

“Mimesis of the Alienated”: Commodity Form and Artwork’s Autonomy in late Capitalism: An Analysis of Hirst’s *For the Love of God* and Santiago Sierra

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Abstract

The article offers a critical reading of Damien Hirst’s *For the Love of God* and Santiago Sierra’s oeuvre, interpreted as two antithetical ways to deal with the complex relationship between autonomous artwork and commodity form. To this end, the contribution first clarifies the aesthetic dimension of commodity form: it will be shown that commodity’s social performativity is necessarily carried out within an aesthetic medium. On this basis, and by drawing back to Theodor W. Adorno’s understanding of the concepts of art’s aesthetic autonomy and aura, it will be then proposed an analogy between commodity fetishistic abstraction and artwork’s aesthetic autonomy. This theoretical background will be finally used in interpreting Damien Hirst’s *For the Love of God* and Santiago Sierra’s artistic performances: the first will be read as artistic radicalisation of commodity’s abstraction, whereas the second as attempts to expose the social relations embedded in and concealed by commodity fetishism.

Keywords: commodity form, fetishism, artwork, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Damien Hirst, Santiago Sierra

“Die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur, der sie schlug [The wound can be healed only by the spear which smote it]” (Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act III)

Introduction

What is the specific relation between art practices and capitalist society or, more specifically, between autonomous artwork and commodity form? Through which categories should we understand artwork’s autonomy and how does it relate with

commodity abstraction? In this contribution, I am going to offer some preliminary conceptual tools to answer these questions, by offering a critical reading of two artistic practices: Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* and the performances and installations of Santiago Sierra. As I will try to show, these artistic experiences represent two radical alternatives for the artwork, in a context in which the commodity form has become the central social dispositive. This is why, in order to fully grasp the significance of these artistic alternatives, it is first necessary to understand the aesthetic dimension of the commodity form. In what follows, I do not aim to offer a comprehensive definition of the work of art in late capitalism, nor I propose a general criterion for aesthetic judgements in the epoch of consumerism. Nonetheless, by addressing the aesthetic dimension of the commodity and by creating a bridge between this dimension and the art, I hope to give some conceptual clarifications and methodological indications for a critical assessment of these open questions too.

I will start by focusing the aesthetic value of commodities within the contemporary society, thus further developing the crucial insight of some recent streams of studies. The debate concerning the so called *aestheticisation* (Featherstone 1991; Welsch 1996; Michaud 2003; Lipovestky and Serroy 2013; Matteucci 2016 and 2017) has focused on the growing importance of the aesthetic value in our society, by highlighting the structural link between late capitalism, consumerism and aesthetic values and by developing a philosophical terminology able to grasp this intertwinement. On the wake of these studies, I will argue that, in order to offer a solid and critical understanding of artwork's relationship with commodity form, one should start "from below" and first grasp the structural intertwinement between commodity form and aesthetic dimension. In the second section, I will then consider the modern concept of autonomous art: following Adorno, I will show how art's autonomisation and commodification represent not two different and contrasting phenomena but, on the contrary, two structurally related processes. Finally, on this basis I will be able to offer a critical reading of the two aforementioned artistic experiences, and clarify why they

represents two antithetical alternatives in addressing artistically the link between work of art and commodity form.

1. Commodity form, fetishism and social relations

The first point I would like to highlight is that the so called "aestheticization" does not represent only a historical, contingent phase in the capitalistic development, but more substantially a necessary condition of the functioning of the commodity form and thus of capital society as such. The increase of aestheticization processes in contemporary capitalism has been highlighted by different scholars (See Matteucci 2017, 210 f; Gandesha and Hartle 2017, XI f): according to most of them we live today in an "artistic capitalism" (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2013) or an "aesthetic capitalism" (Böhme 2017); a "medial society" (Carmagnola and Ferraresi 1999, 20 f.), in which we assist to a shift "from the factory to the theatre" that radicalizes the debordian identification between commodity and spectacle (Debord 1995). Yet, as already mentioned, and as I shall attempt to demonstrate shortly, the pervasiveness of the contemporary aestheticization is not the contingent outcome of a specific kind of capitalistic society, or a stage in its historical development, but rather the consequence of an essential feature of its fundamental institution: the commodity form. In fact, commodity's fetish character consists precisely in the attribution of "suprasensible or social" value to "sensuous things" (Marx 1976, 165): aesthetics constitutes in this sense the medium of its functioning. For this reason, to the expansion of capitalist social relations *necessarily* corresponds an expansion of the process of aestheticization.

It is important to stress that the structural relationship between aesthetic field and commodity form cannot be explained only through a phenomenological analysis of the aesthetic experience in its given immediacy. By focusing only on the individual experience, or the aesthetic experience as such, it is impossible to grasp not only commodity's embeddedness within the social process, but also the non-contingent character of its aesthetic dimension: it is necessary to contextualize the experience of the commodity within the social totality, thus

following the dialectical “primacy of the object” assumed by Adorno as methodological frame for his micrological analysis¹. For the same reason, in order to understand the relationship between the singular artwork and the commodity form we need to frame aesthetic theory within a social theory able to highlight the historical determinate constitution of its object. In particular, we have to grasp the aesthetic value as a historically determined apparatus of social praxis (see Agamben 2009, 14), i.e. as a form of social mediation specific of the consumeristic capitalism. The aesthetic dimension related to the commodity permeates “the way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs”, which “is conditioned not only by nature but by history” (Benjamin 2006, 104). This necessarily has an impact on the production and reception of works of art, both of which cannot be abstracted from taking place within this medium.

The key feature of the capitalistic mode of production is the institution of the commodity as the social institution that regulates not only the productive process and the distribution of the goods, but also the social relations. In analysing commodity’s aesthetic dimension, it is not necessary to consider the whole cycle of capital production, but only to focus on the sphere of circulation: the relevance of the aesthetic element appears namely only within it. Yet it is important to notice, that the primacy thus granted to circulation over production is at the same time true and false: it is true, insofar as commodity’s circulation *objectively* organizes the distribution and the division of labour, but is false, insofar as it also conceals the real social relations that are mediated through the commodity form². In order to highlight commodity’s aesthetic dimension, one has to take the circulation sphere as it *appears* in our society: it is namely the necessity of the commodity to *appear* on the market that grounds its need for an aesthetic field.

Capitalism can be interpreted as a specific form of social regulation that works by objectifying social relations into material fetishes: the commodities. Commodity fetishism maintains a peculiar relationship with the aesthetic dimension: not only it is possible to reconstruct the Marxian concept of fetishism through the lenses of the aesthetic performativity of

the commodity (see Schimmenti 2021), but, more substantially, the construction of an aesthetic field is a necessary precondition for the commodity in order to perform its social function. The aestheticization is not an *additional* element of commodity's essence but rather the necessary *medium* through which it is able to regulate social relations. As is well known, Marx introduces the concept of commodity's fetishism in the fourth paragraph of the first chapter of *The Capital*. As already mentioned, commodities are here defined as "sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social" (Marx 1976, 165; see also Khatib 2017, Carmagnola and Ferraresi 1999, 13 f). The commodity is a material, sensuous thing that "reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things" (Marx 1976, 164 f). The commodity form incorporates the social relations it articulates in the "sensible" dimension of its thingness. Social relations are primarily complex temporal processes: therefore, they are "suprasensible". The commodity form has the capacity to reify this complex process into a sensible, empirical thing. Commodity fetishism is thus a form of alienation (*Entäußerung*) in which a social relation is externalized in an immediate, material thing – a fetish – *independent* from the social actors embedded in it. Commodity form becomes "a category of society influencing decisively the *objective* form of things and people in the society thus emerging, their relation to nature and the possible relations of men to each other" (Lukács 1971, 88 my emphasis). On the one hand, it mediates the social relations embedded in it, but on the other, it conceals these very relations assuming the form of a thing. Commodities "do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things" (Marx 1976, 166). This is the reason why the sphere of circulation *appears* as the regulator of the productive process: in a capitalist society, productive relations appear as objectively regulated through the exchange of commodities on the market³. In capitalism the commodity becomes "the universal structuring principle" (Lukács 1971, 85) of the whole society. This also implies that in a capitalist

society social objectivity is *necessarily* mediated by appearances, since social relations are objectively mediated through their abstraction in commodity forms. The fetishistic abstraction of the commodity form is thus a “real abstraction” and “therefore not subjective or thought-induced” (Kathib 2017, 51), to the extent that such abstraction performs regulation and coercion. “Wherever commodity exchange takes place, it does so in effective ‘abstraction’ from use. This is an abstraction not in mind but in fact.” (Sohn-Rethel 1978, 25).

2. Market as aesthetic field

It is now necessary to focus the aesthetic performativity of commodity form by analysing its concrete functioning in the market. Commodity’s double nature as material object *and* as social dispositive mirrors the double significance it acquires within the market as use-value and as exchange-value. Use-value refers only to commodity’s sensible and material dimension, whereas exchange-value refers only to its social meaning, i.e. its exchangeability with other commodities. As Wolfgang Friz Haug has pointed out in his seminal study on commodity’s aesthetics, these two aspects play two completely different, even antithetical functions: whereas the seller sees the commodity only as potential exchange-value, the consumer considers primarily its potential use-value (Haug 2009, 25 f). Their position is symmetrical and mutually exclusive. Use value and exchange value are in fact mutually exclusive too. As Marx explains,

Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects. We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value. (Marx 1976, 138)

How do these two mutually exclusive aspects of the commodity and their respective social interests meet? They are both present in the commodity form, but it is not clear how they relate with each other during the exchange.

Now, according to Haug it is precisely by *constructing an aesthetic field* that these two aspects of commodity, or more precisely the two interests associated with them, are brought

into relationship with one another. It is only thanks to its aesthetical display that a commodity can act *both* as exchange value – for the seller – and as use value – for the buyer. Their encounter is made possible by constructing a space, prior to sale, in which commodities *appear* as “promise of use value [*Gebrauchswertversprechen*]” (Haug 2009, 29), i.e. as object of aesthetic contemplation: thanks to the “shop-window quality of things [*Schaufenster-Qualität der Dinge*]” it is possible to arouse “the interest of the buyer” with no actual consumption, but only “by the external stimulus of the object” (Simmel 1997, 257). Commodity’s presentation defers both purchase – which would exhaust its exchange-value – and consumption – which would exhaust its use-value: thanks to aesthetic distancing, it enables the two side to meet each other on the market. As Simmel brilliantly explain in his *Philosophy of money* it is “the distance established between the object and ourselves which enables us to accord it a value beyond that of being merely enjoyed” (Simmel 2004, 69). Commodity’s double nature necessitates an aesthetic sphere in which the buyer is distanced from objects but is able to enjoy its promise and thus evaluate its objective social value. On the side of the seller, commodity’s aesthetic presentation expresses its use value *independently* from its actual consumption, that is to say, before the *realization* of its exchange value through the sale. The sphere of circulation, which follows production and necessarily precedes both sale and consumption, is mediated by commodity’s aesthetical “*apparition*” that enables commodity’s qualitative and sensible dimension to meet its quantitative abstract dimension: it *appears* to the buyer *sensibly* by addressing his senses, his aesthetic receptivity, without being consumed, thus remaining nothing else than an exchange-value carrier. With the extension of the market as universal institution, we then assist to a progressive enhancement of commodity’s “staging-value [*Inszenierungswert*]” (Böhme 2017, 27). According to Böhme, in late consumeristic capitalism the staging-value acquires even an autonomous relevance over use- and exchange-value: “through commodity’s aesthetics is satisfied a need that does *not* aim to use-value” (Böhme 2017, 34). This holds not only for consumer goods, like food products or fashion

products – with regard to which the “shop-window quality” is particularly evident – but also for production factors, like workers: they need to *appear* in the market in the form of commodity, i.e. as material carriers of living labour. This is the reason why they are objectively forced to conceive of themselves as a form of capital to be purchased and invested. Self-fashioning thus becomes a key skill required to interact as an entrepreneur of the self within the labour market (Foucault 2005 and 2008).

For this reasons, aesthetic value can be assumed as a structural, non-contingent feature of the commodity form as such⁴. In this sense, it is important to stress the structural function of commodity’s aesthetic value within the market, and to distinguish its function from its contingent role in consumption and sale. Commodity’s aesthetic value is not something additional with respect to use- and exchange-value: it is not the mere packaging of commodity’s physical body, but rather its social *medium*. As we shall see, this aesthetic field that enables the commodity to function as a social medium is of crucial importance in order to grasp not only the problematic relationship of artworks with commodification processes, but more crucially to understand its becoming an autonomous social praxis.

3. Aura and commodity

As we have seen, commodity’s aesthetic performativity takes place within a contemplative distance analogous to that which takes place in the experience of artworks, at least as we understand it since the modernity. Simmel highlights the analogy between economic and aesthetic evaluation: in both cases, “in place of the former concrete relationship with the object, it is now mere contemplation that is the source of enjoyable sensation” (Simmel 2004, 70). In this regard, commodity maintains a relationship, however paradoxical, with the concept of “aura”, understood as “the unique apparition of a distance” (Benjamin 2006, 104 f). On the one hand, the aesthetic performativity of a commodity is entirely built on distance, by evocating its intrinsic and unique use value. On the other hand, its social form negates both its sensible

qualities and its uniqueness, reducing it to a mere exchange-value carrier. Yet, there is no fundamental contradiction between commodity form and aura. On the contrary, auraticity can become an object of categorical and conceptual reflection only in the modern commodified world: in fact, only with the commodity form does the discrepancy between these two contradictory moments – infinite exchangeability and uniqueness – emerge as such. Commodity's double nature, caught between singularity and reproducibility, quality and quantity, intrinsic use value and relative exchange-value's carrier, is an effect of the specific social form that the thing assumes as a commodity. Commodity's serial character is therefore not based primarily on the ontological qualities of the object but on its social form: a commodity *must* strive to be empirically identical to another commodity of the same type because it *must* have the same use value *in order to be* identical as exchange value on the market. It is the primacy of exchange value that determines the aesthetical homogenization of commodities as use values. From a strictly empirical point of view, no object, however produced in series, is totally identical to another; absolutely identical, however, is its value in relation to other identical commodities on the market. The equality between commodities (reproducibility) is first of all presupposed by their social form – that is, by their being exchange values – and only subsequently (re)produced by the technical process that is directed towards the creation of objects that are as empirically indistinguishable as possible. In other words, the empirical homogenization achieved by industrial mass production *follows* the principle of formal equivalence required by the primacy of exchange value in determining the commodity form as such. The "decay of the aura" that implies "changes in the medium of present-day perception" (Benjamin 2006, 104) represents a structural process, internal to the commodity form as such or, more precisely, to its form as aesthetic construct.

It is thus precisely the tension between the two characters of the commodity that makes possible the specific aesthetic experience of the opposition between unique sensible experience and commodified reproducibility. The emergence of

auraticity, as the distinctive feature of ‘authentic’ artwork, can be traced back to commodity’s double nature and to the tension that springs from this contradiction. This is the reason why aura can also be considered an essential element of the “staging-value” of the commodity. In fact, on the one hand, the commodity form, due to its double constitution, must present itself within an auratic distance as irreplaceable in its promise of use value; on the other hand, its social form contradicts its qualitative uniqueness at the very moment when it makes its infinite interchangeability possible as exchange value. The commodity promises a unique happiness, but realizes itself as an exchangeable value: it is always simultaneously a use value – an intensive quality – and an exchange value – a pure quantitative value. The aura, emerges as hallmark of uniqueness, irreplaceability and pure qualitative dimension, in opposition to reproducibility, seriality and quantitative dimension of exchange value. Auraticity can become an autonomous aesthetic category only within the aesthetic medium of capitalism. Therefore, the aesthetic performativity of the modern work of art cannot be fully grasp without taking into account the aesthetic dimension of the commodity form: as I shall demonstrate, not only it’s auratic character, but also the institutional constitution as an autonomous aesthetic field – that makes auraticity possible – has its roots in a social context permeated by the commodity form’s aestheticity.

4. Artwork and commodity

We can now grasp the reason why aesthetics, as modern doctrine of taste and science of sensations, has always maintained a relationship, albeit ambiguous and problematic, with the world of commodities from its very beginning (see Eagleton 1990, 64 f). It has been shown that some of the main categories of modern aesthetics have developed on the basis of the new aesthetic experience of commodities – such as the “sublime” (see Baioni 1981); yet, more radically, in order to offer a comprehensive account of the historical emergence of the modern concept of autonomous artwork itself, it is necessary to take into account the specific aesthetic environment established by modern market society and by commodities: it is namely

within the tension between use value and exchange value, between autonomy and *fait social*, that the modern "autonomous" artwork find its own 'autonomous' field⁵. Aside from this tension, the development of the main artistic currents remains incomprehensible: from classicism (cf. Baioni 1991) up to the avant-garde (cf. Bürger 1984), all significant art movements develop in tension with the commodity form and with modern division of labour. In this sense, not only is there no contradiction in principle between commodity form and work of art (cf. Schimmenti, 2015), but rather the specific aesthetic performativity of modern autonomous art itself would be not fully understandable outside its relationship with the commodity. Modern art, far from *refusing* any relationship to the commodity form, *assumes* its contradictions as operative field: this is why an adequate understanding of the relationship between commodity form and aesthetic field, which recognizes the latter as a non-contingent moment of the former, is necessary to grasp the specific aesthetic performativity of modern artworks. In fact, the ontological and institutional constitution of modern art is built on the radicalization of commodity form's immanent antinomies.

Modern artwork can be understood as a paradoxical object: it is both an *unusable use value and an exchange value without equivalents*. According to the first definition, the work of art contradicts the consumability of the commodity: in the words of Valéry quoted by Benjamin, "we recognize a work of art by the fact that no idea it inspires in us, no mode of behaviour it suggests we adopt, could ever exhaust it or dispose of it" (Benjamin 2003, 337). By arresting the user on the contemplative threshold of aesthetic experience, artwork cannot be *consumed*: that no concept, no interpretation, no behaviour can exhaust its meaning also implies that no use can exhaust its enjoyment. Precisely because its enjoyment is subtracted from both function and consumption, it maintains in tension what commodity must solve once it is used. On the other hand, artwork also contradicts exchange value, insofar as it presents itself in the form of a unique piece without equals. The autonomous work of art is, by definition, a unique example – even when, as in Warhol, it plays with its possible

reproducibility. Yet, even in denying commodity's two natures, the autonomous work of art is *also* a commodity: in fact, it can be sold and thus exists only in capitalist's "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2004), i.e. by assuming the social form of the commodity⁶. But this brings up another problem: even if use- and exchange-value are distinct from one another, both are necessary to commodity form. As Marx explains "nothing can be a value without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value" (Marx 1976, 131). Should we then conclude that the absoluteness of artwork's commodity-character relies in its being a pure exchange-value with no use-value whatsoever? Or should we follow here Adorno's idea, according to which in late capitalism it is increasingly exchange-value as such that is being consumed (cf. Adorno 1991)? In other words, has exchange value itself become a use value, i.e. a form of enjoyment? The suppression of use-value opens up the idea of an "absolute commodity" endowed with pure exchange-value that becomes aesthetically enjoyable as such. In this case, "exchange value disguise itself as the object of enjoyment" (Adorno 1991, 39). Yet the work of art denies not only its use-value: it also short-circuits its exchange value. By presenting itself as unique and irreplaceable, the work of art is, by definition, not exchangeable. This clearly does not mean that it is not sellable, but that its exchange value is not relative, i.e. is *absolute*, not depending on either a comparison with other commodities or the socially necessary labour contained in it. In this sense, an "absolutely" autonomous work of art would incarnate the realized utopia of the commodity form: a promise of inexhaustible enjoyment and of a value without equals. As Adorno enigmatically states, "the absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity" (Adorno 2002, 21). What does Adorno mean precisely?

The debate on the relationship between art and commodity can be divided into two antithetical, and yet simple main positions: "art is a commodity; art is not a commodity" (Martin 2007, 16). These two positions should be understood as ideal types in the Weberian sense, i.e. as theoretical constructions that do not correspond to any actual, empirically

given position, but that can be useful to organize and to conceptualize a sociological complex. According to this distinction, different artistic practices, critical analysis or interpretative categories can be interpreted as more or less radical deployments of one of these two positions. Thus, one could compare Pop Art against Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism as possible example of integral conformation to commodity form, in the first case, and radical negation of commodification on the other (Martin 2007, 16). To return to Adorno, what is interesting about his position, is that he maintains *both* the absorption of aesthetic autonomy within the processes of commodification *and* artwork's autonomy (cf. Martin 2007, 17): in Adorno's analysis, if "art's autonomy remains irrevocable" (Adorno 2002, 1), this same autonomy is constructed not only in a context of social constraint, but more radically *through commodity abstraction itself*. That's why "art and artworks [...] right into the smallest detail of their autonomy [...] are not only art but something foreign and opposed to it" (Adorno 2002, 4): because their autonomy is obtained by *assuming* the form of commodity's abstraction, that is to say through the same abstraction that interferes with their autonomy.

This dialectical constitution of the work of art shed light on the convergence between absolute artwork and absolute commodity. In fact, it is by appropriating and radicalizing the contradictions that inhabit the commodity form, and not by abstractly negating them, that the work of art is able to expose these contradictions. In other words, artwork can counter commodity's reification, only by incorporating, and thus exposing, its own commodity-character. The work of art cannot escape the antinomies generated by the double nature of the commodity, because it obtains its autonomy by *mimetically assume* the form of the commodity: abstraction. Like any other commodity, in fact, artworks gain their autonomy by concealing the social process that makes them possible and by presenting themselves as fetishes. As for commodities, the material precondition of artworks' autonomy is their abstraction from the social process: paradoxically enough, "they are a social product that has rejected every semblance of existing for

society” (Adorno 2002, 236). As in the case of commodities, artwork’s abstraction too is connected to social reification:

Social forces of production, as well as relations of production, return in artworks as mere forms divested of their facticity because artistic labour is social labour; moreover, they are always the product of this labour. In artworks, the forces of production are not in themselves different from social productive forces except by their constitutive absencing from real society.

In other words, artworks’ detachment from social labour “as mere form” is itself the index of their embeddedness in social abstraction. Just as the commodity, also artwork obtains its formal autonomy through abstraction “from real society”. Not only their abstraction is the same one that occurs between abstract labour and living labour in commodity form, but also their aesthetic performativity – that is, their auracity – arises from the concealment of human labour, in the same way as in the case of the commodity form in general: “Is not the aura invariably a trace of a forgotten human moment in the thing”, namely “the moment of human *labour* [?]” (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 321 f) asked Adorno to Benjamin in an often cited letter. Benjamin reacted sceptically to Adorno’s suggestion, arguing that “even if the question of the aura does in fact involve a ‘forgotten human moment’, this is still not necessarily the moment of human labour” (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 327, cf. Lijster 2017, 57 f). If Benjamin’s objection would best refer to the aura of natural elements – as the example he gave of “a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder” (Benjamin 2002, 105) – Adorno’s argument may be helpful in order to understand the auratic character specific to commodities and artworks. As showed in reference to commodity’s aesthetic performativity, also artwork’s auracity is bounded to its fetish character, that is to say to its abstractness. In this sense it can be said, that “modern art” becomes such “through *mimesis of the hardened and alienated*”, insofar as it “syncopates the overwhelming objectivity of the commodity character”. The alienation of the commodity form from social relations is mimetically imitated by artwork’s autonomy. Therefore, “it is its abstractness [...] that becomes a cipher of what the work is”

(Adorno 2002, 21 f my emphasis). And yet, as already said, by mimetically incorporating the commodity form, artwork is also able to expose its paradoxical constitution. By imitating its abstractness, it reveals "the ideology inherent in the commodity form, which pretends to exist for another, whereas ironically it is something merely for itself" (Adorno 2002, 236). Artwork's mimesis of the commodity form does not mean its capitulation to the omnipotence of the market. Rather, "only by transferring market's *imagerie* to its autonomy, can art surmount the heteronomous market" (Adorno 2002, 21, trans. mod.). In this sense, it is precisely because he "neither railed against nor portrayed reification", but "protested against it in the experience of its archetypes" that Baudelaire stands "supremely above late romantic sentimentality" (Adorno 2002, 21).

5. Autonomy between abstraction and social embeddedness: two case studies

As I have shown in the previous paragraphs, modern work of art and commodity form, far from being abstractly opposed, are, in fact, dialectically interconnected: they explain, influence and clarify one another. The work of art dismantles commodity form from within. As we have seen, according to Adorno, it is the oblivion of social labour that generates the aura: this would also explain the auratic character of both artworks and commodities, since both obtain their abstraction by concealing the social relation embedded in them. Following Adorno's account of the convergence between absolute work of art and absolute commodity, we might also say that the work of art radicalizes its auratic force by embodying the utopia of the self-valorisation of capital, able produce surplus value without labour and without consumption. The absolute artwork mimetically approaches the absolute commodity, that is to say the commodity assumed as *ab-soluta*, as fully abstracted self-valorisation detached from its material condition. A shining example that can help to illuminate both the aesthetic performativity of the commodity form and the structural analogy between artwork's and commodity's aura is Hirst's "absolute artwork" *For the Love of God* (Hirst 2007): as well known, it consists in a platinum sculpture of a human skull

encrusted with 8,601 diamonds. It was sold on 30 August 2007 for fifty million pounds to an anonymous consortium that, apparently, included Hirst himself. It has been argued that also the auction sale was part of the work of performance art in itself, insofar as it seems to be an essential element in understanding its meaning. Hirst's work concentrates in the materiality of his work the archetypal features of the absolute commodity. On the one hand, the skull recalls the archetypal images of death, *vanitas*, transience, which are not only some of the recurring themes in the artist's work, but also, as I argue, metaphors of commodity's transience character. On the other, the diamonds that cover the skull are the archetype of luxuriousness and exchange-value in the most concentrated and purified form. The union of the archetype of transience with diamonds is especially striking and meaningful if one takes into account also the performative dimension of Hirst's work. The process of self-valorisation, to which the work underwent at the auction, and the fact that Hirst himself was part of the consortium that bought it, is not simply a disturbing short-circuit in today's art market. The affinity – or the coincidence – between the mechanisms of valorisation in the art market and those in high finance is not accidental or contingent: it draws back to the structural analogy between commodity form and modern artwork. Artworks and financial assets are both forms of exchange-value that “autonomously” produces surplus value: more specifically both assure a valorisation detached by labour process. Read as mimesis of absolute commodity, i.e. of a value able to produce surplus value by its own, the diamond skull becomes the perfect image of the “dead labour [*verstorbene Arbeit*] [...] which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour” (Marx 1976, 342). Commodity appears here as the dead corpse of living labour: “life is drained from the object and what remains is an empty shell, similar to the Baroque emblems of the ruin, the skull, and the corpse” (Lijster 2017, 59). No life other than capital self-valorisation vivifies Hirst's *For the Love of God*. Hirst's artwork, insofar as it radically pursues artwork's abstraction pushes to the limit the identification with the absolute commodity and brings therefore to the extreme the concealment

of the social relationships that underlies it. As Julia Steinmetz writes, "in *For the Love of God*, we can see capital's maintenance of itself in the artwork's surrender to circulation and indifference to form when it comes to its place in the market" (Steinmetz 2009). The abstraction of value incorporated in diamonds shows no trace whatsoever of the enormous amount of living labour contained in it: by striving to become pure value, *For the Love of God* enact and exposes the concealment of human labour sedimented in it. Human substance and social relations do not appear except as dead material reified as commodified aura: as skull, archetype of death, and as diamond, purest value carrier. In this respect, Hirst's work radically pursues the "mimesis of the hardened and alienated": its reified abstractness instead of exposing commodity's social character, "syncopates the overwhelming objectivity of the commodity character" (Adorno 2002, 21). Its "affirmative character" stresses its separateness from the material world and affirms a superior realm of everlasting "Beauty", where one can overcome time, transience and ultimately death (cf. Marcuse 2007, 87 ff). This utopia is well explained by Hirst himself, where he contends that this artwork is "ethereal and timeless" (quoted in Shaw 2007). According to Hirst, "buy art, build a museum, put your name on it, let people in for free. That's as close as you can get to immortality" (quoted in Steinmetz 2009). Hirst's claims of overcoming time and history through art also confirms the denial and repression of the material, historical relation enacted by his work, which thus mimetically approach the sublime experience of commodity's abstraction (cf. White 2009).

It is however possible to find artworks that, while maintaining the moment of abstraction, i.e. of aesthetic autonomy, strive to *expose* the antagonistic social relationships that are concealed by reification. In this sense, the works of Santiago Sierra, without aspiring to the dissolution of aesthetic autonomy in the sense of relational aesthetics, unveil the space of aesthetic autonomy as a space of abstraction, by showing the antagonistic social relationships that underlies it (cf. Bishop 2004, 70 f). Most of Sierra's works consist in collective actions that imply the direct involvement of active participants, who

are employed in apparently absurd activities that implies the exploitation of their corporeal force or the temporary and even permanent marking of their body. Sierra's works, such as *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People* (2000), *A Person Continuous Working Hours* (2000), *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blonde* (2001), *Raising of Six Benches* (2001) were interpreted in the wake of relational aesthetics, insofar as they operate by setting-up relations among people. However, unlike relational artworks, which usually aim to create "reconciled" spaces for freed, meaningful human relations (Bishop 2004, 72), Sierra's works always highlight the moment of subordination, even of subjugation of the participants, achieved through monetary remuneration, thus exposing the social material relations that underlie artwork's autonomy and that normally remains concealed by it. The actions requested by the artist to his remunerated participants are often explicitly meaningless and purposeless and always implies physical effort or body modifications, more or less irreversible: in his performances participants are asked, for example, to hold up a bench for set periods of time, to let oneself tattooed with a line of a given length, to get one's hair dyed blonde, being secluded in a small space for a given amount of time and so on. If we analyse Sierra's actions according to the aforementioned analogy between artwork's and commodity's abstraction, we can say that here both use value *and* exchange value are reduced to degree zero: what is maintained in Sierra's oeuvre of the commodity is not the pure value abstractness of the fetish – as in the case of Hirst – but rather the naked social relationships of exploitation that underlies commodity's production and that here constitute both the content and the form of the work of art itself. Thus, it is exploitation itself that stands out explicitly. One could thus affirm that, strictly speaking Sierra's artworks do not mimetically reproduce commodity's *form* as abstraction, but rather, by dismantling the form of its abstractness, they express the social relation concealed by it. In this sense, "the outcome or unfolding of his action forms an indexical trace of the economic and social reality of the place in which he works" (Bishop 2004, 70). For example, in *Raising of Six Benches*, performed at the Kunsthalle in Munich, Sierra (2001a) paid

random people from the city of Munich to hold up all the leather benches in the museum galleries for set periods of time. The action, as stated by Sierra, was thus able to "reflect[] the reality of labour relations in Munich. Munich is a clean and prosperous city, and consequently the only people we could find to perform the task at hand were unemployed actors and bodybuilders who wanted to show off their physical prowess" (quoted in Bishop 2004, 70). In *133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blonde*, performed during Venice Biennale, Sierra (2001b) invited illegal street vendors – most of whom were migrant – to have their hair dyed blond in return for a small amount of money (\$60). The result was the affluence in the exhibition's spaces of a large number of people normally excluded from the elitist circle of contemporary art. The illegal vendors found themselves in the exhibition spaces, branded with blonde hair, while the audience was forced to confront the mechanisms of exclusion that characterize the social field in which artworks obtain their institutional autonomy. As Bishop notes, "is important that Sierra's work did not achieve a harmonious reconciliation between the two systems [art system and social reality], but sustained the tension between them" (Bishop 2004, 73) It is also important to highlight, that Sierra's work always include the payment of a salary to the participant involved: in this way the subordination and the exploitation of the body exposed in these actions is explicitly associated with the subscription of a contract of employment. Thus, the mechanism of exploitation through salary is made explicit and exposed in all its meaninglessness and violence. The most disturbing and radical example in this sense is probably *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People*, in which, as the artist explained, "four prostitutes addicted to heroin were hired for the price of a shot of heroin to give their consent to be tattooed" (Sierra 2000). This work was preceded by another action in 1998, during which Sierra tattooed a 30 cm line on the back of a "remunerated person". On his website Sierra explain that he "looked for a person who did not have any tattoos or intention of having one, but due to a need for money, would agree to have a mark on his skin for life. The person received \$50 as payment" (Sierra 1998). In these actions the moment of exploitation is

made as explicit as possible, by appropriating and inflicting a permanent sign, one could say, a scar on a body of a person forced by his social condition to submit itself to such a treatment. In all Sierra's work the aesthetic autonomy is confronted immediately with the social reality in which it takes place and over which it affirms various form of exploitation. The social violence that remains concealed by artwork's and commodity's "space of appearance" is here put at the centre: art's autonomy is made explicit, but not to save artwork's auratic separateness, but rather to allow the emergence of the conflict between aesthetic abstraction and socio-material conditions. The form of abstraction is here immediately a form of exploitation.

6. Conclusions

Commodity form can be interpreted as the translation of social relations between humans into a material, sensible object. Commodity's fetish character implies the creation of an aesthetic field, not only insofar as it reifies a social relationship and transforms it in a sensible object, perceptible with the senses. Moreover, as argued by Haug, commodity operates as social medium by creating an aesthetic space that enables the two contradictory natures of commodity form – use-value and exchange-value – and the divergent interests connected to them, to meet on the market. In this sense, aesthetics plays a structural role in the understanding of the commodity form as such. As I have shown, this fact has important consequences for the status of the work of art in capitalism. Just as the aesthetic dimension is central for the understanding of the commodity form, the understanding of the commodity form is central to grasp the aesthetic performativity of contemporary artworks. The very status of autonomous work of art is not in antithesis with the abstraction of the commodity form: on the contrary, according to Adorno, the very autonomy of the work of art is constituted precisely by mimetically reproducing the abstractness of the commodity form, by formally embodying its alienation from the social relation implied in it. In this sense, the modern artwork's autonomy cannot be understood as opposed to commodified reification, as if it would preserve as

autonomous a space supposedly free from market mechanisms; on the contrary, modern art autonomy assume the same abstraction of the commodity form as its field of aesthetic performativity. However, this socio-historical condition can have different outcomes: on the one hand, as in the case of Hirst, what is emphasized is the formal abstractness of the commodity form; on the other hand, as in Sierra, what is emphasized is the social reality hidden by commodity's abstractness. In this sense, the distinction between critical and affirmative culture should not be made on the basis of the alleged rejection or acceptance of the commodity form, but rather on what is brought to light by confronting this form. The reified forgetfulness of time and history exemplified by Hirst's "ethereal" art is antithetical to "the aesthetic capacity to construct mnemonic experience as one of the few acts of resistance against totality" (Buchloh 2003, XXV) performed by Sierra. To aesthetically "construct the mnemonic experience" means, as exemplified in Sierra's oeuvre, to expose the social conditions, i.e. the material relations and the violent and exploiting social processes that underlies the timeless, ethereal abstractness of both art's autonomy and commodity's abstraction: however, these "acts of resistance" do not occur by abstractly refusing art's reification, but rather by exposing the concealed tensions out of which its abstractness has emerged.

NOTES

¹ In *Minima moralia* he writes that in order to grasp the particular experience we have to comprehend it as a moment of the social totality "that transcends the individual and calls his substance by its name." (Adorno 2005, 16)

² "It thus becomes evident that because the objectivity of commodities as values is the purely 'social existence' of these things, it can only be expressed through the whole range of their social relations; consequently, the form of their value must possess social validity." (Marx 1976, 159)

³ This does not imply that the sphere of circulation determines the process of production: it rather follows from the productive relations not only logically, but also genetically. Its role in determining e regulating the productive process follows from the primacy of the abstraction of the value form. As Isaak Rubin brilliantly explains, the reification of social relations, made possible by the commodity, is crucial for the functioning of the capitalistic society: "in a market society, [...] a thing is an intermediary in social

relations, and the circulation of things is inseparably related to the establishment and realization of the productive relations among people. The movement of the prices of things on the market is not only the reflection of the productive relations among people; it is the only possible form of their manifestation in a market society. The thing acquires specific social characteristics in a market economy (for example, the properties of value, money, capital, and so on), due to which *the thing not only hides the production relations among people, but it also organizes them, serving as a connecting link between people.*" (Rubin 1992, 10, my emphasis). It is therefore within the market, in which commodities are exchanged, that the capitalistic economy regulates production and distribution, the relation between different production branches, the level of investment, etc.

⁴ One could ask if the aesthetic value still plays a crucial role also in the exchange of raw materials or services between different manufacturers: even though these are exchanged as commodities, their aesthetic value seems to be not particularly relevant. In order to address this problem properly, one should further deepen the relationship between sphere of production and sphere of circulation: a task that cannot be undertaken in the context of this contribution.

⁵ We cannot deepen the concept of autonomy adequately. Yet, it is important to distinguish between two different understandings of artwork's autonomy: a formal-ontological, and a sociological one. The first one suggests that in order to grasp artwork's aesthetic value and meaning, one has to consider it in its separateness, i.e. in its autonomy; this understanding can be traced back to Kant and focuses especially the formal dimension of artworks, which are conceived as pure objects of aesthetic contemplation. The second understanding suggests a sociological interpretation and puts into question the "*historical and social conditions of possibility*" of this supposedly pure aesthetic experience: according to this reading, autonomous is not so much the artwork as such, but the social field in which it is recognized as aesthetically relevant (cf. Bourdieu 1996, 285 ff). It can be argued that Adorno tries to offer a mediated understanding of these two approaches, developing on the one hand a immanent hermeneutics of the work of art and, on the other hand, a social theory of its historical constitution.

⁶ Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre has defined a specific form of accumulation connected to artworks: this "economy of enrichment" encompasses markets in fine arts, limited-edition luxury goods, high-end collectibles etc. and is characterized by a specific form of value, that they call "collection form". Cfr. Boltanski and Esquerre, 2020.

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