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Performing Preformations: Elements for a Historical Formalism

It may seem like the pinnacle of frivolity to discuss formal concerns in the present state of exception, yet I would like to insist that form matters, vitally, more than ever. "Formalism," of course, has long had a bad reputation. The term was weaponized both by Stalinists and by reactionaries in early- and mid-twentieth century debates about modernism, with the frequent implication that modern art was devoid of meaningful content and social use value. The 1960s witnessed the greatest triumph and ultimate downfall of formalism in art criticism – although, in keeping with the term's bad reputation, critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried did not necessarily self-identify as formalists, but rather as modernists. Today, after decades of Greenberg-bashing, a set of contemporary neoformalisms – in theory as in aesthetic practice – often conceives of form in social terms.

One such neoformalist is literary scholar Caroline Levine, who defines form as "*an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping*."[1] This broad definition includes "social arrangements," meaning that forms are "the stuff of politics," and thus formal devices in a novel such as *Jane Eyre* can be read in conjunction with the structures of institutions in the fictional world of the novel; Lowood School, with its disciplinary regime and its "semicircles, timed durations, and ladders of achievement" is a matter of form, too.[2] In contrast to such an articulation of a social structure within the text of a novel, certain contemporary artists work *directly* with social gatherings as their material, such as creating forms for alternative parliaments and various types of assemblies. For instance, Judith Butler's theorization of the *assembly form* has been being taken up by artist Jonas Staal in his proposal for "assemblism" as a morphological practice.[3] Here, social form is self-constitution, self-organization, and ultimately self-institutionalization: the preemption of forms imposed by others.

If form is "the stuff of politics," it would be a fallacy to assume that it is a politics of pure presence and concretion – or that political forms can be equated fully with conventional methods of representation. It is worth recalling Theodor W. Adorno's modernist insistence that in art, formal articulation will always remain partial and fractured: "The articulation, by which the artwork achieves its form, also always coincides in a certain sense with the defeat of form. If a gapless and unforced unity of form and the formed succeeded, as is intended by the idea of form, this would amount to the achievement of the identity of the identical and nonidentical."[4] If today's neoformalisms rightly broaden the
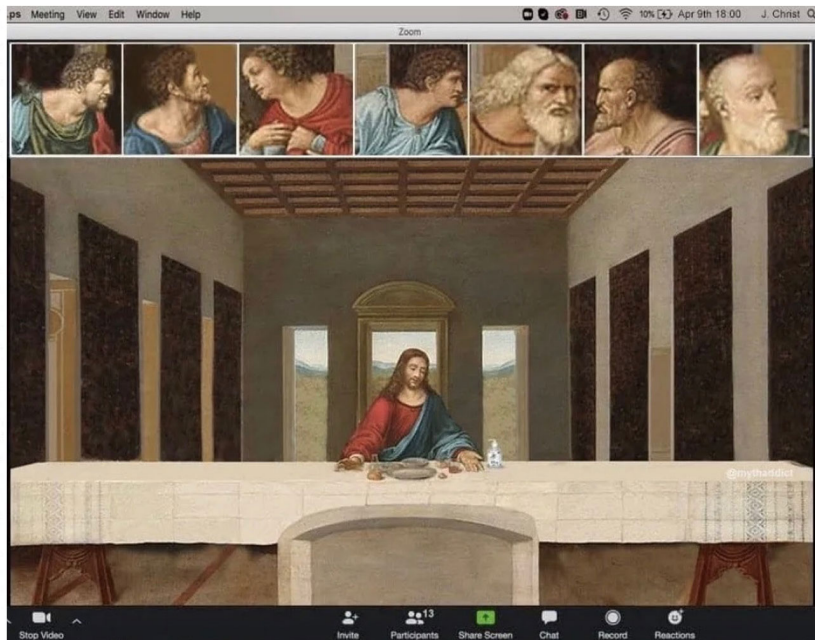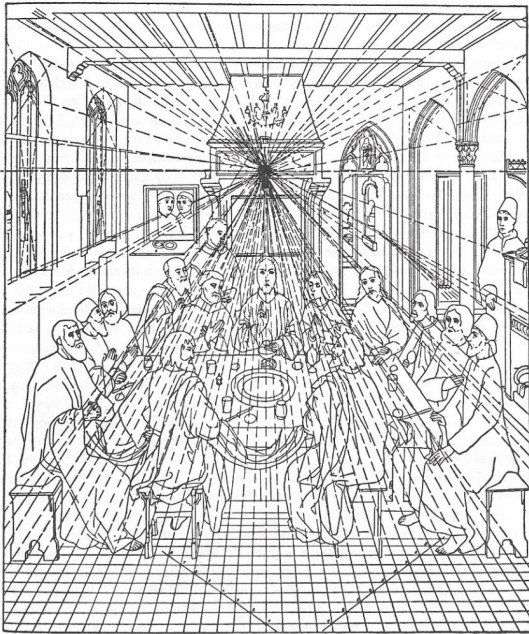
Left: Illustration from Erwin Panofsky's book *Perspective as Symbolic Form;* Right: a COVID-19/Zoom meme by an unknown author.

understanding of form beyond late-modernist reductivisms, Levine's suggestion that the formal turn amounts to a shift from a (Marxist) privileging of "deep structures" to an emphasis on the patterns of lived experience strikes me as problematic in its one-sidedness.[5] Form should instead be thought of as the mediation- – and, at times, the conflict – between deep structure and concrete articulation. Form enacts a dialectic of the concrete and the abstract – an oscillation that makes it central to modern thought.

Today's progressive political formalisms continue to operate under conditions shaped by what Alfred Sohn-Rethel termed "real abstraction," an actual and operational abstraction rather than a mere matter of thought. The capitalist value-form molds the social, and does so in conjunction with the formal schematas of the law and technoscience. The elaboration of (new or renewed) organizational forms needs to instead be complemented by an engagement with the dominant schemata that continue to structure subjects and objects, collaboration and collectivity. Whereas modern aesthetic theory at times posited a quasi-autonomous *life of forms*, the question now needs to be how *forms of life*, with a degree of autonomy, can be created from and against the structural conditions that both necessitate and sabotage them.

The Return of Formalism (But Which One?)

Never a neutral descriptor for a clearly defined phenomenon, the notion of form has always been an unstable signifier that has been paired off with concepts such as *content*, *matter*, or *structure*, creating dichotomies that haunted modernist and anti-modernist criticism and theory alike. As the storm of history erodes cultural conventions, modernism often revolved

around the problematic relation between form and content, exemplified by Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and his insistence that form is a "sedimentation of content" – in a far from effortless and remainder-less dialectical process.[6]

If forms shape experiences and the horizon of expectations, moulding what can be perceived, thought and done, then it obscures just as much as it makes visible. Drawing a line creates a formless outside where monsters live. As Adorno states:

> Form inevitably limits what is formed, for otherwise its concept would lose its specific difference to what is formed. This is confirmed by the artistic labor of forming, which is always a process of selecting, trimming, renouncing. Without rejection there is no form, and this prolongs guilty domination in artworks, of which they would like to be free; form is their amorality. They do injustice to what they form by following it. At least something of this was sensed by vitalism's endlessly rehearsed assurance, ever since Nietzsche, of the antithesis between form and life.[7]

Adorno, offering here yet another "form and..." pairing, thus suggests that a political and social formalism in aesthetic practice – attempting to shape the social and create structures for living and working together – must also remain cognizant of what remains disavowed and formless in the process of formation.

In Greenbergian modernism and its exclusive focus on abstract art, medium-specific "flatness" and forms and colors, the awareness of "sedimented content" was limited to a few vague comments on "feeling" or "mood." By the

Left: People's Tribunal *Dissolve the NSU Complex*, Cologne, 19 May 2017. Photo: Jasper Kettner; Right: Forensic Architecture, *77sqm 9m26sec,* 2017. Installed at BAK, Utrecht, 2018-19.
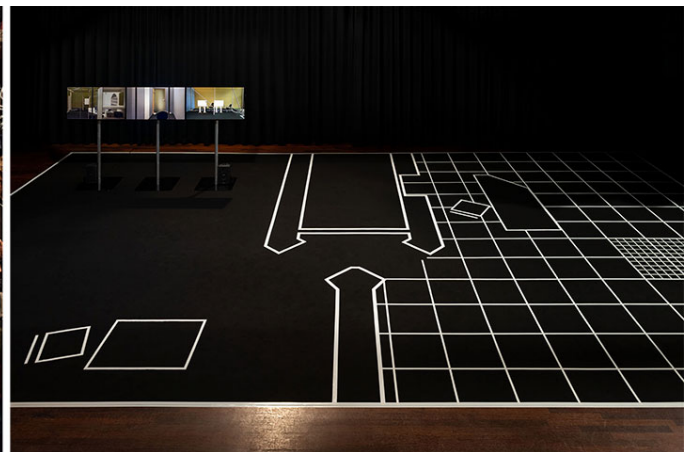
end of the 60s, and into the following decades, art production and theory, marked by a widespread rejection of this entire approach, took on such guises as post-minimalism, conceptual art, institutional critique and appropriation art. But was this really the last word on formalism? In the 1980s and 1990s, Yve-Alain Bois argued that what had (rightly) been rejected was merely a "restricted formalism"; Roger Fry and Clive Bell's concern had been "merely good design." The same might be said of Greenberg, who – with his notes on the "deductive structure" in paintings by Newman and others notwithstanding – ultimately reduced form to "morphology."[8] Seeking forebears who instead conceived of form as "generative structure," Bois looked among the Russian formalists (Jakobson and his contemporaries), Saussure, and Barthes.[9]

Bois charged morphological formalism with an idealist conception of form that is ultimately "an Aristotelian one, where form is an a priori UFO that lands on raw matter."[10] Aristotelian hylomorphism ties together the terms of the second major opposition within which form functions: *morphe* (form) and *hyle* (matter). In the 1930s, Henri Focillon had already protested against such a hylomorphic UFO approach, stating that "form does not behave as some superior principle modeling a passive mass, for it is plainly observable how matter imposes its own form upon form."[11] Bois, however, does not critique the UFO approach in order to claim that matter informs form, but so as to argue in favor of a structuralist emphasis on the conventional and differential value of the sign, which has "slipped away from the fixity of what semiologists would call an iconic condition."[12]

In structuralism, both the form/matter and the form/content pair were replaced by a dialectic of *langue* and *parole* – in other words, of a deep structure and its performative enactment. In analyzing Mondrian's work in terms of the "semantic function played by various combinations of pictorial elements" in order to "understand how a seemingly rigid formal system engendered diverse significations," Bois continued to treat it as an autonomous – albeit surprisingly rich – system.[13] However, the fact that this approach lacks any sense of in-formation as semiotic labor raises questions. How, under what social circumstances, and through which media and materials, does *langue* come to be performed as *parole?* How does the deep structure become enacted and to what effect might the resultant forms be socially transformative?

While Bois discussed the impact of Brecht

The White West, symposium at La Colonie, Paris, May 9, 2018.

on the early Barthes of *Mythologies,* his neoformalism largely negated the avant-garde impetus of artists and theorists such as Brecht, or the communist critic Lu Märten.[14] In her work of the 1910s and 1920s, Märten effectively replaced the *art(s)* with that of *form(s)* to counteract the reductive formal questions of art from the narrow, institutionalized/high art perspective. What mattered to her was "the materials and means that could generate the forms – arts, if you prefer – of the revolutionized life" in a communist society.[15] Märten's forms of a revolutionized life can be seen as a radicalization of early twentieth-century German theories about *Lebensformen*: life-forms, or forms-of-life.[16] Many of the authors who wrote on forms-of-life were conservative; it wasn't only the leftists who were interested in developing a formalism of social life.

Even Focillon, who was intently focused on "the life of forms *in art*" (as per the title of his 1934 book), quoted Balzac to the effect that "[everything] is form, and life itself is form."[17] For Focillon, form does not exist in autonomous isolation but is a way of trans-forming the world – Greece without Greek architecture would merely be a "luminous desert."[18] Focillon thus posits form as the medium through which art takes on life, and life becomes aesthetic. He likely would have found much to agree in Rudolf Arnheim's perception psychology, which considers that "the work of art is a Gestalt of the highest degree," and can be thought to present a kind of morphological clarity that transcends unfocused, everyday perception.[19] At times, Arnheim uses an all-encompassing sense of *Gestalt*; in a 1951 essay, for example he discusses football teams and electrical circuits, as well as paintings, as "wholes, which determine their parts."[20] He argues that organizational and artistic form come together in the string quartet:

> Four musicians who form a string quartet will create a unified style of performance. This style is a delicate crystallization of affinities and conflicts of temper. It is the balance of convergent and divergent social forces and, in turn, modifies the behavior of each player. Change the arm of the left boy in the Laocoon group, and the entire piece of sculpture assumes a different composition. Such internal play of influences obeys rules that are largely independent of the particular medium in which they are observed. In a sense, they refer to "formal" properties.[21]

Here, Arnheim does not refer to the string quartet primarily as a musical form, but instead

as a group of people. However, this social arrangement clearly informs the composition and its performance in ways that belie any claim of aesthetic independence from this particular (human) medium. It is in passages such as these that the seemingly most apolitical or conservative of formalists – such as Arnheim or Focillon – can prove productive, suggesting the need to problematize blanket condemnations of the "wrong" kind of formalism.

The art of recent decades encourages a critical rereading of the formalist corpus. For all its limitations, the relational aesthetics of the 1990s was instrumental in the widespread shift from a modernist-formalist understanding of form as superior Gestalt – created by an artist for individual aesthetic apperception-- – to what Nicolas Bourriaud called a focus on "social forms which are invariably historical (Marx: the human essence is the set of social relations)."[22] For all the strengths of certain works by Pierre Huyghe, Rirkrit Tiravanija, or Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, relational aesthetics helped inaugurate an era of bland biennale art and project-based ubiquity, yet a question posed by Bourriaud continues to be valid: "One day, somebody ought to write the history of art using the peoples who pass through it, and the symbolic/practical structures which make it possible to accommodate them. What human *flow*, governed by what forms, thus passes into art forms?"[23]

While the use of "symbolic/practical" is intriguing, it is unclear what kind of relationship is signified by the slash between the two terms. Structuralism had frequently accorded a questionable autonomy to sign systems. By contrast, in the 1990s Judith Butler began using and developing J. L. Austin's notion of speech acts (as well as its critique by Derrida and others) to focus on the enactment of langue in the subject's interpellation as a gendered being.[24] Here, the performance of the linguistic deep structure, its social conditions, effects and affects, become the center of attention. Even back then, Butler insisted that "bodies matter," but her recent (post-Occupy, post-Arab Spring) work places greater emphasis on the physical enactment, in addition to the linguistic performance; the intersubjective speech act becomes a collective assembly. In contemporary artistic practice, when Staal organizes a parliament in Rojava whose formal arrangement and mode of operating differs from a standard representative democracy, this is a practico-symbolic structure where speech acts have agency within the precarious and embattled enclave of the Kurdish autonomous cantons.[25]

Projects such as Staal's entail a critique of 1990s relational aesthetics' bubble-bound staging of conviviality and easy sociability, and

its refusal to acknowledge contradictions and antagonism. These works amount to a form of *organizational aesthetics*.[26] Examples of such practices could be multiplied. They range from branded "artist organizations" à la Staal's own New World Summit or Tania Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International to cooperatives such as Inland (founded by Fernando García-Dory, among others) or the decolonial space *La Colonie* in Paris (initiated by Kader Attia, and run by a dedicated team); one can also think of artistic-curatorial practices such as Don't Follow the Wind or *Ruangrupa*, and of a networked antiracist alliance such as Dissolve the NSU Complex and its artistic offshoot: the artistic alliance The Society of Friends of Halit, in which Natascha Sadr Haghighian was a key participant. Many such forms crucially revolve around physical assemblies – which recently became painfully obvious when such gatherings were no longer possible in the COVID-19 state of exception, and the dependence of critical practices on the platforms of surveillance capitalism was exacerbated.

Paul Chan has analyzed these platforms in hylomorphistic terms. Illustrating the templates of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, Chan notes that "a form is something we fill out with what matters in our lives. And the principal substance that motivates and underwrites this operation is every bit as valuable, vital, and immaterial as what was once called the soul. Today, we call this substance data."[27] For Aristotle, the real form of a human person is the soul that animates the body; hence the *morphe* is not always the visible form. A sculpture modeled after a human being, or a dead body, lacks the living person's soul, and hence their form.[28] Does then the *morphe* of an entity posting propaganda on Facebook matter? In the logic of the network, does it matter terribly if there is a human mind behind an avatar, or if it is a bot? What kind of relations and assemblages between human and technical entities are possible, and indeed desirable? How are subjectivities and collectivities being *pre*formed, and how can such preformations be *per*formed otherwise?

Perspectives
When Paul Chan illustrates the aforementioned article with screenshots of social media "boxes" and profile windows with the deadpan caption "This is a form," such structures – with their objectification of precarious and nervous
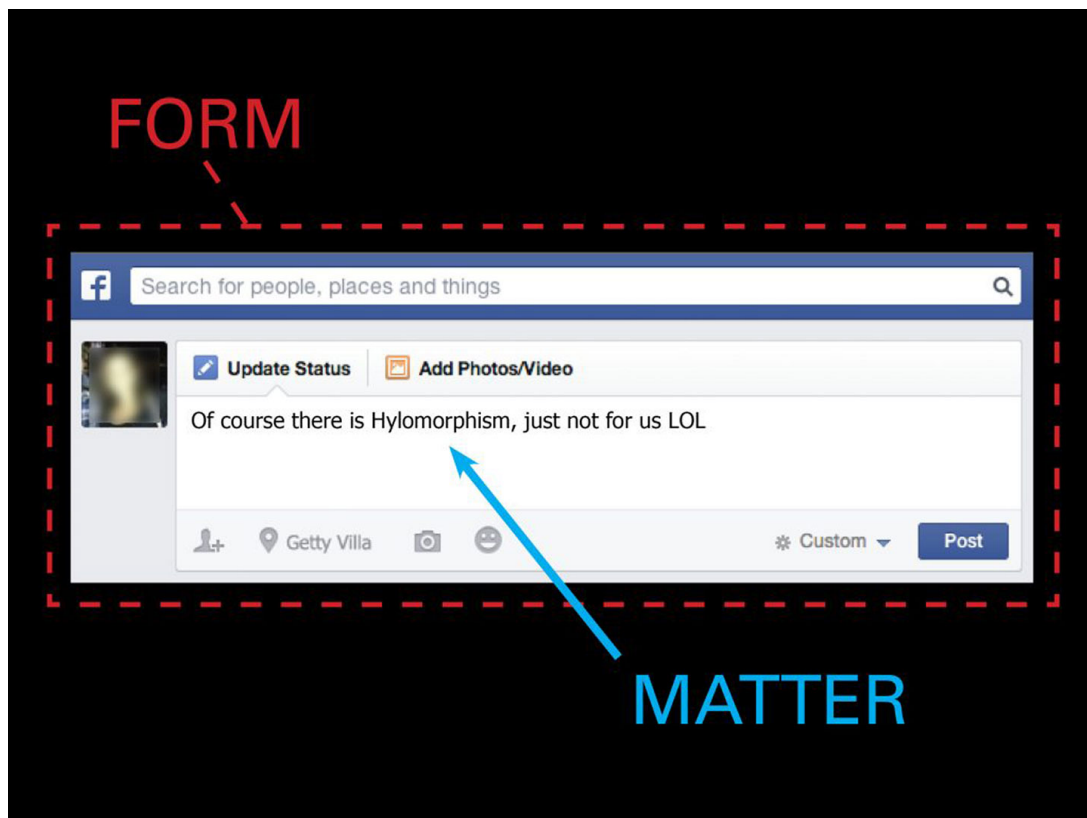
Paul Chan, *This is a Form,* image from the essay "Our Data, Our Selves" (2019). See https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/our-data-our-selves/.
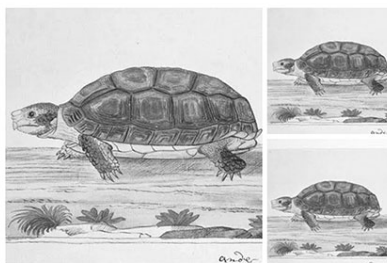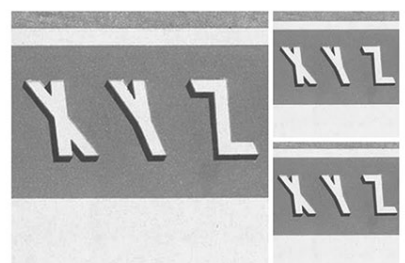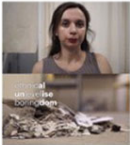
Sean Snyder, homepage of the *Rembrandt and Ravachol Appreciation Society* (desaturated).

Nicoline van Harskamp, *Englishes MOOC,* ongoing project. Screenshot.

subjects – become the contemporary equivalent of Renaissance perspective and its latticework. In his famous 1924-25 essay "Perspective as Symbolic Form," Erwin Panofsky interpreted Renaissance perspective as a symbolic form that functioned as an "objectification of the subjective."[29] He extended this analysis by suggesting that it also does the reverse: linear perspective first creates a distance between people and things, but then "abolishes this distance by [...] drawing this world of things, an autonomous world con-fronting the individual, into the eye."[30] The *objectum* is appropriated by the subject. Illustrating the text with diagrams that abstract perspective grids from the physical paintings, the iconologist sought to reveal the deep structure that both separates and connects the viewing subject and the depicted world.

In analyzing the geometric latticework as a *symbolic form* that places the depicted objects in a definite relation to the viewer, Panofsky used a key notion from Ernst Cassirer's neo-Kantian philosophy. Cassirer *pluralized* and *culturalized* Kant's epistemological framework. Kant's mental categories and transcendental schematism constituted an apparatus that structures our reality (and relegates the *Ding an sich* to an epistemological netherworld). In this manner, Kant had given an idealist turn to old Aristotelian debates about substance and attributes. Cassirer noted that Kant's thinking "keeps circling around the dualism of matter and form set forth in its beginnings, and [...] gradually changes and deepens the meaning of this opposition.[31] Following cues put forth by Yuk Hui, one could indeed discern a displacement of hylomorphism in Kant's categories of understanding and transcendental schemata, through which the subject imprints the sense data with form: the mind in-forms perception.[32] Cassirer, however, posited not a single schematic apparatus but rather a plurality of symbolic forms that each have their own innate logic that structures the world in different ways: myth, for instance, or language, or science, or art. Late in his life, in a 1942 lecture at Yale, he acknowledged Saussure's semiology as a kindred and compatible project, even if Saussure's privileged sign system – language – was, for Cassirer, only one particular symbolic form among others.[33]

If art *as such* is a symbolic form, it seems rather curious that Panofsky would choose to specifically interpret Renaissance linear perspective – a device from a particular type of art – as a symbolic form. This could be seen as a symptomatic lack of rigor, or also a further purposeful specificity: as a step in the labor of concretization. In fact, Cassirer's own listing of "myth and art, language and science" as the four

fundamental symbolic forms is curiously like a Borgesian encyclopedia, since the terms clearly overlap and are not comparable in every respect. The interrelations between the "linguistic sign" and the "mythical or artistic 'image,'" which can be articulated in linguistic signs, remain undialectical and approximate.[34]

Kant's ethics and aesthetics are frequently characterized as formalist. The same can be said of his epistemology in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Kant's categories of understanding constitute a quintessential "thought-abstraction" (*Denkabstraktion*) or "thought-form" (*Denkform*). Having studied with Cassirer in the 1920s, Sohn-Rethel became close to the Institut für Sozialforschung and developed a Marxian reading of Kant – culminating in his 1970 opus *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, in which he desublimates the thought abstractions by generically linking them to the "real abstractions" of money.[35] Marx, of course, had himself analyzed value in formal terms, with the commodity having a natural form (*Naturalform*) and value-form. The latter takes on a false autonomy, a reified appearance that occludes the basis of any commodity's value in labor-power.[36] For Sohn-Rethel, money functions as the ultimate medium for the "pure formal abstractions" of the value-form, of "formal properties abstracted from all use value."[37] As the deep structure that supposedly preforms our perception and cognition, the Kantian mental apparatus works along similar lines.

Sohn-Rethel notes that this preforming Kantian mind appears to arrive on the scene fully formed; it is *itself* preformed. Kant interpreted this preformation in purely mental terms without any temporal or spatial specificity. However, this preformation of the Kantian thought-form should in fact be regarded as being *social* in nature, and as the outcome of a long historical process.[38] While tracing this process back to Antiquity and considering the emergence of a money-based economy in the Mediterranean, Sohn-Rethel acknowledges that whereas ancient economies were largely based on *appropriation*, modern capitalism revolves around the *production* of surplus value.[39] Nonetheless, his account of real abstraction remains exchange-centric: production is hardly featured.[40] In this respect, it constitutes a step back in relation to Marx's analysis of the historical emergence of capitalism's systemic features. Surprisingly, Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of technical objects – elaborated during the 1950s and 1960s – is much closer to Marx in this respect.

In a critical reconsideration of Aristotelian hylomorphism, Simondon argues against the "UFO conception" of form. Rather than somehow

magically manifesting itself in matter, form is the result of complex operations and modulations. Even in the case of something as seemingly simple as molding clay into bricks, we are always dealing with *prepared matter* and with already *materialized forms* (such as a mold). In addition to *matter* and *form*, an important third term, which classic Aristotelian hylomorphism leaves out, is social human labor. Simondon suggests that this blind spot reveals that the *hyle/morphe* distinction reflects the divide between the craftsman/slave and free man/designer.[41] This recalls Marx's observation in *Capital* that Aristotle made some headway with the analysis of value, but that Greek society's foundation on slavery had prevented him from unveiling its innermost workings: "The secret of the expression of value, namely, that all kinds of labor are equal and equivalent, because, and so far as they are human labor in general, cannot be deciphered, until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice."[42]

The constellation of authors brought together here offers pointers for the elaboration of a historical formalism – as a component or complement of historical materialism. Their very limitations can be generative. For instance, Sohn-Rethel, who is perhaps more indebted to classical bourgeois philosophy than he would care to admit, has a tendency to characterize sensory experience as irredeemably private and solipsistic. This leads him to speculate – in a negative mode – that "although the perception [of a commodity] is as multiple as the people perceiving it, its existence is singular. If the existence of one object were divisible, the object could indeed be owned simultaneously by separate owners. Each owner could then not only experience the world as his 'private datum' but own it as his exclusive property."[43] In the age of digital commodities and social media this needs to be rethought; what happens when we produce value for Facebook by sharing what was once private data, ultimately becoming trapped in a tableau watched over by machines of loving grace?

Or, more specifically: What happens when the Rijksmuseum asks people to create their own albums with items from its collection on the Rijksstudio online platform, and to submit product designs based on downloaded images from this same platform for a "Rijksstudio Award"? The Rembrandt and Ravachol Appreciation Society, initiated by artist Sean Snyder, filled out the online submission form with a self-destructive meta-proposal about a photograph of a Shell gas station that cannot be downloaded from the site due to copyright restrictions, claiming to regard "the slippery

image of a Shell gas station as the very embodiment of the immutable visual vocabulary deeply imprinted in the fossilized mental landscape of capitalist exhaust."[44] In its quixotic manner, such a performance by the mysterious "Society" highlights the ways in which the real abstractions of exchange *preform* the experience of the perceptions and actions of our social life.

Creative Deformations
Sohn-Rethel's key criterion for exchange being a "real abstraction" is that "in the exchange process, doing and thinking diverge on the part of the participants."[45] While he obviously needs to maintain that this abstraction is not *just* conceptual but takes on an actual social form, it is odd to suggest that it is a *lack of awareness* that makes abstraction real rather than conceptual or intellectual. Real abstraction is certainly an operational force, preforming and remaking the world. But does an awareness of the inner workings of capitalism – for instance one fostered by reading Marx, or Sohn-Rethel – make capitalist market relations any less "real"? Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano have argued that "greater attention to the *legal* forms of property" problematizes "the unconscious character ascribed to commodity-exchange as a form of practical abstraction," since legal forms are, of course, consciously elaborated as real abstractions that are operative in the social world.[46] The value-form under capitalism is deeply dependent on the supposedly universal rights accorded to the abstract person – particularly the right to hold property.[47]

If economic real abstraction is identified with the *value-form*, juridical real abstraction can be designed with the *rights-form*. The value-form and the rights-form both abstract from the material and sensory world; Sohn-Rethel quotes Marx to the effect that "not an atom of matter [*Naturstoff*]" enters into the composition of value, and the legal person, in theory, is also abstracted from all particulars.[48] In practice, of course, a variety of sciences have been at the ready to determine which persons were more equal than others, from nineteenth-century racist phrenology, psychology and criminology, to today's digital profiling. In Sohn-Rethel's opposition between real abstraction and thought abstraction, the latter covers not only idealist philosophy but also science – or at least the ruling epistemology of modern science.[49] But have the "thought abstractions" of technoscience not also demonstrated their operational potential? Sohn-Rethel acknowledges this in remarks on science and technology in the service of capitalist enterprise; while he interprets this as the first step towards a socialist reappropriation of the production
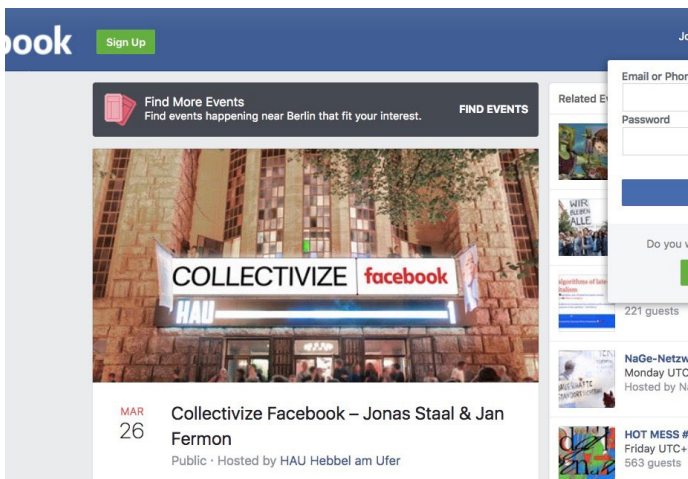
Jonas Staal and Jan Fermon, *Collectivize Facebook,* announcement for pre-trial announcement planned for March 26, 2020; Transformella Malor at *Deserting from the Culture Wars*, BAK, November 15, 2019.

process, the accelerating operationalization of (techno)science has in fact boosted capitalism.[50]

As a third form of real abstraction, technoscience can be identified with the *information-form* – to coin a pleonasm. Taking cues from Vilém Flusser, Alexander Galloway has stressed that *data* are "things given," while *information* means giving form or being out into form.[51] Technoscience parses and processes data to turn them into actionable information. Protocols and metadata schemata function as quasi-Kantian schemata that are used to arrange, navigate and mine data, creating value in the process.[52] In-formed data can be rematerialized in any number of production processes. 3D printing is today's phantasmagorico-real hylomorphism. In genetic engineering, life itself having been reconfigured in informatic terms of coded DNA sequences and cellular protocols that regulate the replication. However, it is not only cellular depths that are mined for information; the same goes on the surface. Facial and voice recognition software, for instance, can be used for racial profiling or to reject asylum claims, while fitness trackers influence health insurance rates. Technoscience has culminated in an informatic and networked paradigm in which life itself and its contingency are subject to constant (re)design and management.[53] Algorithms trawl vast quantities of data to predict potential movements or occurrences that break the known patterns – whether they are fatal or profitable deviations from the norm.[54]

The economic, juridical, and technoscientific vectors of real abstraction are key preformations of capitalist modernity. The value-form, rights-form, and information-form are together an operational structure that creates *inequality through equivalence.* Monetary, informational and juridical equivalence create new hierarchies by destroying old ones; this is the core business of real abstraction. The juridical fiction of all persons being equal before the law, for instance, produces safeguards for some, but it also produces a system of violent exclusions. Some have always been more equal than others – artificial juridical persons increasingly outstrip and outperform natural persons, who sign away rights by agreeing with any and all "Terms and Conditions." Modern reason is productivist, and its real abstractions become all the more operative as various vectors of real abstraction enter into a productive exchange.

Nicoline van Harskamp's digital art project/online school, *Englishes MOOC*, concretizes and politicizes Cassirer's symbolic form of language by examining English as a global lingua franca and the proliferation of

creolized or specialized "Englishes."[55] The project engages with the transmutation of linguistic form into value-form (English as currency and capital, for instance, in the art world), even while critiquing imperial standards and valorizing difference. As a MOOC (massive open online course), the project is also dependent on programming languages that use instructions in English to mediate between natural language and machinic code. From a Cassirerean symbolic form, English has become information-form. While *Englishes-mooc.org* uses open-source software and has free registration, the MOOC format that is pushed by American juggernauts such as Harvard and MIT further strengthen strong global edu-brands based in the Anglosphere, allowing users from all over the world to sign up for an online course even if they can't have access to the full experience. Even if you are unable to legally enter the United States, you could still pay for a MOOC. As the project fosters reflection on such entanglements, it hardly dispels the reality of real abstraction; if anything, that reality becomes all the more concrete.

The ever-tighter integration of the vectors of real abstraction has resulted in the *regime of concrete abstraction* of global hypercapitalism. Its fundamental principle is a networked enmeshing of platforms, products, and lifestyles that is as dependent on neoliberal "deregulation" as it is on high-frequency trading algorithms. Under the onslaught of "creative disruptions" that might as well be called *creative deformations* of the old order, everything that is solid melts into Airbnb. The likes of Airbnb and Uber synthesize the technological, legal, and financial dimensions of the network form into disruptive innovations. The proliferation of designed solutions based on relentless extraction and on the dissolution of old juridical obstacles – or, in short, the total mobilization of equivalence – generates forms of entropy that are opportunities for disaster-capitalist accumulations. Crises give rise to tailor-made solutions waiting to be marketed. During the COVID-19 outbreak, information-forms proper to Big Pharma and Big Tech merge in virus tracking apps. The operational hylomorphism of networked design solutions – which had long promised (some of) us an ever-smoother life – turned out to be perfectly compatible with a state of emergency. Being stuck in an Airbnb at the other end of the world as one's cheap airline tickets have been canceled and everything goes into lockdown – this situation, too, is a product of operational abstraction, and a boon for social media giants. The state of exception is a state of product development.

The rise of the network economy in the

1990s spawned debates about the nature of sovereignty under neoliberal globalization. In a post-9/11 dialogue with Geert Lovink, Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker insisted that "*in recent decades the processes of globalization have mutated from a system of control houses in a relatively small number of power hubs to a system of control infused into the material fabric of distributed networks).*"[56] Breaking with 1990s net utopianism and its "tired of trees" rhetoric, Galloway and Thacker maintain that networks, even distributed networks, are not intrinsically liberating, but impose new forms of control.[57] Seeking to problematize the entrenched opposition between centralized state hierarchies and liberating distributed networking, they point out ways in which multiple topologies can coexist within a network, with examples that include the state-based and centralized Domain Name System and the distributed Internet Protocol.[58]

Galloway and Thacker ultimately analyze this aggregate in Foucauldian/Deleuzian terms of a society of control in which the old "sovereign power" over life and death gives way to a new "regulative power" based on constant biopolitical monitoring and data-gathering: "Express yourself! Output some data! It is how distributed control functions best."[59] In the *"Society Must Be Defended"* lectures, Foucault effectively relegated sovereignty to the past; the sovereign power to take life and let live had been replaced by modern biopower to instead become the power to make live and let die. In contrast to Foucault, Giorgio Agamben tends to do for power what Sohn-Rethel does for value: in an *argumentum ad antiquitatem,* he privileges Ancient Rome and its institution of the homo sacer to explain (and at times "explain away") the recent distinctly capitalist and neoliberal forms sovereignty.[60] Here one should heed Joshua Clover's insistence "that capitalism, with its industrial body and crown of finance, is sovereign; that carbon emissions are the sovereign breathing; that *make work and let buy* must be annihilated; that there is no survival while the sovereign lives."[61]

All this notwithstanding, and in spite of the fact that his public interventions in the COVID-19 crisis might as well have been tweeted from the bathroom at 6 AM, Agamben's serious work remains a crucial theoretical account of sovereignty, the state of exception, and the forms-of-life that this state makes (im)possible.[62] A key passage from *Homo Sacer* comments on the formalism of Kant's ethics and its focus on "the simple form of law."[63] As one of the Italian authors (along with Paolo Virno) to have brought back the *Lebensform* concept from its post-war eclipse, Agamben argues that if

Kant "left the form of law in place as an empty principle," then it raises the question of which "*form of life*" corresponds to the "*form of law.*"[64] Glossing Kafka's parable of the law, Agamben notes that "the empty potentiality of the law is so much in force that it becomes indistinguishable from life." Given such indistinguishability of the law and life, "life under a law that is in force without signifying resembles life in the state of exception."[65] Such is the a-signifying semiotics of the rights-form. Operational abstraction remakes relations by producing forms of life that offer no other alternatives and impose themselves, insofar as being, for some, unlivable.

Some lives are more literally unlivable than others, of course. As dehumanized Black subjects continue to be robbed of even the right to *breathe,* the unidentified and unaccountable violence targeting recent protests against police killings demonstrate that the sovereign revocability of "universal" rights, long experienced viscerally by people of color and migrants, is increasingly experienced more widely. Neofascist politics today (let us dispense with euphemisms) makes sovereign exceptions in the name of a capitalist elite that weaponizes the white working and middle-class fear of ending up among the (post-)human surplus.

Surviving Forms of Unlivable Life
In his 1930s manuscript *Fabrikation der Fiktionen,* Carl Einstein compared the "archaic" use of metaphors in modern poetry and philosophy to the liquefaction of the material world by capitalist exchange:

> The metaphorical strings contain another archaism. The different conditions and things slip into one another and are evaluated evenly. One sign can replace the other randomly. And so the mana wanders serenely from humans into things, from animals into stones. A similar neutralization of concrete things or persona is administered by the capitalist. He defigures humans and objects by the means of abstract money, which is his mana. Poets and capitalists are dynamists and are seeking out a maximum of mobility."[66]

Quoting this passage, Kerstin Stakemeier notes that the metaphor-laden aesthetic mode comes to function as a "figure of capital" and "its boundless ability to homologize all things living and dead under the value form."[67] Art's sensate forms can deny and occlude – and perhaps, at times, negate – their preformation by real abstraction, yet art can also foreground those

very preformations and use them as aesthetic material. Stakemeier focuses on avant-garde and queer "debordered formalisms" that attempt to get rid of the self and entrenched modes of subjectivity and identity. Since the "subject of capitalism inhabits an unliveable form," an "impossible form," Stakemeier pursues an investigation of modern and contemporary aesthetic "[destabilizations] of the boundaries safeguarding the continuation of our (aesthetic) subjectivities," which she regards as "enabling self-inflictions."[68] To be sure, avant-garde attempts to break or transmutate dominant forms of subjectivity (or personhood) and objecthood (or property) have long been complicit with the capitalist *Umwertung aller Werte* (transvaluation of values) through equivalence. Such complicitness is not so much their dismal outcome as their starting point, their *conditio sine qua non.*

In recent times, any number of art-based anticapitalist, antiracist, feminist, or queer practices have privileged physical assemblies- – workshops, reading groups, training sessions, cookouts, and so on – in conjunction with social media platforms. From the great assemblies of organizational aesthetics to the queering of such aesthetics in informal and half-underground spaces such as Bei Cosy, Philipp Gufler's re-imagining of a legendary 1960s gay bar in the basement of Rongwrong in Amsterdam for one example: these meetings are networks physically manifested, and transformed in the process. As Werker Collective has put it, social media has a great potential to "mobilize the collective body [...] especially when online and offline collectivities invigorate each other to demand equal rights, equal pay, and respect."[69] But what if the dialectic between online and offline is brutally interrupted? In the early days of the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown, Kader Attia wrote a great rant (on Facebook) about the dire consequences of events being cancelled, not just at La Colonie, but across the board of emancipatory practice; as much as the cancellation of gatherings was necessary, it was hard not to sympathize with Attia's outcry. Recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations underline the necessity – with precautions being taken and a degree of risk being accepted – of physical protests that take the outrage found on Twitter to the streets, channeling it into transformative social form.

Both online networks and physical gatherings are "natural forms" taken by the networked value-, rights-, and information-forms. Or rather: they will be natural(ized) forms as long as we resist engaging with the sometimes conflicting and contradictory ways in which they have been preformed, and the ways in

which these preformations are performed. For March 26 of this year, Jonas Staal and lawyer Jan Fermon had planned the "pre-trial" launch event for their *Collectivize Facebook* lawsuit – also announced on Facebook, of course – at HAU in Berlin. In the end, under the state of exception, this had to take the form of a website launch and an online video, in which Staal and Fermon explain the key points of the indictment (available on the site), which takes aim at Facebook (and Google, and the other tech giants) as "new feudal overlords" appropriating people's (informational) labor.[70] If capitalist technoscience is an operational hylomorphism that remakes matter and humans and social relations, then to work against such preformations and toward different technosocial formalizations may involve the seemingly impossible dream of a collectivization of Facebook, as well as the development and use of open-source alternatives to the dominant platforms.[71]

More often than not, productive reason does indeed produce impossible forms. How to live and act repeatedly within those formal constraints? In the 1960s, the German post-Situationist group Subversive Aktion strove to realize "the ambivalence of constructed (and not practically necessary) situations, in which social conflicts can be concentrated and carried out in an exemplary manner."[72] In current aesthetic practice, artists and others aspire to create more livable and workable forms on the basis of the materials at hand. They themselves, and the constraints they are operating under, *are* those materials. Johannes Paul Raether's avatars, including the various Protektoramae and Transformellae, engage with "smartphone fetishes," while demonstrating alternative recording devices such as the Transformellae's "data body," a dynamic record of the various personas, activities, mutations and "forkings" in the artist's overall "identitecture."

Falling short of transforming ourselves (our selves) into potential forms of life with such aesthetic deliberation, most of us struggle with the productive constraints of operational abstraction in more haphazard ways. As deformed subjects attempting to attain a degree of self-organization by intensifying self-exploitation, we cultivate an art of breakdown in precarious affinity groups, coalitions, and alliances. As always, some are more exposed and vulnerable than others; this is precisely what makes such organizational labor imperative, as well as fiendishly difficult. In the accelerating storm of history, today's historical formalists try to construct the necessary out of the impossible.[73]

✕

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1

Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 3. Emphasis in the original. Levine's work is also discussed by Tom Holert in a book chapter hat has a number of (very welcome) resonances with my own work, though I've come across it too late to discuss it here: Tom Holert, "Matters of Form," in *Knowledge Beside Itself* (Berlin: Sternber Press, 2020), 86-119.

2

Levine, *Forms*, 2.

3

Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015); Jonas Staal, "Assemblism," *e-flux journal*, no. 80 (March 2017) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100465/assemblism/.

4

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (1970; Bloomsbury, 2013), 200.

5

Levine, *Forms,* 14, 17.

6

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* 192. Foucault traced the rise of the form/content dichotomy back to his "classical episteme" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while acknowledging that it only became consolidated in the nineteenth century. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; Routledge, 2002), 88.

7

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 198.

8

Yve-Alain Bois (unsigned), "Formalism and Structuralism," in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (Thames and Hudson, 2004), 33.

9

Yve-Alain Bois, "Whose Formalism?," in *The Art Bulletin* LXXVIII (March, 1996), 11.

10

Bois, "Whose Formalism?," 11.

11

Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler (1934; Zone Books, 1989), 96.

12

This exact phrasing is from Bois' close colleague Rosalind Krauss, *The Picasso Papers* (Thames and Hudson, 1998), 28.

13

Bois, "Formalism and Structuralism," 38.

14

Bois, "Formalism and Structuralism," 32.

15

Lu Märten, "Wesen und Veränderung der Formen und Künste," (1924), in *Formen für den Alltag. Schriften. Aufsätze, Vorträge* (VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1982), 107.

16

As Stefan Helmreich and Sofia Roosth have argued, the biological discourse on *Lebensform* in the early nineteenth century was indebted to a Kantian and Goethean understanding of form as "aesthetic, self-determining, and teleological, as well as (generously assuming sufficient knowledge of the mechanism of its formation) deductively predictable." *Lebensform* was thus used in a "broad biological sense," even while there was increasing emphasis (following Alexander von Humboldt) on *Lebensform* as custom or habit, as adaptation by organisms to their environment. *Lebensformen* can thus only ever be deviations from Goethe's *Urform*, from an ideal prototype. By the early twentieth century, this "social turn" of the concept led to a veritable glut of books about *Lebensformen* in the German-speaking world. See Stefan Helmreich and Sofia Roosth, "Life Forms: A Keyword Entry," in Stefan Helmreich, *Sounding the Limits of Life: Essays in the Anthropology of Biology and Beyond* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 19–34.

17

Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 33.

18

Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 61.

19

Rudolf Arnheim, "Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form," in Lancelot Law Whyte, *Aspects of Form* (Lund Humphries, 1951), 197. However, whereas Focillon insisted that form is never a modelling of a passive mass, in a 1951 essay, Arnheim indulged in a masculinist fantasy of submission: "Dancers and actors, who use their own bodies, and to some extent photography, which uses the direct registration of physical objects," are "suspected of being hybrids of art and nature. The artists prefer the submissiveness of amorphous matter." Arnheim, "Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form," 197.

20

Arnheim, "Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form," 196.

21

Arnheim, "Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form," 196.

22

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Les Presses du réel, 1998), 18.

23

Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* 74.

24

Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 1997).

25

See Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* and Staal, "Assemblism."

26

Staal refers to his own and related practices as organizational art. I use the broader term to indicate a potential opening toward practices that are not primarily based in the art world – and in an ironic nod both to relational aesthetics and to a network and a journal that define organizational aesthetics in terms of consultancy aiming to improved organizations through "arts-based methods."

27

Paul Chan, "Our Data, Our Selves," *Los Angeles Review of Books,* September 19, 2019 https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/our-data-our-selves/ .

28

Christopher Shields, "A Fundamental Problem about Hylomorphism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-psychology/suppl1.html.

29

Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (1924-25/27; Zone Books, 1991), 66.

30

Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 67.

31

Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 3: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Yale University Press, 1957), 7.

32

Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 6–8.

33

S.G. Lofts, *Ernst Cassirer: A "Repetition" of Modernity* (State University of New York press, 2000), 227 (note 5).

34

Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 1: Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Yale University Press, 1955), 106.

35

Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und Körperliche Arbeit. Zur Theorie der gesellschaftlichen Synthesis* (Suhrkamp, revised second edition, 1972). The English version of Sohn-Rethel's book is an anglicizing reworking rather than a pure translation; it sometimes adds clarifications, but is in many ways an inferior digest of the original. I refer to the English version only when it contains a particularly apt expression of one of Sohn-Rethel's crucial points. I use the second (1972) German edition, which was revised and expanded in response to the book's critical reception. The "versioning" of *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit* doesn't stop there: Sohn-Rethel published a revised German edition in 1989, which is remarkable for its acknowledgment that his "thought-forms" are closer to those of mechanistic natural science than Kant's categories, and for his dialogue with Cassirer, which is missing from previous editions.

36

"The value-form denies and veils the quantitative relation of value to labor through the 'reified appearance' (*gegenständlichen Schein*) of commodity value." Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (1867), chapter 1.3 https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S3. Referenced in Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 77.

37

Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 20–21.

38

Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 22.

39

Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 139, and more generally, 123–146.

40

Anselm Jappe, "Sohn-Rethel and the Origin of 'Real Abstraction': A Critique of Production or a Critique of Circulation?," in *Historical Materialism* 21, no. 1 (2013), 3–14.

41

Gilbert Simondon, *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* (1958; Millon, 2013), 40–51.

42

Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One* (1867), Chapter 1.1.4 https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm.

43

Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (MacMillan, 1978), 43; for the (more or less) equivalent passage in the German edition, see page 70.

44

From the Rembrandt and Ravachol Appreciation Society's submission for the Rijksstudio Award, February 27, 2020. The submission was rejected https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudioaward.

45

Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und*

körperliche Arbeit, 57. My translation.

46
Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, "Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction," in *Radical Philosophy*, no. 174 (November/December, 2015), 9. Meanwhile, Christoph Menke has proposed an ambitious critique of the modern conception of rights as a *form* that needs to be understood historically. See Christoph Menke, *Kritik der Rechte* (Suhrkamp, 2015), especially part II.

47
See my "The Juridical Economy: Notes on Legal Form and Aesthetic Form," *New Left Review*, no. 106 (July–August 2017), 105–123.

48
Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 48. English translation in *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 27.

49
The more general German "*Begriffe der Naturerkenntnis*" becomes "the concepts of natural science" in the English edition; see *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 42; *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 20.

50
Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, 167–172, 179–182.

51
Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Polity, 2012), 81–83.

52
Hui, *Existence of Digital Objects,* 52.

53
Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 47–57.

54
Krystian Woznicki, *Undeclared Movements* (b_books, 2020), 25–37.

55
Week 5, on "Professional Englishes" includes a discussion of International Art English https://www.englishes-mooc.org/.

56
Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*, 3. Emphasis in the original.

57
Lovink, for his part, has long been skeptical of Silicon Valley-style technolibertarian net utopianism, insisting on the importance of building "organized networks" with strong links, à la the Jesuits, against a situation of platforms on which we are connected through weak ties, and "we pass around status updates." See

Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, *Organization after Social Media* (Minor Compositions, 2018), 34, 130.

58
Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*, 44–45.

59
Galloway and Thacker, *The Exploit*, 41.

60
For Foucault's historicization of sovereignty, see lectures 1–5 and 11 of *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76,* trans. David Macey (Picador, 2003). In contrast to what Joshua Clover suggests, Foucault here tends to oppose sovereignty to biopolitics, rather than defining biopolitics as a new form of sovereignty. What Clover calls "the famous formula of biopolitics: *the sovereign power to make live and let die*" is Clover's own rewrite of a passage on page 241 in which Foucault pointedly refrains from calling this biopolitical power *sovereign*. Joshua Clover, "The Rise and Fall of Biopolitics: A Response to Bruno Latour," *Critical inquiry* blog, March 29, 2020 https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/29/the-rise-and-fall-of-biopolitics-a-response -to-bruno-latour/.

61
Clover, "The Rise and Fall of Biopolitics."

62
Agamben drew simplistic conclusions from his own work on the basis of a "COVID-19 is not much worse than the flu" assessment – but he is hardly the only philosophical Methuselah to have made a fool of himself in these days. For a good analysis, see Tim Christaens, "Must Society Be Protected from Agamben?," *Critical Legal Thinking* blog, March 26, 2020 https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/26/must-society-be-defended-from-agamben/. For Agamben's latest missive, "Requiem for the Students" https://medium.com/@ddean3000/requiem-for-the-students-giorgio-agamben-866670c11642.

63
Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998), 51.

64
Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 52. Both Virno and Agamben will have encountered the term in Wittgenstein, who in turn was likely informed by W. Fred's *Lebensformen* (1911). In addition, the concept was used by Weimar-era reactionary thinkers with whom Agamben must have at least a passing familiarity. Carl Schmitt, a crucial reference for Agamben, quoted or discussed Eduard

Spranger's *Lebensformen* (1921) as well as the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén's *Der Staat als Lebensform* (1917).

65
Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 52.

66
Carl Einstein, *Die Fabrikation der Fiktionen* (late 1930s), ed. Sibylle Penkert (Rowohlt, 1973), 311. English translation from Kerstin Stakemeier, "Breaks with the Future: A Halt? Confessions, Some Notes," in Eric de Bruyn and Sven Lütticken (eds.), *Futurity Report* (Sternberg Press, 2020), 54–55.

67
Stakemeier, "Breaks with the Future: A Halt? Confessions, Some Notes," 55.

68
Stakemeier, "Breaks with the Future: A Halt? Confessions, Some Notes," 50–51, 53. See also Stakemeier, *Entgrenzter Formalismus. Verfahren einer antimodernen Ästhetik* (b_books, 2017).

69
Werker Collective, "Imaging Dissent: Towards Becoming a Collective Subject," Art & Education, January 15, 2020 https://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/310806/imaging -dissent-towards-becoming-a-common-subject.

70
The indictment can be downloaded from https://collectivize.org/.

71
Magdalena Taube und Krystian Woznicki, „Zusammenarbeiten trotz ‚Corona-Krise'? Warum der aktuelle Netz-Hype unsere Gesellschaft gefährdet," *Berliner Gazette*, April 8, 2020 https://www.englishes-mooc.org/ https://berlinergazette.de/zusammenarbeit-corona-krise-netz-hype/.

72
Editorial comment by Frank Böckelmann and Herbert Nagel in their anthology *Subversive Aktion. Der Sinn der Organisation ist ihr Scheitern* (Verlag Neue Kritik, 2002), 168.

73
After the publication of this article, I came across a text by Heidi de Mare I edited more than twenty years ago, when I was a grad student: "Gedisciplineerd kijken. Van kunstgeschiedenis naar historisch formalisme," in *Kunstlicht* 20, no. 3/4 (1999): 14–20. I cannot exclude the possibility that De Mare's use of "historical formalism" had lodged itself somewhere in the recesses of my mind, though my derivation and usage of the term are markedly different. Through a discussion of developments in Dutch art history, De Mare proposes a renewal of art history through "historical formalism," or the combination of synchronic and diachronic methods; the

latter do not include dialectical materialism, which was anathema in the highly depoliticized field of Dutch art history in the period in question.