

The Stuff Commodities Are Made Of

Since Heidegger we tend to expect from art to present an ontological question. Namely, we expect that art won't only tell the truth, but that it will do so by posing a question and open the world to question. This was an almost unattainable task to begin with, and it was made even more difficult to reach by the bleak threat that the economy poses to art - the irrefutable suspicion that art is a commodity and as such it is based on a lie. If something succeeds as art, no matter what its content and regardless of its efforts not to become a commodity - indeed a commodity it will be. From this logic, it is exactly critical art that might seem the emblematic example for the deceit of the commodity.¹ With the recognition that the commodity closes in on the world, we realize that what might present itself as the opposite of the commodity can become an extremely expensive commodity in itself. Therefore, too often, the task of opening the world to question is replaced with an impossible task, as with Adorno and Horkheimer for whom the role of art is to negate the world. And as the commodity cannot be negated, art becomes impossible in the world of the commodity. It is hard to refute such solid inferences. But we can try to turn this conclusion on its head. The claim "art is impossible" should not mean that we cannot make art, but rather that art should be an act of the impossible.

We should consider Elisheva Levy's exhibition as presenting us with exactly this kind of impossible yet necessary art; Impossible as a way

¹ Conceptual art is the most apparent example for this depressing process. To begin with, it aimed not to be a commodity - the idea being that a concept which its realization in material is unnecessary cannot be traded. But of course today also conceptual art can be commoditized. What is traded are the rights to realize the object. In this way conceptual art is not just another commodity, but the commodity. After all, with brands what is bought and sold is the right for temporary use of that which cannot be traded. When we buy a can of Coke, we are not buying the symbol "Coca Cola" but the right for one-time usage of it is can.

to pose an ontological question about the world of the commodity, and necessary in the exact same sense. The exhibition presents the commodity as what it must and yet cannot be. It would be a mistake to think that the commodity eliminates art's ability to pose an ontological question. The commodity covers the world, and this is exactly how it enables us to open the world and our presence in it to question. Elisheva's exhibition presents another way to approach this question: the commodity demands an ontological question because its existence is put on hold, suspended between a thing and a promise for a thing. Where is the commodity **really**? Where can we observe it as it is? Before buying it or after buying it? In the shopping mall or at home? In our immediate surrounding or on TV? What is it **really**: the food we eat or the images of food around us?

On top of the villa we see a big cigarette pack standing as an advertisement for cigarettes. At first sight, this seems like a critique of the world of commodities and its all encompassing propaganda, even inside our homes (actually, mainly inside our homes). This is of course true, but it is only part of the story. It is more important to think of all this from the perspective of the object. From this side, the bombardment of advertisements on billboards is part of the desperate attempt of the thing to be an actual thing. Depicting an advertisement for cigarettes of all things, hanging on top of a house made from paper, brings a sense of urgency and danger to the notion of the commodity and its form of existence. People who live in glasshouses shouldn't throw stones and people who live in paper houses shouldn't smoke, even if a huge cigarette pack is hovering over their home. This is how the commodity exists today, as a form of restraint, sometimes this restraint even poses a threat. This is how we can explain the way our culture admires thin people while it overflows with endless images of food - photos, texts and never ending talk of food. These are all forms of restraint from eating that echo more than anything the threat that is food.

In fact, it is quite strange that manufacturers did not yet apply the practice that Elisheva proposes - using the commodity as an advertising space for another commodity: advertise coffee on milk boxes or advertise cigarettes on beer bottles. Faced with the tremendous ingenuity of creating ever more advertising space, this self-restraint demands an explanation. It might be that it reflects the fear from getting too close to the core of consumer society. Already at the beginning of the twentieth century Simmel recognized that the pleasure provided by things is at most ephemeral and temporary. Of course in the past century since, humanity did not give up on the hope to enjoy the pleasure offered by things. On the contrary, Simmel's insight is unveiled by the ongoing and ever intensifying flow of things. Advertising on the packages of products, one commodity pointing already to the next commodity, is therefore a required step, a necessary-impossible step.

Material

The exhibition deals with material, and more precisely it deals with the material commodities are made of. It holds some direct answers to this question. An immediate first answer would be that commodities are made of hard and unnecessary work. We are overtaken immediately by the charm of Elisheva's impeccable paper replicas of everyday commodities. Such hard and unnecessary work cannot but charm us. Yet, it also reveals an economic truth: commodities are made of hard and unnecessary labor. This is the only explanation why in a technologically advanced world where our needs could be met easily, we still work so hard to get commodities. The question why we still need to work so hard for commodities demands an in-depth analysis of the way our economy operates. We can credit the exhibition for aiming straight at the heart of the matter by making this its initial claim: commodities are made of hard and unnecessary work. Indeed, we can also claim: unnecessary work is needed, as technology advances and we continue working hard for commodities. Humanity of course will always need to invest work in the production of commodities. Even in the

Communist paradise builders will have to build houses. But if we think of something other than a house, say a commodity like Coca Cola, we will find it hard to explain the real reason why people are not getting it for free and instead having to work for it. Intellectual property makes for one of the reasons that stem from the fact that the Coca Cola Company has to make a profit. But this is just another way of saying that the work we are doing in order to buy Coca Cola is unnecessary work. The fact that we need to work for Coca Cola touches the scandalous core of capitalism.

And what if we will all get Coca Cola for free?

People will still drink Coca Cola - Maybe more, maybe less. What is certain is that it will no longer be the same Coca Cola. It will lack that discreet charm that makes it a Coke. The magic that makes the brand will dissolve. This is also the magic that attracts Elisheva to mundane commodities.

And this brings us to the second answer the exhibition gives to the question what are commodities made of. When Elisheva produces commodities from paper in a meticulous labor process, she discards, as much as she can, from their material presence. Not entirely so, as we are still left with paper - and this is exactly the thing here - but paper is the minimal material surface needed to carry the shape of the commodities and their image. We are taken by her objects because of the impossible paradoxical act they perform: an appearance that nevertheless exists as an object. Here also the relation to economy is direct. Elisheva's objects are as attractive as an Iphone or an Ipad: Apple's products are enchanting because they enabled us to touch a digitized image, they have made it into a thing, allowing us to touch something immaterial.

Therefore it would be a mistake to think of the exhibition in terms of optical illusion, fraud or deceit. An appearance turned into a thing is not an illusion of the commodity. On the contrary, it is the typical commodity today. Especially, if we take into account the

twentieth century's transformation into the brand economy. Naomi Klein defined it poignantly when she coined the term "divestment of the world of things." Along the second half of the twentieth century corporations discovered that manufacturing is less profitable and that marketing images is a much more lucrative business. Klein defines brands exactly as this shift between symbols and things. Modern advertising began with industrial production in order to define and make sense of the various commodities made by different manufacturers. But branding is something totally different: it is the understanding that the symbols and images that once described the commodity and depicted its qualities, are now part of the commodity itself.

This fundamental change surrounds us in our daily lives and therefore it might seem self-evident. But it would be true to claim that the fact that it surrounds us in our daily lives makes it to be anything but self-evident. The true meaning of this is that the world has changed in the most literal sense of the word. The things that surround us, the things we live with and the way we live with them - all this has changed. We still have stuff: shoes, cars, cloths. But from an economic perspective these things are appearances, material residues of something else, the economical thing - the brand.

Proof of this can be found in an philosophically enigmatic statement by Nike CEO, Phil Knight which Klein quotes: "for years we thought of ourselves as a production-oriented company, meaning we put all our emphasis on designing and manufacturing the product. But now we understand that the most important thing we do is market the product. We've come around to saying that Nike is a marketing-oriented company, and the product is our most important marketing tool." Although this quote contemplates things, in three sentences the thing itself disappears. The actual thing we buy is a marketing tool. But marketing of what then? A possible answer: the thing, a shoe for example, is a tool to sell what cannot be bought and sold, namely the symbol. It is common knowledge that brands have to do with symbols and images, with designing meaning and with lifestyle - all that marketing mumbo jumbo

we are so familiar with. But what is usually forgotten here is that an image, symbol or lifestyle cannot be sold. It is not that you cannot sell them because they are immaterial, but because they are not limited resources - they can be infinitely replicated. This is the true meaning of the product as a marketing tool. In order to sell an image, a symbol or lifestyle you need to attach them to a material object - the opposite of these things: a non symbolic, meaningless thing.

Elisheva's objects are not imitating the commodity. They are the commodity as it would have liked to be - an appearance that is nevertheless a thing; Appearance that has discarded most of its materiality and yet remained a thing. These objects are placed in a paper house, open from all sides, a house whose walls cannot delimit any determined space. This is a sign for the way economic change, and its invisible reasons, has changed the world in which we live in. The change in the way companies choose to profit has hollowed the world from within.

Shopping

Our secret desire is for things to be weightless. How else could we please our desire for so much stuff? In this sense the frustration of our consumerist desire expresses also the aspiration of manufacturers to get rid of the overbearing existence of objects. We would have loved to get rid of them but we can't. Again and again we find ourselves toiling on things that have appeared in the world as means to sell us symbols. The average consumer is familiar with this feeling: the things that looked so nice and attractive in the store become a depressing pile of stuff in our homes: now we need to cater to their materiality - to clean them, store them, move them around, sort them out, throw them away, keep them and then throw them away. This is one of the great paradoxes of our time: things look better in the store. Moreover, they are more true to themselves when displayed in the store. Maybe paper commodities could be a good practical

solution; a reasonable compromise between the desire of manufacturers for profit and the desire of consumers for things. Everybody wins: we can buy much more stuff when things will be reduced to their material minimum.

The phenomenon of shopping shows us how the desires of manufacturers for profit, and their new methods of making money, are expressed through the desires of consumers. The term "shopping" as opposed to "buying" is essential to distinguish two very different forms of pleasure from things. The meaning of shopping is that the pleasure from buying the thing is disconnected from the pleasure of owning it. It is easy to explain this when considering what marketing experts call "shopping experience." If we take this term seriously, we cannot avoid the conclusion that today, when we spend money buying things, we are paying for two different things: we pay for the thing, and we pay for buying the thing.

This would be the last proposal here for how to see Elisheva's exhibition. By making appearances of things in paper, we linger on these things as they are in actuality - as they are in the store; all his labor is invested in creating the thing so that it won't collapse into its depressing materiality.

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