

# What Does Art Work Through?

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Many would probably find that Hegel's aesthetics did not age particularly well and preserved only modest relevance for thinking art's vicissitudes in capitalist times. As if this was not enough, Hegel's view of art as a mere transition in the development of spirit, and of diminished metaphysical significance compared to religion and philosophy, is anything but flattering and reflects an outdated conception of philosophy. Nevertheless, Hegel's aesthetics revolves around an issue of ongoing importance, the double character of artwork and its inner tensions.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, Hegel's aesthetics indeed anticipates the critical horizon of two prominent theoreticians of work, Marx and Freud. In the following I will return to some intersections between these contexts, sticking closely to Hegel's framework and merely indicating possible synergies of his philosophical aesthetics with Marx's critique of political economy and Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis.

## I

Hegel begins his lectures on aesthetics by distinguishing between "servile art" (*dienende Kunst*) and "free art" (*freie Kunst*) (TWA

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term *artwork* for describing both art-practice or aesthetic production and art-object.

13, p. 20).<sup>2</sup> Aesthetics must therefore depart from the recognition that the field of artistic production is traversed by the opposition of freedom and servitude. Servile art is subjected to external demands and unfolds as a compulsive process, whereas free art supposedly proceeds autonomously and spontaneously, without imposed restrictions or directions. True artwork would then have to resist aesthetic consumption, where it is valorized via sensuous or intellectual pleasure it may or may not cause. However, this consumption is art's smallest problem; other valorizations represent a significantly greater challenge to the presumable artistic freedom, and particularly from the economic point of view, there is no such thing as free art. As if this is not enough, another predominant valorization concerns production of knowledge, a feature that philosophical aesthetics repeatedly sought in art, beginning with the discipline's founder, Alexander Baumgarten, and its most famous representative, Immanuel Kant. Nowadays the question of art's epistemic value and its contribution to the "growth of knowledge" is more than ever on the agenda. Artistic work became a form of research, and correspondingly, artworks assume the role of epistemic objects, containers of "surplus knowledge" (Milner 2006, p. 337).<sup>3</sup>

If the couple "free art" and "servile art" is meant to pinpoint two distinct registers of artwork, then such opposition indeed amounts to purism, which echoes in the somewhat newer opposition between autonomous and commodified art. Rethinking

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<sup>2</sup> The English translation for *dienende Kunst* is ancillary art (Hegel 1988, p. 7).

<sup>3</sup> To speak of art-knowledge, or of art as cultural technique, as is often the case in contemporary German academia, ultimately demands that artistic practices justify themselves as epistemic procedures and become integrated into the scientific regime of knowledge. Here, German language is again most precise: *Wissenschaft* (science) is composed of *Schaffen* (creating) and *Wissen* (knowledge), which defines science as *the* mode of production of knowledge. As such, science is also the discourse, which determines what counts and what does not count as knowledge.

Hegel's inaugural steps may nevertheless show that artistic freedom and autonomy obtain a more nuanced, sophisticated and critical meaning, signaling a minimal yet crucial resistance of artwork to valorization. The couple "free art" and "servile art" then does not necessarily describe two distinct modes of art, but a difference that traverses every artwork from within, an immanent split of art, indicating a rupture or a torsion in the relation between artwork, on the one hand, and pleasure, knowledge and value, on the other. In this respect "free art" could also be called conflictual.

## II

Hegel himself could be suspected of pursuing an epistemic, and specifically metaphysical valorization of artwork, thus reproducing the typical philosophical attitude. The oldest epistemic valorization of artwork departs from examining its relation to nature (for instance Plato's mimetic conception of art). In this framework Hegel registers the first tension that can be associated with artwork. The emphasis on discontinuity rather than continuity between art and nature logically follows from Hegel's attempt to break with the aesthetic tradition of his time (notably with Kant, where aesthetics remains in service of epistemology) and elaborate a properly dialectical philosophy of art, which conceives artwork as a conflictual process of becoming (of spirit, the absolute, idea, etc.). Understood in this way, artwork contains a break with the regime of natural being. Because natural phenomena do not contain any spirit, they cannot cause any feeling of the beautiful or sublime that would be comparable to art.<sup>4</sup> Hegel did not need to develop his mature philosophical system to draw this conclusion. In a diary documenting his excursion to the Bernese

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<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that nature cannot be experienced as beautiful or sublime. But these are then radically contingent.

Alps, the young Hegel already made a note, which anticipates his later critique of Kant's aesthetics:

Neither the eye nor the power of imagination finds in these formless masses any point, where the former could rest with approval or where the latter could find preoccupation or play. Only the mineralogist finds stuff to risk insufficient assumptions about the revolutions of these mountains. Reason finds in the thought of duration of these mountains or in the art of sublime one ascribes to them nothing that would impress it or necessitate astonishment and admiration. The view of these eternally dead masses caused me nothing but the uniform and at length boring idea: *this is how it is* [*die einförmige und in die Länge langweilige Vorstellung: es ist so*]. (TWA 1, p. 618, my translation)

There is no such thing as the natural sublime because nature contains only duration, as opposed to becoming, *the* feature of spirit. Consequently, there is nothing particularly astonishing about the duration of being, the fact that something *is*. The opposition between duration and becoming reflects other dichotomies – state and movement, identity and non-identity, stability and instability – as well as two types of temporality, the linearity of duration and the retroactivity of becoming. The movement that the mountain view triggers in reason corresponds to their duration and is accompanied by the feeling of *Langeweile* (boredom, or literally long duration). Contrary to Kant, it is the feeling of boredom – and not of the sublime – that names for the young Hegel the affection of thinking through (natural) being. Or more closely to Hegel's text, the appearance of natural being triggers a boring idea or representation – “this is how it is,” or simply, “it is” (of course, this does not imply that nature is boring).

A scientific discipline such as geology has its epistemic reasons for reconstructing the events that created the mountain landscape, but this scientific reasoning does not touch upon the issues raised in the emergence of sublime. Behind the explicit thesis that there is no such thing as the natural sublime, an implicit one can be

intuited, namely that astonishment has no place in science. Science proceeds under the condition that it overcomes the fascination with its object. The paradigmatic example of science rooted in astonishment is the premodern, Aristotelian and Ptolemean science, which strived to construct a harmonious totality (*kosmos*) endowed with an aesthetic surplus. Plato and Aristotle both argued that the task of science consisted in “saving the appearances” (*sozein ta phainomena*) – describing reality from the perspective of the astonished human observer.<sup>5</sup> A science departing from the feeling of the sublime projects an aesthetic surplus into the natural real and thus performs cosmetics on the scale of the universe (recall that *kosmos* echoes both in cosmology and in cosmetics).

The young Hegel may have targeted the following reflection from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*:

The astonishment amounting almost to terror, the horror and sacred awe, that seizes us when gazing upon the prospect of mountains ascending to heaven, deep ravines and torrents raging there, deep-shadowed solitudes that invite to brooding melancholy, and the like – all this, when we are assured of our own safety, is not actual fear. Rather is it an attempt to gain access to it through imagination, for the purpose of feeling the might of this faculty in combining the movement of the mind thereby aroused with its serenity, and of thus being superior to internal and, therefore, to external, nature, so far as the latter can have any bearing upon our feeling of well-being. (Kant 2007, p. 99)

The natural sublime triggers movements of thought, it introduces a dynamic into reason that is caused by an object in excess,

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<sup>5</sup> For a favorable reading of this premodern scientific ideal, see Pierre Duhem (2003). Duhem insists that this ideal remains valid for modern physics. The position has been questioned by Alexandre Koyré (1973). Of course, the astonished human observer *par excellence* is none other than the philosopher, whose discipline, again according to Plato and Aristotle, originates in astonishment (*thaumazein*).

a surplus situated at the border of subjective and objective, inner and outer, thought and reality, without pertaining either to the intellectual or the natural register. This is not the Hegelian scenario from above. The natural appearances contain no cause for an affective surplus and the only aesthetic thought they may trigger is the empty assertion: *Es ist so*. No affective surplus is produced; instead, we are dealing with a negative affect, which moves by diminishing affective tension rather than increasing it. The observed phenomena seem empty: “eternally dead masses,” being without becoming, hence without difference, which would destabilize natural being from within. Relating to nature by means of the sublime is displaced, because nothing *works* in nature, or rather, because nature works in the sense that it functions, hence Hegel’s talk of duration (boring ontological stability).<sup>6</sup> In order for the sublime to emerge in the subject, something in nature would have to fall out of place; a disruption would have to occur, which would trigger a proper change in being. Dynamic as it may be, the grandeur of wild nature is ultimately a standstill. And Kantian aesthetics seems to overlook that the natural sublime is rooted in the fetishizing gaze of the neutral observer, who in any case remains at distance from the natural dynamic.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, Hegel’s lines perfectly match the Newtonian universe, which functions like clockwork. The universe of thermodynamics, of Einsteinian physics and of quantum mechanics hardly function in the same manner; they no longer resemble a clockwork but rather stand for an organized disequilibrium.

<sup>7</sup> A homologous development takes place in the register of politics, where the Kantian observer can experience enthusiasm only under the condition of being exempted from violent historical events such as the French revolution. The enthusiastic spectator observes history from an ahistorical position, for being part of historical turmoil would imply repulsion, as Kant (1991, p. 182) himself concedes.

### III

Once artwork is no longer compared with nature it can appear as an activity organized around a specific surplus (*Überfluß*), by means of which art succeeds in “softening the soul” (TWA 13, p. 16). This is where the appearance of artwork as superfluous (*überflüssig*) comes in. The German term *Überfluß* reveals its speculative potential, if we consider its literal meaning – overflow – which simultaneously points to fluidity, redundancy, and surplus. The assumption of free art then implies that this surplus cannot be entirely integrated in the predominant registers of valorization, notably scientific knowledge and economic value. Differently put, the surplus in question cannot be converted into increase of knowledge (surplus-knowledge) or increase of value (surplus-value) without leaving a remainder, which continues to generate its own type of movement. Art affects the spirit in various ways (Hegel names three of them, which will be discussed toward the end of this paper), and these affections may manifest as pleasurable. Here, the third restriction to the potential artistic break with external valorization re-enters the picture, libidinal valorization or what Lacan occasionally called the “value of enjoyment” (Lacan 2023).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, free art would also have to sustain a minimal gap between its *Überfluss* and increase of pleasure (surplus enjoyment).

To specify his understanding of free art, Hegel dedicates much time to refuting the aesthetic doctrines, which relate art to an external need, demand, or utility. A prominent example of such “relational aesthetics” (to misuse Nicholas Bourriaud’s term) is

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<sup>8</sup> Lacan proposes *valeur de jouissance* as possible translation of exchange-value, thus drawing attention to the proximity of libidinal and social economy. Still, only as superfluous does artwork contain the potential for causing a movement, which may lead to a change in spirit. The superfluous places artwork in direct proximity with the work of critique and the work of psychoanalysis, two other superfluous practices (notably from the economic point of view).

mimetic art. As mimetic technique, art supposedly imitates nature in a more or less “adequate” manner. In doing so, it generates the appearance of natural beauty, including the ontological and cosmological appearance of duration, stability, and harmony. Moreover, if imitation proceeds in an adequate manner, mimetic activity can be interpreted as the epistemic value of art. At least Plato’s valorization of artistic mimesis moves in this direction. However, as soon as art is valorized through the lens of knowledge, its epistemic value inevitably appears diminished, notably in comparison to science and philosophy. Thus, art ends up in a double epistemic servitude, first in relation to the imitated external reality and then in relation to other knowledge-producing activities, with which it presumably competes. The situation seems more favorable if artistic mimesis is examined from the viewpoint of its potential value of enjoyment, which, at least for the silent majority, appears greater than that of science and philosophy. Here, however, art is embedded in libidinal servitude with the imperative of producing sensual or intellectual pleasure. In any case, the mimetic conception restricts artistic activity to the register of appearance.

Hegel strives to complicate this constraint by refusing to engage in a general critique of appearance, not only because “*appearance is essential to essence*” (TWA 13, p. 21), but also because such critique assumes the divide between good and bad mimesis. The former presumably stands in adequate relation to the imitated and is therefore valued as truthful, whereas the latter establishes an inadequate relation to the imitated and is considered false and deceiving, non-relational or self-related. Against the background of this opposition, the critique of mimesis concludes that only relational mimesis is worthy of philosophical examination. The third option, the emergence of truth out of non-relation and contradiction remains excluded; *there is no non-relational truthful mimesis*. In contrast, from the Hegelian point of view only



this third kind of mimesis would deserve closer examination.<sup>9</sup> The true ontological scandal of artistic mimesis, if imitating is what art really does, is that it invents new originals and thereby introduces another type of difference from the one between idea and thing, model and copy, essence and appearance, or absolute and relative. In non-relational mimesis art places appearance in the position of idea.<sup>10</sup> In doing so it feints imitation and, more importantly, exposes instability in the order of being, thereby rejecting the ontological tradition grounded in Parmenides's separation of being and movement.

Another relational conception of art follows from the popular view that art pleases the senses or the intellect by offering them an object that corresponds to a sensuous or an intellectual need. This immediately brings art down to consumption. In turn, art *becomes* free when it sabotages the imperative of pleasurable satisfaction, thus destabilizing the system of needs and values from within. In this case, artwork does not simply serve any purpose; claiming this would still entail a superficial understanding of the artwork's superfluity. Rather, the aim of artwork consists in forcing the ongoing valorization of human activities to backfire. Free art must therefore contain more than "futile play," which causes sensuous and intellectual pleasure or serves for "entertainment," "decoration," and other pleasurable goals (*ibid.*, p. 20). While these goals remain within the register of consumption, free art strives to produce a non-consumable and non-valorizable *Überfluss*; it

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<sup>9</sup> Here, one could also speak of hybrid mimesis, which effectively abolishes the Platonic dualism of original and copy. An example of such mimesis can be found in nature: animal mimicry. From a Platonist perspective, the very existence of chameleon is an ontological scandal.

<sup>10</sup> An example of such activity would be the realistic painting of a curtain, which creates the impression of concealing a painting. The example refers to the competition between the ancient Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios (See Lacan 1998, p. 103). For further Lacanian discussion of mimesis, see Dolar 2017a, pp. 570-589.

stands for the perseverance of such surplus amid consumption and valorization. Perhaps one could say that artwork is an irritation of the aesthetic pleasure principle, its immanent disturbance.

Such conflictual unfolding of artwork touches upon the register of truth. Why is this the case? Hegel's singularity in the history of truth-doctrines comes down to the association of truth with non-relation rather than relation. This break is sharply formulated already in Hegel's habilitation theses from 1801, which are introduced by the following: *Contradictio est regula veri, non contradictio falsi* (TWA 2, p. 533; see Dolar 2017b, p. 87). Declaring contradiction the rule of truthfulness and non-contradiction the rule of falsity rejects the entire logical tradition, which originates in Aristotle's foundation of rational thinking on the principle of non-contradiction and its sub-principle of excluded third. It is also no coincidence that the formulation is the first among Hegel's habilitation theses, since it plays the same role as the principle of non-contradiction in Aristotle: it lays the discursive foundations of the system, the logical entry into ontology, providing an orientation in thinking the non-relation that sustains both thinking and being. Above all, truth is here no longer conceived as a stable relation of correspondence between words and things but as the movement of contradiction, for Hegel a paradigm of non-relation. From this viewpoint, art becomes both truthful and free, when it succeeds in making non-relation *appear*.

The Latin etymology suggests that this non-relation concerns the absolute itself (from *absolvere*, loosen or untie). By placing the tension between appearance and the absolute at the core of his reflections on art, Hegel proposed the first thoroughly *non-relational aesthetics*. The appearance of the absolute destabilizes the organization of appearances, but the same action of appearing demonstrates the inherently unstable nature of the absolute. This double instability indicates a different understanding of appearance than, say, in the dualism of sensuous appearance and suprasensuous essence. The German distinction between *Schein*

and *Erscheinung* proves useful for pinpointing the difference between both scenarios. *Schein* is appearance in the traditional sense of lower, diminished and potentially deceitful reality, which must in any case be thought in dichotomy with the suprasensuous (spirit, idea, absolute, essence). *Erscheinung*, in contrast, is appearance, which no longer stands in simple external relation to the suprasensuous but rather comprises its emergence in and through sensuous activity. Hegel calls this the “sensuous presentation of the absolute” (TWA 13, p. 100). There is no absolute outside appearance; only an absolute that appears (or rather emerges) is considered real, but it can only appear by destabilizing the order of appearances. Emergence is the specific movement of the absolute, and Hegel’s metaphysics is a metaphysics of emergent absolute, an absolute emerging from a material activity, in which work plays the central part.

In this scenario appearance is understood as *production* of a “higher reality” and “more true existence” (*ibid.*, p. 22).<sup>11</sup> This implies that the main achievement of artwork consists in intensifying the objectivity of appearances rather than in diminishing the reality of ideas,<sup>12</sup> producing an *Überfluß* that Hegel directly associates with artwork. To reiterate, contrary to the scenario in which the suprasensuous obtains an expression in the register of sensuousness, *Erscheinung* comprises the self-overcoming of sensuousness, the production of sensuousness’ otherness that is nevertheless immanent to sensuousness. This activity is expressed in the dialectic of art, which according to Hegel unfolds from architecture via music to poetry, from spatial structure to symbolic

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<sup>11</sup> To repeat, because this is productive *Erscheinung* it can be called emergence, in order to differentiate it from unproductive appearance, *Schein*.

<sup>12</sup> Freud and Lacan were preoccupied by tragedy because it thematizes the destabilization of the existing order (of appearances or semblances) through singular figures such as Oedipus and Antigone, who are indeed figures of instability. For a systematic account of the role of tragedy in psychoanalysis, see Zupančič 2000, pp. 190–191, 203–204.

structure (and more specifically to the poetics of the signifier, to put it in structuralist terms). Of course, one can always criticize Hegel's decision to introduce hierarchy in this dialectical movement, instead of focusing on homological developments in different registers of art. What is nevertheless worth retaining in this dialectic is the self-overcoming of sensuousness, as well as the insight that this activity is not autopoietic but involves a laboring negativity, which cannot be reduced to the figure of the artist, genius, talent, skill, or knowledge. Since this self-overcoming is understood as a process of becoming, the task of aesthetics consists in examining the relation between structure and history, as well as in determining the exact nature of the laboring subject in this process.<sup>13</sup>

Hegel's aesthetics nevertheless seems to encounter a complication, since his notion of artwork as "sensuous presentation of the absolute" resonates well with Marx's description of commodity as "sensuous supra-sensuous thing" (Marx 1990, p. 163, translation modified; see Khatib 2022, p. 92). What is the relation between artwork and the aesthetics of commodity form? Hegel provided a means for thinking the intricacies of this relation, while keeping the minimal gap between artwork and commodity open, when he distinguished between *Kunstwerk* (artwork) and *Kunststück* (artpiece) (*TWA* 13, p. 69).<sup>14</sup> The crucial point lies in the very meaning of *Kunststück*, artifice or stunt, which anticipates the way Marx famously writes about commodities:

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<sup>13</sup> Framed in this way, the problematic of appearance touches upon Lacan's occasional definition of the signifier as "matter transcending itself in language [*matière qui se transcende en langage*]" (Lacan 2001, p. 209). Lacan's phrasing suggests that speaking is a bodily activity, from which an abstraction emerges: language, understood as an autonomous system of differences existing "outside" the speaking subject.

<sup>14</sup> Hegel makes this wordplay only in passing, and in relation to the question of artistic imitation of nature. But this does not diminish its relevance for thinking the artwork's potential resistance to the various regimes of valorization.

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it [...]. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a sensuous supra-sensuous thing. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (Marx 1990, pp. 163–164)

Commodities perform, or simply are, *Kunststücke*. They stand on their heads, in other words, they invert the relation between use-value and exchange-value; they act like dancing tables, or differently, they follow the logic of value, which endows them with autonomous life; and finally, they cause dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction, which might just be their greatest *Kunststück*. In Hegel, however, the artwork's sensuous suprasensuousness does not overlap entirely with "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" that artworks undoubtedly possess as objects of consumption and valorization. Free art insists in the split between truth, on the one hand, and value, knowledge, and enjoyment, on the other. From the psychoanalytic viewpoint one could add that in this split artwork assumes the function of the symptom, the exact opposite of fetish, a conflicted material and symbolic formation placed at the very point of contradiction between opposing tendencies: the tendency of valorization and the tendency of producing an *Überfluss*, which is neither surplus-value nor surplus-knowledge nor surplus-enjoyment. If resistance against reduction to the system of consumption (value of enjoyment), the system of exchange (economic value), and the system of knowledge (epistemic value) is an essential component of artwork, then this resistance addresses a truth concerning work and its vicissitudes in the existing regime of production—the appearance of structural contradiction at the heart of the economic, epistemic,

and libidinal order. In this way, free art could be understood as a way of working through the tensions and contradictions that concern work in general and artwork in particular.

#### IV

As previously mentioned, Hegel distinguishes three main relations between the sensuous and the suprasensuous.<sup>15</sup> The *first relation* is *desire*, or libidinal relation, which overtly places artwork in the framework of consumption. In this relation to a denaturalized need (that Hegel indeed calls desire) art obtains above all the value of enjoyment. Consumption of artworks is accompanied by the production of sensuous pleasure and, being a consumption, contains their destruction, even if the latter is entirely speculative, in the sense that artworks are deprived of their symptomatic status and transformed into commodities or *Kunststücke*: “Neither can desire let the object persist in its freedom, for its drive pushes it just to sublimate this independence and freedom of external things, and to show that they are only there to be destroyed and consumed” (Hegel 1988, pp. 36, translation modified).<sup>16</sup> Consumption entails a sublation (*Aufhebung*), which does not lead anywhere; it is *Aufhebung* in the sense of abolition, rather than elevation, and has no transformative effect (except of transforming *Kunstwerk* into *Kunststück*). If artwork involves resistance, it offers an “other

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<sup>15</sup> For Hegel’s discussion of these relations, see *TWA* 13, pp. 57–60.

<sup>16</sup> If free art nevertheless entails some type of satisfaction, then the mechanism of this satisfaction must be inverted. Artwork then comprises a satisfaction without a corresponding need, inadequate satisfaction. The emergence of freedom in the field of art comprises an excess of satisfaction over the existing system of needs, demands and valorizations, a needless satisfaction without consumption, insofar as intellectual consumption of artworks would be, in one way or another, associated with knowledge (epistemic value), exchange (economic value) or pleasure (value of enjoyment).

satisfaction” that suspends the satisfaction of desire by means of consumption and valorization, in other words, by means of extracting an epistemic, economic or libidinal surplus out of artwork. Artwork should then be undesired; instead of causing desire it should transform it. Hence, for instance, the psychoanalytic link between art and sublimation, which draws attention to such transformation of desire through artistic practice.<sup>17</sup>

The *second relation is intelligence*, or epistemic relation, which strives to overcome the particularity of sensuous circumstances and contemplate the generality (essence or law) behind them. Hegel himself names the work that satisfies this theoretical interest “the work of science,” which, by moving from the particular to the general, “transforms [the object] from within, out of something sensuously concrete it makes an abstraction, something thought, and so something essentially other than what that same object was in its sensuous appearance” (Hegel 1988, p. 37). Here, the change of object occurs in accordance with the imperatives of science, understood again as the predominant mode of production of knowledge. For art to break with theoretical valorization and epistemic servitude it must keep the gap between knowledge and truth open. Understood as *Kunstwissenschaft* (science of art), aesthetics cedes the temptation to reduce artwork to epistemic value and transform artists into epistemic workers in the modern accumulative regime of knowledge.

Finally, the *third relation is appearance*, an inherently conflictual relation, or non-relation. The sensuous in artwork must

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding sublimation it is worth recalling the following lines from Lacan: “the properly metonymic relation between one signifier and another that we call desire is not a new object or a previous object, but the change of object in itself” (Lacan 1992, p. 293). The crucial point concerns the shift from the changing of objects to change as object. Lacan indeed speaks of desire for change or transformation, which makes the excerpt relevant for reflecting on the link between desire and emancipatory politics. Desire for change must also be distinguished from something that may appear as such, the desire for increase, growth or augmentation of value – the capitalist desire for quantitative change.

be present purely as surface. As such superficiality (*Überfluss*), the artwork is situated “in the middle between the immediate sensuality and the ideal thought” (TWA 13, p. 60).<sup>18</sup> This relation is constitutive of the difference between external, empirical circumstances, which capture desire, and the internal, intellectual conditions targeted by science: “It is not yet pure thought, but despite its sensuousness also no longer bare material existence” (*ibid.*). The placement of artwork between the *not yet* and the *no longer* is indeed crucial. Art acts in the zone of indistinction between the material and the intellectual, something that desire and science both seem to miss. The split of matter in artwork reflects on the level of the senses. Hegel (*ibid.*, p. 57) recalls that the sensuous in art refers only to two senses, vision and hearing, which establish a distance between the object and the subject, but which also bring the autonomy and activity of appearances (images and signifiers) into play. Incidentally, the two senses also play crucial role in the transformation of an object into fetish, which is why artistic production cannot but remain split between *Kunstwerk* and *Kunststück*. In both cases there is a continuum between the sensuous and the suprasensuous, spiritualization of sensuality and sensualization of spirituality, except that in *Kunststück* the laboring negativity falls out of the picture and artworks appear as quasi-autonomous agencies (hence, the purist notion of free art). Hegel’s non-relational aesthetics is superficial, insofar as it focuses on the intricacies of appearance, which can be observed only on the surface, where the sensuous converts into suprasensuous and vice versa. As such, non-relational aesthetics is also

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<sup>18</sup> According to Hegel, “spirit seeks neither the concrete materiality, the empirical inner completeness and extension of the organism which desire demands, nor the general and purely ideal thought, but the sensuous presence which should remain sensuous, but equally liberated from the scaffold of its bare materiality” (*ibid.*). Spirit thus seeks the self-overcoming of matter, but such self-overcoming can only take place in and through work (unless we want to spiritualize matter and thus make it into a laboring subject).



a symptomatology insofar as it constantly exposes the tension in artwork, its immanent redoubling on the fetish and the symptom, *Kunststück* and *Kunstwerk*.

Hegel then finally determines the specificity of work in the field of art. This work must be intellectual but of sensuous character, which is another way of saying that it is neither of the two. Artwork is indifferent to the difference between the sensuous and the intellectual. Therefore, it cannot be subsumed either under “mechanical work, a barely consciousnessless skill in sensuous manipulation or a formal activity according to fixed rules to be learned by heart” or under “scientific production, which passes over from the sensuous to abstract presentations and thoughts or is active entirely in the element of pure thinking” (Hegel 1988, p. 39).<sup>19</sup> Hence the ongoing comedy of negation in Hegel’s introduction to aesthetics, the constant determining of what artwork is not: neither concrete nor abstract, neither technical nor scientific, neither useful nor useless. The artist is neither a subject of knowledge nor a subject of value, neither genius nor talent, which would be the fetishist version of the subject of art, a subject in which knowledge and enjoyment presumably intertwine. Whenever aesthetic practice comprises a striving for freedom it necessarily negates the three central surpluses at stake in the capitalist knot of economy, science, and subjectivity: surplus-value, surplus-knowledge, and surplus-enjoyment. What artwork then produces is truth-value, whereby the crucial agency in this production is not the artist’s person but something that Hegel calls “driving restlessness” (*treibende Unruhe*) (TWA 13, p. 64), an intermediate term between concrete individual and abstract spirit. Driving restlessness does not imply that the work-process unfolds without a subject; rather it exposes a subject situated between individual and spirit, sensuous and suprasensuous, a

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<sup>19</sup> Hegel then concludes, “in artistic production the sides of the spiritual and the sensual production must be as one” (*ibid.*).

subject, which is no longer individual and not yet spirit, indeed a split and decentered subject.

For Hegel, art ultimately stands for the free productive force of human beings, but this does not involve freedom from every antagonism or subordination to external goals. Before unfolding his own narration of the history of art, Hegel rejects all the conventional purposes of art: art is not imitation (whether to demonstrate the power of imitation over nature or to produce pleasure for the senses or the intellect); art does not express the most inner features of humanity or what makes us human; art does not educate or give moral lessons, etc. It is because of its superfluity that art must be associated with the category of truth rather than with knowledge. Truth is, indeed, superfluous, notably in the capitalist subordination of all activity to economic valorization, as well as in the scientific subordination of all work to epistemic valorization, where the only truth that counts is truth as facticity. What remains superfluous is conflictual truth, which is as such irreducible to positive knowledge and economic value and which is the main point of interest for psychoanalysis and the critique of political economy, truth as symptom.

At this point art and philosophy encounter one another. According to Hegel, the task of philosophy consists in sublating oppositions, “to show that neither the one alternative in its abstraction, nor the other in the like one-sidedness, possesses truth, but that they are self-dissolving; that truth lies only in the reconciliation and mediation of both, and that this mediation is no mere demand, but what is in and for itself the accomplished and ever self-accomplishing” (Hegel 1988, pp. 54–55, translation modified). Reconciliation and mediation are here described as accomplished deeds, but they are even more so ongoing actions that do not cease to accomplish themselves. Situated between automatic work and intellectual work, between value and knowledge, artwork expresses something that is at stake in all human activities tending toward freedom, an attempt to work through

the systemic contradictions, *the work of sublation*. There is no sublation of sublation, hence the virtually endless character of sublation. One could say that sublation is the work of truth *and* the truth of work. *Aufhebung* is *Durcharbeiten*.

For Hegel, the main purpose of art consists in sustaining the movement of spirit, its transformative becoming. This is only possible by producing difference in the regime of apparently static being and fixated thought. In this respect artwork indeed comes close to psychoanalytic work, as it is formulated in the Freudian imperative: “Where It was, there I shall *become*,” or to translate, where there was the resistance of libidinal economy, which has hitherto consumed the analysand’s existence, there the suffering subject must begin working on the structure that conditions her suffering. In Freud’s formula, becoming stands for *work in progress*, which mobilizes a traumatic truth of the analysand’s history and causes desire for change *qua* object. Psychoanalysis comes down to what Lacan called “the work of truth” and Freud “working-through” – a work on structure, which resists change.<sup>20</sup>

Just like for Hegel art neither instructs (cognition) nor entertains (enjoyment) but moves the spirit (through superfluous work), psychoanalysis stands neither for *scientia sexualis*, whose aim would be to produce knowledge of sexual enjoyment, nor for *ars erotica*, a practical technique of enjoyment, but for “cultural work” (*Kulturarbeit*) (Freud 2000, p. 516),<sup>21</sup> which introduces in the analysand’s life a new conflict. To repeat, in Hegel’s scenario, which was reborn in Marx’s critique of political economy and Freud’s psychoanalysis, truth is inseparable from contradiction, but the question remains, how to deal with this contradiction. It must certainly not become self-sufficient; one must aim for its

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<sup>20</sup> In this respect, the analytic cure is the perfect opposition to “*Es ist so*” (this time accentuating the Freudian signification of *Es*). One certainly never gets bored in analysis.

<sup>21</sup> The expressions *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* are adopted from Michel Foucault’s first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.

sublation. Hence, the task of philosophy and emancipatory politics: striving for reconciliation, which would not assume at the end of the work-process a frictionless state but organize the laboring subjectivity around change as the *common* object of desire.

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