

Objects of Art after Industrialization

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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 contrive the power of the noetic soul as its possibility -- which is only by irregularity-- of passing to acts².

-Bernard Stiegler, *De la misère symbolique, tome 2 : La Catastrophe du sensible*

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 reach 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 requires a wide range of measures³.

-Joseph Beuys, *Aufruf zur Alternative*

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 esthetics that is closely associated with their intended nature in the factories, workshops, and most importantly, the everyday use of them. Thierry de Duve recalled

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² Bernard Stiegler, *De la misère symbolique, tome 2 : La Catastrophe du sensible*, 2005, quote translated by the author. I would like to thank Bernard for kindly showing me his unpublished manuscript on esthetics that has inspired me a lot.

³ Joseph Beuys, *Aufruf zur Alternative*, quote translated by the author from German.

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 color, the texture. 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 century. 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 produced.”⁴

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. 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 art in his age. In his own words, the readymade is based on the ‘visual indifference’ and ‘total indifference of good or bad taste’. Now, we see that art becomes multi-functional, the ‘indifference’ 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 perception – the reorganization of the sensible by the technical artifacts if we follow Stiegler here. 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

⁴ Boris 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/

of a single transcendence of art.⁵ 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 favor of revolutionary moment, is unfortunately never fully realized.

Merhwerk 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'. This French word gives a better sense of the working of artwork meaning to craft, to make, to work and to ACT. Instead, art becomes, as the art critic Diedrich Diederichsen shows, becomes a 'mehrwerk'⁶, or where one can say an 'added-value'. Marxists used to translate *merhwerk* as 'surplus value', but it is much more accurate to call it 'add-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 labor 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 constitutes lifestyle that follows the dynamics of the market. We see two movements of art objects. Firstly, the move from museums and colleges to everyday urban lives, as giants posters on the buildings, and one should recall that during 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; and secondly, the museums loaded with art objects are installed in gentrified areas that become the *merhwerk* to the property or land. Back to the context in Asia, the rapid development of the cultural

⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacles*, 1971, 133

⁶ Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus)Value in Art*, Witte de With, 2008

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 I tried to described briefly, is that the relation between art objects and gentrification, which is familiar to most of the art practitioners and dealers, but not necessarily so to those that live within the spectacles of lifestyle. 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 player of this economy. 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 value 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, once Brian Holmes was describing 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, 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 with⁷. 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.

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

⁷ One World One Dream - China at the Risk of New Subjectivities, www.brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/01/08/one-world-one-dream/

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 organizes the sensible, but also if we follow Jacques Rancière who distribute the sensible. The translation of Rancère's 'le partage du sensible' as the distribution of the sensible, ignores for the most part that 'partage' 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 re-emerge? Or more precisely, taking economy as object of art.

The first inspiration of this question is 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'. 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 free associations, challenged the liberal conception of economy that economy is defined by individual transactions 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. This operates on the level of individuals, but more rigorously on the level of the chiefs of the tribes, when it comes to the inter-tribal exchanges. Gift giving acts are sometimes amiable rivalries, in common cases, they are the basics of antagonism and war. Mauss compared it with the Chinese 'face', "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."

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 Central 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 is now doing a research project on rediscovering 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 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 favors psychic and collective individuation, recognize the inseparability of the I and the We by recreating the *hau* and *mana*. There are many very interesting struggles happening in East Asia, for example the Amateur Revolt in Japan, the Squatting Art in Korea, the Go Straight Café in Taiwan, and the Wooferten in Hong Kong, etc, all these

seems to me the effort to reimagine the community and activism through the reconceptualization of art, but not limiting it to a squat, a 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 qua industrialization in the organization of the sensible. The revolutionary act in Duchamp's ready-made is to give new power to the industrial objects through 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 artifacts today mostly lie quietly in the museums and storages, it is not simply that time changes the public's perception of them, but also the absorption of these creativities in a flexible 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.