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GALILEO'S MESSENGER
ART, SCIENCE AND COMMODITY PRODUCTION

The activity of every artist is purposive. An artist has something quite determinate in mind when he creates, even though the aim may change as he progresses. For the non-artist, one whose standards are developed in other fields of societal activity, such a structure might imply an impossible scenario.

The steady expansion of commodity production demonstrates the potential endlessness of standardizing and useful activities as well as forms of material labour. By the same token, it shows how critical our need is for a common concept of these activities. We realize intuitively, so to speak, that such a concept is a necessary link in our understanding of the world.

Nevertheless, if we are unable to arrive at such a thought without our surrounding activities as the point of departure, then it cannot be expected that we understand commonality in activities without having a specific, material activity to reference and reassure us. This activity or starting point for understanding is called "art" and it has always been there. As a product of enigmas established for us by human labour, its original form is the opposite of labour, namely a child's playful imitation of the adult world. When children are growing up, it is the game, which serves as a sign of initiation into the world they imitate. The grown-up children turn into either artists or art public.

How can we say that we know art as a purposeful activity? In part, because the work of art is a material product which we are able to track to certain material causes: all of an artist's mechanical easels (literal or figurative), all his labours, chemical raw materials, auxiliary materials, are the totality of his conscious work. On first sight, this is nothing more than an example of the most commonplace, yet at the same time the most neglected event: namely, how nature itself is continually mutating into a higher purposiveness. But when we are capable of seeing thus far, it is because we have become sober in the course of history. The whole multitude of economic activities is to an ever higher degree happening without chimerical ceremonies; it is lay through and through. Even after the breakthrough of the modern, bourgeois mode of production during the course of the Renaissance, material production has from time to time been understood as a kind of worship, impregnated by devotion and incense. Happily, that sort of thing has faded away. Christianity had given the first warning of a new time coming, by turning the sacrifice and its mystic content into a one-off event. Later, capital threw itself onto the Christian bandwagon. It burned mysticism out of the labour process, while the capitalists took on the Protestant idea that labour in its pure and concrete form, was the true religious activity.

When art helps to form a common concept of material activities, its own existence as a material activity is an indispensable factor. But it is not a sufficient one. Art must also contain material aspects, which in principle can be traced in every possible purposive material activity. Only then is it truly "art", that is, the power to produce, independently of every singular material thing being produced. According to the Greeks, art was *techne* pure and simple – the art of being "technical", the general potency to produce with a *telos*.

The first "modernization" took place precisely in classical Greek art. In his "Introduction" to the study of political economy, Karl Marx made some remarks on Greek art, considered as a relation of production. He stated that Greek mythology was its "foundation or womb". He expressed the opinion that the Greeks were the only people in Antiquity consisting of "normal children". Other peoples behaved like "unruly" or "precocious" kids. Marx included the Egyptians among these, thereby rehabilitating the Greeks, whom Plato had treated so condescendingly in *Timaeus*, where the author's mouthpiece, an Egyptian priest, uplifts his critical voice: "You Hellenes are never anything but children, and there is not an old man among you."

Why did the Greeks become normal? When Marx related it to their mythology, he must have been reflecting on the fact that no other *mythos* than the Greek could possibly develop into a *logos*: out of its womb emerged not only a clarified art, but also a rational investigation of the world. The Greeks never completely abandoned the idea that human labour was tied to a mystic content, nonetheless, they still managed to free human thought from the perverted confinement to which it was subjected by their neighbours.

Marx called mythology an "unconsciously artistic reworking of nature, here meaning everything objective, hence including society." When the mythology of the Greeks coexisted with their *logos*, it meant that artistic activity passed from something unconscious to something conscious. This is what art is – a specific practice, which has become independent of other practices. Marx held that the material of this art is provided by the mythological "popular imagination". Prior to the Greeks, the "art" of civilizations could not be separated from mythological apologies for despotism.

There also exists an inner connection between the Greek *logos* and art as a phenomenon. It is this that explains the fact that teleological thinkers in the fourth and third centuries B.C. were so heavily preoccupied with *techne*.

For those philosophers focussed on questions such as: How do we know we know something when we know it? How is it that when we endeavour to know, we also feel sure that we know we have reached a result? It would seem we have to know the essential beforehand. But then, what is it that we call "new knowledge"? And what is knowledge anyway? The questions raised were the main concerns for the philosophers who became the first theoreticians of art: Socrates and Plato. They tried to reach a solution through a concept of imitation: *mimesis*. All knowledge is recollection and imitation of existing patterns. The artist is compelled to imitate exemplars, given from eternity. The philosophers, however, had their doubts regarding the artist's obedience in such matters. Plato, in fact, held artists to be the most dangerous and most undisciplined of citizens. Those who read his works in a superficial manner believe that Plato aims to expel artists from his ideal state, especially authors. But the truth is, he wishes to give them ritual and limited assignments, and by all means keep them inside the state. Plato knew something about integration.

What was it about artists that Greek upper-class philosophers could not stand? Today it is possible to disclose a truth that they themselves dared not face: that artistic activity presents a solution to the key Socrates-Plato dilemma, without being in the least bit compatible with their points of view. The philosophers had cast their love on spiritual models and detested material production. Yet it is precisely in the artist's material labour that he demonstrates how the determinate pattern, namely the purpose of the process, can be

present in our cognition – and still be something new and unknown.

Art reveals that it is meaningful to search for a thoroughly specified product of labour, without prior knowledge of it. In artistic endeavour, nothing can be formulated in advance, yet one still knows whether the aim has been attained or not, by finally declaring oneself satisfied – or giving up. Art demonstrates a fundamental structure: the construction of the determined out of the undetermined. And perhaps art demonstrates that the undetermined is much more determined and structured than what we are apt to think. For example, a video artist lays a flimmering noise upon a visual impression, with the aim of demonstrating that it is manifest as something still unstructured, although its interplay with light may make it appear structured – as if sound has entered an alliance with colour.

The worker who is chained to modern commodity production knows the determinate in advance. He produces according to design and command, with a precise measure of the time span involved. In contrast, the artist only knows the determinate step by step and will perhaps not meet the end at all. He still, however, knows it exists and presents an adequate picture of the cognisant human being. Cognition arises only when thought has a sensuous material with which to work. Art refines the raw material. It explains the real material for sublime thought. The thought at which one finally arrives, has been refined by the meeting of formed material and thought. Art shows that it is necessary to change the raw material, which forms the background of our thought. It makes clear that when thought fails, it may be because we have not understood that a changing, material activity lies at the foundation of thought itself.

Artistic production is, or at least leads to, a process where the concept of the "undetermined" is presented as in an image. It creates a new basis for thought. Immanuel Kant took the aim of art, the beautiful and the sublime, to be that which creates fear in the sensuous channels of spirit – that from which we step back, but to which we are still attracted, because it alludes to the pleasure in having a thought that rests on itself, unlimited by the senses. That is true enough: the indeterminate that we would like to further develop creates fear. What we seek is the determinate.

Art is a free activity, as free as an activity can be, as long as the socially dominating mode of production is dependent on coercion. Its origin is in the experience of the productive labour of society, but it also maintains a vendetta against the form of organisation of the said labour. Renaissance art began in craft, but also ruptured its frame – as effectively as capitalist industry later crushed the guilds. Leonardo and his colleagues were artists taking orders. Formally, they were precisely as Plato would have liked them to be. And accordingly, Plato's mystics of nature inspired the new, fanciful, scientific thought. Nonetheless, the artists crushed the Platonic dream just as certainly as they crushed the limited horizons of their patrons. The hideous Borgias and the hilarious Sforzas were all outwitted by artistic potency.

The Platonic worldview had its own secret model in the idea that the lord who submitted an order for a product also knew how it should look. He who produced the item, made it according to instructions delivered by the lord and would even complete the order, helped by materials the patron provided. Since the Platonic worldview implied a theory of Ideas or Forms, preaching the eternity of patterns, the performer would be understood to be a character forced into sempiternian servant status. When the lords of this world clearly began to disclose the incompetence of their thinking, the Theory of Ideas stood to lose all

credibility. And that is the way things went.

While the guilds were gradually pushed aside in the first centuries of the modern world, capitalists invaded handicraft. The different forms of craftsmanship, workshop labour, and manufacturing, came to culturally dominate Europe and The New World. By and by, they would conquer the supremacy over materials and forms of production. It was in this ambience, that Kant presented his theory of the sublime. Here, nothing was more natural than to place reason in opposition to the sensuous: the craftsman's raw materials were treated with the virtuosity of the craftsman. A limitation was, however, implicit, for the performers came to be seen as bodily prolongations of their material instruments, without the possibility of coming to grips with Spirit itself.

The great transition came as capital freed itself from the foundations of craftsmanship, introduced regular machinery and consciously employed chemical processes in production. Now, the means of production were no longer limited by the structure of raw materials as before. Materials were forced under their hegemony with which craftsmanship had partly complied and partly given up their use.

A dependence on materials was still there and is an "eternal necessity of nature", as Marx said on a similar occasion. But the dependence was no longer immediately particular and personal. Now it took on a class character. Art had been given a new structure to imitate. The Aesthetics of Hegel, making of the work of art a "moment" of his Absolute Idea, reflected this new relation of subjugation.

But subjugation was twofold. In the same manner as each and every raw material, no matter what its mechanical-chemical structure, could now be seen under the aspect of capital, so the element placed on the other side of the instrument also changed its character. The worker reached a fruitful indifference to the machinery. In Marx's words, he too would undergo a "real subsumption under capital". A worker was created who could no longer be thought of as an extension of the materials of production: A free wage worker, let loose from immediate coercion, both socially and materially. Historically, that was something totally new: an exploited being who knew coercion only in its mediate form.

Economically, the transition was groundbreaking. For as capital coerced materials and the forces within its environment to serve its own ends, brutally organizing all substances and potencies to its purpose, it also changed its own character. Capital now truly stood out as a social relation hunting for profits; the impetus to absorb surplus value became relentless and general. Capital took the form of a relation working towards a higher aim, independent of its own material guise. Marx was therefore right when he defined the productive worker as one who produces surplus value for capital, regardless of sphere of production.

According to Marx, being a productive worker is troublesome. When he is productive, it is because of his subordination to the augmentation of capital. Capital exists as a steadily growing mass of fixed means of labour and treated raw materials, congealed labour time, dead labour, all accumulating in front of the worker: an alienated power. Yet hidden in the development of this relation of production lies the seed to the abolishment of all class structure. In the last instance, a worker is thus productive because his labour brings forth a new society. He represents a higher aim through the coercion in which he stands when producing the higher aim of capital – surplus value in the abstract. The worker's activity points to a society where such value production is superseded and abolished.

The artist, however, conversely, is truly no productive worker. He sells specific products, which are freed from standardization and thus, from the structure of commodity production.

A commodity is a commodity because it is a useful thing produced for sale. In this relation it is already presupposed that the expected profit is the only purpose of production – precisely that which turned out to be capital's end result. But art is another matter. It has been all too easy to fall for the thesis that “everything turns into commodities” in modern society. It is a phrase pertaining to sulking intellectuals, representatives of all sorts of *à la mode* rebellions in the world of the social middle strata throughout two centuries – from the *Burschenschaften* of Napoleonic times to the “student revolt” of academic climbers from 1968 to the present day.

Our emotions, motives, and points of view, however, are not apt to turn into commodities, simply because we may get paid for uttering them now and then – as little as Polish peasants of the 18th century turned into aristocrats by being paid through permission to take on the names of gentlemen.

A painting is sold for money. This is simply an act necessary to feed the artist. It has nothing to do with the work of art. If a “work of art” is truly a commodity, it simply means that it is not a work of art. It has been misinterpreted. Or: to the same degree that the true work of art seems to be functioning as a commodity, it simply counts as a material product and no longer as the work of art it is.

Just as we are in no position to grasp the totality of activities inside commodity production without having a general picture and thus a concept of this picture, i.e., “art”, we cannot understand the content of commodity production without having before us a material creative process that is not commodity production and cannot even become one. That is what gives us perspective. It is art. It is a necessity of cognition!

Art, then, can be defined as the special kind of material creative process, which negates commodity production. It is precisely in this way that its connection with the manifold activities of material creative activity stands out in full flower. The connection is, however, purely negative since these activities also negate commodity production. From the inside, they undermine the whole system of exploitation on which they depend. What the workers do from the inside, the artist does from the outside.

But this outer negation also shows the danger to which art and its performer are exposed. For capital, too, in its subjective form of *capitalist*, desires a negation of the commodity world. The capitalist has a dream of turning away from his stupidifying role as an exploiter. He buys art and becomes a collector of negations of his everyday existence. He secures for himself products that are never going to circulate – manifest negations of commodities and money. An artist favouring such a clientele may be transformed into a craftsman. His products may at one stroke lose their character of being art. Nevertheless, he has many a reason for showing caution. Not even the capitalist would wish for commodities for such a use. He may turn his back to such a craftsman and buy from others. To safeguard his existence as an artist, the latter should be the first to turn his back on the other. He is not safe before he has tied himself to the inner negation of capital.

This inner rebellion gets its strength from the breadth and diversity of commodity

production. The same goes for art. Since art is the general picture of commodity production of the day, it must have the possibility to fasten itself anywhere within it. Each and every technique, old or new, can be employed in art. Each and every innovation can be utilized. This is an unavoidable condition, for otherwise we cannot be guaranteed that art is a real common concept for activities. The long scientific revolution from the *Timaeus*-inspired optics of Grosseteste through Galileo's breakthrough in practical physics, to the calculus of Leibniz and Newton, may adequately be understood as a journey of discovery in the world of sensory impressions – a world where strength and intensity in experiences of sound, colour, smell and touch are investigated through mathematical physics, with inter-subjective and therefore objective validity. It is on this foundation that art flourishes today no matter if it reveals itself in a seemingly traditional manner, or if it combines such a form with innovations like electronically steered welding, or employs modern audiovisual and acoustical techniques.

Nevertheless, the artist is still in a fragile position. Technique in itself will not save him. That an artist cannot always succeed with what he makes, is closely related to a risk that is specific to art. In the extraordinary position it is to work one's own way through the undetermined with an anticipation of the determined in mind, the artist assumes the position that Brecht conjured up in a sentence uttered by the protagonist in *Leben des Galilei* from 1938: "Take heed when you're passing through Germany with the truth in your inner pocket." The artist lives like Galileo's messenger. He travels in the country of fear with the formulas of salvation. Not only is the way to the goal undetermined, but in addition, both the way and the goal are sensuous actuality. The artist, alas, is just an artist; he represents an image-creating ability. It is here that his practice separates itself from science. Science, like art, confronts the determinate in an as yet unknown and indeterminate form. But contrary to art, it does not search for its result through a material labour that transforms factual, genuine and scary symbols, exposing them as they are through structured light and colour. On the contrary, the symbols of science are created through convention, abstracted from fear, and seek a result that can be formulated rationally. Still, even Galileo would have been harassed in Plato's state. The Greeks neither could nor would have a practical science of nature. However, the affinity between science and art lay already and originally in the unity of *mythos* and *logos*.

In that contemporary art unfolds on the basis of modern science of nature, it brings to mind their common destiny. They are however separate from each other by the fact that the artist meets the fear of cognition by creating its picture, while the scientist only tries to conquer the fear by way of thought. Art gives to hand the picture of the *raison d'être* of science. The need for philosophy and science is based on the fact that, as Hegel put it, social contradictions have reached an intolerable form and must be abolished. Art creates the picture of the intolerable form as well as of its content. Kant managed to look this fear in the eye, albeit his misinterpretation. Its real content is past labour in its inimical form of congealed labour time, the worker's daily nightmare.

Without the picture of art, there is no science. The picture is expressed through an ever more advanced technique, which even in its original form, as is found in commodity production, points at the coming breakdown of the bourgeois mode of production. Still, without an artistic production of the immediate, its mediation in thought would not exist. Liberation stands on the shoulders of art, as art stands on the shoulders of the child.

At the base of art's rebellion against the intolerable, lies the child's way of approaching the

world. Here we find the most profound reason why it is right to say that it is through their art that the Greeks present themselves to us as “normal children”. On the other hand: why do we take interest in such a perspective at all? It became apparent to Marx as he tried to find the reason why Greek art speaks so distinctly to us, even in the most modern of times. He wished to explain why it is that Greek pieces of art “still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model”. And he meant to find the answer in the fact that we know it represents a level of society that will never return. “Why should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm?”

The adult is attracted to the child, because in the child he sees a step that will never return. In fact, there are so many troublesome things that always come back. The world is full of phantasms and evil memories, saturated by the ghosts of past labour. They wish to have you on your knees. Marx used the words of the poet to describe the condition: “The dead seize the living”. But the child is affirmation that an irreversible time still exists. The world can be changed. This is the truth of Jack London’s “brief thanksgiving”,

That no life lives forever,
That dead men rise up never

Do we not always presuppose that we are on our way through certain steps and levels? Do we become less human by taking our nearest future to be something determined? In a world where everything is turned upside down, where the past casts its spell of coercion upon the future, art has no interest in accepting our existence as one without stepping-stones, free as a bird, dreamlike and full of contingency. Art ought to show the world as a purposive universe. Art itself provides the example of material, aim-directed labour, making of that world a unified whole.

The reader may consider the above as a set of reflections on Plato’s early (“Socratic”) and mature dialogues, especially *Phaedo*, *Meno*, *Republic*, and *Timaeus*; further, on Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* and Marx’s “Einleitung” in the manuscript *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*.

Translated by Jørgen Sandemose