Convex Portrait in a self-mirror:

Social Dissonance and Social Synthesis

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I.

In a commentary about John Ashbery's "Self-portrait on a convex mirror", Lee Edelman states:

> The very title poses the problem raised by Ashbery's poem--a problem that itself might be formulated in terms of posing and imposture, a vocabulary of disguise that introduces doubt into the representation of the self. The title, of course, announces the text's engagement of the issue of representation and, specifically, of the difficulties that inhere in the attempt to represent oneself. For the image constitutive of a self-portrait demands that it be read in some relation to the original; but as Ashbery's poem indicates, the nature of the "original" is often far from clear.[1]

The issue of *representation* is, in a related sense, at the core of Mattin's *Social Dissonance*. Not only representation itself, but *self-representation* as the book dives into Marxist theory of ideology, but doesn't stop there, searching for the absent core of identity within the neurobiological realm as depicted in Metzinger's theory of the *Phenomenal Self-Model*. Mattin's book aims to construct a possible mediation between the social realm determined by capitalist abstract domination and the neurological realm. In that sense, it attempts to uncover the conditions of *adequate* conceptualization of our self-determination, and to question whether this conceptualization is even still possible, considering all the *convexities*-to take Ashbery's turn of phrase- of the relationships between the intervening media involved

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[1] Edelman, 1986, p. 95

in the process, from social determination to the individual taken (in an ideologically dubious way) as an atom.

In the preface to the book, Ray Brassier states:

> Capitalism tethers subjectivity to the property relation: to be a social subject is to be a proprietor, either of capital or of labour-power. The realisation of freedom, individual and collective, is stymied by this basic antagonism, locked between its poles. The construction of social dissonance ties this antagonism to the dynamic of alienation traversing the superposed strata of subjectivity: alienation from below, attributable to the dysfunction of the subpersonal mechanisms conforming awareness into the shape of the self; and alienation from above, imposed by the suprapersonal structures constantly personifying us. Personification interpellates the self as a proprietor of experience. By exposing this complicity between naturally mandated selfhood and socially mandated personhood, social dissonance aims to alienate us from the proprietary relation to the experience we call our own. Sandwiched between the sub- and supra-personal levels, cognitive subjectivity is constrained from below (by neurobiology) and conditioned from above (by ideology).[2]

Thus, *Social Dissonance* aims to offer a theory of the mediations between two forms of alienation, one, social-historical in origin, which constitutes the bulk of the first part of the book, while another, neurobiological, constitutes the second part. A third part tries to mediate between these through the *exercise* of a third form of alienation. *Social Dissonance* is then not only a theory of alienation, investigating the means of *representation of representation* within the distortion one is unavoidably prone to in one's view of the current conditions. It aims to theorize a specific form of *practice* that can contribute not only to making alienation manifest, thus, turning it into a positive condition once it is integrated into our self-knowledge, which is deemed to be a step in the path to eventually change this alienated condition. Here, one might find a second *doubling-* that of practice- that mirrors the doubling of representation just alluded to, namely, the representation of representation as a means to understand the conditions of representing as necessarily alienated. In his *dissonant practice of practice*, Mattin aims to provoke discomfort. A productive discomfort that would, in a way, echo Dominic Fox's idea of *militant dysphoria.*

> At such times we seem particularly aware of the world *as* a world, as a place where we have to live. This awareness can become artistic or political: *artistic*, when the world made strange by our own detachment and dissociation presents itself as an object of fascination; *political* when the

[2] Mattin, 2022, p. 14.

difficulty of going on living in such a world begins to reveal its causes in the impersonal circumstances of our personal sorrows.[3]

While in the case of Fox, it is *sadness* that may bifurcate into the political and the artistic domain, in Mattin's work, *dissonance* is the name of the condition that is to be mined for militancy, but a form of militancy that is also aligned with the aesthetic (or the anti-aesthetic within the aesthetic) in the sense of Mattin's wielding of social dissonance as a means to make the world appear *as a world.* This amounts to the mobilization of *further alienation,* but an alienation of alienation, in a third doubling that is the genus of which the former two were species- *representation of representation,* and *practice of practice-* in the sense that it is through further alienating the subject from the naturalized world of everyday goings-on that it not only represents the world, but becomes conscious of its own representation; and it is alienating the subject from immediate practical goals that the category of practice as such appears. A form of alienation that has in *conceptual mediation* its privileged means of unfolding.

As Wilfrid Sellars suggests, the sapience/sentience distinction hinges on the sapient being able not just to perceive something, but to perceive something as something, i.e. through conceptual mediation. If selfhood is a form of reification, then further mediation of this sort—further alienation—is necessary in order to gain sufficient awareness to perceive the self as commodified and to understand how this commodification occurs. This understanding of alienation—non-essential and non-teleological—doesn't need to presuppose full agency and the already-available possibility of expressing freedom, as was the case with the Situationists' construction of situations, or in the context of free improvisation. Instead it assumes alienation as a negative condition which can be taken as a starting point in order to develop the necessary reflexive distance to perceive our selves as something.[4]

The theory of alienation as alienation of alienation, which makes alienation prone to be objectified by theoretical reason through the alienation proper to conceptualization, paves the way to the thinking of the practice-that-aims-to-show-practice-*as-practice*, what Mattin calls, beyond the first two forms of alienation *-from above and from below- externalizing alienation,* the one who turns alienated experience into an experience of alienation, as Ray Brassier mentions in the preface. Mattin aims to revive Brecht's and Schklovski's *estrangement effect* to make explicit the alienated state of our own self-conception. And this is related to Mattin's

[3] Fox, 2009. p. 1
[4] Mattin, 2022, p. 76

own artistic practice, particularly the score offered at the end of the volume, which bears the *Social Dissonance* title.

Social Dissonance is then, both a form of practice, an effect of that practice- the furthering of the already present socially dissonant effect/affect-, and a specific *score*, proposing possible kinds of action to an audience to bring about the consciousness of their own unfreedom- or, more radically, the consciousness of their unconsciousness. But this program has two insufficiencies: first, the circuit through which the risen consciousness of an unfree state may translate into forms of *action* is not provided. Secondly, even if one has successfully elicited the experience of unfreedom, the transmission of that feeling of unfreedom within a localized social milieu- typically enclosed within an art gallery, a concert hall, or a punk club- to the consciousness of the unfreedom of the social world at large is, in the least, problematic. The first insufficiency relates to the problem of the *theoretical* conditions of *practice*, or what kinds of influence can a theoretically gained description have upon practice - a very classical problem. The second insufficiency is more specific to Mattin and one would say amounts to the influence one practice may have upon other practices. But this last formulation is a superficial one, being maybe more fruitfully described as the problem of the traction one form of action may have upon the *practical* conditions of *conceptual* representation- once we understand the dialectics between action and conception that seems to be implicit in Mattin's account, and much of the present text will be dealing with exactly that.

The following diagrams might function in two ways: they offer a first approximation of the two problems I just mentioned, to be complemented by more thorough diagrams as this exposition unfolds. And they may also represent initial attempts in the context of this text at picturing two different *practices* that put forward the two problems just mentioned in a very acute form. The first practice, mapping unto the problem of the theoretical determination of practice takes its cue form Althusser's notion of "Theoretical Practice", where he offers the view that the construction of *scientific knowledge* doesn't take as initial data experiential items so much as already *theoretically determined* data- that, from the point of view of the new scientific concepts are *ideological data, and no yet scientific ones*. In the diagram, this is portrayed in the direct relationship between conception and practice that is called there "Ideological situation". This relationship between conception and practice is the initial building block of all the diagrams in this presentation- which are intended as ways of showing the fly out of the bottle of "ideological representations" of practice; and, "ideological

constraints" from practice to conception from the side of practice- determined through the capitalist operational schemes.
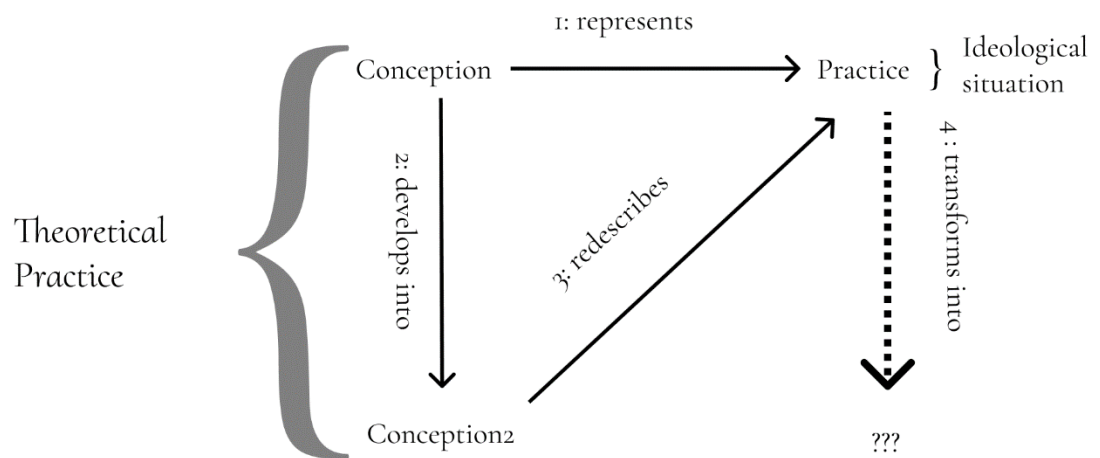

Fig 1: 1ˢᵗ problem/theoretical practice

The second diagram portrays not simply the convert situation of the practical constraint on conception and articulating the changes in conception that changes in practice would entail but deals with what lies beyond this initial cycling from practice to conception. If one may understand changes in practice as enabling, by the changes in constraints, changes in conception, therefore producing a novel pair of practice/conception, the question becomes: what about the ways this new pair (*"conception2/practice2"*) interact with different sets of specific practices.

The question is even more prominent as the diagram aims to offer a first approximation of *social dissonance*- that is usually operated locally within specific spaces, typically art spaces- as a means to influence action through the influence *action has on conception* (the making explicit of alienation). And aids in articulating a question about the move *beyond the boundary* of these enclosed spaces wherein the social dissonance is operated.[5]

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[5] I am here drawing upon the notion of boundary that was proposed by Renzo Barbe within the collective Subset of Theoretical Practice, and which was explored in the joint presentations 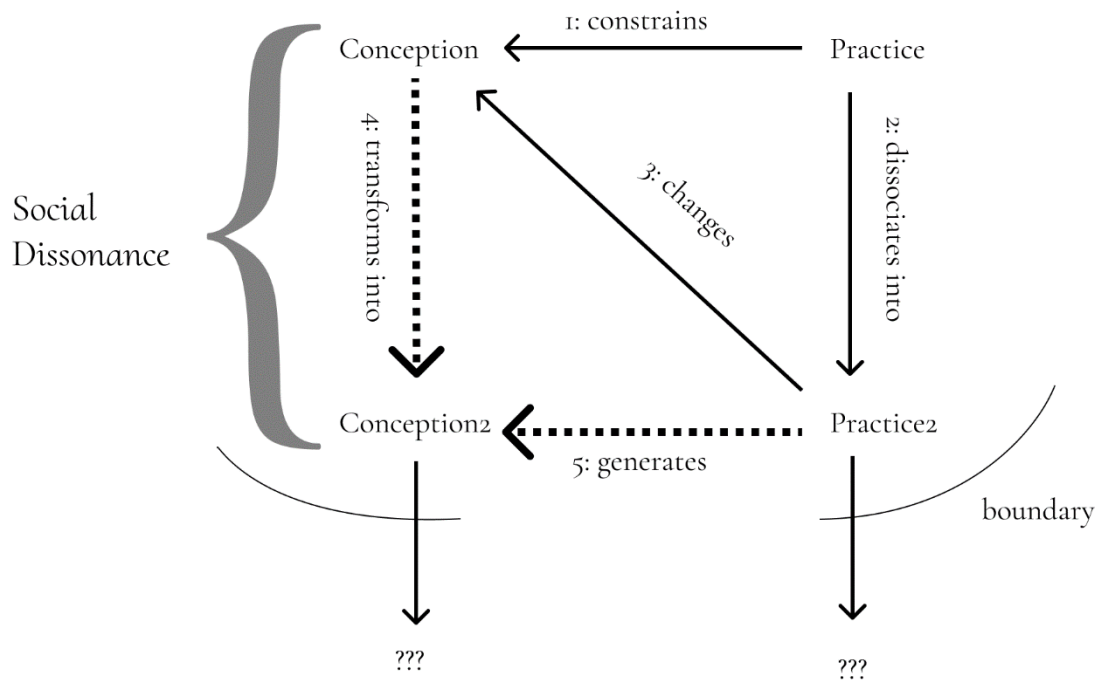Rezon did with Victor Silva, "The Hustle of the Struggle". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJM90IYQ53U and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggZegYSrfIE

Fig 2: 2ⁿᵈ problem/social dissonance

Let me make this clearer. The statement "I am now conscious that I am unfree"- produced within an individual that has passed through the experience of social dissonance is, at first, an individual statement, having as reference an individual's emotional state. But I concede this is misleading, as the reference of the *unfreedom* felt by the individual includes the state of the social whole. But the sheer individually gained consciousness of the unfreedom of the social whole doesn't necessarily translate into (1ˢᵗ problem) forms of action and *even if it does*, it is not guaranteed that these localized forms of action may (2ⁿᵈ problem) *scale up* to more generalized social milieus. So, social dissonance ends up being a form of practice that should elicit a further practice the conditions of which are left undetermined- a further form of practice that is conditioned by the conscious upholding of a form of unfreedom, which, therefore, must pass through a more *adequate* conceptualization of our inadequacy.

II. Self, Individual, Subject, Language

As mentioned before, Mattin's book starts from a particular field- the field of experimental art, or noise music- proposing a form of action that would make explicit a *general* condition of our social and/or individual lives: the state of *alienation*. This is conceptualized as being of two different kinds: *alienation from above,* which is the result of abstract social domination under the conditions of capitalism, and *alienation from below*, which is sustained by a particular neurobiological framework upheld by Mattin- the one proposed by Thomas Metzinger.

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss the tenability of Metzinger's positions. It is much more important it seems for Mattin's purposes and for this paper to verify its compatibility with a particular philosophy of language that seems to be instrumental in mediating between the more Marxian *alienation from above* and the Metzingerian *alienation from below*: the conceptions of Wilfrid Sellars.

> We produce commodities through our human labour-power and this labour is transmuted into 'crystals of social substance'. However, the process of becoming a commodity erases all subjective and social traces by making the commodity appear as an objective thing, a natural phenomenon; what we take to be a relation between things (i.e. commodities), is a relation between people (i.e. expended human labour-power), and what we take to be a relation between people is actually driven by commodities such as money which have become quasi-personified agents. This is what György Lukács, following Georg Simmel, called rei.cation (Verdinglichung) and, as we shall see, it has effects not only on our perception of the world, but also on our self-conception. Capitalist mediations of the social and our engagement in value production have effects which we cannot fully understand through our personal experience, but which nonetheless condition the way in which we experience, and our understanding of our experiences and of ourselves as persons. This is precisely because spectral objectivity arises from the non-immediate and non-observable processes that constitute value production: even if 'not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values', this value appears as if is a natural property.[6]

Out of this statement of the ways commodity production determines in a non-phenomenologically available way the constraints of our experience, Mattin rehearses a dialectics of alienation within XIXth century post-Hegelian thought. The discussion around the concept of *Gattungswesen* is remembered, both in the discussion between Stirner and Feuerbach, and between Marx and Stirner, finally bottoming out in Marx's own critique of

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[6] Mattin, pp 35-6

this concept, entangled as it is in the concept of alienation. "Marx says that alienation is concretely defined in the capitalist mode of production as the division between the products of labor—which are the objective conditions of labour—and labour itself, subjective labour-power."[7]

Here we find the contemporary concept of alienation that Mattin subscribes to- if only to enrich it with *alienation from below* and *externalizing alienation*. As Mattin states, this give us three layers of mediation on the self/individual/subject (itself a threefold placeholder for the role of the subject in Mattin's theory, as we will see below). These are, according to Mattin:

1. The exchange abstractions (commodity form, exchange relation) of capitalist relations that impinge upon us the form of the (proprietary) individual.

2. The subpersonal processes wherein a 'phenomenal representation in which an individual information processing system generates a reality-model', whereby the form of a *self* is generated.

3. Through the conceptual mediation of language, which in turn is developed through sociality. Arguably one could imagine that this is where a form of a *subject* is harbored.

Corresponding to these, Mattin offers his approach to the concepts of *individual, self* and *subject*.

> It was with the development of the Enlightenment and especially that of liberalism that the individual began to be understood in terms of separation, as a person having the rational capacity to make their own decisions, implying an idea of autonomy in which the individual can act according to their own will without being coerced. (…) But liberal ideology tends to naturalise this sovereign autonomy and render it inseparable from consciousness as such, while identifying it with the identity and responsibility necessary for contractual transactions and property ownership.
>
> The concept of selfhood refers to the reflexive experience of having a first-person perspective; it names the phenomenon of a stable continuous presence that allows experiences to cohere or 'belong' to the same agent.
>
> The concept of subject emerged in the fourteenth century and comes from Old French sogit, suget, subget, meaning 'a subject, person, or thing' or 'person under control or dominion of another'. It therefore implies a paradoxical combination of subjecthood and subjection, an articulation

[7] Mattin, p. 52

between an individual and an apparatus of power that precedes and exceeds them.[8]

Mattin explores the differences between these three concepts by emphasizing the kinds of mediation that are constitutive of each one- while *individual* is a historical understanding of an almost juridical entity that is received by our modern liberal democracies as an atomic element in the organization of property laws, *self* is a much more complex element, pertaining to the phenomenally perceived continuity of a *center of coordination of decisions* which we identify with ourselves; finally, the subject as the articulation of being subjected with being subjectivized- in the sense of exercising agency.

Beyond the proposal of the threefold division of the concept of the individual agent into: selfhood, individuality and subjectivity, Mattin also wages on *conception* as a way to make explicit the aforementioned condition of unfreedom, and, therefore, engages in the investigation of the conditions of conceptualization of this condition- an investigation in which partakes the procedure of *social dissonance* as a kind of *breaking of the inner fourth wall* separating audience and event, as Mattin defends his procedure in the final part of the book. But this procedure has as its own conditions the assumption of alienation as an *enabling condition* and of at least the *possibility* of transit between the conscious experience of this alienation and a form of agency that is able to either *escape or revise* these conditions of alienation- a condition of subjectivity enmeshed in the social fabric and the different *externalizations and estrangements thereof.*

> In his text 'Strange Sameness: Hegel, Marx and the Logic of Estrangement', Ray Brassier suggests using the term 'externalisation' for *Entäußerung* and 'estrangement' for *Entfremdung*, explaining that, for Hegel's Spirit, self *externalisation* is constitutive of freedom, but when this freedom is subjected by a foreign power it becomes *estranged*. This means that while all estrangement is externalisation, not every externalisation is an estrangement. Since for Marx's materialism, practice is a form of self-externalising, the termination of subjected or estranged externalisation is not the reinstatement of some form of interiority. De-estrangement or the end of estranged externalisation is another form of externalisation, not the end of externalisation itself.[9]

This quasi-definition of the subject is adequate, according to our reading, to the Sellarsian account of language that Mattin sustains. For Sellars, language is a rule-governed activity that

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[8] Mattin, pp. 11-12
[9] Mattin, p. 50

is social in a fundamental sense. While usually for representationalist theories of meanings, words are labels that are applied to extra-linguistic objects somewhat directly, from which we derive the correctness of use on the part of the speaker and of inferences on the side of contents, Sellars' inferentialism inverts this order of explanations. It is the rule-governed use of language that determines correctness of *inferences,* such as those obtaining between "cat" and "mammals" that enables the use of those word-designs as labels applied to extra-linguistic objects[10]. Successful representation is not produced by a primitive semantic relation between thing and word, but by the tracking of a natural object by another natural object (the word-designs) that is regulated by the rules of language use. This also entails inverting the order of explanation between pragmatics and semantics. Thus, the inferences that constitute the meaning of a term are first encoded by correctness in the use of a term: this means that the meaning will be explained by use, according to Wittgenstein's maxim[11]. This use is endorsed by the community- that is, it is the intersubjective use that gives meaning to expressions- meanings are not thought of as *preceding* socially shared use.

This entails an interesting consequence, which is the *relative alienation* between concept and the objects being referred to that enables controlled conceptual revisability in the Sellarsian picture. In Sellars' words, "the idea that the categorial structure of the world – if it has a categorial structure – imposes itself on the mind as a seal imposes itself on melted wax"[12] is to be castigated as a form of the myth of the Given. This does not mean an endorsement of metaphysical idealism, insofar as there is an extra-linguistic reality, but which is not transparent to the cognizing mind without a series of mediations including perception ("language-entry transitions"), action ("language-exist transitions") and the intralanguage inferential transitions that will constitute what the sellarsian tradition calls the space of reasons. This is the semantic and epistemic holism that is characteristic of Sellars' philosophy. Something qualifies as knowledge if it enters the space of reasons conceptually articulated. In Sellars' own words: "The essential point is that, when characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of such an episode or state; we are locating it in logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what is said"[13]

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[10] This is part of a more complex story that is not the case to rehearse here. For the specifics see, "Some Reflections on Language Games" *In:* Sellars, 1963.

[11] "For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." Wittgenstein, 1958, paragraph 43

[12] Sellars 1981. http://www.ditext.com/sellars/carus.html , retrieved in 08/12/2022

[13] Sellars 1963, p. 169

In this sense, revisability happens as the cluster of inferences that constitute a determined conceptual nexus change- and with it the concept- and with it the conception we might have of the referent of that concept. Mattin gestures towards something like this when he insists upon conceptual mediation as the medium that is presupposed in his investigations of the types of mediation.

> Our experience is already conceptually mediated, but at present we are not in control of how concepts mediate our experience. Now, the problem cannot be mediations as such— otherwise there would be no hope at all— but the capitalist colonisation of these mediations. Fortunately, we do have the cognitive capacity to understand these mediations and to act upon them. When we actively conceptualise our experience, we involve ourselves in a fight for a new form-of-mediation.[14]

But, while conceptual mediation carries with it degrees of freedom from giveness, it is also something we must enter into, be *subjected to*, to participate in this gain of degrees of freedom. And, in Mattin's account, the Marxian account of capitalism occupies the role of accounting for the specific categorial constitution of our (self-)understanding while extracting value from the "expenditure of a certain amount of human muscles, nerves, brain, etc."[15] while reproducing labor power.

III.

Mattin offers social dissonance as a way to undercut and exhibit the circuits of determination of both the form of the individual and the appearance of selves. But two points had remained open: 1st- the passage between conception and action *in general*; 2nd the passage between action *within the sphere of aesthetic action and action within the social whole at large*. We proposed these as a problem of the transmission between conception and practice and as a problem regarding the *social syntheses* beyond the immediate realm of socially dissonant art practice- the relationship between Mattin's socially dissonant practice and other practices.

In tandem with our reconstruction of the social determination of the subject according to Mattin- which posits the problem of the continuity between conception and action- Mattin

[14] Mattin, 2021, p. 72
[15] Marx, 1999, ch. 1. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/ch01.htm retrieved in 11-02-2023

criticizes what he calls *posthumanist philosophies* for their deficit of social determination. The neorationalism of Reza Negarestani is addressed as a form of thinking that posits sovereign powers for the thinking subject as the bearer of Reason. Here it is interesting to note the common intellectual tradition uniting Mattin and Reza in the figure of Sellars.

> But, as Wilfrid Sellars points out, although the conceptual activities that underline the exceptionality of the human may indeed be pattern-governed behaviours, they are not just any sort of patterns. They are pattern-governed behaviours that are sui generis because they are properly speaking rule-governed—that is to say, because they have a formal autonomy that arises from their functioning according to intra-pattern-governed norms of behaviour (i.e., rules of transition or inference). But conceptual activities are also sui generis in a stronger sense: their formal autonomy, which is logical and linguistic, enables the recognition of any other pattern-governed behaviour in nature.[16]

While conceding, as we saw, the powers of the concept as able to *reproduce* and understand social totality, Mattin takes issue with the *productive* aspect of reason as proposed in Negarestani's account. Here Alfred Sohn-Rethel's account of real abstraction is brought to bear on the issues at stake- what Mattin calls "real abstraction mindscrew".

Sohn-Rethel's basic argument, which runs in tandem with his aim of providing a materialist critique of epistemology, is that the *origin* of the categories of the understanding (the reference to Kant is explicit in Sohn-Rethel) lies in exchange abstraction. In a previous paper[17] I have divided this argument in two different theses:

1. The activity of exchange gives rise to an abstraction that is not a thought abstraction.

2. This so called "real" abstraction in turn is communicated to thought and is the origin of the "abstract" categories of philosophy, mathematized science and the transcendental Subject in the Kantian sense.[18]

The first thesis is vindicated by the idea that, during the act of exchange, an equivalence is established between commodity A that is exchanged for commodity B. It is an act brought

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[16] Negarestani, 2018, p. 110

[17] Caron, 2023 *In:* https://criseecritica.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/08.2023.CRISE-E-CRITICA-A-ABSTRACAO-REAL-E-O-DADO.pdf (in portuguese). Forthcoming in English.

[18] Sohn-Rethel emphasizes these three instances of abstract thought specifically. There is much to be discussed though regarding the theory of history that is supposed to support this thesis.

to fruition, according to Sohn-Rethel, without the participation of thought, in the sense that the people involved in the exchange have in mind the *use values* of the commodities being exchanged. This means that the *difference* between the commodities is of the essence for the act of exchange, but, as a byproduct of exchange, a second layer, the exchange *equivalence*, determined by the *identity of value,* comes into being.

The second thesis is more polemical, and it states that *this abstraction*, established through the exchange, is *transmitted to the mind*, giving rise to the thought abstractions that are characteristic of philosophy and modern science.
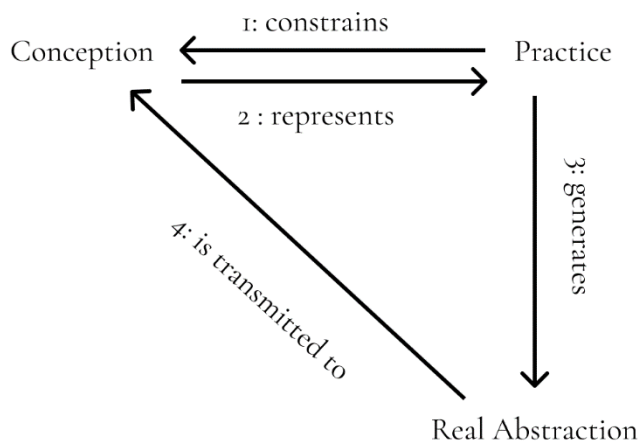

Fig 3: Sohn-Rethel's "transmission" problem

Once again, returning to our conception/practice pair, Sohn-Rethel's theory intends to be an intervention on that relationship. If practice not only constrains thought/conception, but give it its fundamental categories, the question emerges about what specific set of practices are able to influence thinking, keeping in mind that the generation of *real abstraction* is, according to Sohn-Rethel, independent of thought- which justifies Mattin's deployment of the theory as a form of critique of what is perceived as a *sufficiency* of thought in neorationalism. For Sohn-Rethel *coinage* is the essential piece missing in that movement. The advent of coinage marks the appearance of something in the world which has the characteristics of a non-empirical abstraction. While coins as material objects do wither, as representatives of value, they are supposed to be changeless, and timeless.

> The minted currency is the value-form that has become visible. Because here we print formally in a natural material that it is not intended for use, but only for exchange. The authority that prints money - whether it stems from a private trade tycoon or a "tyrant" who usurped royal power - guarantees the weight and fine metal content and promises to replace coins that have suffered some wear, with others of integral value. *In other terms, the postulate of inalterability for an unlimited period of the equivalent is here formally recognized, and it is distinguished explicitly, as a social postulate, from the empirical-physical characteristic of such or such metal.* The old relation, where the value-form of the commodity was subordinate to its natural form, is inverted: the social value-form uses a particular and specific natural form for its functional purposes.[19]

Sohn-Rethel proceeds then to ask: where in the world something corresponding to the concept of *substance* is to be found- meaning, something that is what it is beyond its accidents? He offers money as the candidate, proceeding to derive many categories of traditional philosophy and mathematized science from the non-empirical and yet real character of exchange abstraction, such as abstract time, space, substance, strict causality, perpetual movement, etc.
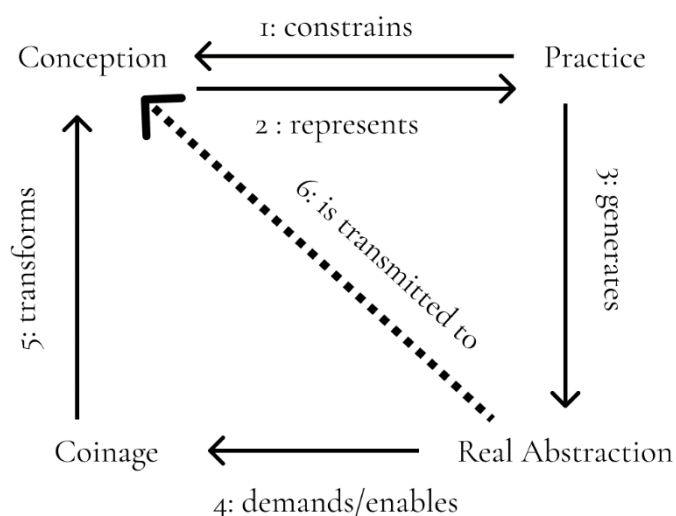

Fig. 4 : coinage as mediator between practice and conception in Sohn-Rethel

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[19] Sohn-Rethel 2018, p. 103 (translation by the author)

Sohn-Rethel makes a second tactical appearance in the second part of the book, dedicated to *Alienation from below*. In this part, it is not the sufficiency of reason that is the target, but the (methodological) solipsism that is the locus of the self, according to the Metzinger picture. It offers a *social nexus* as a constitutive element of the self-conception that comes to be part of what it is to be a self. In both cases it reorients the argument towards a social medium that is arguably absent from both neorationalism (part 1 of the book) and Sellars/Metzinger (part 2). In a sense, the appeal to Sohn-Rethel offers a response to the first question we posed at the beginning of this paper: the question of the relationship between theoretical reason and praxis. The Sohn-Rethel example- if we take it to be correct beyond its historical vagueness- makes it plausible to think of a circuit of determination that comes from practice to thought and vice-versa. Instead of thinking of it as a materialist *debunking of epistemology*, we might think of it as an account of the way thought *integrates the accidental results* of the social practice, determining back the latter as new categories are devised within language, in cognitive friction with material practice. From this point of view, Sohn-Rethel is a thinker of *functional bootstrapping*. At the same time, Mattin's argument is *cognitive in its purport*. It is a matter of *gaining conscience* of these forms of alienation to change them. The *political valence of the aesthetic techniques he comments upon depends on that level of conscience*. But, as we have seen, a conceptualizing consciousness is determined by and determining back material practice. Sellars and Sohn-Rethel figure here as improbable twin thinkers of the mediation - through language and through material practice.

IV.

John Cage is also an important figure in the book. But, while Cagean *ideology* upholds the forsaking of the category of the musical work as a means to access the untamed sound of the world, Mattin's social dissonance aims instead at listening to the metaphorical "sound" of the audience- meaning that, by playing the audience as an instrument, as Mattin says, it aims at making manifest the audience's own dissonance concerning their presupposed social function.

> The instructional score Social Dissonance took as its starting point John Cage's 4'33", a piece designed to allow the context to come to the foreground. As is well known, 4'33" demonstrated that any sound can be treated equally as music, and that in a social situation it is impossible to

perceive silence. However, in 4'33" the audience is supposed to hear the sounds in themselves for what they are, independent of their context and their meaning. Effectively, Cage was trying to generate an artificial white cube or black box: the context within which the material is presented is meant to be as neutral as possible, separated from everyday reality, allowing the audience to focus purely on the sonic material as an aesthetic experience. In Social Dissonance, instead, the audience hear themselves and reflect upon their own conception and self presentation: aesthetics is deliberately refused any autonomy from the social.[20]

As such, *social dissonance as aesthetic practice* (in distinction to the concept of social dissonance at large, and to the individual work "social dissonance") is not supposed to be oriented towards the contemplation of artworks but behaves instead like a *social mediation-* an organizational form that can satisfy a set of determined properties. In the text "Working through political organizations"[21] the collective Subset of Theoretical Practice (STP) offered a theory of *political* mediation as *epistemic mediation* that is useful here. Commenting on their example of school occupations in Brazil, they state:

> Consider the way school occupations disturb the social world by enabling the extraction of information otherwise unavailable without the political action of the students. The composition of the movement - mainly students - enables a certain form of action - interventions on the school system, the student's families, the neighborhood, the state - which in turn yields information about how schools are normally organized - their true budgetary constraints, the effective authoritarian structure hidden behind its pedagogical board. Hence, social forms that make themselves manifest through the disturbance and reaction provoked by political action. In the sense that student occupations as a political practice make available a perspective on the world that was not previously available, we are dealing with an epistemic mediation operated through collective organization itself.[22]

According to the STP a *political* mediation, and not just a social one, makes available a perspective *different from* the one already embedded in the social world at large. It draws a *boundary* to the organization separating the exterior from the interior whereby a set of normative commitments different from the normative commitments of the world at large make themselves present. This is in a sense intuitive from the example of the school occupations that was explored in the STP paper, if we think for instance of how "going to school" is a social mediation, but one that is already embedded in the relation of individual

[20] Mattin, pp 20-21.
[21] STP. 2022. https://www.crisiscritique.org/storage/app/media/nov-25/subset-of-theoretical-practice.pdf retrieved in 10-05-2023.
[22] STP, 2022, p. 343

to the established social world, wherein schools have an important formative role. While *occupying* a school, is something altogether different, which brings with it its own perspective- in the sense of demanding tactic thinking to *produce effects*, the material means to *reproduce the movement,* and the set of demands and goals that are internally constituting the movement- necessarily different from the set of goals and demands of the normal student. Of course, the same person might at one time be a normal student, and at a different time be part of a school occupation- which is the militant condition, being divided into different worlds.

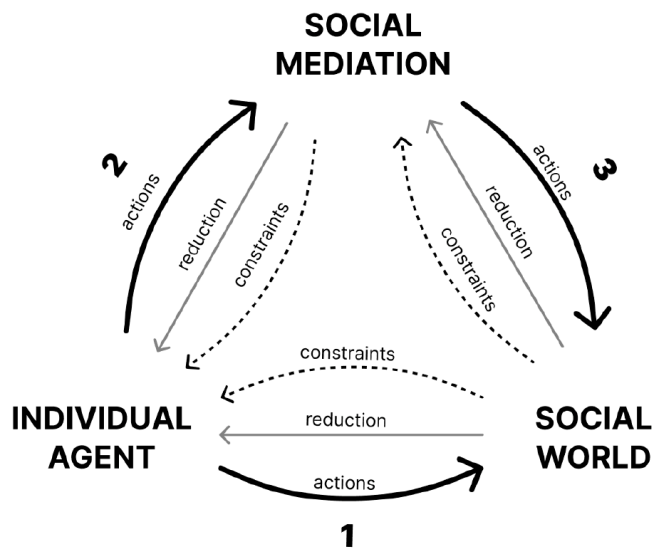 The idea may be elegantly conveyed by the following diagram.

Fig. 5: STP's diagram of social mediation as epistemic mediation

According to the STP there are three different relationships between agent, social mediation and social world:

> 1. *Constraints:* the structures defining the costs of actions, the effort that it takes to go "against the grain" in each situation.

> 2. *Action spaces*: the possible paths one can take when interacting in each context.

> 3. *Reductions*: the relevant information about the world needed to adjust future actions and evaluate previous ones, a useful picture of the world.

The idea is that the difference between actions and constraints yields information ("reductions") of the world, in a test-and-run way in which the movement acquires information. One important element of the theory that makes the distinction between a *conservative* mediation- in the sense of a mediation that preserves an already existing relationship with the world, and a properly *political* mediation, is the fact that, in the second case, the diagram does not *commute*- which is a category-theorist way of saying that the relationship between individual and world established through the mediation is not the same as the direct relationship between individual and world as depicted by the lower arrows- thus, $1 \neq 3 \circ 2$ in the diagrams.
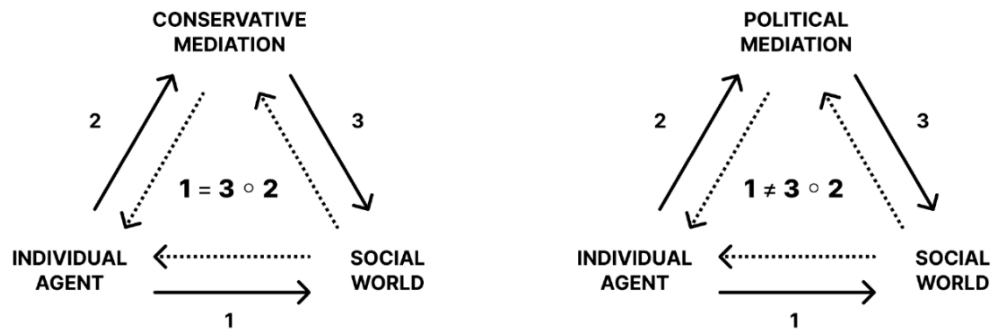

Fig. 6: STP's comparison between mediations

This means of course that the *political cost* of being part of a conservative mediation approaches zero because the mediation is already part of the world it is embedded in, and the information obtained *through participation in the mediation* from the point of view of the difference between actions and constraints, is also null- one is doing what the constraints allows one to do.

On the other hand, the political mediation offers a perspective that is unavailable to the normal relationship between agent and world. This is useful for understanding social dissonance. As said earlier, social dissonance intends to elicit a *representation of representation*, through a *practice of practice*, that untethers practice to its normal goals. Moreover, while social dissonance in a broader sense is supposed to be spread out in the social fabric at large, social dissonance in the strict sense always happens in a temporary organizational setting- a music

venue, an art gallery, etc. In that sense, the socially dissonant situation may behave as a political mediation according to the STP theory.

To keep with the idea of *finding the mediations* between thinking and doing that was part of our approach to Sohn-Rethel's thinking, we shall rewrite the relationship STP proposes between *agent and world* as our relationship between *conception and practice*.
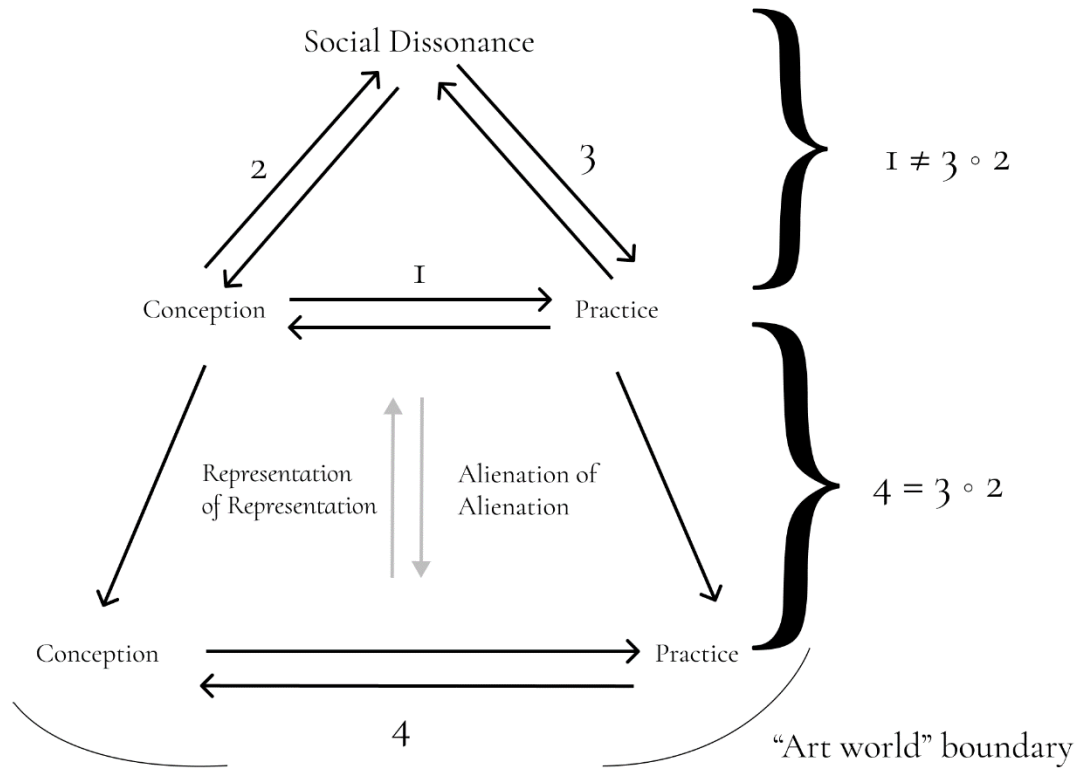
Social Dissonance

$$1 \neq 3 \circ 2$$

2   3

Conception   1   Practice

Representation of Representation   Alienation of Alienation

$$4 = 3 \circ 2$$

Conception   Practice

4   "Art world" boundary

Fig. 7: Social Dissonance extended diagram

The relationship is analogous to the relationship between agent and world in the STP diagram, in the sense that it establishes a *regular* situation whereby the appearance of a *pressuposedly* adequate representation of practice by thought obtains. In a sense, as much as the agent belongs to the world, thought belongs to the practice that it is thinking. This is the *normal* situation- or the *ideological situation* in our diagram depicting theoretical practice.

The *socially dissonant situation* intervenes, composing a non-commutative diagram, in the sense that, if $g \circ f \neq i$ there ought to be an arrow resulting from the social mediation that links thought and practice otherwise, *at a distance from themselves*. This distance is what we are calling

the *alienation of alienation*. And the fact that what is preserved is a transformed version of the same two elements, conception and practice, offers an *image of that very relationship at a distance from itself.*

The diagram preserves from the Sohn-Rethel diagram the basic relationship between thinking and practice. But in that case, the circuit that was proposed between thought and action was mediated by a concrete world historical technical invention: coinage. This puts forward yet implicitly the point of a crucially neglected category of Sohn-Rethel's thought: the category of *social synthesis.*

> [Social synthesis is] the network of relations by which society forms a coherent whole (…) As social forms develop and change, so also does the synthesis which holds together the multiplicity of links operating between men according to the division of labour. For every society made up of a plurality of individuals is a network coming into effect through their actions. How they act is of primary importance for the social network; what they think is of secondary importance.[23]

Social synthesis refers to the "glue" that connects a social world. Typically, the main criterion for the location of the ways the social synthesis is operated within a social world is the social and productive links that enable the *social reproduction of said whole*. In tandem with that idea, Sohn-Rethel proposes the two concepts of societies of production and societies of appropriation. The first is characterized by the socialization of production itself, meaning, whatever is produced within the socius, is socially shared from the get-go, in a form of primitive planned economy that produces the output according to the shares that are to be distributed amongst all. The second form, the societies of appropriation, are characterized first by the fact that production is carried on independently by autonomous sectors, and secondly, that this *autonomous* division of productive sectors entails that exchange must be carried on for the output to be shared. Let us imagine that one sector produces food, while another produces clothing. Sector one does not have access to clothing, while sector two needs food. They must engage in exchange to have access to the whole of production that would enable the social reproduction of the whole. The situation illustrates one wherein then the *social-synthetic function* is performed by exchange- instead of communal planning.

Real abstraction emerges as a function of the social synthesis being operated. It is because one must engage in exchange to guarantee one's own survival- and because, despite the separation

[23] Sohn-Rethel 2021 [1978], p. 4

between producers- one can't produce alone what is needed for survival, depending on that *still* on the social whole, one is obligated to exchange commodities, and in the absence of any other, one is obliged to exchange one's labor-power. This is why these are called societies of appropriation by Sohn-Rethel: the product of the labor of one part of society is appropriated by another part and resold (offered back in exchange) to the first part.

While the concept of social synthesis is primarily used in Sohn-Rethel to analyze the material-economic nexuses that maintain a social whole functioning, we can generalize this idea for other mereological scales, in connection to the organizational point of view brought forward by the STP. As mentioned, a school occupation, while materially dependent on the social world at large for its reproduction, therefore being part of this social world, still brings about its relationships to its outside. For instance, school administration might react by cutting the supply of water- which might or might not provide the opportunity for the enactment of a solidarity network to help maintain the occupation- which in turn might be responsible for the politicization of other parties that might take an interest in the situation. This example makes explicit the material relationships one enclosed space- with its organizational protocols- may have with what lies beyond its boundaries. The question of social synthesis helps locate the relevant nexuses and boundaries between one organizational form and the next, as much as between one organizational form, and the greater organizational form of which it is a part.

While operating social synthesis is not the overt goal of Mattin's procedures of social dissonance, the political purchase of the procedure might be related to the reach or absence thereof of social-synthetic functions. As I announced in the first section of this essay, if *social dissonance* is to have political traction, we must interrogate its means of propagation beyond the enclosed spaces wherein it is performed- which is for me a way of asking about what kinds of social synthesis it might be able to perform.

V.

Social Dissonance rejects the representative function of the work of art by breaking the *inner fourth wall* between audience and themselves. But by doing so, it elicits a second-order representative function where the situation is not only present but re-presented to the audience. It turns *seeing the world* into *seeing a world as a world*, at a distance from oneself. One

interesting political experiment that can be brought to bear on the problems posed by *Social Dissonance* is the organizational patterns explored by the international collective Circle of Studies of Idea and Ideology (CSII).[24]

In the text "Freeing thought from thinkers", Gabriel Tupinambá elaborates on the functioning of the collective:

> Our wager can be formulated as follows: there are ideas which can only be consistently thought of within certain forms of collective organization. That is, there are ideas which can only be properly developed if their conceptual construction is tied together with the practical construction of a given institutional space.[25]

The CSII functioned as the experimental institutional space for the constitution of the political idea. "Idea" here must be understood in its non-personal form, as a trajectory of problems immanent to a collective unfolding. The model for such concept of idea we already revisited: the *real abstraction* as it appears in Marx, Sohn-Rethel and Zizek as a *form of thought* outside of thought, begotten by social determination.

> We have just examined the "meta-economical" hypothesis that the subject of science in political economy is not the actor of exchange, but something that is implicated and determined by the commodity-form itself. Irreducibly social forms are in fact constituted by the indistinguishable point where their being and their thought mutually support each other, but such a point paradoxically does not coincide with ourselves as thinking beings: **the starting point of Capital is rather that there is such a thing as a social form which thinks - "a form of thought that is distinct from thought"** (Zizek, 1989: 19).[26]

But, while the form determinations of capital impinge upon us in a compulsory manner, the experiment of the CSII intended to bring about different dynamics out of the cluster behavior of the group while offering protocols for the group to guide itself through the problem space constituted by its own unfolding. In a sense, the CSII was looking for *new, different, real abstractions* as embodiments of a political idea that was of no one in particular. To

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[24] The STP was originally part of the Circle, hence its name "Subset". The Circle was disbanded in 2020.
[25] Tupinambá, 2016, p. 156
https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/dd28f62e-9042-4386-b0fe-10b85bbbdef1/content retrieved 10-05-2023
[26] Tupinambá, p. 161.

bring this about, it relied on purely formal protocols, that would evade any demand for members to personally *commit to any content whatsoever.*

Tupinambá rightly divides the CSII organizational protocols in four criteria: A. Entry; B. Permanence; C. Positions and D. Process, which we shall rehearse briefly.

A. Entry: "In order to join the group, one has to fill in an admittance form, divided into two sections: one demanding objective information about the candidate, another asking for the proponent to write a commentary on the Circle's project."[27] In keeping with the idea of relying on the formal unfolding, the content of the comment is up to the candidate, and it *won't be judged by the collective on the merit of its content; it will only be judged whether the candidate filled out the form.* If the candidate fills out the form, the candidate is in the collective.

B. Permanence. The collective met periodically, usually weekly, mainly to study and to discuss some of the practical endeavors the members were involved in. Attendance at the meetings was optional. The only requirement to continue to be part of the collective was to write a *work note* after each meeting, even the ones one didn't attend. This is consistent with the fact that the work note is also a purely formal protocol, the content of which won't be judged as appropriate or inappropriate by the group.[28] If one member lags behind and owes more than four work notes, she is expelled from the collective, after which she would only have to fill out the form again to be reinstated.

C. Positions. The constitution of a Circle cell requires that there be at least two people, for this is the minimal number necessary for distributing the two basic positions that compose its functioning: the "Plus one" and the General Secretary. The General Secretary was a paying position that kept the books of the collective moneywise, and also the accountability of notes for each member, as much as performing a general organizing function. The "Plus one" was somebody who organized *the meeting* or a sequence of meetings, the function of which was to: A. define the agenda for the meeting. B. read back and summarize the work notes produced in the previous meeting (this was a mandatory part of the agenda for a meeting).

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[27] *Idem*, 171

[28] One should take this very literally. At one point I owed four work notes. I sent the collective the work notes containing one word each, of the sentence: "I" "owe" "four" and "notes". That paid my debt.

Both the entry form and the work notes presented a problem for the one engaging in the group. Since the demand that was placed was not fully determined (being akin to "write anything"), the one engaging becomes conscious of her own choice of how to fill out the form and of what to write in the work note- a choice that may be read by the group as a response to what *she thinks the collective wants*. In that way, a feedback circuit was established whereby the dynamics of the group itself modulated the behavior of its members, which defined back the group dynamics. The "plus one" position functioned as an *attempt* at giving the group a self-consciousness, some reflexive instance that was able to give back to the group what is being thought by members. But, inevitably, the *plus one* was just a member like any other. The attempt at collective consciousness embodied in the *plus one* necessarily failed as it was the enactment of the same dynamics of presupposition of the expectations of the group as the work note enabled. The Idea was no one's.

The CSII was an attempt at producing new social-synthetic functions out of the experimentation with the group dynamics. While Social Dissonance doesn't have the same goal, the wager on a form of practice that would create a distance from oneself as a way to make explicit something about what we feel is demanded from us by the current conditions has more than a passing resemblance to the CSII.
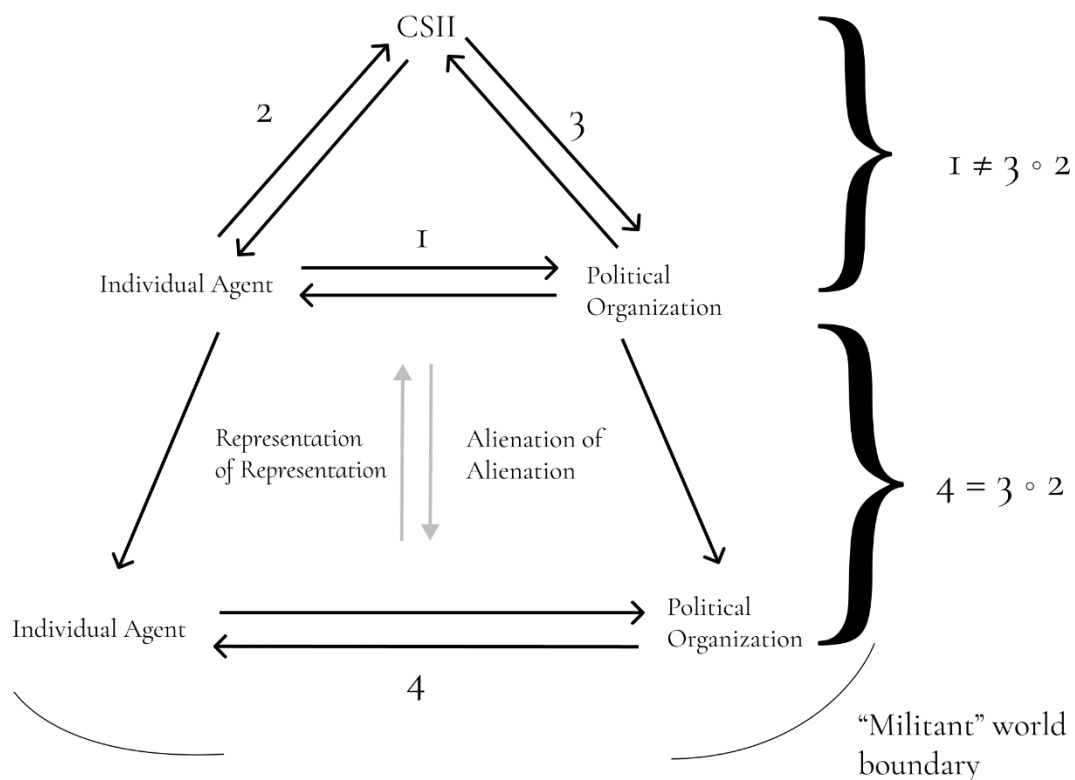
Fig 8. CSII diagram

The diagram has the same form as the SD diagram depicted earlier. Note, though, that what we have been referring to as the "fundamental pair", which was in previous diagrams the *conception-practice* pair, is closer to the STP diagram: the difference between *individual agent and the social world*. This is clear enough through examining the respective objects of intervention of SD and the CSII. In the first case, the individual agent is the *domain* where the dissonance is produced, untethering specific understandings from the practices they are supposed to represent. In the case of the CSII, while similar to SD in the sense of *suspending the practical goals* that are characteristic of a normal functioning of a political collective, and, by doing this, making the dissonance in the self-conception of the militant manifest, one could say the CSII was a mediation between the militant and the organizations beyond the CSII, wherein members carried on their more conventional political practice. This sheds some light on why, in the CSII diagram, the *social world* category is replaced by the *political organization* category. Because CSII was not exactly trying to have direct effects on the social world at large but on the mediation between militants and world, which is the organizations the militants took part in. But, while the CSII was a *political collective*, mainly composed of militants that came either from political parties, anarchist, or autonomist organizations, and which are already politically engaged in those organizations of origin, social dissonance is an *aesthetic protocol*, usually carried out within art institutions, the wager of which is to *produce* the dysphoria that would maybe be mobilized in a militant form. While the SD comes from an artworld milieu, while sutured to a political idea, CSII is just the reverse: it comes from the political milieu and ends up having an aesthetic function, in the sense of yielding a form of visibility that was unavailable in regular radical politics. It is a place for militants to reflect on militant practice. As such, it suspends direct militant practice.[29]

The CSII was not so much a *militant intervention in the world* as an *intervention into the militant world*. And its action has proved effective in dismantling overly superegoic dimensions of the militant work carried outside of the collective. In that sense, its direct influence on the world outside of militancy might be an indirect one, because of its influence in the world of the militant. The same might be said of SD. Instead of a social mediation that directly ruptures

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[29] A number of concrete political projects had the involvement of CSII, but these were lateral to the formal protocols that were the core idea of the group. The relationship between these and the concrete political actions is a matter for further debate.

the fabric of the social world, SD is, until the present moment, an intervention within a specific world- the art world. As such, it yields a paradox: while SD is effective in making alienation manifest, therefore rupturing the ideological framing of the relationship between conception (especially self-conception) and practice, these kinds of self-reflection are expected from the art world. In a sense, Social Dissonance is dampened by the boundary that is supposed to sustain the procedure. It remains to be seen what it can do outside of the *license to disrupt* given to art practices- that, notwithstanding their real *dissonant* character, may get filtered out by their own status as "art."

VI.

Let us take stock of the ingredients of our treatment of SD: the unfolding of an Idea that is of no one having a supporting collective body (CSII); the idea of an internal perspective that is at odds with the general perspective of the world (STP); the possibility of social syntheses beyond the pure *intellectual influence of ideas* as a measuring criterion of political efficacy (Sohn-Rethel); the relative autonomy between social form and the forms of thought that are supposed to represent it, especially regarding the emergence of unintended social nexuses and real abstractions (Marx, Sohn-Rethel), the role of theoretical frameworks produced within our language to retroactively track the movements of such abstractions and the subjective determinations thereof (Sellars).

One hypothesis I have been putting forward is to look at matters from the point of view of social synthesis. Which enables us to formulate the question: what kinds of social syntheses these practices can produce?

A relevant example here is Punk. A simplified musical grammar, which integrates incompetence as privileged aesthetic information. Element *par excellence* of normative rupture, insofar as it carries in its core an acceptance of previously unacceptable sound elements - the dissonance, the out-of-tuneness, the distortion, all that comes in with the acceptance of incompetence. But this *aesthetic* information is also social information – carried on by the proposition that *anyone can do it*. The imperative of punk is not just a demand for specific sensible content, as a license for non-competent agents to research on their own and take part in a practice that is traditionally associated with particular skills. When previously existing judgments of competence are suspended, anyone can propose new aesthetic information -

which does not exclude the normative in itself - as each proposal will be judged according to its immanent consequences - "did it work or not?" – and not to transcendent and previously accepted criteria. But the central point is that this "anyone can do it" implied not only new sounds but a new social synthesis that led to the formation of a "scene" - the renewal of the entire circuit of independent music with the constitution of labels, concert spaces, zines. And with that, a movement that, despite having its commercial counterpart, in its more underground and speculative fringes continues to research forms of social organization and distribution of its creations to this day. Punk offers an example of a particular relationship to the boundary. But one where the element that is responsible for the social synthetic nexus- the idea that anyone can do it- overflows the artistic limit over to the social need for community, expression, and not free time, but *liberated time*.

To be alert to the unnoticed social-synthetic functions of our practice is to be alert to the social forms unintentionally begotten by practice and to the unexpected weavings of the social fabric new practices may provide. It befalls the kinds of social syntheses the practices operate to decide upon their specific political character. And these are to be experimentally created, by mobilizing a set of vocabularies that enables our trackings within the circuit between seeing and doing.

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