DAMAGED GOODS
Desire and the Economy of the Object

Judith Barry
Gretchen Bender
Barbara Bloom
Andrea Fraser
Jeff Koons
Justen Ladda
Louise Lawler
Ken Lum
Allan McCollum
Haim Steinbach

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THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
A PRODUCT YOU COULD KILL FOR

Brian Wallis

What fascinates us is always that which radically excludes us in the name of its internal logic or perfection: a mathematical formula, a paranoid system, a concrete jungle, a useless object.
—Jean Baudrillard, For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign

Anything that impairs global communications is in fact impairing trade. Information and trade are intertwined and inseparable.
—Philip H. Geier, A View from the Top: The Importance of Managing Global Communications

Second for second, surely the most spectacular filmic experience of recent years is the 90-second television commercial Manhattan Landing, produced in 1983 for British Airways by the London-based advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi. Over the horizon appears an apparition: the entire island of Manhattan has been uprooted from its geographical setting and is airborne, approaching with its immense, twinkling skyline intact. Equipped with massive headlights and space-age propulsion, Manhattan passes overhead like a silent space station, bound for London’s Heathrow Airport. Above London suburbs Manhattan attracts the amazed stares of stereotypic Britons momentarily distracted from their stereotypic British activities. Airport runway lights appear and the massive island jets in for a landing. A closing graphic shows a globe exploding with rays connecting London to all points in the world.

Though presented as extraordinary, the scene is a familiar one, drawing directly on the forms and associations of similar scenes from science fiction adventures such as Close Encounters of the Third Kind. This familiarity does not diminish the ecstatic drama of the advertisement, however, but instead testifies to the widespread appeal of sheer technical virtuosity. A triumph of special effects, Manhattan Landing delineates our special fascination with certain characteristics of new technology: speed, scale, brilliance, simulation, and raw technological power. Despite its generic science fiction trappings, Manhattan Landing is also a summary of real concerns in representation, focusing attention on the seductive lure of the simulated object and on imagemaking which certifies the obliteration of real time and real space.

Beyond these formal, visual accomplishments, however, at the time of its release, Manhattan Landing also signified a critical economic encounter: the advent of global advertising. For the first time, an identical advertisement was available for broadcast in 46 different countries, with a voiceover in one of 34 different languages. Heralded in the New York Times as “Opportunities for World Brands,” the global advertising scheme envisioned by Saatchi & Saatchi was seen by them as an inevitable development. Their full-page advertisement argued that,

“At the same time as demography is converging, television and motion-pictures are creating elements of a shared culture. And this cultural convergence is facilitating the establishment of multinational brand characters. The worldwide proliferation of the Marlboro brand would not have been possible without TV and motion picture education about the virile rugged character of the American West and the American cowboy—helped by increasing colour TV penetration in all countries.”

For Saatchi & Saatchi, the world is already becoming more homogeneous through the repetition and proliferation of the signs of culture, therefore it is inevitable that people in various cultures could be induced to want the same brands and products. In partial contradiction of the standard advertising strategy of targeting audiences, global advertising suggests that the penetration of the image is so deep and so effective that it has evacuated cultural distinctions among local consumers; the smart company would therefore market the same product with the same images to various markets. As Thomas Levitt, marketing professor at Harvard and the genius behind the Saatchi & Saatchi strategy, asserts, “the global company will shape the vectors of technology and globalization into its great strategic fecundity. It will systematically push these vectors toward their own convergence, offering everyone simultaneously high-quality, more or less standardized products at optimally low prices, thereby achieving for itself vastly expanded markets and profits. Companies that do not adapt to the new global realities will become victims of those that do.”

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This totalized strategy of global marketing is predicated not only on the saturation potential of any image, but also on a radically restructured world economy. The “crisis” of global economy stems in large part from the decline of United States superiority in Western political and economic order, and was prominently signalled in the early 1970s by a collapse in financial domination (the revocation of the gold standard) and a fundamental defeat in politico-military supremacy (the victory of nonconventional warfare in Vietnam). The oil crisis of 1973, which pointed to the complete supercession of the bipolar model of global politics (U.S.-U.S.S.R.), and the rise of supranational organizations of international power (particularly the World Bank, the IMF, and the multinational corporation), further clarified the reduced nature of United States economic power and more generally, suggested a decline of world capitalism.

Although all manner of commentators have therefore theorized the dawn of a “postindustrial society” beyond the laws of classical capitalism, the Marxist economist Ernest Mandel has argued instead that this new economic structure is in fact a more complete stage of capitalism. This third stage of capitalism (following market capitalism and monopoly or imperialist capitalism) Mandel calls “late capitalism” and he associates it with the rise and total penetration of consumerism and multinational capitalism. “Late capitalism,” Mandel stresses, “constitutes generalized universal industrialization for the first time in history. Mechanization, standardization, over-specialization and parcellization of labour, which in the past determined only the realm of commodity production in actual industry, now penetrate into all sectors of social life.” These routines of industrial production have entered not only into more and more remote markets, but also into the individual psyche, affecting and influencing the structure of everyday life. For, along with the “generalized universal industrialization” has come a thorough penetration of advertising into every level of social life.

Advertising succeeds in structuring desires and consumptive habits as the extension of the industrialization process. For inevitably advertising has at least three functions: first, to sell a product; second, to sell an ideology or generalized value system to which the producers of the product subscribe; and third, to conceal the actual labor processes required to produce the product. In other words, advertising proceeds by a series of abstractions, abstractions which remove the product (object) from its material or unsavory context and project it outward toward its audience in the form of a sign. By simulating reality or the world as we know it, advertising overlays onto our image of that world the particular motivations and belief systems of the advertisers. Locally this may be of little consequence, but extrapolated to the international level, this type of global advertising serves to disintegrate difference, consolidate economic and political control, and institute universal standardization.

Thus, Manhattan Landing seems poised precariously on the lip of the future. This advertisement with its dematerialization of space, time, and gravity, with its spectacular demonstration of the fluid acceleration of the image, with its instant transfer to 46 countries throughout the globe should stand as evidence of the withering away of the commodity and its replacement by an international image market based in the media and generated by telecommunications and information transfer. Indeed, the French theorist Jean Baudrillard has announced that, “There is no longer any system of objects,” but rather—according to him—a world governed entirely by reproduction (rather than production) and by simulation of the real. But what can this mean, for certainly we live in a world of commodities, of consumer goods, merchandise, and comstores, in which economic exchange is also—still—an aspect of social exchange? For Baudrillard and others, the object is superceded because it has been surpassed as the dominant structural element in politico-economic commerce. What Fredric Jameson calls “the waning of affect” also refers to the loss of emotional investment in the object (a loss which precludes expressionism), which is characteristic of our time. But if these theorizations of the demise of the object as the vital core of capitalistic production are true, then how can we regard the continued circulation of objects and commodities? How could this understanding of the social function of objects relate to a larger understanding of shifting social, economic, and political relations? And, finally, in what ways might this shifting structure of capital affect our everyday lives, particularly the intimate relations of objects and desires?

These questions form the basis for a large discussion to which this exhibition can only be a partial response. “Damaged Goods” does not attempt to define a new role for the object in society, but rather to address aspects of our psychological attraction to the object and to examine the context in which those desires are structured. In general, the artists in this ex-
hibition address the strategies and the deployment of consumerism at a historical juncture when consumer culture is itself being questioned. For some artists, this involves the production of "false objects," works which resemble functional commodities, but which are mute, imperfect, useless. For others, their response is formulated in terms of an analysis of the system which supports the circulation of objects, that is, forms of display, advertising, presentation, and distribution. But both of these approaches investigate ways in which the object in contemporary economic relations is both inadequate and imperfect. Today the object or product is transformed into a desirable commodity through a panoply of advertising and marketing devices, but is itself hollowed of use or meaning, atrophied in deference to the supplements of presentational devices and props. It is this constructed object, distilled from its own aura and bearing no relation to "Nature" or to "the Real," which Baudrillard describes as "simulated." The simulated object, according to Baudrillard, is eviscerated of substance, but projected outward on a colossal scale; object as product, commodity, and object of desire, the simulated object is today inadequate to its promise. Images and codes no longer refer to "an original" but to one another, and it is the image-sign or more precisely the system of signs which fascinate us, which we desire. That we now desire the fetishized image, the artificial object, is suggested by recent advertising which more and more emphasizes "lifestyle" rather than a particular product (often only "casually" mentioning the brand) and removes utility from prominence as the criteria for purchase. Thus, in a series of recent Nike ads for a new line of sportswear, famous sports stars are simply shown in large color photographs (one, of Dwight Gooden, is twenty stories tall), with no advertising copy and only a small Nike logo. More than just an innovative ad campaign, this device points to the supercession of the object as the centerpiece of capitalistic exchange and its replacement by an order of signs and signifying devices.

The method by which inherently neutral objects are endowed with desirable and hence marketable qualities depends both on the abstraction of the commodity character of the object (through brilliant finish, bright colors, enlargement, repetition, accumulation), and on the physical and psychological siting of the subject in relation to the object (through architectural devices, lighting, decorative props, and furniture). It is this second aspect—the positioning and control of the shopper/viewer—which is the focus of Judith Barry's work. Trained in both architecture and in film theory, Barry is interested in the psychological effects of this predetermined location of the viewer. This is an issue which has been raised in film theory because of the necessarily fixed vantage point of the spectator, but in her essay "Casual Imagination," Barry considers the experience of shopping as related to the cinematic one, though even more highly manipulated. For in the department store, the shopper is both a voyeur and a discoverer, passing through a highly orchestrated environment designed to govern circulation and to heighten the shopper's consumptive urges. In a similar way, her videotape Casual Shopper (1983), foregrounds the manner in which social exchanges are embedded in the architecture of everyday life, through mirrors, signage, windows, displays.

Many of the same psychological exchanges and manipulative cues are structured into exhibition designs as well, so in her design for the present exhibition, Barry has attempted to delineate the more subtle psychological narratives which are imagined for museum spaces. Her strategy is "to problematize the role of the spectator, [creating] 'by means of design,' an active participation rather than a passive viewing." This rupture of the apparent transparency of the exhibition space has both theoretical and theatrical precedents (which Barry locates in the exhibition designs of El Lissitzky and Carl Akeley, master of the dioramas of the Museum of Natural History); in each case these works draw attention to the "effects" which are created and which structure the transaction between (art) object and (viewing) subject.

In a somewhat different way, Justen Ladda also describes the spectator's perfect positioning by the product, for all his works employ a rigid system of perspective. In his works, images (often derived from mass culture, such as The Thing or Durer's Praying Hands) are often projected onto other objects in such a way that the complete image is visible from only a single vantage point. In constructing The Thing, for instance, a fragmented image of a comic book character was painted on the seats of an auditorium in an abandoned school in South Bronx. Viewed from various angles, the painting on the seats made little sense, but once the single "proper" sightpoint was reached, the complex visual puzzle fit together to form a unified image which seemed to hover menacingly in the dark space.

Ladda's work is not about the illusionistic trickery of such
Barbara Bloom also examines the structuring of mood or ambience as a way of manipulating desire, particularly as this mood is structured around images of absence, longing, or threat. Working in a variety of forms and media (film, photography, installation, books, design), Bloom develops ways in which to simultaneously represent and reproduce the conventional form of commercial seduction. In her film, *Diamond Lane*, for example, the quintessential come-on—the film trailer—provides the form to suggest a narrative about potential success (“...in the almost empty Diamond Lane the traffic flows at great speeds...”). The film is a trailer for a nonexistent “original.” It offers a variety of oblique scenes which create only the fragment of a story and thereby constitutes an unfulfillable promise of completion. At the same time this five-minute trailer was released an extensive publicity campaign was carried out for *Diamond Lane*.

For Bloom it is important that these works function in total complicity with the context they seek to challenge. Thus, her works are generally public and often are indistinguishable “real” versions of those objects. As she says, “In all my work seeming and appearing as it play a large role. In making works within the chosen medium, I attempt to have the work look like normal products made within that form. I remain true to the ‘rules’ of the particular medium, thus producing a poster which looks ‘like’ a normal commercial poster, a film trailer which appears ‘like’ a normal trailer, a book cover ‘like’ a regular book cover. But this looking ‘like,’ this chameleonic means of achieving my purpose is, on the surface, a first impression. The images, often through irony, offer commentary upon the medium in which they are placed and cultural images (clichés) in general.”

This general strategy of operation within the medium being critiqued—common to all the artists in this exhibition—reflects not only an inability to function critically outside of the medium or system, but also the signal importance of penetrating, inhabiting, and degrading the functional core. By taking elements of inducement—posters, advertisements, film trailers, book jackets—as her medium, Bloom distinguishes those ostensibly marginal cultural by-products as the central forms which shape our consciousness and our social environment.

The works of Barry, Bloom, and Ladda, then, suggest certain ways in which the consumer is already controlled, not by the object, but by the social context in which the object is situated. As channels of desire, these architectural spaces with their props and images serve to map our fundamental striving for coherence and order, to fill in for absence and lack, and to encourage the satisfaction of libidinal proclivities through the consumption of material goods. But Andrea Fraser’s works look at another type of marginal social manipulation: the pedagogical supplement. She has fabricated, for example, books, posters, polls, art criticism, and, in this exhibition, docent tours, all in a self-conscious attempt both to identify how these fully accredited devices function as covert bearers of meaning, but also...
to challenge the institutionalized authority of the artist (as commodity) and the value-laden art object. Her book, *Woman 1/ Madonna and Child, 1506-1967*, for example, functions as both an artists’ book (relatively inexpensive and easily distributed) and a parody of a lavishly produced museum brochure. In fact, the texts—excerpted from actual museum catalogues on the work of Raphael and Willem de Kooning—demonstrate how an ostensibly “neutral” art history constructs a stereotypical and condescending view of both women (the subjects) and artists (the producers).

Despite its specific art world references, Fraser’s work should be taken as a study of the dissemination of “mass culture” as a product. For the formal systems which she examines are those which mediate between the specialists of high culture and the general public. In this exhibition, for instance, her work consists simply of a docent tour, conducted weekly, and calling attention to not only the artworks but also the institutional setting and the device of the tour itself. Guided tours of art exhibitions are increasingly routine, but despite the creation of a new mass audience for art, their form has not substantially changed. As Fraser says, “More often than not the docents employed by the museum are not themselves authorities on the work at hand. Rather they are conduits of conventional opinion briefed by the curatorial staff.”

In this way such public information merely reconstitutes and reinscribes a conventional wisdom, maintaining the autonomous structure of the art historical system with its linear progression of masters and masterpieces. Fraser disrupts this easy acceptance with a counternarrative which points explicitly to the non-art objects in the space, highlighting their essentially invisible role in the structure, production, and consumption of art and art information.

In this respect, nearly all of the artists in the exhibition seek to demonstrate the relationship between their art and exchange functions in the “real world.” This is most explicit in the works of Haim Steinbach and Jeff Koons, primarily because they utilize actual products—relatively unaltered—in their sculptures. But these works are not simply readymades, for they involve careful attention to the formal qualities, number, color, and subtle economic codings of the objects they present. Both Koons and Steinbach make clear that these objects of popular culture (rug shampooers, desk clocks, Halloween masks, basketballs, toilet brushes) are not simply random forms of kitsch, but are conceived by their manufacturers as strategically marketed products. Although not generally perceived as “design objects,” the products they use are extraordinary examples of a compromise between productivist values (clean, efficient design and mass distribution) and consummavtivist desires (variety, innovation, color difference, standardization of quality, and newness).

For Koons the principle abstraction which advertising constructs for the object is newness. Advertising presents newness as always-present, when in fact experience and use present newness as always-lost. An object that can retain its newness—which can be preserved, sealed, encased—can sustain desire. This is the utopia which advertising projects (as in Koons’s *New! New, too!* one in which the elusive “new” is blended with other forms of abstraction (color, surface sheen, scale) to suggest something which is desirable, yet unattainable. In his early works, such as *New Sheldon Wet/Dry Tripledecker*, Koons uses actual products—rug shampooers—which he adds on to by encasing them in plexiglas. This creates a double distancing, simultaneously protecting the object’s brand-newness from use and removing or entombing the object. By making the original object unattainable, Koons preserves the denial which lies at the heart of the consumer’s desire. Not wanting to violate the seal of newness and at the same time trapped by a craving to own, possess, and manipulate the object, the consumer is caught in an oscillating closed-circuit of attraction and frustration. In these encased works and in the later works—such as basketballs floating in fish tanks or cast bronze life preservers and life rafts—Koons accentuates the distancing or removal of the object by emphasizing the tactile quality of the objects. Changes of weight, material, surface, density, and gravity serve to remove or contradict the touching or handling generally associated with the urge to consume.

If Koons’s work is about the distancing and denial which is fundamental to strategies of consumption, Steinbach’s work is
far more about the all too pervasive availability and proximity of all objects. Steinbach dramatizes the overproduction of late which even toilet bowl brushes are designed as if destined for the Museum of Modern Art Gift Shop. Steinbach's works demonstrate Baudrillard's claim that the functionalism of the Bauhaus has now invaded all aspects of life. For, by their repetition, use-less design, and proud mounting on minimalist shelves of formica, these objects testify to the functionalist urge toward rationality. Positioned soberly enough, these objects nevertheless scarcely conceal an impish humor. For they are not the cool, efficient objects of the Bauhaus, but are more rational objects which flagrantly deny any function. Thus the objects which Steinbach selects are, taken together, not simply "cute commodities," but are objects which reveal fissures or slips in the system, objects which are odd or awkward or over-produced, and objects which when isolated and repeated become both humorous and nightmarish.

Steinbach is concerned to suggest the rampant ubiquity of certain products, a hyperproduction which is nevertheless made snows now the familiar is made unreal, Allan McCollum stresses the familiarity of the unreal. McCollum makes devices which he calls "surrogates" or "vehicles." These are generally plaster casts of a specific, generic cultural form, such as a picture frame or a vase. These devices are not attempts to be pictures or vases, but are decoys, designed to elicit the desires for possession, meaning, and appreciation which accrue to culturally sanctioned objects. McCollum's work suggests that it is the sign of the object or artwork to which the viewer reacts to. Lum hopes to construct a (pseudo)scientific method for gauging attraction and desire.

The vase-like "vehicles"—even more than the surrogates—suggest the multiple readings of these essentially abstract forms. The vehicles take the general form of a Chinese vase (perhaps?), but they also suggest figures, military formations, candy jars. Each suggestion has a latent attraction which is emphasized by the brilliant, enameled, candy-colored surface. Individually, collectively they assume quite different levels of meaning. Installed—as in this exhibition—with one hundred copies varying only in color, these works provide a wry (or frightening) introduction of the serial mode of production into the genital cottage industry of artmaking. But, more than this, the vehicles stress certain immutable abstractions in the structure of desire: repetition, difference, and vast accumulation.

Ken Lum employs the repetitiveness of mass production in order to differentiate from his other work. In a field of type of seriality run amuck suggests a system which has become dysfunctional—though with a complete appearance of rationality. This same type of tension between convention and de-studio portraits of friends or acquaintances are linked with abstract logos which certify or commodify their names. Through the modular conformity and inward-facing of the furniture and the proximation of portraits and logos, Lum suggests the ways in which the serialization, standardization, and parcellization of objects not only serve as inducements to behavior, but also as representations of behavior.

This mobile positioning of parts, this relative interchangeability, this accessibility, is perhaps what entrepreneur Gretchen Bender. Working in various media, Bender has attempted to confront what she calls "the perversion of the visual." This is represented in her video Dumping Core, for instance, as a constant reiteration of special effects and computer graphics—all derived from television commercials and trailers. The perversion of the visual is the way in which international image industries—movie studios, advertising agencies, television stations, the media—are capable of assigning an back and forth of abstract graphics or the equalized representation of appropriated images on a single surface are similar gestures aimed at "describing the potential technological reduction of all images to a single digital code."

Against this technological reduction, Bender offers an ironic series of works entitled Total Recall. Consisting of sheets of rolled steel, approximately three feet square, these works feature a strip of film running through the center. On these illusionist film strips, features the titles of famous films.
the extent to which all critical activity—all "revolution"—today must be read in quotation marks. In a world dominated by international flows of information and reproduction, in which images are turned into object and objects into images, in which commercialism and economic exploitation are rampant, the very concept of resistance is rendered suspect.

Not surprisingly, many of the artists in the exhibition have investigated the psychological nature of consumption and display in reference to art collectors, both private and corporate. Many of Louise Lawler's works, for example, represent the ways in which artworks are presented in corporate collections, particularly as they are displayed and protected as assets (with appropriate plaques, labels, and guards). Similarly, her photographs of works in collector's homes suggest that the owner will often install the work of art with an eye toward recreating the desire which first motivated the purchase. Lawler's works both participate in and comment on this seemingly invisible issue of installation of works in museums, galleries, corporate headquarters, and private homes. At the same time her photographs always refer outward to the broader economic and social conditions which structure these environments. For instance, in an installation entitled Interesting (1984), at Gallery Nature Morte, Lawler suggested ways in which the architecture and signage of the gallery—in relation to the artworks—could carry specific ideological meanings and cues. In the gallery space, she had the word “Interesting” painted on the main wall as a type of logo. To the right, photographs of Japanese toys were installed, and to the left was a long, lacquered shelf like one might find in a bank machine vestibule. This simultaneous emphasis of the gallery space as a waiting or holding area and as a site of economic exchange was extended by the wall text which told the fable of a dog with a bone who, seeing his reflection in the water, tried to grab the other dog’s bone and lost.

What photographs might suggest by their siting and image/text relations is further indicated by Lawler's work in this exhibition, an installation entitled Two Editions. This work again alludes to both the specific habits of the consumer or collector and to a larger economic issue. Playing on the pun, two additions, the work contrasts the sumptuous with the mundane, the color photograph with the black and white, the funding for military procurement with the funding for health care services. The work signals an attempt not only to intervene in a system of economic disequilibrium, but moreover, an attempt to pinpoint the motivations behind such disparities, which exist among both governments and collectors.

As Louise Lawler's photographs suggest, the art object—that specialized form of consumer object—occupies an increasingly significant role in the environment of corporate power. Drawing together the already converging vectors of image reproduction, information transfer, and the circulation of simulated representations, art has in many ways come to represent corporate business. Employed in promotional literature, exhibition sponsorship, and interior design of corporate headquarters, contemporary art (in particular) has come to signify for the corporation—many of the images it seeks to present: humanist ideals, good taste, quality, and enduring value. For the global corporation, contemporary art has become advertising.

This utilization of the superficial and abstract meanings of art parallels in many ways the abstraction of commodities central to contemporary advertising. This conceptualization, spectacularization, and emptying-out of both art and the consumer object in the global market go hand in hand; each supports and reflects the other. And it is this adjacency of art and object in the service of promotion and advertising which may explain, in part, the growing interest in contemporary art of many advertising executives. Indeed, most recently Charles Saatchi, of Saatchi & Saatchi, a powerful collector of contemporary art, and Philip H. Geier, chairman of the Interpublic Group of Companies, a holding company of advertising agencies, have begun to acquire works by several of the artists in this exhibition.13

Thus, just as the bourgeois society of the modernist era seemed capable of assimilating the most outrageous or radical developments of modern art, so now the global advertising and business community seem able to acquire and potentially seal off works which seek to critique or at least draw attention to the economic and social systems they encourage. It is a thorny issue, and one which is critical to the role of artists today, for it signals not only an artistic problem, but a more general theoretical and strategic question of how one might structure opposition to totalizing structures and controls.

The artists in this exhibition seek to operate at the core of the economic system, to signal its weakness through sly
complicity. These works may legitimately be called “damaged goods” for, while on the surface they appear to valorize the brilliance and perfection of new consumer objects, they harbor an ambivalence, one which inserts doubt, introduces humor and absurd overproduction, dramatizes display, and provokes questions. Moreover, in refusing to adopt conventional artistic modes or traditional materials, by utilizing the marginal and supplemental devices of institutions, by overemphasizing and eroticizing the formal qualities and presentations of their work, these artists question the conventionalized assumptions of the systems they inhabit. In so doing they suggest new strategies for the social consideration of the production, promotion, and exchange of all manner of objects.

NOTES


5. Mandel, Late Capitalism, p. 387.


11. Andrea Fraser, unpublished statement.
