

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: TROPE OF ESTRANGEMENT  
Relations between Art and Consumer Object

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I declare that the work presented in the thesis is my own

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the relationship between objects and subjects and asks to what extent objects are constituted through an act of subjective interpretation, and by which they enter into a circulation of meaning; or to what extent objects, as things, escape a full determination by this act of interpretation. Through the analysis of a variety of artistic practices (including my own artistic trajectory) and drawing on different philosophical traditions, I will argue that the object can neither be reduced to interpretation nor can it be theorized as ‘outside’ language. Conversely, I claim that, although linguistically mediated, the relation between object and subject is characterized by a space of ‘undecidability,’ which arises as a consequence of a partiality in the nature of the encounter between them. It is the nature of this partiality that I will address in this thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

As a practice based research, the aim of this thesis is to find a way to specify the grounds of my own and like art practices that involve the consumer object. The central preoccupation of my practice and the one that situates the field of enquiry for this thesis is based on an observation of the relation between object and subject. In this context, this thesis asks to what extent the relation that one establishes with mass-produced objects is determined in advance, and to what extent, as objects enter the realm of things in its later consumption, they are misaligned from the implicit imperatives of the market, fashion, prestige, etc., and find a rather indeterminate status in the context of a lifeworld. I offer this question to reflect on the position of the artwork and its reception in a contemporary context. For I aim to situate my work through this question and to give rise to thoughts about the position of the artwork as an object within a market-driven world. Conversely, I want to contrast the way the consumerist object, denatured of its spectacular ‘aura,’ becomes intimate to the individual once adopted to the everyday life of its owner. It is within these crosscurrents of proximity and distance; symbolic and utilitarian significance; identity and alienation that I aim to situate my work to question how this has a resonance with the spectator.

Just to give a broad account of my work: it employs techniques and strategies that are characteristic of Sculpture, Installation and Process Art, and, more specifically, it employs everyday objects as its raw material in order to enquire into the nature of how we, western subjects, relate to material objects in an era dominated by mass-production, standardization and global circulation. In this thesis I theorize the subject/object relation through the paradoxical figure of an encounter whereby the very act of the encounter initiates an escape. I put this in relation to the formal procedures and actual modes of making that characterize my art practice. Thus, I observe everyday situations where intended and unintended omission mediates the subject/object relation and through my artistic practice, I seek to estrange such situations so that that which is overlooked in daily relations may find a place of

encounter in the context of the artwork. In this thesis I deal with the possibilities and impossibilities of such encounter. While the study of the subject/object relation is generally directed either to one or other side of this dualism, I want to propose a conceptual and aesthetic approximation to the problem by centring attention precisely on their relation: that is, on the nature of the distance between object and subject. I do this through a number of different philosophical traditions (Blanchot, Foucault, Marx, de Certeau, Gombrich, Kant, Heidegger), which I read in relation to actual works of art (Jean-Luc Vilmouth, Allan McCollum, Richard Wentworth, Felix Gonzalez-Torres). I make one further proviso: that in the contemporary stage of late Capitalism to which we have arrived, the relationships of purchase and consumption are no longer solely determined by need and want, but are situated in a continuum with relationships of status, prestige and identity. And it is these relationships that my work primarily addresses. I argue that since the determination of the (consumer) object is established at the level of relations (social relations, relations of power, etc.), it is precisely in the relation between the object and its addressee where art practices are able to intervene. It is as a response to this historical moment when late capitalism determines a differing set of relationships to the market that my practice addresses and for which this thesis will offer a conceptual framework. This is the contribution I see this thesis as offering to the realm of art practice and that I hope is manifest in my own work. In relation to the conceptual field of enquiry, this thesis proposes, from the position of the practicing artist, that the relation between object and subject may only ever be partial, and that in this partiality resides an important aesthetic potential. The partiality of this encounter accounts for a space that is not yet determined, it is open for new modes of relations. Within this schema I argue that art has no privileged position for explication as such, more than any other discipline. However, it may have the possibility of bringing to acknowledgement this undetermined space. In this regard, I will argue that the task of art is not to cancel such partiality as already occurs determined by the encodings of the consumer object, but rather to provide the means for our awareness of it.

Through an analysis of my work I identify a central strategy as a trope of estrangement by which to expose established orders and systems of regulation that determine relations between subject and object. I argue that through this strategy of estrangement a new perspective or point of view can be offered so that the subject (viewer) may reorient herself in her relation to material objects of consumption. I

situate this trope of estrangement and that of opening new possible perspectives within the history of art practices that emerged in the 1980s; ones that I believe evidence a similar preoccupation. Turning from the material object in its guise as consumer object, I also introduce the consumption of the object as it enters the everyday. Alongside art practices that either ironized or critiqued the consumer object, a number of practices also arose within a similar time frame that drew on materials taken from everyday life. The references that many of these works adopted was either popular culture or the on-going experimentation with banal materials as ‘proper’ in the ambition to relate art to everyday life and as a gesture of greater democratization of the arts. However, in the artworks under discussion here – including my own – my concern is not so much to draw material out of the everyday but to re-employ it, still retaining the index of the everyday that provides its context. Even if the unperceived of the everyday has been approached by art in a variety of different dimensions or from different angles, I have limited this study to those artworks that explore the strange relations, marked by visibility and invisibility, into which an object enters in the course of its production, circulation, distribution and consumption. Practices of the 1980s distanced themselves from the practices of previous generations, such as Pop Art and *Arte Povera*, which had been motivated by the desire to extend the remit of art into fields hitherto regarded as improper to fine art. These practices sought to dissolve the distance between the art object, the commodity and the everyday, banal object. By moving away from strategies that sought to equate commodity with art object, art with life, unrestrained subjective expression with artistic creation, the later art practices of the 1980s were no longer concerned with debate as to what could constitute art or its remit within society; they were no longer concerned with an emancipatory agenda but with existent relationships, functioning between subject and object as currently constituted. To whatever degree this was a reversal, it could be seen more positively as an agenda to discriminate between relations in an evolved capitalist context rather than the attempt to surpass them by an ideological gesture. An aspect of artistic practice that this also entailed was to qualify any exalted status of the artist as uniquely insightful and so forth and to reposition the artist as one among many trying to make sense of a changing world.

It would be a mistake not to recognize my own practice and those of the artists of the 1980s considered here as having some relationship to the tradition of the ready-made and the found object. There is, however, a substantial difference between the

two, though it can be readily admitted the one would not be possible without the other. The legacy of the ready-made made the gesture of appropriation and nomination alone sufficient to give the work its critical input. Equally, while I wish to discriminate between the practices of the 1980s and those of Pop Art and *Arte Povera*, they too provided a legacy in as much as they greatly extended the materials to which art had become accustomed. Nevertheless, these later art practices, including my own, find their socio-political context in a distinctly different period when an overarching and global economic regime has already absorbed the criticality of the gesture or of practices of appropriation. Finally, it might be said that while the century-long history of Modernism had so extended the possibilities of art practice, these had found a parallel in the aesthetic practices of branding and advertising such that it was, or is, almost impossible to make a clear distinction between the two. These three conditions frame a context for the development in art that will be the evidence in art practices that support this thesis. It is at this interface between the aestheticized consumer object and the artwork that I stage my own art practice. As we will see, it is the in-between nature of this that is important. However, the resource that I have turned to and in order to prevent the ready elision of the one into the other is that of the everyday in which a different dimension of the object arises. In this context, therefore, the everyday, along with the objects that are transacted within it, became for some practices a central figure and a fruitful terrain by which to construct a work of art that could both go beyond the gestural trope and manage to engage critically with the sheer pervasiveness of the market. This situation gave rise to an idea of an art practice in which the artist considers herself in a position equal to any other social participant, not privileged in any way either as ‘author,’ that is, authority, or as ‘artist’ backed-up by art as an institution or as a sacred pursuit. The same is the case for the artwork whose identity does not seek to dwell on pre-given designations of art, artist or the market. Conversely, those art practices with which this thesis is concerned, seek to introduce, as their particular virtue, a space of undecidability that prises open the all-embracing skein of the consumer market whereby the ever-growing consumer regime may be seen under a different perspective.

I will argue that, even if such practices are not obviously engaged with an art of estrangement (either of the everyday or of the consumer object), they can be read as practices that by re-articulating the distance between object and subject what they achieve is to estrange established relations between the two. This kind of

estrangement is not a cancellation of the perspectival regime set in place by the market but what it offers is a new, though still partial, point of view. In this respect, what I will argue is that both the experience of the everyday and the mode of working of art practices that deal with it continue to function within a perspectival regime and that it is by this that a positive intervention can be made. While the latter provides the grounds to situate the partiality of the subject, it also assumes that there is always a perspective that defines the experience of the everyday and the agency of the artist. What could be an alternative regime? If by perspective we mean a line of sight, that is, an act of looking at and through that demands the realization of a position from which a construal of the world is defined, such position, necessarily, is always partial. The alternative or contradictory proposition would be to argue for a possibility defined by no position at all, or by an omniscience constituted by all positions at once. The former I associate with works of art that subject their practice to indifference and disregard a critical engagement with their social context; the latter I associate with a kind of omniscient eye, which embraces all knowledge at once, analogous to the methodology of a third-person omniscient narrative that is defined by an all-knowing, all-seeing position that have access to all events. Both regimes of thought rest on the belief in the superiority of the subject, either as artist, creator, entrepreneur, etc. In this respect, I believe there is always a perspective that can only be defined in relation to other points of view, and that therefore, each perspective is always partial.

The concept of ‘dead ground’ may help us to introduce the idea of this partiality of subject positions that suggests how the encounter between object and subject can only be partial. The concept of dead ground is mainly associated with a battle-ground situation or field of fire. By analogy, dead ground implies something that escapes the gaze, though what lies beyond it may be clearly visible. It applies to a given point of view from which the location of *something that matters* for the context or the situation can be known to exist but its significance, how important or otherwise, remains undecidable: “Dead ground is space that cannot be observed from a given location.”<sup>1</sup> In this sense, dead ground refers to an actuality, but one that cannot be known from the given point of view. From this position, there is something that remains unknown, hidden, and therefore cannot be determined by one single subject position. Let’s take for example the composition of a landscape, a scenic vista: we may say that its

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<sup>1</sup> Salovaara-Moring, Inka (2008) “Dead Ground: Media Studies and Hidden Geographies of Knowledge” in *Television and New Media*, January 2009, 10:144

representation will inevitably be composed by things that are not there, in as much as they are not available for the subject's gaze. Nevertheless, the landscape does not appear fragmented to the subject. That which the subject cannot see, can be inferred, but not known. This might situate us close to the metaphysical subject of *a priori* judgement central to Kant's philosophy. However, the dead ground may not only be that in the subject's field of view that escapes its gaze, dead ground also implies that there is something like a dead ground under one's feet: the very position from where any landscape may be constructed demands in advance a certain partiality, an impossibility of apprehending – from the subject's point of view – a whole. It is in this sense that the dead ground refers to something that escapes the gaze, that is, to something that the subject inevitably loses by virtue of having a position or a presence at all. However, to continue with the analogy of figures in a landscape, from a second point of view, the first subject's dead ground may be viewed; and so on, with the addition of further numbers. In this sense, therefore, a dead ground is not absolutely unknown, but rather, it is known partially from a different subject position. The dead ground, therefore, also mirrors the paradoxical figure of nearness and farness that Heidegger draws in relation to *Ding*. Heidegger addresses this distance by breaking with the object of conscience of Phenomenology and by shifting from the object (*Gegenstand*) to the thing (*Ding*).<sup>2</sup> It will be through the notion of 'thing' that I will qualify the nature of a partial encounter.

Drawing on this idea of partial encounter and partial perspectives that identify the relation between objects and subjects as taking place within a space of undecidability, in the conclusion to this thesis, I offer the notion of 'thingscape'. Thingscape captures both the philosophical and spatial/material dimensions of the relation between subject and object arising from this moment of undecidability. In breaking with the domination of the subject, in introducing the encounter between subject and object on a terrain of undecidability, a greater parity between subject and object becomes possible to argue for and with it a greater possible agency for the object comes to the fore. My interest here is twofold: in the first place, it is only in the space of this aporetic possibility that the artist can create something new: in the second, and thinking about my own practice, it is the dissonance created by a refiguring of the consumer object that animates the work.

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<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, M. (2001). 'The Thing' in *Poetry, language, thought* (A. Hofstadter, Trans.). Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

In Chapter One I begin by extending Maurice Blanchot's notion of the everyday as that which escapes as one of the central preoccupations of my practice. By indentifying the everyday as a space with no rule wherein the individual gets lost between anonymity and a lack of hierarchy, I pose the question of how can one engage with that which lacks rule; and from there, to ask how the artist may either enter or have access to the everyday.

I introduce some general aspects of my practice and how they were informed by the immediate social and political context of Santiago de Chile in the 1990s: in a Chile that was emerging from seventeen years of dictatorship but with a strongly developed neo-liberal economic agenda. What this amounted to was the transition from a profoundly overt disciplinary regime to an economically disciplinary regime but one where the rule was opaque and diffuse. So, it may be the case that one motivation for my working practice and for those of my generation was an implicit sense of order and a need to determine the rule where none overtly existed. If a previous generation had comported their art practices constrained by a military regime and in response to which the need was for subversion, for a contemporary generation the immediate imperative was to take some purchase on the chimera of globalized neo-liberalism that held itself to function by no rule whatsoever. However, as I have refined this agenda both in practice and as I am theorizing it here, that rule is played out in a relation of subject to object and the trope of estrangement that is central to my practice rests on finding the means by which to subvert that rule. The relation between contemporary artists of my generation and those of a generation who worked under the dictatorship has, at times, been an uneasy one. Nevertheless, I think I can claim that the politics of subversion propounded by the one has a form of continuation in the later generation. Whether this is indeed the case, however, will have to be vindicated by arguments set out in what follows.

In Chapter Two I propose an analogy between the methodology of the participant observer – a figure taken from sociology and cultural anthropology – and the experience of the everyday. Which is to say, there is a parallel between the anomalous situation of the ethnographic task, in which one is both observing and participating at the same time, and that of the artist who draws on the everyday as a source for her work. However, the anomaly lies in the fact that to wholly participate one cannot maintain the distance of observation while to observe, one cannot become

wholly absorbed in the experience of the participant. I suggest that works of art that engage with the unperceived of the everyday entail just such a paradox. However, what the figure of the participant observer brings in to focus is that from the side of observation there is necessarily a point of view. From the perspective of the participant there is a level of undecidability that would require a rule of decision. This, however, can only come from the side of the observer who maintains a position of objectivity. In practice as we all too readily know, we both participate and observe in something of a compromise between the two in a state of partiality, dependent on any number of exigencies. It may be important to register the caveat that I do not intend the artist to be misunderstood as acting as ethnographer or anthropological researcher; only to emphasise the divided position of one who attempts to make work from out of the life experience of the everyday.

Through an analysis of particular works of Jean-Luc Vilmouth and Allan McCollum I aim to show that it is through practices of estrangement that regimes of power and rules may be called into question. For conceptual models that frame this idea of estrangement I turn to Kant's notion of the reflective judgement wherein the rule to judge is not given; to Derrida's notion of *restance* as an ambivalent figure of that which *is* not; and to Heidegger's account of withdrawal in our daily dealings.

I end the chapter by arguing that the trope of estrangement in the works considered is applied not to the object (the mass-produced or consumer object that is either employed or implied in the artwork) but to the relation between subject and object, user and utensil, etc.

In Chapter Three I situate the idea of partiality and estrangement as a condition that affects relations and not entities as such. I address certain modes of relation that take place once an object has been already acquired: the horizon of the consumer world that comes into view beyond the checkout point, so to speak. Following Marx's notion of the 'mystery' of commodities, I draw a parallel between the process of alienation that takes place in the assignment of exchange value, and how the relation between user and product of labour may enter an inverse process of estrangement (or de-alienation) once they enter a lifeworld. The latter provides the context for what I will term an 'afterlife' of objects, where the public codes invested in objects become interconnected with private, subjective ones. In order to identify the codes that works

of art appropriate and re-articulate in order to draw attention to prevailing systems of signs and those relations of power within the everyday that are transacted by them, I introduce Michael De Certeau's idea of tactics and strategies in the workplace. I situate the argument in relation to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Richard Wentworth. Finally, I establish a relation between the indeterminacy produced by the trope of estrangement with Heidegger's definition of 'thing' and in relation to how he situates this in the figure of far and near.

## CHAPTER 1: THE WORK OF ART AND THE EVERYDAY

### *Something escapes*

The everyday escapes. In this consists its strangeness ...

Maurice Blanchot  
*Everyday Speech*

My work as a practicing artist commences with the observation of everyday life and it focuses mainly on material objects and the way we relate to objects of daily use. Through the making of art I have sought to get closer to our daily routines in order to study in greater depth the modes by which we relate to material objects that are commonly at hand and often overlooked. I have centred my attention on those aspects of the everyday that we do not usually pay much attention to; things that pass unnoticed however noticeable they may be; things that, by their very familiarity or even necessity, are overlooked. It is from this initial consideration that the overlooked, the omitted, the unperceived, the ordinary became the subject matter from which my work departs.

The everyday has been extensively theorized, and it exceeds the scope of this text to review those theorizations. From amongst them, however, I will look at Maurice Blanchot's essay 'Everyday Speech'<sup>3</sup>. In this essay Blanchot relates the overlooked and unperceived aspect of the everyday to an idea of 'escape.' It is this particular aspect that brings it close to the aesthetic dimension that I seek to develop throughout my work. 'Everyday Speech' offers an interesting analysis of the everyday that puts a construal of everyday experience that can be traced in language into a

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<sup>3</sup> Blanchot, M. (1993). "Everyday Speech" in *The infinite conversation* (82). University of Minnesota Press, p. 238-245

relationship of tension with an experience of the everyday that somehow exceeds the subject of language or the subjective interpretative act of giving meaning to what we encounter in the everyday.

In what initially seems a paradoxical move, Blanchot draws a relation between what exceeds language and what is contained in it by exploring the act of speech that, in one way or another, ought to stem from language. He looks for a figure that is both contained within and is outside language, something that in the speech act communicates but that lies outside the signifying nature of words:

“... with no one in particular speaking and no one in particular listening, there should nonetheless be speech, and a kind of undefined promise to communicate guaranteed by the incessant coming and going of solitary words.”<sup>4</sup>

Everyday speech is like a flow, a speech of solitary words. Solitary words because they are without subject, and without object. In this brief but profound text, Blanchot asserts that the everyday “allows no hold,” thus “it escapes.” The everyday escapes “because it is without subject.” However, while he argues that the everyday is without subject, he also asserts that neither does it belong to the objective realm. What I understand Blanchot to be saying is that, within the everyday, neither a subject nor an object links speech to an orderly structure, one with coherence, that is, meaning. To the everyday he accords the ability of utterance without this systematic grasp on what has been said or heard. Thus in this sense there can be ‘solitary,’ orphaned words; words that exist and yet are without the power to organize thought. In turn what this entails for the everyday is not that it is marginal to quotidian reality or relates only to an underclass, rather that it is invisibly pervasive but, in the sense we propose here, undetected. We have then a kind of existence without power or will, though what sustains it remains uncertain. Herein, beyond the subject, beyond the object, Blanchot claims that the everyday only *is*:

“*il y a du quotidien.*”

“There is [*il y a*] the everyday (without subject, without object)”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.240

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.245

We can read the “*il y a du quotidien*” as if it is a proposition with no grammatical subject: as if it dwells alone, solitarily in language. ‘*Il y a,*’ somewhere: unsecured to any definite or fixed point of view. “The incessant coming and going of solitary words,” seems to indicate a speech with no subject: the words are, as in the ‘*il y a,*’ but are without subject, and without object. So, if the everyday escapes and it is without subject and without object: from whom is it that the everyday escapes? Or as Blanchot asks, “what corresponds to the “Who?” of the everyday?” The implicit contrast Blanchot is making is with the intentionality of consciousness of Phenomenology; thus, in the everyday, things subsist without being cohered by consciousness into purpose. Life, however, requires the anonymity and amnesia of the everyday; the impossible alternative would be to live like the character Funes in Borges’ short story, ‘Funes, his Memory’: “ He [Funes] was able to reconstruct every dream, every daydream he had ever had. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day; he had never once erred or faltered, but each reconstruction had itself taken an entire day.<sup>6</sup>”

If the everyday is without subject and without object, the ‘who’ of the everyday corresponds neither to the position of subject nor to the position of object. If the ‘without’ of the everyday that Blanchot addresses refers to something that is on the outside of the subject and/or on the outside of the object, it might reside in some kind of in-between, some kind of relation between subject and object. Put in other words, if the ‘who’ of the everyday somehow dis-aligns the perspectival position of a perceptive and cognitive subject that gains knowledge over the phenomenal world as in the Kantian subject, perhaps the ‘who’ of the everyday corresponds not to what the subject apprehends, but that which escapes representation by the subject. The everyday corresponds to all that is of the self, the persona, the individual that lacks the governance of the perceiving subject. In this sense the everyday retains that which is the excess or remainder of the culturally constructed subject. In what follows the relationship between this excess or remainder and the power relations embodied in, or imposed upon, the culturally constructed subject will be seen to be the platform for my artistic practice. Perhaps, what escapes in the everyday is what is mostly in view, what is most susceptible to be seen, but that is omitted by the gaze. Here resides the

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<sup>6</sup> Borges, J. L. “Funes, His Memory” in *Collected Fictions*, translated by A. Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 131-137.

strangeness of the everyday: “The everyday escapes. In this consists its strangeness”<sup>7</sup>. The clue here is that what escapes, what is unperceived cannot be the unknown. Strangeness is a quality of what is known, or a form of knowing the world that paradoxically involves that which escapes.

Thinking of the everyday as the unperceived, Blanchot argues that we cannot enclose the everyday within a panoramic vision, suggesting perhaps that we only have a partial view of the everyday, in as much as something escapes our gaze. It is as if, on the one hand, we are completely immersed in the everyday, and, at the same time, we are dispossessed or unable to reach it:

Man (the individual of today, of our modern societies) is at once engulfed within and deprived of the everyday. (...) the everyday is also the ambiguity of these two movements, the one and the other hardly graspable.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps, to be at the same time engulfed within and deprived of is the very condition of the everyday and its ‘there is’ [*il y a*]. Pursuing this idea of the everyday, how could it be related to the practice of art? Is there anything in common between the experience of the everyday and the aesthetic experience of art? What corresponds to the ‘who’ of art?

An initial approach might be to say that the field of action of the work of art or the region where it operates resembles the everyday in that it cannot be measured in terms of being true or false:

What is proper to the everyday is that it designates for us a region or a level of speech where the determinations true and false, like the opposition of yes and no, do not apply ...<sup>9</sup>

Following Blanchot’s theoretical approach to the everyday, I understand that the position of the artist (from where the work is announced) is also something like a region or a level of speech that provides the work with a voice, and, like the everyday, that voice might be inhabited by solitary words. If what is proper to the everyday is that it escapes, and that its speech cannot be determined as either true or false, the knowledge of the everyday dwells both within and without language. In this sense, a

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Blanchot, p. 240

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 239

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.242

paradox binds together the excess of familiarity and the unavoidable strangeness that constitutes the experience of the everyday: what escapes is both an excess and a remainder. It has been this tension between excess and remainder, strangeness and familiarity, that I have sought to explore in my artistic practice. It is in this respect that, the voice or direction of my practice, if it is possible to put it in such terms, has been related to the experience of the everyday. It is from here that I have focused my practice on exploring what remains silent, hidden and perhaps out of access to the customary flows of knowledge. I understand that what we do not notice in everyday experience, escapes us. This is perhaps the only way the everyday may function and characteristic of the everyday is its very pervasiveness; it would be a mistake to think of it or the connotation of escape as referring to some demimonde, some bohemian alternative to propriety or counter-culture. Nevertheless it is the principle feature of the everyday to be without rule. In this sense, and if the everyday is without rule: how can we judge our experience of the everyday? Which is to say: how could one think that which is without rule? This question lies at the core of the nature of the aesthetic judgment that Kant defined as a reflective judgement vis-à-vis a determinate judgment. In Kantian terms, judgement as such debates with itself from between a space of determination and one of indeterminacy. While in the determinate judgement the subject has access to a concept (rule) under which an object of perception can be subsumed and thus determined, in the reflective judgment the name or the concept ('rule, principle, or law') that is necessary to define what one is perceiving is not given, it has been projected into a future,<sup>10</sup> one could say, and has left the subject's representation indeterminate – dwelling in a space of undecidability and in constant quest for the rule. Since this rule is not given, the subject needs to propound a new concept, enquiring from the particular (the object of perception) to the universal (the missing rule) and not the other way around as is the case in a determinant judgement. In the latter, the subject has the rule or concept in advance – before encountering the object – and applies it when representing the object:

Judgement in general is the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, or law) is given, then the judgement which subsumes the particular under it is *determining*. ... If, however,

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<sup>10</sup> For Hannah Arendt, this kind of projection of the rule into a future bears an important political dimension: it bears also a central relation with the notion of *sensus communis* and the implications of political judgment. See, Arendt, Hannah (1989) *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* Chicago: The University Chicago Press.

only the particular is given and the universal has to be found for it, then the judgement is simply *reflective*.<sup>11</sup>

If we think the un-ruled (unruly) of the everyday as the sum of particular events that escape a universal or governing rule, then what is perceived in the everyday takes on a strange, provisional reality as only standing in relation to something unknown, as something that has escaped the *determining* way we approach those things that remain always under a given law. The relevant aspect of the reflective judgment to what is under discussion here is that the lack of rule maintains the subject in a kind of contemplation, engaged in “an indeterminate reference to concepts”<sup>12</sup> whereby the purpose at stake has as its principle one of reflection rather than that of determining. If we transpose this into the context of the everyday, we could say that the lack of rule is not equivalent to boredom, lack of interest or disengagement; rather, the lack of rule, if we can put it that way, is linked to a condition of indeterminacy that defines the existential nature of everyday experience. In this context, and arising from an observation of the everyday, I see my work as an attempt to engage with this dimension of experience: that is, with the uncertainty (and delight<sup>13</sup>) produced by a lack of rule that nevertheless remains in relation to the determined world of rules, principles or concepts. This is an important aspect of my approach to art whereby there is an estrangement of a governing principle but not a destruction of either the rule or of the context that frames the within and the without of that rule. It is just the kind of indeterminacy that sustains a reflective judgment, and that one finds in the everyday – as discussed here – that I draw on in my practice, recognizing that in doing so the work stands in the context of the determinate judgment that is the tradition of art as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kant, Immanuel (2007 [1790]) *Critique of Judgement* (tr.) James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, ‘Introduction IV’, p.15

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, § 23, p.75

<sup>13</sup> The notion of ‘delight’ is central to Kant’s aesthetic but it is too complex to expand on it here. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge its importance within Kant’s definition of aesthetic judgement. See, Kant, Immanuel (2007 [1790]) *Critique of Judgement* (tr.) James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, ‘First moment of the judgement of taste: moment of quality’ and ‘Second moment of the judgement of taste: moment of quantity’, §1 - §9. Caygill, Howard (2007 [1995]), *A Kant Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p.154-155

<sup>14</sup> In Chapter 3, I discuss art practices as works of estrangement. The premise of this discussion again relates to a relationship between rule and indeterminacy and I further link it to an idea of engagement and reflection in relation to Marx’s notions of alienation and estrangement. Contextualized by a Marxist frame, it is possible to read my work as grounded in the ambition of de-alienating the relation between labour and product of labour (labour and capital) that in Marx’s theory is established in the unequal distribution of social relations.

Blanchot relates the without-rule of the everyday to language and to the administration of order that he views as originating in the grammatical construction of order through the positioning of subject and object. This is what he puts in opposition to the ‘solitary words’ of the everyday. Turning now to my own practice: where is this regime – or non-regime of the everyday – to be found: how does it find a place in my practice? This opens onto the question of the nature of the materiality of my practice, the participation of my agency and that of the viewer together with a certain difficulty of nomenclature. Our reading of Blanchot has foreclosed on referring unproblematically to the material entities I use as ‘objects’. However, since any alternative phrasing will appear unnecessarily convoluted, I will speak of objects; not, however, to be understood as objects of consciousness.

As I will examine in the following section, my work explores the rather banal and physical relations that we establish with the material world of the everyday, I will deal with its more immediate rather than transcendental questions. For example, following our discussion of Blanchot’s text, what is it of common objects that we do not notice in our everyday experience? What is it in the constant engagement that we have with objects that escapes (us)? Can art interrupt the flow engendered by habit and routine and explore the nature of that which escapes us in the midst of what is most familiar to us? And finally, what role do material objects play within the tension of familiarity and estrangement, described by Blanchot that constitutes the everyday?

### *Palimpsest, from omission to hybridisation*

Given my personal background (I grew up in Santiago de Chile), I equate the everyday with the cityscape and, particularly, with one that is in constant change. The type of change that I witnessed in Santiago by the end of the 1980s and all through the 1990s was one that is linked to an idea of modernization in Latin America. In his book *Culturas híbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* [Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity, first published in Spanish in 1989<sup>15</sup>], Nestor García Canclini analyses the phenomenon of modernization in Latin America as a socio-economic process which seeks to construct a form of modernity (i.e., a historical epoch) in response to the demands of globalization. García Canclini refers to discrete practices by way of distinguishing indigenous cultural practices – that is, methods of production, cultural practices or social relations – from homogenized global means of production, distribution and the social conformity they entail. Broadly speaking he envisages three possibilities: the persistence of traditional practices; their demise due to the imposition of ‘modernity’ from without; and, what he seems to advocate, a novel form that evolves through the hybridization of the indigenous and exogenous. If García Canclini is advocating the last of these possibilities it might be best understood in the context of Latin American history: globalization at least holds out the possibility of transaction between the micro- and the macro-economies; the history has been a notorious one of gross exploitation of natural resources with little benefit to the indigenous population, who were seen as all but irrelevant. In contrast to this history that in large measure by-passed the population of most Latin American countries in favour of European or North American capital on the one hand and a small controlling elite on the other, García Canclini’s proposal of hybridization provides for a role for the population at large and a place of an, albeit, re-imagined everyday. Chile, due to its history of the last forty or so years, has seen little of this form of hybridization.<sup>16</sup> On the whole, growing up in Santiago one witnessed the

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<sup>15</sup> See García Canclini, Néstor (1989) *Culturas Híbridas, Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, México: Editorial Grijalbo. *Hybrid Cultures, Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (tr) Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1995

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, some kinds of cultural hybridization have taken place, many of which echo the phenomenon of urban tribes that has developed globally. However, this kind of mixture seems to be more like a process of pastiche rather than the notion of hybridization theorized by García Canclini.

increasing marginalization of indigenous means of production and the increasing dominance of foreign capital.

So in Chile, as in many other Latin American countries, the question became how to integrate the local or national economy to the international economy. During the decades of the seventies, eighties and nineties, Chile not only had to face the problems of modernization but also those carried out by the oppression of a coup d'état (11 September 1973) and of seventeen years of dictatorship that followed it. Under the rule of Augusto Pinochet, the Chilean policies to integrate its economy to the international trade basically consisted of instituting a strong neoliberal programme. What followed was a huge wave of privatization. In this respect, Chile has perhaps been the country that saw the most dramatic rupture from a state driven economy to a market driven one. In this scenario, the rhetoric of modernization was translated into a dynamic of replacing the old (what was already there) with the new (imported goods). In this sense, getting rid of the local so as to make room for the global became one of the hallmarks of the economic transition. From a material culture point of view, the effects of privatization were reflected in the rapid transformation of material culture: the architecture of the city, the new urbanism applied onto the city, the artefacts that began to populate the market, the material things that began to form a landscape of objects became increasingly populated by the artefacts of global importation rather than by those of local production, which were being steadily replaced. For example, old cinemas started to disappear, while new cinema complex equipped with multi screens commenced to be built from scratch. The same was the case for small stationary shops, pharmacies, and so on. The physical scenario of the city was in constant change.

Very markedly during the 1990s, the city of Santiago was changing at an ever-accelerating pace. What in Spanish its called *tiendas de barrio* (corner shops, convenient shops, neighbourhood or local shops) along with small family businesses increasingly disappeared. Instead, shiny, large and new supermarkets, malls, petrol stations equipped with restaurants and grocery shops began to appear. Such changes indexed the rapidly changing social relations that, in turn, inculcated a new set of aspirations among the population. The dramatic rate of the change made it apparent that a new configuration of the everyday was taking place. Not only were the sites of social interaction changing, the tokens by which those interactions were transacted

were also changing and with them new forms of identity constructed through the aspirations inculcated in the means at the disposal of society at large. The shape of the everyday was being changed by new means of consumption, a changing distribution of wealth and a changing distribution of education and health care. It was a time when I became increasingly interested in the physical supersession of local production by global goods: how the local struggled to compete with its counterpart. In all of this there is the temptation to nostalgia; to privilege the fast-disappearing, rather old-fashioned goods made by local craftsmen and to eschew the homogeneous products of the global economy. However, I commenced to explore the everyday both through the objects that had populated the market till that time and were now rapidly disappearing and through those that just commenced to populate it. In this sense, regular trips to particular markets, wanders around the city became strategies of working; for the goods on offer, new and old, were the fabric of the everyday and provided the terrain on which people inhabited the everyday, which was the ultimate object of my enquiry.

What was interesting, but not less poignant, is that the process of modernization in Chile – as in many other Latin American countries – proceeded along with a process of erasure. As if echoing that which escapes in the everyday, in this process of modernization, something is erased. This image of erasure by superimposition became very relevant in my work. I somehow tried to relate that phenomenon of erasure with the work: could the work retain what was being erased? Or could the traces of that that was being erased still be possible to survive in some way or another? From this perspective, integrating into the work actual material objects that I could get from the market became central to my practice. For I was interested in how objects reflect and connote fragments of a life. The question became how to translate these observations and a growing collection of objects into a productive artistic practice.

In practice the ideal for García Canclini that is a form of hybridization beneficial to both local production and global markets was rarely realized at least as far as Chile was concerned. I came to think of the phenomenon of hybridization more as a process of erasure and of over-writing as it were a palimpsest. I first looked at it as if both the local market (represented by objects manufactured in Chile) and the global market (represented by the huge wave of imported mass-produced objects coming mainly from Asia) were two different texts: the one superimposed on the other. Like a palimpsest, where one written text is erased in order to inscribe another one in its

place, I was mainly interested in what results with the superimposition of the two texts: something like a third, hybrid text appears. It was this third text that I witnessed evolving in the city and thus in the everyday that I sought to transpose into my work. I sought to construct this displacement by literally buying, using and transforming everyday objects that I collected from various marketplaces. In retrospect, this seems like an intermediate stage on the way to my engagement with the everyday. In the terms we have adopted from Blanchot, the notion of text is no mere analogy to a literary text but is a textual subject – here one of neoliberal economics – that distributes an object, a regime of economic power. The question of the *il y a* of the everyday into which it falls was a question that would come later and that would open a space for seeing the object not so much as a token of power as in its role as commodity, but also as gaining certain agency of its own that is related with the power of contexts (speech and text) and less with market forces.

In 1999, and following the idea that the local and global markets had been superimposed, I began a work under the idea of a palimpsest. I entitled the work *Palimpsest, from Omission to Hybridization* [Fig. i]. I consider the various processes that were involved in making the work not just as its means of production but as part of the sense of the work, however, the finished project presented three series of multiple objects. Three, as if echoing the three texts of the palimpsest I was thinking about: the local, the global and the crossover of the two that I identified with a hybrid figure. All of the series were formed by the amalgamation of heterodox, rather small, everyday objects that I bought from the market. All the objects I used were readily available, so to speak; they were very common, sold cheaply in various market places, and were easy to manipulate or fiddle with. They were anything but extraordinary.

One series was formed by the repetition of one and the same object: a plastic shoe heel, bought in a market as bankrupt stock. Even though the objects were meant to be identical, there were variations of tones in the material: this in turn revealed that the production of these particular objects was not altogether mechanical. This was a sign of the local manufacturing that was starting to be overwritten by the fully mechanical means of production evident in the imported objects. This series consisted of 244 equal pairs formed by combining two of the same object. By juxtaposing the same object, the shape of the objects gained a degree of abstraction that made its origin difficult to identify, and therefore to give a name to the object that was

presented. It was not easy to identify at first or even second glance what it was that one was looking at. This loss of referentiality I associated with the loss of visibility that was occurring to many objects in practice in the marketplace. It was as if in the work, one were presented with a trace of the actual object, though, as in Marcel Duchamp's unassisted ready-mades, it was the usual position of the object that appeared estranged in the gallery space. In this, the position of the object was changed, and thereby the point of view of the beholder required change or was, at least, put in question.

The second series was formed by the combination of two objects: rubber thimbles that were produced locally by a family business – which closed not long after I made the work – and imported, mass-produced, metallic key rings designed to be personalized for promotional purposes. The work comprised two hundred and fifty two of these composite objects set out uniformly on a wall, with the public invited to take one. In the work, the key ring sustained its function, while the thimble's functional nature was annulled, and remained only as a decorative feature, though similar to a brand logo, in the way the key rings were originally intended.

For the third series I followed the same constructive principle that I had used for the other two: the juxtaposition of objects whereby the position of the object was altered to divest it of any obvious referentiality. However, in this series I employed a selection of different objects. For this series, I collected from different sections of the domestic marketplace a selection of diverse objects: through lack of contemporary usage, some objects were difficult to identify, other were falling into disuse, and some other tend to pass unnoticed given their daily and repetitive use – toothbrushes, plugs, razors, curtain finials, etc. The idea was to put together different shapes and materials: glass, plastic, rubber, metal, etc. Some were parts of certain objects: the handle taken from a pot, or a lid. Others were intended to be used out of sight, such as the spiked base intended for flower arranging that is placed at the bottom of flowerpots to hold the flowers in place; others were engine parts – things in everyday use but out of sight. Out of this odd selection I combined two or three of each to form new objects. What resulted was a group of around sixty hybrid objects that by the combination of commonplace materials and forms in novel form retained the sense of familiarity in what were nevertheless ersatz oddities.

The trope of juxtaposing disparate objects into a single form that retained the appearance of useful domestic or utilitarian items, while at the same time creating unreal purposeless objects created a disconnect to any known function while retaining a sense of familiarity. The effect was to erase a point of reference in relation to the object, so as to foreground the characteristics of an industrial, cheap, mass-produced object. The works play on the trope of an anti-aesthetic reading, current in contemporary practice – ‘interest’ substituting for aesthetic appeal – and parallel the consumer marketplace where novelty and sensation substitute for craft and beauty.

By estranging the object, something is erased in the object. With the difficulty of identifying the object comes the difficulty of giving it a name, and therefore, a meaning. The idea was that what one was to encounter in the work would be on the one hand familiar, and, on the other hand, strange. Familiar and strange; excess and remainder: can we give meaning to that which escapes a name? In this sense, and going back to what Blanchot identifies as the ‘solitary words’ of everyday speech, the everyday objects that formed the work *Palimpsest, from Omission to Hybridization* somehow appeared as if pertaining to the realm of the ‘*il y a*.’ The objects, initially encountered as commodities, had been removed from the regime of consumerism and commercial circulation, and set in train in a different sphere of circulation where, with a certain alteration, their original ‘meaning’ determined by use or consumption had been put in conflict with their signifier. Since no one object can be identified, any judgement about it is necessarily suspended. Following Ferdinand de Saussure, one could think that both the material object displaced to the gallery and the word that names it in language as compound linguistic sign have been estranged from any one signified.<sup>17</sup>

As a gesture of equivocating the objects in their original market-symbolic language, every combined object of two of the series was covered with a translucent plastic layer (polystyrene) to give the object the appearance of a new, off the shelf,

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<sup>17</sup> Saussure defines the linguist sign as formed by two parts: a concept and a sound-image that he identified with a signified (more abstract) and a signifier (more material) respectively. He addresses the necessary relation of the two-part sign in language and the abstraction or ambiguity into which they may fall if the one is estranged from the other as follows: “The linguistic entity exists only through the association of the signifier and the signified . . . take only one of these elements, and the linguistic entity vanishes; instead of a concrete object, you no longer have before you anything but a pure abstraction”. Saussure, Ferdinand de (1974 [1916]) *Course in General Linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure*, p. 144, quoted in Sanders, Carol (ed.) (2004) *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.64

ready for sale product. The one, the miscellaneous series of objects, was displayed on a table, approximating to a sales counter that was located in the middle of the exhibition space, such that it encouraged a sense of shopping. The height of the table or plinth-like support permitted the objects to be manipulated, thus involving the viewer in a more physical way. The second series, comprising 244 pairs of the same object (488 in all), was presented in a regulated grid and hung on a wall. By this means, the accumulation and repetition of these indigenous objects were marshalled into the uniformity and homogenizing character of the modern grid.

In her well-known text ‘Grids,’ Rosalind Krauss argues that the temporal dimension of the grid “is an emblem of modernity.”<sup>18</sup> Ubiquitous in the art of the twentieth century, the discovery of the grid, Krauss asserts, ‘lands’ in the present declaring everything else to be the past. Something of this metaphor was at stake in *Palimpsest, from Omission to Hybridization*, particularly in the series formed by the 244 pairs of objects, where remaindered objects from local production were organized in a regulated, uniform grid. An influx of imported, cheap objects ‘landed’ in the present of an everyday, displacing objects from a present to a past: increasingly over a short period of time, such objects were indeed becoming part of a past. This is also in connection with the spatial dimension of the grid of which Krauss argues that:

In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. In the overall regularity of its organization, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree.<sup>19</sup>

The aesthetic decree that Krauss reads in the use of the grid is one that stands by the idea of art being “at once autonomous and autotelic.” According to Kraus, by declaring its autonomy, by having its own purpose and its own end, the use of the grid announces, from the side of the artist, a will to silence and certain hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse. In *Palimpsest, from Omission to Hybridization*, by juxtaposing the hybridized objects of a changing market and a changing everyday, I sought somehow to contaminate the silence, rigidity and flatness inscribed in the

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<sup>18</sup> Krauss, R. E. (1985). “Grids” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. p.52

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50

modern grid, and to leave in it a sound, a murmur that perhaps could indicate some kind of narrative or discourse that belonged to the changing but real everyday.

While developing the work *Palimpsest, from Omission to Hybridization* I was increasingly aware of a population of objects that were the product of the global trade system that reached a significant visibility in the cities of Chile by the mid 1980s. The prominence of imported Asian goods was one of the effects brought about by the fact of Chile joining the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1994. Created in 1989, APEC's aims states to be focused on facilitating the trade between the countries of the Pacific Ocean and on collaborating in the financial and commercial liberation of the countries involved. By the year 2000, cheap and poor quality mass-produced goods from Asia had invaded the shops and streets of Santiago and most other Chilean cities. This over population of imported objects along with their lower prices made local production collapse. As it is inscribed in the laws of commercial liberation, the weaker, that is, the one that struggles to compete with lower prices, disappears. It became increasingly cheaper to buy Asian products rather than ones that were locally produced. The difference of price did not last long. Soon after, the *tiendas de barrio* began to close down, together with various family run industries that supplied them. In the early 1990s, I personally witnessed the closure of small family businesses producing such things as lollypop sticks, shoe heels, paper clips, overalls, rubber thumbnails, decorator's brushes, amongst many others. It is not that these small industries represented the economy or identity of the country; what they stood for was a scale of production, a proximity to their intended market and a sense of integration with the local community. However, taken as a whole and in contrast to the large conglomerates that were coming to dominate the market, they stood for a loss of power being retained within the local communities and, more essentially, represented a nexus of social relations that once formed part of a culture.

I became familiar with this type of small industry because going around the city, buying objects from various marketplaces became a central activity in my work. To wander and explore the city became not only the necessary activity for gathering material to work with, it also became a research tool. More than developing a way of creating a particular object or form, I began to develop a sort technique that consisted of combining and putting into relation various practices. For example, in the year 2000, I decided to work again with the idea of familiarity and strangeness, of excess

and remainder but this time without altering the identification and thus the name of the object. As if applying the opposite strategy to the one I had developed in *Palimpsest, from Omission to Hybridization*, in this work – *Untitled (Brushes)* – the aim was to estrange the object by sustaining its identification. The object I selected to work with was a decorator's brush, but with one with the longest possible bristle. I looked around the city for all the brush industries I could find, and asked them if they could produce this kind of brush. In this process, I arrived at a family business that agreed to produce the dysfunctional object. Since the brushes were made from horsehair, the only limitation on their length was the length of a horse tail. They made two dozen brushes of approximately 60 centimetres long.

### ***My Home and the anonymity of the everyday***

As an art student I used to wander the city of Santiago in search of everyday materials that would hopefully coincide both with my specific object-search and my budget. It was by this route that I arrived at “My Home”. My Home – an anglicized affectation befitting a global market – is the name of a Chilean industrial concern specialized in plastic injection moulding. They produce all kinds of plastic objects: cups, plates, jugs, feeding bottles, flowerpots, chairs, toothbrushes, etc. They offered a vast catalogue of very cheap, functional and decorative objects to furnish the home. This particular shop was run as a family concern and was located in a popular market district of the city, in the immediate vicinity there is ‘La vega’ a daily market that provides all sorts of staples, dairy products, vegetables, meat: all the basics both for home and for the small business. There are other small shops in the neighbourhood selling other basics such as DIY items, fabrics, clothes, furniture, and so on.

The name, My Home, appears somehow anomalous in so far as the idea of ‘my home’ was presented in a foreign language, which in itself defines what is strange, rather than what is familiar or homely. Furthermore, there was nothing cosy or homely about the goods they offered to the market: these were highly mass-produced objects of very poor quality and almost lacking in what is understood as a design. In this sense, and contrary to what the possessive adjective ‘my’ denotes, there is nothing

singular about these objects. Unlike what its name promotes, My Home is about a standardized world of objects that can only reach some kind of singularity either through use or by reaching the life, that is, the home of someone who already has, so to speak, a home in the sense of a life context.

I made various works with objects I purchased from My Home. I developed a sort of sociological curiosity to try to understand how this shop works, which kind of people buy these objects and for what purpose. The shop offered both a price for wholesale and retail. However, most of the people who bought wholesale intended to re-sell them retail in tiny shops in their local communities. The method of buying the goods was a whole system in itself. After waiting for your turn in a rather chaotic line, a man or woman with a pad and pencil would approach you and write down in a rush the code of the object and the quantity of it you wanted to buy. It was assumed that whatever that was going to be bought by the customer would be required in an assortment of colours for any particular item from the shop's inventory. The same salesperson with the pen and pad would then rush around the shop dropping in a large, black bin bag the objects you had indicated. The order once completed, the purchaser queued at a till while another person would take all the objects out again from the black bag and check them off against the list made by the first salesperson. After you had paid the cashier, you took your receipt back to the second salesperson and collected your black bag or bags. It was definitely not a place for doubts or hesitation; the pace was fast and furious; it was a place for prompt decisions and to pass through very quickly; in this sense, the shop itself, at least in those days, was in no way like a home, where you could take your time and find your way through it.

Since I was interested in the type of objects sold at My Home and the material world that surrounded them, between 2000 and 2004 I made a series of works with objects I purchased from the shop. I was mainly interested in the productive system or the way the objects were made, in the social and economic systems in which the objects were involved, in the relationship between amazingly low prices and bad quality, and in the system that the shop had for selling the objects. In 2000, for a group exhibition entitled *Estar* [To Be], [Fig. ii], I purchased as many yellow objects as I could. Obviously, this way of buying broke with the customary way objects were sold in the shop: instead of ordering a particular item, I would ask for yellow objects, and instead of buying assorted colours of the same object I would ask them all to be

yellow. By gathering various objects of a same colour it was possible to gather a variety or range of different yellows. I mixed the objects with expanded polyurethane which is also of a yellowish colour. I wanted to set up variations of the same colour against each other and juxtapose the various common, plastic objects with which we are all familiar. I distributed the objects in two facing corner-shelves made of polyurethane. As if echoing the title of the exhibition – *Estar*, to be, to lie; that is, with the sense of merely existing – the objects were just lying on the shelves, as if ‘off the shelf’ or just waiting for something to happen – echoing perhaps Blanchot’s *il y a*.

Also in 2000, I made another work with objects I purchased from My Home. This work I entitled *Tercera generación* (Third Generation) [Fig. iii]. At that time, very much influenced by North American conceptual and minimal art practices, I was in the habit of establishing very clear process rules for the work in advance. Understanding that the construction process of injection moulding requires a matrix into which some special kind of plastic is injected in order to take a copy of its negative space, *Tercera generación* was about the making of a third generation, drawing on the schema that the first generation was the matrix; the second, the one that is the copy or object sold at the shop. The ‘third generation’ would take the form of an art object whose constructive process continued the logic of moulding and copying. I used the second generation or the plastic objects bought at My Home as a new series of moulds or matrixes and made a copy of the interior space of various objects with expanded polyurethane. This time I altered the recommended proportions between the two components that, once mixed, formed the expanded foam, as if introducing an error or a mistake in the copying process. The result was that once the foam had copied the inner space of the object, it commenced a process of shrinking in which it lost its reference to its matrix on the one hand, and gained an organic look on the other. The then organic appearance of the objects contradicted the very artificial and plastic source of their origin, rendering it difficult to situate or recognize the objects. Any familiarity that this third generation objects could transmit came only from their scale and certain traces of the object that had served as their mould and that remained in the shrunken polyurethane. As the objects had lost reference and it was no longer possible to recognize the objects in the sense of what they were or how were they made, they seemed to share a condition of a something, or a ‘thing’ in its philosophical sense. The ‘rarity’ or strangeness that the objects had gained in the process of construction and shrinking was emphasised by the way they were

displayed. I distributed the objects in two Perspex display stands that worked like a shop window or display cabinet. Presented like this, the objects gained the sort of museal presentation more normally associated with rare objects or curiosities. Not only in this particular work, but also in my practice in general, I have put great emphasis on the way in which objects are displayed. When thinking about the display of objects I always have in mind that movable objects – like the ones I have employed in my practice – carry with them a sense of place and thus part of their signification depends on where and how the objects are located. The meaning of the object is never complete until it finds a place and mode of presentation. With regard to this, I have preferred to combine various signs of display and to construct a rather ambivalent setup whereby an explicit quotation of any one given context is withheld providing a more ambiguous place of reference. A different, though indeed related, possibility is when artworks connote explicitly, not only one or another mode of display (of a museum, shop, collection, forensic classification of criminal evidence, taxonomy or any other specific scheme of classification), but also insinuate an identity of place. With respect to the latter, there are various artists that have presented, in the context of art, their own museum or shop. In 1972, Marcel Broodthaers presented his *Museum of Modern Art* [Fig. 1] centred on the figure of an eagle that the artist wanted to stress as symbol of power:

The exhibition gathered dozens of different types of eagles, from many cultures and in all materials. They were classified in the corresponding catalogue in alphabetical order according to places of origin. Each eagle was accompanied by a label, “This is not art.”<sup>20</sup>

In adding to every object in the display the label that states ‘this is not art’, Broodthaers makes it even more explicit that what is at stake in his work is a question about the context of art and therefore of art as a ‘place’<sup>21</sup>. Beyond the specificities of the art object and regardless of its material form, the work places a question over the ‘place’ that art, understood as a context, has within a broader social order. Questions

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<sup>20</sup> Martin, Jean-Hubert (1995) ‘The “Musée Sentimental” of Daniel Spoerri’ in *Visual Display*, Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen (eds), New York: The New Press, p.55

<sup>21</sup> See Howard Caygill, “The Destruction of Art” in (2008) *The Life and Death of Images: Exchanges on Art and Culture*, Dominic Willsdon and Diarmuid Costello (ed.), Tate Publication, p.163-168. From the perspective of art’s finitude and art’s destruction, Caygill offers an ontological approach to the question of what is and is not art. The text addresses questions such as how is it that something comes to be, stay and pass away? Or where do the arguments that hold for issues of creation, conservation and destruction lie? The text offers a way of understanding the distinction between the art object – as thing – and its context – as place.

like: wherein resides the essence of art; what makes an artwork to be both recognized and valued like an artwork; and if so, how is that value ascribed to it; or what is the role of the artist in providing an answer to those questions. These were very much questions that were at stake in the 1970s, not only in Europe and North America, but also in Latin America.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, a crossover between the art object and the commodity was also very present in artists' preoccupations. There are several artists that have questioned the nature of art by conflating the boundaries between various contexts – of art, museum, science, or the marketplace. In 1977 Claes Oldenburg presented his *Mouse Museum* [Fig. 2] that brings together consumer objects together with representations of them that he produced. The specificity of the objects was less important than the question concerning the distance between the context of art or the studio and that of the museum. Indeed *Mouse Museum* was realized through the presentation of a particular type of object, but the import of the work, it seems to me, relates to the autonomy of art rather than deriving from the nature of the objects that comprised it. Another parallel that enters the equation is that between the context of art and that of the everyday. In 1976 Daniel Spoerri made his first *Musée Sentimental* [Fig. 3] in which he gathered together a broad collection of everyday objects that belonged to a specific place or community. In the first version of *Musée Sentimental* Spoerri gathered objects that had belonged to various artist in the artistic community of which he was a part. As exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, the work comprised two parts: the one, a shop selling the donations from friends; the second comprised of vitrines of objects connoting the social history of famous French artists. Spoerri conflicts the boundaries between the context of art and the everyday of the artists that form part of that context:

Most of the objects in the vitrines related to French history and culture, including things like Vincent Van Gogh's furniture from his home on Auvers-sur-Oise, René Magritte's bowler hat, Arthur Rimbaud's suitcase, and three little toy horses owned by Marcel Duchamp when a he was a child.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> As in every part of the globe, Latin American art practices of the 1960's and 1970's addressed those questions around the nature of art in direct relation with their immediate socio-politic contexts; by then, many Latin American countries were under the rule of imposed military dictatorships that sought either to sustain the dominance of an oligarchic class or to eradicate a socialist agenda that had arrived to parliament by means of free election. Between 1964 and 1984 almost all Latin American countries were ruled by military dictatorship (Chile, Argentina, Perú, Uruguay, Brasil, Nicaragua, Paraguay).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Martin, p.59

The first *Musée Sentimental* interpolates the private and public lives of artists and draws our attention to the criteria by which meaning enter the life of objects both in the context of art and in relation to the rules put forward by the museum institution. An old piece of furniture is one thing; ‘Van Gogh’s furniture’ has become something completely different. The distance between an anonymous object and a ‘valuable’ one relates to the object in a paradoxical way: on the one hand the very qualities or conditions of Van Gogh’s furniture are irrelevant in relation to what the name Van Gogh has come to signify both to the artistic community and the market. Another exemplar of the same furniture of the time would have little value whatsoever. Herein resides a paradox: it only suffices for the object to have belonged to Van Gogh for that value to be assigned; and yet, in some way it arises from it being the commonplace of his everyday. There is an idea of value and of authenticity entangled here: the qualities of the object are mapped onto those of a social and subjective meaning. By drawing a parallel between The British Museum and the department store, Selfridges, in London, in *The Value of Things*, Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska give an interesting account of this process of giving and interpreting value whereby the objects remain the same while the signification ascribed to them may change. They argue that:

... the values attributed to objects are not properties of the things themselves, but judgements made through encounters people have with them at specific times and in specific places.<sup>24</sup>

By comparing the department store with the museum the artists unravel a world of signification that is somehow knitted together by a social construction of the facts and beliefs that organize the values given to both:

Although clearly organized around different economic drives, what the store shares with the museum is the encyclopaedic desire to render the whole world understandable: classified and displayed for the visitor to consume.<sup>25</sup>

Since Lewandowska and Cummings are artists that actively engage with the world of objects in connection with the everyday, as a gesture or sign, *The Value of Things* becomes an artwork in itself. The book in itself is presented in an ambiguous way, as

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<sup>24</sup> Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska (2000) *The Value of Things*, Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhäuser, Publisher for Architecture, p. 20

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

if somewhere between a catalogue and a book, at the same time emphasizing its signifiers (size and font of written words, layout of writing) but equally emphasising the signified (the conceptual or more abstract message). In this sense, the book/work gathered together the museum, the store and the context of art. This goes back to the discussion about the various modes of display employed by works of art by presenting either an ambiguous reference to one or another mode of display, or by appropriating codes from another context – museum, store, science, etc. – by employing quite literally both names and respective modes of display. It seems to me that the difference between the two approaches we have considered – the ambiguous and the explicit – resides in the critical context by which the work is situated. While an ambiguous combination of display-codes puts in place a question about the nature of the objects, a literal appropriation of the actual modes of display poses a question about the nature of art – as place, context or socio-economic category. Although the two are undoubtedly closely related, the one is closer to a concern with material culture while the other relates more nearly to theories of institutional critique.

For example, in *Orden y semejanza I* [Order and Similarity I] (2003) [Fig. iv] – a site-specific installation at the VI Biennale of Mercosur, Brazi – I developed a mode of display by combining codes which are characteristic of different contexts. Since the exhibition space was in an old and very large building that had functioned as a warehouse in a trading port, I decided to mix modes of display and arrangements that could speak both for an economy of storage and for one of exhibition in the manner of consumer objects offered for sale in the marketplace. If storage is ruled by the economics of space and the shop display by the requirements of exhibition, in order to present the object desirable, I contrasted the two figures. This work was a kind of expansion of *Tercera generación* [Fig. iii] on a bigger scale, though this time the work consisted of both expanded polyurethane castings of the inner space of objects, mainly kitchen or household utensils and translucent, mass-produced, plastic containers. In this way, the work gathered both identical objects (five hundred and seventy six translucent plastic containers) and different – though similar – solid expanded polyurethane objects, themselves moulded from plastic industrial objects, that were then placed inside each container. The work was structured in the form of an L-shaped wall, measuring more than three and a half meters high. It was a big structure, but not so big in relation to the scale of the building. The wall of objects had a rather clinic appearance that equivocated the nature of the objects inside each container, in as

much as they came to seem like a clinical specimen. However, if its apparent clinical austerity was at odds with the warehouse space, its scale seemed appropriate to the space and the other museographic elements that were part of the exhibition. It may be argued that an excess of ambiguity or lack of determination leave a work too open, as if devoid of offering any direction to a reading or unable to guide any kind of reflection. However, in my practice I have tried to maintain a tension between what one can and cannot recognize or situate as belonging to one or another context. For this to be successful, the work needs to be placed precisely in the space of an in-between: neither accommodating too readily a conventional reading, nor appearing as merely abstruse or eclectic.

In *Orden y semejanza I*, both the objects and the architecture of their display together constitute what could be understood as a particular object-based population. This idea of population engages with ideas of identity (or the particularity of the objects themselves), of number (how many objects form a specific population), and of classification (or location of objects in relation both to themselves and to a given space). These three elements, identity, number and classification, are in direct relation to how we encounter the objects or a work, and therefore to how we may interpret it. In this respect, what I see as implicit both in this work and in my continuing practice is a dialogue with the class of material objects as currently constituted by consumerism and the mass-produced. The world of consumer objects already admits a paradoxical relation between the uniformity of the brand and the individualization that this or that brand bestows on its owner and the globalized mass production that underpins the market. The marketplace is already equivocal about this as it introduces the ‘limited edition,’ the ‘signature model’ and as the exclusive brand flags up the qualities of the hand-made. The contemporary high street offers us tiers of products, whether it be Primark or Cartier or all the incrementally nuances brands that proliferate between. For each purchase, it would seem, our choice or taste is already forestalled, decided or predetermined. This is one aspect of our relation to the culture of the mass produced. However, what I am also interested in is the ‘afterlife’ of these objects: what they become through familiarity and use; how, irrespective of their acquisition, they become ‘our own’ – this is an aspect I will develop later in the thesis.

Within the notion of population individual details of difference seems to fade out and common aspects to come to the fore. In other words, our attention is directed

more towards determining what characteristics the collectivity shares in common rather than what sets each apart from the other. When observing a population, what is common to the objects seems more present than what is exclusively the attribute of one or the other, as if similarities had become more graspable than differences. It is within this tension between singularity and commonality that I have developed a greater interest in objects of mass-production rather than in objects of exclusive design. If a focus on the objects themselves enhances their individuality and a focus on the group highlights their relatedness, I have tried through my work to stage a configuration or population of objects ambiguously situated between commonality and distinctiveness. In 2002 I made a work that precisely hinges on this tension between repetition (indifference) and distinctiveness. The work takes the common plastic cup as an example of a mass-produced, multiple object to be individualized in the work. At about this time I began to incorporate into my practice aspects of the use made of the objects I was employing; uses that I understood as a kind of afterlife of the object that commences once the object has been purchased and enters the alternative realm of consumption, characterized by use. This work was formed by some sixteen to seventeen hundred plaster casts of the inner space of the object. As if giving continuation to the objects' original function, I used the same plastic cup as a mould, and, before casting the space – void – that defines the function of the object, I squeezed each of them, mirroring the way one fiddles with a plastic cup, a beer or cola can, or one or another of the other objects that one, unconsciously or inadvertently, handles in the everyday. I used various types of plaster, so that, in addition to the variation of 'same but different' shapes, I superimposed a variation of tonalities; so that, when the whole collection of objects was installed together in the gallery space, a kind of optical shimmer was produced by the local variations in the different hues of white. The objects were installed on shelves ranged around the four walls of the exhibition space. The central idea for their display was to configure a space in which the viewer would find herself surrounded by objects. I related this image of finding oneself wholly surrounded by objects both with the idea of excess of the mass-produced and with the figure of a landscape of objects that by virtue of its immensity, each becomes less distinguishable; they withdraw from our attention, and we take them for granted. So that in the end, we are surrounded by an object-based landscape that has become increasingly naturalized. Another aspect of the work's installation had to do with a question of *distance* that I sought to introduce in the moment the

viewer encounters the works. I was interested in configuring the space such that, between objects and viewer there existed two possible, though conflicting points of view from which to see the work. One of these is the overall view the spectator has on immediately entering the exhibition space: the second is that produced when the spectator approaches the work, only to find herself absorbed into the space of the work – a kind of claustrophobic encounter, compared to the more distanced one of the initial point of view. From afar, the viewer could not identify the individual objects; the chromatic shimmer caused by the various hues of white prevented any clear discrimination at first glance of the objects that lay on the shelves. However, as the viewer comes closer to the work, she could identify the repetition of a very common, disposable, banal object. On the other hand, since the cast objects were squashed or crumpled, rather than presenting serried ranks of uniformity, there was additionally a play of light on the folds of the objects that equivocated a rather more sacred or traditional sculptural form. I entitled the work *El Objeto y su Manifestación* [The Object and Its Manifestation] [Fig. v]. My concerns at the time were about the nature of those objects that fall into oblivion and that we cease to perceive, though they persist in some fashion or another. The plastic cups that formed the basis of the work are, as it were, truly anonymous. More common is the path of the utilitarian object that, from the moment of purchase, slips away into the commonality of objects that comprise the everyday. I came to understand the direction my work was taking as the ambition to give a presence to those undiscriminated or unperceived objects that constitute the materiality of the everyday. In Spanish, more so than its English synonym, *manifestación* connotes both the sense of becoming visible and of articulating a point of view. I began to think of my practice in these twofold terms: of making those objects of which we have become oblivious present and capable of articulating something latently present in their position within the everyday.

Another example of a work that functions by bringing together aspects of singularity with that of the multiple is *Ficciones de un uso*, [Fictions of a Use] (2004 - 09) [Fig. vi]. This work reconstitutes over two thousand lipsticks and their cases (without any additional material) to present a work ambivalently referencing the worn-out stubs of a used lipstick and formal sculpture in miniature form. The work consists of altering the shape of the actual coloured material that is the lipstick itself. It is central to the intention of this work that it is the very material of the lipstick that is shaped, and is, therefore, the raw material of the sculptural form. I reshaped every

lipstick through a process of moulding and casting so that, in the work, while each recast lipstick appears as an individual, small sculpture, taken as a whole, they appear as a kind of uniform population. I made over six hundred different shapes which I then cast around four times each in the various colours – pink, red, brown, violet, etc. – of which lipsticks are made.

The work began in the recognition of the fact that, through use, every lipstick is given a particular shape by whoever uses it and is worn to a stub in a particular way. It is possible to find a great variety in the shapes of the stubs created by use in every woman's lipstick. This was the starting point of the work. The question then became how to bring to attention the fact that everybody shapes lipsticks in a unique and singular way that indexes a human presence. In this respect, I thought of the work as less addressed to issues of gender than to ones concerning the mark of individuality put on a mass-produced object. At the time, I was thinking about a question of identity formation that transcends boundaries of gender, and to enquire about the extent of the possibility of constructing one's own point of view, one's own identity, within the highly regulated systems from which the everyday may depart, but yet on which it nevertheless depends. It was then very important for me to present an object in such a way that a human presence was denoted, somehow estranged, but reconfigured in such a way as to create a distance from which that which was present could be seen anew. This would be signalled by some aspect of the individual that had been transposed into the object both before and after its market transaction. The choice of colour might indicate one possible inscription of human presence; the sculptural form, referencing the lipstick stub, another. On the other hand, an array of lipsticks, each pristine, suggests that these transactions are, as yet, to occur. The work, therefore, comports an aesthetic distance by a trope of estrangement in which familiar and simultaneously unfamiliar objects are presented to view. In this respect, I see my work, not as a lament for the rule of the marketplace and the unperceived of the everyday, but rather as providing the site of the possibility to reorient our positions within the world of the everyday. To reorient one's point of view, to surpass the limits of the either/or, something like an ambiguous or paradoxical situation needs to be configured. In *Ficciones de un Uso* I aimed to achieve this in a number of ways: firstly, by the paradoxically 'industrial' finish of the objects, contrasting either with the natural expectation of a used lipstick as somewhat abject or with the expected regularity or sameness of industrial objects. In the work that expectation of sameness

is exceeded by what appears as a limitless variation of colour and shape. Secondly, in a way similar to the previous work, by the incremental variations of close colour tones, or red to brown, the work sets up a chromatic shimmer that produce a kind of distance between the object and the viewer. Thirdly, in its mode and scale of display: the objects were displayed on an oval base with ambiguous connotations: it was part sculptural, or museum, plinth; part counter. From a consideration of the installation and reception of the work, it was important that the viewer, in her relation to the work, could not keep a count of the number of objects on display, but, at the same time, that she could grasp, so to speak, the magnitude of the work within her field of view. Put otherwise, the number of objects that comprised the work had to be large enough to give a sense of an ‘almost too great’ in grasping the whole<sup>26</sup>. By bringing together contradictory elements, I sought to place the work in a kind of space of undecidability whereby elements that were actually present and those that remained absent but were connoted by the work – the lipsticks’ past or future user, perhaps – could not be interpreted in any singular way. The work then appeared as both familiar and strange, ordinary and extraordinary, seductive and excessive. In this respect, the work draws in several discourses: multiplicity in difference and repetition; the trace left by use; the indifference of the consumerist object reproduced here as the quasi-unique art object; and aspects of individuation that is connoted by both the unique forms of the objects and the inferred relation between the objects and their potential owners. The choice of lipstick colour, for example, is personal, but is also a means of expression: an articulation of the way one wishes to present oneself to the world. In this latter aspect, it not only confirms a subjective sense of identity but further, it announces a desire to make that identity public. Then again, in a world where there is no apparent outside to the rule of commodity, the choice of a lipstick marks the subjective interface with the objective world of the commodity. *Ficciones de un Uso* is an attempt to disambiguate those objects whose merit seems to rest entirely in their fetishization, as per Marx, and which circulate wholly within the sphere of the commodity, and those which circulate within the everyday, either as symbolic tokens of identity or as objects of utility.

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<sup>26</sup> In Chapter Two I take up this point again in relation to Immanuel Kant’s definition of the mathematical sublime. “An object is monstrous if by its magnitude it annihilates the end which its concept constitutes. The mere presentation of a concept, however, which is *almost too great* for all presentation (which borders on the relatively monstrous) is called colossal, because the end of the presentation of a concept is made more difficult if the intuition of the object is almost too great for our faculty of apprehension.” Kant, Immanuel (2007 [1790]) ‘On the estimation of the magnitude of things of nature that is requisite for the idea of the sublime’ in *Critique of Judgement* (tr.) James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, §26, P.136 [italics added]

As I researched further into the nature of objecthood, both in *Ficciones de un uso* and in *El Objeto y su Manifestación*, I was interested both in the logic of use of objects and in the social codes and what specific significations were inscribed in them that somehow transcend their mere material and physical presence. As I have focused my attention on aspects of commonality rather than on the exclusivity enciphered in ideal or elite objects, I did not concern myself with the status assigned to particular brands – Chanel, Dior, Lancome, etc. – but with that which all lipsticks have in common and that can be found in both exclusive brands and in the prodigiously mass-produced. This is an aspect that is characteristic of my work as a whole: I have developed an interest in the everyday object in its more generic forms, in that which is eminently replaceable unless or until the moment it enters the life of someone and enters into the possibility of becoming one's own. Throughout my art practice I have retained a tension between what is held in common and what is distinctive between the objects that form a gathering or population. In other words, what pertains to the category of the same and what enters the realm of singularity, variation, identity. Within this tension between sameness and variation, the parallel between what can be repeated and what cannot be repeated identically also enters the very constructive processes I use in my work.

The nature or identity of the objects I chose to display, mould, or manipulate in one way or another is a matter of intentionality. In this way, the strategy I use in my work takes a distance both from that of the 'ready-made' – where the selection of the objects acts under a principle of indifference – and from the 'found object' – where a principle of chance is at work in the selection of object. The aesthetics of the 'ready-made' and of the 'found object' construct two, no doubt related, but distinct approaches to the practice of art. The former invokes an institutional critique of art practices, advocates a particular relation of art and nature – of the artifice of art to the notional authenticity of nature – while the latter takes a position in relation to free play and the agency of the artistic subject. My work inevitably carries echoes of both these strategies. However, I hope to have shown in the above explanation of my working practices that I do not employ existing man-made materials either for their eclectic or picturesque qualities – as for the found object – or within a Duchampian trajectory.

However, Duchamp has stated that the quality of indifference appropriate to the ready-made is, in fact, quite difficult to find: everyday objects, perhaps by their sheer

familiarity, tend to invoke sentiments of familiarity and perhaps affection. On the other hand, the chance involved in the more surrealist version of the found object is closer to an experiment of freedom rather than to one of indifference. In this context, my work engages with that world of affections not to elevate the value of the object by mere sentimentality, or by an institutional artistic gesture, but by way of bringing to light the latent participation that characterizes material objects. If the indifference of the ready-made and the unconscious freedom of the found object selects an object under the rule of a 'whatever',<sup>27</sup> the strategies I apply in my work comports a set of rules that aim to engage with a something. By taking a further direction from Minimal strategies, in my search for objects I cross the indifference characteristic of the ready-made and the chance characteristic of the found object with the rational but also indifferently predetermined rules adopted from Serial Art.

The works I have commented on (*Estar, Tercera generación, Orden y Semejanza I, El objeto y su manifestación* and *Ficciones de un uso*) deal mainly with issues of use, repetition and standardization within the realm of industrial, banal objects. Use here operates in a twofold dimension. On the one hand, I use the objects to create new forms or to provide a new situation for the object; on the other, I give shape to that new form/situation by using the object for what it was designed, that is, by giving continuation to the function for which the objects were designed. For example, I have used cups, glasses, bowls, flowerpots, and bins as containers. This double use of everyday objects proves to be relevant for the semantic field I wish to make present within and throughout the work. The potential or latent variation of mass-produced objects, the idea of an accumulation of objects as a population, the approach to material culture via a regime of power and transaction, the emphasis on the variations left behind by use and the passage of time are all perspectives that seek first to understand the logic of how objects work, how do subjects work or relate with them, and, within that, to bring about an understanding, or better, a re-engagement with objects that by their very nature are so readily to hand as to be overlooked. In this sense, through my work, I do not seek to annul the everyday, but to offer a new perspective from which to encounter its normalized rules. I hope to do so by carrying out a practice of estrangement through a process of deconstruction by the way the materials appear in the work. This particular mode of transformation is related to an

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<sup>27</sup> See de Duve, Thierry (1996) 'Do Whatever' in *Kant after Duchamp*, an October Book, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The Mit Press, p. 327-370

ambiguity that lies latent in-between binary oppositions such as same and other, singularity and standard, strange and familiar, presence and absence. These dichotomies characterize the great majority of the material objects that populate the everyday and how the intrinsic uniqueness everyday objects once had – those crafted objects from small Chilean workshops, for example – had been replaced by a uniformity that nevertheless belies their intimacy with and particularity for their owner. With the benefit of hindsight I see the works I have been analyzing here informed not only by the experience my generation has had in the city or public spaces, but also by what was my own private, domestic situation. The latter was markedly framed by the material and ideological legacy of an Italian family that immigrated to Chile at the end of the nineteenth century. Even though, I belong to the third generation of this family that was born in Chile, I grew up surrounded by possessions that belonged to a European culture, objects that were kept by the family and that connoted aspects of otherness and duration that contrasted sharply with the world of standardization and replaceability promulgated by the nascent, emergent consumer society. In my child afternoons I used to wander the house peering at antique furniture impregnated with the story (life) of others. For every piece of furniture, its drawers and cubbyholes would reveal a further world of objects. Like the structure of a Russian doll, there were arrays within arrays, and every object seemed to cede its interest to something else; each with its own particularity: each seemed to offer the story of a particular situation, a particular person, or a particular set of relations. On the one hand, and since the trade of the family was cabinet-making, there were many hand made, large, dark items of furniture; on the other hand, there were many small objects that had belonged to one or another successive member of the family. In my eyes, both the furniture and the objects displayed or stored in them (vases, porcelain, clothes, notepads, inkwells, and so forth) were kinds of tokens of an anonymous, strange singularity. Their most obvious singularity rested in the fact that they were elements familiar to a rather old European scene instead of to an emergent neoliberal culture that privileged the standardization of objects and a grotesque mass-production of them. The strange singularity I perceived in those objects hinged on the fact that they had belonged to someone else. In this sense those objects appeared somehow dislocated from their original places conforming a sort of puzzle. In this respect, these objects were not standard, and if one day they were, they had been already singularized and thus limited by a personal trace and the affection of time over

things. I had a predilection for some wooden trunks that were to be found at the top of the house in something like an attic. The trunks were full of odd objects, especially clothes and accessories – hats, handbags, etc. I used to play around those trunks and to play detective, figuring out to whom those objects might have belonged. I wondered about the stories to be found in those objects, about what was connoted by those objects, what of their owners or users was held in them now that they were not longer present. There was something dead, something alive, and something in and around those objects.

The actual occurrence of all those objects in the same place (inside a trunk, e.g.) transformed the object's dislocated origin into a kind of riddle, an enigma that somehow instigated fictions of their possible histories. Both the story lodged in the objects themselves – in their materiality and actual presence – and the stories that could be woven out of an encounter with these objects – by the occurrence of their planned or accidental arrangement – constituted a peculiar landscape that in one way or another had a relation with that other landscape of mass-produced objects that was being mobilized beyond the home in the city. The landscape of objects inside those trunks, and the landscape of objects re-arranged in the city offered an agonistic but very rich approach to material culture. In this sense, my intimate sphere was marked by ideas of preservation while the public sphere was marked by ideas of change that seemed to require the eradication of what was already there. This not only related to the policies of the free market that swept small-scale local production, but also to a more perverse agenda that aimed to get rid of the legacy left behind by the previous socialist programmes that had characterized Chilean governments for over a hundred and fifty years.

Previously I drew on the figure of the palimpsest to illustrate the superposition of two markets – local and global. However complex or hybrid, this palimpsest presents in itself a structure or an order that can be also be read as a kind of riddle from the perspective of someone who lives in or experiences the city. And if we go from the general to the particular, the same could be said of the structure or order given inside private places – in my home, as it were. Alternatively, these two structures can be seen as two differing texts that are superimposed in the experience of every subject. In this sense, the kind of riddle that I found inside a trunk in my childhood house was not alien to the riddle I found in Santiago's streets or in the

*Persa del Bío-Bío* in the mid 1990s. In Chile, the crossover of markets – local and imported, foreign and exported – gave rise to a kind of riddle regarding material presence. One of the invisible but very pregnant characteristics of the production of standardized objects is the absence of its makers or the opacity of their condition of production: cheap goods in large quantities seem to appear as if out of the blue: they do not reveal their provenance, indeed the brand imposes a further palimpsest on the materiality of the object, and still less is revealed of the conditions under they were produced. As the objects found inside a trunk in an intimate sphere that, in the absence of their owners or the absence of any practical function, give rise to an enigma. The same occurs in the marketplace, specially perhaps in the place and moment of sale: where neither local production is wholly present or wholly displaced, nor global trade has ceased to arrive. These two types of riddles – the one formed in a private sphere and the other formed in the public arena – constitute an array of material culture that I have read under the idea of incommensurable relations.

### ***Work and context***

I see the works that I have considered in this chapter as a part of my practice that was a response to an avalanche of new, mass-produced objects that were arriving in the marketplace and that brought with them the sameness of standardization. As I have indicated above, the Santiago of my earlier years offered a very particular lens through which to view changes to a material culture that had or has parallels throughout the world but which had a particular intensity in the Chile under the military dictatorship led by Pinochet. What commenced on the day of the coup and was sustained throughout seventeen years of imposed government was a regime of coercion and intimidation. This was carried out not only by physical and psychological repression: the dictatorship also found an all-important ally in a new economic order that flourished under Pinochet. This new order consisted in shifting a state-driven economy to a free-market one that sought both to transform the relations between social classes and between the state and society at large and to deploy the market as the regulatory engine of both the country's economy and its social and

cultural relations.<sup>28</sup> The radical policies of this new model followed the principles established by the Chicago School of Economics, where many of Chile's younger economists had studied with the support of US funding. This group of economists was later to be known as the 'Chicago Boys' and would find, under the government of Pinochet, an ideal terrain on which to apply their new radical policies, after which some would return to Chicago to further propagate the doctrine that was "based on the principle that market forces and careful control of the money supply were the keys to sound economic policy"<sup>29</sup>.

At the behest of the 'Chicago Boys', the military regime in Chile imposed a strong neo-liberal program on the country's economy with little accommodation to existing circumstances. The extreme irony in all of this was that the 'free market' could only be instituted by the imposition of a draconian power and an overarching system of social regulation that was applied not only to economic assets but also, very importantly, to social relations. A sense of constant regulation backed up by the ever-present threat of punishment<sup>30</sup> became the country's quotidian state of affairs. Not only at the level of governmental policy – the imposition of a curfew for many years, for example – but more generally a sense of discipline and surveillance somehow infiltrated social relations. In turn, social relations became increasingly marked by a figure of division and antagonism, typically through the antinomies of right and left, rich and poor, communist and fascist, and so on.<sup>31</sup> The coupe d'état brought with it a

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<sup>28</sup> "Since the 1930s the Chilean political economy was characterized by a structuralist approach to development ... which sanctioned the formation and expansion of state institutions aimed at promoting industrialization, regulating social conflicts and reshaping social structures. The new policymakers in the authoritarian regime ... professed the need to reverse this trend through a rapid and uncompromising restructuring of social institutions. By transforming the relationships between state and society and between social classes, the intention of these reforms was to strengthen the regulatory role that market forces played in the processes of capitalist development in Chile." Taylor, Marcus (2006) *From Chile to the 'Third Way': neoliberalism and Social Transformation in Chile*, London: Pluto Press, p. 2

<sup>29</sup> "Between 1956 and 1961, at least 150 promising students received fellowships to Chicago through a U.S. government-sponsored program ... The "Chicago Boys" returned to Chile with a new vision of economic science, based on the principle that market forces and careful control of the money supply were the keys to sound economic policy. ... Beyond their antagonism to socialist policies, the Chicago Boys were convinced Chile's economy had been smothered for decades by an overblown welfare state, and they dreamed of replacing it with a pure free-market model. ... within weeks of the military coup, these outcasts were being called to fill dozens of government posts ..." Constable and Valenzuela (1993) *A Nation of Enemies: Chile under Pinochet*, NY and London: Norton, p.168

<sup>30</sup> For example, everybody was required to carry always their identity card. The police had the right to ask for one's identity card at any time and to arrest anyone that could not produce it on demand.

<sup>31</sup> "I am constantly struck by the radically divergent narratives about the past I encounter among Chileans. For some, Pinochet is Chile's "saviour," a hero who rescued his country from the throes of Marxism, set the stage for its return to democracy, and turned it into an "economic tiger." For others, he is a brutal tyrant, a dictator who gave Chile a neoliberal market economy at the expense and endless

dimension of rupture that goes well beyond a change in a government agenda. The coupe d'état – in Spanish, *el golpe de estado*, and in Chile usually truncated to *el golpe* (the blow) – changed the order of the everyday, of individual freedom and the sense of social relations in general. Art, of course, was not immune from the rupture, quite the contrary; the art context of Chile remains until today marked by a division that is the discriminatory of a before and an after. To give a very brief account of Chile's art context: from the 1950s, art in Chile can be indentified with a few but very committed groups or small art movements engaged with central aspects of modernism that had their roots in European modernism. There was *Grupo rectángulo* (a group close to geometric and kinetic art); *Grupo Signo*, which, within the tradition of painting, was engaged with a transition from Impressionism to Informalism; by the mid to end of the 1960s there was a group of artists experimenting with aspects linked to Installation Art and *Arte Povera*.<sup>32</sup> These three types of art practices were displaced and disrupted by the violence and social changes brought about by the coup d'état. Many artists went into exile, most notably, those associated with the pictorial Informal movement; many others ceased practicing art; others continued their artistic involvement as best they could; while others sought to resist and denounce the new regime. This was the option of *Escena de Avanzada*, the name given to a set of loose interdisciplinary art practices that by the end of the 1970s – around four years after the coupe the d'état – emerged with the intention of bringing together art and politics, taking it into everyday life, as a common project to resist and denounce the oppression of the regime. In this context, a new division emerged now within the ideologies of the left: *Escena de Avanzada* saw itself closer to the utopian vangardism of high modernism and quite distant from both the more popular forms of art carried out by militant, populist groups, most characteristically for Latin America, including the *Brigadas Muralistas* (muralist brigades), and also from the pictorial movement linked to Informalism. If the pictorial Informalists and the muralist brigades remained on the side of social realist modes of expressions, *Escena de Avanzada* sought to inaugurate a new relationship between art and politics that, perversely, could only be possible

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suffering of those who dreamed of a different nation: the supporters of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government (1970-1973)". Lazzara, Michael J. (2006) *Chile in Transition: The Poetics and Politics of Memory*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, p.2-3. Michael J. Lazzara is Assistant Professor of Latin American Literature and Culture at the University of California, Davis. He is the author of *Los años de silencio: conversaciones con narradores chilenos que escribieron bajo dictadura* (2002) and has published in the *Revista de crítica cultural*, among other journals.

<sup>32</sup> See Gaspar Galaz and Milan Ivelic, *Chile Arte Actual*, 1988, Gaspar Galaz and Milan Ivelic, Valparaíso: Eds. Universitarias de Valparaíso. This text is available in: <http://www.memoriachilena.cl/index.asp>

under the extremely violent circumstances brought about by the military regime: “What undoubtedly characterises the *avanzada* scene are the specific circumstances under which it emerged”<sup>33</sup>. With hindsight, *el golpe* – the military coup – is considered as a point of no return for the Chilean avant-garde. In other words, *el golpe* is held up as a hiatus, an unpassable moment of Chilean history, against which all claims to vanguardism or radicality are held hostage.<sup>34</sup> On its own terms, critical art in Chile managed to survive the seventeen years of dictatorship though may not have outgrown its preoccupations: for that senior generation of progressive Chilean artists of the seventies and eighties, the grand narrative of their work was never in doubt. For those that came after by a generation or two the question has been more equivocal. How does one make art from the relatively banal facts of an everyday, no longer set against the backdrop of tragedy and loss: of torture and the disappeared? How does one engage with an audience in a consumerist global market place for art?

Since the objects I employ in my work are common and banal, and because what I reinvest in the work is already present or constitutional for everyday objects, my work addresses singular but shared experiences within a rhetoric of the small or the intimate rather than that of grand narratives or elevated genres. Does this mean that, contrary to many critical discourses that revolve around globalization, free market economics and neoliberal politics, I am advocating a resignation to the banal and the shoddy? That the game has already been lost and we must make do with what we are given? I would understand if my address to mass-produced objects might be taken in such a way. My response would be twofold: in the first instance one aspect of my work has been the parody of the standardization of the consumer object. Secondly, I intend my work to evoke a critical response that invites the viewer to ‘think again’ about their relation to the objects in their life. Finally as I have already indicated my background in Chile has a bearing on this. Chile has been now generally acknowledged as the test bed of neoliberalism following the seventeen years of military rule that dramatically marked its history. The imposition of a ‘free’ market, the destruction of local industry and local identities came early to Chile. However, though we now increasingly treat with the undifferentiated standardized global object, the social nexus into which that object enters will in each and every case be unique.

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<sup>33</sup> Richard, N. (1986) *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973*; Art & Text, Melbourne: p. 17

<sup>34</sup> Thayer, W. (2006) *El fragmento repetido: escritos en estado de excepción*, Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Metales Pesados.

This would be my humanist take on my work in so far as it seeks to privilege that moment when the object becomes not 'one' or 'an' but 'my own'. Which is to say, the object enters my world, not that I enter or subscribe to the pervasive lifestyle choices of the market. It is in this sense that that moment can be understood as a moment of resistance to the politics of globalization within the consumerist framework that has tended to eclipse older antimonies of right and left. Those antimonies framed the art practices of an older generation of Chilean artists, who, though their scope for action was limited by the repression under Pinochet, succeeded in actions as critical and subversive (political) provocations against the regime. Their work has more recently been seen as a kind of heroic period of Chilean art in the shadow of which contemporary practices such as my own are seen as acquiescing to the status quo. I would hope these foregoing remarks would indicate that works such as mine and others are attempting to explore what might be an appropriate response to the current dispensation.

Since my practice is very much engaged with the everyday, I would say that all dealings within my work are related with a recuperation of the same rather than the invention of the new. My work functions then, by a kind of deconstruction of the familiar, as familiar, rather than the imagining of the wholly new. In this sense, my work aims to invite to an encounter with that which is familiar, with that which is already there but for various reasons we somehow overlook. In this respect, my work aims to explore that which is overlooked in our everyday experience; it aims to bring to light what gets lost within the folds of routines, habits and normality. The mode of address my work takes to the everyday is through its material objects which I understand as embodied signifiers of the culture to which they belong. From this perspective, I see my work as involved in the kind of politics that are transacted in everyday life: buying and selling, keeping and discarding, using and storing, giving and receiving, etc. Everyday transactions are, I will argue, the incremental constituents of the greater politics of a polis: they are some of the atoms that together with their human counterparts constitute the all of a society.

I see my practice as a project to break with a kind of sameness imposed by the marketplace; that is, to seek for variation within an increasingly standardized world. This potential variation, I will argue, is latent in man-made objects and is triggered not by the apparent difference between neighbouring objects but through their relationship

with a subject: be it a relationship given by use, possession or other circumstances where an engagement between subject and object occurs. In this sense, central to my work is the type of relationships that we establish with material objects within the quotidian. Within this, and given my own experience in Santiago, what I found that prevailed in the relation between subject and object was always a kind of immovable rule. This was to become another central concern within my practice: which is to say, a concern with the predominance of a given (and imposed) rule in the formation of meaning and the way one constructs a world within the everyday that by some means negotiates, subverts or eludes it. How does one position oneself in relation to a given rule? How does one negotiate the rules and codes and the uniform anonymity that mediate our everyday practices?

In 2005 I moved from Santiago de Chile to London. Inevitably, the cityscape and everyday scenario I was to encounter in Europe differed from the one I was familiar with in South America. The rules that qualify London's everyday entail a different history with different implications that lead into specific codes through which one enters into relation with its material culture. Perhaps influenced by a necessary reorientation to a differing set of implicit values, in 2009 I began a new body of work that evolved from the idea of 'broken things,' *cosas rotas – cosas rotas* also having in Spanish the connotation of the banal or ordinary. These new series of works introduced new elements to my practice: the fragment, the partial object, the incomplete; all of which sought to incorporate my current shifted perspective and my reflections around aspects of loss, in relation to the care and attachment with which we treat those often overlooked objects that meet our daily needs. The new series was to tell us something about mass-produced objects as part of our material culture and about the singularity that they might achieve through use, attachment and human agency over time. In short, I was straddled between an attachment to objects of my past and the stimulus of the new. Hitherto there had been a considerable emphasis in my practice on a formal resolution of works, not only in relation to the unity of the object (work) itself, but with respect to its site and the positionality of the viewer. To a certain extent, in previous works there was a tendency towards a formal 'completeness' that perhaps left the objects somewhat devoid of a relationship to their audience. With the commencement of this new project, I wanted to engage with modes of relation to material objects regulated more by the qualities we, their beholder, owner or custodian, invest in them, rather than by the values, status, utility

and so forth endowed by the market. To whatever degree these new works mark an advance they nevertheless arise out of one consistent aspect of my practice, which is the use and transformation of the mass-produced object. The several series that evolved out of this new project consisted mainly in the transformation of second-hand common objects that I bought in various flea markets, car-boot sales and charity shops in London, Norwich and Weston-Super-Mare.

After a considerable period of experimentation, the object I settled on was domestic crockery. The project developed three distinct strands. One work of the first series is *The Missing Willow* (2010) [Fig. vii]; a work that makes ironic reference to the museum conservation of archaic pottery, often found only as shards or fragments and which are restored to its presumed, original shape with the addition of ghost fragments to reconstitute the whole. In Japanese restoration, gold lacquer is often employed in such a way as to complete the fragmented vessel, while in the process giving rise to a 'new' object that now signals the marks of its own history with distinction – that which was missing having been filled with gold. However, *The Missing Willow* employed a further trope, often employed in my previous work: the serial – and therefore ironic – reproduction of the apparently unique object. One of the results of this practice is to produce a population of unique and yet banal objects, as opposed to the unique precious object of the museum to which it, nevertheless, makes reference.

The project, 'Broken Things,' *Cosas rotas*, also uses a variety of decorative patterns. These are transfer prints and, as the term implies, they are a product of both mechanical reproduction and liable to become indifferent to the surface to which they are applied. Amongst commercially available, ready-made decorative patterns, I focused on the Willow Pattern, which is now found on a vast range of commercially produced pottery. The pattern has an interesting history: firstly because it is a pastiche of traditional hand-painted decoration to be found on antique Chinese blue and white porcelain; once again a prestigious field of collection and conservation that in European culture connotes an aristocratic provenance. The Willow Pattern's origin, however, and the Chinoiserie narrative it depicts originated in eighteenth century England, was always intended for use in mass production. Secondly, whereas throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries blue and white porcelain carried a mark of distinction for its owners, today the Willow Pattern has the kind of virtual

reality that today we associate with the brand and can be printed on the most indifferent quality of pottery to be found in the high street.

The pattern, conceived by an English man ‘as if’ it were Chinese, is situated at the outset of the second Chinoiserie period (ca. 1780), also marking the transition from the hand-painted to the use of transfer prints and coinciding more generally with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution – the Willow Pattern was one of the first motifs to be reproduced using engraving methods that could mechanically reproduce the same motif indefinitely. Today, however, the Willow Pattern has become a design fallen into hackneyed convention through overuse. Equally though it carries the ghost of a prestige still accorded to blue and white porcelain together with a nostalgic glance towards the innocence of English tearooms and a bucolic past. However, given its high level of production, a certain indifference has been introduced between the pattern and the object to which it has been applied. In this respect, the pattern has become what I would want to term ‘nomadic,’ thereby drawing a distance or gaining an independence from the fine objects it once decorated. The once-functional integrity of a design intended to cover a teacup, plate, dish or meat plate has become a floating cipher applied arbitrarily here and there. In terms of cultural theory, the Willow Pattern has become a simulacrum whose relation to origin or model is at best opaque. Here, the notion of ‘copy’ stands for both a compounded origin, in the sense of cultural identities, and for the loss of craft of the hand-painted and the expansion of mechanical processes of ceramic decoration inaugurated by the technique of transfer printing. It is in this sense that the pattern serves as an example of how the consumer object has become regulated by the sign, with a complete indifference to the material quality of the object thus produced. The Willow Pattern is but one ironic example of this, just as the ‘brand’ has now often become completely decoupled from any guarantee of a quality for which it once stood.

The second strand in the project was to adopt the free-floating sign of the transfer print – its potential to be applied to any object and in any fashion – in order to produce an ambiguous object: one that is simultaneously both fragmentary and ‘finished’. Here, the transfer print appears to ooze away from its fixity in the bounded, if broken, object into an amorphous mass. A relation of form and formlessness is entangled in the objects: while a fragment of the object is recognized, another part escapes a clear definition. The works *Broken Things* (2010) [Fig. viii] and *Nomad*

*Patterns* (2012) [Fig. ix] mark the first and last work of this series respectively. Each work consists of a series of objects, made from fragments of everyday objects – cups, bowls, jars, pots and the like – that appear as staged somehow indeterminately between something that is about to collapse or has just been restored; between things that have been invested with the attention of care but also have the appearance of a ruin. In this sense, the objects take on the appearance of the hiatus of a suspended accident: what contains and what is contained forms a sort of third indeterminate object suspended between formation and dissolution. It is the decorative pattern of the objects, which both remains in and departs from its common place that maintains the ambiguity of these objects.

The third strand of the project ‘Broken Things – *Cosas rotas*’ employs not the objects as such but their photographic representation. This series is in turn formed by two distinct body of works: one based on studio-like photographs (*From the Series Broken Things*, 2010 [Fig. x]), and another one that takes as its reference seventeenth-century still life painting *Nature Morte* (2010) [Fig. xi]. In both series, photographs of objects appear torn and incomplete. Fragments of an incomplete photograph are put back together by a delicate and patient stitching in gold thread. This makes reference to the technique of restoration mentioned above where gold recuperates that which is absent or lost, marking both that which is missing and the care invested in recuperating and reconstructing as if in a gesture of returning to the object its form. However, away from the formalities of museum conservation, a more vernacular form of nineteenth century conservation was undertaken by jobbing journeymen who would go from house to house, restoring breakages with rivets. The technique can be remarkably efficient and accomplished, piecing together with a series of heated rivets or staples the two broken halves of a plate, cup, tureen and so forth. The ceramic surface is first partly drilled on one side, hot staples inserted and as the metal cools the parts are pulled together to form a remarkably secure bond. In the work, the technique of stitching or embroidering, as a traditionally female task, is crossed with these antique and now obsolete techniques of ceramic restoration. In essence, the adoption of acts of repair forms a kind of opposition or critique to more prevalent habits of consumer culture wherein purchase and discarding and replacement occur at the behest of the market ever more frenetically. A further ambiguity arises in so far as the objects that appear portrayed in the series of photographs are in some way completed by the ‘repair’ to the photograph itself with its close-woven gold stitching. Both the

act of photography and that of repair can be thought of as acts of, or metaphor for, retention; countering that of discarding and replacement. The object itself lying in a kind of hinterland to the photograph on which the repair had been undertaken. In this sense, the works present a kind of contradiction or ambivalence of presence: the image is both complete and fragmented: in the work, something remains yet escapes at the same time.

In the series *Nature Morte*, perhaps the status and connotations attributed to the genre of still life painting can serve as a reference point to the general structure of my work. Within the traditional hierarchy of painting genres, still life was deemed to comprise the lowest order (with history painting at its apex). Nevertheless, particularly in Spanish and Dutch still life of the seventeenth century, by staging the unseen or overlooked aspects of everyday life, the still life was imbued with codes of semiotic values centred on wealth and possession. In this context, the theme of *vanitas* was, perhaps, the most consistent. The skull, the arrested timepiece, the broken vessel or overturned glass, all speaking of the ephemeral nature of life and the futility of wealth. This had a particular resonance in the Dutch republic of the seventeenth century, which saw the emergence of an empowered bourgeoisie and made reference to the objects of their everyday life. There is here, in relation to the everyday and its material objects and particularly the relation between the consumerist object and the work of art, a point of relation, however oblique, with the role of material objects in the Chile of neoliberalism where I began my art practice.

Notwithstanding the acute divergence in quality from the objects depicted by Dutch still life, the world of material objects of mass consumerism does also incorporate a subsistent world of semiotic codes. It is this secondary aspect of objects that I address through my art practice. Just as the objects of seventeenth century *vanitas* still lifes encoded certain moral precepts, the world of consumer objects, in this our largely secular society, encodes an orientation to the world about us and to others. Whether this be by their exchange as tokens or as symbols of identity through which we mark our presence in the world. As in still life painting, the objects that are present in my work are characteristic of the everyday, of routine: and they take on a referentiality by virtue of our acquaintance with them within a shared experience. In another register, if certain still life paintings connote waste or filth (*rhypparos*) and the delivery of a moral message, my work engages with connotations of commonality to

give account of the social participation of objects. Perhaps I could say that where in still life painting there is symbol and allegory, in my work there is the opaque sign of commodities. Not so much a Marxist notion of commodity value but values acquired in their subsequent life of retention, transaction and conservation.

## CHAPTER 2: APPROACHING THE EVERYDAY

... it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.

Michael Foucault

*Las Meninas*

### *The artist in the guise of participant observer*

“*Il y a du quotidien.*” There is the everyday. This was our starting point for the previous chapter in order to address a kind of subject/object relation characteristic of the everyday that is conditioned by what we fail to perceive and that forms a central preoccupation within my artistic practice. We followed Maurice Blanchot’s reading of the everyday as the unperceived, as that which ‘escapes,’ that which ‘is’ without subject and without object, that which amongst solitary words designates a level of speech wherein we, the individuals of our modern societies, find ourselves ambiguously both “engulfed within and deprived of”<sup>35</sup>. According to Blanchot, there *is* the everyday, but it escapes. ... such that the only definitive statement we can make thus far is ‘*il y a*’ [there is] without reference to meaning, causality or agency: not a particular sub-stratum of society, but within the fabric of a life world so universally common to all that it engenders no hierarchy of governance. One question that arises is how could works of art approach or deal with the unperceived and that lack of hierarchy that disempowers the everyday from presence. How could a work of art make present that whose very characteristic is its absence from any communicable statement? Is it either captured or perhaps reinforced, i.e., creating a double omission? Put in other words, how does the artist deal with the very problem of an announcement that remains both within and yet speaks to the without of the everyday? This entails a methodological question, but one that is not only related to the very

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<sup>35</sup> Blanchot, M. (1993). “Everyday Speech” in *The Infinite Conversation* (82). University of Minnesota Press, p. 238-245

nature of the everyday (a more philosophical and theoretical question), but one that seeks to map out the experience of the everyday through the relations that the everyday person establishes with material objects. From the perspective of the practicing artist: what figure could provide us with an alternative address by which to explore the relation between object and subject within the ambiguities of the everyday, so as to investigate how this process of cancellation whereby one is ‘at once engulfed within and deprived of’ could take place in the making of art? What I want to examine here is how this process of cancellation that structures the everyday, implies an ambiguous position that somehow unsettles the usual way through which we normally ascribe meaning and that it persists in (or is transferred into) the artwork. One of the questions that this engenders is about the agency of the subject in the context of the everyday and entailed by that question there is a further one that asks how the subject either produces or derives meaning from practices situated within the everyday. Does the unperceived character of the everyday imply a lack of intentionality and therefore a passivity on the part of the practicing subject? Or, borrowing Bourdieu’s analytical terms, can we ascribe to the everyday a *habitus*, understood “as principles which generate and organize practices and representations”<sup>36</sup>, that either qualifies or conditions the experience of the everyday? Can we think the everyday, not so much as a context where passive actions take place, but one in which there resides a potential for agency, resting in the very fact that it is not already compromised by a place within a determinate regime?

The early works of French artist Jean-Luc Vilmouth may serve as an example of the way art can approximate and retain the ambivalences of the everyday in relation to either a passive reception of a given order, intentional actions or disinterested activity. In his early work Vilmouth employed everyday objects and building materials – such as bricks, wooden pallets, chairs, wall clocks and tools such as hammers and nails,

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<sup>36</sup> “The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor ... The *habitus* makes questions of intention superfluous, not only in the production but also in the deciphering of practices and works ... Automatic and impersonal, significant without a signifying intention, ordinary practices lend themselves to an understanding that is no less automatic and impersonal”. Bourdieu, Pierre [1980] “Structure, Habitus, Practices” in *The Logic of Practice*, Trans. Richard Nice, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992: pp. 56-58

pliers and electric cable, scissors, and so on – and estranged them by exposing something of their use that in the everyday usually passes unnoticed. The objects in the work appear estranged by means of a trope that over emphasises that which is familiar to the context of use of the objects: a kind of over familiarity brings to the objects an halo of unfamiliarity or strangeness. In 1980 he did a series of three drawings, *Rèunir I* [Bring Together 1] [Fig. 4], in which a piece of paper is stapled to a wooden board: in doing so the staples that secure the paper to the board produce the silhouette of a stapler. The work articulates itself in two directions: while on the one hand the work presents a quasi-tautological configuration in as much as the work draws attention to its own construction: staples stapling a paper in the form of a stapler. On the other hand, by over-elaborating its own explanation of itself it tends, beyond reason, to absurdity. What does this work tell us about the nature of everyday objects or the way we relate to them? To a certain extent the work tells us nothing new or anything that we do not already know about the objects. The representation of the object is unproblematic in that its image is directly recognizable: the shape and size coincide with the actual everyday object, which in turn is reinforced by the materiality of the image which reiterates the function and work context of the object. In this respect, by a trope of repetition and iteration of the same, perhaps the work achieves an ambition to provide an access to the same but from a different perspective, such that the objects –board, paper, staples, image – remain the same but become other at the same time, allowing the viewer to look again at the objects in a slightly different way.<sup>37</sup> Like *Rèunir I*, other early works of Vilmouth in which he employs carpentry and electrician's tools, the function of objects again appear at once reiterated and questioned. In *Cut Out* (1980) [Fig. 5] and *Autour d'un Marteau* [Around a Hammer] (1980) [Fig. 6] tools appear “surrounded by that on which they act”<sup>38</sup>: in the first, an ellipse made of electric cable surrounds a pair of pliers and, in the second, a hammer is surrounded by an array of nails: in both instances the cable and nails radiate out from an outline of the tool at the centre of the work, which they reiterate to produce a successively more indistinct outline of the original form at its centre. The objects, and

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<sup>37</sup> In ‘The Image – the Distinct’, Jean-Luc Nancy offers an analysis of image as that which always stands at a distance ‘as an “image”’: it is not a form, not a thing, it has no object: “The self-coincidence of the image in itself excludes its conformity to a perceived object or to a coded sentiment or well-defined function. ... The image is the obviousness of the invisible. It does not render it visible as an object: it accedes to a knowledge of it”. Nancy, Jean-Luc (2005 [2003]) ‘The Image – the Distinct’ in *The Ground of the Image*, Jeff Fort (tr.), New York: Fordham University Press, p.10-12

<sup>38</sup> See Newman, M. (1980), *Jean-Luc Vilmouth*, Lisson Gallery, London.

[http://www.lissongallery.com/#/exhibitions/1980-10-22\\_jean-luc-vilmouth/](http://www.lissongallery.com/#/exhibitions/1980-10-22_jean-luc-vilmouth/)

the way Vilmouth manipulates them, seem to appear in the work in an ambiguous way: both confirmed and denied at the same, but surely invested with the same self-evident quality that characterizes everyday objects in the use we make of them and which constitutes our understanding of them. In other words, what Vilmouth seems to be doing in his artworks is to stage commonplace objects, which we normally only relate to in the use we make of them, and re-stage them in a setting that opens them to a more discursive relationship. In a much later work, *Same Same but Different* (2005) [Fig. 7], it seemed that Vilmouth wanted to reiterate in actual language the strategies of estrangement that he set in place in his early works though here we might say, on this reading, he reverses the polarity, taking a phrase, a discursive fragment, and estranging it by means of its material formation and with a contradictory or ambivalent message. The work consists of the words “SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT” formed in neon. Here the artist announces not only the self-evidence that surround everyday objects but also the paradoxes that comprise the life of the everyday. Perhaps, I would suggest, the very question of meaning is itself absent both in the everyday and the artwork that works along with it so that some other criterion (of meaning) applies. Perhaps a work of art cannot provide a new meaning, or knowledge about the everyday, but, paradoxically, by dealing with it, it may affect the way we look what it is to be meaningful, and thus, the way in which we confer meaning.<sup>39</sup>

We must then think of a subject position that is not uni-directional and thus organized by only one point of view. Perhaps, the figure employed by cultural anthropology and sociology referred to as a ‘participant observer’ may offer an alternative approach or point of view. The concept of the ‘participant observer’ arose in cultural anthropology as a response to a previous generation of ethnography. To understand the ‘ethnic’ object the observer was to put herself in the place of the participant of the culture native to the object. The ethnic object was no longer to be understood as the subaltern or inferior version of its more fully realized western

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<sup>39</sup> In relation to the object and its image, though through the general problematic of representation, as instanced in the works of Vilmouth that we are considering here, one interesting concept to consider could be the degree to which the object differs from itself in the sense of what Levinas terms ‘resemblance’: “The most elementary procedure of art consists in substituting for the object its image. Its image, and not its concept. A concept is the object *grasped*, the intelligible object. Already by action we maintain a living relationship with a real object; we grasp it, we conceive it. [...] An image marks a hold over us ... a fundamental passivity. [...] In what does an image differ from a symbol, a sign, or a word? By the very way it refers to its object: resemblance.” Levinas, Emmanuel (2001 [1948]) “Reality and Its Shadow” in Clive Cazeaux (Ed.) *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, pp.119-121

equivalent. The observer of the object was no longer to adopt the disembodied, omniscient position that the Eurocentric observer of the past had abrogated to herself. But is this possible? To put it another way, the experience of the 'participant observer,' if it is to produce any form of additional knowledge about the 'ethnic' object, must simultaneously retain some form of second order of thought about the object to which the observed culture is not itself privy. However, while rejecting the integration of the ethnic object into a western and universal taxonomy of objects in general, the participant observer nevertheless retains a privileged perspective. What is less clear, however, is how this mode of observation can apply to one's own cultural artefacts. What if the participant observer is already immersed in a culture comprised of artefacts, remembering that these artefacts are both material and intellectual – the latter referring to the means of their own evaluation? What then is the relationship to the artefacts of that culture? How could those artefacts be endowed with meaning? And is that meaning defined from within the observed culture or from a position of alterity?

To a certain extent, as citizens, piqued by curiosity of the new and attachments to the old, we all are in a position that is something like that of the 'participant observer'. To observe necessarily demands a point of view and therefore the construction of a distance in relation to that which is observed. If we relate this to the experience of the everyday, we may suggest that a fully immersed social being necessarily needs to withdraw from her observing position, which means to withdraw from her point of view, to deconstruct the distance between her and the object under observation and enter into the unperceived of the everyday. By contrast, one could re-draw the proximity between one and the other (be it a person or a thing under observation) and become aware of one's subject position reconfiguring the distance between the observer and that which is observed. This in turn, would necessarily demand the withdrawal from participation: the perspectival subject and the subject of participation (immersed in daily life, for example) are intermittently and casually, but reciprocally, displaced by each other. In this sense, the coincidence between the subject of participation and that of observation is not consistently possible because the requirements of the one always threaten to displace those of the other. In this sense, even if shifting from one position to the other may be contingent on events, their incompatibility is drawn under a rule of necessity. We may say that the position of the participant and that of the observer are related through a rule of remainder and that

this incommensurate and undecidable remainder or excess is inherently characteristic of the everyday. Jacques Derrida's notion of *restance* or remaining may be helpful to clarify this ambivalence. Inscribed within the logic of "trace", *restance* refers to that which remains, not as actual residue, but as that which 'is not':

A trace is never present, fully present, by definition; it inscribes in itself the reference to the specter of something else. The remainder is not present either, any more than a trace as such ... The remainder *is not*, it is not a being, not a modification of that which is. Like the trace, the remaining offers itself for thought before or beyond being. It is inaccessible to a straightforward intuitive perception.<sup>40</sup>

'The remainder is not present'. 'The remainder *is not*'. We may say that the figure of the participant and that of the observer are reciprocally inscribed in each other, but only as trace, one of the other, as that which is not fully present and not available to straightforward perception. In other words, as that which 'is left unclaimed'<sup>41</sup>. That is, in order to observe, participation needs to be left unclaimed, and, vice versa, in order to participate, to observe needs to be left unclaimed. The figure of the 'participant observer' may serve to analyse both the experience of the everyday and the possible strategies that art may take to address precisely what passes unnoticed, that which, in the life of the everyday, as remainder, falls into the orbit of the other, without presence.

As a practicing artist, and since I became increasingly interested in exploring the city and its various forms of marketplaces, the compounded figure of both observing and participating defined the standpoint for my own artistic research. After all, before being an artist working with everyday objects and materials in general I am first of all a consumer of those materials. It is in this sense, that even if the actual methodological research figure of 'participant observation' is invested with intentionality, somehow or other, moved by everyday's contingencies, we all attempt to observe with

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<sup>40</sup> Derrida, Jacques (2001) *Paper Machine*, Tr. Rachel Bowlby, Stanford University Press Stanford, California, 2005, p. 151

<sup>41</sup> To explain the notion of remainder as that which is left unclaimed, Derrida turn to the figure of a letter and, in responding to Lacan's claim that a letter always arrives at its destination, he asserts that 'it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving'. Cf. Derrida, Jacques (1987 [1975]) 'Le Facteur de la Vérité' in *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, pp. 412-496. Poe, Edgar Allan (1967 [1845]) "The Purloined Letter" in *Selected Tales*, pp. 318-337. London: Book Club Associates. Lacan, Jacques (2005 [1955]) "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, pp. 6-48. New York: W. W. Norton.

discrimination our own culture at the same time as we find a role or an active (participating) position within it. The analysis here hinges on the idea that on the one hand to be fully immersed in the culture dispels any notion of an overarching viewpoint; on the other hand, to retain this in whatever measure will necessarily dissociate the 'participant observer' from the full experience of the object of study as experienced by the members of the society. One way or another something is remaindered. One is either immersed in the act of participation, or that of observation; there is no position that wholly reconciles the two. There are two main questions that arise from this and that I would like to address. On the one hand, what is the special relationship to its objects that the west claims in order to understand implicitly and more fully than its counterparts in other cultures the nature of objecthood? On the other hand, how is this nature of objecthood relevant for art practices that by employing everyday materials explore, both as observers and participants, the subject/object relationship as both in the work and in the everyday? Put differently and thinking about how artists approach the everyday: does the methodology of the participant observer tell us something about the way art deals with the relationship between (everyday) objects and subjects (citizens, individuals of our modern societies)?

The task of the participant observer is to construct some new meaning in relation to that which is being observed. But how is this meaning constructed? From where does it arise: from within or from without the context of the observed culture? It is in this sense that the role of the participant observer implies something like a double position or a dual perspective. On the one hand, her perspective is defined as if arising from within the context to which the ethnic object pertains, but, on the other hand, that same perspective necessarily has been (in)formed from without that given context. In other words, since the observed object can never be severed from its context, and neither can the observer be severed from her means of observation or of constructing meaning, a hierarchy inevitably arises. This is where the privileged perspective of the participant observer resides. However, we have already argued that that which is characteristic of the everyday is that it lacks the ordering of hierarchy; since the alternative would be to distribute it within a system of meaning thus rendering the term (the everyday) trivial. Were this not the case, the everyday would be unable to undetermine the orders of meaning that is the central significance of Blanchot's argument. Given this context, what is relevant to our current concerns is to

explore the particular way that art practices have developed in order to engage with what is unperceived in the world of the everyday; and that by strategies of estrangement. In dealing with articles circulated by the distribution and consumption of the consumer society what is at stake is the ability to make possible a reengagement with the codes of identity by which they are put into circulation, while enabling a certain distance from which those codes can be seen anew. In other words, by some kind of restaging, it is to foreground that which in Derrida's terms has hitherto been a trace, the kind of background radiation resonating within, but not identified with, the thing in its designated role within the commercial economy.

The methodology of the participant observer arose in a context, perhaps informed by post-colonialism, but certainly within the liberalization of western societies more generally. In a similar fashion within the artistic community a general feeling was abroad, less to do with the intellectual vanguardism of Duchamp's 'readymades,' and more to do with a democratization of the arts to include 'the common man' or with some inevitability, the everyday. In British theatre, 'kitchen sink drama,' in British cinema, for example, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and in France *Nouvelle Vague*; in the visual arts, assemblage and *bricolage*, Italian *Arte Povera* and perhaps most significantly, in the USA in particular, 'Pop Art'; all turning their attention away from the ideal to the quotidian: life on the streets or common experience. From this shorthand for the seismic changes in post-war Europe and elsewhere, I want to look in a little detail at certain artworks that by employing everyday objects interrogate the construction of meaning and propose an undetermined space wherein the relation between (everyday) objects and meaning – and thus the subject that constructs it – is estranged. I will pursue this figure of the 'participant observer' since it seems to me that its methodology provides for an alternative to the ability of western rationalism that constructs meaning by means of binary oppositions and therefore to think a space of undecidability.

Even if the aim of the participant observer is to produce 'from within' a new discourse – a new logos, i.e. rule-governed speech – about the native object, the new logos will inevitably retain its condition of entering from without. Inside and outside, within and without, are binary oppositions that are inscribed within the role of the participant observer and define a particular mode of address that, in the case of the ethnographer, the participant observer brings from anthropology. The role of the artist

in relation to the everyday may be seen as parallel to that of the ethnographer<sup>42</sup>, though perhaps more than with an intention of producing knowledge, the artist approaches the everyday with the intention of investigating and thereby manipulating those codes of identity that are the basis on which meanings are constructed. The argument hinges on the means by which, in the materiality of things, signification – that is significance – is transmitted in codes of identity. As one might say, the artist, as participant observer, is part cryptographer, unscrambling and re-scrambling codes, whose reception occurs at the level of aesthetic experience. In being a part of, in being engaged within the everyday, the artist nevertheless brings to it a battery of techniques and a discursive regime from without: it is in this respect that the artist breaks with the otherwise closed circle of the everyday that Blanchot characterizes as marking everyday speech. For Blanchot, everyday speech is to be “at once engulfed within and deprived of the everyday [in the sense of its inherent invisibility]”. However, the artist brings from an exteriority the possibility to open a discourse that moderates between its two polarities: those of unmediated experience or mediated reflection. It is the simultaneous occurrence – an encounter one could say – of the immediate and the mediated reflection that the work of art manages to set in play. Without generalizing, and always referring to those art practices here proposed as invested with strategies of estrangement, as the everyday object enter the context of art it both retains its everydayness but also is set into relation with an alternative discursive regime defined by the art context and one which opens the object to fresh critical enquiry. The ambiguity of the everyday dictates a space of undecidability, whereby meaning is somehow suspended or put on hold at least as far as the legislation of meaning is concerned. Perhaps what is achieved by the participant observer’s standpoint is that it gets closer to the rather undetermined relation between what belongs to the inside and what belongs to the outside of the everyday that is both seen to flow imperceptibly and that comes into a clarity of focus under her study. A further aspect of participation

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<sup>42</sup> Our intention is to emphasize the paradoxical position of the participant observer that arises from the tension between the possibility and impossibility regarding her task of both observing and participating. It is not to present an account of art practice as being that in which the practice of the artist is equated to that of the ethnographer. However, an interesting artwork that brings the practice of the artist together with that of the ethnographer is Mark Dion’s *Tate Thames Dig* (1999), currently on display at Tate Modern Gallery. Not only the final presentation of the work, but also the work as process brings techniques of research characteristic of the ethnographer and the archaeologist to the practice of art. See, Foster, H. (1996) ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’ in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge: MIT Press. Downey, A. (2009) *An Ethics of Engagement: Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer*, *Third Text*, 23:5, 593-603. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528820903184849>

conditions and changes the very nature of the observation: that was what was held to be its specific advance in the methodology of ethnography. Indeed once transferred to the sphere of art, what is singularly at stake is the ability to change or influence the act of observation – now the viewing public of the artwork. However, just as the ethnographer can never be the wholly neutral participant, amnesiac of her learnt discipline, nor is the artist. The question that then arises using the model of participant observer is what relation from the pole of ‘observer’ the work of the artist bears to meaning; and from the pole of ‘participant’ how the artist brings materials into relation with the requirement of meaning. In engaging with the process of the construction of meaning, the work of the art of estrangement intercepts already existent regimes or systems of order redeploying the artefacts of those regimes to its own ends. These systems may be the propriety of social forms, or economic, political, aesthetic, domestic, or whichever the artwork seeks to address. Here we are concerned with material objects, but as we have commented above, it is the codes of identity inhering in their material form that the artwork addresses. We might want to say that the artwork remains proximate to meaning but without the import of meaning. This opens to a discussion in relation to language, perhaps the context from where meaning is framed and ratified. Within this, we want to explore how the signification invested in everyday objects once they enter the context of art changes or remains: how does one, as a viewer, relate to, or describe a work of art? Addressing the relation between language and that which is seen, and, with reference to Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, Michel Foucault writes:

...the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say... if one wishes to keep the relation of language to vision open, if one wishes to treat their incompatibility as a starting-point for speech instead of as an obstacle to be avoided, so as to stay as close as possible to both, then one must erase those proper names [of those depicted in the painting] and preserve the infinity of the task.<sup>43</sup>

Foucault gives shape to the problem we are discussing; but he implicitly endorses the primacy of language: that is, of the primacy of the observer. The ‘task’ for Foucault is

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<sup>43</sup> Foucault, Michel (1970 [1966]), ‘Las Meninas’ in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage Books, p.10

infinite because according to him the artwork can never be wholly encapsulated in language; something will always be remaindered. On the other hand, from the pole that Foucault does not adopt, the artist as participant, what agency attaches to the artwork as it erupts into the field of language, the field in which meaning is transacted? For example, Michael Craig Martin's *An Oak Tree* (1973) [Fig. 8]: we might interpret it as reaching into language to produce the linguistic phrase, 'an oak tree,' as an artwork; to quarantine it in art so to speak. The work consists of a Duralex glass filled with water, placed in the centre of a glass bathroom shelf (displayed at 253 cm high approx.) and a text (displayed beneath and to the left of the shelf) where the artist asks and answers questions regarding how he has changed "a glass of water into a full-grown oak tree". The work functions by a trope of estrangement in which a conventional phrase is reallocated to an alternative object. Or the glass and shelf of the work is assigned an anomalous place in language. Or more immediately, language's purview over the artwork is simply cancelled. In doing so what comes to the fore is that the very question of discursability is put in question; a question that for Foucault is self-evidently unproblematic. What is put forward is not an alternative meaning for the phrase, 'an oak tree,' only the onus to consider again its meaning. To consider meaning in itself was something that was a very present issue for the artists of the 1970s, like Craig Martin. In *An Oak Tree*, for example, through a kind of tautological trope, the question about the nature of art becomes the actual agenda of the work itself: what is a work of art? Is it a particular object or can it be what the artist says it is? Are its means of execution limited to those sanctioned by use or tradition or, given the arbitrariness of representation *per se*, can any one arbitrarily chosen object signify another? In this respect, *An Oak Tree* deals with an idea of belief and disbelief. On the one hand, the work addresses the belief of the artist that he – as artist – can transform a glass of water in an oak tree – and in this the work connotes aspects 'God-like transubstantiation'<sup>44</sup>. On the other hand, the work tackles on aspects of disbelief since what one sees does not coincide with what one reads, extrapolating the relation that Foucault explores when claiming: "what we see never resides in what we say". When those artists that I will turn to shortly came to adopt the everyday as the site of their intervention and in the general ethos abroad at the time we can imagine that two things were uppermost in their minds. Firstly, that the everyday was where the broad

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<sup>44</sup> Walker, John A. (1998) "Michael Craig-Martin: An Oak Tree (1974)" in *Art and Outrage: Provocation, Controversy and the Visual Arts*, London, Pluto Press.

mass of humanity encountered the life world and secondly that it comprised a mass of assumptions, self-evident truths and unconsidered facts. It was or is not so much the case that the everyday is meaningless but that meaning is tacit and unproblematic. While at the same time the tokens whereby people transacted the meaningful events of their lives were drawn from this unexamined flow and more often than not the sense connoted by meaning is that of purpose – and one imposed from above. We might recall, however, that while the figure of the participant observer acts from within this context and is not exempt from it, the figure of the artist brings to bear the critical act of the observer. It is this configuration of intention and engagement on the part of the artist that we wish to determine. Craig Martin's work exemplifies how an artwork might erupt in to the linguistic field. It qualifies an 'order of things' that Foucault seems to implicitly endorse. However, in this reading, the water glass and the bathroom shelf that comprise the work would seem to be interchangeable with any manner of alternative objects.

I want to move on to consider some works in which the nature of the objects used is not so arbitrary, that somehow there is a necessary connection between the objects employed in the work and the questions addressed by the work. They are works where the existing semiotics of the object remain and find a necessary and not only contingent place within the artworks composed. We have been considering the artist as participant observer. What I now want to introduce here through this simile is that in this role, the artist opens a point of access to the everyday: that is, that by the artistic means at her disposal the artist opens a perspective through the artwork into the world of objects, and, more specifically into the way we relate to those objects. To think about the complex figure of the artist who is at the same time both inside and outside a given culture, that, as participant observer, she seeks to articulate, provides an entrance not only to my experience of making art, but also to the work of various other artists that have at the core of their works the various paradoxes that characterize the everyday – to find oneself "at once engulfed within and deprived of". And when these works function at their best they dissolve a clear cut distinction between that which is familiar and that which is unfamiliar, inviting the viewer to enter into a paradoxical relation with meaning by falling in and out of familiarity with what is unfamiliar, and unfamiliar with what is familiar.

### *Unique and variable*

In 1982 North American artist Allan McCollum gave shape to a work entitled *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* [Fig. 9] that was to become a kind of hallmark of his artistic career. The work takes the form of an enormous series that, as the title indicates, brings together over ten thousand similar objects. Each object is unique, yet very similar at the same time. Each object was made by making a unique combination of different shapes from about hundreds of banal, common objects. McCollum collected commercial, mass-produced objects – or fragments of objects – from various everyday situations and then made multiple combinations of their shapes by means of a process of moulding and casting. In his studio, McCollum made a rubber mould of each of the collected object and made plaster casts from them. In tandem, in a further stage, he made other multiple combinations of those casts to make a new form to be cast, yet again. The work commenced with hundreds of original objects or parts of objects that were initially taken as basic units and that for the artist meant a “huge vocabulary of little odd bits and pieces”<sup>45</sup>. Subsequently, the artist combined the casts of those basic units in a variety of ways so that he ended up with thousands of similar but different ‘everyday’ cast shapes:

To produce the *Individual Works* hundreds of small shapes are casually collected from peoples’ homes, supermarkets, hardware stores, and sometimes from the sidewalks: bottle-caps, jar-lids, drawer-pulls, salt-shakers, flashlights, measuring spoons, cosmetics containers, yogurt cups, earrings, push-buttons, candy-molds, garden-hose connectors, paper-weights, shade-pulls, Chinese tea-cups, cat toys, pencil sharpeners, etc. From this collection of shapes many rubber molds are produced from which replicas of these shapes can be hand-cast in plaster in large quantities — thus creating a vocabulary of shapes which can be combined to produce new shapes ...<sup>46</sup>

McCollum devised a mathematical formula by which to produce from his expanded ‘vocabulary’ thousands of new objects (in a potentially infinite series) mimicking, but thereby exceeding, a kind of mechanical reproduction. In following such a

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<sup>45</sup> Broad cast interview, McCollum, Allan, “Over Ten Thousand Individual Works” Episode #129, filmed in McCollum’s Brooklyn Studio.

[http://wn.com/Allan\\_McCollum\\_Shapes\\_Copper\\_Cookie\\_Cutters\\_|\\_Art21](http://wn.com/Allan_McCollum_Shapes_Copper_Cookie_Cutters_|_Art21)

<sup>46</sup> As described in William S. Bartman (1996) ed. *Allan McCollum: Interview by Thomas Lawson*, Los Angeles: ART Press, p.58. Quoted in Molesworth, Helen (ed) (2005) *Part Object Part Sculpture*, Wexner Center for the Arts and The Pennsylvania State University Press, p.203

mathematical formula for this procedure, this combination gave the seemingly paradoxical result that was to produce ‘over ten thousand individual – *and unique* – works’ from unconsidered and therefore unperceived ‘bits and pieces’ taken from the everyday. The series is formed by means of a seemingly artless and mechanical process. In this sense, the work formulates a criticality in relation to the tradition of uniqueness in art. In doing so, and by employing traditional sculptural techniques of copying, the work destabilises assumptions of originality and uniqueness so long attached to the traditional endorsement of the creative process in the making of art. While one aspect of the work engages with a discourse of value linked to the notion of what is unique and original in art, another aspect of the work engages, in a more oblique way, with two unperceived levels of the everyday: the form of common objects and the latent labour that resides in them. It is this aspect, related to the unperceived of the everyday and the ability of the work to disclose its hidden aspects that is of relevance in our context here. The means of production that McCollum employs in his work are already inscribed in the objects that are transformed in the work. Endorsing this, the work presents a strategy of transforming the same by the same: mechanically produced objects transformed by a mechanical process. The difference is that while the former produces standardisation, the latter draw differences out of that same standardisation, giving rise to a work that then presents a potentially infinite variety, without end. This paradox of standardization and a potential infinite differentiation within mass-production already had a precedent in the marketplace. For example, in North America, the product *Little Person* launched in 1976 that later became the very popular *Cabbage Patch Kids* consisted of a series of hand-stitched dolls among which each doll was unique, one-of-a-kind, and offered for ‘adoption’:

From the beginning, Cabbage Patch Kids were not posited as ordinary toys; children were urged to “adopt” Cabbage Patch Kids as if they were their babies. Each doll came with an “adoption form” – blue for boys, pink for girls – imprinted with the doll’s name ... Many children began collecting multiple Cabbage Patch Kids and forming families.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Yaverbaum, Eric; Bly, Robert W., Benun, Ilise (2006) *Public Relations for Dummies*, Wiley Publishing, Inc., p.303

*Cabbage Patch Kids* is a mass-produced commodity invested with the sign of individuation – “each one is an individual ... no two are ever exactly alike”<sup>48</sup>. Even though the objects are produced in mass (millions of them have been sold in the market), in their design the sign of individuation has been incorporated, so that “out of the 3 million Cabbage Patch Kids sold in 1984, no two were alike”<sup>49</sup>. Even if the market concept of a unique, individual ‘little person’ was marked in the actual distinctiveness between each doll given in its gender, name, date of birth and physical appearance, the radical insertion of uniqueness was given in the rhetorical figure that the act of purchasing was to be understood as one of adopting. Here uniqueness not only references an original with no copies but, perhaps more centrally, it indicates something like a pure beginning, a place of birth, an origin that can be ‘adopted,’ that is, specified. The anthropomorphic characteristic of a doll was doubled by the possibility of its being adopted and thus becoming something else, something different to the rest of the dolls offered in the market. This logic of adoption acts very strategically on the mind of consumers in that they come to believe that, through the practice of adoption, they are genuinely choosing for themselves, that they are getting near to a wish, a choice, an option of their own. This is a strategy of inversion that is central to the market economy: to make the consumer believe that the commodities offered by the market are necessities, and not that the commodity is imposed on her. In as much as the consumer adopts the doll, she also adapts to the regime of a market that first creates desire in order to fulfil it. Even if the Cabbage Patch Kids are still around, it was particularly during the mid-1980s when its revolutionary uniqueness, individualization and ‘humanity’ became a huge phenomenon. This was as true for the market as it was for the lifeworld of those in whom the arousal of a desire to ‘adopt’ a doll became an imperative. Although always recognizably only another marketing strategy, “at holiday time, stories appeared in the press saying that stores had a shortage of dolls. Parents stampeded to get Cabbage Patch Kid dolls for their kids”<sup>50</sup>.

In relation to a phenomenon of large quantities invested with the mark of the unique, another interesting aspect of *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* is the simplicity of its construction vis-à-vis the grandiosity of its scale. There is nothing extraordinary about the work or the procedures from which it arises. On the one hand,

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<sup>48</sup> Cabbage Patch Kid, “Original Kids” in <http://www.cabbagepatchkids.com/about/legend/>

<sup>49</sup> Scott, Sharon (2010) *The African American Entrepreneur: Then and Now*, Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford: Greenwood, p.52

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., Yaverbaum

the work achieves the bringing to attention of unseen or overlooked quotidian objects; on the other hand, it does so by perpetuating the mechanical and repetitive tasks that define the industrial workplace, its routine and circularity. However, in transforming the same or that which is familiar through mimicking its original means of production, the transformed elements of the everyday are presented in the work in an estranged way. So, perhaps we could say, that there is nothing extraordinary about McCollum's work, and yet in that resides its strangeness. As I have commented above, the idea of estrangement that I am trying to cohere is not related to any idea of awkwardness, or of how weird or inadequate an object may appear in a work of art. Rather, the idea of estrangement that I want to exemplify through the analysis of McCollum's work is one where the object has been estranged from its internal logic or from the 'rules of formation'<sup>51</sup> that have been invested in it in the first place. For example, the logic of mechanical labour that was employed in the construction *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* is estranged from the unique result it produces; or, the unique products of a systematized labour are estranged from their uniqueness given the overwhelming quantity in which they are presented. The objects that comprise *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* are left in a kind of undecidable field: they cannot be fully determined as mass-produced, not yet fully as unique.

McCollum's work is not merely about the use of everyday objects; that is, about the departure from the use of traditional materials for the making of art – by now a well established trope. What is at issue is how he insinuates the everyday, as such, into the work and how he produces the everyday as a visible feature of the work. I want to propose that the work unveils such invisibility by a process of estrangement: a process by which the norm is made to appear as abnormal or at least questionable. In that respect, and with regard to the integration of everyday objects into an artwork, I want to suggest that it is possible to identify specific process of estrangement at work in *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*. I identify this process of estrangement in the work as the art-object being indeterminate in as much as the work neither conforms to the norm of mass-production not to the norm of the unique individual object. This opens up, I propose, a space now comported as impossibility in so far as it resists designation by either one or another rule. It is a space where a sense of belonging and

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<sup>51</sup> "The *rules of formation* are conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive division". Cf. Foucault, Michael (2002 [1969]), *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 42

not belonging conflate. Strangeness, then, is not the overcoming of repression – as in the Freudian *unheimlich* – but about a space of undecidability that allows one to question a norm or to approach it from a different perspective.

***Magnitude: remainder and excess***

One trope of estrangement that one can recognize in McCollum's *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* is based on the technique of multiple combinations of shapes wherein the possibility of identifying this or that everyday object tends to disappear. As we have considered, the cast forms that constitute McCollum's works do not depend on the appropriation of everyday objects – at least in their original forms. The actual object is not present in the work, but in the casting process, a trace of the objects has been transposed into the artwork. In this particular case, because the process of casting permit multiple combinations, it performs the function of estrangement in that the form of everyday objects or their fragments are alienated from their original materials and colours. Meanwhile, the scale and the shape of the 'original' collected object remain in the new cast object. On the one hand, the object is estranged via a technique of moulding and casting: the viewer finds a group of objects that 'looks like' something familiar but that cannot in fact be identified. On the other hand, by differing only in minute but incremental differences the resulting objects generate a sense of strangeness since it becomes difficult to define what they are, how they have been made, and for what purpose. Said otherwise, the process of moulding and casting estranges the object from its material while instituting a distance between the scale (size) and shape of the objects and the system of reference or semiotic field to which they might possibly belong. In this sense, *unusual* combinations of *usual* objects produce a new object that have been estranged from some of the codes that locates it in a system of references that permits us to recognize. Even though the new, cast object appears in an estranged form from its original in a system of reference, such referentially is not annulled: the object remains somehow and anomalously within it so that we have the feeling that we should already know something about it though equally may be unable to say what that is. The uniqueness of the objects is brought about by the combination of their cast forms. The objects in the series are all unique, yet they share one or another element that were originally casted from objects

that were collected from the everyday. The order in which the forms are combined gives rise to a series of unique objects tending towards the infinite. From a certain theoretical perspective, this aspect of the work has to do with the construction of differences from the 'same', thus functioning within the complex figure of repetition of being always the same and always different at the same time. This opens up to a philosophical question around the meaning of two or more things either being the same or different.<sup>52</sup> While this is an aspect of the work worth further enquiry, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a Deleuzian theorization of the problematic and one that takes us beyond our immediate concerns. For I want now to turn to what is perhaps the central trope of McCollum's practice that is the issue of magnitude and to look in some detail at the mathematical combination that is at work in *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*.

The mathematical combination that McCollum employs in the construction of difference from the same structures a series by a progression of combinations that potentially tends towards the infinite. We find in the title of the work a sign of this infinite progression in that it only specifies an estimation of 'over ten thousands' therefore leaving the exact number of objects undetermined; perhaps, insinuating an indefinitely postponed conclusion. Nicolas Bourriaud has written on the work of McCollum:

There are already more than ten thousand *Individual Works*, and the exact number will never be known ... Thanks to a game of infinite differences, it is impossible to recognize the object, just as it is impossible to deny it an original identity. This ambiguity is accompanied by a fault in naming: what among this display of forms can be called a "work of art"? The ideas? The installation? The object?<sup>53</sup>

Bourriaud underscores the question of infinite combinations, of recognition and original identity, in relation to the context of art. Even if from a different perspective to Craig Martin, McCollum also has a preoccupation about what is it that constitutes a work of art; what it is that makes one object valuable as a work of art and another as merely the indifferent product of the market. The ambiguity implied in what

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<sup>52</sup> See Deleuze, G. *Difference and Repetition* (1994 [1968]), trans. Paul Patton, New York: Columbia UP.

<sup>53</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas (1988) "McCollum's Aura", Originally published in, *New Art International*, October/November

Bourriaud refers to as a ‘fault of naming’ indicates a kind of undecidability that is at work in McCollum’s work. How to define, with any precision, what makes the objects in a series constituting an artwork belong to the realm of artistic construction rather than to that of the mechanical processes that define industrial products? Our argument thus far has been that it is the ambiguity or lack of determination that is introduced by the trope of estrangement in the work that determines the difference: the objects, incorporated into the artwork, are distanced from any precise denomination and hence debarred from entering any one signifying discourse and therefore from having meaning as either object, thing, bits and pieces, and so on. I want to look in more detail at the kind of indeterminacy that is encoded in the title of the work and that announces the central characteristic of McCollum’s work, that is, the magnitude of his works.

The exact number of objects that comprise McCollum’s work *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* remains, at least theoretically, undetermined. Experientially, this is also in practice the case so that a central aspect of the work is its appearance as beyond measure. In leaving this open McCollum seems to raise the question of the relevance that may or may not reside in determining an exact number within the world of the mass-produced vis-à-vis the world of the unique. As we have suggested, the infinite combination of cast-forms makes the series to tend towards the infinite. In this respect, since a precise number escapes in the definition of the work, we may say that by exceeding a logic of numbers, something remains unqualified. What is it that remains unqualified in McCollum’s work? Following Immanuel Kant’s analysis of the mathematical sublime, we can propose that what remains unqualified in the work is precisely its magnitude. Magnitude in the mathematical sublime can be defined as that which escapes a logic of measurement and thus enters into a relation with an aesthetic judgement. In exploring the nature of the feeling of the mathematical sublime Kant poses two questions: what does it mean when one refers to something as being great or small? And, how can that magnitude – great or small – be accounted? For example, amongst various descriptions of *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*, Helen Molesworth writes: “... objects lay on top of a mammoth table”<sup>54</sup>. What means then, to qualify a table as being mammoth? It refers indeed to its size. So then the question would become: what does it mean to be of a mammoth size? To answer this

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<sup>54</sup> Molesworth, Helen (ed) (2005) *Part Object Part Sculpture*, Wexner Center for the Arts and The Pennsylvania State University Press, p.203

question, Kant makes a distinction between that which is *great* and that which is *absolutely great*: that is, between that which is quantifiable and therefore comparable with other quantifiable units, and that which is a measure in itself and therefore cannot be compared. That which the subject can count or determine with a given unit of measure is a matter of quantity (*quantitas*) and that which resists all quantification is a magnitude in itself (*magnitudo*). Kant argues that “in the judging of magnitude we have to take into account not merely the multiplicity (number of units) but also the magnitude of the unit (the measure)”<sup>55</sup>. It is the inability of the subject of comprehending ‘the magnitude of the unit’, that is, magnitude as such, that brings about the feeling of the sublime. So following our example and knowing that ‘mammoth’ does not correspond to a number, that is, to a definite concept or unit of measure, we may suggest that it rather indicates a magnitude which cannot be subsumed under a concept:

... we can only get definite concepts of *how great* anything is by having recourse to numbers (or, at any rate, by getting approximate measurements by means of numerical series progressing *ad infinitum*) ... we can never arrive at a first or fundamental measure, and so cannot get any definite concept of a given magnitude.<sup>56</sup>

By distinguishing between magnitude and quantity Kant is arguing for the ultimate impossibility of defining the magnitude of a magnitude, in the sense that we speak of enormity, for example. How big or how small something is will always be in relation to something else: by comparison to something other. The viewer who encounters McCollum’s work finds herself faced with the necessity either to produce some kind of unit of measures in order to grasp the work or to confront its scale. Since the size of the work surpasses the viewer’s comprehension, her natural units of measure (the length of an arm, the distance of an afternoon walk<sup>57</sup>, for instance) seem inadequate and her “ability to measure intuitively stumbles”<sup>58</sup>. The viewer can grasp perceptually a great presentation of objects arrayed in front of her, but she cannot find the means by which to measure its size. Herein resides McCollum’s essential trope of

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<sup>55</sup> Kant, Immanuel (2007 [1790]) *Critique of Judgement* (tr.) James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, § 25, p.79

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, § 26, pp.78-79

<sup>57</sup> Burnham, Douglas (2000) *An Introduction to Kant’s Critique of Judgement*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p.92

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

estrangement. The viewer find herself estranged from her ability to determine the object placed in the gallery space:

The mathematical sublime is characterized by the overwhelmingness of the experience being because of its spatial or temporal enormity (size).<sup>59</sup>

Even if Kant addressed the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime with particular reference to ‘objects of nature,’ he does not completely leave aside from his analysis the relation that the subject develops with artificial or man-made objects – such as pyramids or columns. One figure that Kant mentions briefly and that Jacques Derrida develops in greater depth is that of the ‘*colossus*’ [*kolossos*]. Kant argues that “the colossal is the mere presentation of a concept which is almost too great for presentation”<sup>60</sup>. As an indicator of scale, then, is the idea of a ‘mammoth table’ close to the idea of the *colossus*? In ‘Párrergon’, Derrida relates to the feeling of the sublime through “*taille*” to introduce a contrast to the size or magnitude of the *colossus*: that is, the magnitude of the *colossus* as represented by the subject, and the magnitude of the *colossus* as giving a size to itself, and as such remaining out of reach of the subject’s representation. Through the use of the word (in French) “*taille*” Derrida points towards that which can be ‘cut down to size’ whereas by contrast the *colossus* stands as precisely that figure which cannot be ‘cut down to size’: that is, brought within the scope of human comprehension, which Derrida suggests, takes as its natural point of reference the human body<sup>61</sup>:

Everything is measured here on the scale of [*a la taille de*] the body. Of man. It is to this fundamental measurer (*Grundmass*) that the colossal must be related, its excess of cise<sup>(\*)</sup>, its insufficient cise, the almost and the almost too much which holds it or raises or lowers it between two measures.<sup>62</sup>

Whereas the colossus is that which cannot be compared:

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.91

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., Kant, § 26, p.83

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, Jacques (1987) *The Truth in Painting*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 120)

<sup>(\*)</sup>‘Cise’ is a word introduced in the English version of *La vérité en peinture* by the translators to refer to the word “*taille*” in the original; the explanation of its use is given in a footnote: “To render this second sense of the French *taille* [as ‘the line of a cut’], and to preserve the uncertainty between the two senses which is vital in some of what follows, we shall use the word “cise,” an obsolete spelling of “size” (see OED) and suggestive of cutting (cf. incision).” Derrida, Jacques (1987 [1978]) *The Truth in Painting*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, p.120 (fn.32). The Spanish translation employs the word “talla” that connotes the two senses of the original “*taille*”.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., Derrida, p.140

“... cise [size] is compared only with itself. For the limit does not exist. Even if *there is* some, the cise of this broaching does not exist, it never begins, anywhere. Neither originary nor derived, like the trace of each trait. That’s what is presented without cise.”<sup>63</sup>

Derrida relates the mathematical infinite to the figure of the *colossus* as that which, in its presentation, is trapped in an in-between of an almost and an almost too much which triggers the feeling of the sublime in the subject for whom the *colossus* exceeds her as that which is presented with no size – “that’s what is presented without cise”.

If we agree that in a ‘numerical series progressing *ad infinitum*’ the feeling of the mathematical sublime arises, not due to the absence of a definite number, but due to the impossibility of grasping its size: could we suggest that the very arousal of the feeling of the sublime is a process of estrangement that, in our example from McCollum, has been transposed to the reception of a work of art? In Kant’s schema, the mathematical sublime puts in conflict that which the subject can apprehend (by the senses through intuition) and that which it can comprehend (in concepts via the understanding). To comprehend the size of the object then, the subject “requires a standard unit of measure (an inch, a mile, a second, and so on)”<sup>64</sup>, and since “we can never arrive at a first or fundamental measure”, when confronted with the *absolutely great* or the *colossus*, the feeling of the sublime arises as a product of the dis-encounter between sensibility and understanding. Can we call this estrangement? Put in other words, can the Kantian definition of an aesthetic relation to the world be seen as an estrangement in itself? And can this possible estrangement occur because the rule that permits understanding and intuition to coincide has escaped the subject? It is at this point and faced with a seeming impasse that Kant introduces the mediation of the imagination between understanding and intuition. We need not follow Kant in this further. What we have been endeavouring to establish is that the artwork at the point where it confounds any one regime of understanding opens onto the possibility of a free play of interpretation. As we saw with the example of Craig Martin’s *An Oak Tree*, the 1970s saw the rapid expansion of the means of representation and as we saw with the examples taken from Vilmouth the real and the represented became increasingly interpolated such that it has become necessary to define one field of art practices as neither ‘conceptual’ in the sense of an object or image as standing in the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.144

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Burnham, p. 91

place of an idea, nor wholly 'sensual' – as once divided by classifications of mimetic or expressive – but rather as an arena characterized as a place of openness by the cancellation of any one determinate idea or convention. This finally becomes the sense we have of estrangement.

*Erasing differences: identity and anonymity*

A further technique of estrangement that functions in McCollum's work operates in the opposite direction to that of enhancing uniqueness by discrete combinations of the same that we described above. Instead of drawing differences from that which carries the trace of repetition and sameness, the work, taken as a whole and in its final presentation, levels all those elaborately constructed differences. This is achieved not only by the use of the same material in making the casts but also by the use of the same colour and the disposition of the objects in a non-hierarchical order or field. Once the shape of the objects is defined, each of the over ten thousands works is (hand) painted with the same colour. This gives the work on first encounter the appearance of complete uniformity. McCollum has made several versions of this particular work, the colour that he has chosen for each series is not a basic or primary one, the colours are composed and each series has been painted in these composed rather than primary colours: they have been variously turquoise, salmon, ochre. The colours he chose for painting the objects carry the signs of a specific select object rather than of one that has been produced in massive quantities. In other words, the colours chosen are not those of the high street, but speak for a more sophisticated choice. The type of blue used in the work does not correspond to an ordinary or primary tone, it is a particular turquoise hue (a kind of green cyan); the orange is not the plain secondary colour of the colour wheel but a rather composed hue of orange, a kind of salmon. The same is the case for the 'yellow' series where the colour is an ochre hue composed by mixing yellow, red and violet. In painting every object with a composed or a 'particular' colour, the works, taken as a whole, incorporate another strategy of contradicting commercial norms where colour choice is more likely based on cost and availability. The three colours that McCollum has used in this work are composed colours that bear the sign (appearance) of special objects. However, put into a tension with the seeming uniformity of the objects, the signification given to the

works by the unique or particular colours employed in the work functions both as a mode of erasing differences that were mathematically constructed in the previous stage of combining casted forms, while at the same time enhancing their aesthetic appeal: at least equating them to a more select segment of the market economy. Just as the process of moulding and casting equivocates uniformity and difference, the colour choices equivocate banality and distinction. The work retains the presence of the mass-produced by staging a massive accumulation of objects that sustain minute variations between them. While the signification lent by their colour exempts them from the merely banal.

Finally, the process of estrangement, by erasing differences that McCollum employs and of standardising thousands of different objects by painting them the same colour, is enhanced or emphasized by the proximity of each object to its neighbour in the final presentation of the work. Which is to say, the objects are placed closely one beside the other, leaving no free space between each piece. Even if the objects are displayed on one enormous plinth – giving a sense of the spectacular – the structure of their arrangement connotes an economic use of space and a lack of hierarchy that characterizes the production and distribution of the mass-produced. The lack of hierarchy reflected in the layout of the objects, seems to echo the lack of hierarchy and of rule that, as we considered in the previous chapter, paradoxically governs the space of the everyday.

The fact that every object of the series *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* is different from every other by slight variations in shapes and that those variations are erased by using the same material and colour for the construction of the objects and by placing the objects in great proximity, makes things that were familiar to appear in an unfamiliar. The world of objects that McCollum presents in this series of works confronts the viewer with a world composed by fragments of a reality that ought to be familiar but that, nevertheless, reaches the viewer as both pertaining to a space of familiar references and at once departing from it. Something is exhibited as familiar – large accumulations, repetitions of similar objects, standardization – but also something is hidden or concealed in the presentation of that familiarity. In McCollum's work one could say that the opposites that are confronted – singular and standardized, mass-produced and unique, difference and repetition – overlap each other like two texts in a palimpsest. If each pole of the dualisms that McCollum put in

a relation of tension in his work were to be understood as two differing texts overlapping each other, for some aspects of each text to remain visible, some other aspects of it need to remain invisible. That which is the visible of one text obstructs the vision, the path of light, one could say in a metaphorical way, so that which is left out of sight is that which of the other text remains silent, unseen, concealed. What follows from here is that two points of view are overlapped, giving rise to a conflict in what holds priority in the ascription of meaning. There can then only be a sense of something inferred – not a physical perception, identifiable as an attribute of the object of perception but a presentiment or sensation or an orientation towards the object. It is to speak of a subtext implicitly endorsed but yet unspoken, just as the palimpsest overwrites an existing text without wholly removing it. For we define, to the extent that definition is possible, the everyday in just these ungraspable terms: as a rule that is without rule, lying beneath a more explicit rule. What I am arguing for by an explication of McCollum's work is that a relation holds between the work and the viewer that brings the everyday to light (sic) in the manner of conflicted norms (a contradiction of rules): those that had, hitherto, been complacently thought or passed on unnoticed in the everyday.

*Estranged labour (the hand-made and the mass-produced)*

The objects employed in McCollum's 'vocabulary' were unaccountable, industrial, mass-produced objects. However, once the objects entered the production of the work, specifically in the process of casting and combining, each object had to be transformed and worked manually. Here an element to do with a new type of combination is introduced into the work: this time not so much about the shape of common objects but about differing modes of labour: both manual and mechanical. This is a trope of estrangement that one can identify in the work. The scale of the work produces an unusual or contradictory combination of labour: manual labour is set to produce differences from objects that carry with them the indifference of the mass-produced. However, the process of making these differences functions by means of repetitive tasks. Here the process or technique of combination puts in tension the mass-produced origin of the objects, their anonymity, together with the necessary craftsmanship (manual labour) required for their individual construction in order that

each of the over ten thousand objects can be unique and individual. For, while the elements that comprise the work bring with them the mark of mass production, once they enter the work through a process of manual manipulation, their identity is transformed to that of the singular. However, it is a means of fabrication that in the end does not fail to follow the regime of mass production. Nevertheless, it is not a process of mechanical reproduction, despite its final appearance. This is, in my view, the central trope of estrangement set in place in the work. Put in other words, by bringing together the scale of mass-production together with the dimension of the hand-made a trope of estrangement is placed at the centre of the artwork. The emphasis given to the vast number of objects that formed the final work and the iteration of hundreds of possible different combinations make the familiar appear estranged.

By its very nature McCollum's work deals with mass-production, both with respect to its material (material culture) and with respect to the social implications of the labour imbued in it (immaterial culture). This provides the context for the idea of estrangement that I have tried to develop throughout this text. The practice of estrangement that I am attempting to characterize engages as much with relations – organizational systems of production – as it does with random material elements lifted from the everyday. In other words, what I wish to show is that, in the end, and again taking McCollum's work as an example, what appears estranged in the work is not the actual “bottle-caps, jar-lids, drawer-pulls, or measuring spoons” cast in the work, but the relationship that one normally and usually has with them. This is reflected in the conflictual coincidence of modes of labour that the work presents: variously hand-crafted vis-à-vis mechanical reproduction; the unregulated, ‘creative’ work of the artist vis-à-vis the regulation of the factory worker. It is our relationship to the various modes of labours (to a greater or lesser extent alienated) that the work brings to the fore. Photographs of his workshop show a considerable work force employed in production, with clearly defined areas of storage, preparation and so forth: the whole arranged systematically for the efficient production of the works. To what extent can the practicing artist as ‘participant observer’ participate in and maintain a critical distance from that which she takes as her subject matter? Where does McCollum's work, and that of many others, stand in relation to these issues? One critical rejoinder to McCollum's work might be that what began as a critical response to the unthought regimentation and uniformity of the everyday had decanted itself into that very

process. However, as we have discussed, it is in this paradoxicality that the strangeness of the work resides. Indeed, since McCollum's workshop looks no different from a small factory in which workers are subjected to one, discrete and repetitive task, the critical dimension of the works is not always easy to decipher. Do the works call into question the social consequences of mass-production and distribution of labour, or does it ravish the senses by sublimating the scale of standardization? This question hinges on the value placed on the unique production identified with immaterial or intellectual labour and the indifference of the repetitive nature of Fordist factory work. While it is an inevitable fact that the artist, in her contract with the market, is not immune from the demands of production, the relevance of McCollum's work resides in the mode by which the artist enters and intervenes the unperceived world of the everyday. The latter, as we commented on above, does not refer to some class or sub-set of society but is rather the unobserved and undifferentiated – the unarticulated of being in a society as such – the question again arises as to what extent the artist can both participate and observe at the same time and, in doing so, can offer a new perspective from where to explore the mode we engage with objects in the everyday.

There is an evident contrast of scale between the work of Jean-Luc Vilmouth *Réunir 1* and McCollum's work *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*. However, even if both works appear to be radically opposed in scale, more centrally, the strategies of estrangement that are at work in both works do share something like a point of view or a way of looking into the unperceived world of the everyday and daily practices linked to work or the workplace. However removed one work seems to be from the other, I want to suggest that the works share one issue in common, which is how they approach the everyday and what of the undifferentiated population of everyday objects they chose to bring to the fore. The mode the two works find their entrance, so to speak, to that which escapes the everyday and thus to that which escapes the daily relations that we establish with common objects are similar. Both works account for those aspects of everyday practices that by way of giving attention to 'the work' itself the objects or tools employed in such practices necessarily pass unnoticed. This is what in Heidegger's vocabulary is known as ready-to-hand that indicate entities, tools for example, that are defined as that which, in a daily practice, are "in-order-to" and "expresses the Being of equipment." In everyday experience, the common use of objects or equipments demand to remove such objects from awareness and immediate

attention in order for the work to be carried out. However proximate, however close and lodged at the centre of what is at work in everyday practices, the tool, the equipment, is destined to depart, to escape from our awareness:

The ready-to-hand is not grasped theoretically at all, nor is it itself the sort of thing that circumspection takes proximally as a circumspective theme. The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw [*zurückzuziehen*] in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically. That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools themselves [*die Werkzeugesbelbst*]. On the contrary, that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work – that which is to be produced at the time; and this is accordingly ready-to-hand too. The work bears with it that referential totality within which the equipment is encountered.<sup>65</sup>

What is of interest for our discussion here is what of ‘our everyday dealings’ remain present in the work of art and how everyday objects are encountered or not encountered in the work of art. According to Heidegger, it is work itself what is more close to our everyday dealings, while tools and objects in general fade away as if escaping. It is this nature of everyday objects that we are concerned with here: to explore the degree of presence that these objects may attain as works-of-art rather than as merely ordinary equipment. In other words, what of the everyday escapes when it enters the work of art, or what of that which normally escapes the everyday becomes present in the context of the work-of-art? In the case of Vilmouth’s work *Rèunir I*, we could say that the very construction of the work, the use of a stapler, the stapling a paper on a wooden board, requires the tool (stapler) to disappear. In the kind of tautological technique that, as we have commented before, forms a rhetorical trope in the structure of *Rèunir I*, the tool that disappears in the making of the work somehow appears represented in the work: as if said again, but differently. Put in more Heideggerian terms, we could say that the equipment (a stapler) that was ready to hand for the making of the work, while withdrawing from the artist’s attention in the action of stapling, it remained, as image and trace, in the product of that work. If in *Rèunir I* what withdraws is the equipment, I propose that in *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* the magnitude of work is what comes to the fore in the artwork. Perhaps the viewer asks herself about the technical resources involved in the making

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<sup>65</sup> Heidegger, M. (1976 [1966]) *Being and Time*, tr. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell. [70],p. 99.

of the work – how was it made? But what persists in the work is the dimension of labour (the process of working as such) with which we are unused to be confronted. This is part of the opacity of commodities: one finds the product on the shelf, but does not perceive the labour – or even the conditions of that labour – that stand behind its production. In this sense, McCollum’s ‘individual works’ share some conditions of production with commodities. Not to say here that the work shares an important condition with commodities because the work itself became a commodity and has been assigned a market value. This is a separate matter linked to the art market and the Marxist idea of commodification that differs to what we are trying to focus on here: that is, how the artist, both as a participant and as an observer of a given culture, approaches the everyday through her work. The question that McCollum’s work raises in this specific context is more related to Marx’s notion of “the fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof”<sup>66</sup>. One could ask: how does objects of use, as commodities, both enter and remain in the everyday unnoticed, unperceived? Do they escape and remain precisely by hiding the secret of its labour? McCollum’s huge installations, together with the production lines that the works necessarily entail, are required in order to produce the strategies of estranging our relation to the everyday. Nevertheless they replicate the kind of labour that was invested in the first place to produce the objects that he later transformed through techniques of moulding and casting. Consequently, perhaps what remains in the work is something like a double secret – to use Marx’s vocabulary – a double exposure of the (hidden) labour: the one that took place in the fabrication of the original objects and the other generated in the making of the artwork.<sup>67</sup> This double exposure may direct us towards the magnitude of the work that we proposed to read through Kant’s mathematical sublime. Could one argue, therefore, that in order to expose (critically) the hidden labour invested in the objects of daily use that McCollum transforms in his work, he necessarily needs to remain within the same regime of labour? So that, in order to offer a critical

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<sup>66</sup> Karl Marx [1867] “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret” in *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, Penguin Books Ltd., p. 168

<sup>67</sup> This notion of the double exposure of labour within the work/context of art, is explicitly articulated in the analysis of the readymade by John Roberts in *The Intangibilities of From: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*, Following the Marx’s assertion that an homogenization of different forms of labour occurs in the process of exchange-value, Roberts argues that the unassisted readymade brought to the fore the social conflict between intellectual and productive labour. In the words of Roberts: “Indeed, the hidden labour embedded in the commodities consumed in the production of the artwork is deliberately not concealed. This is why the passage of the readymade into an artwork constituted such a shock for the traditional defenders of artistic creativity: this process of revelation dared to expose the necessary labour which makes artistic labour possible.” Roberts, John (2007) *The Intangibilities of From: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*, London, New York: Verso, p.25

perspective on the division of labour, he necessarily needs to reproduce that same regime of labour he aims to expose.

### *Final Comments*

In relation to established critical studies about estrangement, I would say that the duality between manual and mechanical, and material and immaterial labour that McCollum invests in his work, more than evoking a Freudian feeling of the uncanny which is related to something that becomes unfamiliar through a process of repression, can be seen to evoke a sense of estrangement connoted by the Russian word *ostranenie* that resonates with theories of the everyday. This is a term theorized by Viktor Shklovsky, the Russian and Soviet critic writer. Similar to the Freudian *unheimlich*, *ostranenie*, literarily means “making it strange”. In Shklovsky’s work, it defines a practice of estrangement that seeks to highlight perception in and of the everyday by presenting that which is familiar in an estranged way. In other words, through a literary practice of *ostranenie* the everyday is produced as unfamiliar, made to stand before us rather than that which is absorbed into our own subjectivities. The relation between art and the everyday is central to Shklovsky’s theory of estrangement. For Shklovsky, *ostranenie* is an artistic devise of estranging the everyday and a practice that could resist what we have described via Blanchot as the ‘*Il y a*’ [there is] of the everyday. For Blanchot, the ‘*Il y a*’ is something so unassuming, so lacking in distinction as to be unqualifiable: for him, it is vested with a paradox of something at once potentially liberatory and totalitarian. For Shklovsky, this ‘*Il y a*’ was in fact specifically a European experience and one that he saw quiet at odds with the Russian *byt*: ‘everyday existence’. Which is, perhaps, to say, if the ‘*Il y a*’ of Blanchot, and in the liberal democracies of western Europe, was philosophical; the *byt* of Shklovsky, and of Soviet-era Russia, was political. Making the everyday estranged was for Shklovsky a way of responding to objects more through perception and engagement than through reflection on what we already know about them:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception ...

The purpose of art ... is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By “enstranging” objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious."<sup>68</sup>

Shklovsky proposes ‘[through] the device of art [to make] perception long and "laborious”.’ This then is a synthetic experience, orientated towards praxis rather perception; and one to be mediated by art. Through his theory of estrangement perception is deferred and with that a space is opened for new constructions of meaning. Both theories of estrangement have to do with something put in brackets; one a product of anxiety, the other a product of purposeful undecidability. In this, Shklovsky anticipates Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (literally, away-from-the-familiar effect or as the term employed here, “estrangement effect”). In the context of theatre, through various devices of acting, vocal emphasis, lighting and a foregrounding of the theatricality of the performance, Brecht sought to bring a sense of curiosity to the self-evidency and familiarity that crosses the everyday. As with Shklovsky, Brecht presumes a specifically political frame to his theory.

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<sup>68</sup> Shklovsky, Viktor (1991 [1929]) “Art as Device” in *Theory of prose*, IL: Dalkey Archive Press

### CHAPTER 3: PARTIAL PERSPECTIVES

Any path always risks going astray, leading astray. To follow such paths takes practice in going. Practice needs craft. Stay on the path, in genuine need, and learn the craft of thinking, unswerving, yet erring.

Martin Heidegger  
'The Thing'

#### *The individual as partial subject*

Remaining always within the boundaries of art practice and arguing both that subjective perspectives can only be partial and that knowledge about subject and object hinges on their relation, this chapter aims to analyse that aspect of the object that escapes interpretation when it departs from determinative regimes of thought and enters the rather indefinite character of things. I situate the argument in the context of art practice by analysing two works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and one of Richard Wentworth. The argument moves on to suggest that it is those aspects of the subject/object relation that in the life of the everyday escape objective interpretation are those which are more central to art practices. By adopting the everyday and the banal object, art takes a stake in those aspects of life that most resist interpretation and through which art can bring a fresh perspective to bear. Though that perspective may inevitably itself remain partial it opens onto the question of meaning lodged in existing hegemonic regimes of thought. This occurs through an aesthetic encounter between the viewer and the artwork and, without that encounter itself being meaningful, inflects the viewer's relation to the world.

In Chapter Two we introduced an analysis of how the artist approaches the ambiguous or dual position of being 'at once engulfed within and deprived of the

everyday'<sup>69</sup> through the practice or method of observation employed in cultural anthropology and sociology known as 'participant observation'. We argued that in approaching the ordinary experience of the everyday, the participant observer finds herself in another kind of dual position that resembles that of being both within and deprived of the everyday. The perspective or point of access that the participant observer requires to approach her object of study is conceived by a kind of impossibility: the position of the participant observer is engendered by a split opened by the intended simultaneity of the act of observing and that of participating. We suggested that something is lost in that split, as things that may fall in an abyss because they fall out of sight by either one means of address or the other. Something escapes the subject's gaze, something cannot be represented; something is let loose – and remains unqualified. In this sense, the relation between the participant observer and her object (of study) remains always partial: the immersion of participation is compromised by the act of observation, just as the act of participation is distanced by that of observation. In this chapter, we will attempt to extend the argument to propose that, by the very natures of experience and knowledge, this is also the case for every encounter between object and subject. Further, that it is the very character of the everyday to lie within this disjunction between experience and knowledge in so far as the everyday is the site of familiarity without recognition.

By drawing a parallel between the position of the artist who looks at the overlooked object and the unperceived of the everyday to that of the participant observer, we proposed that through strategies of estrangement art practices seek to address the ambivalence that frames the everyday. In this respect, it is important to clarify that this mode of address of art does not annul or overcome the indeterminacy of the everyday: it is not merely that the indeterminate space of the everyday is a site of potential by virtue of its indeterminacy; rather, what I want to argue is that it is possible to recover it by aesthetic means as a site of critical intervention such that the existing regimes of determination can themselves be put into a different perspective, which, while still subject to partiality, nevertheless can intersect with existing lines of sight to give a new definition to that which was hitherto opaque. The artistic intervention I am seeking to address does not subscribe to a case of clearing away the ambiguity of the everyday as if one, the artist, know better than everybody else or

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<sup>69</sup> Blanchot, M. (1993). "Everyday Speech" in *The Infinite Conversation* (82). University of Minnesota Press, p. 238-245

possesses some kind of authorial omniscience. Consistent with that, what I want to argue for is that artistic intervention may only offer an alternative way to reflect – still from a partial perspective – on that which remains unclear. Perhaps in art, one mode of estranging the lack of determination and ambivalence of the everyday is by the interaction of more than one partial view whereby no one viewpoint is capable of qualifying or determining all the others. In this sense, estrangement is not about removing the rule of perspective, which, as I have argued, is not possible: it is to set up a situation aesthetically whereby alternative possible perspectives create a situation of underdetermining a complacent acceptance of what has seemed ordinary or normal. Estrangement is putting two perspectives in conflict so that one interjects with the other; thereby organizing a conflict that requires the subject to re-orientate herself. As we saw, in the case of Allan McCollum’s work *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* that we analyzed in the previous chapter, it could be said that by bringing together the view, or even vista that infers the monotony of industrial labour together with the uniqueness and individuality of the individual components of the work, two perspectives are put in conflict that demand a necessarily new position from which to look at mass-production, the standardization of commodities, the world of consumption and its relation to art.

How does the partiality of the subject and the indeterminacy given by her perspectival position relate to the consumer object? Objects reach the market already as determined entities. Commodities have already been endowed with a physical or material identity given in their shape, material, scale, assignation of function, price, and so on. However, over the course of their existence, and specifically through practices of use, exchange value, investiture with social signs, objects gain something like an immaterial identity. The material and immaterial identity of the commodity does not always cohere in a direct or logical relation, and they may enter differing regimes of values depending on the particularities of each case: the dress of an iconic celebrity like Marylyn Monroe for example attains a value well in excess of the same dress owned anonymously<sup>70</sup>.

By the time commodities reach the market, they have already been invested with a complex system of signs to be both consumed and deciphered by the consumer. The

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<sup>70</sup> At a sale by auction on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2011 of the collection of the actor Debbie Reynolds, the ivory, pleated dress Marilyn Monroe wore in *The Seven Year Itch* for the ‘subway’ scene sold for more than \$5.6 million while another three of Monroe movie outfits were sold for \$2.7 million.

market becomes a system of signification in which objects find both a place and a relation to other objects. Signs of prestige, uniqueness, nostalgia, fashion, style, luxury, power, quality, good value, etc., are manufactured in tandem with the production of the materiality of the object itself, so that when the consumer object reaches the market an intertwined system of codes have already been set in place. Following a Marxist agenda, in his early works, Jean Baudrillard analyses objects-as-signs within a semiotic field comported by consumer societies: in this, he argues that a system of sign-values run in parallel to one of use-value.<sup>71</sup> Baudrillard centres his attention on how the behaviour of the consumer is affected by the codes and signs inscribed in the object. Delving a bit further into the lifeworld of people, I want to look at how the signification given to objects from the marketplace changes once the object has been acquired. Framed within the flow of everyday life, once commodities are purchased they enter into an alternative register of differentiation to the one set forth by the market and its prearranged system of signs of uniformity and uniqueness. Once mass-produced objects enter the lifeworld of people they set course for a new stage or form of consumption where aspects of an individuation brought about by use, attachment or habit, set in train a process of familiarization that, in turn, signals a new process of estrangement between the object and its commodity-form. Here, we may identify two distinct, though nevertheless related, processes of estrangement: one more broadly identified with the Marxist theory of alienation, and the other linked to a process of differentiation wherein anonymous, mass-produced objects, once acquired as commodity-forms, give rise to a process of singularity through consumption, here, understood as use. In Marx's economic theory of capitalism, "a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another"<sup>72</sup>. When the commodity reaches the market it does so invested with its commodity-form that embraces both its use-value and an extra value that provides for its possibility to be exchanged – namely its exchange value. The process of assigning a value to a product of labour is what alienates the relation between labour and its product, that is, between worker or producer and the practice of workplace. In Marxist terms, human labour is isolated from its specific practices (welding, sewing, painting, etc.) and translated into abstract units of human labour.

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. Baudrillard, Jean (1996), *The System of Objects*, (tr) J. Benedict, London: Verso; (2004 [1970]), *The consumer society: Myths and structures* London: Sage Publications Ltd.; (1981) *For a Critique of the political economy of the sign*, St. Louis, Mo: Telos press Ltd.

<sup>72</sup> Marx, Karl (2010 [1867]) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, Chapter 1: Commodities, Penguin Books Ltd., p.25

Consequently, these abstract units of labour are then transposed into the physical object or a product of labour in order to define an exchange value. This is the alienation that takes place in the commodity-form and one that the consumer meet in the act of purchase:

A use value, or useful article ... has value only because human labour in the abstract has been embodied or materialised in it. [...] The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.<sup>73</sup>

From this premise, Marx argues that “a commodity is a use value or object of utility, *and* a value”<sup>74</sup>. It is then the addition of that abstract value which separates things from its process of making. Then, in the process of assigning a value (of exchange) to a product of labour, that which is alienated is not the actual thing or object of utility, but the relation that holds between it and the labour invested in its production: they have been separated, distanced, thus, in Marx's terms: alienated. This becomes relevant to our discussion because, like the strategies of estrangement that we have been discussing, Marx's theory of alienation is also understood at the level of relations (social relations, specifically) and not as some isolated or ‘mysterious’ condition of objects as commodities: what lies behind the ‘mysterious’ character of commodities is precisely a set of social relations that have been transposed from the subject into the object. Such is the ‘mystery’ lodged in the commodity-form that Marx sets out in his famous section of *Capital*, ‘The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret’. Marx's argument thus far relates to the supplementary value invested in the object from the side of production. By following this argument, could we say that in Marx's characterization of the commodity-form the relation between object, in its commodity form, and subject, as production worker, has already been invested with a mode of estrangement in that what once belonged to the one (the subject's labour) has been made another's (the object's commodity value)? Ranged against the power of capital, Marx's worker and consumer seem disempowered. However, what I have drawn from theories of the everyday is the proposition that a further, less identifiable circulation of

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.27 and p.44

<sup>74</sup> Karl Marx [1867] “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret” in *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, Penguin Books Ltd., p.38 [*italics added*]

the object now occurs, equally invested with signification; but now a signification of a different order. It is one that draws on the object as one of use, familiarity, token of affection and from a myriad of social interactions in which the object partakes. It is an order of existence that is encountered beneath the regulation of generalizable rule. In this place the object is sequestered to any number of indeterminate modes of use and transaction, just as its form of commodity falls away. And if this is the case, how does art engage with this second mode of estrangement?

From this premise, and in relation to those strategies of estrangement employed by certain art practices that we considered in the previous chapter, I want to look at the phenomenon of estrangement that occurs when the commodity object enters a lifeworld and how it becomes estranged from the identity given to it by its place in a consumer economy. Estrangement, however, is not a complete transformation. The lifeworld, the everyday, is not cordoned off from the world of consumption or the workplace. And the passage of the object from one sphere to the other does not embargo the encodings of the one from a place in the other. It is precisely in this intermediate place in which labour, use, value and identity converge in a form of agonistic relationship that the object, now from within the everyday, acts, vested with the alternative encodings given to it by its further adoption. What one wants to say, perhaps, is that, given the connotations of indeterminacy of the everyday, identity can only occur above the horizon of the everyday – in a public space, so to speak – but that in relation to this and by virtue of the value acquired within the everyday the object transacts an empowerment of individualization from its further circulation. This is of some considerable import if we further acknowledge that the space of the production of art is also a public space, itself in relation to commodity and an economy of objects. As we shall consider further but have already remarked on with respect to the work of McCollum, it is by the constructive employment of this disjunction between the singularity of the article in the lifeworld and its uniformity in the marketplace that provides a site of intervention for the artist. Mass-produced objects are one of an anonymous population, that through practices of use, keeping (preserving), worship or some kind of practice that alters the pre-determined distance between object and subject, they may become ‘my own.’ This process is one of an estrangement that occurs when something – like an affect or a kind of proximity – is supplemented to the object and it becomes something different to that determined by the market in the first place. This releases a process of differentiation that is related

with an idea of an *afterlife* that objects may attain when they supersede the market and enter a world characterized by use, possession, worship, need or desire that allows the article to enter into a different perspectival regime. Subtracted from the realm of the market and consumerism, we are beginning to establish an alternative typography of lifeworld, afterlife, 'my own' in which to situate the object. Following from the alterity thus set up between the marketplace and the lifeworld we can now produce a paradox of consumerism predicated on the notion of consumption itself. The consumption of the consumer ends at the checkout; for the market the value of the object is expended at the point of sale. However, from the perspective of the lifeworld, consumption only begins at this point. Though the two remain mutually interpolated when what is at stake is a question of identity deriving from the possession of the prestige object. In this case possession and acquisition remain the sole desideratum. This has to do with those forms of relation that within the market place are commonly thought to fall away after the article has been purchased. Though in the purchase of an artwork, for example, its value – its commercial value, at least – can never be detached from the market. However, what concerns us here is the subsequent aesthetic experience of the article often sidelined by considerations of use and practice. If the everyday is the site of the unregarded, it is the unregarded aspects of identity in relation to objects in their afterlife that we are pursuing here. Just as the object becomes estranged from its encoded set of values in the marketplace when it enters the lifeworld, a second estrangement occurs in a more ambivalent way when the object becomes overtaken by the invisibility of the everyday by virtue of its over-familiarity. It is this double movement of the object, in its transition from consumerist object (commodity-form) to the everyday lifeworld that serves as a guide to certain art practices that investigate and work within these modalities of estrangement, seeking to bring to the fore that which has been either added or subtracted to the relation between subjects and objects – thing and commodity, user and equipment. The relation between object and subject, or between consumer and commodity is necessarily mediated by a distance: it is in the nature of this distance wherein various forms of estrangement reside. Since a logic of proximities is inherent in any form of relation, the artist may bring together more than one form of proximity, thereby producing a kind of paradoxical figure by which an object may at once appear both close and distant. For example, what the market projects as the thing (product) stamped with its consumerist aura, is not what the thing becomes (familiar, ready-to-hand, functional,

utilitarian, sentimental...) when subtracted from the marketplace regime of desire. One strategy of estrangement, for example, would be to bring aspects of both codes together: to produce a more paradoxical object, marked both by signs of prestige and signs of commonality; the worn out by use, presented as the perfectly preserved object of the museum, say; or, the public and the private. Perhaps, by colliding elements that belong to the norms of either the private with elements more normally associated with the public realm or vice versa, the distance that is socially ascribed to differentiate the two is altered and therefore the relationship the subject has to that which is private and that which is public becomes estranged.

Some works of Cuban-born artist, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, may serve us as an example of an art practice that collides that which belongs to an intimate sphere with the anonymity and indifference of public spaces, thereby estranging the distance at which the two are normally held apart. Following the idea of estrangement as an estrangement of concept or rule governing a relationship that we have tried to define in this thesis, I would suggest that two works by Gonzalez-Torres can be read as exemplifying artworks wherein the trope of estrangement is at work. The titles of both works have been left open, undetermined, ambiguous, thus providing few indications as to how to decipher the works. The title of one is simply *Untitled*, and that of the other is also *Untitled* but followed by a qualification in brackets that does provide some key to the work. One work, *Untitled* (1992) [Fig. 10], consists of an intervention and the employment of twenty-four billboards in New York; the other, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) [Fig. 11], consists of an accumulation and the installation of multicoloured candies in the gallery space.

In 1992, and as part of his exhibition *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres* held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Gonzalez-Torres placed a large-scale monochrome photograph on twenty-four billboards in different locations throughout New York. The image is of a bed with white sheets seen from above, unoccupied, but that retained the marks of occupation by two anonymous individuals. As one learns later through the literature that accompanies the work, the bed is the artist's bed that he shared with his partner Ross Laycock who had died from an illness, related to AIDS, the year before the work was made. The work is structured by a paradoxical relation: intimate and distressing aspects of a lifeworld are signified through a devise that belongs to techniques of advertising that generally promote happiness and the

fulfilment of a desire through the acquisition of the product thus promoted. The promises or projections implied by conventional advertising run counter to the logic of loss, which, as one may think, is what the image produced by Gonzalez-Torres signifies. If, through advertising, the market promises the fulfilment of a desire, what the artist proposes in place of that fulfilment is an impossibility: the return (acquisition) of what had already been lost. In the work, what is estranged is both the private life of the artist, and the signifiers or conventions of advertising that the artist employed to make the private public. If what the market generally promotes is the acquisition of the new (a new lifestyle, for example), what Gonzalez-Torres was publicising by intervening in the public text of the city was a/his loss. In this respect, I will argue that the work produces a contradiction since that which belongs to a particular lifeworld – that of the artist – and that which belongs to the indifference of the market becomes blurred: the usual or normal distance that distinguishes one from the other has been erased, omitted or breached.

In 1990 Gonzalez-Torres began a series of works that are known as ‘candy spills’ which the artist made over a period of four years – from 1990 to 1993. The works consist of accumulations and spatial distributions (installations) in various gallery spaces of commercially-produced candies which the public is invited to take away and consume. At first sight, the various versions of the work differ only in the type of candies, their wrapping and their distribution in the exhibition space: ‘The candies vary, from Baci chocolates, to bazooka bubble-gum, black rod liquorice lollipops, or they can be comprised of candies wrapped in a single colour of cellophane’<sup>75</sup>. Also, in the form of the different candy spills, the objects are arranged either in a pile in the middle of the space or in a corner of it; or organized in a flat rectangle on the floor either in the middle of the gallery space or, in some, towards the edges thereby determining various modes by which the viewer can approach and engage physically with the work. This aspect of the work links it to aspects of Process

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<sup>75</sup> “The candies vary, from Baci chocolates, to bazooka bubble-gum in “Untitled” (Welcome Back Heroes) of 1991, black rod licorice deployed in “Untitled” (Public Opinion), also of 1991, lollipops in “Untitled” (Para un hombre en uniforme) again, of 1991; or they can be comprised of candies wrapped in a single colour of cellophane, such as the blue cellophane of “Untitled” (Portrait of Marcel Brient), of 1991, green in “Untitled” (LA), or light blue of “Untitled” (Revenge) of 1991 or multicoloured as in “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in LA) of 1991.” Cherry, Deborah (2007) ‘Sweet Memories: encountering the candy spills of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’, in *Transnational correspondence*, special issue of *Arte e Ensaios / Arts and Essays*, pp. 96-109

Also available in

<http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/m.g.bal/bestanden/Cherry%20Deborah%20paper%20encuentro%20READER%20OPMAAK.pdf>

Art: visitors are encouraged to take a candy; hence the work is not only about the presentation of an object but about a constructive process that relies on various forms of relations involving artist, viewer, exhibition space and established modes of interrelation between them. On the one hand, the ‘process’ of the work is set in conflict with conventional museum protocols: how to display an artwork, how the viewers should approach the work within the sacred space of the museum. However, the work was designed to be appropriated and dismantled by the public – Gonzalez-Torres himself stated: “I wanted to make art work that could disappear”<sup>76</sup>. On the other hand, by making the work intentionally ephemeral, Gonzales-Torres would seem to have been responding to a developing critique of the 1990s that artworks were increasingly seen as elitist and exclusive to one section of the public<sup>77</sup>.

Unlike McCollum’s work (that we analysed in the previous chapter) that is defined by a numeral unit (‘over ten thousand’), Gonzalez-Torres’ ‘candy spills’ takes an ‘ideal weight’ as a unit of measurement, which is put in conflict with the provision for an ‘endless supply’ by which the works can be replenished. In the ‘candy spills’ works, this ‘ideal weight’ is defined by the artist in order to determine the scale of the accumulation (it has varied from work to work: variously, 175, 325 or 1200 pounds); ‘endless supply’ functions within a logic of replaceability as one of the imperatives of the market place: at the end of each day any candies that had been taken away by the viewing public are replaced to match again the ‘ideal weight’ variously defined by the artist. The key element in all the ‘candy spills’ works is that the weight of candies that make up each accumulation is not arbitrary. It is this that gives the works the element of a crossover between public concerns and the private ones of Gonzalez-Torres. In my view, however, the more poignant work of the series is *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*. In this, the weight is indexed by the ideal weight of his now deceased partner, Ross Laycock. The work was made in 1991, the year when Laycock died. The ideal weight for this specific work is the ideal weight for a middle age healthy man:

Ross Laycock was Félix’s partner, and when he was diagnosed with HIV his doctor set his ideal weight at 175 pounds. “Portrait of Ross” is precisely that: 175 pounds of candy set in a pile. The candy is unguarded, the purpose being for the viewer to take some of it from the mound. Each and every day, the remaining

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<sup>76</sup> Storr, Robert (1995) ‘Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ in *ArtPress*, January, pp. 24 -32

<sup>77</sup> This is an aspect that is also part of Allan McCollum’s preoccupations and reflected in his multiple installations which are presented more as a field of the many rather than as an exclusive display.

candy is removed, weighed, and more is added until it weighs exactly 175 pounds. Then it's set back out again.<sup>78</sup>

Both *Untitled* and *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* function as a metaphor of loss. The objects involved in both works (billboards and mass-produced sweets) have been altered by a subjective act that re-codes and weights the signification inscribed in them. We could say that the objects have ceased to be just a sign of market-like indifference and have become a sign of a particular subjective interpretation. For some, sweets may be a sign of childhood, happiness, innocence; for Gonzalez-Torres, they have become a sign of loss, death, illness, and of something that is destined to disappear and impossible to retain. In this respect, these two untitled works of Gonzalez-Torres function like a secret code that demands a key to be deciphered. However, since the key to the works is unknown in any immediate encounter with them, the works are left open to interpretation and the key to their code, left undetermined. For example, in viewing *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, short of asking a guard in a museum or reading the caption for the work in the exhibition space, the viewer is not informed about the key to decipher what lies behind the 'ideal weight' – that is, the two contradictory imperatives formed between the finitude of a life and the potential infinitude of supply. As in the city intervention carried out in *Untitled* where billboards were used to make public something private, in *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* the dimension of an act of subjective interpretation and that of generic signification are brought together in one and the 'same' mass-produced and mass-consumed object: candies. In both works, the singularity and intimacy of the private (a particular lifeworld) and the anonymity and homogeneity of the public (rules that apply to an all) coincide in an element that belongs to the world of advertising and the mass-produced – billboards and mass produced candies.

Since the signification of an intimate and a public space has been inscribed in one and the same motif, its interpretation has been left open to the viewer. The work opens onto a space of indeterminacy such that a conventional understanding of neither the private nor the public permits a complete reading of the work. If the full semiotic value of the work is to be realized, as, for example, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* as implying both finitude and infinity, the work must exert a kind of agency to determine an alternative subject position from which this can be realized. Just as the

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<sup>78</sup> Spector, N. (2007) *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, New York: Guggenheim Museum.

anamorphic skull of Holbein's *The Ambassadors* requires a particular point of view from which the 'skull' can be realized as such, these works set in conflict opposing points of view that are not readily reconcilable. The point of view from which the 'skull' is realized sits, so to speak, within the frame of the painting but is never reconciled with the frontal point of view from which the painting as a whole can be viewed. Works, such as those we are discussing, at a more conceptual level, set in place a disjunction of points of view that remain in tension one with another. The openness of the work, therefore, proceeds from the partiality of differing points of view. The artist leaves latent in the work codes to its interpretation; but how these are transacted is left open to the viewer. In this respect, the work demands the formation of a subject position from which the semiotic coding of the work may be deciphered. However, a code can only be deciphered by a key and the question arises as to where these are to be found. One answer would be that in the very interpolation of the private and public that is common experience we are, by culture and education, already equipped. That to consume, in the sense we have been discussing, we are already literate in them. What artworks, such as those we have been discussing, do is to transpose an already familiar encoding onto the unfamiliar terrain of the artwork. As we have already noted, the consumer object in its passage into everyday life is not somehow stripped of its previous values; but rather those values are modified and adapted. Which might be to say they become the same but different. What changes lies in the hinterland of the everyday and its causal discriminations. Said otherwise, what is demanded of us as consumers, in order to relate to those codes of value that allow us to participate as consumers in the first place, is the very understanding that may allow us to transcend them. It is into this context that works such as those of Gonzalez-Torres can make a significant intervention by playing back onto advertising institutions such as billboards, or objects of consumption such as candies, a trope of estrangement that disrupts their naturalized signification. As we might say: to play them at their own game.

### ***Daily practices and the practice of art***

In the previous section we related the artistic trope of estrangement to Marx' notion of alienation and estrangement by mainly highlighting the estrangement that

takes place between the worker and the material objects he or she produces. In relation to this Marx writes:

The product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object, it is the *objectification* of labour. The realization of labour is its objectification. Under these economic conditions, this realization of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker, objectification *as loss of and bondage to* the object, and appropriation *as estrangement, as alienation*.<sup>79</sup>

For Marx, the rule that imposes a relation between labour and the value assigned to it is that which produces the objectification of labour. Such objectification marks the relation between the worker and the product of his/her labour with a contradictory figure understood both as a loss of relation and as a retention of that relation in the form of bondage – as a kind of captivity in place of that which has been lost. As Peter Osborne explicates in *How to Read Marx*: “The product has no reality for the workers who produce it because once produced it no longer has anything to do with them.”<sup>80</sup> So far, we have mainly drawn attention to the mode of estrangement that occurs between the worker and the product of his labour. However, Marx’s theory of estrangement and alienation addresses, in all, four modes of estrangement and alienation: ‘the alienation of the product; the alienation of the activity; the alienation of workers from their participation in humanity’s ‘generic-being’; and alienation from each other.’<sup>81</sup> Our aim is to find a relation between the trope of estrangement developed within art practices. Since it is beyond the scope of this text to give any extended account of Marx’s theory of alienation and estrangement, in the following section we will concentrate on the aspect of estrangement that characterizes the relation between the worker and his ‘generic-being,’ and the worker and the workplace. We will relate the former to Foucault’s distinction between subject and individual in relation to forms of power, and the latter to Michel de Certeau’s analysis of daily practices that explicates forms of relation between worker and workplace. Finally, we will bring to our discussion the Heideggerian ambivalence between nearness and farness that he develops in his definition of *Ding* (thing).

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<sup>79</sup> Marx, K. (1988 [1844]) *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, tr. Martin Milligan, New York: Prometheus Books. (Also available in [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf)). Quoted in Osborne, P (2005) *How to Read Marx*, London: Granta Books, p.46.

<sup>80</sup> Osborne, P (2005) *How to Read Marx*, London: Granta Books, p.52

<sup>81</sup> See, Osborne, P (2005) “Critique of Political Economy: Alienation” and “Communism” in *How to Read Marx*, London: Granta Books, pp. 45-55 and 70-80

In Chapter One we raised a question regarding the ‘who’ of the everyday. Drawing on from Blanchot’s theorization of the everyday as that which is – *il y a du quotidien*: there is the everyday – we suggested that the ‘who’ of the everyday may lie somehow outside the object and outside the subject: perhaps in a kind of in-between wherein the relation between object and subject evolves. Indeed, such lack of determination may serve to define the nature of the everyday and give cause for its adoption by theorists seeking a means of exit from the closure of subjective experience in relation to the so-called thing-in-itself and the various forms of relation between subject and object to which the subject may not have access. Following this, and if the everyday stands for a radical indeterminacy by the subject, it then opens to a theorization of an object world, thought differently and as imbued with autonomy. The latter engages with an idea that the object develops a kind of independency from the subject that cannot always be reduced to subjective interpretation or inscribed within one discursive frame of reference or value system.

Drawing on but also developing Blanchot’s theorization of the everyday, we suggested that the ‘who’ of the everyday does not represent the position of the subject nor that of the object: conversely we suggested that it addresses a space of an in-between wherein various sets of relations find a place. In this we sought to direct attention towards a multiplicity that is implied by the various perspectives or subject positions made possible within the everyday, as they are comported by our relations to everyday objects: relations of affection, use, familiarity, utility and so on. We have so far used the terms, subject and individual, somewhat indiscriminately. In what way do they relate or in some way interpolate one into the other? A subject position stands both for a spatial location from where something is observed, and for an individuality that – in a Foucauldian sense – is formed and framed from that location. In ‘The Subject and Power’<sup>82</sup>, Foucault gives an account of both subject and individual. He proposes to look at power relationships by looking at the secondary or subordinated pole of binary relations whose meaning has been derived from its opposite term that stands in a dominant position in relation to it. Foucault sees the subordinated or secondary pole – the pole of the *other* one may say – as a form of resistance against different forms of power and proposes to investigate the meaning ascribed to them by

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<sup>82</sup> Foucault, Michel (1982) “The Subject and Power” Afterword in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (1983) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Second Edition, The University of Chicago Press.

assuming them as a starting point rather than an end point. In other words, to trace the process of signification retrospectively rather than as determined in advance by the values of a normative regime. In order to do this, he proposes to invert the direction that is usually followed in the act of interpretation that, as Foucault claims, characterizes western thought: if what is bad is usually defined in relation to what good is; or ugly, in relation to what is considered to be beautiful. Foucault retains the agonistic construction of meaning by means of dichotomy or antagonistic figures and the rule of non-contradiction, however, he inverts the normative priority given to the positive value: the good or the beautiful. In effect he asks, how would it be seen from its opposite pole. By inverting the sense of interpretation and its point of departure or point of reference, the production of meaning is called into question and with it the dominant subject position from which it was conceived in the first place. In concrete terms, Foucault suggests investigating insanity in order to discover what society at large means by sanity, to investigate illegality, to understand legality. Taking as examples a series of oppositions such as ‘men over women, parents over children, psychiatry over the mentally ill, medicine over the population, administration over the ways people live,’ Foucault proposes the need to look into how power has been structured (distributed) within such relations.<sup>83</sup> In inverting the process of investigation, Foucault seeks to look at ‘the status of the individual’ within societies, that is, to ask what it is that ‘makes individuals truly individual,’ rather than by subtraction from a common pool of attributes. By inverting the sense of interpretation, Foucault identifies the second pole of the binary oppositions, mentioned above, with a space of resistance and struggle. He argues that these forms of struggle share a kind of standpoint of being against not so much specific forms of power such as a determinate group, institution, elite or class, but of standing against a technique, a form of power in a more generic form. By this reversal, Foucault argues that secondary or subordinated poles in antagonistic figures are concerned about the status of the individual in the immediacy of everyday life, and that in that they ask about ‘Who are we’ and ‘who we are individually’:

This form of power [a technique, a form of power] applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. *It is a form*

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 211

*of power which makes individuals subjects.* There are two meanings of the word *subject*: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.<sup>84</sup>

The relation of tension that Foucault draws between subject and individual regarding relations of power become relevant to our discussion since everyday life is crossed by endless forms of power that inevitably have become part of the unperceived and that are in turn in relation with a subject position that one inevitably finds (already determined) or constructs (in a more conscious way). Every relation that we establish not only with another individual but also with material objects is entangled with techniques of power. In this sense, the formation of subject positions is in direct relation to the various forms of power that surround and circumscribe them. In other words, the notion of context – be it the context of art or the context of the everyday – is conceived by webs of relations that interact between each other. In the life of the everyday, social relations are linked to forms of power that in turn are in connection with daily practices, that is, with what we do on a daily basis and with the way we do things: how do we manipulate objects and operate in general, how do we find our way in the anonymity of the everyday and its opaque system of regulations?

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau looks into daily practices and identifies a dialectic between different forms and techniques of power. He identifies two logics of actions: strategies and tactics. Although these are not opposite terms, De Certeau analyses them unveiling a logic of subordination inscribed in them: tactics are defined in relation to strategies because they are identified with the position of the weak that reacts or finds his place in a territory already delimited by an order that has been established from a stronger position, by those who operate through strategies. A strong or weak position is set in relation to *its* place – is my position located in my place or am I required to find *a* position in a place that is not *mine*? This relates to what we have previously discussed about the indeterminacy of subject positions whereby the subject finds herself both within and without the everyday (“at once engulfed within and deprived of the everyday”<sup>85</sup>). De Certeau relates the formation of power relations and the development of techniques of power such as strategies and tactics with a spatial element and asks from where they originate; where

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 212. (First italics in this quote have been added; the second, i.e. “*subject*,” in the original)

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., Blanchot

is their position located? De Certeau draws a distinction between place (*lieu*) and space (*espace*): place is a location, while a space is a place of practice. If *espace* is identified with a place of action and of operation and *lieu* with a location, one may relate the one with the place of verbs and the other with the place of nouns. Elsewhere, de Certeau links verbs with agency while nouns take on the ambivalent character of subject both in the sense of subjugation to a regime and as active principle, somewhat in the manner of the Foucauldian ‘individual’ detached from a regime of power<sup>86</sup>. Space, in de Certeau’s usage, is somehow the ground on which subject and individual (in Foucault’s sense) diverge, when one defines or conditions the other and marks a kind of partiality. The individual released from the subject’s subjugation yet retaining the partiality that determines the subject in the first place. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a place is a distinct location that is constituted by a system of signs: when such systems of signs are activated by a particular practice (reading, cooking, walking, talking, etc.) the place becomes a space. In this sense, de Certeau argues, a “space is a practiced place.”<sup>87</sup> whilst strategies rely on a place of their own from where an exteriority can be drawn, tactics lack a place of their own hence an exteriority or outside cannot be delimited. Since tactics lack a place of their own, those who operate tactically find themselves always in a place that is not their own. “The space of a tactic is the space of the other.”<sup>88</sup> The space of the other brings about a sense of otherness that is implied in the ambivalence of the everyday: within and without, at home and alienated from home, grasping a sense of belonging and not belonging at the same time. Since logics of actions like strategies and tactics, territorial and topographical determinations such as place and space – and thus the difference between what one may call ‘my space’ from that which one calls ‘the space of the other’ – are in necessary relation with everyday practices they are central in the formation of subject positions. How then do subject positions relate to the various practices that the subject carries out in her everyday? Which gives rise to the question, how can we link the idea of the subject-position that we have been exploring in relation to what Foucault and de Certeau argue about the subject and the individual to the relation of subject to object and the quotidian relation of the individual to the banal object of use, affection, etc.?

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<sup>86</sup> For de Certeau’s discussion of a ‘verbal government’ see *The Mystic Fable*, p. 124

<sup>87</sup> de Certeau, Michel (1988) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, Berkeley, p. 117

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36-37

The binary opposition that we have followed thus far in this thesis is that of subject to object, together with the ancillary figure of the individual: that in order to define what is an object, it is, as Foucault has argued, customary to define first what is a subject. The intention of this text has been to provide a thesis that gives some account of the aesthetic experience of artworks that take as their materials everyday or commonplace objects that surround us and give definition to our lifeworld. In doing so, however, we have adopted terms and theories from a number of disciplines in order to give a name or account for the location of aesthetic experience, not only on the part of the viewer but to fashion some account of the agency of the artist and the means by which she can or does manipulate the materials to hand in relation to their signifying properties. We have drawn on theories of the everyday in particular; giving rise to a consideration of what best describes the entities that populate the everyday; how they engage with one another; what frames the everyday as a theoretical postulate. Within this, the aim of this text has been to remain within the field of art practice and from there to explore how the employment of everyday objects in works of art may call into question the way we (modern, western subjects) interpret objects. The question nevertheless arises, and it would seem to arise within the orbit of the discussion in hand, as to the value of artworks and that that in turn suggests a relation to meaning. The announcement of meaning in whatever form it takes, however, requires an interlocutor and that requires a self-referentiality as individual; for in the terms we have been discussing, the subject is always a theoretical construction, imposed on or adopted by the individual, but never the existential interlocutor. Following Foucault, whereby the individual of the everyday is never presumed as constructed by a dominant, prevailing discourse; but is to be understood as arising from and within the everyday, the question of the relation of subject to individual cannot be forfeit. It seems impossible, therefore, to avoid all philosophical investigation around the subject and its relation to the object if the aim is to offer a possible reading that does not ultimately hinge on a matter of personal opinion and preference. In this respect, even if the 'who' of the everyday is a philosophical category, it nevertheless signifies a part of one's actual life that goes along in the context of the everyday. And yet, as Blanchot claims and our common experience tells us, the everyday is that into which everything subsides but also that from which everything arises. This is no less the case with individuality and paradoxically the commonality of the everyday is that from which our individuality arises. We must

therefore give some account of the means by which difference is grounded in the same. We all form part of the ‘who’ of the everyday, or, at least, we form part of its construction. In being so close to the experience of us all, the ‘who’ of the everyday accounts both for aspects of individuality and commonality: things that we share and things that set us apart. The ‘who’ of the everyday day is invested both with the same and with the other. What defines me and what defines the other is yet another ambivalent figure of the everyday. From here we want to suggest that the ‘who’ of the everyday corresponds not to that which the subject apprehends but to that which escapes her point of view, her apprehension and representation of the world. The key point here is that the notion of escape refers to a partiality of the subject that in turn refers to an indeterminacy given by the perspectival subject. If by following Blanchot we have asserted that the everyday escapes, then, it might be appropriate to ask: what is it that remains when the everyday escapes? Could we say that that which remains, because it only remains, is defined by a kind of partiality that in turn qualifies the various modes that the everyday man relates to objects? We are left with a kind of partiality of experience whereby something is known, while we have only the sense – an inkling – of something within the experience as fugitive. Following Foucault’s argument that forms of power that are already at work in the immediacy of everyday life ‘make individuals subjects’ in the sense of ‘being subject to ... ,’ we want to suggest that the perspectival subject, inevitably defined by her point of view, become, through such partiality, the individual of the everyday. It is, then in answer to the question posed above, the partiality common to all that allows the individual to emerge as individual from the commonality of the everyday. Since we are all partial, we are all different and by being different we are all the same, differently. We have as yet to explicate how that partiality arises in the implication of subjectivity in the individual. Since, more than redrawing a line between subject and individual, we want to emphasise the relation between objects and subjects, much in the way that de Certeau highlights logics of operations rather than the particularities of subjects or individuals in everyday life:

... the question at hand concerns modes of operation or schemata of action, and not directly the subjects (or persons) who are their authors or vehicles. It concerns an operational logic whose models may go as far back as the age-old ruses of fishes and insects that disguise or transform themselves in order to

survive, and which has in any case been concealed by the form of rationality currently dominant in Western culture.<sup>89</sup>

The field of action that de Certeau tackles is that of consumerism drawing special attention to the consumer as user. User does not refer here merely to a person who operates a machine or manipulates a piece of equipment, rather, user in de Certeau's investigation of the practices of everyday life points towards the consumer as a user of a systems of relations. In this light, I want to move on to analyse how this composed notion of use can be traced in the work of art, and which new perspective or possibility it may offer to approach the rather opaque order or system of regulation imposed by consumer societies. What happens when works of art are put alongside the opacity inherent in the market regime together with what de Certeau called the quasi-invisible actions of users in their invention of everyday life?

#### *Aspects of Use*

As we have considered, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau proposes a parallel between strategies and tactics in order to explore daily practices that generally passes unnoticed – quasi-invisible, in his words. In relation to social orders and scales of power, he explores how the weak – that is, the worker or the employee, the section of society that is regimented from above – through logic of actions of the type of tactics, can invest themselves in the space of the other. In de Certeau's analysis, the notion of 'use' becomes central since it relates not only to the use of common objects, but more centrally, to how those common objects once they enter a world of consumption give rise to new practices, that is, to new ways of doing things. These new practices are invested with an act of acquisition: the user acquires something through a new practice: it is something that is gained by means of doing something vis-à-vis the means of exchange value where the act of purchasing vanishes along with the desire of acquisition. The mode of acquisition that is at work in the practices of the weak need to be sustained by a tactic within the strategies of the strong; in that consists their use. De Certeau identifies these type of tactics as ways of 'making do' referring to various practices that the worker employs to gain something

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. xii

extra from his work: it could be a chauffeur that uses the vehicle of his employer to make journeys of his own, or a cook that brings home some special ingredients from the restaurant where he works, or an employee who, on trips to the bank to make company deposits, stops for a coffee. These kinds of ingenious ways of which de Certeau writes, refer to practices that seek to gain something extra above and beyond what is already provided for in the work contract.

De Certeau specifically addresses practices of acquisition that allow the weak to gain something extra, to get something in addition, to take an advantage: in the end, these practices point towards a desire of breaching the social role/figure to which the weak have been subscribed. De Certeau associates these techniques both with a form of consumption and with a form of production that is not revealed in its products but in the way they are used. If commercial products are already a kind of imposition on consumers, then consumption, understood more broadly as how the products of consumption are put into circulation by use, offer a new possibility to look into the relation between the person who uses commercial products and the products themselves:

In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called “consumption” and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it.<sup>90</sup>

De Certeau identifies a gap between commercial products and the person who uses them. Two forms of productions draw this gap: there is one spectacular or clamorous form of production that provides consumers with objects of consumption determining in advance some kind of position from which such products will be received. There is another ‘fragmented’ form of production that deviates from the former, which de Certeau identifies with daily practices invested with tactical techniques of power that develop within the field of ‘consumption’ and whose aim is to make use of that which has been imposed on you. This techniques may imply either action or the cessation of action: on the one hand, techniques like *la perruque* – meaning an employee using assets that belong to the workplace for personal use – and the diversion of time or

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 32

inactivity of employees in the workplace on the other<sup>91</sup>. An analogous case in England of the nineteenth century would be what is known as end-of-day glass. Typically, glass blowers would re-use the glass remnants and odd ends of materials that were left over at the end of the working day to produce an extra benefit to themselves by creating novelty items in glass of their own devising. These were either used as personal gifts or on some cases offered for sale. As an interesting aside, one of these techniques was adopted (acquired) by the industry itself as a form of decoration, consisting in the random combination of colours using the variously coloured fragments of glass that had been the ‘perk’ of the workers. In this case, something that was invested with a new use (end-of-day glass) was then re-integrated, for the sake of profit, by the consumer industry.

De Certeau’s theorization of tactics in relation to strategies, the distinction he draws between consumption and use, allows us to think more broadly about satellite practices that emerge out of the circumstances of a given context. Even if products of consumption are imposed on consumers, the consumer, as individual, may find (or develop) a space of freedom in the midst of the objects that she either uses or that simply surrounds her. This can be seen as an alternative form of resistance to the regulated system of consumer goods and objects, or as a form of practice that responds to subjective needs in a rather creative way. Ernst Gombrich’s essay “Meditations of a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form”<sup>92</sup> may serve as an example for this kind of everyday practice through which common objects are invested with a new use. Gombrich starts from an everyday, almost banal situation: a broom stick, leaning in a corner of a nursery, and the imagination of a child that draws, out of his desire to play, a relation of use between the broomstick and a hobbyhorse. The relation, Gombrich asserts, is ‘neither metaphorical nor purely imaginary.’ Midway between an act of imagination and one of subjective representation, the link between the two objects is brought about by a desire (“to fix ‘real’ reins”) that allows the subject to substitute one object for another:

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p.26 and p.180

<sup>92</sup> Gombrich, E.H. (1985 [1963]) “Meditations of a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form” in *Meditations of a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the theory of Art*, Oxford: Phaidon, p. 1-11

It needed two conditions, then, to turn a stick into our hobby horse: first, that its form made it just possible to ride on it; secondly – and perhaps decisively – that riding mattered.<sup>93</sup>

For the substitution to take place, the object needs to present a minimum of formal properties and the subject to recognize in the object such potential. The formal correspondence between one and the other may vary depending on the subject's desire and the object's capacity to serve as a substitute. It is an act of subjective representation that which mediates this particular relation between object and subject. For the subject, the broomstick represents the idea of horse-ness. Gombrich links his example of substitution with a mode of representation that responds both to aspects of resemblance and to psychological dispositions and sets it in relation to the tradition of representation in art. He claims that "representation is originally the creation of substitutes out of given material"<sup>94</sup>, which is located within a relation of tension between what one sees and what one knows. From the perspective of representation, Gombrich draws attention to biological and psychological needs and places them together with a particular cultural formations and with aspects of language by which, through the process of naming, an object may be transformed. In this respect, to the process of subjective interpretation and ascribing meaning to objects, here Gombrich gives a complementary view to both the cultural constructions on which Foucault focuses, and to de Certeau's logics of action. By addressing a process of ascribing meaning that hinges on the abilities of the subject to construct a representation of the world informed both by what she sees and what she knows, Gombrich situates his argument in the field of aesthetic experience. What is relevant to our discussion here is that the object that Gombrich chooses for his example is an object with 'no aesthetic ambitions': it could almost have been whatever other object whose form 'made it just possible to ride on it'. The specificity of the object was drawn from a subjective perspective set in an ordinary everyday situation. There is, therefore, a tension drawn between uniqueness and commonality, between whatever, undifferentiated object that becomes a specific and distinctive one. This brings us close to our analysis of works of art that deal with the banal, the unperceived of the everyday, whose aim is to interrupt the flow of normality that regiments it. The lack of aesthetic ambition of a broomstick, reveals yet again an aspect of singularity and commonality that is

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p.7

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p.8

inscribed both in objects and in the subject's experience, since under a different set of desires, and conditioned by what matters to the subject, the broomstick may have become the substitute for any number of other objects and represent, perhaps, an idea or sword-ness, shotgun-ness, bridge-ness, and so on:

The same stick that had to represent a horse in such a setting would have become the substitute of something else in another. It might have become a sword, sceptre, or – in the context of ancestor worship – a fetish representing a dead chieftain. Seen from the point of view of 'abstractions', such a convergence of meanings onto one shape offers considerable difficulties, but from that of psychological 'projection' of meanings it becomes more easily intelligible.<sup>95</sup>

The convergence of meanings of which Gombrich writes, and de Certeau's analysis of the diversion of use and the creation of practices through which, so far they are sustained, bring about a particular mode of acquisition, are reflected in the work *Making Do and Getting By* by the English artist Richard Wentworth [Fig. 12]. The work is an ongoing series that the artist commenced in the 1980s and that document photographically unusual everyday situations. Even though the series is very large and has grown over the years to include a variety of oblique and anomalous situations, it is mainly common, banal objects that form the focus of the depicted situations. In this sense, it may be said that the series follow the logic of traditional still-lives, in that it is only objects (and sometimes animals) but not people that are depicted. If a human presence is in some fashion the referent, the figure of a subject has been withdrawn and left to be indexed through (his/her) objects and actions. One of the interesting aspects of the series is that the scenes are both imbued with high levels of anonymity and yet with an aspect of uniqueness. There is in each shot a disruptive element: according to some natural or conventional order of things, something is out of place, or misplaced, or misused. In the juxtaposition between anonymity and uniqueness that the images present lies a strangeness. The idea of everydayness is nonetheless present in as much as the images show a 'whatever' situation. They correspond very precisely not only to the unperceived of the everyday but also, in de Certeau's sense, to the improvisational tactic of alternative use. However, in each image there is an element that seems out of joint as if pushing the over-familiar onto an unfamiliar terrain.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.7

Another way of looking at the strangeness that these images present us with is that in registering an object being used in a different way to that for which it was designed (designated), they bring to mind the more usual or commonplace use of the objects that in the course of the everyday pass mainly unnoticed. On the one hand, the work reveals a use that is hidden in the repetition of the everyday, and, on the other, reveals a new, derivative or provisional use that speaks more for use made by the subject of consumption than de Certeau analyzes than for the object in itself. Broadly speaking, the everyday situations captured in *Making Do and Getting By* may be linked with de Certeau's idea of use on a terrain of tactical operations. Remembering that "the space of a tactic is the space of the other"<sup>96</sup>, we may say that some of the photographs of Wentworth's series reveal a logic of tactics demonstrated by the alternative or 'wrong' way that objects are used. In this, the images reveal various modes of negotiating with imposed orders when, for example, the action of the situation takes place in the 'wrong' place, that is, in a place that has been assigned for a different situation: a plastic cup stuck between the bars of a gate. In this way, we may suggest that the actions captured in Wentworth's work occur in an-other space, in a space where the norms and rules that define it have been overlooked. For example, a signpost which, though it continues in its function of signpost, is now commandeered for the additional use of securing a dog leash. The signpost, a symbol of control and order: do not cross the road, do not stop, do not *something*, is used by a casual passerby for leashing her dogs. From another perspective, taking into consideration the order already given to objects: books to read, hammers to hammer, cups to drink, and so on, these are encountered now in situations in which the original function has been suborned and the objects used in another way, serving as a ready substitute. It is in this sense that some of the objects depicted in Wentworth's work appear to be in a space of otherness: it is a space, we may say, because the objects has been put into action to facilitate an adjacent practice: a wine cork is used to stop a door from closing, a coat hanger is being used to hold a window open, a bottle top was used as an ashtray. The market economy would have it by contrast that it can or will provide the fitting and appropriate object for all and every situation: the proliferation of apps for mobile phones would seem to be a case in point: and conversely the inventiveness of the marketplace creates needs not previously present in the lifeworld. The alternative we have been considering here is that the everyday extemporizes solutions

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., de Certeau, p. 36-37

from what is to hand. In this context, *Making Do and Getting By* presents these two aspects of the world of objects in a tension: the appropriation of commercially available objects and the uses to which they are subsequently put. There are two further aspects of Wentworth's artwork to be considered.

One aspect relates to language: in which temporality or verb tense can the viewer define the actions portrayed in the images? How to describe the situation? For example, one image shows a bottle top that had been used as an ashtray, another, a window is being held open, in the present tense of the picture, by a teacup; or dogs, tethered to a signpost are waiting for their owner to come. Indeed, this is a temporal aspect that is inscribed in the everyday and that Wentworth's work allows us to encounter from a different angle (position) and in a deferred temporality. The use of photography as a medium by which Wentworth frames the everyday, creates a temporal distance and suspends the passage of time, so to speak. With this, the work not only brings together the time of the portrayed scene together with that of the viewer when she encounters the work in the context of art, but also brings together the action that occurred in places that have been, or continue to be, or will continue to be practiced. The anonymity of the everyday derives from the passage of time. A part of its imperceptibility lies in the passage of time that leaves events unremarked in its wake. What happens when Wentworth interrupts this silent passage of time to hypothesise the events within it? They are in a sense removed from their temporality, creating a deferral in which their anonymity is superseded by becoming discrete events within a different frame. There follows a decision, which is to present the photographs as works of art. This indeed is another of the aspects that is at work in *Making Do and Getting By*: what is it that makes these photographs a work of art? Are they not just photographs of banal situations, which anyone could make? Yes, they are. And, no, they are not: the series draws on a particular relation to subject positions, both of those of the person who takes the 'snapshots,' those of whoever exists as indexed in the image and those of the viewers who now see the 'photograph' presented in an art context. Even if such considerations may open onto an analysis regarding authorship, designation, and appropriation, it is the aspects of acquisition through practices that may transform the sameness of the everyday that is of more immediate concern to our analysis. In this respect, there is an ambivalence inscribed in the work that builds a tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the unique and common, the usual and the unusual, a tactic of making do and that which is at

hand that inform us of the relation between subject and object. For we might imagine an alternative: the unrecorded momentary feeling of a passer-by experiencing one or another of Wentworth's odd situations as a fleeting action merging without note into the everyday.

The other aspect of the world of objects that Wentworth's work brings to the fore has to do with the idea of acquisition that we have commented on above and that engages with Gombrich's analysis of representation and the convergence of meanings. Like de Certeau's analysis of use, this does not refer strictly to the 'use' of a particular object – a shoe, a bottle top or a signpost – but to a practice that allows one to get something additional, circumventing the given regulation of everyday life from without. A hammer may serve for hammering and may also be used as a doorstop. As a logic of substitution, the object is transformed without being physically altered. The object remains the same, but becomes something different at the same time. Like the relation that a child may create between a broomstick and a hobby horse, which on the one hand is invested with a very particular desire, and on the other reveals a certain indifference towards the actual object, gathered in the series *Making Do and Getting By*, some images reveal a similar aspect of subject/object relations. Different images in the series portray different objects carrying out the same action, or different objects being used for the same purpose. A wine cork, a hammer, a boot, a book are indifferently used as doorstops. The fact that the use of objects may be interchangeable draws attention to the orders of function and propriety when they are put in opposition to one another – a hammer for hammering, not a doorstop; a boot for the foot and so on. As Gombrich proposes, these orders are mediated by a subjective representation of the object, since something of the subject – a desire, a need, an indifference – has been transposed into the object. What belongs to the subject and what to the object becomes blurred opening a new perspective from which to direct our attention to the relation between the one and the other rather than to the individuality of each of them.

### ***Between Object and Thing (Distance and Imagination)***

We want to propose that the tension between familiarity and unfamiliarity that art practices institute through strategies of estrangement, are directed less to the subject or the object as such or in isolation, and focus more on an accustomed relation that has become settled between the two. In this sense, that which is estranged is the relation between object and subject. To estrange the relation between object and subject does not consist of just making an ‘odd,’ ‘unusual’ or ‘inappropriate’ object, but that the art practice of estrangement pays attention to the subject position and that the artwork sets up an alternative relationship between the two. In other words, art may offer an alternative subject position to be occupied. As such, and in order to explore the relation between object and subject, the new position or alternative perspectival point of view that art may offer needs to be conceived within the partiality that orchestrates the encounter between object and subject. In this sense, it remains subject to the condition of partiality. We are however proposing that the object is a divided presence: one that is recognizable under two differing regimes which are that of the consumer object of desire and that as the object of familiarity in the everyday. What we are further saying is that these two objects are more usually subsumed each within the other and that what the artwork makes possible is to re-complicate this to produce two antagonistic and ambivalent subject positions from which the object within the artwork can no longer be clearly assigned to one position or the other. However, there is a further dimension to be acknowledged; for to understand this more clearly we have to recall the proposition, discussed above, that the individual is constructed from an amalgam of subject positions, such that one single division does not encompass the complex of subject positions adopted towards the object in its various guises. In this sense, the totality of subject positions cannot be yoked in one single position. Perhaps, it is the case that they are connected through language and the various systems of norms and discourses that define any social context, but they remain apart, undetermined, escaping each other, as it were. The process of estrangement might be thought of as bringing down a house of cards whereby once one unthought and familiar relation to the object is disturbed whereby a succession of others falls by default. For what is to be read *as* the object can be successively its guise as consumer object; its utilitarian value; its accrued sentimental value and so forth, without limit to these possibilities. For it is the very lack of

conclusiveness as to the nature of the object that is the conceptual keystone of the everyday, premised on the notion of familiarity. That is, subject positions account both for actual positions in the everyday at a time and place and for a conceptual category by which those positions may be thought. In other words, a subject position that is engaged both with that which one sees and with that which one may find out about it. This is the very nature of aesthetic experience and one in which the work of imagination takes a central role. In Kant's philosophy, imagination is the faculty that bridges the world of the senses and that of concepts. This faculty brings to the mind something that 'is not present in the perception of things', that is, something that remains out of the reach of the senses and that imagination seek to grasp through a new *image*. In relation to this new image, what is perhaps difficult to overcome is the sense of the object as graspable (intuitively) and yet not quite the thing we think it is. And yet this is the issue on which rest the trope of estrangement. In her brief but thorough text 'Imagination', Hannah Arendt provides a very insightful explication of Kant's notion of imagination:

Imagination, Kant says, is the faculty of making present what is absent [from sense perception], the faculty of re-presentation ... If I represent what is absent, I have an *image* in my mind – an image of something I have seen and now somehow reproduce ... What is not present in the perception of things is the *it-is*; and the *it-is*, absent from the senses, is nevertheless present to the mind ... by looking at appearances (given to intuition in Kant) one becomes aware of, gets a glimpse of, something that does not appear. This something is Being as such.<sup>97</sup>

Perhaps we could say that what is absent from sense perception – the *it-is* of things – is present to the mind, and, conversely, that which the mind cannot grasp directly – the phenomena of things – is only present to sense perception. The task of imagination is to conciliate the absence of each of these in that of the other through the production of a new *image* that supplements the two absences. In this sense, we could say that imagination is after that which escapes, that which for the senses or the mind *is not*. There is then a paradox in the world of appearances in as much as for everything that appears, as phenomenon, there is 'something that does not appear'. In his text 'Kant's

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<sup>97</sup> Arendt, Hannah (1989) "Imagination" in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* Chicago: The University Chicago Press, p.79-80

Explanation of Aesthetic Judgement', Dieter Henrich explicates the task of imagination in its constant engagement with understanding and sensibility as follows:

The aesthetic situation must be understood in a way that does not collide with an indisputable fact: aesthetic judgements are compatible with every conceivable way of classifying and theorizing over a given object – provided we are exposed to that object in a perceptual situation.<sup>98</sup>

The key to imagination resides in the paradoxical condition of things that, from a subjective position, are both present and absent; therefore, there is a residue that escapes as indisputable facts. We want to argue that, in the process of encountering the world of things, in as much as there are multiple positions (rather than one 'indisputable' position) there is a residue that escapes. In which way is such multiplicity linked to that which escapes? Could it be that what is common to the multiple positions is precisely that residue that partially escape each and all of them, yet does so communally? And that it is through this residue that the multiple positions can be considered as an all, that is, totalized? And, does this relation between the multiple and the residue that escapes find its paradigmatic place in the diffuse world of the everyday? So, can we say, further, that that which does not appear escapes *a* subject; and because it escapes it cannot be considered an 'indisputable fact'?

I want now to bring into relation with what we have been arguing about the partiality of subject positions, the divided presence of objects either as ready-made commodities or as subjective constructions. And I want to propose how this provides an explanation for the artworks we have been considering; and finally, my own. We have proposed that a work of art may offer a space of undecidability wherein that which is present to the senses and to the mind is estranged and thus left open. We could say that in an aesthetic situation, the subject is left with an image, and, as we have emphasized, it is not the image which is 'strange', rather, the image informs the subject that her relation to the objective world has been estranged, resists being cohered by any one single term.

Another way of looking at the partiality of subject positions in relation to imagination is through the immediate and mediated relations it establishes with the

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<sup>98</sup> Henrich, Dieter (1992) "Kant's Explanation of Aesthetic Judgement" in *Aesthetic Judgement and the Moral Image of the World: Studies in Kant*, Stanford, Carolina: Stanford University Press. p. 43

world. The aesthetic situation is one which is informed both by an immediate relation to the world (sensibility, what we see, touch, hear, smell, taste: what we can sense) and by a mediated relation through a task of conceptualization, of giving a name to that which we see – to provide a concept under which to subsume that which is sensed. However, for the reasons we have proposed, between the two poles that inform an aesthetic experience, there is no settlement, something always escapes: the concept cannot wholly subsume the senses, and the senses can never totally escape. This is the free play, led by imagination, that seeks to bring together that which in the aesthetic relation to the world has diverted or cannot come into total coherence or domination. However, and following the logic of the dichotomies that has informed this chapter, the role of imagination is also doubled or paradoxical: on the one hand, it seeks to conciliate sense and concept (sensibility and understanding) and, on the other, seeks also to sustain the (free) play between what we see and what we name. The act of naming is kept in suspense, is not absent, but put on hold. In this sense, the aesthetic experience is characterized by something that escapes in the encounter between a world of concepts lodged in language and a world of things lodged in perception.

In between the world of senses and that of concepts lies a rather ungraspable sphere that resists measure and thus determination. In traditional aesthetics, this space of an in-between has been identified as the space of imagination. However, what is of interest to us here is the degree to which this also maps onto the conceptual space of the everyday and in the particular connotation of the everyday as the unthought: that which is, perhaps, lacking in imagination. In so far as this is the case, those relations of the imagination to concept, traditionally held, may also yield to something more akin to an intuitive grasp of the familiar: something more undecidable and less consciously intentional in our transactions with the material world. In what follows we will pursue the notion of how this rather ungraspable world of affects, which exists as an aesthetic relation to the world, can be understood by the ideas of proximity and vicinity. Proximity in itself cannot be measured – conceptually or mathematically – since what for one is nearness for another may seem like farness. Of the writing on this page there will be differing orders of distance and proximity for the reader and the writer. Writing, I am immersed, engaged, my everyday for the moment becomes the writing itself and surrounding events fall away to a distance. For the reader something similar may occur or other concerns may press in more immediately. Nevertheless,

both are 'in' an everyday, differing from one another, yet viewed from a further distance of, say, an imaginary spectator, they are both in the generality of the everyday.

If we recall Vilmouth's work *SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT* that we considered in Chapter Two, we may say that that which escapes is a complete conciliation between the immediate and mediated everyday. It is as if there is a necessary distance that one is required to take from the immediate world in order to think about it. In this task, language is somehow trapped in-between the two worlds, neither belonging nor not-belonging completely either to the immediate or mediated worlds; thus, belonging only partially to both of them. As we have stated above, the object of perception vis-à-vis the subject can be simultaneously a conceptual object and a sensory one. The art works we have been discussing have equivocated these two possibilities by processes of estrangement in order to under-determine any one conventional subject position, such as that of the museum visitor in expectation of the fine or rare object there to elicit respectful admiration. Such conventions are constructions of language: we are informed in advance of what are we going to encounter and how our response should be. Art practices like those that we have discussed in this text knowingly play on these conventions. They are situated within the partiality of language, and, within that partiality they aim to construct a new subject-position from where already given and unperceived orders are estranged. Such (art) subject-position aims to access that space of the in-between. However, this can only be done negatively, since it is not possible to access to what escapes. It is in this possibility that I see the contemporary challenge of art to lie. The work of art may not resolve the aporia between what is possible and what is impossible to know about. Nevertheless by acknowledging the partiality implicit in any one point of view and the multiplicity of their possibilities it may create a distance and open a space of further possibilities and a new compartment to the world. This possibility is predicated on an initial division wherein, on the one hand, objects and things dwell, while on the other there is a world of discursive object – one to which, after all, Blanchot's everyday also belongs. There remains a further division between the familiar and unfamiliar: the former being grasped immediately; the latter approached through concept. However, in the majority of cases and following the means by which we have theorized the object thus far, that which is grasped immediately is grasped in so far as it is fully realized by a known concept; perhaps merely banal, but nevertheless with nothing remaindered. The unfamiliar on

this theorization is that to which a concept has as yet to be applied or is unfulfilled by any known concept. However, Martin Heidegger claims an alternative relationship to both the familiar and unfamiliar. It is a relation without concept at least as we have thus far employed the term. At stake is Heidegger's notions of 'present-at-hand' and 'ready-to-hand'. The 'ready-to-hand,' like 'equipment,' is that which is there 'in-order-to'... The 'present-at-hand' is that which is 'in-itself': 'merely there'. For Heidegger these entities are no longer the objects given to consciousness, thus entailing a kind of conceptual distance; rather they are entities that occupy 'our world' so that by what amounts to a radical reversal of the relationship mediated by consciousness, those things with which we have greatest contact are the most 'unfamiliar' though the opposite is not quite the case. Heidegger's theorization hinges on an equality of presence of both ourselves and the objects that surround us. In Heideggerian terms to be in the world – Dasein – and to have or inhabit a world are 'equi-primordial' and this gives no primary privilege to consciousness. Philosophically at least, for Heidegger being cannot be placed under a concept of epistemology. Therefore, that being is itself a mystery to positive science; is that which makes the seeming familiarity of that which is in constant use 'unfamiliar' in Heidegger's terms. Without pursuing Heidegger's ontological questions, what he releases to us is the notion of a thing, unencumbered by subjective determination, and that, as Graham Harman explicates in *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing*, 'thing' is to be understood more as an event than as 'perceptual or physical occurrences'.<sup>99</sup> The cost of this, however, would seem to be that for the moment we can say very little about it. Yet it is just at this point the very indeterminacy of the everyday and Heidegger's world of things would seem to converge. And this is, perhaps, the point we should wish to retrieve.

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<sup>99</sup> For a thorough analysis and contextualization of Heidegger's philosophy see Harman, Graham (2007) *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing*, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, Open Court Publishing Company. In analyzing Heidegger's relation to phenomenology, Harman writes: "Things are events, not perceptual or physical occurrences. They are a "how," not a "what"—in other words, they cannot be reduced to a list of traits and qualities that might be found in a dictionary. To repeat, the things encountered by humans are events, and this means that there is more to them than anything we can see or say about them. If I look at a flower from thousands of different angles and perform hundreds of experiments on it, all of these actions will never add up to the total reality of the flower, which is always something deeper than whatever we might see, no matter how hard we work. In some way phenomenology misses this point, since it claims that the true being of a thing lies in the way it is present in our minds. Under the influence of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), Heidegger realized that historical reality is a deeper and darker layer of the world than Husserl's philosophy of phenomena can grasp. History tries to come to grips with events that are often complex and murky, not lucid appearances for human consciousness." p.23

Following the structure of aesthetic experience, we have recognized a world of objects and a world of concepts. We have also identified the individual as an aggregate of subject positions rather than a substantive singularity. With these considerations in mind, and in relation to the idea of estrangement, we are now in a position to speak about my artistic practice and perhaps the ones that we have considered, as an approach to a space of in-between (things and discourses) by estranging the subjective order given to the world of things. Since to alter the relation between subject and object is the aim of my practice, and that relation lies in a space of the in-between – for which we are beginning to convene the means to discuss – and to which one does not have access, it is by exploring the world of things that I aim to estrange the subject/object relation. According to Heidegger, what relates objects and subjects is not an immediacy but a distance. Hence, it is that distance which can be altered in one way or another. Because that distance is not conceived in units of measurements (centimetres, feet or miles) but rather in terms of proximity since it entails forms of relation such as attachment, desire, need or phobia, it ought to be measured (considered) in terms of nearness and farness. We might note, therefore, that in his rejection of the governance of consciousness, Heidegger enters in to a complex discrimination of the familiar and unfamiliar, the near and far, effectively reversing their conventional understanding.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger brings together and differentiates the two levels of everydayness mentioned above (immediate/mediated, things/discourses). He does so by using the figure of a distance, as if one could give a step back from the immediate everyday and gain a different point of view from where to grasp, thoughtfully, a world of discourses and conceptualizations. Heidegger claims that an object (or the object world) cannot be defined in relation to itself, nor can it be defined only in relation to the representation of a subject, therefore, a bearing on the context where one and the other meet need to be considered. In order to address the subject, the object and the context (world), Heidegger offers a new binary opposition:

That which is optically closest and well known, is ontologically the farthest and not known at all; and its ontological signification is constantly overlooked.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Heidegger, M. (1978). *Being and Time* (tr. J. M. a. E. Robinson), Oxford: Blackwell, p. 43

In offering the far/close dichotomy, Heidegger both steps out of the subject/object dichotomy largely identified with Kant's universal, ideal and transcendental subject, and introduces new philosophical means by which to think our experience of the everyday. It is here that Heidegger takes a step further from the dichotomy between subject and object and introduces the dichotomy of that which is close and that which is far to interpret not the subject and its relations to objects, but *Dasein* (Being) in relation to world. What is relevant for our discussion here is that *Dasein* is conceived *in relation to* world. Heidegger argues that in average everydayness Being is at once close and far. This new dichotomy, Heidegger claims, should not be interpreted according to a 'definite way of existing;' rather, it should be uncovered from the undifferentiated character of Being in everydayness. It is important to note that this undifferentiated character Heidegger associates as pertaining to Being-in-the-world not to the everyday as such. The key point here is that a condition of relation is always at stake. Since in Heidegger this relation incorporates a third pole, so to speak, it is no longer binominal. For Heidegger, "'near' and 'far' are contraries, but each involves the other. If something is too near, it is far;"<sup>101</sup> and such nearness and remoteness is not quantitative. That which becomes near to us in everyday life cannot be measured by the normal parameters of time and space, seconds or meters, so to speak. Its immeasurable distance is that of being as such, which for Heidegger has been lost to modernity. Said otherwise, the familiar tool, the piece of equipment handled daily, is known only in its being, which is distant from us. In analysing Heidegger's theory of equipments and tools, Harman situates the paradox of near and far alongside that of visibility and invisibility: "The world of tools is an invisible realm from which the visible structure of the universe emerges"<sup>102</sup>. The common ground between the two paradoxes is that in encountering the world there is a dimension that remain incommensurable, concealed – "the function or action of the tool, its tool-being, is *absolutely* invisible-even if the hammer never leaves my sight"<sup>103</sup>.

In his essay 'The Thing,' the polarity formed between that which is near and that which is far serves Heidegger to draw an ontological distinction between everyday objects seen as mere objects that stand over-against us or as things that stand

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<sup>101</sup> Inwood, Michael (1999) *A Heidegger Dictionary*. Oxford, Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, p.138

<sup>102</sup> Harman, Graham (2002) *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, Open Court Publishing Company, p.24

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21

forward as self-sustained and independent from us. Heidegger writes of a “uniform distancelessness” wherein ‘everything gets lumped together, vis-à-vis the quality of *things* of being near and remaining absent at the same time. Both with the notion of distancelessness and of that which is near but remains absent ‘despite all conquest of distances’<sup>104</sup> Heidegger opens a space beyond the metaphysical frame of subject and object from where to think the subject in the world as being-there and as being-with others – Da-sein as Being-there<sup>105</sup>. In contrast to the subject’s representation that aims to bring to mind a determined actuality, Heidegger proposes to think Being not as a matter of merely representing something existent, but as an entity whose mode of presence is in-the-world, ‘there’ and ‘with’ and that cannot be mathematically proved:

“Being” is in no way identical with reality or with a precisely determined actuality ... To think “Being” means: to respond to the appeal of its presencing ... this thinking can never show credentials such as mathematical knowledge can.<sup>106</sup>

A form of thought that ‘never show credentials’ leaves open the possibility for *something* to remain unnamed, un-grasped, hidden, unseen. Something escapes, leaving behind, as remnant, a condition of partiality. This condition of partiality, in connection with Heidegger’s account of thing, is linked with a space of undecidability wherein things cannot be determined.

In dealing with common objects and with the intention of estranging the habitual way we relate to objects in the undifferentiated flow of the everyday, we have considered some works of art that in dealing with everyday objects set in place a process of estrangement. Following Heidegger, we could identify this process of estrangement as objects leaving behind their objectness and entering the realm of things. From this stems our final argument that hinges on the idea that the process of estrangement involved in my practice and kindred practices can be seen as seeking to evoke that passage from object to thing. In this process of estrangement, thought as one of objects of common use becoming things, somehow ‘subject-less; somehow

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<sup>104</sup> Heidegger, M. (2001). ‘The Thing’ in *Poetry, language, thought* (A. Hofstadter, Trans.). Harper Perennial Modern Classics, p.164

<sup>105</sup> “Through disclosedness, that entity which we call “Dasein” is in the possibility of being its “there”. With its world, it is there for itself, and indeed-proximally and for the most part-in such a way that it has disclosed to itself its potentiality-for-Being in terms of the ‘world’ of its concern.” [BT 270] Heidegger, M. (1978). *Being and Time* (tr. J. M. a. E. Robinson). Oxford: Blackwell

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., Heidegger, ‘The Thing,’ p.181

‘object-less’: something is added to the object: something other, foreign to the intrinsic logic of everyday habits or mass-consumption is added to the object: for the ‘thingly character of the thing’ to become manifest, a kind of nearness is introduced into the relation between users or owners and objects, utensils or equipments. How can we think this process of estrangement produced when a kind of nearness is added to the object? Like the corresponding tension between ‘ontical nearness’ and ‘ontological farness’ that Heidegger envisions in *Dasein*<sup>107</sup> it cannot be measured quantitatively, the question of something like a nearness being added to the everyday object cannot either be measured or interpreted in a literal or quantitative way. According to Heidegger what sets apart things from objects is a tension drawn between nearness and farness. However nearness as such remains absent, out of reach:

What about nearness? How can we come to know its nature? Nearness, it seems, cannot be encountered directly. We succeed in reaching it rather by attending to what is near. Near to us are what we usually call things.<sup>108</sup>

In his essay ‘The Thing’ – published after *Being and Time* and originally delivered as a lecture – Heidegger does not approach the study of thing in terms of ready-to-hand or present-at-hand and their relation to being in the everyday and in the context of equipment. Rather, as the above quote indicates, in ‘The Thing’ Heidegger focuses on deciphering how the thing is grasped only in terms of distance and proximity. In this, Heidegger proposes that nearness can only be reached through attending or presencing things, which in turn are defined as that which sets forth, independently and brings about the process of its making. The thingly character of a thing lies again in a relation: in a relation to a purpose (to gather, to hold), in a relation to its matter (earth), in sum, in a relation to that which it is not:

The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds.<sup>109</sup>

A jug, as a vessel, as that which holds something within it, is a thing. The thing depends on a nearness that can never be grasped since ‘nearness cannot be encountered directly’ but through things. However, since the nearness of things

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<sup>107</sup> “DASEIN is ontically nearest to us, but ontologically the farthest.” Ibid., Inwood

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., Heidegger, ‘The Thing,’ p.164

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.167

remain absent, when one is presented with a thing one is faced with a rather unsettling feeling, of not being able to determine it with a definite meaning:

The terrifying is unsettling; it places everything outside its own nature ... It shows itself and hides itself in the way in which everything presences, namely, in the fact that despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent.<sup>110</sup>

If the thing show itself and hide itself at the same time, and its nearness remain absent 'despite all conquest of distances,' we are returned to the ambivalence of the everyday wherein we are 'at once engulfed within and deprived of the everyday.'<sup>111</sup> The everyday escapes. The thing escapes.

To bring Heidegger's theorization of the everyday in relation to forms of estrangement in art practices, we may suggest that in order to bring the object closer, that is, in order to unveil the nearness that characterizes things, it is necessary to operate from the opposite pole: that is, by subtracting something, like a farness. Rather than adding something to objects in order for them to become things, perhaps by subtracting something from the object, its thingly character might emerge. This will become clear using a concrete example: let's look briefly at the work *Cage de Lumière* (1985-1988) by Jean-Luc Vilmouth [Fig. 13]. The work is a public intervention carried out in the central square of the vocational school in Léon Blum in Saint-Fons, France. The objects in question are the lampposts that originally illuminated the square. Vilmouth was invited to propose a public sculpture or work, instead he moved the lights around and arranged them in a different order. This new order does not annul the original function of the lights, but proposes a different use. Instead of their functional arrangement along the length of streets he grouped them in a circle in the forecourt of the school, thereby producing a focal point in the town on the one hand and highlighting their previous use by their absence. Nothing was added to the place though the objects appear estranged. The rule by which the lampposts existed as street lighting had been subverted, denying them, so to speak, their functionality, while, with nothing quantitatively altered, an ambivalent space was demarcated by their new arrangement. The original position of the object was

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p.164

<sup>111</sup> Blanchot, M. (1993). 'Everyday Speech' in *The Infinite Conversation* (82). University of Minnesota Press, p. 238-245

changed, they had been brought closer: this is not to suggest that because the lampposts have been erected closer is that the thingly character of the object has come to the fore: but rather, that with the new arrangement, a kind of void – a kind of place which had no established name – perhaps similar to that of the vessel that Heidegger analyses, has been set forth.

## CONCLUSION

In exploring the relation between object and subject from the perspective of art practices that deal with the unperceived of the everyday, this thesis proposes three central arguments. Firstly, there is a condition of partiality that exists in the relation between subject and object. This partiality derives from the argument that there is a certain dimension of the object that cannot be fully determined, and therefore remains occluded or eclipsed. This thesis is concerned with art practices that arise in the observation of the everyday and employ consumer objects. They are based on the grounds that consumer objects can be understood as signifiers not only of a commercial economy, but, more importantly, of a cultural economy that exists in the everyday. On the grounds of the partiality of the relation of subject and object, this thesis argues that art practices can occupy the indeterminate space, broadly defined as the everyday, and by means of which a meaningful and reflective engagement with the viewer may take place. Secondly, this thesis proposes that it may be through a trope of estrangement that focuses on relations and not on the entities (subject and object) of such relations, that the indeterminate space may be exposed by means of offering an alternative perspective in relation to governing systems of rules. We have called this space for reflection and of partial encounter a space of undecidability, by virtue of the fact that it can never be fully known. On the one hand, this space for art practice finds a corollary in the tension between familiarity and un-familiarity that has been characterized as the life of the everyday. The argument then also claims that the sense of familiarization and de-familiarization that characterizes the experience of the everyday is not accounted for by a quality residing in one or another given entity – either the subject or the object in the context of our discussion – but applies to the relation established between the two. It is between certain, and only certain aspects, or qualities, of both subject and object that a relationship is possible. It is for this reason that we argue that relationships are partial. The relationship that most commonly holds in that which is characteristic of the everyday is one of familiarity. Clearly, this is not, however, the only possible relationship and the trope of estrangement works to reverse that familiarity, such that the relationship must be negotiated afresh. On the other hand, the undecidability of this space, characteristic of the everyday, can be

brought to attention by art practices that initiate a new position from which to attend to the nature of rules that determine relations. This is only possible by the very aporetic nature of the everyday; if the contrary was the case, that is, if all possible, alternative relations could be accounted, then the trope of estrangement would be impossible. More specifically to certain art practices that emerged in the 1980s, this thesis argues that by rearticulating given codes and rules, the work of art estranges the usual and accustomed distance established between object and subject and it is through codes (and indeed language) that the relationships under discussion are transacted. Such art practices move away from dealing with the substantive materiality of form and scrutinize the codes that inhere in objects and that determine relationships with their subject. Thirdly, and through an analysis of various art practices, this thesis proposes that the work of art has the possibility to address the partiality of the subject, neither with the intention of cancelling it nor of overcoming it, but rather by offering new perspectives from which the subject may encounter, again always partially, the relations through which she engages with the material world.

Having made the case for an art of estrangement that re-articulates the codes and rules of relation in the subject and object dichotomy, finally, I want to address the nature of the space of undecidability opened up by the partiality of the subject by relating it to the notion of ‘-scape’ introduced by Mark Cousins in his twentieth annual series of lectures at the Architectural Association in London in 2004/5<sup>112</sup>. What is implied by partiality as we have theorized it is that there is something unobserved; indeed the site of the position of the perspectival point of view is itself singularly unobserved. The trope of a -scape – that Cousins borrows from the suffix of landscape, dreamscape, cityscape, and so on – serves to complement the discussion of a partial and unidentified position that we have linked to what is overlooked, not overviewed. It is as if the hyphen of -scape suggests an as yet to be identified author or spectator: a relationship awaiting its affirmation.

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<sup>112</sup> Cultural critic Mark Cousins has for more than twenty years given a series of annual lectures (Friday Afternoon Lectures) at the Architectural Association in London. The recordings of many of these lectures, including those on ‘the -scape’, are archived in the audio-visual library of the Architectural Association. Cousins, Mark, (December 2004 – March 2005) ‘The Scape’, [audio] Twentieth *Friday Afternoon Lecture* given at Architectural Association, CD (seven lectures), Architectural Association Photo Library, 36 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3ES. Enquiries: 0207 887 4066. Those phrases quoted in the text are transcribed from the recordings of ‘The Scape’.

For Cousins, a -scape, is a category or level of something rather than a concept in that engages logically (as opposed to chronologically) with the order of the post-object; that is, it relates to an order in which concepts and ideas ('what is interesting,' as Cousins will advocate) have surpassed the sensible knowledge of traditional aesthetics. In this, the -scape is situated beyond the representation of the subject, and supplants the notion of object by that of an array, an articulation, a system of relations: an articulation of the between of objects. It is this sense of -scape as opening a field of discussion of relations of and between objects that engages with those art practices we have described as invested with the trope of estrangement. The -scape is about the relationships between objects as much as about objects as such. Cousins introduces the category of -scape to mean an arena, a field of affects and an articulation whereby things come together in certain types of relations. What predominate in the -scape are the relations of an already given arrangement (of things, of objects), and with them, the 'rules that rule what goes beside the other'. Relations do not exist on the surface and yet at the same time are not an essence. Relations in the -scape seem to rest in a space of an in-between: in-between the surface and in that which escapes the surface. Cousins defines a -scape by drawing on Foucault's epistemological theory of a discursive formation understood as 'a system in dispersion'<sup>113</sup>. -Scape, Cousins proposes, 'is a kind of system of arrangement in dispersion'. A -scape, Cousins claims, is a kind of arrangement, an articulation or the production of that articulation: a -scape is 'the system by which that arrangement comes to a manifold or perceptual level.' It is as if it is no longer an object, discrete and identifiable on its own, but a set of relations, linking one object to other positions in the -scape, that becomes available to perception. In this, the -scape is 'a kind of loose form of system' which is already there ... a -scape 'refers to something which is always already around': it offers to a logic of something being the second time around, and, therefore it is related to the logic of the second-hand. Further, and this brings Cousin's formulation of the -scape close to our enquiry about the ambivalence of the everyday, the -scape is 'not about bringing something new to the world, but about reworking, rearranging what is

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<sup>113</sup> In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault calls into question social orders that by presenting apparently fixed regularities are automatically accepted or thought of as constituting a fixed 'community of meanings.' Instead, he proposes to look at such community of meanings as formed by 'dispersal events,' as an arrangement of statements that form the 'material with which one is dealing.' Foucault produces an alternative vocabulary identifying the material (things) with which one deals as 'unities' (be they 'objects, modes of statement, concepts, thematic choices') that together constitute 'discursive formations.' See, Foucault, Michel (2010 [1969]) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, tr. Smith, Sheridan, London and New York: Routledge

already *there*.’ The -scape, in Cousin’s formulation, provides an alternative to the question of the object as determined by the subject or as the appearance of the thing-in-itself; itself, absolutely unknowable. However, it transposes the question from one of *what* to one of *where*. For, if the central question that Cousins raises with the -scape is about that which is already there, one may ask where is, or wherein lies the ‘already there’? Where is it to be found? As he stated at the outset of his lecture series, the -scape is an attempt to answer the questions: ‘*where are we?*’ and ‘*how we think about where we are?*’ Cousins seeks an answer in the -scape, in what could be understood as its *topos*: a place that cannot be defined by only one point of view, therefore, a place ‘that cannot be reduced to one, and only one form of judgement’ and yet is already around, *there*. It is the nature of that positional and topographical ‘there’ that Cousins seems to suggest has changed. As we have already noted, Cousins makes reference to the post-object and draws on Foucault’s notion of ‘discursive formations,’ yet he appears to acknowledge that the perspectival relationship that structures the relation between subject and object still pertains in some form or another. His question, to which the schema of the -scape is his provisional answer is the synthesis of these two competing theoretical claims. However, it is the aporetic nature of the *where* that seems to open before him. Noting the temporal distance marked by the post-object, he asserts that in the notion of landscape of the eighteenth century, subject and object were separated. What the contemporary -scape suggests is that in the land-scape, the city-scape, the dream-scape there is no longer just a representation, but that ‘one is in the landscape’, just as, perhaps, one is in the everyday. Does then, Cousins’ question resonates with Blanchot’s theorization of the everyday? If we return to the starting point of this thesis and recall Blanchot’s approach to the everyday:

“*il y a du quotidien*”

“There is [*il y a*] the everyday (without subject, without object)”

As we considered in Chapter One, with regard to the ‘there is’ of the everyday, Blanchot asked about what it is that corresponds to the ‘Who’ of the everyday, which in turn is that which is without subject and without object. There is, we argued, a certain ambiguity, a relation of tension between that which is possible and not possible to grasp in the ‘there is’ of the everyday. We then approached our relation to the everyday through the figure of a participant observer, and we argued that “the position of the participant observer is engendered by a split opened by the intended

simultaneity of the act of observing and that of participating”. Does Cousins’ question ‘*where are we?*’ and its correlate, what are the resources one has at hand to think about where we are, provide an answer to the nature of the partiality of the encounter that we find in the artwork? What Cousins finds in the -scape are not objects but sets of relations. In the first place, we may conclude from Cousins’ formulation that the ‘already there’ is a field formed by multiple relations and therefore by multiple positions, or perspectives, from which relations are both engendered and observed. We may then put this into relation with the trope of estrangement. The trope of estrangement remains faithful to the sets of relations that are sustained within the -scape, or the everyday. For example, *Ficciones de un uso* began in the casual observation of a relationship, typical of those casual and ephemeral relations that exist within the everyday: it was that every woman wears down a lipstick in a unique way. Transposing this into the artwork, hypostasizing it, no longer as a transient relationship, but as a rule by which the series was produced, the work opens the question, what is the relationship between subject and object; and how can we qualify it. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and with reference to ‘discursive formations,’ Foucault claims that ‘*rules of formation* are conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive division.’<sup>114</sup> We are now able to bring this into conjunction with our earlier statement that the kind of art practices being considered here ‘move away from dealing with the substantive materiality of form and scrutinize the codes that inhere in objects and that determine relationships with their subject.’

For Cousins, however, the -scape remains enigmatic; he sees in it an escape both from the solipsism of the subject into the dream-scape, land-scape, city-scape and so on and the presumed governance of the object by the subject. Finally, to qualify the space of undecidability opened up by artistic practices engaged with estrangement, I want to extrapolate Cousins’ figure of the -scape to that of an *objectscape*, in order to propose a site where subject and object meet, partially, on a common ground of interaction and transaction. This common ground entails at least the diminution of governance by the perceiving subject and inscribes a measure of agency in the object. To a certain extent, objects give us agency. At the most banal level they allow us to mop floors, saw wood, cook food. However, they also have agency over us; in subtle

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<sup>114</sup> Foucault, Michel (2010 [1969]) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, tr. Smith, Sheridan, London and New York: Routledge

ways they confer on us our subject positions. Again at a banal level they may inform the way we mop floors, saw wood and so on and this may be of little importance.

In my artistic practice I have drawn on a universe of banal, mass-produced objects that are by their nature easily replaceable, despite their symbolic value and their relevance, as common objects, to our daily life. Somehow, these objects have no place, or can only aspire to appear momentarily in a particular place, until they are discarded, stored, put away or forgotten. Some of the objects from this material universe pass unnoticed because they are wholly absorbed by their function: they are only there for use. Other objects live with a sort of latency: they can be out of picture, but can be reintegrated to ‘the system of objects’ once they get out of the attic and reappearing in a room or kitchen, or in a charity shop, car boot sale, antique fair or flea market. There is a third category of objects that happens to be in a more intermediate position: they are not completely out of the picture: these are objects that are a part and parcel of everyday life, so intimately associated with everyday life that they acquire an invisibility: objects that somehow haunt the world of the everyday – objects that wonder, one may suggest. To a certain extent, these three types of objects have a sort of intermittent appearance, as if coming in and out of their own presence or falling in or out of awareness. This universe of material objects belongs to a generality rather than a specific type of objects: somehow, they are just *stuff*. I understand this material universe as something like an *objectscape*, understanding it as that landscape of mass-produced, everyday objects that local and global markets manufacture, distribute and maintain in circulation by a rhetoric of presence and power. The relationship of consumerism assumes or determines a certain subservience of the consuming subject to brands, lifestyles, etc. The art object, the ethnic or museum object, the scientific object, the everyday-industrial object, the intimate and anonymous market object share not only a spatio-temporal framework, but, as I wish to argue, they share a condition of presence that constitute an object-scape. They all inhabit Cousins’ -scape. They all are elements of an already established articulation of relations.

Like landscape, seascape, and cityscape, the objectscape comprises, in the first instance, a vista – a perceptible field – of objects. A first move in my construction is to suggest that, like in Cousin’s -scape, the ‘objects’ of object-scape exceed the sense of object in its classic relation to the subject. The meaning of -scape, its signified,

implies the sense of both a subjective horizon but also of a view or vista yet to be acquired: one that is, as if somehow pre-existing its acquisition by a spectator. Indeed the etymology of ‘scape’ as the aphetic<sup>115</sup> form of *escape*, suggests something beyond reach. Both, in the representation of the object-scape and in finding a position within it – as in ‘one is in the landscape’ – there is something that is lost, it escapes, and remains, as such, undecidable, yet is *there, already around*.

My purpose in formulating the object-scape in this way allows a broader theoretical framework that encompasses the formality of acknowledged works of art as well as the more ephemeral or anonymous population of the everyday. My intention has been to provide a theoretical platform for an analysis of artworks that deal with the mass-produced through strategies of estrangement, by means of bringing together the perspective of traditional aesthetics based on the representation of the subject together with Heidegger’s distinction between object and thing. It is to explore the possibilities of an undetermined relation between the consumer object and the spectator in relation to its incorporation into the realm of art. We have argued, thus far, that the relation between object and subject does not rely on a definition of the object in terms of an either/or, but rather that such relation is transacted on a terrain, characterized by an aporia, rendering the encounter between the two always partial. However, we suggested that such aporia could be traced in the definition of ‘thing,’ which, in Heidegger’s account of it, embraces, in its very nature, a paradox of proximity, and therefore holds out the possibility of attaining a position from which such proximity may be realized. To carry this argument forward, we could say that, though the indeterminacy of the everyday may be identified in the *objectscape*, the space of undecidability opened up by an art of estrangement is better theorized by the idea of a *thingscape*. Thing, as we have argued following Heidegger, does not address that which is either near or far, but allows one to grasp the distance of nearness or farness as a relation. If we identified the trope of estrangement as the technique by which a relation is converted into a rule. Now, with the idea of *thingscape* we may qualify the nature of estrangement *per se*. It is that the Heideggerian terms nearness and farness provide an index of the relation; and it is in the reversal of the conventional relationship that holds between them that estrangement occurs: that

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<sup>115</sup> In linguistics, particularly phonetics, its branch that deals with the sound of speech, APHESIS means “the gradual and unintentional loss of an unaccented vowel at the beginning of a word,” e.g. squire / esquire. The Chambers Dictionary, Chambers English Dictionary, New 9th ed., Edinburgh: Chambers, 2003.

which was near becomes far and vice versa. What was known by its familiarity becomes an object of inspection; what seemed unfamiliar becomes recognizable as, or akin to, one's own.

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**Fig. i** – *Palimpsest, from Omission to Hybridization*, 1999

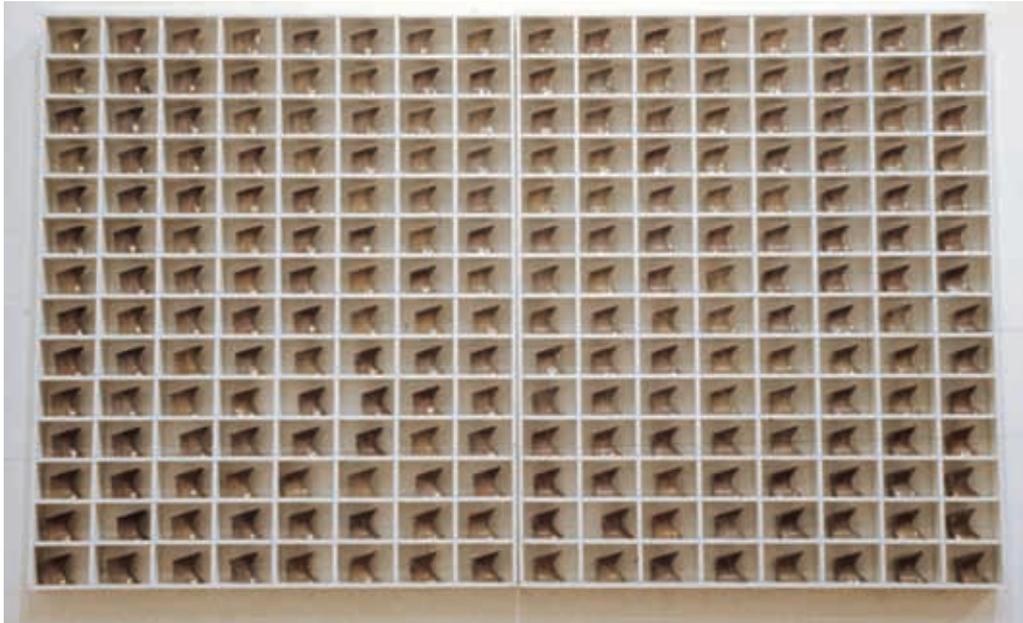
Everyday objects, polythene, wooden structure

Installation view at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Santiago



*Palimpsest I*, 1999 (details)

*Palimpsest II*, 1999  
244 pairs of shoe heels wrapped in polythene film; wood shelf

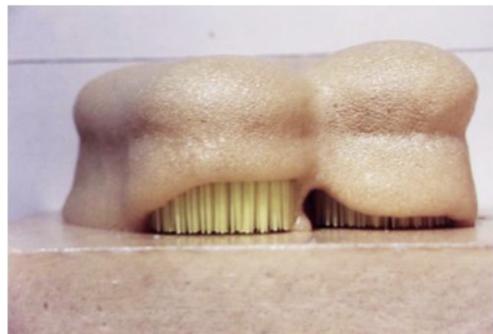


*Palimpsest II*, 1999  
Detail

*Palimpsest III*, 1999  
Rubber thimbles and key rings (details)



**Fig. ii** –*Estar*, 2000  
Plastic objects, expanded polyurethane  
Museo de Tajamares, Santiago, Chile



Installation view and details

**Fig. iii** – *Tercera generación*, 2000  
Expanded polyurethane, Perspex  
Galería Bech, Santiago



Installation view and details

**Fig. iv** – *Orden y semejanza I*, 2003

576 plastic objects, expanded polyurethane, Plexiglas 374 (height) x 390 (shorter side) x 760 (longer side) x 20.8 cm (width of the objects)

IV Bienal Mercosur, Porto Alegre, Brazil



Installation view and details

**Fig. v** – *El Objeto y su Manifestación*, 2002

Around 1600 plaster objects casted from the inside space of a disposable cup

Room size: 11 x 9 x 4 m high

Galería Animal, Santiago



Installation view and details

**Fig. vi** – *Ficciones de un uso II*, 2007,

Around 2.000 intervened lipsticks; oval wooden base, 320 cm long, 740 cm across, 100 cm high, top surface width: 20 cm

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles



Installation view and details

**Fig. vii** – *The Missing Willow*, 2010

Silkscreen on hard casting plaster  
50 objects 18 x 26 x 1 cm each

*Tectonic Shift: Contemporary Art from Chile*  
Saatchi Gallery, London



Installation view and details



**Fig. viii** – *Cosas rotas II*, 2009

Crockery, plaster, paper  
Dimension variable

*El lugar de lo invisible*  
Sala Gasco, Santiago, Chile



Installation view and detail

**Fig. ix** – *Nomad Patterns*, 2012

Ceramic, resin, plaster, transfer print, varnish.  
Dimensions variable

Eagle Gallery, London



Installation view and  
details



**Fig. x** – *From the Series Broken Things*, 2011

Gold thread, C-Type print, paper, wooden frame. Dimension variable

*Sutura*

Galeria Eduardo Fernandes, Sao Paulo



Installation view and  
details



**Fig. xi** – *Nature Morte*, 2010

C-Type print, gold thread, paper, wooden frame.

Mixed media. Four works of 62.2 x 109.5 cm and four of 62.2 x 109.5 cm (unframed)

House of Propellers, London

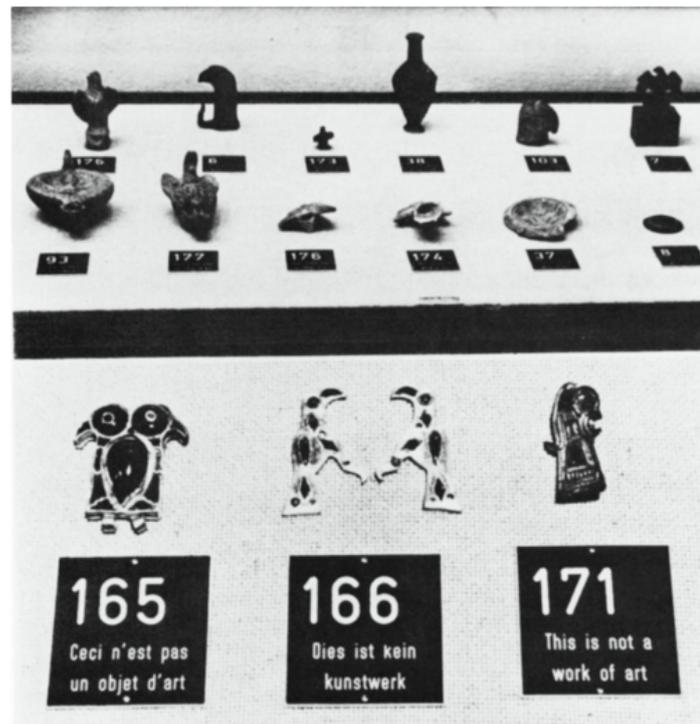


Installation view and  
details

*Other works discussed in the thesis*

- Fig. 1 Marcel Broodthaers presented, Museum of Modern Art, 1972,
- Fig. 2 Claes Oldenburg, Mouse Museum, 1977, Whitney Museum Art
- Fig. 3 Daniel Spoerri, Musée Sentimental, 1979 , Cologne
- Fig. 4 Jean-Luc Vilmouth, R  unir 1, 1980, (various collections)
- Fig. 5 Jean-Luc Vilmouth, Cut Out, 1980, Mus  e des Beaux Arts, Angers, France.
- Fig. 6  
Jean-Luc Vilmouth, Autour d'un Marteau, 1980, Nouveau Mus  e de Villeurbanne, Collection Centre Georges Pompidou
- Fig. 7 Jean-Luc Vilmouth, SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT, 2005, Galerie Aline Vidal, Fiac
- Fig. 8 Michael Craig Martin, An Oak Tree, 1973, National Gallery of Australia
- Fig. 9 Allan McCollum, Over Ten Thousand Individual Works, 1982
- Fig. 10 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled, 1992, New York
- Fig. 11 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991
- Fig. 12 Richard Wentworth, Making Do and Getting By, 1980
- Fig. 13 Jean-Luc Vilmouth, Cage de Lumi  re, 1985-198, Saint-Fons - France

**Fig. 1** – Marcel Broodthaers presented, *Museum of Modern Art*, 1972, Düsseldorf Kunsthalle



Installation view and detail

**Fig. 2** – Claes Oldenburg, *Mouse Museum*, 1977, Whitney Museum Art

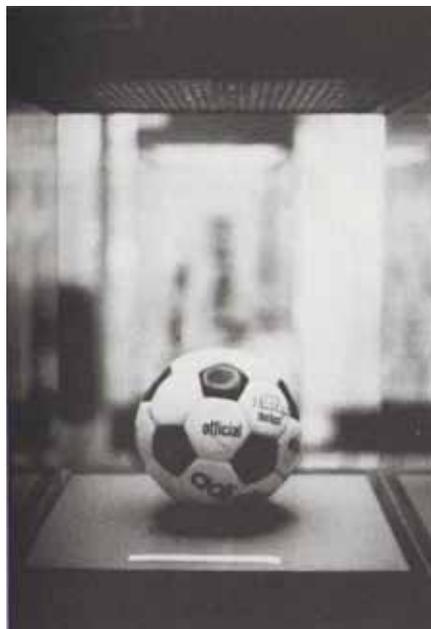


Detail

**Fig. 3** – Daniel Spoerri, Musée Sentimental, 1979, Cologne



Installation view



Daniel Spoerri, *Musée Sentimental*  
Soccer ball from the final game of  
the German Soccer league in 1978,  
as installed in Musée Sentimental of  
Cologne

**Fig. 4** – Jean-Luc Vilmouth, *Rèunir 1*  
A drawings of a stapler made of staples, 90 X 60 cm, (detail)  
(various collections)



Detail

**Fig. 5** – Jean-Luc Vilmouth, *Cut Out*, 1980

Pliers, white metal cables covered with coloured plastic; variable formats

Musée des Beaux Arts, Angers, France.



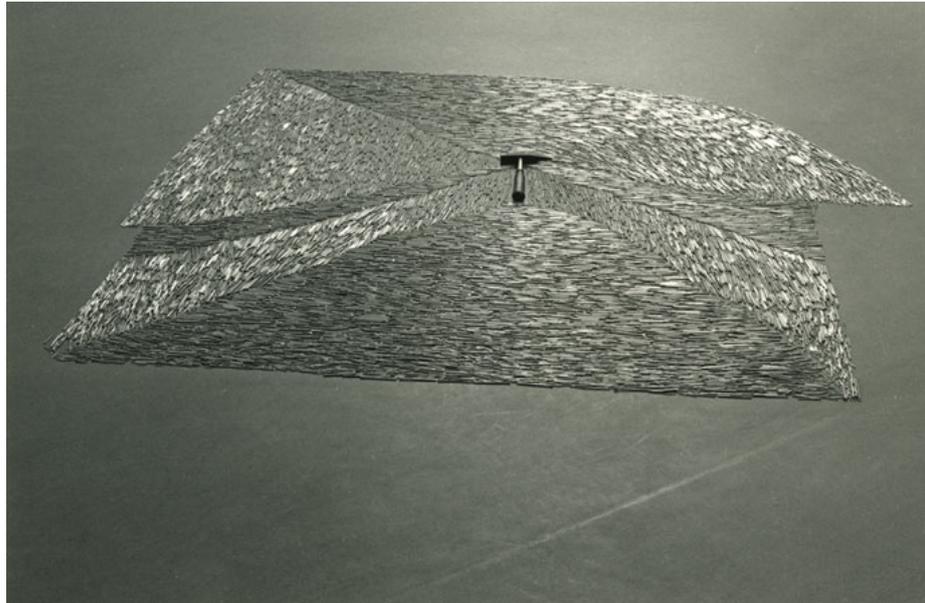
Installation view  
and detail



**Fig. 6** – Jean-Luc Vilmouth, *Autour d'un Marteau*, 1980

Accumulation of nails and hammer on the ground, 300x300 cm

Nouveau Musée de Villeurbanne, Collection Centre Georges Pompidou



Installation view

**Fig. 7** – Jean-Luc Vilmouth, *SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT*, 2005

Galerie Aline Vidal, Fiac



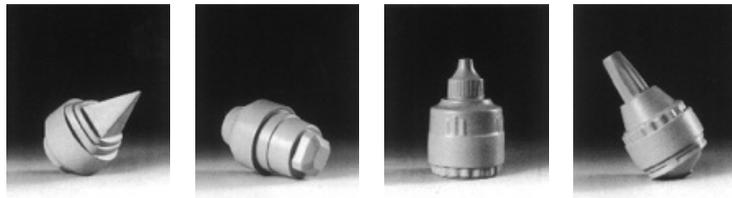
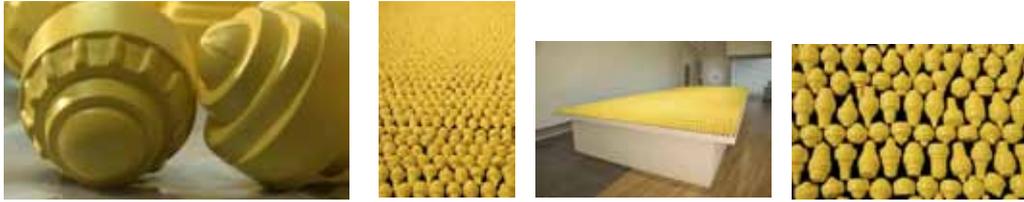
Detail

**Fig. 8** – Michael Craig Martin, *An Oak Tree*, 1973  
National Gallery of Australia



Installation view

Fig. 9 – Allan McCollum, *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*, 1982.



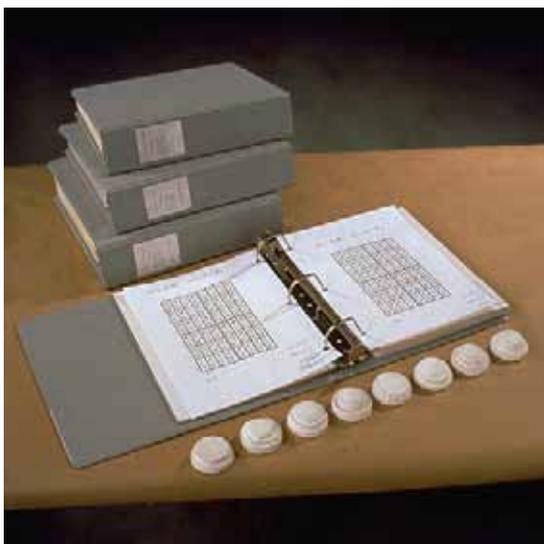
Details



Installation view at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg



Images of work in progress: Allan McCollum's *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*



“A combinatorial system is devised and recorded in workbooks. Each of the books' pages represents a different way of combining one tray of “halves,” which are cast in Hydrocal and put together by studio assistants. The system is used during the production process to insure that no two finished Individual Works will ever be alike.”

<http://homepage.mac.com/studioarchives/amcnet2/album/individualworks4.html>

**Fig. 10** – Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1992, New York



As installed in New York in 1992

**Fig. 11** – Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991  
175 lbs of multicoloured fruit candies.



Installation view



Fig. 12 – Richard Wentworth, *Making Do and Getting By*, 1980 -



Details



Details



Stockholm, 1984

Photograph mounted on glass  
297x 420 mm



Bell Street, London, 1989

**Fig. 13** – Jean-Luc Vilmouth, *Cage de Lumière*, 1985-198, Saint-Fons, France  
Public intervention carried out in the central square of the vocational school  
in Léon Blum in Saint-Fons, France

