

intrinsically constitutive of subjects—for example, in Hebrew, “object” means “will” (*cheftetz*—similar to “having an objective” in English). “Piece” is also common in this context, as it introduces a maker as the master of that piece and suggests that the thing is passive and transparent, a mere projection of its maker’s intention. “Thing” is used mainly in relation to a mere presence that calls for contextualization. “Product” refers to a process of creation, bringing with it an impression of finality, a *fait accompli*. And “artifact” relates to an outcome or a residue. “Commodity” is used primarily in the context of a critique of the market, but I believe that this term should include all of the definitions mentioned above.<sup>25</sup>

In our prefabricated world, one can claim that all things are commodities: objects, land, air, garbage, debt, action, and so forth. In a world where everything is already a commodity, “object” and “thing” are in this respect terms that attempt to cleanse the commodity of the chains of its birth, thus hiding its history and the means by which it appears in the world. As both a retinal and non-retinal viewing mechanism, the exhibition embodies a much wider aesthetic experience that allows us to view commodities as they are. More than in any other context, commodities are most true to themselves as art.

25 My aim here is to preserve the Marxian notion that to some extent the commodity has a mind of its own and that this “mind” is actually what we see in the exhibition. For a critical analysis of use value and exchange value, as well as fetishism in relation to labor, see the chapter “Fetishism and Ideology” in Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (New York: Telos, 1981), 88–101. For a discussion of various “pure” and “loose” definitions of the commodity between exchange and value, see Appadurai, “Commodities and the Politics of Value,” 3–64.

## The Unreadymade

The broadening of contemporary art’s audience has been discussed in urban renewal forums, reviews of biennials, museum debates, and art fair talks. The common wisdom says that more and more people have an encounter with contemporary art, which is measured in terms of popularity (admissions), experience (big installations and effects), and market value (the price of certain art works renders their display a unique event). Under the conditions of the spectacle of contemporary art, “art fair art” was the name given to art works made in the age of art fair supremacy.<sup>26</sup> The Armory Show art fair has branded itself as selling “New Work by Living Artists.” In the spirit of trends and fads, this might read like the most contemporary statement, since it deals with the here and now. And yet, for someone investing in buying artworks, “new” and “living” carry a meaning that project into the future. The Armory Show promises its clients that the artists whose new work they are now buying will someday die. This is of course an obvious statement, yet for someone investing in an art piece, this means the artifact will increase its value when it becomes a collectable. The death of the artist is intrinsic to the value of the commodity. This logic echoes the win-win spirit of zero-risk debt derivative operations by which life pays the price as profits go to finance

26 See Jack Bankowsky, “Tent Community,” *Artforum* 44, no. 2 (October 2005): 228–32.

capital. Art buyers that work at hedge funds, consulting firms, and financial banks should feel comfortable with the fact that this market is also structured for their benefit.

This little anecdote does not intend to simply bash art fairs. Since the underlying understanding here is that the commodity precedes the artwork, it is the relation between the artist and the artwork that interests me. The story of Vincent van Gogh's life might seem to have little to do with the life of today's artist. And yet it is a telling story, especially with regard to the market value of an artist's work after his or her demise. Therefore, the Armory Show slogan should be read as advice for an investment: buy new artifacts by living artists from us. We guarantee they will die.

For the past two decades, a new sculptural gesture has emerged that applies an assemblage-syntax, but uses another vocabulary than that of the readymade and neoreadymade. This new gesture is the unreadymade. Emerging from loan-ridden graduates of MFA programs, this gesture is aimed at undoing the one-way street appropriation tactic of the exhibition. Not being an arts and crafts movement that asserts authorship through authenticity, the unreadymade is an acknowledgment of the suspended authorship of things in the world. It is a gesture involving a whole ethics of living with things.<sup>27</sup>

27 Chris Marker and Alain Resnais's 1953 film *Les statues meurent aussi* (*Statues also Die*) depicts the anthropology museum as a graveyard for colonized native cultures. Their statues that were once objects of worship are now exhibits. The questions the film raises regarding the role of display beyond its usage in the hands of colonization and appropriation process are as pertinent today as when the film was made.

### Readymade and Unreadymade

As much as the moment in which the artist renders an object as art through display is a moment of appropriation through valorization (i.e., the readymade), it is also the moment of the unreadymade. Against the limited logic of authorship, the exhibition actualizes the world from which these displayed things come from, and the world in which the exhibition itself operates. While the readymade uses display to make things from the world become art, the unreadymade uses display to make what is shown as art testify to its existence in the world as a commodity. The undoing of the appropriation power of the readymade is what allows us to see these things that come from the world as something else, namely, unreadymades.

Authoring an event of display by employing a series of strategies including appropriation, composition, abstraction, and the recontextualization and decontextualization of different things from the world, modern art has often tried to see entities as beyond their existence as commodities. In an art context, the commodity—this omnipresent “other entity” that we engage in a variety of intimate moments (we eat, drink, wear, sit on, sleep in, and touch the commodity)—has been central to Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, and Pop.<sup>28</sup>

28 When describing Claes Oldenburg's enlarged and deflated commodity-objects, Bill Brown defines his strategy as one which relates to kitsch, drive, and sentimental value—in a fashion very much appropriate for proposing the unreadymade as well: “If these objects are tired, they are tired of our perpetual reconstitution of them as objects of our desire and of our affection. They are tired of our longing. They are tired of us.” Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 15.

Investigations into the commodity on both linguistic and conceptual grounds had already begun with the shift from Pablo Picasso's *objets trouvés*, which he incorporated in his paintings and sculptures, to Marcel Duchamp's readymades.<sup>29</sup> The examination of the relationships between humans in the world of commodities has likewise become a focus of cinema—in romantic comedies, for example, humans struggle to couple through different rituals of consumption.<sup>30</sup>

In our contemporary world, one could argue that only some commodities are art objects but all art objects are commodities. Commodities precede artworks, and the commodity nature of a thing precedes it being an 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 images (even those of abstract painting) are all commodities, an examination of the commodity as a presence that precedes the artwork's commodification in the art market is long overdue. In this vein, 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, he writes: "since the tubes

29 See Thierry de Duve, "The Readymade and the Tube of Paint," in *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 147–96.

30 Parallel to the "simple truth" television advertisements that make commodities their main characters (notice the screen time humans receive versus objects in television ads), contemporary romantic comedies focus on the struggle of humans to couple in a world of commodities, where courting has transformed into a ritual of consumption structured by dating, status symbols, and lifestyle accessories.

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."<sup>31</sup> De Duve later quotes Duchamp speaking in similar terms about commodities as the material for readymades: "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."<sup>32</sup>

The notion of the readymade emphasizes the artist's ability to identify and select an object, and to then valorize it as an artwork. In this 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 artist Gabriel Kuri shows *Vacto Olivia* (2007), a waterproof roofing roll folded under the weight of two ten-liter cans of olives, or when Gedi Sibony shows *Untitled* (2007), the leftovers of a wall-to-wall carpet hung on the wall, 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. It is an understanding of the world on the part of the commodity as a historical subject, rather than on behalf of humans.<sup>33</sup>

31 De Duve, "The Readymade and the Tube of Paint," 163.

32 *Ibid.*

33 The dialectics of this maintain a production of subjectivity as commodity. Lazzarato reminds us that "in the current economy, the production of subjectivity reveals itself to be the primary and most important form of production, the

