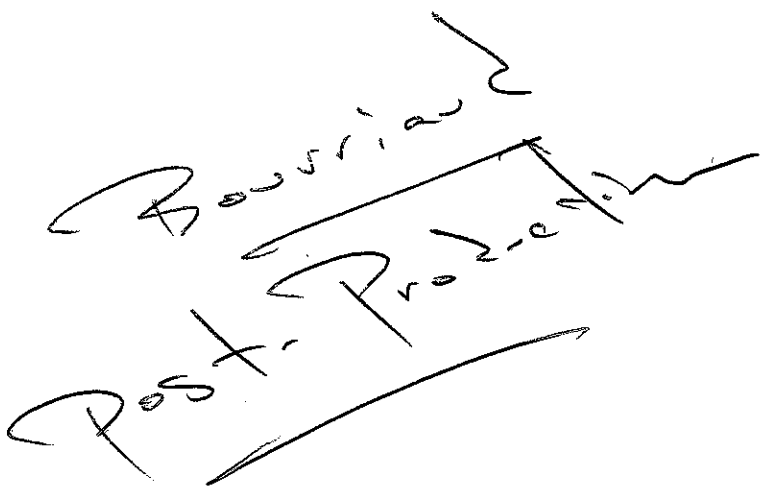

THE USE OF OBJECTS

The difference between artists who produce works based on objects already produced and those who operate ex nihilo is one that Karl Marx observes in *German Ideology:* there is a difference, he says, between natural tools of production (e.g., working the earth) and tools of production created by civilization. In the first case, Marx argues, individuals are subordinate to nature. In the second, they are dealing with a "product of labor," that is, *capital,* a mixture of accumulated labor and tools of production. These are only held together by exchange, an interhuman transaction embodied by a third term, money. The art of the twentieth century developed according to a similar schema: the industrial revolution made its effects felt, but with some delay. When Marcel Duchamp exhibited a bottle rack in 1914 and used a mass-produced object as a "tool of production," he brought the capitalist process of production (working on the basis of *accumulated labor*) into the sphere of art, while at the same time indexing the role of the artist to the world of exchange: he suddenly found kinship with the merchant, content to move products from one place to another. Duchamp started from the principle that consumption was also a mode of production, as did Marx, who writes in his introduction to *Critique of Political Economy* that "consumption is simultaneously also production, just as in nature the production of a plant involves the consumption of elemental forces and chemical materials." Marx adds that "man produces his own body, e.g., through feeding, one form of consumption." A product only becomes a real product in consumption; as Marx goes on to say, "a dress becomes really a dress only by being worn, a house which is uninhabited is indeed not really a house."[01] Because consumption creates the need for new production, consumption is both its motor and motive. This is the primary virtue of the readymade: establishing an equivalence between choosing and fabricating, consuming and producing – which is

01 KARL MARX, *A CONTRIBUTION TO THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY,* TRANS. S.W. RYAZANSKAYA, ED. MAURICE DOBB (NEW YORK: INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS, 1970), PP. 195-96.

difficult to accept in a world governed by the Christian ideology of effort ("working by the sweat of your brow") or that of the worker-hero (Stakhanovism).

In *The Practice of Everyday Life,* the astonishing structuralist Michel de Certeau examines the hidden movements beneath the surface of the Production-Consumption pair, showing that far from being purely passive, the consumer engages in a set of processes comparable to an almost clandestine, "silent" production.[02] To use an object is necessarily to interpret it. To use a product is to betray its concept. To read, to view, to envision a work is to know how to divert it: use is an act of micropirating that constitutes postproduction. We never read a book the way its author would like us to. By using television, books, or records, the user of culture deploys a rhetoric of practices and "ruses" that has to do with enunciation and therefore with language whose figures and codes may be catalogued.

Starting with the language imposed upon us (the *system* of production), we construct our own sentences (*acts* of everyday life), thereby reappropriating for ourselves, through these clandestine microbricolages, the last word in the productive chain. Production thus becomes a lexicon of a practice, which is to say, the intermediary material from which new utterances can be articulated, instead of representing the end result of anything. What matters is what we make of the elements placed at our disposal. We are tenants of culture: society is a text whose law is production, a law that so-called passive users divert from within, through the practices of postproduction. Each artwork, de Certeau suggests, is inhabitable in the manner of a rented apartment. By listening to music or reading a book, we produce new material, we become producers. And each day we benefit

02 SEE MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE,* TRANS. STEVEN RENDELL (BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1984).

from more ways in which to organize this production: remote controls, VCRs, computers, MP3s, tools that allow us to select, reconstruct, and edit. Postproduction artists are agents of this evolution, the specialized workers of cultural reappropriation.

THE USE OF THE PRODUCT FROM MARCEL DUCHAMP TO JEFF KOONS

Appropriation is indeed the first stage of postproduction: the issue is no longer to fabricate an object, but to choose one among those that exist and to use or modify these according to a specific intention. Marcel Broodthaers said that "since Duchamp, the artist is the author of a definition" which is substituted for that of the objects he or she has chosen. The history of appropriation (which remains to be written) is nevertheless not the topic of this chapter; only a few of its figures, useful to the comprehension of the most recent art, will be mentioned here. If the process of appropriation has its roots in history, its narrative here will begin with the readymade, which represents its first conceptualized manifestation, considered in relation to the history of art. When Duchamp exhibits a manufactured object (a bottle rack, a urinal, a snow shovel) as a work of the mind, he shifts the problematic of the "creative process," emphasizing the artist's gaze brought to bear on an object instead of manual skill. He asserts that the act of choosing is enough to establish the artistic process, just as the act of fabricating, painting, or sculpting does: to give a new idea to an object is already production. Duchamp thereby completes the definition of the term *creation:* to create is to insert an object into a new scenario, to consider it a character in a narrative.

The main difference between European New Realism and American Pop resides in the nature of the gaze brought to bear on consumption. Arman, César, and Daniel Spoerri seem fascinated by the act of consumption itself, relics of which they exhibit. For them, consumption is truly an abstract phenomenon, a myth whose invisible subject seems

irreducible to any representation. Conversely, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, and James Rosenquist bring their gaze to bear on the purchase, on the visual impetus that propels an individual to acquire a product: their goal is less to document a sociological phenomenon than to exploit new iconographic material. They investigate, above all, advertising and its mechanics of visual frontality, while the Europeans, further removed, explore the world of consumption through the filter of the great organic metaphor and favor the use value of things over their exchange value. The New Realists are more interested in the impersonal and collective use of forms than in the individual use of these forms, as the works of "poster artists" Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé admirably show: the city itself is the anonymous and multiple author of the images they collect and exhibit as artworks. No one consumes, things are consumed. Spoerri demonstrates the poetry of table scraps, Arman that of trash cans and supplies; César exhibits a crushed, unusable automobile, at the end of its destiny as a vehicle. Apart from Martial Raysse, the most "American" of the Europeans, the concern is still to show the end result of the process of consumption, which others have practiced. The New Realists have thus invented a sort of postproduction squared: their subject is certainly consumption, but a represented consumption, carried out in an abstract and generally anonymous way, whereas Pop explores the visual conditioning (advertising, packaging) that accompanies mass consumption. By salvaging already used objects, products that have come to the end of their functional life, the New Realists can be seen as the first landscape painters of consumption, the authors of the first still lifes of industrial society.

With Pop art, the notion of consumption constituted an abstract theme linked to mass production. It took on concrete value in the early eighties, when it was attached to individual desires. The artists who lay claim to Simulationism considered the work of art to be an "absolute commodity" and creation a mere substitute for the act of consuming.

I buy, therefore I am, as Barbara Kruger wrote. The object was shown from the angle of the compulsion to buy, from the angle of desire, midway between the inaccessible and the available. Such is the task of marketing, which is the true subject of Simulationist works. Haim Steinbach thus arranged mass-produced objects or antiques on minimal and monochromatic shelves. Sherrie Levine exhibited exact copies of works by Miró, Walker Evans and Degas. Jeff Koons displayed advertisements, salvaged kitsch icons, and floated basketballs weightlessly in immaculate containers. Ashley Bickerton produced a self-portrait composed of the logos of products he used in daily life.

Among the Simulationists, the work resulted from a contract stipulating the equal importance of the consumer and the artist/purveyor. Koons used objects as convectors of desire: "In the system I was brought up in – the Western, capitalist system – one receives objects as rewards for labour and achievement. ... And once these objects have been accumulated, they work as support mechanisms for the individual: to define the personality of the self, to fulfill desires and express them."[03] Koons, Levine, and Steinbach present themselves as veritable intermediaries, *brokers of desire* whose works represent simple simulacra, images born of a market study more than of some sort of "inner need," a value considered outmoded. The ordinary object of consumption is doubled by another object, this one purely virtual, designating an inaccessible state, a lack (e.g., Jeff Koons). The artist consumes the world in place of the viewer, and for him. He arranges objects in glass cases that neutralize the notion of use in favor of a sort of interrupted exchange, in which the moment of *presentation* is made sacred. Through the generic structure of the shelf, Haim Steinbach emphasizes its predominance in our mental

03 JEFF KOONS, FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH GIANCARLO POLITI IN *FLASH ART,* NO. 132, FEBRUARY-MARCH 1987, QUOTED BY ANN GOLDSTEIN IN *A FOREST OF SIGNS: ART IN THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION,* ED. CATHERINE GUDIS (LA: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND CAMBRIDGE, MA: THE MIT PRESS, 1989), P. 39.

universe: we only look at what is well-presented; we only desire what is desired by others. The objects he displays on his wood and Formica shelves "are bought or taken, placed, matched, and compared. They are moveable, arranged in a particular way, and when they get packed they are taken apart again, and they are as permanent as objects are when you buy them in a store." The subject of his work is what happens in any exchange.

THE FLEA MARKET: THE DOMINANT ART FORM OF THE NINETIES

As Liam Gillick explains, "in the eighties, a large part of artistic production seemed to mean that artists went shopping in the right shops. Now, it seems as though new artists have gone shopping, too, but in unsuitable shops, in all sorts of shops."[04] The passage from the eighties to the nineties might be represented by the juxtaposition of two photographs: one of a shop window, another of a flea market or airport shopping mall. From Jeff Koons to Rirkrit Tiravanija, from Haim Steinbach to Jason Rhoades, one formal system has been substituted for another: since the early nineties, the dominant visual model is closer to the open-air market, the bazaar, the souk, a temporary and nomadic gathering of precarious materials and products of various provenances. Recycling (a method) and chaotic arrangement (an aesthetic) have supplanted shopping, store windows, and shelving in the role of formal matrices.

Why has the market become the omnipresent referent for contemporary artistic practices? First, it represents a collective form, a disordered, proliferating and endlessly renewed conglomeration that does not depend on the command of a single author: a market is not designed, it is a unitary structure composed of multiple individual signs. Secondly, this form (in the case of the flea market) is the locus

04 SEE LIAM GILLICK IN *NO MAN'S TIME,* EXH. CAT. (NICE: CNAC VILLA ARSON, 1991).

of a reorganization of past production. Finally, it embodies and makes material the flows and relationships that have tended toward disembodiment with the appearance of online shopping.

A flea market, then, is a place where products of multiple provenances converge, waiting for new uses. An old sewing machine can become a kitchen table, an advertising poster from the seventies can serve to decorate a living room. Here, past production is recycled and switches direction. In an involuntary homage to Marcel Duchamp, an object is given a new idea. An object once used in conformance with the concept for which it was produced now finds new potential uses in the stalls of the flea market.

Dan Cameron used Claude Lévi-Strauss's opposition between "the raw and the cooked" as the title for an exhibition he curated: it included artists who transformed materials and made them unrecognizable (the cooked), and artists who preserved the singular aspect of these materials (the raw). The market-form is the quintessential place for this rawness: an installation by Jason Rhoades, for example, is presented as a unitary composition made of objects, each of which retains its expressive autonomy, in the manner of paintings by Arcimboldo. Formally, Rhoades's work is quite similar to Rirkrit Tiravanija's. *Untitled (Peace Sells),* which Tiravanija made in 1999, is an exuberant display of disparate elements that clearly testifies to a resistance to unifying the diverse, perceptible in all his work. But Tiravanija organizes the multiple elements that make up his installations so as to underscore their use value, while Rhoades presents objects that seem endowed with an autonomous logic, quasi-indifferent to the human. We can see one or more guiding lines, structures imbricated within one another, but the atoms brought together by the artist do not blend completely into an organic whole. Each object seems to resist a formal unity, forming subsets that resist projection into a vaster whole and that at times are transplanted from one

structure to another. The domain of forms that Rhoades is referencing, then, evokes the heterogeneity of stalls in a market and the meandering that implies: "... it's about relationships to people, like me to my dad, or tomatoes to squash, beans to weeds, and weeds to corn, corn to the ground and the ground to the extension cords."[05] As explicit references to the open markets of the artist's early days in California, his installations conjure an alarming image of a world with no possible center, collapsing on all sides beneath the weight of production and the practical impossibility of recycling. In visiting them, one senses that the task of art is no longer to propose an artificial synthesis of heterogeneous elements but to generate "critical mass" through which the familial structure of the nearby market metamorphoses into a vast warehouse for merchandise sold online, a monstrous city of detritus. His works are composed of materials and tools, but on an outsize scale: "piles of pipes, piles of clamps, piles of paper, piles of fabric, all these industrial quantities of things ..."[06] Rhoades adapts the provincial junk fair to the dimensions of Los Angeles, through the experience of driving a car. When asked to explain the evolution of his piece *Perfect World,* he replies: "The really big change in the new work is the car." Driving in his Chevrolet Caprice, he was "in and out of [his] head, and in and out of reality," while the acquisition of a Ferrari modified his relationship to the city and to his work: "Driving between the studio and between various places, I am physically driving, it's a great energy, but it's not this daydream wandering head thing like before."[07] The space of the work is urban space, traversed at a certain speed: the objects that endure are therefore necessarily enormous or reduced to the size of the car's interior, which takes on the role of an optical tool allowing one to select forms.

05 JASON RHOADES, *PERFECT WORLD,* EXH. CAT. (COLOGNE: OKTAGON/DEICHTORHALLEN HAMBURG, 2000), P. 15.

06 IBID., P. 22.

07 IBID., P. 53.

Thomas Hirschhorn's work relies not on spaces of exchange but places where the individual loses contact with the social and becomes embedded in an abstract background: an international airport, a department store's windows, a company's headquarters, and so on. In his installations, sheets of aluminum foil or plastic are wrapped around vague everyday forms which, made uniform in this way, are projected into monstrous, proliferating, tentacle-like form-networks. Yet this work relates to the market-form insofar as it introduces elements of resistance and information (political tracts, articles cut out of newspapers, television sets, media images) into places typical of the globalized economy. Visitors who move through Hirschhorn's environments uneasily traverse an abstract, woolly, and chaotic organism. They can identify the objects they encounter – newspapers, vehicles, ordinary objects – but in the form of sticky specters, as if a computer virus had ravaged the spectacle of the world and replaced it with a genetically modified substitute. These ordinary products are presented in a larval state, like so many interconnected matrices in a capillary network leading nowhere, which in itself is a commentary on the economy. A similar malaise surrounds the installations of George Adeagbo, who presents an image of the African economy of recycling through a maze of old record covers, scrap items, and newspaper clippings, for which personal notes, analogous to a private journal, act as captions, an irruption of human consciousness into the misery of display.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the term "market" moved away from its physical referent and began to designate the abstract process of buying and selling. In the bazaar, economist Michel Henochsberg explains, "transaction goes beyond the dry and reductive simplification in which modernity rigs it," assuming its original status as a negotiation between two people. Commerce is above all a form of human relations, indeed, a pretext destined to produce a relationship. Any transaction may be defined as "a successful encounter of histories,

affinities, wishes, constraints, habits, threats, skins, tensions."[08]

Art tends to give shape and weight to the most invisible processes. When entire sections of our existence spiral into abstraction as a result of economic globalization, when the basic functions of our daily lives are slowly transformed into products of consumption (including human relations, which are becoming a full-fledged industrial concern), it seems highly logical that artists might seek to *rematerialize* these functions and processes, to give shape to what is disappearing before our eyes. Not as objects, which would be to fall into the trap of reification, but as mediums of experience: by striving to shatter the logic of the spectacle, art restores the world to us as an experience to be lived. Since the economic system gradually deprives us of this experience, modes of representation must be invented for a reality that is becoming more abstract each day. A series of paintings by Sarah Morris that depicts the facades of multinational corporate headquarters in the style of geometric abstraction gives a physical place to brands that appear to be purely immaterial. By the same logic, Miltos Manetas's paintings take as subjects the Internet and the power of computers, but use the features of physical objects situated in a domestic interior to allow us access to them. The current success of the market as a formal matrix among contemporary artists has to do with a desire to make commercial relations concrete once again, relations that the postmodern economy tends to make immaterial. And yet this immateriality itself is a fiction, Henochsberg suggests, insofar as what seems most abstract to us – high prices for raw materials or energy, say – are in reality the object of arbitrary negotiations.

The work of art may thus consist of a formal arrangement that generates relationships between people, or be born of a social process; I have described this phenomenon as "relational aesthetics," whose main feature is to consider interhuman exchange an aesthetic object in and of itself.

With *Everything NT$20 (Chaos minimal),* 2000, Surasi Kusolwong heaped thousands of brightly-colored objects onto rectangular shelves with monochromatic surfaces. The objects – T-shirts, plastic gadgets, baskets, toys, cooking utensils, and so on – were produced in his country of origin, Thailand. The colorful piles gradually diminished, like Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "stacks," as visitors of the exhibition carried away the objects for a small sum; the money was placed in large transparent smoked-glass urns that explicitly evoked Robert Morris's sculptures from the sixties. What Kusolwong's arrangement clearly depicted was the world of transaction: the dissemination of multicolored products in the exhibition space and the gradual filling of containers by coins and bills provided a concrete image of commercial exchange. When Jens Haaning organized a store in Fribourg featuring products imported from France at prices clearly lower than those charged in Switzerland, he questioned the paradoxes of a falsely "global" economy and assigned the artist the role of smuggler.

08 MICHEL HENOCHSBERG, *NOUS NOUS SENTIONS COMME UNE SALE ESPÈCE: SUR LE COMMERCE ET L'ÉCONOMIE* (PARIS: DENOËL, 1999), P. 239.