

Continued from “Neo-Materialism, Part Two: The Unreadymade” in issue 23.

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Yet what is here already very plainly expressed is the idea of the future conversion of political rule over men into an administration of things ...

– Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880)

Joshua Simon

# Neo-Materialism, Part Three: The Language of Commodities



Harald Thys and Jos de Gruyter, *Untitled, (No. 2)*, 2009. Black and white photograph mounted on MDF.

In his 1898 “The Beginnings of Ownership,” Thorstein Veblen explains how we have arrived at the notion of property through our understanding of its subjectivity. Veblen presents a concept that the savage’s individuality covered a pretty wide fringe of facts and objects, which commonly included his shadow, his reflection, his name, his peculiar tattoo marks, his glance and breath, the print of his hand and foot, his voice, representations of his person, parings of his nails, pieces of his hair, his clothes, his weapons, and other “remote things which may or may not be included in the quasi-personal fringe.”<sup>1</sup> These were part of him, not owned by him. And he was part of an early collective community that shared

a communal life. It is only with looting that women were brought into his community not as beings that were extensions of the man's individuality, but as things to be owned by him. But even under ownership these women had their own subjectivity and will – they had minds of their own. This, says Veblen, is at the core of our understanding of property:

And when the habit of looking upon and claiming the persons identified with my invidious interest, or subservient to me, as “mine” has become an accepted and integral part of man's habits of thought, it became a relatively easy matter to extend this newly achieved concept of ownership to the products of the labor performed by the persons so held in ownership.<sup>2</sup>

So, the thing owned has a consciousness of *its* own, according to Veblen. It is in this sense that Marx's question in “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” in *Capital* – What do commodities want? – should be taken as embedded in the tensions between labor and exchange, value and use, and individuality and subjectivity.

During the transition into the Soviet utopia of the 1920s there was an attempt to rethink the relations to objects beyond the commodity relation, to find harmony and camaraderie between people and things in a world of harmony and camaraderie between people.<sup>3</sup> In 1925, Boris Arvatov wrote one such research document. In

his essay, Arvatov suggested replacing instrumentality and use and exchange value with fraternity and sentimental value:

The organization of Things in the everyday life of the bourgeoisie does not go beyond the rearrangement of things, beyond the distribution of ready-made objects in space (furniture is the most characteristic model). Thus the Thing's form does not change, but remains once and forever exactly the same. Its function also remains exactly the same. The Thing's immobility, its inactivity, the absence in it of any element of instrumentality – all these create a relation to it in which its qualified productive side is perceived either from the point of view of a naked form (the criteria of aesthetics or taste: “beautiful” or “ugly” things), or from the point of view of its resistance to the influence of its surroundings (the thing's so-called durability). The Thing thus takes on the character of something that is passive by its very nature. The Thing as the fulfillment of the organism's physical capacity for labor, as a force for social labor, as an instrument and as a co-worker, does not exist in the everyday life of the bourgeoisie.<sup>4</sup>

A similar argument was presented by Dziga Vertov in his 1922 manifesto “We,” where he proposes a new set of relations between humans and objects in the form of the Kino-Eye: “We

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Ohad Meromi and Anna Craycroft in collaboration in Meromi's *Rehearsal Sculpture*, 2011. Performance.

exclude for the time being man as an object of filming because of his inability to control his own movements.”<sup>5</sup> Vertov extols the love of the peasant for his tractor and claims that in the communist world, a world beyond commodities, the camera will allow for the appearance of “seen facts” in the form of an international language, enabling the creation of an optic link between the workers and the world. Vertov offers a communist visual language of movement that would not only influence its viewers, as images do, but also help create a new social order.

Both Arvatov and Vertov describe unification and equality between people and objects in a society characterized by equality between people. Following pioneering film theorist Béla Balázs, Stanley Cavell claimed that this sort of equality between people and objects already exists in cinema, as the camera perceives man and object in ontological equality – it does not prefer one over the other.<sup>6</sup> A clear example can be found in romantic comedies, which focus on the relations between people in the world of commodities – be it the sirloin steak the paleontologist David Huxley (Cary Grant) buys for the leopard named Baby in Howard Hawks’s 1938 film *Bringing Up Baby*, the walk-in closet and black diamond ring Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) receives from her fiancé in *Sex and the City 2* (2008), or Ben Stiller’s terror-

stricken roles, Jennifer Aniston’s never-ending bachelorette tales, and certainly Judd Apatow’s insightful bromance movies examining male camaraderie in the midst of familiar commercial products.

Under the current economic regime, our daily labor (which now exceeds traditional employment) is focused mainly on absorbing surpluses. A 2011 report by the US neo-conservative Heritage Foundation asks, in the spirit of poverty-denial: “What is Poverty in the United States Today?” and answers, “Air Conditioning, Cable TV, and an Xbox.” The authors, Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield, attempt to undermine the growing phenomenon of the “working poor” – those who are employed, yet remain poor – by accusing them of overconsumption.<sup>7</sup> Yet overconsumption through debt is precisely what is constantly demanded of them. One can see this tendency personified in the obese.

Unlike the wealthy, who are tuned to the culture of abundance, the obese internalize the social logic of surpluses. Sixty years after suffering from malnutrition on a massive scale following World War II, the UK now faces an obesity epidemic. Feudalism had the Black Death, imperialism had cholera, robber baron industrialism had black lung disease, and the shock of industrial warfare brought psychosis;

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Jean-Luc Godard installing the last frame for the movie *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, 1967.

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Harald Thys and Jos de Gruyter, *Das Loch*, 2010. Video, 20'.

today's economic order is personified by the conduct disorder of the obese. The case of obesity in the UK today is such that after trying to put people under diet supervision and into educational plans, the NHS faced the collapse of its anti-diabetic and anti-obesity preventive schemes, and acknowledged that weight-loss operations would be the easiest solution. The state-funded health service in the UK has now authorized the use of gastric banding, stomach stapling, and other methods in order to better cope with the actual bodily absorption of surpluses. This has reached a point where the NHS now finances 4,000 operations a year.<sup>8</sup>

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things, the hoarder can be situated on a spectrum opposite the collector. While the latter uses judgment and choice in relation to things, subordinating them to her will, personality, and possession, the hoarder subordinates herself to the will and personality of things, and is possessed by them.

To the vibrant discussion on vitalism, animism, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and what Bennett calls "the somatic affectivity of objects," Anselm Franke has recently contributed an elaborate multi-venue traveling exhibition titled "Animism."<sup>9</sup> One volume has been published on this project, reflecting on the boundary between objects and subjects through the Western and the non-Western, applying artistic and theoretical perspectives on these boundaries. It is worth noting that "Animism" comes at a moment when the class project of capital's technocratic fascisms has come to openly express its animistic characteristics. Today it seems that we cannot discuss animism without addressing its actuality in the legal framework of our social life – this is especially apparent with the three C's: commodities, capital, and corporations. In January 2010, the US Supreme Court christened the corporation a person. The court ruled in the case *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission* that corporate funding of independent political broadcasts in federal elections cannot be limited, as corporations are protected by the First Amendment. This protection entails that corporations are juridical persons.<sup>10</sup> Adding to their various rights, including the right to contract and copyright, this ruling further promotes the equality of these immortal zombies. Free speech, a right attached to "natural persons," is now shared by these personalities of legal animism.

Boris Groys wrote of installation practices that they "reveal the materiality and composition of the things of our world."<sup>11</sup> Translation of the language of things begins with the actualization of the commodity through display. As much as it is common to discuss the master artist as one who knows materials – someone who converses with them intimately – the function of both the master artist and the curator today is to know the material from which all materials are made – the commodity.

The new objecthood of Detroit-based artist Michael Edward Smith brings commodities into the gallery in different compositions – a mobile phone lying in a bowl of water, on which he places a black-colored, split Styrofoam ball; a toothbrush stuck in a light bulb fixture in the ceiling; two bags resting on the gallery's floor. An atmosphere of failure, self-destruction, and exhaustion is expressed by the commodities he



Francesco Finizio, *Self-Portrait as a Remote Control*, from the series *Contact Club*, 2004-2008.

The figure of the hoarder has likewise become prominent in contemporary culture. Pointing to the reality TV show *Hoarders*, philosopher Jane Bennett has discussed the character of the hoarder as a person who answers the call of things. In a recent lecture titled "Powers of the Hoard," delivered at the Vera List Center at the New School in September, Bennett made the claim that, in relation to



Woman washing floor in communal dining hall, image from the exhibition "Kibbutz: Architecture Without Precedent" (curators: Yuval Yasky and Galia Bar Or), The Israeli Pavilion at the 12th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennial, 2010.

exhibits, and with these unready-mades it is unclear whether the artist is the author of this assemblage. Through his strategy of dispossession, Smith does not seem to have more power over the objects than they have over him. If anything, the artist here offers himself as a lover – meaning an *amateur*.<sup>12</sup> As post-appropriation strategies, dispossession and withdrawal bring this proposition closer to constructivist understandings of our relations with objects, and shifts away from Dadaist practices.<sup>13</sup>

In mashing the aesthetics of inanimate subject matter with representations of persons. Brussels-based artists Harald Thys and Jos de Gruyter's videos bring portraiture into the realm of still life. In their cinematic narratives centered on frozen images, *Ten Weyngaert* (2005), *Die Fregatte (The Frigate)*, (2008), *Der Schlamm von Branst* (2008), and *Das Loch* (2010) they have formulated a stillness that goes beyond that of the *tableau vivant*. They ask their actors to stand, sit, look, or stretch their limbs while keeping still – an intrinsic mode of display that becomes an exhibition of exhibited stillness.

While things would only have sentimental value in the communist world-beyond-commodities, in the present world Thys and de Gruyter's work confronts the reign of total alienation in which objects, things, and goods are all commodities – alien entities we can no longer understand. In contrast to Vertov's rapid visual and linguistic montage, the extreme stillness of Thys and de Gruyter's videos highlights the impossibility of communication between humans in a world of commodities. Thys discusses this interaction in terms of immobilization, highlighting the quality of stillness the characters in their films exhibit:

You can see this occur in animals who are confronted with some bizarre opponent, another (bigger) animal, a human, or a combination of both. Humans also have this capacity. The same mechanism is applicable for the relation between objects and humans or animals. Sometimes objects can provoke the same immobilization but objects can also undergo the same consternation. They can suffer an eternal shock when they are confronted with some weird character and become silent witnesses of perverted or strange actions, or the behavior of humans and animals ...<sup>14</sup>

This stillness is just one aspect of their investigations into the human-commodity interface. Through its stillness and muteness, Thys and de Gruyter translate the language of things into the language of images. In his book on

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the films of Jacques Tati, Michel Chion discusses the differences in the way cinema treats objects and human faces, and points out that “in the English language a distinction is made between a close image of a face (close-up) and the detail of an object or a part of a body (insert). This distinction does not exist in French; both concepts merge in a single word”<sup>15</sup> – *gros plan*. Following the French example, Thys and de Gruyter refuse to differentiate between the two shots. Instead, the absence of dialogue in their films gives way to another language beyond that of humans: the language of things. Thys and de Gruyter populate their videos first with objects, then with humans so still and mute that they almost become objects themselves. We cannot determine who (or what) possesses a more “evolved” consciousness, and the artists insist on indifference.

Their silence is perhaps due to the fact that neither the objects nor the humans perform the function they were originally expected to perform: the humans, by not being able to interact with each other through speech or meaningful action; the objects, by no longer being of any particular use.<sup>16</sup> Thys links this stillness to a lack of communication, one symptom of a larger malaise,

the final stage in the evolution-decline of Western civilization. The physical expansion has made place for digital expansion, and leads to a slow and gigantic implosion, a massive standstill, an epidemic attack of autism.”<sup>17</sup>

With toys, children are taught to generalize by matching color and shape (the green cube fits into the green square, the red pyramid fits into the red triangle, the yellow ball fits into the yellow circle, and so forth). But one can observe how toddlers treat things before learning to generalize. Playing with sand, for example, does not necessitate its categorization as “sand.” Every fistful is different, and the child examines each as unique, as if every grain had a first name. In the language of things, everything has a first name.

In a letter from 1916, published as “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” Walter Benjamin writes:

Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question “What does language communicate?” is therefore “All language communicates itself.” The language of this lamp, for example, does not communicate the lamp (for the mental

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being of the lamp, insofar as it is communicable, is by no means the lamp itself), but: the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression. For in language the situation is this: the linguistic being of all things is their language.<sup>18</sup>

For Benjamin, the language of things is not the language that names, categorizes, and identifies things – that is the language of man.<sup>19</sup> The language of things is that of God, of potential, of what can be done with things. Its interest is in the extension of what things have to say – this is “the language of the practice.” But we do not understand the language of the lamp, because the lamp doesn’t try to communicate its language to us.<sup>20</sup>

Writing on Benjamin’s text, Hito Steyerl suggests the practice of curating as an example of a system that could translate the language of things into aesthetic relationalities. She does not mean that curating translates the language of things by eliminating objects, or by inventing collectivities that “are fetishized instead,” as she puts it, but by means of creating unexpected articulations “by presencing precarious, risky, at once bold and preposterous articulations of objects and their relations, which still could become models for future types of connection.” To follow Steyerl’s ideas here would mean to take both the spiritual-vitalist direction and the social-materialist one simultaneously, bringing together early and late Benjamin, the mystic and the Marxist. The commodity entails not only the subjectivity of the people who took part in designing, making, delivering, and selling it, but also of those who use, clean, dismantle, and scavenge it. The commodity is the form in which things come to be in this world. Beyond any concept of alienation in relation to labor, we can see that the commodity’s material is constituted by our very social relations. This composition gives the commodity a subjectivity that is not particular to any one of us, but is rather one in which we all participate in forming.

This matter is first and foremost one of presence, not of representation. Therefore, our interest in the language of things has everything to do with our ability to change the social, historic, and material relations that are present in the commodity. Beyond its seductive surface, the political matter-of-factness of the commodity speaks our world. Actualizing it becomes our mission.

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Thorstein Veblen, "The Beginnings of Ownership," *The American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 4, No. 3 (Nov. 1898), 355-366.

2  
Ibid., 365.

3  
Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 41-89. A recent addition to Kiaer's pivotal book is *Kibbutz: Architecture Without Precedents*, which was published as part of the exhibition at the Israeli Pavilion for the 12th International Architecture exhibition at the Venice Biennial, 2010 (curated by Yuval Yasky and Galia Bar Or). In it, special mention is given to the material culture of the Kibbutz and the junkyard playground as a Socialist educational project. See also Ohad Meromi and Joshua Simon, "Repurposing The Kibbutz," in *Solution 196-213: United States of Palestine Israel*, ed. Joshua Simon (Sternberg Press, 2011), 117-121.

In the second part of his "Art and Thingness," titled "Thingification," Sven Lütticken gives a series of references from Aleksander Rodchenko, Bertolt Brecht, and Theodor Adorno, all concerned with Marxian attempts at redefining the role of objecthood and thingness beyond the distortion of the commodity character. Rodchenko is quoted writing in Paris in 1925: "Our things in our hands must be equals, comrades, and not these black and mournful slaves, as they are here." And Brecht is quoted paraphrasing Hegel: "things are occurrences." See *e-flux journal* no. 15 (April 2010), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/132>.

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Boris Arvatov, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)," trans. Christiba Kiaer, *October* no. 81 (Summer 1997), 124.

5  
Dziga Vertov, "We: A Version of a Manifesto," in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 69-72.

6  
See also Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979).

7  
See <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/09/understanding-poverty-in-the-united-states-surprising-facts-about-americas-poor>.

8  
See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/aug/27/nhs-obesity-operation-ninefold-increase>. This logic resembles the 1904 satire "The Sale of an Appetite" by Paul Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law and an original Marxist in his own right, in which a poor man sells his appetite to a rich man who does not want to be limited by his own capacity for appetite - a kind of a mirror story to Kafka's "A Hunger Artist." I thank Max Lomberg for introducing me to this beautiful tale.

9  
For now it has shown January through May 2010 in Antwerp at Extra City Kunsthall Antwerpen and the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA), and a second part opened this September in Vienna at the Generali Foundation. See also *Animism, Volume I*, ed. Anselm Franke (Sternberg Press, 2010).

10  
See <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/09pdf/08-205.pdf> and <http://storyofstuff.org/citizen/united>. For the history of corporation personhood and its relation to the abolition of slavery, the Reconstruction Era, and the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (1868), see [http://www.reclaimdemocracy.org/corporate\\_accountability/history\\_corporations\\_us.html](http://www.reclaimdemocracy.org/corporate_accountability/history_corporations_us.html).

11  
Boris Groys, "Art and Money," *e-flux journal* no. 24 (April 2011).

12  
This brings to mind a comment Hito Steyerl made in a lecture at the post-graduate program at Hamidrasha Art School in Tel Aviv in February 2011. Steyerl proposed that the iPhone asks to be caressed in the way it is handled and operated by a tender touch-screen, because it is traumatized by the conditions of labor through which it was produced. The melancholic funereal aftermath nature of Smith's work has been highlighted recently by Chris Sharp in his "A Complete Rest," *Kaleidoscope Magazine* 10 (Spring 2011), 42-49.

13  
See also Joshua Simon, "Neo-Materialism, Part Two: The Unreadymade," *e-flux journal* no. 23 (March 2011).

14  
Email conversation between Thys and de Gruyter and Katia Anguelova and Andrea Wiarda, published in the booklet accompanying "Suitcase Illuminated #6: Tunnel Effect - Part 1: Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys," curated by Katia Anguelova, Alessandra Poggianti, and Andrea Wiarda (DCM - Dipartimento Curatoriale Mobile) for Kaleidoscope HQ, Milan, May 27-June 30, 2009. See also Joshua Simon, "The

Silence of The Lamps," *Afterall* 22 (Autumn/Winter 2009), 63-70.

15  
See Michel Chion, *The Films of Jacques Tati*, trans. Antonio D'Alfonso (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2003), 81.

16  
Being the ultimate representational system of value in this civilization, Money, argued Marx, actually changes the object it represents. Marx demonstrated how commodity fetishism is the mechanism that conceals labor (i.e. social relations) through an objective-symbol known as money-value. In "the market," the maker, despite the fact that his or her labor is the source of the value of the commodities, thinks of them as a consumer would - as an object to be bought and traded. The voice of the commodity is the echo of the workers' silence.

17  
"Suitcase Illuminated #6," *op. cit.*

18  
Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 316.

19  
See Hito Steyerl, "The Language of Things," available at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0606/steyerl/en>.

20  
See also Hilary Jane Englert, "Occupying Works: Animated Works and Literary Property," in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Mark Blackwell (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2007), 218-241. I would like to thank Ofri Ilany for drawing my attention to this book, which makes the connection between the early rise of capitalist consumerism and its animistic manifestations.

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