

A Heteroclite Excursus into the Currency that Lives

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Writer, editor, and critic Marina Vishmidt is preoccupied with issues that involve art, labour, and value. She takes up Chris Evans' artwork *Portrait of a Recipient as a Door Handle* to elaborate upon Pierre Klossowski's text *Living Currency* and to address the notion of people as currency and commodities and the inherent economies of affect.

In an interview with the curator Francesco Manacorda some years ago, artist Chris Evans summed up the difference between two then recent works in the following terms: “*The School of Improvement* has the intention of forcing a voice upon those who need one whereas the sculptures following the conversations with the politicians could be the consequence of giving a voice to those who already have one”. In the background details for the work *Portrait of a Recipient as a Door Handle, After a Drawing Produced by an Anonymous Philanthropist* [onlineopen.org/portrait-of-a-recipient-as-a-door-handle] installed on the street door of the Rabobank in Rotterdam's Blaak in February 2014, we learn that the piece is the outcome of conversations with an anonymous philanthropist who decided to draw a recipient of the philanthropist's generosity as seen in the moment that this recipient had overcome their reluctance to accept their gift. Such a reluctance can be formulated as the fear of exploitation, of consequences or “strings” to the gift, which may be apprehension about the expectation of return or of being bound in some kind of relation of servitude – a fear which has good material basis at a time when large financial institutions typically sponsor cultural institutions with one “hand” while throwing mortgage debtors out of their homes with the other.

So here we have two schemes or tableaux whose consequences involve a process of visual embodiment, then again a rendering opaque or packed-in, of power asymmetries or tensions arising from inequality. In *The School of Improvement*, it is giving a voice to Italian judges who judge, giving an object to a philanthropist who gives. In better focus, what immediately lends itself to the understanding is that the fear of exploitation experienced by the recipient is nothing but the insecurity about the ability to keep up repayments experienced by the bank customer who takes out a loan. Like the door handle, she is both introspective and future-shocked in that moment of necessitous indecision, looking both inside the bank to its engines of dispensation and utilising its transparent architecture to entertain an impulse to flee.

Banks as a crucible of our current mode of valorisation and accumulation, frangible behemoths closing, consolidating or vaporising into the perforated economy they helped create like houses into sinkholes (houses which may already be underwater on lenders' balance sheets), banks as the institutional bastions of “strategies of financial control and appropriation of surplus outside of the wage relation in our present,” as cultural studies professor Morgan Adamson writes.¹ Such an appropriation of surplus depends on the calculation of a living stream of currency, that is, human capital, which can also be written off. But there is a distinction to be made between human capital which is potential and

functions in a fiction of separability, like an owner and her portfolio, and the living currency that writer, translator and artist Pierre Klossowski writes about, which is “inert”:

“Imagine, for a moment, an apparently impossible regression – to a phase in industrial production where producers are able to demand objects of sensation, as a form of payment, from consumers. These objects would be living beings.

What we are describing here, in fact, already exists. Without relying on a literal barter economy, all modern industry is founded on bartering mediated by the sign of inert currency, which neutralizes the nature of the objects exchanged. This simulacrum of bartering exists in the guise of available labor, a living currency disavowed as such.”²

The reason it is disavowed as such is that there is an assumption that the person herself cannot be evaluated, as that would violate her integrity. Her potential to appreciate cannot be made thus inert, as she is a living person. Even if valuation itself is an index of flux, and hence of potentiality in both directions, to plummet or ratchet up, looking inward and outward. Yet in the world of living currency, the “living object” is, like money, both a sign of value and its token of circulation; her abstract value, strictly speaking, cannot be pegged to a standard because what it does is go up and down according to the emotions the person elicits, regardless of her own value calculated in the mode of labour-power as a commodity, that is, the value of her means of subsistence (I use “her” here generically, as Klossowski does not stipulate gender as being decisive in the matter of living currency, though he does project industrial workers being paid in women, and working women being paid in “boys.”) Living currency may have a standard but it is a libidinal one – what Klossowski calls the “phantasm.” He thus captures the phantasmatic quality of all money as supposedly commensurate with what it buys, albeit the intensity of the investments we have in it stems precisely from the incommensurability it marks and cannot measure, a certain voluptuous incommensurability which can be scarcity or excess but must have a pretense of being “denumerable” as Klossowski cites in his discussion of the Marquis de Sade – free as in freedom is not really that enticing. Money as a store of value and a medium of circulation, for Klossowski, can be established as a psychic modality which humanises money and financialises people: this is the “phantasm” also, a trick of the commodity as it asocialises social relations and vivifies objects (and “services”). But significantly here, it is because the impersonal ratio embodied by money represents a source of pleasure, of erotic alienation.

Money in other words both makes palpable the infinitely morphing sequences of desire as commodities and makes these desires abstract, marinated as they are in the gelid tank of equivalence. For Marx, things – things produced under the law of value, that is, commodities – enter into social relations among themselves while humans watch spellbound, mute and silent like teapots or housing loans. Klossowski takes the normative mediation and occlusion of this thingification, that is, the way the exchange of labour-power for money tries to isolate the exchange-relation as something contingent and instrumental to real social and emotional relations, and finds it to be central, and because central, impossible to consider, under a ban. The fear of exploitation is the fear of being treated as just another resource, your human autonomy and uniqueness negated or rendered superfluous. What Klossowski gets is that all exchanges for money are exploitative insofar as persons alienate some part of themselves, considering that part or power or potentiality a thing in a relation of value on a market with other things. At the same time, this idea of exploitation, however pointed and running counter to the acceptability or dignity of wage labour, should not occlude the fact that in capitalism, the worker is always both subject and object at the same time – as philosopher Lucio Colletti elucidates, she is an object for capital, but a subject in her separation and refusal of this integration as just another cost or factor of production, and this refusal is what makes her both a liability and a source of incalculable value.³ If recent theory has made much of the

valorisation of subjectivity, it remains to add that the subjectivity of the worker has always been an essential part of the labour-capital relation, and its simultaneous existence as source of value in the wage relation and as a source of refusal or perversion is what makes it a site of politics. What we can also add here perhaps, is a regime of accumulation premised on debt rather than the wage-relation erodes this distinction between subjective and objective – which is to say, when the reproduction of you as a living and social subject is tied up with financial systems directly, rather than one which is mediated by the sale of your labour-power, you are rather intimately an object of extraction – it seems we have not yet figured out, or forgotten how to, discover an insurgent collective agency in refusing to pay, rather than refusing to work.

Where this seems to cast another reflection on the discussion of living currency is the connection between negation and emotion, the abstraction of the individual who is an embodied unit of exchange whose undecidable object-subject status, between alive and dead, is at the same time a source of infinite variability, and thus, affect. In this sense the living currency idea brings it into alignment with other objects of dubious ontology which are fetishised, that is, seen as being both exchangeable-transferable-abstract (the psychoanalytic rather than Marxian notion of the fetish is not so different, since it is predicated on fungibility too, cathecting object after object) and irreplaceable (here we can refer to art as emblematic) practices as well as objects, hence, to its practitioners, artists. One slight digression that could be made here is Klossowski's brief reference to artists as perverse intermediaries, assuming the double phantasm – that is mirroring – the sponsor's disinterestedness and monstrous greed at the same time:

"[The] two different systems of appraisal. On one side, [the artist or the man of letters] represents the intrinsic value of the fabricated simulacrum in accordance with institutional norms, which are those of sublimation. On the other, he is in the service of the valorization of the phantasm in accordance with the obsessive constraint of perversion. . . Such is the personal position of Sade, the day after the Revolution. No one can serve two masters."⁴

Here the artist seems to bear some of the characteristics of living currency too – the limitlessness of affect, and the inertia of the institutional norm. This sounds like an erotic relation, an eroticisation of power read through the lens of a passionate attachment to the unknown, to the self as subject to unforeseen change (the passionate idiom of art as dissolving or dispossessing the self, which we see, for example, and very differently, in the work of both Theodor W. Adorno and literary theorist Leo Bersani).⁵ Yet an erotic relation is supposed to be a relation irreducible to systems of valuation in the market, unless you are employed to do sex work. Klossowski's reading of De Sade makes it plain that erotic obsession, or perversion, slithers along the gradient of money and fictional number value, a scene of excess that revels in dynamics of scarcity and impossible appropriation, impossible thinghood that is all too voluptuous.

People who are commodities are slaves, but what about it if we consider people as currency? Then they can never can be rendered equivalent – thingified – by money, because their value is not value at all, but a relationship. The only way to really establish the irreducibility of human relationships as the material foundation of society rather than incidental to the movements of money is to act as if people are money. Human capital speculates on it and on others, with itself and others, insofar as it is a thing-in-process, or value. It is the mode of appropriation of surplus outside the wage relation, and presupposing it, it qualifies you to receive gifts that inspire a fear of exploitation. Living currency, it seems to me, is the opposite, though it would be curious to consider speculative markets in living currency, and to connect that to how the institution of chattel slavery pioneered many of the financial instruments (risk management, hedges, insurance) in their modern state as we know it today.

And it is the non-personhood of the slave which is the history that writers such as Fred Moten elaborate on in their speculative poetics of “nothingness” as grounds for an excess of collective feeling and performative practice.⁶ Here we could say that Klossowski comes at this paradox of speculation more from a thought of abstraction, calling for a severe and ruthless levelling down of all human relations to a code (money) which then dissolves into the million specificities of those relations, thereby cancelling the separation we make between affective and economic life, a separation still more fixed and endemic at the time he was writing, thus needing to be flushed out into the open, than in our day, when we see that the power of general equivalence is far from diminished by a dissolution of borders between affective and economic life.

A few last scattered thoughts: with living currency we assume fungibility – this person can buy all kinds of commodities up to a certain value – but the value is uncertain as it is based on unique emotional responses. Can units of living currency substitute for one another, then? And in the case of the donor and recipient relationship at issue here, what is substituted for what? The recipient is the bank customer – or is it the bank, or even more reconditely, the door, which hopes to symbolise the transparency of the contract between bank and customer, another splintery phantasm? If the bank evokes a cathedral, then this work falls into the category of medieval art, a sumptuary trinket representing the donor who funded its construction or perhaps an extension, supported by a few aspirational buttresses, just like the donors who were painted in parenthetically, small and supplicant, in medieval altarpieces, in all the ostentatious humility they could afford. And given the notably Art Nouveau aesthetic of the door – a melancholy lady, one who has overcome a certain fear threshold, we are told, but it clearly hasn’t finished clouding her thoughts just yet, is this a risk I can afford? Can I afford not to?

We have to recall the philosopher less of abstraction and equivalence in language than against those tendencies, against theory’s formal correspondences to the de-materializing effects of money, a proponent of language’s specificity and non-translatability, as in the concept of “language games” in Ludwig Wittgenstein. We shouldn’t forget Wittgenstein also being a philosopher of negativity, his sweeping aside of centuries of philosophical problems as so much metaphysical detritus, so many improper uses of words – as ideology, in short, crafted de facto to keep flies happily doing Sudoku at the bottom of the fly bottles and to think they were doing philosophy. Wittgenstein was concomitantly a keen architect and craftsman who parlayed his inherited family fortune not just into the independence to work on his philosophical trajectory sans professional pressures, but also to large-scale philanthropy to artists, not to mention door handles as we see [here](#).

Other theme article *Portrait of a Recipient as a Door Handle*:

[Essay Tirdad Zolghadr](#) [onlineopen.org/annunciation]

Marina Vishmidt completed her PhD, entitled *Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital* at Queen Mary, University of London in 2013. She is the co-editor of *Uncorporate Identity* (Lars Müller, 2010) and *WINTER: Poetics and Politics* (Mousse Publishing, 2013). She is currently writing a book with Kerstin Stakemeier on the politics of autonomy and reproduction in art (Hamburg: Textem, forthcoming). She has taught at Middlesex University, Goldsmiths, Central Saint Martins and Universität der Künste Berlin.

Footnotes

1. Morgan Adamson, "Labor, Finance, and Counterrevolution: 'Finally Got the News' at the End of the Short American Century," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 4 (Fall 2012): pp. 803–823.
2. See Pierre Klossowski, *Living Currency*, trans. Reena Spaulings; originally published as *La Monnaie vivante* (Paris: Éric Losfield, 1970).
3. Emilio Macchia and Michele Filippini, *Leaping Forward: Mario Tronti and the History of Political Workerism* (Maastricht: Jan Van Eyck Academie, 2012).
4. Klossowski, *Living Currency*.
5. While this idea runs throughout their respective work, see for example Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002) and Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
6. See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

Crosslinks

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