

Zeitschrift: Outlines
Herausgeber: Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft
Band: 9 (2015)

Artikel: Paradoxes and problems of the reproduction and commodification of art in the age of the capitalist spectacle
Autor: Kuspit, Donald
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-872121>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 20.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Donald Kuspit

Paradoxes and Problems of the Reproduction and Commodification of Art in the Age of the Capitalist Spectacle

Many years ago, Max Frisch said that 'technology [is] the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it.'¹ I will argue that the technology of reproduction of art eliminates the necessity of experiencing it firsthand, which involves aesthetic experience of it. The art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy calls it 'aesthetic shock', a perceptual experience which 'shakes' us to the roots of our being, and as such is the most 'serious' perceptual experience possible.² The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead argues that aesthetic experience involves 'presentational immediacy' or pure 'sense presentations,' sharply differentiating it from the everyday 'experience of causal efficacy' and conventional 'symbolic functioning'.³ The psychoanalyst George Hagman thinks that adult aesthetic experience is grounded in 'the intimate aesthetics of mother and child,' involving their 'affective interplay' in 'mutual idealization', which gives rise to 'the sense of beauty [...] an invariant characteristic of anything that is experienced as ideal.'⁴ The art critic Roger Fry distinguishes between aesthetic experience, in which one becomes conscious of emotions and sensations as things in themselves, and ordinary experience, in which they stimulate and are associated with action, thus obscuring their inherent qualities, and implying that they have little or no meaning in themselves.⁵ For Fry it is hard to become aesthetically conscious of emotions and sensations; it requires a sort of willing suspension of belief in the world of action. The world of action's indifference to aesthetic experience, even denial and dismissal of it as inhibiting the action necessary to survive in society, does not help matters. Only by critically turning the tables on the world of action by regarding it as an illusion, or at best a necessary evil, can one see that emotions and sensations are not illusions, but uncannily real. Tuning it out, one sees the peculiar transcendence of emotions and sensations. Only then, and with the help of what Nietzsche called the "'intelligent" sensuality' of art, can one enter the '*aesthetic state*', an 'altered' state

of consciousness bringing with it 'an exalted feeling of *power*' – vitality, for in the aesthetic state 'we infuse a transfiguration and fullness into things and poetize about them until they reflect back our fullness and joy in life.'⁶ However understood, firsthand aesthetic experience is precluded by the secondhand experience of art in reproduction, whether electronically advanced or old-fashioned mechanical reproduction. If the art work is the privileged site of aesthetic experience, or at least its repository and trace – the social amber in which it is preserved, the expressive space that contains it – as the quoted thinkers suggest, then its reproduction deprivileges aesthetic experience along with it. Reproduction challenges and mocks the skill that went into its making by implying that its own technology is superior to the techniques that inform the work's artistry.

Reproduction trumps art by appropriating it wholesale – digesting it until it becomes a shadow of itself. Even in digital art the technology seems to usurp the place of the art. Reproduction levels its sensuality, dampens its emotional effect, and makes it seem less intelligent than it is – subverts its evocative power, devitalizing and de-aestheticizing it, rendering it useless as a means to the end of a vitalizing aesthetic experience. Reproduction, which claims to serve memory, leads us to forget what is most memorable – experientially real – about the art by reducing it to an appearance. The real work is superseded by its cannibalization in reproduction.

Aesthetic experience is rare and demanding, for it involves relentless intensification of experience, leading to the dialectical transfiguration and transcendence of ordinary experience. What Mondrian called 'man's drive toward intensification'⁷ drives creativity and climaxes in intense aesthetic experience. Reproduction deintensifies and detranscendentalizes the art work by reducing it to an ordinary object – banalizing it into another social phenomenon by stripping it of aesthetic quality. Art manifests *Geist* in aesthetic form; reproduction strips art of *Geist*, which is inherently unreplicable, by – paradoxically – reifying it as an illusion. Reproduction is a false epiphany of the art work, for it desensitizes us to the creative work immanent in it. In a genuine epiphany we become aware of this creative work, and, more subtly, of our own creative work – our cognitive and emotional engagement with it, resulting in a creative apperception of it, to use the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's term. We actively work it through rather than passively accept it as given. It is difficult to have the same

intense creative intimacy with a reproduction. A genuine aesthetic epiphany creatively concentrates our being; in the 'epiphany' that is the reproduction there is little or no sense of creatively being. Codified, historicized, and disseminated as a reproduction – an impersonal mass product – the art work appears to lose the idiosyncratic originality, and with that the aesthetic uncanniness, that made it personally compelling. We come to doubt its originality, and our own, and eventually discard the idea of originality as a meaningless notion.

We are unable to internalize over-mediated art – art reduced to commonplaceness by widespread reproduction – as a symbolic good object, emotional refueling and sensuously refreshing the self, and with that its recognition of its creativity and 'originality'. Such internalization is inseparable from firsthand aesthetic experience. The aesthetically convincing work becomes 'original' to us, as it were, just as it 'originates' the artist. Hence its own aura of 'originality', unavoidably idiosyncratic, because of the variety of selves.

Idiosyncrasy hints at differentiated originality – the capacity to differentiate, implicit in creativity – but reproduction trivializes idiosyncratic nuances, making them seem creatively inconsequential. Without its idiosyncratic nuances, the work loses its expressive power and originality. Reproduction is a kind of dedifferentiation of a subtly differentiated art work, implying that it is made by formula, instead of what it is at its creative best: the idiosyncratic, uncanny, self-originating result of intense, nuanced creative work. The problem with the reproduction is that it is too selfless to serve the self.

It cannot afford what the philosopher John Dewey called 'an' experience. It cannot enlighten us about emotions and sensations; reproduction re-embeds them in the world of action. Reduced to a sort of ornamental background music to action, they lose intrinsic value – the intrinsic value art tries to get us to recognize. Art itself loses intrinsic value by being subsumed into the world of action as a decorative backdrop for more important concerns than it. As the history of social action shows, art gains credibility and respect to the extent it serves the commercial, political, and religious powers that be. There are always connoisseurs capable of experiencing it aesthetically, but they are a minority, even if they belong to the commercial, political, or religious elite that use art to reinforce and glorify its power and further its interests.

Digital reproduction undoubtedly makes for a more refined reproduction than mechanical reproduction. It is so sophisticated that it seems adequate to the art it reproduces, even as aesthetically convincing. So convincing that it may lead one to believe that it is as good as and even better than the art it reproduces or copies – so ‘adequate’ that one doesn’t have to bother to look at, let alone experience, the real art. The reproduction becomes adequate for the purposes of scholarly analysis, and comes to replace the original it copies, to the extent that it begins to seem original in its own right. It seems to have its own imaginative aesthetics, and thus able to effect the same alteration of consciousness as the original work. Mechanical reproduction makes no pretense of being adequate to the art it socially mediates, no pretense of being as aesthetically satisfying as the art it reifies. All reproduction is reification: it cannot help selling art short as an experientially unique creative product of a self by reducing it to a mass produced product of technology.

When American Pop Art appeared in the 1960s, it was said to look better in reproduction than in reality. It was a perversion of art validated by Warhol’s perverse wish to be a star so that he could meet real stars face to face and see that they didn’t look as perfect as they did in their photographs. Their faces, like his, had blemishes, which made them real. He preferred their glamorized appearances to their reality. It was the kiss of death for aesthetic experience and the ironic negation of Walter Benjamin’s theory that reproduction was socially progressive in that it eliminated the cultic aura art had in pre-modern societies. As Warhol’s populist commercial art shows, reproduction serves the cult of the celebrity, whether it is a person or a product – presents a person as a commercial product or a commercial product as a crowd-pleasing personality. Two decades before Warhol’s crowd art, Benjamin’s theory was brought into critical question by Theodor Adorno’s theory of the culture industry – a deliberate response to Benjamin grounded in the realities of capitalist Hollywood and mass culture. For Adorno, art is the victim of mechanical reproduction, and with that a mode of deception, like all reproduction.

We are all members of the society of the spectacle, which is correlate with capitalist society. Warhol, who presciently called himself a business artist, was also a celebrity artist, that is, a servant of the society of the spectacle – an artist who, like it, preferred appearance to reality, celebrated it at the expense of reality, used it to obscure and deny reality. The society of

the spectacle is a postmodern society, in that it has given up on external as well as internal reality, treating both as codified appearances. It has given up on what psychoanalysts call reality testing. Modern art grappled with both realities, insightfully teasing out the dialectical tension between them, which became its own reality. Postmodern art subsumes modern art – and reality, internal and external – by reproducing it as a cultural code: one among many, and thus of no special consequence. Postmodernism kitschifies modern art and its dialectical realism, the basis of its aesthetics. In postmodernity and postmodern art reality is derealized and depersonalized, completing the much acknowledged process of alienation and dehumanization in modernity and modern art. Postmodernism is the triumph of derealization and depersonalization over reality testing and self-origination or realization, that is, the realization that one is an original person not a social robot, or, as Winnicott says, has a True Self capable of ‘spontaneous gesture and personalized idea’ however routinely false to oneself one may be.

Derealization and depersonalization are psychotic defenses: the postmodern society of the spectacle – art must become part of the spectacle to be ‘recognized’ – is a psychotic society. Derealization is ‘an experience or perception of the external world as unreal, strange, or alien, as if it were a stage on which people were acting.’ Dare one say performing in a spectacle? Depersonalization is ‘a feeling of emotional detachment or estrangement from the perception of self, as if one were acting in a play or observing one’s physical and mental activity from without.’⁸ It is the feeling one has watching oneself perform. The defamiliarizing effect that modern art has been said to aim at – it has been reified in postmodern art – may be a psychotic symptom.

Today Homo Spectator is dominant, as the Situationist Guy Debord argues. In the society of the spectacle we live in fantasy not in reality and are unable to distinguish them. ‘The spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances,’ he writes, ‘and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance [...] it [is] a visible negation of life [...] a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*.’ ‘It turns reality on its head,’ even as ‘the spectacle is real.’ It establishes ‘the empire of modern passivity’: the ‘image of the ruling economic order,’ it is ‘beyond dispute’ and ‘demands [...] passive acceptance.’ In early capitalism there was a ‘downgrading of *being* into *having*.’ Late capitalism ‘entails a generalized

shift from *having* to appearing: all effective “having” must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d’être* from appearances.’ The society of the spectacle relies on ‘technical rationality’ to produce pure appearances; reproduction, digital or mechanical, is the technological means of doing so – of converting human life into pure appearance – rationally negating it, which is to rationalize it as illusion. ‘The spectacle is [...] a technological version of the exiling of human powers in a “world beyond” – and the perfection of separation *within* human beings.’ Art has credibility only as a marketable ‘technical’ appearance in the society of the spectacle – as what Debord calls an ‘image-object’ in the service of the ‘dictatorial freedom of the Market.’⁹ It is the ultimate spectacle and the ultimate reason for art’s existence. Like God, the Market gives it permission to exist, a permission it can withdraw, as the apocalypses of art – the rapid replacement of one movement by another – that are the milestones of its history in modernity indicate.

In the society of the spectacle, publicity is the only ideology. ‘Publicity acquires the significance of an ideology, the ideology of trade,’ Henri Lefebvre writes, ‘and it replaces what was once philosophy, ethics, religion and aesthetics. The time is past when advertising tried to condition the consumer by the repetition of slogans; today the subtle forms of publicity represent a whole attitude to life.’ He adds: ‘publicity is the poetry of Modernity, the reason and pretext for all successful displays. It takes possession of art, literature, all available signifiers and vacant signifieds.’¹⁰ Publicity is a way of ‘*engineering...consent*,’ the sociologist Wilson Bryan Key writes. Publicity ‘assaults human perception at both conscious and unconscious levels, especially the latter,’ making it difficult to ‘easily discriminate between fantasy and reality.’ It is ‘psychological indoctrination,’ leading to ‘self-deception.’¹¹ ‘The essence of ideology is to create illusions, disguise the real, and substitute something unreal for it without this substitution being apparent,’ Mikel Dufrenne writes. ‘Why combat ideology, if not to free: and free whom, if not the individual? Only the individual has to be freed, and precisely because he is alienated.’¹²

Writing about ‘pseudo-events,’ and by extension ‘pseudo-images’ (in effect pseudo-art), the historian Daniel Boorstin notes that ‘from their very nature [they] tend to be more interesting than spontaneous events [...] pseudo-events tend to drive all other kinds of events out of our consciousness, or at least to overshadow them [...] the experience of spontaneous

events is buried by pseudo-events.¹³ Pseudo-events and pseudo-images give rise to pseudo-experience – experience which is not spontaneous but simulated and ‘spectacular’. A reality-deceiving pseudo-experience occurred at the Vancouver Olympics. An article in the *New York Times* dated February 22, 2010 and headlined ‘After Skating, A Unique Olympic Event: Crying’, describes how crying was turned into spectacle, that is, stripped of its subjective meaning and spontaneity and objectified as a programmed marketable appearance. Crying was commodified as a pseudo-event by the television media that publicized it. It was used to stimulate the sales of the products advertised in the intervals between the reporting of Olympic events. Media analysts have shown that more visual space-time is given to the money-making advertising agenda than to the ‘live’ sporting event. It becomes an entertaining adjunct to the advertising. It is derealized and depersonalized, while the technology of advertising ‘realizes’ and personalizes the product. The event is used to market the product, and becomes a way to publicize it, completing its derealization and depersonalization, that is, ‘pseudoification’ and ‘psychoticizing’.

Skating is ‘a very technical sport,’ the champion skater Mark Ladwig says, but it is also ‘a sport of aesthetics.’ He thinks its aesthetics have been corrupted by being turned into ‘theater’. ‘He had attended a U.S. Figure Skating training program in which skaters participated in a mock kiss-and-cry.’ It was rehearsed and simulated, losing reality and personality by becoming a staged appearance. David Michaels, ‘a senior producer for NBC’s Olympic coverage and the network’s director for figure skating,’ notes that the Olympic stadium has a ‘kiss-and-cry area.’ ‘It’s gone from a blue curtain and a bucket of flowers on the side to plastic ice sculptures and crazy sets. It becomes a big design element that everyone works hard to figure out. The network often adjusts the lighting to make it look more realistic and less like a TV set, he said, adding that one of NBC’s cameras is attached to a small crane that swoops into the kiss-and-cry from above.’ ‘The value of the kiss-and-tell is basic [...] if you add up the total amount of airtime that the kiss-and-tell gets relative to the skating, it’s a very large percentage.’ What is supposed to be an ‘unscripted moment’ in which the skaters let ‘their guard down,’ becomes a scripted moment in which the skaters let their guard down on cue.

Postmodern art events are not much different than postmodern sporting events. Indeed, the spectators – fans – of both become part of the spec-

tacle, a point clearly made by Yves Klein's organization of an art opening (certainly a pseudo-event) in which the only 'works' exhibited were the spectators. They were for sale, because by becoming part of the spectacle of art they became marketable as celebrities. As Boorstin writes, 'the hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name.' Does Klein's exhibition of the spectator, and later incorporations of the spectator into the theatrical space of the spectacle that the postmodern art work has become – e.g., in Dan Graham's and Bruce Nauman's installations – make him a hero of art, a big man, or an art celebrity, a big name? In postmodernism the psychotically reified False Self comes into its own, just as art becomes a psychotic spectacle – not simply a theater of the absurd, but beyond absurdity, which has its own reality, while the postmodern theater that is the spectacle makes no pretense of addressing reality. It offers psychotic entertainment instead. There is not much difference in principle between the dancing mannequins of the Radio City chorus line and the static mannequins in a Vanessa Beecroft installation. They are both glamorized robots, that is, derealized and depersonalized human beings.

The entertaining celebrity is a capitalist robot in a merchandizing spectacle, and today anyone can become a celebrity robot, or rather buy a 'Celebrity Look with a Photo and a Click,' as the *New York Times* tells us, making her a pseudo-celebrity, which is almost as good – good-looking – as the unreal thing. As the *Times* tells us, also in the February 22, 2010 issue, 'Selling a Celebrity Look' is Big Business. All the would-be celebrity has to do is look 'at gossip blogs to get fashion ideas from celebrities.' Thus, on CelebStyle, Kate Mitchell saw a photo of the actress Kate Winslet 'in a navy shift dress with a white cardigan and recreated the look. "I was so excited," Mitchell exclaimed, "because I was like 'I own that dress and it was like \$40'"'. Winslet's dress cost somewhat more. Winslet, a theatrical marketing personality, has done her job: she has sold Mitchell a bill of goods in more ways than one. Mitchell identifies with Winslet by way of her clothing, and wearing the clothing Mitchell may believe, unconsciously, that she is Winslet, certainly as attractive, fashionable, and glamorous as her. Why isn't she in the movies and making big money? Any woman can 'Buy the Clothes of the Famous' – or at least clothes that look like those of the famous – and feel famous as she walks down the street, perhaps hoping

that some Hollywood agent will notice her and give her a 'spectacular' job. Mitchell may get tired of pretending she is Winslet, and prefer to be Angelina Jolie. Her fantasy can come true by going to INFDaily and clicking the 'Shop this look' badge to purchase – instantly and inexpensively – clothes like those Jolie is wearing in her photo. Copying Jolie or Winslet Mitchell becomes 'original', suggesting just how debased the idea of originality has become. Dressing like Jolie and Winslet, Mitchell has the illusion that she is true to herself, even though she has falsified herself by trying to look like them. Wearing clothes like theirs, she in effect becomes them, but who are they? Mitchell has forfeited her reality, not to say autonomy and identity, to become an imperfect copy of an imperfect copy of a Platonically perfect idea of a Fashionable Appearance. If, as Winnicott says, the psychotic often unconsciously feels unreal, then a Fashionable Appearance compensates for the feeling of being unreal, even as it confirms that one is unreal. It is no accident that actors and actresses have become ideal types in the society of the spectacle, for the most celebrated of them impersonally perform an appearance so that it seems real and personal. They have mastered the art of pretension: the society of the spectacle is a theater of imposters, a Platonic cave in which media mannequins fake existence by reproducing it as a stereotype. The term 'hypocrite' comes from the Greek word 'hypokrites', a stage actor or one who plays a part: in the society of the spectacle everyone is unwittingly a hypocrite. Like Mitchell, who wants to play a part in the spectacle, pretends to be someone she isn't, suggesting that she doesn't know who she is. Without realizing it, she is self-defeating. Self-knowledge and self-realization are meaningless in the society of the spectacle, for there is no self to know and realize. Or rather one can only know and realize oneself by making a spectacle of oneself. Reflected in the mirror of the spectacle, one becomes a spectator of one's reified appearance, thus realizing oneself as an image-object.

Is there any saving grace to the commodification and theatricalization of art as part of the psychotic spectacle of reified appearances in capitalist society? The process of commodification and theatricalization is completed by the corporate sponsoring and publicizing of the art, which gives it the unmistakable imprimatur of money. Does the incorporating of art as capital do it any good? Does it make aesthetic experience possible for the many rather than the privilege of the one by making art accessible to

everyone, if only because everyone believes in money? If aesthetic experience is a mode of critical consciousness in that it creates what the psychiatrist Silvano Arieti calls a margin of freedom beyond biological, ideological, and social determinisms, does the capitalization of art, correlate with its mass reproduction, which amounts to a new determinism, create, however unexpectedly, a margin of freedom for the overdetermined masses? Does capitalism foster critical consciousness for the masses even as it publicizes and celebrates art as part of the spectacle of mass society, suggesting that capitalism is more humanizing than any other economic system despite its bad reputation as a system of reification? Does the capitalist corporation offer the masses the opportunity for aesthetic self-enlightenment by conferring its status on art by way of sponsoring its appearance – supporting and endorsing it with the power of its money?

I think so, however ironically: just as the corporation affirms its power by spending its money on art, so it empowers the public by presenting the art to them. Art becomes as extraordinary as the corporation, and thus extraordinary for the spectator, who is beholden to the capitalist corporation for his existence. Ironically, art becomes the breath of psychic fresh air in a life made inwardly stale by capitalism – a capitalist life in which the basic concern is to physically survive rather than psychically thrive. Art becomes the relief from the relentless cycle of work and consumption that is the banal substance of capitalist life. Capitalist-sponsored art becomes therapeutic compensation for the sickness of capitalist-sponsored life. Art could not become a saving human grace in a graceless capitalist society unless it was a form of capital. It is an emblem of capitalist creativity, for without capital nothing can be created. It is to art's advantage to be appropriated by capital, taken under its generous wing, allowing it to function as a margin of freedom within capitalism however subject to its iron rule: make money. Conforming to capitalism, art makes the nonconformist moment of aesthetic experience possible for the anonymous spectator, demassifying him by convincing him it is the one margin of psychic freedom allowed in capitalism. Art re-assures him that he is not a 'selfless' worker-consumer robot – even if he feels like one – but has a self of his own: a self not owned and manipulated by capitalism however much it is, not caught up in the capitalist struggle for survival however much it has to be, not reified by everydayness however everyday it unavoidably is. Thus art has nominal use value, however ordinarily useless it is.

Spectacularization by way of reproduction and commodification also do the art work good. For only by becoming a spectacular commodity can it survive in capitalist society, and with that into posterity, for the capitalists who own, sponsor, and celebrate it as a spectacular achievement have the power to give it a post-commodity future. The only way for art to become unconditionally elite – immortal – is to become a spectacular commodity and thus appeal to the spectacular capitalist elite. It is the commodity art of the capitalist elite – usually also the political, social, even religious elite – that survives in museums and textbooks. There it becomes a fully realized appearance, transcending the conditions of its making, commodification, and reproduction. The greatest power the capitalist elite has is the power to create, control, and own the future – to bring works of art into the establishment and pantheon called Posterity.

Today commodification and reproduction are the only path to immortality – the uniqueness that is unreproducible and thus transcendent. There will be neither art works nor commodities in the future – it is already here – but aestheticized commodities, representing the entertaining ‘world beyond’ and as such eternally elite. Marx called religion the opium of the masses; aesthetically entertaining commodities are the opium of the capitalist elite. What today we continue to call an art work is a subclass of entertaining aestheticized commodity. An aestheticized commodity makes the old distinction between art world and life world, work world and consumer world, obsolete. Surplus value is built into every commodity by aestheticizing it, giving it the aura of art. The more aesthetically elite the commodity, the more it becomes an ‘experience’, which is what Bernd Schmitt and Alex Simonson, in *Marketing Aesthetics: The Strategic Management of Brands, Identity, and Image*, says the advanced capitalist consumer expects from a commodity.

The avant-gardizing and idealizing of the commodity as aesthetic entertainment is the grand climax of its capitalist development. And the ironical destiny of what Clement Greenberg called aesthetic purity or fundamentalism. The avant-garde commodity appropriates it, reminding us of its connection to capitalist innovation – the capitalist invention of novel commodities. Thus Yves Saint Laurent’s Mondrian dresses and boots shed their commodity identity by their use of Mondrian’s pure abstract art as decorative design, raising their exchange value as well as that of Mondrian’s purity, and reifying abstraction as a marketable commodity.

Even countercultural anti-art, such as Duchamp's ready-mades, and anti-elite non-art, such as Kaprow's happenings, will be acculturated as elite commodity art and preserved in the museum of the capitalist spectacle. The literary critic Murray Krieger has analyzed 'the fall of the elite object', but he fails to note that it rises again as an elite commodity, as everything collected as capital does. The society of the capitalist spectacle is a society of collectibles, and everything is collectible in a capitalist society, and as such museum-worthy, and with that immortalizable, which makes it all the more marketable. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx celebrated bourgeois capitalism for its liberation of work and its technological achievements, but he neglected to note that bourgeois capitalism liberated objects from banality – which is what Duchamp did to found objects when he called them ready-made art, inaugurating what has become to be called Conceptual Art – by making them spectacular commodities.

If any object can have 'the status of art conferred' upon it, which are the words Breton used to justify Duchamp's ready-mades, then 'art' has become merely a label. The label gives the found object surplus value as though to compensate for its loss of use value. 'Art' becomes the object's imperial new clothing, until some clear-eyed skeptic points out that the object is naked – just another object, conceptualized or theorized as art. Conceptualism turns art into what Dufrenne calls a vacant signifier, an empty shell sometimes inhabited by an *au courant* ideology, as though to give contemporary life to what is dead.

Since Duchamp, theory serves as compensation for artistic and aesthetic inadequacy. Art must conform to theory as though to a Procrustean bed to be credible, suggesting that it has no credibility in itself. Whatever is conceptualized as art brings itself into question when it tries to walk without the crutch of theory. More pointedly, seeing through its conceptual disguise to its banality, one sees that it is just another commodity, and a fake one at that, for it has no use – experiential – value however high its exchange value. The theorization of art completes its commodification: theoretically experienced – if theory is a way of experiencing – art is experienced as a commodity. Today any found object can be theorized into art, and with that commodified, even as every commodity is an art object in theory. Art has become subservient to theory, another actor in the theater of spectacular theory, significant because it illustrates some theory. Theory, like capital, has more inherent value than art in postmodernity.

Theory becomes the Emperor's New Clothing on the commodity art has become in capitalism. All theorization serves capitalist purposes, suggesting that Conceptual Art is the most ingeniously capitalist con game ever invented.

The tacky work of Conceptual Art – but the only psychic work invested in it is labeling an object 'art' with as much ideological and theoretical pomp and circumstance as can be mustered – becomes a tactic in the post-modern game of art poker. It is a game in which bluffing is hyped as innovative; the bluff is called when the work is recognized to be a pseudo-event and image-object. Conceptualizing something as art is not the same as creatively working to make art – imaginatively working some subject matter through to cognitively and emotionally master it, to use the psychoanalytic idea of 'working through.'

The tendency to spectacle in 20th-century avant-garde art – the fact that it increasingly exists under the sign of the spectacle, and from the beginning struggled to compete with the populist spectacles of the entertainment industry – seems to have seriously begun with Picasso's spectacularization of the nude in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Fauvism made a spectacle of color – treated color as pure appearance rather than as external reality, even when symbolizing internal reality. It is well-known that Cubism and Futurism were inspired by early moving films. However crudely dynamic, they were a new species of spectacle. Cubist collages borrowed from the media – used newspaper headlines and advertising labels – to signal their spectacular character and advertise themselves and their modernity or newness. I suggest that Cubism can be understood as an unstable dialectic of public spectacle and hermetic abstraction. It can also be argued that Expressionism spectacularized emotion and Surrealism spectacularized the unconscious. One of the founders of Zürich Dadaism was a vaudeville performer, implying its indebtedness to spectacle. It can be argued that the Dadaists turned social entertainment into anti-social spectacle, as Huelsenbeck's *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* implies. From Monet's water-lily murals to Pollock's all-over paintings spectacle has become standardized in abstract painting. Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling murals are also spectacular, but they enlist spectacle in the service of transcendence, which is why they are more elevating than entertaining.

Today one cannot help wondering what exactly the status of art is – if it has any status apart from the status its commodification and mass repro-

duction confer upon it – especially since they seem to mock its presumably high status by popularizing it in the mass culture. Everything in it is subject to the common denominator consciousness of ideologizing publicity. Clearly mass reproduction and corporate capitalism work in strange, miraculous, dialectically slick ways, indicating their absolute power over consciousness. They have the magical power to create souvenirs of an experience we never had and no longer need as long as we have the spectacle. The spectacle is wish fulfillment at its most ironically consummate. Capitalism understands the deep human need to believe and trust, and brilliantly manipulates it by giving us faith in a make-believe aesthetic world populated by commodities – appearances of a reality that never existed – signaling there is nothing left to believe in and trust.

The issue that haunts this paper is whether ideology, including the ideologies of technology and corporate capitalism, converging in the ideology of the spectacle, represses, even denies, interiority and subjectivity, or whether the spectacle grants them a new lease on life, bringing with it a fresh consciousness of emotions and sensations – more broadly, of subjective possibility, indeterminate yet invigorating – despite capitalism's production of spectacular appearances that discredit their reality, for emotions and sensations interfere with efficient functioning in the world of action and technological society. They are the unconscious ghosts in the human machine that now and then cause it to malfunction, like mischievous gremlins, and always threaten it – and the social machine – with complete breakdown from within. They are the internal reality that reminds us that the external world of technological action is incompletely human. Emotions and sensations tend to assert themselves – rebelliously intensify – whenever human beings are 'caught up in the creativity...of a machine,' as Winnicott says, rather than their own creativity. A 'wearing of the heart on the sleeve,' as he says – sometimes a broken heart – they defy the conformist pressure to accept one's place in the heartless social machine. Such 'compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living,' Winnicott writes, while intense emotions and sensations, expressing one's primary creativity, can lead to 'creative apperception,' which 'more than anything else...makes the individual feel that life is worth living.'¹⁴

'By slaying the subject, reality itself becomes lifeless,' Adorno wrote,¹⁵ that is, merely appearance, as Debord would say. For Adorno the social

result is pervasive indifference, the final manifestation of alienation and dehumanization. But the capitalist spectacle, however life-negating as Debord argued, and reifying as Adorno said of the culture industry that produces it, is constructed of appearances, and if the spectacle can convince us that appearance is reality, implying that we can never experience anything but appearances – that the sense of reality is a byproduct of the totalization of appearances in a popular spectacle, suggesting that popularity and reality are correlate, (that reality is always and only what is popular) – then the spectacle, despite its reifying effect (reality is reified as well popularized appearance, that is, popularization is a form of reification), may have a dereifying effect on life. Capitalism may have surplus experiential value, redeeming itself and the spectacular society it constructs, not to say the spectacle it makes of itself. The dominant *Zeitgeist* is Capitalism, suggesting that there must be *Geist* in it, if in the perverse form of the spectacle and the reproductive technology that makes it seem timeless.

- 1 Quoted in Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, New York: Harper & Row, 1961, p. I.
- 2 Ananda Coomaraswamy, 'Samvega: Aesthetic Shock,' in *Coomaraswamy. Selected Papers*, ed. by Roger Lipsey, Bollingen series, vol. 89, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, vol. I, p. 82.
- 3 Alfred North Whitehead, 'Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect,' in *Alfred North Whitehead: An Anthology*, ed. by F.S.C. Northrop and Mason W. Gross, New York: Macmillan, 1953, p. 535.
- 4 George Hagman, *Aesthetic Experience*, New York: Rodopi, 2005, pp. 3–6 in passim.
- 5 The distinction is developed in Roger Fry, 'Art and Life' and 'An Essay on Aesthetics,' in id., *Vision and Design*, New York: Meridian Books, 1963, pp. 1–38.
- 6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, New York: Random House, 1968, p. 421.
- 7 Piet Mondrian, 'Natural Reality and Abstract Reality,' in *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, New York: Da Capo, 1993, p. 101.
- 8 Andrew M. Colman, *Dictionary of Psychology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 197, 195.
- 9 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books, 1995, pp. 14–18 in passim.
- 10 Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, New York: Harper & Row, 1971, p. 107.
- 11 Wilson Bryan Key, *The Age of Manipulation*, New York: Henry Holt, 1989, p. 4.
- 12 Mikel Dufrenne, 'Why Go To The Movies?' in id., *In the Presence of the Sensuous*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1990, pp. 131, 133–34.
- 13 Boorstin (see note 1), p. 37.
- 14 Winnicott, 'Creativity and Its Origins,' in id., *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock, 1982, p. 65.
- 15 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 45.

Kunst im Zeitalter der kapitalistischen Event-Kultur

Gegenstand der vorliegenden Abhandlung sind die Reproduktion von Kunst und ihre Auswirkungen auf die ästhetische Erfahrung. Die unmittelbare ästhetische Erfahrung, nämlich die vor dem Kunstwerk selbst, unterscheidet sich erheblich von einer solchen aus zweiter Hand, also der Begegnung mit einer digitalen oder gedruckten Reproduktion. Ein Kunstwerk zu vervielfältigen mindert seine Wirkkraft, reduziert es auf ein bloss äusserliches Abbild und banalisiert es durch die Beseitigung seiner ästhetischen Qualität. Darüber hinaus wird der Begriff des Originals infrage gestellt. Die Gesellschaft des Spektakels ist eine postmoderne Gesellschaft und fördert als solche Entwirklichung und Depersonalisierung. In ebendieser Gesellschaft spielt der «Homo Spectator», der Zuschauer oder Betrachter, eine herausragende Rolle, Publicity ist zur alleinigen Ideologie geworden und Pseudo-Events, Pseudo-Bilder sowie Pseudo-Erfahrungen haben an Bedeutung gewonnen. Veranstaltungen, sogar Pseudo-Events, werden dazu benutzt, auf Produkte aufmerksam zu machen, dafür zu werben und sie zu vermarkten, was ebenso an Sportanlässen wie an Kunstveranstaltungen zu beobachten ist. So stellt etwa Yves Klein den Betrachter aus, der in der Folge zur Handelsware wird. Und Prominente können ihr Aussehen vermarkten, indem sie den Traum, wie sie zu sein, verkaufen. Wer darauf hereinfällt und sich wie ein Star aufmacht, büsst die eigene Wirklichkeit und Individualität ein. In diesem System kann die Kunst indessen durchaus eine gültige Position finden. Sie bietet Entlastung vom Kreislauf aus Leistung und Konsumtion, und wenn sie zum spektakulären Handelsgut wird, kann sie sich in einer kapitalistischen Gesellschaft behaupten. Sogar Antikunst wie Duchamps Readymades kann zur aufsehenerregenden Ware in diesem System werden. Dabei bleibt freilich die Frage nach dem eigentlichen Status der Kunst unbeantwortet.