

# AESTHETICISM: THE NEW SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM?

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## Part 1: Eleven Theses on Art and Economy

### I. Art is an act of creation

Art, from the Latin ‘ars’, is the act of putting together, joining and fitting.

The business of every art, observed Aristotle, is to bring something into existence.

### II. Wealthy societies are prodigious producers of art

Whether it is ancient Athens or Rome, Renaissance Italy or 20<sup>th</sup>-century America, Elizabethan London or *fin-de-siecle* Vienna—wealthy societies are primary producers of art works.

Yet wealth is not the cause of art, or at least not its principal cause.

Wealth provides the social time needed for the execution of artworks, and the means for their accumulation, distribution and display.

Yet, even if it is the requisite means to the ends of art, wealth does not explain the artistic drive to create or objectivate—to “bring something into existence”.

### III. Art is a mode of production

Wealth has weak casual power. It is more an effect than a cause.

Art is the obverse of this. It is a model for “bringing things into being”. Art is productive.

It produces, creates and objectivates by transforming materials, ultimately energy, according to form, pattern and shape.

### IV. Art’s productivity is mystical

The greater part of the power of art is the power of tacit design, the intuitive shaping of things, words, tones, pigments, stones.

From the practice of art, societies learn how to silently, tacitly, aesthetically compose, order, and organize themselves.

Art is the mysticism of the social order.

#### **V. Art is the animus of wealthy societies, because of its productive mysticism**

The social impact of the productive shaping forming impetus of art is remarkable.

Viewed from a causal standpoint, it is not wealth that produces art, but rather art that produces wealth.

That is why wealthy societies are artistic. Far beyond all of the patrons, endowments, and museums, wealthy societies glorify art because art teaches such societies how to be productive.

It is a difficult lesson to learn—and naturally, what can be learnt, can also be unlearnt.

#### **VI. Modern capitalism is an aesthetic mode of production**

Many kinds of wealth have existed in human history. But nothing compares with the scale of wealth of modern capitalism.

(Modern capitalist societies, since 1820, when English industrial capitalism entered into full flight, have generated historically unprecedented levels of wealth. The difference in scale is not relative but absolute.)

Modern capitalism produces such prodigious wealth because it has coupled itself with the advancement of the arts and sciences.

#### **VII. The aesthetic mode of production, though, is not a knowledge economy**

The arts and the sciences are not simply knowledge. They generate knowledge, but their productive core is not knowledge, and cannot be reduced to knowledge.

Knowledge is an effect not a cause. When effect is substituted for cause, then the power of the arts and the sciences visibly decays.

Knowledge economies are the expression of a decadent, not an ebullient, capitalism.

#### **VIII. The power of art and science is aesthetic**

Aesthetics is a universal condition. Self, society and nature—each one of these has an aesthetic core.

Everything that we recognize, everything that has meaning, everything that we can usefully interact with has form, shape and pattern. This includes nature and the cosmos.

Thus science also has an aesthetic core. Great mathematics, engineering, and technology constantly pay homage to beauty. Nature is built on symmetry, symmetry-breaks, clustering, pairing, scaling, morphogenesis, tripartite structures and many other qualities familiar to us from aesthetics.<sup>1</sup>

Creation is the act in which features emerge from featureless nothing, be it the blank sheet, the social desert, or the cosmologist's void. Human beings are redeemed from the tortures of boredom by the distinctions, contrasts, and symmetries that grace all creation and that are separate from time and space.

The mobile technology we so delight in today is governed by its kinetic and tactile, visual and auditory aesthetics. Its time will pass, as does the time of all technologies, but the underlying aesthetic qualities endure.

Art and science tap into these. Modern capitalism taps into art and science.

### **IX. The power of aesthetics is economic**

Whether it is the Shakers' furniture paying homage to God, or John Adam's glorious repeating oscillating string work *Shaker Loops* (1978), or the puritan minimalism of Modernist industrial design, unadorned, sheer and sleek, or the direct immediate language of advertising and Hemingway, shorn of baroque tangents—all is economic.

Abstraction is the act of taking away.

Modern capitalism is built on the art of abstraction. Abstraction unlocks the power of design. It harnesses its spirit.

In doing so, it unlocks the power of aesthetic economy.

Firms, organizations and markets rationalize.

Less is more—as Mies van der Rohe put it.

If the energy consumption of machines was not hundreds of times more efficient than it was in James Watts' time, then capitalism would be the extinct species many had expected it to become.

### **X. The cultural condition of capitalism is paradoxical**

The aesthetic of 'less is more' is a paradox.

Paradox permeates both art and capitalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, in 'Sociological Aesthetics', Simmel writes: 'The origin of all aesthetic themes is found in symmetry. Before man can bring an idea, meaning and harmony into things, he must first form them symmetrically'. He adds that symmetry is the initial step in the evolution of 'man's form-giving power' and therefore the precondition for all subsequent aesthetic orderings of reality.

In art, rational asceticism begets pleasure. Is not Richard Hamilton's design of the chaste cover of *The Beatles' White Album* (1968) a sensual delight? Do we not find in modern capitalism's most successful forms a fine line between the bourgeois and the bohemian? Did not venture capitalists in Silicon Valley lend millions of dollars to individuals who did not own a suit?

Be wary of hard-and-fast distinctions, for capitalism, like art, dissolves them. Reason and mysticism might seem to be opposites. Yet the hardest workers, and the finest organizers, are often mystics. Marx thought that capitalism would die because of its contradictions. Instead it flourished because of them. No social order has ever been so embracing of contradiction and so art-like.

"Things come into existence" when oppositions become identities, and identities turn into oppositions. Einstein speculated that the cosmos is hyper-spherical in shape. It looks a little like an Alexander Rodchenko sculpture. If Einstein is correct, then the infinity of space is bounded. This is a metaphor of creation. For all creation—every act of "coming into being"—is a paradox.

As they emerge—in a quantum state—from nothing, time behaves like space, and space like time. Stephen Hawking and James Hartle in any event thought so. The extraordinary power of this is surely only exceeded by the astonishing capacity of nothing to behave as if it was something.

Creation is smeared. It is lip-stick on an androgynous character out of a Lou Reed or David Bowie song, a blurry but prolific identity perfectly captured by Mike Garson's atonal piano on 'Aladdin Sane' (1973).

Smearing is what art does. It is what capitalism the colossus of innovation does. Within the domains of both art and capitalism, we are obliged to live ironically, ambidextrously, atonally.

## **XI. Thus, the conservative is a revolutionary, and the greatest revolutionaries are conservatives**

Like its formidable twin, rationalization, innovation is a driver of modern capitalism. The pair animates relentless change and transformation. Yet, like the great prophet of innovation, the economist Joseph Schumpeter, both are profoundly if paradoxically conservative.

Schumpeter's avocation was the sketching of old churches. He clearly felt in his bones that the most radical expressions of modern capitalism are aroused by something deeply conservative.

The golden age of English capitalism finds its apotheosis in aesthetic medievalism, Gothic wonder, Hellenism and classicism. The neo-Renaissance marvels of the City Beautiful movement were the halcyon consummation of Chicago's frenetic capitalism, a laboratory in which everything from the production line to the balloon-frame house, the department store to the annual sale and mail-order was invented.

This should remind us of a larger paradox: all change is a function of permanence, and all originality is an expression of imitation. The question of what comes before “the first moment of something new” dissolves once we accept that time in general and capitalist time in particular is revolutionary. The wheel of time moves forwards and backwards simultaneously.

That the modern multi-story office building emerges in the skin of the Renaissance palace should remind us that capitalism’s ability to reconcile breath-taking cultural contradictions is its winning way. The disassembly line of the meat packing plant inspires the motor car assembly line that inspires Andy Warhol’s screen making factory. The Fordist company mutates into the art firm, or else goes bankrupt.

John Maynard Keynes thought that capitalism tended to stagnation, and would only be saved by government spending. It was not inherently dynamic and its existence was only justified by art, which lay outside of its domain. This, in essence, is the view of a MOMA trustee. But Joseph Schumpeter, sketcher of old churches, and prophet of innovation, was much closer to the truth when he observed, like Max Weber, that capitalism is value free. It unites the warring gods of reason and mysticism, worldliness and other-worldliness, asceticism and hedonism, bourgeois and bohemian. Their tense harmonics produces a vast dynamism that ploughs on through repeated cycles of boom and bust.

The best marriages result from the oddest couples.

The marriage of the warring gods is the strangest of all.

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## **Part 2: Dialogues from the *Small Worlds* of Aesthetic Capitalism**

### **Dialogue No. 1: When Max met Andy and a New Ethic was Born**

The year is 1984, and Max, Professor of Economic History, at the University of Heidelberg, is at a dinner party in a converted warehouse in the Meatpacking District of New York. After many years of *ennui* and existential doubt, his suffering wife pleads with him to either take a long trip or get a prescription for the new drug *Zoloft*. Too much the ascetic, to take the easy road to mental recovery, Max decides to travel to America hoping it will inspire him to complete several academic studies already in the pipeline. At the same dinner party, is a famous artist by the name of Andy, whose dramatic white hair and wearing of dark sunglasses indoors capture Max’s attention. Andy seems to have a coterie of friends, sycophants and other ‘hangeronerers’. Also present is a young rock singer, Lou, who Max soon discovers fancies himself as a one-

man Greek Chorus. Max, who is keen to absorb New York artistic and cultural life, quizzes his dinner companions about a range of topics.

Max: So, Herr Andy, are you a painter or do you work in a more contemporary medium?

Andy: Aha.

Hangeronerer: Andy works with various media. He does silkscreens, makes movies, hosts parties and takes photographs of weird people.

Max: Andy, are there any works of yours that I might see at a museum in New York?

Andy: Aha.

Hangeronerer: Lots of them. Andy is very prolific. For example, he does dozens, sometimes hundreds of silkscreen paintings of glamorous celebrities, soup cans, revolutionary leaders and communist paraphernalia, and things like car crashes and the electric chair. He has a real thing about repeating images in different colors.

Lou: (Breaks into song)

Images/Images/Images/Images...

I think images are worth repeating

If you're looking for deeper meaning, I'm as deep as this high ceiling

Cars and cans and chairs and flowers

You might find me personally boring

Hammer, sickle, Mao Tse Tung, Mao Tse Tung –

I think that it bears repeating the images upon the ceiling

I love images worth repeating and repeating and repeating

Images/Images/Images/Images<sup>2</sup>

Max: What did he say, something about images?

Hangeronerer: Lou is a poet-cum-musician who is very good at channeling Andy's thoughts.

Max: I see. However, Andy's tendency to aestheticize everyday objects worries me. For some time I have been puzzling as to whether the desire to judge things in 'aesthetic' rather than 'rational' or 'moral' terms is the sign of a decadent culture? An intellectual culture but a decadent one all the same. Tell me, Herr Andy, how do you work?

Andy: Aha.

Hangeronerer: Andy thinks the creative process is very mysterious and he doesn't like to talk about it.

Max: Ah, well that confirms one of the arguments I advance in a publication of mine, 'The Intermediate Reflections'. I argue that the artist is a modern-day mystic who dislikes the limitations imposed by 'form' and that art often becomes a type of 'escape' the pressures of 'everyday practical rationalism'.

Hangeronerer: Everyday practical what?

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<sup>2</sup> The lyrics for Lou's one-man Greek Chorus are from Lou Reed and John Cale, *Songs for Drella*, Sire Records, 1990.

Max: Rationalism or what I also call ‘this-worldly asceticism’. You strike me as a rather ‘other-worldly’ character, Herr Andy. Would you describe your art as ‘other-worldly’? Do you think the artist resembles the mystic?

Andy: Aha.

Hangeronerer: Actually, Andy is a very down-to-earth kind of guy. He calls his studio ‘The Factory’ and with him it’s work, work, work.

Max: Interesting. Tell me, Herr Andy, do you come from a Protestant family background?

Hangeronerer: No, Andy’s mother was Catholic but made Andy go to church every Sunday until he left home.

Max: (Sounding surprised) Catholic?

Lou: (Breaks into song)  
 Andy was a Catholic, the ethic ran through his bones  
 He lived alone with his mother, collecting gossip and toys  
 Every Sunday he went to church  
 He’d kneel in his pew and say: ‘It’s just work,  
 All that matters is just work’...  
 He’d say, “I’ve got to bring home the bacon, someone’s  
 Got to bring home the roast’

Max: Did he say ‘bacon’ and ‘roast’?

Lou: He’d get to the factory early  
 If you’d ask him he’d tell you straight out  
 It’s just work, the most important thing is work.

Max: The bit about Andy being Catholic I don’t understand, but his strong work ethic is something I talk about in my sociological writings. But I can’t work you out, Herr Andy, according to my theories, as an artist, you ought to be an ‘other-worldly mystic’ but if your friends are correct then your work ethic suggests you are in fact a ‘this-worldly ascetic’.

Andy: (Finally speaks up) Perhaps, I’m a ‘this-worldly mystic’, although there are times when I feel more like an ‘other-worldly ascetic’.

The entire dinner party pauses in stunned silence. That was the longest sentence Andy had uttered in years.

## **Dialogue No. 2: When Georg discovered *Wallpaper*\***

The year is 2009 and untenured academic, Georg, has been invited by the Department of Aesthetics, at the University of Budapest, to be a keynote speaker at a conference celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the best-selling book, by his good friend Max, entitled, *The Ascetic-Mystical Ethic and the Spirit of the Warhol Economy*. Georg had planned to finalize his presentation on the plane but he is feeling a little weary and decides instead to enjoy the comforts of Business Class travel. En route to the departure gate he stops at a bookshop and buys the *Wallpaper*\* Guide to Budapest. Georg takes his seat, requests a single-malt whisky from the from the stewardess, and while taking his recent purchase from his briefcase, looks up to see an attractive young woman in her early 20s who is about to sit next to him. She turns out to be

German supermodel, Heidi Klune, who has recently finished a photo-shoot for a campaign advertising a Brazilian Guarana energy drink.

Heidi: How do you do? My name is Heidi.

Georg: Pleased to meet you. I am Dr Simmel, untenured *privatdozent* at the University of Berlin, specializing in sociology, philosophy, philosophy of culture, cultural criticism, and the study of everyday phenomena such as sociability, dining, fashion, adornments, Trade Exhibitions, the metropolis, money, adventures and Alpine Journeys, doors and bridges, the picture frame and the handle. Please take my card.

Heidi: Handles?

Georg: Yes, the cultural study of handles. I contrast the 'handle' to the 'spout' and show that the handle contributes greatly to vases, bowls and other utilitarian objects gaining aesthetic value.

Heidi: And what is the title of your publication on handles?

Georg: 'The Handle'.

Heidi: I see you bought the *Wallpaper\** Guide to Budapest. They really know all the cool spots, those *Wallpaper\** people.

Georg: Yes, I'm very interested in all aspects of interior design. You see I'm an aesthete. I hear Budapest has some very fine Art Nouveau and Secessionist buildings. These are very much to my taste. So I thought this book might serve as a useful guide to the city's interiors. I also collect Japanese vases.

Heidi: (Laughing) Interiors? No, the book is not about wallpaper. It's about Budapest and its produced by the people who run the magazine *Wallpaper\**.

Heidi could see from the puzzled look on Georg's face that he didn't know what she was talking about.

Heidi: *Wallpaper\** is a magazine that was started by style-guru Tyler Brûlé. Tyler once described it as the magazine for 'urban modernists and global navigators... An indulgent magazine for men and women, covering interiors, architecture, entertaining and travel, which will be consumed by all things contemporary'.

Georg: But why would people who run a magazine also want to produce travel guides?

Heidi: Make money I suppose. *Wallpaper\** is a brand that many young people who travel a lot identify with. The guides recommend cool places to eat, drink, visit, and where to shop. If you don't have much time they have a special section titled, '24 hours in...'. It's the 'must-do' things in any international city.

Georg: So you're saying that people want to be told where to eat, drink or shop. As I argue in my essay, 'The Problem of Style', what 'drives modern man [I should probably add woman] so strongly to style is the unburdening and concealment of the personal'. In short, style is part of what I call 'subjective culture'.



- Heidi: But is there anything wrong with other people doing background research for us? Many of us have busy lives and have limited time to find out what is interesting about a place? Not everyone is an anthropologist you know!
- Georg: But what could this book tell me that anybody with a *gymnasium*-level education wouldn't know about Budapest?
- Heidi: Well, take the Tisza Cipő trainer there on page 98 of your *Wallpaper\** Guide to Budapest. The book tells us that these trainers were designed in the communist era, they are now 'hot property' amongst young arty types in Central Europe, and that the 'T' logo on them is now regarded as a design feature well ahead of its time. By the way, according to *Wallpaper\**, Adidas trainers were banned in Hungary during communism.
- Georg: That doesn't surprise me. As I wrote in my essay, 'Sociological Aesthetics', socialism had an aesthetic dimension but it tended to privilege the aesthetics of the machine and the factory – an aesthetic order where every cog has a carefully prescribed function. I guess there is beauty in machines. But as to why an austere, drab looking trainer from the communist era should become a desirable consumer item? One of the key mechanisms by which something acquires aesthetic significance is 'distance': distance from need and utility. Without distance, humans tend to value objects according to 'quantitative' rather than 'qualitative' criteria. In *Philosophy of Money*, I suggest money is important in putting 'distance' between people and objects. Paradoxically, money makes it possible for aesthetic value to flourish; for the quantitative to become qualitative.
- Heidi: *Wallpaper\** also recommends a museum called the House of Terror, a neo-Renaissance mansion that was used by the Hungarian fascists and then the Soviets to torture political prisoners. It also lists many Soviet-era 'Brutalist' buildings worth visiting and a theme park full of statues and monuments associated with the communist era.
- Georg: Again, my 'Sociological Aesthetics' essay pre-empted all this. I suggested in this text that there is nothing too 'low', too 'ugly', too 'repulsive' or too 'uninteresting', that the carefully trained eye can't find some aesthetic merit in it. Everything can be 'dissolved into color and form' or seen in terms of how it shapes 'feeling and experience'. If we focus on such factors, we soon start to see that 'beauty and meaning' flow through all things. I suppose that observation could be extended to places where political prisoners were tortured or a theme park full of statues of Marx, Lenin and heroic workers. However, it wouldn't surprise me at all, if, some of the attractions *Wallpaper\** are recommending comply with a theory I outlined in my essay, 'The Ruin'. I noted there that some objects and forms acquire more beauty as they start to decay. The decaying process creates new surfaces on wood, stone or

even metal, and also creates a more organic relationship between a building and its surroundings.

Heidi: Well, Georg, you are going to love Budapest because *Wallpaper\** says the city is full of something called ‘ruin pubs’, bars set up in decaying and abandoned buildings...

Before Georg can respond to Heidi’s proposition, an announcement is made that the plane is about to begin its descent. As the plane approaches its destination, Georg wonders whether it’s too late to change the title of his Budapest keynote address to: ‘Beyond the Warhol economy: *Wallpaper\** and the hyper-aestheticization of the metropolis, the money-economy, the adventure, the ruin and (of course) the handle’.

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**Postscript:** *Central to the problematic of both the Theses and the Dialogues is the dialectic of ‘form’ and ‘psychic energy’. On this topic, in addition to the work of Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Joseph Schumpeter (whom we have discussed in our text), we would highly recommend Gabriel Tarde’s Laws of Imitation, Wilhelm Worringer’s Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style and John Dewey’s Art as Experience. We should admit, in all good conscience, that we find it hard to read, let alone recommend, anything published after about 1934.*

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