

A White Cow in a Snowstorm

Walead Beshty

Page 1: [1] Comment	Walead Beshty	8/19/06 1:51 PM
i think this goes without saying, every version of this text is "new and revised", in other words, the title refers to the project, and the parameters of the project haven't been revised...		
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1 See Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces" in Rosalind Krauss, <i>The Originality of the Avant-</i>		
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You believe in a crystal edifice that can never be destroyed, an edifice at which one would not be able to stick one's tongue out, or to thumb one's nose, even on the sly. And I am afraid of this edifice because it is of crystal and can never be destroyed, and because one could not stick out one's tongue at it on the sly. —Fyodor Dostoevsky

At the 1913 Armory Show in New York, Marcel Duchamp deposited what was a confounding challenge to the efficacy of artistic practice. By simple transposition, a displaced urinal titled *Fountain*, disassembled an assumed continuity between art and daily life. In one gesture, Duchamp's "invention" of the readymade not only managed to offend the still prevalent connoisseurist torpor of nineteenth-century tastes, but simultaneously issued what would be a crippling foreclosure on the most radical and coveted aspirations of a utopian avant-garde. The epic project to dismantle the border between art and daily life and transform art into an implement of social change was not only lampooned, but rendered moot. Easily dismissable as yet another childish scatalogical Dadaist taunt, the readymade's seeming impudence cloaked a much more corrosive and unforgiving revelation. While on its first face, the readymade represented the power of the work of art to reflect and problematize its context, positing what would prove to be one of its most disarming abilities (i.e., its capacity to reflexively examine its own social function as it is tied to the conditions of exhibition), it simultaneously refuted the possibility for direct political efficacy in any gesture that called itself art. For if a gesture as simple as the recontextualization of a common object could obliterate its use-value, thus transforming it into art, it also made it clear that this quality of uselessness was alone the very thing that made art art. The readymade didn't so much alter or pluralize the art object, than it distilled it to its base social condition, a quality Rosalind Krauss called "exhibitionality."¹ To follow the logic of the readymade, each art object, equally dependant upon the frame of exhibition, was also equally mute when it came to the address of an external state of affairs. The disjunction between the utopian aspirations of art, and art's relation to the everyday, was more than simply the byproduct of exhibition. It was the very foundation of it.

In "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," a text that would become the foundation for his epic and unfinished treatise on modernity *Das Passagen-Werk* or *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin echoed Duchamp's insight with similar irony. Benjamin surmised that the impetus to collect and display objects derived from the desire to evoke "a world that is not just distant, and long gone, but also better—a world in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the real world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful."²

Perhaps the subtly backhanded tilt to Benjamin's wording, especially the phrase "drudgery of being useful" was the result of witnessing the radical formalism of the avant-garde transform into the aesthetic of totalitarian propaganda in the hands of Stalin and Hitler. Regardless, in both Duchamp's and Benjamin's constructions, art's ability to imagine a utopian image of the world is inextricably tied to its incompatibility with the world of instrumental use. We thus have a paralyzing double bind: the proposal of a transformative utopian vision of functionalist and materialist aesthetics required the absence of instrumental use to even be spoken, a seemingly unacceptable trespass upon the very ideal that defined the productions of the avant-garde. Conscripted to a limited field of possibilities, a producer who acknowledged the implications of the readymade was forced to position themselves within an array of equally bleak options, either resigning to a general attitude of bourgeois complacency, a naïve zealotry, or engage in a prolonged negative characterization of their own crisis of efficacy by rephrasing it in a multitude of equally deadened forms. Thierry de Duve put it succinctly when he wrote that in the wake of the readymade, the only truth to which art could attest was the power of its own name, a "pact that would unite the spectators of the future around some object . . . that added nothing to the constructed environment and did not improve on it but, quite the contrary, pulled away from it, bearing no other function than that of pure signifier." ³ Duchamp's "invention" was corrosive not only to any sense of ideological purity that contemporary and future productions might claim, but most importantly, to the movement-based history of art itself. What defined art was this invisible "pact" that Duchamp had exploited, a mass collusion around a tacitly agreed upon category that was autonomous from any rational criteria, materiality, or functionality. In contradistinction to his contemporaries, Duchamp did not strive to expand the field of possibilities available, but quite the opposite; he locked art within an invisible prison of its own making. Yet, the paradox that Duchamp outlined relied upon the invulnerability and evasiveness of the monolithic categorical framework that assures the term art its symbolic power (i.e. that of exhibition or exhibitionality) as an a priori and ahistorical ideological structure.

If there is any lesson to be learned from Duchamp's transgression, it is that no object within an exhibition can be taken literally: in functional terms, making an exhibition is to work by analogy, to work via a model. Extricated from the world of use, exhibitions operate allegorically, no matter how one defines the parameters. To confuse this is to fall into the looking glass, to live life within phantasmagoria. Exhibitions always suffer from parallax when drawn into comparison with the everyday. They act as hypotheses, and perhaps this is why they have become affixed to the tabula rasa of Cartesian grids, far removed from sites of common exchange, cloaked in museum white.

The Great Exhibition of 1851, held in London's Hyde Park, defined the conditions of exhibition in the modern sense. From the early 1500s onward the term had only specialized legal meaning, referring to a giving of evidence, meaning literally to "hold out." But with the Great Exhibition, and in world's fairs that followed, the antiquarian meaning and implications of the term blossomed. Born of the nascent consumer culture of Victorian England, the world's fairs were a key distillation of modernity, uniting technological innovation, immersive spectacle, nationalist ideology, and a forewarning of the borderless world of global capital. In short, they were an instrumental expression of modern life by symbolic metonymy. The late nineteenth century also gave rise to the modern corporation. The corporation, which would achieve the most radical redefinition of personhood in a legal sense by the end of the century—re-imagining the very qualifications of the term "individual" as constituted by the state—was in its earliest stages at the time of the world's fairs. Many have written of the redefinition of subjectivity in early modernism as fractured and anomic, an optically centric incorporeality initiated by a constellation of discursive forces too expansive to discuss here, but the invention of the modern corporation as individual under the law is perhaps the clearest, and most complete distillation of this transformation. It was not merely anthropomorphization, but the becoming of abstract and ephemeral relations in political, economic, and productive terms as a subject. It is why McDonald's can now speak in the first person, and it also provides for the possibility for a series of ruses, provocations, and liquidities. What for the humanist was the indelible and ineffable fact of the individual was rendered porous and contingent, stripped completely from the notion of the body (a term corporations semantically contain, i.e. corpus). Far from obeying the humanist conception of the self, corporations are instead a multitude of voices congealed into a singular entity, a transcription of an ephemeral set of compromises and competing agendas given a singular voice. As Gilles Deleuze noted, the corporation is "a spirit, a gas," and we must wonder what it means for this ghost to speak.

In the late '80s and early '90s, many artists were going corporate, sweating out the entrenched polarization that fueled the critical debates of the preceding decades. The paragon of '60's artistic radicalism, the art worker, received a promotion to bourgeois entrepreneur. Warholian-dandy nihilism became less provocation and parody (becoming earnest is the trump card for an earlier generation's irony), and more about being self-sustaining. At its worst this was cynical realism; at its best it was a reflexive understanding that the traffic of a work of art, its role in the market, is a key element of its meaning. Recently one contemporary artist said in a lecture that the most important artistic precedent in recent times was American Apparel.

Saying that it is effective as art because it is self-sustaining outside of art, a complete reversal of the bourgeois readymade. But this example forces the question of whether art can exist outside the frame of exhibition by simply stepping to the side, by resigning the title “art,” and even if it operates outside the literal context of a museum or gallery space, can it exist without an implied “exhibitionality”?⁴ Still, with the erosion of the mythology of a white cube as a pure site of experiential exchange, and the awareness of an art object’s capacity to reflect the contradictions implicit in its condition, the backstage machinations of the marketplace and its relation to the network of exhibition spaces remain impolitic topics of discussion. With the accepted condition of compromise, the competing forces that shape the production and reception of art have become even more adept at hiding in plain sight.

Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace, which housed the Great Exhibition of 1851, was a singularly remarkable material manifestation of this paradox posed architecturally. The Crystal Palace was the prototype of the modern steel and open-frame, glass curtain-walled architecture, providing the template for what would become the museum, the corporate complex, and the department store. Conceptually, the structure took the industrial dream of endless production and limitless expansion as defining principles, innovating a design that eschewed the monolithic stone construction and the revivalist pastiche popular in its time, opting instead for a serialized modular structure of four-foot-square cells comprised of wrought iron. Despite its immense scale (it was over 1800 feet in length and covered nineteen acres) and industrial construction, it had an overall feeling of “lightness,” the glass panes alternating between reflections of blue sky and surrounding greenery. Its sheer ephemerality so perplexed contemporary critics that it was denied even its existence as architecture. The Crystal Palace was not of the world of buildings and monuments. It was a machine, a container for vistas, a scrim upon which spectacle could occur: a proposal that was alien to the public affirmation of cultural stability that architecture had come to represent. It was perpetually new, a structure whose modular construction allowed endless substitution. Or, more exactly, it was an embodiment of newness. At every turn, its interchangeable serial components shone with a “fairy-like brilliance,” as if dropped from the heavens. When it was gone it would leave no auratic ruin for tourists, burning up in an explosive fire that was all too fitting.

General consensus denied the Crystal Palace a place in the esoteric battle over architecture’s identity. It was the work of a technician not of an architect (artist). Paxton wasn’t ideological enough to be labeled a heretic—there was no manifesto for the Crystal Palace; that project could be left to the high

practitioners. He was ostensibly making do, problem solving—there was no program, no doctrine. Its effect was an “intoxicating” and disorienting experience. As one critic described, “It is, in my opinion, extraordinarily difficult to arrive at a clear perception of the effect of form and scale in this incorporeal space.” Or as another visitor wrote, “There is no longer any true interior or exterior, the barrier erected between us and the landscape is almost ethereal.” He continued, “If we can imagine that air can be poured like a liquid, then it has, here, achieved solid form.”⁵ The threat that the structure contained to architecture proper was its challenge to humanism and the authorial mark. It contained no singular architectural event, no style. It was, instead, a frame. The architecture embodied not only a technological sublime in its modular and serialized industrial form, but also the very concept of exhibition. Its chief effect was invisibility, with its grand halls described as a chimerical container for “a perspective so extended” that it appeared to be, “a section of atmosphere cut from the sky.”⁶ As a site, it was a microcosmic image of the reach of the western world, an egalitarian fantasy that invited visitors to engage in virtual transport, offering the compression of time and space, a safari of capitalism staged in an interior as “a journey through a charged and exotic landscape.”⁷

It was then, not some fifty years later, that architecture cleaved the visual from corporeal reality. Long before Le Corbusier’s Maison Domino ushered in an era of functionalist architecture (the ubiquitous contemporary form of the art exhibition space), architecture and cinema (time travel) were one and the same: modern architecture had already been born as a Cartesian virtual reality. Everything within the modernist architectural field, from the accumulation of objects to the world framed by its windows, were elements in an expansive order, an abstract topography that we are invited to float above and through, like ghosts. The body subsequently left behind is relegated to one more modular element in the constellation of objects, to be considered as a relational component, a unit of measure, an abstraction. Where labor’s vulgar bodily exertions are required, it exists out of view, in off-hours, backrooms, and distant factories, negotiated in private communications and invisible transports.

The Crystal Palace threatened not only traditional architecture, but also the traditional divisions between the classes. It served as a prescient indication of the impending displacement of an aristocratic elite’s monopoly on the dictation of cultural value at the hands of free-market modernity, an awareness seemingly lost on Victorian architecture’s clunky pastiche. As with the corporation, architecture as a bodily extension, an exoskeleton that protects our fleshy vulnerability, was becoming a vapor. There was

no need for massive granite walls to protect wealth and power; capital could now float in the ether. The marketplace, and the form of populism it offered, would be the new social fabric; it would create its own alternate time and spatiality. It was an abstract site unto itself. Within its walls the Crystal Palace disrupted notions of spatio-temporal connectivity. Anyone could experience sights and smells from around the world by moving only a few steps. Anyone could survey the expanse of exhibits from one of its many balconies, and take possession of the ersatz world laid before them, like gods from Olympus. It was sights such as these that led Stéphane Malarmé, in a series of articles on his travels to one of London's later fairs, to comment that "the word *authentic*, which was for many years the sacramental term of antiquarians, will no longer will have any meaning."⁸

Yet discussions of authenticity, on authorial presence, persist without irony. In its name, vulgar Marxists continue a ritualistic unmasking with Dimmesdale-like self-flagellation, neo-populists with moral authority and condescension. Puritanism is still in vogue. The innocent and the righteous both require monumental evils around which to congeal the compromises of everyday life. For many, the only answer to proposed utopia is to imagine its opposite, apocalypse. Yet both are cut from the same cloth, and the one has always implied the other. Both contain alternate time or timelessness. Functionality is never the measure for their potency; they exist in parallel, exempt from a collective temporality as synchronic expanses. The dystopian morality tale came into popularity among cultural discontents in the late 1800s. They were a tool of both right- and left-wing agitators, perhaps because such imaginings allowed for visceral, ideological clarity. The fantasy of utopia and apocalypse produce the same emotional impact. Each implies a radical suspension of a contemporary state of affairs and are seamlessly substitutable for the another. Exhibitions are utopias in the strictest sense of the word. As hypothetical sets of relationships, they are non-places, symbolic sites, with no easily claimable, direct worldly implication beyond their own material fact (such implications are hidden, interpretive). They simultaneously imply their opposite, an apocalypse of meaning, or as is more often lamented, an unattained political efficacy. There is a giddy elation in imagining a parallel world freed from our familiar day-to-day negotiations; but perhaps there is a way to recognize this need for fantasy without cynical resignation.

The nihilistic cavalcade of mirroring, appropriation, and copying, in the hands of Warhol, and later in the hands of the pictures generation, was a re-reversal of the avant-gardist faith in industrialization to enable an egalitarian technological utopia. Perhaps this neo-Duchampian maneuver was necessary to

overturn the neo-avant-garde: perhaps we are on our way to affixing further neos upon the others. Like clockwork, this cynicism has caused some to reinvest in a redemptive artistic voice, an experiential mythos vicariously delivered. This is an even more bleak state of affairs. Where once the recognition of anomie was hopeful, a repressed nihilistic vision called into view, the reemergence of the artist shaman offers emptiness as sustenance, the dictation of emotional experience by tacit authority: an aesthetic fascism. This is not an ethical problem, but more one of sheer boredom; like the drab neoclassical, neo-baroque Victorian aesthetics that Paxton turned a blind eye to in his Crystal Palace, the reiteration of returns deflates any possibility for outrage or enthusiasm. Utopianism need not be *retardinaire*; nor does emotional experience. And if it is true that art has lost a "personal" voice, its resuscitation requires more than amnesiac pantomime. The endless circulation of purisms in a culture of copies always seems to lead to the same place, back into the blank, which leaves the sites of production camouflaged in plain view, like Paul Bilhaud's preemptive joke on monochrome painting's radicality, a white cow in a snowstorm.⁹ Despite their potency and succinct radicality, both the readymade and the Crystal Palace were monolithic and absolutist proposals. In both instances, as viewers, our role is to dissolve into their frames, into an aggregated mass subject to their proposals of order and meaning. Yet, seeing ourselves as part of the mass, our individuality in a perpetual vacillation between disappearance and reappearance, does not have to be debilitating. Rather, it can be a source of strength.

Autonomy has historically emerged from such zones; pirates and radicals hide like rats in the walls, housewives stage mini-revolutions in their kitchens, office workers in their cubicles. An understanding of this can make it clear that production is a common fact, a daily ritual of compromise enacted with various levels of awareness, but present nonetheless, as a lingering force. We can be both inside and outside of the picture, one of its parts and one of its producers; there need not be a stratified hierarchy in our relationship to aesthetics. The imbedded compromises and negotiations present in any production and the lack of authorial solidity need not be seen as dirty secrets. This would not be an absolutist proclamation of the corruption of authorship, but rather, an assertion that this authorial position is a communal one. In this realization, there is a middle ground, where negotiations may be rendered transparent. All production, even that of authorship, are simply transit points, and indexes of competing forces, with the appearance of solidity.

The world we see from transitional spaces—the world outside the window; the world from the perspective of escalators, people movers, monorails,

and shopping centers—has become an intellectual bogeyman, a storage container for all our alienations. As infrastructural interstitial zones and transitory spaces, they stand as compromised, indeterminate way stations between chimerical destinations. Some of these sites promise a moment before symbolization, or outside it. But as an open field they occupy the space of bare fact, of which we should be suspicious. But perhaps it is our presumption that all things, in order to exist, must have a determinable authorship that renders inscrutable these plays of compromise. Railing against architecture has become a noble leftist cause. Perhaps this is because architecture's seeming solidity offers the hope for a stable and dominant ideological power to fight; a metaphor for the patriarchal institution, social and otherwise; a wall to bloody one's knuckles against. As Bataille wrote, "The storming of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of affairs: it is hard to explain this mass movement other than through the people's animosity (animus) against the monuments that are its real masters." ¹⁰ From a distant vantage point, all action is symbolic. But models such as the Crystal Palace are unstable; they float, they are a mass-cultural collusion. The monolithic expressions of power are a similar accumulation of compromise and negotiation, they all contain gaps where any visitor may assert their own agenda; we, too, are collaborators even if we choose to relinquish this role. These momentary openings, the pockets between, their ruins, their transitory spaces, their ignored seams and forgotten vistas, promise a site from which the either/or of utopian and apocalyptic thinking, or the political/formalist opposition can be dismantled, and production can be both symbolic and literal at once.

*The uncitable influences of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, George Bataille's "The Accursed Share," Patrick Beaver's *The Crystal Palace, 1851–1936: A Portrait of a Victorian Enterprise*, Beatrice Colomina's *Privacy and Publicity*, Marshall Berman's *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, Seth Price's "Dispersion," Michel DeCerteau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Keller Easterling's *Believers and Cheaters*, Frances Stark's *The Architect and the Housewife*, and Raymond Williams' *Culture and Materialism* should be noted.

Notes

1. SEE ROSALIND KRAUSS, "PHOTOGRAPHY'S DISCURSIVE SPACES" IN ROSALIND KRAUSS, *THE ORIGINALITY OF THE AVANT-GARDE AND OTHER MODERNIST MYTHS* (CAMBRIDGE, MA: MIT PRESS, 1985), 131-150.
2. WALTER BENJAMIN, "PARIS, CAPITAL OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: EXPOSE OF 1939" IN *THE ARCADES PROJECT*, ED. ROY TIEDEMANN, TRANS. HOWARD EILAND AND KEVIN MCLAUGHLIN (CAMBRIDGE, MA: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1999), 9.
3. THIERRY DE DUVE, *PICTORIAL NOMINALISM: ON MARCEL DUCHAMP'S PASSAGE FROM PAINTING TO THE READYMADE* (MINNEAPOLIS: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 1991), 115.
4. THOMAS HIRSCHHORN OFFERED A WHOLLY AMUSING ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IN HIS PIECE "SOMEBODY CARES ABOUT MY WORK" FROM 1992. PLACING A SERIES OF COLLAGES ON THE STREET OUTSIDE HIS STUDIO, HIRSCHHORN PHOTOGRAPHED GARBAGE MEN HAULING OFF HIS WORKS. IN RELINQUISHING THE FRAME OF EXHIBITION, THE WORKS HE DEPOSITED MET THE SAME END AS ANY OTHER OBJECT FREED FROM USE, THE DUMP.
5. AS QUOTED IN, LOUISE WYMAN, "CRYSTAL PALACE" IN *PROJECT ON THE CITY 2: HARVARD DESIGN SCHOOL GUIDE TO SHOPPING* (COLOGNE: TASCHEN, 2001), 240.
6. *IBID*, 239.
7. *IBID*, 241.
8. STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ, "EXPOSITION DE LONDRES [1872]," *OUVRES COMPLETES*, PARIS: GALLIMARD, 1945. P. 684, AS CITED IN JONATHAN CRARY, *SUSPENSIONS OF PERCEPTION: ATTENTION, SPECTACLE, AND MODERN CULTURE* (CAMBRIDGE, MA: MIT PRESS, 2001), 122.
9. SEE ARTHUR DANTO, "PAINT IT BLACK," *THE NATION*, AUGUST 18, 2003. AS DANTO WRITES "HEGEL LIKENED THE ABSOLUTE IN SCHELLING TO A DARK NIGHT IN WHICH ALL COWS ARE BLACK, SO A CLEVER STUDENT IN JENA MIGHT HAVE HAD THE BRIGHT IDEA OF PAINTING AN ALL-BLACK PICTURE TITLED *ABSOLUTE WITH COWS*—WITTY OR PROFOUND DEPENDING UPON ONE'S METAPHYSICS. IN 1882 THE EXPOSITION DES ARTS INCOHÉRENTS IN PARIS FEATURED A BLACK PAINTING BY THE POET PAUL BILHAUD TITLED *COMBAT DE NÈGRES DANS UNE CAVE PENDANT LA NUIT*, WHICH WAS APPROPRIATED IN 1887 BY THE FRENCH HUMORIST ALPHONSE ALLAIS, IN AN ALBUM OF MONOCHROME PICTURES OF VARIOUS COLORS, WITH UNIFORMLY ORNAMENTAL FRAMES, EACH BEARING A COMICAL TITLE. ALLAIS CALLED HIS ALL-RED PAINTING *TOMATO HARVEST BY APOLECTIC CARDINALS ON THE SHORE OF THE RED SEA*.
10. GEORGE BATAILLE QUOTED IN, DENNIS HOLLIER, *AGAINST ARCHITECTURE: THE WRITINGS OF GEORGES BATAILLE*, TRANS. BETSY WING (CAMBRIDGE, MA: MIT PRESS, 1992), 15.