UNCOMMON GOODS

GLOBAL DIMENSIONS OF THE READYMADE

BY JAIMEY HAMILTON FARIS

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Jaimey Hamilton Faris

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Preface

> *… [T]here remains … what happens to us and sweeps over us by the name of globalization, namely, the exponential growth of the globality (dare we say glomicity) of the market—of the circulation of everything in the form of commodity—and with it of the increasingly concentrated interdependence that ceaselessly weakens independencies and sovereignties [and also] … weakening an entire order of representations of belonging…*
>
> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 2007

It has been a productive challenge to write an introductory book on contemporary readymade practices that would appeal to a broad and critical audience. Despite its accruing history and heavily validated art historical pedigree, the readymade can still be mystifying to art viewers. I wanted to write a book that would address this—not by simply rehashing its history with new little twists, but by grappling with what I see as the very fundamental hurdle to understanding the readymade as a valid aesthetic form. That hurdle is simply this: As a commodity, an object is presented as transparent. It is what it is and has an apparently obvious function. Either buy it or don't. In an art frame, that same object is often met with non-comprehension, if not a deep suspicion toward the artist who is seen to be pulling one over on the audience by presenting it as "art." In other words, all a urinal salesman has to do is sell urinals. An artist who raises questions about the aesthetic condition of that urinal has a much harder task—both in the sense of explaining why the inquiry is necessary, and in the sense of engaging the aesthetic to speak of the political, social, and economic implications of that urinal's very existence.

Marcel Duchamp found this conundrum impossibly delicious, and deeply resonant with the technological age. He played the provocateur to great effect, even when he seemed to revert to the role of the traveling salesman (Marchand du Sel), who packed up his finely hand-crafted miniature readymade multiples in his green valise. The artists included in this book have endeavored to expand upon Duchamp's initial moves and pose even more pointed questions about the contemporary commodity in aesthetic form. I have endeavored to find an equally complex, and hopefully useful, guide to introducing their delicate maneuverings.

The aim of this book is to convince my readers that the gap between the easy understanding of a commodity and the difficulty of understanding a readymade has less to do with the hermeticism of the art world, and more to do with an insidious hermeticism perpetuated by capitalism itself: the cultivation of comprehensive ignorance about the ontological condition of the commodity–where it comes from, how it is produced, how it comes to be in the hands of a consumer, and eventually, an artist. The seeming obviousness of the commodity, not the orneriness of the artist, is really where the viewer's suspicion should be pointed.

com·mon (kmn) adj. Of or relating to the community as a whole; public: for the common good. Mutual. Widespread.
goods [gʊdz] pl. n. Possessions or personal property. Commodities that are tangible, usually movable.

Common goods. This is a funny and paradoxical term sometimes used to describe the nature of the commodities we use everyday. While they may seem mundane or widespread, they are actually not mutually held, or "commonly" shared materials at all. By definition, commodities uphold the idea of personal property, of individual selection and taste, one's distinguishing mark of personality from another. Jean-Luc Nancy argues that in their very prevalence, now in global dimensions, commodities have weakened our desire to share resources as a community, as well as our desire to represent our belonging together and to the world. In other words, why should we share in the "common good," when we can each have our own "common goods?"

uncommon [un'kmn] adj. Outside or beyond normal experience, conditions, etc.; unusual.
good [gud] adj. Virtuous, right, commendable.

Many current art practices appropriate and transform these "common goods" into forms, shapes, and attitudes that often expose their fundamental "uncommonness." Examples include Jason Rhoades's PeaRoeFoam; Yinka Shonibare's batik Victorian bustles; Cory Arcangel's endlessly looped *Super Mario Clouds*; Santiago Sierra's employment of Chechnyan refugees; Atelier Van Lieshout's Master-Slave mobile living units. In making commodities unusual, or beyond the normal frame of our experience, these artists allow us to gain perspective on recent historical transformations of the commodity world and the often radically undemocratic nature of their becoming. New artistic readymade forms put the paradoxes of our global economy and resources to the test, they allow us to ask: What are "goods" now anyway? Are they still tangible and material? How prevalent are they really? Who makes them and who consumes them, and do these people have any shared sense of relation or interconnection with each other?

In the 1930s, when Duchamp produced his first readymades (along with his fellow Dadas and Surrealists who were making collages and *objets trouvés*), I wonder if he could have imagined the current enchanting/nightmarish world of feline drinking fountains, collapsible shoe racks, and electronic snore-relief devices, hundreds of varieties of paper cups, plastic buckets, coffee makers and tires. Objects are now shipped, based on "economies of scale," via massive container ships to Africa, Micronesia, the southernmost tip of Peru, and Iceland. The difference between Duchamp's moment and this one is the pervasiveness of commodity production and distribution evident in shopping mall fashion in most cosmopolitan cities, in YouTube and Google's global reach, and in the relatively inexpensive price of an exotic getaway package.

The diversity of this material world has been met with a diversity of contemporary readymade approaches attempting to work through the problems and possibilities of assuming that the commodity form is a "common good." Through the aesthetic frame, the commodity experience becomes a more conscious, embodied, and particular encounter, allowing us, as viewers, some entry points into exploring a material's hidden histories, values, and relationships.

This book is the result of the contemporary readymade's success in piquing my curiosity as a viewer, historian, and cultural critic. My argument and method of analysis is meant to strategically demonstrate the kind of curiosity, research, and structural connections that I feel need to be more central to art viewing and criticism in general. What happens once art gives us entrée into contemplation and exploration? How does art engage in the becoming of political consciousness (and my own in particular)? As a privileged autonomous and quasi-fictional space, both contemporary art and art criticism often fall into the trap, despite its diverse political foundations, of being a bit too careful and judicious in making claims for its aesthetic, political, and even more importantly, ethical potential.

I believe that concretely subjective and rigorously historical analysis is one of the most powerful ways to reaffirm art's function beyond its luxury commodity status. As an individual trained in neo-Marxian, feminist, and material-visual studies, I want to continue a strong tradition of highlighting art's role in questioning and contesting values, exposing structures of power, and in this particular book, critiquing our current assumptions of private property, global business efficiency, and consumer individualism. My aim is to do this in the spirit of creative engagement with the paradoxes of the current commodity composition of the world, knowing full well that as much as I am critical of it, I am also part of it.

I take my inspiration from artists who have managed to look at the way we live our lives and relate to our material world with a refreshing and often humorous curiosity and grand historical perspective. If we have, in the course of human history, only recently invented a highly elaborate capitalist system for handling the resources of our world and our relationships with each other, then couldn't we imagine entirely different systems and new kinds of materialities?

Introduction

Materializing the Commodity Situation, *or* Toward the Affectual Readymade

The banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual […] How are we to speak of these common things, how to track them down, how to flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they are mired, how to give them meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what it is, who we are.

Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces*, 1974

It has been almost a century since Duchamp placed a store-bought urinal on a pedestal and titled it *Fountain*. He called this recontextualization of such a banal and obvious commodity, a "readymade." In reference to the standardization of mass-produced items available before a person even thought of needing it, *Fountain* obviated art's uneasy relationship to contemporary consumer life like nothing before it.

The gesture's efficacy had to do partly with the way it dealt with the ontological question of art in the modern era. Even a few decades before Duchamp's *Fountain*, mass production, reproducibility, and commodification posed serious questions for the nature of art and the position of the artist. Gustave Flaubert quipped in his satirical tract *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, "Art leads to the workhouse. What use is it since machines can make things better and quicker?" (1974: 294). Written in the 1870s and published in 1911, the statement captures a sense of art's self-doubt in the face of technological progress. Should it retrench or engage? What would be its new purpose? What would be its new relation to the commodity? In 1917, *Fountain* definitively engaged, opening up new onto-aesthetic strategies that challenged the perceptual acuity of viewers to relate art back to the materials of everyday life.

Ever since, Duchamp has been a salient reference point in the continual renewal of found object art. A dominant readymade lineage has emerged: Andy Warhol, Elaine Sturtevant, Jeff Koons, Sylvie Fleury, Damien Hirst, and Ai Weiwei. Each time one of these artists revisited the readymade gesture he or she created a new moment in which art's discursive and institutional construction, with attendant focus on authorship, craftsmanship, and value, was scrutinized. There are a number of excellent texts that have analyzed these practices and have explored the readymade as self-conscious art institutional critique: from Thierry de Duve's *Kant After Duchamp*, to Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon's *The Duchamp Effect*, to John Roberts's recent *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling after the Readymade*. But underneath these explorations of the ontological condition of art, there lingers a very important obverse question: How does the readymade address the ontological condition of

the commodity? How can art speak about a commodity's coming into being? This question was not so obviously addressed by Duchamp, and not explicitly taken up by the various authorities on the Duchamp effect. Yet, this has become a very marked concern for many contemporary artists using commodities.

Duchamp primarily engaged the histories and contexts of his chosen objects in circuitous and poetic ways. Counter to his usual assertion that he was indifferent to the object that ended up on the pedestal, his actual practice demonstrated a complex material and verbal play with things. The construction of his two famous perfume bottles, *Belle Haleine, Eau de Violette* (1921) and *50 cc air de Paris* (1919), for instance, both humorously commodified "essences." (The first was the essence of a fictional composite character of many powerful women in Duchamp's circle, personified as Rrose Selavy, and (…the other was the city of Paris.) Duchamp's material choices in these two pieces, especially the bottles and labels, can be read in relation to intricate meanings associated with his exploration of commodified desire in the age of industrialization. Each piece indicated a metaphysical (or 'pataphysical) commentary on modernization, but not necessarily a strong interest in making a larger statement about perfume as a commodity.

Duchamp once said that the readymade began as a "private affair," when in 1913, he attached a bicycle wheel to a stool as a "pleasure, something to have in my room … as one watches a fire in a fireplace" (Tompkins 1965). Like the perfume bottles, the *Bicycle Wheel* registered Duchamp's fascination with the mechanical onanism of modernization and its parallel crises of labor and masculinity in newly Taylorized manufacturing systems, as Helen Molesworth (1998) and Amelia Jones (1995) have each argued separately. That said, Duchamp situated the wheel and stool more clearly in terms of metaphorical, alliterative, and performative meaning than in terms of their economic materialist history.

By the end of the twentieth century, many artists have taken Duchamp's original gesture of "wresting" an object from the "dross" of its daily context, to use Perec's phrasing, and given it renewed importance. Their art clearly and unequivocally asks questions about the nature of the object as commodity: When is it defined as such, by whom, and by what process does it come into being? Especially since the nineties, the practice of incorporating commodities in art to address these questions has become ever more pervasive. Installation art has often used site-specific strategies to reconnect viewers to the history of exhibition spaces that were once factories. They also use an often aggressive accumulation of commodities in a variety of ways to highlight the problematic origins and transformations of raw material and labor into consumer goods. Relational art often uses the commodity as a tool to refocus a participant's habitude toward consumer and work environments and their own participation in affirming a commodity's importance. Multi-media art resounds with the remixed residue of global image consumption in ways that point to the fluidity between free and copyrighted digital information.

These activities do not discount the fact that there are artists interested in using mass-produced objects for other reasons. Some more clearly follow in Duchamp's footsteps. Some use readymades primarily as foils to the individually crafted art object. Some use

commodities solely for their formalistic qualities. There are any number of artists that employ commodities in ways that are compelling, but don't necessarily engage the viewer in understanding the importance of the commodity's ontological status. But there is also an obvious dominant strain of contemporary readymade artistic practices that *are* especially interested in what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has called the commodity's "social life."

This book argues that these particular practices have significantly moved the strategy of the readymade beyond its focus on the art-commodity situation (i.e. when an everyday object becomes "art"). More and more artists are interested in the ontology of commodities, or what I will call the material-commodity situation, (i.e. they use the art-commodity situation to more pointedly reference the moment in which materiality—whether it is an earthly substance, energy, or a person—becomes a commodity). In addition, this book asks: Why has this shift in emphasis from art-commodity to material-commodity happened and what is its importance?

To begin to answer this, we need to explore how readymades have changed in relation to the historical expansion of the international trade system since the post-war era, and even more radically since its liberalization and globalization at the end of the twentieth century. In Duchamp's era, consumer commodities were still typically concrete everyday items: bicycle wheels, coat racks, and snow shovels. Now, however, not only is there a more diverse array of durable and non-durable *stuff*, but there also exists globally produced and available prepackaged information, media, labor and services. The number of artists working with these particular types of materials in order to enact a political-aesthetic challenge to their rapid and overly naturalized emergence *as commodities* has dramatically expanded. Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe's purchase of the manga character Annlee, Santiago Sierra's hourly remuneration of migrant labors within the art gallery, and Superflex's development of a new soft drink, GUARANÁ POWER, for global distribution, are but a few examples explored in this book.

In shifting the focus to the question of the material-commodity situation, these artists "wrest" manga characters, laborers, and guaraná berries—as much as bicycle wheels—from their everyday contexts. They do so increasingly to draw attention to the new global dimensions of our contemporary consumer life and to explore how raw data, human energy, and the fruits of the Amazon become commoditized. Even more historically conscious of capitalism's fluid commodification processes than Duchamp, and already well aware that whatever they put in the art frame will be accepted as an art-commodity, these artists construct material-commodity situations *within that situation* to show how modern capitalist society presents itself as seductively standardized and predetermined. The convenience of the commercial world (especially in global urban centers) easily hides the amount of energy and real labor costs involved in manufacturing disposable goods. Indeed, most consumers have an abstracted and reckless relationship to the material of everyday consumption. Although many perceive this era as increasingly dematerialized or "virtual," typical consumer goods made with mined, spun, compressed, or molded materials still obviously populate the world. Even virtuality needs a

material-intensive infrastructure of microchips, computer screens, and millions of miles of fiber optic cable.

Uncommon Goods tries to make one fundamental historical point: the expansion of the readymade strategy, and its current attention to the ontology of the commodity, is proportionate to the ways in which the ethical dimensions of a commodity's becoming are increasingly hidden to global consumers. It would be unrealistic to expect to know everything about each particular commodity's social-economic matrix (how its materials were harvested, how much the laborers who processed it were paid, et cetera). But it is also very clear that the current global corporate structure of vast and complex webs of production, distribution, and consumption (what economists call commodity chains), creates a systematic deferment of information, wealth, and responsibility that obscures and inhibits ethical awareness.

Within this historical situation, it appears that artists have become fascinated with making material-commodity situations more visible. That is, they have developed ethico-aesthetic practices of exposing the historical and cultural processes by which the earth's materials and energy become privatized and individualized. Their work runs parallel to debates about globalization in the last two decades, and specifically those about consumer excess, outsourced manufacturing, international labor rights, access to natural resources, environmental degradation, intellectual copyright, and the commoditization of virtual space. We will see these debates crop up in discussions of their work. But it is important to recognize that many of the artists in this book do not vocally take sides in these conversations; their contributions are usually focused on the ethical conundrums of the particular material-commodity situations evident in their art.

In fact, many artists now seem to focus an entire oeuvre or career on exploring one material and its history as a commodity. For instance, Yinka Shonibare consistently uses African cloth, Cory Arcangel has become known for his hacked videogames, and Andrea Zittel has focused on the development of prefab living units. The artists' interests, not surprisingly, have to do with their own historical and biographical investments in these commodities. Many of these materials, as commodified forms, played an important role in the artists' coming of age. Particularly aware of their position as historical subjects within the grand scope of capitalist production, the artists are clearly and understandably fascinated by the ability of a material's social life to resonate so deeply in their own.

The kinds of material research artists now conduct and the critical reflection they have on their own position within current global ethico-economic debates will be the main focus of this book. In order to better understand their interest in global commodities, it is necessary to see the development of their artistic strategies in the long view of the growing global commodity system since the post-war era. This overview, as it leads to nineties trade liberalization and a heightened moment of consciousness about the commodity in art, will be the subject of Chapter 2. The chapter will trace a consistent materialist focus from the sixties to the nineties—from the neo-dada artists Akasegawa Genpei and Robert Rauschenberg, through the work of Cildo Meireles, Joseph Beuys, Jeff Koons, and finally to Jimmie Durham.

The remaining chapters are organized around discussions of artists to have emerged since the nineties according to their interest in the following dominant global commodity categories: common goods, apparel, media, labor, and land. Chapter 3 explores the growing consciousness over the glut of common durable and non-durable consumer goods as well as the global disparities of material wealth signified in their production and accumulation. In comparing the manic readymade installations of Jason Rhoades, Ai Weiwei, Surasi Kusolwong, Michael Landy, Song Dong, and Christoph Büchel, the evident concern over the uneven distribution of consumer wealth on a global scale is explored. Chapter 4 focuses on artists interested in the rise of the global apparel industry as a particularly lucrative, but very material and labor-intensive, global commodity of the late twentieth century. The industry's system extends from outsourced factory production in Mexico and China to the high fashion world of New York and Paris. Debates about labor exploitation and the hyper-objectification of fashion models as they have directly impacted popular consciousness about apparel will be traced in the works of subRosa, Ni Haifeng, Yinka Shonibare, Michael Blum, Sylvie Fleury, Josephine Meckseper, and Thomas Hirschhorn.

Chapter 5 centers on clashes over intellectual property rights in global media. Over the last 10 years especially, artists have been interested in charting how and in what context digital information has been captured and capitalized upon by the market. This chapter features artist-entrepreneur-hackers who engage with this dynamic, including Takashi Murakami, Cory Arcangel, Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, Goldin+Senneby, and Paul Chan. Chapter 6 looks at the intense commodification of immigrant labor and service since the establishment of regional trade agreements that emphasized the de-regulation of labor. The analysis focuses on the work of Francis Alÿs, Emily Jacir, Santiago Sierra, Tania Bruguera, the Yes Men, and Minerva Cuevas. Chapter 7 contemplates the global reorientation of land and natural resources as international commodities in the work of Atelier Van Lieshout, Andrea Zittel, The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), Superflex, Marjetica Potrč, The Land, and Eating in Public.

These artists have been chosen because they are exemplary of what I consider to be an important trend in the expanding readymade paradigm of pointedly creating aesthetic spaces in order to witness the emerging global dimensions of a commodity's becoming. They invite us to contemplate the consciousness that we have (or do not have) in recognizing moments of commodification. In recomposing capital's materiality, the art works provide political, informational, as well as affective tools for viewers. They help viewers to visualize how objects already speak, as Georges Perec says, of *what they are,* as well as *who we are*. They challenge us, as viewers and subjects of contemporary capitalism, to become curious about our connections to our daily objects as well as to the larger assemblages of politics and representation at play around them. The onus is not solely on the work or the artist, but on new aesthetic and theoretical tools that viewers need to acquire in order to access possible meanings. In the remainder of this introduction, I will focus on some of these tools and their theoretical contexts in material culture, materialist politics, and materialist philosophy.

From the nominal readymade to the affectual readymade

Recent histories of counter-commodity, counter-consumer, and counter-spectacular strategies have usefully offered analyses of how contemporary readymade art tries to subvert, or at least ironize, commodity spectacle culture. The Tate Gallery's *PopLife: Art in a Material World* (2009); Jonathan Harris's *Introduction to Globalization and Contemporary Art* (2011); and Olav Velthius's *Imaginary Economics* (2005) offer a few places to start. In these overviews of the development and the varieties of appropriative practices in the last thirty years, the artist is usually characterized as one of two standard tropes: the *bricoleur* or the cynical appropriator. Contemporary histories of neo-avant-gardism still admire the disempowered artistic subject position of Michel de Certeau's *bricoleur*, who uses whatever is at hand to brazenly disrupt the logic of modern life. By the same token, art historians now constantly speak of the *bricoleur's* foil, the ambivalent cynical realist, who likewise appropriates to disrupt, but always with an understanding of how the object will be quickly co-opted back by commodity forces. (The cynical realist often smooths the way so that he or she can take advantage of this process. For an especially cogent characterization of this subjectivity, see Hal Foster's *Return of the Real*.)

There is something dissatisfying about the way these two positions of artistic subjectivity recur in the history of contemporary art and it has mostly to do with the way that an artwork's success is always evaluated by the appropriative procedures used by the artist. The dominance of what has been called the Duchamp effect (and its attending concern over artistic intentionality) is nowhere more evident than in this kind of analysis (DeDuve 1998; Buskirk and Nixon 1996; Judovitz 1995).

The history of the Duchamp effect is complex and could start at multiple beginnings, but one such origin could be art critic Lucy Lippard's famous essay, "The Dematerialization of Art," published in *Artforum* in 1968. This essay was dramatically influenced by Duchamp's emphasis on "the idea," and the priority of choice, otherwise known as the "nomination" of an object as art. It argued that the incorporation of new materials and the expanding paradigm of art in general should be understood as a move toward conceptualism. In the emerging 1970s conceptual art scene, as Lippard wrote, idea is "paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious, and/or "dematerialized" (Lippard 1973: vii). Lippard's sentiment has been reiterated to such a degree that the history of contemporary art is now largely written and understood through the conceptual, "nominal" paradigm. Its thesis has been corroborated and expanded at multiple points along the way. Historian Rosalind Krauss for instance, very soon after Lippard, argued for an understanding of the expansion of the art object within the conceptual procedure of the "post-medium" condition. As she described in her essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field": "The logic of the space of postmodernist practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or for that matter, the perception of material. It is organized instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation" (1986: 288). Taken in the context of the growing influence of

conceptualism, this statement has been read as an argument in which medium and material are trumped by an artist's engagement with the intellectual terms of art production, what Krauss calls an "operation" in another of her influential essays, "Notes on the Index II."

Lippard and Krauss's arguments are foundational for contemporary art history's emphasis on concept and institutional critique, as well as the importance of avant-garde intentionality. Stemming from these arguments, the master narrative for art's expanding use of materials has been explained as a self-critical position in which art has moved progressively along Duchampian lines, from medium specificity to "dematerialized" art forms based on the priority of the artist's choice and operation.

In the 1970s, this notion of dematerialization described the artist's strategic use of information as an immaterial "material," and therefore an uncommodifiable, form. In the context of Marxist analyses coming from the Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry, "dematerialization" as an ideal counter-consumer practice made sense. Yet the problem with the term was evident from the start. Even the conceptual art collective Art and Language, celebrated by Lippard, quickly objected. They stated in their second issue of *Art—Language*: "The false bifurcation of object, action, and idea, the 'material and the immaterial,' leads down the treacherous path of forgetting the material productive basis of capitalism as well as anarchic alternatives to capitalism" (Atkinson 1970). To separate and prioritize the idea over material process, and with it, the artist over the layered context in which art generates meaning, seemed to over-simplify a developing avant-garde materialist approach to transforming reality. Incidentally, Lippard later acknowledged that conceptual art did in fact feed very self-consciously into a commodity system in which "information," in the form of contracts, writings, photo-documentation, et cetera, was the new commodity for a growing international network of exhibitions, gallery dealers, and corporate patrons (1973).

The danger of becoming so focused on procedural "turns," institutional critique, and immaterial ideas, as Art and Language foresaw, is that the power of the intense materiality of the objects themselves is overlooked. Yet contemporary art's concern with conceptual priority as an ideal counter-cultural strategy has greatly affected the tone, purpose, and method of art historical and aesthetic inquiry in the last few decades. Especially in relation to new approaches to readymade art, more attention is usually given to evaluating the type of appropriative procedure and whether it is politically effective in escaping the trap of art's commodification, than to a more nuanced aesthetic and materialist inquiry into the art object itself. This is most obvious in books such as Nicolas Bourriaud's short polemical *Postproduction* (2002). While it was a timely and important contribution to contemporary media-based art, it was organized around a panoply of sampling and culture-jamming techniques inherent to the artistic appropriation of mass media, without really delving deeply into the material forms of the artworks themselves. Josiah McElheny's article "Readymade Resistance" (2007) offered more rigor. In this short piece he brilliantly taxonomized three appropriative strategies that now stand out in contemporary art practice. The first is the procedure of "borrowing" preexisting objects. (Examples would be Rauschenberg's *Combines*, or more recently Rachel Harrison's similarly chaotic sculptures, or even Nancy

Rubin's massive installations of used mattresses and airplane fuselage.) The second is to "fake" or imitate a product (Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Boxes*, Koon's metalized inflatable bunnies, Murakami's Mr. DOB and Superflex's GUARANÁ POWER would all be appropriate to this discussion). The last is to appropriate the methods or processes of capitalist production and consumption itself (Warhol and Murakami's factories or Kusolwong's open air Thai markets). McElheny rightly points out that often artists move from one procedure to another, elaborating or mixing them up. While these are useful terms of analyses, an identification of the procedure, in the end, tells us very little about the appropriated material's meaning in relation to commodity reality.

Ultimately, the questions proposed by Bourriaud and McElheny, and many others concerned with the contemporary history of the readymade, are limited to these: How has the artist incorporated, recontextualized, extended, intensified, accumulated, displaced, reiterated, juxtaposed, linked, rearranged, fragmented, disintegrated, categorized, organized, copied, and/or otherwise reoriented an object? To what degree has one of these procedures been successful? And to what degree has the artist been critical (a *bricoleur*) or complicit (a cynic) in his or her use of said procedure? As one follows this line of argument, one witnesses an endless discussion about the idea and the intention of the artist, without serious consideration to the importance of the materials themselves. Why does avant-gardism so often get reduced to this kind of discussion?

This book argues that the questions asked of art, especially readymade art, need to move, at least for a moment, away from artistic intentionality and the priority given to Duchampian "nomination" in order to regain a focus toward exploring the important but overlooked materiality of the commodity object itself, to say nothing of acknowledging the contingent material position of the artist. We need to start asking some of the following questions: How are artistic procedures contingent responses to the conditions in which a commodity is created? How do artists situate objects in a variety of formats (installation, sculpture, relational modes) so that these objects can begin to tell their own story? How do artists construct meaning through different kinds of transposition, yet not make the objects so radically abstract that they lose their identity and their ability to evoke a connectedness to everyday life? While many artists would attest to the validity of procedural terms, they also often choose to work with found objects precisely because their material complexity contradicts the abstract idealisms and simplistic political side-taking implied in describing art solely as an intentional operation.

In their presentation of material-commodity situations, artists often resist the role of being visual ideologues and instead allow the objects themselves to refocus a viewer's attention on the here and now, including the wonder of their own recurring encounters with the material of the world. This is, on the simplest level, what I mean to suggest by taking "a materialist approach" to the readymade. More and more artists are acknowledging and even insisting that objects have an efficacy and vitality of their own. This needs to be accounted for in an aesthetic understanding of readymade art. As many materialist philosophers of late (from Bruno Latour, to Jean-Luc Nancy, to Jane Bennett) have argued, subjectivity and intentionality, including the artist's, are formulated in relation to the stuff of our world.

Even more important to my materialist explanations are the political philosophers Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Jacques Rancière. Each offers, in my opinion, inventive and sustained approaches to understanding how readymades can call attention to the hidden material forces of global capitalism. This book, in attempting to move out of the histories of Duchampian nomination, adopts some of their materialist principles.

We will explore materialist explanations, for example, of Yinka Shonibare's so-called African fabric, as it emphasizes the meaning of historical fabrication, use, contextual relations, and receptions that are cathected to its traversals through many social and political contexts. The basic principle of my materialist theoretical perspective is to allow that art's messages and meanings are embedded in the concreteness of an object's material relations. Artists may seize upon pre-made materials to create specific statements, but they also generally expect situations in which their efforts could again be overlaid with other material contexts and relationships that complicate or contradict a singular intentionality. In looking at the world as a complexity of substances, impulses, and formulations, the artist's lived experience and choices become part of the material world, not a fictional autonomous act upon it.

As Gilles Deleuze put it, "the artist is not outside the symptoms, but makes a work of art from them, which sometimes serves to precipitate them, and sometimes to transform them" (2004: 140). That is, more often than not, artists are both *bricoleurs* and cynical realists. Moreover, their subjective investment in both the political potential of the object as something *other than a* commodity and its new economic value as art commodity often intermingle. (This is to say nothing of the intermingling investments of many museums and art collectors that are also part of this situation.) Do not artists, as much as any contemporary subject, have to constantly realign their attitudes toward contemporary consumer life in each moment? Does not capitalism itself impel this condition of flux? Readymade practice is not an exception to capitalism's own practices and processes; it forthrightly struggles within its context. This is what makes it so important to our day and age. If it does not escape a commodity framework completely, what it can do, (and this is what this book will explore) is provide material aesthetic moments in which new conditions of material possibility can be seized and built upon by the artist and viewer.

The Deleuzo-Guattarian philosopher Stephen Zepke has already initiated this shift in thinking about art, and particularly readymades, in his two recent books, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guattari* (2005) and *Deleuze, Guattari and the Production of the New* (2008). The latter volume includes his evocative essay "The Readymade: Art as the Refrain of Life" (2008: 33-43), in which he gives attention to an understanding of the readymade's material relations within the larger picture of capitalism's processes. He bases this on Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's own materialist re-reading of Duchamp. The philosophers' famous book *A Thousand Plateaus*, for instance, offers such statements as: "Territorial marks are readymades" (1988: 349). They argue that artists create "territorial markings," much like an animal marking its boundaries. This act is "nominal" in the sense that an artist has marked or framed an object as "art." But more importantly, that mark acknowledges a strategic positioning in the context of all other territorial boundary

markings on the earth. Deleuze and Guattari argue that in the long historical period of capitalism, territorial boundaries and commodity thresholds are many and the artist's own territorial act has the potential to question capitalism's deterritorializing-reterritorializing processes (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 381). This seemingly idiosyncratic vocabulary will begin to make sense as we follow a materialist line of argument.

Figure 1: Hélio Oiticica. Nildo da Mangueira with *Parangolé P4 Cape 1*, 1964. © Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro. Courtesy Projeto Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro and Galerie Lelong, New York. Photo Andreas Valentin.

Zepke argues that the best examples of this kind of readymade are not from Duchamp, but from the post-war Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. He briefly describes Clark's *Máscaras sensoriais* and Oiticica's *Parangolés* as attempts to "unclasp" commodities from the capitalist assemblage of productivity, initiating onto-genetic forces in which the materials shift value not only from commodity to art, but from commodity back to materiality (2008: 34). Zepke's language (itself peppered with Deleuzian neologisms) needs a bit of clarification and expansion in terms of the argument of this book. Both Clark and Oiticica, working in the sixties and seventies, used cloth, shipping sacks, and plastic as post-consumer found objects for their interactive art. They transformed this material into wearable forms that could create new sensorial experiences. Oiticica's *Parangolés*, for instance, were made for favela inhabitants to wear while dancing the Samba. The *Parangolés* thus shifted the meaning of the material from a commodity (used to transport other commodities) into an interactive costume. The heavy sacks the workers carried as dockyard laborers were made into fluid open color forms, sometimes with political messages on them, worn by those same workers as they composed themselves freely in dance. As the art historian Anna Dezeuze (2004) makes more explicit, the *Parangolés*' phenomenological engagement of material and body was a guerrilla tactic meant to re-politicize the disenfranchised and displaced populations of the favela.

Oiticica considered the *Parangolés* "trans-objects": a combination of conception, experience, and physicality. In his "Outlines for New Objectivity" (1967), he stated "the work requires the body to move in a local space with the hope of constructing a recognition of inter-corporeal" space as well. The Mangueira favela residents in São Paolo, with whom Oiticica often collaborated and performed, were a mostly rural population displaced from the interior of Brazil by major land appropriations of the sixties. In performing Oiticica's wearable structures, they were potentially inviting a new visibility for themselves as humans and creators rather than simply as laborers. As a dancer lifted and twirled the layers, a message would be revealed. Fairly simple and straightforward statements, such as that of *P15 Cape 11*, "Incorporo a revolta," (Embody revolt), materialize the potential of the body-object composition as "inseparable, feeding off each other" (1967). In one instance, Oiticica invited Mangueira residents to perform the objects at his art opening in 1965 at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. The performance caused a huge scandal among the city's elite (Brett 1969). This ended up causing a very potent political moment of visibility in which people who were usually seen primarily as labor-commodities disrupted that situation by becoming celebratory political dissidents.

Zepke proposes to call Oiticica's *Parangolés* "affectual readymades." His analysis is mostly philosophical, not art historical, and so clearly needs some explication in the context of this book. But, as a start, his use of Deleuze and Guattari's materialist philosophy allows a new view of readymade practices. The artist literally "unclasps" and leverages commodities as material forces in contradiction with capitalism's deterritorializing and reterritorializing processes. I see this kind of analysis as a useful launching point for articulating a wide variety of contemporary artistic readymade approaches as they

illuminate the reality of contemporary capitalism. Any instance of an aesthetic moment in which the commodity is used by an artist to momentarily resist capitalism's perpetual commoditizing process is an "affectual readymade." It incorporates Duchamp's notion of choice, but also accounts for the complexity of a material's (and an artist's) intimate connection to capitalism's forces.

Important to a materialist framework for the affectual readymade is an understanding of the dynamism of capitalism. It is not simply an epoch in human economic history, but a particularly potent systemic force shaping our present and future access of the earth's materials. Capitalism is, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, a great schizophrenic accumulation and abstraction of energy and earth. In the *longue durée* of history, capitalism is a relatively recent ideological-social-political-economic system built on human, and eventually national, "territorializing" of the earth. Though it uses territorial boundaries to its advantage, in the form of national borders and private property, it also seeks to deterritorialize labor and natural resources into mobile systems of value moved further and further afield from their originating earth territory. In order to perpetuate an economy of desire for commodity objects, capitalism then "institutes and restores all sorts of residual, artificial, imaginary or symbolic territorialities, thereby attempting, as best it can, to recode and rechannel persons who have been defined by abstract quantities" (1983: 37). Deterritorialization and reterritorialization are mutually enmeshed, or opposite faces of one and the same process (258).

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (political philosophers also deeply informed by Deleuze and Guattari) sum up the current global nature of this dynamic in their famous historical and theoretical characterization of contemporary capitalism as "Empire":

> In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command.
>
> (2001: xiii)

Hardt and Negri are concerned with transnational capital's ability to enforce diffuse, non-isometric, and systemic forms of power through webs of consumer and business interdependence. Capital is characterized by its mobility: its constant creation and elimination of boundaries as artificial territories through which it can quantify, demarcate, revalue, and further commodify the earth's material.

The affectual readymade is an equally complex situation in which an aesthetic of unclasping objects from commodity forces can be either a mode of territorializing (in the animal-earth sense, of "coming back to earth" as materiality and energy) or further deterritorializing (in so outrageously overcoding an object with messages and meaning that it escapes the grasp of capitalism's own capture). We will come back to this moment and these terms

throughout the book. In either case, whether a readymade moves toward territorialization or deterritorialization, I argue these are "materializing" strategies. Materials are perceived to be, even if momentarily, something other than commodities; they are sometimes things, gifts, substances, or simply people, plants and animals. The possibilities are endless. The goal of many contemporary readymade practices can be characterized by this simple but radical perceptual shift: *Within the frame of art,* the commodity becomes visible as *something other,* allowing new ethico-socio-political combinations to change a viewer's relationship to the commodity system.

Materializing the commodity situation

If a materialist understanding of capitalism is important for this book's discussion of the affectual readymade's "(de)territorial" processes, a materialist understanding of the commodity is even more important. Arjun Appadurai coined the phrase the "social life of things" to capture the paradoxes of defining the commodity. This social anthropologist sees the commodity not as a static object of symbolic consumption, but as a material situation (or multiple situations). In his famous *Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986), he argues that we need to start thinking less about which objects are commodities and which are not, and instead understand, especially now, that the "commodity potential" is in all materiality. Appadurai broadly defines the commodity situation as one in which the materiality of our world is recognized in its exchangeability for some other resonant materiality (1986: 10–12). The special feature of the capitalist system is that the commodity situation is usually valued through the abstracted aid of currency and multiple trading relations, hiding exploitative social and cultural relationships in commodity production and exchange.

The commodity is now one of the most effective global units of cultural, political, and economic influence. At this very moment, the world economy identifies over ten billion goods and services as commodities: bolts, microchips, blue jeans, rolled metal, electronic music files, webhosting servers, as well as financial management services and packages (McKinsey Global Institute 2011). The fundamental directive of the contemporary commodity is that it is owned and enjoyed by a single person or business. While this definition and initial list of commodities seems straightforward enough, Marx characterized the commodity as a "mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appear to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour" (Marx 2000: 52). Through the additional lens of Appadurai's understanding of the commodity as situation, we can see that, indeed, the commodity is a mysterious thing. Because it is not really a "thing" at all, but a constant valuation framework. It is a recurrent and seemingly self-perpetuating production of alienating human relations through privatization and objectification. It is a system of marketing in which the desire for goods perpetuates the illusion of individualistic distinction and reinforces the naturalized image of a world in which resources are not

shared, but rigorously and often aggressively monetized. Although commodities saturate a consumer's life, the term is not often used in a consumer's daily vocabulary. This is the most obvious indicator of the commodity's mystification. People know the word, but do not really know how it applies to them. (The term "marketing" on the other hand, is ubiquitous, referring more positively and superficially to the commoditization process, even as applied to the self.) The more old-fashioned and colloquial term of "common goods" referenced in the title of this book is meant to draw attention to the enforced obscurity of the commodity situation. Whatever one calls them—commodities, products, services, or common goods—they are all material situations that reinforce possessive relationships with the world and its materiality. In sum, the apparent miraculous omnipresence of plastic bags, endless varieties of street fashion, and computer screens belies capitalism's process of *un-commoning* the world and its people.

Appadurai argues extensively that commodities gain meaning and value through their circulation and through their interrelationships with other material situations. This aspect of the commodity's situational contingency is indebted to Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of gift exchange in the Kabyle culture in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993). The French anthropologist described what came to him as a profound shock when he understood that the very act of not giving, the delay of a return gesture, was actually more significant and called more attention to the relationships and meanings that objects manifest, than if one simply reciprocated immediately. The capitalist system demands even more rigorously that commodities always be in motion (Appadurai 1986: 5). This motion is often not an agreeable exchange or lubricated fluidity, but a move toward un-commoning. Commodities often appear through what Appadurai calls conflicting "tournaments of value," as when there is a fight over and redistribution of land, a privatization of mines, or a contentious labor agreement. Tournaments of value are analogous to what Deleuze and Guattari might call symbolic territorializations: boundaries, breaks, or schizzes instituted within the capitalist structure in order to capture materiality and populations and transform them into commodities. Symbolic territorializations are everywhere in the age of globalization. Obviously there are packages, parcels, and prices. There are also territories instituted and enforced by nations at the behest of business interests: national borders, customs checkpoints, trade agreements, and chain-link fences. Even more interestingly, there are various ways in which capitalism enforces the commoditization of labor or service through the symbolic territories of uniforms, time clocks, and passports, for instance. It does the same with information in the form of copyrighted brands or digital cookies.

These boundaries are always shifting because the constant *instability* of global trade rules and border agreements is what actually generates wealth within the capitalist system. In the last 10 years, new intellectual property laws alone have successfully put borders on ideas, but only where they are most strategically valuable to global business. Likewise, the disparities and constant flux between different countries' standards of living, labor laws, and currency values are used to prime the global distribution of production and consumption. Sometimes

it is economical to crack down on migrant labor, but sometimes it is more convenient to look the other way. All of this emphasizes how commodities are ongoing social-political situations, and not just one individual's symbolic accouterments.

Artists have come up with a myriad of ways to articulate the thresholds of the becoming of a commodity across these territorializing and deterritorializing boundaries. "A boundary is not at which something stops … a boundary is that from which something begins its presencing," writes Heidegger in "Building Dwelling Thinking" (1951). That is, a boundary is the point at which an entity crosses over into discursive existence. For Duchamp, the multiple boundaries by which the commodity became art were the pedestal, the museum door, the submission form, or the signature. Many contemporary artists now work on "presencing" the capitalist boundaries within which the world's materials become commodities. Their art, in some fashion, undoes or problematizes the commodity's becoming. By "wresting objects from the dross" (per Perec) of an ideological, naturalized, and daily investment in consumer goods or by "unclasping" them from capitalism's boundaries, artists can show the precariousness of the commodity moment.

Wresting and *unclasping* are interesting words to use in terms of the appropriative readymade procedure. How hard is it really for an artist to buy buckets or glean used cloth to use in an art piece? It may not be physically challenging to do this, but somehow the readymade is very difficult perceptually because it insists on an affective and ideological shift of understanding the same object, positioned in a different context, in a different way. Wresting and unclasping indicate just how difficult and momentary this process can be for both artists and viewers. Regardless of the operation or procedure used by the artist, the affectual readymade's efficacy lies in the different temporalities and situations of commodification, as well as the strength of the aesthetic frame, to bring these to the perceptual surface. Affectual readymade strategies are never linear, two-dimensional or one-way. It might be better to think of them, like commodity situations, as multiple, overlapping moments occurring within and upon global capital's dimensions. The power of the affectual readymade comes from an artist's attention to the instability of an entity as it crosses boundaries, moving fluidly from material to commodity to other material to other commodity, et cetera. If an object becomes wholly aestheticized or formalized, it simply becomes beautiful and its power to disrupt our vision of material economies vanishes. If the object is not extricated from the capitalist circulation to a large enough degree, it never achieves visibility as an aesthetic moment.

Moreover, the affectual readymade is nothing if it is not the production of *new* materialities, sensations, and perceptions. The goal of many affectual readymades is to encourage viewers to revalue the thing in front of them as materiality and not commodity. We will see how artists experiment in creating moments in which commodities can take on new configurations of material-world-subjectivities, all the while resisting conclusive understanding or harmonic recognition. These practices are especially interested in the obdurate identities, histories, and social lives of objects that contradict commodity status and often bring these contradictions into visibility.

If capitalism and commodities are material situations, than understanding how art can create perceptual shifts within those situations is paramount. Zepke's uses the term "affectual" in conjunction with the term readymade in order to highlight this importance. He is following a Deleuzian line of argument in understanding that shifts in aesthetic perception are not simply conceptual realizations, but also material situations between the body and the world. The moment of affect happens in many different kinds of representation, including reading and thinking. As Brian Massumi argues, "the primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between *content* and *effect*" (Massumi 2002: 24). Between the expected meaning or semiotic structure of representation (content) and its resulting reception of understanding in the viewer (effect), there is opportunity for an event that transforms systemic understanding into paradox. A readymade's potential of affect is usually in the creation of a confusing moment when a viewer does not really understand what an object is supposed to do within the artistic configuration, when it can neither be wholly absorbed into commodified everyday use nor into traditional modes of formal aesthetic contemplation. Affectual readymades refuse the immediacy of the commodity's naturalized use and the transparency of its meaning so that its materiality and the viewer/participant's subjectivity can be exposed, undone, or otherwise transformed. This is a specific, but recurring, strategy in material relations that make it a politically potent moment for any particular perceiver open to it. Duchamp used this moment (which he called "delay") to explore a vast territory of arbitrary value, especially the value of art. The artists in this book use it to provide an ethical consciousness toward the global commodity structure.

In "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes," philosopher Jacques Rancière discusses the potential of affect to bring representational and political visibility to overlooked material situations around the world. Aesthetics, he states, now has to be open to the task of making perceptible and participating in the expanding and chaotic "common sensorium": the smells, actions, sights, and moods of our everyday lives (2002: 144). For this reason, the commodity, as one of the primary mediators of our everyday existence, is a timely and strategically important artistic material. But it can only be made sensible, Rancière argues, by first strategically shifting it toward non-sense. The success of a readymade, no matter what the process of transformation, is predicated on that moment of non-comprehension, a pause in the perpetuation of object and image consumption. (Rancière 2010; Panagia 2009). Rancière calls this affective moment "dissensus."

In the context of materialist philosophy and readymade art, one does well to understand that affect and dissensus are not just situations of delayed recognition that reorganize political and economic visibility. They are also distillations that reorganize material relations. To materialize a commodity, the goal of affectual readymades, is like getting an element in a solution to sediment. Indeed if capitalism is described by Marx and Engels (1978: 475–76) as an age in which "all that's solid melts into air," then the affectual readymade responds by attempting to rematerialize those solids. As Daniel Miller argues, commodity objects are important to consider precisely because we do not "see" them, because they have become so naturalized in our visual landscape. "The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully

they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so" (2005: 5). Materializing an object successfully is more than mere appropriation of reality, imitation of reality, or presentation of reality. It is an artful labor of constructing concrete poetics so that the "heterogeneous sensible" appears everywhere. With the right agitation and conditions, commodities will settle out as concrete materiality once again.

Art is perhaps less predictable than chemistry. The variables, experiments, and contexts for making the material-commodity moment appear to us again as something meaningful and worthy of our attention is subtle, ephemeral, and often not even repeatable or verifiable in the crucible of history. The same basic elements are always there, but depending upon the "solution" as well as the observers, they can either remain invisible and normalized, or become visible and meaningful materialities to encounter in a different way. Whenever those confusing moments happen, they do so because the seeming ordinariness of the commodity situation suddenly becomes unusual, and *other* to the viewer. Impinging upon consciousness, it prompts further processes of perception and interpretation of the world.

The material-commodity situation undoubtedly depends on the richness of the metaphorical, metonymic, allegorical, and extensive potentialities of the objects chosen by the artist. But it also strongly depends on the viewer's ability to disconnect from common habits around commodities so that there can be a positive and potentially multiplicitous reconnection with that object-situation as a materiality.

And what is materiality exactly? It is everything that constitutes the plane of life and relation, the substances and energies generating the world. The artists in this book are concerned mostly with our common materiality or what some materialist philosophers have simply termed, "the commons." As Hardt and Negri remind us: "The commons refers not only to earth, but to air, the elements, or even plants and animal life, but also the constitutive elements of human society, such as common languages, habits, gestures, affects, codes, and so forth" (2009: 171). While we think of these common materialities as aspects or elements that need to be shared, it is important to acknowledge that they also have a vitality of their own. In her recent book *Vibrant Matter: The Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett argues that "the sheer volume of commodities, and the hyper consumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter" (2010: 5). Once the value and necessity of the commodity is questioned, materials can be looked at again as entities that sustain us, and of which we are a part. They can be recognized as actants—political entities with forces that are beyond human understanding and control. She argues that if a different ethics toward the materiality of the world is not developed, human survival itself is at stake. Bennett, along with Jean-Luc Nancy, Stephan Zepke, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, subscribe to Deleuze and Guattari's vital materialist subjectivity, "linger[ing] in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them. This sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the outside may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans—animals,

plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically" (2010: 17).

Artists who employ affectual readymade strategies are obviously vital materialists as well, in the sense that they are fascinated by how an object, beyond its commodity status, can open new kinds of human and world relations. While not necessarily sharing the same ecological agenda as Bennett, their aesthetic work is definitely involved in the larger philosophical and ethical issues that she and other materialist philosophers have recently raised. At the very least, their work is motivated by a recognition that this particular moment of intense global commodification demands to be met with a shift in consciousness toward some notion of re-commoning the world and its people. Art can play a powerful and affective role in this regard. Distilled through the artistic frame, common materiality can re-relate different local histories, economies, and memories that have been separated by the forces of capitalism. Through this process, affectual readymades can disassemble some superficial "common sense" assumptions about the commodity world, while also poetically and politically rearrange it to concretize new "commoning" senses of the material world.

Chapter 1

Of Kula Rings and Commodity Chains