



Consumerism's Dreaming: An Examination of the Readymades in Contemporary Art

ABSTRACT: In his renowned 2004 book, *Consuming Culture in Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*, Julian Stallabrass appears to deride contemporary art practices that engage with consumer culture. By reviewing a select number of art objects and carefully examining the overall practices of their creators, I will demonstrate that Stallabrass is not panning out contemporary art but rather the ubiquitous capitalist system in which it inevitably flourishes within.

The paper also scrutinizes the cited artists' drive to engage with mass culture and analyses the overall message they wish to communicate to the general public.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary Art, Consumerism, Mass Culture, Readymades, Art Object, Commodity Fetish, Jeff Koons, Tracey Emin, Marcel Duchamp

“Art may be imagined as consumerism’s dreaming, playfully recombining the elements of mass culture in promiscuous assemblages and along the way happening upon items of use”. Julian Stallabrass, ‘Consuming Culture’ in *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*, 2004

From the outset, Stallabrass’s ambiguous statement about the state of art in contemporary capitalist society appears to be a critique; whereby art is reduced to an alternate reality or fantasy dream-world parallel to the existing consumer culture prevalent in real life. The statement also infers that there is no actual purpose or tangible function for art, or if one is found, it is merely realised by happy accident rather than through careful deliberation. However, further examination of this thought within the larger context of Stallabrass’s oeuvre and in-light of the current art practices, compels us to reconsider this position. In this essay, I will demonstrate how contemporary artists chose to engage with popular consumer culture through readymade assemblages whilst attempting to uphold the sanctity of Art and maintain its autonomy. Further, by exploring the market reaction to their efforts, the challenge of Art escaping from the commercial grips of a consumerist society will become very evident.

examine a select number of art objects that incorporate elements of mass culture and demonstrate why their creators chose to engage with popular culture and what are the messages they wish to communicate to the public through their art. Further, I will show how Stallabrass is not against contemporary art per say, but rather the inescapable capitalist free market which consistently engulfs its autonomy within its ubiquitous system.

Jeff Koons maybe regarded as one of the most controversial artists today. Not only did he use readymade mass produced objects in many of his art series like *Popeye*, *Inflatables* and *The New* among others (see Fig. 1), but he also embraced the all-engulfing and mighty consumerist culture and played by the rules of capitalist economies much to the dismay of contemporary art critics, “artists like Jeff Koons ... appeared to delight, nihilistically, in the commodity fetish and the media celebrity as the historical replacements of the auratic art work and the inspired artist. In effect he acted out what Walter Benjamin had predicted long ago for capitalist society: the cultural need to compensate for the lost aura of the art and artist with “the phony spell” of the commodity and the star”.¹



Figure 1 Jeff Koons, *Inflatable Flower and Bunny (Tall White, Pink Bunny)*, 1979 from *Inflatables Series*



Figure 2 Jeff Koons, *New Shelton, Wet/Drys 10 Gallon, Doubledecker*, 1981 from *The New Series*

Yet, *New Shelton Wet/Dry Double-decker* of 1981 (See Fig. 2) from his *The New* series is part of MOMA’s permanent collection display; an unlikely place to occupy had it been a promiscuous assemblage of mass produced objects with no real use. His unorthodox sculpture of two vacuum cleaners on top of each other and their encasement in transparent Plexiglas box; which appropriates Marcel Duchamp’s readymades robbed these everyday objects off their utilitarian function and displaced them from their natural setting; namely the house. Like Duchamp’s readymade objects, the vacuum “initiates a critical act that compels the reader or viewer to renounce critical judgement and to consider instead how different contexts affect meaning, to understand that all meaning is socially constructed”.²

According to Antony Hudek, “The study of objects through the prism of art, and through the words of artists allows one to see how complex the world of ordinary and less ordinary objects and things truly is ... [it probes] the exemplarity of the art object to elucidate the multi-facetedness of objects and things in general”.³ Indeed, consumer objects exist on two levels: a basic functional level in which its utilitarian benefit addresses a tangible human need and on an emotional level in which the object possess an allegorical value that is understood within the

¹ Hal Foster, Rosalind Kraus, Yves-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, David Joselit, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2012, pp. 644

² Kathryn Rattee and Melissa Larner, *Jeff Koons: Popeye Series*, Koenig Books, London, 2009, pp. 32

³ Antony Hudek, ‘Introduction: Detours of Objects’, in Antony Hudek, *The Object: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Limited, London, 2014, pp. 14

collective human psyche. Koons' composite *Popeye* structures (See Fig. 3) allude to these two dimensions of the everyday object's purpose.

According to Dorothea Von Hantelmann, the found objects in Koons' multifactorial structures; namely the aluminium ladder in *Caterpillar Ladder*, the stainless steel pots and pans in *Dolphin*, the wooden logs in *Dogpool (Logs)* and the wood and straw chair in *Acrobat* belong to a "primary economic order of production whose activity is focused on the production of things that cover basic needs".⁴ From a Heideggerian perspective, these items are the *thingly* elements which form the substructure of an object; its *equipemental* being.⁵ He argued that objects possess a fundamental *equipemental* element in their material existence and Koons' found objects in his altered readymades point towards this functional value.

Hantelmann continues her diagnosis of Koons' *Popeye* composites when she asserts, "The other object [the manufactured inflatable-like toy] ... is a leisure item that only exists in post-industrial, consumer societies. It belongs to a secondary economic order of things that are not there because we *need* them but exist because we *want* them".⁶ Indeed, Koons' leisurely inflatable toys do not satisfy a basic human requirement, but are a result of an economy of excess and overproduction. They invoke ideas of a desirable lifestyle which include lazy summer holidays languishing by the pool and quality family time. These conjured up images in our collective memory are not only a result of past subjective experiences, but are largely fuelled by mass circulated fantasies that permeated our psyche and instigated a longing for them.

⁴ Dorothea Von Hantelmann, 'Why Koons?' in Kathryn Rattee and Melissa Larner, *Jeff Koons: Popeye Series*, Koenig Books, London, 2009, pp. 52

⁵ In order to understand the 'thingly element', Heidegger argued that we must define the concept of a 'thing'. He identified three interpretations/modes of defining a thing: subject and its properties, the unity of perceivable sensations and finally the formed matter which he focused his argument around and explained further through its equipemental being. Refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Truth of the Work of Art' in *Heidegger's Ways*, SUNY Press, 1994, pp. 102

⁶ Dorothea Von Hantelmann, 'Why Koons?', pp. 52

Koons employment of banal objects and/or altered readymades as well as his close engagement with popular culture, instigates a critical discourse on the function of art and its relationship with the varying strata's of contemporary society.⁷ Like his Pop Art predecessor; Andy Warhol, Koons casts a critical eye on everyday capitalist life and our growing obsession with objects that in actuality do not satisfy a fundamental human need for existence. According to John Caldwell, "The disparity between the comforting images of everyday life purveyed by advertising (and incorporated, of course, into everyone's consciousness) and the harsh reality of Warhol's paintings ... no doubt brot forth the audience's anger and dismay ... Koon's work, like Warhol's touch(s) a deeper reality and raise(s) unhappy questions about contemporary life, our lives, the way we live now".⁸

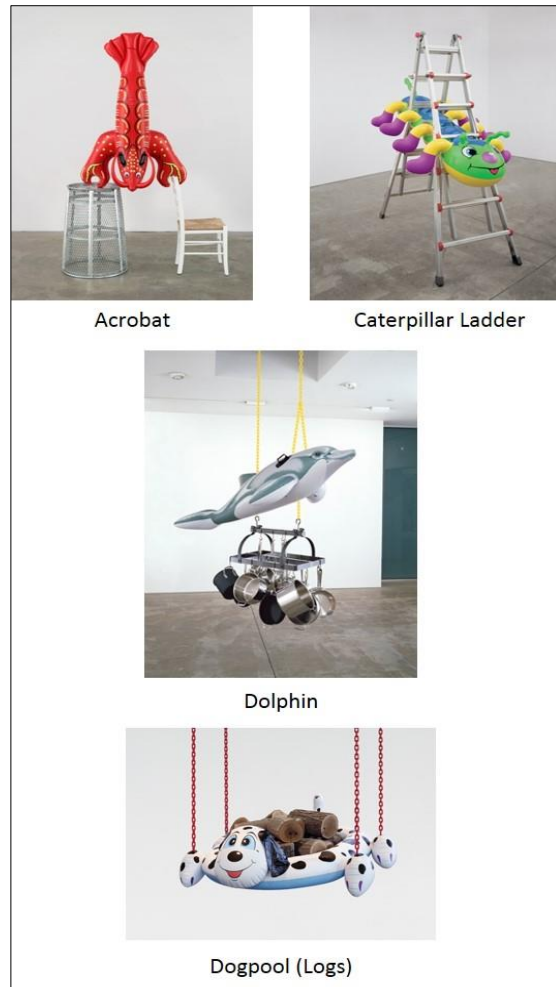


Figure 3 Jeff Koons, *Popeye Series*, 2002 - 2003

Koons acknowledges the *Ambient Order* championed by Baudrillard,⁹ and embraces the economics of the art world. His assemblages of mass produced items demonstrate that not only does the context of material objects affect their meaning (in the same manner that Marcel Duchamp's infamous *Fountain* of 1917 is regarded as an art object whose form commands its own aesthetics when displayed within the museum context vis a vis its status as a functional urinal that allows men to discard hygienically their fluid excrements in common toilets)¹⁰, it also affects their perceived value. Hal Foster notes,

The readymade, perhaps more than other art form, exposes the complicated relationship between art and the market. On the one hand endowing an object ... with aesthetic value,

⁷ Dorothea Von Hantelmann, 'Why Koons?' in Kathryn Rattee and Melissa Larner *Jeff Koons: Popeye Series*, Koenig Books Ltd., London, 2009, pp. 49

⁸ John Caldwell, 'Jeff Koons: The Way We Live Now' in Fronia W. Simpson, *Jeff Koons*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 1993, pp. 9

⁹ The *Ambient Order* refers to an open region or "field of relatedness" within the *Symbolic Register* that psychoanalysts like Lacan and Freud had identified and in which consumer objects acquire value through the collective meaning in a network of signs.

¹⁰ Artist Allan McCollum states, "I have observed that a common vase becomes an art object upon the suspension of its utility; that is, it is filled with meaning and value only after it is emptied of its substance". See Allan McCollum, 'Perfect Vehicles/1986' in Hudek, Antony. 2014. *The Object*. London: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, pp. 94

could inflate its price from lowly work to masterpiece. On the other, the buying and selling of these expensive works has the same structure as the marketing of any other luxury item, thus lowering the [art] object (aesthetically speaking) to the level of any other commodity.¹¹

Perhaps, Tracey Emin's infamous bed is one of the best 'lowly work' art pieces that exemplify the



Figure 5 Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998

above argument. *My Bed* executed in 1998, is a composition of an unmade bed of rumpled dirty sheets, a duvet and two pillows that were stained by its occupant's bodily fluids and surrounded by her accumulated detritus of several days including empty cigarette packs, drained vodka and juice bottles, used

condoms, dirty tissues, menstrual-blood soiled knickers and two chained suitcases (see Fig. 4). It demonstrates how 'rubbish' can acquire a monetary exchange value through its framing. This banal setting and rather revolting selection of mass produced objects was auctioned by Christie's in 2014 and sold for GBP 2,546,500.¹² As Stallabrass notes, "In recombining and storing what has gone out of use, art may also serve a similar purpose to 'junk' DNA, which is believed to hold obsolete sequences in reserve in case they should be needed again".¹³ Whilst Stallabrass and many post-modernism critics scorn the astronomical exchange value awarded to celebrity art objects in the free market, they do not denigrate their artistic significance. Indeed, the art 'guardians' recognise the artistic value of Emin's bed to the degree that it is re-displayed today at the Tate Gallery after 15 years of absence. Emin's confessional art which takes the form of creative documentation interrogates our structured formalism around the archiving process. By pushing back against the conventional notions of the archive where they became a "site of lost origins and [dispossessed memory]"¹⁴, she reacquaints us with their original and true purpose; that of regenerating our lost emotions,



Figure 4 ARMAN, *Ecology #2*, 1970 from his *Poubelle Free Standing* series

¹¹ Hal Foster, Rosalind Kraus, *Art Since 1900*, pp. 128

¹² See Christie's past auction sales results on corporate website. <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/sculptures-statues-figures/tracey-emin-my-bed-5813479-details.aspx>

¹³ Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 53

¹⁴ Okuwi Enwezor and Willis E. Hartshorn, *Archive Fever: Uses of Documents in Contemporary Art*, Steidl, Gottingen, 2008, pp. 47

banal activities and futile moments that makeup our human life on this planet.

Emin was by no means the first artist to recombine obsolete items into sculptural objects. Arman's *Accumulation* series which began in the 60s assembles uniform objects into a single composite. His objects which "seem to emerge from a limitless expansion of blind repetition of production"¹⁵, compels the viewer to revisit his/her relationship with the object, the means by which it constructs his/her subjecthood and examine the framing and display mechanism of the commodity and art object. In addition, the combines in his *Poubelles* series (*See Fig. 5*) not only initiate a discourse between the everyday past and the industrialised death, they "evoke an emerging ecological catastrophe resulting from an accelerating and expanding consumer culture and its increasingly unmanageable production of waste".¹⁶ In fact, the mass-produced assembled object is one of the most commonly adopted artistic expressions to tackle issues of waste and consumption today. A junk aesthetic advanced by artists like Max Frisinger, Tim Noble and Sue Webster proliferated from the 90s onwards, "drawing attention to the ramifications of accumulated refuse with sculptures that wittily highlight the realities of urban culture".¹⁷

Readymades also act as a critique of the commodity fetish and the increasing culture of consumerism. Gillo Dorfles notes, "The other fundamental reason for the utilisation for an artistic end of industrially produced objects and in general of products commonly found on the market, must be discovered in a precise will to 'mythicize' exactly the elements used by the masses".¹⁸ In an economy of excess where Maslow's basic and secondary levels in the hierarchy of needs are fulfilled, people seek feelings of love and belonging as well as self-esteem. Commercial entities recognise these needs and relentlessly strive to fulfil them through the sale of their products. They present these mass produced objects as the solution. Yet, they are conscious of the fact that once these needs appear to be satisfied, people will cease to purchase their products. Hence they continue with their manipulative strategy to recreate these needs and lure consumers to purchase more products in the hope that they attain satisfaction. Stephen Willats observes,

*The elevation of the object in social relations, so that it plays a central part in interpersonal relations, derives from possession having become a parameter for authority, the object symbolising the social power of the possessor. The object becomes a central preoccupation of our culture; it becomes a carrier of society's idealisations and hence becomes an icon through which people may recognise a dependent system of references that can capture a whole way of life.*¹⁹

¹⁵ Hal Foster, Rosalind Kraus, *Art Since 1900*, pp. 476

¹⁶ Hal Foster, Rosalind Kraus, *Art Since 1900*, pp. 476

¹⁷ Anna Moszynska, *Sculpture Now*, Thames & Hudson Ltd, London, 2013, pp.60

¹⁸ Gillo Dorfles, 'The Man-Made Object/1966' in Antony Hudek, *The Object*, Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, London, 2014, pp. 73

¹⁹ Stephen Willats, 'Transformers/1989' in Antony Hudek, *The Object*, Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, London, 2014, pp. 77

Birgit Jürgenssen was one of many artists who understood the truth about mass produced objects and our relationship with them. She designed a series of shoes from readily available materials such as in *Relict Shoe* and *Our Daily Bread* of 1976 (See Fig. 6) to expose their allegorical inferences. On the primary level, shoes are merely tools that protect our feet from harsh terrains and adverse weather. They have become an integral tool in our daily lives, and thus are easily absorbed into their *equipmental* being. By recreating and representing them as artworks, Jürgenssen bestows on them a new identity which helps reveal their true essence.²⁰ Not only does she re-contextualise this familiar artefact to exemplify the truth about its 'objecthood', she physically illustrates it by creating the shoes from breadcrumbs and bacon and verbally reiterates it in the artwork's title; *Our Daily Bread*. Jürgenssen's representation of this highly fetishized object in contemporary society brings it back to its material existential truth, free of all its symbolic associations.

On a different level, *Relict Shoe* portrays the Austrian artist's critical social viewpoints of the female identity in a patriarchal society. The leather soles are stained by a bloody imprint of a female's foot which "evokes the damaged feet of the ballerina in her ribboned toeshoes, or even more forcefully, the bound feet of Chinese women in their exquisite bootlets". The back-lace which holds the shoe together resembles bloody tendons whilst the shoe welt is shaped in an isosceles triangular form made-up of bones that "provide the contrapuntal reference to that fantasy of castration incarnated by the *vagina dentata*".²¹ To increase the ironic tone of this abject piece, Jürgenssen presents *Relict Shoe* on a white satin cushion; invoking notions of delicacy, luxury and holy significance.

²⁰ Heidegger cited one of Van Gogh's 'Old Shoes' paintings to demonstrate the shoes' inability to disclose its essential truth when used or viewed by the peasant woman (See Index I, Fig. G). Christopher P. Long notes, "The less conscious she is of the shoes, the more they blend into the context of her environment", whereas when the shoes were painted by Van Gogh, the shoes revealed the truth about their being. In Christopher P. Long, 'Art's Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art and Politics', *New German Critique*, 83 (Spring-Summer 2001), pp. 99.

²¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'If The Shoe Fits: Fetishism, Femininity, and Brigit Jürgenssen's *Schuhwerk*' in Gabriele Schor and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Brigit Jürgenssen*, Hatje Cantz and Sammlung Verbund, Ostfildern, 2009, pp. 238

Indeed, this shoe is the antithesis of the highly coveted shoes displayed in leading shoe stores and luxury department stores. It does not connote images of female glamour and seduction power, but rather it divulges the object fetishism developed by society and the pain-inducing means which women are subjected to; willingly or not, in order to rise to an approved social ideal. With sales of 15cm heels rising, modern-day women do not appear to have freed themselves from the millennium-old foot deforming practice of China to achieve ideal beauty. Sebastian Manes, Selfridge's Director of Accessories commented in 2008, "This season we are selling the highest and most incredible shoes I've ever seen. Not for the faint hearted, fetish heels offer the wearer an extreme, attention grabbing look, these are definitely taxi shoes!"²²

Further, the title of these shoes embodies the very notion of this continued practice. As Solomon-Godeau notes, "It reminds us that patriarchy is not something "done" to women, but rather, a complex and highly articulated sex/gender system that women themselves assimilate, internalize and thereby perpetuate".²³ Women's endless pursuit of eternal youth, the publicised glamour and ability to distinguish oneself is embodied in this commodity object; the desirable fashion shoes.



Figure 6 Birgit Jürgenssen, *Schuhwerk* Series, 1976

By elevating shoes into a reified object commodity which determines the status value of its wearer, we lose sight of the utilitarian purpose behind this protective wear. According to Marxist thought, the reification "act of transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties, relations and actions of man-produced things which have become independent (and which are imagined as originally independent) of man and govern his life" is the most common characteristic of modern capitalist society.²⁴

Jürgenssen's shoes deconstruct the social and psychosexual mystifications of these fetish commodities. By confronting the viewer with the reality that lurks behind these glamorous objects of women's affection and men's fantasies, she "mobilizes effects that encompass the playful, the

²² Daily Mail Reporter, 'The Gwyneth Effect: Why Sales of Super-High Heels Are Soaring', *The Daily Mail*, 30 April, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1017675/The-Gwyneth-Effect-Why-sales-super-high-heels-soaring.html>, Accessed 6 May 2015

²³ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'If The Shoe Fits' in *Birgit Jürgenssen*, pp. 238

²⁴ Gajo Petrović, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, edited by Tom Bottomore, Laurence Harris, V.G. Kiernan, Ralph Miliband, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1983, pp. 411 - 413

grotesque, the poetically allusive, the horrific”, and above all the transformative and malleable properties of common materials.²⁵



Figure 7 David Batchelor, *Parapillar 7*, 2006

Another area that readymade art objects address is the framing and display mechanism used in capitalist economies to confer financial value on material objects. David Batchelor’s *Parapillar 7* of 2006 is a totem tower constructed from cheap small objects like plastic combs, clothes pegs, feather dusters, toilet brushes, foot files, plastic sifts and many more common household products (See Fig. 7). Purchased from the regular supermarket, these items are unlikely to exceed a total of GBP 200, however, the tower was sold in 2013 by Sotheby’s auction house for GBP 10,000 since its perceived status was elevated from an amalgamation of common household products to a desirable art object that was displayed at the Saatchi Gallery.²⁶ Batchelor’s tower acquired a symbolic value

when it became a cultural object that is displayed in a cultural institution.²⁷ As, John Berger notes, “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe”.²⁸ We have become conditioned to view art creations as expensive art objects and if they are displayed in famous galleries or museums, or if they were owned by celebrities then the price of the art object increases.

Polish artist Alicja Kwade successfully illustrates the notion of a learnt perception of value. In *Curb Jewels* of 2008, Kwade collected stones she found in the streets of Berlin and had them cut, carved and polished in the classical facet style adopted by the fine-jewellery industry. She is not attempting to fool the viewer, but rather to question and reflect on the “conventions that determine the value of



Figure 8 Alicja Kwade, *Curb Jewels*, 2008

²⁵ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, ‘If The Shoe Fits’ in *Brigit Jürgenssen*, pp. 234 – 238

²⁶ See artnet.com auction results for David Batchelor

²⁷ French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu states that “symbolic goods are a two-faced reality, a commodity and a symbolic object. Their specifically cultural value and their commercial value remain relatively independent, although their economic sanction may come to reinforce their cultural consecration”. In Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Market of Symbolic Goods’, in Johnson Randall, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 115

²⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books and British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 1972, pp. 8

things”.²⁹ (See Fig. 8). She used the same approach earlier in 2006 when she manipulated the shape and structure of the readily available charcoal briquette to expose “the contradiction between form and material” in *Lucy* (see Fig. 9).

The small visual cues discernible in *Lucy* and *Curb Jewels*; namely the multi-facet cut, the polishing of stones and the raised pedestal allude to gemstones of considerable monetary exchange value and we begin to formulate an estimate of their material worth before we even examine the stones that lie before our eyes. These visible clues which act like value signals in an empirical system; where “cultural assumptions about worth” are judged by the physical framing and visual display, are deeply



Figure 9 Alicja Kwade, *Lucy*, 2006

ingrained in our everyday existence, so much that we accept them as absolute reality. In an interview with Kimberly Bradley, Kwade questions the status quo, “It’s all about agreements, because we all agreed that it is like that, so it is like that. It’s not that somebody else is doing it, but we are doing it. Everybody of us is doing it, so creating the reality”.³⁰

Undeniably, the only reason that *Lucy* or *Curb Jewels* are not valued like gemstones is their failure to acquire gemstone status as instructed by the institutions and experts of the jewellery industry, rather than an inherent material concern with their substance composition.³¹

Hence, we may regard Kwade’s artworks as a poststructuralist artistic statement in which she

challenges the canonical structures which shape our cultural hierarchies and inject meaning into non-living objects. There is no inherent monetary value in objects since all value is perceived. In simple terms; it is what it is because we say it is!

In artworks like *Lucy* and *Curb Jewels*, Kwade extrapolates further the capricious association between an object and its signifier and “posits a kind of extreme subjectivity in which the empirical cornerstones of reality have been dislodged and replaced by a system which ascribes monetary

²⁹ Dobrila Denegri, ‘Alicja Kwade’ in Zak Branka Foundation, *Polish! Contemporary Art*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, pp. 164

³⁰ Alicja Kwade. Interview with Kimberly Bradley. Art Review Soundbite, Paris, December 1, 2013

³¹ All gemstones are essentially mineral substances that fall into two main categories; natural and synthetic. Their monetary value is determined by a number of conditions that were set by credible institutions and laboratories such as the GIA (Gemological Institute of America) or the IGI (International Gemmological Institute) and their cultural significance is determined by market conditions. In effect, all natural stones can be classified as gemstones should the authorities choose to sanction such an act.

value, material property, and rational meaning, on other terms”.³² In short, Kwade questions the domineering value system in today’s world.

Readymade art objects ultimately aim to blur the lines between the art world and real life (commercial world). They are the most prominent art form to illustrate the growing phenomena where art is becoming more consumeristic/commercial and commodities are becoming more cultural and artistic. Antoon Van Den Braembussche observes that, “only with the advent of capitalism did the tension between “economic” and “intrinsic” value of art emerge as a hot issue on the cultural agenda”.³³ Our societies grew to believe that Art possess an “experience of wonderment, indeterminacy, and ambiguity” which must transcend worldly economic principles and capitalist rationality.³⁴ However, as many of the above cited examples confirm, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, it is this inevitable by-product result of the readymades that Stallabrass is concerned with rather than the actual artwork form or its quality. Its inherent physical property reduces its being into a material commodity and like all commodities in a capitalist society with a free market, it acquires a monetary exchange value.

Several artists recognise this inevitable commercial end to their creations. They sought various ways to ‘de-create’ art and render it impossible to sustain a monetary exchange value for. Michael Landy’s 2001 *Break Down* art project is perhaps the most celebrated and successful art piece which



Figure 10 Michael Landy, *Break Down*, 2001

precluded this ending. It involved the systematic destruction of 7,227 items he owned including, books, furniture pieces, toys, clothing articles and many more. After a two-weeks-long process of deconstruction where his personal objects were “smashed, pulped and granulated” in a factory-

like setting with conveyor belts and a team of operators, his artwork creation was finally

³² James Harkness, ‘Translator’s Introduction’ in Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1983, pp. 24

³³ Antoon Van Den Braembussche, ‘The Value of Art’ in Arjo Klamer *The Value of Culture: On The Relationship Between Economics and Arts*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 1996, pp.33

³⁴ *Ibid.* 33

realised.³⁵(See Fig. 10). All that was left of this art performance piece is its memory, dust remains and documentation; which the art dealers requested to be bagged for sale. Landy refrained from yielding to their suggestion and his immediate economic need to preserve the integrity of his artwork. In the words of Landy, “*Break Down* is critical of consumerism but at the same time it does not pretend to stand outside it. You can’t stand outside it”.³⁶

The comingling of art, the media, the celebrity culture and the free market which undermines art’s autonomy and submerges it into the commercial world is what exasperates critics like Stallabrass. He expresses his distaste of this phenomenon when he writes,

*an emphasis on the image of youth, the prevalence of work that reproduces well on magazine pages, and the rise of the celebrity artist; work that cosies up to commodity culture and the fashion industry, and serves as accessible honey pots to sponsors; and a lack of critique, except in defined and controlled circumstances.*³⁷

His statement about readymade art is not a critique of the genre, but alludes to his apprehension of the capitalist system in which it exists.

³⁵ See Michael Landy Artangel projects. http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2001/break_down/about_the_project/break_down

³⁶ Michael Landy in conversation with Julian Stallabrass before the commencement of his project. http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2001/break_down/interviews/michael_landy_and_julian_stallabrass_2001

³⁷ Hal Foster, Rosalind Kraus, *Art Since 1900*, pp. 734

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