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Editorial

e-flux journal #13 — february 2010 Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle
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Repeated attempts to dismantle the aura of value and rarity surrounding art objects have been, for the most part, unsuccessful. Why is that? The majority of these attempts throughout the twentieth century have consisted of infiltrating the economy of care, custodianship, conservation, and considered attention granted to art objects upon entry into the art establishment. While the introduction of impostors into this ecosystem in the form of real-world doubles (such as Duchampian readymades) served to short-circuit the aura of authenticity within spaces of art, over time these impostors nevertheless began to perform the function of ritualizing a general sense of disbelief with regard to the art establishment's unpredictable and indeterminate patterns of attention to art objects.

In essence, these attempts mistook the art establishment for being in the business of producing an aura of authenticity, when in fact the real commodity has always been this attention itself, the care and custodianship bestowed upon objects by this system. It could be said that the fear of encountering one's own double that Freud articulated in his notion of the uncanny no longer becomes relevant – such an encounter would not produce any kind of crisis of identity because a regulatory system has already been installed to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of exhibiting everyday, easily reproducible objects and formats. However, the real fear that remains even today is that an art object will encounter its material double (mass-produced or not) on the street one day, and – rather than experience some kind of crisis of identity – befriend it, forming the unholy union possible: one that would simultaneously denigrate and distribute its care, conservation, and custodianship beyond the spheres where it can be safely regulated.

In this issue, Sven Lütticken opens his upcoming three-part series “Art and Thingness” by looking at how an approach to artworks through their status as common objects can reveal a way for art objects to overcome the aura of the complex contemporary commodity. Starting as a response to Paul Chan's “What Art Is and Where it Belongs” from issue 10, Lütticken echoes Chan's assertion that “art is both more *and* less than a thing,” and further proposes that, rather than suppress art's thingness, looking at certain works as concrete objects absent of their added commodity value could allow “these alienated and hollowed-out objects ... to be charged with new subjectivity.”

Elisabeth Lebovici speaks with Pierre Bal-Blanc about the exhibition “The Death of the Audience” recently curated by Bal-Blanc at Secession in Vienna. In trying to work with

“professional marginals” – artists who, “voluntarily or not, strayed from the movements through which they would otherwise have defined themselves as professional artists” – the exhibition attempted to engage with many of these artists’ propensity for open forms and processes that evade straightforward completion or easy commodification. Bal-Blanc further explains how the refusal of spectacle was mirrored in his approach to the exhibition as being less about inclusion than about exclusion.

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez begins the first part of her series “Innovative Forms of Archives,” looking at artists who amass or simply invent semi-authoritative archives of historical or contemporary material. Whether compensating for an absence of available resources locally – as did Lia Perjovschi’s Contemporary Art Archive, started in the artist’s Bucharest apartment in the 1980s – or working with documentary evidence as a form, many of these approaches nevertheless comprise displaced, improvisational, portable museums that question the authority of historical canons by mimicking their structure and presentation, sometimes in oblique and playful ways, and sometimes replacing their function altogether.

Bernardo Ortiz Campo takes a speculative look at how *October*’s editorial policy of publishing images of artworks in black and white speaks to a fundamental distance between the act of writing about art and the object of that writing: the artwork itself. Campo then proceeds to build an argument for the autonomy of the act of writing, which works at its best when it can take this distance for granted and use it to produce its own form of imagination, its own experiences and subjectivities, alongside and independent of artworks themselves.

Monika Szewczyk considers the role of labor in art through Allan Sekula’s 1974 work *This Ain’t China: A Photonoel*, an exhibition of which she is curating at e-flux’s project space from February 20 to April 3. Documenting labor and social conditions at a fast food restaurant where the artist was once employed, the work’s forty-one photographs alternate between the mock-heroism of demanding worker’s rights in a typical American restaurant, the products of labor (pizza, hotdogs, burgers), and, as Szewczyk points out, the spectral presence of mass workers’ movements in Mao’s China and elsewhere at the time.

Finally, Adam Kleinman looks at the expectations heaped on artists and artworks to be validated through withstanding the “test of time,” an understanding of historical relevance that is as constructed as it is projected. How do works then qualify for this privileged conservation? Kleinman proposes that such

great works are in fact stand-ins for the conglomeration of culture and human activity that produced them, symbols of a preferred history. But the question remains: how do we then access these works when the elevation of their status has the simultaneous effect of placing them beyond critique?

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