

*di volta in volta*

Art isn't fair

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In bourgeois ideology, the piggy bank appears as a symbol of restraint and accumulation that it tirelessly preaches. One should not consume all of one's income; part of it should be dedicated to hiring productive workers. It is part of Marx's work to have dispelled the popular prejudice that confuses capitalist production with hoarding. Accumulation does not mean withholding from consumption the objects that constitute wealth or saving money from the risks of circulation. On the contrary, it is the surest way to fail to accumulate surplus value, which depends on the amount of unpaid labor extracted from workers who produce more than they receive. "The accumulation of commodities in the sense of hoarding them", writes Marx, "would be sheer foolishness."<sup>1</sup> Yet, the belief may persist that the capitalist becomes wealthy not due to the free labor absorbed but because of the renunciation of all forms of pleasure. Like the hoarder, the capitalist is thought to sacrifice all the desires of the flesh at the altar of the fetish of abstinence. However, his treasure does not only possess a raw form but also an aesthetic one, Marx wrote in the 19th century. Goldsmithing then represents a latent source of monetary supply during periods of social crisis. It expands or contracts with the rise or fall of social wealth, along with other luxury products. Like these, a work of art is therefore particular in that it allows its prudent owner to save their capital while enjoying the sophisticated, albeit guilty, pleasure of its possession. It satisfies these two contradictory impulses that arise from the desire to fix the metamorphosis of the commodity, from money to gold and then to treasure. However, a work of art differs from other luxury products in that it not only lacks utility but also has the capacity to reflect its own value in one way or another. That is, it reflects its power to attract all elements of material wealth, and consequently, the social wealth of its owner. While luxury goods ultimately share with any other commodity the fact that they are exchanged like samples of indistinct labor power, crystallized by a process of abstraction underlying their exchanges, a work of art is closer to money in its ability to disguise the material shell of human labor spent in production through signs. It shares the commodity-crystal's ghostly nature and, with the sign-money, a part of its enigma, tending toward a form of the sublime. The convolutions of abstraction turned into wealth, or the ultimate fantasy—value itself.

Jean Bourgois

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, London, 2004, p.734.