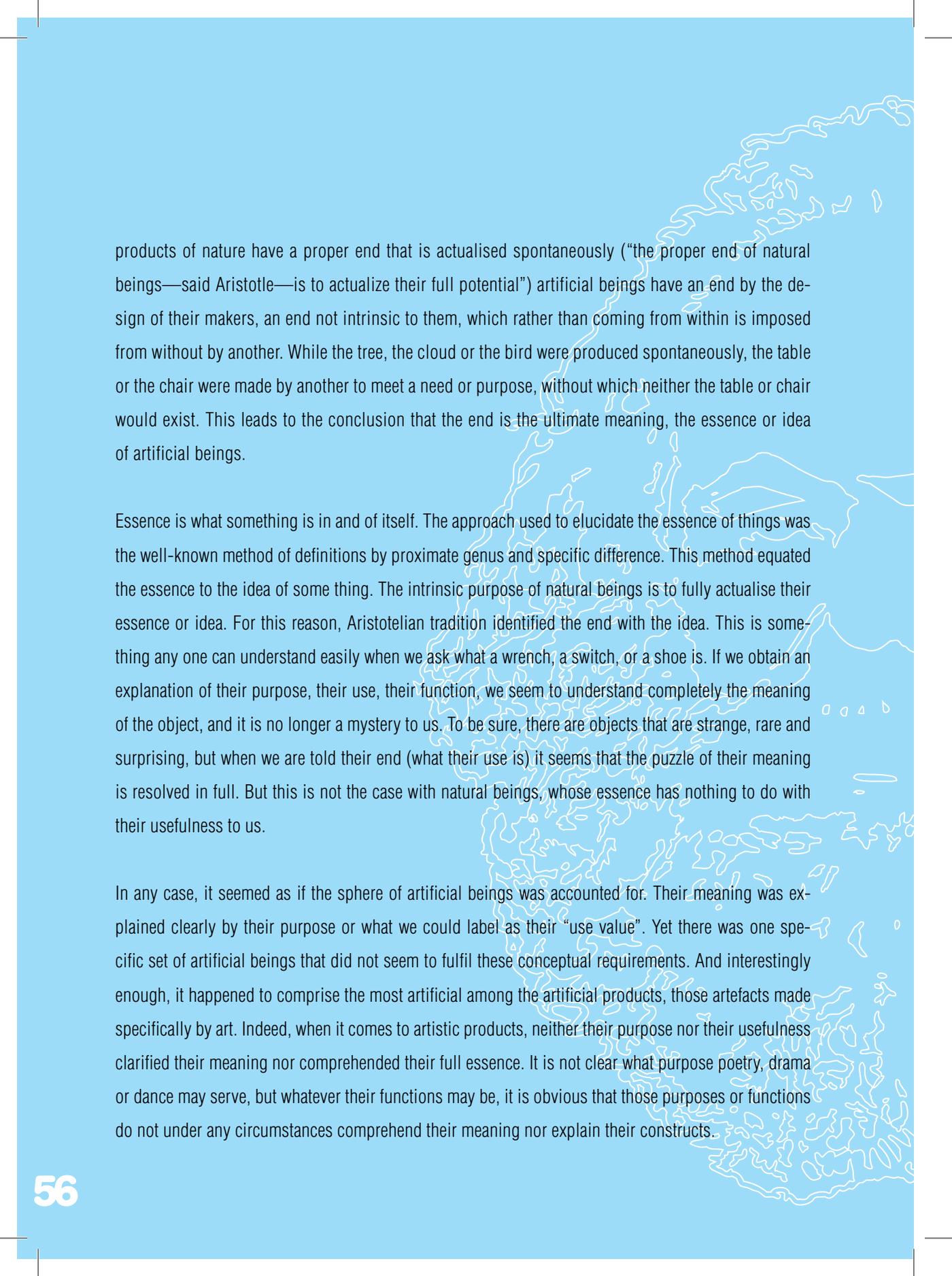


# A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SIGN

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It seems as if the distinction between the natural and the artificial were an evident one. But it is not so. At first, one might think that what distinguishes artificial beings from natural ones is that the former are created with a purpose, whereas the latter are produced spontaneously. However, the old Aristotelian differentiation between natural and artificial products was not based on having or not having a purpose. While Aristotle believed that artificial products were made with a specific end in mind, he also thought that natural products too had a proper end. Such was the surprising teleological character of his *Physics*. This may have been due to the fact that the Aristotelian model of the *physis* revolved around the artificial, as was underscored by Clément Rosset in his delightful book *L'Anti-nature*.

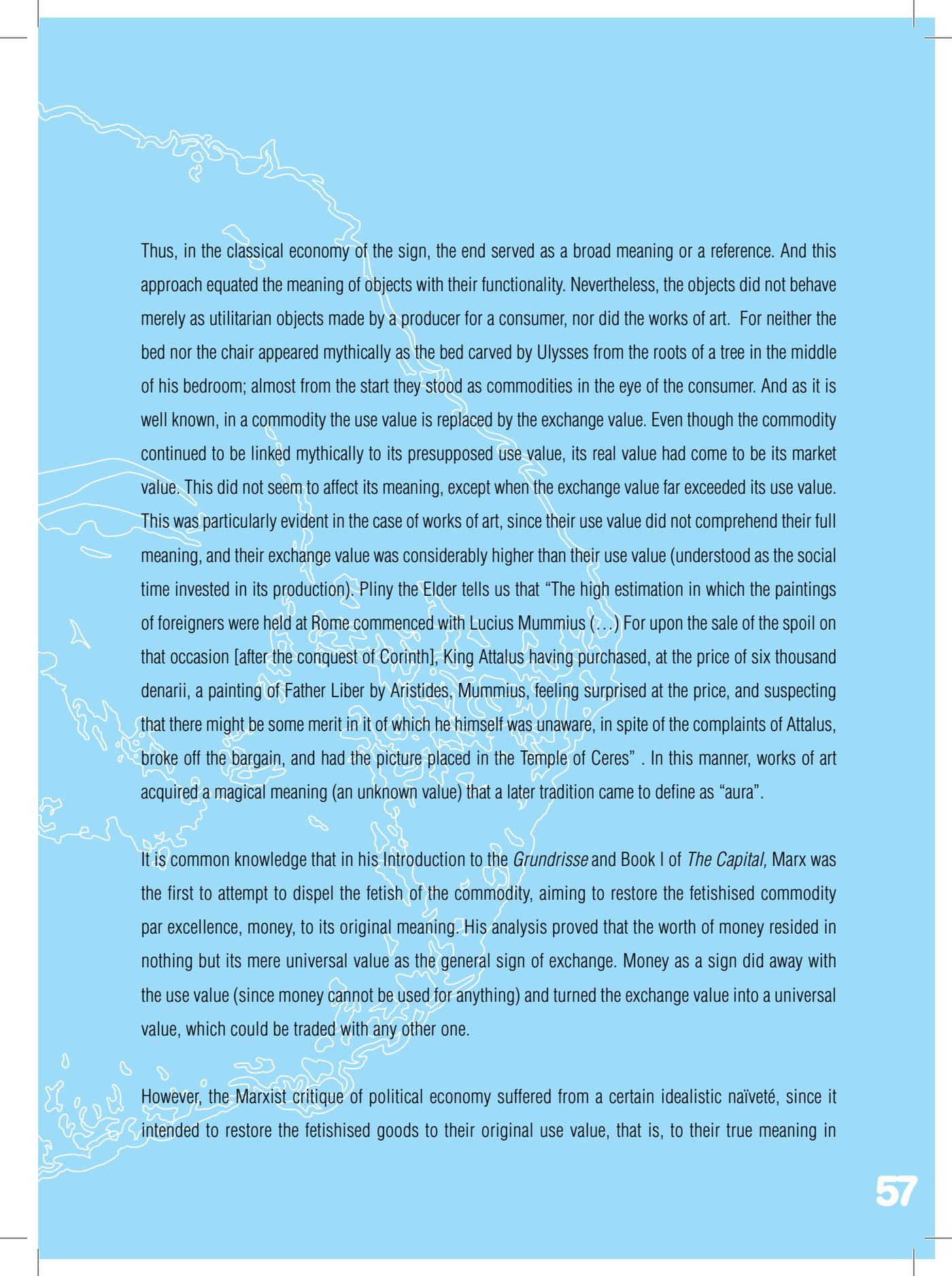
Nevertheless, the difference between the end of artificial beings and the end of natural beings pointed at spontaneity as something unique to natural production. Unlike natural products, artificial products were not produced spontaneously, but produced by us as a means to an end. Thus, while the



products of nature have a proper end that is actualised spontaneously (“the proper end of natural beings—said Aristotle—is to actualize their full potential”) artificial beings have an end by the design of their makers, an end not intrinsic to them, which rather than coming from within is imposed from without by another. While the tree, the cloud or the bird were produced spontaneously, the table or the chair were made by another to meet a need or purpose, without which neither the table or chair would exist. This leads to the conclusion that the end is the ultimate meaning, the essence or idea of artificial beings.

Essence is what something is in and of itself. The approach used to elucidate the essence of things was the well-known method of definitions by proximate genus and specific difference. This method equated the essence to the idea of some thing. The intrinsic purpose of natural beings is to fully actualise their essence or idea. For this reason, Aristotelian tradition identified the end with the idea. This is something any one can understand easily when we ask what a wrench, a switch, or a shoe is. If we obtain an explanation of their purpose, their use, their function, we seem to understand completely the meaning of the object, and it is no longer a mystery to us. To be sure, there are objects that are strange, rare and surprising, but when we are told their end (what their use is) it seems that the puzzle of their meaning is resolved in full. But this is not the case with natural beings, whose essence has nothing to do with their usefulness to us.

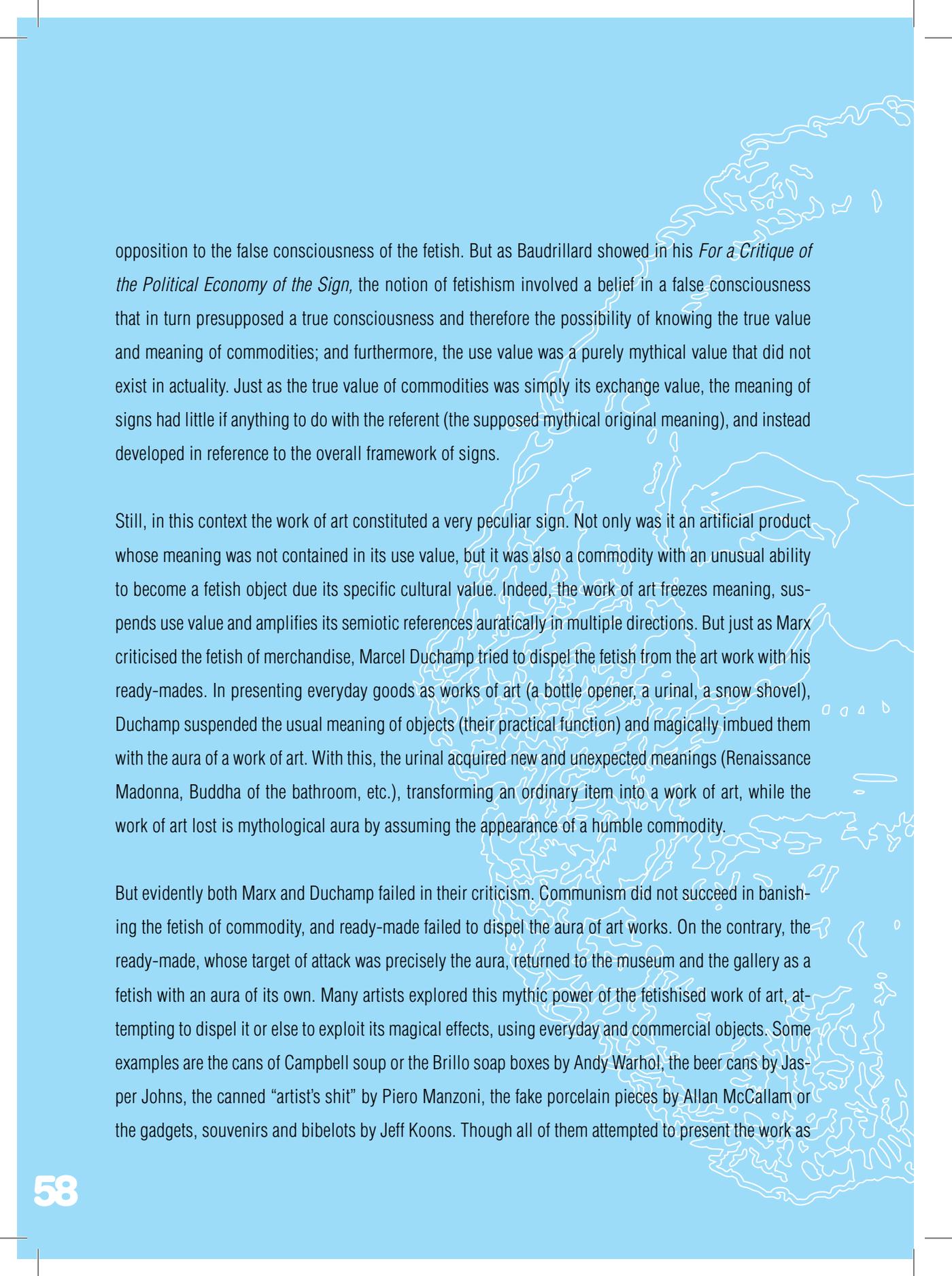
In any case, it seemed as if the sphere of artificial beings was accounted for. Their meaning was explained clearly by their purpose or what we could label as their “use value”. Yet there was one specific set of artificial beings that did not seem to fulfil these conceptual requirements. And interestingly enough, it happened to comprise the most artificial among the artificial products, those artefacts made specifically by art. Indeed, when it comes to artistic products, neither their purpose nor their usefulness clarified their meaning nor comprehended their full essence. It is not clear what purpose poetry, drama or dance may serve, but whatever their functions may be, it is obvious that those purposes or functions do not under any circumstances comprehend their meaning nor explain their constructs.



Thus, in the classical economy of the sign, the end served as a broad meaning or a reference. And this approach equated the meaning of objects with their functionality. Nevertheless, the objects did not behave merely as utilitarian objects made by a producer for a consumer, nor did the works of art. For neither the bed nor the chair appeared mythically as the bed carved by Ulysses from the roots of a tree in the middle of his bedroom; almost from the start they stood as commodities in the eye of the consumer. And as it is well known, in a commodity the use value is replaced by the exchange value. Even though the commodity continued to be linked mythically to its presupposed use value, its real value had come to be its market value. This did not seem to affect its meaning, except when the exchange value far exceeded its use value. This was particularly evident in the case of works of art, since their use value did not comprehend their full meaning, and their exchange value was considerably higher than their use value (understood as the social time invested in its production). Pliny the Elder tells us that “The high estimation in which the paintings of foreigners were held at Rome commenced with Lucius Mummius (...) For upon the sale of the spoil on that occasion [after the conquest of Corinth], King Attalus having purchased, at the price of six thousand denarii, a painting of Father Liber by Aristides, Mummius, feeling surprised at the price, and suspecting that there might be some merit in it of which he himself was unaware, in spite of the complaints of Attalus, broke off the bargain, and had the picture placed in the Temple of Ceres” . In this manner, works of art acquired a magical meaning (an unknown value) that a later tradition came to define as “aura”.

It is common knowledge that in his Introduction to the *Grundrisse* and Book I of *The Capital*, Marx was the first to attempt to dispel the fetish of the commodity, aiming to restore the fetishised commodity par excellence, money, to its original meaning. His analysis proved that the worth of money resided in nothing but its mere universal value as the general sign of exchange. Money as a sign did away with the use value (since money cannot be used for anything) and turned the exchange value into a universal value, which could be traded with any other one.

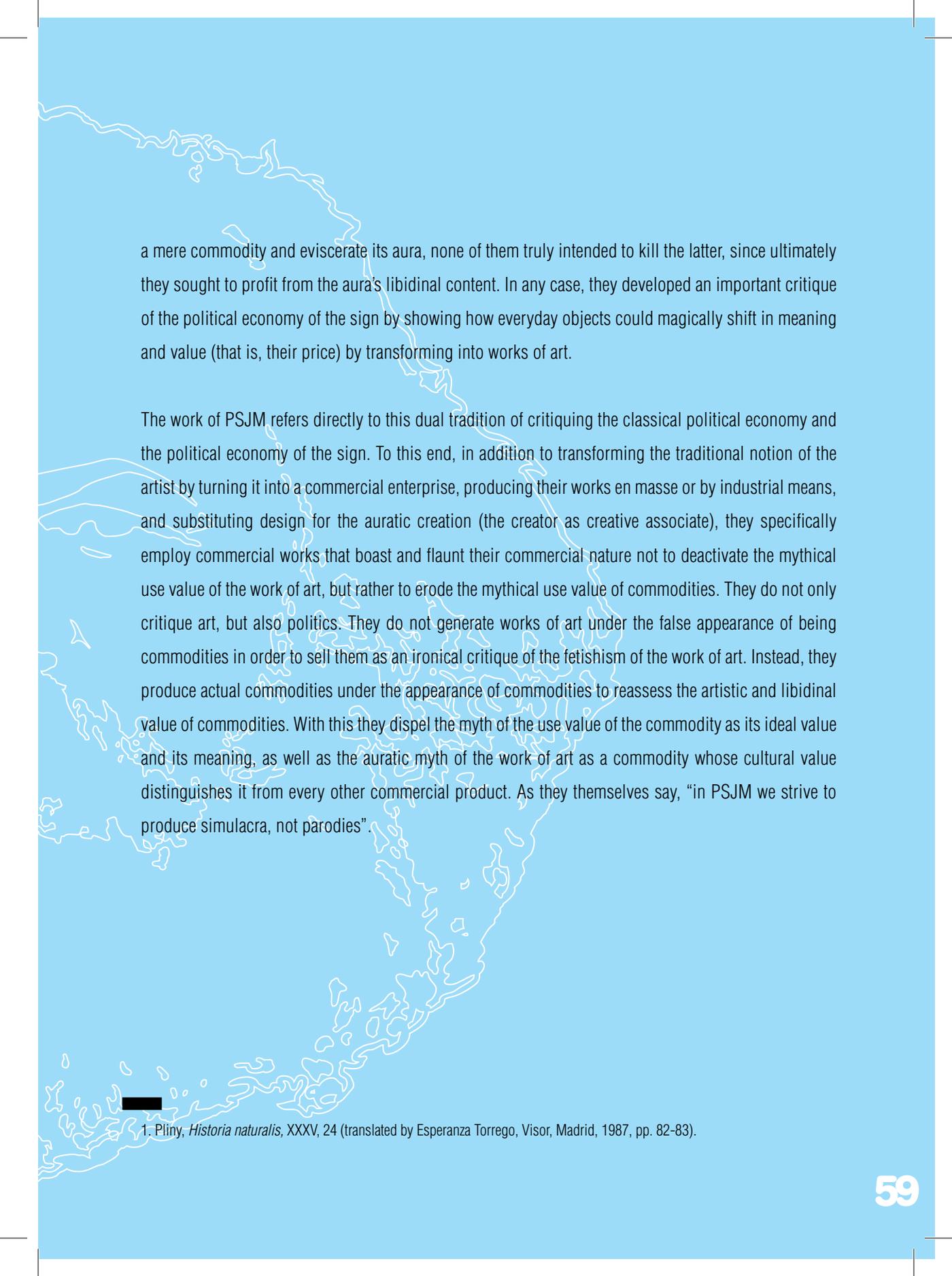
However, the Marxist critique of political economy suffered from a certain idealistic naïveté, since it intended to restore the fetishised goods to their original use value, that is, to their true meaning in



opposition to the false consciousness of the fetish. But as Baudrillard showed in his *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, the notion of fetishism involved a belief in a false consciousness that in turn presupposed a true consciousness and therefore the possibility of knowing the true value and meaning of commodities; and furthermore, the use value was a purely mythical value that did not exist in actuality. Just as the true value of commodities was simply its exchange value, the meaning of signs had little if anything to do with the referent (the supposed mythical original meaning), and instead developed in reference to the overall framework of signs.

Still, in this context the work of art constituted a very peculiar sign. Not only was it an artificial product whose meaning was not contained in its use value, but it was also a commodity with an unusual ability to become a fetish object due its specific cultural value. Indeed, the work of art freezes meaning, suspends use value and amplifies its semiotic references auratically in multiple directions. But just as Marx criticised the fetish of merchandise, Marcel Duchamp tried to dispel the fetish from the art work with his ready-mades. In presenting everyday goods as works of art (a bottle opener, a urinal, a snow shovel), Duchamp suspended the usual meaning of objects (their practical function) and magically imbued them with the aura of a work of art. With this, the urinal acquired new and unexpected meanings (Renaissance Madonna, Buddha of the bathroom, etc.), transforming an ordinary item into a work of art, while the work of art lost its mythological aura by assuming the appearance of a humble commodity.

But evidently both Marx and Duchamp failed in their criticism. Communism did not succeed in banishing the fetish of commodity, and ready-made failed to dispel the aura of art works. On the contrary, the ready-made, whose target of attack was precisely the aura, returned to the museum and the gallery as a fetish with an aura of its own. Many artists explored this mythic power of the fetishised work of art, attempting to dispel it or else to exploit its magical effects, using everyday and commercial objects. Some examples are the cans of Campbell soup or the Brillo soap boxes by Andy Warhol, the beer cans by Jasper Johns, the canned "artist's shit" by Piero Manzoni, the fake porcelain pieces by Allan McCallum or the gadgets, souvenirs and bibelots by Jeff Koons. Though all of them attempted to present the work as



a mere commodity and eviscerate its aura, none of them truly intended to kill the latter, since ultimately they sought to profit from the aura's libidinal content. In any case, they developed an important critique of the political economy of the sign by showing how everyday objects could magically shift in meaning and value (that is, their price) by transforming into works of art.

The work of PSJM refers directly to this dual tradition of critiquing the classical political economy and the political economy of the sign. To this end, in addition to transforming the traditional notion of the artist by turning it into a commercial enterprise, producing their works en masse or by industrial means, and substituting design for the auratic creation (the creator as creative associate), they specifically employ commercial works that boast and flaunt their commercial nature not to deactivate the mythical use value of the work of art, but rather to erode the mythical use value of commodities. They do not only critique art, but also politics. They do not generate works of art under the false appearance of being commodities in order to sell them as an ironical critique of the fetishism of the work of art. Instead, they produce actual commodities under the appearance of commodities to reassess the artistic and libidinal value of commodities. With this they dispel the myth of the use value of the commodity as its ideal value and its meaning, as well as the auratic myth of the work of art as a commodity whose cultural value distinguishes it from every other commercial product. As they themselves say, "in PSJM we strive to produce simulacra, not parodies"

1. Pliny, *Historia naturalis*, XXXV, 24 (translated by Esperanza Torrego, Visor, Madrid, 1987, pp. 82-83).