In modern art, the increasing resemblance of art objects to everyday objects raised the threat of eroding of any real difference between works of art and other things. Barnett Newman railed against both Duchamp’s readymades and “Bauhaus screwdriver designers” who were elevated to the ranks of artists by the Museum of Modern Art’s doctrine of “Good Design.”¹ The danger for art was the same in both cases: the dissolving of the dividing line between works of art and everyday objects. Just as ancient art proper should never be confused with the craft of “women basket weavers,” modern art should never be confused with a screwdriver or urinal.² In the 1960s, Clement Greenberg would also worry that a blank sheet of paper or a table would become readable as art, that the boundary between artworks and “arbitrary objects” was eroding.³ While not evincing any Modernist anxieties about readymades, Paul Chan’s recent assertion that “a work of art is both more and less than a thing” shows renewed concerns regarding such an assimilation – in a context marked, until quite recently, by an unprecedented market boom in which works of art seemed to be situated in a continuum of luxury goods spanning from Prada bags to luxury yachts.⁴

But what does it mean to say that an artwork is both more and less than a thing? The notion of the thing is prominent in contemporary theory, and one might say that the thing has emerged as something that is both more and less than an object. In W. J. T. Mitchell’s words:

> “Things” are no longer passively waiting for a concept, theory, or sovereign subject to arrange them in ordered ranks of objecthood. “The Thing” rears its head – a rough beast or sci-fi monster, a repressed returnee, an obdurate materiality, a stumbling block, and an object lesson.⁵

Rather than building a wall between art and thingness, the work of art should be analyzed as just such a sci-fi monster. If objects are named and categorized, part of a system of objects, thingness is resistant to such ordered objecthood. If we grant that a work of art is both more and less than other types of things, this should not be regarded as an incentive to exacerbate and fetishize those differences, but rather as a point of departure for analyzing the complex interrelationships of artworks with these other things – and for examining certain works of art as problematizing and transforming this very relationship.⁶

A prominent proponent of the thing in recent theory is Bruno Latour, who has taken it upon himself to reveal “the terrible flaws of
dualism,” which marked modernity.\textsuperscript{7} The hubristic project of modernity was based on the dichotomy of society and nature, of subject and object; this enables the modern “work of purification,” the triumph of the subject and the relegation of nature and of non-moderns to the abyss of thought. Underneath this purifying dichotomy, however, there is a disavowed continuity of networks, of hybrids; modern binary, “critical” thinking exists by virtue of the denial of this continuity, this world of “quasi-objects” and “quasi-subjects” – that which is “between and below the two poles” of object and subject.\textsuperscript{8} “Moderns do differ from premoderns by this single trait: they refuse to conceptualize quasi-objects as such. In their eyes, hybrids present the horror that must be avoided at all costs by a ceaseless, even maniacal purification.”\textsuperscript{9}

Like all good caricatures, Latour’s portrayal of modernity presents some traits in sharp, even exaggerated clarity. And like many good and bad caricatures, it is one-sided and self-serving. If we look carefully at modern theory and (art) practice, it should be obvious that there have been a number of significant attempts to go beyond a static dichotomy of subject and object. Reexamining such moments can be of extreme interest – not in order to create some kind of oneiric ancestral line leading up to present concerns, but in order to sound out the limitations as well as the unfulfilled potential of various practices. Working though the contradictions of, for instance, the Duchampian readymade can help focus current debates – turning such a historical phenomenon into an anachronistic intervention in the present.

The rejection of the readymade by critics and artists such as Greenberg and Newman was shaped by a fear of the collapse of categories, the fear of identity, of the work of art becoming just another “arbitrary” object. In addition to such critiques, which we may label conservative, the 1960s saw the emergence of a second strand of anti-Duchampian discourse. Its proponents were artists including Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, and Daniel Buren, and an important point that their different criticisms had in common was that Duchamp’s own practice was itself conservative in that it merely seemed to confirm and exploit the existing art-world structures and their power of definition.\textsuperscript{10} Apparently working on the assumption that Duchamp’s work was fully accounted for by the then-emerging institutional theory of art, these artists felt that Duchamp merely used the...
institution(s) of art to redefine objects as artworks, thus multiplying their aura, their fetishistic allure, and their value. As Robert Smithson put it, “there is no viable dialectic in Duchamp because he is only trading on the alienated object and bestowing on this object a kind of mystification.”

Such remarks were no doubt made in view of Duchamp’s own commodification of his readymades in the 1960s, with the Schwartz editions, and of the proliferation of Neo-Dada and Nouveau Réalisme objects, accumulations, and assemblages. This type of art object was tailor-made for the dismal science called the institutional theory of art, which it helped spawn, and which statements by artists such as Buren and Smithson parallel. However, if we look beyond the horizon of the 1960s reception of Duchamp, at the repercussions of the readymade among the Surrealists around 1930 in particular, things become rather more complicated and interesting.

Hegel saw modern art as bifurcating into on the one hand a “realist” tendency that would show the surface of objects in minute “objectivity,” and on the other a “spiritual” tendency that would place all the emphasis on the subject. For the Surrealists, Duchamp’s readymades became crucial at the moment when the question of the relation between subject and object, between spirit and matter, became an overriding concern: when they placed their activities “in the service of the revolution,” entering into a difficult relationship with the party that claimed to represent and enact dialectical materialism, and which eyed the Surrealists’ idealist focus on dreams and visions more than a little suspiciously. The Surrealists set out to prove that their approach in fact complemented orthodox Marxism, in that Surrealism, “within the framework of dialectical materialism, is the only method that accounts for the real links between the world and thought.” If dialectical materialism can cause bricks to be laid, then surely this relationship was of primary importance.

One of the issues of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* contained a montage of textual fragments on Hegel and Marx, which contrasted the lackluster number of Hegel’s works available in French with the blockbuster sales of Hegel’s complete works in the Soviet Union, informing us that “the five year plan is founded on dialectics.” In the middle of a page is a line drawing of Hegel’s death mask; Spirit has become plaster. If the facts about the prices...
André Breton’s crystal ball from the auction catalog *André Breton. 42, rue Fontaine*, 2003.
and sales of Hegel’s works seem to fit into Aragon’s quite linear remarks on spirit influencing things in the world, the death mask complicates things. As an outmoded relic of the nineteenth century, it is a Surrealist object par excellence, but it is hardly operative in the contemporary world — unless one instrumentalizes it for the purpose of some Stalinist personality cult.

To some extent, the Surrealist art of the object represented an appropriation, a détournement of Duchamp’s project. Surrealist objects were supposed to provide shocks, to give the viewer a jolt, which sets them apart from Duchamp’s more “disinterested” montages of existing objects and new thoughts. What the Surrealists saw very clearly, however, is that the Duchampian readymade was, in David Joselit’s words, “a paradoxical object locked in a perpetual oscillation between its status as a thing and its status as a sign.”

The bottle rack — sometimes called Hedgehog — inscribed with Duchamp’s signature becomes its own double, a visual pun combining Duchamp’s favorite “ism,” eroticism (the phallic protrusions), with references to his arcane geometric and n-dimensional concerns. Outwardly, the object remains the same, yet it is dislodged, integrated into the web of signification spun in Duchamp’s notes.

When André Breton’s estate was auctioned off, one of the items for sale was a semiotic object par excellence: a fortune-teller’s crystal ball that had been used in 1933 to illustrate Breton’s text “Le Message automatique.” In his 1925 “Lettre aux voyantes,” Breton had addressed the fortune-tellers, or “seers,” who had been marginalized by modern science:

Mesdames, today my mind is wholly on your disgrace. I know that you no longer dare to use your voice, no longer deign to use your all-powerful authority except within the woeful “legal” limits. I can see in my mind’s eye the houses you live in, on the fourth floor, in districts more or less remote from the cities.

Breton pleads with the “ladies” that it is time for them to give up their passivity and reclaim their proper role. The crystal ball, smaller than one would expect on the basis of cartoons and comic strips, speaks of the same ambiguity between exalted visions and the banality of banlieue fortune-telling. An exemplary visual object or object-sign, the crystal ball was at the same time...
time a materialization of desire and a
dematerialization of the object; a proper
Surrealist thing.

The last major Surrealist exhibition,
"Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanters' Domain," which took place in New York in 1960, was also the last collaboration between Duchamp and Breton (after almost forty years, it would lead to a mutual estrangement that lasted until Breton’s death). Breton’s decision to structure the exhibition using a list of mythical “enchantlyers” sits oddly with Duchamp’s Nouveau Réalisme–style environment, with its toy trains, clock, and real chickens. The catalogue features another Duchampian contribution: an embossed reproduction of the electrical sign, a double red cone called a carotte, that identified French tobacconist’s shops. As a “virtual” readymade that does not actually exist as a three-dimensional object, this relief, existing in between two and three dimensions, has obvious connections with Duchamp’s n-dimensional speculations. In the context of the early 1960s, it also seems to acknowledge that the readymade has become its own image, that capitalism has turned itself into a forest of signs. The tobacconist’s sign makes the crystal ball look like old hat.

In the postwar decades, the old three-dimensional tobacconist’s cones were being replaced by graphic, two dimensional versions; this transformation suggests that Duchamp here opted for an object that was fast becoming obsolete, but which allowed him to play with dimensions in a more interesting way than the new version. For the most part, of course, Duchamp’s readymades refrain from a Surrealist flirt with the obsolete, with outmoded commodities, with the debris of Walter Benjamin’s Second–Empire Paris, with the refuse of modernity’s myths; neither, of course, do the readymades constitute montages in the manner of Dalí’s lobster–telephone. Once could see an impetus at work in many surrealist objects that, in a less extreme and overt way than Greenberg or Newman, aims at establishing and emphasizing differences – at distinguishing these objects from “arbitrary objects” by imbuing them with signs of the psyche, of subjectivity. While many Surrealist objects emphasize that they “function symbolically,” the readymades do not.

In this, ironically, they foreshadow in their own way the future of the commodity, in an archaic guise: they announce the profusion of goods that are bought for their coded distinctiveness in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the 1970s this becoming-sign of the object would lead Jean Baudrillard to diagnose fundamental changes in capitalism by supplementing the categories of use value and exchange value with his concept of sign value. Referencing Bauhaus furniture, with its “functionalism” that has become style, become sign, Baudrillard effectively theorized an economy in which the circulation of sign value creates exchange value, in which commodity fetishism stops being an illusion and becomes a reality. While Baudrillard noted that exchange value is based on “equivalence” and sign value on “difference,” the latter is at the service of the former: the difference between Brand A and Brand B is expressed in prices that are subject to the law of exchange, hence of equivalence. This triumph of fetishism – of commodity fetishism as an active agent – results in object-signs that suppress most traces of their history, of their trajectories. Their lives seem to be lived in a realm of pure semiosis. Are the readymades and the Surrealist objects they helped spawn not just as crucial to this development as Bauhaus furniture – or Bauhaus screwdrivers?

David Joselit has equated the readymade’s “oscillation between its status as a thing and its status as a sign” with the fundamental tension between material commodities and immaterial networks in the modern economy. However, the readymade-as-sign is primarily part of a network of signification created by Duchamp’s other objects and texts; in this sense, the readymade is indeed the model for the branded commodity and for “actually existing fetishism.” The consumption of the pre-existing object by the artist and its use for the production of new value is presented as a purely semiotic operation, and the readymade’s trajectory in different economical networks is obscured. In a roundabout way, we seem to have arrived back at the point of departure – at a rejection of the readymade as mystifying and complicit in an ever-intensifying process of commodification. Were the Surrealists then entirely deluded in regarding Duchamp’s readymades as object lessons in “thingifying” desires in ways that radically differed from alienating commodity-objects?

In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno described the latter’s notion of the dialectical image in terms that seem to emphasize Benjamin’s indebtedness to Surrealism: Adorno stated that “if the use value of things dies,” these alienated and hollowed-out objects can come to be charged with new subjectivity. While the things become “images” of subjective intentions, this does not erase their thingness: dialectical images remain montages, constellations of alienated things and meaning. Adorno neither attempts to eradicate the object nor does he recoil from the horror of the hybrid; the ruined object, charged with new subjective
intentions means, becomes precisely a quasi-subject, one that offers a glimpse of a world beyond the false objectivity constituted by the quasi-natural “necessities” ruling industrial production. This point needs to be remembered now that we are surrounded by industrialized versions of such quasi-subjects, in which coded difference creates a kind of generic subjectivity that amounts to a thin layer of paint glossing over the substratum of false objectivity. How can one go beyond the limitations of the readymade and retain the project of making things, quasi-objects, that point beyond the limitations of the contemporary commodity?

To be sure, it can be argued that any readymade object will unavoidably be marked by an infra-thin difference in relation to its allotted place in the codified order of objects. In its obtuse materialism, it is always potentially a thing, which is to say: a ruin. In her photographic series Detitled (2000), Barbara Visser saves modern design icons precisely by showing them in a ruined state (in different ruined states, each with its specificities). And is it not the task of critics and art historians to bring out the work of art’s potential, the ways in which it resists complete assimilation into the order of things? If we answer this in the affirmative, we should also ask ourselves whether such an exercise cannot also, at some point, become an exercise in self-delusion. Even if we try to help the neo-readymade by deconstructing it, bringing its complexities and contradictions to the fore, such operations leave intact the structural limitations of the logic of readymade, as brought out by its decades-long, crushing success.

Like Duchamp’s and the Surrealists’ practices, Adorno’s remark is limited by its focus on giving new meaning to existing objects — on producing meaning, and ultimately value, by consuming objects. Of course, such immaterial labor is itself dependent on specific social and economical circumstances and structures, but these remain largely implicit with Duchamp, and even more so with the Surrealists. For all the productive and viable elements in the dialectic of object and subject that marks their mutant commodities, it remains rather abstract and idealist. If one wants to go beyond the exploration of the semiotic system and explore the readymade’s place in a socio-economical network, such a project — whether in critical writing or in artistic practice — necessarily explodes the logic of the readymade.

Now that the social and ecological consequences of an economy that mystifies

production have come home to haunt us, the limitations of the readymade when it comes to intervening in the system of objects are painfully clear. At the same time, the legacy of Soviet Productivism, which has often been obscured for decades by the dominance of the type of “Good Design” discourse exemplified by MoMA, takes on a renewed importance.

→ Continued in “Art and Thingness, Part Two: Thingification” in issue 15.


3 Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” (1960) and “Recentness of Sculpture” (1967), in The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969, ed. John O’Brien (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 95–93, 250–256. In “Modernist Painting,” Greenberg was still confident that the limits of painting “can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object,” but “Recentness of Sculpture” is marked by concern that just this was by then happening. See also Thierry De Duve, Kant Against Duchamp (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1999), 198–279.


6 This text continues a line of inquiry from the third chapter (“Attending to Things”) of my book idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle (Berlin and New York: Sternberg, 2009).


8 Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, 51–55.

9 Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, 112.


12 See Hegel on “the dissolution of romantic art” (by which he refers to Christian, post-Antique art); G. W. F. Hegel, Werke, vol. 14, Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 239.

13 “Que le surréalisme, dans le cadre du matérialisme dialectique, soit la seule méthode qui rende compte des rapports réels du monde et de la pensée, je le crois plus que jamais, moi ai vu la dialectique matérialiste entasser des pierres, et parce que j’ai vu les hommes transformer la monde avec la dialectique matérialiste.” Louis Aragon, “Le Surréalisme et le devenir révolutionnaire,” Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution, no. 3 (December 1931): 4.

14 Aragon, 4. On this period of Surrealism and the privileged role it accorded to objects, see also Steven Harris, Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

15 “Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831),” Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution, no. 3 (December 1931): 1.


18 See André Breton, “Le Message automatique,” Minotaure 1 (1933), no. 3–4, 55.


22 Baudrillard already notes the strong connection between Bauhaus design and Surrealist objects, considering them “des sides of the same coin” (240–241).

23 Joselit, 51.


239.
In a text written in response to the upheavals of the Russian Revolution and the early Soviet avant-garde, Carl Einstein claimed that tradition “piles up in the object”; that the object is a “medium for passive thinking,” bound to tradition and bourgeois property relations; and that in order to “assert the human person, objects, which are preserve jars, must be destroyed.” Going so far as to state that “every destruction of objects is justified,” Einstein proclaimed a “dictatorship of the thingless.”

Einstein’s text seems to reflect simplistic narratives in which modernity is virtually synonymous with a purist, idealist suppression of the thing. Of course, such idealist tendencies did exist, but so did opposition to them. As if responding to Einstein’s quasi-Suprematist essay, Adorno once remarked that “someone who looks upon thingness as radical evil, who wants to dynamize all that exists into pure actuality, tends to be hostile to otherness, to the alien – which has lent its name to alienation, and not for nothing.”

In a Latourian manner, one might present the recent turn to the thing as a break with the project of modernity: after all, isn’t modernity in theory and in praxis the desperate attempt to (re)form the world in accordance with the will of an autonomous, imperious subject that turns things into ordered and emaciated objects? Such an opposition, however, is dubious; as Adorno’s remark may serve to recall, it is not only manifestly “anti-modern” modern philosophers, such as Heidegger, who prefigure the recent thing-turn. Adorno too was far from embracing objects or things as they were, rooted as his thought was in the Marxian analysis of commodity fetishism and the Lukácsian critique of reification or Verdinglichung. After all, isn’t the very term Verdinglichung – literally “thingification,” to which an important section of Lukács’ History and Class Consciousness is dedicated – manifestly idealist?

For all the problems with History and Class Consciousness – of which Lukács was well aware later in his life – it remains worthwhile to trace the main steps of its argument, whose repercussions can scarcely be overestimated. Lukács’ starting point is Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism, in which “a definite social relation between men” assumes “the fantastic form of a relation between things,” which Lukács characterizes as “the basic phenomenon of reification.” But the fetishist illusion of commodities – as “social things” whose exchange value appears to follow gratuitous
whims – is only one half of reification; it is not only that the commodities form a spectacle of quasi-subjects, but the subjects themselves, as workers, are transformed. In consequence of the rationalization of the work process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as mere sources of error when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions. Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already preexisting and self-sufficient; it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not. As labor is progressively rationalized and mechanized, his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative.

According to Lukács, modern philosophy reflects reified consciousness. Starting with Kant, philosophy had set itself “the following problem: it refuses to accept the world as something that has arisen (or has been created by God) independently of the knowing subject, and prefers to conceive of it instead as its own product.” However, absolute idealism with its exclusive focus on the absolute “I” proved untenable, as idealist philosophy had to take its departure precisely from the split between subject and object, which it sought to overcome, to sublate – to contain within a higher unity from which the philosophers “could ’create,’ deduce and make comprehensible the duality of subject and object on the empirical plane, i.e. in its objective form.” The world was now conceived in terms of a dialectical process that shattered the original, absolute unity, but restored it on a higher level. It is precisely where idealist philosophy finds its limit in the dialectical process – which it conceives in abstract terms as being enacted by subject and object – that Lukács begins to reflect upon an economy in which the subject is alienated from its objective conditions, and in which the products of labor take on quasi-subjective qualities.

Marx broke with the philosophical deadlock of idealism by using the dialectical method to analyze dialectical processes between classes. Lukács himself, however, gave a rather idealist interpretation to this materialist turn; as he later admitted, his explicit presentation of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history was still highly idealist. In his autocritique, he also argued that he had unduly
Graphic illustrating the construction of the billboard from...deeply__to the notion that the__world is__to the observer...[committed] (real) [external].
equated reification with alienation, and furthermore that he had tended to identify alienation with objectification; in fact, objectification is unavoidable, as any type of society must to some extent objectify itself in practice, in physical objects as well as in social structures. Alienation, on the other hand, based on commodity fetishism or reification, is not a given; structures that alienate man from his own nature must be abolished.\footnote{8}

If at first sight Carl Einstein’s text appears to merely celebrate an idealist triumph of pure spirit – of the abstracted subject – over objects, on closer inspection it becomes clear that Einstein too wishes to go beyond the dichotomy of subject and object. Stating that “the object no longer dominates vision; rather vision is now directed against the object, ruthlessly, dictatorially,” Einstein proclaims a project of revolutionary Entdinglichung (a reversal of Verdinglichung), resulting in a “dictatorship of vision, ascetics of the object, destruction of facts, and accordingly, renunciation of the self.” It is not so much a matter of the subject triumphing over the object, but of a new vision that creates a new “fluctuant experience of space.”\footnote{9} In admittedly idealist terms (that also recall some of Raoul Hausmann’s writings from the period), Einstein here sketches a situation in which a form of praxis generates experiences that undermine any stable dichotomy of subject and object.

In this sense, he comes close to the Constructivist/Productivist theorists of the veshch, the object that would offer an alternative to the “idolized” commodity-object of Western capitalism. Writing from Paris in 1925, Aleksandr Rodchenko wrote that “the light from the East is in the new relation to the person, to woman, to things. Our things in our hands must be equals, comrades, and not these black and mournful slaves, as they are here.”\footnote{10} Later, Brecht would paraphrase Hegel by stating that “things are occurrences” rather than immovable states.\footnote{11} We are dealing here with a constellation of Marxian attempts at redefining the role of objecthood and thingness – a constellation that also includes Adorno, in whose development History and Class Consciousness played a crucial role. Adorno’s most developed thoughts on the matter are to be found in Negative Dialectics, where he places great emphasis on the dangers of equating objects with alienation. “In Marx one can already find the difference between the object’s primacy as something to be produced critically and its caricature in things as they are (im Bestehenden), its distortion by the commodity character.”\footnote{12}

Dialectics becomes materialist when the primacy of the object is established; yet, Adorno warns, “the primacy of the object notwithstanding, the thingness of the world is also illusory. It tempts the subjects to ascribe to the things themselves the social conditions of their production. This is elaborated in Marx’s chapter on the fetish ...”\footnote{13} What is crucial for Adorno is to combine “tenacious opposition against that which exists: against its thingness,” with a staunch rejection of attempts to identify thingness as evil.\footnote{14} “In thingness there is an intermingling of both the object’s unidentical side and the subjection of people under the prevailing forms of production – their own functional relations, which are obscure to them.”\footnote{15} While, on the one hand, thingness (das Dinghafte) stands for the subjection of people under alienating and mystifying forms of production; on the other, the thing stands for the non-identical, for that which escapes the clutch of instrumental reason. It does so more fully than the object, which is “the positive face of the non-identical”; in other words, “a terminological mask.”\footnote{16} Objecthood is thingness objectified, subjected to concepts in the same way that a subject is a person become concept, a legal-philosophical abstraction; a thing is to an object as a person is to a subject.

However unlikely this may sound to those who think of Adorno only as a late-modernist mandarin, his thinking in this respect echoes of debates that raged in the 1920s and 1930s and can be seen as a belated contribution to the theory of Productivism, of an art aiming to construct new types of things that would be true “comrades.” The crucial term veshch can be translated either as “thing” or as “object” (as in the case of Lissitzky and Ehrenburg’s journal Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet), but a dominant motif in Productivist theory was the need to go beyond fetishized capitalist object-commodities towards a new type of veshch production and distribution that would no longer hide the things’ histories, the productive conditions that shaped them. The counterpart of the new veshch-thing is of course a notion of self different from the classical-modern subject; noting critically that Paris was marked by a “cult of woman as thing,” Rodchenko attempted to redefine both thing and person in their interrelationships.\footnote{17}

It is above all this aspect of Constructivism/Productivism that relates to present concerns – as it was to those of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the period that saw the rediscovery of Constructivism in a different sense than its formalist reduction by the likes of Naum Gabo and George Rickey.\footnote{18} The recent purchase of a reconstruction of Rodchenko’s 1925 Workers’ Club by the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven – which already around 1970 played an important role in the rediscovery of the social
and political side of Constructivism – is a significant event, provided that the museum avoids presenting Rodchenko’s furniture (which rejects the semiotic reduction of chromed “functionalism” in favor of flexible constructions that demand an active user) as a nostalgic and reified image of the early Soviet Union. For all the doubts we may harbor about aspects of the Constructivist project, such as its belief in relentless industrialization, Rodchenko’s attempt to redefine and reform things and their role in human life – of which the Workers’ Club forms one partial realization – can overlap with the present in a momentary Jetztzeit.

Now that everyday life is increasingly marked by convoluted attempts to gain some insight into the tangled thingness in which we are embedded, to trace the origins of the food we buy, to try and quantify the production of pollution resulting from our energy consumption, to do more than merely survive under ever more precarious working conditions, Productivism chimes with current concerns. It is reactivated in current practices such as that of Chto Delat, even if the formal means employed in their videos and installations sometimes court the risk of appearing to be exercises in nostalgic retro chic. In a less literal way, a similar impulse can be detected in the activities of Temporary Services, for example in the recent “Art Work,” an exhibition in the shape of a newspaper discussing the consequences of the collapse of the economy for artists, and pushing for “new ways of doing things, developing better models.” Here one may also think of Natascha Sadr Haghighian’s Solo Show project (2008), which foregrounded the semi-hidden world of companies that produce work for today’s big artists by giving a man used to interpreting artists’ designs a much more active role in determining the show’s content, as well as that of her earlier installation, “continuously to the notion that the world is...”

...continuously to the notion that the world is...continuously to the observer...continuously (real) (external). Contains a video in which two women set up a do-it-yourself billboard in the middle of a highway. The billboard itself, which shares the space with the video projection, consists of a series of photo/text montages that address, in a less than linear way, the consequences of multiple events of the early 1970s: the collapse of the gold standard, the rise of conceptual art and immaterial labor, and the transformation of the dollar into a “virtual currency” whose fate is, however, linked to the price of oil. All of its graphic components can be downloaded from the Internet and then printed and pasted onto a self-assembled wooden structure. Rather than a didactic exposition, the board’s montage creates juxtapositions that are, quite literally, questionable. How exactly does the rejection of the object in conceptual art relate to the collapse of the gold standard, and immaterial labor to the continuing importance of oil – the oneiric master-commodity? Having been emphatically told that various wars were definitely not about oil, should we believe such statements any more than the rhetoric of dematerialization employed in the context of conceptual art? In spite of the increasing importance of certificates for determining the rights to a work of art, in the world charted by Haghighian’s Solo Show, the concepts faxed or mailed by managerial artists are still destined for production by specialized companies – a division of labor that Haghighian’s project undermines by instigating a different working relationship, one that leads to the production of mutant things.

Clearly, today a search for “new ways of doing things, developing better models” does not imply the abstract negation of the past propagated by Carl Einstein or, in a different manner, by the Productivists. Yesterday’s tabula rasa is now itself part of the historical repertory – at times neutralized through nostalgic quotations, at other times activated in the form(s) of projects that treat the historical material as a potential waiting to be actualized, however partially and fleetingly. But if Neo-Productivist impulses can be found in a number of important practices and projects, the readymade still haunts much of contemporary art; its afterlife is not over yet. As part one of this essay has argued, the readymade principle has been severely compromised by its integration into the logic of the market of the past decades, but it continues to inform constructive and Constructivist responses to present exigencies.

Continued in “Art and Thingness, Part Three: The Heart of the Thing is the Thing We Don’t Know” in issue 16.
Fundamentalist Spectacle: Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Market


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contemporaneous artistic production would merit a more detailed historiographical study.

19 See, however, the cogent discussions on Productivism in issue 01-25 of the Chto delat magazine (March 2009), http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?view=article&id=606.

20 "Art Work: A National Conversation on Art, Labor, and Economics" exists as a printed newspaper as well as in various online versions that can be downloaded from http://www.artandwork.us/download/.

21 See "not about oil" at http://www.possest.de/notaboutoil.html, which contains the billboard schematics and graphics, as well as an essay.

22 For an example of the latter, see also Hito Steyerl’s essay in this issue.
In Hans Haacke’s pieces Broken R.M... and Baudrichard’s Ecstasy from the late 1980s, Duchamp’s readymades are subjected to transformations that highlight the problematic use of the readymade in the commodity art of the era: in the latter piece, a gilded urinal sits atop an ironing board; water is pumped through it from a bucket in a closed, self-referential loop. After Warhol’s canny exacerbation of the emerging image of the commodity, and the focus on the “picture” in late-1970s Appropriation Art, the commodity art of the 1980s focused on objects once more, but this time on objects devoid of the Duchampian tension between sign and thing, between a utilitarian object and the meanings projected onto it; these objects were programmed from the beginning to signify, to create value through the theological whims of their designed interplay. While Haim Steinbach’s shelves demonstrate this mechanism with considerable elegance, they remain in its thrall. Haacke’s objectified comments on 1980s commodity art are fitting epitaphs for such an art of the instrumentalized readymade, and his body of work as a whole can be seen as a sustained attempt to think through the readymade’s limitations as well as its consequences.

In the 1920s, both Lukács in History and Class Consciousness and, slightly later, Heidegger in Being and Time, critiqued the subject-object dichotomy in modern philosophy.¹ Both authors attempted to develop an analysis of the complex situatedness of praxis in the world, but in Heidegger’s case this praxis was a depoliticized and dehistoricized Sorge, a taking-care of being along the lines of the earth-bound farmer taking care of the Scholle (the earth shoal, a favorite term in reactionary and Nazi philosophy during the 1920s and 1930s). Heidegger recalled that the term Ding originally referred to a form of archaic assembly, and in recent years Bruno Latour has latched onto this genealogy to redefine things in terms of “matters of concern” rather than “matters of fact,” as quasi-objects and quasi-subjects that fall between the two poles of the dichotomy.² As I have argued — contra Latour — this needs to be seen as a critical project within modernity that brings together thinkers and artists (and not only them, obviously) that would be bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble.

Last year, in an exhibition that was part of a series of events on “social design,” curator Claudia Banz combined elements from the publications of Victor Papanek with a selection of multiples by Joseph Beuys.³ Bringing together


Garage Sale

Her piece involve her mimicking this object's
purification.Ó Martha RoslerÕs various versions of the
American suburban version of the SurrealistsÕs work, they too are counter-commodities Ð and
while it would be a mistake to lose sight of their compromised status, it would be an even bigger one to be content with that observation.

Even if we were to disregard Beuys as regressive and unmodern, many of the 1960s and 1970s practices that are most steeped in the tradition of critical theory that Latour seeks to toss into the dustbin of history show that a critique of commodification is something rather different from a “ceaseless, even maniacal purification.” Martha Rosler’s various versions of her Garage Sale piece involve her mimicking this American suburban version of the Surrealists’s flea market; having been advertised in art and non-art media, it is a more or less normal garage sale to some, and a performance to others. However, Rosler noted that the setting transformed even the art crowd into a posse of bargain hunters, who did not pay that much attention to the structure of the space, with odd and personal objects tucked away in the outer corners, or to the slide show and sound elements. For a 1977 version, Rosler assumed the persona of a Southern Californian mother with “roots in the counterculture,” who on an audiotape that played in the place mused on the value and function of things: “What is the value of a thing? What makes me want it? . . . I paid money for these things – is there a chance to recuperate some of my investment by selling them to you? . . . Why not give it all away?” The woman goes on to quote Marx on commodity fetishism and to wonder if “you [will] judge me by the things I’m selling.”

In such a work, the object is placed in a network that is social and political, not merely one of signs. Semiosis is always a social and political process. There is a diagrammatic dimension to such a piece, as there is, in different ways, to many works of Allan Sekula or Hans Haacke. If the diagram in Rosler’s piece is one that primarily concerns the circulation of objects in suburban family life, a number of Haacke’s works contrast the use of corporations’s logos in the context of art spaces, where they become disembodied signs, with those corporations’s exploitation of labor or involvement in authoritarian or racist regimes; Sekula’s Fish Story and related projects chart the largely unseen trajectories of commodities and workers on and near the oceans. Things and people. These practices, in particular those of Haacke and Rosler, spring from a critical reading of both the Duchampian heritage and the Constructivist project, which was being excavated in the same period by art historians, critics, activists, and artists. In their reading of these two genealogies, these artists recover some of the impetus behind the Constructivist/Productivist attempt to redefine the thing.

A diagrammatic impulse, an attempt to trace the trajectories of people and things, can also be seen in recent work such as Sean Snyder’s Untitled (Archive Iraq) (2003–2005) and related pieces, tracking the circulation of various types of commodity in the contested terrains of Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. When Snyder, in his photo pieces and films, zooms in on Fanta cans or Mars bars, on Casio watches or Sony cameras, the “social relations” between these commodities are not limited to the fetishistic coded differences celebrated by commodity art.

Filmic montage can be one tool for keeping track of things, of comparing different modes of production and distribution. In this respect, Allan Sekula’s films and Harun Farocki’s installation Vergleich über ein Drittes (Comparison via a Third) (2007) are strong demonstrations of the possibilities of filmic means – and in Farocki’s case, of their use in multi-channel video installations. A diagrammatic impulse can also

Harun Farocki, *Comparison Via a Third [Vergleich über ein Drittes]*, 2007. 16 mm film, color, sound, 24min.
be discerned in such filmic pieces; but here, as in the case of Snyder’s Untitled (Archive Iraq), the aim is not to strive for some suggestion of complete transparency that would reduce objects to geometric points for a sovereign subject to grasp at a glance. Rather, the objects and subjects are placed in a jumbled constellation in which they become problematic, questionable things and people. Of course, the artificial limitations on the availability of film and video pieces in the contemporary art economy make such pieces highly questionable things in their own right, and crucial projects such as Snyder’s Index, which involves the digitization and uploading of the artist’s archive, address the limitations of the dominant form of media objecthood.

The limitations imposed on the circulation of commodities by intellectual property law are also scrutinized in a number of projects by Superflex – commodities that include, in their current project at the Van Abbemuseum, a wall piece by Sol LeWitt. In a less interventionist and (in the military sense of the term) offensive way than Superflex, Agency/Kobe Matthys charts the legal battles waged over the use of objects, images, and programs by collecting, investigating, and exhibiting specific things. A recent installation in Anselm Franke’s “Animism” exhibition at Extra City in Antwerp contained a number of things that have been subject to litigation, as instances in which human authorship is thrown into question because of the role played by the non-human (technological, animal), with items ranging from bingo cards to a video game and a German TV broadcast of a circus act with elephants. Exhibited in a space lined with crates containing many more items, the space seemed to channel Surrealism via Mark Dion. Some of the things on display had an anachronistic quaintness to them, yet Matthys’ classified readymades go beyond the conventional exacerbation of the commodity’s theological (or animist) whims.

There are, of course, other important examples of practices that seek to push the work of art to a point where it reveals itself to be a special category of thing that reflects (on) the state of things. Here one may think of Michael Cataloi and Nils Norman’s “University of Trash” project, with its investigation into various alternative economies and social structures proposed in the 1960s and 1970s, and of Ashley Hunt and Taisha Paggett’s project about the garment industry and its workers, with its charting of the movements of contemporary products across the globe. Some of these projects and practices may be more successful than others, but an important characteristic that they share is that their embrace of the work of art’s “thingified” status is not a capitulation, an assimilation of the work of art to the dreaded world of hat racks and other arbitrary objects. Rather, such projects are interventions into our society’s production of (in)visibility. If anything, they can more properly lay claim to continuing the project of modern aesthetics than those intent on erecting a wall around the work of art; after all, from Schiller and the Jena Romantics onwards, the modern aesthetic project was expansive, aimed at intervening in the “art of living.”

However, avant-garde attempts to abandon autonomous art in favor of a complete integration of art and life were as misjudged by critics as modernist rappels à l’ordre that limited art to reflecting on the unique properties of its mediums, or later attempts to limit Conceptual art to a series of proposals about its own status as art and nothing else. Even Constructivist forays into production in the early 1920s depended on a specialist sphere of practice and discourse whose confines they sought to escape – a sphere that would soon be destroyed by Stalin. On the other hand, a properly reflexive work of art can never be only about its status as art, about “art itself.” Since art’s apparent autonomy is socially conditioned, the obverse of its heteronomous inscription in a global capitalist economy that penetrates into ever more realms of life and parts of the planet, the work of art’s self-reflection is a sham if it is not potentially about everything, and every thing.

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5 See Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes,” in *New Left Review* 14 (March–April 2002), http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2383. Rancière’s writings on the modern “aesthetic regime of art” have become almost suspiciously popular in the art world; when Rancière writes that “Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity,” this seems to generate a pleasant vagueness, legitimizing anything and everything. However, one could and should in fact see it as an incentive to examine possible correspondences and points of connection, however fraught with difficulty, between art and different (especially political) interventions in the sensible realm.

6 Writing about the conceptual essay-as-a-work-of-art, Jeff Wall argues that it can only be about its own status as an artistic kropsla; it can’t be about any other subject. Jeff Wall, “Introduction: Partially Reflective Mirror Writing,” in *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 1999), xv.