

Sven Lütticken  
**Inside  
Abstraction**

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Writing in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, a novelist and entrepreneur diagnosed the Occupy protests as a “revolt against abstraction,” a revolt that he considered irrational and misguided precisely to the extent that it aimed at abstraction as such.<sup>1</sup> But is it really, fundamentally? It is true that the dizzying complexity of contemporary financial “products” and transactions creates a craving for tools to understand and attack this rarefied sphere. A brochure called *Demystifying the Financial Sector: A Nuts and Bolts Guide* illustrates the longing for concretion with a drawing of a screw and a bolt on the cover.<sup>2</sup> However, while some subscribe to a fundamental critique of money as agent of abstraction and alienation, what is more dominant is surely the critique of the financial sector as driving force (or it just enabler?) of a debt-driven economy.

What is under attack, therefore, is a very specific form of financial abstraction, weighed heavily against “ordinary consumers” and small businesses. And this abstract system obviously has very concrete consequences; if on the one hand it appears Byzantinely abstract, at the same time it can be all too concrete. Paul Chan has reminisced about his local McDonald’s in the crisis of the early 1990s: “The McDonald’s where I went now and then closed toward the tail end of the ‘91 recession; so did other businesses in the area. At the time I didn’t think much of it, and if I did, I thought it strange.” The place seemed to do good business, since the neighborhood didn’t have a grocery store or any kind of community center, so it doubled for those. Chan remarks that he was “too young and naive to know” much about the causes of the depression, and economic lingo was “as abstract and remote to me as the actual reasons behind the appearance of a recession are in reality.”<sup>3</sup>

During this period, “Survival had nothing to do with measuring the rise and fall of economic indicators, but the cunning of living between these inhuman quantifications, and finding novel ways to be unmoved and unmoored by their movements, in any direction. Progress was not chasing profit, but standing firm where you happened to have found yourself, against the forces that bull or bear either way.”<sup>4</sup> But how do these inhuman quantifications actually shape the in-between spaces that we traverse or doggedly occupy? As the case of Chan’s local McDonald’s shows, abstract quantifications have a habit of becoming seemingly concrete qualities.

### **1. Failures of the Abstract, Failures of the Concrete**

A 1928 photograph by the abstract painter



César Domela, *Ruth*, 1928.



Poster designed by César Domela for AEG, 1928.

César Domela shows his wife Ruth in front of one of his paintings: a Van Doesburg-like “counter composition” with diagonal lines. Following Van Doesburg’s example, in the 1920s Domela broke with Mondrian’s “neoplastic” aesthetic of equilibrium, which was based on an essentialist opposition between vertical (male) and horizontal (female). The diagonal stood for a rejection of the latent naturalism in Mondrian’s abstraction and the embrace of a dynamic, time-based approach to art.<sup>5</sup> It also meant that the easel painting was no longer necessarily the preferred medium. In Van Doesburg’s design for the Ciné-Dancing at the Aubette (1926–28), abstraction becomes a transforming force of daily (nocturnal) life, and the diagonals join the film image in celebrating dynamic urban life as the *real* new reality, over and beyond artistic dogma. The point was to go beyond an idealist form of abstraction to concrete social situations. The term “abstract” was on its way out; in a 1927 Elementarist manifesto, Van Doesburg stated that the terms “abstract” and “concrete” were both nothing but formulae, but by 1930 he was advocating *art concret*. What mattered was treating lines and forms not as abstractions of reality but as concrete elements within it, as real as a brick or a person.<sup>6</sup>

While Domela did not cosign the 1930 manifesto, the counter-composition on the 1928 photo sees him partaking in Van Doesburg’s “elementarist” phase, and with the photograph he stages a dialectic that recalls (on a smaller scale) that of the Aubette: the painting is placed in dialogue with the woman, and in a way that differs markedly from the manner in which Henry Van de Velde integrated his wife into his decorative schemes, by making her an element in the overall composition with the dresses he designed. Without being in any way “formalized,” Ruth Domela – her head in profile – exists on equal terms with the composition that is behind her, but is more than a mere backdrop.<sup>7</sup> A painting such as this, the image seems to say, is only complete when it is integrated into social situations. Mondrian’s studio and the artist’s working life surrounded by his art proved highly fascinating to critics and photographers, yet Mondrian could only conceive of his praxis as anticipating a future life that was as yet impossible. With Van Doesburg and Domela, the future is now. The discussions in the late 1920s and early 1930s about abstraction versus concretion were perhaps never more succinctly encapsulated than in Domela’s photograph, which reframes the idealist utopia of abstract art as concrete lived reality.

The growing preference among artists for the term “concrete” around 1930 reflects the fact that art, as aesthetic practice, addresses the

senses in some manner and thus cannot help but concretize abstraction. Mondrian’s paintings would be impoverished without their imperfections, without their signs of vacillation. In fact, Liam Gillick has diagnosed a constitutional “failure of the abstract” in modern art, which promises and abstraction that it cannot deliver:

By making the abstract concrete, art no longer retains any abstract quality, it merely announces a constant striving for a state of abstraction and in turn produces more abstraction to pursue. It is this failure of the abstract that lures and hypnotizes – forcing itself onto artists and demanding repeated attention ... It is the concretization of the abstract into a series of failed forms that lures the artist into repeated attempts to “create” the abstract – fully aware that this very act produces things that are the representation of impossibilities.<sup>8</sup>

Art as the concretion of the abstract into a series of failed forms – a more succinct characterization of the logic of modern art can scarcely be imagined. Modern art is marked by an ongoing and uneasy dialectic of movements between abstraction and concretion, creating potent yet failed forms.

Failures of the abstract, but also failures of the concrete: a staple of Marxian criticism is the diagnosis of the artwork as a *pseudo-concrete* entity. It is not so much that “art no longer retains any abstract quality,” but that its concretions are a matter of appearance only, for the artwork is really an abstract commodity: exchange value. This Marxian indictment of the artwork’s lack of concretion is one partial and partisan articulation of the dialectic of the abstract and the concrete within modern art. It shows that this dialectic cannot be thought of as a purely formal affair operating in splendid isolation from the version of the dialectic of abstraction and concretion that marks the capitalist economy. Marx criticized Hegel’s philosophical notions because they remained philosophical abstractions, in spite of their claim to concretion.<sup>9</sup> The abstraction that is money, on the other hand, is a *real abstraction*, as the Marxist Alfred Sohn-Rethel put it.

From the End of World War I to the early 1970s, Sohn-Rethel developed his theory of the “secret identity of value form and thought form.” Starting out in a dialogue with Bloch, Benjamin, Kracauer, and Adorno, Sohn-Rethel sought to demonstrate that the intellectual superstructure mirrored the base – more specifically, that Kant’s categories were secretly indebted to those



Details of Joseph Beuys' installation *Wirtschaftswerte*, 1980.

regulating capitalist exchange. Philosophical abstraction deludes itself by not acknowledging its base in economic abstraction, which is a *real abstraction*.<sup>10</sup> This repressed relation predates Kant and ultimately goes back to the antique Mediterranean economy and Greek philosophy, but Sohn-Rethel focuses on Kant as the prime modern example of philosophy's unacknowledged debt to real abstraction. Kant's fundamental concepts or "categories" that regulate the understanding's processing of things secretly mirror market categories. It is only by being "blind" to this that philosophy can lay claim to its "logical autonomy."<sup>11</sup> The conceptual framework of both modern science and of modern philosophy – which developed partly in tandem during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – is based on exchange. Economic exchange abstracts from an object's use value and therefore its qualities, turning it into pure quantity at the moment of exchange. The abstracted value-form is expressed or doubled in *money*. Money, like Kant's categories of the understanding, abstracts from the world and imposes abstract categories on the sphere of things, repressing all historical and economic specificity. The transcendental subject is the mirror image of money.<sup>12</sup>

In his attempt to show the fundamental identity of Kantian and economic categories, Sohn-Rethel pays insufficient attention to elements of Kant's "blindness" and only seemingly autonomous philosophy that may actually represent moments of non-identity, moments that resist or problematize such identification. Still, his somewhat quixotic project also contains productive points. As he stresses from the start, the development of the capitalist mode of production was both an economic and an intellectual process. The development of new technologies, of new industries, necessitated an increasing split between *Kopfarbeit* and *Handarbeit*. Intellectual labor and manual labor are both essential to capitalism, but they are no longer in direct contact; it is capital that mediates between them.<sup>13</sup> Modern intellectual labor has become a "quantified" exact science, while manual labor too has been rationalized. Intellectual laborers design production processes and products for entrepreneurs or companies that then put them into production. Marx already noted that the "growth of scientific power" and its transformation into fixed capital was both fuelling and ultimately undermining industrial capitalism.<sup>14</sup> Thus the real abstraction of money (and of money in the form of capital) is complicit with the real abstraction of technoscience – of science that has become immediately economically productive.<sup>15</sup>

In the early twenty-first century, the relation between capital and technoscience is of course closer than ever. In the financial sector, technology allows for an ever faster and more massive circulation of capital, of capital-as-data. In his video *Unsupported Transit* (2011), Zachary Formwalt combines footage of the construction site of the Koolhaas-designed Shenzhen Stock Exchange with a voice-over recounting Eadweard Muybridge's collaboration with the railroad tycoon Leland Stanford that showed there was a moment of "unsupported transit" in a horse's gallop. The later development of time-lapse photography by a former stockbroker and the use of this technique in showing large buildings being constructed seemingly within minutes and without human agency reminds of what Karl Marx described as the "abbreviated form of capital" – capital seemingly breeding capital on the stock market, rather than being generated as surplus value through production.<sup>16</sup> Formwalt recounts Stanford's wish that Muybridge create a panorama photo showing trains laden with silver and gold extracted from mines moving to the commercial centers, as well as the Golden Gate Bridge and ships in the Pacific. Gold and silver are of course the ultimate concretization of the real abstraction that is money. The Shenzhen Stock Exchange stands for its ultimate dematerialization, even as the financial crisis sees gold prices soaring, as investors are looking for "safe" assets; the German tabloid *Bild* even held a raffle in which readers could win real gold bars. Meanwhile, capital circles the globe in ways that seem to escape representation. It has concrete effects, but the effects seem to spring from mysterious and overly complex causes.

Formwalt notes that as capital spends less time in production, its moments of concretion become rare; it circulates in the form of money, which is to say: of data. Formwalt's previous video film *In Place of Capital* (2009) muses on the (un)representability of capital in relation to the invention of photography, and in particular on Fox Talbot's photographs of the London Stock Exchanges in which passersby appear as immaterial specters due to long exposure times. His book *Reading the Economist* (2010) is a similar montage inquiry into capital and visibility, remarking on the basis of Marx's notations from early issues of the *Economist* magazine, "The invisibility of the instruments of exchange was measure of their efficiency; the less visible, the more efficient they were in the circulation of capital."<sup>17</sup>When a crisis hits,

suddenly visible instruments of exchange are all that will do and the sudden demand for such instruments, for all other

instruments to be converted into cash, or something very close to it, produces a rupture in the field of visibility – the financial suddenly appears directly, not as something buried comfortably in behind anonymous glass building facades or company logos in the Business and Finance sections of the press, but directly on the front pages as people demanding their money.<sup>18</sup>

Inhuman quantifications, then, take on visible form again. Formwalt seeks out failures of the abstract, for it is here that his art can intervene in the dialectic of abstraction and concretion. Next to capital and technoscience, modern and contemporary art is a third manifestation of real abstraction, interacting with the other two. If art is marked by a dialectic of (failed) abstraction and (failed) concretion, something similar can be said of the other types of real abstraction. Blundering between failed abstractions and pseudo-concretions, artistic practice reflects and *can reflect on* the instability of any type of real abstraction. Chan's reflections on McDonald's and Formwalt's video essays on stock exchanges and visibility drive home the point that today's techno-scientific capitalism is marked by a botched dialectic of abstraction and concretion. Examples of this abound. Suicides and riots at FoxConn would seem to make the abstract tangible in a rather radical manner – but for most consumers, the site of production for Apple's gizmos is conveniently remote and therefore "abstract," so they can focus their attention on the pseudo-concrete iPhone they covet so much. We can look at this case from the vantage point of contemporary artistic practice, but in a sense art is already at the heart of the matter: we are dealing, after all, with branded or "aestheticized" capitalism.

In the late 1920s, when César Domela joined the ranks of abstract and Constructivist artists who applied their photo-typography to advertising by working for companies in the avant-garde of capitalist technoscience, such as AEG, this application of modern (graphic) design was still at a remove from the product itself; by now, the object itself is a design product. As products of technoscience, capital, and a specific design aesthetic, the iPhone and the MacBook stand for the increasing integration of different strands of real abstraction. This integration makes the dialectical interplay between moments of the abstract and its concrete manifestations ever more complex. When, for instance, a corporation planned a field test of a new genetically modified (GM) animal vaccine, it met with fierce local protests that were immediately publicized via the media, and

its stock took a hit in the process – affected by stockbrokers but perhaps even more by the "black boxes" making calculations faster than any human. This drives home the point that contemporary capitalism pervades daily life in much more complex ways than it did under classic industrial (Fordist) capitalism, when the conveyor belt and punch-clock still seemed like a violent imposition of abstraction on life. Writing in the 1940s, Adorno and Horkheimer could still think of abstraction only as a *liquidation* of concrete objects; now it is obvious that abstraction does not so much liquidate as *liquefy* and transform the concrete from within.<sup>19</sup>

The increasing integration of economic and technoscientific real abstraction, and of artistic real abstraction in the guise of design, has led to a regime that Deleuze called a "society of control," in contrast to the old disciplinary society.<sup>20</sup> The society of control is a regime of *concrete abstraction*. Here, from social media to GM foods, abstraction is not just real and operative but has transformed the nature of concretion itself. This does not mean that the dialectic of abstraction and concretion is abolished, just that it becomes ever more complex and refined. Institutions that are still perceived as impositions on the "true" subject have been supplemented and reshaped by networks that invite participation and investment. School can be out; Facebook never is.

## 2. The Ends of Money

If a lot of modern and contemporary art has taken the form of what Gillick calls the production of "replacement objects that scatter the globe as reminders of the failure of the concrete in relation to the abstract," some practitioners have challenged this by either using or bypassing the object in order to make the economic system a whole concrete and (potentially) subject to human intervention. Art thus takes the form of an alternative political economy – foregrounding and potentially intervening in the production of failed forms, rather than merely and merrily proliferating them. Asger Jorn, in his *Critique of Political Economy* (1962), lambasted Marx for creating confusion over value with his notions of exchange value and use value. Noting that money is pure convention, especially after the end of the gold standard, Jorn predicted the end of money under "proper" communism, which would see the realization of the Situationist project of art becoming identical with the totality of life.<sup>21</sup> Life would therefore be ruled no longer by capitalist surplus value, but by a different

surplus altogether: aesthetic surplus. With Jorn, then, we do indeed have a radical rejection of money as a quantitative abstraction and art as the purveyor of ineffable qualitative sensations.

A similar dichotomy underpins Pierre Klossowski's *La Monnaie vivante*: that of the "obsessive phantasm" versus utility – the latter being associated with industrial production. In an analysis that develops elements from his own and Georges Bataille's work from the 1930s in the context of *Acéphale* and the Collège de Sociologie, Klossowski problematizes and ultimately collapses this dichotomy. With Sade's narratives of secret societies using great wealth to realize phantasms, or stage them, we encounter a kind of hidden market which is the mirror of the market of commodity-objects; in later capitalism, in which advertising and eroticism played an ever increasing role, Sade became industrial reality.<sup>22</sup> Without Klossowski emphasizing the point, the text revolves round capitalism's cognitive and affective turn which encompasses even commodities that seem untouched by it.<sup>23</sup> Klossowski notes that the atom bomb is a "useful" good that produces phantasms (fear), and that the work of art (a sculpture of Venus) is just the "laughing side of the bomb."<sup>24</sup> In general, the repetitions of mass

production, which devalue the individual object and make it disposable and ephemeral, take on a compulsory and Sadean quality.

Conversely, phantasms generate a production of simulacra that can be integrated into the economy, that can be submitted to the rule of the universal equivalent. With Sade, suggestion and the living object still had to coincide; in later capitalism, suggestion could be produced independently through audiovisual media. No need to stage elaborate and costly rituals in remote castles. The market appears to be based on "neutral" exchange of goods via money, but in fact this covertly becomes an exchange of human beings; it is universal prostitution. Thus the contradiction between the uniqueness and untranslatability of obsession on the one hand and the rule of equivalence on the other is mitigated, as the *état impulsif* is turned into a productive activity.<sup>25</sup> Money itself is fantasmatic, an imaginary value, and Klossowski imagines a "regressive" scenario in which money would be replaced by living objects of desire, by human beings that would be the opposite of the culture industry's "industrial slaves" – such as Sharon Tate, whose "visual qualities" and the emotions they produce can be precisely quantified, expressed by numbers.<sup>26</sup> In

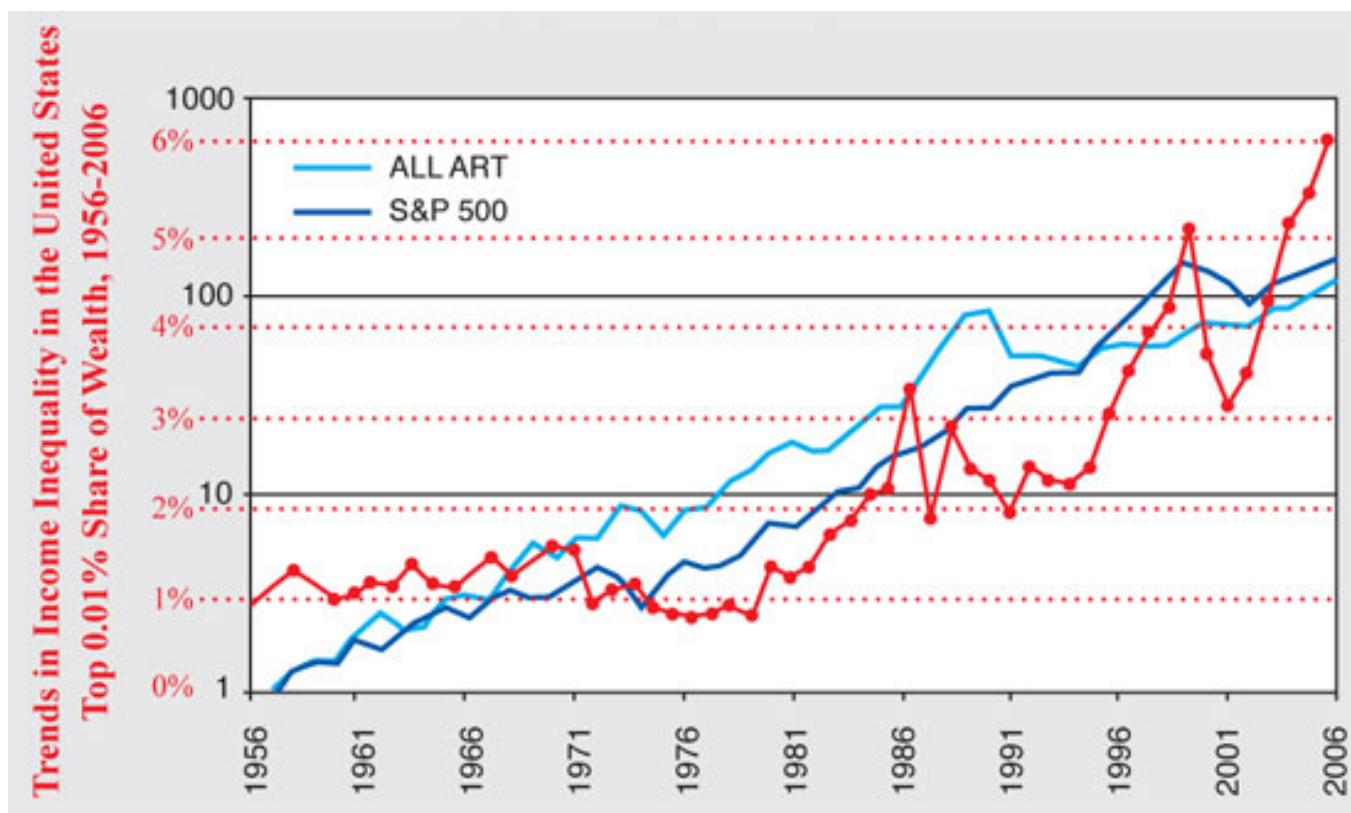
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Workers at a FoxConn rally organized in honor of the company after a number of suicide attempts by its workers.







Andrea Fraser, *Index*, first published anonymously in *Artforum*, Summer 2011, p. 431. Produced for "24 Advertisements", a project by Jacob Fabricus, with design assistance by Santiago Pérez Gomes-de Silva, Studio Manuel Raeder. Graph represents the Mei Moses 2006 annual all art index and S&P 500 total return index (1956-2006).

Klossowski's scenario, the living beings might end up becoming a new form of currency, money in a new guise; alternatively, they would base exchange value on the basis of the emotions given. In the latter case, they would embody values beyond abstract measure.<sup>27</sup>

Klossowski's book was published in an integral German translation in the catalogue of the exhibition *Museum des Geldes*, organized by Jürgen Harten and Horst Kurnitzky at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in 1978, as something of a sequel to Marcel Broodthaers's *Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute*.<sup>28</sup> With a catalog containing anthropological-economic speculations by Kurnitzky, placing a premium on the religious aspect of money and its origins, the exhibition included a plethora of ethnographic and antique objects as well as works by artists ranging from Broodthaers and Kosuth (the dictionary definition of "abstract") to Beuys. If *Das Museum des Geldes* was mostly interested in forging a link between neo-avant-garde and conceptual reflections on the commodification of art and the deep-time of economic (pre)history, Beuys in the late 1970s and 1980s advocated a redefinition and a different use of money.

For Beuys, the problem was that money had become a commodity, and therefore an object of speculation. Money should never be treated as a commodity; it should instead be a legal document (*Rechtsdokument*) that can be used as a regulatory instrument.<sup>29</sup> Money, in other words, should not be seen as belonging to an "autonomous" economic system; it is a social entity. In a contentious 1984 discussion with economists in which Beuys repeated his notion of money as a legal title in a mantra-like manner, he joined the banker and author Johann Philipp Bethmann in attacking the established position that money can be adequately defined by its threefold function: universal means of exchange, calculation unit, and device for storing value. Bethmann argued that in fact money had to be seen as a result of debt: money is created through every new loan. Debt creates money.<sup>30</sup> This "credit theory of money" had already been circulated in the nineteenth century, and David Graeber revisits it in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*.<sup>31</sup> In spite of all economic narratives about the emergence of money in coin form to replace barter, and then its gradual dematerialization into credit, Graeber asserts that "historically, credit money comes first," and credit systems existed before coins.<sup>32</sup> Graeber stresses the inequality of the debt equation: in ancient empires as well as in the age of sub-prime mortgages, the game is weighted in favor of the creditor (except when the debtor is a large bank or corporation, and the creditor is the state). Thus, far from being the product of a

progressively abstract capitalist system, debt is the beginning of money.

Even so, over much of the history of money, gold and silver gave a body to the credit instrument and universal means of exchange. The collapse of the gold standard inaugurated an age of increasing financialization, of floating currencies and ever more complex financial "products." Marcel Broodthaers's eagle-stamped gold bullion, to be sold for twice their current material value, articulated the role of art as investment under a postindustrial regime of abbreviated capital. Beuys's proposals are the other side of Broodthaers's precision irony. With his 1980 *Wirtschaftswerte* installation and related objects, Beuys in effect created a counterpoint to Broodthaers's gold bars: in taking the trouble to import them and exhibit them in the West, Beuys problematized the coexistence of two flawed economic and social systems.<sup>33</sup> Beuys was obviously not unaware of the value he was creating by turning these objects into his *Wirtschaftswerte*, but the project might be said to be not about the result but precisely about the interval between socialist sub-commodity and artistic hyper-commodity, just as the Broodthaers's bullion are about the interval between material and art value.

Money is an aggregate of functions, and if economists have long stressed its function as universal means and measure of exchange, the new or renewed focus on its status as a property title and/or credit instrument is potentially a means to challenge the actually existing *Geldwirtschaft*. Beuys used the term *Wirtschaftswerte* to denote both human creativity and its products; those are the only real "economic values." The problem with money was that it was seen as a means of exchange and therefore as a universal commodity.<sup>34</sup> Instead of a means of exchange, it needs to become a *legal regulatory instrument* expressing rights and obligations. In his "Aufruf zur Alternative," Beuys had claimed that money had in fact already come to function in this manner; with the emergence of central banks and modern monetary policy, money "became a legal regulatory instrument for all creative and consumptive processes."<sup>35</sup> What "Aufruf zur Alternative" presents as an established *fact* – money *is* a tool for regulation – Beuys presents as a *demand* in the 1984 discussion – money *has yet to be* "legalized." The real breakthrough in the reconceptualization of money had not yet been made.

Characteristically, Beuys's "solution" to the problems of capitalism consists of a highly rhetorical slogan. Yet this need not be unproductive; it is worth asking what it would *mean* to conceive of money as a legal document encompassing obligations and rights, and by

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implication as a regulatory instrument that does not just try to regulate “the market.” At the very least, it would have to entail the rejection of the crude “abstractionism” promoted by the financial sector and its ideologues: the idea of finance as an autonomous sphere of pure abstraction, which should not be meddled with in any way. On the contrary: if financial abstraction impacts the local McDonald’s, this is one manifestation of a dialectic of abstraction and concretion in which we can and must intervene.

### 3. Fatal Strategies

But how to intervene? If “art is the concretization of the abstract into a series of failed forms,” then the question is which forms and structures provide the most productive failures now that art is itself being financialized. When hedge fund manager Eduard Pomeranz presented an overview of his collection of contemporary art at the Jewish Museum in Vienna earlier this year, press reports focused on his use of a computer program advising him on his artistic investment – algorithmic collecting!<sup>36</sup> As finance and its real abstractions transform art from within, the question of a possible response becomes urgent. This requires a shift from treating abstraction as a symbolic trope in art and art discourse to a reflexive intervention in abstraction as a condition of art. Abstraction shapes art’s material conditions even while transforming materiality itself. To deal with one’s implication in concrete abstraction and the ways in which today’s drive towards integration of formerly disparate realms transforms not only art but also academia demands a move away from finished form to the matrix of form, to the conditions that produce the varied forms of failure.

In her essay “Le 1%, c’est moi,” Andrea Fraser investigates the burgeoning art market and the rise of a class of super-collectors – investors who may also happen to have paid bribes to get control of Russian natural reserves, or who received an astronomical bonus before their company collapsed and gave “\$150,000 to an organization seeking to limit public pensions.”<sup>37</sup> Going beyond such enumeration, Fraser cites a paper in which three economists argue that there is no relationship

between art returns and “overall income variables (such as GDP or total personal income),” but only with income inequality: art prices do not go up as a society as a whole becomes wealthier, but only when income inequality increases. Their analysis suggests that “one percentage point

increase in the share of total income earned by the top 0.1% triggers an increase in art prices of about 14 percent.” They conclude: “it is indeed the money of the wealthy that drives art prices. This implies that we can expect art booms whenever income inequality rises quickly. This seems exactly what we witnessed during the last period of strong art price appreciation, 2002–2007.”<sup>38</sup>

Art, then, is now an integral loop in the circuits of “abbreviated capital.” It is a commodity whose whims were always hard to explain away using the labor theory of value – and indeed the artwork has become the model for a whole segment of branded or “culturalized” commodities where the profit margin is disproportionately high. In the top segment, the disproportion between the material side of the artwork and its value becomes so pronounced that it takes on stock-like characteristics. The conclusion, then, is unavoidable: what is good for the art world is “disastrous for the rest of the world.”<sup>39</sup> The question, as always, is what is to be done on the basis of this insight. Fraser proposes an affirmation and exacerbation of the divide between different types of artistic/institutional practice: European museums should secede from the art market and the blue-chip art and artists it produces.

If this means that public museums contract and collectors create their own privately controlled institutions, so be it. Let these private institutions be the treasure vaults and theme-park spectacles and economic freak shows that many already are. Let curators and critics and art historians as well as artists withdraw their cultural capital from this market.<sup>40</sup>

The danger, of course, is that the freak show will become the only available model of art for an ever greater group, and that the “other” art world will become ever more marginalized. Already, prominent newspapers can see no other logic than that of the blockbuster and spectacular private patronage: *De Volkskrant*, a Dutch newspaper whose art pages have become laughable, dedicated its entire front page to the announcement by Joop van Caldenborgh, owner of a sub-par collection of blue-chip art, that he was going to build his own museum.<sup>41</sup> The freak show is the new normality, and public institutions are scrambling to be part of this new order. Furthermore, a secession could also have the unwanted effect of “[colluding] in the distancing of affect and the dissimulation of our immediate and active investments in our field,”

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an effect on which Fraser has written eloquently.<sup>42</sup> Is there any sort of gain to be had from split off and distancing part of the art world – deciding that “that’s not us”?

that this is in fact a way of targeting certain forms of art production and reception.<sup>44</sup> Referencing a remark by the artist Hendrik Andersson during a debate at Tensta Konsthall, Frans Josef Petersson noted that

Lind’s ideas form a perfect match with the ideology that Storåkers made his career in marketing: capitalism as an exchange of floating, “abstract” values, separated from the human bodies – in Ogaden or other places – which in fact produce the surplus-value that this market builds on exploiting. That Storåkers expressed several times throughout the night his admiration for the clarity of Lind’s ideas is, in other words, not surprising: they both speak capitalism’s language, as I seem to remember Andersson putting it.<sup>45</sup>



Zachary Formwalt's *In Place of Capital* production stills on the Bukowskis web site for the “Abstract Possible” auction.

Contrary to the “secession model,” Maria Lind collaborated with an auction house for her project “Abstract Possible” at Tensta Konsthall. “Abstract Possible” created a constellation of different forms of abstraction, including formal abstraction in art and economic abstraction. Goldin+Senneby made an artwork in the form of a book containing investment advice on the artists in the show. Only the buyer of this piece could access the contents, not regular visitors to the exhibition; the work was sold at a Bukowskis auction that also included other works by “Abstract Possible” artists – including production stills of Zachary Formwalt’s *In Place of Capital*. Who’s mocking whom here?

Protest swiftly arose, with critics homing in on the Lundin family, owners of Bukowskis and “the Swedish businessworld’s most ethically unacceptable family”: Maria Lind’s exhibition “Abstract Possible” is allegedly exploring the nature of abstraction and the economy of today’s art world, but the institution nowhere exposes the ownership of the auction house or the relationship between the funding of the exhibition and Lundin Oil’s horrific operations in Africa. To make things worse, the suburb in which Tensta Konsthall is located is also home to hundreds of exiled families from exactly those parts of Sudan which Lundin Oil has made uninhabitable.<sup>43</sup>

But the criticism went beyond the post-ethical Lundin family to see Bukowskis as a symptom and symbol of the destruction or transformation of the publicly funded art infrastructure in Sweden; here as in the Netherlands, right-wing cultural policy is draining public funding and imposing “private patronage” as the normal and desirable way of doing things – without, of course, acknowledging

The project can indeed hardly be defended as an act of immanent critique; lots of immanence, certainly, but hardly any critique. While the inclusion of Formwalt’s work in the auction could generously be seen as confronting the piece with its economical-ideological conditions and contradictions, thereby introducing a higher degree of reflexivity, this would be a rather insane critique that operates by making things worse and ends up being a strategy of *Verelendung* in every way but financially.

Is the alternative, then, to adopt the “secessionist” model? This would seem to be as dysfunctional a model, as fatal a strategy, as Lind-style immanence – but it is precisely as impossible models, as models *that have already failed*, that both have their value in a situation without easy answers and clearly-labeled emergency exits. Perhaps Lind’s project, seemingly an affirmation of “abstract” values, was in fact marked by a failure of the abstract: after all, Lind was accused of taking *blood money*. The notion of blood money suggests that money has a biography, that blood can stick to it – that financial transactions can be a gothic novel.

Follow the money: Andrea Fraser’s 1% essay developed from a research initiative termed Artigarchy, which and was first proposed in 2010. The idea was to create a web-based data platform visualizing the economic, artistic and political entanglements of top collectors and museum patrons. How does one's entrepreneurial activities as a manufacturer of screws, nuts and bolts relate to his statements about taxation and his dealings as a collector? And how can such relations be made sensible, tangible? The initiative is now developing under the auspices of Slought Foundation in Philadelphia as an expanding collaboration of

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organizations and individuals, presently including Derek Curry, Fraser, Jennifer Gradecki, Aaron Levy, Ken Saylor, and Orkan Telhan. The initiative, which is still in its early stages, has developed “from a focus on individual collectors and patrons to the visualization of distributions of income and resources within the art field and its institutions, as well as its correlation to the distribution of resources within and among sectors (public, nonprofit) and to distributions of wealth in national contexts with active art markets.” One of the primary manifestations of the initiative will be charts and statistical graphics that visualizes networks and actors in concrete-abstract diagrams.

Rather than only focusing on individuals and their sources and levels of income, we hope the initiative will be able to represent the systemic relationship between inequality and the art field today. At the same time, we hope to activate the data by linking various points in these distributions to specific individuals and their income levels, to the prices of specific artworks, to institutional budgets, and so on, which will place them in the context of directly invested experiences and interests. We also hope to develop visualizations that track the political affiliations of art collectors and patrons, as well as involvement of financial institutions active in the art world in fraudulent dealings, like the sub-prime mortgage crisis, LIBOR manipulation, etc.<sup>46</sup>

In the regime of concrete abstraction, the failure of form needs to be repeated, over and over again. Form needs to fail again and fail better, without turning into replacement objects. Form in the realm of concrete abstraction needs to be defined not in terms of some branded “signature style,” of replacement objects accompanied by discourse, but in terms of the constellations we enter and the ways in which we affect them.

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This article takes up a line of inquiry from my article/book chapter “Living with Abstraction.” It is part of my long-term project *Art and Thingness*.

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1 Ernst-Wilhelm Händler, "Lügen gegen das Kapital," *Die Zeit*, April 19, 2012. See <http://www.zeit.de/2012/16/Europa>.

2 *Demystifying the Financial Sector: A Nuts & Bolts Guide* (s.l.: Corporate Watch, 2012). See <http://www.corporatewatch.org/?lid=4171>.

3 Paul Chan, "The Spirit of Recession," *October* 129 (Summer 2009): 3.

4 Ibid.

5 Challenged by Van Doesburg's Elementarism, Mondrian noted that he did not reject the diagonal in principle. The crucial thing was the *right angle*. He did, however, reject the theoretical underpinnings of Van Doesburg's use of the diagonal. See Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (London: Reaktion, 2001), 192.

6 Theo van Doesburg, "Schilderkunst en plastiek. Elementarisme (Manifest-fragment)," *De Stijl* Vol. 7, No. 7 (1926–27): 85. The "art concret" manifesto was published in 1930 in the only issue of the magazine of the same name (1).

7 A related photograph by Raoul Hausmann shows both César and Ruth Domela in front of the same painting.

8 Liam Gillick, "Abstract" (2011), [liamgillick.info](http://liamgillick.info). See <http://www.liamgillick.info/home/texts/abstract>.

9 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993), 100–102.

10 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972 [1970]), 38–45.

11 Ibid., 108.

12 Some of Kant's qualities actually pertain to the object's qualities, but they are *logical abstractions of qualities*; "quality" becomes a philosophical concept as abstracted from specific qualities as "quantity" itself. Ibid., 20–22, 45–57, 88–115.

13 Sohn-Rethel, 26–27, 107.

14 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 750. In the late 1960s, Hans-Jürgen Krahl would use such remarks by Marx for his argument that the scientific/academic caste was a now a productive class on par

with the proletariat, and needed to develop its own forms of political and social action. See Krahl, "Thesen zum allgemeinen Verhältnis von wissenschaftlicher Intelligenz und proletarischem Klassenbewusstsein" (1969), *Konstitution und Klassenkampf. Zur historischen Dialektik von bürgerlicher Emanzipation und proletarischer Revolution. Schriften, Reden und Entwürfe aus den Jahren 1966–1970* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 20007 [1971], 336–351. On Krahl as an early theorist of the "cognitariat" and the need for new organizational forms, see Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Guiseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 66–67.

15 The term "technoscience" was introduced by Gilbert Hottois in the 1970s and used by Lyotard and Latour, among others. I use it to denote the increasingly tight and complex integration of science and industry, which turns science into an operative *real abstraction*.

16 The reference is to *Capital: Volume 3*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1993), 515.

17 Zachary Formwalt, *Reading the Economist* (Utrecht/Porto: Casco/Serralves, 2010), 16.

18 Ibid., 135.

19 "Die Abstraktion, das Werkzeug der Aufklärung, verhält sich zu ihren Objekten wie das Schicksal, dessen Begriff die ausmerzt: as Liquidation," in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988 [1947]), 19.

20 Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992), 3–7.

21 "Value and Economy" (1962), in Asger Jorn, *The Natural Order and Other Texts*, trans. Peter Shield (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 117–217.

22 Pierre Klossowski, *La Monnaie vivante* (s.l.: Joëlle Loesfeld, 1994 [1970]), 30–35.

23 Ibid., 18–21.

24 Ibid., 13.

25 The artist as maker of simulacra obeys two masters, both the institutionalized world of equivalence and sublimation (productivity) and obsessional

world of phantasms (sterility); it is because of this that art can unveil the secrets of the commodity. Klossowski, *La Monnaie vivante*, 48.

26 Ibid., 72.

27 Ibid., 70.

28 Jürgen Harten and Horst Kurnitzky (eds.), exhib. cat. *Das Museum des Geldes*, Vol. 1 (Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf/Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 1978), 78–99.

29 In the earlier "Aufruf zur Alternative" (1978), Beuys had used the term *Rechtsregulativ* (legal regulative instrument) instead of *Rechtsdokument*. Joseph Beuys, "Aufruf zur Alternative," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, December 23, 1978. See [http://www.impuls21.net/pdf/aufruf\\_zur\\_alternative.p df](http://www.impuls21.net/pdf/aufruf_zur_alternative.p df).

30 Joseph Beuys et al., *Was ist Geld? Eine Podiumsdiskussion* (Wangen: FIU-Verlag, 2009), 43.

31 David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), 43–71.

32 Ibid., 18.

33 On the Wirtschaftswerte installation, see also Max Rosenberg, "Through the Wall, Slowly: Joseph Beuys's Economy of Transformation," *Texte zur Kunst* 85 (March 2012): 70–81.

34 Beuys, *Was ist Geld?*, 48 a.o.

35 Beuys, "Aufruf zur Alternative."

36 See Almuth Spiegler, "Extrem berechnend und unglaublich berührend," *Die Presse*, May 23, 2012, 23.

37 Andrea Fraser, "Le 1%, c'est moi," *Texte zur Kunst* 83 (September 2011), 114.

38 Ibid., 118, 120.

39 Ibid., 122.

40 Ibid., 124.

41 *De Volkskrant*, March 28, 2012.

42 Andrea Fraser, "There's No Place Like Home," exhib. cat. *Whitney Biennial 2012* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art), 33.

43 "Boycott Bukowskis!," [bojkottabukowskis.blogspot.com](http://bojkottabukowskis.blogspot.com). See <http://bojkottabukowskis.blogspot.com/2012/01/boycott-bukowskis.html>.

44 Ibid.

45 Frans Josef Petersson, "Critical Collapse at Tensta Konsthall," [www.kunstkritikk.no](http://www.kunstkritikk.no). See <http://www.kunstkritikk.no/international-edition-en/critical-collapse-at-tensta-konsthall/?lang=en>.

46 The Artigarchy website may be found here (under development.) <http://www.artigarchy.org>.

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