

Shower him with all earthly blessings, plunge him so deep into happiness that nothing is visible but the bubbles rising to the surface of his happiness, as if it were water; give him such economic prosperity that he will have nothing left to do but sleep, eat gingerbread, and worry about the continuance of world history.

-Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Notes from Underground

Manners and modes of consumption within the contemporary capitalist market are constantly shifting and reorienting themselves to better rest in the spaces that we, as consumers, create by our fascination and fetishization of commodities. Whereas it was once that the consumer sought out psychical objects that obtained value in relation to their ability to be utilized by the human body or given value by the time and amount of labour that was part of their creation, we now consume objects that have been separated from labor by the wedge of abstraction that is the consumption of the image as an object, the associative narrative of objects or characteristics given to an object in order to align it with a personal fiction, and the object as an accumulative element of an object based environment. It is necessary that the contemporary lense of capitalism extends its's breadth in order encompass all objects of commodity and their surplus value as represented in concrete forms, as well as the personal fictions that are built upon the consumption of these objects and the environments in which these personal narratives exists. The capitalistic entity is not static, but rather a narrative itself that creates its own expansion and fixes itself, readily adjustable, aside and within all modes of consumption as it continually shifts and evolves more readily than the subjects who attempt to determine, confine and understand its complex abilities of proliferation. As commodities are given agency to feel comfortable in all places governed by consumption, capitalism has constructed its own limits and properties within the contemporary consumer society wherein the critical lense and understanding of late-capitalism is of a lesser size, or perhaps more accurately of fewer forms, than of that which it seeks to investigate.

Most mystical in the consumer landscape is the environment become object and the personal fiction constructed by the accumulation of commodities. Within these two modes of consumption objects are assigned use value by allowing themselves to be turned into signs and symbols representing taste, affluence, happiness, etc. It is from these signs that the human body arranges itself, constantly orientating itself to better utilize an object, no longer solely as a form that allows the expedited completion of a task and asserts mans supposed and sought after dominance over natures will, but

more so as a constructive symbol that helps build and raise an ambience and ever more so consuming objects in order to create an environment that is representative of this individual personal fiction. As the body orientates more and more towards objects, it becomes increasingly similar to them. It is in this everyday consumption of objects and images as objects that contemporary capitalism is given license to act freely by the individual as they pile on the signs and symbols of their personal, private, fiction and create their environment. In this increased consumption the body interacts more with the material object than it does with other bodies and in this new world of material intimacy it is not unlikely that the body has become more comfortable within a world of objects, arranged and consumed in a certain personal way, than in a world of bodies.

Exchange and dissemination of objects, as well as the signs that embody them, has become exponentially prevalent in daily participation with the world and it is in exchange that commodities accrue their social value. As objects and images are consumed as signs they garner the ability to cast away, or create new, histories for themselves. Histories that may not be linked to the actual past as much as they are linked to importance imbued within the object by the accumulation of signs and symbols as representations of social value which are instilled within the commodity. Here is the point that the consumed object has the unique ability to be separated from its material makeup and exist entirely as symbol. The commodity as symbol is then able to be traded and molded infinitely to form or fit any and all personal narratives and object environments in which it is placed. In Joshua Simon's essay *Neo-Materialism* he discusses the materialization of symbols in relation to the 1971 unilateral cancellation of the ability to directly convert the US dollar to gold, which was a way to separate foreign currency exchange rates and their ties to the value of gold. In the attempt at dematerializing capital by separating exchange from the surplus of gold we instead wound up with an abstracted form of capital, *money* becomes a materialized symbol.

As commodities become symbols rather than objects the importance of production and labour time is brought into question. Modes of production that exist as part of rich historical traditions such as earthenware ceramics and natural dying processes, become less part of a lineage and more part of an environment or ambience created to inform the consumer of said history and of its reflection in the object, as a form of social value. The history, just as the commodity, becomes a symbol that is then ready for consumption and casts away its actual past. In this commodification of material history and the history of products, we prepare ourselves to consume more. We are able to consume history as signs and symbols that can be attributed to an object in order to better create a commodified personal fiction and raise the ambience of an object,

securing its place within an environment. The symbol of history becomes the object for consumption and the history itself is the material of which it is created.

Through the process of object becoming a symbol it is more difficult, if not impossible, for any object to gain autonomy from commodification. Where once an object produced in private, outside the mode of consumption, and existing as an object of zero use value had a higher ability of escaping commodification, now this is not so. The object is seen as a symbol and is then compared to familiar symbols as they are exchanged. The object of private production and zero use value may not itself be exchanged but it exists within an environment of symbol commodification and becomes an element of this environment or ambiance and acts as the symbolic surplus value of contemporary consumption.

Environments, as they exist as objects, materialize themselves as they are built of commodities and the piles of symbols these objects are laden with, while simultaneously being exchanged as an object themselves. These environments extend their reach as they are exchanged and consumed in all of their forms, consistently extracting the symbol from its history and adding said history as a material to be utilized. There is no room for labor that is not consumption.

—

1
Baudrillard, Jean, *The Consumer Society*. London: Sage, 1998.

2
Lütticken, Sven, "Art and Thingness." *e-flux journal*, 2010.

3
Marx, Karl, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Co, 1906.

4
Simon, Joshua, "Neo-Materialism." *e-flux journal*, 2011.

5
Squibbs, Steven, "Genres of Capitalism." *e-flux journal*, 2014.

