A compelling case can be made for the transformation of artistic production in parallel with the transformation of production within capitalist industrial production. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, art took on the technologies of the mechanical and digital reproduction of imagery, artists have developed practices using the techniques of administration and management, artworks thematise advertising imagery and mimic the protocols of marketing, the big studio factories resemble manufacturing, artists are presented in the media as celebrities and some have brand strategies, artists have become professionalised, and art has been deskillled so that its labour appears less and less like the handicraft practices of the Renaissance. We would not expect artists to be somehow external to capitalist society. The transformation of artistic labour in the era of the capitalist mode of production, which mirrors the industrial dissolution of craft, offers strong circumstantial evidence of the impact of capitalism on art. While it is possible, for instance, for art to enter the market and fetch enormous sums while remaining in all other respects unaffected by the division of labour, mechanisation, etc., it is also possible for the production methods and relations of art to be utterly revolutionised by the division of labour, new technologies and so on, without entering into the capitalist mode of production. There may be social, cultural, psychological, technological, ideological or other forces that cause art to adopt the productive processes of capitalism, but I am interested here in whether art’s production is transformed by capitalism by being brought within its economy. The key factor in art’s relationship to the capitalist mode of production, rather than capitalist forms of consumption or finance, which we will consider later, is the relationship it establishes with productive capital. The thesis of commodification, namely the conventional formula by which Western Marxism theorises the incorporation of art into capitalist exchange, remains aloof from the question of art’s relation to productive capital. Artists are consumers of capitalist commodities and, in their second jobs, are wage labourers, too. When the first video cameras were made cheap enough to be available to consumers rather than just professionals, artists were among the first to purchase them and video art was soon established as a mode of art production alongside painting, sculpture and performance. The fact that the new video technology was specifically designed to extend the market for leisure (including the new market for the video cassettes that fed them) means that video artists were beneficiaries of capitalist R&D.
What is more, given that technology is never neutral but carries values within it, all attempts by artists to adopt new technology brings art in close proximity to the values and processes of capitalist society. But the social relations thus established between art and capitalism are a misleading measure of art’s economic relations with capital.

What Marx says about ‘the mist through which the social character of labour appears to us’, in his discussion of ‘commodity fetishism’, is not the preamble to a call for the study of labour in itself. The labour theory of value is also a value theory of labour. Labour is more extensive than value, or economics in the narrow sense, but even labour outside of economic exchange produces values. Use values, if nothing else. We might coin the term ‘labour fetishism’ to describe any attempt to discuss labour in isolation from the social totality and particularly the isolation of labour from the economic transactions through which it circulates, from which it is derived or from which it escapes. Marx criticises Ferdinando Galiani for saying ‘value is a relation between persons’ when he ought to have said, according to Marx, that value is a relation between persons expressed as a relation between things. Similarly, labour must be seen dialectically not only as the productive activity that creates things and values but also as mediated and dominated by the things and values it creates. Examining labour processes in their social, historical, cultural, technological and political contexts, from the point of view of Marxist economics, is to miss the really vital question. Let us take the example of housework to illustrate the point. An individual cleaning their own home performs the same labour as the cleaner who is paid by the household to clean their house. Looking at the work does not tell us which one is waged and which unpaid. Furthermore, the cleaner who works for cash directly from the household does not produce surplus value, but takes the full value of the work. Working for an agency, on the contrary, means that the cleaner works part of the day for those who own the agency. The difference between these three economic circumstances (unpaid, wage labour, surplus labour) is central to understanding the social and economic significance of the work, but it is impossible to get the slightest inkling of the difference by looking at the labour alone. It is the social relations of labour that reveal its economic meaning. Capital circulates only in the third instance of our example, when the agency pays the cleaner's wages and takes the payment from the household as the consumer’s purchase of the service that they offer through the labour of the cleaner. In the first instance, no money is exchanged at all, and in the second, the disposable income of the household, not capital, is used to pay the cleaner. Since capitalist production is the production of

1 Marx 1954, p. 79.