KUNST UND POLITIK

JAHRBUCH DER GUERNICA-GESELLSCHAFT

Schwerpunkt:
Keywords for Marxist Art History Today

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Foreword: Keywords for Marxist Art History Today

This volume of *Kunst und Politik* borrows its title from Raymond Williams's well-known book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, first published in 1976. This was a hugely successful work, which went through eight impressions in five years, before appearing in a second and revised edition in 1983. There have been several editions since, the most recent from Oxford University Press in 2014.

Unlike *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958) – the study out of which it grew – *Keywords* was openly an essay in historical materialism; in the Introduction Williams took his distance from Structuralist approaches to language.[1] Describing his field as »*historical semantics*«, Williams emphasized that the book was the fruit of work »done in an area where several disciplines converge«.[2] In that respect our enterprises coincide. But while we acknowledge the inspiration of Williams's work our own objectives are necessarily more modest. We are not so much interested in the »historical semantics« of words – although that plays some role in the essays that follow – as in the present state of Marxist art history. We conceived the volume as an assemblage of soundings into current debates and concerns, rendered timely by the discernible uptick in interest in Marxist art history over the last two decades.

Williams himself acknowledged that a vast amount of research needed to be done in the field he had mapped and that this would necessarily require work that was collective in nature.[3] In conceiving this volume, we wanted to involve a range of scholars from different generations, different national contexts and with different relationships to Marxism. (To come clean: one of the editors is near the beginning of her academic career, the other is well into his retirement). We hope that it will contribute to the strengthening of links both nationally and internationally, and provide helpful overviews for those seeking to grasp the history of concepts sometimes taken for granted. When assembling the volume, it became clear that while certain keywords have been crucial to recent developments in Marxist art history and cultural theory more broadly, others seem to have slipped out of view. While the debates of the last decade around art and labour have meant terms such as commodity, labour, value and autonomy are never far from view, terms including ideology, period, style, public sphere, and patron have been far less present in recent years. We therefore hope that these keywords will clarify the continued purchase of concepts that have been displaced, and that connecting the dots between entries may further invigorate current Marxist art history. For example, elements of James Van Dyke's discussion of style might offer ways to address the contemporary inter-media relations described by Marina Vishmidt in the entry on Mediation, while read together, Ciarán Finlayson's entry on Uneven and Combined Development and Avigail Moss's entry on Period clarify the political stakes of historiography and periodization both historically and today.

The first edition of *Keywords* has 110 entries and took almost twenty years to gestate and write – it began life as a 60-word appendix to *Culture and Society*, which had to be

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sacrificed for reasons of length.[4] We too had restrictions of length as well as the problems that arise in collaborative projects that depend on the generosity of over-worked friends and colleagues. We originally commissioned 21 entries but in the way of things, three of these were not delivered for one reason or another. Those which remain at present in the status of unrealized intentions include Contemporary, Imperialism, and Post-Colonialism. We should also acknowledge that some of the topics arose from the suggestions of contributors and three of our original proposals – Global, Materialism, and Reproduction – were not taken up. It's also easy to think of other terms that would be included were we envisioning a larger project: Abstraction, Academy, Art Theory, Avant-Garde, Form, Genre, Hegemony, Iconography, and Sign are obvious omissions. One of our original invitees – who sadly could not contribute – observed: »what kind of Marxist work is it that doesn't include Class?« This was a problem we were not able to resolve and about which a few words are necessary.

We do of course accept David Harvey's terse formulation that »class is the foundational inequality necessary to the reproduction of capitalism«,[5] but the changes wrought by globalization and financialization force on us a rethinking that looks backwards as well as forwards. Harvey has made a useful distinction between capital (the systemic exploitation of proletarians through wage labor) and capitalism as a larger system in which workers are exploited in a whole range of different ways throughout their lives: »the left, obsessed with the figure of the factory worker as the bearer of class consciousness and as the avatar of socialist ambition, fails largely to incorporate this other world of class practices into its thinking and its political strategies.«[6] In other words »there is necessarily a contradictory unity in class conflict and class struggle across the spheres of working and living.«[7] It is through the structures of exploitation that pervade daily life that racialization, gender and other forms of differential empowerment reproduce inequalities that divide working class people from each other. It has long been evident that Marxism needs to develop modes of analysis more attentive to this level of everyday experience. These transformations partly inform our decision not to have an entry on Class. It seemed that if we were to have an entry on that term, we would also want to include entries on Gender and Race. Yet, to separate out these terms asks too little of Marxism, enabling us to proceed as if those vectors of experience are not constantly interrelated and reproduced by capital, and therefore should not inform the way we understand *all* our categories, from Autonomy to Value. In this spirit, many of our entries incorporate theoretical advances made in black studies, postcolonial thought, feminist theory, queer theory and ecocriticism alongside Marxism. To work in this way is to work against the ossification of thought, and also against scholarly novelty as a career-building mechanism. Instead, it signals a commitment to keep pushing for ways of understanding the world that clarify both our targets and our resources in the ongoing project to end capitalism. This has to remain our baseline, and the project shared with our comrades in order to maintain that thread between intellectual work and practical action, especially during the current, global rise of the far-right whose targets painfully remind us of the lines of solidarity we must forge.

Raymond Williams died in 1988. He lived long enough to see Margaret Thatcher elected to her third term of office as British Prime Minister in 1987 and was acutely sensitive to the reactionary turn of the western democracies from the mid-1970s. The period since his death has been one of successive crises and wars to the extent that in-

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formed commentators have begun to speak of global capitalism entering a phase of terminal breakdown and decline. One response to this situation – from the most prominent public intellectual of the art-historical left in the English-speaking world – has been to emphasize the failure of Marxism's predictive powers (the non-appearance of the triumphant working-class subject) and advocate a turn to a vision of human prospects more tailored to the limitations of the human species. A »pessimism of strength« one might say, to borrow a phrase.[8] This is emphatically unlike Williams's perspective. In one of his last books Williams wrote: »As things now are, all the good ideas, and especially the ways in which they connect or might connect with how people are actually living, have to be rigorously examined.«[9] Williams saw that »mode of production«, the central concept of Marx's critique of capitalism, was itself tainted by capitalism's instrumentalist mentality and called for a »unified social theory« that encompassed humanity's affective life as well as those aspects that could be quantified.[10] This perspective also informs our previous comments on class, for as Cedric Robinson describes, where Marxism »absorbed the conceits of bourgeois historical consciousness, a formal (mathematical), rationalist epistemology costumed in a teleological historicity« it cannot help but give »primacy to commerce« and thus, reinscribe the classical figure of the revolutionary proletariat as its priveleged agent.[11] More importantly, Williams and Robinson share a conception of human nature premised in an essentially optimistic view of human potential, even against the odds. We support this perspective.[12]

Williams wrote in his Introduction that »this is a book in which the author would positively welcome amendment, correction and addition as well as the usual range of responses and comments«.[13] He was good to his word and in the second edition included twenty-one new words, acknowledging that these – together with additions and corrections to the original text – had arisen partly from the stimulus of the many people who had written or spoke to him about the book, some of whom he named.[14] We hope that our readers will follow this example. *Kunst und Politik* has generously promised us space for an Addendum in a future issue.

Our thanks to all the contributors for their time and patience and to Norbert Schneider and Martin Papenbrock for their support.

Larne Abse Gogarty and Andrew Hemingway

1 For the origins of *Keywords*, see Raymond Williams: *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Glasgow 1976, pp.12-13; for historical materialism, see p. 20-21.

2 Ibid., pp. 20, 11-12, 15. Williams used the same term to describe the work in his interviews with *New Left Review*, although his interviewers described it as »a sort of historical philology«. Raymond Williams: *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. London 1979, p. 175.

3 Ibid., p. 18.

4 Ibid., pp. 12-13.

5 David Harvey: *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oxford 2010, p. 231.

6 David Harvey: *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. London 2014, p. 68. This is not to deny the continuing importance of factory labor as a potential social force globally.

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The largest factories in human history are currently operating in China. See Joshua B. Freeman: *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World*. New York 2018, chapter 7.

7 Harvey 2014 (as note 6), p. 85.

8 T.J. Clark: »For a Left with No Future« In: *New Left Review*, series 2, no. 74, March/April 2012, pp. 53-75.

9 Raymond Williams: *Towards 2000*. Harmondsworth 1983, p. 243.

10 Ibid., pp. 260, 264-7.

11 Cedric Robinson: *The Anthropology of Marxism*. Aldershot 2001, p. 134.

12 Susan Watkins, in her response to Clark's pessimistic charge against human nature has challenged both his use of anthropological evidence and his reading of sources. She also draws on Williams to propose an alternative to Clark's call for a tragic understanding of history (pp. 98-100). See Susan Watkins: »Presentism« In: *New Left Review*, series 2, no. 74, March/April 2012, pp. 77-102.

13 Williams 1976 (as note 1), p. 23.

14 Raymond Williams: »Preface to the Second Edition« In: *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London 1983, p. 27.

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Peter Smith

Aesthetic

On Marx, Marxism and the Aesthetic

Since the word »aesthetic« was first assimilated into philosophical discourse in the eighteenth century it has entered everyday language. Related terminology including judgment, value, sensibility, and taste is part of the historical genesis of established notions of the aesthetic. These terms indicate a human capacity for »higher perception« – often used as discursive markers of social refinement and sensibility. In an early formulation the aesthetic implied moral sense and a social perspective and later aspired to greater autonomy in the kind of art that is said to function »without … rules or constraints other that its own.«[1] In general the term is rooted in the social categories of artistic perception with due emphasis on the life of the senses and the ideal of beauty.

Thinking through the use of the term in relation to the world-changing ideas of Marx requires critical engagement with his conception of the human subject. His early writings underline the idea that the development of the senses is a constituent part of full human development. The significance of this perspective had lasting importance in Marx's systematic writings on the relationship between the economic, political and intellectual activities of humankind. In his early writing he alludes to the quality of human life as the basis for a person's way of being in the world. Following this we argue that Marx's critique of alienation represents an aesthetic outlook centered on human self-creation in free activity and self-determination.

The importance of the aesthetic for Marx and other theorists who followed German idealist thought lies in the discovery that aesthetics is connected with the emergence of subjectivity as a key issue in modern philosophy. Andrew Bowie has noted that »without recourse to divinity«[2] knowledge is grounded in the subject and the aesthetic becomes a link between internal and the external worlds, between self-consciousness and nature. The characteristic forms of aesthetic production, including the visual arts, provided an experience of natural and artistic beauty that is »vital to the understanding of self-consciousness.«[3] The emphasis on making, doing, and self-creation figure prominently in a search for meaning after the demise of theological authority in the world. Bowie notes: »[…] The new awareness of the fact that human beings can create aesthetic products whose interrelating parts are significant in ways which natural science cannot explain are essential to this search.«[4] Sensuous perception in this view indicates an aptitude beyond the instrumental view of things, beyond scientific quantification and the commodity form. As Bowie observes: »Marx's insights into the social and cultural effect of capitalism have their roots in aesthetics.«[5]

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Although he left no systematic exposition of his ideas on aesthetics Marx's thought was guided by the epistemological turn in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century philosophy that had given prominence to this term. We will argue therefore that art and aesthetics, or theoretical products and forms of consciousness more generally, belong to a Marxist conception of history that connects these interests with material practice. The romantic vision of the unalienated state of humankind in a classless society centers squarely on labor in its various forms. The early writings of Marx develop a theory of alienated labor linked with the liberation of the senses and a way of approaching things in the world. In a description of the material conditions in which people live Marx and Engels present an ontological definition of the human subject as something inscribed within its capacities and its endeavor: »The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions of determining their production.«[6] This in turn relates to the way in which human activity is understood to be more than mere survival or (of necessity) the reproduction of physical existence:

> »Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals [›men‹/humankind], a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with what their mode of production.«[7]

Marx's ideas on the philosophical principle of labor are based on study of its historical manifestations. His early critical thinking derives from Rousseau and Schiller whose attacks on modernity were expressed as a revolt against social fragmentation, division of labor, alienation in the workplace, and the characteristic eighteenth-century idea of society as a mechanically driven whole.[8] This moral critique has a philosophical counterpart in the Hegelian dialectic and later in Marx's own dialectical philosophy. Both Hegel and Marx attacked the systematic abstraction of the categories of work, exchange value, and money in political and economic discourse.[9] The outstanding idea of Hegel's philosophy was his conceiving of human labor as the act of self-creation and as process. As Marx writes:

> »The importance of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and its final result […] lies in the fact that Hegel conceives of the self-creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of object [*Entgegenständlichung*], as alienation and as supersession of this alienation; that he therefore grasps the nature of *labor* and conceives objective man – true, because real man – as the result of his own labor.«[10]

For Hegel labor is the »self-confirming essence of man«.[11] Building on this Marx observes that for Hegel »the self is *abstractly* conceived man, man produced by abstraction.«[12] In this abstraction, Marx argues, Hegel fails to recognize that labor has a negative side, embodied in the crucial concept of alienated labor.[13] In this view, labor still remains as an abstraction and it is wrong, according to Marx, to say, as Hegel appears to say, that »*self-consciousness* has eyes, ears and essential powers.« This conceptualization makes no sense for Marx because, as he notes »*self-consciousness* is rather a quality of human nature, of the eye, etc; human nature is not a quality of *self-consciousness.*«[14]

Marx thus posits that humankind *is* human nature, a human natural being and a *species-being* differentiated in itself as conscious activity, and in its developmental and productive labor. The real corporeal *man*, is an »active natural being« with »dispositions

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and capacities«[15] and passions deployable in establishing standards and producing »in accordance with the laws of beauty«:

> »It is therefore in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a species being. Such production is his active species-life. Through it nature appears as *his* [sic] work and *his* reality. The object of labor is therefore the *objectification of the species-life of man*: for man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate for himself in a world he has himself created. In labor therefore tears away from him his *species-life*, his true species-objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage of his organic body, nature is taken from him.«[16]

Marx is most eloquently »aesthetic« in his thoughts on the notions of »fashioning« and »making« as human capacities that unfold in the free exercise of the senses or lack of fulfillment in the conditions of oppression. István Mészáros thus observes:

> »The ideal of ›positive transcendence‹ of alienation is formulated as a necessary socio-historical supersession of the ›mediations‹: *private property – exchange – division of labor* which interpose themselves between man and his activity and prevent him from finding fulfillment in his labor, in the exercise of his productive (creative) abilities, and in the appropriation of the products of his activity.«[17]

In other words what Marx opposes is not mediation as such but the mediation of the mediation, and the rupturing of the »*ontologically fundamental* self-mediation of man with nature«[18]

In his early writing and consistently in his mature writing Marx tried to find ways »to get history started, by removing obstacles in its path.«[19] In a materialist aesthetic this will require the full powers of the human subject, freely expressed as constituent parts of a world in which work, leisure and happiness might be realized. The Marxian notion of this sublime condition, it should be noted, would in any case require a more concrete historical definition of the problem of alienation than had hitherto been available. Eagleton writes: »Marx's *Paris Manuscripts* surpass the duality between the practical and the aesthetic« which, he [Eagleton] says, »lies at the heart of philosophical idealism«[20] and separates culture from material life.

The convergence of the practical and the aesthetic in Marx's formulation of his thoughts in the 1840s is expressed in relation to the mediation of private property and the capitalist mode of production. Understanding the linkage between growth of independent private capital (that is private property) and labor as the source of property is central to Marx's critique of alienation in the past as well as in the industrial age. Private property is a concept viewed by Marx from both sides of its meaning – that is from the side of the worker and the non-worker. One is the »master of labor« and the other is not. The laborer is thus estranged from herself and her own activity since the product is not hers. She creates »the domination of the non-producer over production and its product«.[21] A little further on Marx adds: »*Private property* is therefore the product, result and necessary consequence of alienated labor, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself.«[22]

The concept of private property and the reality to which it refers is viewed by Marx in relation to the human body and »the sensuous appropriation of the human essence« in which the human subject is transmogrified by »a sense of *direct*, one-sided *consumption*,

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of *possession*, of *having.*«[23] For Marx the remarkable upshot of this »sense of having« is expressed as follows:

> »Although private property conceives all these immediate realizations of property only *as a means of life*; and the life they serve is the *life* of *private property,* labor and capitalization. Therefore *all* physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple estrangement of these senses – the sense of having. So that it might give birth to its inner wealth, human nature had to be reduced to this absolute poverty.«[24]

The solution to the alienation of the senses for Marx is in the supersession of the rule of money and private property:

> »The positive supersession of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and attributes: but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become *human*, subjectively as well as objectively. The eye has become a *human* eye, just as its object has become a social, *human* object. Made by man for man. The senses have therefore become theoreticians in their immediate praxis.«[25]

In short the alienated version of visuality and the life of the senses more generally will be resolved in the struggle against private property. Margaret A. Rose notes:

> »The end of the alienation of our senses will, according to these terms also mean an end to the fetishization of both human qualities and objects … production will again be artistic … and the appreciation of artistic value no longer dominated by the sense of ›having‹.«[26]

For Marx the senses are endowed with knowledge and possess a power of reasoning in their »theoretician character« as Mészáros calls it.[27] In a restricted form human powers are limited to the sphere of utility and impoverished by dehumanization. In other words the alienation of the senses from the praxis of life was intensified when human skills and labor were subdivided into discrete categories and the day-to-day notions of industry and progress were increasingly distanced from the world of art.

It should be clear that we wish to defend the aesthetic as key component in Marxism as a philosophy of freedom that is rooted in the concept of human nature. It is precisely the concept of human nature, with its humanist connotations, that was challenged by Althusser[28]and his followers in the 1970s and the 1980s and later defended against its detactors in the writing of Norman Geras and others.[29] The anti-humanist argument effectively constructs the view that Marxism is a »science« and as such is inimical to aesthetics and the ethical dimension which may be dispensed with as residues of bourgeois philosophy. It is a view that marginalizes the creative potential of human beings and establishes a binary opposition »as destructive for cultural theory as it is for Marxism in general.«[30] In our view the historical differentiation of science and art dissociates the latter from its critical cognitive functions as part of life praxis, devaluing theory and eliding materialist conceptions of human nature. Marx formulates this point in *Capital* when he writes: »[Man] … acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.«[31]

Geras argues that human nature and the related concepts of »natural desire« and »needs« is subject to historical variation and yet maintains general and enduring characteristics. Human nature, therefore, is »fundamental to historical materialism in the exact

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sense of being part of its theoretical foundation.«[32] The aesthetic implications of this argument occur in the recognition of enduring imperatives of essential human needs and capacities. As Marx puts it: »the full development of human mastery over the forces of nature… the absolute workings of his [sic] creative potentialities… the development of all human powers.«[33]

As we have noted human nature is stunted and alienated under capitalism in ways that are directly related to the labor process. Where human activity is compromised and debased under capitalism, the experience of loss and fragmentation is replaced by a call to action (the Marxist option) or, alternatively, the intellectualist option: separation from mainstream society. Critics and historians have thus observed a turning point after 1848 when art increasingly came to be seen as »the social anti-thesis of society«[34] and an escape from the banality of official culture.

The Autonomy of the Aesthetic

From the early nineteenth-century there was a distinction between two conceptions of art. Michael Podro notes a fundamental opposition between »a conception of art as part of a contemplative and as a part of active life – as tied primarily to thought or primarily to social relations.«[35] This opposition was played out in the formation of artistic fractions with common interests: there was at one extreme the trend towards hermetic modes of aestheticism, underscored by the label *l'art pour l'art*, and at the other, an art of confrontation and social engagement. Released from the metaphysical moorings of the church or the state, art becomes an autonomous institution no longer attached to the praxis of life and oriented to »purely aesthetic« ways of seeing. Löwy and Sayre note »the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest«[36] as characteristic of a sense loss and alienation of human relations. This feeling of apartness is reflected in the bleakness of Peter Bürger's conclusions on the fate of modern art: firstly: »As the division of labor becomes widespread, the artist and the writer turn into specialists«[37] and secondly:

> »The citizen who, in everyday life has been reduced to a partial function (means-ends activity) can be discovered in art as ›human being‹. Here, one can unfold the abundance of one's talents, though with the proviso that this sphere remains strictly separate from the praxis of life.«[38]

For Bürger the separation is definitive and irreversible: »Art becomes the content of art«[39] and this, for him, confirms a reading of the way philosophical aesthetics in the late eighteenth century had already established a »non-purposive realm of art« where in theory the notion of usefulness (or *prodesse* as Bürger calls it) is viewed as »an extra-artistic factor […] and criticism censures as inartistic works with a didactic tendency.«[40]

Aesthetic activity in the past included ritual functions incorporated into the life praxis of the societies that they served. These included cultic and representational works serving the church or the court. These constituencies changed in the industrial period as the arts were no longer defined by or responsive to the collective modes of reception of the past. Bürger notes that when art is no longer »tied to the praxis of life«[41] it becomes a new kind of social phenomenon. And this in turn calls into being a negation of the autonomy of art in the form of counteractive and revolutionary critique.

This negation represents a turning point and the formation of the historical avant-garde – a short-lived but influential movement – that represents an »attempt to organize

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a new life praxis from a basis in art« (49) and an attack on the *institution* of art as a bourgeois concept: »Seen in this fashion, the separation of art from the praxis of life becomes the decisive characteristic of autonomy of bourgeois art« (49). Eagleton captures the paradox of the historical avant-garde when he says:

> »An aesthetic society will be the fruit of the most resolutely instrumental political action … The disinterested emancipation of human faculties will be accomplished not by by-passing specific social interest, but by going all the way through them and coming out the other side.«[42]

Art in bourgeois society is an escape from the means-end logic of everyday life, assigned to a place of confinement in an ideal sphere. In the period of the historical avant-garde the attempted conciliation of art and life »had all the pathos of historical progressiveness on its side«[43] but failed in its political objectives. The institutionalization of art marked a separation of aestheticist or modernist art from society. Schulte-Sasse underlines the importance of Bürger's attempt to show there is a »historically specific institutionalization of aesthetic praxis in every era«[44] and that art and society are always mediated. Most acutely Bürger has in mind the mediations of aesthetic theory itself which he claims is its most »developed exemplification«[45] in bourgeois society and the paradigm case for its ideological institutionalization. The debate has continuing relevance to the aesthetic as a largely abstract and reified concept. If bourgeois society is the enemy of aesthetic thought we manage, nevertheless, to continue to work with the concept. And in so doing recognize the moral, social and the political matters that concern us are not immune to the cultivation of sensibility and whatever lies ahead must include some recognition of this.

The failings of aesthetic theory result from its apparent externality to art as if it were some kind of conceptual framework for something other than itself. In opposition to this approach the work of Adorno is predicated on the primacy of the work of art itself. He avoids the magisterial tone of academic writing by adopting a paratactical and aphoristic style that requires the reader to engage with the performative and manipulative aspect of the text as if its materiality stood for something more than its argument. What Adorno presents is an aesthetic theory in which the work of art refuses classification and works against fashion, good taste and the exchange economy. It is an alien formation in a society where »art no longer has a place«.[46]

The bland sensuality of mass culture and the degeneration of aesthetic attention under capitalism had thus become a primary target for critics. John Roberts notes Adorno's post-war aesthetic philosophy denotes a crisis in art's reception[47] and there is a sense in which he (Adorno) saw radical aesthetic modernism as an impossible but somehow necessary response. Walter Benjamin's dissolution of the »aura« (and the faith in its sublime and aesthetic validity) is replaced in the Adornornian schema by a return to renewed belief in »art« as the last refuge of truth in what was increasingly seen as a barbaric and philistine world. There is great strength in Adorno's originality and his rethinking the way aesthetics and politics converge, but readers struggle with his negative evaluation of the prospects for a dialogic and *social* use of art and many are driven to question the limitations in the case he makes for its autonomy. He recognizes the impoverishment of the human senses under capitalism but ignores the socializing potential of art and its emancipatory effects.

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Conclusion

What are the prospects for the aesthetic? In what conditions could a radical or emancipatory aesthetic be found? This is a rewording of questions posed by Joseph North.[48] Rather than dismissing the term (the aesthetic), as Raymond Williams appeared to have done in his later writings[49] North has argued for a re-founding of the term »in properly materialist ground«[50] which he claims is present but concealed in his (Williams') writings. The particular focus of this study by North is what he considers to be the troubling relationship between *aesthetic* response and *political* response in judgments that relate to specific sites and objects under discussion in the various historical and critical writing of Williams. The argument relies on the suggestion that a certain tension is intrinsic to the relation between these two kinds of response.

In his book *The Country and the City* Williams shows how class politics relate to material and geographical elements in the English country house (its stones, furniture, location etc.). North shows how Williams observes »the social impulses which people bring to saying ›this is a beautiful building‹«[51] and the difficulty he has in theorizing these responses. The difficulty, according to North, is in his wanting to abandon the notion of the aesthetic and yet finding himself returning to it.[52] Having rejected the idealist notion of a dispassionate or »purely aesthetic« response, North cites Williams' judgment on »the way somebody has shaped a stone or uttered a musical note«[53] invites the kind of social response which, Williams observes, is »right there in the senses themselves«.[54] For Williams this kind of judgment (on the building's proportions, say, or the character of stone) is, as he puts it: »what your eyes are quite aware of when you are looking at it.« Significantly, it is something (the »what your eyes are aware of«) that cannot be isolated from its functional or other readings.[55]

The disparity in scale between the country house and working farms function as signifiers of domination and class difference and this *very difference* is a key issue for Williams. The two building types invite comparisons between opulence and modesty in ways that have historical and political resonance. And yet Williams goes further. He is also saying, and this is North's argument, that aesthetic readings are inscribed in other sensibilities including the moral and the political. In other words a reconstruction of the aesthetic in materialist terms insists upon continuity between aesthetic and social responses. North observes how Williams »teaches us how to perceive, feel and value more deeply […] with a richer fuller sense of history«.

»It is«, North comments, »an aesthetic effect that works on our moral social, political and historical sensibilities«.[56] Williams writes:

> »[…] You know, looking at the land and then at the house how much robbery and fraud there must have been, for so long, to produce that degree of disparity, that barbarous disproportion of scale.«[57]

In thinking it through as *labor* or as the »sensible history of the place« we can appreciate what lies beyond the purely formal aspects of the experience.[58] The house and the land around it, in this reckoning, becomes a social and historical sign. North thus concludes: aesthetic readings are thoroughly historical and have moral, social and political value.

It is implicit in the formulation of a materialist aesthetic that human labor, in all its forms, is accounted for. Williams notes how far cultural artifacts, the stones and the furniture and the land, should be thought through as the results of human labor. The

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judgments we make about things have an aesthetic quality measured in terms of suffering and loss and in its counteractive reading of the measurable achievements of human productive powers. Williams' sensitivity to the agreeableness or otherwise of human labor is implicit in his attentions to the aesthetic and so – we may argue for its recovery as a keyword in what North has called a »crucial unfinished project of the New Left«.[59]

In taking account of the force of Williams' critique of the aesthetic we have noted his rejection of the traduced use of the term as a by-word for specialization and privileged modes of artistic practice. The skepticism he shows towards the aesthetic in his *Marxism and Literature* is tempered by his comment that its history is in large part a protest against the »forcing of all experience into instrumentality … [and] … the reduction of art to social engineering«.[60] We might conclude that where Williams and others express a critical response to the aesthetic it often remains a component part of their wider politics in spite of itself.

Other Marxist writers have sought to trace the interrelationship between the stratified social levels of the arts. The sociological analysis of art and art history in the writings of Arnold Hauser has parallels with the Williams-North attack on idealist-aesthetics and relates in a very particular way to the banausic and technical elements of art. Williams' sensitivity to the shaping of stone or the expression of a musical note is consistent with a version of art that has been described as a kind of »embodied technology«[61] – an expression which underlines the sensuous aspects of art and its assimilation of the material and technical resources at its disposal. John Roberts' observation that: »Art and technology for Hauser are dialectically inseparable«[62] provides a grounding for the idea of a labor theory of culture[63] and lays stress on the quality of work experience which, as we have argued, always has a social as well as a physical and psychological value. It is a perspective that gives prominence to the belief that aesthetic value is not merely a compensation or substitute for alienated labor but an aspect of »expressive« life in its widest sense.[64]

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36 Löwy/Sayre 2001 (as note 9), p 41.
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38 Ibid., pp. 48-49.
39 Ibid., p. 49.
40 Ibid., p. 42.
41 Ibid., p. 47.
42 Eagleton 1990 (as note 19), p. 206.
43 Bürger 2009 (as note 37), p. 50.
44 Jochen Schulte-Sasse: »Forward: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde« In: ibid., p. xxxvii.
45 Bürger 2009 (as note 37), p. 98.
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50 North 2019 (as note 48), p. 163.
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52 Ibid. Cited in North 2019 (as note 48) p. 171.
53 Ibid., p. 171.
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63 See Charles Woolfson: *The Labour Theory of Culture: A Re-examination of Engels's Theory of Human Origins*. London. Boston and Henley 1982.
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Jan Dumolyn and Andrew Murray

Artist

»Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.« So wrote Karl Marx. This basic insight into the historical sciences is known today as the interaction between structure and agency, between the determinative circumstances of social life and the freedom of action to intervene in that environment. Such considerations over the limits and potential of human agency have not only been central to Marxism, but also to the history of the category »artist«. Indeed, this idea precedes Marxist thought by centuries, and it has produced intellectual traditions and circumstances in which Marxists have had to refine their understanding of the relation between the individual and their society. To continue the famous quote we opened with, these traditions weigh »like a nightmare on the brains of the living«. Blockbuster exhibitions and their scholarly monographs continue to reproduce the idea of the genius individual working in abstraction from their society, either by rebelling against bourgeois mores or by supposedly producing work expressing universal ideas and experiences. As O. K. Werckmeister argues in his critique of the exhibition, »Images of Man in the Art of the West« (1980), radical art historians have an urgent political agency in exposing the ideology inherent to such ideas.[1]

Ideally, such a critical position should enter into the literature of exhibitions dedicated to individual artists. Indeed, a major forthcoming exhibition on one renowned painter Jan van Eyck (d. 1441, »Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution«, Ghent, 2020) partly curated by one the authors (Jan Dumolyn), offers such an occasion. Van Eyck is a particularly important case for reconsidering the concept of »artist«. Although he is among the most famous painters of the fifteenth century, that he was Flemish rather than Italian means that he does not fully align with the ideal model of the Renaissance artist. Art historians have therefore studied his art and career as stemming from the interaction between multiple centres of cultural production, including courts and towns as well as different European countries. A historiography of how Marxists have dealt with Van Eyck and Flemish art therefore provides some perspective on how they have revised the concept »artist« as well how their ideas on this concept can be extended further.

The historiography shows that there have been two main vectors for a Marxist critique of the »artist«: one that, like a lot of non-Marxist historical, sociological and philosophical research, associates the artist with the history of modernity, individuality and creative freedom; and another that conceives of artists as an emergent property of specific fields of production and consumption. This overview will allow us to argue for a third, underexplored position: an attention to Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and, more specifically, the strategic means by which artists manipulate the ideology of a

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society to secure for themselves their desired social and symbolic status. This position, we argue, addresses weaknesses in how the two prior Marxist theorisations of the artist conceptualise agency. The first position reifies the concepts of individuality and freedom, whereas the other reduces such agency to a function of the social field, and thus cannot account for how that field can itself be affected by artists. A renewed focus on the conception of hegemony would allow the artist to be historicised to particular social fields whilst also concretely describing how they produce change within them.

Although it had undoubtedly circulated before him, the modern history of the concept »artist« has its most notable roots in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Great Artists* (1550, 1568). For Vasari, the artist was courtly, erudite and inventive, and the greatest were touched by inexplicable, even divine, inspiration and ability. Vasari attributed such qualities to the artists he admired unevenly, defining the work of some artists and cities (notably, Michelangelo and Florence) as a norm for others. The example of Van Eyck throws into relief the merits and limitations of these norms. He developed his career far from Florence and although Vasari was aware of his work and abilities he knew little of him (evident in his erroneous claim that Van Eyck invented oil painting). Yet, an overview of Van Eyck's life reveals that there is some truth to Vasari's description of the emerging artist as courtly, learned, competitive and conscious of their abilities. Van Eyck was a courtier, being retained by Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy as a *valet de chambre*. He was reputed to be learned; the duke claimed that there was no other »so excellent in his art and science« (a judgement also echoed in 1456 by the Italian humanist Bartolomeo Facio, who described Van Eyck as »not unlettered, particularly in geometry« as well as a reader of Pliny and other ancient authorities). He promoted himself as an individual and not only signed his work, but perhaps made a self-portrait (*Portrait of a Man*, 1433), and certainly included himself within his works as cryptic self-portraits in reflective objects, most famously in the *Arnolfini Double-Portrait* (1434). Furthermore, a personal cult seems to have existed around both Jan and his brother, Hubert van Eyck (d. 1426), during their lifetime and soon after their death. Contemporaries gave Hubert an epitaph »a better painter than him was never found«, which indeed seems to refer to the modern, individualistic notion of artist, while Jan was called »second in art«.

Given the geographical and temporal distance between Van Eyck's career and Vasari's account of great artists, some broad historical analysis is necessary to explain their similarities. The earliest and most influential explanation comes from Jacob Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860). Burckhardt associated the arrival of the »artist« with a more general rise of individuality in the late medieval and early modern period. From his perspective, the mosaic of smaller city states and despotic regimes across Italy, unified neither by the Papacy nor the Empire, created the conditions for rulers to develop and maintain their power through the calculated manipulation of political networks and opportunities. The state, in such precarious conditions, was itself »a work of art«, and the retainers and advisors of rulers, including their poets and artists, had to assess and act on their individual capacities and resources to survive as well as advance their careers. Although centred on the Peninsula, Burckhardt's correlation between state formation and the rise of individuality created a general model for cultural development, one in which Italy was »the first-born among the sons of modern Europe«.

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In the first half of the twentieth century, a series of Marxist art historians sought to revise Burckhardt's thesis. Scholars such as Frederick Antal, Meyer Schapiro and Arnold Hauser maintained Burckhardt's association of the artist with freedom and creativity, but found the conditions for such freedom in productive labour. This allowed the origins of the modern artist to be pushed back into the artisanal classes of the Middle Ages. This form of argument had already been developed in the 1920s and 1930s by Schapiro, who saw in the monstrous and acrobatic themes of Romanesque sculpture an expression of a secular culture of burghers and craftsmen. In *The Social History of Art* (1951) Hauser also stressed the importance of a rationalised, capitalist economy to Renaissance art and, in doing so, emphasised the cultural continuities between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. An alternative position that reaffirmed the distinctive nature of Florence was made by Antal in his conclusion to his *Florentine Painting and its Social Background* (1947). He claimed that »the social origin of these modern artists was often no longer the artisan class; they sprang from middle-class surroundings and became artists from talent and conviction.« For each of these writers, the formation of commercial societies was the precondition for the development of an alleged burgher class who were able to operate outside the confines of feudal authority. Hauser applied this view to Van Eyck and this position also survived in later Van Eyck scholars, notably Hans Belting and Craig Harbison.

The twentieth-century Marxist tradition seems to have been less concerned with Burckhardt's Italocentrism. Although Burckhardt himself acknowledges that Hubert and Jan van Eyck »suddenly lifted a veil from nature« and that they influenced Italian art, these remarks do not constitute a comparative account of the development of the artist between Italy and Flanders. Such a task was left to a series of French, Belgian and Dutch scholars who advocated for their national traditions. Notably, Louis Courajod (1841–1896), a professor at the École du Louvre, argued that Burgundian and Flemish painters formed a school that initiated a European-wide Renaissance and in which Van Eyck was a principle figure. Courajod's thesis influenced monumental exhibitions such as the seminal *Exposition des primitifs flamands à Bruges* of 1902. Johan Huizinga (1872–1945), inspired by this exhibition, developed an alternative and even more influential view of Flemish painting. He saw in Van Eyck's work the swansong of medieval society, one of the expressions of a courtly and chivalric culture gradually decaying at the same moment as the Italian Renaissance was emerging.

In retrospect, the fact that there was no Marxist analysis of, or alternative to, Huizinga's work or those of his predecessors seems like a missed opportunity. Instead, the first attempted comparative, sociological analysis of fifteenth-century Flemish and Italian artists arose in the work of the American anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, a student of Franz Boas. In his wide-ranging work *Configurations of Cultural Growth* (1944), Kroeber analysed the economic, political and cultural preconditions for the development of »genius«. He surveyed societies and artists across cultures as diverse as ancient Egypt and Greece, China from the ancient to the modern eras, medieval Japan, Renaissance Italy and, indeed Flanders during the life of Jan van Eyck »under whom the great development of Netherlands painting begins«. But, despite recognising the Flemish painting as a cultural achievement distinct from Italian influence, he could not account for the coincident »florescence« of painting in both of these nations. On the level of drawing general conclusions, his comparative and functionalist approach was a failure.

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It was only in the late eighties that a scholar working within the tradition of the social history of art addressed the appearance of the artist in Europe from a perspective that accommodated both northern and southern Europe. In *Hofkünstler* (1985), Martin Warnke located the origins of the artist's self-identity and freedom of expression in the courts rather than the towns. He uses Van Eyck as an example of an artist that the court allowed to work outside the supposed restrictions of the painters' guild. This view of Van Eyck is one that goes back to Max J. Friedländer, who Warnke quotes: »Freedom from compulsory membership of a guild made it easier for the master in princely service to break with tradition«. This negative view on the economic and innovative effects of craft guilds is one that went back to the influential medieval historian Henri Pirenne and even further to Adam Smith. Such an attention to court societies allowed Warnke to demonstrate similar cultural developments across southern and northern Europe. Nevertheless, he maintained Burckhardt's association between the artist, freedom and individuality. In doing so, he projected the dialectic between freedom and corporatism onto the courts and towns, isolating each from the other, and thereby foreclosing any analysis of their economic and cultural interrelationships.

Today, it seems that Burckhardt's connection between the artist and individuality has come to a dead end. By looking for the specific environmental conditions for such individuality, scholars have underestimated the complexity of the social field in which artists operated, a field that included not only the towns, the church and the courts, but also their interaction. Furthermore, the opposition between the free modern artist and the corporate medieval artisan creates a periodisation that projects a post-industrial »bourgeois« consciousness back onto the fifteenth century. As an alternative, historians of the late twentieth and twentieth-first century, such as David Gary Shaw and Gervase Rosser, have revised the assumption that the development of collective identities would be at the expense of individual expression and vice versa. Such historians have argued that social standing and participation within a city, guild or confraternity could underline one's individuality rather than diminish it.

A second tradition of Marxist scholarship holds a similar position. However, if we first return to Marx, we can see that such an understanding of the artist was not only possible in the nineteenth century before Burckhardt published his *magnum opus*, but also one Marx opposed to the Burckhardtian association of the artist with the free individual. In response to Max Stirner's statement that Raphael's works are »of a unique individual which only this unique person is capable of producing«, Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology* (1845–46):

> »If he were to compare Raphael with Leonardo da Vinci and Titian, he would see how greatly Raphael's works of art depended on the flourishing of Rome at that time, which occurred under Florentine influence, while the works of Leonardo depended on the state of things in Florence, and the works of Titian, at a later period, depended on the totally different development of Venice. Raphael as much as any other artist was determined by the technical advances in art made before him, by the organisation of society and the division of labour in his locality, and, finally, by the division of labour in all the countries with which his locality had intercourse. Whether an individual like Raphael succeeds in developing his talent depends wholly on demand, which in turn depends on the division of labour and the conditions of human culture resulting from it.«

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In sum, the individual and their creativity do not precede society, waiting for conditions of freedom, but are rather produced by a society and its particular labour processes. This was also a key component of Marx's economic thought. In both his introduction to the *Grundrisse* (1857–58) as well as in the first volume of *Capital* (1867), Marx discusses the figure of Robinson Crusoe to deride the view of the individual in classical economics. His own position, as explained in the introduction to these texts, was that: »The human being is in the most literal sense a *ζῶον πολιτικόν*, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.«

Marx did not turn his attention to Burckhardt's work. A critique of Burckhardt similar to that Marx made of Stirner only appears decades later when Antonio Gramsci sketched some ideas on Renaissance humanism within his prison notebooks.[2] Developing his position by commenting on the ideas of Burckhardt, Francesco de Sanctis, Ernst Walser and Vittorio Rossi, Gramsci was able to position cultural developments in Renaissance Italy within a European perspective. He distinguished between two humanist currents: a »regressive« and Latinate one made of the functionaries of Papal and local nobilities, and a »progressive« and vernacular one comprised of »bourgeois« intellectuals in the service of nation states. Whereas, for Gramsci, the former eventually succeeded in Italy, the latter were dominant in northern Europe, especially through the influence of the Reformation. The formation of a cosmopolitan group of humanist intellectuals in Italy was therefore split between different classes, and it was but one influence within a more general Renaissance culture that was developing across Europe from the eleventh century.

Gramsci's analysis is undoubtedly vague, especially for our purposes in that it is concerned with humanism generally rather than art more specifically. Nevertheless, it provides a framework to be revised and developed in that it analyses the formation and agency of individuals in terms of their status as intellectuals. This idea is salient to understanding Van Eyck's career, which seems to mark a transition for painters from what Gramsci would call »organic intellectuals« (those with a technical and specialised knowledge of a craft and connected to new classes in society), to »traditional intellectuals« (those who are considered specialists in traditions of philosophy and culture and support the traditional ruling classes). That Van Eyck was aware of his position between these two types of intellectual is evident in his recurring motto, *als ich can* (»I do as I can«). This phrase expresses a craft ideology that values humble service and the dignity of labour. However such modesty rings false. Indeed, such mottos with obscure wordplay were more often adopted by the nobility at court as well as the urban culture of Burgundian rhetoricians. Even if he was not directly influenced by humanism, Van Eyck can thus be compared to Italian artists in that he presents his knowledge and abilities as exceeding those of the humble craftsman. The basic similarities between Van Eyck and his Italian counterparts is that their careers and self-presentations do not mark a shift from artisans to artists (however the latter is defined) but rather, more concretely, from organic to traditional intellectuals.

Gramsci's ideas have already had some influence within art history, making their way into the discipline through the highly influential work of Michael Baxandall. In interviews with Allan Langdale and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Baxandall states how important Gramsci and his concept of the intellectual were to his research and teaching. Indeed, Alberto Frigo has recently pointed out how, throughout his output, from *Giotto and the*

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