Georgia State University
Digital Archive @ GSU

Art and Design Theses | Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design

4-21-2009

Consumer Goods?

Matt Sigmon

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/art_design_theses

Recommended Citation
Sigmon, Matt, "Consumer Goods?" (2009). *Art and Design Theses.* Paper 44.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design at Digital Archive @ GSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art and Design Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Archive @ GSU. For more information, please contact digitalarchive@gsu.edu.

CONSUMER GOODS?

by

MATT SIGMON

Under the Direction of George Beasley

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to extrapolate through research the conceptual underpinnings of a body of artwork created by Matt Sigmon. The thesis explains the work in relation to art historical references to readymade art and the dilemmas that arise when fine art is compared to consumer commodities.

INDEX WORDS: Readymade, Banality, Aesthetics, Craftsmanship, Democratization of art, Value, Economics, Capitalism, Commodity, Production, Consumption, Consumer goods, Fine art, Authenticity, Originality, Appropriation, Artifice, Critical thinking, Dialogues, Conversations, Absurdity, Comedy

CONSUMER GOODS?

by

MATT SIGMON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

Copyright by

Matthew Neil Sigmon

2009

CONSUMER GOODS?

by

MATT SIGMON

Committee Chair: George Beasley

Committee: Susan Richmond
Ruth Stanford

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
May 2009

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of George, Susan, and Ruth in their honest criticism and insight toward my work and research.

I would also like to thank my peers, colleagues, follow artists, and friends that I have met thus far who have provided motivation to continue my efforts.

I greatly appreciate the assistance and continued support of my family through all my endeavors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

LIST OF FIGURES vi

PREFACE vii

ESSAYS

1. THE READYMADE: ART VERSUS AESTHETICS 1
2. AESTHETICS OF BANALITY AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF ART 4
3. ARTIST AS CRAFTSMAN 8
4. THE COMMON PLACE BECOMES FINE ART BECOMES COMMON PLACE 14
5. ORIGINALITY AND ARTIFICE 20
6. VALUE AND ECONOMY: THE FINE ART COMMODITY 24
7. CRITICAL THINKING, COMEDY, AND CONVERSATION 29

REFERENCES 38

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. *Cinderblock* 32

Figure 2. *Cinderblock and Receipt* 32

Figure 3. *Cinderblock, Receipt, Video, Dialogues Installation* 33

Figure 4. *Cinderblock Video Still* 33

Figure 5. *Bookcase* 34

Figure 6. *But It Still Looks Like a Brake Disc* 35

Figure 7. *But It Still Looks Like a Brake Disc (Detail)* 35

Figure 8. *Plastic Vacuum Forming Machine* 36

Figure 9. *Plasticware Trial and Error* 36

Figure 10. *Plasticware Dialogue* 37

PREFACE

The following thesis is written as a collection of essays. Each essay can be read independently or in succession from one through seven. The thesis was written in this manner because the ideas contained within are overlapping and often repeating. I recommend looking at the images of the work before reading the essays. A complete list of images can be found on page vi.

1

THE READYMADE: ART VERSUS AESTHETICS

Readymades, as defined by Marcel Duchamp, are ordinary, industry manufactured objects that can be transformed into art simply through the decision of the artist. *Fountain*, Duchamp's most famous readymade, is a porcelain urinal with "R. Mutt 1917" inscribed on its rim. Commenting on *Fountain*, Duchamp stated, "Whether R. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view--created a new thought for that object." [1] My investigation builds on the legacy of the readymade. However, instead of appropriating manufactured objects, I make copies of industrially manufactured objects. These objects retain the appearance of a commodity, but become art objects simply through my decision to make them works of art. Therefore, like Duchamp, I have created "a new thought" for my objects.

In "Echoes of the Readymade," Thierry de Duve describes a readymade as neither a painting nor a sculpture, but simply "art in general." Duchamp, often considered the forerunner to the Conceptual Art movement of the 1960s, made it possible for an artist to be an "artist in general," without being a painter, writer, musician, sculptor, architect, filmmaker, or choreographer. [2] Joseph Kosuth, an early practitioner of the Conceptual Art movement, states as much: "Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art…That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a kind of art." [3] Kosuth has also credited Marcel Duchamp "with giving art its own identity…All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually." [4] Essentially, Duchamp and Kosuth have exposed the idea that art exists only because we say that it exists. We define art and every object around us. I am attempting to question the nature of art, and as a result, seeking to question the entire hierarchy of object importance. As

the philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto suggests, I too consider art history to be progressive in the way that the history of science is progressive. [5] My artistic exploration is influenced by the artists, writers, and thinkers that set the precedent before me. Therefore, perhaps it is my responsibility to learn from and build upon their work.

In my work, the key precedent is the separation that Duchamp and the conceptualists made between art and aesthetics. The Modernist Clement Greenberg would abhor this distinction, since he once noted that "art and the aesthetic don't just overlap, they coincide." However, a distinction between the two has resulted from the works and actions of artists pushing to exclude art from the limitations of visual aesthetics. [6] The readymade has been a vital vehicle for escaping Modernist appeals for the aesthetic visual experience.

Likewise, my creation of seemingly readymade artworks is not aimed at highlighting the visual aesthetics of a manufactured commodity. I do not demand that an inherent beauty radiate from my objects. Beauty, as a subjective quality or matter of taste, is of no importance when discussing a readymade. When selecting his readymade objects, Duchamp emphasized the irrelevance of aesthetic pleasure. He stressed that "the choice of readymades is always based on visual indifference and at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste." [7] Similarly, Kosuth describes aesthetics as "extraneous to an object's function or reason to be, unless…the object's reason to be is strictly aesthetic." [8] Again, I would reiterate that the art object's "reason to be" is not strictly aesthetic. With visual aesthetics downplayed, an appeal can be made toward the conceptual.

In his essay, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," Sol Lewitt states that, "the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work." Lewitt defines art of a conceptual nature as "made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions." [9] Thus, Lewitt, like Kosuth, affirms that aesthetics are conceptually irrelevant to art. [10] Danto has also stated that "aesthetics does not

really belong to the essence of art." Aesthetics, based on an art history of progressive precedents, is no longer a defining characteristic of art.[11] Through my work, I wish to further explore art forms whose aesthetic significance has been replaced by conceptual significance.

NOTES

1. Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History: Volume Two*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 2002), 1102.
2. Thierry De Duve, "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October, vol. 70, The Duchamp Effect*, (August 1994): 63.
3. Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 18.
4. Kosuth, 18.
5. Arthur C. Danto, "Banality and Celebration: The Art of Jeff Koons," *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 287.
6. De Duve, 97.
7. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett, (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1971), 48.
8. Kosuth, 17.
9. Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum, no. 10* (June 1967): 79.
10. Kosuth, 16-19.
11. Arthur C. Danto, "Aesthetics and Art Criticism," *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1994), 384.

2

AESTHETICS OF BANALITY AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF ART

The readymade, it is no longer the object that's there, but the idea of the object, and we no longer find pleasure [aesthetics] here in art, but in the idea of art. We are wholly in the idea of art.
-Jean Baudrillard

In one of his later writings, Jean Baudrillard attributes the irrelevance of aesthetics in contemporary art to the readymade and its aesthetic banality. Baudrillard asserts that with Duchamp's advent of the readymade, "the banality of art has merged with the banality of the real world." [1] Contemporary art put forth the idea that "any object, any detail or fragment of the material world, could exert the same strange attraction and pose the same insoluble questions as were reserved in the past for a few rare aristocratic forms known as works of art." Consequentially, all reality has been thrust into the aesthetic realm, as the democratization of art has made it possible for everything to be encompassed by, and defined as, art. This "democracy" embodies the fact that every object, without distinction, would be called art. [2]

Joseph Beuys sought to create a democratized art world--an egalitarian arrangement of art objects and creative actions. Although Baudrillard's analysis offers a bleak outcome to the democratization of art, Beuys intended to create a better world, one not consumed by its banality or insignificance. Beuys thought that a better world could be created through the democratization of art. He advocated "an aesthetic involvement from science, from economics, from politics, from religion--every sphere of human activity. Even the act of peeling a potato can be a work of art if it is a conscious act." [3] Beuys supported the idea that the creative act or critical thought was inherently aesthetic. His view of aesthetics was so all encompassing that his definition of aesthetics did not limit itself to the autonomous visual aesthetics of the art object.

However, I think it would be incorrect to assume that Baudrillard's and Beuys's views on the democratization of art and aesthetics are conflicting ideas. Through my work, I approach these

seemingly disparate views in a manner in which one is complementary to the other. Baudrillard sets up the idea that contemporary artists have essentially "killed" their objects and themselves through the democratization of art. As a result, art, in its form--in its visual beauty or aesthetics—signifies nothing. Art in this form, as an object of visual beauty, is now insignificant and indifferent. Therefore, Baudrillard supports the idea that the last bastion of art's purpose lies in the thoughts art can elicit in the viewer. [4]

If Beuys's idea of "aesthetic involvement" in every conscious human activity has the potential to be a work of art, then perhaps the aesthetic experience exists in the labor that was used to create the object rather than within the object itself. In following this line of thought, Baudrillard's writings are able to redress the thoughts and concerns of Beuys. To summarize, Baudrillard has announced that the particular art object's form is irrelevant. Consequentially, the autonomous, aesthetic art object was destroyed by the readymade's ability to democratize all objects, art or not. Because every object has the potential for aesthetic engagement, aesthetics as a quality specific to the art object is removed as a distinguishing feature of art. Therefore, the object remains as merely a medium for creative activity through which concept and ideas are expressed. Following this line of reasoning, perhaps Beuys has created a "new home" for art aesthetics. Maybe aesthetics can now reside in the creative human activity and not within the object that resulted from the human activity.

Beuys's view of art relates to the writings of Karl Marx. Marx describes an object as being consumed in three ways: "It may be consumed as means of subsistence: eaten, in the primary case. Or it may be consumed as means of production, as a tool or machine, as object used to produce other objects. Or it may be consumed as an aesthetic object, as painting, sculpture, music." [5] Marx also contended that "the critique of bourgeois society is the critique of the bourgeois object." In this instance, the bourgeois object is the commodity. As a commodity, the object negates its power of

aesthetics based on Marx's three ways of object consumption because an object, as commodity, "has its value, not in itself, like an aesthetic object, but in another object for which it may be exchanged." [6]

I am interested in exploring this dilemma. When commodities are presented within an art gallery, with all the signifiers of art including pedestals, frames, and track lighting, their aesthetic qualities come in to focus more strongly than they do when the same objects are found within a kitchen cupboard or grocery store aisle. However, if the commodity in a kitchen cupboard can be an autonomous aesthetic object, as Baudrillard would contend, then it is able to emanate aesthetic qualities without being placed within an art gallery. Therefore, if aesthetics can be experienced in any venue, from any object, then the visual aesthetic importance of art is greatly diminished. With visual aesthetic object autonomy rendered unimportant, the issues of concept, intent, purpose, and function of the object come to the forefront.

Through further analysis, it becomes apparent that Beuys drew a tremendous amount of influence from Marx—particularly his concept that "all praxis, all 'sensuous labor and creation'…is aesthetic praxis; every labor process is an art process." To further paraphrase Marx, Howard Press denotes, "Beauty is not in objects as such, but in the evolving forms of human association, which are mediated by objects." [7] However, if the aesthetics of the tangible object are irrelevant, as Baudrillard and Marx would contend, would the aesthetics of labor and creation also be irrelevant? I do not wish to proclaim that aesthetics exist in one venue rather than another. I am, however, interested in raising these questions.

In his analysis of Marx, Press stresses one of the problems with traditional aesthetics: "The assumption that beauty is in objects --museum objects, marketable commodities, bought and sold, created by a special race of men and women--is an assumption of alienated life, the artistic alienation…In this artistic alienation, art, like money, takes on the quality of a material

thing,…external to man." [8] Following on Press's observation, I take the position that art's importance does not lie in the visual aesthetics of the object, but in its concept and means of production. If an aesthetic experience does permeate an art object, perhaps it can be found within the idea of an object or within the labor or "sensuous human activity" used to create that object. Therefore, the object itself is merely a representation of the labor used to create it. This labor, this "sensuous human activity," I will call craft.

NOTES

1. Jean Baudrillard, "Contemporary Art: Art Contemporary with Itself," *The Jean Baudrillard Reader*, ed. Steve Redhead, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 205.
2. Baudrillard, 206.
3. Linda Weintraub, "Joseph Beuys: Political Reformation," *Art on the Edge and Over*, (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, 1996), 181.
4. Baudrillard, 207.
5. Howard Press, "Marxism and Aesthetic Man," *The New Art: Revised*, ed. Gregory Battcock, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), 156.
6. Press, 160-161.
7. Press, 165.
8. Press, 165-166.

3

ARTIST AS CRAFTSMAN

To begin, I will recall a story that was told to me by an artist named James whom I met during an international iron casting symposium in 2007. James had worked in a commercial foundry in London. The foundry often received commissions from several of today's prominent artists including sculptor Anish Kapoor. James and another foundry worker were assigned to work on a piece for Kapoor for over a year. At a point during the construction, Kapoor stopped by the foundry and inquired, "When is it going to be done?" James's fellow foundry worker replied, "It'll be fucking done, when it's done, Anish!" Apparently, because Kapoor had little knowledge of the material or work that was necessary to create an Anish Kapoor sculpture, Kapoor had difficulty responding to such a quip. I mention this story because it exposes an apparent rift between worker and artist. By demanding the completion of his object, Kapoor reinforced the existence of his art object as a commodity. The art object's identity as a commodity is reinforced when the value of the sculpture is no longer in itself, as an aesthetic object. The value of the art object is now in the labor of the workers who created it for which it can be exchanged. A result of the artist's separation from the work process is artistic alienation.[1] If the artistic, even aesthetic, moment is contained within labor instead of the autonomous object, then one could assume that the artist can not merely be a designer/planner/thinker alone, but must also be a laborer as well.

The work I create is reliant on my skill as a craftsman. Consequentially, I must disagree with Sol Lewitt's insistence that art of a conceptual nature is "free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman."[2] I would also have to disagree with Duchamp's assertion that it does not matter if a readymade was made by the artist or not. My objects mimic the items of mass, industrial production, but are in actuality handmade and "one of a kind." The concept of my work is heavily dependent on my skills as a craftsman. If I did not fabricate a cinderblock to meet the

quality appearance of an industrially manufactured cinderblock, or if I did not construct a common bookcase to the same mass production standards of cheap particleboard and plastic, faux wood grain finish, as would be available at such discount superstore as Wal-Mart or Target, my concept would falter. Even though I am a contemporary artist placing emphasis on craftsmanship and skill, the contemporary art world, according to Arthur C. Danto, continues to espouse that "the connotations of craft sit uneasily today with the connotations of art." Martin Puryear understood this. When Puryear was complimented on the excellent craftsmanship of his work, he refused the compliment and attempted to make craftsmanship a non-issue. He did not want his work to be derided as "mere exercises in craft." [3] I too do not want my work derided as merely craft. The craft and labor is important, but it is simply a means to arrive at an overriding idea and concept of greater importance.

The division between craft and art began when art was viewed differently from furniture, or the functional object. The distinction between fine art and functional art can be traced back to Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution. David classified furniture as an inferior art when compared to painting, sculpture, or architecture. Apparently, he desired to make this distinction because the previous aristocracy did not discriminate between the furniture maker and the painter. According to David, painting and sculpture, unlike furniture, were able to serve the "highest purpose of art…to give moral instruction to its viewers, making them better persons--and, incidentally, politically correct citizens." [4] Although David's division of furniture and fine art sought to dismantle the hierarchy of aristocratic objects, he ultimately, over the course of time, reinforced a new hierarchy and elitism which developed a new set of connoisseurs and collectors who placed painting and sculpture above so-called craft arts such as furniture making or pottery.

The rift between furniture and fine art widened further when the painter and sculptor became romanticized figures. Furniture (or any functional article of life, or in this instance, the readymade) cannot capture the "expressive fervor," "creative frenzy", or emotional impulsiveness that is evident

in the fine arts of painting and sculpture. [5] However, I would state that the artist need not engage in an "expressive fervor" which by its very nature is an appeal to visual, universal aesthetics.

My work offers dilemmas, quandaries, and often inconsistencies. I place importance on precision, attention to detail, and technical skill. I refuse the aesthetic "expressive fervor," "creative frenzy", or emotional impulsiveness that most think typical of an artist. I create the banal, Wal-Mart style bookcase that would be abhorred by a fine furniture maker who relies heavily on honed craftsmanship, complex joinery, and the inherent aesthetic qualities of a fine hardwood. I work with faux wood grain laminate and particle board. As a result, an important question is raised: Why make a cheap bookcase from scratch when I could easily purchase one for a fraction of the cost? Although I heavily reference previous readymade art, the fact that I build my "readymades" from scratch destroys the found object immediacy essential to the appropriated readymade. My objects remain simply facsimiles of the readymade. I embrace the readymade's appearance and I embrace its potential for inquiry; but, I push away the readymade's terms of production.

My decision to make the banal, readymade object is a response to the precedents of previous artists, movements, and trends within art and the teaching of art. In his essay, "When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond," Thierry de Duve traces these trends of skills and materials as it related to the teaching of art. He breaks the teaching of art into two models: "On the one hand, there is the academic model; on the other there is the Bauhaus. The former believes in talent, the latter in creativity. The former classifies the arts according to techniques (métier)…the latter according to the medium. The former fosters imitation; the latter invention." [6]

For my purposes, I will focus more intently on the issue of métier (techniques) versus medium. Métier, as classified by the Academy, is specialized skills, artisan habits, canons of beauty, rules of composition, and a specific tradition. Medium, as classified by the Bauhaus, or generally, Modernism, is particular materials, gestures, technical procedures, and conventions of specificity.

The primary difference between the two can be defined as follows: an artist practicing the métier is doing "what painters do." "An artist that works in the medium of painting means that he questions painting for what it has to say about itself and hasn't said yet." According to de Duve, "teaching the arts according to the medium cultivates distrust of technical skill because mastering the medium gets in the way of questioning the medium." [7] As a result, the distrust of technical skill has led to a third component of this discussion.

The third component is embodied by the fact that in contemporary art, métier and medium are obsolete. With métier long forgotten and art schools absorbing "mixed media," "interdisciplinary," and "free-for-all" studios, the teaching of art "no longer rests on an aesthetic commitment to the specificity or the purity of the medium." [8] Consequentially, artists rely on Duchamp's dematerialization of art and the placement of artistic emphasis solely on concept. Therefore, the term that would override métier and medium is practice. For example, painting is not thought of as a specific skill (métier) or as a specific medium (such as Greenbergian flatness), but simply institutionally it is thought of as "pictorial practice." [9] I am even seeing this trend directly within the institution from which I am seeking a Master of Fine Arts degree. At some point in the near future, the university will merge the ceramic discipline with the sculpture discipline to create one discipline titled "three-dimensional studies," which is synonymous with, and could be called "three-dimensional practice."

I find myself in this trend. As de Duve noted, contemporary artists and art institutions are not clinging to medium, but instead seem to be fighting against medium and definitely seeking to resist a rehabilitation of the métier. [10] This even helps support Danto's claim that "the contemporary world remains suspicious of skill and elegance in art." [11] If progress is continued in this fashion, the contemporary art world, as supported by art institutions, may continue to remain

suspicious of technical skill in art. Although I would not support a total rehabilitation of the métier, a reemphasis on craftsmanship in art is one particular aspect I wish to highlight in my work.

My approach to art making seems to merge these conflicting ideals. I maintain the necessity of skill, technique, and the individual labor of art production. However, I approach it in a manner that would render important qualities of métier such as "canons of beauty" and "rules of composition" as irrelevant. I support practice's push to make concept more important than the art object or art medium. Yet, I resist Modernism assertion that medium itself should be questioned. Like Kosuth stated, "If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art." [12] Finally, the work I make designates me as a conceptual artist questioning art, but maintains my status as an individual laborer whose art making is founded on skill, technique, and production.

NOTES

1. Howard Press, “Marxism and Aesthetic Man,” *The New Art: Revised*, ed. Gregory Battcock, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973), 165-166.
2. Sol Lewitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum, no. 10* (June 1967): 79.
3. Arthur C. Danto, “Martin Puryear, or the Quandaries of Craftsmanship,” *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1994), 289.
4. Arthur C. Danto, “Furniture as Art,” *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1994), 75.
5. Danto, “Furniture as Art,” 81.
6. Thierry de Duve, “When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond,” *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 22.
7. De Duve, 23.
8. De Duve, 28.
9. De Duve, 28-29.
10. De Duve, 28
11. Danto, “Furniture as Art,” 81.
12. Joseph Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy,” *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings,1966-1990,* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 18.

4

THE COMMON PLACE BECOMES FINE ART BECOMES COMMON PLACE

The readymade, with its banality and lack of craftsmanship, reduced the work of art to its enunciative function. The readymade, more clearly than any other art form, must proclaim or enunciate itself as art. [1] However, the readymade cannot serve its enunciative function in a vacuum. Four conditions must be fulfilled for the readymade to achieve this end. In his essay, "Echoes of the Readymade," Thierry de Duve defines the four conditions that validate the enunciative function of the readymade: 1) an object, 2) an author, 3) a public, and 4) an institution. Without these four conditions working together, the readymade will cease to be a work of art. [2] When applied to modernist, non-readymade artworks, this quadruple requirement includes: 1) a material object crafted by the artist, 2) an author's opus, 3) a visual phenomenon offered to the viewer, and 4) the bestowing of institutionalized value. However, the readymade and its proliferation through conceptual art deconstructed and negated many of these tenets. The readymade negates the work as material object manipulated by the artist; negates the work as being part of the opus of an author; negates the work as a visual phenomenon offered to a viewer through its rejection of the judgment of taste, of formalism, and of aesthetics; and negates the work's institutionalized value through its acquisition of the banal or commonplace. [3] As du Duve states, "To produce a readymade is to show it; to transmit a readymade is to make it change context; to enjoy a readymade is to wonder what it is doing in the museum, in the institution." [4]

The readymade's negation of institutionalized value is probably its key attribute, as it defines its status shifting abilities as a visual object within the hierarchy of all objects. The readymade is able to shift from art object to non-art object based on its contextual location. In an art gallery or museum, the readymade achieves art status. Taken out of the gallery and returned to its proper place, the readymade regains its original status whether domestic, commercial, industrial, etc.

This is the readymade's most unique attribute. If the inverse is attempted and an object of fine art such as a painting is removed from the gallery and placed within a domestic, commercial, or industrial setting, the painting remains a work of fine art. Although the context change does not eliminate the painting's art status like the readymade, it does adjust its aesthetic qualities by contrasting it to the surroundings within its new location.

For example, Louise Lawler's photographs showcase the places fine art inhabits after it is purchased. Once owned by the artist, it is sold and now the property of the buyer—thereby highlighting the artwork's property status and new aesthetics within a different location. Lawler's photographs often show works of fine art side by side with decorative items or domestic furnishings such as serving dishes or lamps.[5] Her work deals with a range of important issue concerning property, wealth, aesthetics, and decoration. For the purposes of this study, I am only highlighting Lawler's photographs to show how fine artworks such as paintings remain fine art even when placed in non-museum locations.

A similar, but opposite, example of this phenomenon is demonstrated in Haim Steinbach's artwork. Steinbach's objects (such as Bold detergent, Ajax cleanser, and Corn Flakes) are taken from the grocery store shelves of consumer society and placed within an art gallery. Accordingly, they attain fine art status. This is the inverse relation of viewing, for example, a Jackson Pollock above a tureen in a domestic setting. However, once Steinbach's Bold detergent, Ajax cleanser, and Corn Flakes are taken away from the gallery and placed back into the home of an art collector, the items merge with the surroundings and other things within the art collector's home. As a result, the object's original intended purpose becomes confused. If the objects were placed back into the hidden broom closets or kitchen cabinets, they would lose their art status. However, if they remain on display within the home, they too can become sources of aesthetic and symbolic contemplation. [6] Thus, this rather completely demonstrates Baudrillard's assertion that "the banality of art has

merged with the banality of the real world." [7] As a result, the aesthetics of the commonplace object can bear the same weight as the aesthetics of the fine art object.

I see this phenomenon occur with the objects I create. For example, the bookcase I created maintains its fine art status when placed on a white plinth in an art gallery. No one would use it as an actual bookcase in the gallery. It has become art and most people are usually taught not to touch art. However, when the bookcase leaves the art gallery and goes back to my apartment without the plinth and without dramatic gallery lighting, the bookcase becomes a bookcase again. I currently store a hat, a few books, and a plastic container on it. Another object that permeates this strange dichotomy is a plastic container that I formed from sheet plastic. Again, in the gallery, on a pedestal, it is art. In my home, it is just a plastic container similar to disposable Gladware or Tupperware. I have even used the container as a drinking vessel. However, these are not arbitrarily found, and placed objects. I crafted each by hand—a fact that conflicts with the original intent of the readymade art object.

However, Steinbach supports the readymade as object/material devoid of manipulation by the hand of the artist. By equating art-making with shopping, Steinbach embodies the mainstream characteristics of American society in the current era. [8] Similarly, the labor-intensive paintings of John Singleton Copley and Charles Wilson Peale conveyed the eighteenth century values of hard work, temperance, and discipline. Today, Steinbach's use of shopping, instead of laborious painting, embodies the pursuit of consumption, extravagance, and indulgence that characterized the recent decades of the American century. Steinbach states, "Objects, commodity products, or art works have functions for us that are not unlike words, language. We invented them for our own use and we communicate through them….What I do with objects is what anyone can do, what anyone does anyway with objects, which is talk and communicate through a socially shared ritual of moving, placing, and arranging them." [9] Steinbach rearranges his objects in a new location, such

that their "meaning is recalibrated. A new order is devised. They become art." [10] By using shopping instead of a chisel, saw, or brush to make art, perhaps Steinbach is pointing out the absurdity of today's most American of pursuits. George Carlin described shopping as the "new national pastime." He described it as, "The only true lasting American value that's left: Buying things! People spending money they don't have on things they don't need." [11] Carlin is, and Steinbach seems to be, commenting on the meaningless consumerism that is plaguing America. However, through my work, I am approaching this issue from a slightly different angle. Unlike Steinbach, who may be reveling in the very shopping activity that he is criticizing, I make my commodity and then, like Steinbach, turn it into artwork. I have focused on production as a key component to dealing with the problems left by rampant consumerism. At the same time, I am also questioning the importance of my objects as fine art and the importance of my objects as consumer goods.

As a predecessor to Steinbach, Warhol's *Brillo Box* is another example of commodity turned artwork. Danto describes the differences between Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the original, as designed by Steve Harvey, as simply the difference between the prior knowledge that is brought to bear on an analysis of the two objects. "Steve Harvey's boxes are about Brillo and about the values of speed, cleanliness, and the relentless advantages of the new and the gigantic. Warhol's iconography is more complex and has little to do with those values at all. In a way it is philosophical, being about art…" [12]

Jeff Koons's first exhibition titled *New,* installed in the street-level windows of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, included bright, new vacuum cleaners. Koons's vacuum cleaners hold on to the readymade status. A derivative of Duchamp's efforts, the vacuum cleaners "were more or less aesthetically unnoticeable when part of ordinary life." They bear no aesthetic distinction. [13] However, Danto focuses on Koons's *Banality* series as being the most progressive

step in the tradition of the readymade. In talking about his *Banality* series, Koons states, "I did not work with direct ready-made objects but created objects with a sense of ready-made inherent in them." [14] Koons piece, *Ushering in Banality* is a polychrome wood carving depicting a pig wearing a green ribbon, flanked by two cherubs and a boy pushing the pig from behind. The piece appears as a statuette from a gift shop. [15] Danto hailed this as an achievement in readymade art because Koons successfully created an original object that was only readymade in "appearance."

Both Warhol's *Brillo Box* and Koons's *Banality* series seem to have been predicted by Salvador Dali's prophetic quote in the preface to Pierre Cabanne's *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*. Dali stated, "In Paris, in the early days, there were 17 persons who understood the "readymade"--the very rare readymades by Marcel Duchamp. Nowadays there are 17 million who understand them, and that one day when all objects that exist are considered readymades, there will be no readymades at all. Then Originality will become the artistic Work, produced convulsively by the artist by hand." [16] However, Koons did not physically create the *Banality* series by hand. He thought of the idea and hired workers to render the carvings. Yet, his efforts seem close in line with Dali's thoughts as a step toward originality, although achieved through the most unoriginal means. Approaching originality seems to be a common goal of most artists—to make or think of something that has yet to be done. Perhaps a more cynical artist would retort that everything has been done already, so what's the point? This quandary has led me to the following conclusion: I must originally create, by hand, banal consumer goods that I handle as both fine art and ordinary commodity.

NOTES

1. Thierry De Duve, "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October, vol. 70, The Duchamp Effect* (August 1994): 68.
2. De Duve, 70.
3. De Duve, 86-87.
4. De Duve, 90.
5. David Barrett, "Louise Lawler: Monika Spruth & Philomene Magers, London," *Art Monthly, no. 313,* (February 2008): 37-38.
6. Linda Weintraub, "Haim Steinbach: Shopping," *Art on the Edge and Over,* (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, 1996), 138.
7. Jean Baudrillard, "Contemporary Art: Art Contemporary with Itself," *The Jean Baudrillard Reader*, ed, Steve Redhead, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 205.
8. Weintraub, 134.
9. Weintraub, 136.
10. Weintraub, 137.
11. *George Carlin – Life is Worth Losing*, DVD, Directed by Rocco Urbisci, MPI Home Video, 2005.
12. Arthur C. Danto, "Aesthetics and Art Criticism," *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1994), 386.
13. Arthur C. Danto, "Banality and Celebration: The Art of Jeff Koons," *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 296-297.
14. Danto, "Banality and Celebration: The Art of Jeff Koons," 293.
15. Danto, "Banality and Celebration: The Art of Jeff Koons," 296.
16. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett, (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1971), 14.

5

ORIGINALITY AND ARTIFICE

The issue of artistic originality seems to be a major concern of many artists. I know many artists who are seeking an individual voice and a way to stand out in a contemporary art scene flooded with artists. In conversations with fellow artists, I have noted many working almost identically (both visually and conceptually) to a past, or contemporary, artist. Once this is revealed through conversation, several of these unknowing artistic imitators respond by saying, "I can't continue making this work because it's already been done." However, when faced with this proposition, I respond by pointing out that the main difference is individuality. In conversation I have replied, "Although the work is similar, the difference is that *you* are doing it *now*. Perhaps the next step involves investigating why the previous artist made a similar body of work and why you are also draw to it."

"Originality implies some sense of coming first or doing first, a priority or lack of precedent." [1] However, the history of art shows a sequence of artistic precedents leading from one artist, or movement, to the next. In his essay titled "Originality," Richard Shiff proposes the question: "If artists must use what has already been shaped, how can they and their artworks attain originality?" He continues, "Perhaps originality is manifested when one alters existing directions or forces." Therefore, the artist appears original when he adds onto, or counters, a previous direction. [2]

Even though artists may be striving toward some aspect of originality, the public as a whole accepts counterfeits. For example, Sherrie Levine's art reflects our society's acceptance of copies. The presence of faxes, Xerox copies, CDs, videos, and MP3s demonstrate how the "value system implicit in Sherrie Levine's art is a part of everyday contemporary existence." Industry manufactures and markets copies without hiding the item's artifice. "Plastic plants, Astroturf, margarine, Gucci clones, new Colonial furniture, replicas of sports cars, theme parks, and recorded

music are all acknowledged counterfeits. So are industrially produced building materials that mimic marble, terrazzo, and other luxury materials…Even museums market replicas of their collection…Fake material goods and events constitute the bulk of our real experiences, including our experience of art. Simulated art is a product of an era in which simulated experiences have become the norm. [3] I see this phenomenon within my work, as well. The cinderblock I created is a fake. The brake disc is a fake. The bookcase is a copy of another bookcase. A stranger peculiarity about the bookcase is that the original, with its use of a faux wood grain finish, was a copy of a finer bookcase made of hardwood instead of particle board and plastic laminate. Essentially, my bookcase is a copy of a copy that already embodied the public's acceptance of fake materials resulting in simulated objects and experiences.

According to Book 10 of Plato's *Republic*, through the mouth of Socrates, the artist is defined as an image maker and framer of representations. The artist, as represented by a painter, is contrasted with a carpenter, or craftsperson, working with tangible, three-dimensional objects. "The carpenter knows how to fashion in real life what the painter can merely imitate; therefore, generalizing on this, artists have no real knowledge at all, trafficking only in the outward appearances of things." [4] The purpose of these distinctions was to set up a hierarchy from artist to craftsperson to philosopher. In this hierarchy, "Craftspersons are somewhere between artists and philosophers, but no one is lower than the artist." Philosophers are placed higher because they understand the principles through which objects exist or function. Although the hierarchy in Plato's *Republic* is somewhat outdated, a similar hierarchy still permeates art today. [5] In contemporary art, the hierarchy progresses from conceptual artist (philosopher), as the highest, to craft artist, as the lowest. Because simulated experiences have become the norm in the present day, the hierarchy now forgoes placing an artist dealing in artifice as a lesser artist. As a result, the craftsperson is lower than the artist. Today, artists of a conceptual type are placed above craftspeople. Furthermore, the

artist has merged with philosopher. Therefore, concept or philosophy still reigns supreme in today's hierarchy. Danto has termed this the "philosophical disenfranchisement of art." [6]

After taking the Platonic reference and its comparison to today into consideration, the work I create appears to be stretched across the entire hierarchy. I agree and disagree with each distinction. For example, the brake disc I created appears as a brake disc. It is even handmade from the same material as a brake disc. However, it does not meet today's industrial engineering standards. Unlike the Platonic painter, I deal in artifice three-dimensionally rather than two-dimensionally. Also, the brake disc's existence as a functional item can be contemplated. While at the same time, its existence within an entirely different context can also be pondered as means of philosophical amusement.

Referring back to Plato's time, being an artist meant to be an image maker, a creator of artifice and simulated experiences. The artist was never meant to be a creator of originality, but instead an imitator of the natural world. It was not until the birth of Modernism that art ceased to be a direct simulation of nature. Furthering this point, "art is no longer a path eventually leading back to nature…but a trace recording nothing beyond or deeper than other instances of itself." [7] My work definitely embodies this idea. Its claim to originality is minimal. The work perpetuates a reference back to itself and to the few artists, acting as setters of historic, artistic precedent, who contributed to its existence.

However, one artist of interest, Vija Celmins, seems to have found a way for art to lead back to nature. In her piece, *To Fix the Image in Memory*, she displays eleven pairs of acrylic-painted cast bronzes and original stones. "Each pairing consists of a stone the artist found in northern New Mexico and a bronze replica painted with acrylics to simulate aspects of the surface appearance of the 'original'." [8] I use Celmins as an example because she appeals to the initial role of the artist as an imitator of nature. At the same time, she embodies a total lack of visual originality: the idea

espoused in the *Republic* and which has permeated every artist until the beginning of Modernism. However, today, in the postmodern era, unoriginality and the appropriation of preexisting material is completely permissible. "'To appropriate' today means to take something for one's own use…taken positively or pejoratively, appropriation is not passive, objective, or disinterested, but active, subjective, and motivated."[9]

I am specific in my appropriation of objects. They are motivated selections to generate specific thoughts concerning issues of production, consumption, fine art status, and commoditization. Similar to Celmins, I make copies of preexisting objects. However, whereas Celmins copies a "natural" object such as a stone into another material (bronze), and then simulates its surface appearance, I copy a manufactured, man-made commodity. However, the copies I generate are not in bronze or an alternate material, but in the same material from which its commoditized predecessor was also made.

NOTES

1. Richard Shiff, "Originality," *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 145.
2. Shiff, 145.
3. Linda Weintraub, "Sherrie Levine: Unoriginality," *Art on the Edge and Over*, (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, 1996), 252.
4. Arthur C. Danto, "Fine Art and Functional Objects," *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, (New York: Noonday Press, 1994), 298.
5. Danto, 299.
6. Danto, 299.
7. Shiff, 153.
8. Shiff, 154.
9. Robert S. Nelson, "Appropriation," *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 162.

6

VALUE AND ECONOMY: THE FINE ART COMMODITY

In this section, I will investigate the value of art as it pertains to economics. Although art can have value expressed in other areas such as culture, psychology, aesthetics, nostalgia, and/or linguistics, for my purposes I will focus on value as it relates to economics. Economics would define value as exchange quantified by price. "Contemporary economics understands that individual human intentions and beliefs are largely unavailable to systemic analysis." As a result, the economics of art would not explain the cultural value of art, nor explain the differences between art objects, but rather classify art objects as "monetary instruments and commodities." This classification is completely reliant on the "auction houses, dealers, museums public and private, artists, art schools, collectors, critics, and art historians" as evaluators of art. [1]

In our capitalist economy we are taught that our markets are efficient. This efficiency is brought about by the "common-sense principle" of supply and demand. This principle goes as follows: "When the demand for a particular product goes up, so does its price, which is then followed by an increase in supply. According to this theory, prices jostle up and down keeping supply and demand in perfect balance." [2] Therefore, it is also assumed that supply and demand work across the board in all aspects of the economy. If supply and demand remains true for the market of consumer goods, then it should also remain true of markets for factors of production including labor, land, and capital inputs. [3] However, the market of fine art and luxury items presents an anomaly within the theory of supply and demand as leading toward an efficient market. In the marketplace for fine art, as one would expect, demand is directly stimulated because supply is low and cannot be increased. For example, a Jackson Pollock painting can be valued at $140,000,000 because supply is limited. Therefore, based on the supply and demand principle, demand should eventually decline if prices remain high with no increase in supply. However, this

does not happen because it is the "publicly" high prices of fine art that generate the demand. Economist Thorstein Veblen argued that the wealthy used the purchase of high-priced goods to signal their economic status. [4] Furthermore, it has been noted in Koerner and Rausing's essay, "Value," that "a New York art gallery sells not only an art object, but also an experience—that of belonging to an imaginary commonwealth of connoisseurs." [5]

Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, is another example of publicly high prices generating demand. In the 1980s, this small painting, measuring less than a square meter and weighing no more than a few ounces, was auctioned between collectors for $55 million. [6] At this point, the "exchange value of the work of art resembles much more closely the ebb and flow of stocks and shares than it does the price of something like [a] can of soup," or other typical commodity. [7] Furthermore, during times of widespread economic uncertainty, investment in art has become a form of defense against inflation, similar to the way that gold and other precious metals have existed as stable assets. [8] Therefore, rather than art being viewed as total commodity, it is viewed as investment and status builder for the elite. The judgment of economic value and interest is treated similarly to the "business confidence" for stocks. For art, its "business confidence" is generated by the support structures of art, including criticism, exhibitions, publications, etc. [9]

However, what happens to the value of a fine art object as a tool for investment when its fine art status is simply removed by placing it in direct market competition with non-fine art consumer goods? Sherrie Levine dealt with this issue during an exhibition in 1976. She was invited to create an exhibition dealing with commerce. Levine had acquired seventy-five pairs of black shoes from a thrift shop and decided to hold an exhibition that by economic standards would have been called a shoe sale. The postcard for the "exhibition" even announced, "Two shoes for two dollars." All of the shoes were sold for prices nowhere near the fine art standard. The shoes completely sold out. Then, demand increased for her readymade shoes. Because Levine was unable to find more shoes

like the seventy-five, she decided to fabricate more shoes just like the originals. [10] Instead of igniting a bidding war for the readymade art shoes, she simply made more shoes. Immediately, Levine is challenging the uniqueness and originality that is usually demanded of the fine art object. She further confronts this issue by circumventing the ability of the fine art object to function as a tool of investment and as an economic status building tool for the wealthy. In this way, Levine's shoes more closely resemble a true commodity rather than a tool of investment like most works of fine art.

"'Commodity' is the term given to products when the process of production is centered upon market exchange." [11] In the market, commodities are exchanged for money or other commodities. Essentially, "a commodity is a product made by a person and ultimately used (consumed) by another." [12] Consequentially, the key relation of commodities is a social relation between producer and consumer. Therefore, "artworks are a special kind of good." As another example, "The labor involved for Malevich in producing a black square, or for Duchamp in nominating a bicycle wheel, does not relate to the exchange value of the resulting object in the same way as, say, the skilled work and technology involved in producing a car." [13]

Going back to Levine's shoes, it seems as though she has created an object that exists between the area of art and non-art. Levine has even stated that she is "very curious about that area where the commodity meets the sublime." [14] On the one hand, the shoes are art because Levine is an artist and her work is discussed, conceptualized, and shown in all the venues that would lead one to conclude that her work is art. But on the other hand, it is not art because they are simply shoes sold at commodity shoe prices.

Through my work, I am exploring this peculiarity of commodity versus fine art object. For example, I have fabricated a concrete cinderblock that is virtually indistinguishable from any other commercially available cinderblock. However, my block is art. It will be displayed in an art

gallery. I am an artist. I made the block with my hands. I have conceptualized it as art. Thus, it is art. However, in its form, it remains a mere cinderblock. Until this point, I have dealt with issues of production. I have produced an apparent commodity. However, the full scope of the commodity is not realized until the commodity's existence moves from production to consumption.

Therefore, I decided to purchase my own handmade cinderblock from the corporate hardware/building supply store, Home Depot. The cashier found the block in the computer catalog and sold me my own cinderblock for $2.13. She even gave me a receipt detailing the cinderblock's apparent monetary value as commodity. The cinderblock would not be thought of anything more valuable until I begin to speak about it as having a higher monetary value because it is a fine art object. In the contemporary era, Jean Baudrillard "emphasized consumption over production as the key economic and social activity, and he treated it as a form of labor that utilized neither tools nor objects but rather signs, which he argued "simulated" objects to create a "hyperreal" social order." [15] As a result, economics began to fall under the scope of semiotics, or the philosophy of signs. "The production, exchange, and consumption of commodities were no longer a science of abstract value measured as price, but had become a signifying practice no more rational or stable than art." [16] It is through the ideas of Jean Baudrillard and the understanding of signs that allows my cinderblock to exist as both commodity and fine art object. The receipt itself acts as sign, proof, and even corporate validation that my object is a cinderblock and a commodity. The next step, placing the block in an art gallery on a white pedestal with focused lighting, signifies the cinderblock's fine art status.

Fine art is one form of commodity in a wider field of cultural commodity production and consumption. [17] This quandary presented by the commoditized art object again raises the issue of how value is determined. Does the cinderblock's worth exist within the uniqueness of the labor used to create it? Does it simply reinforce itself as a cinderblock that could potentially be used as a

building material? Does its value come from the conceptualization that is possible when viewing this work as an art object within a particular location or context? Does an object always retain the original idea of itself regardless of context? Finally, the issue remains: Can meanings and ideas contained within particular objects accrue additional monetary value beyond the initial monetary value of the materials/functionality of the given object? [18]

NOTES

1. Joseph Leo Koerner and Lisbit Rausing, "Value," *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 425-426.
2. George Cooper, *The Origin of Financial Crises: Central Banks, Credit Bubbles and the Efficient Market Fallacy*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 5.
3. Paul A. Samuelson, *Economics: An Introductory Analysis*, 4th Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), 39.
4. Cooper, 7.
5. Koerner and Rausing, 427.
6. Paul Wood, "Commodity," *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 402.
7. Wood, 401.
8. Wood, 402.
9. Wood, 401-402
10. Martha Buskirk, "Interviews with Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson," *October, vol. 70, The Duchamp Effect* (August 1994): 99.
11. Wood, 384.
12. Wood, 388-389.
13. Wood, 388.
14. Buskirk, 100.
15. Koerner and Rausing, 430.
16. Koerner and Rausing, 431.
17. Wood, 404.
18. Wood, 404.

7

CRITICAL THINKING, COMEDY, AND CONVERSATION

I try to make art that celebrates doubt and uncertainty, which provokes answers but doesn't give them. Which withholds absolute meaning by incorporating parasite meanings. Which suspends perpetually dispatching you toward interpretation, urging you beyond dogmatism, beyond doctrine, beyond ideology, beyond authority.
- Sherrie Levine

"…things that you want to change in the world have to start inside yourself. You can't just acquiesce. You can't be at the mall, with a fannypack on, scratching your nuts, buying sneakers with lights in them. You have to be thinking. You have to be resisting. You have to be talking."
- George Carlin

I have written at length on the importance of concept in artwork. It is the most important, overriding issue emanating from my objects. However, I have not specifically defined my concept. Essentially, the idea of my work is to create objects that evoke questions and engage critical thought. In discussing his comedic goals, George Carlin has stated, "I never set out to do that [make people think]. Sometimes interviewers will ask me, do you like to make people think with your shows? I say, no, I like them to know I'm thinking. Then I like to show them that. And they take and do what they want." [1] Although an individual can not be forced to think, perhaps the mind of an inquisitive viewer can be engaged by letting him know that someone else is thinking.

Rather than directly state all the questions that I hope my objects present, I prefer to address these questions indirectly through the conversations that have resulted from the creation of my banal objects. From these transcribed dialogues, the issues and the resulting questions can be inferred. During the course of creating this body of work, I have engaged in several conversations concerning the objects that I have chosen to create. These commodities I recreate produce conversations that would not occur if my commodities remained commodities rather than becoming works of art. For example, the following dialogue resulted from the creation of plastic bowls:

> "You're an artist, too? What kind of stuff do you do?"
> "Well, I'm currently making plastic bowls--kinda like Tupperware."

"That's great. Yeah, you could definitely sell something like that. You should make them all kinds of interesting and unique shapes. You know: your own artistic take on Tupperware."

"Yeah, but that's not exactly what I'm doing."

"But seriously, people could really get into something like that. It could be a good way to sell some work."

"Maybe. It'd be difficult competing with industry in the disposable plastic food container market, though."

"Well, yours would be different: decorative and artistic."

"But that's not what I'm doing. I'm just making regular, common place Tupperware."

"So just regular Tupperware, huh? That's it?"

"Yeah. That's it."

Even when confronted and accepted as an artist, the idea of an artist as commodity maker still exists and is expected by the viewer. Even when I down play visual aesthetics, it is still expected that the artist is a purveyor of aesthetic visual experience. As evident by the conversation below, artists are not expected to make mundane functional objects.

"Did you cast a brake disc?"

"Yes."

"That's just fucking goofy."

"I know, right?"

"Yeah, I mean, brake discs are usually what we melt down to make art. There's enough of them already and they're hard enough to melt down as is. And you're just making more of them?"

"Yeah."

A level of absurdity and comedy exists within the objects I create. The conversations and dialogues associated with each object highlight the comedic nature of these forms. In the end, my mode of object making and artistic expression are silly activities. Comedy is a vital part of my work. George Carlin has stated, "…laughter is a moment when we are completely ourselves. It's that disarming moment, or disarmed moment, when something strikes us, and we laugh without even knowing it, trying it, or being able to prevent it. It just happens. No one is more himself than the moment when he's laughing at a joke. It's at those moments that people's defenses go down, and that's when you can slip in a good idea." [2] I agree with his sentiment. I think that comedy is a

great method to open someone up to an important idea. Just below the surface of my work, following the initial comedic moment, is a poignant issue of seriousness.

My work reflects our society and contemporary art. It recognizes how silly meaningless consumption and art has become. To quote Carlin again: "Comedy is grievances. It's a recitation of grievances—whether they're inconsequential, superficial—like "my wife shops too much," or "kids today," all those old-fashioned themes—or, if it's deeper, and somewhat more thoughtful, about social imbalance and inequities, and the folly of human behavior. It's usually a complaint. So I think in some of that complaint is a sense of wanting more balance, more fairness, and I guess that can translate to justice." [3] This is the pursuit of my work. Get beyond the readymade, beyond the pretense of visual aesthetics, laborious art making, and craftsmanship. Get to the concept and the serious issues behind the object of silliness and absurdity. An object is just an object at the end of the day unless it can spark a thought beyond itself.

NOTES

1. David Jay Brown, "Napalm, Silly Putty, and Human Nature: An Interview with George Carlin," *Conversations on the Edge of the Apocalypse*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 192.
2. Brown, 192.
3. Brown, 189-190.

Figure 1. *Cinderblock*

Figure 2. *Cinderblock and Receipt*

Figure 3. *Cinderblock, Receipt, Video, Dialogues Installation*

Figure 4. *Cinderblock Video Still*

Figure 5. *Bookcase*

Figure 6. *But It Still Looks Like a Brake Disc*

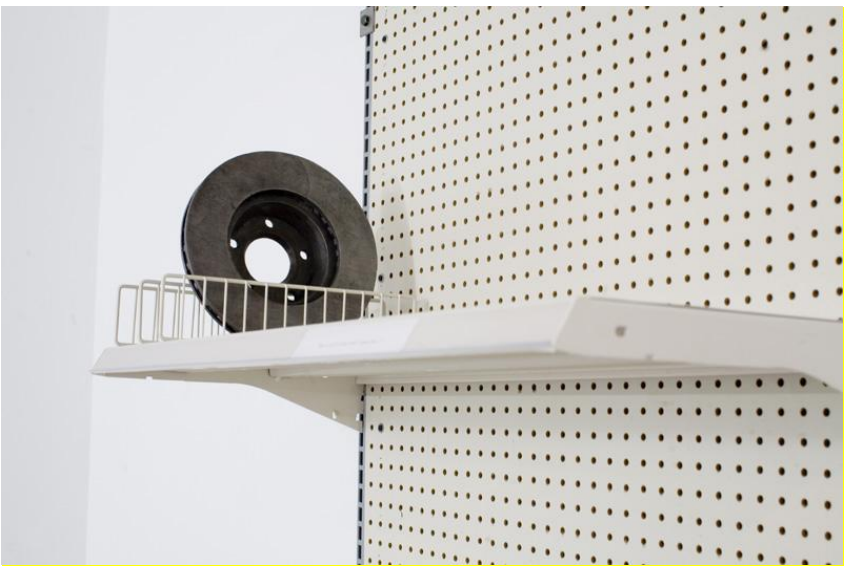
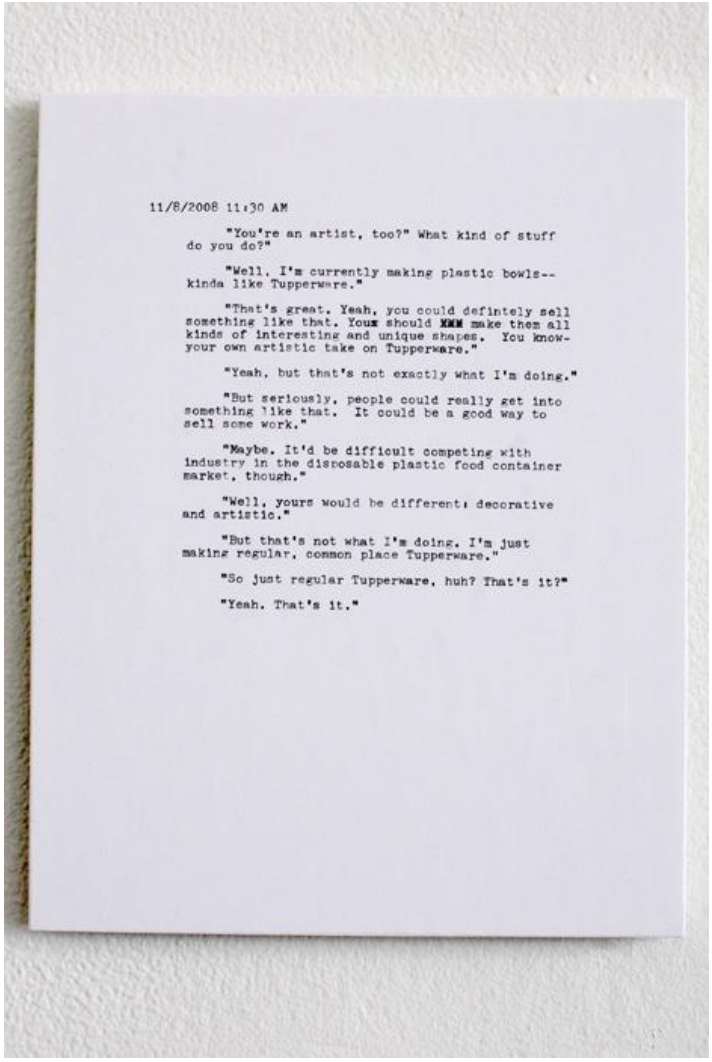


Figure 7. *But It Still Looks Like a Brake Disc (Detail)*

Figure 8. *Plastic Vacuum Forming Machine*

Figure 9. *Plasticware Trial and Error*



11/8/2008 11:30 AM

"You're an artist, too?" What kind of stuff do you do?"

"Well, I'm currently making plastic bowls--kinda like Tupperware."

"That's great. Yeah, you could defintely sell something like that. Youx should XXX make them all kinds of interesting and unique shapes. You know-your own artistic take on Tupperware."

"Yeah, but that's not exactly what I'm doing."

"But seriously, people could really get into something like that. It could be a good way to sell some work."

"Maybe. It'd be difficult competing with industry in the disposable plastic food container market, though."

"Well, yours would be different; decorative and artistic."

"But that's not what I'm doing. I'm just making regular, common place Tupperware."

"So just regular Tupperware, huh? That's it?"

"Yeah. That's it."

Figure 10. Plasticware Dialogue

REFERENCES

Barrett, David. "Louise Lawler: Monika Spruth & Philomene Magers, London." *Art Monthly, no. 313 (*February 2008): 37-38.

Baudrillard, Jean. "Contemporary Art: Art Contemporary with Itself." *The Jean Baudrillard Reader,* ed. Steve Redhead. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

Brown, David Jay. "Napalm, Silly Putty, and Human Nature: An Interview with George Carlin." *Conversations on the Edge of the Apocalypse.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Buskirk, Martha. "Interviews with Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson." *October, vol. 70, The Duchamp Effect* (August 1994): 99.

Cabanne, Pierre. *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1971.

Cooper, George. *The Origin of Financial Crises: Central Banks, Credit Bubbles and the Efficient Market Fallacy*. New York: Vintage Books, 2008.

Danto, Arthur C. "Aesthetics and Art Criticism." *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*. New York: Noonday Press, 1994.

Danto, Arthur C. "Banality and Celebration: The Art of Jeff Koons." *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Danto, Arthur C. "Fine Art and Functional Objects." *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*. New York: Noonday Press, 1994.

Danto, Arthur C. "Furniture as Art." *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*. New York: Noonday Press, 1994.

Danto, Arthur C. "Martin Puryear, or the Quandaries of Craftsmanship." *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*. New York: Noonday Press, 1994.

De Duve, Thierry. "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism." trans. Rosalind Krauss. *October, vol. 70, The Duchamp Effect* (August 1994): 63.

George Carlin – Life is Worth Losing, DVD, Directed by Rocco Urbisci, MPI Home Video, 2005.

Koerner, Joseph Leo and Lisbit Rausing. "Value." *Critical Terms for Art History*. ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Kosuth, Joseph. "Art after Philosophy." *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991.

Lewitt, Sol. “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art.” *Artforum, no. 10* (June 1967): 79.

Nelson, Robert S. “Appropriation.” *Critical Terms for Art History*. ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Press, Howard. “Marxism and Aesthetic Man,” *The New Art: Revised*, ed. Gregory Battcock. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973.

Samuelson, Paul A. *Economics: An Introductory Analysis, 4th Edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958.

Shiff, Richard. “Originality.” *Critical Terms for Art History*. ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History: Volume Two*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 2002.

Weintraub, Linda. “Haim Steinbach: Shopping.” *Art on the Edge and Over*. Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, 1996.

Weintraub, Linda. “Joseph Beuys: Political Reformation.” *Art on the Edge and Over*. Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, 1996.

Weintraub, Linda. “Sherrie Levine: Unoriginality.” *Art on the Edge and Over*. Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, 1996.

Wood, Paul. “Commodity.” *Critical Terms for Art History*. ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.