Beyond *Trompe l'Oeil* Realism: Redefining the 'Readymade'in the Post-Digital Age

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In the exhibition-catalog essay for the 2012 show "Lifelike" at The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN (USA), Curator Siri Engberg characterizes the show as a tour-de-force survey of «art-illusionism» from the 1950s to today, achieved through «meticulous, labor-intensive means», that possesses «the potential to be transformed and to take on new meaning» (Engberg, 2012, pp. 13-15). The Walker's exhibition of studied *trompe l'oeil* realism aspires to make familiar objects unfamiliar while encouraging viewers to appreciate often-fastidious craft and sometimes-ironic shifts of scale. In doing so, the Walker Art Center activates historical connections to nineteenth-century, mass-popular, American trompe l'oeil traditions, while also making a specific nod to 1950s and 1960s New York City-based Proto-Pop/Pop artists such as Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol, and successors Duane Hanson and Chuck Close. Even with these artists' works included, the exhibition's thrust still is decidedly post-millennial, Engberg explains its inspiration:

> It seemed that everywhere I looked [at the Frieze London Fair], there were young artists engaged with trompe l'oeil realism or photorealism. This impulse is definitely in the air right now, I think in part because many artists are wanting to return to old-school studio practice — making things with their hands, spending time and labor on something that will make us take notice of real life from time to time (Caniglia, 2012).

Re-engaging craft, Engberg here suggests, is a nostalgic practice for these artists, yet also is a means to be fully mentally cognizant and immersed in the present. Through a closer examination of exemplary contemporary artworks from "Lifelike," this essay offers an alternative exploration and theorization of the rejuvenation of a post-millennial hyperrealism. It will be argued that the resurgence of realism since the year

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2000 is less about returning to the past, and more about reflecting the unique challenges of art-making for a twenty-first-century audience imbedded in, and conditioned by, digital culture. Two artworks from the "Lifelike" exhibition, Tom Friedman's *Untitled (Bee)* (2001) and Maurizio Cattelan's *Untitled (Elevator)* (2001), reveal differing approaches to the task of creating hand-crafted sculptural facsimiles in the digital age of three-dimensional printing, direct user engagement, and digital image circulation via social media/memes. As both artists reclaim the everyday "non-art" object as the subject matter of fine art, they reframe the cerebral humor of Marcel Duchamp's "readymade" in order to explore the pervasive role of the "personalized quotidian" in Post-Digital culture.

Much Buzz About Tom Friedman's Bee

A bee, true-to-life-size, sits still on the museum wall. As viewers notice and walk near it, they instinctively back away from the insect until they realize that it is one of the artworks. When asked to comment on his decision to sculpt a bee, Friedman quips that he wanted to disrupt into visitors' movements through the gallery space by bringing an everyday-life reflexive habit – bee avoidance – into the most unlikely of spaces, the museum (Green, 2012). After viewers fully realize that the bee cannot harm them, they approach the insect – also known as *Untitled (Bee)* (Fig. 1) – and inspect its delicate craftsmanship at close range. Friedman's bee is a refined and mesmerizingly skillful, 2.2-centimeter-by-1.6-centimeter-by-1.3-centimeter sculpture comprised of clay, wire, the artist's own hair, plastic, and paint. A subtle application of fuzz also adds a believably furry texture to the bee's legs and torso.

But a few hints of artifice appear. At a much closer examination from a few inches away, the bee's wings appear more hard-edged and angular than an actual bee's wings. Some of the wings' veins extend ever-so slightly past the end of the wings. The bee's antennae are thick and untapered, and its eyes are not bulbous, faceted, or differentiated from its head. Still, when viewed from a few feet away, these telltale details Friedman's sculpture appears *to be* the object it represents. Friedman's sculpture thus entices viewers to look more closely at an object whose real-life counterparts rarely receive such scrutiny – much less, such enjoyment.

Friedman ironically places a Duchampian "non-art" object (a bee) in the realm of "fine art." However, instead of buying a factory-produced, pre-

fabricated, commercial object to reframe for viewers' consideration as art, Friedman painstakingly reverses "readymade's" anti-craft expectations and displays an admirable degree of workmanship – on a minuscule scale, nonetheless. He also poses a question to his viewers: *why go to such great lengths to remake such an ordinary object with intense care?*

Fig. 1 Tom Friedman, *Untitled (Bee)*, 2001

To begin, the subject holds philosophical importance to Friedman. He summons a popular theory first announced in 1934 by French entomologist August Magnan, who famously quipped that a bumble bee's flight is impossible according to the laws of physics and aerodynamics, because the amount of lift provided by the wings is not enough to lift a bee's body (Green, 2012; Magnan, 1934). Magnan's hypothesis prompted scientists to reconcile the conundrum that a bee's flight could be *theore-*

tically impossible, but was, in fact, *practically* possible – or *real*. Replicating a bee is a celebration of the art subject as nonsensical, irrational, illogical, and rule-defiant. (Incidentally, similar words also have been used since the Enlightenment to describe the position of art-making in opposition to science.) This insect raises other philosophical questions about visual realities, as well. What the mind and eye perceive as reality (namely, that a bee can fly) conflicts with the findings of rational science, according to Magnan. The bee becomes a symbol, then, for a realism divorced from facticity. Friedman's presentation of a sculpture that is not, in fact, a "readymade" bee from nature – but one made by his own hands. It is a realism that likewise is separated from the actual and factual.

Magnan's hypothesis has since been disproven by many scientists, who noted that bees do not fly in the same manner as airplanes. Instead, their wings rotate to create air vacuums – or, small hurricanes – that displace air and lift the wings. Nonetheless, Magnan's hypothesis has remained in the mass popular consciousness as an "urban legend," or cultural myth. By recreating the insect with such great care, Friedman commemorates the miracle of the bee's flight is a nod to the enduring power of popular cultural mythologies and non-truths to persist, despite being disproven. Such myths are a mainstay on the internet, where urban legends find quick global circulation and re-circulation to a seemingly infinite audience. (Incidentally, several websites such as Snopes.com, Urbanlegend.com, and Americanfolklore.net, have even sprung into existence to help the discerning web surfer from taking myths like this one as fact – provided the reader bothers to fact-check seemingly dubious information. Many online audiences do not.) In a Post-Digital, "Post-Truth" culture, information is primary social currency and its accuracy is secondary. Digital information consumers are conditioned to approach most information posted online with skepticism, and to become discerning connoisseurs of such messages. Truth occupies a space of contingency in an economy of online information exchange. This ethos profoundly influences producers of visual culture. Friedman, for instance, recites the myth of the bee's impossible flight in statements about his work, but knowingly or unknowingly misattributes its genesis to quantum physicist David Bohm: «[A]ccording to today's laws of physics, the bumble should not be able to fly [...] the shape of its wings, their velocity of operation, and their size, compared to the bumble bee's body, make no sense [...] it's a miracle, it's comical, and it cannot be denied» (Gagosian Gallery).

Online information also is subject to mutation as it is shared in various reproductions and parodies online. As users share information from other sources (or, "repost" it), they personalize this data to reflect their variegated views, needs, or desires. Consumers thus become part-authors, or creators of the message in a Post-Digital culture of the "personalized quotidian" – in which information is quoted, but modified by sharers and re-sharers. Some popular ways to reframe online information include adding personal messages, making images into memes, and creating short, looping GIFs (Graphics Interchange Formats), voice-overs, mashups, and composite or montaged photographs. Members of the information-sharer's social network audience are encouraged to leave "comments" and/or express their "likes," "dislikes," support, and are free to re-post and reframe that data as they please for sharing with additional audiences. Sometimes, a post prompts a rapid and voracious re-sharing and becomes "viral" – a medical term that has been applied to online communications to express the rapidity and "infectiousness" with which digital images and ideas may circulate in social discourses. Messages do not necessarily actively solicit their *virality* (although certain catchy attributes can help make that more likely). Rather, they are *not* the agents of action, but the *subject* of others' actions and recontextualizations.

This digital culture of the "personalized quotidian" pervades the project of a contemporary hyperrealism, as objects from the known world are emulated with scrupulous care and painstaking detail. No matter how much care many of the post-millennial artists from "Lifelike" take to copy their real-life subjects for their artworks, the human-made versions of manufactured/natural objects, such as Friedman's *Untitled (Bee)*, still reveal their artificial nature under closer inspection. Many artists in "Lifelike" embrace this inevitability and sidestep this conversation altogether by altering the scale of their artworks distinguish their art objects from their referents.

Cattelan's 'Readymade-to-Order' Elevators

In one of the final galleries of the Walker's "Lifelike" exhibition, a miniature, ankle-level pair of steel elevators designed by Italian "prankster" artist Maurizio Cattelan are imbedded in the bottom of the gallery wall (Fig. 2). They occasionally ding to announce their arrivals, and small metal sliding doors open to receive their imaginary passengers. The number readout

boards above the doors change "floors" to let the spectator know whether their arrival is imminent. Viewers are invited to crouch down and "call" the elevator by pressing the "up" button of Cattelan's installation *Untitled (Elevators)*. Every detail – from the buttons to the frame and doors – is meticulously reproduced and crafted, although not by Cattelan himself, who announces that: «I am not the best person to make it» (Worth, 2010, p. 70). *Untitled (Elevators)* are an odd hybrid of Duchamp's "readymade," the "readymade-to-order," or, objects crafted by outside experts for the intention of gallery display, by Cattelan's special order, by an industrial manufacturer. The artist assumes a role as director of their creation, without actually engaging any of the hands-on making. Cattelan provocatively flaunts this distinction by making statements such as «I am not an artist. I really don't consider myself an artist» (Spector, p. 9). However, Cattelan's decision to staff-out the craft and creation of the elevators to experienced elevator-making experts likely contributed to their impeccable, well-made, true-to-life appearance. Had he not chosen to alter their scale from actual elevators, viewers might not even know that they were "art".

Fig. 2 Maurizio Cattelan, *Untitled (Elevator)*, 2001

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Thus, while Friedman reclaims the artist's hand in crafting the art object, Cattelan assumes a different strategy by embracing industrial manufacturing for an increased fidelity to the real. His art offers a distance from hands-on craft as the artist assumes the role of producer. As such, Cattelan anticipates the expectations of museum visitors conditioned to expect slick, well-crafted, well-engineered products in the Post-Digital age of three-dimensional printing and digital manufacturing. For Cattelan's illusion of a hyperreal uncanny to be most effective, his audience ideally should believe that the elevators could be real.

As viewers stand by the miniature elevators, they may wonder whether the elevators indeed move vertically, and if they do, whom they are designed to transport. (Do invisible creatures, or a family of mice, live in the museum? Are the artworks, then, safe? Why have we never seen the creatures who use them?) Cattelan also invites viewers to contemplate their own scale with respect to the elevators. In the "Curator's Notes," the Los Angeles County Museum of Art compares this installation's disorienting effect to that of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (LACMA). Others, including the international art-auction house Sotheby's, are transported by the art installation to an «alternate Lilliputian realities exist just beneath the fabric of earthly life, such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*» (Sotheby's, 2015). Commentators have suggested that Cattelan's elevators provide a portal to an «incisive examination into the surreal subterranean current lurking beneath the banality of daily life» (Sotheby's, 2015).

In addition, Cattelan invites viewers to press buttons to "call" an elevator. The installation engages the viewer to participate in the illusion by conjuring not only a bodily self-consciousness of scale, and references to fictional narratives of their own creation (or someone else's), but also, by pushing buttons. By inviting user participation, Cattelan appeals to a mass culture that is accustomed to online interactivity. Relational artworks such as these challenge the viewer to adhere to museum conventions – which do not allow visitors to touch artworks – or to disregard these expectations and activate the elevators. Pushing the "call" button and operating the elevators affirms the affinity between the installation and real-life, full-scale elevators.

But it also relates to viewers in manner that is familiar to many visitors. Virtual communications (whether by phone, e-mail, text-message, video, or social media) and digital applications are activated by key-pressing. This is to say, to be productive at work or socially engaged in life in gene-

ral requires a bodily engagement with technology. Several scholars, including N. Katherine Hayles, have suggested that the habit of button-pushing is such an ingrained behaviour that it is inseparable from our mental processes:

> The more one works with digital technologies, the more one comes to appreciate the capacity of networked and programmable machines to carry out sophisticated cognitive tasks, and the more the keyboard comes to seem an extension of one's thoughts rather than an external device on which one types. Embodiment then takes the form of extended cognition, in which human agency and thought are enmeshed within larger networks that extend beyond the desktop computer into the environment (Hayles, 2012, p. 3).

Thus, Cattelan relates to his viewers in a manner that is all-too familiar to them, while simultaneously inviting them to violate conventional museum behaviour and touch the artwork celebrating a likewise familiar object – made unfamiliar to viewers by its scale.

In the introduction to the exhibition catalog, Engberg writes that the artists of "Lifelike," including Cattelan, tend to celebrate relatively mundane subjects (Engberg, 2012, p. 13). Indeed, large steel elevators are abundant in sizeable art museums for the easy transportation of artwork and the transport of visitors. Viewers have become conditioned to ignore elevators and other "working" industrial parts of the museum as part of a field of banal background architecture that are not themselves artworks. With *Untitled (Elevators)*, Cattelan reverses those expectations, using a miniature scale to differentiate his elevators as *artworks*.

Steel, sleek, unadorned, industrial elevators also conjure associations with high-rise workplaces and functionalist, rigid, efficient "glass box" architecture. The elevator is the site of the repetitive tedium of work life in corporate environments, and of the routine act of transit to and from the workplace. In a museum setting, they transport a flow of visitors while also allowing art handlers a way to move artworks from place to place. Elevators are forgotten, liminal spaces. But they are spaces of everyday transit that people encounter regularly, and with which they are familiar. Seldom – if ever – are contemporary, industrial elevators appreciated as a destination or point of interest in and of themselves, other than in Cattelan's ironic *Untitled (Elevators)*.

The celebration of the banal, everyday object, as noted in the exhibition catalog, is hardly a subject unique to only the hyperrealist artists (Engberg, 2012, pp. 19-29). Since Duchamp placed a tipped urinal in an art

exhibition under a pseudonym in 1917, this dialogue has been a recurrent one in the history of art. It was an especially prominent strategy of the 1960s Pop artists. Artist Robert Smithson, for instance, commented in 1966 that he thought the «sensibility of the sixties» was marked by a «sensibility of inauthentic boredom,» which brought attention to the ironic «dynamics of banality» in reaction to, among other things, the overly introspective, existential-angst-ridden Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1950s (Smithson, 1966, p. 329). To the Pop artists, a retreat to banal, everyday, non-self-centered subjects was a rebellion against the grave seriousness of AbEx. For artists working in the Post-Digital era, however, prosaic subjects embody no significant stylistic revolution from the art of the past. What perhaps distinguishes a post-millennial evocation of commonplace objects from those of earlier precedents is, among other things, its connection to social-media-encultured shifts in the perception of moments worth sharing.

For example, according to her annual survey of technology trends by Mary Meeker, the number of photographs shared on social media (Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.) in 2015 increased 165 percent from the previous year (Meeker, 2016). This has been attributed to the ease of operating cell-phone cameras and social-media applications (Meeker, 2016). However, as several scholars have argued, these additional photographs are not necessarily "better" ones. Many viewers share the banal settings of everyday life, as they did in family "snapshot" film photography of everyday life in the late-twentieth century. Only capturing these everyday, banal moments in a lasting image in the Post-Digital era is less about preserving fleeting memories and more about documenting the self. Specifically, photographs are posted to social media to support a narrative, a story, and/or a version of the self as the poster/author wants to appear to others. It is not unusual on social media to see cliché images of what a friend had for dinner, a selfie of them in a nondescript location, photographs of pets, children playing, and an image of something they encountered during the day at school or work. Shooting and sharing digital images on social-media sites, Mette Sandbye suggests, is a very different approach to making photography to preserve the past: «Today photography is predominantly a social, everyday activity rather than a memory-embalming one, creating presence, relational situations, and communication» (Sandbye, 2016, p. 97). Making and sharing photographs is a means of connecting socially, of conveying presence and maintaining relationships. The "personal" becomes the

"public," and potentially the viral. This has prompted some commentators and scholars to dismay for the loss of the subject's former importance, and a state of being in which Craig Richards quipped that «People take photographs because they *can*, not because they *should*», or, in Om Malik's words, we «photograph everything and look at nothing» (Brown, 2013; Malik, 2016). In turn, rapid visual consumption is rewarded, and slower, deliberate, contemplative viewing and connoisseurship, some scholars argue, have fallen to the wayside (Carr, 2010).

A return to meticulously made art objects offers an alternative to fast looking while celebrating everyday objects. Quick-gazing viewers are disrupted from their usual temporal pace of processing visual stimuli and invited into a heightened one that implicitly criticizes habits of rapid-fire visual processing. Friedman and Cattelan, as well as others in the "Lifelike" exhibition, defiantly only reward viewers for contemplative viewing and appreciation of the slow – and sometimes, painstaking – creation process. Perhaps to underscore the slowness of this looking process, these artists present familiar, banal, everyday objects whose "objectness," in-and-of-itself, is less likely to distract the viewer from the task at hand: looking. This is to say, Friedman and Cattelan borrow from a banal vernacular visual language of online culture while paradoxically challenging the quick consumption of visual images that it encourages and encultures.

Conclusions

A closer look at the work of Friedman and Cattelan from the Walker Art Center's "Lifelike" exhibition reveals differing strategies for exploring the pervasive role of the "personalized quotidian" in Post-Digital culture. Friedman goes to great lengths to meticulously recreate a true-to-life-size bee – complete with handmade wing veins (made from the artist's own hair), "fuzz," and furry legs (Green, 2012). Only under close scrutiny, the bee's fabricated nature reveals itself. Alternatively, Cattelan's miniature set of elevators is a "readymade-to-order" – or, a pair of objects that were industrially manufactured under the artist's direction, with the intent of becoming installation art. Likewise, the elevators' seductively pristine craft is admirable, and its illusionistic realism is impeccable, even at a close distance. Only the elevators' scale speaks to their artifice.

Rather than being seen as a retroactive practice with nostalgic connections, though, exemplary artworks from the "Lifelike" exhibition by these

two artists offer an alternative exploration and theorization of the rejuvenation of a post-millennial hyper-realism. The work of Friedman and Cattelan offers a portal for considering the ways in which "truth" and "the real" have enjoyed a unique degree of contingency in the Post-Digital era, and the way by which technology may condition such a viewpoint. They question not only the nature of realism, but also, the tendency toward a "personalized quotidian" and participation-based social-media culture. These artists' banal everyday objects also entice viewers to engage "slow" looking, while announcing the continued relevance of crafted sculptural facsimiles in the digital age of three-dimensional printing, direct user engagement, and digital image circulation via social media/memes.

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