

6/The Mass Production of Copies

President Carter loves repetition
Chairman Mao he dug repetition.

—The Fall, “Repetition,” *Bingo Master’s Breakout*, EP disc (1977)

The Multiple

You can see them on the factory conveyor belt in Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. What are they? Rectangular slabs of metal with two metal knobs growing out of them. They emerge out of a machine in an apparently infinite number, all exactly the same. They have no identity or purpose other than to make life hellish for the factory workers whose job it is to assemble something from them, but they are clearly copies. The workers themselves become twitching machines, each devoted to a single action on the assembly line, a gesture they repeat endlessly until it is all they can do in the world.

So far, we have examined different ways of framing a single act of copying, or a single event in which a copy manifests. But as the origins of the word “copy” (in “copia,” “copiousness”) attest, implicit in

the notion of copying is the possibility of producing multiple copies. If nothing else, we all understand that “copy” today means “more than one.” Copying is an act of repetition, and contains in it the possibility of repeating that repetition unto infinity. If the world we live in today is obsessed with copying and copies, it is because that world is one which is based on the amazing realization that we (who are “more than one”) can make “more than one” of just about everything, and, more darkly, that we are interested only in things that we can make, buy, or sell “more than one” of.

If marketplaces have always been places which heap up piles of objects in a display of richness, today’s supermarkets and malls, with their endless lanes and canyons stacked with vast quantities of goods are like galleries or cathedrals of copying. We walk these lanes in a strange trance, hypnotized by the sheer numbers of identical objects—which ripple around us, as Andreas Gursky has captured so beautifully in photographs like *99 Cent*. The counterparts to these shrines are found in the photos of Edward Burtynsky, who shows us the factories in which these copies are produced, the warehouses in which they are stored before heading off to the malls, and the garbage dumps in which they end up and from which they are sometimes recycled.¹

This is the other side of copia as abundance—what Taussig, following Horkheimer and Adorno, calls “the organization of mimesis”² through the global capitalist economy, the nation-state, and its various appendages and substrates. We might also call it “the modern appropriation of copia,” since it is a very particular enframing of copia as universal abundance, as plenitude.

Why are objects stacked en masse in a supermarket or store? As I walk the aisles and look up and down the shelves, what I see are copies, identical copies. When I walk through the supermarket, where bright lights are reflecting off the shiny packaging and the products themselves are hanging in groups, I am sent into a trance. Perhaps, as

Brion Gysin suggests, we all recognize the trace of infinity that is there in the rows upon rows of objects sitting on those shelves. They can look beautiful, as those Gursky photos show. Or rather: sublime, in the sense of something overwhelming that exceeds the senses' ability to take it in, as though the whole of the global marketplace were somehow embodied in those aisles, with their apparently endless waves of consumer products looming above us.

Despite Plato's hostility to mimesis, the world of industrialized mass production of copies appears as a bizarre realization of Platonic philosophy concerning the object. The essence remains an idea which can be implemented not once but an almost infinite number of times, each iteration of the object having the same relation to essence, or lack thereof, as all the others. Processes such as standardization function as a perverse implementation of Platonic idealism, since they encourage the notion that if each industrially produced object is identical to every other, this must be because they are all "perfect copies" and thus stand in undistorted relation to the ideal which they are a manifestation of. Furthermore, if outward appearance is a way in which the idea comes to presence, as Heidegger suggested in his reading of Plato, then identical packaging, seductive presentation, act to confuse us into thinking that we are getting something more real than real itself—not merely the already-distorted copy of the craftsman, but an object that, through the effacement of its own production, can be perceived (falsely, of course) as being somehow closer to the idea itself.

The counterpoint to these supermarkets and mass-produced items can be found in composer/artist Phill Niblock's beautiful movie *The Movement of People Working*, which projects images of people around the world at work simultaneously on multiple screens, to a soundtrack of the vast pulsating drones which Niblock has explored throughout his musical career. This juxtaposition is an enigmatic one, without any obvious explanation. But the droning provides a

powerful counterpoint to the repetitive, cyclical, sensuous movements of dockworkers and others, their slow work of transformation of their worlds. The droning constitutes a hub of sameness, but a sameness that, over time, changes in its aspects—as all sustained tones do, and as “people working” do. The discipline, concentration, and mastery involved in sensuous labor are presented sympathetically, but without sentimentality, embedded in the limited economy of a particular marketplace, as well as in the general economy of universal flux.

The Mass-Produced Object

Mass production did not begin with European and American industrialization, or for that matter with Gutenberg’s printing press. Any consideration of mass production, even as an object of human consciousness, must begin by recognizing it as a physical and biological phenomenon that is evident everywhere to us: the falling of rain and snowflakes, the growth of leaves on trees, the spreading of trees into a forest, the massing of birds in flight. Reproduction, in the visible world of insects, mammals, and plants, as well as in the invisible-to-the-naked-eye world of microorganisms, occurs mostly through a proliferation of apparently identical organisms, seeds, spores. Even the stars appear as a mass phenomenon, from which humans make differential figurations of various names and forms.

The manufacture of a mass of more or less identical or “standardized” objects and forms by human beings can be traced back as far as the Neanderthal age, in which we know, for example, that humans made such things as beads. But this raises the question: What exactly do we mean by “mass-produced object”? Can a mass of lotus seeds, of the kind used for *malas* in India even today, be viewed as so many “copies”? Are they mass-produced? Copia, as goddess of the harvest, is the goddess of masses, of the massing and gathering of na-

ture, which works through the production of multiples, seeds, leaves, fields of plants, the teeming of tiny fishes in rivers, the endless rolling of waves. But some further act of appropriation or transformation—call it labor, work, production—must be performed on those nature-produced masses before we refer to them as “copies.” Thus, *Copia* is also the goddess of the storehouse, where abundance is measured and held in reserve for the future.

The question of the origin of mass production is an open one, but it is clear that most of the elements have been in use for a long time. Seals and stamps, which are able to mark objects in a repetitive, identical fashion have a long history as markers of property or identity, dating back to at least the fourth millennium B.C. Religious objects, such as the clay figurines known in Tibet as *tsa tsa*, were produced en masse in both Asia and Europe for millennia. These were “copies” of deities brought to life by cultures that believed the deity could find its way into presence an infinite number of times in an infinite number of objects—not because of an idea, but because of rituals of supplication, blessing by religious teachers, infusion with relics, and other tactile mechanisms of mimetic magic. According to Lothar Ledderose, mechanical duplication of bronze vessels in China dates back to the fifth century B.C., and Chinese factories utilized the division and specialization of labor to mass-produce lacquer and bronze objects in the first century A.D. Amphorae were mass-produced in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome for transport of wine and other goods. They were often stamped or otherwise marked to identify their place of origin, for otherwise these products would fall back into the sea of undifferentiation.³

Looked at from this point of view, the various histories of mass production, in ancient China, Greece, Rome, Mesopotamia; the revival and transfiguration of these methods in the Renaissance, with the printing press, and the modular production of ships and other items in Venice; the Industrial Revolution in England in the eighteenth century; the Fordist assembly line at the beginning of the

twentieth century—all can be viewed as chapters in an enormous universal history of the drive to make copies, to mass-produce identical items, and to expand this mass production to every possible sphere by all available means. Above and against all the avowed utilitarian goals that this mass production is said to enable—from the satisfaction of economic wants at a lower cost, to the equitable distribution of needed items—lies a fascination with the magic by which things, including money, can be multiplied, a still-mysterious power. Contagion, named by Taussig (following Frazer) as one of the two components of mimetic magic, is itself a power of multiplication and proliferation; for the unstable act or event by which a mimetic reshaping takes place, whose simplest form is doubling or a single repeat, already implies the possibility of a reoccurring, a repetition *ad infinitum*.

The fear of being inundated, submerged in a crowd, or trapped in an unending repetition is a basic human fear, although it has taken particular forms in modern societies, where the fragility of bourgeois individualism runs up against the ominous masses who loom, waiting to stake their claim on history. Repetition, as Freud told us, can be the mechanism of repression, but also, simultaneously, of the insistence of the traumatic fact, in the form of symptom.

Mass production reigns supreme today—not just the mass production of consumer items, but the mass production of natural resources secured as a standing reserve to be sold and consumed, the mass production of weapons, the mass production of information in various media. There is also the mass production of markets, both physically in the growth of shopping malls and similar retail spaces around the world, and in the ideology of the capitalist marketplace as the only game in town (aside from the military and the priesthood, both intensely mimetic formations as well) in the age of globalization—a process that is itself a particular implementation of strategies of mimetic installation.

Towns, too, can be mass-produced from a blueprint, as attested by

the endless proliferation of mock-Tudor pseudo-villages, houses all built at the same time within a certain margin of variation, in the suburbs of major metropolitan areas around the world. In these towns we find the same stores, the same entertainment centers, as corporations seeking global saturation of markets compulsively spew out copies of their products and business models, with minor variations for whatever remains of local condition—in imitation of the Darwinian model of nature, which is the reigning dogma today. It is an ideology of saturation, of proliferation that continues until an externally imposed limit is met. Even the ideology of individuality and/or uniqueness is mass-produced, through websites like MySpace or businesses such as Dell's build-on-demand computer company, which automate the production of individual identities and products as possible iterations of a predetermined set of options and possibilities that can be mass-produced.

Nations are likewise copies, assembled out of mimetic desire, the desire to be what others around them claim to be, this thing called a "nation"; or conversely, the object of a desire on the part of others which forces a group or space to submit to the installation of the structures of nationhood. Power functions through imitation. In Bertrand Russell's definition, it is the ability to produce intended effects. Power, then, is always mimetic, since the effect is the repetition of the intention. Power works through installing effects and making them endure. Thus the monumental architectures of power, from feudal castles to modern government buildings like the White House in Washington or the Hall of the People in Beijing; but also the everyday rituals of interpellation that constitute modern life—for example, business attire (men in dark-gray suits, sober ties, close-cropped hair, smiling and shaking hands with each other, in imitation of the CEO or national leader), or Louis Vuitton bags as fashion accessories. Countless men and women imitate these images of power.

It is banal but nonetheless true to say that our hunger for copies threatens to consume the world, without our even being aware of what it is we are hungering for. But mass production can also be a progressive force that makes it possible for many more people to have access to things they want or need. We also fear it, because it breaks the taboos on copying that I described in Chapter 3. Mass production reminds us of that teeming biological mass that we come from and live in; and it contains an echo of that greater similarity which we are part of, and the limits to our own separateness and individuality.

Commodity Fetishism

In what, then, does the specificity of capitalist mass production consist? *Copia*, the goddess of abundance, has been appropriated in the modern, capitalist, industrialized marketplace through what Marx termed “commodity fetishism.” The shift from the craftsman’s making of a table to the stepping forth of that table as a commodity is a shift in the table’s mimetic qualities. Before, the craftsman’s table was a reasonably well-behaved Platonic object, the idea, coming to presence in wood, but also maintaining the nature of wood itself. After, the table-as-commodity becomes “something transcendent,” “stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas.” It also stands the Platonic hierarchy of idea-and-object on its head, reversing it so that the object now invents ideas.⁴ “Fetishism” refers to the practice, supposedly confined to the non-Western world, of attributing powers and agency to inanimate objects. “Commodity fetishism,” then, involves discovering a whole set of mimetic magical powers latent within the Platonic object, and setting them free—so long as they conform to the rules of the marketplace. The table has been transformed; it means something different from what it formerly did; it has different powers, “metaphysical subtleties.”

What are these powers? First, it has exchange value—in other words, a price—by which it is linked to everything else that has a price. And this exchange value is an abstraction of the labor that went into the production of the object. But as Taussig points out, it is this absorption of the sensuous powers and energy of labor into the commodity that provides the tactile, contagious component of mimetic magic: “The swallowing-up of contact we might say, by its copy, is what ensures the animation of the latter, its power to straddle us.” The commodity “conceals in its innermost being not only the mysteries of the socially constructed nature of value and price, but also all its particulate sensuousness—and this subtle interaction of sensuous perceptibility and imperceptibility accounts for the fetish quality, the animism and spiritual glow of commodities.”⁵

What, then, accounts for the fetish quality of noncapitalist commodity forms? Arjun Appadurai has argued that the structure of the commodity is not unique to industrial capitalist societies, and has shown that around the world, “things” manifest as commodities according to a variable political organization of exchange and exchange value that includes barter, gift giving, and gift receiving, as well as money-based transactions.⁶ We could extend Appadurai’s argument with respect to the Marxian fetish too. All forms of fabrication endow their products with fetish powers that contain within them the sensuous work of production, whether this happens through nature, artisanal methods of craftsmanship, factory assembly lines, or the fully automated factory. Speaking more broadly, all actions that go toward shaping particular names, forms, and identities are fetishistic in their transformation and appropriation of the object as object. In other words; whenever something is labeled an “object,” the structure of the fetish is already there. Bruno Latour coined the term “factish” in order to draw attention to this process, even in the objective production of scientific knowledge.

The difference between fetishes in traditional societies, where all

matter is animated, and fetishes in modern capitalist societies, where all matter has exchange value, at first appears to be one of volume. But as I argued in the chapter on copia, folk cultures always possess the means to “infinite” their local environments. The abstraction of the products of this local process of infinitezation, as they are exchanged in a vast global marketplace, results in a particular mode of fetishization. The folk object or commodity integrates within its outward appearance the marks of environment and history which constitute what Benjamin called its “aura.” The capitalist commodity whose outward appearance takes the form of the plastic-wrapped, colorfully packaged object for sale at Walmart is “new”; and by an abstraction of the sensuous labor that went into making it, an evasion of the signs of history that would constitute aura, it is presented as something close to the Platonic idea of the object. As a copy, rather than a thing made imperfect by the wear-and-tear of the world, it appears perversely more close to being ideal. Capitalist commodities present themselves as “perfect copies,” meaning the embodiment of the ideal form in an object protected from history and the world.

Money

Money was arguably one of the earliest mass-produced objects. Money appears to have emerged in Mesopotamia and Egypt when agricultural products such as grain and livestock became standard measures of value beyond their actual use value. Among the earliest physical forms of money were objects, such as cowrie shells, that were somewhat rare (cowries were found only in the Maldive Islands), naturally multiple, visually splendid and thus ornamental and/or prestigious, and that were also invested with exchange value. Coins evolved from the use of particular weights of silver or gold as currency in Mesopotamia, as far back as 3000 B.C. The widespread

practice of counterfeiting such weights (by mixing other metals in) led to the Lydians' development of the stamped coin around 600 B.C.; the shape of the coin and the mark stamped onto it guaranteed authenticity and weight.⁷ Although the forms of weighed precious-metal coins may have been identical, it is the gesture of stamping each coin that makes coins copies. Such guarantees operate within particular sets of limits, and within a socioeconomic-political structure that assumes a monopoly in the production of coins; if anyone at all could make a copy of a coin, it would cease to have the value that it does. Given that money began as a quantity of precious metals, measured as a weight, and later became coinage whose form symbolically denoted a quantitative value, we might ask: Is there a copying that is purely quantitative and does not involve a symbolic or formal act of imitation? Conversely, can there ever be a purely quantitative entity whose appearance does not depend on an act of mimetic figuration? The importance today of stock indexes, tickertape, and the rest of the iconography of the global financial system is evident—as though even in an age of computerized numerical calculations, some act of figuration is necessary.

Money literally embodies many of the qualities we have discussed regarding the infinite plasticity of mimesis. Money, as the marker of exchange value, the privileged register of economic circulation, is a powerful manifestation of “mimetic energy,” with all the supple flexibility of form and value that implies. This flexibility is intimately linked to the possibility of exchange itself, and to the transfer of power and value from object to object, and from person to person. The very qualities that modern money is said to possess—storage of value, abstraction, and convertibility, for example—illustrate the plasticity of mimesis, the incredible ease with which likeness or equivalence can be produced. In this sense, it's no coincidence that “plastic” (as in, “I'll put it on plastic”) is vernacular for “money” in its potent but temporary abstraction—the monthly credit card bill being all too real.

A certain tendency of money to multiply is also related to mimesis. Inflation, for example, is often the result of excessive exploitation of the possibility of mass-producing money, i.e., copying banknotes; leverage is a way of mass-producing money through a multiplication of debt. From Girard, we are aware of the tendency of mimetic energy to multiply itself, proliferate; and these dangers are certainly apparent in the history of money and economies, to the point where we might wonder if Bataille's "accursed share," the tendency toward excess that he saw as a universal law, is itself connected to a quality of mimesis.

Branding

Mass production today is not just the mass production of the identical, à la *Modern Times*, although the Walmarts, Home Depots, and Ikeas of this world still exist to service the need for this (along with so-called hackers, in the case of Ikea, who work at transforming the generic items on sale). This is modular mass production in which the mass-produced items are "unique objects," limited editions, customized, personalized, individualized objects, featuring add-ons, deluxe options, and so on. Examples range from the variety of coffee options at Starbucks, to Dell's build-on-demand model of computer manufacture, to Nike's design-your-own sneaker salons.

What holds this mass of options and singularities within a particular set of names and forms is a series of strategies, such as branding, advertising, and marketing, which use mimetic magic in particular ways to transform objects that are essentially generic into highly charged objects of desire. Naomi Klein's *No Logo* provides a good description of the factories where sneakers and other brand-name clothes are made.⁸ She shows us how a generic object—let's say, a shoe that fits a human foot and that is made of a rubber sole and a stitched-leather or canvas upper—gets turned into a branded product. The factory workers in Sumatra who make a particular brand of

shoe are working with copies of a shoe design to mass-produce an object. But the sportswear company then transforms these copies by adding logos and other design elements, by naming the shoes, by introducing permutable options, and by linking them to a whole advertising and marketing apparatus that transforms the set of associations connected to the shoes.⁹

Branding works because of the same paradox regarding the copy that I set out in Chapter 1. It is the nonexistence of a Platonic essence to the things of this world that paradoxically allows their transformation through mimetic magic into a branded product, but the continuing belief in this essence then serves to help make the products of this transformation appear as natural or truly existing. In his recent book *Lovemarks*, Kevin Roberts, CEO of the advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi, talks about the enormous emotional investment and charge which is the true currency of successful branding. Indeed, the possibility of transfer of ungrounded patterns of energy, which have the ability to attain being in temporary, multiple ways through techniques of mimetic magic, is the basis of branding and advertising. This transfer is usually accomplished through an intense feeling such as desire or fear, which, as we all know, are emotions that can be easily manipulated.

Although we are continuously immersed in the rhetoric of individuality, free choice, and uniqueness, which branding exploits in a variety of ways, there would be no possibility of creating a product line, let alone a brand, without the serial chains of similarity that allow for identities to emerge out of a mass of copies. In the words of Jean Baudrillard: “The serial nature of the most mundane of everyday objects, as of the most transcendent of rarities, is what nourishes the relationship of ownership and the possibility of passionate play: without seriality no such play would be conceivable, hence no possession—and hence, too, properly speaking, no object. A truly unique, absolute object, an object such that it has no antecedents and

is in no way dispersed in some series or other—such an object is unthinkable.”¹⁰

Without this seriality, there is no such thing as a brand. Shell Oil could decide to diversify into breakfast cereal, and Merck pharmaceuticals could start its own record label, but it would be difficult to do this without some historical, productive trace that facilitated this. The attraction of Louis Vuitton bags is that the original objects themselves look like exquisite copies. The very idea of branding is contingent on a company’s ability to separate the existential objects that it produces from the idea or image of them. Branding is always a revaluation and an appropriation, and the very thing that it insists on, the uniqueness of the brand, is necessarily impossible, or, to use Baudrillard’s word, “unthinkable.” Of course, there is no reason this insight should not also be appropriated. On the Web, one can purchase bags emblazoned with the legend: “This is a fake LV bag.” But surely it is only a matter of time until Vuitton markets its own fakes, designed by Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons.

Compression and Amplification

The seriality of objects around us today is obvious to all, but branding is only one of the ways in which it is produced. Another way is through scale—for example, Starbucks’ Tall and Grande coffees, a crafty appropriation of branding into the language of scale, increasing the identificatory power and prestige of Starbucks’ product. Many brands today produce items whose value is tied to the scale on which they are produced: limited-edition runs of items manufactured in a different color or slightly different style, such as Adidas’ Missy Elliott Bass Line shoe; or mass-produced versions of *haute couture* items, such as Armani’s AX line. The meaning of the product is intimately linked to knowledge of the number of copies that exist.

Manipulation of scale is one of the basic mimetic strategies. Cana-

dian multimedia artist David Rokeby uses surveillance and digital-scanning technologies to explore the power of compression and amplification.¹¹ The simplest example of compression would be the movement from hearing a concert in a concert hall, to listening to a CD recording of the concert, to listening to an MP3 of the same concert. Each step of the process entails considerable compression. In the first case, the full complexity of the concert performance (mediated by amplification) is translated and compressed into digital data, which is considerably less rich than the original sound. This data is then compressed tenfold further, into an MP3 file. A similar process happens visually when one takes a photograph of a landscape, prints from the negative, digitally scans the print into a TIFF file, and then converts the TIFF into a JPEG. Rokeby points out that at every stage in the process, technicians make decisions as to what parts of the original they need to preserve in order to maintain the similarity of the compressed file to the original, and which parts are unnecessary and can be discarded. When something is compressed, the compression is a creative act of transformation of the original, and the consequences of this shift of scale are considerable. My iPod, about the size of a deck of cards, contains the equivalent of several rooms full of vinyl LPs or a sizable wall of CDs. It compresses a mass down to a tiny size.

Amplification is also a powerful tool for transformation of an object. Not only can one stretch the object by making it larger, so that the bits are distributed over a larger area of time and space, but one can also build larger, high-resolution versions of the object, whether it be the vast statue of Maitreya that is currently being built in Bodhgaya, full of sacred relics, or Jeff Koons's gigantic poodle at the Guggenheim in Bilbao. An elegant digital example would be Leif Inge's *Nine Beet Stretch*, which time-stretches a digital recording of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony so that it lasts twenty-four hours, adjusting the pitches so that they match those of the original, creating

dense, glacially shifting walls of sound that still contain the melodic and harmonic qualities of Beethoven's original, in nearly unrecognizable form.

All decisions as to scale are creative ones. Such decisions are a basic form of copia, and the production of difference within the same. To quote Morton Feldman, one of the first composers to devote himself to the exploration of repetition:

Like that small Turkish "tile" rug, it is Rothko's scale that removes any argument over the proportions of one area to another, or over its degree of symmetry or asymmetry. The sum of the parts does not equal the whole; rather scale is discovered and contained as an image. It is not form that floats the painting, but Rothko's finding that particular scale which suspends all proportions in equilibrium. . . . For me, stasis, scale and pattern have put the whole question of symmetry and asymmetry in abeyance.¹²

In Feldman's work, "scale" means the number of repetitions of a melodic shape in a particular piece, and thus also the duration of the piece. Feldman's *Second String Quartet* runs for close to six hours of variations on a chord-like cluster of notes.

In a variety of Buddhist devotional practices, the use of symmetrical and other scalable elements makes possible the creation of forms which manifest a specific and recognizable "likeness" or pattern that expands or contracts according to the situation. One of the foundational texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*, exists as the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra in One Syllable* and also as the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra in 100,000 Lines*—and these texts are not "different." A mandala or "mind palace," providing a blueprint for the visualization of the universe as an arrangement of interdependent enlightened forces and elements, can exist as a narrative text, a 2D painting of almost any size (e.g., on canvas, in sand), a 3D sculpture,

a mental image, or a variety of other things. The symmetrical quality of mandalas suggests the way that pattern can emerge from an essenceless, mirrorlike, groundless repetition in which one side repeats the other. Although such symmetry is something we take for granted—in the shape of our own bodies, in nature, in our various productions—it underlies much of what we find both disturbing and fascinating about copying.

Many Buddhist practices involve repetitions and visualizations of phenomena on a vast scale. The Ngöndro or preliminary practices of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, involve one hundred thousand prostrations, the same number of recitals of the hundred-syllable Vajrasattva mantra, and so on. Other Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools have similar quantitative practices, the goal of which is to saturate the individual and the universe simultaneously with a particular relative, cognitive structure, to point to and produce through practice and repetition a recognition of our always already-existing absorption in the sphere of nonduality. The mass production of brands, commodities, saturation advertising, propaganda attempt a similar level of saturation, but with no other aim than the monopolization of consciousness for purposes of control.

Fountain(s)

Art has been confounded with the art object—the stone, the canvas, the paint—and has been valued because, like the mystic experience, it was supposed to be unique. Marcel Duchamp was, no doubt, the first to recognize an element of the infinite in the Ready Made—our industrial objects manufactured in “infinite” series.

—Brion Gysin, “Dream Machine,” in *Back in No time: The Brion Gysin Reader*, ed. Jason Weiss (2001)

In 1917, one R. Mutt of Philadelphia (a.k.a. Marcel Duchamp) submitted a found object, a “readymade,” for the first exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists. The object, entitled *Foun-*

tain and signed on one edge, was a lavatory urinal, turned on its side and placed on a pedestal. The exhibition jury rejected the object, claiming: “It is, by no definition, a work of art.”¹³ The object sat behind a partition for the duration of the exhibition, after which it was sold and then lost. Today, we know *Fountain* primarily through a photograph of it taken by Alfred Stieglitz. But during his life, Duchamp also made several copies of the piece, consisting either of found objects like the original, or of replicas cast in full size or in miniature.

The urinal used in *Fountain* was an industrially produced object, one of a series manufactured from a mold, en masse, by J. L. Mott Ironworks of Fifth Avenue, New York. Placed on a pedestal in an art gallery, the object became singular—a copy presented as an original, although its creator was nevertheless accused of “plagiarism” and lack of originality.

Duchamp theorized *Fountain* and his other readymades through the concept of the infrathin: “The difference / (dimensional) between / 2 mass produced objects / [from the same mold] / is an infra thin / when the maximum(?) / precision is / . . . obtained.”¹⁴ The infrathin establishes a minimal unit of difference which, conversely, establishes the absolute singularity of all objects—including apparently identical mass-produced artifacts, such as urinals produced from a single mold. Thus, Duchamp observes: “The possible is / an infra-thin— / The possibility of several / tubes of color / becoming a Seurat is / the concrete “explanation” / of the possible as infra / thin.”¹⁵ Even the most “perfect” copies are different, because their spatial situation and thus their relationship to their environment must be different—they cannot be identical. Also, they cannot be composed of exactly the same physical matter—the molecules of which they are made are not the same. Furthermore, the time and place of their production must be slightly different, even if both objects were created in a mass-production facility using the same

mold—again, because a machine cannot produce two objects in the same place at the same time; it produces them either sequentially in time in the same location, or simultaneously but adjacently. Finally, all objects, mass-produced or not, have their own unique histories—as did *Fountain*, made from a urinal that Duchamp had bought used—and it is these unique histories which produce what Walter Benjamin called the “auras” of objects.¹⁶ While Benjamin argued that mechanical reproduction destroyed the unique aura of objects, and while few people are interested in the extremely subtle and delicate set of distinctions that would mark off one particular mass-produced object from another, there is a great deal of importance to these distinctions. Any object, whether naturally occurring, hand-crafted, or factory made, is unique in that it is composed of unique physical matter, occupies a unique point in the space-time continuum, and has a unique passage through that continuum, meaning that it has a unique history. In this sense, all objects can be said to possess an aura; and phenomenologically and otherwise, this is what it means to say that “this object exists.” And here we are not even thinking about another issue that interested Duchamp: whether an object is the same object it was one second before (from the point of view of physics, it is not).¹⁷ In other words, whether the being-in-time of all entities and objects has as its correlative a singularity or uniqueness that manifests at every moment within nonduality.

The gesture of drawing attention to an infrathin is commonplace in contemporary art, where everything from a drugstore (Damien Hirst) to classic paintings and photographs (Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine), to pop-cultural imagery and text (Andy Warhol etc.), to a pile of bricks has been re-presented in a gallery or museum context. But the infrathin is also operative in folk cultures—in the repetition of generic motifs and devices such as particular songs, rhythms, patterns, and practices, in situations where the singularity that is evoked is not merely a singularity wrested from the illusory appearance of

the identical, but a significant, contingent, affectively potent singularity.

Duchamp himself was rather cautious about readymades, and in his 1961 essay on them, he notes: “I realized very soon the danger of repeating indiscriminately this form of expression and decided to limit the production of ‘readymades’ to a small number yearly. I was aware at this time that for the spectator, even more than for the artist, art is a habit-forming drug, and I wanted to protect my ‘readymades’ against such contamination.”¹⁸ Again, we come up against the danger of a contagious proliferation of objects that begins as soon as a mimetic process is initiated. The comparison of these dangers to a drug recalls Plato’s mimetic pharmakon. Repetition is “habit forming”—it can lead to Hegel’s bad quantitative infinity, where “one more” is added an infinite number of times.

The Information Object

Mass production today increasingly means the mass production of digital objects. The imagined proximity of the digital copy to Plato’s ideal form is radically changing our relation to objects, so that the actual object is undergoing a major devaluation in favor of virtual objects, which form an increasingly “loud cloud” around us. My iPod has 12,990 songs on it, including duplicates. Like Benjamin with his book collection, I have not listened to most of them, and I know they exist only because they appear within the grid of a database on iTunes in a way that locates them.

One of the basic uses of computers is to give names to objects in the form of particular strings of ones and zeros. In his groundbreaking 1979 story “True Names,” computer scientist Vernor Vinge spelled out many of the possibilities for creating multiple identities, for surveillance, and for tracking that have become basic facts of twenty-first-century life. “True names” are the names by which you

can be tracked, the digital code that underlies the Dungeons and Dragons mythical names that the protagonist and his proto-chatroom denizens use, as well as the everyday names which hide the hacker's true identity and agency. In his book *Shaping Things*, science-fiction writer Bruce Sterling describes what he calls the "Internet of things." The history of object tracking in business goes back a long way, and is most familiar to us in the form of the barcode—the set of black and white stripes, attached to most industrially produced objects, that a scanner can read and translate into information which can then be connected to a computer database. Sterling describes the recent development of arphids (a.k.a. RFIDs)—digital tags, with a small radio attached, that can broadcast the identity of the object to systems capable of tracking the object in time and space. These arphids become the names of objects, since "naming enables the generation of pattern. Naming enables measurement."¹⁹ They are not generic, as a barcode is, but unique to each object.

What Sterling means by the "Internet of things" is the possibility of being able to search for and track down any object in the world using its arphid identity. According to Sterling, the result "is that I no longer inventory my possessions inside my own head. They're inventoried through an automagical inventory voodoo, work done far beneath my notice by a host of machines. I no longer bother to remember where I put things" (93). Furthermore, because every object is in some sense at hand—can be called forth on the Internet of things (Heidegger would say that *where* it is no longer matters, since all distances are similar, but *what* it is is no longer known, since what is closest to us remains a mystery)—the actual material presence of the object is unimportant. Indeed, "at many other times, many crucial times of serious decision, I'm much better served with a representation of that object" (95). The object itself is now "merely hard copy" (96) which can be made or found when required, while a "weightless, conceptual interactive model that I can rotate inside a screen"

(95)—in other words, the digital file—holds the true identity of the object, including the history of its real-life uses.

This is the object as pattern, as information, as accumulation of ones and zeros. It is then concretized by a machine called a fabricator that spews out copies of the information object known as “fabjects.” From Sterling’s point of view, this system will make possible a true ecology of matter and material objects, which will be designed and tracked from idea to store to consumer to wastebasket to recycling heap. Thus, what appears to be a joke at Plato’s expense, with “ideal form” replaced by “information object,” actually ends up reflecting Plato’s caution with and suspicion of material objects—i.e., fabjects as mere false copies of the real ideal forms.

In the light of what I have said about copia, there are reasons to doubt this ecologically correct view of copying. If industrialization came about because a few wealthy people were able to get their hands on technologies that allowed the infinite replication of material objects, a capability they then proceeded to indulge to extreme excess, the democratization of material industrial production through the universal availability of “fabricators” is likely to cause an exponential increase in material production—as the ubiquity of personal computers and printers has resulted in a rapid growth in paper consumption and printing.²⁰ The production of copies, as I hope I have demonstrated already, is a matter of *passion*, of almost bottomless fascination, and the idea that the workers of this world will enjoy it any less than their bourgeois predecessors is questionable.

While the mass production of objects has been shifted to non-Western countries, Western economies concern themselves with the creation of services, lifestyles, information. The folk-cultural practice of copia provides a set of models, styles, and blueprints that can be appropriated from the community that developed them and mass-produced somewhere on the planet, then marketed and sold globally.

But one of the consequences of the personal computer is the pos-

sibility that, whereas formerly mass production was limited to a small elite class of bourgeois entrepreneurs, today many more people can mass-produce copies of things. And this is the major crisis concerning copying today. Terrorism is spoken of as “asymmetrical” warfare because the size of the threat is much larger than the quantity of participants, wealth, or conventionally defined power involved. Computer-virus attacks, denial-of-service attacks, spam, the distribution of MP3s through peer-to-peer networks, news blogs, and the like all make possible an asymmetrical production and distribution of copies with considerable consequences. Different phenomena have different levels of resistance to being copied and reproduced in this way: music, itself so close to nonduality, is eminently copyable and lends itself well to mass distribution, whether by phonograph, cassette, CD, or MP3. Matter, including human beings, is much more difficult to digitize, although back in the 1950s Norbert Wiener argued that teleporting humans was by no means impossible, just technically very difficult for now.²¹

Digital Perfection?

If there is no such thing as a perfect copy in the material world, can we say the same thing about a digital copy? Mathematically, it seems possible that two copies of a computer file could well be composed of completely identical data—i.e., the same stream of ones and zeros. At first glance, these two copies of a file would be identical in a way that two of Duchamp’s urinals could never be. They might genuinely be identical. But there are objections to this at a number of levels.

First, from a physical point of view, it is as impossible for two copies of a digital file to be stored in the same place as it is for two copies of an object to occupy the same point in space-time. The place where digitally copied things are held, waiting to be called up, replicated, recombined, is a database or filing system, which is where a digital

copy is physically located, in the form of a series of ones and zeros, symbolically registered as bits of high and low voltages stored in a series of compartments. Thus, just as two urinals cannot occupy the same space, the same is true for two digital files, which would have to be stored either on different computers or in different locations on the same hard drive. Even if they were on identical hard drives, the way in which they were stored would be different, since files are not stored as a linear sequence. The two copies that were generated from another copy would also have a certain error rate, which, although quite low, means that files of any significant size would not be exactly the same. And again, when the code was executed, each file would be executed either on a different computer in a different digital environment from the other, or on the same computer but not simultaneously, and so the execution of the code would be different, both in the time elapsed and in the outcome. The difference might be small, but the files would not be identical.

New-media theorist Julian Dibbell has pointed out that the question of how a one and a zero are constituted in different computing systems is also indeterminate—that ones and zeros are not absolute quantities, but simply temporary differences in voltage. In a recent conversation, he observed:

We tend to think of bits as these sort of atomic, on-or-off monads, but they are usually represented as two different voltage levels—1 being thus-and-such a voltage, 0 being another. And since there's usually a gap between the levels, and large numbers of electrons involved in determining a given voltage, there's lots of room for physical difference at the electron level between two digitally equivalent bits. Digital information really is nothing more or less than a form of writing. Just about any question you ask about bits can be illuminated by asking it about script, I find. So: "How different can two electronically coded 1's be?" is sort of like

asking how different two 1's written on a page can be. The answer to the latter is: very different indeed, as the disciplines of typography, calligraphy, and handwriting analysis attest. The "invisibility" of electronic code makes it sort of opaque to these disciplines. But is it impossible to imagine that there might one day be a sort of calligraphy of the bit?²²

Thus, Duchamp's infrathin, the smallest possible difference between similar things, asserts its full power in the computer: the difference between a one and a zero is an infrathin, or is becoming an infrathin as technologies seek the smallest, the briefest, the most subtle measurable difference between states of energy or matter—the infrathin as the minimum, minimal unit of information. Stretched out in ever-longer chains of ones and zeros, the power of the infrathin is maximized. Going back to Walter Benjamin's dictum, explored in Chapter 1, concerning the interplay of sensuous (i.e., semiotic) and nonsensuous similarity in mimesis, we can say that ones and zeros are semiotically different, but that this difference is reduced to the minimum needed to be technically perceptible. The digital realm relies on the fact that energy itself is discontinuous. The mimetic power of the computer—the flexibility with which it establishes new kinds of mimetic relationships between entities—may be related to the proximity of sensuous and nonsensuous similarities. In other words, digital ones and zeros represented as tiny differentials of energy are as close to being "the same" as it is possible to be, while maintaining a quantifiable difference. And they point to, or figure, that nonconceptual mimetic stuff/nonstuff through which we fabricate the relative world of name and form which we inhabit.

The Politics of the Infrathin and the Infinite

We vacillate continuously. We are all the same; we are not the same. We are copies produced by the shuffling of genetic code; we are all

unique individuals with our own specificity and contingency. As Henry Flynt points out, many of the claims that are made to the effect that we are all identical machines are mere posturing, and the all-too-human actions and affects of those who make claims of being robots or genetic clones or networked computers reveal themselves as such at every moment.²³ At the same time, the creative appropriation of images and discourses of uniformity is a key part of contemporary culture, from drag queens and kings to the Crips-and-Bloods gang aesthetic in hip-hop, to the various mutations of skin-head. All speak of a knowing embrace of copying as a strategy that produces a rule, a game, a challenge out of the tension between same and different.

But is the difference between man and man not also an infrathin? Freud coined the term “narcissism of small differences” to describe the exaggeration of this infrathin as a way of trying to establish individual separateness and self. But the acceptable margin of our differentness is also very small; corporeal and mental deviations from the norm remain disturbing to us, and, in the past, excision from the community could be absolute. Conversely, excessive similarity is also considered disturbing. As control over the most delicate and obscure areas of consciousness and embodiment becomes a concern of the various operative forms of government, and as zones of normality and pathology are defined in ever-finer detail, we are increasingly called upon to present ourselves as copies, as repetitions of a certain model, a certain framework. And this is no longer enforced through a crude behaviorism, as classic modern dystopian texts like *A Clockwork Orange* or *1984* imagined, but through drugs like Prozac, the manipulations of genetic engineering, or the requirements of the job market. Conversely, mass production today involves the demand that we present ourselves through the production of differences, through acts of mimetic transformation that can be framed within the order of the marketplace. The same/ not the same.

It would be a mistake to conflate the general phenomenon of

mass production, particularly in its folk forms, with industrial capitalism. Indeed, the gap between the two has been usefully deployed in key moments of struggle against imperialism—for example, during Gandhi’s campaign for *swaraj* (self-rule) in India, which included the boycotting of industrially produced cloth and clothing from Britain. Gandhi, controversially, went further in an attempted refusal of even domestic industrial production. He proposed that Satyagraha Ashram members, and (later) Congress members, and (later still) all Indians make their own *khadi* cloth, as a move toward autonomy and self-determination (*swadeshi*). Early attempts to produce cloth at the Satyagraha Ashram floundered, due to lack of knowledge and technology, until Gandhi met Gangaben Majumdar, who offered to locate the traditional *charka* spinning wheel and teach him how to use it. After Gandhi learned the skill, the ashram began a program of spinning practice and production which all ashram members were required to participate in. It also promoted the distribution of copies of the *charka*, education projects in *khadi* production, and outreach programs to village communities.²⁴

To put it within the framework that I have elaborated over the past few chapters: Gandhi mobilized a folk technology for the mass production of cloth, in opposition to an industrial mass production that imitated it. The technology itself could be duplicated and disseminated throughout Indian villages and cities, in the form of an object (the *charka*, or spinning wheel) and a set of practices. More important, the practice no doubt already existed in many places. But Gandhi arguably made some mistakes in attempting to disseminate a particular mode of making cloth among diverse communities, whose members already used a variety of local and traditional cloth-making practices—methods that, Gandhi argued, they should give up. This was the modern error of attempting to universalize, or rather nationalize, a particular folk modality as symbol of the people, rather than supporting the development and flourishing of a va-

riety of folk forms, including those that appropriate industrial technologies.

We are left with the problem set out in Phill Niblock's movie—the one with which we began this chapter: What is the universal that articulates the desire and demand of the diversity of moving bodies, without turning them into the mechanized zombies of *Modern Times*? Perhaps it could only be a sound, unstruck or otherwise, like Niblock's droning, or like the glossolalic song that Chaplin sings toward the end of his otherwise silent movie. While music remains framed as entertainment within our existing societies, or the kitsch universality of "We Are the World" and other globalizing abominations, it has also emerged, through hip-hop and other forms of electronic dance music, as one of the principal vectors of an actually existing *autre-mondialisation*, the revealing of a "planet of drums (or rather drum machines)," in Steve Goodman's recent formulation, which transforms Mike Davis' "planet of slums."²⁵ Profoundly at home in the uncanniness of repetition, and the particular powers of digital sound manipulation, popular Afrofuturist dance musics have proliferated in the first decade of the twenty-first century, from kuduro, to dubstep, to coupé décalé, reggaeton, and cumbia—all diasporic but developed in specific locations. To twist Bob Dylan's definition of folk music, these are unconstitutional reruns of mass production. Neither modern nor not-modern, they work with industrial capitalist commodity forms, but are committed to other forms of mass production. Goodman refers to such subcultures as mobilizing a "bass materialism" which, he says, "is enacted as the microrhythmic production and occupation of space-times by collectively engineered vibration" (172). As Goodman recognizes, the politics (or "subpolitics") of such collectivities remains an open question, yet it offers a powerful example of a liberatory mass production that is happening today.