How U Survive This Life Everyday, Resourcefully aka A Subjective Guide to Waste Management aka The Volatility of Objects Extended and Unedited

By Anna Reutinger

Preface

Within the definition of "novelty" exists a paradox. On the one hand, to be "novel" is to be new and innovative, somehow breaking a boundary or forging a new path—on the other, it has the connotation of cheaply made and easily consumed goods, often with no practical function beyond producing a laugh. While released from the constraints of function, these items are often conceived by accident, and produced outside of a rigidly predefined economic category, by people who possess some sort of entrepreneurial spirit, and often, limited means. They are sold as souvenirs and jokes, and so in one way or another are closely tied with a certain place or culture (or stereotype thereof). Although they may not be redefining our lifestyles, novelty items are markers of a cultural moment, and often bridge traditional craft and industrial process with material

gathered on-hand. It is this fabrication of "newness" alongside a study of using waste material to "close the loop" in a given context that I wish to explore.

I wrote the former paragraph when I first arrived, thinking it would succinctly define my area of interest for this research. What I soon realized, was that I was researching instances in which people in extreme poverty sought to get out of their situation, or make it a bit easier, by making something they could sell out of material they had access to (and often through an exploitation of their own culture). And here I am, sitting in a temperature controlled library of artist books with a 10.000 euro grant on my shoulders. Who am I to write their stories? Or to attempt to understand their genius? This is where the direction shifted to a more introspective look at waste and the constructs of value within the context of this residency and my own practice.

Upon my arrival, the majority of residents had been at the Van Eyck for 6 months already, and at that point were growing tired of the monotony of its bubble. The interiors are white washed, with high ceilings and pastel colored accents. From the text above doors to the toilet paper, every element feels carefully considered, and is always in its place. Elise, who works in the café, says that she was told to use complimentary colored plates under each coffee cup. Eighty percent of the studios contain only a desk and a bookshelf, and the workshops are as spotless as the library. I begin to think about ideal working conditions, and remember my studio back home—congested with tools and materials harvested mainly from the trash room. The last residency I had was in a squatted palazzo in Milan, where I found the majority of materials for my work in the asbestos-frosted basement. Here at the Van Eyck, you are given

a blank slate, an empty shell, a fresh start that may be difficult to plunge into. I feel that it is important with any form of production to create the conditions in which a sense of agency, empowerment, and purpose can be expressed. For me this means to establish at least seemingly autonomous domains, both in terms of physical space and social identity, which can change depending on the range of actions I may need to perform.

Having a studio space to work in was "not part of the agreement" of my stay at the Van Eyck, which I came to realize was an anomaly. Initially, I was totally fine with this, but came to understand that within the academie, a studio was not only a space to work, but actually the only area where you could exert some level of autonomy. It was your "home turf" from which to defend your position and invite others to discuss your work—acting as

a physical mind map. I soon received questions like, "if you have no studio then what are you doing here?" I chose to work with the fact that I was this "novelty" with an ambiguous status, by establishing a VOLATILE existence within the institution, taking on the role of the bag-lady / squatter / shit-stirrer. I assembled a "studio" using waste metal and wood from the Heimo labs, and pieces from the neighboring secondhand shop. Visually, I wanted to provide a contrast to the pristine architecture of the Van Eyck, as if to break the illusion, or establish a rupture, which could allow for new conversations and actions to be had. I wheeled around performing my daily practice in the "unuseable" spaces like stairwells and corridors, but also made visits to the studios of participants, spending half a day working with them, discussing their practice and testing some of my ideas. Part of this discussion involved elements of a theory I have been developing, which

acts as both my working method and a conceptual framework for much of my work. This is the theory of the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS—an approach to materiality within the INTERNET CONDITION.[1]

This text includes personal anecdotes, formal-ish research, and paraphrased conversations, and should be approached as if it were a Wikipedia article that contains many interesting but not always entirely relevant links to other articles.

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1 The *internet condition* is the deep daily integration of internet usage which has occurred since the proliferation of smart phones and related devices over the last ten years, and the social, psychological, emotional and ontological condition created by this integration.

The Volatility of Objects

What is VOLATILE **is unstable, unpredictable, and likely to change, becoming, all of a sudden, something completely different than its original state.**

I will use the word "VOLATILE" **for many reasons. Firstly, it is not a passive word, but one which carries considerable weight and a number of connotations across multiple fields. Scientifically, it is used to describe substances that have the capacity to change dramatically and unexpectedly, changing states, evaporating at normal temperatures, or erupting on a whim. In computer science,** 'VOLATILE **memory'** **refers to computer memory in which data is lost when power is removed (imagine your computer being wiped clean each time you turn it off).** VOLATILE **memory is actually faster than non-** VOLATILE **memory, and is therefore used in most RAM. In economics,**

VOLATILITY is the amount of variance that can occur in market prices, so it is seen as a range where possible change can occur. The word VOLATILITY is also used to describe a market, political situation, or region that is considered unstable, and is often used in news stories surrounding conflict and economic crash. As you may have noticed, these connotations are generally negative. It is important to note that the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS does not derive from a positive situation, but it has positive potential in the space and mindset it creates. Across the board, VOLATILITY can be seen as a natural occurrence, and not one with an isolated cause. Whenever a substance/situation is considered VOLATILE, there are many factors that have influenced it. Understanding the interconnection between these factors is the most valuable knowledge one can have.

The VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS is a theory of our changing relationship to the

notion of material within the INTERNET CONDITION. The VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS allows for a hands-on approach to escaping constraints by using the inherent VOLATILITY of resources available. To be clear, when I speak of material, I speak of physical, tactile matter in our environment.

1. The VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS is a byproduct of advanced capitalism and a general shift toward DEMATERIALIZATION.

To start with a few definitions, advanced capitalism is a term developed by the Frankfurt school of political philosophy, which refers to a situation in which capitalism has been deeply ingrained in a society for an extended period of time.[2] When I speak of DEMATERIALIZATION, I refer to the use of less material resources and the reduced need for the consumption of material commodities

2 Douglas Kellner, "The Frankfurt School Revisited: A Critique of Martin Jay's 'The Dialectical Imagination,'" New German Critique, no. 4 (1973).

as economies shift toward experience and attention-based systems. In the 1930's, Buckminster Fuller developed the philosophy of EPHEMERALIZATION— the guiding principle of which was to do, "more and more with less and less until eventually you can do everything with nothing."[3] He believed that technology would eventually allow for this shift to occur. In 1999, Al Gore noted a movement toward dematerialization at the annual convention for the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences: "Throughout our economy— skills, intelligence, and creativity are replacing mass and money—which is why, in the past 50 years, the value of our economy has tripled, while the physical weight of our economy as a whole has barely increased at all."[4]

The birthplace of the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS is the crux in the shift from

3 Buckminster R. Fuller, *Nine Chains to the Moon*, (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1938), 252-259.

4 Ronald Bailey, "The Law of Increasing Returns," In *Readings in Applied Microeconomics: The Power of the Market*, ed. Craig Newmark (New York: Routledge, 2009), 119.

a goods to an experience economy. Mass production has always aimed to produce more, for lower costs and higher markup. Presently, we expect the constant renewal of everything we own, with the average lifespan of a material object being 2-3 years or less. One could attribute this rapid consumption cycle to trends and marketing, or perhaps a globalized economy with more accessibility to an ever-increasing range of products produced through an exploitation of cheap labor and resources. But one thing is certain, our devotion to objects in their materiality is temporary. The reality of over production/consumption is not likely to reverse itself, but instead, a shift in mindset toward consumer empowerment and the emergence of a PROSUMER mentality can alter the way we approach material altogether.

Charles works at Twiedehands Twiedekans in the North of Maastricht,

a three story secondhand shop with anything from clothing to souvenirs from unknown vacations. He said he could fill a space twice as large in one week if he said yes to every phone call he gets from people looking for a place to take their old stuff. He says that students nowadays are the worst, consuming new IKEA furniture they will trash in a year, rather than getting something secondhand. He recalls an episode of "Everybody Loves Raymond", where Marie finally removes the plastic cover on their "good couch" and everyone is afraid to sit on it. People are obsessed with keeping things looking "new". When he was a student, he was happy with an old bed from his grandmother and a closet from the housekeeper, "that would fall apart if I sneezed." Charles also remembered a site called Clubvan100.nl where people could post their skills and their needs, and were matched accordingly, creating a sort of barter system. He wonders what happened to it.

After my conversation with Charles, I put together this list of tactics to avoid the consumption of new things:

* Rearrange your possessions at home, see them in a new light
* Imagine yourself in the midst of a catastrophe, where stores have been destroyed or looted, but you need not worry
* Do a trade with a friend
* Buy a plant, water it instead of buying another
* Recognize the fact that discounts, coupons, or sales trigger a survivalist instinct that you can easily suppress
* When buying a gift for someone, choose something that can be eaten, imposing material on others is even worse than imposing it on yourself
* Put a rubber band on your wrist, flick yourself every time you wander close to the register
* Ask yourself, "when will I use this?" if the answer is once a month or less frequently, then run in the opposite direction

* **Fix/improve things you already own, or just change their color**
* **Take a selfie with the thing you wanted to purchase, post it somewhere, feel fulfilled**

We have always used objects beyond their immediate functionality, as a tool for establishing our place in the world and relating to others. In child psychology, the "transitional object", as coined by Donald Winnicott, is an object given to us as infants, which allows us to make the first distinction between ourselves and an other. These objects are "not part of the infant's body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality."[5] Winnicott believes this in-between state or grey area to be essential to human development: "the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life

5 D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), 3.

both contribute."[6] We can compare this intermediate area to the INTERNET CONDITION, and how it has created new venues for the material expression of both "inner reality" **and** "external life". **We once used objects, as stated by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi,** "to transform the precariousness of consciousness into the solidity of things".[7] **We now use digital means to stabilize our consciousness—we constantly project our identities and assert our lifestyles, archiving every aspect of our lived experience online.**

What is our psychological attachment to objects as they stand today? In 1981, Csikszentmihalyi wrote that "[a]rtifacts help objectify the self in at least three major ways. They do so first by demonstrating the owner's power, vital erotic energy, and place in the social hierarchy. Second, objects reveal the continuity of the self through time [...] Third, objects**

6 Ibid.

7 Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things," in *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, ed. S. Lubar and W.D. Kingergy (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993) 22.

give concrete evidence of one's place in a social network as symbols (literally, the joining together) of valued relationships."[8] Since this was first published, these objectifications of the self have been expressed in an increasingly DEMATERIALIZED way, especially with the widespread use of social media sites. Continuity of self, demonstration of power, and status in social networks is largely presented through platforms such as <u>Facebook</u>, <u>Twitter</u>, <u>Instagram</u> etc., which allow one to document, archive and receive validation for experiences. Objects remain important to our psychological stability insofar as they function to produce an image that can be shared online. The object becomes secondary to the documentation of that object, leaving the materiality of the object itself of the lowest importance.

2. The VOLATILE COMMODITY, as a side effect of its poor production quality and

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8 Ibid.

low cost, provides an invitation to be "hacked" or altered.

Material quality is an abstract concept today. We tend to judge what to consume based on what those around us consume, relying on a projected standard of living. Consumption is motivated less by actual needs and usually addresses superficial concerns. There is hardly any consideration for longevity, as long as it can provide for the current moment for the right price. I speculate this is due to instant gratification and the rapid flow of content rejuvenation online. The VOLATILE COMMODITY expects to inhabit a landfill within a couple years at most.

The most obvious example of such a commodity is Ikea furniture. Ikea furniture is notorious for being poorly made and easily discarded. It has become popular to alter, combine, and reconfigure Ikea furniture to create something new—which often has a

more high-end aesthetic (although it is still made from the typical cardboard-like compact board with laminate coating). Sites like ikeahackers.net and apartmenttherapy.com allow users to post their most ingenious de- and re-constructions of Ikea furniture, often combining different products together to make something entirely unexpected. Although Ikea hacks assert that virtually anyone can shape their home, they give new impetus to consume more Ikea products than ever before. Knowing the products are of poor quality easily enables you to transform them completely. One of the paradoxes of the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS is that low material quality both allows for malleability and perpetuates the production and consumption of low quality materials.

There is a sort of "dollar store" in the Netherlands called Action. In Action, they sell everything from food to toilet brushes to paint to ash

trays in the shape of iphones, and almost everything is cheaply produced in China or some such place. The enormous range of products, their low cost, and the ease at which you can take them apart and later throw them away, naturally attracts most art school students. Once you know products "in actie" each week, you begin to see them appear in sculptures, installations and even paintings. The most skilled of artists learn how to disguise these materials and to mimic those of higher quality or to work the irony or flimsiness of these materials into their concepts. They are working with material they have on-hand within their means, they are utilizing the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS, and someday, they may even make money with these skills. I am one of those artists, as are most, and any moral/ethical conflicts are resolved through the mantra, "I'm poor, what else am I supposed to do?" It is liberating to work with material that doesn't impose itself as precious

or valuable, to defeat it and prove your own vitality over it, and to allow this sense of empowerment to grow as each material/product is pushed past the limits of its intended use.

Compulsive action is one which requires a fair level of neurosis and healthy lack of discipline. When a problem is presented, or a need, there's often little to no time to dwell on every possible solution, but to find the one which is closest at hand. I really wish I had a toothbrush right now, and quickly, a finger becomes one. While choosing to fertilize these tendencies, a number of unexpected solutions are found, and a sense of all empowering resourcefulness develops. You begin to think, "if I can make a discoball out of a broken mirror, then I can survive anywhere." Nothing is stronger than the power of denial, and if you deny yourself the opportunity to consider something impossible, then it will find a way to be possible.

As makers it is our duty to take responsibility for what we make, the materials and methods we use to make it, and who it affects all the way down the line. As people, we need to communicate our needs and our excess, to be open to lending a hand or diving into a dumpster, in order to live responsibly.

3. Sometimes, the only hack required to push an object past its usual function is a shift in thinking, or a new way of classifying or perceiving an object. If we look past the initial function of an object, we can see an almost infinite number of possibilities arise.

As with almost every American family, we would make a trip to COSTCO every month to stock up on living essentials in bulk. Upon entering the cooly lit warehouse, my mother would nab one of the much desired

flatbed carts, so my sister and I could sit comfortably on a large moving platform rather than hang out of a typical mesh shopping cart like caged monkeys. From this platform, we created a comfortable domestic environment from the items she pulled off the shelves. A frozen pizza became an abstract painting hung above a mantle of tissue boxes, a plastic duster when wedged between a block of cheese and a bag of bagels, became a beautiful lamp. We would fight over who got to sit on the couch of 25 rolls of paper towels (this being the most luxurious) while she wheeled us around, collecting every taste tester of ranch dressing and pizza pockets and arranging this feast on our kitchen table (a pack of 500 paper plates). It was easy to create the lifestyle we wanted from whatever came our way, abstracting intended function and creating an efficient use for various volumes and densities.

My grandmother was a miniaturist, constructing small flower arrangements, food and furniture for dollhouses in the 1970s. She wrote books, sold at trade shows and craft fairs across the country, and made all the flower arrangements and plants for the White House dollhouse (a dollhouse replicating the White House at 1:12 scale) Her secret was a dough made from Elmer's glue and Wonder Bread, colored with food coloring and thinned by lemon juice. When making miniatures, you have the sense that any material has potential—by mimicking the composition of an object at 1:12 scale, you begin to notice that past the surface, matter is matter, and anything is possible at little to no cost. In the State Dining Room sat a large bouquet of blush pink roses and lilies bowing before deep red gladiolus and propped up by fern fronds. In the Oval Office, bouquets of simple yellow tulips and a few fishtail palms in emerald glazed pots. Unfortunately,

the original arrangements my grandmother made for the White House dollhouse were eaten by mice, and so had to be remade using a polymer clay.

"**Mimicry can ease us into adaptation, the adaptation to new materials, new conditions, new tools, by providing that element of continuity for which there is so strong a need.**"[9] **By using material on-hand, you take the possibilities of a given context that feel fixed and expand them, taking their intended function and mimicking a new one.**

4. **The VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS can allow for the formation of alternative/micro economies.**

An exciting byproduct of the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS is a situation in which limited material/monetary means and

9 Gombrich, E.H. The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art, (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1984), 174.

craft can produce some extremely innovative results. Reportedly, in the 1960s, security workers on the graveyard shift in South African factories would weave bits of telephone wires they found into small baskets to pass the time. This idea spread to Zulu craftsmen who had been weaving intricate baskets for centuries out of brush and local plant matter. The telephone wires they found were brightly colored and allowed for more vibrant patterns that removed the laborious tasks of dying and preparing the natural materials.[10] With skilled labor and an appropriation of materials these craftsmen were able to revitalize the industry of their traditional craft and demonstrate its place in a contemporary market. Now, the baskets have become so popular that they rarely use recycled material but instead produce custom wires for weaving—removing a bit of the magic and all of the sustainable benefits,

10 "Zululand, South Africa," *Baskets of Africa*, 2002-2015, accessed 30 June 2015, http://basketsofafrica.com/zululand-wire/zululand-wire-baskets.html.

but nevertheless demonstrating the potential of the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS.

"While individuality and originality are accepted unquestioningly as characteristic of the best Western art, anonymity and adherence to tradition are still predicated for the non-Western."[11]

The most expensive coffee in the world is made by collecting cat shit. In the 17th century, Dutch colonizers set up massive coffee plantations in Java and Sumatra, and prohibited the workers from picking coffee for their own use. Workers started collecting the feces of palm civet cats who came to the plantation to eat ripe coffee cherries. Once cleaned and roasted, this coffee was found to have a special flavor, and allowed workers to have their own supply of coffee. Once the colonizers caught on, they saw it as

11 Meuli, Jonathan, "Writing about objects we don't understand," *The Culture of Craft*, edited by Peter Dormer, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.

an opportunity to profit. Now civet coffee is sold for $30 - $100 a cup.[12]

Athos is a center for those who have difficulty finding their place in society. Originally a place for disabled people, it now includes people with all types of addiction, disability or situation in which they are unable to make money and find a sense of purpose, now including refugees as well. Founder, Tom, says he wanted a space where the label the government would give you (such as "disabled") is left behind, and you can take part in activities which you find interesting. They have been working toward developing high-end products that appeal to consumers while remaining sustainable and using this workforce of people.

I wonder if there is a way to design a product, which allows for the makers to have a certain amount of creative

12 Kwok, Yenni, "The World's Most Expensive Coffee Is a Cruel Cynical Scam," *Time*, 2 Oct 2013, accessed 30 Nov 2016, http://world.time.com/2013/10/02/the-worlds-most-expensive-coffee-is-a-cruel-cynical-scam/. This article goes on to discuss, not the social justice issues surrounding the production of this coffee, but how civet cats are kept and force fed in "appalling living conditions".

agency in the piece. We talk about the need of the designer to respond to the context of the production of what is designed. He mentions a designer who is making jeans that are pre-worn for two years by Scottish construction workers and then sold for €600, their names and information are on the tags. Maybe aging/distress has become a novelty, maybe instead of buying new things that look old we can finally get over the disgust that seems to float around "pre-used" products. Maybe by creating an appealing backstory behind used products, they can become desirable again, like selling a suit pre-worn by a successful businesswoman.

Some questions I have no answer to: Does and idea ever directly benefit those who conceive it? Is appropriation the only way to have an idea spread? Is knowledge always produced through exploitation? When is appropriation "bad"? Is

appropriation more accepted now as authorship is more difficult to maintain?

Upcycling is the process of taking discarded material and creating a product of higher value than the original, downcycling is takes discarded material and produces material/products of lesser value than the original, and recycling is the process of making waste into reuseable material. The problem with these terms is that they assume a certain definition of value, which is attributed to the sellability of goods. I had an art history professor once who told me, "the value of something is determined by how much someone is willing to pay for it." What someone is willing to pay for something is often determined by the way that thing is presented/marketed, which can be a totally immaterial process. Part of this marketing is the "creation story" of this thing, which could be a fiction.

With networked devices, we are used to consuming mass amounts of information that we often accept as truth, knowing full well how easy it is to propagate fiction online.

Iván calls himself a designer. We talk about the power of fiction, I bring up "Catfishing" and the Orson Wells broadcast of "War of the Worlds" while he comes up with a way better example. One night he was going to visit his parents in a suburb of Mexico City and they called to tell him there were police in the street telling people not to go outside. He checked Facebook and there were images of burning cars and gun violence. The next day it was discovered that someone had found and posted those images, spreading the rumor that this was actually happening, and the police and everyone thought it was real. This incident was soon forgotten. It's like a strip tease, the anticipation of nudity is more exciting and momentous than

the outcome. Boris Groys writes, "art is no longer understood as the production of works of art but as documentation of life-in-the-project."[13] We listened to horror music like Smackos "The Age of Candy Candy", he tells me about the band Goblin, who took disco and made it undanceable.

I had a meeting with Pieter-Paul, the Senior Policy Advisor for Economic and Cultural Affairs at the Gemeente of Maastricht. I commented on the paintings we passed in the hallway, "those are nice." He answered, "no they're not." Then he went on to explain that the city of Maastricht at one point purchased works from every local artist in order to support them. Now they have a huge collection of "bad art".

I have an ongoing collection of amateur abstract paintings, which I buy from secondhand shops. How do we assign value to something so

13 Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin/New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 78.

subjective? What does Pieter-Paul really know about paintings? Maybe how much they were purchased for.

He showed me room that is considered to be the center of democracy in Maastricht. It was a circular room, with long curved tables centering around two podiums where presentations could be made. These podiums were facing only the major, while their backs would be turned to the rest of the room. I think about how interior/product design is maybe inherently fascist because it dictates a certain action or way of living. Maybe with the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS, individuals could recognize these constraints and feel empowered to break out of them.

I had a studio in downtown Los Angeles on Los Angeles Street. Every morning, across the street, a man would arrive with a shopping cart lined with tin foil in which he had created a barbeque to grill and sell

bacon wrapped sausages. He used the top shelf of the cart as the grill, and kept hot coals beneath, grilling around ten sausages at once. A few months later, another man showed up with a shopping cart full of oranges. He had mounted a metal juice press on the upper basket and sold fresh squeezed orange juice. They worked side-by-side and attracted a number of customers everyday. Every so often, the cops would come to check their permits, and in a flash they would be gone, taking only the juicer with them (which happened to be detachable). These cops seemed tired of the situation—there was nothing they could do but put out the coals and discard the carts, knowing full well the business would be up-and-running again next week. I never bought a sausage or an orange juice, and now I use this as an example to illustrate my point.

A former classmate of mine had the idea of turning our studio at the

Sandberg Instituut into an Airbnb in order to generate enough money to pay off his tuition. The most ingenious ideas for the utilization of the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS to create micro-economies are those which use a closed loop approach—taking the resources available to directly feed back into what the source of those resources requires of you. With this, one is able to illuminate and form a direct critique of the systems which are operating below the surface. For example, the Netherlands charges a tax of 21% on design objects which are sold, while art objects only have a tax of 6%.[14] In this situation, it would make sense to buy design objects, and sell them within an art context.

Orange County has established a CLOSED LOOP water system, meaning they produce drinking water out of wastewater through a complex system of filtration. It still comes out of the tap

14 "Starting Your Own Business as a Self-Employed Entrepreneur," *Kamer van Koophandel*, 4 February 2016, http://www.kvk.nl/download/KvK_Brochure_SYOB-engels_tcm109-400541.pdf

and goes down the drain in the same way, so few would even notice the difference. "CLOSING THE LOOP" is a concept that can be applied on any scale, to make us aware of waste or excess of any kind (material, emotional, personal) and how it may affect the people and environment around us. To CLOSE THE LOOP is to accept what would be considered unwanted and discarded, and find ways to live with them. Would you get rid of an old friend because they didn't look as cool as a new one?

5. The VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS supports an expanded definition of ownership. We now can collect and "lay claim" over physical material through the production and circulation of images.

Platforms like <u>Facebook</u>, <u>Instagram</u>, <u>Tumblr</u>, <u>Pinterest</u> and <u>Twitter</u> encourage a collection and redistribution of digital material, often obscuring its source and allowing it to

transcend contexts. With the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS, I propose a second look at what we own (in a material sense) through the lens of the INTERNET CONDITION and the general concept of sharing and PROSUMERISM which has come as a result. If we were to share, for instance, our clothing as willingly as we share an image on Facebook, or if we had the same impulse to curate our living space as we do to curate our online persona, maybe we could do more with less and more closely consider the material we use.

What could be the effects of a DEMATERIALIZED and fluid sense of ownership? On the one hand, DEMATERIALIZATION requires a worldwide shift in economies. Much of the population of underprivileged countries relies on the production of material goods for income, and it is primarily positions of privilege which possess skills and equipment for DEMATERIALIZED occupations. This

shift can and will occur, and could ultimately lead to the growth of a kind of self-employment through online platforms such as <u>fiverr.com</u> and <u>Amazon's Mechanical Turk</u>, although the transition will be devastating to many.[15] Another drawback to a shift toward DEMATERIALIZATION is the backgrounding of bodily attention, as more of our lives become consumed by interactions online, which render the body motionless. Another issue is what to do with the sheer amount of pre-existing material. Even if production and consumption of mass-produced goods decreases, what is left behind is a mess of obsolete material/products. This excess could be dealt with by utilizing the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS.

On the other hand, while a new relationship to material could cause a loss of employment, bodily attention

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15 This kind of self-employment is also extremely exploitative and, as pointed out by my editor, Margarita Osipian, "continues the trend of underpaid, insecure, and precarious work."

and an excess of waste, it is also saturated with the possibility for positive change. We are well past the post-war era where consumption of goods en masse seemed like the key to a successful life, and we are now afforded the opportunity to reexamine our actual needs. Through this reexamination, we may find that many of our social and psychological needs are already met in DEMATERIALIZED ways, leading to a restructuring of our environment and new commodity-less economies. The most exciting possibility of DEMATERIALIZATION is the rapid dissemination of visual/physical ideas through the now all-powerful image, allowing a reflexive relationship between maker and audience to expand.

6. The VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS has produced a condition of WEAK OBJECTS and STRONG IMAGES. Images are STRONG because of their visibility and ability to circulate

across multiple contexts, objects are WEAK because they are unable to do so without an image.

The capacity for the production and circulation of images has grown within the INTERNET CONDITION—images have become naturally STRONG due to their ability to be copied and circulated online, regardless of content. Barry Winfield Jr. (aka mrpimpgamegood) has been dubbed the Selfie King.[16] He has 179k followers on **Instagram**, which consists entirely of close-up selfies of him in different domestic settings.[17] Not much is known of him, although he seems to be an incredibly normal guy who just likes taking photos of himself. Needless to say, the criteria for an image to reach mass visibility has dramatically changed in the INTERNET CONDITION. The top ten most "liked" images on **Instagram** for

16 Robert Gordon, "This Guy Is The Selfie King! His Instagram Has 17k Followers And 95 Posts That Are All Selfies," *Elite Daily*, September 4, 2013, accessed 29 December 2015, http://elitedaily.com/news/world/this-guy-is-the-selfie-king-his-instagram-has-17k-followers-and-95-posts-that-are-all-selfies/.

17 Barry Winfield, *Mrpimpgamegood*, Instagram, accessed 29 December 2015, https://www.instagram.com/mrpimpgoodgame/.

2015 were, not surprisingly, celebrity selfies, five of which were of Taylor Swift (not performing or meeting famous people, but playing with her cats).

It seems that images today that are able to circulate and be seen by many, are those which contain the specificity of a face. Maybe the trend of the selfie has reached new heights because it acts as a natural form of copyright within a mass of imagery that is circulated without connection to its source. Maybe selfies provide a certain reassurance of our physical continuity, saying "look, I still exist." A selfie can also provide a window into the life of an individual and act as validation of their lived experience, which appears to be authentic. This window, whether it be highly constructed or not considered at all, is successful if it seemingly reveals something private and intimate.

Next to the STRENGTH OF IMAGES, OBJECTS ARE WEAK **as their physicality limits their movement across contexts and functions. However, through utilization of the** VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS **and the condition of** STRONG IMAGES, **objects can begin to take on new possibilities, to exist in a non-static realm, to both use and mimic the movement of images online.**

Louie has a graphic design practice, but has always enjoyed painting. Sometimes he makes a digital painting, posts it on <u>Instagram</u>, and if people like it, he paints it with actual paint. He wants to do more with his hands but wonders if he should just focus more in the direction of the digital skills he knows he is good at. As we listened to D'Angelo, Solange, and gospel, we talk about the benefits of doing the things you're not good at. He has no waste because he is reluctant to work with physical material. <u>Tinder</u> may be considered the best

way to waste time and/or have as many one night stands as possible. It's also a way to exist a bit more outside your very limited sphere of people and typical interactions, and gain some new perspectives. With every swipe or awkward first date, you acknowledge someone else in the world that you didn't know existed before. We have an enormous capacity to create mental images of a person based off of very little information. He sits next to an older woman on a beach, she is probably his mother, he loves his family and they still vacation together, maybe even for weeks at a time, not because he can't afford to vacation by himself, but because he actually enjoys their company and vice versa. He wears very cool but a little bit dorky sunglasses while sipping probably a cappuccino at probably a very nice but not too pretentious café. He likes to take things easy and isn't stressed out about much, he just enjoys these small moments

probably with a friend or a former lover because someone had to take the photo. After you sleep together he will take you to his favorite café and you will sip coffee and laugh and enjoy the morning together in a leisurely way, you might even bring a book and quietly read next to each other for a while in comfortable silence. Upon actually meeting (as this is just what you gathered from his two photos on his profile) if any comment or action should contradict the image of a laid back man who loves coffee and his family, the image is ruined, and all you are left with is a nervous wreck who talks too much and has bad posture. Where the image prevails, the object (or in this case, human) leaves much to be desired, and with <u>Tinder</u>, there is always the prospect of someone smarter, better looking, and more novel in some way to replace them.

7. **The** VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS **is being explored by contemporary artists through the use of commodities and ephemeral media, producing** MINIMIZED **and** AGGREGATIVE **works.**

Contemporary art dealing directly with materiality (mainly sculpture and installation work) has grown into two general camps—that of MINIMIZATION using very little material and simple form, and AGGREGATION with collections of objects both created and found by the artist. The terms MINIMIZATION and AGGREGATION are used intentionally to describe artistic work that deals with material within the INTERNET CONDITION. MINIMIZATION is the act of reducing something to its minimal amount. It is used in reference to a reduction, such as to "minimize damages" but also in interface design, to "minimize a window" in order to create more screen-space to work with. To create MINIMIZED sculpture is to present a "WEAK" gesture that

looks as though it took no time at all—this is where it differs from the tradition of Minimalist art, and hence requires a new term. AGGREGATION is often used in the context of websites that display and organize content from other parts of the internet. The term means a whole created by a combination of different elements, or a collection. This work often includes an installation of found and created objects, which may or may not have obvious connections between them. Within both MINIMIZATION and AGGREGATION there is the use of "readymade" or found objects, usually a VOLATILE COMMODITY or ephemeral material which has been hacked and appropriated, much in the same way that content is collected, duplicated and republished online.

Although they may seem at odds, both MINIMIZED and AGGREGATIVE work are different approaches to addressing the same condition brought about by the

economy of attention, DEMATERIALIZATION, and the VOLATILITY OF OBJECTS. MINIMIZED material gestures can be seen as a response to the simplification of information popularized with the Twitter revolution and concise, simplistic language that many scholars are turning to. Additionally, MINIMIZED work provides a physical counterpart to digital overload, recognizing the WEAKNESS of materiality. Materials often employed in addition to found objects are thin neon tubing, thin metals, plastics and gels, but also DEMATERIALIZED elements such as scent, sound and light. In the curatorial text to accompany Pamela Rosenkranz's "Our Product" at the Swiss Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia 2015, curator Susanne Pfeffer talks of "materials that have made the distinction between synthetic and organic and between subject and object impossible."[18] She also remarks, "Rosenkranz confronts us

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18 Susanne Pfeffer, "Our Product," *Design Boom*, 8 May 2015, accessed 7 June 2015, http://www. designboom.com/art/swiss-pavilion-venice-biennale-2015-pamela-rosenkranz-05-08-2015/.

with materials and concepts which, through their ubiquity, have become determinants of our time while remaining difficult to perceive."[19] Contemporary MINIMIZED works literally address the DEMATERIALIZATION and material instability, which we have been discussing.

With AGGREGATED work, there is firstly an emphasis on an installation practice, as no one object is considered on its own, but rather, in relation to other objects. Materials used are commonly made to mimic their commodified counter objects. This style of work reflects the now relatively defunctionalized material excess we live in, treating material without hierarchy of value, but moreso drawing connections between both ephemeral/cheap material and the seemingly stable art object. Any object, whether worthless or

19 Susanne Pfeffer, "Swiss Pavilion at the 56th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia," *Biennial Foundation*, 23 January 2015, accessed 7 June 2015, http://www.biennialfoundation. org/2015/01/the-swiss-arts-council-pro-helvetia-has-nominated-pamela-rosenkranz-to-exhibit-in- 2015-at-the-pavilion-of-switzerland-at-the-biennale-di-venezia/.

priceless in the traditional sense, can act as a symbol. In the case of Camille Henrot's installation The Pale Fox, a cheesy postcard sits next to a bronze sculpture, a cardboard cone in front of a painting—"The Pale Fox articulates our desire to make sense of the world through the objects that surround us [...] This highly personalized aggregation of distinct systems of thought is presented through an intense accumulation of objects and images encountered within a highly constructed, meditative environment."[20] Making sense of the world by connecting both art objects and seemingly valueless materials reflects Claire Bishop's hypothesis as to why the art world has hesitated to incorporate themes related to our digital condition. "At its most utopian, the digital revolution opens up a new dematerialized, de-authored, and unmarketable reality of collective culture; at its worst, it signals the

20 Camille Henrot, "The Pale Fox," *Camille Henrot*, 2014-15, accessed 7 June 2015, http://www.camillehenrot.fr/en/work/74/the-pale-fox.

impending obsolescence of visual art itself."[21] Both ᴀɢɢʀᴇɢᴀᴛᴇᴅ and ᴍɪɴɪᴍɪᴢᴇᴅ art step toward the utopian realm the digital revolution reveals, without the direct use of digital media.

With both ᴍɪɴɪᴍɪᴢᴇᴅ and ᴀɢɢʀᴇɢᴀᴛɪᴠᴇ works, the artist becomes a prosumer playing with the tension inherent with the creation of work that includes or mimics a specific selection of objects, often commodities. When speaking of artistic production within the ɪɴᴛᴇʀɴᴇᴛ ᴄᴏɴᴅɪᴛɪᴏɴ, Claire Bishop remarks that "questions of originality and authorship are no longer the point; instead, the emphasis is on a meaningful recontextualization of existing artifacts."[22] Just as content moves between contexts online, contemporary artistic work attempts to produce the same through ᴡᴇᴀᴋ gestures and combinations of material.

21 Claire Bishop, "Digital Divide: Claire Bishop on Contemporary Art and New Media," *ArtForum*, September 2012.
22 Ibid.

AGGREGATIVE and MINIMIZED works represent different approaches to material abstraction as allowed for by the INTERNET CONDITION. Both challenge presupposed material hierarchies and established forms of art commodities while pushing culture production into grey areas. Both appropriate familiar objects in a reoriented and recontextualized way in order to move them beyond a consumer level understanding into a position as cultural artifact, reflecting our changing relationship to material. Both types of work open up a space in between construction and collection, allowing for an abstraction of value, authorship and materiality itself. Tim says he used to throw away his work right after showing it, it was often easier to make it again than find a place to store it. He feels bad about that. He now hardly throws anything away because at this point, everything has the potential to be used in his work. He is photographing

compositions of objects he's made and found for a book he's working on. His final show here will be a collection of other people's work which he'll arrange along with his own, a sort of group show, but with him as the composer rather than the curator.

8. In a general sense, VOLATILITY creates a space for ambiguity, which allows for both adaptation and constant reevaluation.

General sentiment of impermanence, unpredictability and adaptability has led to the creation and acceptance of ambiguous spaces, situations and identities. Who is to say what will come tomorrow? What will be popular? Will there be water? The INTERNET CONDITION comes at a time when we may have the answers, but they are manipulated and overpowered by the sheer multitude of information and distractions present online to

see them. We are overwhelmed with content, and we are still learning how to sort through it. With the distribution and redistribution of information, content is transformed, existing in no one place within no one context. Alongside the ambiguous space created by this manipulation of content, there is a shift away from specialization amongst the young and educated. The rise of creative/tech industries requires a labor force capable of creating, manipulating and distributing images and ideas in a holistic way. The job market requires that individuals "wear many hats" and possess skills that may be peripheral to their job description, but would allow them to "see the bigger picture". The emphasis on this total perspective has been the largest shift in thinking within the INTERNET CONDITION.

Social media sites allow our identities to SHAPESHIFT—to fracture and dispense different ideas of how

we see ourselves, sometimes from dramatically distant angles. As seen in the film "Catfish" (2010) identities can translate online to extremely developed alter egos that allow a person to live multiple lives.[23] In an interview with Paper Magazine, artist Jayson Musson aka Hennesy Youngman, comments on a similar condition referenced in his work Easternsports, a colorful absurd soap opera made in collaboration with Alex da Corte: "It's a comment on the notion that, as Westerners, our identities are not fixed. From our position of privilege we're able to explore or dabble with cultural exports from other parts of the world, religion being one of them. Westerners are encouraged to 'find themselves' and in that process we try on, then discard many ideologies, thus reducing them to trite intellectual garments, or a

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23 *Catfish* is a documentary following a romantic relationship that develops through Facebook. The two eventually meet in real life, and major discrepancies between the Facebook profile and the person who created it are revealed. *Catfishing* is a term which has been adopted since the release of this film, to describe the act of misleading someone online through the creation of a false identity.

light pastime much akin to sports."[24] This "trying on" of identities is more possible through social media.[25] Even if we believe our <u>Facebook</u> or <u>Instagram</u> to be a true reflection of ourselves, we are in many ways divided, floating between interpretations and representations in a mediated space.

A VOLATILE approach is one that has the capacity to change. When employing VOLATILITY in the creation and smart consumption of objects, we can utilize resources on-hand, harness the power of images to propagate ideas without material production, and see material with an expanded definition of ownership to raise the standard of living while actually living with less. If we begin to adopt VOLATILITY into our lives, we can more efficiently and intelligently make use of what we are

24 Gabby Bess, "Artists Jayson Musson and Alex da Corte Play *Easternsports*," *Paper Magazine*, 17 September 2014, accessed 5 September 2015, http://www.papermag.com/2014/09/ayson_musson_alex_da_corte_easternsports.php.
25 Jayson Musson himself has been experimenting with this fragmentation of persona with his YouTube series "Art Thoughtz" which he started producing in 2010. In these short videos, he takes on the persona of Hennessy Youngman, a hip-hop loving, tall-T wearing, gangsta fabulous guy, who talks about the art world using only the most colloquial language. His formula for becoming a successful artist is "be white".

given to construct the lifestyle that we want. To begin to live a VOLATILE life, we must question and reject those industries and structures that impose an antiquated relationship toward objects and materiality, grounded in a rapid consumption cycle and a reliance on trends. We must learn to oppose stasis, embrace subjectivity, and develop an empowered response to change.

The Stimuleringsfonds invited me to be interviewed and participate in a discussion about the future of the funds and the design field in general. I presented myself as an artist, and explained my research, and an older man from the crowd posed the question, "why is a design grant giving funding to an artist?" Which of course inspired a huge discussion on the distinction between art and design and what it means to have a practice that encompasses both. Many of the younger people in the

crowd identified as having some sort of overlap, designer-engineer, artist-designer, fashion designer-theorist etc. One guy raises his hand and says he changes his business card every 6 months. Maybe digital natives are more prone to fracturing their identity as it is easier to create, manipulate, and multiply persona online across platforms.

If she really has to when someone asks, Radna calls herself a curator/programmer. She has a background in journalism and radio and "entered the art world" when she started working for museum night. She noticed a shift in the demographic of people whom she was surrounded by—the radio world was fairly diverse compared to the art world. We talk about how music might be the most accessible art form. She interviewed Gary Wilson once, and is including him in a text she wrote. We talk about the importance of pop culture references alongside art

references. Neither of us have read Deleuze and Guattari, although we will someday. She collects a number of motivational one-liners that are displayed on her wall, one of them says, "a realness that we relate to."

As a designer, you are taught to start a project by establishing the constraints in which to work. As an artist, you are taught to see no limit to what you can do. When you have a identity crisis, you seek out constraint while fighting to break out of them (even if they were self imposed in the first place). My favorite constraint to work within is: I will spend no money. My second favorite is: I will use nothing new. My third favorite is: I will make this in 2 days. Maybe the "starving artist" stereotype exists not only because you tend to make no money as an artist, but because creativity reaches it's maximum when given constraint to work within.

Simon did commercial work for ten years before applying to the Van Eyck. We talk about how the artist has the illusion of autonomy while really they are connected to external powers like galleries and institutions to survive. Can autonomy ever really exist? We are always bound something, whether it be to the situation in which we are born, to the people we want to be near, to material, to information. He has friends who collected photographs of products that look like they could be artworks. He is frustrated with the way that many here communicate, using convoluted language and referencing philosophers for the sake of sounding intelligent. We talk about the importance of accessible language (especially within an international institution). I took a piece of double stick tape, two orange feathers and a mandarin peel.

Friends in a residency in Los Angeles once told me, when I do a residency I

should be sure to put lots of things on the walls, to show that I am working hard and to give people something to look at when they visit. When you don't have walls to put things on, everything you do becomes trivialized as it seems to lack a sense of direction.

The city of Maastricht has a goal of having zero waste by 2030. Although this seems incredibly ambitious, it seems they already lead the pack, recycling 72% of waste in 2014. While recycling and reducing "restafval" or "residual waste" is all well and good, it doesn't actually solve many problems—no one is consuming less or throwing less away, the infrastructure and technology to sort garbage into reusable material is just improving. This, alongside a very efficient system of waste removal and concealment has shielded the population from acknowledging the level to which they discard material. Efforts are being

taken to prevent litter by educating young children about trash on the street, but none are aimed at the more wasteful population of university students who often only live in Maastricht for a short time.

Mervin, who works at the largest recycling center/dump in Maastricht says, "as soon as they pass through those gates, whatever they bring to throw away becomes property of the Gemeente." This means that no one coming to the Milieupark can take anything away with them, waste goes in, and nothing comes out, you bring a load and leave with a clean conscience. Only the electronics are given to kringloop shops, and the rest is recycled or brought to a landfill. They have a number of bins, each for a different material, but it is up to the public who brings waste to sort them into the right ones. Sometimes Mervin and his colleagues pull things out and resort them, although their boss told

them not to bother. It costs €6.50 to dump a load about one meter square, and goes up by increments of €6.50 for each additional load.

As soon as you pass through the doors of the institution, you become a sort of student who is not yet or no longer an expert in their field, and rely on the resources of the institution for support. You cannot make it yet in the real world, and take advice from others who can. You are given €900 a month for living expenses, €2,000 for materials, and a studio space with a desk and two chairs.[26] After one year, you move out, you take all the things off your walls and throw them away.

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26 An extremely good deal as far as residencies go. If you work at Starbucks in Amsterdam, you make an hourly wage of about €9, and if you work three days a week, you make about €900 a month for living expenses.

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