

Rift

[rift]

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“**Rift**” and “rifting” are the effects of interlocking material, economic, social, and ideological processes that work to produce separations and segregations essential to the perpetuation of the global capitalist system. The critical use of the term is often modified by the addition of an adjective, e.g. “metabolic rift;” “ecological rift;” “aesthetic rift;” “colonial rift.” A rift is generally caused by the commodification of a resource, its over extraction and eventual exhaustion and collapse. Rift has recently entered general cultural parlance in the context of the climate emergency due to the eco-critical inflection it carries arising from Karl Marx’s discussion of industrial agriculture’s production of a “metabolic rift” between nature and society in *Capital* (vol.3). Marx understood that capitalism “disturbs the metabolic interaction” between the two through studying the work of agricultural chemist Justus von Liebig. By 1859, the latter had already identified that the failure to return the nutrients of food consumed in cities to the farmland where it originates was leading to unsustainable soil impoverishment. The transformation of land into productive capital, human beings into landless labor power, and food into commodity had upset the equilibrium of the natural and social ecology, driving both to their biophysical limits and impoverishing all.

In times of anthropogenic climate change, the concept of the rift ironically becomes a way to join together those productive spheres, ecologies, lives, and practices that have been cast asunder by capitalist expansion and its accompanying ideology and optics. This in order to sustain the racial hierarchies, global disparities, and environmentally destructive extractivism that underlie commodity production, commodity fetishism, and limitless capital accumulation. For instance, the figure of the rift allows for a recognition of the ecological and economic dependencies of artistic autonomy ordinarily dissociated as conditions of its very possibility. The list of art’s dependencies is long, but must include the division of creative from uncreative labor, exhibition value from use value, and “civilized” from “savage” cultures that emerge with capitalist modernity and colonialism. Conversely, the autonomy of art has historically been used to justify the very rifts that produce it, e.g. helping to legitimate claims of white Western superiority in the context of colonialism. Each one of art’s constituting divisions can be understood as a rift in itself that can ultimately be traced back to the underlying metabolic rift. In order to establish such a global system of classed, raced, and gendered divisions through which the artistic genius could appear, along with artworks in the museum, there must be a radical separation of human beings from the land that sustains us.

The schema of the rift thus forcefully inserts the ecological dimension into analytical frameworks, presenting a hard biophysical limit to ongoing capitalist and neo-colonial practices that have successfully dissociated themselves from their impacts. Thus apparent green capitalist solutions to the climate crisis that continue to privilege the production of cash crops and capital growth over nourishing soil practices that sustain local communities and

healthy ecologies are recognized as perpetuating the metabolic rift. Art practices that thematize ecological breakdown and colonial extractivism while continuing to participate in energy intensive, growth-oriented, and rent-seeking global creative economies cannot be counted as innocent of the processes they critique. Ultimately, autonomous art that exists separately from the environments, communities, and selves that create it, and perpetuates the above mentioned fetishistic divisions, will not be able to tackle the metabolic rift but only deepen it.

Yet perhaps a word in favor of certain rifts is required. If the critical possibilities of culture developed as an effect of modernity's multiple rifts—not least urbanization and the demise of art's cultic value and its resulting autonomy—then the distance between subject and object that critique depends upon is vital to its operation, as well as the production of oppositional subjectivities that emerge along with it. Likewise, the geographical rifts brought about by capitalist colonization and globalization, namely through migration and diaspora, induce new cultural hybridities, increase tolerance of difference, and induce social mutations, alongside deep divisions. These critical and migratory rifts produce some of the sharpest tools with which to negate the negativities of the unsustainable capitalist system that gives rise to them in the first place. The concept of the “rift” is thus vital for all future discourse since it allows for essential connections to be drawn between capitalism's social formations and the planet's biophysical limits upon which they depend and against which they simultaneously transgress; limits that must be protected for a future to exist at all for nearly all earthlings, and whose defense demands an immediate change to social organization as we currently know it.

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