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On Markets and Culture: Object Exchange and Subject Formation

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

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2012

The Thesis of Misael Giovanni Diaz is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

DEDICATION

To my family and Amy.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

On Markets and Culture:
Object Exchange and Subject Formation

by

Misael Giovanni Diaz

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Fred Lonidier, Chair

This thesis explores the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings that have led me to develop an artistic practice rooted in interventions in the form/function/exchange of commodities to create micro-political renegotiations of subordination—using the act of exchange as a way of reflecting on the greater ideological order of social, cultural, and economic structures that maintain current relations of power.

I. Introduction

What follows is an attempt to synthesize the theoretical influences on my practice, to map the conceptual underpinnings of my artistic process and the ultimate goals or desires of the projects I have developed individually and as part of cog•nate collective. The most challenging aspect of writing this paper has been trying to contend with the disciplinary boundaries that separate the sources I have read, analyzed, and cite, recognizing the difficulty of moving from the fields of subjective experience (psychoanalysis/ philosophy), to the field of symbolic and material social relationships (anthropology), to institutional iterations of those relationships (sociology/political science), while at all times keeping in mind the central relationship between economy and culture. The result is an assemblage of concepts and ideas that although may be disrespectful to disciplinary and historical boundaries, represents the multi-layered and at times competing components in my practice--think the academic research equivalent of informal precarious improvised squatter structures.

One of my first presentations as part of the MFA program for a class taught by Teddy Cruz, included a slide with the following dialectics that encapsulated central concerns in my practice: idea / object, observer / creator (participant), art / non-art, public / private, egalitarian / hierarchical, dialogue / sermon, democracy / power, artist / citizen, everyday / transcendence, genius / chance, active / passive. Today, about to finish my time in the program, I would re-articulate these in the following way: state/market, public/private, subject/object, power/submission, dialogue/subservience, subjectivity/intersubjectivity, individual/collective, I/Other, Desire/discipline. For about two years I have attempted to work through these dialectics, in an attempt to understand

not just the relationship between the individual pairs, but to also develop an overall schema for understanding the interplay between these in the creation, legitimization and perpetuation of social, economic, cultural and thus political relations of power.

The first iteration of this schema was heavily influenced by Louis Althusser's work on Ideology. This concept became a way of understanding the relationship between these various pairs. Everything for Althusser is ultimately subsumed as part of the ideology that maintains a status quo plagued by unequal relations of power. As I have delved deeper in the model proposed by Althusser, I have come to better understand the significance of the model as a way of understanding the relationship between macro-political and macro-economic structures of domination, and the formation of subjectivity, i.e. the pathway between public rhetoric and private individual experience.

With this development has come an increased interest in the realm of subjective experience, in particular looking at psychoanalysis and philosophy to understand the move from subjectivity to intersubjectivity. In this, the writing of Hegel, the lectures of Jacques Lacan, the work of Slavoj Zizek, as well as a course taught by Marcel Henaff on the Struggle for Recognition have been instrumental. In Henaff's course I was introduced to the concept of recognition and the work of Axel Honneth, who attempts to marry the work of Lukacs on the Marxian concept of reification to the Heideggerian concept of "care" and ultimately, the Hegelian concept of recognition.¹

This link between an economic discourse and linguistic/philosophical concepts have been profoundly influential in continuing to establish a theoretical and

¹ Axel Honneth, "Reification: A Recognition-Theoretical View", Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Delivered at UC Berkeley, March 14-16, 2005.

methodological process from moving between the subjective and the social. This is of special interest to me because as Honneth argues, this effort is tied to the formation of new pathways in the negotiations of social and political realities, which remains a central concern in my practice.

Another important point of connection between these realms is an analysis of the commodity, the process of reification, and the significance of the act of exchange and consumption. These Marxian concepts have proved invaluable in understanding the relationship between object and subject, a relationship that art objects seem to articulate and work within. In my work, this connection is not sought through an affective route, but rather through an economic one: understanding the interplay of desire, fantasy, and commodity fetishism as integral to the Capitalist system of commodity consumption. Interventions into the realm of the commodity and the act of consumption/exchange become the crux for envisioning new possibilities for art that move beyond its function as a veiled commodity within the market system.

And with this, I come to the question of a political artistic practice. Throughout my time working with Fred Lonidier, I have been asked countless times: “What are your politics man?!” Although it always requires a laugh, the question is one that I have wrestled with: how is the work I produce political? What are the goals and aspirations of the projects I have executed? It isn’t until now that I realize that part of the difficulty in answering this question came as a result of having an unstable definition for politics or what it means to be political. I would consider one of the most critically important achievements of my time in the program to be the development of a fixed notion of what politics and the political means for me. Through the projects I have executed and the

research I have conducted, I have come to understand politics as the construction/negotiation of subordination, i.e. the realm of action and non-actions through which individuals establish/maintain/subvert their subservience to the Other and to the collective whole.

This working definition has allowed me to understand my work as political in that it attempts to not only make more visible the contours of this negotiation (to function as critique), but also catalyze or effectively renegotiate current economic and/or cultural patterns of subservience on a micro-level (to function as praxis). This is the best way I have found to understand the desires of the projects I have worked on throughout my time in the program and wish to continue developing afterwards.

A way to articulate this goal is through the analogy of short-circuits in electric fields. A short circuit is an unintended connection between two points of different potentials in a circuit that disrupt the dictated flow of current. My research and the intended results of the projects I have undertaken attempt to create such connections across disciplinary boundaries/approaches to the study of culture and economics as they relate to social and political issues. To use the categories developed by cultural studies theorist Michael Denning, I am interested in understanding/creating connections between national cultural markets and global mass culture, between hybridization and homogenization, and ultimately between the state in its capacity to survey/dictate movement and the market in its ability to alienate/reify.² For Denning, the division between market and state shapes a “fundamental antinomy of cultural studies” between

² Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 84.

the market-oriented cultural studies of the likes of Adorno's "Culture Industry" and Debord's "Theory of the Spectacle", and the state-oriented cultural studies of Foucault's "Discipline and Punishment" and Louis Althusser's "Ideological State Apparatus". These models and approaches exist as points with different potentials on the circuit of cultural research relating to economy and politics, to the creation/reproduction of socio-political hierarchies and division of power. I am interested in the short-circuit between the two fields: in the effect of analyzing and producing cultural artifacts that lie at the intersection between the relations of power maintained by states and relations of consumption/production maintained by markets.

In order to create such short-circuits, I at times make use of seemingly disparate sources to support my argument, e.g. Hegel and Marx. More than pastiche, I would like to propose and frame such theoretical contacts as short-circuits in the field of cultural theory, through which I hope to arrive at a model of research and practice grounded in micro-political interventions in sites like the Mercado de Artesanias de La Linea that exist literally at the intersection between state and market. Models of praxis that involve collaborations with labor/culture agents who do not fit into the categories of formal industrial production analyzed by Marx, or the abstract spiritual search for universal truth expressed in Hegel, but whose subsistence is impacted/limited by national and global cultural and commercial discourses that can be understood best by analyzing the interplay of cultural industries and cultural state apparatuses. Echoing Denning's call for cultural studies: "perhaps the very ordinariness [of mass culture industries and state apparatuses] today can lead us back to their place in daily life, to a sense of culture not simply as the peculiar ways of life of small and distinctive communities of identity nor as the new high

arts of the studios of Disney and Nintendo, but as the means of subsistence of mobile and migrant workers.”³ I would posit my work as analyzing the possibility of culture both as a tool for disrupting social, political and economic hegemonies, and simultaneously, as a method of engaging micro-level models of subsistence through cultural exchanges that create/make use of short-circuits in the field of cultural systems of production/distribution/consumption.

II. Social Realm:

From the Individual to the Collective

How is the connection between the subjective private-self and the collective public established? How is it negotiated? How can it be renegotiated? These questions first arose in my work when I started working with the topic of violence in Tijuana. In the city, like in many others in Mexico, drug-related violence was part of the public collective experience of the society. I was interested in understanding how this public exposure to violence, mostly through mass media, was interiorized, how it becomes part of a subjective experience. This led to an interest in studies of trauma, and especially to the work of Jean Baudrillard on spectacle and terrorism.⁴

More than re-presenting the effects of violence, I saw the role of the artist as seeking to understand the history and ideological dimension of violence in the society. I soon realized the task would involve an analysis of not just violence, but power and the

³ Denning 96.

⁴ Although the later work of Jean Baudrillard on terrorism is considered by some on the Left to be nihilistic and therefore problematic to analyze as a complement to my analysis of Marx, I have chosen to focus on his early work on symbolic exchange, prior to the adoption of positions that can be seen as wholly contradictory to positions developed with Marx.

search for power, which then lead to questions of national sovereignty, economy and the Mexican State. This inability to divorce the present day manifestation of violence to historical precedents of state repression and corruption made it difficult for me to tackle the topic of violence in a compelling way.

This led me to a consideration of violence in a more abstract, ideological component or form, divorced from the historical specificity of the present. To do this, I began a serious consideration of the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic. For Hegel, intersubjective encounters are at their genesis violent confrontations, a struggle between subjects to gain recognition from the Other, a struggle that results in one subject, the Master, establishing their superiority (and thus their dominion) over the Other, the Slave.⁵ This struggle for recognition is for Hegel an inevitable aspect of intersubjectivity, an aspect that establishes power relations between individuals and later structures the basis for the social collective.⁶

In pre-modern society, this struggle was negotiated through systems of what Jean Baudrillard called “symbolic exchanges”.⁷ Marcel Mauss’ work on gift exchanges are revelatory here, in that the systems of reciprocal exchange characteristic of gift giving either build social prestige or devolve (back) into violence. For Mauss, the gift is imbued

⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115.

⁶ I would also like to qualify my use of Hegel in this paper, recognizing that Marx broke with many of the paradigms established by Hegel. I am interested in Hegel in terms of intersubjectivity on an abstract level, as a frame to discuss negotiation of power relations. In this I believe there can be an interesting dialogue with the Marxian materialist approach to the formation and maintenance of unequal relations of power.

⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (London: Sage, 1972), 49.

with power that causes the recipient to reciprocate, establishing the basis for social relations and intersubjectivity. The act of exchange is for Mauss a total social fact:

Phenomena [that] are at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on. They are legal in that they concern individual and collective rights, organized and diffuse morality; they may be entirely obligatory, or subject simply to praise or disapproval. They are at once political and domestic, being of interest both to classes and to clans and families. They are religious; they concern true religion, animism, magic and diffuse religious mentality. They are economic, for the notions of value, utility, interest, luxury, wealth, acquisition, accumulation, consumption and liberal and sumptuous expenditure are all present.⁸

For Mauss the gift is the bridge between the subjective, private-self, and the collective, public-self. This system of reciprocal exchange is the bridge that structures how individuals understand themselves in relation to others, and thus the bridge that defines the individual's engagement with others; ultimately such exchange is a tool that shapes the contours of indebtedness and thus subordination. The object exchanged, allows for collective arrangements to form in pre-modern societies that prevent a community from devolving into violent anarchy. The object gives structure to subjects.

With the industrialization and urbanization of modernity, this relationship between object and subject changes. In *Capital*, Marx positioned the commodity as the defining object of exchange in industrialized society. Like the gift for Mauss, the commodity becomes the receptacle of an entire social schema, i.e. when exchanged the object encloses and embodies social arrangements, and reinforces the social/political order. However, unlike the gift, the object is alienated from the giver or exchanger: because it is considered private property it does not function to build social cohesions and

⁸ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2004), 101.

articulate social relationships.⁹ It rather converts social relationships into economic relationships, transforming intersubjective exchange into a form of commodity exchange: the subject becomes object. This process, which Marx called reification, subsumes the social, creating a social order that is subservient to the logic of the commodity and exchange for profit.

The commodity assumes like the gift, a magical aspect when it becomes an object of desire. Commodity fetishism endows the object with magical characteristics that drive the engine of capitalist production, exchange and consumption. Desire fuels the process of exchange, which becomes a mystical experience: the consumption of an object that contains more than itself, that seemingly represents more than itself. The logic of decay and “the new” intrinsic to capitalist production makes the desire insatiable, and the production/exchange/consumption of commodities maintains the unequal relations of power in the social order born from the accumulation of capital and private property.

Within this cycle, the social order based on the Marxian class dialectic is rearticulated in such a way that it will not be overturned or renegotiated. For Baudrillard, a renegotiation of this dialectic can therefore be achieved only through violence, through the return to the realm of symbolic exchange. Baudrillard argues for example, that terrorism today has assumed a function on a purely symbolic level, completely outside of the realm of commodity consumerism that defines contemporary global Capitalist society. Building on Mauss, Baudrillard understands violence as a return to a system of reciprocal exchange, the bridge that structures how the self is understood in relation to

⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy* (Penguin Classics: 1992), 179.

others, and thus the bridge that defines engagement with others and the symbolic negotiation of subservience. The arena for the renegotiation of subservience, political, social, ideological, is thrust back into the symbolic realm, outside of the realm of objects. This return to the symbolic realm can be seen clearly in the case of Mexico, a country in which *narco* symbolic acts of violence become a way of renegotiating their subservience to the State.

In my recent work, I have been developing projects like *Un Dolar 2011 - 2012* and *32 Cans* that postulate an alternative return to the realm of symbolic exchange, by conflating symbolic exchanges and commodity exchanges, creating new forms of exchange that act as micro-political renegotiations of subservience. The aspiration is that this move towards establishing connections between disparate parts, to create new pathways of signification between cultural, economic, and social components becomes a short circuit of sorts, diverting the ideological process that replicates and prevents a renegotiation of power relations.

III. Cultural Realm:

Ideology and Exchange

It's essentially a mechanism of economic exchange that allows a gesture to circulate as an artwork in the culture.¹⁰

In their entirety, what Mauss and before him Durkheim referred to as social facts can be seen as analogous to Louis Althusser's definition of Ideology. For Althusser, however, ideology begins/ends with the creation of the subject, that is, the interiorizing of

¹⁰ Alexander Alberro, ed., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), xxiii.

social facts not only dictates/molds the subjective experience by limiting the realm of possibility, but creates the possibility for subjects to come into existence in the first place. Here Althusser is thinking though Lacan, to understand the origin of the subject, a subject that can never exist outside of the Ideology that allowed for their formation.

Ideology dictates how one enters the collective realm, and it allows for that entrance: seemingly arguing that without a system that establishes and maintains a Master/Slave dialectic of power relations, collective models under capitalism would not be possible. This entrance was negotiated in the past, as seen in the work of Mauss and Marx, through the exchange of the object. In Althusser the object itself must be understood as a receptacle of ideology, as a cultural artifact whose consumption comes to define the formation of subjective experience and allow for collective experience.

Althusser's model of Ideology builds on Antonio Gramsci's work on Hegemony, understood as the system of moral and cultural values that allows a minority ruling class to maintain economic and political control over the oppressed masses. For Gramsci, this process unfolds as a negotiation between those who stand to benefit from the system of values, and those who will see their status unchanged. This is of interest, because unlike Althusser, who posits that all subjects are by their very understanding of themselves as individual subjects already part of a coercive system of thought, Gramsci figures individual and collective agency into the fold. In other words, the working class must consent to its own oppression. At times this concession is violently imposed, but at other times the working class participates willingly in the machine of their oppression. This can partly be explained or understood in relation to commodity fetishism, and the desire for objects as a desire of that which is forever beyond the object. To better understand this

link, we can rethink the relationship between Marx and Hegel. For Marx, the commodity itself lies at the heart of conflict, and so the desire of objects is what fuels the reproduction of the capitalist system. For Hegel, it is rather the self, and the need of the self to be recognized by an Other, that structures the conflict that drives history. Through Gramsci, we can see both of these understandings of desire play out in the role of popular culture within the construction of national hegemony: the desire of the cultural object (Marx-desire of commodity) driven by the desire to participate in the consumption of the commodity with others (Hegel-desire of Other) to establish and maintain group identity.

Culture is thus a prime agent of ideology in that it encloses/reproduces social facts, and in the process of consuming cultural objects the individual and the individual's relationship to others is given form. In other words, cultural consumption becomes a project of self-construction and the construction of citizens, as Nestor Garcia Canclini argues in relation to Mexico. The type of culture consumed defines the individual and makes of the individual a citizen, an agent of collective engagements.¹¹ As Canclini argues, the consumption of a similar culture allows consumers to become part of an imagined community—term used by Benedict Anderson to define the nation.

On the other hand, Bourdieu argues by building on the deferential semiotics of Sussure that the consumption of culture can also be a way of marking difference, acting as a social marker of taste and creating the High/Low cultural dialectic. Within this model, the more popular something becomes, the less it serves to mark a social distinction in class, making it part of the realm of the Low. The High realm of culture is

¹¹ Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2001), 39-40.

thus dictated by restricted access and availability, and in its consumption articulates a hierarchic social arrangement: "Every appropriation of a work of art which is the embodiment of a relation of distinction is itself a social relation and, contrary to the illusion of cultural communism, is a relation of distinction."¹² For Bourdieu, consumption becomes a matter of building and accruing cultural capital: "Aesthetic practice-- attendance at museums, theatres, galleries, concerts, reading, listening to music, lectures, and so on-- is bound up with a whole universe of material objects --furniture, clothes, painting, books--making up a certain 'cultural capital', which has symbolic value in the way that it 'buys' social distinction."¹³

Thus, cultural consumption constitutes the performance of social relationships, and the product in itself embodies a set of social relations within itself that are expressed when it enters the market as commodity. Returning to Baudrillard, cultural consumption and exchange becomes a way to rearticulate economic, social and political relations of power.

The act of consumption can be said to be social in two ways: in that the consumption of any cultural product establishes a relational social status (in consumption), while the product that is consumed carries within itself a set of social relationships that are manifest (in production) through its own status as a commodity.

In the traditional Marxian formula, Capitalism is defined by the transference between Money (Capital)-Commodities-Money (Profit/Surplus). In cultural consumption, the equation is the same, but the surplus is no longer monetary, but social and cultural

¹² Perre Bourdieu, from *Distinction*, in Michael Greenfell and Cheryl Hardy, *Art Rules: Pierre Bourdieu and the Visual Arts* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 45.

¹³ *ibid* 44.

(thus cultural capital). And again, the object, the commodity, is at the heart of this movement, the *raison d'être* and vehicle for the maintenance of power relations.

Expanding on the concept of reification, Althusser's argues that power relations have ceased being based on real intersubjective relationships, on actual encounters and struggles for recognition, but because they are mediated by objects divorced from the realm of subjective production, relations have become entirely symbolic. As Sean Carney explains "As reification the commodity mirrors back at men not themselves, or their real relations, but rather ghost-images of themselves: the commodity is a specter, both real and not real, future-oriented, containing a messianic kernel."¹⁴

Again we can return to the gift, an object that was endowed with symbolic elements that build social cohesion and structured power relations in the act of exchange because the individual was contained in it. This symbolic element was constructed/legitimized and allowed to function because of ideological constructs of values expressed in intersubjective exchange.

With the commodity, the symbolic dimension is sublimated, as the act of exchange is no longer for social prestige, or between two individuals seeking recognition, but for monetary currency, between individuals seeking not the other, but seeking capital (profit). The contestation of value is removed from the social and cultural realm, and it pretends to be inherent, innate. As a result reciprocal exchange no longer contains traces of the subject, but only of the subjects quantified labor, to be merely defined by its price, by a symbolic standard. This becomes the basis of the symbolic order that is the

¹⁴ Sean Carney, *Brecht & Critical Theory: Dialectics & Contemporary Aesthetics* (Routledge: 2006), 80.

ideological state of being: that structures the relationship between individuals. The symbolic order however, is sublimated, taken as natural, innate, and therefore becomes masked: the symbol becomes a thing, the representation becomes real.

This becomes the basis for ideological hegemony and control. As Bourdieu writes: "Intellectuals could be said to believe in representations--literature, theatre, painting-- more than things represented, whereas the people chiefly expect representations and the conventions which govern them to allow them to believe 'naively' in the things represented."¹⁵

Culture is the symbolic order that allows for the expression and satisfaction of desire within a group, so as to build relations of affinity or distinction with others, while allowing for mutual recognition and respect of difference. The abuse of desire, or the insatiability of desire, is what breaks the accord and causes devolution towards violence, disintegrating the walls of the symbolic order.

There is therefore a need to return to culture, to the symbolic relationship of people to things and to each other, to rethink the position of the commodity as gatekeeper between the self and the collective, to reimagine the connection between the private and the public, between the desire of self and the desire of the Other, between the Master and the Slave.

¹⁵ Bourdieu, in Grenfall & Hardy, 46.

IV. Political Realm:

Short-Circuits

“Commodities are things, and therefore lack the power to resist man. If they are unwilling, he can use force; in other words, he can take possession of them. In order that these objects may enter into relation with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another as persons whose will resides in those objects... it is as bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other.”¹⁶

Within a society organized according to the logic of commodity production/consumption, in which intersubjective exchange is regulated by products of alienated labor, the desire for recognition by the Other is no longer resolved through a direct confrontation. The commodity becomes the mediator between self and other, and thus object of desire for that which transcends the object, entering into the realm of fetishism. The result is a negation of the object in two dimensions: the act of consumption not only negates the commodity, but also the Other who produced it, the Other subject who has been transformed into object. The desire for recognition is not satisfied, and desire becomes unsatiable in the system of commodity exchange. As Zizek writes:

Desiring property and power is legitimate insofar as it enables an individual to achieve independence from others. Adversaries in a conflict, however, each have a natural tendency always to demand more. Nothing is enough for them and they are never satisfied. They do not know how to stop themselves; they know no limits. Desire demands more, much more, than need.¹⁷

The lack of significant intersubjective exchange transforms the Other into a figure to be feared, a figure who in satisfying their presumed desire would negate the self. Again to return to Zizek: “The Levinasian figure of the Neighbor as the imponderable Other who

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy* (Penguin Classics: 1992), 179.

¹⁷ Slavoj Zizek, *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 63.

deserves our unconditional respect” becomes “the imponderable Other as enemy, who is the absolute Other and no longer the ‘honorable enemy’, but someone whose very reasoning is foreign to us, so that no authentic encounter with him in battle is possible.”¹⁸

The limitlessness of desire is a consequence of modernity, of the capitalistic order in which money and value begets an accumulation and search for more, and the circulation in the market is infinite. This limitlessness is expressed as a constant return, as a failure to end, to be consumed, to reach a conclusion, a closed circuit of desire, consumption, and fear of the Other.¹⁹

This leads to a condition of increasing separation between Masters and Slaves, codified as political relations of power in which equality represents compromise of the self’s desire. It is therefore in the circulation of commodities, and the exchange of consumer objects that the political relations that structure society find their expression, where Desire, and the conflicts that arise from its satisfaction reside.

As interventions in the act of exchange/consumption, projects I have developed serve a documentary function, mapping the current political circuits that are superimposed on social and cultural relations of power. An intervention into these circuits can reveal possible reconfigurations, in either the private formation of subject, or in the realm of social-cultural engagement. The ultimate aim of these alterations is to renegotiate the configuration of subordination, the relations of power, creating political change on a micro-level. This change can then reveal or hint at the possibility of macro political engagement and thus the interruption of the circular articulation of ideology.

¹⁸ Zizek 55.

¹⁹ “Rivalry between human beings can only be surmounted when each individual puts a limit on his or her own desires.” Zizek 63.

In works like *Un Dolar 2011 & 2012* and *Mapping the Cross Border trajectory of Objects...* these interventions serve to map glitches revealing the shortcomings of the program, working to reveal or exploit the vacuous spaces and gaps where the system fails, where, if only momentarily and seemingly inconsequentially, the logical progression breaks down. The act of repetition and seriality in these works act to highlight the structural operation of the commodity exchange system, but also hint at the possibility of new systems, of new circuits, of new structures. And this is what the projects reach for, what they strive to accomplish: the instrumentalization of glitches and disturbances in the collective structure of commodity exchange, to invert the social, political, economic and cultural hierarchies that their consumption construct and legitimize.

At the very (still very ambitious) least, the projects seek to adopt a position articulated by Helio Oiticica for his own explorations with radical conceptualism as a “starting point for...social and political changes, or the fomenting of them at least...the retaking of confidence by the individual in his or her intuitions and most precious aspirations.”²⁰ A position that was echoed by the artists of Tucuman Arde who described “the deployment of an artistic phenomenon as positive and real actions intended to initiate a modification of the environment in which they were generated...[an] artistic object capable, on its own, to produce modifications as effective as a political act.”²¹

What is important is creating disruptions, short-circuits that disturb the socially

²⁰ Helio Oiticica, “Position and Program”, in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, 8-10 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 9.

²¹ Maria Teresa Gramuglio and Nicolas Rosa, “Tucuman Burns” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, 76-79 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 76.

dictated rationale for the current political order; that demonstrate the irrationality of the logic, and hack the logic to create alternatives, new possibilities that have been excluded in the economic relations of power. As Chantal Mouffe notes:

Things could always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. It is in that sense that it can be called ‘political’ since it is the expression of a particular structure of power relations. Power is constitutive of the social because the social could not exist without the power relations through which it is given shape.²²

V. Public Realm:

From Greek Agora to Border Market

Individuals seek power so as to not be dominated by others.²³

Public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation.²⁴

The current nature of political/economic relations of power creates vacuous identities (subjects) that can be easily molded/given form by hegemonic ideologies. For Chantal Mouffe, public space becomes the site to engage in the struggle against such hegemonizing structures. The public realm is the space where the individual enters into the realm of the collective: the negotiations between self and other are contested and structured in public space.

This is not to say that the private realm is not a site of contention, as the ideology permeated in public space is interiorized and made subjective in the private realm.

Returning to Althusser, however, the moment in which the individual can assume the

²² Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces”, *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts, and Methods*, Volume 1 No. 2 (Summer 2007), 3.

²³ Zizek 63.

²⁴ Mouffe 3.

form of subject, and therefore enter to the realm of the collective, is the moment when the individual enters into ideology, an ideology that itself is molded and crafted by a collective hegemonic force. There can be no subject without a collectivized ideology to give it form, structure, meaning, identity, a notion derived from Lacan's work on Language, and on Freud's notion of the ego and superego.

It is therefore in the public sphere that new relationships to the private can be formed where learned Desires can be questioned, and repressed Desires can be voiced. This is because symbolic exchanges have continued to take place in public space to effectively negotiate social relations, whether it is a party in the mountains of Mexico, as was first analyzed by George M. Foster in Tzintzuntzan, or terrorist acts like those analyzed by Baudrillard, and those in Mexico that see Narcos hanging bodies from bridges. These acts become ways to dictate the realm of action of the individual subject, intersections of the political and the social that take place and depend on the public dimension of the act.

Marketplaces have become a site of interest in my work, as they are physical spaces in which the intersections of commodity consumption and social/cultural exchanges take place. The market place has thus emerged as a key site in which to imagine the renegotiation of the act of consumption and the possibility of direct intersubjective exchange, with a political purpose. In particular I have looked at three models of marketplace, the Greek Agora (through the work of Hannah Arendt), the Parisian Arcades (through the work of Walter Benjamin), and border marketplaces (through my work with cog•nate collective).

The Greek Agora has served as an abstract case study, and is of interest for the

way it functioned as a site for civic engagement and dialogue, in addition to being a site of commercial exchange. Agoras in ancient Greece developed in response to the need to bring together individuals from various villages, as these joined together to form towns. The agora as space was integral in creating a political and commercial semblance of unity between disparate villages: "If a Greek town had grown out of the fusion of earlier separate villages, the former sacred area of one of them became the focal point of the new organism...An agora in the later sense did not exist yet. It would develop from the need for a political and commercial center for all inhabitants together."²⁵ The Agora can be conceptualized as a sort of platform, a physical and conceptual space in which commercial, but more importantly social, civic and cultural exchanges can be located, a site in which political relations of power can be addressed.

I have sought to understand this model of the Agora in relation to the work of Hannah Arendt on the public realm in Greek society. In Greek society, speech and action were valued as the basis through which the political realm was enacted. In this entering of the political, the "social" (Roman word, not Greek, conveying "an alliance between people for a specific purpose") was engaged in so much as communication needed to occur between individuals, *as equals*. This represented a way of life in which the central concern of citizens was to talk with each other.

This meant, that in order to participate in the political sphere, the primal necessities associated with the home had to be satisfied and even destroyed, that is the act of negation and the imposition of hierarchy were construed as existing entirely as part of

²⁵ Paul Zucker, *Town and Square: From the Agora to the Village Green* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 27.

the private realm.²⁶ This would allow for public engagement to take place in a non-violent manner in the agora: “It is the agora that makes a town a polis... This new element, represented by the Agora, new from the sociological as well as architectural viewpoint, was based on the potentialities of a gradually growing democracy and may be contrasted with the principle of the axis... [which] always represents the architecturally crystallized form of a dictatorial concept of society.”²⁷

This began to change with the advent of industrialization, the modern discourse of individualism, and eventually the development of a commodity based economy with the spread of capitalism. The resulting society is organized as a collective arrangements of households, economically organized into a super-human family as "society", and politically organized as "nation".²⁸ This nation became organized as the household had been conceived in classical terms: as the violent establishment of hierarchy to rule over the house, to assure the satisfaction of need. And the satisfaction of desire through the negation of objects (i.e. consumption of commodities) became the logic for intersubjective exchange.

This transformed markets into sites of commercial exchange, into temples of commodity fetishism and sites of surplus that nonetheless failed to result in significant intersubjective exchange. Walter Benjamin recognized and analyzed the duality of potential and failure for engagement of modern marketplaces in relation to the Parisian Arcades, spaces that were at once utopic realms of possibility--shelters from the

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 31.

²⁷ Zucker 31.

²⁸ Arendt 28.

alienation of the urban landscape that presented endless choice of consumption--and sites where that consumption could never be fully satisfied, where the desire of commodity fetishism would prevent/interrupt meaningful exchange, and for Benjamin, consciousness of the historical significance of the present moment.

In the fragmentary Arcades Project, like in much of his work, dreams figure heavily. For Benjamin, the Arcades represented a sort of dream, but awakening from it was impossible through the act of consumption alone. The symbolic realm of the dream, wholly centered on the I and in which the Other is subsumed, becomes a prototype for a way of understanding Ideology in Althusser, and Spectacle in Debord. What unites the concepts is the way commodity consumption maintains and in some cases prevents an awakening onto the realization of its empty promise of deliverance from desire. For Benjamin, the act of desire and the act of consumption is powerful precisely because it holds within itself a vision of utopia, a deliverance from want, from need. Of course, this promise was perpetually in a state of deferral, and what results is the creation of masses of consumers, which became fully engrained with the development of department stores.

Benjamin notes about the department store: "The customers perceive themselves as a mass; they are confronted with an assortment of commodities; they take in all the floors at a glance; they pay fixed prices; they can make exchanges."²⁹ Benjamin identifies the possibility of localizing the act of politicization in the act of consumption, as the act of consumption is now on the level of the collective, on the level of the masses.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, Notes from *The Arcades Project*, in *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, ed. Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2006), 95.

Today, this has reached an even greater scale, as entire nations can be seen as consumers in global networks of markets. Within this network, Border Markets (markets along the border between two nations that sell mainly to travelers between the two countries) can be said to represent the contemporary correspondent to the Arcades. These markets represent at once the potential to undermine the creation/upholding of national borders for consumers, while at once failing to achieve a meaningful exchange beyond desire and commodity consumerism. The myth of nation, the transgression of the myth, and the fetishistic desire for kitsch objects come together in liminal spaces like the San Ysidro Port of Entry.

Here you find the dialectic of the commodity analyzed by Benjamin (the new becoming old, and the new new as utopia) on the level of physical market structures, as once booming marketplaces become ruins and new shopping centers are heralded as utopias. At the San Ysidro Port of Entry, this dialectic is represented by the Mercado de Artesanias de la Linea on the Mexican side of the border, and the Plaza las Americas on the U.S. side of the border.

The Mercado de Artesanias was at one time a booming market designed to function as a promenade with about 80 stalls selling artisan and folk products from various regions of Mexico, a site where tourists and locals alike could experience the Other through cultural objects and then perhaps gift it as a souvenir. Today, lack of tourism has left a large variety of the Market empty or selling objects representative of American popular culture, divorced increasingly from actual indigenous communities, manufactured in China and made to represent stereotypic images of “Mexican culture”,

and thus disallowing genuine intersubjective exchange--allowing only an engagement with the Other as specter (simulation) of the Other.

On the other side of the border, the Plaza de Las Americas, a large outlet shopping center with 125 stores selling clothes and accessories from popular American brands is flooded with buyers, a significant number of which are from Tijuana. The consumption is driven by a desire for differentiation, following Bordieu, a desire to accrue cultural capital to use as a form of social class differentiation. The Plaza itself, modeled and corridors of which are named for renown public city centers like Las Ramblas in Barcelona, is the contemporary arcade, where an entire city (Tijuana) flocks to purchase objects that will simultaneously dissolve the border and rearticulate it within the social public realm of the city. Citizenship is granted to brands, to trans-national icons, and in consumption allegiance to them is pledged.

My work as part of cog•nate collective has used the Mercado de Artesanias as a case-study of the possibilities/limitations of markets to become spaces for alternative forms of intersubjective exchange, both social and economic. The work has taken the form of mapping current networks of economic exchange and structures that govern and organize the market, as well as the repurposing of space to incorporate new actors, especially those who had been excluded such as a group of Mixtec women and children, to become part of the social, economic and cultural fabric of the market. This has taken the form of hosting a residency for a Mixtec collective of self-taught artisans to grant them space to produce and sell hand-embroidered blouses, and also working collaboratively with them to produce pieces like *Es Mejor encender una luz...* which was

part of the *Espacio Disponible* project that sought to create new forms of address at the crossing that did not have a commercial end.

Through such projects, the possibility of transforming the Mercado de Artesanias de La Linea into an agora of sorts, a site of meaningful and transformative dialogue and alternative forms of commercial exchange has been sought and will continue to be explored and developed.

VI. Conclusion

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it. – Bertol Brecht

I would like my work to achieve what Brecht ascribes to realism, in particular making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it. That is, allowing for micro-political changes to occur through interventions in the form/function/exchange of commodities, while also using the act of exchange as a way of reflecting on the greater ideological order of social, cultural, and economic structures that maintain current relations of power and prevent a renegotiation of subordination without an erupting into violence. This is what I have sought to do and will continue to attempt through my work individually and as part of cog•nate collective.

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