

Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research

Simon Sheikh

We read *Capital* as philosophers, and therefore posed it a different question. To go straight to the point, let us admit: we posed it the question of its *relation to its object*, hence both the question of the specificity of its *object*, and the question of the specificity of its *relation* to that object, i.e., the question of the nature of the type of discourse set to work to handle this object, the question of scientific research.

– Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 1969.

One of the current buzzwords of art production and education is the notion of artistic research. But what does such a concept entail? Let us begin by posing three, admittedly tentative, possible definitions:

1. research into artistic practices and materials, or,
2. research as artistic practice, or, finally,
3. research that is artistic, i.e. an aesthetic approach to science. I will here suggest that we look at the term research through Louis Althusser's famous description of (Marxist) science as an enterprise that has a theory of its object of study, and thus ask what could be the object of study in the arts after the dematerialization of the art object, and, in turn, question the role of (dematerialized) artistic production within the knowledge economy of current cognitive capital.

The dematerialization of the art object, was, of course, the title of a famous book by Lucy Lippard, mapping the development of conceptual art in the period, 1966-72, that is, the same time that Althusser was developing his theory of science in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. For Lippard, the move from art objects into what Jean-François Chevrier, in his study of the period, was later to name 'public things', was also a move away from the commodity status of art, and thus a critical and political intervention into the economy of art and the economy of signs. However, Lippard's claims are about the potentiality of the practice, of its logic of enunciation, not of its recuperation, as is to a large extent the case of with Chevrier, about the potentiality of the practice, of its logic of enunciation, not of its recuperation.

Since the 1960s, with the advent of minimal sculpture, conceptual art and site specific practices, art institutions have had to take the double process of dematerialization of the art object on the one hand *and* the so called expanded field of art practices on the other, into account. Which, in turn, has led to the establishing of new public platforms and formats, not just exhibition venues, but also the production of exhibitions in different types of venues, as well as creating venues that are not primarily for exhibition. The crucial shift that cannot be

emphasized enough is accurately best described as ‘art conquering space’ by art historian Jean-François Chevrier, who has written of how this conquest has facilitated a shift in emphasis from the production and display of art objects to what he calls “public things”.¹¹ Whereas the object stands in relation to objectivity, and thus apart from the subject, the thing cannot be reduced to a single relation, or type of relation. Additionally, the introduction of the term ‘public’ means that this thing is placed in a relation to the many, that its significations are uncertain in the sense that it is open for discussion. This shift also entails, naturally, different notions of communicative possibilities and methods for the artwork, where neither its form, context nor spectator is fixed or stable: such relations must be constantly (re)negotiated, and, ultimately, conceived in notions of publics or public spheres. And it indicates how notions of audience, the dialogical, modes of address and conception(s) of the public sphere(s) have become the important points in our orientation, and what this entails in terms of ethics and politics.

Words such as audiences, experiences and differences naturally also smack of market research and public relations management. Which has indeed been the other side of the coin, the other major shift in the public roles of the institutions, and in the mediation between artist, artistic production and reception. For a cultural industry, as well as for the currently prevalent neo-liberal governmentality, replacing publics with markets, communities with segments, and potentialities with products, are the new points of orientation, implemented by degree from funding and government bodies onto art institutions, as indeed any public institution. As the sociologist Ulf Wuggenig has repeatedly pointed out, the managerial critique of institutions has had far more fundamental effects on art institutions than the artistic critique from conceptual art practices such as institutional critique. However, this ‘marketability’, or market ideology, if you will, have also been presaged within the artworld, and especially from the conceptual circle. Writing about the same period as Chevrier, who focused on the crucial year 1967, Alex Alberro has recently supplied us with a poignant revisionist history of conceptual art and its relations to the new, post-Fordist ways of working and marketing industry.²² Alberro analyzes the important role of curator/dealer Seth Siegelaub, and how he forged connections between the corporate world, the self-image of the new ad men, and the dematerialized art works of Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Wiener *et al.* It is his contention, that the materials, language and publicity, where shared by the two fields – talk value becoming sign value, we could say.

We can then, perhaps, talk of a linguistic turn, meaning that language and (inter)textuality have become increasingly privileged and important, in art practice, the staging of the discourses around art, the aestheticization of discourse, and the new knowledge-based industries such as marketing, PR and services. Similarly, and also simultaneously, as art has become dematerialized and expanded, labour itself has become dematerialized and expanded, we could say, and production shifted towards a cultural industry and the so-called knowledge economy. Indeed, Félix Guattari has written about a semiotization of capital, and of production.³³ This notion is crucial for two reasons: both in terms of description and articulation. Or, put in other terms, analysis and synthesis.

Guattari obviously takes his cue from the psycho-analytic theories of Jacques Lacan, turning his famous idea of the subconscious being structured like a language onto the logic of capital, its expansions and subjectivizations, and claiming that capital is (like) a language. Accounting, measuring and the stock exchange are all linguistic effects, as is the automatization and machinic assemblage of the production and labour process. This notion of

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semiotization is also a way of describing labour becoming immaterial (and the subsequent dematerialization of value). Guattari's linguistic turn brings about metaphors of grammar and structure, obviously, but perhaps also notions of counter-narrative, incoherent speech, gibberish, lying and *detournement*. And maybe even silence, muting. That is, in the usage of language also lies resistance.

The linguistic turn can also be found in theories of post-Fordism proper, such as the writings of Paolo Virno, who sees post-industrial production as the development of capital that has included "within itself linguistic experience as such".⁴⁴ That is, a process without a necessary end product, but rather endless communication and language games, that requires virtuosity and skills of a performative and thus political kind of the worker rather than technical or bodily knowledge. This also means that features such as cooperation and informality, traditionally at the background of industrial work now moves to the foreground, or, in an image, from the assembly line to the project team:

Virtuosity becomes labour for the masses with the onset of a culture industry. It is here that the virtuoso begins to punch a time card. Within the culture industry, in fact, activity without an end product, that is to say, communicative activity which has itself as an end, is a distinctive, central and necessary element. But, exactly for this reason, it is above all within the culture industry that the structure of wage labour has overlapped with that of political action.^{5 5}

Political action has to be understood in the terms of work itself here, that is work without an end product, albeit not without products, where the evaluation and thus remuneration of this cannot be measured in the hours spent producing the objects, as was, argued Marx, the case in the industrial era of capital. Here, Virno uses the example of the peasant versus the industrial worker versus the cultural worker (or entrepreneur...). Where the peasant is awarded for producing something from nothing (growing foods from the bare earth) and the worker is salaried for his ability to transform one things into another (raw materials into usable items), the cultural worker's work can only be evaluated by his or her progress in the field. That is, there is no product to show how skillful a priest or a journalist are in convincing their audience or consumers, so instead they must be evaluated for aptitudes and skills of a political kind, how they are capable of advancing within the system: the quality of the priest can only be seen in him becoming a bishop, and the journalist becoming an editor and so on. It is, thus, a matter of careerism and power brokering that are at stake. The parallels to the artworld are only too obvious. How else to decide who are the best artists or curators? By the number of people they have convinced? Or, rather, by the institutions in which they have shown, the titles and awards they have been granted and so on? I believe the latter to be the case, why else the need for the endless CV's and bios in every catalogue or application! Clearly, the work in terms of objects cannot be enough, otherwise therey would be no need for the inclusion of the CV's!

However, as Virno remarks, this cultural mode of production is not only a postindustrial sector in itself, but has become the norm: "The intermingling of virtuosity, politics and labour has extended everywhere".⁶⁶ We can thus talk of an industry of communication, where the artist figure (as well as the curator) is a role model for contemporary production, rather than a counter model. Or, to put it another way, what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello has termed the 'artistic critique' of capital has been integrated into capital itself, and virtuosity, creativity,

performativity and so on, are all the basis of this production, and knowledge itself a type of commodity.⁷⁷ These are the characteristics of what can be termed the knowledge economy.

In the knowledge economy, education plays an important role, not just as a commodity in itself, but also as a measure of constant de-skilling and redistribution of labour power. Indeed, politicians in the current merger between neo-liberal hegemony and the maintenance of the (national) welfare state constantly talk about life long education as a new mode of being. Which can be translated into a constant subjectification into language as economy (or, to use Paolo Virno's term into performativity, virtuosity, general intellect and the political.) Seen in this light, the educational role of art institutions, such as exhibition places needs to be re-examined, as does the role of artistic production in the knowledge economy, as well as the corollaries between conceptual art and immaterial labor, and finally between knowledge and discipline.

Knowledge is, in the words of Michel Foucault "...that of which one can speak in a discursive practice", and "...also the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse", as well "...the field of coordination and subordination of statements in which concepts appear, and are defined, applied and transformed" and finally "knowledge is defined by the possibilities of use and appropriation offered by discourse".⁸⁸ Obviously, it is not difficult to understand the setting of the speaker as performer in this context, at once being in a language that gives validity to the performers speech act, as well as speaking in a way and about objects that can be known by this language, and thus always already guaranteeing this language its supremacy. So, when speaking about knowledge production within art or economy for that matter, when cannot separate it from how it is produced, what it excludes and negates in other to produce, and how it is formed by discourse. As Foucault writes in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, "There are bodies of knowledge that are independent of the sciences (which are neither their historical prototypes, nor the practical by-products), but there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms."⁹ So, despite whatever experimental and innovative metaphors for knowledge production that is employed within current art speak, or, for that matter, business talk: talk value (as stated earlier) is also sign value.¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, there is the relation between *the will to knowledge* and *the will to truth*, as Foucault puts it, since the production of truth always requires an alteration of knowledge and its institutions.¹¹⁰ Knowledge is thus not truth, but an instrument of discourse, and as such subordinate, servile and dependent. Here, Foucault refers to the Nietzschean rather than aristoleian Aristotelian notion of knowledge. Where Aristotle sees a link between sensation and pleasure in the production of knowledge, Nietzsche sees knowledge not as a natural instinct, but as an invention, that comes about through an ambiguous mixture of pain and pleasure. Knowledge always hides its subconscious (fear, desire, impulse etc.), and it is in the clash of these disparate instincts that knowledge is produced rather through harmony and a naturalist notion of cause and effect. And if knowledge professes any truth, it is "through the action of a primordial and renewed falsification that establishes the distinction between the true and the untrue".¹²¹¹ Interest, or even ideology, thus precedes the production of knowledge and conditions its scope, and its alterations. How then, to account for changes in the discursive formations, such as in the case of artistic presentation and production? Here, Foucault writes:

The transformation of a discursive practice is tied to a whole, often quite complex set of modifications which may occur either outside of it (in the forms of production, in the social relations, in the political institutions), or within it (the techniques for determining objects, in the refinement and adjustment of concepts, the accumulation of data), or alongside it (in other discursive practices).¹³¹²

If applied to the field of art, we can see the changes occurring outside in the political and administrative changes contexts I mentioned, or general changes in production and consumption, within it in terms of dematerialized and expanded art practices, and alongside it in the a number of wide ranging transformations from the changes in other academic disciplines to the changes in political economy, or national and sacred re-territorializations. Indeed, we can see a number of transformations in contemporary art practices: a certain openness or expansiveness in regards to its objects of knowledge; if not discursive formations; an interdisciplinary approach where almost anything can be considered an art object in the appropriate context, and where more than ever before there is work being produced within an expanded praxis, intervening in several fields other than the traditional art sphere, touching upon such areas as architecture and design, but also philosophy, sociology, politics, biology, science and so on. The field of art has become – in short – a field of possibilities, of exchange and comparative analysis. It has become a field for alternatives, proposals and models, and can, crucially, act as a cross field, an intermediary between different fields, modes of perception and thinking, as well as between very different positions and subjectivities. Art thus has a very privileged, if impermanent, but crucial position and potential in contemporary society. But crucial in its very slippage, in that it cannot hold its ground as a discipline or institutional place. It is not a matter of the politicization of art, but rather of the culturalization of politics, in the sense that Virno suggested.

Perhaps it is also in this context that we should view the emergence of a term such as ‘knowledge production’ and ‘artistic research’, in both art education and exhibition making.? We are dealing with a transferal of terms, since we are not just talking about ‘research’ as such, as in other fields, but with the prefix ‘artistic’ added. That is, something additional and specific to the field of art. One must thus inevitably ask what kind of practices does *not* involve artistic research? What practices are privileged, and which are marginalized or even excluded? Does research function as a different notion of artistic practice(s) or merely a different wording, validation process and contextualization that can mold and place artistic work within university structures of knowledge and learning, as well as within the aforementioned advancements in cultural work?

Often, but not always, in such dematerialized, post-conceptual and, perhaps more accurately termed, re-contextualized art practices, there is, of course, a notion of research invoked. Research has even, to some extent, superseded studio practice. Artists are increasingly researching projects, not only to make site-specific works, but also time and content specific works. Here, form follows function, and the materialization of the work is decided upon different parameters than in historical studio practice. It is clear that this interdisciplinarity stands in opposition to a traditional division of art practices into particular genres, mediums or indeed disciplines. In order to address the situation that contemporary artists, or cultural producers, face, we cannot rest on the pillars of tradition, neither within institutions, art production or methods of teaching. On the contrary, traditions seems quite counter-productive to our current endeavor: the assessment of new skills and tools for a re-contextualized art

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practice. So, if we view art production as knowledge production rather than formal production, we will have to develop and define a different set of properties and parameters for discussion, production and evaluation. And when we focus on art as a place 'where things can happen' rather than a thing 'that is in the world' we will see how an engagement between art production and critical theory becomes necessary and that education itself is a multi-faceted inter-disciplinary field that moves in many spaces as opposed to staying within one mode of production, or form. And any change that goes beyond the knowable must engage itself with discursive formations, with truth procedures and thus with how we can change political institutions, ways of doing and knowing, how we know rather than simply what we know or do not know.

In a sense, the notion of the cultural producer, a contemporary artist figure, must be seen as complicit with the later developments within administration, politics and capital, within the emergence of the knowledge industry. Artists function as a sort of social avant-garde, on the forefront of the risk society and the notion of immaterial labourers. As producers of knowledge, art institutions and universities are often mere teaching machines, reproducers rather than producers of knowledge and thinking, which is why we should not maintain their structures while transforming their products. Rather, we should learn from those structures as spaces of experience, as discursive spaces, and simultaneously to the implementation of its productive features, maintain a notion of *unproductive* time and space within exhibition venues. We have to move beyond knowledge production into what we can term *spaces for thinking*.

Thinking is, after all, not equivalent to knowledge. Whereas knowledge is circulated and maintained through a number of normative practices – disciplines as it were – thinking is here meant to imply networks of indiscipline, lines of flight and utopian questionings. Naturally, knowledge has great emancipatory potentials, as we know from Marxism through psycho-analysis, but knowledge, in the sense being what you know, what you have learned, is also a limitation: something that holds you back, that inscribes you within tradition, within certain parameters of the possible. And thus with certain eliminations of what it is possible to think, possible to imagine – artistically, politically, sexually and socially. Secondly, the notion of knowledge production implies a certain placement of thinking, of ideas, within the present knowledge economy, i.e. the dematerialized production of current post-Fordist capitalism. And here we can see the interest of capital become visible in the current push for standardization of (art)education and its measurability, and for the molding of artistic work into the formats of learning and research. There is a direct corollary between the dematerialization of the art object, and thus its potential (if only partial) exodus from the commodity form and thus disappearance from the market system, and the institutional re-inscription and validation of such practices as artistic research and thus knowledge economical commodity.

So, let us now return to the question posed at the outset of this paper – what is the object of study? – and to the theory of knowledge that is involved in artistic research. For Louis Althusser, the notion of science had to do with the relation between study and its object, which is always a relation of difference. Namely, that the object is always a specific object, and thus definable in a specific way, and within a specific relation. Thus, when reading *Capital*, Althusser wanted to posit a relational reading of thinking, as opposed to reading it from disciplines such as economy, history and logic, and their relations to the object of study. All of whom which never questions the object itself. Instead, *Reading Capital* is part of a new

mode of study, implied by Marx himself as the instigator of the discourse now known as Marxism, whose object of study is neither economy, history nor logic, but rather a critique of these disciplines as themselves. A critique of them as ideological constructions, and in their place positing a new object of study: capital itself. Capital is, then, both the producer of discourses and disciplines, as well as the object of study and political struggle, and even revolutionary change: tThe creation of new discipline through a new object and new object relations.

Indeed, the subtitle of Marx's *Capital* is *A Critique of Political Economy*, as Louis Althusser stressed:

I shall take literally the sub-title of *Capital* – ‘A Critique of Political Economy’. If the view I have put forward is correct, ‘to criticize’ Political Economy cannot mean to criticize or correct certain inaccuracies or points of detail in an existing discipline – nor even to fill in its gaps, its blanks, pursuing further an already largely initiated movement of exploration. ‘To criticize Political Economy’ means to *confront* it with a new problematic and a new object: i.e., to question the very *object* of Political Economy. But since Political Economy is defined as Political Economy by its object, the critique directed at it from the new object with which it is confronted could strike Political Economy's vital spot. This is indeed the case: Marx's critique of Political Economy cannot challenge the latter's object without disputing Political Economy itself, in its theoretical pretensions to autonomy and in the ‘divisions’ it creates in social reality in order to make itself the theory of the latter. Marx's critique of Political Economy is therefore a very radical one: it queries not only the object of Political Economy, but also *Political Economy itself as an object*.^{14 13}

So, how can we understand the relation between *knowledge* and *object* in the three forms stated at the outset of this text: research into art forms, research as art, or research done artistically? And how do they imply a relation of *knowledge-as-object* within their discourse? In the first instance, we must talk of the disappearance, or more accurately dematerialization of the object. That there no longer is any given materiality of the art object, nor are there specific materials that are artistic. We cannot separate between the object of knowledge and the ‘real’ object (in the form of raw material). The second notion, research as an artistic practice, involves, as we have seen the introduction of a form that lies outside the limits of the established discourse, and must thus entail a modification of the very discourse of artistic production and reception, which, naturally has huge consequences for the third, more speculative definition; the aesthetics of research. Such a notion would have to include the two first definitions, but by doing so posing a challenge to the very notion of research, that is, scientific discourse, itself: making science and research into an object of study, not only in terms of the aesthetic demand, but also questioning it as a discourse, as a production of knowledge and truth. Artistic research is not only an object, then, but must also, for the time being, remain a subject for further research...

¹ See Jean-François Chevrier's downstroke on the cultural products of one crucial year of the 1960s, *The Year 1967: From Art Objects to Public Things* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1997).

² See Alex Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003).

³ See Félix Guattari, ‘Capital as the Integral of Power Formations’, in *Soft Subversions* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), p. 202.

⁴ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 5.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Virno, p. 59.

⁷ See Luc Boltanski & Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), especially the chapter 'The Test of the Artistic Critique', pp. 419-482.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 182-3.

⁹ Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* p. 183.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, passim.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in *Power* (New York: The New Press, 2000), p. 152.

¹² Michel Foucault, 'The Will to Knowledge', in *Ethics – Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 14.

¹³ Foucault, *Ethics*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, translated by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970), p.158.