**THE
PARAFICTION AS
COUNTERPOINT
TO THE
GIMMICK**

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In her article "The Theory of the Gimmick," Sianne Ngai makes the argument that the gimmick is found in every object bought and sold in a capitalist economy and, therefore, the aesthetic of the gimmick is a phenomenon specific to that of capitalism.¹ Ngai investigates why the gimmick elicits a feeling of ambivalence—one's response to it is both annoyance and attraction, disgust and fascination. The reaction is always negative, yet somehow it retains an allure.² In an attempt to understand this contradiction, Ngai proposes it may be due to the way in which the gimmick transforms idea into thing.³ In this paper, I will look at the aesthetic of the gimmick as it relates to practices in visual art. First, I will suggest that the transformation of idea into thing, exemplified by Duchamp's readymade, has resulted in an aesthetic condition wherein there is a collapse of the boundary between "art" and "non-art"—fiction and reality. Second, I will argue that parafiction, an art practice that performs a deceptive act through use of aesthetic mimicry, does not necessarily re-establish this boundary between the real and the fictive, but promotes a necessary awareness of this collapse.⁴

The Readymade

Marcel Duchamp's readymade was the first widely acknowledged work of conceptual art. Working during the early part of the 20th century, Duchamp caused a massive disruption in the art world when he proclaimed an ordinary, found object to be an artwork by placing it in a gallery. One of his earliest readymades was a mass-produced, manufactured bottle rack that was purchased at a Paris department store in 1914. The bottle rack was chosen for its absence of visual signifiers—an everyday item devoid of any connection to aesthetic meaning. In short, what Duchamp accomplished was to challenge the established definition of art by shifting the "techne"⁵ of art practice from material to intellectual labor—to a conceptual praxis. To use Rosalind Krauss's words, "conceptual art supposedly performs the lifting of the work of art into a pure philosophical realm by means of the ontological question posed by the readymade."⁶ The merging of idea and object established a situation in which art and art theory were fused into one enterprise. This transition in visual art from aesthetic-based exercises into cognition-based exercises is one way of understanding the origins of the capitalist fetishization of the idea.

The fetishization of the idea in capitalism is one of the reasons for the pervasiveness of the aesthetic of the gimmick. The gimmick, as Ngai discovers, is one bright idea, one stroke of genius, a lightening-bolt conception that is then transformed into material form. It is the embodiment of idea-cum-thing, which Ngai argues is universally appealing: "Is not the realization of supposedly abstract ideas in supposedly concrete things regarded as desirable by pretty much everyone, skeptics and proponents of capitalism alike?"⁷ The gimmick is alluring because it is extremely satisfying to experience an idea as an object in such a succinct way. The readymade operates in precisely the same way. As such, Duchamp proposed "one bright idea": art must be redefined outside the confines of formalism; then he represented that idea with a found object. The readymade is therefore simultaneously the procedure of redefining the parameters of art practice (the act of pulling an object from the realm of "real-life" or "non-art" into an "art" domain), and the effect of that procedure (a found object is now considered to be an artwork). The gimmick also shares this quality: "...the term gimmick describes both the effect and the procedure used to generate it, conflating two ostensibly discrete moments in the same way it conflates idea and thing."⁸ The technique of the readymade is a conceptual provocation, but the conceptual provocation is also the artwork itself. The readymade was a technique used to challenge the prior understanding of how art functions and, in so doing, it succeeded in fundamentally changing that understanding. In this way, the readymade can be viewed as a sleight of hand, a masterfully implemented device, a gimmick; in one swift movement, one Duchamp managed to operate by the new rules of the game while he was rewriting them.

To name the readymade a gimmick is not to dismiss or undermine its significance in the history of art, but rather to understand it as a device—a technique. The readymade is reminiscent of the gimmick because its aesthetic payoff happens in an instant, yet instantly vanishes.⁹ The efficacy of the gimmick is exhausted after its first use and it therefore must be "thrown away once the trick has been performed."¹⁰

Paradoxically, however, the gimmick is reused over and over again in perpetuity. In order to make sense of this, Ngai alters her definition: "[Gimmicks] are in this sense less like 'one-time unrepeatable formal events' than equipment whose essence is to endure across multiple operations."¹¹ This "equipment," as she names it, reimagined in different contexts, time periods, and scenarios is at the core of our irritation with the gimmick. It becomes overfamiliar and cheap—something that is inauthentic and undignified. After this "equipment" has been reused enough times, it becomes easier and easier to "see through" the operation and identify the fatigued device underneath. The gimmick irritates because it gives us the feeling we're being tricked, manipulated, or played for a fool through the use of a worn-out technique.

The device or "equipment" of the readymade was to redefine art as a conceptual practice. According to Joseph Kosuth, one of the prominent figures of the conceptual art movement of the '60s, this has been the default mode of art praxis ever since: "all art created after the readymade is conceptual art."¹² Kosuth was of the strict mindset that art must be self-reflexive, that it must abandon traditional practices of craftsmanship to embrace instead an intellectual craft. Before the readymade, visual art was largely considered to be formalist; it was broadly conceived of in terms of exercises in aesthetics rather than concepts. Kosuth argues art had only one "language"—one concerned solely with manipulations in morphology.¹³ Practicing artists could move along a horizontal plane that dealt only with issues in aesthetics, yet could stretch the subject matter of their works in all directions. But ultimately, to be deemed art, its "language" (ie. painting, sculpture, printmaking) remained formalist. After the readymade, Kosuth says, art practice became an endeavor that must make a "proposition," it must challenge or add something new to the "art condition."¹⁴ In order to be considered art, a work must contribute to the continued exploration of how art is defined and, in so doing, expand upon the "languages" art has the ability to speak.

In his text, Kosuth makes reference to Kant's distinction between the analytic and the synthetic in order to illustrate this turning point in art practices. Kant makes a differentiation between two forms of metaphysical thought: the first, analytic, is a thought that is explicative of what one already knows about the world—a form of thinking that establishes a definition by further dividing it into evermore specific categories; and the second, synthetic, is a thought that is determined by one's empirical experience of the worldly, a conclusion derived from sensorial knowledge. Kosuth says once art is freed from the bounds of formalism, it can deal only in analytical propositions.¹⁵ In his view, analytical art practice works within a tautological-like framework in the confines of "art." Therefore, once the readymade redefined art, it seemed tautological maneuvering was seemingly the next path to take. All subsequent works in some way must expand on Duchamp's redefinition of art as concept—the device or the "equipment" of the readymade. The more that device was used, the more recognizable as a gimmick it became.

The reuse of the readymade's "equipment" indeed resulted in a century of tautologies. The moment Duchamp walked into the gallery with a found object and called it "art," a comprehensive repetition of that technique was put into motion. The readymade was a simultaneous arrival at its conceptual endpoint and the beginning of a never-ending exploration of its reiteration. In other words, Duchamp created a situation in the art world that was instantly limited and limitless. Limited because a theoretical endpoint is understood at its conception—the readymade implies that everything previously ascribed to the "non-art" realm now has the potential to be redefined as "art." Limitless because the analytical exercises are infinite. Artists could now make tangible all those potentialities, which is exactly how the twentieth century played out. For this reason, many artworks following Duchamp's readymade were not only influenced or inspired by it, but labeled by theorists as "readymades" themselves. Conceptual art is tautological because it "goes through the motions" to confirm Duchamp's premise "everything that is "non-art" can be called "art" if the artist deems it to be."¹⁶ As Hal Foster puts it, "the neo-avant-garde enacts its project for the first time—a first time that, again, is theoretically endless."¹⁷

The "equipment" of the readymade can be categorized as going through three successive stages of expansion by means of tautology: the first material, the second contextual, and the third temporal. The first, the materialization of an idea—the basis for conceptual art—was brought forth by the readymade,

as outlined above. The second was a contextual turn in which concept was appropriated by space. Two works created in the latter half of the twentieth century, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and Christo's *Wrapped Reichstag* (1994), exemplify this pivot into considerations of contextuality. The readymade proposed that a "non-art" object can exist within the established bounds of the art institution (i.e. a gallery space) if the artist labels it as "art"—or if the artist completes the simple action of "reframing" it by pulling it into an "art" space. Land artists challenged the context of the frame by expanding its bounds. For example, the *Spiral Jetty* confronted the problem of "art" being restricted to exist only in an "art" space by declaring a lake to be a valid context in which an artwork can exist. Similarly, Christo suggested that a city can act as a gallery, and a government building can be named "art." Not only are these variations of the readymade (by one simple gesture—placing a "wrapping" over the Reichstag—Christo transformed a building into an idea) but they effectively transformed context into idea. The preexisting way of framing or indicating "art" was slowly eradicated by redefining the context of where art can exist. The "equipment" of the readymade evolved from idea as object, to include context as a conceptual additive. Any context now had the possibility to be transformed into an "art" space with a simple gesture by the artist. As a consequence, a second wall is knocked down on the divide between "art" and "non-art" through an expansion into the spatial. The reliance on a concept is the basis of their function and therefore these works still register as gimmicky.

The final collapse of the dividing line between "art" and "non-art" is one that attends to the temporal. Ngai likens the gimmick to a "pure present without a past or future."¹⁸ Cory Arcangel's *Photoshop Gradient Demonstrations* (2007–), a series of large-scale field paintings created using the gradient tool in Photoshop, demonstrate this presentness. This series reimagines the readymade in the context of new technologies—in this case, Photoshop. In making these works, Arcangel was interested "in the series' inevitable obsolescence; as he points out, there presumably will be nothing impressive about the prints' production quality ten or twenty years from now."¹⁹ In an attempt to situate his work at a certain time in history, Arcangel managed to add a temporal dimension to his version of Duchamp's technique. By emphasizing a technological placement and its firm association with time, the artist is now able to label a specific timecode as "idea." Furthermore, the title of each painting provides the exact x- and y- coordinates of the mouse in the gradient tool used in its conception, giving anyone the opportunity to recreate the works at any time. Reminiscent of Sol LeWitt's instruction-based *Wall Drawings* of the '60s, the supplied formula gives prominence to the moment the "paintings" are printed, while diminishing the relevance of its materiality.

Performance-based artworks like Allan Kaprow's "happenings" of the '50s/'60s made similar gestures and anticipated what Fredric Jameson names paradigmatic of postmodern art practice: the installation.

...they are not objects, because they are in fact events. The installation and its kindred productions are made, not for posterity, nor even for the permanent collection, but rather for the now and for a temporality that may be rather different from the old modernist kind. This is indeed why it has become appropriate to speak of it not as a work or a style, nor even as the expression of something deeper, but rather as a strategy (or a recipe)—a strategy for producing an event, a recipe for events.²⁰

The installation, with its multiplicity of signifiers (including objects, spaces, and time), attempts to evade the tautological practices that preceded it—but the readymade's "equipment" remains in operation as all its elements together are experienced as one idea: "...therefore we consume, not the work, but the idea of the work."²¹ The installation expands on Duchamp's redefinition of art by transforming an event into an idea. Time as a concept is divided still from a point in history (a general era or marker) to an instant that is comprised of an exact compilation of objects, in a specific space, at a specific time.

If the readymade redefined the parameters of what art can be in a universal sense, then the analytical practices in tautology throughout the twentieth century (moving from material to contextual to temporal) have culminated in the nominalist formulation of the installation—a circumstance that Jameson wonders can still be defined by the general term art.²² It is here that the division between "art" and "non-art" is finally threatened by total collapse. Arriving at a condition that the readymade suggested in the abstract, all possible aspects of both "art" and "non-art" (object, space, time) now have the potential to be transformed into idea—the ideal grounds for the aesthetic of the gimmick. To put it differently, all corners of reality now have the capacity to appear gimmicky if read in a certain conceptual light. Conceptual art has buried formalism and sensory aesthetics so masterfully that a conceptual reading of our surroundings now might be the most dominant mode of perception. "Idea" has been liberated from the polarity of fact and fiction—perhaps no longer belonging to either camp.

The Parafiction

In 2003, Eva and Franco Mattes set up a two-story info booth in Vienna's central town square and public park with text on one of its glass windows that read "Nikeplatz (formerly Karlsplatz)." On the park side of the booth, graphics indicated a new international campaign to convert city parks, streets, and plazas all over Europe into sponsored spaces owned by Nike. Inside the booth, there were informational brochures and a URL one could visit to learn more about the initiative. Not only was the corporation renaming the plaza, citizens were informed of a forthcoming giant monument in the shape of Nike's signature "swoosh" logo that was to be erected on the grass to mark the company's ownership of the park. Not too long after the booth appeared on site, reporters pursued Nike Vienna for comments, quickly discovering it was a prank. Nike, of course, caught wind of the project and threatened to sue the artists—but in the end, didn't end up pressing charges. Slowly it was revealed to the public that it was not a corporate kiosk but an artwork created by the Mattes'.²³

In recent decades, there has been a surge in similar experiments in visual art practice. These works have the appearance of being "real" but are then revealed by the artist or creator to be a farce. According to Carrie Lambert-Beatty, this type of art form falls under the category of what she calls the parafiction.²⁴ The parafictional is not a fiction but a lie that allows for the possibility of coming clean, of declaring its deceptive nature. It is first a fact, then a farce; intending to act as an intervention that forces the viewer to re-evaluate their interpretation of reality. Of the same ilk as performers like Stephen Colbert and Sasha Baron Cohen, it attempts to imitate a current circumstance so as to illuminate its absurdities. Lambert-Beatty writes, "post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust."²⁵ As argued above, the ubiquity of the gimmick can be considered a result of the slow breaking down of the divide between "non-art" and "art" in the art world. Over time, this omnipresence has generated an attitude that is poised to "look through" aesthetic experiences from a position of "knowing"—whether consciously or unconsciously. An overexposure to gimmicky antics has caused a predisposition that assumes every aesthetic experience is a trick, a device, a subtle farce. This circumstance has led us to trust all aesthetic experiences to be manipulative. Feeling tricked is so commonplace even "facts" about these encounters lose their truth-value: "Gimmicks are also fundamentally cheap, even when they look or really are expensive."²⁶ This indicates a shift in our perceptual ability to discern truth from falsity. The parafiction challenges us to reconsider the orientation of our trust.

In a move to interject, the parafiction draws attention to the device behind the aesthetic by creating a kind of detournement or enacting a type of culture jamming.²⁷ Interestingly, both the gimmick and the parafictional are tricks—one subtle, the other overt—yet the emotional response they bring forth differs in flavor. The parafiction, when implemented properly, elicits feelings of confusion, discomfort,

and embarrassment. When deceived in this way, the emotional blow in relation to one's epistemological grounding "snaps one out" of a constant hum of outward criticism ("I know when I'm being tricked") and replaces it with a sudden inward criticism ("Wait, do I know when I'm being tricked?"). It produces an awkward feeling because our assumptions are misplaced. The parafiction pressures us to question the prevailing technique or "techne" we entrust to discern between fact and fiction—and what role aesthetics play in confusing this technique. Another artist working with the parafictional, Walid Raad, said "facts have to be treated as processes."²⁸ The aesthetic of the gimmick prevents such a process because an "idea" in the form of an aesthetic cannot be categorized as fact or fiction, as truth or falsity. The parafiction, however, asks us to develop a skill, or a process, for piecing apart the aesthetic from the conceptual so we can recognize when we are being manipulated. Strangely, the parafiction advocates for a return to an aesthetic condition before Duchamp—one in which there's a reinstallation of a border between aesthetics and "real-life."²⁹

In the aesthetic condition that has emerged from a century of analytic, self-reflexive art practice, the parafiction offers a disruption that may not reinstate a boundary between "the real" and the "fictional" (synthetic, aesthetic-based), but it does promote an awareness of the how we relate to this new condition. In Lambert-Beatty's words, "artists in the last century have ceaselessly demonstrated the co-extensiveness of art and the real, sloughing off, again and again, the eighteenth-century distinction between utility and the aesthetic."³⁰ The parafictional reasserts this distinction by calling attention to the gimmick's utility of the aesthetic. The parafiction is most effective when it correctly identifies an aesthetic and seamlessly replicates it: "the crucial skill for parafiction is stylistic mimicry," says Lambert-Beatty. By mimicking the aesthetic, the Mattes' have, in theory, divorced "idea" from the gimmicky aesthetic cues used to veil it. Nike has implemented the utility of the gimmick to further establish the "idea" of the company as it exists in our minds—but when the artists revealed that it was not "real" but that it was "fictional" (i.e. an artwork), the audience was forced to consider how the aesthetic consistency of our world can result in a blindness.

Speaking to the success of the Yes Men, another artist duo who have staged parafictional performances, Lambert-Beatty notes, "they discovered an ability to intervene in what Jacques Ranciere calls the distribution of the sensible: the system of inclusions and exclusions that determine what can be sensed."³¹ When Nike Ground was stationed in the park, those who stopped to inquire about the booth were often indifferent to the corporate take-over. Naturally, some may argue this is due to a lethargy resulting from a lack of agency (ie. political pessimism), but perhaps this passivity is due to the fact that we are simply incapable of parsing through a new aestheticism. If indeed the gimmick and the idea are synonymous, not only are we exhausted by the availability and volume of "ideas" coming from the information surge that defines our time, but also by a basic inability to separate our sensory experiences from the "idea." Paul Virilio concurs, "control operates now not through the censure of true facts, but through the 'over-information' surrounding them."³² The "over-information" he speaks to may prove to include aesthetic of the gimmick—the "idea" at the center of a selling point—that clouds an objective discerning of how that control is operating.

At stated, Nike, just like any other brand, has a central "idea" that encompasses and propels their aesthetic. With Nike Ground, the Mattes' warn of the expansion of corporate ownership, the "idea" of Nike, sold to us through the use of gimmicks, will eventually permeate the objects we buy (shoes, apparel), the spaces we inhabit, and the way we spend our time in a more absolute way. The marriage of idea and object—idea and commodity—are becoming more interwoven the more sophisticated the aesthetic tricks of corporations become. (Think of a music festival like Coachella as an idea, translated into a gimmick, embodied as an event, and sponsored by corporations.) Nike Ground delivers an ominous forecast of how idea can be manipulated by those who claim ownership to the dominant aesthetics of our

reality. Aesthetics that, as Ngai has concluded, are attractive and alluring to us despite the fact that we know we're being tricked.

In frieze, Mark Nash writes, "there is no longer any mileage to be gained from the opposition between fiction and reality. Decades of post-Structural philosophizing (ie. Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum) have inured us to the argument that it no longer makes sense to try and distinguish between reality and its representation."³³ However, a case might be made to attempt this conceptual heavy lifting anyway: if we do not try to, in the least, understand what our processes are for distinguishing fact from fiction, we might find ourselves in a situation where corporate ownership of ideas is a standard. Marketing campaigns succeed not because the brand image is repeated but because the idea attached to the commodity they're selling is most succinct as a gimmick—as an aesthetic.

Endnotes

- 1 Sianne Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 466–505.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 478.
- 4 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (Summer 2009): 51–84.
- 5 "Techne" here refers to the Heideggerian understanding of the term in which technique expands into the process of thinking—thinking as a craft, thinking as a processual technical skill.
- 6 Benjamin Buchloh, Rosaline Krauss, Alexander Alberro, Thierry de Duve, Martha Buskirk and Yve-Alain Bois, "Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp," *October* 70 (Autumn 1994): 126.
- 7 Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 478.
- 8 Ibid., 485.
- 9 Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy," in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1994), 96 as quoted in Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," 483.
- 10 Here Ngai pulls from Fredric Jameson's contemporary readings of aesthetics which deal with the notion of "singularity." Fredric Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review* 92 (Mar.–apr. 2015): 113 as quoted in Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," 485.
- 11 Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," 485, which references Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," 113.
- 12 Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," *Studio International* 178, no. 915 (October 1969): 134–37, accessed on UbuWeb, http://www.ubu.com/papers/kosuth_philosophy.html.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid. Kosuth describes the "art condition" as a conceptual state: "That the language forms that the artist frames his propositions in are often 'private' codes or languages is an inevitable outcome of art's freedom from morphological constrictions; and it follows from this that one has to be familiar with contemporary art to appreciate it and understand it."
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Including all praxis that was conceptual in nature, not only "Conceptual art" as a movement.
- 17 Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant Garde?" *October* 70 (Autumn 1994): 20.
- 18 Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," 113 as quoted in Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," 485.
- 19 Christiane Paul, "Cory Arcangel: Pro Tools," exhibition brochure, The Whitney Museum of American Art, May 26–September 11, 2011, p. 22, accessed on https://api.whitney.org/uploads/generic_file/file/104/arcangel_brochure.pdf
- 20 Fredric Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," 111.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 114.
- 23 Domenico Quaranta, Eva Mattes, and Franco Mattes, *Eva and Franco Mattes: 0100101110101101.org* (New York City: Charta, 2009).
- 24 Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (Summer 2009): 51–84.
- 25 Ibid., 54.
- 26 Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," 494.

27 Lambert-Beatty, *Make-Believe*, 58.

28 Ibid., 84.

29 During a conference last fall, Joshua Citarella, Aria Dean, Dean Kissick, and Nora Khan discussed how the role of the artist is now to reinstate sanity in an environment of aesthetic chaos. Artists used to be the renegades stretching boundaries of aesthetic definitions, but they are now in the position of attempting to draw lines in the sand.

30 Ibid., 80.

31 Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), as referenced by *ibid.*, 64.

32 Ibid., 78.

33 Mark Nash, "Reality in the Age of Aesthetics," *frieze*, April 1, 2008, <https://frieze.com/article/reality-age-aesthetics>