

Total art and mimetic subsumption

Thoughts after Marina Vishmidt

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I knew Marina primarily through her writing, which radiated an intelligence that was sometimes disconcertingly intense. It feels wrong to refer to Marina by her surname, in a way that enforces an academic formality that her voice was constantly occupying and at the same time undermining, in the spirit of Adorno's straining against language to make it crack under the pressure of the dialectic. But since the Marina I know is primarily Marina as she appears in her work, I have the feeling of her being two persons, one textual, one embodied: Marina the comrade and Vishmidt the writer. I know this feeling is incorrect. Still, there's something significant about this (false) split between a writerly and an embodied practice that still has much to give us – in the literal sense that there are unpublished works to look forward to, and in the less literal sense that the larger contours of her thought, its trajectory, and its relevance to struggles both immemorial and yet to come are still emerging. Such 'splitness' also says something about Marina's place amidst and against disciplinarity. In talking about Marina's work, I've sometimes called her an art historian. This is clearly wrong.

The discipline of art history could be understood as a technology for keeping defunct subjectivities on life support, or of revivifying them as hermeneutic zombies. Many of those subjectivities are bourgeois, because the bourgeoisie, for a few centuries, produced, in art, a uniquely dense residue of its ways of being in the world. We have to look at bourgeois paintings – and also of course at aristocratic paintings, courtly statues, peasant pottery, and so on – in ways that the bourgeoisie itself no longer can: maybe, but by no means *certainly*, to preserve an archive of ways of feeling and seeing that don't fit into the present world. And also to keep vivid the fact that even oppression was once different.

Marina's return to moments such as the feminism of

the 1970s was the opposite of antiquarian. I think that Marina had little necrophilia in her and accordingly I've never been sure whether the name 'art historian' applies to her, although it would be flattering to the profession if it did. But there is, I'm going to try to argue, a way in which Marina's inquiry rubs at the edges of art history, disclosing thereby a way in which the maddening certainty of a painting like, say, Poussin's *Dance to the Music of Time* at the Wallace Collection – its certainty in conveying something more than a contingent web of signs, but rather a world, in its proper density, in which meaning or ideology (the allegories *as* the passage of time and as real persons at once) inheres as a property of the representational order itself – might dissolve on contact with one or more opposed, untimely totalisations.

For the past few years, I've been trying to rid myself of a book on Joseph Beuys, the German artist who lived from 1921 to 1986 and who invented what he called 'social sculpture' – a kind of art that takes social relations as its material and which accordingly reconceives social forms as themselves 'aesthetic'. This led Beuys to strange propositions, among them, for example, that money ought to be thought of as a collectively shaped 'sculptural' good. Although there are references here and there, so far as I know Marina never discussed Beuys in depth. Nonetheless, as I was returning to *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art*, the book she wrote with Kerstin Stakemeier (published by Mute in 2016), I was struck again by the relevance of Marina's thinking to an interpretation of Beuys that I've been developing for some time.

Beuys' work involves a specific, resonant desire for totalisation that has repeatedly popped up at certain moments in capitalist modernity, probably first with the German Romantics at the end of the eighteenth century. The totalisation is that of art. In effect, social sculpture

posits that everything is or can be aesthetic. As Beuys put it, ‘Even the act of peeling a potato can be a work of art if it is a conscious act.’¹ Art in this expanded sense becomes indistinguishable from intentional human practice in general.



Photo by Sam Dolbear

What’s going on here, clearly, is an expansion of Marcel Duchamp’s discovery of the readymade, or the principle that any object can be perceived as a work of art under the proper conditions. Things get tricky in Beuys, though, when this universal aestheticism meets the social or political field. The inference, from which Beuys did not shy away, is that politics or the social must in turn be conceived in plastic terms, as a ‘sculpture’ of sorts, and thus subject to shaping and reshaping by conscious human will. So far, so good, arguably: this is not incompatible with a classically socialist model of replacing the anarchy of the market with planning. But the analogy gets less comfortable when we ask who exactly plays the role of the sculptor, and what is being sculpted.

Beuys had a few recurring slogans that make things slightly more precise. First, he said that art equals capital. What he meant by this is that creativity ought to be the

basic driving and mediating force in the coming order that he called ‘free democratic socialism’, as capital is in our present world. Your ability to create (in the expanded sense in which peeling a potato is a creative act, too) is your capital. Second, he claimed that everyone is an artist. Creativity is not confined to a specific social role or class or profession but is rather innate in everyone. But what happens to those two theses when we add them up? If everyone is an artist, and art equals capital, then everyone is a capitalist, too. What we have now is not ‘free democratic socialism’ so much as the world that Marina wrote about so effectively in her 2018 book *Speculation as a Mode of Production*: the world of so-called human capital, in which art comes to model universalised entrepreneurial subjectivity. What’s happened, then, is that a Duchampian totalisation of art has turned out not to result in the romanticisation of the world, as Novalis imagined in 1798, but rather art’s mimesis of capital. This is a terminus that paradoxically seems to dissolve aesthetic autonomy in universalising it.

What’s involved here is a two-way mimesis, though. In *Reproducing Autonomy*, Marina briefly describes post-Duchampian art in terms of what she calls ‘mimetic subsumption’. Subsumption notoriously has two varieties, formal and real. The readymade, or the ‘nominalist gesture’ of selecting something as an artwork, is a machine that recruits potentially anything to the status of art, as capital can subsume many things. But of course, art in modernity is also in an important and perhaps definitional way exceptional with respect to standard commodity production.² The exchange-value of artworks is not generally regulated by socially necessary labour time, although artworks enter into more general exchange relations. Art is indirectly market-mediated. This is the basis on which Marina correlates art with social reproduction, to which the domain of aesthetic semblance would at first seem not to be very close. And this issue of semblance or its absence will be important.

So, there are two dynamics of totalisation in play here: that of capital and that of art, neither of which, in principle, possesses an absolute limit. Art’s mimetic subsumption of anything meets and mirrors, but is not identical with, capital’s subsumption of production processes. The latter, for one thing, doesn’t obviously involve mimesis. Yet what Marina seems to be suggesting here is precisely that it does: capital relates to its indir-

ectly mediated reproductive sphere as Duchamp relates to a urinal.

Now, let's step back and observe that the readymade model was in its time a displacement of a prior matrix of artistic subsumption. In the long period between Giotto and Manet, approximately, in other words from the early fourteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, European painting conjured phenomenological spaces that possess a certain finality. Poussin's *Dance to the Music of Time* is here my synecdoche for everything that this tradition contains. I'm inclined to attach the phrase 'the age of the picture-world' to this unit of history, in contrast to Heidegger's 'age of the world-picture'.

The age of the picture-world can be defined as that phase of Western culture during which images on a two-dimensional surface can claim to correspond to a total sense of embodied reality. It would be easy to reduce this totalising claim to ocularcentrism, or to the identification of vision as such with immobile single-point perspective. But rigorous perspectival constructions are an inessential aspect of the picture-world. More important is that a conviction be conveyed to the viewer that a represented space is continuous, contains bodies – whether of human beings, still life objects, landscape features, etc. – and is complete, meaning that there are neither parts of the pictorial field that are unaccountable in terms of the totalised reality effect, nor ontological disruptions that negate the continuity of space and bodies. This sort of picture-world can undoubtedly contain supernatural entities and events. It can show rupture and paradox. But it makes those discrepancies part of its continuity. Time plays a lyre. Apollo floats in the sky. Time and Apollo are *real*.

This subsumption of space and bodies to a totalised pictorial field precedes and parallels capital's subsumption of things to the value-form, but is also incommensurate with the social synthesis accomplished by real abstraction, which reduces phenomenal qualitative equivalence to abstract quantitative equivalence.³ The picture-world probably ends with the rise of what Guy Debord called spectacle. Everyone who knows a little about modern art will have her own candidates, but as I see it, the last instances of picture-world painting can be found in Cubism – including examples as attenuated as Braque's late studios – and in Matisse and Bonnard, and maybe some Jackson Pollocks that are more like landscapes. The

recovery of something resembling a picture-world also seems to be a recurrent if usually frustrated aspect of the past century's art. Nicole Eisenman has been trying it out, for example.



Photo by Sam Dolbear

The point is that there was and perhaps in a tenuous way still is a cultural realm in which picture-world and readymade coexist as shapes of totalisation within and occasionally against the wrong totality of capital. Much of the story of modern art can be told as that of the migration of semblance from residual bourgeois representational technologies to specifically capitalist forms of appearance. (Technical reproducibility – the paradigmatic analysis of which remains, of course, Walter Benjamin's famous essay – has long been the chief means with which to achieve the real subsumption of semblance and thus, arguably, its ruin.⁴) The readymade is a moment in which mimesis shrinks to the mere fact that an object imitates itself, which differentiates a thing thus designated from a formally identical thing not thus designated. But the way in which these two artistic modalities – readymade and picture-world – subsumed things always lagged a step behind capital. Representation alters what it rep-



Photo by Sam Dolbear

resents, and an object that turns into a readymade is different from what it was before. Nonetheless, pictorial representation as well as the readymade both take their objects as given – as empirical forms that dictate their aesthetic analogies. They both have a reality principle, in other words. Politics, too, can sometimes intrude as a massiveness that even artists can't avoid. Something like this happened in France after the revolution of 1848, or in Berlin Dada's refraction of the Spartakus revolt. A reality principle need not generate realism in its familiar meaning.

Things dictate art, but art also seizes things without wholly abrogating their autonomy. Although the analogy is deliberately tenuous, I want to call the latter process 'mimetic formal subsumption', in order to compare it with capital's formal subsumption of production processes on which it does not yet impose a substantially new organisation. A readymade remains the same thing;

its relations have simply been reordered. A picture-world still has to be a world.

What, then, would be the aesthetic counterpart to *real* subsumption – subsumption that alters production and labour in its image? And what specifically aesthetic logic might correspond to specifically capitalist rationality? Maybe none; it may be that art simply doesn't do this, at least as long as semblance is in play – which may be a reason not to assent at once to an abstract negation of the aesthetic. This would take us to Adorno and other disagreeable subjects. I'm going to have to bracket both this and the many debates over real versus formal subsumption in Marxist theory. I should at least clarify that I don't believe that either term names a historical period. Still, the labour of representation involves techniques, and if mimetic real subsumption exists it probably involves a closer dialogue with general social technique than do the reserved archaic technologies of paint and

brush. There needs to be a medium.

Cameron Rowland is an artist Marina wrote about at some length, for instance in a review of an exhibition of his at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, in 2020. The mahogany doors of the ICA were produced by enslaved labour and, all else being equal, would continue to accrue value to their owners, namely the British royal family. For his show, Rowland set up a corporation to which the ICA mortgaged the doors as well as a mahogany handrail inside the building. He also stipulated that the mortgage would not be repaid – an arrangement that constitutes what is known as an encumbrance on any future transaction. This lowers the value of the property and by extension the British crown's net worth, with no physical alteration.

'Art' and 'value' seize hold of the same object. But 'art' acts here as a mimetic subsumption of property law, which becomes – unusually – a weapon *against* value. Law remains unaltered. Mimetic subsumption is perhaps inherently unreal when applied to genuinely effective forms. The best it can do is to use law as a medium with which to injure another social form. And nobody has claimed that paintings can abolish paint. Arguably, one thing the perspective of infrastructural critique does is to shift the site of medium to a substrate that obligates a different notion of practice – practice that would by its nature exceed the aesthetic.

But the aesthetic turns out not to be so easy to uproot. As Marina put it, 'Here, the legal instrument of encumbrance becomes akin to a termite colony – commodity fetishism riddled with subterranean channels. The inescapable ownership relation between the ICA and the Crown Estate gets aerated by this parasitical one, which the institution has itself invited, sanctioned and

signed.'⁵ Or, as she states a little later in the same article: 'In its many-sided thoroughness, Rowland's practice puts one in mind of a crystal drill, if there is such a device: It creates sight lines by cutting through language, provenances, and histories, but the cutting apparatus is already a prism.'⁶

Termites with prismatic crystal drills: one feels Marina grasping here for a set of metaphors that would irradiate the incision of transformative practice with the shine of semblance, down through history, through infrastructure, through 'our busy insect-like comings and goings', to quote Monsieur Dupont.⁷ This is art history as it might be when the kaleidoscope turns.

Notes

1. Willoughby Sharp, 'An Interview with Joseph Beuys', *Artforum* 8:4 (December 1969), 40–47.
2. As Dave Beech has most exhaustively demonstrated. See Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical, and Marxist Economics* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).
3. Alfred Sohn-Rethel develops the notions of real abstraction and social synthesis in his book *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021).
4. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', trans. Edmond Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
5. Marina Vishmidt, 'Cameron Rowland', *Artforum* 58:8 (April 2020), 164.
6. Vishmidt, 'Cameron Rowland', 165.
7. Monsieur Dupont, *Nihilist Communism: A Critique of Optimism (the Religious Dogma that States There Will Be an Ultimate Triumph of Good Over Evil) in the Far Left* (Cambridge: Monsieur Dupont, 2003), 1.