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## Social Art: The Work of Art in Capitalism

### Abstract

While not considered the focus of Marx, aesthetics, and art have become a project of Marxism. But understanding art in a Marxist world requires taking Marx's philosophy and understanding how art behaves in capitalism. I transplant the artwork to a Marxist analysis by investigating art as described by Heidegger, Dufrenne, and Merleau-Ponty, how art relates to the idea of the commodity in Marx, culture in Deleuze, and art in modern capitalism through Marcuse.

### Keywords

Art, Aesthetics, Marxism, Capitalism, Martin Heidegger

### 1. Ontology of Art

To properly conduct this project, we need to establish a working concept of art—primarily as it exists in capitalist systems. Art continues to evolve in contemporary times as it re-engages in artistic pursuits. While philosophic writings often play catch-up, two significant texts have solidly described a more recent exploration of art. These are *The Origin of the Work of Art*, an essay by Martin Heidegger, and Mikel Dufrenne's *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, a text exploring the aesthetic quality of art.

I will explore the concept of art in its explication by Heidegger and Dufrenne. Before moving into this text, we should note that while the diversity of art is seemingly endless, I will focus on visual forms of art for this project. Visual art is the section of art with the most coverage, historically since the rise of capitalism (a critical reference point for the project). As a result, that

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is the section of art found in the market dynamics of economies in contemporary times. This gives us a unique set of information to work with. We can trace the commoditization of art throughout history—from ancient art to industrialization—and trace its economic and social function. As a note, I am focusing on art while not committing to a historical project. Therefore, I will stick primarily to art as it has been situated in capitalism and not older market systems, such as feudalism or primitive communism.

### ***Heidegger and “The Origin of the Work of Art”***

In Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” we are confronted with a working concept of art and the nature of its origin as a work of art. This isn’t to say that, in some way, Heidegger explores the birth of art in a historical sense. Instead, he writes, “Origin here means that from which and by which something is what it is and as it is. What something is, at it is, we call its essence” (Heidegger 2008). This idea of origin implies that we can understand that art has a particular essence that can be dissected and explored so that we may say something about its composition. Early in the text, Heidegger explains that the essence of art is also “the origin of both artist and work” (Heidegger 2008).

At first glance, this second quote seems to say nothing different than the original assertion, except maybe a division between artist and work in the body of art essence. But on closer inspection, we see that Heidegger has subtly introduced the second aspect of his meditation, a vital piece of our project. That is, we need to determine both what art is and what is a *work of art*. To be a work of art is a particular kind of essence that is much more specific than art.<sup>1</sup>

But how do we see this particular “work”? It is not found in some professional sense that art critics or even philosophers assign. The work of art is found, instead, in the art itself. As Heidegger says, “Art essentially unfolds in the artwork” (Heidegger 2008). To more closely understand the work of art, Heidegger explores an ontology of things and thingness, which he considers a telescoping from the more specific to the more general. Heidegger moves to understand how the parts make the whole, specifically regarding the idea of equipment. He writes, “...equipment displays an affinity with the artwork

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of art can be expanded into a great many directions, but to restrict it to the *work* means it is deeper and more specific than a mere artistic venture. It codifies and categorizes it into a space in capitalism that is important to our project.

insofar as it is something produced by the human hand. However, by its self-sufficient presencing, the work of art is similar to the very thing that has taken shape and is self-contained” (Heidegger 2008). This helps further refine our understanding of the work of art because we now know that crafting by the artist has design, intent, and utility—all-important notions that also go into creating the work of art.

To further expand on this argument, Heidegger says, “The equipmental being of the equipment consists indeed in its usefulness. But this usefulness itself rests in the abundance of an essential Being of the equipment. We call it reliability” (Heidegger 2008). This reliability is the *techne* of equipment because that is what it aims toward.<sup>2</sup> When looking at art, we can see that to find its *techne* is also to find its motivation and projection. Art, then, serves a purpose that is visibly part of its essence and, therefore, contributes to its origin. Heidegger says later, “Art is actual in the artwork. Hence, we first seek the actuality of the work. In what does it consist of? Artwork universally displays a thingly character, albeit in a wholly distinct way” (Heidegger 2008). This is an important connection between equipment and its nature. Because equipment, in this case, is a thing, and so is a work of art. Therefore, we can see that the thingly character of the equipment radically alters our perception of the art and how it leads to being available to our perception.

Heidegger, further developing his concept of the work of art, explains the importance of truth in finding the nature of art. In this case, the work of art must communicate a sense of truth (*aletheia*). This argument means “Truth means the essence of the true. We think this essence in recollecting the Greek word *aletheia*, the unconcealment of beings” (Heidegger 2008). This unconcealment is vital to art because it is how we reveal the truth. By interacting with art, we connect to the craft in a way we would phenomenologically call being-in-the-world. Finding ourselves a part of the art creates an unconcealing that reveals the truth of the work. Heidegger writes:

For Greek thought, the essence of knowing consists in *aletheia*, that is, in the revealing of beings. It supports and guides all comportment, towards beings. *Techne*, as knowledge experienced in the Greek manner, is a bringing forth of beings in that it *brings forth* what is present as such out of concealment and specifically into the unconcealment of its appearance; *techne* never signifies the action of making (Heidegger 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> *Techne* here means a type of nature of craft and craftsmanship that many Greeks used to refer to the artists as well as other types of craftsman.

This is an important note. Our interaction with the work drives the unconcealing. This is a type of labor mirrored by the creation of art. Furthering this labor allows the experience of the artist, art, and spectator to flourish.

This interaction is clear later, as Heidegger explains:

Art, as the setting-into-work of truth, is poetry. Not only the creation of the work is poetic, but equally poetic, though in its own way, is the preserving of the work; for a work is in actual effect as a work only when we remove ourselves from our commonplace routine and move into what is disclosed by the work, so as to bring our own essence itself to take a stand in the truth of beings (Heidegger 2008).

This interaction between the spectator and the artistic work is how art comes to reveal the truth. We find ourselves experiencing a work of art when we view it. We remove ourselves from the background noise and truly experience the work.

### ***Dufrenne and the Phenomenological Elements of Art***

Mikel Dufrenne is another prominent voice in the conversation about what constitutes art. While Heidegger focuses on the essence of the work of art, Dufrenne takes a phenomenological view of art and describes it in a more physical sense. Dufrenne describes the general goals of art in his book *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*:

These are the general conditions common to all the arts through which the work can: (1) assume formal determinations, especially spatiality, which will constitute it as an object by giving consistency and harmony to the sensuous; and (2) say something and manifest (through an internal movement which confers on it a certain temporality) its aptitude for a type of expression which surpasses the explicit significations which the work sometimes presents (Dufrenne 1973).

There are several arguments in this excerpt; each one is worth analyzing: The first section of this quote suggests that art must occupy space and position that phenomenologically orients into being recognized as artistic. This does not mean that art must occupy a space at a gallery or museum, but it does mean that art needs to be constituted in a particular structure that uses materials in a certain way—that this production is, in fact, a work of art. The second half explains that art must present itself as art and occupy a place in time. Art must have a quality that engenders a reaction in the viewer that may cause effects beyond the assumed; i.e., a painting engenders a response to its concept other than the notice of color and form on a canvas.

Dufrenne calls these components “matter” and writes, “Every work possesses a matter which constitutes, properly speaking, its sensuous nature” (Dufrenne 1973). He continues, “The matter of music is sound and not the instruments which are the means for engendering sound” (Dufrenne 1973). This quote reveals more clearly what matter is: the expression of the product of creation ultimately constitutes matter. In turn, the shaping of this matter creates what Dufrenne would call “an aesthetic experience.” This matter becomes what Heidegger would consider the work’s essence, which means that its nature is how we experience the work (in a phenomenological sense).

Before diving further into the essential components of the work of art, we must define what constitutes an aesthetic experience. According to Dufrenne, we first become involved in the aesthetic experience when we recognize the aesthetic object in the work of art itself. He describes the aesthetic object as “always relative to consciousness, to *a* consciousness, but only because consciousness is always relative to the object, coming into the world with a history in which it is multiple, in which one consciousness crosses another as it encounters the object” (Dufrenne 1973). Therefore, this object is a conduit by which we engage in art. Engagement lets us enter the same world in which art exists. We are led into the aesthetic experience when we recognize the object and consciously interact with the art. Essentially, the aesthetic object is our way of entering into the experience of art. This includes developing a sense of art as an object of the gaze.

Dufrenne devotes an entire chapter of his work to “The Structure of the Work of Art in General.” As noted above, a fundamental part of the work of art is its sensuous nature or matter. As Dufrenne stated, this is not necessarily the physical components used in creating the art (paint, instrument, ink, etc.) but the underlying sensuous engagement of the art with the spectator viewing it. Dufrenne defines this process when he writes, “The artist wrestles with his materials so that they may disappear before our eyes as materials and be exalted as matter” (Dufrenne 1973).

There is also the ontology of this matter to become the “represented object.” As Dufrenne writes, “The represented object is not necessarily a real object which would serve as a model for the creative enterprise. It can obviously, also be a creature taken from the universe of the fantastic or the legendary” (Dufrenne 1973). This is the object of the art that leads one into it, the central image that drives the interaction with the work. This leads to a more intimate viewing of the work and gives us an understanding of the artist’s meaning. As Dufrenne notes, this object need not be a gathering from

sensible objects we experience regularly but instead constitutes a version of art that can excite the imagination and the senses and bring the viewer into the fold of fantasy as profoundly as an image of everyday-level recognition.

Moving more deeply into this relation of the object becoming an aesthetic object, Dufrenne explains, "Aesthetic perception can become acquainted with the aesthetic object only if it is an object and its sensuous qualities are attached to a support which they qualify" (Dufrenne 1973). What this means for our work of art is that it brings perceptive resonance into the fold when we interact with the aesthetic object—more clearly defined here as the object of the art that converts from seeing to viewing. This work of art is more clearly in line with Heidegger's notion of the work of art because it is a movement toward the truth of the piece and its unconcealed components that we interact with within the viewing process. Dufrenne explains:

It is not that the doctrine is the truth of the work but, rather, that the work is the truth of the doctrine. For the work does not need to be proved; it does the proving itself. Ideas are formed on the basis of the work and possess value only if they can be rediscovered in the work (Dufrenne 1973).

In a Heideggerian sense, this doctrine makes the truth available and relatable for the spectator. Dufrenne argues, "The painting must be understood in itself" (Dufrenne 1973). This is true, however, for all types of art—the painting, the musical piece, the dance performance, and the written story—they must be independent of the outside to stand on their own. This does not mean that art does not relate to or interact with the world around it—on the contrary, one of the critical features of artwork is that it places itself in and of the world. By this, Dufrenne means that the work of art must be a single being in itself and not directly rely on outside stimuli to deliver its unconcealing and, ultimately, the idea of the truth.

Heidegger and Dufrenne provide us with tools/arguments, but Karl Marx shows how we gain the context to understand the art process. Heidegger helps us know the essence of the work of art and its almost spiritual composition. Dufrenne presents us with a more phenomenological and commonsense notion of art. However, both perspectives are critical to understanding art beyond the single viewer.

## 2. Marx and the Commodity

A unique aspect of capitalist production is that almost all goods, including art, require some physical exertion to contribute to or complete a finished good. Therefore, art does not have a different relationship to the market than other finished goods. To further crystallize this relationship, I will explore the notion of commodity, labor, work, use-value, and surplus-value in this section. I will endeavor to understand how the capitalist system has turned almost all human activity toward the world of production while subsuming art from a historically unique position into the ever-thicker folds of capitalist economies.

We can argue that the artist's surplus-value is found and kept as this type of creative energy deposits itself in the work. As Heidegger said, "The artwork is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than what the mere thing itself is, *allo agoreuet*. The work makes public something than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory" (Heidegger 2008). This analysis reaffirms our previous claim that a work of art is not merely the physical canvas and the paint on it or the dancer and their stage. Instead, it is a deeper element that transcends physical lines of communication and draws upon the more significant part of consciousness to transmit from the artist to art and from the art to the viewer.

For Marx, economic activity is social. Therefore, it is crucial to understand commodity placement within an economic system or marketplace. For Marx, this is primarily done through the distribution system of capitalist production. Marx supplies a detailed discussion of this process in *Grundrisse*. The capitalist distribution system delivers a commodity from a production item to a final good. This exchange is driven by the most important commodity: money. Marx writes:

The simple fact that the commodity exists doubly, in one aspect as a specific product whose natural form of existence ideally contains (latently contains) its exchange value, and in the other aspect as manifest exchange value (money), in which all connection with the natural form of the product is stripped away again—this double, *differentiated* existence must develop into a *difference*, and the difference into *antithesis* and *contradiction* (Marx 1973).

This notion of exchange value is central to understanding Marx's ideas. Essentially, it is the value of a good relative to other goods, broken down into a measurement of labor-time. However, as Marx notes above, there is also

exchange value as it relates to the exchange commodity (money). Money occupies a unique position as an exchangeable commodity in that all other commodities can be exchanged for money.

I arrive at an opportunity to systematize how the work of art exists in a Marxist economic position. Even if we remove the labor cost of producing a painting, we can assign a value (even if not congruent with the labor theory of value). This value depends on a cash zero-sum (i.e. gather the cost of paint and canvas and all other producing materials and then assign a value as such, once again disregarding labor input as value-added). Therefore, we find our first possibility to import the notion of art into value.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Commodities and Marxist Political Economy***

For Marx, the body is the source of labor-power, meaning it is the source of the energy and output that allows labor to be performed (Marx 1976). He believes the worker sells his labor-power to achieve subsistence, which turns the labor-power sold into a commodity (Marx 1976). Marx defines a commodity as “first of all, an external object, a thing through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind” (Marx 1976). This notion of a commodity shows us that labor can become a commodity that creates other commodities.

In general, we do not consider art to be a commodity, at least not in contemporary definitions. However, Because art satisfies human needs, it meets Marx’s basic criteria for commodity. Yet the problem is more complicated: the labor-power input into art is unique and ever-changing, making each work of art a unique piece that operates as a stored value in the market for goods. This unique value will be explained further on, but for now, suffice to say that art can be an activity that consumes labor-power and has a unique value regarding its creation.

The time and energy it takes to create this finished product (commodity) are what labor theory of value refers as labor-time. As Marx writes, “A given quantity of any commodity contains a definite quantity of human labor. Therefore, the form of value must not only express value in general but also quantitatively determined value, i.e. the magnitude of value” (Marx 1976). This section shows that value is derived from labor-time and the values of

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<sup>3</sup> Discussion of labor input value and further exploration of what this means in Marxist labor theory of value will be discussed in-depth in further sections. For now, I merely understand that value is created by inputs and although I am not noting it here, labor is indeed an input and indeed adds value to the work of art, as in all other finished goods.



the inputs that are utilized to create a commodity. This value system is central to Marx's description of how labor can take disparate ingredients and create something new. We cannot develop a system of value where we merely take the cost of the inputs and add them up to find the cost of the product. Instead, it's the inputs and the special commodity of labor-power that create the value of a finished commodity.

This labor, as I discussed earlier, can be put into place for the creation of art as well. The creation of art, like any economic production, requires inputs, a process by which those inputs are united, and at least one laborer who undergoes an act of creation to take the inputs and create a newly formed object—a commodity itself. This process takes time, or what Marx calls labor-time. Each unit of labor-time (typically expressed as an hour) has a certain cost, and that cost is embedded in the value of the final product. Therefore, those items that require similar inputs and similar time and energy should be relatively equal. There is a great deal of debate over the accuracy of labor theory of value, but in this case, it proves very useful because it helps take the creation of art, a diverse activity, and puts it on equal footing with other forms of labor in the sense that art can be reduced and picked apart to equally measurable units, even when comparing painting to writing a poem, for example.

Use-value refers to the measurements of the productivity value of the labor or inputs. In labor theory of value, use-value is a concept developed in labor that essentially takes the components of a commodity and describes these components in a standardized way. For the sake of generality and ease, I will call the measure of this use-value utils instead of money since varying costs and representations of money can make a standardized measurement difficult. The notion of utility is vital to our understanding of commodity production and how it distributes inputs, money, and labor-time to various tasks in the creation of a commodity. If a painter is preparing to create a painting there are necessary and unnecessary items. The unnecessary items may cost more but yield more utils in the end and therefore have enhanced use-value. That may cost more but bring more utils to the project and, therefore, have enhanced use-value and can be applied in a different measure than the necessary items.

In the scenario above, Marx may conclude that this creative value that erupts from the labor of the artist is in some sense a part of its surplus-value. Indeed, Marx argues that surplus-value arises when the laborer works past the point of subsistence to generate extra value that is in turn absorbed by the capitalist. In a similar way, we can argue that the artist's surplus-value is

found and retained as this type of creative energy that deposits itself in the work. As Heidegger said, “The artwork is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than what the mere thing itself is, *allo agoreuet*. The work makes public something than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory” (Heidegger 2008). This analysis reaffirms our previous claim that a work of art is not merely the physical canvas and the paint on it or the dancer and her stage. Instead, it is a deeper element that transcends mere physical lines of communication and draws upon the greater part of consciousness to transmit from the artist to art and from the art to the viewer.

Now that I have defined the terms of our debate, it is time to return to the real world to generate a new theory. For Marx, because economic activity is social in nature, it is important to understand the placement of commodities within an economic system or marketplace. For Marx, this is primarily done through the distribution system of capitalist production. Marx provides a detailed discussion of this process in *Grundrisse*.

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In this section, I have laid forth a significant amount of theory necessary for my project. The notion of art as a commodity and that commodities are subject to capitalist control of culture will show us the power that capitalism has over the artist and how such a level of control drastically alters what the work of art is and how it is presented. In the next section, I will expand this theoretical framework and develop the commoditized system of art and the artist's labor.

### **3. The Social Laborer (Artist)**

In this section, I will explore the action of creating art, and its subsequent viewing, in greater depth. In the first part, I will draw out the theoretical model of this action and explore its relation to the body—the source of labor. In the first two segments, I will draw lines around the body and demarcate for its ability to experience, even in capitalism, individual responses. In the third segment, I will take up Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Herbert Marcuse to explore how the particular artist described in the former two sections has a unique but still captured existence in capitalism.

#### ***Art and Artist as Process***

Although Heidegger's conception of art is compelling, it is incomplete because it does not account for the viewer. It is not enough for art to exist—it must be perceived and appraised by viewers to be considered art, even by only one viewer. This is the case because art is continually expanding as a concept. However, what has remained true is that art is both created and recreated in spectating. It is not enough to paint a beautiful self-portrait and keep it hidden away from all onlookers. This would make it nothing but the combination of inputs and creative energy—ingredients for art, but not enough to establish something as a work of art on its own. Only once the painting is seen for the first time does it become a work of art, as Heidegger would describe it.

Art can also have a complex nature in its expression. Heidegger asks, "But perhaps the proposition that art is truth setting itself to work intends to revive the fortunately obsolete view that art is an imitation and depiction of something actual" (Heidegger 2008). He further states that "the work, therefore, is not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be at hand at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of things' general essence" (Heidegger 2008). This movement in conversation over art

is imperative to understanding the nature of the work of art. Art is not merely copying things around us—instead, art is an interpretation of the essence of things. This leads to a deeper conversation in which the work of art channels something of our mimesis and grasps a more central component of the subject. Heidegger cites the example of Van Gogh’s painting of a peasant’s shoes. While this is merely a recreation of a pair of shoes on canvas, Heidegger argues that it is still a unique work of art because we capture the essence of these shoes and its representation stimulates the viewer (Heidegger 2008).

This approach to art is not a singular system, though. Gilles Deleuze, in his book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, effectively synthesizes Bacon’s works and the philosophical ideas that are embedded in Bacon and all artists. This work on sensation in paintings becomes his central project and analysis of Bacon. Deleuze, in a prescient moment to our topic, writes “The figurative (representation) implies the relationship of an image to an object that it is supposed to illustrate; but it also implies the relationship of an image in a composite whole that assigns a specific object to each of them” (Deleuze 2004).

Deleuze seems to be saying that when we create art, we use the figurative form that draws on experience to suggest emotions, action, and movement. Also, when I take this analysis further, it becomes clear that we divide our understanding of art by being a series of objects that create a whole message. It is also essential to recognize that the whole leads us to specific objects. The painting has a unique role in drawing us into it with a focus and a powerful wholeness that creates each object as a single constituent of a more extensive system. Deleuze explains further that “The contour, as a “place” is, in fact, the place of exchange in two directions: between the material structure and the Figure, and between the Figure and the field” (Deleuze 2004). But what are the field and Figure, and how do they relate to the material structure?

In Deleuze’s analysis of Bacon, the Figure is the body or the object of flesh. The field it engages in is the painting, the likeness taken from it, and the landscape it evokes. So where should we situate material structure? Material structure is the formalized markings of the painting. It is the areas of the painting that frame and center The Figure, creating a recognizable space to arise as the field after given thought. For our project, it is helpful to look at this information and see what kind of experiences seem to be at play in painting and their effects on the body. Deleuze rightfully says this is an area of exchange because it is the movement of the eye and the attention that the

contour directs, which specifically creates the activity necessary to make an exchange “between the material structure and the Figure, and the Figure and the field” (Deleuze 2004).

But what does all of this mean about the methodology of the painter? Creating a work of art that can evoke such qualities cannot be done without forethought. Deleuze seems to believe that a distinctive element of painting makes this happen. He says, “...when sight discovers in itself a specific function of touch that is uniquely its own, distinct from its optical function. One might say that painters paint with their eyes, but only insofar as they touch with their eyes” (Deleuze 2004). This methodology means that to view art is to touch it and to create art is to feel it with your eyes. This perception of art as touching and interacting engulfs the senses and merges viewership with experience. In this sense, we understand art as more than a projection of thought onto canvas, but in many ways, physical interaction with a type of creation.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives a compelling sense of this interpretation and the interaction we have when interacting with art in *The Visible and the Invisible*. He says:

A certain red is also a fossil drawn up from the depths of imaginary worlds. If we took all these participations into account, we would recognize that a naked color, and in general a visible, is not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, offered all naked to a vision which could be only total or null, but is rather a sort of straits between exterior and interior horizons ever gaping open, something that comes to touch lightly and makes diverse regions of the colored or visible world resound at the distances, a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world—less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colors, a momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility (Merleau-Ponty 1968).

Merleau-Ponty is saying here that when we approach the visible world, one that would include paintings, we see that from the deepest recesses of our minds, we generate ideas about the images we see. In a phenomenological sense, we would observe the painting as merely uninformed objects collected in a single space. But as the sediment sifts into our perception, we begin to see a tighter connection to the painting. That said, for this project, we can directly see the value of our interacting with the visible by finding the archaic images in our consciousness that reach out and interact with the objects of our perception.

But what precisely does this do for our project? It helps that the reasoning behind it is developed further in yet another Merleau-Ponty essay titled “Eye and Mind.” This essay by Merleau-Ponty is focused on painting. It forms the notion of art and painting relating to image and perception. He says:

The word “image” is in bad repute because we have thoughtlessly believed that a drawing was a tracing, a copy, a second thing, and that the mental image was such a drawing, belonging among our private bric-a-brac. But if in fact it is nothing of the kind, then neither the drawing nor the painting belongs to the in-itself any more than the image does (Merleau-Ponty 1993).

This description of our perception is that we have difficulty claiming that we can see art and immediately perceive it as it is—its in-itself, as Merleau-Ponty describes. We thought the painting of shoes was merely a picture of shoes, just a painted copy of something in the tangible world. This is a misleading notion. We are not as in control of the object and our perception as we would like to think. What Merleau-Ponty wants us to take away from this is that our perception is of the world and in the world. This means we perceive things a certain way without concentrating effort. For Merleau-Ponty, all art is a kind of interpretation, and all viewing of art is an interpretation of an interpretation.

I have extensively analyzed art as it is presented to us in the world and our perceptual experience. From here, it becomes clear that the bodily experience of art is beginning to look more and more apparent as a type of sensation for the artist and the viewer. That said, our experience thus far with experiencing art has been insufficient. Further ahead, we explore how art and the artists exist in the system of capitalism.

### ***Process, Viewing, and Capitalism***

To wit: Does capitalism affect art? If so, why and how?

To answer the first question: of course. Any system will always affect artistic output because it drives the cost of inputs for art, the free time the artist has away from life-sustaining labor (if the artist is not a full-time artist, which I will not consider now), and often the subjects of the art. If we accept that art is affected by a system, then all art made in that system will have some relation to the art already created, shaping new meanings and subjects that reflect the effect of a system.

Herbert Marcuse argues in *One-Dimensional Man* that capitalism drives people towards conformity and to chase profits. The search for profit is potentially one of the most understated threats of capitalism. It drives workers to accept lower wages in pursuit of “future wealth”—what Marx refers to as the Reserve Army of Labor. This is part of capitalism’s protective reflexes to keep laborers working while blaming their poverty on personal rather than systemic failures.

Marcuse writes:

Under the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole (Marcuse 1991).

This excerpt can be misinterpreted in isolation but describes the exact mechanism described above—capitalism manipulates primarily through its ability to instill fear in losing wealth. This heresy has been guarded against not just by the promise of wealth but by piecemeal reforms disguised as progress when they are simply reifying the capitalist order. Shorter work weeks, no child labor, and the like (at least in the Western world) have made much of the labor force believe it has won the battle over who controls the lives of the proletariat. However, as Marcuse, Deleuze, Marx, and other thinkers have shown, capitalists have lost the battle to win the war.

Suppose we reframe this analysis and focus on its place in art. In that case, we see that art is not only subject to the general energy of capitalism but receives particular focus and allowance by capitalism due to the fear that art has often reflected the feelings of the lower class before rising (the French Revolution comes to mind). Marcuse notes, “Technical progress and more comfortable living permit the systematic inclusion of libidinal components into the realm of commodity production and exchange” (Marcuse 1991). While Marcuse is referring to the pervasiveness of sexuality in modern culture, in more general terms, he is alluding to the body and its process. As I noted earlier, art derives from the body, and therefore we can see that culture has come back to capitalism but only what is considered appropriate and non-threatening. This endorsement of the art of capitalism greatly changes the nature of art and threatens to suppress all art that disturbs this “comfortable living” that Marcuse notes.

As we can see, the development of art has been significantly impacted by the rise of capitalism and the ideas surrounding value and inspiration. As these influences have intermingled, new pressures and systems face the artist as they pursue their art. As we continue to move forward, these influences will wax and wane and help shape what art becomes in the future.

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