

Praxis: A custom or practice that we have accepted as the norm or implement as part of our everyday lives.

I first learned of this term in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), in which he argued that the images we communicate to the world through materialistic branding are so imbedded in our lives that there is no longer a true "reality." Our consumerist culture has manipulated and constrained our minds, compelling us to purchase products simply to project an artificial external persona.

My installation represents two extremes of the consumerist culture argument. On one end, we leave our freedom of choice entirely in the hands of corporation's advertising and manipulation. The rope that suspends the figure in the sculpture constrains it, preventing it from much movement. It digs deep into the figure's back and pulls apart at its skin; the position in which a society based solely off of consumerism leaves us.

The other, opposite end, materializes society if there weren't any branding at all. Life would be completely uniform across the board for everyone and our existence would be a robotic one. The black tape stems from the figure's limbs, trapping it to the point where there is no longer any possibility for shift. Its entire personality has been stripped apart. Both of these situations merge together and leave just the shell of a human body at the center.

Cyan

Consumer Culture and its Effects on self-expression

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Consumer Culture - a social system that is dominated by the consumption of commercial products - constrains us. Manipulates us. Bends our thoughts in ways over which we no longer have control. On the other hand the opposite of consumer culture would isolates us from everyone. We do not wish to be victims of either extreme.

At the same time that marketing culture deceives us, our society of spectacle also frees us to create whatever image of ourselves we wish for the world to see.

While our branding-oriented culture might seem detrimental to individual growth and culture, the ability for us to explore and connect with others through it could be a way to help us discover ourselves, use the tools of media to shine attention on issues that we care about, and inspire us collectively to create change.

Individualism in a Consumerist Society

Imagine a city where every single house is an exact replica of the previous one. Bus #11 arrives daily at exactly 9:03am to take you into the 2.75km radius city center and the nearest supermarket is, at most, 310 meters away from the farthest living space in the neighborhood. Imagine a city where every front yard is exactly 5 meters long with two street parking spaces in front in order to ensure the time it takes for the average person to walk from his or her car into their house is five seconds at most. In this city, efficiency is key. Imagine a city where everything always flows perfectly on schedule and there is a zero percent chance of change. Imagine Almere, The Netherlands. This is my hometown, and it exists today.

Almere is a polder¹ city created just over 40 years ago by reclaiming land from the IJsselmeer² Lake, which in turn was reclaimed from the North Sea. The city is in fact built right on top of an area that 100 years ago was ocean. Being such a new city, Almere was designed with the intent of fostering productivity with an emphasis on creating an inclusive society regardless of social status. However, when the population rose at an unexpectedly fast rate, the initial plans for an accepting community were scrapped and the efforts were focused instead on creating a more efficient and routine-oriented population flow. Every aspect of people's lives in Almere were directed by the hands of corporations and city planners to create a system in which individuals no longer have control of most their life choices. It was all designed to just be quicker and more convenient. The result, however, is that Almere is a city where individuals' lifestyles suffer from a lack of identity. It is a city where people have willingly given up their decision-making freedoms in favor of a system created by corporations looking to bring forth a robotic - but efficient - society. In this space, interaction and care is limited to include only oneself, playing on the idea of blissful ignorance in regard to one's neighbors; not only literally, but also metaphorically. As humans, we have been taught to overlook the true cost of products. This means going to the same grocery store or shopping center every Saturday morning and buying the promoted commodity, without thinking about its production or where it came from. We are taught to just be happy that these products magically reappear on our trusted shelves. In the consumerist society, corporations continually manipulate humans to ignore the manufacturing process, which is detrimental to our well-being, and to instead only focus on the resulting image, which we view as positive. There seems to be an abundance of product satisfying our bare necessities, so rather than worrying ourselves with the consequences of this or questioning the reason behind this, we instead direct our attention to the image that we put out through the consumption of them.

A commodity, as Karl Marx describes it is "a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind", such as sugar or gas. The use-value of these commodities is judged by its physical ability to fulfill our basic life essentials, through the angles of quality and quantity. However, our civilization now lives far beyond wanting basic needs at this point. Exchange-value is the term Marx uses to explain how products of similar function can be traded in the free market economy for different monetary values prescribed by the companies providing them. In *Das Kapital*, he explains that the reason behind this is labor: "As exchange-values,

¹ A tract of low land reclaimed from the sea or other body of water and protected by dikes

² Artificial lake created in 1932 when the large inland bay, Zuiderzee, was closed off by a dam for the engineering project, Zuiderzee Works. At 1100km² (424.7124mi²) it is the largest lake in Western Europe (even after much of its land was reclaimed for the creation of the Flevopolder of the Flevoland region, of which Almere is now the largest city, in 1968.)

all commodities are merely definite quantities of congealed labor-time" (Marx 130). He concludes this idea by then combining both the use- and exchange-values into the overall value of a product, stating that the latter would remain constant if the quality and quantity of both the labor and function of a product were to be the same across different providers. I believe that this concept, if taken as literally as it was written, is no longer true when observing our modern market, as utility seems to no longer be any more relevant to pricing than the image a customer seeks when buying a product.

Before the 1980s, an emphasis was placed on the importance of making things. Factories were of utmost importance because corporations were manufacturing their products and it was believed that the more products one produced, the more income this would generate. This is when the concentration was on labor and the quality and quantity of it. However, this method of creation was beginning to falter when corporations noticed that "they owned too much, employed too many people, and were weighed down with too many things", and a new kind of corporation on the rise. Companies like Nike and Tommy Hilfiger who "produced not things... but *images* of their brands. Their real work lay not in manufacturing, but in marketing... [They] no longer produce products and advertise them, but rather buy products and 'brand' them" (Klein 4-5). We have moved away from the physical production of items and are moving towards the psychological manipulation of human desire. Karl Marx's theories on use-value versus exchange-value in *Das Kapital* were first published in 1867, making them highly applicable to society then, but require retouching when speaking of our situation presently. Perhaps, the term 'labor', in our modern age, can be reinterpreted to include the work that companies put into their marketing to accommodate for the additional effort accompanied by *branding* and *image*. People now, rather than simply buying the necessary products, are purchasing brands and using these to put together the personal appearance, which they wish to embody.

Image vs. Individualism

I've always been told that if I want to excel, then my image is one of the most important qualities in the world. It matters how you look because it is directly correlated to how you will be perceived, and in turn, treated. This is how it has always been for as long as anyone I know can remember and this is how it likely will be for as long as I live, *or so I have been told*. I believe in the importance of self-expression; however, I also believe that image is something entirely different. Image does not necessarily require contributing towards one's own individualism or sense of personality. Image is what, as I have been taught, we build up as a façade for people around us, in order for it to be possible for us to expect a certain type of behavior in return. Unlike expression, image is not necessarily an external reflection of who one feels they are internally. For example, wearing heels out in public could be for a multitude of different reasons. If it was solely for one's own expression, they would be worn in order to feel more powerful and to walk with more conviction, but there are often times when wearing them is not an internal necessity to compensate for confidence. In these cases, nonetheless, they are still worn. This is decision made for image, in order to direct people's perception of one's person. People that walk in heels are often viewed as more elegant, more feminine, more mature, more intelligent, etc. and if these are the qualities that one wants to project around a certain audience for a specific occasion, then they must wear the heels even if they don't enjoy the act of doing so. In this way, it could be said that people in our society value image and the perception of reality over the actual thing.

The epigraph to the first chapter of Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle*, "Separation Perfected" expands on this, exclaiming: "For the present age, which prefers the sign

to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence... *illusion only is sacred, truth profane*. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness³". Debord defines these images, the illusions we publish, as the 'Spectacle', a mere, but preferred, representation of the truth, a 'show' if you will. Working hand in hand with our new means of market production, he argues that rather than reality, life is instead a vast collection of these spectacles. Many of the things we strive for, to fit in socially or to achieve a certain standing of living, are all representations of this concept, aided by mass media to appear desirable or even necessary. We are the consumers of not only products, but also of ideas, which companies, in turn, then often *turn into* products. For example, take the celebrity. The image they portray of themselves is highly manufactured and carefully curated, and created in order to sell themselves and their lifestyle to the public. The celebrity, or rather their image, is "the spectacular representation of a living human being... Being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived" (Debord 60). They seemingly show to the world the 'ideal' way of living and thus 'ordinary' humans feel the desire to be connected to these celebrities as we believe this brings us just *this much* closer to achieving this carefully fabricated lifestyle. We want to embody the same level of success they have seemed to achieve, even though this is just an illusion of the truth, a spectacle. What we are striving for is an intangible symbol that is simply representative of an imaginary perfect situation. Debord theorizes that this is true for all aspects of living and that all social relations are facilitated by the façade, an invisible divide between every living human being, of the spectacle.

I don't fully accept this idea a complete truth either. There is a different time and place for everything. If the idea that *all* social relations are mediated by images presented as mere representations of reality is really true then there can be under no circumstance genuine human connection. If it really were so, then there would be no such thing as reality. In that case, would symbols of the truth actually be reality? Then would it really be such a negative thing? What our society's consumption of products seems to provide for many people a sense of connection and belonging, a sense of expression, regardless how superficial, and individuality. Because what alternative form of expression do we have to go by if the true picture is so inaccessible? After all, much of our knowledge of another person depends, initially, heavily on these representational images. It is the first step we take in creating relationships. The images we portray express who we want to appear to be as individuals. So when we notice other people with similar images to our own, we feel the desire to connect with each other due to our perceived likeness. Human connection is a vital part of living. Being able to express ourselves with these 'illusions' and create for ourselves an individual both frees us and restricts us. The line between the two of these may not be finite, and the answer not be set in stone, but it is important to explore both sides of the argument when dealing with the topic of individuality versus image.

Individualism vs. Uniqueness

We are also under the impression that individuality and uniqueness are the same concepts and that the latter is also something to endeavor to achieve. In Western society, it seems true that we all want to be different, unique, and rebels of the norm. We want to be the first person, or best person to ever do something, anything. We dread the idea that it has already been done before us. But it is the truth. People are more similar to each other than we think. There are millions of

³ Feuerbach, Preface to the Second Edition of *The Essence of Christianity*

people who believe they are going against the general will of society who have the same opinions as each other. It goes hand in hand with expression of oneself, but I have found that there is seldom a facet in which we are truly unique. If we photographed and documented the thoughts of every person who claims to be different than the usual or identifies with an alternative approach to life and compared each of these photographs in a collage, we would begin to notice many similarities in both the opinions stated and the physical appearance between these people. But rather than dismay, I see comfort in the commonality of ideas and personas we share. If I were the only person to ever think a certain thought, and no one in the world shared this thought with me, if it is completely unique, then I would be deemed insane! There would be absolutely no way for me to prove my unique opinions to any other person with the absence of evidence. And if there were it would, in turn, no longer be unique. Instead of striving towards this goal and becoming the sole *experiencers* of certain aspects of life we should strive to become discoverers and teachers and share what we know in order to help the world grow together.

Can we see that connection with other people is more beneficial? Knowing that we aren't all so different comforts me. We aren't identical, as we have all lived different lives, but despite this, there is so much that we have in common. It's a wonderful thing. It means that my ideas aren't so crazy, because I can be sure that am not ever entirely alone in my thoughts. There is always someone out there who is just like me, who thinks what I think and who I can find and will be able to confide in. There will be other aspects of life that we will disagree on, but as human beings, those can be discussed to create mutual understanding and eventually we are able to gather more sides to the story and connect on a deeper level. We can all know that we're not alone. There is a fine line of similarity between the ideas of uniqueness and loneliness. I think we can find solace in knowing neither of these is one hundred percent true.

Connection and Manipulation as a Means to Divert

I want to create a piece of work that digs itself into and fully consumes the minds of its viewers with its intention. I want to create art that resonates in people's lives and transports these people into the position of the piece's subject. I want to generate a vivid reaction, whether that be an urgent need to express joyous laughter, or it be the itching sensation mimicking that of intrusive spiders crawling up their spines, finding a house within it and burrowing themselves there permanently. Why? Because to be able to create such a sense of connection being and another subject is one of the most powerful capabilities in the world. It is how you create a reaction. Unless they feel personally connected to a cause, most people don't truly feel resonance with issues that are occurring around the world. In order to truly make a change in the world and solve our problems, we need to formulate a plan to generate within each person a genuine drive to fix what might not affect them directly, urgently.

Unanswered Questions

The truth is, if we continue on with our current trajectory, soon many issues that were once distant, will hit suddenly very close to home. I wonder why it is that we haven't yet figured out a way to unite the world's population in this way. Corporations have long mastered the techniques of this power in order to be able to sell their products. Celebrities use their idealized platforms and publicity gained through media as a means to spread the ideals and ideas for further personal growth. Why is it that organizations that are mainly seeking monetary gain are able to grasp the attention of vast amount of people, while those working on curing the current

affairs seem to become more and more scarce⁴? How are certain techniques able to be used in such a way and to the extent that millions of people buy into the product that is being sold? How does this work differently when observing inconsistencies in human morality? What psychological and philosophical studies are there focusing on this way that humans make personal connections with things that are so separate from their own beings? Is it ever a possibility for these techniques can create a deep personal connection and sound attractive to 100% of the people, in such a way that everyone relates and feel personally towards a topic, to the extent that it then after causes said persons to start their own initiative? Can and will there ever be a true consensus about any discussable topic? Is corporate manipulation a necessary and natural part of living? How can I personally apply what they have been using for ages to fulfill my wishes of creating an active change in the world?

⁴ Why is it that we often become obsessed with seemingly trivial matters, but such as the latest gossip in celebrity news or acquiring next season's most fashionable runway items, but ignore so many life-threatening issues currently affecting billions of people on the planet around us?

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