

Title of talk: "Dave Beech, Art, and Non-subsumable Use Values"

Event: Left Forum, NYC, Author Meets Critics Session on Dave Beech, *Art and Value* (Brill, 2015)

Much as I admire the service to humanity that Dave Beech's *Art and Value* does in pointing up the sheer, sometimes flatly perverse, wrongheadedness of certain widely-circulated Keynesian and neo-Classical dogmas about the economics of art, what I admire more is its ruthless expulsion of some cherished pieties that one again and again encounters in Marxist art theory. After all, Keynesians and neo-Classical economists are wrong about most things; one more falsehood concerning an economically marginal phenomenon like fine art is a small drop in a large bucket. But Marxists have been right about many things, and are moreover on the right side of history, and so it is more troubling that they should have been so wrong, for so long, concerning basic facts about the art world.

Chief among the errors of Marxian art theory, Beech shows, is the promulgation of an empirically and theoretically untenable "commodity analysis of art."<sup>1</sup> In broad strokes, this genre of critique seeks to show that at some point in capitalism's development--usually the advanced industrial stage is named as offending moment--the creation of artworks is revolutionized by the generalization of commodity production that necessarily attends the relentless forward march of capital accumulation and its attendant total subsumption of productivity *per se*. The commodity status with which art is thereby endowed, it is alleged, becomes the chief determinant of art's material and social-functional properties. An inexorable process of "commodification," according to proponents of the commodity analysis, explains why art is as it is and does as it does under capitalism.

As Marx somewhat enigmatically remarks in his *Theories of Surplus Value*, "the product of mental labour--*Wissenschaft*--always stands far below its value, because the labor-time needed to reproduce it has no relation at all to the labor-time required for its original production. For example, a schoolboy can learn the binomial theorem in an hour."<sup>2</sup> In a bit, I will return back to this assertion and interrogate Marx about whether certain products of *Wissenschaftlich* labor are best understood as embodying value. But for the moment I only want to agree with the simpler underlying point, which is that many important intellectual achievements can appear obvious or easy in retrospect. Accordingly, upon finishing *Art and Value*, I was convinced of something I felt I should have known all along: artworks--by which Beech means *the kinds of things presented as objects for absorbed visual contemplation and appreciation in elite institutions such as galleries and museums*--are in our society not typically produced in the way that commodities are typically produced. Which is to say: they are not typically produced by wage laborers whose labor power is purchased as variable capital by an industrial capitalist and whose invested labor time determines the value of the product. Marxists are supposed to be experts at unmasking ideological distortions, mystified appearances, and inverted fetishizations. Yet somehow, for a full century, it apparently never occurred to those wedded to the commodity analysis of art to ask such questions as: Is it plausible that the things we customarily identify as works of art are *literally* capitalist commodities? Are artworks in fact the value-excretion of the industrial circuit of

---

<sup>1</sup> Gyorgy Márkus, "Adorno's Wagner," *Thesis Eleven* 56 (February 1999), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/add1.htm>

capital? Do artworks have prices that reflect the socially average rate of profit applied to a given magnitude of capital invested? Are artworks produced under competitive conditions that create an imperative for production to be technologized, streamlined, and deskilled? Are the profits that redound to the makers of artworks derived from the realization of surplus value? Beech's answer to all these questions is a firm "no," and in my view the arguments by which he reaches this conclusion are conclusive. I won't rehearse those arguments here; *Art and Value* presents them lucidly and without needless obfuscation or fancification, in contrast to the obnoxious stylistic predilections of much of the Marxian (read: Frankfurtian) art theory it criticizes and supplants.

All this to say that I'm grateful to *Art and Value* for pouring cold water on a misapprehension that proved curiously irresistible to Lukács, Adorno, and their epigones. As a token of my gratitude, I'd like to take this opportunity to briefly defend *Art and Value* against a criticism raised by Daniel Spaulding and Jasper Bernes in their recent review of it in *Radical Philosophy* (<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/truly-extraordinary>). This defense will then segue into some preliminary thoughts about a special class of commodities to which, in my (still rather inchoate) view, many artworks belong.

The substance of Spaulding and Bernes's charge against Beech is that his allegiance to a Marxian model of economic explanation--relative to which, as he demonstrates, art shows up as an aberrant or exceptional economic domain, in that it is not characteristically a zone of commodity production--prevents him from making any real progress in formulating an explanation of art's character and qualities, beyond correctly, and correctively, registering the manifest truth that a spurious commodity status cannot be the *explanans* for whatever may be the *explanandum* when it comes to art. They write:

[I]f the point of Marx's mature theory is to describe the dynamics of a fully capitalist economy in order to transcend it, then it is also possible that this theory is unable to offer a satisfactory account of exceptional economic orders. Whatever the virtues of Marxism, Beech's desire to claim a theory of art's exceptionalism for it gets him into trouble, making his book more of a beginning than a sufficient account of the economics of art.

...Marx's *Capital* simply was not built to explain production of this particular sort. *Art and Value* undoubtedly leaves us in a much better position to formulate a proper economics of art. Ironically, though, the very theoretical resources that allow Beech to debunk the reigning doxa perhaps blind him to the way forward. If art is exceptional to capitalism, it might also be, in some regard, exceptional to the theoretical thrust of Marx's critique of political economy.<sup>3</sup>

There is a pseudo-objection raised twice in the above quotation which says, in essence, "Beech's work is correct but not complete." To this the accused need only reply: "thanks, I'll keep up the good work." A different worry, which is logically independent from but confusingly woven together with the pseudo-objection, can be paraphrased this way: If from the perspective of a

---

<sup>3</sup> Jasper Bernes and Daniel Spaulding, "Truly Extraordinary: Review of Dave Beech, 'Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics,' *Radical Philosophy* (2016), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/truly-extraordinary>

certain theoretical framework (Marxian economics) the investigator discovers that some phenomenon (art) is not the exact kind of thing that the framework was principally constructed to accommodate and explain (commodities as produced under capitalism), then the possibility of making appreciable explanatory progress within that framework, vis-a-vis that phenomenon, is necessarily foreclosed, and a new framework is required.

But why accept this? Take an analogous case. The model according to which people's actions are explicable by reference to their beliefs and desires is not exposed as totally inadequate the moment it is noticed that some pathological behaviors (such as an addict's search for a fix) are not best understood as motivated chiefly or in the normal fashion by beliefs and desires. In fact, the anomalous case can only be understood *as anomalous* within a framework that highlights its discrepancy relative to how the theory says things usually go. The belief-desire model gives us one way of bringing addiction into theoretical focus, by allowing it to be characterized as, in a specifiable sense, out-of-the ordinary. Likewise, only from a Marxist perspective is it striking that lots of art-making activities turn out *not* to have been formally or really subsumed by commodity production undertaken by capitalists in a quest for surplus value. Art's otherness to the circuit of productive capital stands out as a diagnosable phenomenon precisely against the background of Marx's theory of expanded reproduction. More than this, the claim that art making has not been subsumed cannot even be *understood*--much less can the asserted state of affairs be *explained*--outside the confines of what Spaulding and Barnes call "the theoretical thrust of Marx's critique of political economy," for *subsumption* has the technical meaning it has only within the field of reference established within Marx's critique of value. Not only is there no reason to think that Marxian theory can make no headway in explaining art's peculiarity; there is every reason to think that *only* Marxian theory can make headway on this, provided that the peculiarity in question is peculiarity *in respect to prevailing conditions of self-valorizing value as understood by Marx*. Hence I think it is little more than empty posturing for Spaulding and Barnes to coyly mention the possibilities that art just "might be exceptional to the theoretical thrust of Marx's critique of political economy" (what is a theoretical thrust and what is it to be exceptional thereto?) and that Marxism perhaps (just perhaps?) blinds us to the way forward (what is this way to which it blinds us)? As an aside, I would also register the complaint that "Okay, but what's your positive proposal?" is a lazy rejoinder that does not take to heart the how crucial it is, especially in the current historical predicament in which the Left finds itself, to deracinate demonstrably incorrect but widely influential ideas. "'No' is an important word on the Left," Moishe Postone has quipped.<sup>4</sup> Nowhere is this more true than the credulous--and in the worst cases unapologetically unserious--domain of Left art theory.

Another way to diffuse the criticism leveled at Beech by Spaulding and Barnes is simply to make an illuminating and irreducibly Marxian positive claim about art. Needless to say, there are many such claims in *Art and Value*. But I want to spend the rest of the paper trying to make one of my own, by using some properly Marxian concepts to isolate an interesting class of objects, one that intersects with, and that may prove to be useful in analyzing, the class of art-objects: namely, *objects the character of whose use-value renders the manufacture of those objects un-subsumable (formally or really) by the capitalist mode of production, in some respects or to some degree*. Call these objects "non-subs." A non-sub is an object the production of which

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://zero-books.net/blogs/zero/zero-squared-108-the-subject-of-capitalism/>

resists being drawn into and refashioned by capitalist accumulation, where the reason for this resistance has to do with the nature of the object's use-value.

Consider the prototypical artwork and its prototypical attributes of uniqueness and authenticity. György Márkus takes it as read that since commodification "can only be applied to products which are socially reproducible" the concept of commodification therefore "has no meaning for genuine works of art as strictly individual and irreplaceable objects of human objectivity (characteristics Marx accepts as self-evident)" (Márkus 2001, 3-4). I. I. Rubin makes the same point about the logical incompatibility of uniqueness and reproduction.<sup>5</sup> According to José María Durán, (who here uses "subsuming" in a different sense than I am at the moment),

Rubin's discussion...has to do with the fact that subsuming unreproducible objects, such as original "works of art by certain masters," under Marx's law of value is unfeasible. The mode of production of traditional visual arts like painting, characterized by the production of unique works—to which, as Hobsbawm noted, "the visual artist was committed, and from which he or she found it difficult or even impossible to escape"—has been seen as the foundation of the lucrative art trade.<sup>6</sup>

Walter Benjamin spoke—with more whistfulness and mysticism than is desirable—of the unique "aura" of a genuine work of art, which contrasts with the fundamental sameness of items mass produced in "the age of mechanical reproduction." "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art," he maintained, "is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."<sup>7</sup> But, allowing that this is a fact, what kind of a fact is it? Clearly not a fact about the physical or material nature of the artwork. Artworks insofar as they are material objects *are* in some sense materially reproducible, as Duchamp's *Fountain* and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* vividly demonstrate. And it is also the case that any standard-issue mass produced commodity whatsoever is in some sense materially unique: no two Gillette razors are *perfect* replicas right down to the last atom. So, the status of irreproducibility must be acknowledged as a *social* status that has consequences for the types of desires the artwork (*qua* artwork) has the capacity to satisfy, a capacity which constitutes the *use-value* that permits the artwork to carry a price on the market. Chief among these desires is the desire the purchaser has of becoming the possessor of a unique object made in a unique manner by a unique individual (etc., etc.—for a fuller account of the "ideology of the aesthetic," see Eagleton 1991). It is tolerably clear that an object that can satisfy *that* desire is precluded from being reproduced *at all*, even once, and *a fortiori* cannot be mass produced. This is not a prohibition so much as a logical exclusion. Copies of "genuine works of art" (to stick with Márkus's term)—even, *per impossibile*, perfect, physically indistinguishable copies—do not and cannot satisfy the desire that the original (and only it) can satisfy.

---

<sup>5</sup>I. I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (Black Rose, 1973), 166.

<sup>6</sup> José María Durán, "Artistic Labor and the Production of Value: An Attempt at a Marxist Interpretation," *Rethinking Marxism* (April 2016), 222-23.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," (<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>)

Genuine works of art, we can try saying, are to that extent real (vs. formal) non-sub: the kind of “real subsumption” that Marx describes in *Capital* vol. 1, in which there is a division, mechanization, and and de-skilling of labor for the sake of heightened productivity in the creation of (more or less) identical, fungible items *is necessarily unable to revolutionize the production of genuine artworks*. An artwork would be a formal (vs. real) non-sub if, for example, the desire-satisfying property that renders the artwork saleable is the property of not having been produced within and for the circuit of capital accumulation and in the the context of capitalist social relations. If a buyer desires that the artwork be produced by a petty proprietor, or by a slave laborer (there are galleries that market art made by prisoners), or within an indigenous tribal setting, the production of the kind of thing that will satisfy the buyer’s desire, owing to the nature of the desire, cannot be formally subsumed by capital, since anything produced within capitalist social relations would *ipso facto* lack the relevant desire-satisfying property (use-value).

Related to the issue of unsubsumability is the fact that the concept of socially necessary labor time becomes difficult to apply confidently when we consider the case of genuine artworks construed as “individual and irreplaceable objects.” What shall we say about the social average that governs the creation of a use-value that (by definition) only one person can make? One of (at least) two things. One option is to say that there is no social average, as the production is not in the relevant sense *social*, because competitive market conditions (which do not exist for genuinely artistic labor) cannot create an abstract equivalence between genuinely artistic labor and and wage labor of the normal sort, meaning that genuinely artistic labor is not productive of value, from which it would follow that the products of such labor do not harbor value that is brought into existence by the artist’s labor. This assumption underlies Márkus’s assertion that “the artwork as universal human value can thus have no economic value in the proper sense, only an irrational, both economically and aesthetically accidental price.” Yet I doubt that things are so cut-and-dried. The Empire State Building is a thing of beauty and a work of art, let’s agree, and it is irreplaceable and irreproducible in something like the way Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch* is irreplaceable and irreproducible. Yet it straightforwardly constitutes a value-conferring improvement to the parcel of land upon which it is constructed. Moreover, having an “irrational” or “accidental” price is no evidence that something lacks value. A baseball is a mass produced item and has a value that can be measured using the familiar Marxian metrics, if anything does. No doubt, a baseball autographed by Mickey Mantle has an “irrational” and “accidental” price, but this is a price that *departs from*, not one that *negates*, its value, which corresponds to the amount of socially necessary labor time required for producing a comparable (though unsigned) baseball.

Another possibility is to say that for certain kinds of one-off productive processes, the social average is derived trivially, such that socially necessary labor time to collapses into actual labor time. The amount of time it takes “on average” to make *this artwork* (rather than *an artwork*) is, more or less by definition, however many hours the artist in fact spent making it. The condition of uniqueness that this “social average” is unalterable: it is (logically) impossible for other producers to enter the arena and produce the thing more efficiently. But the artwork *has value* all the same. If this is the right way to think about things, the fancy prices of some artworks are not accidental numbers assigned to valueless things. They are instead prices that greatly exceed the amount of living and dead labor congealed in the art object.

Note that uniqueness (as a feature of some use-values) is not sufficient for non-sub status. The fact that you can customize your new Chevrolet does not somehow problematize the real and formal subsumption of the automobile industry. Uniqueness is easy to mass produce, through the simple trick of making noticeable variations to otherwise substitutable, underlyingly similar items.

What makes genuine art different from a customized car? The special use-value of genuine art objects has to do with more than just uniqueness. As I alluded to before, it also has to do with *how the thing gets made*. Approximately speaking, a genuine art object is supposed to be an irreproducible expression of the creative impulses of a talented (or otherwise exceptional) individual who is given latitude to freely make choices about the features and character of the art-work, and to implement them in the way she sees fit (etc.). But for an object to be produced by a wage-worker whose labor-power is coercively commanded by and disposed of by a capitalist producer engaged in competition with other capitalist producers of the same type of object, *just is* for that object to fail to comport with the aforementioned aesthetic ideology in the way that would allow the object to possess the use-value that is paradigmatic of paradigmatic art.

This *in-principle* unsubsumability distinguishes such products from products that are contingently unsubsumed, but not of necessity unsubsumed. In our society, for a bunch of historical, economic, political, and legal reasons, the transportation infrastructure and military defense system are largely managed along non-capitalist lines (although there have been notable recent capitalist incursions into these spheres). But one can easily imagine a close possible world in which both of these branches are organized as for-profit ventures. While it is not random or accidental that soldiers and roads aren't fully subsumed under capital, there is nothing *intrinsic* to soldiers and roads requires that this be the case. There is also much that could be said along these lines concerning the reproduction of labor-power itself as a commodity, since labor-power--a power immanent in, and only in, human bodies and minds--is reproduced largely in the private domicile outside of (although not insulated from the effects of) capitalist commodity production. The labor that goes on in the home is merely contingently unsubsumed, for it is at least conceptually possible that the responsibility for rearing workers (reproducing the labor force) could be largely or fully transferred from family to firm (and, indeed, much labor that used to be domestic has been taken over by the service sector of the capitalist economy). Not so with paradigmatic art: the unsubsumability of authentic art is guaranteed, as it were, *a priori*, or constitutively, or metaphysically, by the very nature of its use value. Call this kind of use-value a "production-tracking" use value. Production-tracking use values have the power to satisfy the consumer's desire that an object be made (or not be made) in a certain way.

What about non-art items that have production-tracking use values? Once one knows what to look for, it is easy to see that many everyday products--typically, but not always, luxury items, at least to some degree--have the use-value of having been made in a certain way. Some but not all of these are non-subs. Organic food is food that must be grown in such-and-such a way, not solely because of whatever advantages this creates for taste and nutrition, but at least in part because of the consumer's non-instrumental desire for the food to have been grown thusly. Owing to the nature of its use-value, there is a level or form of real subsumption that is ruled out for organic food, in that there are ways of reconfiguring food production to make it more efficient

(chemical fertilizers, genetic modification, etc.) that its use-value disallows. Brand-name clothing is clothing that satisfies the consumer's desire that the garment be the authenticated product of a specific corporation (among other desires that it satisfies, such as the usual desires for warmth and comfort). Note that, in contrast to that of genuine works of art, the production-tracking use-value of brand-name clothing *requires* the production of the goods to have been formally subsumed by capital; a *brand-name* commodity is after all a brand-name *commodity*. Amish furniture, which accounts for 10% of furniture shipments in the United States, must be produced by members of a specific faith community, and, owing to the peculiarities of that faith, is made without the use of electricity or heavy machinery.<sup>8</sup> Those who purchase an Amish-made chair are not simply purchasing something to sit on. After all, a seat that delivers a comparable sitting experience could be had at a lower cost from Ikea. We can infer from this that part of the use-value of Amish furniture is that it is made by Amish people and in a distinctively Amish way. And this precludes the thoroughgoing technologization and scientification of the labor process involved in making such furniture, for this would subvert the character of the use-value that makes this furniture saleable (at its comparatively high price) in to begin with. Beyond a relatively superficial reorganization of the factory floor, real subsumption of the Amish furniture industry is literally impossible. Closer to home for urbanites, Whole Foods, which showed 15.7 billion dollars in revenue last year, is a cornucopia of production-tracking use-values: fair-trade products, environmentally friendly products, made-in-America products, ethical/humane animal products, union-made products, non-dolphin tuna, no-cage eggs, Halal and Kosher food, and so forth, are all branded and advertised as such so that they can satisfy the desire for the products to be produced under certain conditions and constraints.

So far I have taken note of instances in which the structure of a use-value, as defined by a relation between a desire and a mode of production, has consequences for the subsumability of certain forms of labor. In those cases it was not the material/physical/natural aspect of the labor (the labor insofar as it is *concrete*) that makes it unsubsumable. Nothing about the brute physical process of painting a canvas prevents it from being performed by a wage laborer, or for that matter a machine. Instead, once again, non-subsumability is a *social* fact that arises because of the normative structure of certain desires and preferences.

This brings me back to the earlier quotation from *Theories of Surplus Value*: “the product of mental labour--*Wissenschaft*--always stands far below its value, because the labor-time needed to reproduce it has no relation at all to the labor-time required for its original production.” It is difficult to know how much to read into this remark and how much to rest on it. Certain kinds of mental labor can be performed as abstract labor that yield reproducible products: there is a social average for how long it should take an IT consulting firm to study a workplace and make its recommendations for re-configuration, such that the cost of this service will depend on the expenditure of socially necessary labor time it represents. Marx himself talks about literary “hackwork” that is done for a wage and that is productive of value. And Marx is clear on the point that both mental and physical labor within a firm belong to the “collective laborer,” the “living production machine” made up of all productive laborers who are involved in the production of commodity, and who are differentiated from one another based on a complex division of labor that creates a hierarchy of authority, knowledge, and expertise. Thus the “works engineer has yet another relation and in the main works mainly with his brain, and so

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://amishamerica.com/what-are-typical-amish-businesses/>

on,” but is no less productive, no less a performer of abstract labor, and no less exploited, than manual laborers.

However, can the same be said of the *revolutionary* intellectual labor of, say, inventing novel methods and technologies that radically reconfigure the way in which existing use-values are produced, or of inventing novel, saleable use-values that can create and fill a need not currently engendered and addressed by the “great heap of commodities” on the market? Is the *invention* of the light bulb something for which there is a socially necessary labor time? Is it a productive process subject to formal or real subsumption? We run again into the issue that the event itself is one-off, since the light bulb can only be invented once. Thus, perhaps, there is no sense to be made of the idea of really-subsuming the process of inventing the light-bulb so as to make more efficient or productive the process of invention (of *the lightbulb*, though perhaps the same cannot be said of the process of invention *uberhaupt*). To that extent, the lightbulb *considered as an invention* (rather than as a type of physical object) is a non-sub. But, unlike the cases considered above, non-subsumability here has nothing to do with some desire on the part of the consumer that the labor of inventing the lightbulb be conducted in one way or another (by Amish people, or in a way that doesn’t harm animals, or whatever). For all the capitalist cares, the invention of the light bulb need not involve labor at all. Better for the capitalist if the secret of electric light were magically conveyed by a Ouija board or revealed in a dream. Differently put, the use-value of the *invention* of the lightbulb is entirely a matter of the possibilities it creates for providing super-profits to the capitalist who first corners the light bulb market or who first outperforms competitors by implementing light bulbs in the production process. The use-value of the invention of the light bulb is not production-tracking, though the invention of the lightbulb (considered as a product independent of light-bulbs themselves) is a non-sub.

Characterizing things this way probably raises more questions than it answers. For instance: even if it is the case that the invention of *the light bulb* is not a subsumable process, is the process of *producing inventions* in general subsumable? It seems so: Edison ran a company that sold inventions. How can we know whether the amount of labor time that Edison and his associates matter-of-factly invested in research and development did or did not correspond to a social average? What other investments of labor time should or could we use as a basis for comparison in order to determine this? (At least when Newton and Leibniz both discovered the calculus, we could compare their individual time investments!) Or are we supposed to imagine that there is a social average for invention in general? Further, exchange value is a feature of commodities that only surfaces when they are thrown onto the market with and against comparable commodities. Can this even happen with, say, the binomial theorem? (This question immediately opens up a can of worms concerning intellectual property and the commodification of *abstracta*). If not, how can Marx suggest that the theorem, or its invention, has a *value*? I suggested that one available theoretical move would be to trivialize the notion of the social average in these kinds of cases, by identifying the socially necessary labor time with *de facto* labor hours. This would at least allow us to give content to the notion that Edison sold his inventions at prices above or below their values. This immediately leads to questions about Marx’s distinction between productive and unproductive labor, which is one of the most vexing and disputed theoretical moves he makes.

Rather than venturing any answers to these difficult questions, let me close by noting that most of them are applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of art. There is an interesting

commonality between artistic and scientific non-subs: in both cases, it is capitalism itself that is responsible for creating a demand for a kind of consumable item the production of which it is unable to fully or adequately subsume. Capitalist competition creates enormous system pressure for invention and innovation, but the nature of these activities is such that they are recalcitrant to capitalist subsumption. And the individuality and irreplaceability of artworks considered as “individual and irreplaceable objects” become use-values *par excellence* primarily and especially within a capitalist lifeworld marked by comparatively widespread commodity production and the consequent proliferation of non-individual, replaceable objects. Science and art, much like the existence of the working class itself, are illustrations of how capitalism is a sorcerer’s apprentice that conjures up entities it cannot govern.