# Materials, Money, Crisis
## Introductory Remarks and Questions[1]

Artists try to capture materials as they flow through the system: paint, plastic, printers, software, hammers, cameras, gestures, jpegs, words, lists, whatever. Some materials are retrieved unaccountably, as if fallen from the sky into an already expanded field opening into an abyss of possible criteria. Some materials are retrieved with assertions of necessity, disciplinary engagements inherited from modernism, travesty, indifference, dispersion, spleen, claims of interestingness—a panoply of discursive supports.

A skeptic might proclaim that if all of these supports are valid, none can have authority. A theorist of networks might perceive new lines of agency arising from materials being conceived as "actors in a network," an approach that allegedly does away with confused, monolithic categories in favor of newly found descriptive resources. A beleaguered melancholic, on the other hand, might lament the foreclosure of critical negativity as old taboos become irrelevant for most artists. Despite the clarity of work done from each of these positions, one might want to begin by searching for connections between the now-commonplace expansion and homogenization of material resources and media to fundamental characteristics of the crises of capitalism that serve as their historical backdrop. During an earlier period of crisis, Georg Lukács wrote: "In periods when capitalism functions in a so-called normal manner, and its various processes appear autonomous, people living within capitalist society think and experience it as unitary, whereas in periods of crisis, when the autonomous elements are drawn together into a unity, they experience it as disintegration."[2] Indeed, the contemporary consolidation of the corporate state and a decadent global financial system, defended by the expanded powers of the military and police, seems to correspond historically to an artistic culture that feels at home in an amorphous and not apparently hierarchical field of tools, conceptual strategies, technical processes, etc., all of which count in the institutional definition and material structure of artworks. The ever-expanding field appears particularly dis-integrated.

Early theorists of postmodernism focused on the cultural breakdown of historical narrative and the dissolution of a unified logic of development as factors issuing into pluralized strategies and historically untethered aesthetic resources. Artists born from the mid-1970s on, during the rise of neo-liberalism, mostly came to consciousness after debates over the internal differentiation of these theories had reached a point of entropy, increasingly becoming the stuff of professionalized art school curriculum. Questions surrounding the mobility of the signifier (a symbolic economy often seen as coeval with the rise of floating prices in finance)[3] seem today to be totally subsumed—"after" institutional critique, wall-hung digital photography, and relational aesthetics—by a return to assemblage aesthetics and flatbed picture planes. In the present, when speculative capital has reached a stage of quickening cyclical crises, it might then not be so far fetched to ask: What mediates the fact that during the same period in which asset managers have been busy dematerializing the object of investment, structuring it away from productive economies into a process of spreading risk across their portfolios, many artists have been busy adding materials to theirs? While this question remains entirely rhetorical in its current formulation, asking after what resources help conceptualize the ways in which the constellation of materials, money, and crisis hangs together may provide a basis for thinking the limits and possibilities for artistic practice in the present.

* * *

So what of money? Most materials cost money, a mega- or meta-material if there ever was one. While money purchases materials, its value at the same time provides a model for dematerialization. Art's naked relation to capital bears the matter out, certainly as an investment opportunity for the financial elite, but also on a more speculative epistemological level. More than a century ago the sociologist Georg Simmel articulated the structure of monetary equivalence with that of aesthetic judgment in his *Philosophy of Money*: "The strange, coalescing, abstraction, and anticipation of ownership of property which constitutes the meaning of money, is like aesthetic pleasure in permitting consciousness a free play, a portentous extension into an unresisting medium, and the incorporation of all possibilities without violation or deterioration by reality."[4] The cost of art materials then raises the question of the materiality of cost itself, its very sensibility.

This question of the materiality of cost poses a peculiar dilemma. After all, exchange-value structures a strictly *conceptual* relation between materials. It establishes equivalences between wholly different orders of physical existence, none of which can contain its value, or even its price. “So far no chemist has discovered the origin of exchange-value in either a diamond or a pearl,” Marx writes. He goes on directly concerning the commodity form: “Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects.”[5] Marx himself couldn’t have imagined that monetary exchange could have functioned adequately without the general equivalent of a money-commodity (like gold, or in some cases silver), yet his analysis of money had already clarified the ways in which money coalesced the general form of value equivalence into a new form, one that concretely displays its abstract generality on the money market. “On the money market … [t]he commodity has the same form… It exists in the undifferentiated self-identical form of independent value, of money.”[6] Since the dissolution of the gold standard in 1971 most currencies have not been backed by any material serving as a “guarantee” of their value. This has served to strip capital down to the naked fact of its automatic self-reference, now displayed on HD screens, backlit by an array of LEDs that rapidly flash the changing digits of price volatility. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the Black-Scholes-Merton formula was developed around the same time as the elimination of the gold standard, reinforcing price volatility itself as the centerpiece of modern risk management and inaugurating the ultimately disastrous twenty-year period of a skyrocketing derivatives market[7]. Money’s vanishing act seems to realize something curiously specific to the value that it presupposes, represents, and circulates. With the financialization of capital, prices refer strictly to wagers on future prices and exchange value is freed from any even illusory associations with perceptible material properties, grounding a concept of monetary flow that cannot be separated from a permanent and fundamental volatility that is ultimately identical to a concept of crisis.[8]

Exchange-value tends toward its pure state as the idea that circulates through the system. This is something that is *realized* rather than *perverted* by finance capital. Of course, this is only a tendency in the strict sense. The movement toward the idea of exchange is always necessarily incomplete as it is only the daily, material activity of transacting that leverages its conceptual efficacy. Production materials are thus left to a contingent logistical future: Finance commences invisibly matching and betting against complex contracts that hedge technical processes and obsolescence, raw matter and poisonous waste, final products and food shortages, promises of payment, their derivatives, speculations in the art market, etc. The geography of global volatility continues to expand, even as value contracts to its idea and the paid labor force shrinks. Perhaps this modulation of expansion and shrinkage allows us to generate forms of material equivalence? For instance, what are the ties that bind the multitude of fingertips stimulating tactile touchscreens in New York with the neuro-toxin-numbed, nerve-damaged hands of workers on production lines in Shenzhen? How might we think of the material structure of the interface here as a heuristic device for something like a *geo-conceptual* contraction of production, circulation, and consumption?

* * *

The German playwright Bertolt Brecht, in an early note on an attempt to understand and research the best way to represent the wheat exchange on the stock market as material for an unfinished production, writes: "I thought I would be able to acquire … information [concerning Chicago's wheat exchange] quickly by making a few enquiries of specialists and practitioners. It happened otherwise. No one, neither well-known writers on economics nor business people … could explain the processes of the wheat exchange to me adequately. I won the impression that these processes were simply inexplicable, i.e. not to be grasped by reason, i.e. unreasonable … this grain market was one big swamp."[9]

The stock market, Brecht suggests, is an unreasonable material to represent, save for metaphors of congealed liquidity (and by extension, of evaporation). Here a flood of questions starts to break in: What other lexical structures might enable us to give form to processes seemingly too complex (or simply self-mystifying) for adequate representation? What does this imply for defining a specifically materialist artistic practice? In what ways can artworks eschew facile representational conventions—i.e., mere information about present conditions—while still making a claim upon the social imaginary that surrounds their material foundations? What forms of perceptual experience can artworks mobilize—or proscribe—in opposition to the accelerating time of capital's destructive and self-perpetuating data streams (measured in microseconds in the case of practices like high frequency trading)? What meaning does the affective free play of the faculties in modern theories of aesthetic experience signify after the advent of proprietary algorithms used to track and predict affects transmitted over communications technologies (or, as one executive muses, "We've never before had the technology or the data to be able to quantify human emotion. This is the 4th dimension."[10])? What mediates the relations between expanding material resources in the contemporary artwork and attempts to renew capital accumulation cycles through national austerity programs? What forms of cultural localization and site emerge from a global corporate museum culture, one that is as distributed and remotely controlled as any matrix of data centers? Might turning to an examination of the nexus between instruments, physical supports, and organizational structures allow us to capture these flows, even fleetingly, in order to cast them in a light that reveals and exploits the ways in which they are riven by contradiction and crisis? Or does this suggest a mere fetish for the contingent perceptible qualities of technical media?

Artists, just like everyone—and everything—else, are themselves materials that flow through a system in which they are captured, which raises the question of what might be mobilized for the construction of new eddies and countercurrents.

1 A version of this text was sent out as an invitation to participate in the symposium "Materials, Money, Crisis," organized by Richard Birkett and Sam Lewitt at Artists Space in New York, 27–29 April, 2012. It was also read at the symposium as part of the introductory remarks.

2 Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in Theodor W. Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, London, Verso, 2002, p. 32.

3 Cf. Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998*, New York, Verso, 1998, p. 136–162.

4 Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, New York, Routledge, 1978, p. 328.

5 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, New York, Vintage Books, 1977, p. 139.

6 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach, New York, Penguin Classics, 1991, p. 490. See also Marx's allegory of money as a topsy-turvy incarnation of abstract classificatory systems into individual form: With money, "It is as if, in addition to lions, tigers, hares and all other really existing animals which together constitute the various families, species, subspecies, etc. of the animal kingdom, the animal would also exist, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom." (Cited in Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, trans. Alexander Locascio, New York, Monthly Review Press. p. 78) The sublimation of all merchandise, and homogenization of all qualitatively distinct types of labor in the singular form of money might also be related to Simmel's observation concerning the hardening of the singularity of judgments of taste into the abstract possibility of the money form. Following the Kantian model of aesthetic judgment whereby the singularity of a pure reflective judgments prescribe their own universal validity. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co., 1987, § 6–9. For an account of the exchange abstraction as the historical condition for the emergence of transcendental subjectivity, see Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press, 1978.

7 See Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004.

8 The conceptualization of money as a medium of exchange has always been linked to crisis. On the simplest level, this is clear from the fact that one can sell a commodity without necessarily buying another in return with the money earned, thereby interrupting the process of reproduction through hoarding, i.e. by fetishizing money as an independent form of value's appearance. What is new with the explosion of derivatives trading and related financial practices is a conception of price as a form that corresponds to no material production *except* the production of crisis itself through circulating price volatility.

9 Quoted from Patty Lee Parmalee, *Brecht's America*, Miami, Ohio State University Press, 1981, pp. 139–140.

10 This is from a press release by London-based Derwent Capital Markets, a boutique hedge fund that uses Twitter to monitor social media in a practice called "Social Media Sentiment Trading." Information can be found at www.derwentcapitalmarkets.com.