

STEVEN COTTINGHAM/METAPHORIC EXCHANGE AND THE DISCURSIVE
COMMODITY

There is a schism between the representation of politics and the politics of representation, although the cynical artist mistakes the two in the pursuit of humanism. What results from this conflation is a general apolitics—a corroborative realism that doubles down on the form of the system as is. In accordance with the epistemological framework of media like activism and journalism, the cynic espouses a deep aversion to autonomous art because it is not deemed immediate enough, relevant enough, or legible enough. Rather than critiquing artistic autonomy for obscuring conditions of social heteronomy, the cynic derides it as niche or anti-populist without distinguishing disciplinary abstruseness from economic abstractions. And yet, the immediate legibility they valorize is precisely the terrain of corroborative realism (an auto-poietic hyperreality) and therefore can only operate metaphorically. By this I do not only mean that representations of politics are, on their own, non-affective in relation to the intended target domain, but also that metaphoric representation operates with the *same* abstract mechanics as does the capitalist circulation of commodities that undergirds status quo discourse. Both rely on the self-valorization of a symbolic paradigm, and each exchange entrenches it further. In this modality meaning is indexed without actualization, allowing capitalist discourse to proceed as inertia, governing the syntagm of possibility and thereby precluding formal deviation from its codes and logics. The distinction between politics as form and content of representation is therefore crucial to understanding the political capacity of art in the capitalist superstructure.

In what follows, I will address the cynic's critiques and aporias alike. By advancing my argument in three phases, I will 1) elaborate

how metaphoric representation adheres to normative rather than exceptional logic as far as art and its infrastructure are concerned, 2) provide a technical discussion on the abstract discursive mechanics that serve to corroborate the realism of the capitalist social relation itself, and 3) work to articulate a mode of discursive estrangement that resists being instantly overcoded by inertial force.

1. SUPPLICATION AND SPECULATION

Because art after conceptualism comprises a mode of production wherein an artwork is nominated rather than crafted—that is, it is discursively produced—then our current modality can be articulated in terms of a supplicative discourse. Whereas the discursive production of other paradigms comprised manifestoes and the signing-in of artist-led societies, in our postconceptual moment artistic discursive production occurs primarily through speculative texts like curriculum vitae, grant applications, competitive proposals, and curatorial liaisons. The diachronic shift in predominance from societies organized by artists (e.g., INKhUK in Russia, MAVO in Japan, Supports/Surfaces in France) to institutions that organize (curate) artists reflects a shift in the tenor of artistic discourse from an argumentative mode to a supplicative one. Oriented with power (namely, public and private institutions with the capacity to offer shows, grants, and other forms of discursive capital) rather than peers as the primary audience, the supplicative discourse operates metaphorically in that it 1) makes arrangements of *like content* to *like content*, operating within unalien familiarities such as moral, normative, or reformist argumentative modes, and 2) *corroborates* the state on the level of form by way of situating discourse firmly within extant (permissible) channels of communication, in the

same way metaphor comprises variability on the paradigmatic axis (as content) but remains fixed in place syntagmatically (as form). By structuring political interventions as a demand or plea, the supplicant is forcing the recipient of the plea to answer in the same legible or normative channel, doubling down on the extant state by giving it permission to respond *even as the state a priori permits the utterance and its form*.

Driven to politics but captured by humanism, cynicism manifests in part as the turn toward usefulness. Wary of the "disinterestedness" of art on the one hand, and disinclined to artist-led forms of argumentation that forsake state-sanctioned entitlements on the other, cynics ground art within a discursively-functional role.[1] For instance, cynical art can adopt methodologies from disciplines deemed more immediate or legibly political (e.g., journalism, activism). As such, art realizes a cynicism to autonomy that brings it in line with the activities threatened by contemporary austerity policies.[2] Art in these modes often stands for the common goods that neoliberal governments defund or privatize, with work taking the representational form of public spaces, libraries, food banks, civil demonstrations, news outlets, etc., thereby serving funding organizations by providing a metaphoric iteration of cut services, at far diminished cost, enabling the austere status quo as is. Metaphoric production is, in this sense, a nostalgia for liberal humanism, a return to previously-useful forms of activity, not dissimilar from what Leigh Tennant argues regarding artisanal-expressivity as an artistic mode that attempts to index labour as a way out of capitalist subsumption.[3] What is disregarded in the process is an anachronistic conflation of disparate communicative and economic syntaxes, meaning that the creative capacity to imagine anything other than a nominally more

diverse version of the milquetoast mid-century paradigm is foreclosed in favour of a reformed liberal capitalism.

Ultimately, the cynic invokes a realism of policy, thereby corroborating the state discourse by deferring to extant modes of permissible engagement. This corroboration is expressed both as an entrenchment of normative exchange value beyond that which is properly economic, and as reproduction of discursive structures that possess only an ideological correlation with matter. Cynicism reduces the art-object to a protest sign or propaganda poster—neither of which are “invalid” in the broader tactical field, but, within the discourse of art, which is irreducible to the populist discourse of policy-oriented politics, never accedes more than a metaphoric capacity.

Metaphor as a form of artistic representation may appear to be more directly political—therefore giving both producers and consumers of art-objects some sense of involvement and even agency—but this directness cannot be confused for an actual politic. Instead, art becomes doubly metaphorical, producing state-sanctioned propaganda for a model that no longer exists, and conflating itself with the democratic *demos* that bear no effect on oligarchic systems anyway. Democracy serves as metaphor that corroborates capital, galleries become metaphorically public spaces, mass legibility and populist metricism are metaphors for disruptive potential: class war reduced to an attention economy. The artwork is caught in the semantic drift between a target signifier and its source signified.[4] Insofar as the syntax of neoliberal capital is the production of surplus value (a telos found even and especially beyond the economy as such), then this metaphoric approach to politics in art produces the opposite of the intended effect,

offering slight paradigmatic disruptions for the sake of a coherent syntagm.[5] The metaphoricality of the metaphor is forgotten, and what remains are reactionary clichés that not only do not threaten the status quo, but remain functional and value-productive through their tired invocation.

THE CURRICULUM VITAE

We can understand the CV as the supplicative text par excellence; it is the locus in which discursive commodities participate in metaphoric exchange. The CV instantiates speculation as a mode of production, delineating each “opportunity” and all unpaid or compromised work undertaken in order to boost employability for future (potentially less coercive, more creative) work.[6] This capital, in turn, operates in grant applications and studio visits, always pushing toward the future production of discursive value. Each entry functions as a metadata tag, a buzzword, an index, references in a circulatory language—here the fetishism of discourse is in full swing so that the work and its proximal actors can signal quickly and efficiently, a kind of scientific management of semiotics. Every line on the CV is a metaphor for productive work, regardless of its quality or character. An exhibition may be subject to critique in a review, but what matters for the lens of discursive capital is not whether or not the show was good (whether or not it provided an argument for its claims—provided it claimed anything at all), but that it was reviewed. This instantiates a kind of feedback loop based purely on production (not production of anything in particular), where having a show or having a show reviewed or writing a review all equally result in the valourization of the curriculum vitae. Content is not explicated, and matters little to

the pure quantity of activity occurring.

Insofar as the curator (an abstract role embodied by institutional curators and directors, but also by granting agencies, collectors, philanthropists, etc.: those to whom the supplicative discourse is addressed) has the agency to peruse and make selections of art, and insofar as these selections accrue value (the sign of work) within the artistic discourse, then we can begin to grasp how this selection procedure acts recursively on artistic production—the latter ultimately corroborating the former even if they occur in disparate chronological orders. In *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, Marina Vishmidt articulates that “time is central [to speculation], as a quantifiable future whose prospects have to be effectuated in the present, while the past stands as a repository of data for metrics that calculate the likelihood of future risk, which then acts to determine access to privatised sites of social reproduction for individuals.”[7]

In the postconceptual era, the matter of an artwork is selected, nominated, and then *discursively produced* so that it can become legible within the field of art. The discursive process of production is necessary for an artwork to be read as art: how else would we differentiate any old object from a work of art? As Andrea Fraser writes, “the capacity to perceive and recognize, as well as the disposition to appreciate, particular forms *aesthetically* developed alongside the capacity to *produce* those forms ... something is art if it exists for discourses and practices that recognize and can appropriate it as art.”[8] The production of *meaning* is reliant on a compossible capacity for *intention* (from the artist) and a capacity for *interpretation* (from the viewer). The recursivity of these capacities constitutes the artistic discourse.

Curation operates in a similar way, only removed by an order of magnitude. The matter of a curatorial project is selected and then *discursively exchanged* so that it might be legible as value—how else would we differentiate important art from unimportant art unless some enters circulation and some does not? The selection process acts upon and determines the work from its conception. When the curator selects an artwork to bring into discourse, the work accrues discursive value (qua importance, leveragability) which is shared between both producer and consumer. The artwork as such is exchanged for a line on the CV, emboldening both producer and consumer while corroborating the supplicative discourse—that is, affirming the curator's capacity to hold the terms of the state and therefore their own discursive capital as power and leverage. It cannot refer back to its prior signified, it has forsaken this role through paradigmatic exchange. The resultant acontiguity between signs is homologous with the commodification process: a commodity exchanges as a metaphor, it could be exchanged for *anything*, and its content is permitted variability so long as the form remains the same. After this exchange, the next exchange has an increased probability of occurring, for it has been selected just as it was produced to be, and so on. It is not that a work's importance begets its inclusion in various exhibitions and collections, at least not initially. The work is made important *by virtue of* its inclusion, just as a commodity is exchangeable *because* it has been exchanged, and from there the tautology of value proceeds. Economic value follows discursive value, manifesting initially as tax-breaks for collectors or grants for institutions, fodder for tourists, marketing for gentrifiers, admissions, donations, and then as bastion of speculative value for auctioneers... The cycle of production, exchange, and *discursive consumption* loop back as economic resources guarantee

the production or commission of art in the first place. It does not matter that the art world possesses a variety of disparate discourses that affirm different kinds of practices: the use-value of a discursive commodity is not found in its meaning, it does not need to be unanimously interpreted or recognized, just as the use-value of an economic commodity need not be universally useful for all consumers. It merely needs to be exchangeable somewhere, by some agent, to affirm its exchange-value.

In a professional sense, an artist cannot point to their portfolio of artwork to justify participating in a biennial or receiving a grant, they must point to their CV, to their portfolio of speculative assets, for it is their CV and not their oeuvre that signifies the curatorially-sanctioned importance of their work. I emphasize that it *does not matter* if these speculative assets are actualized—that is, if they are subject to a critical, historico-aesthetic reading in the pursuit of conceptual meaning—it only matters that they hold the *possibility* of actualizing. They are mandated to exist as indices, metaphors that signify work, commitment, and the capacity to go forth and accrue value for producer and consumer. An artist cannot make an argument for their own work *in case* it precludes the capacity of a curator to circulate the work through a discursive venue of their choosing, for their benefit. Use-value and exchange-value must be held separate: instead of realizing argumentation as the mode of discursive production, art's discursive production occurs supplicatively. The work of the artist is therefore to produce work, to leave it open-ended as a *sign of work*, allowing its discursive production to enable exchange and circulation as lines on the CV.

Furthermore, because the CV is inextricable from the artist as human discursive capital,

even though all indices on the CV are produced in relation with legitimated institutions, it performs a kind of autobiographical role. In this way, we also see instances of discursive capital at work through the insistence on the artist's biography (the substance of the CV text) rather than their work as such (which is only referred to metaphorically by the CV). Is an artwork curated, or is it the artist who occupies the curatorial gaze? Adrian Piper writes about the conservative reduction of critique from artwork to artist's body or biography—prevalent amongst discussions of racialized or otherwise marginalized subjectivities—noting that “focusing on the otherness of the artist rather than the meaning of the art presupposes a background of Euroethnic homogeneity against which the person can be identified as an ‘other’.” [9] This manifests not only in the discussion of an artist (rather than their work or efforts) possessing a kind of essentialized novelty to white-coded institutions, but instantiates a “politics of recognition” wherein individual art-career successes come to metaphorically signify structural processes of decolonization, reparation, and reconciliation. [10] As long as these signifiers are metaphorically routed to the signifieds of recognition and individual success within the colonial system, corroboration secures a consistent form (syntagm) that tolerates nominal deviations of content along the paradigmatic axis. Ultimately, the deployment of discursive metaphors, no matter how political the content appears to be, instantiates a *formal limit* to art's political capacity. This limit—often arising through normative state coding, but sometimes through cynicism toward art itself—ensures that the metaphor is indexed directly to the production of discursive capital, rather, as some might suggest, to political action in the sphere of thought and representation.

We have begun the critique, but what of the affirmation? Against the cynical recourse to metaphoric democratism, art must produce alien formulations that act without the assent of the state, disoriented from the curatorial gaze, as an expansion of the entropic virtual instead of value-productive speculation. I will develop this line of flight in the third section of this text, but first we must attend to the abstract machine of exchange itself in order to grasp what is circumvented by such a line of flight, and how.

2. METAPHORIC EXCHANGE

Art circulates as discursive commodity when each exchange only increases the work's speculative value by way of the artist's professional advancement. The discursive value of a work of art has little to do with its conceptual meaning, much less its political capacity, which instead serves as a nominal trait (rather than a formal antagonism) that secures discursive exchange-value. This describes a metaphoric operation, where the artwork becomes partisan to the signifying collapse that emboldens discursive value. Ultimately, the subsumption of work by metaphor brings the artwork into the legibility of curatorial and state-sanctioned discourses.

In this section, I want to show how art—as defined by curatorial discourses in this historical moment—takes on the fungible qualities of a discursive (if not economic)[11] commodity by deferring to the form of metaphor in both representation and exchange, that is, as content and form alike.

Any art (and this means both the making and reading thereof) that aspires to be political must confront the political ramifications of the forms, codes, and logics that structure

representation. Inasmuch as the question that drives my research is "what is the political capacity of art?", the apolitics of metaphoric representation must be addressed, as I believe the consequences are not only unsettling for how we understand (for how the prominent discourse compels us to understand) art's operative modalities, but, more importantly, for clarifying what it is that remains political about a work of art.

VIRTUAL SEMIOTICS

In order to make this argument, I will have to explicate an aspect of my methodology. I work, in part, from the terms established by Roman Jakobson's writing on realism in art. Crucial to this method is his articulation of realism as a dialectical process—meaning that two primary but antagonistic forms of achieving realism are operating in relation to one another in any given historico-aesthetic paradigm. The first is a *realism of corroboration* which proclaims fidelity to extant forms of mediacy: a realism based on representing how things are, and especially representing how they are represented. "The effect of realism can be achieved when a work conforms to the maximal possible degree with received norms of representation. This is realism as recognition and reassurance: we see what we have seen before, what we have 'always already' seen, and the correspondence between received model and new instance closes a loop and seals us in a circle of solidarity." [12] We experience the world by projecting expectations upon it; when our world-view is corroborated the sensory data is discarded, leaving only deviations from convention available for contemplation. In contrast, Jakobson also describes a *realism of estrangement*, which takes up what were previously considered "inessential details" in order to "deform" the accepted forms

of representation.[13] These inessential details are metonymic contiguities that link one sign to the next, as in an assemblage.[14] Note that a "realism of corroboration and solidarity is secured partly by adhering to a consensus view about what constitutes an 'appropriate' level of detail"[15]—meaning that neither realism is historically specific, although Jakobson argues both describe cycles of advance and retreat in the realist art and literary movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Consider how the deformations of social realism became the corroborative propaganda of socialist realism.

Elsewhere, Jakobson argues that metonymy is the syntagmatic dimension of discourse and concerns principles of combination and contexture. In the same way, because metaphor necessitates selection between qualitatively different but formally similar signs, it describes the operations of the paradigmatic axis.[16] Without simplifying too much, we can understand the syntagmatic axis as the range of *forms* available to an utterance or discursive expression, whereas the expression's possible *content* is decided along the paradigmatic axis. The syntagmatic axis is commonly exemplified as the form of a sentence, a sequence of words with distinct utilities: subject→verb→object, etc., while the paradigmatic axis contains the various signs that could metaphorically fulfill these roles. A discursive expression will proceed along both axes, comprising a finite set of actualizations from the near-infinite array of combinatorial possibilities. That this expression actualizes some signs and not others (including them within a particular sentence, phrased a particular way) does not discard the virtual capacities of each sign: they remain available to be metaphorically substituted or metonymically displaced. Ultimately the distinction between metaphor and metonymy is arguable, as both are discursive concepts constituted

by the recursive relationship between speaker and interpreter.

Bringing Jakobson's aesthetic and semiotic concepts together allows us to understand how corroborative realism necessitates a consistent form in order to maintain its reality, and thus expresses its variables solely within the paradigmatic dimension of an expression. Likewise, a realism of estrangement depends upon the persistence of familiar or conventional content to track syntagmatic deformations at the level of form.

Throughout this section of the text, I will be showing how metaphors are deployed to corroborate the reality of a given discourse—in this case, the discourse of contemporary art. In order to get there, we must develop the concepts given to us by Jakobson by bringing them into relation with the Marxian concepts of the commodity, exchange, and value.

REALISM OF CORROBORATION

A realism of corroboration serves to reinforce that which is held true about a given syntactic order. We can say that it acts deductively upon that which it represents: unfolding a representation according to a set of a priori principles already known or expected about the representation. The result of this syntactic system is a structural relation of signs (the syntagmatic order), and a series of discrete, interchangeable signs (paradigmatic possibilities). Here, signs are interchangeable insofar as they all operate within the deductions of a given ideological or symbolic syntax. It is common for the metaphorical interchangeability of signs within this system to result from the basis of their aesthetic likeness or mimetic

capacity, but this is not a prerequisite. Important to note is the freedom with which these signs interchange: metaphors can be invented at will, and they achieve their maximum capacity for realism as soon as they are thought. This is because their likeness (and therefore their fungibility as signs) is not symmetrical; that is, it is not enforced by the signifier/signified relation itself.[17] Instead, the invocation refers to the sign alone. Therefore, we can make the somewhat counterintuitive claim that, instead of conflating signs, the metaphoric arrangement allows each sign to retain their acontiguity. I.e., THIS is *like* THAT but THIS *does not become* THAT.[18] Metaphor operates *corroboratively* in that it invents discursive relations between signs, ultimately keeping discourse within the territory of discourse. The form is one of exchange: one sign replaces the other along the paradigmatic axis while their syntagmatic positioning remains unchanged. Just because their shared mimetic attributes may not be immediately obvious does not preclude this corroboration from occurring, what they inevitably hold in common is the consistent form of their syntagmatic utility. "They are equated by virtue of being exchanged, they are not exchanged by virtue of any equality which they possess." [19] They still circulate within a common symbolic, and form links between concepts within this symbolic. This reinforces the coherence of the symbolic itself, rather than opening it up to alien encounters beyond. Poetic or heuristic affects may result from these metaphoric modes of signifying, meaning that novelty occurs on a local level (e.g., one may use a metaphor to learn something new) but this alone does not constitute proximity with anything outside the overarching symbolic code.

What both target and source signs share is the *capacity to be exchanged within a common symbolic*. This is a form of realism insofar as it

produces our experience of reality, and its verisimilitude derives from the fact that it makes discourse real. And insofar as corroborative realism or metaphoric representation reproduce the semiotics that undergird this reality, they can be said to exist wholly within the purview of a state-sanctioned symbolic and are therefore apolitical modes of engagement.

THE DISCURSIVE COMMODITY

In order to show how metaphor reinforces a capitalist epistemology—perpetuating the commodity-form as a code in logic, thought, value, etc.—we must first understand that, in the broadest sense, metaphor is a tool. Like all tools, it emerges from a system of contingencies and design, eventually congealing in a particular form of knowledge or meaning. It is a compression of knowledge that produces an array of capacities as well as limitations for the user of the tool. We may understand this as having a similar form to Marx's dead labour in terms of functioning as an accumulated productive capacity. [20] For instance, a carpenter's saw imbues the user with the previously improbable if not impossible capacity to turn a single length of wood into two. This compresses a material-discursive process that, within other technological paradigms, requires laboriously flint-knapping a stone to produce an edge, adhering it to a fire-hardened wood handle, and arranging a variety of other elements such as nearby trees to produce desirable levels of force for a length of wood to be split. The carpenter's saw can play a role in producing other tools, therefore pushing us ever further from the "original" labour-intensive process required to cut wood. There is a discursive compression of design and use, and materially a compression of fabrication. But there are limits—and even a loss of capacity—that comes with this

compression; whereas a stone adze possesses a single sharpened edge, a saw blade comprises many sharp teeth, meaning that it becomes inadequate for scribing, chopping, or carving: all things an adze does easily. Metaphor describes one mode of semiotic compression, lessening the need to arrange complex signifying systems in order to arrive at a given meaning. Where once a concept was limited to its contiguities—it could only be invoked by way of indexing *this* which points to *that* which eventually refers to the intended—a metaphoric relation elides these arrangements through the legacy of dead labour. But, like the saw, its capacities are covalent with its limitations and the compression is not complete to the extent that its signifieds become redundant, even if the technocrat is obliged to discard the old in favour of the new. As stated above, metaphor both necessitates and produces equivalent relationships between signs. The resulting asymmetrical equivalences preclude the instantiation of anything other than a kind of corroborative realism. This means that metaphor, as tool, as discursive form, keeps us within extant capitalist relations, ultimately reproducing them within our epistemology. As Alfred Sohn-Rethel writes, “The abstraction contained in exchange ... determines the conceptual mode of thinking peculiar to societies based on commodity production.”[21]

I argue that the reality produced by capitalist social relations is a metaphorical one. By this I do not only mean that it is corroborative in the sense that an apparatus forged entirely of likenesses (*this* being equivalent with *that*) possesses a dubious capacity to encounter alien forms, but also that it extends into relations with others, with objects, with nature, and ultimately dictates what is *legible* through the epistemology of use and exchange. That is, metaphoric discourse is homologous to commodity

exchange. And the legibilities produced by these paradigms (which are actually aspects of a single paradigm, the capitalist symbolic) in turn dictate what can be valued, and how, and therefore what it is possible to conceive.

What is common between metaphor and commodity exchange aside from the shared operation of substitution? It is true that my argument itself would not escape a metaphoric status *unless I can prove that semiotic equivalence is essential to discursive value production*, just as equivalence between economic commodities is necessitated in the production of surplus value. We know that Marx does not attribute value production to tools or machines, only to labour-power, and so the above line of thinking may seem defeated from the outset—but I will show how it is necessary for understanding corroborative realism writ large. We will build this case in steps.

ACONTIGUITY

The first evidence for our case is that both economic and discursive relations depend upon a lack of contiguity. The conditions for exchange ensure that the item to be exchanged must be separable from its mode of production or etymological process. By becoming metaphor, a sign loses its indexical capacity; it can no longer point toward its contiguities in order to produce meaning just as a commodity retains nothing of its production once it is exchanged. Through exchange it crosses a threshold—from producer to consumer—and, in so doing, becomes monadic. We see the principle developed over and over in Marx's articulation of commodity fetishism. As soon as a sign emerges as a commodity, "its existence as a material thing is put out of sight," and in this way becomes acontiguous. [22] "Value,

therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language.”[23] To become a social hieroglyphic means to appear significant without signifying: a metaphor that has hypostatized. It appears, it comes forth, but we do not know how. Sohn-Rethel elaborates that ultimately the commodity cannot inhabit two roles at once because its appearance (discursivity) and use (materiality) are mutually exclusive:

The point is that use and exchange are not only different and contrasting by description, but are mutually exclusive in time. They must take place separately at different times. This is because exchange serves only a change of ownership, a change, that is, in terms of a purely *social status* of the commodities as owned property. In order to make this change possible on a basis of negotiated agreement the physical condition of the commodities, their *material status*, must remain unchanged, or at any rate must be assumed to remain unchanged. Commodity exchange cannot take place as a recognized social institution unless this separation of exchange from use is stringently observed.
[24]

Let's refer back to what was established above: metaphor posits that THIS is *like* THAT, but THIS *does not become* THAT. Metaphor cannot allow two competing definitions at once, although it may be polysemous in terms of its signifieds and interpretations. The target and source must exist in different referential frames belonging to a common symbolic. They occupy exclusive

“uses” on the syntagmatic axis, and within this role they are fungible along the paradigmatic axis. The quality or use-value that is permitted variability within commodity exchange is likewise permitted to differ along the paradigmatic axis *as long as the form remains consistent*. For economic commodities, this form is a quantifiable relation, such as a consistent amount of socially-necessary labour time. For metaphors or discursive commodities, it is a sign’s role on the syntagmatic axis. A variation in either of these modes *incapacitates* the equivalence of unlike qualities. Therefore it can be posited that the *use-value* of a discursive sign lies in its function on the syntagmatic axis, the content it fulfills, and the grammatical conventions it holds in common with other equivalent signs. Its *exchange-value* arises from the fact that it can be commensurated and substituted with other signs that, while possessing common grammatical functions, have disparate capacities to signify and represent given concepts. Contrast this with metonymy, wherein target and source signs are immanent within the same referential frame but do not necessarily share a common symbolic. On this basis we can understand that, because of their capacity for exchange, both metaphors and commodities are acontiguous entities.

ASYMMETRY AND EQUIVALENCE

The next scene in our argument for the homology of commodity exchange and discursive metaphor is the almost paradoxical relation of universal exchangeability coupled with the asymmetry (irreversibly one-sided exchangeability) of each individual exchange. Any commodity can be exchanged with any other provided they contain the same amount of abstract labour. Commodities may be exchanged for money, which may be exchanged again for commodities. We might imagine

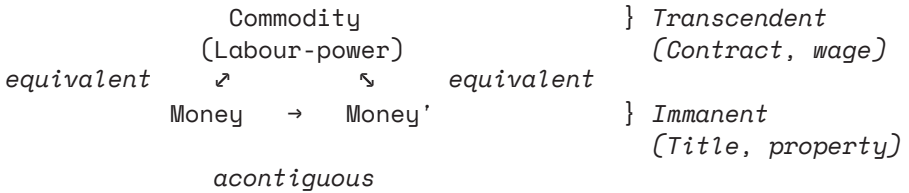
metaphoric discourse as a formal mediator akin to the numeraire of money, meaning that, through metaphor, any sign can be exchanged with any other provided they occupy the same role on the syntagmatic axis. And while these entities can theoretically be exchanged back, creating a symmetry, it is often the case that they do not, and in fact they are precluded from doing so within a capitalist social relation. Why? Marx notes that C-M (the exchange of commodity for money) and M-C (money for commodity) are technically equivalent and can therefore produce symmetry in their exchange, but fail to yield any surplus value, which is the driving telos of capital. Surplus value is produced not through exchange, but through the purchase and exploitation of labour-power in production, signified by M-C-M, which becomes realized in exchange as C-M-C. To exchange a commodity for money and then to use the money to procure another commodity allows the access of different use-values. But to exchange money for a commodity and back for money again would be useless *unless* the exchange somehow results in more money. So the exchange can only be considered in context as M-C-M'. It is exclusively through the commodification of labour-power (C) that surplus value can be produced. The phase state of labour-power as commodity obfuscates the production of value—over the undifferentiated course of the working day, the labourer produces more value than they need to reproduce their labour-power; that is, more than they are remitted—before the product of labour circulates on the market and is actualized once more as money, albeit as a quantitatively-increased amount (M'). This operation allows surplus to be captured in the reselling of the commodity—made acontiguous by virtue of its movement through a numeraire—at a profit.

Does the commodification of labour-power find homology in semiotic exchange? The way to

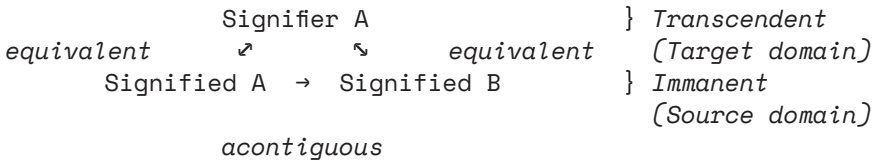
understand its appearance in metaphor is through Sohn-Rethel: "The 'reifying' (*verdinglichende*) property of exchange is bound up with the equating effect which the act of exchange exercises upon the objects. The underlying reason for this alienating effect of exchange is that, on the basis of commodity production, it is property, not the labour of production, which governs the social order by operating the social synthesis." [25] The exchange operation is dependent upon the acontiguous nature of signs—and acontiguity or separability is the discursive condition for property. It is crucial to first establish the relationship of property and exchange before we can develop the appearance of value.

In his writing on commodity fetishism, Marx notes that "the character of having value, when once impressed upon products, obtains fixity only by reason of their acting and re-acting upon each other as quantities of value." For the producers, "their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them." [26] Just as discursive value renders the non-metaphoric relation of the sign illegible, Marx finds that nothing is self-evident about labour in the produced commodity. We see nothing of its process in the product, all contiguities of production are disappeared. Within a given discourse, discursive value is produced in order to corroborate the economic paradigm beyond the economy itself. Therefore we can say that discursive exchange gives rise to a discursive fetishism, wherein signs become indexed to absolute or objective concepts, freed from the contiguities that defined them and gave them use: the entire exchange process slips beyond the epistemological lens.

FORMULA FOR CAPITAL



METAPHORIC EXCHANGE



In the accompanying diagram I show how metaphor becomes fetishized when the distinction between target and source is obfuscated, reintegrating the metaphoric signifier as part of normative discourse. This process re-occurs in the production of economic capital where the distinction between a labourer's wage (M) and their product (M') are rendered indistinct through a two-fold, asymmetrical equivalence. When exchanged, the source is rendered inoperable in terms of its signification. The distinction between the non-metaphoric signified and the metaphoric signified is typically clarified through the context of the utterance, meaning that obfuscation results when the metaphor is fetishized as such. This asymmetrical relation therefore produces a third sign (M' in M-C-M'), namely, a conflation of target and source domains, an apparently non-metaphorical sign. In this instance, where we are confronted with two different signs, we find that "there exists in equal quantities something common to both. The two things must therefore be equal to a third, which in itself is

neither one nor the other. Each of them, so far as it is exchange-value, must therefore be reducible to this third.”[27] The first equivalence of M-C-M’, or M-C, represents the wage. This aspect is legible to all actors, even and especially those without power (such as the labourer). Similarly, as metaphoric exchange, this equivalence is legible as the normative meaning of a sign. Even if a sign has multiple meanings, the instance of becoming-metaphor attributes a new (not previously denotative) meaning to the sign.

It is this second equivalence, resulting in M’, that must be explained away by ideology rather than through contiguity.[28] Discursive value manifests when the metaphor is taken as non-metaphorical, when the play of signs within the metaphor is mistaken for a signifying relationship not of target to source, but of target signifier (the sign of the metaphor itself) to target signified (eliminating that which is legibly metaphoric about the sign), becoming its own source.[29] The obfuscation of source and target within a metaphor allows it to “immediately repeat itself,” becoming ever more acontiguous and therefore ever more exchangeable.[30] The result is polysemy, a semiotic numeraire that should not be confused for the creative capacities of art to open up a fixed symbolic field. Polysemy in this instance behaves corroboratively, and to actualize or attribute an argumentative meaning to the sign, even without excluding its other meanings, would disrupt its capacity to participate in metaphoric exchange. Like commodities within a capitalist epistemology, signs are not deployed for their use (although it is crucial they possess a use) but for their capacity to exchange. The metaphor circulates, indexing meaning, but *without actualizing it*. That is, it becomes a social hieroglyphic and corroborates the ongoing discourse

without leading away from it. That metaphoric signs exchange as acontiguities mean they are never elaborated, for elaboration upsets the efficiency or relative surplus-value of capitalist production. Ultimately, the metaphor generates value because it itself is taken at face-value.

3. A NEW SYMBOLIC

In the first section of this text we articulated the problems posed by artistic discursive production and the tendency to apprehend political interventions as content alone. In the second we attended to the abstract mechanics of metaphoric and commodity exchange, detailing how the common syntagm enables the production of discursive value—ultimately reinforcing the capitalist epistemology itself, regardless of content-level protestations. In this concluding section, we will use the concepts developed so far to put forth a possible mode of engagement that deforms capitalist epistemology without reducing art's political capacity to metaphoric critique.

Elsewhere in our research, Tennant and I have nominated "conceptual materialism" as the name of this mode of engagement, and here I will elaborate that conceptual materialism is undoubtedly a political proposition.[31] We must clarify, however, that the project is not one merely in search of freedom, emancipation, representation, or other ethical ideals proper to liberal humanism. We begin with the political capacities that are intrinsic to art instead of applying politics as content in retrospect to the mandate of a given work or exhibition. Because conceptual materialism is a methodology as much as it is a prescription, its political capacity is immanent rather than transcendent. The following plays with the convention that equivocates art with creativity, ultimately precluding (or

at least deforming) its deployment as aesthetic marker in the innovations necessitated by austerity policies. In the proceeding, we will understand creativity as an expansion of the virtual field, beyond the capitalist telos of profit which limits the virtual from *what is possible* to *what is feasible*. It is here that a conceptual materialist art realizes its immanent capacity for political action.

Why then do we begin with a denunciation of freedom? The curator-centric climate inscribes this yearning within all artists, to be free, to produce a spectacle, to work unhampered by material restrictions, emboldened by state-issued grants at international biennials. All hypotheticals, all applications, all CV-building and exposure proceed toward this goal: proving oneself capable of harnessing (future) freedom. Artists look to these spectacles as a template for the possible, and their own endeavours do not forsake these goals discursively even if material restrictions apply. Regardless of contract fabricators, generational wealth, and state commissions, the work aspires to occupy a position of freedom, especially the freedom to circulate from exhibition to exhibition and collection to collection as a discursive commodity. In this mode, the contingency of material is dismissed for a deferred or speculative future. An ethic of creativity differs from this paradigm in that creativity—or the production of difference, of alien forms—is dependent upon (and works in an inductive capacity with) heteronomous conditions of compromise. The capacity of any artistic material is more or less infinite, but cannot be actualized without being placed in proximity to other materials. In this way, we understand that a virtual capacity (such as the capacity for meaning, for representation, for political action) is always emergent based on its relative context: it does not exist a priori. E.g., a knife does not cut without

being in proximity to a material that can be cut. A work does not mean without being in proximity to that which can interpret. These proximities constitute metonymic relations between relata, ultimately forming a contiguity. Contrast this to a liberal version of freedom, which necessitates an apparent *lack* of proximal actors in order to operate. This paradigm of liberty quickly spirals into solipsism—a corroborative realism based on metaphoric relations between proprietorial monads. Therefore, a political work must possess and respond to a series of didactic closures in order to open up a creative space *beyond* status quo inscriptions and normative inertia. Given these conditions, the pursuit of freedom (especially a liberal “freedom from”) can only naturalize existing inertias and the inequities they have produced. It is an ideal undertaken in spite of historical conditions. And it deeply limits the virtual horizon.

ALIEN DIDACTICISM

The play of freedom and creativity can be elaborated by way of an example. Consider a board game, reduced to its constituent parts. It may possess a wooden board and some stones. To allow this object to remain as open as possible, a rubric of freedom leaves it as is, in fear of foreclosing its subjectivity. Even giving name to the material may be deemed too much of an imposition. In this instance, the modes of engagement are dependent upon the already-existing capacities of those who encounter it. The stones may be stacked, flipped, or thrown. The board may be used as a table, a cutting board, a writing surface. It is apparent that these objects are semiotically open. If encountered by a woodworker, the board may be used as raw material, as for crafting a box. A jeweller may cut the stones and tumble them to produce a necklace.

Their arrangement offers many capacities, more than can be catalogued. But no matter how free or open this material is, it does not on its own produce these capacities for subjects who do not already possess discursive training in woodworking or jewellery. Its potential uses or meanings are dependent upon its proximity to these discourses. There is nothing *self-evident* about it as matter. But imagine that the material of the board and stones is accompanied by a series of discursive restrictions, that is, a set of rules. The stones may only be moved in such a way, their utilizations are dependent on their orientation relative to the board and to other stones. What at first appears to be a hampering of freedoms, of openness, is shown to be a prerequisite for producing openness. Without discursive direction, the objects are encountered as is, according to whatever may be obvious about them (that is, according to whatever is inert within the subject who encounters them). They do not yet possess an alien form, and are only subject to already-determined purposes or meanings. With rules delineating the interaction of stones and board, however, we witness the production of a new field of virtualities. The materials are imbued with possibility that is not specific to the prior discursive training of a given subject. Whether or not these rules are enforceable, a discursive framework *of* and *for* this material arrangement means that moves can be made, strategies contemplated, great spans of time spent moving stones only minor distances around the board. Alien virtualities may be actualized, by which I mean that previously inconceivable capacities enter into history as conditions for further alienations.

This alienness that gives form to the game is delivered through two extant familiarities: the content of the game, its matter (stones and wood, which must be articulated as atomized

entities, and not as contiguities of a terrestrial ecology); and the form of the discourse that communicates the rules, such as the vocabulary and grammatical conventions of language.

	<i>Discourse</i>	<i>Matter</i>
<i>Alien</i>	<i>Content</i> (new names, new descriptions, new signifiers; <i>parole</i> —produced by encounters with matter)	<i>Form</i> (new contiguities, emergent properties, and as-of-yet unactualized virtual capacities)
<i>Familiar</i>	<i>Form</i> (grammar, combinatorial morphemes, regular and recurring conventions; <i>langue</i>)	<i>Content</i> (atomized signifieds, properties, value, use-coded by discourse)

Together these familiarities guide us beyond that which is self-evident and into a new virtual field. The directions of the rules may supercede the possibility of carving wood or cutting stones, but provide us access to a new virtual field with ten to the power of 100 moves, states, and outcomes. I do not mean to indicate that the pursuit of creativity is reducible to a quantification of virtualities, but rather that creativity necessitates tactical closures and restrictions to produce entirely new ways of apprehending the material in question. These contingencies *force* one into proximity with alien forms, reconsidering once-familiar materials so that they can no longer be considered inert or free (which is always over-coded by status quo conventions). [32] Because, as Vishmidt notes, “the artist renounces direct influence on social reality in favour of the capacity to contribute something genuinely new to

it, which will, because of that novelty, often go unrecognized"[33]—the novelty of a creative act is therefore dependent on discursive argumentation, familiarities that throw the alien into relief rather than letting it go "unrecognized," which means either being overcoded by prevalent norms or valued purely as "novelty," as discursive commodity. After all, the convention of art is itself an expectation of novelty. The regularities of the white cube allow for such alien contents while the form proceeds according to its normative trajectory.

The discursive material of the board game produces a unique virtual field but also certain political states, such as strategic or leverageable arrangements. The same is true for art: from the virtual field produced by its discursive material and the materiality of its discourse, certain arrangements are considered politically desirable. These states must come about, as in games, through effort—namely, an argumentative procedure that can prove the manner in which the work affects (and is affected by) the virtual ground of politics.[34] In many cases it is already a formally political endeavour to posit new virtualities beyond the telos of capital that structures the actuality of our lives. But more specific arrangements (such as a homologous or non-metaphorical relationship to political content) can come about as well, given adequate argumentation. All of these states are dialectically produced by two players, or by an artist and a viewer. This dialectic is not necessarily symmetrical in its composition—the constituents are sure to possess markers of disparate discourses prior to their engagement with the discursive material of a given artwork—in which case the figure of the argument may be adapted for different circumstances, the goal achieved in a variety of ways. In fact, this contingency is essential to its political status. The methodology

of conceptual materialism depends upon argumentation—the dialectic of arguing with an entity that possesses the capacity to engage in argument. Do not mistake this dialectic for one of supplication and assent: all it requires is finding instances of affectivity in the other.

Insofar as art can act on modes of apprehension without assent, it remains capable of positing epistemological forms and logics that counter those of capital and the state because both affirmation and critique occur in the same virtual field of apprehension. Understanding argumentation in this way allows for artworks to participate in a virtual field in which both the work and the subjects of its affirmation and critique can be similarly affectable. These forms and logics are actualized in many instances as the way in which apprehension is permitted to occur: which entities are allowed to be considered as individual or significant versus which entities are obliged to remain illegible or contiguous. When you apprehend an object, do you understand what it is for? Where it comes from? How it was produced? Are you attentive of all the other object-entities that comprise it? Take for instance Jakobson's writing on realism, as he emphasizes that verisimilitude is not based in any natural or objective state, but on discursively-produced modes of apprehension:

The methods of projecting three-dimensional space onto a flat surface are established by convention; the use of colour, the abstracting, the simplification of the object depicted, and the choice of reproducible features are all based on convention. It is necessary to learn the conventional language of painting in order to "see" a picture, just as it is impossible to understand what is said without knowing the language. This conventional, traditional aspect of painting to

a great extent conditions the very act of our visual perception. As tradition accumulates, the painted image becomes an ideogram, a formula, to which the object portrayed is linked by contiguity. Recognition becomes instantaneous. We no longer see a picture. The ideogram needs to be deformed. The artist-innovator must impose a new form upon our perceptions, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before. [35]

Without argumentation, art becomes a production of hypotheticals (left unactualized in order to facilitate exchangeability) and therefore of discursive capital. In artistic discourse, capital can take the form of critical theory buzzwords that have become freed of practice and circulate now as symbolic-value-codes sans praxis, or in the form of indices to activist and journalistic modes of legibly political (that is to say, "relevant") content. Critique is hypostatized as a metaphor for critique. Vishmidt argues that "artistic production and subjectivity are becoming more continuous with other kinds of work in their creative disposition, flexibility and indifference to content of the work as long as the gesture attains artistic 'value' in the semiotic and financial marketplace where that gesture is validated." [36] These gestures retain their critical content—albeit in the form of an index to critique, operating now as a convention that is unelaborated beyond metaphor—while remaining free of meaning on the formal level to avoid precluding their fungibility. For Vishmidt, critique "becomes a style or an affect directly plugged into a luxury and service economy, rather than a structural opposition in capitalist value relations." [37] After all, capital's power comes from the fact that it can become (through exchange) hypothetically anything. So doesn't it follow that the possession of capital bestows

new virtual capacities upon the individual? We concede that this is how things appear; indeed, this is how we have been coded by convention to apprehend them. And yet, Vishmidt writes,

Such an articulation crucially depends on an affirmative sense for this shared indeterminacy, that is, a conflation of the subjective self-valorization of [the artist's] own human capital by the entrepreneurial subject and the self-valorization of capital per se. However, this "ontological" indeterminacy cannot be sustained when the ontological creativity exalted by discourses of the entrepreneur is in fact overdetermined by the empirical necessities of competition and the realisation of investment.[38]

Creativity, in our usage of the term, is not about power. It is not about self-reproduction (autopoiesis) in the sense of staying within a single individual's conception of what is possible, much less what is profitable. If we grasp Jakobson's articulation of how conventional ideograms are produced, then we understand it is a relative process of relata in proximity, and the capacity to "deform" or alienate is lost by indexing critique to absolute gestures. This results in mere metaphors. Indeed, for these reasons, it seems most accurate to describe creativity as a death-drive, as a contradiction of negentropic power, against the achievement of single-minded plans and in spite of the conditions of life or sustenance qua waged activity. It is entropic, and always retains the possibility of decomposing without re-composition. The death-drive of creativity necessitates encounter with alienating contiguities, "unnoticed traits", forces that upset state-sanctioned flows, monosemy (semiotics of monogamy), and the supplicative discourse of the curriculum vitae. And there is nothing alien about the logics of capital: they

have been with us as we have been in the world, and we know them (they structure our knowing) even if we have never spoken them.[39]

More importantly, fidelity to the political paradigm intrinsic to art entails a production of virtualities within the *general economy*. Unlike a liberal pursuit of freedom, which operates metaphorically by seeking non-interference for individuals regardless of their context or extant relations, the opening up of virtual capacities is always a result of entities in proximity, rather than anything immanent to a given individual. We can consider the impasses posed by the “freedom of speech,” wherein the a priori right of freedom from censorship only allows extant master signifiers of white supremacy and colonial rule to persist.[40] To consider this scenario from the perspective of creativity (produced through argumentation) allows for exploitative fetters to be removed without recourse to liberal moralism: the field of virtualities available to the general economy atrophies as a result of material-discursive oppressions, even when they take the form of freedom. Instead we ask, how can our ethics *enable* creativity within the general economy? How do we increase our *capacity to act* within and against constraints, and therefore broaden the horizon of apprehension itself, beyond the myopia of seeking *freedom from* others, or an imagined outside of discourse? It is within the terms of this program that we work to describe a new master signifier whose universality is always in relation to death, entropy, and non-productive excess.

As we are aware, all matter is discursively coded-wood, even if it doesn't yield a variety of constructive uses articulated by specific discursive training, still yields the signifier of “wood”—and we cannot access it except through discourse. Nor is it our goal to enter

into closer proximity with the real. Instead, we seek a new symbolic, an exteriority to capitalist codings which limit our conception of the possible to the feasible, inscribing our collective imaginary with the sole telos of profit. Finally, conceptual materialism articulates that there is no creativity to be had in individualistic pursuits of intuition or self-expression, for the reason that the self and all that it intuits constrains us to the code of capitalist social relations, into which we emerge as legible/subjects/citizens/humans.[41] Creativity must arise from contingency, alienation (*ostranenie*), and tactical reorganizations of the symbolic—removing the symbolic, speech, and desire from its constraint within the narcissism of self-reproduction. Autopoiesis is only self-valourizing value. Deviation from an inertial trajectory does not occur without encountering alien forms.

NOTES

1. Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 128. “Whereas capital and art once confronted each other as heteronomy and autonomy, now they seem to share a certain utopian vision of an ‘automatic subject’ that can valorize itself indefinitely. This affinity of course has certain limitations—art can at best be a flattering self-image of capital, which is actuated by profit and is thus as far as can be from the Kantian aesthetic principle of ‘disinterest’.”
2. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art and Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 79. “The process of courting non-art is continuous. Not art but happenings; not art but social action; not art but

- transaction—or situation, experiment, behaviour stimulus. ... American artists seek to immerse the things they make or do in the redeeming otherness of non-art. Hence the instability of the modern experience.”
3. Leigh Tennant, “In defence of conceptual art (A still too small (s)crap of being),” *QQQQOON* (October 2018).
 4. The source domain is the conceptual domain (a legible and apprehendable discourse such as a literal or non-metaphorical signifier–signified relation) from which metaphorical expressions are drawn, whereas target domain is the domain that we try to understand through the heuristic of the metaphor. These terms were developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
 5. “Intention” is here attributable to those who undertake political artistic activity in good faith. I will note that the manifestation of cynicism is not necessarily reducible to the art-object as such, but is a product of the discourses that circulate within both the artist and the viewer. These discourses are in many instances reducible to a broader curatorial discourse in which both artist and viewer participate, and delineates the possible horizon of both producing (conceiving of) and consuming (interpreting) an artwork.
 6. Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, 217. “Speculation thrives on investing previously un-capitalized or indirectly capitalized domains with value logics and value imperatives. And art is exemplary here as a domain that is deemed itself to be ‘socially speculative’. Emerging as an autonomous sphere in modernity, it at the same time came to be held as a sphere of autonomy, able to model forms of labour and subjectivity that suggest emancipation, or at least distance, from capital’s order. Therefore, the speculative

transformation of art in the interests of capital amounts to the transformation of negativity to capital into a form of capitalist reproduction.”

7. Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, 78.
8. Andrea Fraser, “Why Does Fred Sandback’s Work Make Me Cry?” *Grey Room* 22 (Winter 2006), 39.
9. Adrian Piper, “The Triple Negation of Coloured Women Artists,” in *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume 2: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967–1992*(Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 165–166.
10. Glen S. Coulthard, “Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the Politics of Recognition in Colonial Contexts,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 6 (2007), 438: “I take ‘politics of recognition’ to refer to the now expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism that seek to reconcile Indigenous nationhood with Crown sovereignty via the accommodation of Indigenous identities in some form of renewed relationship with the institutions of the Canadian state. Although these models may vary in both theory and practice, most tend to involve the delegation of land, capital and political power from the state to Indigenous communities through land claims and self-government processes. ... Instead of ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the Hegelian ideal of *reciprocity*, the politics of recognition in its contemporary form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonial power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend.”
11. Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, 85. “The distinctly non-subsumed character of art in the sphere of production does not thereby exempt art from commodification in the sphere of circulation.”
12. Brian McHale, “Revisiting Realisms; Or, WWJD (What Would Jakobson Do?),” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 41,

- No. 2 (Fall 2008), 7.
13. Roman Jakobson, "Realism in Art," in *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987): 19-27.
 14. In the vein of Jakobson and the Russian Formalists, I develop this concept of estrangement within art as communicative entropy that resists the negentropic compulsion to order within capitalist society. See: Steven Cottingham, "Art and Entropy," *QOQQOON* (September 2018).
 15. McHale, "Revisiting Realisms," 8.
 16. Roman Jakobson and Moris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1956), 72-75.
 17. Marina Vishmidt and Kerstin Stakemeier, "The Value of Autonomy," *Texte zur Kunst*88 (December 2012): 102-117. "The principal interest of autonomy for art ... is that it is a commodity that gives itself its own law-fixed in its exceptional status by the logic of capitalist production—allowing it to represent non-identity in a society dominated by general equivalence."
 18. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederich Engels (Marx/Engels Internet Archive, 1995), 49. Compare this semiotic relationship with Marx's writing on commodity equivalence: "When we bring the products of our labour into relation with each other as values, it is not because we see in these articles the material receptacles of homogeneous human labour. Quite the contrary: whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it." The two signs in an exchange are not *conflated*—although they may appear to be, and this confused appearance serves as the basis of Marx's notion

of commodity fetishism—they are made equivalent so that they can be substituted without changing the form. For Marx, the form is abstract labour; for semiotics, it is syntagmatic positioning.

19. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978), 46.
20. Augusto Ponzio, "The Role of Language and Ideology in Social Reproduction According to Rossi-Landi," in *TRANS* 16 (2005), 2. "Every single cultural fact may be approached and understood as a message assembled on the basis of codes. Therefore, a general theory of society coincides with general semiotics. ... This becomes clearer when we consider that both in the case of commodities and of linguistic messages semiotics addresses the same problems—the work that produces them and that makes exchange and communication possible."
21. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 23.
22. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 28.
23. Ibid., 49.
24. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 23–24.
25. Ibid., 47.
26. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 49.
27. Ibid., 28.
28. V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 10. "Everything ideological possesses semiotic value."
29. Richard Godden, "Labor, Language, and Finance Capital," *PMLA*, Vol. 126, No. 2 (March 2011), 418. By "mistake" I refer to the same process of mystification—however unconscious or irreducible to individual perception—at work within the exchange of labour-power for wage. Richard Godden reaches a similar conclusion: "My point regarding the value fetish as a metaphoric entity would be that value conceals its own

- metaphoricity, thereby veiling its structural processes in the cause of a universal equivalence, accepted as unambiguous. Value is metaphor in hiding, a 'second-order reference' structurally essential to capitalist reality, yet one whose advocates disavow its internal contradictions."
30. Rebecca Cooper, "Part III: Economic Theory," in *The Logical Influence of Hegel on Marx* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1925). "M-C-M ... does not come to an absolute end, but, on the contrary, because of the reflux of M, the process immediately repeats itself, and so on, without end."
 31. Leigh Tennant and Steven Cottingham, "Introduction: Notes on a Conceptual Materialism," *QOOQOON*(October 2018).
 32. Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003), 185. "What then does this language—the given language of freedom—enable? ... Once you realize its limits and begin to see its inexorable investment in certain notions of the subject and subjection, then that language of freedom no longer becomes that which rescues the slave from his or her former condition, but the site of the re-elaboration of that condition, rather than its transformation."
 33. Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, 221.
 34. John Roberts, "On the Limits of Negation in Badiou's Theory of Art," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 7:3 (2008), 280. Because this relationship is not counted among the self-evident properties of a capitalist object, it must be explicated through argumentation. "Rather, as the name for the conceptualization of art's own conditions of possibility, autonomy's emergent identity is only sustainable through a first-order critique of capitalist relations. Without

this first-order critique, autonomy's attempt to think art as a 'thing apart' is simply a process of autopoiesis. Autonomy, therefore, is the unfolding and transitive site of the conflict or tension between the emancipation from heteronomy and the forces of heteronomy. In this autonomy is a space of differentiation and distinction, where the dominant conditions of heteronomy are tested, discarded and worked through."

35. Jakobson, "Realism in Art," 21.
36. Marina Vishmidt, "Indifferent Agent: Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital," in *Economy: Art, Production and the Subject in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Angela Dimitrakaki and Kirsten Lloyd (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), 70.
37. Vishmidt, "Indifferent Agent," 74.
38. Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, 89-90.
39. Dennis Lunt, "World Spirit as Baal: Marx, Adorno, and Dostoyevsky on Alienation," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (April 2012), 488. "Marx's idea of alienation as confrontation with the nonself expresses the idealist's rage against whatever is not the subject's activity. 'Thingness' becomes the illusion against which we revolt. And this appears [...] to undermine Marx's own materialism, which was supposed to respect the corporeal nature of history. The concrete, three-dimensional individual for which Marx turned to materialism is implicitly liquidated by Marx's notion of alienation."
40. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62. "The slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body."

Hartman is writing about how freedom for the slave is the permission to re-enter the society that produced (and still benefits from) slavehood. There is no possibility of becoming-free without the simultaneous existence of becoming-slave, a modality against which the former is always in juxtaposition. Freedom is therefore incapable of serving as an absolute term, much less as a universal capacity.

41. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 135-136. "Humans are exploited as part of the *Homo sapiens* species for the benefit of other humans, which at the same time yields a surplus version of the human: Man. Man represents the western configuration of the human as synonymous with the heteromascuine, white, propertied, and liberal subject that renders all those who do not conform to these characteristics as exploitable nonhumans, literal legal no-bodies."

