

The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy

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Introduction

The French art historian Hubert Damisch once characterized the brushstroke as an indicator of subjectivity in painting. For him, painting, unlike verbal utterances, reveals nothing but the “traces of an activity to the eyes”¹—and it does so via the brushstroke. The following essay draws on this assumption that painting can be regarded as a trace of an activity, that it evokes subjectivity—the subjectivity of painting—and suggests agency. But unlike Damisch, who worked with a *restricted* notion of painting, limiting it to the narrow borders of the picture on canvas, I will take its manifold historical expansions and openings into account. While doing justice to its expansions and despecifications, I will nevertheless examine what remains specific—or residually specific—about painting.

The subjectivity evoked by Damisch is obviously *not* the subjectivity of the artist-painter manifested in painting. Rather, subjectivity means that painting has its “own discourse” and its “own narrative.”² Damisch is not alone in assuming that painting has a subjectivity of its own, which is a way of treating it like a quasi-subject. This view that painting has a life of its own and can therefore “think” or “speak” is prevalent among many French art historians, from Louis Marin to Georges Didi-Huberman.³ I would argue that we are dealing with *vitalist projections* here and that it is not by chance they are often expressed in relation to painting. Painting is able to trigger such vitalist assumptions because of its specific language, or more precisely, because of its specific indexicality. Of course it could be argued, as Andreas Reckwitz did, that *all* aesthetic practices employ “systems of signs” and therefore contain a semiotic dimension.⁴ But in my view it is specifically in painting where one type of sign—indexical signs—predominates. Indexical signs possess the physical power of a pointing finger, a power that comes close to “magnetisms” (Peirce).⁵ I would say that once they appear in the context of painting they forcefully point to the absent author who seems to be somewhat physically present in them.

¹ Hubert Damisch, *Im Zugzwang: Delacroix, Malerei, Photographie* (Berlin: diaphanes, 2005), 19–20. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² Ibid.

³ See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Die leibhaftige Malerei* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002); and Louis Marin, *Die Malerei zerstören* (Berlin: diaphanes, 2003).

⁴ Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität: Zum Prozess gesellschaftlicher Ästhetisierung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), 28.

⁵ These reflections on the index were inspired by Ludwig Jäger, “Zeichen und Wirklichkeit: Wie semiotisch ist das Reale,” in *Was ist die Wirklichkeit Wirklich?*, ed. Irmgard Bohunovsky-Bärnthaler (Klagenfurt: Ritter, 2010), 30–55.

According to Umberto Eco a sign is a *physical* form that refers to something it is not.⁶ In painting the physical form of its signs seems to get constantly emphasized. Our attention is drawn to the physicality of these signs, and this happens regardless of how they refer to something, iconically or symbolically. Irrespective of what they depict or refer to, they will be experienced in their physicality as a manifestation of the absent author. Of course, other art forms have mobilized this type of indexicality as well—think only of experimental film and how scratches operate as physical reminders of the author’s intervention. But in painting it is all of its signs—iconic or symbolic—that simultaneously evoke the ghostlike presence of their absent author.⁷ This is owing to their enhanced physicality or, to use a more common term, to their emphatic materiality.

I have already hinted to the fact that painting’s indexicality differs from the indexicality of other art forms insofar as it brings its author into play and can therefore be perceived as a manifestation of the artist. This phantasmatic sensation can even be triggered by postwar painterly practices, like those of Sigmar Polke or Gerhard Richter, which had an anti-subjectivist or anti-vitalist agenda. While opting for procedures that undermined authorship, their works nevertheless triggered vitalist projections. Many of Polke’s recent works seem somewhat “alive” or self-active. Indeed, the old myth of painting’s self-activity, the old myth that painting is alive, is activated in his work, albeit ironically.

But what kind of liveliness is suggested here? The type of liveliness I am interested in has little to do with the aesthetic liveliness that is often evoked and praised so highly since the art of the Renaissance.⁸ Rather, the sense of liveliness we get from painting results from the fact that the life and the work time of the respective artists have been spent on it. Indeed painting often seems to be enriched by the artist or through “living labor,” to use a Marxian concept.⁹ But while painting contains this living labor, it can’t be reduced to it since it withholds it as well—and this is one of painting’s many advantages. The labor and the lifetime of the painter are *seemingly* stored in it. I add seemingly to emphasize that the artist does not have to actually touch his or her canvas in order for this indexical effect to occur. These kind of indexical effects can be observed in mechanical or anti-subjective painterly procedures as well.

⁶ Umberto Eco, *Einführung in die Semiotik* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1972), 30.

⁷ The linguist Ludwig Jäger has recently put the emphasis on another dimension of the sign: Signs do not only stand for or refer to something else. They also refer to other signs. And this “inferential play” of signs is presupposed in their reference-function. They are only able to refer to something because they are able to refer to one another. See Ludwig Jäger, “Zeichen und Wirklichkeit.”

⁸ Frank Fehrenbach, “Kohäsion und Transgression: Zur Dialektik lebendiger Bilder,” in *Animationen/Transgressionen: Das Kunstwerk als Lebewesen*, ed. Ulrich Pfisterer and Anja Zimmermann (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005), 3.

⁹ “Das Kapital ist verstorbene Arbeit, die sich nur vampyrmäßig belebt durch Einsaugung lebendiger Arbeit und um so mehr lebt, je mehr sie davon einsaugt” (Berlin 1984). Karl Marx, “Der Arbeitstag,” in *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1984), 247.

It is important to note that there is an inner connection between what I have described as painting's specific indexicality—the way labor and lifetime seem to be contained in it—and its value-form. More precisely, I think that one can relate painting's regained popularity to how it seems to store the artist's life and work time. According to Karl Marx's labor theory of value (*Arbeitswerttheorie*), value can only be generated in a material thing if labor (and therefore lifetime) has been stored in it.¹⁰ Consequently, one could go so far as to say: no value without living labor. Since painting is able to produce the sensation that it has captured living labor, this could explain its current popularity in our new economy, which has been alternatively described by social scientists as a “post-Fordist condition” (Paolo Virno), as “cognitive capitalism” (Yann Moulier-Boutang), or as “network-capitalism” (Luc Boltanski/Eve Chiapello). What designates this new economy is that it aims at our cognitive and affective capacities. Seen from this angle it is the way we live that becomes commodified. Think only of social-media sites like Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook and how they market our “life events.” I believe that painting is particularly well positioned in such an economy since it gives the impression of being saturated with the life of its author. This could explain the renewed interest in painting—it is still at the top of artistic hierarchies and fetches the highest prices, especially at auction, despite the delimitation or “defraying” (Adorno) of the arts.

An Expanded Notion of Painting that Captures Its Specificity

At first it seems obvious that we can't equate painting with a picture on canvas any longer, which is what art historians like Damisch or Marin had assumed. Such a restricted notion of painting has been historically refuted by many pre- and postwar artistic practices—from Francis Picabia's *Natures Mortes* (1920) to artists like Yves Klein or Niele Toroni.

Let me try to distinguish the different ways in which painting has transgressed its boundaries and opened up to the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) by looking closely at some exemplary cases. Note that each attempt to question painting's boundaries in the past ended up contributing to its revitalization. Picabia's *Natures Mortes* is a case in point. It is not only a manifestation of how the boundaries of painting exploded, but stands for painting's fusion with something external to it: a consumer object. On the one hand, Picabia's painting literally integrated the ready-made by attaching a consumer item—a stuffed monkey—to the surface of a canvas.¹¹ But instead of interpreting this as a threat to painting's integrity, as was often done, I would propose that the ready-made actually breathes new life into it. If we consider the ready-made as a way of allowing immaterial labor and the labor of

¹⁰ Karl Marx, “Ware und Geld,” in *ibid.*, 65.

¹¹ Georges Baker, *The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 101.

others to enter the aesthetic sphere, as John Roberts suggested,¹² then we can conclude that painting gets charged with social, living labor once it absorbs the ready-made. Its fusion with the ready-made represents a way of revitalizing painting. But *Natures Mortes* also consists of written messages: the term *natures mortes* and the names of supposed master-artists like Cézanne, Renoir, and Rembrandt are painted on the surface of the canvas. These inscriptions are transformed into a linguistic proposition, which undermines the alleged essence of painting—at least at a first glance. On closer inspection the painting is simultaneously revitalized because it seemingly speaks, albeit in a silent fashion. And only living things can speak. To the same extent that this painting has opened up—toward the sphere of commodity, labor, and textual propositions—it gains vitality and liveliness.

The boundaries of painting also dissolved when it was fused together with the artist's body and performative elements, as in Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* (1960) or in the 1965 painting-performances by the Gutai group. Apart from the specifics of these respective performances, the conflation of paintings and bodies ensures once again that painting gets charged with life. One could therefore go so far as to say that the "performative turn" allowed for painting's revitalization. Sigmar Polke's *The Large Cloth Of Abuse* (1968) is another example of how the narrow boundaries of the picture on canvas dissipate when merged with the artist's body. But this work also gains a sense of liveliness. Worn like a gown, the fabric alone implies the reconciliation between the spheres of fine and applied arts (fashion and design). The work gains further power due to its proximity to the artist's body. Like a relic it has been in touch with its maker and his life—it is charged with it. The curses and insults inscribed onto it add to this life dimension, transforming the cloth into a discursive object that speaks to us and therefore appears to be alive.

We can detect a similar empowerment of painting when considering how postwar painting internalized the lessons of institutional critique, as in the visual marks of artists like Niele Toroni or Daniel Buren. Obviously painting can no longer be regarded as synonymous with a flat picture plane hung on the wall.¹³ It presents itself, as in Toroni's work, as a series of marks, which transgress the boundaries of the canvas and work on the surface of the walls instead. One could say that these marks reach out dynamically into the exhibition space in order to highlight the importance of painting's institutional conditions. These types of interventions presuppose that artistic or painterly gestures can unfold an epistemological potential. They are supposed to reveal something, meaning that they can act like an agent. Once again painting is charged with subject-like qualities.

It seems difficult, if not impossible, to strictly delineate painting under these circumstances. How can we determine the specificity of something that has evidently despecified in many ways?

¹² John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007), 24.

¹³ André Rottmann, "Introduction: Remarks on Contemporary Painting's Perseverance," in *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas*, ed. Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, and Nikolaus Hirsch (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 9–13.

Adding to these difficulties, many painters don't restrict their activities to painting alone. I am thinking of artists like Amy Sillman whose films or diagrams are integral to her practice. In other cases printed matter has risen to the status of painting, like the work of Martin Kippenberger where posters (and not only self-portraits) function as a vehicle for self-promotion. It is not only that painting incorporates other art forms and learns from them, but it can also function as an "implicit horizon" (Kerstin Stakemeier, Avigail Moss) for many non-painterly practices as well.¹⁴ Think of artists like Jeff Wall or Wolfgang Tillmans whose work has tirelessly demonstrated how photography can take up the representative and narrative strategies of painting, how it can produce material surfaces that mimic the surface of abstract painting. Painting's codes have proliferated, especially in those practices that originally wanted to dissociate themselves from painting.¹⁵ Faced with such an omnipresence of painterly codes and conventions it seems tempting to opt for a highly elastic notion of painting, to detect it everywhere. From such a vantage point even the the assemblages of an artist like Rachel Harrison could be considered painting since they mobilize a painterly rhetoric like Impressionism or Abstract Expressionism. But instead of working with an endlessly flexible and arbitrary notion of painting, I would like to propose an idea of painting that, on the one hand, acknowledges painting's manifold historical expansions, while on the other hand, grasps its residual specificity. If it wasn't for this specificity it wouldn't make sense to speak of painting at all. In the following section, the term painting will therefore be designated to those practices that push beyond the edge of the frame, while still holding on to the specificity of the picture on canvas or to variations of this format. This allows for an expanded notion of painting. But since we still encounter variations of the picture on canvas in the midst of its despecification we can assume that painting continues to accomplish something that is specific to it.

The Narrow Bond between Product and Person

But how can we get a sense of this residual specificity once painting has merged with other procedures—from the ready-made and linguistic propositions to bodies and the insights of institutional critique? Is the picture on canvas able to trigger vitalist projections that other art forms only provoke to a different or even lesser degree? To get a better sense of painting's suggestive power I will opt for a semiotic approach, which implies to understand painting as a particular kind of language. More precisely: I will opt for an adoption *and* modification of Charles S. Peirce's concept of indexicality.

Considering painting semiotically—as a form of sign production—has two advantages: 1) It enables us to register the presence of painterly signs in non-painting (which doesn't mean that we

¹⁴ See Avigail Moss and Kerstin Stakemeier, eds., *Painting: The Implicit Horizon* (Maastricht, NL: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012).

¹⁵ Helmut Draxler, "Malerei als Dispositiv: Zwölf Thesen," *Texte zur Kunst* (March 2010): 38–45.

have to go so far as to qualify, say, a painted assemblage by Harrison as painting; and 2) It allows us to notice *and* explain the strong bond between the product and the person (the artist), which seems to be especially tightly woven in the picture on canvas. You might object right away that there are other art forms, such as Performance art, where we encounter an even stronger nexus between the artist's person (person in the sociological sense of an individual playing different roles) and his or her product. This is certainly true: product and person tend to overlap in performance, the product being the person (not the authentic person of the artist of course, but a *highly staged* version of it). In performance the product is the person; it cannot exist without him or her (apart from props or video documentation). By contrast, the metonymic relationship between product and person is mediated and *negotiated* through the picture on canvas. While paintings seem to somewhat contain the artist, they can't be reduced to this person. What prevents the reduction of this painterly product to its maker is its specific materiality. Leon Battista Alberti already spoke of painting as a "more tangible Minerva,"¹⁶ hinting to this specific materiality, to something standing in the way. Both product and person signify one another but they don't collapse into one another.

In other words, painting is a product that is saturated with what one imagines to be the person of the artist but it can't be reduced to this person. Even a renowned art historian like Daniel Arasse admitted to the "crazy idea" that it is possible to get a sense of what someone like Piero della Francesca dreamed or imagined while standing in front of one of his frescoes.¹⁷ Arasse evidently didn't believe in Piero's presence in the product but admitted that the person of the artist (via his thoughts and dreams) might be present in it.

Painting's Specific Indexicality

I propose to relate the ghostlike presence of the absent author in painting to the way indexical signs actually operate. According to Peirce, an index shows something of a thing because of its *physical connection* to it: "The index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair."¹⁸

As an example of this "class of signs," which corresponds to the original object "point by point," Peirce cites photography.¹⁹ Aside from the question of whether we can really conceive the photographic recording of light conditions as a trace or imprint, Peirce's reference to photography at this point had far-reaching consequences. Photography was considered to be the indexical art form

¹⁶ Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura – Über die Malkunst*, ed. Oskar Bätschmann and Sandra Gianfreda (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), 67.

¹⁷ "Il y a peut-être une forme de folie dans cette idée qu'on puisse atteindre à nouveau ce qu'a rêvé ou imaginé Piero della Francesca devant sa fresque." Daniel Arasse, *Histoires de peintures* (Paris: Denoël, 2004), 26.

¹⁸ Charles S. Peirce, "Die Kunst des Raisonierens," in *Semiotische Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. Christian J. W. Kloesel and Helmut Pape (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 199.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

par excellence by many art historians because it gives an automatic inscription of the object without presupposing an author. This allows for conceptualizing authorship or intentionality as a vacant spot. In other words, the index is usually regarded as the anti-subjective device that undermines authorship. I will claim a *different indexicality* for painting, which functions precisely in the opposite way. While its indexical signs also establish—or seem to establish—a physical connection, this connection is not to an object, but to the one who left his or her marks. I adopt the Peircean model, but with a slight modification. Whereas Peirce places emphasis on the factual, physical connectedness of the index to its object, I highlight the index's faculty for *evoking* such a physical connection. Painting suggests a physical connection to the one who made it. Of course we will find indexical signs of this kind in other art forms like film or photography—for instance, I have already mentioned that the scratches on film or deliberate false exposures can be read as manifestations of the author. However, whereas photography is, as Roland Barthes put it, usually characterized by its exceptional capacity to denote reality, painting by contrast tends to bring its author into effect.²⁰

Finally, if I link indexicality to painting in this way it does not imply that I ignore the split that occurs between the artwork and what is imagined to be the “authentic” self of the artist. What we encounter in the indexical signs of painting is not so much the authentically revealed self of the painter. As indexes these signs are able to suggest the (imaginary) presence of the absent artist. Painting is, in other words, a highly differentiated language that consists of a number of techniques, methods, and artifices, which allow for the fabrication of the impression of the author's quasi-presence *as an effect*. Many artists are aware of these instruments and their suggestive power, using them deliberately or ironically to produce *and* mock this effect.

The Subject-Like Power of Painting

For this indexical effect to occur, the artist does not need to set his or her hand on the picture, to have brandished a brush, or to have thrown paint on canvas. A mechanically produced silkscreen by Andy Warhol, who often delegated his work to his assistants, or more recently, the digitally printed paintings by Wade Guyton, are no less capable of conveying the sense of a latent presence of the artist—by virtue, for instance, of imperfections deliberately left uncorrected, selected combinations of colors, or subsequent improvements. Even if the artist hasn't physically touched the work, it consists of indexical signs that, according to Peirce, are able to capture our attention because they are affected by the power of their object, which in this case is a subject—the person of the artist. But couldn't these claims be made for sculpture as well? Definitely. But it is only painting that is backed up with a phlethora of historical arguments, attesting a subject-like power to it. In this context, one need only recall Hegel's *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (1835–38), where he distinguished painting

²⁰ See Roland Barthes, *Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn: kritische Essays III* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

as an art form that opens the way “to the principle of finite and inherently infinite subjectivity.”²¹ According to Hegel, we see in painting that which is active in us and drives us. This allows us to feel more at home and somewhat familiar (*einheimischer*) with it. Certainly, Hegel’s attempt to model painting after subjectivity—subjectivity not in the sense of the subjectivity of the artist but in the sense of a general capacity—leads to a problematic anthropomorphic projection. One also can’t claim a transhistoric validity for his argument especially since painting hadn’t expanded beyond its frame and therefore wasn’t “beside itself,” to use David Joselit’s apt term, during Hegel’s lifetime. Despite this, it is still important to note it is painting (*and not sculpture*) that Hegel used as an example here; it was painting, after all, that provided him with an occasion and reason of such a projection. In my opinion, the unique dynamic developed by paint on a surface already allows for the sensation that we are also dealing with a *model of subjectivity* in the sense of an independent mental life. Note how Diderot declared paint to be the place where “a man’s character and temperament” comes to the fore. Diderot was actually convinced that the painter reveals himself in his work “just as much, if not more so as the writer in his.”²²

When the Critique of the Subject Turns Painting into a Subject

Painting’s signs are indexical insofar as they tend to be read as traces of artists. Even if we opt for a deconstructivist approach, insisting how the trace equally addresses “the formal conditions of separation, division, and deferral,”²³ we are still dealing with the ghost of a presence.

Frank Stella’s observation that painting is a sort of handwriting was actually quite appropriate, despite the fact that his own work has often been perceived as an attempt to undermine the importance of handwriting.²⁴ One could establish the following rule: the more negation there is of handwriting, the more this negation will be considered to be the handwriting of the artist.²⁵ This is also true for paintings that avoid handwriting by using a technical device, as in Gerhard Richter’s abstract paintings produced with a squeegee. By moving the squeegee up and down the painting in a particular way, Richter inscribes his own body movement into the painting, which makes it resemble an imprint. In other words, all those manifold attempts by postwar painting to undermine the authority of the artist-subject with the help of various anti-subjective procedures, nevertheless,

²¹ G. W. F. Hegel, “Die romantische Kunstform,” in *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 17.

²² Denis Diderot, “Notes on Painting: To Serve as an Appendix to the Salon of 1765,” in *Diderot on Art, Volume 1: The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting*, trans. John Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 197–98.

²³ Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” *October*, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 68–81.

²⁴ Bruce Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd,” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 157.

²⁵ Michael Lüthy and Christoph Menke, eds., introduction to *Subjekt und Medium in der Kunst der Moderne*, (Zurich: diaphanes, 2005), 9.

allowed the artist-subject to enter through the back door. And this goes even further: the more artists have tried to erase themselves from their work, the more subject-like their work is going to appear. The painting seems to have painted itself. Agency shifts from the artist to the painting.

Painting's Specific Value-Form

But how does painting's capacity to evoke the sense of what I described as a "ghostly presence" relate to the value that is attributed to it? Value not in the sense of "price" but in the sense of a symbolic worth that is attested to it once it circulates as a commodity.

For an artwork to be considered valuable it must first be attributed to an author—one could say that it is thereby *loaded with intentionality*. This process becomes intensified in the case of the indexical signs of paintings. Here, the artist seems to have left traces (even if mechanically produced, this suggestion of a handwriting persists), enhancing the impression of an intentional artwork, of an artwork that is "an emanation or manifestation of agency" (Alfred Gell).²⁶ Painting then would have to be understood as an art form that is particularly favorable to the belief—widespread in the visual arts more generally—that by experiencing or purchasing a work of art, it is possible to get a more immediate access to what is assumed to be the singularity of the artist and his or her life. Tate Modern's director Chris Dercon recently pointed to this belief when explaining the popularity of Ai Weiwei's work with its capacity to give the viewer the feeling that he or she is part of Ai's life.²⁷ The uniqueness associated with paintings is even more able to implement this impression that the artist has been "in touch" with it—a quality missing in the copy. While all artworks possess a kind of "memorial power" (Boltanski/Arnaud Esquerre) because they are associated with a person, this power operates quite literally in painting. It is therefore particularly well equipped to satisfy the longing for an (imaginary) substance in value. Indeed, paintings could be perceived as a demonstration of how value is founded on something concrete: the living labor of the artist.

Let's recall how Marx conceptualized value. While his labor theory of value didn't take art commodities into consideration, I nevertheless think that it is eminently useful as a backdrop for understanding the specific value of art and painting in particular. Marx defined value as "labor in its congealed state," and for him value is the material realization of human labor.²⁸ But labor, for Marx, can encompass immaterial labor as well—no physical labor needs to have been expended, no concrete material used, for value to come into existence. This means that conceptual or performative art practices are also value-generating forms of labor. For Marx, value was embodied by

²⁶ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1999), 20.

²⁷ Birte Carolin Sebastian, "Kunst soll verbinden, nicht gekauft werden," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Feuilleton*, January 9, 2014, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/tate-modern-kunst-soll-verbinden-nicht-gekauft-werden-12741326.html>.

²⁸ Karl Marx, "Ware und Geld," 65.

commodities. Value here means that we are deceived: the commodity obscures the labor power that was expended for it elsewhere. Now I would argue that the value of the art commodity, and painting in particular, functions in the opposite way because labor is not hidden or obscured, as in the commodity, but emphasized and cultivated, forcing and heightening its aliveness or rather the impression that it is alive. And this is also true for conceptual paintings that consist of mechanic, delegated, or nonlabor—their use of “dead labor” will end up being credited to the individual labor of the artist and thereby still allow for vitalist projections of liveliness.

Liveliness as Valuable Resource

Seen from this perspective, it is surely no accident that liveliness has been a central aspiration in the visual arts since the early modern period, guiding both aesthetic debates and aesthetic productions. Alberti already believed that it was the mission of painting—a “divine power”—to create life and to make “absent men present.”²⁹ Absent men referred to the depicted persons, not to the person of the painter who left traces. As a topos of appraisal, liveliness has an “astonishingly long and continued history.”³⁰ The production of life and liveliness was elevated to the status of an ideal that painting and sculpture labored to achieve well into the nineteenth century. We encounter a redefinition and intensification of this aspiration in the historic avant-garde of the early twentieth century, which, as is well known, sought to translate art into life and aimed to literally integrate the realities of life into art. Today, the emphatic reference to life in the avant-garde appears in a different light, also as a consequence of the intense debate over “the new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski/Chiapello), which is busy absorbing life.

Painting seems to be one of the last places where the desire for a concrete foundation of value seemingly gets fulfilled. Brushstrokes alone can be read as tracing labor and life activities. Painting, therefore, generates the illusionary impression that it is possible to grasp a fiber of the living labor that was mobilized for it—either by experiencing it aesthetically or by purchasing it. The painter James Whistler intuited this already. Faced with the question as to why he asked for such a high price for a painting that took him only two days to make, he supposedly answered: “I ask it for the knowledge of a life time.”³¹ The knowledge of a whole life of labor is meant to have flown into this painting, justifying its price that is evidently unlimited. No price is high enough for it. Indeed, if painting compresses labor- and lifetime it is as invaluable and priceless as life itself.

²⁹ Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura – Über die Malkunst*, ed. Oskar Bätschmann and Sandra Gianfreda (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), 101.

³⁰ Frank Fehrenbach, “Kohäsion und Transgression: Zur Dialektik lebendiger Bilder,” in *Animationen/ Transgressionen: Das Kunstwerk als Lebewesen*, ed. Ulrich Pfisterer and Anja Zimmermann (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005), 3.

³¹ John La Farge, *Considerations on Painting* (New York: Bibliolife Reproduction Series, 2012), 40.

Furthermore, painting promises the existence of an *imaginary* place where labor (also in its form of nonlabor) actually remains private and concrete, detectable in the concrete materiality of its surface and the gestures it displays. The picture on canvas condenses and stores up labor-time (or nonlabor) in a way that is different from time-based media like film and photography. All of the labor stored in a painting is experienced by the viewer at once rather than unfolding over time. Eugène Delacroix had precisely this virtue of painting in mind when he noted that we can see it “in one instant.”³² And in case we find it to be “mediocre,” we can turn away from it to escape a sensation of boredom. This means that painting not only compresses life- and labor-time, but allows us to experience both simultaneously in a way where it can but doesn’t have to appeal to us. If we dislike the work we can turn our gaze away from it. Film by contrast develops over time, making it necessary to spend time with it if we want to get a sense of the work. Of course there are many other art forms, such as pop music or theater, which have proved to be more successful in producing a sense of liveliness. But the visual arts, and painting in particular, presents liveliness in the form of a material object, which is not reducible to this aspect, and that non-reducibility might be its special attraction. Painting’s capacity to appear particularly saturated with the life- and labor-time of its author, while remaining distinct from it, makes it the ideal candidate for value production in a new economy that is busy absorbing life.

³² Eugène Delacroix, *Mein Tagebuch: Aus dem Französischen und mit einer Einleitung von Erich Hancke, einem Essay von Charles Baudelaire sowie einem Personenregister* (Zurich: Diogenes Verlag, 1993), 51.