

Joshua Simon
**Neo-
Materialism,
Part Two: The
Unreadymade**

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Neo-Materialism, Part Two: The Unreadymade

→ Continued from “Neo-Materialism, Part One: The Commodity and the Exhibition” in issue 20.

Readymade and Unreadymade

Traditionally, by employing a series of strategies incorporating appropriation, composition, abstraction, re-contextualization, and de-contextualization of different commodities, modern art tried to see an entity beyond the ever-present commodity. In an art context, the commodity, this omnipresent “other entity” with which we are engaged in a network of intimacies (we eat, drink, wear, sit on, sleep in, and touch it), has been central to Dada, the Surrealists, the Constructivists, and Pop. Investigations into the commodity on both linguistic and conceptual grounds had already begun with the shift from Picasso’s *objets trouvés*, which he incorporated in his paintings and sculptures, to Duchamp’s readymades.¹ The examination of the relationships between humans in the world of commodities has likewise been focused upon in cinema – in romantic comedies, for example, where humans struggle to couple through different rituals of consumption.²

One could argue that some commodities are art objects, but all art objects are commodities. The commodity precedes the artwork. It is the material that inhabits all materials. It is the basic technique of every technique, the fundamental medium of all mediums. Even if, as has been the case for the past 150 years, the paint tubes, canvas, color pigment, wooden frame, and image (even that of an abstract painting) are all commodities, then an examination of the commodity as a pre-existing presence that precedes also the commodification of artworks in the art market, is long overdue. Thierry de Duve describes Duchamp’s readymades as having emerged from the industrial paint tube of the American portrait painter and paint manufacturer John Rand, quoting Duchamp:

Since the tubes of paint used by the artists are manufactured and ready-made products we must conclude that all paintings in the world are “readymades aided” and also works of assemblage.³

De Duve later quotes Duchamp saying:

A readymade is a work of art without an artist to make it, if I may simplify the definition. A tube of paint that an artist uses is not made by the artist; it is made by the manufacturer that makes paints. So the painter really is making a readymade when he paints with a manufactured object that

is called paints.⁴

The readymade emphasized the artist's ability to select an object and identify it as an artwork. That way, we accept that Duchamp's urinal relates more to Botticelli or Titian than to a bathtub. With the notion of the readymade, Duchamp was able to render the validity of this claim. But when Brussels-based Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri shows a waterproof roofing roll folded under the weight of two 10-liter cans of olives (*Vacío Olivia*, 2007) or when Gedi Sibony shows the leftovers of a wall-to-wall carpet hung on the wall (*Untitled*, 2007), can we still call these readymades?

In a world overburdened with stuff, these objects give an object's account of what it means to be in the world. They suggest an understanding on the part of the commodity, rather than of humans, as a historical subject. This is no longer an object that the artist renders as art (i.e. readymade), but rather it is the exhibition format – as both the narrative display of artifacts and the institutional contract of that which is called art – that allows us to see these commodities as they truly are.⁵

On the one hand, this may seem like a kind of hipster, lazy art. I mean, what can be more

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resigned than an assemblage of a few bought or found consumer products? But insofar as every artwork starts with some mode of consumption, every art object begins with shopping, whether by the artist or by someone else. In an admiring and detailed description dating from 1965, Robert Smithson recalled Donald Judd shopping before a new work:

He may go to Long Island City and have the Bernstein Brothers, Tinsmiths put "Pittsburgh" seams into some (Bethcon) iron boxes, or he might go to Allied Plastics in Lower Manhattan and have cut-to-size some Rohm-Haas "glowing" pink plexiglas. Judd is always on the lookout for new finishes, like Lavax Wrinkle Finish, which a company pamphlet says, "combines beauty and great durability." ... Or maybe he will travel to Hackensack, New Jersey to investigate a lead he got on a new kind of zinc based paint called Galvanox, which is comparable to "hot-dip" galvanizing.⁶

Both Smithson and Judd, however, show an interest in materials and finishes, but without much concern for their history or for materialist analysis. As artists, they obtain their authority



Efrat Kedem, Herzl & Frankel
St. corner, 2007, cardboard,
table and door handle.

through picking and choosing.

Meanwhile, art is doing something else today: packing, shelving, and customs bureaucracy. It is essentially the work of import/export businesses, whether dealing in commodities in general or those of the art world. Here a notion of the “unreadymade” could prove useful for distinguishing from the readymade by focusing on display rather than discourse, on commodities that are actualized through display. Sven Lütticken has used the term “altered readymades,” writing:

These would be inverted ready-mades that are no longer content to create artistic surplus-value, but rather investigate the conditions for a different type of thing, one that is no longer taken as a quasi-natural “matter of fact,” but as a political “matter of concern” – to use terms by Bruno Latour that are rather closer to Marxism than their author likes to acknowledge.⁷

France-based Italian-American artist Francesco Finizio’s work has been focusing on the relations between humans in a world of commodities. Finizio’s installation *Contact Club* (2004–2008) presents twenty-four images documenting himself in a room in his house designed especially for an experiment: with the help of a number of purchased aids (sweetened juices, teddy bears, funnels, buckets, masks, tape, and aluminum foil), he relieves himself into a bucket while watching a television playing footage of various horrors and disasters, such as the September 11 attacks and an atomic mushroom. The experiment includes an attempt to “read” his excrement as an expression of an interaction with the images of disasters. The project concludes with a series of photographs of babies in diapers holding remote controls, posted on the internet by proud parents. Finizio’s experiment, which up to that moment seemed ridiculous, was actually a reenactment of the daily experiences of babies around the world, who interact and communicate with commodities as they constitute their consciousness.⁸ In late 2008, just before the collapse of Lehman Brothers, Finizio produced a project entitled *In & Out of Business*, in which he held a weeklong performance at ACDC Gallery in Bordeaux, opening and closing ten different businesses in the gallery space: a café, a funeral home, a hotel, a peepshow, a mini-golf course, a reading hall, a skateboard parking lot, a prayer hall, a laundromat, and an art gallery. For all these different settings, Finizio used and reused the same objects, and when the exhibition opened to the public, the documentation of the weeklong performance was screened in the gallery space,

with the objects – plastic boxes, blankets, newspapers, mugs, boards, and rocks, which became a cross, grave, table, bench, bed, and art – leaning on the walls of the gallery. The setting of the art gallery might be the most telling one of all – as part of the performance, Finizio installed an art gallery within an exhibition in an art gallery. The remains of that gallery-in-a-gallery were blankets hung on the walls.

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Francesco Finizio, *In & Out of Business*, 2008, installation view.

The undoing of the readymade in Finizio’s work actualizes the commodity by using objects as collaborators. Finizio’s strategy of the unreadymade provides us with tools for rethinking the relations between commodities – that is, between people. The idea is not to leave the exhibition with a gaze that can see art in everything, but to use the exhibition to see commodities as they are, as imbued with their own language, interests, and will. When we think of Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, or Jessica Stockholder, for example, we accept their authorship over the different found objects they have assembled. They own their piece through linguistic, psychological, or cultural positioning and deliberation. Yet, unlike the appropriative drive of the readymade, the unreadymade is a form of dispossession – it can take many different approaches, yet all recognize, on some level, the inability to master the object. By actualizing its birth as a commodity and its unruly subjectivity, the unreadymade functions as a split-object shifting between subjugation and subjectification.⁹

In this respect, the artist appears to be a hunter-gatherer roaming a much more advanced civilization of commodities. According to Francesco Finizio, in our relations with objects, we are actually in medieval times, with our households resembling those of serfs.¹⁰ The fact that we live under the regime of a neo-feudal

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Michael Edward Smith, *Untitled*, 2008, cellphone, glass jar and painted styrofoam. Courtesy Koch Oberhuber Wolff and the artist. Photo: Michael E. Smith

debt economy of credit cards and mortgages, along with our domestic practices, renders our daily lives all the more similar to those of medieval sharecroppers. Our modem, phone, blow-dryer, television set, laptop, and boiler – the different appliances by which we make our living in the post-Fordist economy – are the equivalent of the sheep, donkey, goat, chicken, and hog in the Middle Ages. And like the tenant farmer and his domestic animals, our lives are dependent on them to the extent that they become part of the household and the family. Like the vassal, Finizio says, we need to care for these appliances and see that they are healthy and well.

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Elisheva Levy, *Moon Walking*, 2008, fabric and Acrilan.

Neo-Materialism

Lucy Lippard’s book *Six Years*, which promoted the idea of dematerialization in the New York art scene of the late sixties and early seventies, was first published in 1973, corresponding with the Nixon Shock, a culmination of a series of measures that unilaterally canceled the direct convertibility of the US dollar to gold.¹¹ At the time, this was perceived as a way of liberating foreign currency exchange rates from the 1944 Bretton Woods Agreement, which tied them to the value of gold. In this reality of unfixed exchange rates, it was claimed that capital itself was dematerialized. Yet, in fact, through the annulment of the Bretton Woods system, a symbol (money) itself became the material. And thus, from dematerialization we actually moved to a materialization of a symbol, arriving at neo-materialism. In an art context, an evident example can be found in the 2007–2008 retrospective of Lawrence Weiner at the Whitney Museum, where next to each of the artist’s sentences and slogans one could find a light-colored label with the name of the collector who allowed the work (the art object) to be shown.¹²

Following the insights of Noam Yuran, we

see that the neo-materialistic economy is one in which symbols behave like materials (for Yuran, brands are actually commodities made of money). This helps us to understand how brands and labels are regarded as material objects (the criteria of “real” and “fake” in brands, for example) or how labor has shifted from production to consumption (tourism, shopping, entertainment, watching television, advertisements, and social networks). In addition, the role of price has changed in many sectors from one that depicts our social relations through commodities (supply and demand) to become an inherent characteristic of the commodity (“it is expensive because it is expensive” as opposed to “it is expensive because it is valuable”). We are faced with the materiality of the symbol. As Yuran notes, the Nike is first and foremost a Nike and only later a shoe, with the symbol on the shoe becoming the material substance from which it is actually made. In artist Elisheva Levy’s *Moon Walking* (2008) – a shoe-pillow made from fabric and Acrilan – first, we recognize the three stripes of Adidas and only after a second look we realize it is actually a shoe. This work, along with others by Levy, attempts to address commodity fetishism while suspending it without it being burdened by use value. This white Adidas cloud is without a pair of shoes to make it usable. Despite the fact that it is a shoe, it does not need a foot.

The Death of the Object and the Birth of Commodity

The collapse of the Soviet Bloc saw the fall of the economy of productive labor and the rise of asset and commodity markets. The “trickle-down” economy promised by Reagan, Bush, and later Clinton, did not result in renewed investment in production, but rather in assets: the stock exchange, real estate, and the art markets booms.¹³ From Berlin to Baghdad, from Perestroika to the New World Order, it seemed that there was only one way of life available in the unipolar world forged by the events of 1989–1991, and it circles around the commodity as its axis.

As cultural theorist Sylvère Lotringer put it, art has finally fulfilled the program of Dada “with a vengeance,” embedding art into life. “Today,” he said in an interview for *frieze* magazine, “it is difficult to imagine anything that could be excluded from art.”¹⁴ Its field has expanded exponentially to include the entire society. Along the way, it grabbed anything that could be used for its own purpose – recycling garbage, forging communities, investigating political issues, tampering with biology, and so forth – simultaneously appearing and disappearing with an ambiguous promiscuity. This process took

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place while the market and scene for contemporary art was spreading to more varied geographies and assimilating what was once referred to as the periphery of the art world (i.e. the former Soviet Bloc, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East). Under these inclusive conditions, neo-materialistic sensibilities came to enable a reevaluation of our relations with things and objects, with the realm of art-making in the world of commodities transformed into a mode of being in uncertainties, of negative capacity.¹⁵

As a result, an increasing number of artists today exhibit the commodity as it is, in forms of waste and garbage – recent examples of this new objecthood could be seen in the 2007/2008 inaugural exhibition of the reopened New Museum in New York, “Unmonumental: The Object in the Twenty First Century,” which included objects, collages, and sound works. The density of works in the exhibition returned all of its exhibits, graceful as they may have been, to their basic form: trash. Of course, I say this not to be derogatory, but rather as an attempt at finding meaning in this form of clutter-as-display. As a survey show concerned with the move away from installations in the twenty-first century, returning to an interest in sculpture-objects, “Unmonumental” became a exhibition-cum-document of this new objecthood.¹⁶

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plastics industry manages to become ever more efficient and cut prices to a minimum. How is it done? If oil utilization for the plastic industry yields so cheap a raw material, it would follow that plastic in effect contains *aminuscule* amount of real matter. Like a spoon of sugar blown into a cloud of cotton candy, a single drop of oil can be blown into shelves upon shelves of plastic artifacts.¹⁷

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To be continued in “Neo-Materialism, Part Three: The Language of Commodities.”



Shay-Lee Uziel, *High Heels*, 2004, vinyl and glue.

The artist Lior Waterman has described the need for this kind of sensibility in his “The Object Manifesto,” characterizing the relations between art and trash, particularly with regard to the variety of objects made in China and sold at 99-cent stores:

We all know plastic is a byproduct of oil (the thick bubbling blood of the world drained from the earth, a shaman would say). We all know also that oil is a precious raw material over which wars are fought. And yet the

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1
See Thierry de Duve, “The Readymade and the Tube of Paint,” in *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 147–196.

2
Parallel to the “simple truth” television advertisements present us with by making commodities their main characters (notice the screen time humans receive versus objects in TV ads), contemporary romantic comedies focus on humans’ struggle to couple in a world of commodities, in which courting has transformed into a ritual of consumption structured by dating, status symbols, and lifestyle accessories.

3
Thierry de Duve, “The Readymade and the Tube of Paint,” 163.

4
Ibid.

5
The comparative display of cars in an automobile fair is an exhibition, too, and yet it is full of use- and exchange-value unlike that of the art exhibition. In the automobile fair, the commodity does not reveal itself as in an art exhibit. I thank Julia Moritz for stressing this point.

6
Robert Smithson, “Donald Judd,” in Robert Smithson, *Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 4–7.

7
Sven Lütticken, “Attending to Abstract Things,” *New Left Review* 54 (November–December 2008): 120.

8
Following Freud’s speculation on the psychic equivalence of money with feces, Noam Yuran has made a beautiful and useful elaboration of this comparison with the help of Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen, and Sándor Ferenczi. In a conference titled “Money and Soul” at the Freud Museum in Vienna in October 2010, Yuran addressed the notion of money as repression, using psychoanalysis and heterodox economics. While feces are the first social object, according to Freud, the money object embodies the social as absent from the sphere of experience, Yuran says. “The infant gives shit to his parents because of his love. With socialization we give money to people to make them strangers,” he concludes. Adding to Yuran, in the traditional psychoanalytic structure of ontogenetic and philogenesis, one can say that today the child moves from shit through an evolution of objects, but not to coins as Ferenczi suggested, but rather beyond them to a new baby accessory called Taggies – a blanket with labels that can be rubbed. The

texture of the Taggies is the texture of brands; see http://www.taggies.com/home_us.html.

9
Andrea Philips, Julia Moritz and Luigi Fassi helped develop these notions in their presentations at “The Language of Things,” a discussion organized by Caterina Riva and FormContent at The Showroom in London (December 4, 2010). I thank them for their insights, and also Grant Watson for his remarks during the discussion.

10
From a conversation with the artist.

11
Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

12
Joe Scanlan describes Weiner’s strategies in: Joe Scanlan, “Modest Proposals” *Artforum*, vol. 46 no. 8 (April 2008): 312–319; see <http://www.thingsthatfall.com/zencapitalism.php>. In his text, Scanlan quotes Lucy Lippard reevaluating the notion of dematerialization in the 1978 MoMA exhibition of Sol Lewitt: “Some of the blame for this situation must fall on those who, like myself, had exaggerated illusions about the ability of a ‘dematerialization of the art object’ to subvert the commodity status and political uses to which successful American art has been subjected since the late 1950s. It has become obvious over the last few years that temporary, cheap, invisible or reproducible art has made little difference in the way art and artists are economically and ideologically exploited and that it can hardly be distinguished in that sense from Corten steel sculptures and twenty-foot canvases.”

13
See David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2010), 21.

14
“Intelligence Agency: Sylvère Lotringer interviewed by Nina Power,” *frieze* 125 (September 2009): 104–107.

15
One can suggest a taxonomy of strategies, for example, the new objecthood and unreadymades of Rashawn Griffin, Mitzi Pederson, Ruri O’Connell, Gabriel Kuri, Gedi Sibony, and Michael Edward Smith; One can add the living (and dead) artist as an agent of commodification in the works of Rainer Ganahl, Christopher Williams, Roe Rosen, Francesco Finizio, and Josephine Meckseper; the site of work and labor in art in the works of Mierle Laderman

Ukeles, Hito Steyerl and David Hammons; IKEA art and IKEA-hacking by artists as diverse as Maayan Strauss, Andrea Zittel, Jason Rhoades, Clay Ketter, Guy Ben Ner, and Joe Scanlan; ventriloquism and questions of authentic experience in the work of Keren Cytter, Trisha Donnelly, Tino Seghal, and Ohad Meromi; autism and the encounter with commodities as living forms in the works of Igor Krenz and Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys.

16

David Harvey remarks in relation to the built environment: "Even in the shanty towns of self-built housing, the corrugated iron, the packing boxes and the tarpaulins were first produced as commodities." David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*, 147.

17

See Lior Waterman, "The Object Manifesto," in *The New & Bad Art Magazine* (Winter 2010–2011): 56–59 (in Hebrew). For an earlier English version see "One Dollar Store," in *The End of Cordova*, exh. cat. (Tel Aviv-Jaffa: CCA, September–November 2006), no pagination. In this context it is worth mentioning the cinematic link between oil and dinosaurs, for example in the *Jurassic Park* series (Steven Spielberg, 1993, 1997), which came out following the First Gulf War, with the assertion of a new world order based on direct American control over fossil fuels in the Middle East, when American dinosaur obsession grew to unprecedented proportions (after all, the history of America is the pre-history of its nature).

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