

# Commodity Fetishism and the Crisis of Contemporary Art

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*Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility...either cultivated or brought into being...The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.*

— KARL MARX

*The smell of impending death rose from these avantgardes. The future was no longer theirs, though nobody knew whose it was.*

— ERIC HOBSBAWM

It is no longer news anymore, at this late date, to declare that art, in our marketized planet, is deemed a precious commodity. Considered as property, artworks are bought and sold, circulated, forged, stolen, recovered, auctioned everyday. Profits are made for artists, merchants, smugglers, consumers, and anyone involved in trading/merchandising. It's banal or trivial to observe this fact. So intense was this commercialization from the mid-1950's that Ian Burn complained how it spelled "corruption and the prostitution of the artist" (1999, 397). A few recent examples can be cited as prolegomena to our discourse.

In Sotheby's contemporary art auction in November 2013, avant-garde art confirmed its absorption by the market with the \$104.5 million sale of Andy Warhol's 1963 "Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)." In 2007, his "Green Car Crash" sold for \$1.7 million, a proof that the aura of the name dictates market value, with the subject or content of the artwork adding enough *differentia specifica* to mark its historical period or milieu. In the past, Francis Bacon's "Three Studies of Lucien Freud" was sold for \$142.4 million while Gerhard Richter's abstract,



“A.B. Courbet” was sold for \$26.4 million and Cy Twombly’s “Poems to the Sea” (1959 drawings) was sold for \$21.6 million (*New York Times* 2013). Recently, Jean-Michel Basquiat’s 1982 painting, “Warrior,” a work which is said to symbolize the struggles of Black men in a white-dominated world, was sold in a Christie auction for \$41.9 million, which does not rival a Basquiat painting sold for \$110.5 million in 2017. The earlier commodification of cubist art (Picasso, in particular) has been diagnosed by John Berger (1965; see also Raphael 1980). Together with Warhol and Picasso, Basquiat continues to be a key player in the blue-chip art market even in this crisis of globalized neoliberalism.

Commodification seems to have climaxed in a species of trading rituals involving postmodern art, including both “conceptual” and “post-conceptual” species. Exchange-value (embodied in money as cause) has displaced use-value (now conceived as effect). At the outset, the term “conceptual” art offers a conundrum since it is not clear what concept is referred to, or whether the term designates the artist’s intention not necessarily fulfilled or carried out (Smith 1974; Godfrey, 1998). Indeed, Sol LeWitt states that “the artwork may never leave the artist’s mind” (1999, 107), though how we can verify or ascertain this remains a mystery. In any case, a metalepsis seems to have occurred. Art generates the concept (*telos*; universal significance) instead of the concept (vision or intuition) engendering the performative, linguistic/discursive, visual practices that followed expressionism and cubism: constructivism, abstract expressionism, kinetic art, fluxion happenings, pop art, minimalist art, op art, conceptual art, etc.

A historic, epoch-making event occurred at the threshold of postmodernity. In 1973, the “dematerialization of the art object” from 1966-1972, was documented by the critic, Lucy Lippard. It was inaugurated by Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades.” With this gesture, Peter Osborne asserts, “art changed its focus from the form of language to what was being said,” changing the nature of art by focusing not on morphology, structure, or medium, but on function—from “appearance” to conception. Osborne further notes that “all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually” (2002, 13). The idea/intention/concept preempts its hypothetical realization and its physical embodiment or actualization.

The epochal transformation initiated by Duchamp abolished the categorical distinction between creative artifice and found objects/incidents in nature and everyday life. Minimalism further destroyed traditional barriers and conventions. Performance art reconceptualized the art-object as an act or event constituted through and disappearing into time, sustaining itself at the level of its motivating agenda. No longer can art be confined to its visual or spatial experience and pleasure attached to the medium or vehicle. Following the break-up of formalist modernism, minimalism followed after with Sol Lewitt's 1967 manifesto, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." Osborne summarizes the lineages of negation characterizing conceptual art and its aftermath:

1. The negation of material objectivity as the site of the identity of the artwork by the temporality of 'intermedia' acts and events.
2. The negation of medium by a generic conception of 'objecthood,' made up of ideal systems of relations.
3. The negation of the intrinsic significance of visual form by a semiotic, or more narrowly, linguistically based conceptual content.
4. The negation of established modes of autonomy of the artwork by various forms of cultural activism and social critique (2002, 18).

It is the last negation that generates art-oriented activities intervening into everyday life in order to transform sociopolitical structures. In this process, alternative or subaltern ideological positions are explored, analyzing, and defining the relations of power at play in all cultural institutions, in particular the appropriative mechanisms of the museum and the market. Social and political critique ensues from the practice of diverse forms of conceptualist experiments, procedures, and historically defined forms.

### *Consequences of Dematerialization*

As early as 1970, Mel Bochner, one of the practitioners of "conceptual art," questioned the epithet's ambiguity and lack of precision. In any case, the rubric "conceptual art" has been used to cover the works created by artists such as Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Bruce Naumann and others during its

apogee and crisis in the years 1966-72 (Godfrey 1998). While Kosuth proposed that conceptual art defines itself by questioning the nature of art, Lewitt posited its essence to be found in “the idea or concept” which becomes “a machine that makes the art” (1967), the concept itself subsuming the planning and decisions that enable the execution of the art-work.

LeWitt’s pronouncements have become so scriptural that a popular *Dictionary of Theories* ascribes conceptual art as a “cerebral approach” championed by Lewitt in 1967 as a reaction against post-war formalistic art. Since the concept or idea becomes paramount in the artistic process, “the planning and concept are decided beforehand, but the end result is intuitive and without recognizable purpose” (Bothamley 1993, 108-09). Why and how do we explain this shift of aesthetic concern from the material embodiment of art-ideas to the ideas/notions themselves? One answer is provided by Marx’s theory of commodity-fetishism and its further elaboration in Marxist-Leninist thought (for expositions of the Marxist approach, see Arvon 1973; Laing 1978; Johnson 1984).

### *Reification and Alienation*

In the initial chapters of *Capital* Volume 1, Marx delineated the two aspects of that mysterious entity, the commodity. Its use-value refers to the utility of the product, its realization in the act of consumption. Its twin aspect, the exchange-value, is only manifest in the process of exchange in the market where the deposited quantity of labor-time expended in producing the product—the form of value—is recognized. Its “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” inheres in the fact that “the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour” so that the social relations among producers appear then as relations among the products/commodities. In short, “definite social relations between men...assume, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx 1978, 320-321). That insight serves as the matrix of social alienation in a profit-centered political economy (for further elaboration, see Meszaros 1970; Ollman 1971).

What lesson is conveyed by Marx’s insight? In producing any useful thing that is exchanged, the objective value of that thing is ideal,

a suprasensible notion translated into price, whereby private labor appears as part of social total-labor. However, the commodity's abstract ideal property (exchange value) appears as if it were an objective, socio-natural property of the object itself, embedded in the product. Thus, social relations between people assume a phantasmagorical form of relations between things, "social hieroglyphs" (Osborne 2005, 15). Something purely social, exchange value, conceals itself in the product, generating social illusions found in religion, ideologies, and various mystifying practices: the rationale of the hegemonic neoliberal order now in crisis but still devastating the world today.

How do we escape from this fetishized world based on historically varied exploitation of labor-power? Marx responds: "The religious reflections of the actual world can vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between people, and between humanity and nature, present themselves in a transparent and rational form. The social life-process, which is based on the material process of production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it becomes production by freely associated men and women, and stands under their conscious and planned control" (Marx 1976, 173). Art as a form of religious thinking draws its power from the exchange-value it commands, as illustrated earlier. In order to suppress this potential, conceptualists strive to eliminate the concrete embodiment (various media or performance) of the artists' intention, including the situations or places where they customarily occur (museums, galleries, etc.). Those sites/situations are transvalued, negated, sublimated.

"Almost anything goes" as art today from the art-criticism point of view, Cynthia Freeland remarks. She writes: "Even shocking art like Serrano's *Piss Christ* can now count as art, an object with the right sort of idea or interpretation behind it...It communicates thoughts or feelings through a physical medium" (2001, 39). Conceptualists claim that a physical medium is not obligatory. Paradoxically, despite this theoretical claim, their activity does not create transparent, rational arrangements since the whole transaction of learning, judging, and appreciating the art-idea still transpires in a capitalist, profit-dominated society. Ironically, the motivation-idea becomes a value to be communicated or exchanged. While art-as-commodity may be intentionally transcended, the artist remains anchored and circumscribed in a world of alienated institutions and practices governed by the profit-motive, by capital

accumulation. The conceptualist remains a victim of this illusion, his desire for knowledge free from object-attachment was left unsatisfied due to the inescapable reality of his reified, commodified milieu (Wood 1996). This epitomizes the irony of commodified de-materialized art.

### *Aesthetic Discipline*

Allow us to offer a brief historical parenthesis at this juncture. Before venturing further into nomenclature and further inquiry, it might be illuminating to review the traditional field of aesthetics and, with it, the theory of art. Art and aesthetics need to be differentiated, the former dealing with the object produced or created and the latter with the experience and knowledge of the art-object. Ultimately, however, with the postmodern interrogation of the concept of art (in both the ontological and phenomenological senses), the two aspects coalesce in the conceptualist revision. Whether such a result is helpful in clarifying both remains to be resolved. Meanwhile, a historical investigation into the status of the art-object as a distinctive category might be instructive and heuristic.

Foregoing a complete history of the origin of aesthetics from classical antiquity up to the Renaissance, we may begin with German philosophical idealism. Aesthetics (from the Greek *aisthesis*, “perception, sensation”), aesthetics was first theorized by Alexander G. Baumgarten in 1750 as “the science of sensory knowledge or cognition” whose aim is beauty, not truth. It was later elaborated by Kant as “the science of the rules of sensibility in general,” chiefly concerned with the *a priori* principles of sensible experience. In Thomistic aesthetics, the intuitive knowledge of the sensible is grounded in intellectual judgment as a knowledge of the universal. The artistic criteria of *integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas* are abstract ideas mediating the comprehension of the sensibles (Eco 1988).

In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant posited aesthetics as involved with the subjective feeling of pleasure and pain, hence aesthetic judgments pertain to the subject, not the object represented. What is beautiful is tied with disinterested pleasure, a judgment of taste based on immediate intuition without a concept. Kant argues that “Beauty is the formal aspect of purposiveness, insofar as it is perceived in the objectified without the representation of purpose...[T]hat which is

generally pleasing, without a concept, is beautiful” (quoted by Guttman 1963, 18). In effect, conceptualists reject this aesthetic speculation about beauty as meaningless. Formal purposiveness without purpose--this axiom established the privileged autonomy of art which prevailed up to Clement Greenberg’s pontifications on abstract expressionism.

Two additions to Kant may be cited here. First, Schelling proposed the romantic theme of beauty as “the Infinite infinitely presented,” while Hegel is said to have summed up the classic traditional thinking in his view that Beauty equals Idea, beauty as the sensuous manifestation of the Idea. However, the beautiful is nothing unless it is externalized or mediated in the work of art in which the beholder and the artist’s mind encounter each other. The idea then is the content of the art-work in its dynamic historical evolution. In the nineteenth century, the psychological approach dominated the investigations of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Herbart and Fechner, the latter inaugurating the empirical-experimental approach to aesthetics. This was followed by Theodor Lipps’s notion of empathy, with esthetic enjoyment conceived as “objectivized self-enjoyment,” an inner imitation of artistic creation. With Benedetto Croce, this idealist line of speculation culminates in art as intuitive activity, an expression of inwardness, eluding the screen of formal mediation.

### *Hegelian Articulation*

To the rationalist-idealist line of speculation, Hegel introduced a historicizing orientation. He emphasized the philosophical function of art as a vehicle of reason in quest of universals realized in history. While Hegel believed art to furnish “the sensuous semblance of the idea,” for Croce, universals and history disappear. Croce reduced art to lyrical intuition, separated from the phenomenal contingent world, subsisting in pure intuition whose modes of expression germinate in the artist’s mind. The actualization of this intuition is secondary; expression and communication do not affect the value of the unreflected intuition. Unconcerned with the play of imagination or the immediacies of feeling, Croce absolutized intuition as a complex blend of idea, image, and expression whose singularity, however, resists philosophical generalization (Richter 1994, 145). Croce’s expression theory complements the formalist stress on essential form in Clive Bell, Roger Fry, I.A. Richards, and their American counterparts in the

New Criticism. Whether the naturalism of John Dewey's theory of art as intense experience can be reconciled with Croce, is still a debatable proposition.

Aesthetics as an inquiry into normative concepts and values regarding beauty may have given way to the modern interest in a descriptive and factual approach to the phenomena of art (production and reception) and aesthetic experience. Beauty is now construed as an effect of form, of discursive signifying practice. One can mention Charles Morris' idea of art as iconic symbol of value, as well as Susanne Langer's conception of art as the symbol or expressive form whereby emotions are rendered apprehensible in their formal embodiments or styles. Both thinkers are anathema to conceptualism. More congenial to postmodernist aesthetics would be the semiotic approach of Charles Sanders Peirce. He proposed an innovative approach in which a constellation of signs (icon, index, symbol) in the art-work becomes the bearer of meaning and significance. These signs generate a dynamic network of interpretants that encompass form and its organic links with lived experience, exploring virtually all the mimetic and expressive possibilities of art that we have so far summarized here (for elaboration, see San Juan 2022).

### *Historicizing Form*

Together with beauty and the sublime, the ideal of autonomy and artistic genius dissolved with the age of mechanical reproduction. Walter Benjamin dealt a fatal blow to the norm of authenticity intrinsic to the romantic idea of imagination. In capitalist society, the Here and Now of the original is constantly being destroyed by the commodification of labor and practically all domains of human life. Besides the formal properties that authenticate the art-work, the contents of art (idealistic content-aesthetics) have suffered the impact of contingency, chance or accident, entropy, the inexorable incursions of the unpredictable. Art is not timeless but changeable, subject to the process of becoming. Hegel's "bad conscience" implies that art is never for itself but requires, in fact demands, the exegesis and interpretation of others outside the artist. Art's truth-content cannot be fully exhausted by any single hermeneutic organon. Since interpretations are open and endless, all art is subject to historicity and the mutability of standards and criteria of judgment (Morawski 1974).



Alas, have we finally entered the forbidden zone of undecidability, relativism, antifoundationalist skepticism, and cynical reason? So if anything goes, what is the point of argument, dialogue, inquiry? Bitcoins, derivatives, simulacra, expungible fantasies previously called “the sublime” now dominate exchanges, making precarious or unfeasible any agreement or consensus on purposes, motives, intentions, goals. Only the process of everyday living compels us to proceed as though we are all on the same page, using a lexicon and code understood by all participants in the interminable conversation.

In this new catastrophic period of triumphalist globalism, the issue of materialist aesthetics appears not only anachronistic but also a perverse joke. Except those fashioned for immediate use-value (for therapy, etc.), all art in capitalism has become a commodity (exchange-value), as attested to by the auctions enumerated earlier. And since Marxist revolutionaries have allegedly become obsolete if not rare today, aesthetics has become the preserve of museum curators, academic experts/shamans, and pseudo-theologians attached to art galleries and auction houses. Except for Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, John Berger, Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez, and the late Polish philosopher Stefan Morawski, no serious Marxist thinker has devoted a wholesale engagement with the theory of art, with aesthetic criticism and inquiry in our late-capitalist stage. This is a conjecture, obviously open to future correction.

Indeed, in a 1983 international conference on “Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,” Michelle Barrett bewailed the lack of adequate discussion of aesthetic pleasure and value among various tendencies in the left. Given the vogue of poststructuralist textualism and postmodernist nominalism, aesthetics was overshadowed by or subsumed in discourses on ideology, representation, and the deconstruction of the subject. Nature and objective reality have been cancelled out to give room to the floating signifier, *differance*, liminality, and contingency. Henceforth, the “free play” of the liberated signifier would call the shots. Subjectivity, or subject-positions, become reduced to simulacra, aporia, or undecidables wholly vulnerable to infinite semiosis, that is, interminable sequence of interpretations without any conclusion.

Ironically, this putative chaos did not discourage Barrett from giving self-confident judgments. She nonchalantly dismissed vulgar concerns about art's "truth" and social relevance because the meanings of art-works are not immanent but constructed "in the consumption of the work" (1988, 702). Readers/spectators actively co-create the meaning and significance of the art-work. Contrary to the orthodox ideas about typical characters and organic form, Barrett holds that ideological content and political implications are not given in the art-work but are effects or constructions by readers/audiences, an assertion justified within the framework of a reader-response/reception aesthetics. This position is clearly symptomatic of the move of Barrett's cohort toward a more open-ended, adventurist, experimentalist stance, rejecting not only reflectionist theory (Lukacs; Goldman) but also interventionist approaches (Gramsci; Sartre). But what exactly do we mean by a Marxist approach to aesthetics as a mode of distributing the sensible (Ranciere 2004)?

### *Interrogating the Messenger*

In the wake of the post-structuralist transvaluation of texts as the ceaseless play of *differance*, of the unchoreographable dance of signifiers, which one may interpret as a historically specific reaction in the Western milieu to dogmatist leftism in its various manifestations--economistic, sectarian, mechanical, empiricist, etc.--I would like to reaffirm once more the occluded yet irrepressible matrix of art in the Marxist concept of praxis and political struggle based on Marx's insight into commodity-fetishism. Enunciated by Marx in the "Theses on Feuerbach" and *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in particular, this inscription of the aesthetic in transformative action I would call the "Leninist moment," the hegemonic or ethico-political crux in Marxist critical theory. Let us explore its relevance to understanding the politics of conceptualist writing as propounded by its main theoreticians (Alberro and Stimson 1999; Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011).

The original intent of conceptual artists was democratic, subversive and revolutionary. Not only were art and its institutions converted by them into a field of negotiation in order to link it with the everyday politics of bourgeois society; they rebelled against the fetishization of art and its systems of production and distribution. But as Benjamin Buchloh (2006) observed, Pop art, and other postconceptualists

achieved a “liberal reconciliation” and compromise of high art and mass culture. A test-case can be offered here in the controversial performance of canonical “uncreative” writer Kenneth Goldsmith.

### *The Goldsmith Incident*

On March 13, 2015, in the program *Interrupt3* sponsored by Brown University, Goldsmith performed a 30-minutes reading of the official St. Louis County autopsy report on “The Body of Michael Brown.” Brown is the 18-year old black man fatally shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014. The first report stated that Goldsmith introduced his poem as “something to do with quantified self,” but an artist Faith Holland remarked that Goldsmith had re-arranged the original text, focusing on the description of the Cranial Cavity in the line “The weight of the unfixed brain is 1350 gm,” with the poem ending in the line “The remaining male genitalia system is unremarkable” (Steinhaven 2015). The hands of the “uncreative” poet displayed itself quite obtrusively. He was no innocent bystander or naive witness. Immediately came an avalanche of negative responses, such as: “Goldsmith appropriates Michael Brown’s murdered body, reframed as his poetry, and retweets the angry reactions. A troll with tenure,” with even more violent condemnation mounted a few days later.

Death threats ensued, prompting Goldsmith to apologize for the pain he had caused, asking Brown University to withhold the video of his performance. C.A. Conrad summed up the outrage in quoting the poet Anne Waldman’s comment: “What was Kenny Goldsmith thinking? That it’s okay to self-appoint and perform the autopsy report of murdered black teenager Michael Brown and mess with the text, and so ‘own’ it and get paid for his services? No empathy no sorrow for the boy, the body, the family, ignorant of the ramifications, deaf ear to the explosive demonstrations and marches? Reeks of exploitation, of the ‘racial imaginary.’ Black Dada Nihilism is lurking on the lineaments of the appropriated shadow of so much suffering” (Conrad 2015).

### *Anatomy of an Inquest*

We have been ushered into the domain of ethico-political judgment. What seems on trial here are the central techniques of the allegorical gesture of appropriating a pre-existing object or text, and

the procedure of montage. Is the artist free to do whatever he wants, at any time and place? True to his previous practice of copying and reproducing raw materials—eyewitness reports from radio/television broadcasts, as shown in his 2013 book, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, Goldsmith tried to prove that inflammatory material, handled in a certain way, can “provoke outrage in the service of a social cause.” His Facebook entry reveals the “idea” or motivating principle behind the import of information:

I took a publicly available document from an American tragedy that was witnessed first-hand (in this case by the doctor performing the autopsy) and simply read it. Like *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, I did not editorialize; I simply read it without commentary or additional editorializing... The document I read from is powerful. My reading of it was powerful. How could it be otherwise? Such is my long-standing practice of conceptual writing: like *Seven American Deaths*, the document speaks for itself in ways that an interpretation cannot. It is a horrific American document, but then again, it was a horrific American death...

I indeed stated at the beginning of my reading that this was a poem called *The Body of Michael Brown*; I never stated, “I am going to read the autopsy report of Michael Brown’... That said, I didn’t add or alter a single word or sentiment that did not preexist in the original text, for to do so would be to go against my nearly three decades’ practice of conceptual writing, one that states that a writer need not write any new texts but rather reframe those that already exist in the world to greater effect than any subjective interpretation could lend. Perhaps people feel uncomfortable with my uncreative writing, but for me, this is the writing that is able to tell the truth in the strongest and clearest way possible.... Ecce homo. Behold the man....(quoted in Flood 2015)

Evidently, in quest of the truth via reframing, the poet’s ethics became muddled in defending his habit. His mendacity exceeds the boldness of his disingenuous apologia. Contradicting his testimony that he did not editorialize, Goldsmith added that he “altered the text for poetic effect; he translated medical terms into plain English and

narrativized the words “in ways that made the text less didactic and more literary.” The qualification sounds pathetic. Goldsmith claimed that he acted normally for an artist: “People behave very badly in the art world, but it’s what pushes boundaries and makes discussion” (Wilkinson 2015). A group called Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo called Goldsmith’s conceptual poetry “building blocks of white supremacy.” The repartee that persisted for quite some time provides lessons in how postmodern aesthetics, despite its claims to go beyond conventional ethics and morality, cannot elude public criticism if they are staged in public, paid by the sponsors, with the sanction of institutional legitimacy. Poetry has become a commodity too even in the groves of non-profit academia.

Despite the conceptualist’s emphasis on context, sites, situations, Goldsmith failed to recognize the sociopolitical parameter of his performance and the institutional constraints of the information being moved. Concepts are historically grounded and mobilized/immobilized. Instead of animating the fragments of copied texts, or satirizing them as quantifying modes, Goldsmith in “The Body of Michael Brown” evoked the “rigid immanence of the Baroque” devoid of any anticipatory, utopian sense of historical time, “fixed by an attitude of melancholic, awed contemplation—a deliberate theatrical gesture. His montage technique of fragmenting and juxtaposing depleted signifiers mimicked the fabrication of sold commodities. Thus, instead of rescuing the possible elements of communicative value in the report (for example, the excessive shooting inflicted on the victim’s body), Goldsmith allegorized his act of “uncreative” composition by accentuating the ethnic/racial resonance of the anatomical catalogue. Walter Benjamin presciently described the collage/montage aesthetics underlying conceptualist works: “The devaluation of objects in allegory is surpassed in the world of objects itself by the commodity. The emblem returns as commodities” (Buchloh 2006, 29). Goldsmith repeated and reinforced the instrumentalist devaluation enacted by the State, repudiating the classic avantgarde practitioner’s anti-conformist, anarchist stance.

### *Revenge of the Immaterial*

Marx’s concept of commodity-fetishism exposes the irony in the post-Duchampian, conceptualist program of dematerialization. Goldsmith’s “uncreative” alteration of the “ready-made” did not issue

into “immaterial” creativity; on the contrary, it materialized a racialized foregrounding of semantic features otherwise buried in scientific, empirical discourse instrumentalized by the State. As Boris Groys noted, the conceptual artist’s submission to the art institution (usually under academic patronage) and its commodifying hegemony is symptomatic of the failure of avant-garde movements in their avowed aims. What happens is the triumph of alienated abstract labor over non-alienated creative work so that, as Groys notes: “It is this alienated labor of transporting objects combined with the labor invested in the construction and maintenance of art spaces that ultimately produces artistic value under the conditions of post-Duchampian art. Other concrete, historically specific examples, such as the artistic labor of Vito Acconci, Yoko Ono, Bruce Nauman, Lawrence Weiner, and others, may be scrutinized in Peter Osborne’s graphic documentation, *Conceptual Art* (2002).

The crisis of conceptualism originates from the stoic acceptance of a unity of opposites: marketed art produced by the culture industry enabling the sophisticated elite culture of the oligarchy. In 1979, Adrian Cristobal, a bureaucrat-spokesman for the Marcos authoritarian regime argued that mass culture serves profit-making big business, while the State sponsors its opposite, humanist culture. Amid widespread human-rights violations committed by State agencies, Cristobal pays homage to the dictator and his wife: “One sees and one appreciates the role of the First Lady in her sponsorship of such ventures as the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the Folk Arts Theater, the Metropolitan Theater and all other similar ventures. For these are, in the main, institutions which are designed to deliver that redeeming humanist culture to the people. A point of view no doubt shared by the President himself who is, in his own right, a competent writer and more than this, himself a contribution to the development of a truly national culture” (1979). Today, the conjugal dictatorship’s “humanism” has been exposed as euphemistic alibi for barbarism, with the brutalization of thousands of victims by the Marcos “martial law” regime (1972-1986; see McCoy 2001).

### *Provisional Epilogue*

In the new millennium, the Philippine neocolony deteriorated further with the neoliberal rampage of the U.S. crusade against global “terrorism.” The “humanist” culture so highly extolled here coincides

with the religious imagination, the realm of illusions, which is the antithetical reflex of the world of commodities in “the heartless world” invoked in Marx’s double-edged praise and rejection of the people’s opium: “Religion is, in fact, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet gained himself or has lost himself again....It is the fantastic realization of the human being because the human being has attained no true reality...The wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people....The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their true happiness. The call to abandon illusions about their conditions is the call to abandon a condition which requires illusions...(1970, 131). Here, Marx grasps the superstructure (religion) not as phenomenon but as an integral element of an all-pervasive social practice. Religion, like art, subsists on the fixation with illusions. In conceptualizing the contradictory relation between intellectual objectification and social reality, Marx laid the groundwork for the active, dynamic and creative intervention of transformative agents such as artists and intellectuals fully cognizant of the power of fetishized objects, beliefs, practices, and institutions.

In a recent inventory of “the ideology of the aesthetic,” Terry Eagleton distinguishes Marx’s singular theory of art from Romantic humanism, “with its expression/repression model of human existence” (1990, 219). Marx’s vision of an “all-round human self-actualization” is premised on the establishment of socialist relations of production, with a communist ethic where mutual or reciprocal self-realization of persons is cultivated. Eagleton argues that Marx resolves the Kantian dilemma of the noumenal/phenomenal split—the problem that aesthetics/art endeavors to dissolve—by locating “the unity of ‘fact’ and ‘value in the practical, critical activity of men and women—in a form of understanding which is brought to birth in the first place by emancipatory interests, which is bred and deepened in active struggle, and which is an indispensable part of the realization of value” (1990, 226).

Thus, the moment of “revolutionary practice” posited in Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach”(1978) is essential to fully appreciating the dialectical-materialist theorizing of art/aesthetics as a mode of the

realization of human powers, capacities, virtues for the sake of universal happiness and well-being (see Lifshitz 1973; Solomon 1973; Williams 1977; Johnson 1984; Eagleton and Milne 1996). We have noted earlier that conceptual art-practice vitiates its radical impetus due to its nominalist tendency, “an essential scepticism about the existence of an objective reality, or the possibility of arriving at an agreed understanding of it by rational means,” as Eric Hobsbawm diagnosed the postmodernist malady. But an antithetical tendency exists within it of engendering a “socialist art practice” if it returns to its original inspiration in Russian art following the October Revolution (Burgin 2002, 256-58).

One evidence of a hopeful revitalization of the anti-commodity impulse in postmodern art may be found in Yoko Ono’s recent intervention, a billboard in New York’s Times Square inviting people to read its message: “Imagine Peace.” It appeared on a screen at Broadway and 45<sup>th</sup> Street. The message was spelled out in black letters on white, lasting three minutes; it appeared every night in March 2022 in public areas in London, Los Angeles, Milan, Melbourne and Seoul (Smee 2022). Before being overshadowed by Beatle John Lennon, Yoko Ono was acknowledged as one of the most sophisticated and bold artists of post-World War II, inventing the Event performance (such as “Cut Piece”) as part of the Fluxus art-movement in the fifties and sixties (Higgins 2002; Menand 2022). Her timely peace activism somewhat vindicates the flaws and inadequacies of conceptualists and other anti-Establishment projects over-determined by their disparate historical situations.

One conclusion emerges from this brief survey of the nodal stages in the vicissitudes of our brief reflection on the politics of aesthetics, with special reference to conceptual art. A fallibilistic proposition can be offered here: without the focus on the moment of praxis--the artist’s or critic’s intervention in the concrete arena of political struggle for hegemony, any reflection on the nature of art and its function will compulsively repeat the metaphysical idealism (Kant, Hegel, & Croce) it seeks to overcome. It is in the arena of political and ideological conflict that consciousness is grasped in its overdetermined trajectory as a complex of material practices functioning in conserving or disintegrating a determinate conjuncture, a lived situation. The problematic dialectic of conceptualist art that was previously discussed is an example of such a conjuncture. Without positing this moment of rupture or opening for intervention, we shall reproduce the predicament



of the bourgeois intellectual that progressive thinkers such as Brecht, Lukacs (San Juan, 1972), Gramsci, Caudwell, Berger, and others (Arvon 1973; Laing 1978), acutely diagnosed: the division of mental and manual labor; the antinomy between subject and object, society and individual, nature and history, which revolutionary practice hopes to gradually and eventually resolve, despite the mistakes that were made by avant-garde artists who lack the totalizing vision and dynamic praxis of intellectuals working in the socialist tradition.

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