

Objects of Art after Duchamp¹ – on creativity and gentrification

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What is an artist? An artist is an exemplary figure of individuation — understood as process of psychic and collective individuation where a “I” is only inside of a “we”, and where a “we” is constituted at the same time by the saturated potential and strained by the preindividual background that it supposes....it is an operator of transindividuation of available preindividual: it creates the works, that is to say the artifacts... which typically open up the future as the undetermined singularity by an access to the repressed which contrives the power of the no-etic soul as its possibility — which is only by irregularity- of passing to acts².

Bernard Stiegler

Who envisions this image of evolutionary alternative, has a clear fundamental understanding of the SOCIAL SCULPTURE which is formed by MAN AS ARTIST. Who says that there must be a change, but instead skips over the “revolution of concept” and runs against the external manifestations of ideology will fail. He will either resign, or be content with reforms or end up in an impasse of terrorism. All three forms are the victory of systems’ strategy. When it is finally asked: WHAT CAN WE DO? so that we can each the goal of the reorganization of the foundations, then we must make it clear: there is only one way [nonviolent transformation] to change the status quo- but these require a wide range of measures³.

Joseph Beuys

¹ May 2012, as an intervention of the Backroom conversation organized by Asian Art Archive.

² B. Stiegler, *De la misère symbolique, tome 2 : La Catastrophe du sensible*, Paris, Galilée, 2005, quote translated by the author.

³ J. Beuys, *Aufruf zur Alternative*, quote translated by the author.

Industrialization after Duchamp

At the beginning of the 20th century, when Marcel Duchamp stated to exhibit his ready-made, we see clearly a subversive act which sublates, in a Hegelian term, the practices and conceptions of art. The act of Marcel Duchamp is not a negation per se, but one that also preserves art according to its essence, unveil it from its historical and social contexts. While the significant things, that is probably not the fundamental change in the perception of art, but rather the objects of art merged with the industrial objects, and exhibit an aesthetics that is closely associated with their intended nature in the factories, workshops, and most importantly, the everyday use of them. Thierry de Duve recalled when Duchamp was asked in an interview what is a ready-made, he replied simply that it is not made by the artists, who even have no involvement in choosing the colour, the texture⁴. Duchamp anticipates a new form of art that blurred the boundary of arts and industrial objects, the bicycle wheels, the urinal, the bottle rack, the comb, etc. The extension of the bourgeois taste of art to industrial objects, for example furniture has been already described by Walter Benjamin in his description of Paris as the European capital of the 19th century⁵. But it is probably the first time, that an ordinary industrial object enter the realm of “art”, and reorganize the sensible through the link of industrialization and art. The art historian Boris Groys also emphasized this point:

And the main change lies not so much in the presentation of industrially produced objects as artworks, as in a new possibility that opened for the artist, to not only produce artworks in an alienated, quasi-industrial manner, but also to allow these artworks to maintain an appearance of being industrially produced⁶.

This peculiar relation appeared in Duchamp’s readymades in related to the industrial aesthetics must be rethought today and go beyond the discourse of the Kantian aesthetics (specifically the Sublime). Here I would like to take a departure to look at the relation between industrialization and art, and the transformations that it has brought to our everyday life. Today, if we want to differentiate the current development from the revolution carried out by Duchamp, it is that these objects no longer present us the “dysfunction” posed by art, but rather the multi-functionality of art. Duchamp suspends the urinal from its everyday use by putting it in the museum, that is also to say, to dysfunction it and produce a force that disturb the imagination and anticipation of spectators of his time, which we can consider as *sublimation*. In his own words, the readymade is based on the “visual indifference” and “total indifference of good or bad taste”, hence also creates a *disinterested subject*. Now, we see that art becomes multi-functional, the “indiffer-

⁴ T. de Duve, *Entretien avec Jacques Bauduin*, <http://www.multimedialab.be/blog/?p=1136>, 1989.

⁵ W. Benjamin, *Paris, capitale du XIXème siècle*, Paris, Allia, 2003.

⁶ B. Groys, *Marx After Duchamp, or The Artist’s Two Bodies*, e-flux, www.e-flux.com/journal/marx-after-duchamp-or-the-artist’s-two-bodies/.

ence” is turned into differences in multiple forms of commodities, luxury goods in auctions, etc; no matter it is intended to be suspended in terms of functionalities following the artists’ will, it is also always disposed at the same time in a social milieu that renders it multifunctional. The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk states clearly that today we are witnessing the integration of art, design and technologies, and more conceptually the reconnection between functionalism and perception⁷ – the reorganization of the sensible by the technical artifacts if we follow Stiegler here.

Artists play a more and more important role in creating social milieu of living, one finds oneself through engaging with art, not through the production and reproduction of art, but taste and style, like food, wine, cloths, cars, furnitures. Tetsuo Ogawa, a Japanese artist and activist, who has involved in the past decades in fighting for the right of homeless people wrote «In Japan an artist-in-residence program means an art event for the sake of area rehabilitation, which is typically lead by the authorities in collaboration with local businesses, and supported by the funding of corporations»⁸. Art and cultural industry is taking a new role not only in the organization of urban life, but also in the organization of urban space. It was 2012 a few days before Christmas, when I was walking on Kurfürstendamm, the major shopping street in Berlin. I saw two hand-written slogans inside a display box made of glass. On one side we read: *Emancipation von materiellen Sein*; on the other side: *Freiheit durch den Geist*. Were they not direct references to Marx and Hegel? Both historical materialism and dialectics of the spirit? The person who has designed it must have studied some Marx and Hegel, or at least read from Wikipedia. Lets be kind, we assume that he or she may want to create an irony by juxtaposing Marx and Hegel with the consumerism of Berlin's largest shopping street. But didn't this irony finally remain a sad one? Because all radical gestures can be easily absorbed by the aesthetics of consumerism, and finally those who had the will to resistant find themselves like fools among commodities.

Art no longer remains as *techne* that creates and gives us experience of beauty and communities as it was in ancient occidental culture; nor does it serve the function for the regulation of moral behaviour promoted by the ancient oriental philosophy like Confucianism; instead it produces tastes that governs our body and takes individualisation as its goal, that to say life style. As Thiery de Duve showed that in contemporary art, the noun art replaces the noun beauty of the 18th century proposed by thinkers such as Kant⁹. Art becomes the generic, becomes a surface on which new forms of accumulation happens. Functionalism has been long bypassed in the aesthetic dimension of the culture industry, discussed by Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, the new combination of aesthetics and functionalism concretised, for example in a MacBook Air, constitutes a new politics of aesthetics and experience.

⁷ P. Sloterdijk, *Luftbeben. An den Quellen des Terrors*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002, p.7.

⁸ T. Ogawa, «Fight for Living in Miyashita kōen», in *Creative Space – Art and Spatial Resistance in East Asia*, ed. Yuk Hui & DOXA, Hong Kong, Roundtable Synergy Books, 2014.

⁹ T. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1998.

This differs from the critique of the Situationist International, though not entirely. When Debord was criticizing Dada and Surrealism, he wrote «Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it; Surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position since developed by the Situationists has shown that the abolition and realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art»¹⁰. The Situationists are proposing that – in my own interpretation – Dada and Surrealism only resist in the context of art, while it is necessarily to totally smash art and take it away from the context of art. In other words, they proposed the dissolution of the objects of art situated in the discourse of the market, of art critics and the superimposition of art and radical politics. The Situationists' vision of art, through firstly dysfunctioning art, and reinventing new functionality in the everyday life in favour of revolutionary moments, is unfortunately never fully realized. In fact, we are right in the time of the society of spectacles, and even the technics developed by the Situationiste Internationale such as *dérive*, *détournement* become fashionable spectacles.

Merhwert after Surplus Value

A mutated form of art is taking place, as what I described before, the reinsertion of art into the wider perspective of everyday life through industrialization, the reconstitution of art in everyday life termed “lifestyle”. The multi-functionality of art object in the new social milieu, didn't gain itself a substantial form of existence as a work, or “oeuvre”. Instead, art becomes, as the German art critic Diedrich Diederichsen shows, becomes a “*Mehrwert*”¹¹, or where one can say an “added-value”. Marxists used to translate *Merhwert* as “surplus value”, but it is much more accurate to call it “added value” in this context, since surplus value is almost the profits gained from the difference between the price of the commodities and their cost in terms of labour time and machine maintenance. The add-value is not direct project, but one that elevates the price of the commodities, for instance through the packaging of a commodity.

This is obvious when we look at the mobile phones and tablets we are using; the software that allows us to take photos while adding a few artistic touches, the furniture that matches the functionalities of these devices. Beyond the interiority of the living space, architectural design is taking very much its surroundings into consideration, for example, the relation to art galleries, to celebrated schools, to luxury shops, to high-end supermarkets, etc. The exterior design of buildings are full of “artistic” elements that sometimes have to compromise some of the intended functionalities, where aesthetics is taking lead of functionalities, in an ironic sense. This is what we know as gentrification, the reinsertion of art and design into the everyday life that constantly reconstitutes lifestyle

¹⁰ G. Debord, *The Society of Spectacles*, trans. by F. Perlman and friends, Kalamazoo, Black & Red, 1970, p.133.

¹¹ D. Diederichsen, *On (Surplus)Value in Art*, Rotterdam, Witte de With, 2008.

altered by the dynamics of the market. This doomed future was already observed and documented in the 80s. For example, Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan's article *The Fine Art of Gentrification*, published in the MIT Journal *October* in 1984, described the gentrification process of the lower east side of New York. The combination of cultural industry in general, artistic creation in specific, together with gentrification gives us a mixed feeling: on one hand, it shows us the possibility to present art to a wider audience through commodification; also it gives certain artists financial support to pursuit their artistic creations. I quote Deutsche and Ryan's citation of other's writing on the *East Village Scene*:

«unique blend of poverty, punk rock, drugs, arsons, Hell's Angels, winos, prostitutes and dilapidated housing that adds up to an adventurous avant-garde setting of considerable cachet». The area is hyperbolically compared with Montmartre: «... we may be witnessing a kind of American Bateau Lavoir, eighties-style. It is perhaps too soon to predict which of the artists is our Picasso or Stravinsky»¹².

On the other hand, art and cultural industry are becoming, if I can say, organons of gentrification. What exactly is gentrification? I think Peter Marcuse, the son of the philosopher Herbert Marcuse, has already well defined it in the 80s:

Abandonment drives some higher-income households out of the city, while it drives others to gentrifying areas close to downtown. Abandonment drives some lower-income households to adjacent areas, where pressures on housing and rents are increased. Gentrification attracts higher-income households from other areas in the city, reducing demand elsewhere, and increasing tendencies to abandonment. In addition, gentrification displaces lower-income people- increasing pressures on housing and rents. Both abandonment and gentrification are linked directly to changes in the economic polarization of the population. A vicious circle is created in which the poor are continuously under pressure of displacement and the wealthy continuously seek to wall themselves within gentrified neighbourhoods. Far from a cure for abandonment, gentrification worsens the process¹³.

The sad story of gentrification is the same everywhere, often habitants were kicked out of their old neighbourhood by police, then tall and gated residential buildings are build, next to them will be cosy restaurants and galleries, museums, artists and designers are invited to rent those galleries for a relatively reasonable price for the first few years. Then the high property price is justified, middle class or high-income family will move in.

What I tried to described briefly, is that the relation between objects of art and gentri-

¹² Quoted by R. Deutsche and C.G. Ryan, from J. Kardon, "The East Village Scene", in *The East Village Scene*, Philadelphia, Institute of contemporary art, 1984, p.8.

¹³ P. Marcuse, "Gentrification, abandonment and displacement: connections, causes and policy responses" in New York City, *Journal of Urban and Contemporary Law*, 28, 1985, p.196.

fication, which is familiar to most of the art practitioners and dealers, but not necessarily so to those that live within the spectacles of lifestyle. We see two movements of art objects. Firstly, the move from museums and colleges to everyday urban lives, as giants posters on the buildings. One of the example was the Louis Vuitton show in Hong Kong in 2009, the Hong Kong Art Museum demonstrated us one of the best case studies by wrapping itself with wallpapers of the luxury brand. Secondly, the museums loaded with art objects are installed in gentrified areas that become the *Merhwert* to the property or land developers; or similarly shopping malls become art mall¹⁴. In the context of East Asia, the rapid development of the cultural industries, and the commitment of the government to build cultural economies already anticipate that the above description would take an even more extreme form. In China, we can see that almost every city wants to rediscover their culture and render them as touristic objects, and at the same time build contemporary art museums and galleries to show that they also anticipate the future, and not only looking back to their cultural heritages. What would be the possibility to break this new configuration of art? Perhaps we should step back and ask, why should we break it? Isn't it doing very well, at least, we can see that some artists like Damian Hirst are becoming billionaires. Artists, as producers of art objects are becoming the important players of this economy. However, this doesn't mean that the artists are going to thrive, since producing added-value is not equivalent to producing surplus value. Instead, this will contribute largely to the precarity of artists, since it is those who can produce added-value survive the market and the cultural economy, while those produce values don't. Works don't open, but immediately close, not by its own intention, but the economic milieu that encompasses it. Any future works that intend to criticize the rampant development of the cultural economy will be immediately and perfectly absorbed by the market realism. I have in my mind an article that I translated for the American critique Brian Holmes, titled *One World One Dream – China at risk of new subjectivity*. Holmes gave an example of a huge sculpture by the Chinese artist Liu BoLing of a fist pressing the ground installed in 798, one of Beijing's earliest art space now landmark of the culture industry, but such sculpture seems to him produces no effect to the political and economic situation in China, the gesture that was intended to be anti-authoritarian was totally absorbed and became an object that tourists would like to take photos with¹⁵. Any attempt to produces subversive acts through the art objects is destined to go to museums or galleries that may be funded by one of the property developers. All is subsumed to the "economy". The hyper-industrialization of consumerism through art, land, commodities is the destruction of the "I" and "We" by reducing the acts to consumption, work to commodities, and art to added-value.

¹⁴ For example, K11 in Hong Kong, according to Wikipedia "The world's first art mall", [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K11_\(Hong_Kong\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K11_(Hong_Kong))

¹⁵ B. Holmes, *One World One Dream – China at the Risk of New Subjectivities*, 2008, www.brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/01/08/one-world-one-dream/

Art after Economy

The question is whether we can imagine anew? What possibility remains in us? Obviously there is no simple answer, but I would like to propose something that will hopefully provoke further thought and to go back firstly to the role of artists, and secondly, the objects of art in association with what Joseph Beuys calls “nonviolent transformation”. The two quotes from Bernard Stiegler and Joseph Beuys at the beginning of this article point in a similar direction. For Stiegler, an artist is one who produces artifacts that act as tools for transindividuation, the formation of communities through the identification of the “I” and the “We”. Aesthetic in this sense must be social, and artists are those who organize the sensible and distribute the sensible if we follow Jacques Rancière. The translation of Rancière’s *Le partage du sensible* as the distribution of the sensible, ignores for the most part that *partager* is also to share, that is also the constitution of the “We”. Joseph Beuys’ quote is on what has been known as “social sculpture”, again one shouldn’t forget that Beuys also calls it, or even prefers to call it “*Soziale Plastik*” instead of “*Soziale Skulptur*”. What is more interesting is the concept of “plasticity” that opens up all forms of artistic intervention to the formation of the “We” and the “I” — communities. Beuys as we recall of his intervention in the Documenta 7 in 1982, his artwork resulted in 7,000 oak trees in Kassel that transformed the local landscape and created a new ecology. The work acted to open a new passage to act. *My question can be simply put in this way: if gentrification is a process that utilizes art and design to transform the economy of the communities, can artists take economy as an object of art and reinvent an economy that cannot be easily absorbed by the market realism in a way that reorganizes the sensible to allow new forms of social relations to emerge or to re-emerge? Or more precisely, taking economy as object of art.*

The first inspiration of this question was not from Beuys, but rather from the French philosopher George Bataille, though Bataille proposed it in a quite different way. What inspired Bataille is the gift economy elaborated by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss following the works of Franz Boas who did extensive research in Pacific Northwest, especially Kwakiutl at British Columbia, and Bronisław Malinowski who researched the culture reciprocity in Melanesia. Mauss published his research in 1925 as a journal article titled *The Gift*¹⁶. The gift economy operates simply like this: people mostly in the form of tribes give away their properties as gift, and the people who receive these gifts have the obligation to return the gift. Gift giving is not simply something for expressing one’s generosity, for example in marriages, funerals, etc., it is rather totality, which Mauss called the total social fact, or the total prestations. These festivals of gift-giving are called potlatch. Within the guise of reciprocity, are both private and public warfare as sanctions to those who violate this principle. Mauss, the great promoter of corporatism, challenged the liberal conception of economy that economy is defined by individual transactions

¹⁶ Marcel Mauss, *THE GIFT: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, www.goodmachine.org/PDF/mauss_gift.pdf.

and based on the scarcity of resources; instead Mauss showed that another economy is possible, and it demonstrates another rationality.

To exemplify Mauss' answer to the economy of potlatch, we will confine to the case of Maori, a Polynesian tribe. The answer can probably be identified in two keywords, one is called *hau*, and the other *mana*. Firstly in Maori culture, when someone gives away a gift, a kind of spiritual substance is attached to the gift, this spirit within the gift comes from the person who gives. When the person receives the gift, he has to take care of the spirit, and has the obligation to return the spirit back to its place. This place is not necessarily the individual, but also the place of its birth, to its sanctuary of forest and clan and to its owner. It is dangerous to keep this gift, as Mauss states «not only because it is illicit to do so, but also because it comes morally, physically and spiritually from a person». A very important point to note is that an object one receives in this sense is both a poison and a gift. Mana means prestige or in the Chinese case "face", failures to return the gift is a losing of mana, one's prestige or status in the society. Mauss wrote «The expression is more apt than it is even in China; for to lose one's face is to lose one's spirit, which is truly the 'face', the dancing mask, the right to incarnate a spirit and wear an emblem or totem»¹⁷. This operates on the level of individuals, but more rigorously on the level of the chiefs of the tribes, when it comes to inter-tribal exchanges. Gift giving acts are sometimes amiable rivalries, in common cases, they are the basics of antagonism and war. *A negative anthropology*.

Bataille further based on the gift economy and proposed a "general economy", one that is not like the economy of scarcity, but rather an economy of excess. For Bataille the potlatch can act as a weapon against the continual economic division. Since in the potlatch described before, all economic division is shattered, it is rather a festival. It is by no coincidence that the *Letterist International* named their journal after "potlatch". It doesn't seem to us that an everlasting festival is going to be possible, but it points out that an artistic intervention is not only imaginable but also firmly grounded; and probably it is much more creative and imaginary for artists to do this than the dogmatic economists who cannot act outside a formal and rational framework. So for us, the point is not only to return to the economy of excess, but also to take the economy as an object of art. During the Occupy movement in Hong Kong, Luke Ching (a brilliant artist and a good friend) and I collaborated to explore the relation between art and gift economy; this actualized that Luke Ching and others are now engaging projects to rediscover the gift economies existing or in a way disappearing in everyday life of YauMaTei, probably one of the only district in Kowloon one can still marginally identify the existence of communities. For him, the gift economy present in art also defends it from being totalized by the one-dimensional economy. For me, the question is how can we develop it further, and to create a new economy as a social sculpture in the communities, to rephrase the words of Stiegler, that favours psychic and collective individuation, recognize the inseparability of

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

the I and the We by recreating the *hau* and *mana*.

I would like to conclude this short text with a reference to different struggles going on in East Asia, for example the Amateur Revolt in Japan, the Squatting Art movement in Korea initiated by Kim Kang, the Desiree/Womenjia Youth Autonomy Lab in Wuhan, China, and the Wooferten and TakCheongLane anarchist collective in Hong Kong, etc, all these seem to me the effort to re-imagine a community and economy through the reconceptualization of art, but not limiting it to a squat, an isolated occupation, a demonstration against the demolition of communities. Taking such a detour from Duchamp to the situation of art today, is to take a departure from the relation between art and industrial objects, and look at the role of industrial objects as well as industrialization in the organization of the sensible. The revolutionary act in Duchamp's ready-made is to give new power to the industrial objects in the name of art, as Thierry de Duve showed in an archaeological approach in *Résonances du readymade – Duchamp entre avant-garde et tradition*, the four conditions Duchamp demonstrated (the object, the author, the public and the institution). Art also inherited its power from its history that allows it to suspend the appearance of an object and redistribute the sensible in the aesthetic experience. But these revolutionary artefacts today mostly lie quietly in the museums and storages, it is not simply that time has changed the public's perception of them, but also the absorption of these creativities in a flexible – reflexive neoliberal economy. It seems that for any resistance not to be futile, it must take its enemy as object of art, for the artists to become again transducers that produce an individuation against the alienation and proletarianization imposed by the system.