

Joshua Simon

Neo- Materialism, Part One: The Commodity and the Exhibition

01/07

e-flux journal #20 — november 2010 Joshua Simon
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It is perfectly understandable that the dandy, the man who is never ill at ease, would be the ideal of a society that had begun to experience a bad conscience with respect to objects. What compelled the noblest names of England, and the regent himself, to hang on every word that fell from Beau Brummell's lips was the fact that he presented himself as the master of science that they could not do without. To men who had lost their self-possession, the dandy, who makes of elegance and the superfluous his *raison d'être*, teaches the possibility of a new relation to things, which goes beyond both the enjoyment of their use-value and the accumulation of their exchange value. He is the redeemer of things, the one who wipes out, with his elegance, their original sin: the commodity.

– Giorgio Agamben¹

In recent years, in addition to critiques of the market and of the cycles of exploitation enacted by commodity exchange, a new set of sensibilities has been introduced in critical contemporary art, dealing with the ways in which the commodity and its surrounding economy activate us. One can say that the commodity is only really true to itself as art, and thus the exhibition becomes a format that enables us to see the commodity as it is. In order to understand objects, we must first acknowledge that every artwork is first and foremost a commodity.

In his three-part essay "Art and Thingness," Sven Lütticken examines the art object as a transient object subjected to commodification through a series of processes.² Among the many virtues of the text is how Lütticken points out a shift in the object right from the start: "'Things' are no longer passively waiting for a concept, theory, or sovereign subject to arrange them in ordered ranks of objecthood."³ To my mind, however, this impressive survey neglects to examine the commodity as an entity prior to the art object, as the thing that precedes any object, including art objects.

Following the Marxian analysis of the commodity, my essay will focus on contemporary art objects within the framework of the exhibition – a form of seeing that allows an encounter with the art object as commodity. Even when artists, curators, critics, and spectators opt for an intimate, narrative, symbolic, critical, or any other understanding of objects, in an exhibition objects nevertheless converse in the language of commodities. While formalistic analysis reveals that this non-literal

language involves materials, colors, shapes, scale, and composition, what is it exactly that the objects say?

In the section of *Capital* titled “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” Marx demonstrates that the commodity is a materialization of our social relations:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labor. It is as clear as noon-day that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was.⁴

According to Marx, the commodity is comprised of two values: use value and exchange value. But there is a third, intrinsic value that stems from exchange value, and it is here that the total and unconditional interdependency between commodities is found. The commodity is the thing that always feels at home. Whereas man suffers from a folkloristic and identity-dependent conception of foreignness, acquaintance, history, tradition, and alienation, and plants and animals have difficulty acclimatizing, the commodity is a mode of being that is free of all these. It is first and foremost a presence.

Their World, Not Ours

Maybe the time when we will be able to discuss this civilization of private property in the past tense is just around the corner, but for now it is still present in all its extremes. Private property remains the cornerstone of an all-encompassing liberal concept of our civilization, and it is the key to understanding our relations with each other and with objects, as well as between objects. It is a conceptual framework based on

negation, on exclusion – something can be mine only if it excludes others who might otherwise own it. Yet the logic of ownership that has guided our understanding of the world of things no longer answers to the challenge. Most commodities live longer than their creators and consumers alike – for even a simple plastic bag will outlive us all many, many times over. As commodities ourselves, even our bodily organs can outlive us. Therefore, as all objects that enter into this world are commodities, we must realize that this is not our world, but rather theirs. We dwell in the world of commodities.

In Michael Bay’s blockbuster film *Transformers* (2007), beings from another planet fight for control of Earth. As the mythology in the film has it, these beings arrived on Earth in search of a new planet to settle; upon arrival, considering how to properly disguise themselves, the aliens concluded that cars and weapons comprised the main forms of existence on the planet, and they proceeded to assume those forms. While on one level this can be taken as a mere fiction, the number of cars in the world now approaches two billion, and countries such as Germany produce more cars in a year than newborn babies. Can anyone blame the *Transformers* for seeing Earth as a planet of cars, and not of humans?

Guy Ben-Ner’s video *Stealing Beauty* (2008), shot without permission in IKEA stores across the world, focuses on private property’s relation to the family. In the video, Ben-Ner, his wife, and his two children inhabit IKEA’s various domestic settings as if they were in their own home. While shoppers pass through the frame, a series of domestic scenarios play out. The son is caught stealing in school and the father (who masturbates compulsively) offers the son a lesson in moral conduct by explaining the concepts of private property, family, and value. While Ben-Ner’s son washes dishes in a display sink with invisible (but audible) water, his daughter reads from Friedrich Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*:

So, the original meaning of the word family, first coined in Ancient Rome, did not have the sentimental and domestic meaning we attach to it today. For the Romans the word “family” did not even refer to the married pair and their children, but to the slaves. “Famulus” means a domestic slave. “Familia” means the total number of slaves belonging to one man. This was the new Roman social organism whose head, the father, ruled over wife, kids, and slaves. And thus, transition into full private property was accomplished parallel with transition to monogamy. The single family

02/07

e-flux journal #20 — november 2010 Joshua Simon
Neo-Materialism, Part One: The Commodity and the Exhibition

became the economic unit of society. Sentimentality and love came only later, to seal the deal.

The liberal view of the tension between commodification and family is not the point, of course. Following Marx and Engels, Ben-Ner sees private property as the very basis of the family. For him, the family feels no aversion to living in an IKEA store; rather, it is already there. Standardized consumption outlets such as IKEA answer to the same ancient logic from which the family originates. Richard Hamilton's sarcastic question, "Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?" is answered by Ben-Ner, who states that our homes are not ours to begin with – we inhabit the world of another. IKEA's objects do not furnish our world, we dwell in theirs.

Guy Ben-Ner's interest in objects and their function has appeared and reappeared throughout his work. Video works such as *Berkeley's Island* (1999), *Moby Dick* (2000), *Household* (2001), *Elia* (2003), *Treehouse Kit* (2005), *I'd Give It To You But I Borrowed It* (2007) include, among other things, a kitchen that becomes the deck of a ship and a desert island, a fridge that becomes a book, a crib that

transforms into a prison, a table that changes into a chair, a man that becomes an ostrich, objects that become a bicycle, IKEA furniture that turns into a tree. These are turns from the linguistic to the economic that require a change in the position of the subject: it is no longer humans that conduct things; rather, humans are conducted within them. *Stealing Beauty* ends with the two children addressing the camera directly with the following speech:

Children of the world, unite. Release the future from the shackles of the past. My peers, it is our time to steal. Not in order to gain property but in order to lose respect for it. Property is like a ghost. You cannot possess it without being possessed by it. Steal and let others steal. Let property move freely from place to place so it will not haunt your home. Steal from the local supermarket. Steal from the city! Steal from the state! Steal from your parents! And above all, don't accept inheritance – steal it. Rob your parents and rid yourself of promises you will have to keep. Children of the world, unite. Release the future from the shackles of the past.

03/07



Guy Ben-Ner, *Stealing Beauty*, 2007. Screen capture single channel video, color with sound, dvd 17' 40", courtesy of Postmasters gallery, New York.

Private property is the basic category of civilization, and it is through inheritance that private property is passed on, thus creating its own history of civilization. Freedom from property and inheritance can free us from this history and present the prospect of a new civilization, with the relation to, and between, objects remaining a primary anchor. For the purposes of tracing our understanding of objects today, however, it is important to understand the category of private property to be an insufficient one.

04/07

after, and watching over them.

If we examine historical events in relation to the commodity, they can reveal an alternate history. For example, we find that the French Revolution, as a revolutionary demand for private property to answer the bourgeois call *Laissez passer! Laissez faire!*, was also a demand for the free passage of commodities through trade. In the spirit of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), in which private property is a sanctified right (according to article XVII in the declaration), commodities blow with the wind, and every place is their home.⁶ And unlike people, commodities such as cars, trains, and airplanes are allowed smoother, and quicker, passage.

Another example can be found in the European Union, which we usually regard as dating back to the European Economic Community. But if we look again at the events during and following World War II, we find that, contrary to the common belief that the unification of Europe started with the Treaties of Rome in 1957 – signed by the leaders of France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg as a result of the scars of World War II – the union was born, from the perspective of the commodity, in the Vichy government's collaboration with the Nazis in June 1940, when France and Germany worked together for the first time after generations of hostility. Customs regulations were softened, since part of France was occupied by the Nazis and another part was collaborating with them. With the termination of World War II, the relationship simply continued. Thus the commodity teaches us history – the provocative truth it tells us is that the European Union is also a continuation of the collaboration between the Nazis and the Fascists. And insofar as people now have free passage, they are sentenced to be led only as commodities: right of passage is given to them either as members of a workforce or as tourists. The familiar question “business or pleasure?” comes to stand for the limited categories through which movement in the world is allowed.

Everything that comes into this world does so as a commodity. The world belongs to the commodity, not to us. And today it would be hard to deny that we have more intimate relations with commodities than we do with each other. On a social level, the commodity can be considered part of a networked economy of exploitation: from design and creation, through marketing and distribution, to consumption and waste. According to Marxian tradition, the fetishism of commodities empties them of meaning, hiding the real social relations invested in them through human labor. This allows the imaginary, ideological, and symbolic social relations to be,



Patek Philippe ad.

A well-known advertisement by luxury wristwatch-maker Patek Philippe seems to suggest a way into the paradox of ownership and inheritance by identifying the explicit tension between the existence of the object and the ownership of it:

You never actually own a Patek Philippe.
You merely look after it for the next generation.⁵

By consecrating inheritance, the advertisement asserts that nothing can be owned – only looked after. Not only can we no longer believe in the myth of ownership, but we also require a new ethics for using objects – for taking care, looking

in Sut Jhally's terms, "injected into the construction of meaning."⁷ Jhally maps the new meanings advertising produces through commodity fetishism in four successive religious stages: 1) utility/idolatry, in which commodities are freed from being merely utilitarian things; 2) symbolization/iconology, in which commodities serve as abstract representations of social values; 3) personification/narcissism, in which they are intimately connected with the world of interpersonal relations; and 4) lifestyle/totemism, in which the first three stages merge to define the group under a singular lifestyle.⁸

Money is the ultimate representational system of value in this civilization. Marx has demonstrated that it is through the objective symbol of money value that commodity fetishism conceals labor, and thus social relations. In spite of the fact that the producer's labor is the source of the commodities' value, within the context of the market the producer thinks of the fruit of his or her own labor as a consumer would – as objects to be bought and sold. In this way, the commodity echoes the workers' silence. As David Harvey puts it, "capital is not a thing, but rather a process in which money is perpetually sent in search of more money."⁹ As an object, then, the commodity materializes labor as capital – operating as both thing and process. The universality of money becomes easily exchanged for the particularity of the commodity. But when the commodity's particularity must be converted into the universality of money, things become much more problematic.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, the commodity actually loses its money value at the moment of payment – as soon as the commodity is purchased, it is on its way to becoming waste.

According to Marx, the commodity must have human labor invested in it. But although it is the result – and the reflection – of social relations, the commodity, be it goods or services, fetishizes itself through the equivalence of money value, presenting itself as a relation between objects – kicking men out of the equation, so to speak. But in a consumer economy in which cause and effect can no longer be traced – for example, when there are more commodities than human beings – we can no longer believe that commodities are mere materializations of our social relations. While they may still be this, they also have a social life of their own that has included us in it.¹¹ Marx's quote above seems to suggest that we are actually a materialization of *their* relations. Consider our bodies – blood sugar levels, kidney stones, cholesterol levels, or cancerous pollution. In our relations with commodities, we no longer have the ability to decide between

production or consumption, improvisation or function, profit or loss. It is in this way that, as part of the social relations that materialize within it, the commodity gains a life of its own – beyond even the means of its invention: design, manufacturing, production, marketing, shipment, disposal, and evacuation.

The Exhibition

In his seminal 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," Michael Fried recognized the Minimalist ("literalist," according to Fried) object's tendency towards anthropomorphism. It is an art object that aspires to be a subject associated with the viewer's space, that has a presence equal to that of man in the space:

literalist art stakes everything on shape as a given property of objects, if not indeed as a kind of object in its own right. It aspires not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such.¹²

Paradoxically, it is the critical tools used by formalists (and those leaning towards mysticism in all things) that allow for an entry point into the language of things. It is taken for granted that art objects speak – with us and amongst themselves. Neo-materialist formal languages center on questions of material, shape, volume, scale, composition, and authorship only through the commodity character of objects. But at the end of the day, literalist/minimalist attempts maintain the logic of cause and effect, the duality of object and subject. They tell us that the artist created an object aspiring to a presence equal to that of the viewer. Whereas Minimalism is anthropocentric, commodities exist prior to the viewer and to the artist.

Beyond being a narrative and an event, the exhibition is a form of exiting. As soon as you enter an exhibition, you walk through it as if you were on your way out. In this sense, the exhibition and the commodity share an allegorical relation. When we wish to describe what is being exhibited, we usually use the words "object," "piece," "artifact," "thing," "product," and even "commodity." One's preference depends on the discourse to which the description belongs. "Object" is used commonly in contemporary art, as it is regarded as intrinsically constitutive of subjects. "Object" is an interesting word, for in Hebrew it means "will" (*chefetz* – similar to "having an objective" in English). "Piece" is also common in this context, as it introduces a maker, a master of that piece, suggesting the thing to be passive and transparent, a mere projection of its maker's intention. "Thing" is used mainly in relation to a

mute presence that calls for contextualization. “Product” refers to a process of creation, bringing with it an impression of finality, a *fait accompli*. And “artifact” relates to an outcome or a residue. “Commodity” is used primarily in the context of a critique of the market, but I believe that this term should include all of the terms mentioned above.¹³ In a world where everything is already a commodity, “object” and “thing” are in this respect terms that attempt to cleanse the commodity of the chains of its birth, thus hiding its history and the means by which it appears in the world.

In this prefabricated world, one can claim that all things are commodities: objects, land, air, garbage, debt, action, and so forth. And the double-sided nature of the exhibition can also be understood in terms of the commodity – like the commodity, the exhibition is dependent yet independent, it is social and yet it is indifferent, it is inside us yet it is not of us.¹⁴ Objects in an exhibition are characterized by a suspended duration of being, allowing them an existence beyond use and exchange value. As both a retinal and non-retinal viewing mechanism, the exhibition embodies a much wider aesthetic experience that allows us to view commodities as they are. More than in any other context, commodities are most true to themselves as art.

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To be continued in “Neo-Materialism, Part Two: The Unreadymade.”

06/07

Joshua Simon is a curator and writer based in Tel Aviv-Jaffa. The three-part essay published on e-flux journal is a section from his upcoming book on Neo-Materialism. Simon is co-founding editor of *Maayan Magazine* and *The New&Bad Art Magazine* and he is the editor of *Maarvan (Western) – New Film Magazine* all based in Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at the Curatorial/Knowledge program at the Visual Cultures department, Goldsmiths college, University of London. He is the editor of *United States of Israel-Palestine* forthcoming in the *Solution* series by Sternberg Press. Among his poetry projects are *Red: Anthology of Hebrew and Arabic Class Poetry* (May Day 2007), and *Out! Against the Attack on Gaza* (Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Beirut and Cairo, 2008-2009). He is the co-editor of the book of censored exhibition *The Aesthetics of Terror* (Charta Art Books, 2009). Select curatorial projects include: *Sharon* (Tel Aviv 2004), *Blanks* (CCA, Tel Aviv 2005), *The Rear – the first Herzliya Biennial of Contemporary Art* (2007), *Come to Israel, It’s Hot and Wet and We Have The Humus!* (Storefront for Art and Architecture, NYC 2008), *Internazionale!* (The Left Bank – Israeli Communist Party Culture Club, 2008) *The Invisible Hand* (Sommer Contemporary Art, 2009). His latest curatorial project *The Unreadymade* opens at FormContent, London UK on December 3rd 2010.

e-flux journal #20 — november 2010 Joshua Simon
Neo-Materialism, Part One: The Commodity and the Exhibition

1
Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 48.

2
See Sven Lütticken, "Art and Thingness, Part One: Breton's Ball and Duchamp's Carrot," *e-flux journal*, no. 13 (February 2010); "Art and Thingness, Part Two: Thingification," *e-flux journal*, no. 15 (April 2010); and "Art and Thingness, Part Three: The Heart of the Thing is the Thing We Don't Know," *e-flux journal*, no. 16 (May 2010).

3
Lütticken, "Art and Thingness, Part One" and W. J. T. Mitchell *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 112.

4
Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," in *Capital* (1867), available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm%23S4> (accessed June 29, 2010).

5
I thank Noam Yuran for drawing my attention to this ad.

6
See Georges Lefebvre, "The Bourgeois Revolution," in *The French Revolution*, vol 1, trans. Elizabeth Moss Evanson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 102–116.

7
Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (New York: Psychology Press, 1990), 51.

8
Ibid., 201–202.

9
David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 40.

10
Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 106.

11
See for example Arjun Appadurai's notion of the anthropology of things in "Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–64

12
Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 151.

13
My aim here is to preserve the

Marxian notion that to some extent, the commodity has a mind of its own, and that this "mind" is actually what we see in the exhibition. For a critical analysis of use value and exchange value, and fetishism in relation to labor, see the chapter "Fetishism and Ideology" in Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (New York: Telos, 1981), 88–101. For a discussion of various "pure" and "loose" definitions of the commodity between exchange and value, see Arjun Appadurai, "Commodities and the Politics of Value."

14
Jean Baudrillard describes commodities as seductive yet lacking desire. See Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Philippe Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008).

07/07

e-flux journal #20 — november 2010 Joshua Simon
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