or relation between reification in the world and its expression in culture does not identify itself in the space of representation. Krauss reconstructs a well-noted debate in the interwar period among Western and cultural Marxists in which the mutually enforcing relationship between politics and aesthetics is accepted as inherent but in which the specificity of a timely aesthetics *appropriate* to history becomes an object of heated contention in a search for examples.

The modernists understood that forms of seeing are themselves historically contingent. If modernity, which is to say capitalism, had made the world anew at the level of people, places, and things (proletarianization, urbanization, the commodity), how would culture remain timely and relevant to its transformative shocks, or shocking transformations? While modernists insisted on new forms to articulate new worlds, some equally leftist traditionalists thought that traditional culture provided a constant against which to measure change. Nowhere did this debate take on more acute proportions than within the Frankfurt School. Georg Lukács, who elaborated Marx's term *reification*, ironically took the traditionalist view. The modernists, Adorno and others, by contrast argued that perception itself was fundamentally changed and therefore, as a mediation for cognition fundamental to equally changing social relations, new ways of sensing must be pioneered by an avant-garde.⁷

At stake were the means, not the ends, according to Krauss.

Georg Lukács, deploring this technologizing of the body, this need to abstract and reify each of the senses in a submission of human subjectivity to the model of positivist science, would have found nothing to argue with in such an [modernist] analysis. He would only have objected to its tone, to its assumption, which Greenberg shared with Adorno, that in the withdrawal of discipline to sensory experience . . . there was something utopian. For a utopian modernism was insisting that this sensory stratum newly understood as discrete, as self-sufficient, as autonomous—this very stratification—permitted an experience of rescue and retreat, a high ground uncontaminated by the instrumentality of labor and science, a preserve of play and thus a model of freedom.⁸

I will return to Krauss's casual definition of technology as a function of (material) abstraction that facilitates the reification of experience, but for now, Lukács's term *reification* might be read as a way to *describe* the effects of the capitalist organization of labor-power as a function of time, that which is strangely sidelined along with "science" in the quoted passage.

For Lukács, Marx's analysis in *Capital* shows that the fetishization of labor-time in the form of the final commodity hides its process of manufacture by human hands. We might add here that modern art often emphasized the phenomenology of its making as a form of *resistance*, or alterity, in relation to the commodity's tendency to conceal living labor. And for its part, while the commodity is structurally opaque to its origin, insofar as that origin is abstract, anonymous, and generalized, it is, as art historian Sven Lütticken

puts it, an index nonetheless: a severed one. Unlike an indexical sign that points to its source and origin, the commodity is a “severed” index because the capitalist mode of production requires a new division and socialization of labor that renders opaque the social process of making itself—to the point of *seeming* to become almost independent of the social field in which its replication is embedded. We have heard this before. The charge of social opacity against aesthetic autonomy begins to sound like a displacement of the commodity’s impenetrability, except for the way in which the latter appears instead like a fetish. As socially necessary—necessary, that is, to surplus extraction, the division and recomposition of components, including labor-power, the time spent in the process of manufacture or of delivering services is reintegrated in the interest of capital rather than at the free will of the individual or the collective worker, however free he or she may appear to be to “freely” sell that labor-time. Beyond the seemingly bounded space of work, forms of estrangement and anonymity forged in the recomposition of labor enter a wider social dynamic, which also remains oriented to work. The social field echoes the way in which value production becomes the dominant social organizing principle. In other words, the social field comes to mime and *performs* the fact of socially necessary labor-time as the very substance of modern life. It is in this sense that the commodity stands as an *index*—broken only to the extent that its conditions of emergence made possible by any number of anonymous hands and minds are impossible to trace.

Lukács “deplores” the modern dismantling of traditional form in early twentieth-century art and literature for the way in which it too seems to mimic the very nature of the commodity. It is estranging, jarring, depersonalizing. For him, the opacity of modern art is only the sad reflection of the reification of the commodity, whose mode of production through socially necessary labor-time makes it impossible to connect to time, place, hand, or intention.

By contrast, the modernists Adorno and Greenberg both saluted estranged, intensified culture as a way of remaining critical and timely *within* the fabric of a modernity that was newly and recursively recomposed at an almost molecular level by socially necessary labor-time. Key here is “labor-time” as a quantified quotient, in distinction to the laborer’s subjective experience. In return for a wage, time is bought and sold on a labor market that is indifferent to the erstwhile community existence of the worker or their daily experiential life in a social totality. What matters to an abstract totality (both profit’s bottom line and the everyday reproduction of the social field) is labor-power and forms of dis- and rearticulated skill. A labor market be-

comes the impersonal engine of society over time, overshadowing historically entrenched forms of community.⁹

For Adorno and Greenberg, the very fact that the modern estranged work demands of the viewer some exploration of its making affords the latter a space of query away from calculating self-interest, a place of suspension in a momentary apperceptive identification with the artwork itself. While modernists may have disagreed with some avant-garde forms, such as the Duchampian ready-made about which Greenberg said “anything can be reconventionalized on the spot,” they understood that art was autonomous only insofar as it was not fungible or made of expropriated labor-time.¹⁰ A last repository of purposelessness, if not traditional intention, the work of art held open a place of imagination as well as a degree zero of agency through negation.

At once summoned and warded off in the reception and production of the (art)work, the fact of socially necessary labor-time stands at the heart of modernist opacity. Lukács’s theory of reification, derived from Marx’s passages on the commodity fetish in which things take on the agency of subjects while subjects are refashioned as things in the blind field of capital, becomes a kind of conceptual shorthand for the strange way in which cycles of value production and circulation come to inscribe all of social life as equally reified experience, equally estranged and artificially produced. The hidden substance of this social transformation constitutive of reified experience, estranged labor-power, is the common constituent matter overwritten by the expression of any number of tropes across examples of modernist aesthetics.

For example, Mondrian’s *New York City* offers a kind of visually reverberating contradiction at once clarifying contradiction while denying a false or trite closure. For Lukács, this thin line of differentiation between the abstracted artwork and the reified sense perception of daily life in relation to circuits of value would be dangerously narrow, a distinction so delicate as to simply adjust the individual to impersonal forms of exchange. For Adorno, Greenberg, and others, the only way out was through. Heightened, challenging, and dialectical perceptual experience triggered by the work was to operate as a kind of prophylactic against reified consciousness. In a sense, in the end, the artwork’s broad reception brokered a deal that resulted in both reified perception and fetishized objects.

But for these modernists, the political problem with tradition in a new and modern sensory landscape was that it offered trite and immediate closure, and in this was almost indistinguishable from the immediate gratification promised by the commodity—for which a too steep price was paid

through labor itself. Traditional forms of culture were no longer experientially accountable and therefore tendered more of a deferral than a real confrontation with the changing field of the real. True defiance would require a new form of mediation. Conventionalized culture failed to demand that the viewer be alert to the ultimately irreducible component parts of the work, whereby finality is held in abeyance so that dynamic processes have a chance to be set in motion, even if only at the level of consciousness. Otherwise, were cognizance not asked to sense itself sensing, it might sink into stasis and a kind of habituated and dangerously delusional representation of life against its own interest.

Rehearsing the undergirding tenets of the modernist project in aesthetic abstraction, Krauss, via literary theorist Fredric Jameson (via his reading of Louis Althusser), turns her analysis to the unconscious. Jameson's approach had influenced a generation for whom ideology critique was common to political culture in the academy from the 1970s to the 1990s, from Edward Said to Stuart Hall to Jameson himself. In this way, a deal was struck between Lukács's and Adorno's (and Benjamin's and Krauss's own) Marxism. But at what price?

The figure of the sea is one example of a modernist trope that begins to limn the open secret of labor and value and that at once denies and addresses estranged labor sold on a market. This figure recurs across modernism, from Impressionist seascapes to geometric reduction. It is presented again and again as an optically aesthetic object that also allegorizes an overwritten articulation of the totality of a world reorganized through abstraction. That is, in modernism, it indirectly articulates a world reconstituted through the sale of socially disarticulated, metricized time transposed through humans into abstract value, or currency. In the passage of substance from subject to object inherent in the commodity and therefore to a social field more broadly, the labor-time of countless lives is expressed as in the value and price of objects, as though by magic. Art here is understood to doubly raise and defer the question of value in a dialectical relation; it acts as a mimetic exacerbation, a ratcheting or reduplication of reification, while simultaneously resisting that reification by refusing any finality.

In her lucid scrutiny of Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean 5 (Sea and Starry Sky)* (1915) (which she also sees as a reworking of Claude Monet's *Impression Sunrise* [1872] [figures I1.2 and I1.3]) and, crossing media, of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, Krauss notes the way in which descriptions of the sea both dismantle and generously offer spatial plenitude. However, reduced, schematic, and almost notational in form, the modern work still delivers the gratification



Fig. I1.2 Claude Monet, *Impression Sunrise*, 1872. HIP / Art Resource, NY.

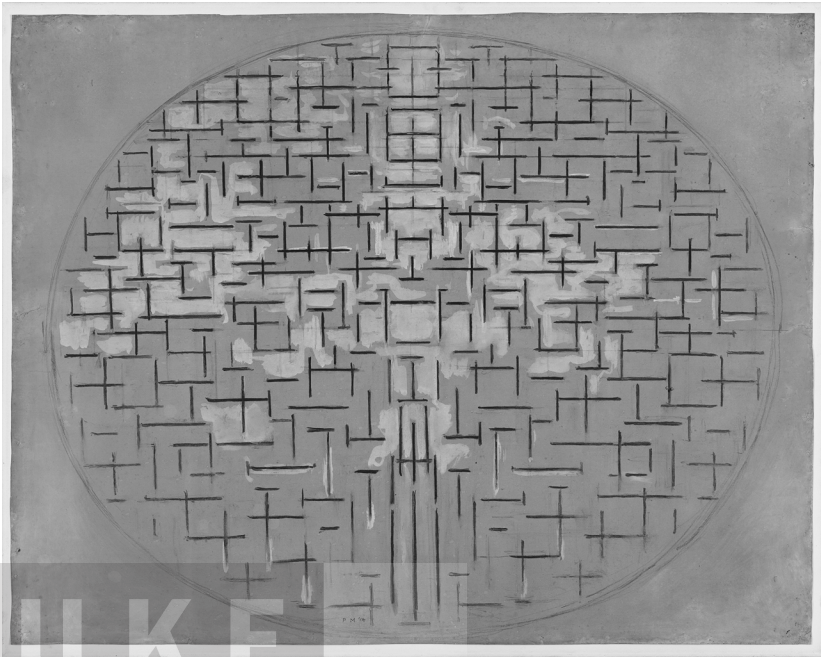


Fig. I1.3 Piet Mondrian, *Pier and Ocean 5 (Sea and Starry Sky)*, 1915 (inscribed 1914). © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

once guaranteed by a referent: “The sea is a special kind of medium for modernism because of its perfect isolation, its detachment from the social, its sense of self enclosure and above all its opening onto a visual plenitude that is somehow heightened and pure, both a limitless expanse and a sameness.”¹¹ Here, she notes how Jameson attends to the way that Conrad seems to reconstitute the sea at the level of language, just as Mondrian reconstitutes visual perception’s component elements in an interrelated set of pluses and minuses, an aesthetic reduction that is somehow already a feature of the sea itself, and that nonetheless opens onto a pregnant fullness of depth, the way illusionism once did—but now, with any conclusive finality pulled out from under it, delivered only as a fleeting optical experience.

Bolstered by Jameson’s account of the way modernists seem to abstract the sea at the level of craft and facture across media, Krauss acknowledges—in passing—that what is transposed is really the space of commerce. If Conrad’s novel *Lord Jim* were to abstract anything in particular, it would be the fact of the sale of expropriated labor in the “medium” of dehumanized persons.¹² Literary analyst Sylvia Wynter, in her exploration of the significance of the sea as both the site of the Middle Passage and as a framework to grasp political economic contradiction in modern culture, argues that this trope complicates Marxism by drawing out and allegorizing three kinds of value producers: the enslaved, violently set into unremunerated production for the purposes of accumulation; the workers, who are socially coerced to set themselves into circulation for the purposes of accumulation; and the consumers, who guarantee the realization of value by purchasing the goods made by workers to keep cycles of accumulation moving.¹³

The sea is thus a “special kind of medium for modernism” on multiple entwined levels. As much a figure for emancipated optical experience as a matrix of the unconscious market whereon human time is appropriated and sold, the sea becomes a “medium” of all three forms of circulation. It were as though the abstraction of Monet’s, Mondrian’s, and Conrad’s work were tacitly paying homage to the very conditions against which it holds a brief fugitive moment of reflection.

Pier and ocean: that non-site where what has been extracted from living labor, enslaved and freely sold, set into circulation as so much exchange value in potential waiting to be ratified on a market is summoned and deferred. This is the sea *as* circulation, as the matrix of networks that cross production, transportation, and consumption. Monet’s seascape *Impression Sunrise*, which inaugurated the category “Impressionism” at the moment

that its author sought financial emancipation from the academy and the state apparatus, could be said to have aestheticized the ocean and its port to the point where that aestheticized figure of a labor to capital relationship appears as an instance of “autonomy.” But the smokestacks on the horizon that reconstitute the very air, or paint (they begin to feel interchangeable), of *Impression Sunrise* suggest otherwise. The place of market trade in which the ultimate commodity—labor-power itself—is both highly differentiated yet disjointed from the individuality of the labor bearer, detached from any context or place or even time, made anonymous and interchangeable and set into circulation, is, after all, the *unconsciously* privileged site of aesthetic self-reflexivity. Paradoxically, this offers the viewer an encounter of the contradiction between consciousness and its *other* unconscious: the impersonal, abstract place of transaction. The unity of the contradiction could not be more evident, held in suspension, and avoided.

In all three paradigmatic examples cited here (Monet, Mondrian, Conrad), the sea is the very matrix of the metabolic process that misreadings of autonomy accuse it of denying: the market. Krauss for her part skips right over this particular social unconscious. Instead, she takes this form of abstraction to be the figure of the cogito. The cogito, or ego founded on cognition, is also founded on the repression of its unconscious against which the repressed volcanically resurfaces as the symptom. However true this may be, she misses an altogether different unconscious: the dazzling field of market exchange, which she has already explained away through the problem of reification as Lukács understands it, and where the problem of value and its transformation in relation to human perception might be finally addressed.¹⁴ In other words, the artwork presents itself as the crucible to decode this other scene of reification rather than to take it as a foregone conclusion. If anything, both sites (the unconscious and the market) are equally gathered *and* occluded in the abstracted presentation of the sea, or rather in the presentation of the sea *as* the very matrix of abstraction. What drives the forms of exchange mediated on so many levels by this non-place of the sea, already hidden in plain sight in the first instance?

The most honest and strident account of art making across the twentieth century as a function of the split subject, of the psyche that is driven as much by an unconscious as by the artist's own design, *The Optical Unconscious* missed only the location and *social* nature of that unconscious. *The Optical Unconscious* situated the work of modernist and avant-gardist art as at once the aesthetic space of the reified cogito *and* its reflexive unmaking through

explorations of unconscious interruption. There, the artwork is shown to be forged as much by unconscious drives as by an urge to work out compositionally unresolvable contradiction from the social field in the limits of the concrete material artwork. But its argument overlooked the extent to which those two constitutive components derive from yet another *other scene*, this time other to the individual unconscious. The artwork desublimates the very masterful aesthetic abstractions to which it consciously or unconsciously aspires by reminding us of this economic register, which washes against the parameters of the frame shored up against it, like Monet's or Mondrian's or Conrad's ocean.

Iconic abstract works of art, such as those cited by Krauss, tacitly and unconsciously acknowledge that the world itself is abstract and that the work of art is painfully fragile insofar as it is "concrete." It is concrete because, standing in willful excess to the anonymous socially necessary labor-time that it indexes, it offers a momentary synthesis of a world made chaotic and seemingly arbitrary by capital.¹⁵ In all three key examples of modernism, across media (painting, drawing, novel), labor-power itself is the structural condition of the scene against which the artist works out a momentary act of consciousness.

Wynter's reading, taken alongside Krauss's, suggests a kind of unconscious that is different from both the political unconscious posited by the analysis of ideology and the individual unconscious drives posited by psychoanalysis. If anything, the libidinal unconscious that Krauss identifies is intimately bound up with circuits of production through expropriation and exploitation as well as compulsory consumption. We might reread her privileged objects and conclude that as much as an optical unconscious, a social unconscious composed of labor scatters indices across modernism in the form of art.

So, if *The Optical Unconscious* is a response to *The Political Unconscious*, the present book is a response to both. It is about the cultural effects of an economic unconscious scattered everywhere and gathered nowhere. The most compelling and enigmatic works of the past 150 or so years mediate that other unconscious—and refuse it insofar as this might be possible for a fugitive moment in time, offering a fleeting clearing in consciousness, not where it "unveils" or "unmasks" this or that but where it can reconstitute its external field for itself, that which is mistaken for "autonomy."¹⁶

If anything, many artists have called out modernist abstraction on the basis that it is far from abstract, that it is in fact excessively concrete. In its emphasis on facture and assorted articulations of material and medium in relation to form, the "truth to materials" mythos that the formalists held

dear, aesthetic abstraction's greatest pathos might be its concreteness. Contemporary artist Liam Gillick notes this as the *failure* of modernism, a lack rather than surfeit of abstraction.¹⁷ Gillick's thesis might have been music to the ears of Russian formalists, those thinkers important to Stein, Pablo Picasso, and others who emphasized facture as that which is concrete on *this* side of the sign—the materiality of language or of paint, of film or of music—and who saw that facture as a place separate from and in dialectical resistance to the abstraction of value (they were thinking on the cusp of the 1917 Russian communist revolution after all, a revolution in every dimension of life and especially in the aesthetic redistribution of meaning, just before its reappropriation by the state apparatus around 1920). What emerges, then, is a kind of condition where “abstract” and “concrete” come to behave as empty signifiers insofar as both become at once opposed and interchangeable, like the famous “duck/rabbit” visual puzzle associated with modernist aesthetics.

All of this begs the question of what abstraction connotes, much less denotes, and by extension, the question of what concreteness might mean. Why must these descriptive terms generate such treacherous confusion, as though in mimicry of the opacity of the modernist artwork or worse, the opacity of the social field reflected in the commodity? It almost feels like a return to another kitschy question: which imitates which, so-called life or so-called art? What explanation might we offer for this?

In “The Open Secret of Real Abstraction,” philosopher and cultural critic Alberto Toscano notes that the problem of distinguishing between abstract and concrete aspects of experience is one of perception, cognition, and formalization. Capitalist social relations restructured around the commodity and its capacity to generate surplus value exacerbate this condition. But this is trickier than it seems. Toscano sets out to demonstrate that abstraction is not that which might be clarified by Enlightenment projects of unmasking or by stripping off the putative veils of ideology. Rather, abstraction is everywhere objectively around all of us, in every moment of every day, irrespective of empirical verifiability and often impervious to local ideologies.¹⁸ It is not that there is a hidden object but rather that abstraction is a material and historical operation that remodels the field of the real. Generated by social relations, it is the matrix of what is knowable or sayable at any given time and certainly more palpable, if diffuse, than any *thought* one could have of it. In other words, abstraction is the field of social relations that constitute the very warp and weft of human reality, against which any individual conscious thought is but a momentary fragment.

Toscano's pun, the notion of an "open secret" or of locating a secret that is in fact exposed everywhere, indicates a historical perceptual condition in which what is everywhere all at once becomes invisible if only because it becomes seemingly natural in its very hovering and ubiquitous if unnatural operation. A second nature, then, abstraction is to be discerned in the processes of capital rather than with any final "concrete truth or hidden essence that the abstractions of capital supposedly occlude."¹⁹ Thinking on the part of individuals brackets the abstract field of the real. This is where Toscano parts ways with Althusserian theories of ideology. "To put it bluntly, abstraction precedes thought," he writes.²⁰ This means that for all his critical analysis of humanism and self-determination, Althusser continued to think within a framework wherein abstraction acted as a mask, veil, or misapprehension of the real via interpellation rather than as itself a form of reality.²¹

Immanent critique of ideology had it inside out, Toscano explains: objective conditions and the social reality we live within are abstract. Ideology (thought) begins on shaky ground insofar as it fails to acknowledge the conditions of its own possibility. Toscano turns to philosophy historian Roberto Finelli, who argues that insofar as abstraction is the very ontology of everyday life within capital, we are mistaken to reason by way of starting with what we find concrete and moving toward abstract thought. To have any cognitive grasp on the historical field of the real, we would do well to acknowledge abstraction itself as having recomposed the apparently concrete aspects of things. Therefore, the only way to begin to posit a social reality is to deduce it from abstractions and proceed to the concrete in relation to it. And of course, this is where the work of art gains its special relevance insofar as it bears a de-reifying function for political economist and philosopher Anita Chari and others who take the Lukácsian notion of reification as a point of entry into thinking capitalist everyday life itself.

Turning away from Althusserian notions of abstraction, Toscano points to the intervention of historian and philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel and, secondarily, to the Lacanian psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek, who both argue that consciousness—thought—is but a stopgap measure against an external field of inchoate determinations. Moreover, this external field does not stand outside of human manufacture—and here both share a materialist episteme solidly rooted in Marx's analysis over and against ideology. This external field might be allegorized as the kind of social relations enacted in moments of transaction in the space of the market insofar as this is where the total circuit of appropriation, production, and consumption, the entire circuit of value itself, is synthesized. The market is the space of finality in the form of trans-

actions. Capital can only grow in motion and through circuits wherein its forms transition from objects to money and back again; exchange is a provisional moment of absolute closure. The fully naturalized and seemingly fleeting moment of exchange ties together, invisibly, the otherwise “chaotic” atomized and anonymous social relations of everyday life. Members of social networks outside the perceivable and conceivable parameters of individual intention meet in exchange, reticulated through a market. Value reigns as sovereign, over and above any individual intention. This “real,” then, is socially and historically composed yet operates outside the cultural epistemes or forms of socially oriented cognition capable of conceiving its dynamic.

A Lacanian theory of the unconscious is also at stake in relation to an economic unconscious.²² While Jacques Lacan posits the unconscious as a repository of unconsciously internalized social codes perceived only subjectively as other and opaque, Žižek, following Sohn-Rethel, specifies a place that is *external* to the formation of the subject but which compels the subject’s seemingly free or at least nominally self-conscious choices and actions.²³ And here we come full circle. For if the ultimate object of critique for both Lacan and Krauss, as well as any number of other modernist writers, had been the arrogant anthropocentric Cartesian cogito, Žižek and Toscano note the utter inability of this critique to begin to probe the nature of its object insofar as all move within a Kantian episteme that is blind to social actions outside the parameters of normative cognitive capacity. Marx implicitly posits a form of cognition capable of a political economic analysis *within* and *against* a contextual lifeworld that structurally blinds it to the sale of its own socially necessary labor on a circuit far beyond its conscious apperception.

What *constitutes* this field of social and therefore real abstraction? The circuit of value that is set into motion recursively in order to keep accumulation operative, becoming autonomous of human interest. The circuit of value breaks paths with the worker and consumer, and even with the individual capitalist, as part of a cycle of growth outside any situated human experience of it. For Žižek and Toscano, Sohn-Rethel’s “real abstraction” offers a way of thinking this disconnect between capital and any specific empirical knowledge of it. This notion of “real abstraction” is drawn from but elaborated to supplement Marx’s *Grundrisse* and *Capital*.

The aesthetic index offers momentary lucidity insofar as concrete value originating in labor yet untethered from its medium in any given person (or countless thereof) scatters signs of its extrahuman trail everywhere in culture.²⁴ We might read culture less as a sublimated and dialectically reworked

political—and within the field of visual culture, optical—unconscious and more of an etiology of the gap between consciousness and the autonomy of the value-form (in a word, real abstraction) scattered everywhere in cultural practices, heightened in instances of art across the century. Art historian John Roberts has coined the phrase “a labor theory of culture,” which he extracts from his reading of the Duchampian ready-made and its way of expressing anonymous socially necessary labor-time as the ontological matrix of modern life. Building on that, we might read some art forms such as the ready-made as reverse engineering alienated labor-time. Art’s specific way of affording a vision into the social unconscious determined by value circulation is simultaneous with its attempt to prevent itself from collapsing into the commodity form itself.²⁵ Art is not a regular commodity, as Dave Beech and others have convincingly argued, but it has consistently prefigured and alerted vision to the dynamic between consciousness and its market unconscious, which draws on art’s own concerns: skill in relation to value, agency in relation to a social order enacted on not only symbolic but also material terms. Art may be a model for other forms of the commodity but is not itself fungible and can de-reify as much as reify unconscious operations imposed by value’s circuits of self-replication.

Marxist art historian Sven Lütticken situates Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s project in the context of central European philosophical debates of the interwar period. For him, Sohn-Rethel describes money as a form that determines social relations invisibly and performatively, not unlike the way in which perspective—regardless of the particular iconography of the perspectival picture, from Perugino’s *Christ Giving the Keys to St. Peter* (1481–82) to Raphael’s paradigmatic *Marriage of the Virgin* (1504) to the universalizing *Last Supper* (1495–98) by Leonardo da Vinci—operates, always in the same way again and again as a formal articulation of consciousness as such, of human cognizance in reciprocity with a projected god. Irrespective of content, perspective itself sutures viewer to picture in a perceptual contract of illusionism, just as it interpolates the viewer into a Christian social contract. In other words, the form is operative in the social field, no matter what the particular iconographic content of the picture may be. This is not to diminish the latter but rather anchors it in an unconscious yet functional social context. While the visual architecture of perspective is historically derived, it comes to be constitutive of an accepted reality once it is naturalized. One rarely questions the fact that there are no straight lines in nature. Perspective, as that which falls outside the experientially or logically deducible, other to both nature and culture alike, is mathematically derived abstraction but

becomes a symbolic form operating in parallel to language. Unlike language that most agree is arbitrary, it is seen as motivated by ontological certainty. This notion of form is indebted to Ernst Cassirer. More specifically yet, we owe this insight to Cassirer in a conjunctural moment in his project, just when he was elaborating his notion of “symbolic form” and about to debate Martin Heidegger on its implications for ontology.

Cassirer’s central intervention was the concept of symbolic form, in which the world is structured through and by schemas that each carry a specific logic, akin to myth or science. Crossing categories of cognition, a schema derives just as easily from myth as from science, complicating any dialectic of enlightenment. Language as theorized by structural linguistics was but one such schema. The art historian Erwin Panofsky famously “applied” this theory to early modern painting—that foundational space of abstraction or metricization in picture making—to understand the illusionism made possible by central point perspective as formative of the representation of the subject itself, in symmetry with the spatial organization representative of transcendental or eternal life facing the subject. In *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927), this modality of pictorial organization is understood to result from engineering and mathematics but also from the crucible of the modern subject’s dominant perceptual understanding of the world, the cogito. It becomes a worldview constitutive of cognition and practically renaturalized.²⁶ Sohn-Rethel bears a much more rooted intellectual debt to Cassirer.²⁷ He was in Davos in 1929 when the debates between Cassirer (with whom he studied) and Heidegger took place, solidifying the divide between the former’s historicist Kantianism and the latter’s theory of presence as “standing-reserve.”²⁸ Cassirer explicitly engaged and rejected Heideggerian ontologies in his understanding of form as a socially derived determinant elaborated as a social constraint.

Sohn-Rethel theorized a cultural foundation of the subject within capitalist domination indebted to Cassirer. Epistemology grounds a form of consciousness barred from an economic social unconscious, a bulwark against nature and a “second nature.”²⁹ This second nature is an abstraction that functions as though it were itself inevitable, “the way things are.” It is not that consciousness is false, nor that “mankind”—a category that cannot in any case be universalized in any other way than historically, for example, insofar as markets mediate across borders—is “alienated.” Rather, this fully renaturalized reality is also a product of the dominant means of value production and a metabolic mediating nature, however the latter is defined. Abstraction comes to saturate the field of the real and to be mistaken for

it. As Sami Khatib has noted in his analysis of the value-form in relation to both aesthetics and a direly needed new theory of class, “Capitalism’s physis produces its own ‘naturally grown’ *metaphysics*.”³⁰

Money is a “symbolic form” like other symbolic forms that come to ramify in the field of the real in the sense that it does not correlate to any fixed natural condition (it is an index of socially necessary labor-time calibrated by transaction, as Sohn-Rethel would come to discover and to argue), and yet the transactions that it enables come to calcify through their performance and reperformance in a social register. Above all, the logic of transaction and its indifference to either the content of that which is bought or sold, or the relationships among buyers or sellers, underlines its autonomy from the social field in which it functions and over which it comes to have immense power. This makes money as a form, a social contract from an “other” register, eerily similar to an operational “symbolic form” such as perspective.

For Lütticken, Sohn-Rethel’s attentiveness to *form* as such, aside of language and immediate ideology, stands out as the key tool to understanding modernity. He takes Sohn-Rethel’s *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (conceptualized intuitively in the 1920s and completed only in 1978) to be a retort to Cassirer’s formalist Kantianism by way of disarticulating the formal parameters of philosophical thought from the Enlightenment notion of free will and agency. It effectively dismantles the framework determinative of liberal subjectivity by questioning the Kantian notion of self-liberation through mental faculties within the limits of individual capacity. Where for Immanuel Kant, Enlightenment is self-liberation from self-imposed external constraints, Sohn-Rethel’s argument demonstrates this model of contained individual cognition and judgment to be itself already mimetically inscribed in the logic of that other abstraction: the commodity as repository of value. Sohn-Rethel thus “desublimates philosophical ‘thought abstractions’ by linking them generically to the ‘real abstractions’ of exchange and money. He thereby attempts to reveal the historically specific economic underpinnings of Kantianism.”³¹ And yet at the same time, this thought remains formalist—but not in the usual sense as “merely” aesthetic or even only political. What has changed is the emergence of a specifically materialist formalism, one that derives its “categories” from the real movement of the value-form in circulation, and the way that this metabolic is *re-mediated into thought through form*. Here, aesthetic form mediates material form. As an index (aesthetic) of an index (circulation; value as an index

of labor-time), the artwork is a margin through which to sense or “see” the field of the socially mediated second nature in all its apparent abstraction.

The ultimate stakes of the Cassirer–Heidegger debate—and what is inscribed in both Panofsky’s and Sohn-Rethel’s debt to Cassirer—is a definition of technology and, consequently, of a worldview. While this worldview itself is historically constituted, the subject who encounters it enters into it as though into a second nature perceived as nature. No essence or ontology precedes these forms as they come to reverberate in the social field as constraints, a social framework within which the subject unconsciously moves.

Form is mistaken for essence insofar as it functions “abstractly,” outside of perceived recognition, yet also “concretely,” through modes of production and equally tangible and productive social relations. Both sides operate yet outside of *conscious* thought. Abstraction is a framework, an episteme and an invisible social ecology within capital, rather than an immediately manifest set of objects in an empirically verifiable place.³² Like a functioning code or schema, it is both constituted and constitutive, not least in the way that social relations evolve within and against circuits of value that also deterritorialize and recompose the material world, driven always by markets. In sum, Sohn-Rethel attempts to do to Kantian “faculties” and modes of cognitive self-possession what Marx had accomplished in relation to Georg W. F. Hegel, namely, to set the form of thought and formal organization of process, be it the category (Kant) or the dialectic, on its feet, on solid materialist ground. This, finally, offers another perceptual and cognitive way into that other problem, one categorized under the “aesthetic” within a Kantian genealogy: the problem of the process of de-reification. The latter had been modernism’s very project from Adorno and Greenberg to Krauss and contemporary thinker of de-reification through aesthetics, Anita Chari.

Foremost here is the division between manual and intellectual labor. If René Descartes formalized the cogito, and Kant refined its many categorical capacities, this is only insofar as the collective division of labor enabled the very production of this thought, a kind of tautology in which the missing referent, the market, makes possible the products sold on it, including philosophy itself as one product among many. Far from reflecting on the material world, Sohn-Rethel reminds us that thinking too is framed for the purposes of circulation on a market. Art’s so-called autonomy, a Kantian notion at its origin, only exists insofar as it is the last refuge of a form of production and consumption that isn’t entirely subsumed, a momentary

reprieve from the divisions managed by a market and remanaged provisionally through institutions of aesthetic judgment.

Recall Marx's infamous statement that the distribution of labor, insofar as it is mediated by a market, determines a fixed identity for he who must sell that labor:

For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.³³

Reversing the common assumption that only intellectual labor, philosophy above all, transcends labor categories as violent as they are vulgar, Marx commented: "The industrialists of philosophy, who till then had lived on the exploitation of the absolute spirit, now seized upon the new combinations [enabled by the philosophy market]. Each with all possible zeal set about retailing his apportioned share."³⁴ Those who have been professionalized to think within the category of intellectual labor do so in such a way that unconsciously replicates the market relations that enable the material conditions for the production of formal thought as such. This circularity is lost on those who *inhabit* its circuit, a value-productive circuit not unlike the circuits on which manual labor-power and its materials inhabit. Again, far from being materially autonomous, art is "autonomous" *only* insofar as the artist need not respect the reification of production at the level of ontology. Art stands in excess to the primary division between intellectual and manual labor, capable of reflecting on labor in general. General labor is inscribed into the art's production without the work's total subsumption into a market totality. This is what passes for creation and for autonomy.

The way in which Sohn-Rethel's work dismantles epistemic categories also suggests a very different kind of "universalism" than the kind of which modernism is so frequently and perhaps rightfully accused. The materialist universalism that his analysis suggests does not preexist its formation through the networks of transactions that it in turn perpetuates. It moves

where markets move. It is neither ideal nor absolute. There is no ontology or any theory of that which is revealed as “standing-reserve.” Instead, transactional social relations create a form of “alienated” society that crosses identity, territory, and nation. Universalism does not originate, nor is it located, in any one geopolitical site or context—although *Intellectual and Manual Labour* privileges fifth-century Greek mercantile culture, it takes this as exemplary of generic market relations across contexts.

Sohn-Rethel’s thought, as Toscano and others emphasize, returns to a basic tenet in Marxian thinking that has been all but extinguished in the bourgeois idealisms facilitated by the liberal market. This basic tenet is that to grasp anything about “real” conditions within capitalist social relations, the thinking subject must begin with the seemingly abstract and move to the concrete—not the reverse, as in bourgeois thinking. This is a basic truism in Marx’s methodology as discussed in recent discourse by geographer and intellectual historian David Harvey and countless others. If anything, to begin with apparently concrete “things” and extrapolating toward generality is a sure-fire path to delusion. Marx writes:

Hence the magic of money. Men are henceforth related to each other in their social process of production in a purely atomistic way. Their own relations of production therefore assume a material shape which is independent of their control and their conscious individual action. This situation is manifested first by the fact that the product of men’s labour universally take on the form of commodities. The riddle of the money fetish is therefore the riddle of the commodity fetish, now become visible and dazzling to our eyes.³⁵

In the shift from the object commodity to the abstraction of money, labor-time is no longer experienced as an object but as a screen, an immersive space as enveloping as perceived nature. As fetishized dead labor circulates in the form of commodities, the contradictions in its mode of production are both smoothed over and heightened. Labor-time is “immanent to commodities,” and yet as soon as that labor-time comes to be expressed as money, it is too abstracted for its concrete immanence to be remotely visible. In the “measure of values,” value as abstracted labor-time measures all the rest of life.³⁶ To see this “dazzling” plane of second nature requires an optics that moves from the fetish to an analysis of this socially ubiquitous yet individually irreducible totality. Art, because of its condition suspended between and among categories and discourses, and between intellectual and manual skill, offers a path through which to see real abstraction. It can afford

a vision that holds open a space to not only imagine but perform and hopefully precipitate a reality other to capitalist second nature, as the historical avant-garde hoped to do. The ready-made was one such perceptual apparatus in its timely capacity to get to the core of the issue: anonymous labor-time as the *only* universal within capitalist time, a universal articulated in the commodity and expressed as money that historically displaced any form of transcendental experience of art in a Kantian register.

Other moments within the historical avant-garde have attempted to overcome the circuitry set into place by value extracted of labor, inscribed in objects and realized as money. One such instance is the Russian avant-garde in the brief moment between the Russian Revolution and the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921, which effectively dissolved revolutionary movement by a return to the capitalist mode of circulation and accumulation under the hollow symbolism of state communism. Any number of studies of this moment of concrete and aesthetic exceptionalism, namely, the avant-garde in the Russian context between 1905 and 1921 (revolutionary era to NEP), from those by Christina Grey and Christina Lodder to Christina Kiaer, Maria Gough, and others, have established the numerous viral exchanges among poets, artists, writers, and others in this moment. Daniel Spaulding, for one, has identified the structural intimacy between radical abstract art and an attempt to sever the relationship between everyday life and real abstraction by abolishing the value-form at the height of revolutionary capacity. Spaulding has explicitly connected this problem, namely, the necessity of overcoming the value-form, as the avant-garde's most pragmatic and fundamental aspiration across disciplines, from art to political economy. Through a reading of Sohn-Rethel's work and value-form analysis, Spaulding reads Kazimir Malevich's and others' refusal of metricization (associated with the quantified framework necessary to capital and to illusionistic representation alike) as an allegory of the entwinement of formal materialist thinking and action at that time.³⁷ He orients the existing scholarship on the Russian and Soviet avant-garde to the materialist underpinnings of its origins in context, by considering how value-form and aesthetic form relate in the avant-garde's most vibrant moment.

Aesthetic form probes crises in the value-form, affording anyone who looks a kind of vehicle through which to probe the coordinates of this otherwise abstract condition.³⁸ Crossing reified vision, art's indexicality requires the labor of reflection. This too is a problem. Consumption time is shortened to fuel the desire that lubricates production. The primary project, then, is to develop a formalism adequate to the value-form.

And yet most accounts of aesthetic form are blindsighted to the ways in which it signals social, political, and economic crisis precisely because of the way it is sensitive to other forms of circulation, above all value. One way to confront the social crises to which aesthetic form points, *avant la lettre*, would be to abolish the value-form altogether. But since this does not appear to be a politically viable position, the aesthetic register goes on formalizing what the conscious political field cannot: an economic unconscious inscribed by the value-form.

To overcome this blind spot, I return to the primary gambit of the *avant-garde*. This primary effort entailed a “transvaluation of values.” The aim was to reverse the catastrophe of capital run amok and indifferent to social agents and to render possible a future in common for all individuals. This would entail abolishing the value-form and allowing socially necessary labor to be renegotiated in the interest of individuals and collectives over abstractions and corporations. For this to happen, an analytic, a new metaphysics, one that offers a “vision machine,” as the collective *Tiqqun* would say of its personification of a commodified subject who must overcome the commodity ontology, the *Young-Girl*, would have to emerge and elaborate the capacity to cut through the second nature forged by surplus-value extraction.

But *how* does this complexly market-mediated relationship to time and labor determine a self? How is it foundational to a technology? But I am getting ahead of the story of the other scene. One way of thinking the entwinement—indeed, the identity—between governance and economic interest is through the question of technology, defined earlier as an organization of social time. While Adorno is quick to dismiss as “technology” that which closes the capacity for open exploration, he conjugates this understanding of technology with *abstraction*. However, he fails to qualify this abstraction as anything other than in contradistinction to intellectual experience, or what Sohn-Rethel would call “thought abstraction.” Adorno writes: “As opposed to this intellectual experience, as its counterpart, everything that can be described as the so-called controlled advance of abstraction or as the mere subsumption under concepts is merely technology in the broadest sense.”³⁹

The objects and art practices steering the text across these pages have been chosen for the way in which the relation to labor and value carves out a medium or practice, the very form of the work: from painting in the earliest stages of the explorations of visual abstraction to the *avant-garde*’s use of the diagram to performance, delegated performance, and beyond, spanning a century. These works function like “vision machines,” not in the sense that they are literally machinelike but because of the way they hold out the

possibility of de-reifying our understanding of our de- and renaturalized world in order to forge a path toward the “transvaluation of values.”

Sohn-Rethel’s attention to the circulation of value at a formal and structural level tracks with aesthetic and modernist formalism only insofar as it offers an account for the urgent motivation of these works. If we are to liberate persons from being tangential to their own capacity for value production and to reorganize life in the interest of preserving ecosystems that foster the lives of individuals and collectives over abstractions and corporations, we might look at what the culture sector can tell us in its own prefigurative and formal terms. For this to happen, second nature must be dismantled for a new metaphysics to emerge, one that is on sustainable terms with material resources.

DUKE

NOTES

PREFACE

1. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*.
2. Bataille, "The Language of Flowers," 11.
3. Bataille, "The Language of Flowers," 14.
4. Elson, "The Value Theory of Labour."
5. Read, *The Double Shift*, 42.

INTRODUCTION 1

1. On the index in relation to modernity, see Lütticken, *Objections*, 71. Sven Lütticken leans on Rosalind Krauss's discussion of the index in "Notes on the Index, Part I" and "Notes on the Index, Part II," in *Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 196–220. Lütticken elaborates the index as a *social* sign "par excellence" insofar as it points to its contingent source and its physical cause, necessarily embedded in the social field. The index bypasses code and offers traces, which in turn point to context. However, in a capitalist social matrix or context mediated by the opacity of the commodity and anonymous labor and by the logic of surplus extraction, the index itself is "broken," as opaque as the commodity form it points to. The "commodity is a broken index" insofar as it is an index of abstract social labor-time. The artwork operates as a secondary highly differentiated mediation of this broken already indexical mediation, offering a pause in which those pieces might be made to cohere for those who can ascertain them.

2. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 21.

3. Adorno, "Commitment," 86.

4. Greenberg stated that artists since the Impressionists remained attached to the newly proliferating bourgeoisie by "an umbilical cord of gold." Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 11.

5. I owe the term *aporetic braiding* to Yve-Alain Bois's essay on Mondrian titled "New York City," in *Painting as Model*, 157–86.

6. In *The Optical Unconscious*, which could be taken as one iteration among many of the articulation of the modernist debt to a genealogy in which aesthetics

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and politics are dialectically co-constitutive in their immediate separation, Krauss acknowledges her own particular debt to Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious*, not least for its Althusserian analysis of ideology and the resonance of that inquiry with her own turn to Jacques Lacan's theory of the unconscious. However, it does not occur to her that a tacit critique of Jameson's method emerges in her work, which will be taken up in the pages of the present book. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 21.

7. The most commonly cited articulation of the entwinement of historicity and perception is Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility."

8. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 8.

9. For a presentation of the debates among Adorno, Lukács, and others on the entwinement of aesthetics and politics in the twentieth century, see Adorno et al. *Aesthetics and Politics*, 28–59.

10. Greenberg saw the Duchampian ready-made as too nakedly transparent to the market. He understood the ready-made to be mimicking the teleology of the market and its fascination with "the new." See Greenberg, "Necessity of 'Formalism,'" and "Counter-Avant-Garde."

11. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 2.

12. Denise Ferreira da Silva argues that the historical and temporal nature of the accumulation necessary to modern capitalism is drawn from the extraction of resources, above all coerced human labor-power. The space of commerce, and above all the Middle Passage, is irreducible to political adjudication, and yet it forms social relations everywhere globally through commercial growth. The "expropriative" appropriation of the sale of enslaved labor-power in the form of racialized persons is the very matrix of capitalism. The sea is the space that enables value to be created through enslaved labor-power while at the same time denying the site of work itself, which remains a hidden abode. Da Silva, "Unpayable Debt." See also Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law*. The notion that the sea is the place of commerce while land is the space of the state is developed effectively in Giovanni Arrighi's Marxian account of the historicity of capital accumulation. See Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*.

13. Wynter, "Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception," 81–82.

14. For a sustained elaboration of Lukács's account of reification and of art as a practice of de-reification as much as of reification, see Chari, *A Political Economy of the Senses*.

15. Lütticken, *Objections*, 71. See also note 1.

16. Vishmidt, "What Do We Mean by Autonomy and Reproduction?" 35.

17. Gillick, "Abstract."

18. Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction," 282.

19. Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction," 282.

20. Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction," 281.

21. For an example of his reading of art, see Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract," in *Lenin and Philosophy*, 230.

22. In his careful *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan*, Samo Tomšič argues that Marx's theory of value precedes and informs subsequent understandings of autonomy insofar as they stand in mimicry of the circuit of value production's actual autonomy from social context, its indifference to lived social relations. The autonomy of the signifier within structuralism, which is fundamental to Lacan's theory of the subject, mirrors this economic field: "Marx's analysis of the commodity form and its anticipation of the autonomy of the signifier gives way to a materialist ontology" (199). Here, discursive categories also mirror the separation and recomposition of the commodity form, especially at the level of intellectual production. For Tomšič, however, Sohn-Rethel reduces ontological categories to economic operations and is thus insufficiently dialectical. Tomšič returns to Marx's original theory of the commodity fetish to recover the dialectic constitutive of the reified subject within the codes of both capital and language. Tomšič thus reads the value-form as correlative to the symbolic. Žižek's equally Lacanian reading of the implications of Sohn-Rethel for understanding the unconscious is different. See Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 10–11.

23. Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction," 284.

24. Ngai, "Visceral Abstractions."

25. Roberts, "The Commodity, the Readymade and the Value Form," in *The Intangibilities of Form*, 21–47.

26. Mitchell, "The World as Exhibition," 232–33.

27. Lütticken, *Objections*, 157.

28. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 17.

29. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 188. See also Brassier, "Wandering Abstraction"; and Sohn-Rethel, "The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature," recently translated into English by Daniel Spaulding in the inaugural issue of the web journal *Selva* and first published as "Die Formcharaktere der zweiten Nature."

30. Khatib, "Sensuous Supra-Sensuous," 57.

31. Lütticken, *Objections*, 156. See also Lütticken, "Attending to Abstract Things."

32. Sami Khatib, "Marx, Real Abstraction, and the Question of Form," in Khatib et al., *Critique*, 69–92.

33. Marx, "The German Ideology."

34. Marx, "The German Ideology."

35. Marx, *Capital*, 187. Marx emphasizes the necessity of moving from abstractions (material abstractions) forming a totality to the concrete throughout both *Capital* and *Grundrisse*.

36. Marx, *Capital*, 188.

37. See Spaulding, "Value Form and Avant-Garde."

38. See Mansoor, "From Fetish to Totality."

39. Adorno, "The Concept of Intellectual Experience," in *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 85.

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1. Steyerl, "Her Name Was Esperanza," in *Duty Free Art*, 127.
2. Steyerl, "Her Name Was Esperanza," in *Duty Free Art*, 115–33. Steyerl cites Apter, "IBB=419," 270.
3. Steyerl, "Her Name Was Esperanza," in *Duty Free Art*, 127.
4. Clark, "Olympia's Choice," 79.
5. Foster, "Mimetic," in *Bad New Days*, 63–98.
6. Lütticken, *Objections*, 71.
7. Marx, "Wages of Labor," in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.
8. Claire Fontaine, "Readymade Artist and Human Strike," in *Human Strike and the Art of Creating Freedom*, 32–49.
9. Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*.
10. Clark, "Olympia's Choice," 79.
11. Claire Fontaine, "Existential Metonymy and Real Abstractions," in *Human Strike and the Art of Creating Freedom*, 194; Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 39.
12. Claire Fontaine, "Existential Metonymy and Real Abstractions," in *Human Strike and the Art of Creating Freedom*, 194.
13. Claire Fontaine, "Existential Metonymy and Real Abstractions," in *Human Strike and the Art of Creating Freedom*, 198.
14. Claire Fontaine, "Existential Metonymy and Real Abstractions," in *Human Strike and the Art of Creating Freedom*, 199.
15. Khatib, "'Sensuous Supra-Sensuous.'"
16. Clark, "Olympia's Choice."
17. For a definitive account of feminist art practices that address prostitution, see Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics*.
18. Fraser's three entries—texts from 1985, 1992, and 2005—are available in Alberro and Stimpson, *Institutional Critique*.
19. Baker, *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, 11. George Baker notes that he is "paraphrasing Rosalind Krauss in a different domain" when he calls the ready-made the theoretical object of the avant-garde.
20. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."
21. Marx, "Private Property and Communism," in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.
22. Marx, *Capital*, 272.
23. Marx, *Capital*, 271.
24. Marx, *Capital*, 277, 280. "The use-value which [the owner of money] gets in exchange manifests itself only in the actual utilization, in the process of consumption of labour-power" (279).
25. Marx, *Capital*, 197.
26. The way I use the term *abstraction* in this book takes on a tension latent in the Marxian usage of it. To what extent is aesthetic abstraction simply the most concrete, which is to say "realistic," way of articulating the social relations that reproduce the "abstract" processes of both value in the act of exchange and

the abstraction brought to bear by the commodity form? The problem of “real abstraction” runs through the work of any number of twentieth-century Marxists across the geopolitical spectrum, including Sohn-Rethel and Althusser. For an overview, see Toscano, “The Open Secret of Real Abstraction.”

27. Lazzarato, *Experimental Politics*.

28. Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*.

29. Ngai, “Visceral Abstractions,” 191–94. Through a reading of Rob Halpern’s volume of poetry, *Music for Porn*, Sianne Ngai arrives at an analysis similar to what I have done of Steyerl in the present introduction—namely, that the work addresses the calcification of dead labor saturated in infrastructure yet articulated circuitously through the entanglement of promissory emotional and sexual fulfillment and the question of value. Ngai, borrowing Halpern’s own language, refers to this entanglement as a “hieroglyph of value” (191). Halpern’s use of catachresis to describe the abstract allegorical work of the soldier’s body in *Music for Porn* helps clarify Marx’s stake in his own use of catachresis to describe “value forming substance” in the value-form (192).

30. Palumbo-Mosca, “The Woman Who Painted Her Body for Artist Yves Klein” (BBC interview).

31. Irigaray, “Women on the Market,” in *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

32. Gonzalez, “The Gendered Circuit.”

CHAPTER ONE. GEORGES SEURAT’S MUSES, ABSTRACTED

1. For a discussion of the way in which Seurat’s pointillist “dot” forged a dialogic response to and critique of the Impressionists’ purportedly spontaneous paint mark in favor of a systematic, programmatic, and replicable mark or “grapheme,” see Foa, *Georges Seurat*; Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*. For the most recent scholarship on Seurat’s extraordinary process and the conditions of its emergence in relation to a broad spectrum of “new media” and forms of technological reproducibility specific to the mid- to late nineteenth century, see Armstrong, “Seurat’s Media.”

2. From Meyer Schapiro to Linda Nochlin, Norma Broude, Jonathan Crary, Eric Alliez, Carol Armstrong, and, most recently, Michelle Foa, the question of the seeming mechanistic of Seurat’s “dot” has been raised only to be dismissed as reductive. However, Broude and Armstrong have located the specific print media with which Seurat seems to have been operating in tandem. See Broude, “New Light on Seurat’s ‘Dot.’” For Nochlin, Seurat’s paintings operate allegorically, although she focuses more on the narrative depicted than on the picture’s singular composition. In “Seurat’s *La Grande Jatte*,” Nochlin argues that modernity’s promises are at once invested and negated. Seurat offers only a mosaic of boredom, of joyless leisure and torpidity, which inscribes the modern condition of anomie and alienation. For Nochlin, Seurat’s work might offer an alternative to Paul Cézanne’s regarding the origin of modernist painting, insofar as Seurat is resolutely reflexively located in history (e.g., time-bound signifiers,

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