Thinking art

materialisms, labours, forms

edited by
PETER OSBORNE

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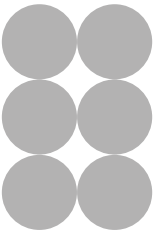

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Preface

The contributions to this second volume of essays derived from events organized by the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) have their source in the conference 'Thinking Art', held at the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) London on 29 February 2020, immediately prior to the Covid-19 lockdown.[1] As previously, the idea was to assemble an eclectic range of national and international speakers to present parts of their ongoing research, in order to provide a snapshot of current work on topics in which philosophical and general-theoretical issues are at stake within and across a range of related disciplines. Here this includes digital humanities, poetics, fine art, art history, gender studies, philosophy itself, visual culture and postcolonial studies. In its broader sense, philosophy is conceived here as a transdisciplinary medium through which connections may be made between, and critical reflection provoked about, the general-theoretical aspects of concrete investigations. The fourfold thematic constellation of materialisms, art and labour, instabilities of form, and social ecologies and intimations of catastrophe – plucked from the ether of the

1. Klara Kemp-Welch and Christian Nyampeta were unable to attend the conference, but have generously made their work available here.

present – functioned both to connect and to hold apart the various presentations.

The unifying conceit, on this occasion, lay in repeating a trope from the ICA's past – 'Thinking Art'[2] – not in order to return to that time, but rather to take the measure of the present's distance from it, registered in current preoccupations and concerns. Back then, at the outset of the 1990s, interrogation of the relationship between philosophy and art was still largely driven by the critical and political legacies of conceptual art, and the various anti-aesthetic agendas they bequeathed to academic study of art. The theoretical resources deployed, in the UK, were largely those of German critical theory, French philosophies of difference (including Lacanian psychoanalysis) and feminist art history. The polemical context was the attempt to maintain the momentum of the critical movements of the 1960s and 1970s beyond a traditional aesthetics which was being revived at that time, mainly in phenomenological forms, on the back of the so-called 'return to painting' of the 1980s, spearheaded by German neo-expressionism.[3] The lines of engagement were clearly drawn.

In the decade that followed, however, those lines quickly became blurred, as post-phenomenological French philosophies of 'affect' moved into the conceptual space vacated by 'aesthetic', in a manner that combined claims to philosophical radicalism with an artistic conservatism and covert political romanticism.[4]

2. See Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds, *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), 1991 – the inaugural publication of the ICA's Philosophical Forum, set up the previous year by its then Director of Talks, Linda Brandon.

3. In the UK, the emblematic exhibition was *A New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1981. Work by artists from that show have been reassembled this year, at the Whitechapel Gallery, in *The Return of the Spirit in Painting*, alongside a companion exhibition, *Radical Figures: Painting in the New Millennium*. Whether this pair of shows reveals the enduring 'radicalism' of painting (qua painting) or merely reaffirms the deepening conservative political function of its cyclical 'returns' is a moot point.

4. The rhythm of this movement was overdetermined by the somewhat haphazard temporality of translation. Lyotard's 1974 *Libidinal Economy* first appeared in English in 1993; Deleuze's 1981 *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (the most influential of these texts) in 2003. Meanwhile, Lyotard's more philosophically significant work of 1971, *Discourse, Figure,* was not translated into English until 2019.

At the same time, new forms of cultural management appropriated, academicized and contained the critical tendencies of the 1980s within the new cultural-industrial forms imposed on universities (including the incorporation of the art schools), in a series of ideological waves, the neoliberal force of which continues to build.[5] With the decline of the supportive political cultures from which they had arisen, art practices concerned to triangulate relations between *concept*, *politics* and *critique* retreated in the face of institutional developments associated with the growing primacy of markets, involving not only the integration of museums, galleries and other kinds of art spaces into the entertainment industries, but the institutions of art education themselves. Critical conceptions of the culture industry were displaced by affirmative, governmental concepts of 'creative industries'. In the new university art schools, little art-theoretical reflection, or even more straightforward forms of art-historical knowledge, were judged necessary for the projected vocational aspirations of students redesignated as clients. This was the point at which right-wing attacks on the 'elitism' of the arts and humanities provided 'market democracy' with its most effective political argument – three decades after the left-populist version of that critique had begun to transform those disciplines themselves, in a process derided by the Right as 'dumbing down'.

Today, the philosophical debates that set the intellectual tone of the anglophone artworld largely concern so-called 'new' – especially 'vital' and 'speculative' – materialisms; the changing and precarious character of labour; the dematerializing effects of social relations and technologies on the destabilization of formal categories; and ecological crisis, postcoloniality and the Anthropocene. The four sections of this book take up variants

5. The Hochschule der Künste Berlin became a university in 2001, for example; University of the Arts London was formed in 2003–4 out of the bulk of the London arts' colleges.

of these themes, respectively, in variously critical ways. What unifies the essays is not any particular theoretical stance, but a concern to maintain a thinking of art and its related discourses that is sceptical of all attempts to use the new eco-naturalisms and vitalisms as an alibi for stopping thinking about art socially. In an art context, the flight from thinking socially cannot avoid becoming a neo-aestheticism – whatever its theoretical modalities and purported political intent.

The question that opened the Introduction to the previous collection of essays with the same title as this one, thirty years ago – 'In what way, if any, does art need philosophy, or philosophy art?' – unanswered then, remains as open and contested today as it ever was; and equally, if not more likely to provoke anxiety, on both sides. All the more reason, one might think, for continuing to ask it.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Richard Birkett for initiating the renewed collaboration between the ICA London and CRMEP in 2018, which led to the conference from which this book derives; and the ICA curators Nydia Swaby and Sara Sassanelli, for taking it on and seeing it through to completion with such equanimity.

PETER OSBORNE, JUNE 2020

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Notes on form

PETER OSBORNE

'How are we to understand the concept of artistic form today?' and 'What are its relations to social form?'[1] In particular, if we understand social form to be immanent to artistic form, how is this immanence to be reflectively constructed, expressed and interpreted at this particular historical moment? And if it is 'the unresolved antagonisms of reality' that 'return in artworks as immanent problems of their form',[2] what do the problems of form in contemporary art have to tell us about the unresolved antagonisms of our reality today?

The movement of contemporary art

In approaching these questions, a fundamental difficulty appears at the outset: in contemporary art the very category of form appears problematic.[3] Indeed, the concept of form marks one of

1. An earlier version of parts of this text was presented as a public lecture at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London (12 January 2017), to the conference 'Crisis as Form: Revisions to the History of the Present', University of Applied Arts Vienna (27 January 2017) and at Yale University School of Art (2 October 2017). I am grateful to Helmut Draxler for the invitation to the Vienna conference.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997 (1970), p. 6.
3. Contemporary art, that is, in the critical historical sense which that phrase has come to acquire over the last twenty-five years or so, which may be projected back, interpretatively, broadly speaking, to artistic transformations of the late 1950s. See Peter

the main difficulties of contemporary art practice and criticism alike: namely, how to give general social and historical significance (and hence, in the classical terminology, 'universality') to increasingly 'individual' – highly individuated – works? The difficulty is twofold. It derives from the fact that contemporary art is a field of generically artistic practices that developed via its Euro–North American heartlands in reaction against both (i) the formal critical norms of medium-specific modernisms and their transformative reproduction and extension of the old, Renaissance 'system of the arts', and (ii) the residual cultural authority of all other received aesthetic forms and universals – residual, that is, from the standpoint of the thesis of the tendentially increasing nominalism or individuality of works of art in liberal (now neoliberal) capitalist societies.[4] This nominalism – inherent in the social logic of autonomous art, and exacerbated in artistic resistance to the reduction of form to the cultural technology of 'formats'[5] – has been intensified, or raised to a higher power, by the dissolution of the boundaries between the arts. In reaction, the countervailing forces of new, increasingly socialized artistic forms, characteristic of the last three decades, have been provoked.[6] In this respect, the field of contemporary art as a field of generically artistic practices exhibits a double and contradictory movement of the *attempted dissolution* and the *reflective, expanded restitution* of artistic form. The problematicity of form, then,

Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London and New York: Verso, 2013, pp. 18–22.

4. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 42, 199–202, 219–22. This tendency has now, of course, been geopolitically generalized via the 'globalization' of the Western art system, irrespective of the particular 'varieties' of capitalist societies into which this system of institutions intrudes. This is the respect in which transnational art institutions are at the vanguard of the geopolitical spread of 'neoliberalized' forms of capitalism, irrespective of the ideological content of the particular works they exhibit.

5. See David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013. Joselit treats this reduction positivistically, rather than critically, thereby exiting the field of art criticism.

6. These successive social, political and activist 'turns' since the 1990s repeat the structures of various anti-institutional artistic practices that can be traced back to the 1960s. The difference primarily lies in the more general, institutionally recognized prevalence of the more recent variants.

manifests itself historically, primarily, as an attempted dissolution and reflective expansion of artistic form itself.

This double movement re-enacts the problematic character of social form in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century capitalism that is a product of the contradictory structure of capitalistic individuality as such, in both its *promise* (the freedom of the individual as a 'self-possessing' subject of exchange relations – call it consumer sovereignty) and its *reality* (the lack of self-possession, or dispossession, manifest in the asocial sameness of the indifference of the system of exchange to the individuals who make it up – call it alienation and the debt society). In this respect, we might say, contemporary art is a mimesis of the broken 'promise of happiness' not merely of art but of capitalism itself.[7] *Art is the agent of the secret discontent of capitalist societies with their own rules*, we might say.[8] In its contradictory dissolution and reflective expansion of artistic form, contemporary art reflects the contradictory structure of capitalistic sociality as a mediated dissolution – a constant dissolution and transformed reinstatement – of the social itself. This is a reinstatement of the social at the level of form alone – commodity form, money, capital and the state – alienated from its constitutive relations between individuals. This is the Polanyian dimension of capitalism, recently analytically revived by the German sociologist and critical theorist Wolfgang Streeck: a cannibalistic capitalism that erodes its own anthropological and social conditions by eroding the living sociality of the social as such. It is a contradictory structure that has been intensified by the political-economic strategies of neoliberalism since the end of the 1970s, in which Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* belatedly prevailed over Polanyi's *The*

7. On art's breaking of what Stendhal saw as its 'promise of happiness', see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 311.

8. Cf. Benjamin on Baudelaire as the 'agent of a secret discontent of his class with its own rule', in Walter Benjamin, Addendum to 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1989, p. 104.

Great Transformation; although that hegemony currently appears to be crumbling, at least to some extent.[9]

In the Euro–North American context, which dominated international artworld debates at the time, at the height of the reaction against Greenberg's modernist formalism in the second half of the 1960s, the double movement of the attempted dissolution and the reflective expansion of artistic form, constituting the field of contemporary art more widely, went under the general heading of 'post-formalism'. This was not just a reaction in the field of criticism, and of art practices tied directly to it, but involved a wider sense of what, in his 1967 book *Beyond Modern Sculpture*, Jack Burnham called 'form exhaustion'.[10] Burnham attributed this to the effect on art of science and technology, but it was equally the effect of the social power of the individualism that drove the cultural transformations of the 1960s in those 'consumer societies' that benefited from the post-World War II boom. Robert Smithson diagnosed the paradoxical reaction of galleries and museums to this situation in terms of an 'avalanche' of new (yet merely nominal) categories.[11] This categorial nominalism produced 'curation' in its contemporary sense, as a practice of temporary sense-making via exhibition-making, rather than the care of a collection over a prolonged period of

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9. Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System*, London and New York: Verso, 2016; F.A. Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001 (1944); Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time*, Boston MA: Beacon Press, 2002 (1944). Intriguingly, recent disputes over neoliberalism and the meaning of contemporary capitalism have defaulted to a replay of a dispute between two Austrian economic historians of the 1940s, on the cusp of the post-war reconstruction of Western capitalist societies. For the revival of Polanyian analyses, see Nancy Fraser, 'Marketization, Social Protection, Emancipation: Toward a Neo-Polanyian Conception of Capitalist Crisis', in Craig Calhoun and Georgi Derlugian, eds, *Business as Usual: The Roots of the Global Financial Meltdown*, New York: NYU Press, 2011, pp. 137–58, and 'A Triple Movement? Parsing the Politics of Crisis after Polanyi', *New Left Review* 81 (May–June 2013), pp. 119–32.

10. Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century,* New York: George Braziller, 1967, pp. 167–81.

11. Robert Smithson, 'What is a Museum? A Conversation between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson' (1967), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 40. Cf. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, ch. 4.

time. 'Curation' in this sense has become central to art institutions since it gives partial and temporary social and historical meaning to highly individualized works via new relational configurations.

'Form exhaustion', Burnham argued, had led to 'The Rise of Phenomenalism' and a consequent critical transition from 'pure form' to what he called 'pure experience'. This corresponded to a shift of focus, at the level of the work, away from form towards a preoccupation with materials (and their often industrially produced technical properties), along with an opening of works onto their own incompletions – often through serialism, but more generally through any means for introducing time into the constitution of the work, especially performance, along with a growing sense of the constitutive role of context. This led to a certain *im*materialism, associated with the conceptual dimension of works and a corresponding uncertainty as to how to locate the boundaries or limits of individual works. This was summed up in 1969 by Victor Burgin in the concept of 'situational aesthetics', in an article published in the same issue of *Studio International* as the first part of Joseph Kosuth's more notorious 'Art and Philosophy' – thereby inaugurating the double trajectory of anglophone conceptual art: relational and linguistic (post-formalist and neo-formalist).[12] The former led to the contextual and relational art of the 1980s and 1990s; the latter to various conceptual formalisms, including the mimetic neo-conceptualisms of the 1990s and early 2000s.[13]

However, as a merely abstract negation, unable to connect itself immanently to the multiple determinacies of its proliferating objects, post-formalism did not last long as a critical

12. Victor Burgin, 'Situational Aesthetics', *Studio International*, vol. 178, no. 915 (October 1969), pp. 118–21; Joseph Kosuth, 'Art and Philosophy: Part 1', ibid., pp. 134–7.

13. These historicist neo-conceptualisms (of, for example, in the UK, Simon Paterson, Gavin Turk, Martin Creed and, most reductively, Jonathan Monk) should be distinguished, in principle, from the most general postconceptual character of contemporary art.

category; less time even than its successor, postmodernism. Nonetheless, the impulse of post-formalism acquired a more enduring, more determinate legacy (different from the critical pluralism that had morphed into the early Hal Foster's 'critical postmodernism') through the idea of the 'expansion of art': the expansion of art to infinity, through the expansion to infinity of the field of possible artistic materials.[14] This idea should be distinguished in principle from Rosalind Krauss's concept of the 'expanded field', with which it is often conflated, in which Krauss exchanged Greenberg's aesthetic formalism for the theoretical formalism (or theoreticism) of a general semiotics applied directly to the artistic field.[15] For the expansion of the 'field' – understood by Krauss in a restricted semiotic manner, as the expansion of the field of significant differences through which artistic meaning is produced – was actually more fundamentally the breaking down – and thereby expansion to infinity – of the borders of the work itself, through the inclusion of new materials: not simply by breaking down the borders between the different arts, but more fundamentally the borders between art and non-art, or what, with slightly more paradoxical ontological nuance, Adorno called the borders between art and 'the empirical' (*der Empirie*).

However, rather than consummating the dissolution of form, the 'expansion of art' found its critical and curatorial correlate in the motif of 'becoming form', emblematically in the phrase 'When Attitudes Become Form', from the opening to the subtitle of Harald Szeeman's famous exhibition (its main title was *Live*

14. In Western Europe in the late 1960s this idea was mainly associated with Joseph Beuys and a group of artists centred on the triangle Vienna–Cologne–Düsseldorf, promoted by the journal *Interfunctionen*. See Friedrich W. Heubach, 'Interfunctionen, 1968–1975', in Gloria Moure, ed., *Behind the Facts: Interfunctionen, 1968–1975*, Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2004, pp. 48–59. For the Eastern European story, see Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Block: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe, 1965–1981*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2018.

15. Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' (1979), in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1985, pp. 276–90.

in Your Head) at the Kunsthalle, Berne, 1969. Symptomatically, this was the phrase by which the exhibition subsequently became generally known. (The full subtitle was 'When Attitudes Become Form [Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information]', and that list is obviously important in giving the exhibition some critical determinacy.) In the wake of the recent revisionist historiography of the exhibitions of the 1960s, this motif of 'becoming form' has been revived and repeated anew in ever more expansive critical contexts.[16] In the last twenty years, 'latitudes' have become form, along with 'history' and even 'living' itself.[17] More prosaically, in 2013 Elena Filipovic suggested that with the rise of the artist-curator, 'Exhibitions Become Form' – borrowing her title from a review of the Venice remake of *Attitudes* – although of course exhibitions don't need an *artist*-curator to do that; and they have in any case been 'form' from the outset of the contemporary conception of curation.[18]

The basic movement of contemporary art, then, has involved an expansion of the concept of art through its dissolution into and reflective absorption of fields of – not just previously, but enduringly – non-art materials and practices. This correspondingly expanded the extension of 'artistic form', while requiring the work's simultaneous preservation of the non-art status of

16. It is significant that when Szeeman's show was restaged at the Prada Foundation in Venice in 2013, not only had the main title of the original disappeared (*Live in Your Head* was too counterculturally 1960s perhaps), but the rest of the subtitle has disappeared too, thereby eliminating the extremes of the conceptual constellation across which the exhibition had been constructed, and which provided it with its internal dynamism.

17. *How Latitudes Become Form: Art in a Global Age* (2003) was an exhibition in the Walker Center, Minneapolis, held in the wake of the 2000 Global Conceptualism show; *History Becomes Form* (2010) sums up Boris Groys's analysis of Moscow Conceptualism; Nato Thompson's *Living as Form* (2012) is the slogan of an art activism of the everyday.

18. *When Exhibitions Become Form: The Rise of the Artist-Curator* is now a series edited by Filipovic for *Mousse Magazine*. This 'curator-artist'-centric conception of form-production appears as a disavowal of the critical recognition that the location of the principle of form-determination cannot be found in the subjectivity of the artist, but is rather distributed across the process of artistic production as a whole and condensed into the structural logic or coherence of the work itself. Transposing the old myth of the artist as the subjective origin of creative form onto the curator appears here as a doubly reactionary move. For a broader approach to exhibitions, see the Exhibition Histories series of books published by the journal *Afterall,* 2010–20.

certain of its new elements within their formal integration. For the criticality of this integration depends on the *ontological double-coding* of these elements, as at once inside and outside the work, in a manner paradigmatically exemplified by collage. It is this kind of double-coding constituting the critical status of the work, their contradictory structure, and the developmental dynamic they impart to the concept of art that suggests dialectical logic as a philosophical key to the comprehension of the concept of artistic form.[19] At the same time, a new question arises: namely, what, if anything, *delimits* this expansion of the concept of artistic form, at the level of the individual work, if the range of possible artistic materials is in principle infinite?

Before we consider this, though, we need to backtrack a little to the traditional, 'hylomorphic' concept of form, which the self-expansion of art since the 1960s effectively destroyed as a viable model for the philosophical comprehension of art, in both its objective (Aristotelian) and subjective (Kantian) variants; along with the Simondonian nominalist alternative that is taken by some as the best option for their replacement as a philosophical account of the process of artistic creation.

Hylomorphism and its nominalist critique

Derived etymologically from the Greek *hylé* (wood or matter) and *morphé* (shape or form), but coined only in the nineteenth century, the term 'hylomorphism' indicates that it is matter to which form is opposed in the traditional Aristotlean conception, in a manner derived via generalizing abstraction from the

19. 'Objective logic', Hegel argued, 'most directly replaces ontology', although 'it comprises within itself also the rest of metaphysics'. Subjective logic, on the other hand, the logic of the concept, takes up the determinations presented in the objective logic 'in themselves according to their particular content', and expounds them as 'something subjective, freely self-subsisting, self-determining'. Thus was ontology transformed by Hegel's dialectical logic into the first historical ontology: a historical ontology of spirit (*Geist*). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 42.

sculptural activity of shaping wood. Hylomorphism is the philosophical theory that being is a combination of form and matter within which matter is *potential* (indeterminate, unchanging and infinite) and form is *actual* and substantial: giving determinacy to matter, in each instance. Hence the ontological prioritization of form over 'mere' matter. Matter is denigrated as homogeneous and shapeless; form is lauded as meaning-giving. In particular, on this familiar conception, matter is essentially indifferent to the forms by which it is shaped.[20]

The problem with this view, as now-canonically pointed out in Gilbert Simondon's critique of hylomorphism (crudely put) is that it is an inadequate account of *individuation*, since it reduces individuals to no more than particular instances of general forms, or particulars, rather than individuating them ontologically. In Simendon's well-known example, the pouring of concrete into a mould, form is hylomorphically understood to reside exclusively in the mould, and to be imposed externally upon an indifferent matter. In contrast, Simendon sought an account of individuation (physical, biological, psychic and collective) as a monistic process of the emergence of individuals out of 'pre-individual' processes of being, which leave their mark within individuals in a residual *trans*individuality. Hence the idea that all individuals are transindividuals. Yet only individuals are actual; this a nominalist ontology. Matter is thus understood as an active material agent with no need of an external form to impose itself from without.[21] As presented by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

> Simondon exposes the technological insufficiency of the matter–form model, in that it assumes a fixed form and a matter deemed homogeneous. It is the idea of the law that assures the model's

20. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*; *Physics*, Book II, ch. 7. The debates regarding the ontological consistency, or otherwise, of the definitions of form in Aristotle's metaphysics and physics do not bear on the basic hylomorphic structure of the concept.

21. See Gilbert Simondon, *L'individual et sa genèse physico-biologique*, Paris: PUF, 1964, ch. 1; Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2013.

> coherence, since laws are what submit matter to this or that form, and conversely, realize in matter a given property deduced from the form. ... Simondon demonstrates that the *hylomorphic* model leaves many things, active and affective, by the wayside. On the one hand, to the formed or formable matter we must add an entire energetic materiality in movement, carrying *singularities* or *haecceitie*s that are already like implicit forms that are topological, rather than geometrical, and that combine with processes of deformation. ... On the other hand, to the essential properties of the matter [deriving from the formal essences] we must add variable intensive affects, now resulting from the operation, now on the contrary making it possible... At any rate, it is a question of surrendering ... [to the material], following where it leads by connecting operations to a materiality, instead of imposing a form upon a matter: what one addresses is less a matter submitted to the laws than a materiality possessing a *nomos* [law]. ...
>
> In short, what Simondon criticizes the hylomorphic model for is taking form and matter to be two terms defined separately, like the end of two half-chains whose connection can no longer be seen, like a simple relation of moulding behind which there is a perpetually variable, continuous modulation that it is no longer possible to grasp. The critique of the hylomorphic schema is based on 'the existence, between form and matter, of a zone of medium and intermediary dimension', of energetic, molecular dimension – a space unto itself that deploys its materiality through matter, a number unto itself that propels its traits through form.[22]

It is easy to see the appeal of such an ontology of individuation as a philosophical foundation for the nominalism of a contemporary art in which each work is imagined as individual to the point of singularity. Matter replaces form as the active principle. It only requires the additional equation of activity with agency to arrive at the monistic premiss of 'new materialism'. But is such a 'flat' naturalist ontology sufficiently differentiated to comprehend anything as deeply social and historical, as well as formally intricate, as works of contemporary art? The

22. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schitzophrenia,* trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 408–9.

problem lies in the unreflected character of the opposition between form and matter shared by hylomorphism and its critics alike. For Hegel, on the other hand, while form is central to the comprehension of any process of determination, and as such it is a general condition of intelligibility, it is not simply opposed to matter, but more importantly also to 'content'. Indeed, the latter appears as the result of conceptual reflection of the dialectics of the form–matter relation.

A dialectical philosophy of form

In Hegel's *Science of Logic* the concept of form is developed, from its most general meaning to more concrete ones, through a series of three dialectical oppositions – form and non-form (form as essence); form and matter; and form and content – while also bringing a range of other logical concepts into play along the way.

1. *Form as essence, or, form and non-form*

> To form belongs in general everything *determinate*; it is a form determination in so far as it is something posited and consequently distinct from *that of which* it is the form…
>
> … the form determinations of essence, as determinatenesses of reflection, are, in their more precise determinateness … identity and difference. The latter partly as diversity, partly as opposition.[23]

In this respect, the concept of form does indeed gain its initial determinacy through its difference from something formless ('that of which it is the form'). However, equally, the formlessness of its opposite is only *determined* as formless through its corresponding reflective opposition to form. At that point, it has become determined as 'matter'.

23. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 448–9.

2. *Form and matter*

'Matter [does not "precede" form, but rather] is determined as formless identity', Hegel argues; that is, it is 'determined as undetermined' by its relation to form. As the first name for 'that of which the form is the form', we could say that matter is a kind of *negative* form. 'Matter is a sheer *abstraction*';[24] as is the concept of form itself in its hylomorphic understanding. However, in this abstract identity with form, in having been formed (through its opposition to form), matter becomes *content*.

3. *Form and content*

Content, for Hegel, is the name for the unity of form and matter: 'the identical element in form and matter'; 'content is [therefore] determinate in its own self'.[25] There is, then, a reproduction of form's opposition to matter, within content, such that the determinateness of form is 'indifference of content'. Dialectically, there is thus a doubling of each concept here: form and content.

4. *Dialectical doubling of form*

> Regarding the antithesis of form and content it is essential to remember that the content is not formless, but that it has the *form within itself* just as much as the form is *something external* to it. We have here the doubling of form: on the one hand, as inwardly reflected, it is the content; on the other hand, as not reflected inwardly, it is the external existence, that is indifferent to the content. What is here present *in-itself* is the absolute relationship of form and content, i.e. the reciprocal overturning [*Umschlagen*] of one into the other, so that 'content' is nothing but the reciprocal *overturning of form* into content, and 'form' nothing but *overturning of content* into form.[26]

24. Ibid., pp. 447–50.
25. Ibid., p. 455.
26. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting and H.S. Harris, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hacking, 1991, # 133, p. 202. For form as a reflection determination of content, cf. Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being: Hegel's False and His Genuine Ontology*, trans. David Fernbach, London: Merlin Press, 1978, pp. 93–4.

There is thus a primacy of 'content' over 'matter' in the dialectical determination of form. Content is developed form. Furthermore, where content is historical, it relies on a historically given state not of matter in general, but of determinate *materials*.

5. *Dialectical doubling of content as developed, self-moving form*

> [The] content is the developed form, i.e. both the externality and *opposition* of independent existences, and their identical relation, within which alone these distinct existences are what they are.

'Developed' form is thus a *self-moving form*:

> self-movement of the form is *activity* [*Tätigkeit*], activation [*Betätigung*] of the thing [*Sache*] as the *real* ground, which sublates itself into actuality, and the activation of the contingent actuality, i.e. of the conditions: their inward reflection and their self-sublation into ... the actuality of the thing/*matter* [*Sache*].[27]

We thus end up with a concept of form as the self-moving activity of things (*Sachen*), sublating the content of 'developed form'. Or, as Adorno put it in *Aesthetic Theory* with regard to the historical character of art: 'the law of movement is the law of form'.[28]

Whereas in Hegel the concept of form is dialectically multifaceted, being constructed in a development running through a series of reflected oppositional pairings, in the critique of hylomorphism associated with Simondon and propounded by Deleuze and Guattari it is the simple Aristotelian concept of form that is the target, constructed exclusively through its opposition to 'matter', without reference to content. Thus when Deleuze and Guattari write of 'less a matter submitted to the laws than a materiality *possessing* a *nomos/law*', they appear not to be escaping 'form', but rather to be implicitly invoking

27. Hegel, ibid., # 147, p. 220.
28. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 3.

the dialectical concept of content, as the unity of form and matter, through which a higher-level opposition to form is then reproduced. And when they write of 'the existence, *between* form and matter, of a zone of medium and intermediary dimension', they appear themselves to be precisely 'taking form and matter to be two terms defined separately' – the main problem with the hylomorphic model.

In this regard, Hegel does not just move beyond the abstract opposition of form and matter in the hylomorphic model, but dialectically incorporates the undialectical critique of hylomorphism into his concept of form. This is not to suggest that there are no conceptual problems remaining here, posed by the historical development of artistic form, but it does relocate the philosophical terrain on which they are to be pursued. This is the terrain of Adorno's immanent critique of the dialectical shortcomings of Hegel's own philosophy of art, in which a particular idealist metaphysics undialectically overdetermines the notion of artistic content.[29] For in Hegel's concept of art as the sensuous semblance of the idea, a predetermined metaphysical 'content' drives the deduction of its sensuous forms of appearance, despite their dialectical difference from it. However, with regard to social form, it is precisely the metaphysical idealism of this depiction of the process of form-determination that makes Hegel's logic appropriate for the presentation of the social form of value, in Marx's *Capital*, wherein social universality appears, precisely, *only* in 'alienated' and illusorily self-sufficient, ideal forms: commodity, money, capital. It is this *illusorily self-sufficient ideality* that makes capitalistic social form structurally homologous to the ontological status of the autonomous artwork.

However, if Hegel's (broadly thematic) conception of artistic content betrays the deeper dialectical character of the

29. See *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 352ff.

form–content distinction in his logic, Adorno's own presentation of artistic form is itself betrayed by a lingering aestheticism, marked by his widespread use of the phrase 'aesthetic form' (*ästhetische Form*), when the philosophical context of his own text demands rather the continued use of his phrase 'artistic form' (*kunsterlich Form*) – and this, despite Adorno's recognition of the fact that 'Kant's aesthetics had no emphatic concept of the artwork and relegated it to the level of a sublimated means of pleasure', a 'castrated hedonism, desire without desire'.[30] Ironically, it is the lingering confusion spread by the use of the term 'aesthetic' as synonymous to 'art' (first noted but then disavowed by Hegel at the outset of the Introduction to his *Lectures on Beautiful Art*) that vitiates a number of formulations in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. In Adorno, Hegel thus comes to act as a Trojan Horse for the maintenance of a residual Kantian aestheticism that is nonetheless formally disavowed. This is a consequence of the conflation of the enduring importance of the subjective mediation of the artwork with a Kantian use of the term 'aesthetic'.

The philosophical moves required to update the Hegel–Adorno problematic are thus (i) the replacement of Hegel's understanding of the 'content' of art with Adorno's more concretely historical conception of content as a relationship between *artistic materials* and *techniques*, within a more fully dialecticized account of form–content relations;[31] (ii) the de-aestheticization or conceptual expansion of Adorno's conception of artistic form, rendering it consistent with his own concepts of technique and artistic materials; and hence (iii) a greater sense of the ways in which the artwork internally mediates *art-institutional* forms, as well as the most general social forms of commodity, money,

30. *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 253, 11.

31. Cf. Walter Benjamin's remark that technique is 'the point at which the unfruitful antithesis of form and content can be surpassed'. 'The Author as Producer' (1934), in *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: *1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 777.

capital and the state, along with other historically received and contested cultural forms, such as gender, race and sexuality.

In Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, following one line of thought in Nietzsche, the problematic of form is displaced altogether, in favour of a discourse on *forces* that appears in a historicized manner in relation to art, as follows:

> If there is a modern age … [t]he essential relation is no longer matter-forms (or substances-attributes); neither is it the continuous development of form and the continuous variation of matter. It is now a direct relation *material-forces*. A material is a molecularized matter, which must accordingly 'harness' forces of the Cosmos. There is no longer a matter that finds its corresponding principle of intelligibility. It is now a question of elaborating a material charged with harnessing forces of a different order: the visible material must capture nonvisible forces. … The forces to be captured are … the forces of an immaterial, nonformal and energetic Cosmos. … This is the postromantic turning point: the essential thing is no longer forms and matters, or themes, but forces, densities and intensities. … The problem is … now a problem of consistency or consolidation: how to consolidate the material, make it consistent, so that it can harness unthinkable, invisible, nonsonorous forces?[32]

Consistency is indeed the problem – but neither the Nietzschean nor the Simondonian framework can offer more than a positivistic response to this issue. For this generalized cosmology of forces is indifferent to the immanent art/non-art relation, which is at the centre of the 'life' of contemporary art in its negotiation of the problem of form. The problematically differentiating, self-enclosing function of artistic form is instead replaced by Deleuze and Guattari by general concepts of *capture* and *territorialization*. Yet in a specifically artistic context, the problem of 'consistency or consolidation' – which for them

32. *A Thousand Plateaus,* pp. 342–3. For a recent Simondonian development of this trajectory, with reference to musical performance, see Paulo de Assis, 'Transduction and Ensembles of Transducers: Relaying Flows of Intensities', in Michael Schwab, ed., *Transpositions: Aesthetico-Epistemic Operators in Artistic Research*, Leuven: Orpheus Institute, Ghent/Leuven University Press, 2018, pp. 245–65.

replaces the problem of form, as a variant of the problem of unity – appears from an alternative perspective to be, once again, precisely the problem of form itself, in the guise of the problem of the organization of a work into coherence.

Articulation, organization and coherence, or, the self-limiting self-suspension of the real

Alongside 'articulation', 'coherence' (*Stimmigkeit*) is the main category of form in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. 'Coherence' names the problem of form from the standpoint of the consistency of the whole.[33] 'Articulation' (*Artikulation*) is the name of the same problem viewed from the practical standpoint of organizing the elements of the work into a unity. Organization (*Organisation*), 'the relation of elements to each other' is what 'constitutes form'. Form may thus be summarized as 'the quintessence of all elements of logicality, or more broadly, coherence [*Stimmigkeit*] in artworks'.[34] Indeed, it is not going too far to suggest that for Adorno, art *is* form.

> As little as art is to be defined by any other element, it is simply identical with form. Every other element can be negated in the concept of form…
>
> [Form is thus] the distinguishing aspect of art… [it is] that in artworks by which they become artworks.
>
> Art has precisely the same chance of survival as does form, no better.[35]

The reason for this is that it is through the artefact's form or coherence that 'each and every successful work *separates itself* from the merely existing'. In separating itself from the merely

33. *Stimmigkeit* was rendered as 'consistency' in the first English translation of *Aesthetic Theory*; 'coherence' in the second. Coherence one might say, following Quine, is simply consistency at the level of the whole.
34. *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 143, 140.
35. Ibid., pp. 140, 144, 141.

existing, 'art *opposes the empirical* [*der Empirie*] through the element [*Moment*] of form' and thereby constitutes its 'autonomy' at the level of the work itself. In so doing form appears as 'the law of the transfiguration of the existing, counter to which it represents freedom'.[36]

However, this separation/opposition/transfiguration is *not* understood to be the act of some transcendental aesthetic subjectivity, but is rather an 'objective' quality of the work. And it is with reference to this objective quality that Adorno uses the term 'aesthetic'. In this regard, in form, the work is said to 'free itself from being simply a product of subjectivity'. 'In artworks, form is aesthetic essentially insofar as it is an objective determination [*objective Bestimmung*].' Appearance, though, remains ineliminable from the reference to aesthetic:

> aesthetic form is the objective organization within each artwork of *what appears* as *bindingly eloquent*.[37]

So, how does the relationship between the expansion of materials and formal limitation appear, in that 'law of movement' or self-development of art that is for Adorno, at the highest level, art's 'law of form'? In the first place:

> Form inevitably limits what is formed, for otherwise its concept would lose its specific difference to what is formed. ... the artistic labour of forming is always a process of selecting, trimming, renouncing. Without rejection there is no form...[38]

This is what leads to the vitalist reaction against form. In this respect, 'the expansion of available materials' (which Adorno believed had 'been *much overestimated* by those external to it') 'is offset by the renunciation demanded of the artist by ... the condition of the [particular] material' selected.

36. Ibid., pp. 142, 5, 143, emphases added.
37. Ibid., pp. 142–3.
38. Ibid., p. 144.

> Every innovative expansion of the material into the unknown, going beyond the material's given condition, is to a large extent a function of the material and its critique, which is defined by the material itself.[39]

Selection of artistic materials is thus the determining factor here. In accordance with 'the Hegelian argument against Kant': 'The moment a limit is posited, it is overstepped and that against which the limit was established is absorbed.' Conversely, as a 'posited unity', form 'constantly suspends itself [*suspendiert sie*] as such: essential to it is that it *interrupts itself through its other* [its materials] just as the essence of its coherence is that it does not [ultimately] cohere'.[40] Otherwise it would as reconciled to, and hence become affirmative of, actuality.

The question of the delimitation of the expansion of the concept of artistic form is thus not, after all, a question of the *extent* of the expansion of artistic materials, or the existence of some *a priori limit* to the extent of that expansion. The expansion is in principle infinite for art as such, already, but not of course for any particular individual work. The question is rather that of the *modes of the self-limiting suspension* of the 'empirical reality' of a portion of what exists, performed by individual works, closing this portion off from its functional context, organizing or reorganizing it, and positing it as an object of artistic reflection; then, in part, suspending that suspension. This is a self-limiting suspension which – in so far as 'the mediation of form and content demands that we recognize aesthetic [=artistic] form as sedimented [*sedimentierter*] content'[41] – requires social form as its immanent 'content'. Here, at the level of social form, the expansion to infinity of possible artistic materials, which makes every selection of artistic materials into an act of freedom, mimics the

39. Ibid., p. 148.
40. Ibid., pp. 5 and 143, emphasis added.
41. Ibid., p. 5.

self-positing structure of infinity of the accumulation of capital (infinite productivity). Just as the subject-like quality of the autonomous artwork as a self-determining form (an object that presents itself as behaving like a subject) mimics both the fantasy of the freedom of the self-possessing bourgeois individual and the actuality of the 'automatic subject' of capital alike. And it does so, not directly, or immediately, but, in each case, via the alienated form of its own mediated objectivity; mimicking the alienated universality of the objective structures of the social forms of value and culture – commodity, money, capital, state, gender, race, sexuality…

In so far as sociality appears as form, it has only an alienated objectivity.

The issue here is thus less the 'sociological' one of the internality of autonomous art to the structures of capitalist societies, via its commodity form (the contradictory art commodity); still less any relationship of artistic representation to capitalism, at a thematic level; and far more the internality of the structures and processes of capitalist societies to autonomous art, *qua autonomous*; that is, not in its dependent or heteronomous dimension (as is usually supposed), but in its very autonomy itself.

Crisis as form

It is within this structural historical immanence that 'crisis' appears as form: as a particular historical instantiation of the contradictory social form of art's autonomy, pushed to the point of a seemingly irresolvable antagonism or antinomy. For crisis, in so far as it is becoming 'permanent', is a new form of capitalistic sociality as such. It is part of the core of the concept of crisis, as a moment of decision within a transitional process (at its limit, in its medical origin, a transitional process within illness from life to death), that it cannot be permanent. What is increasingly

referred to as 'permanent crisis', then, is no longer technically a crisis, but a new and terrible form of social reproduction – a form of social reproduction grounded in the temporality of systemic disjunction that is part of the temporal form of historical contemporaneity produced by the 'globalization' of capital.[42] Capitalist crisis is always a crisis in the consistency or coherence of the social itself. Contemporary art, in the critical sense of that term, is the art of such a situation.

In brief, then, crisis is a new general form of the social. It is expressed by that crisis of art that takes the form of a crisis of form. Crisis of form is the primary form-determination of contemporary art. Each individual work participates in that expression to the extent to which it enacts, or mediates, the problem of form as the problem of the self-limiting suspension of the real.

42. Cf. Peter Osborne, 'A Sudden Topicality: Marx, Nietzsche and the Politics of Crisis', *Radical Philosophy* 160 (March/April 2010), pp. 19–26.

Image credits

INTRODUCTION

Structura Concept, Belgrade, 2019

MATERIALISMS

Digital Deineka, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2015
(*At the Construction of New Workshops*, 1926)

ART & LABOUR

Maintenance Work, Fundacion NMAC, Vejer de la Frontera, Andalusia, 2018

INSTABILITIES OF FORM

Picture Window, Basel, 2019

SOCIAL ECOLOGIES, INTIMATIONS OF CATASTROPHE

Die-In, University of Paris-8, Saint-Denis, 2019

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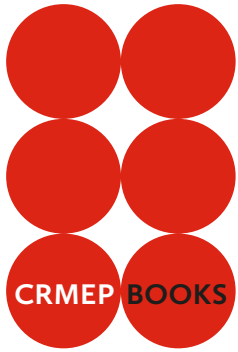

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