

Ways of Perceiving Essay-

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Automatons: Othered by Design

Given the task of the imagined head curator, the exhibition here proposed will focus on Alienation and its many applications, commodity fetish, and the dehumanising qualities found within examples of post-industrial life. Looking into the works of Edward Hopper (1882-1967) and Mike Kelley (1954-2012), this exhibition titled 'Automatons: Othered by Design' will explore the theories of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Guy Debord (1931-1994).

Firstly, to give definition to the term 'Alienation' and how it may be applied through different contexts of life, this essay will explore the current Western system of governance through a Marxian lens. Marx begins his examination of capitalism through the separation of the classes into two distinct groups, the bourgeois, and the proletariat. Whereby through exploitation of labour those of the bourgeois class reduce those of the Proletariat, to a 'cattle-like existence' (Marx, K. (1970)). The two classes oppose each other through a system of unfair currencies, wage, and labour, in which labour is the only consistent form.

Marx notes within, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844' how the two currencies compete and unfairly balance, '...they stand in inverse proportion. In a dear year wages fall on account of the decrease in demand, but rise on account of the increase in the prices of provisions — and thus balance. In cheap years wages rise on account of the rise in demand, but decrease on account of the fall in the prices of provisions — and thus balance.' While labour may be a consistent force, the worker is vulnerable to fluctuations within economies more so than that of the capitalist, 'whilst dead capital always keeps the same pace and is indifferent to

real individual activity... the worker suffers in his very existence, the capitalist [suffers only] in the profit on his dead mammon.'

Alienation may be viewed as a by-product of this established hierarchy. The worker is made dependent on the capitalists to sustain existence and is distanced from themselves, those around them, their environment, and their labour, focus only drawn towards external earnings as a means of survival and consumption. Within the deliberate distancing of the act of production and distribution by the bourgeois class this is then made 'the inviolable natural laws on which society in the abstract is founded,' (Marx, K. et al. (1973)).

Money then becomes a 'fetish' to Marx. The price of commodities forms a material worship, in which the value of an object is distanced from its labour value and prescribed meaning by those who control it. Capital becomes personified and seemingly uncontrolled by the capitalists, Marx likening them to, 'the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells' (Marx, K. et al. (1976)).

Each aspect of this system encourages distance between each key feature and class, 'The more powerful the class, the more it claims not to exist, and its power is employed above all to enforce this claim. It is modest only on this one point' (Debord, G. (1967)).

Bringing these ideas into the modern sphere, the situationist Guy Debord working from Marxian ideas to establish the modern notion of 'Spectacle', declaring 'The spectacle is a social relation between people that is mediated by an accumulation of images that serve to alienate us from a genuinely lived life. The image is thus a historical mutation of the form of commodity fetishism.' The image plays its part through mass media and propaganda. Within the postmodern era, social media and handheld access to new types of communication display that the influence of spectacle is ever present and easily accessed. Modern life according to Debord is no longer a purely material-based existence that was formed after the industrial revolution, but one of

illusion and the appearance of material having. The development of artificial intelligence with its ability to develop artworks without the need of a human artist may be seen as a present extension of this, no longer can a person assume that behind their screen is the work of another individual, they are left to question the very existence of humanness.

[[Figure one: Hopper, E. (1953) Office in Small City. [Oil on canvas].]



Within the exhibition two pieces by Edward Hopper will be shown, namely 'Office in Small City' (1953), [Figure one] and 'First Row Orchestra' (1951), [Figure Two]. His work is notable to the theme due to the period in which he produced work, his depictions of interpersonal relationships, and his complex marriage with his wife, Josephine Hopper (1883-1968). His work will represent the social nature of post-industrial modernity clearly highlighting the isolation between individuals and the environment around them.

The piece above encapsulates that sense of detachment from work. Hopper's palette is subdued, the figure in the piece made the focal point due to the framing, they are surrounded by minimal detail and look off into the distance. Observe that while this is a place of work, they are inactive and alone. An audience is made to observe the figure through the boundary of a window, we are made disconnected. Hopper, before experiencing success, in part due to his wife, worked as an illustrator for an advertising agency. This piece created after his period as an illustrator may be seen as a memory of his previous unfulfilling occupation.

[[Figure two]- Hopper, E. (1951) First Row Orchestra. [Oil on canvas].]



This earlier piece, [Figure two] highlights the state of Hopper's more personal relationships. Depicted above is a couple, sitting next to each other and yet distant. The woman more engrossed in her pamphlet than that of her partner is based on Hopper's wife. All female

reference figures in Hopper's work were based on Josephine. Her legs are crossed in the opposite direction of the man. Where he at first glance may be seen touching her hand, on closer inspection that is not the case. Their positions within the theatre as the front row may assume wealth, as well as her fine coat, with the perspective indicating the viewer is situated behind. Hopper leaves an audience to question the position of the couple's cold resolve and their possible impatience, waiting for the orchestra to begin.

The installation piece conceptualised by Mike Kelley will draw from the idea of fetish. Kandors 1999-2011 [Figure three] is a large multi-media piece, but this essay will focus on his glass bell jars depicting the fictional comic book city. Likening the bell jar to that of the previously established concept of fetish, the bell jar to Superman may be considered a sacred object. The character is an alien in the literal sense, displaced from his home, due to the intentional destruction of his planet Krypton. He is only able to view the lone surviving environment from a distance behind a barrier of glass. The jar becoming a symbolic representation of his inability to connect. The bell jar held within his 'Fortress of Solitude' is placed upon a pedestal in some iterations, Hauser & Wirth, one of the spaces in which the installation was shown, compares the selection of glass pieces to 'reliquaries'.

[[Figure three- Kelley, M. (1999-2011) Kandors. [Glass and resin].]



Opting to show the proposed artworks within the Massachusetts Museum of Modern Art due to the connection of ideas discussed namely, advancements in technology and the separation of people. The space originally a print factory (1860-1942) was transformed during the period in which America entered World War 2. The building was converted into a space to develop the trigger for the nuclear bomb, subsequently allowing US forces to complete the mass killing of over 70,000 Japanese civilians, one of the last major acts performed resulting in the end of the global conflict. According to the United Nations, the act of genocide is defined as, ‘

1. *Killing members of the group;*
2. *Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
3. *Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;*
4. *Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;*
5. *Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.’*

Alienation again may be applied to the act of genocide. Professor Gregory Stanton simplifies the concept into 10 steps, dehumanisation is placed third in this process. Dehumanisation may be defined as the ability to remove personhood from an individual or group. Unlike what has been previously discussed in this essay, distance from labour and isolation within relationships, this example is often applied at a larger seemingly intentional scale. We may observe examples of this application currently towards the treatment of transgender individuals, in which their identities are being denied and the period leading up to the genocide of Jewish people during the Holocaust. Similarly, within a fictionalised context the act of genocide may be applied to the character of Superman, while the piece of fiction was first created two years before the start of the conflict, it seems poignant to the theme as both creators of the fictional character (Jerry Siegel and Joe Shushter) were Jewish Americans.

Each piece, as well as the space chosen, hopes to encapsulate different aspects of alienation. The separation of ourselves, those around us, our labour and environment, both at a grand and personal scale. Debord brings Marxian ideas into the modern era. Audiences within this exhibition are voyeurs into the lives of others through image. To apply these concepts to the post-modern experience, each piece features glass in some aspect, whether as material or motif, the viewer is distanced from the experience each piece represents, similar to that of the glass screens used and needed daily.

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[Figure one]- Hopper, E. (1953) *Office in Small City*. [Oil on canvas]. The Metropolitan, New York.

[Figure two]- Hopper, E. (1951) *First Row Orchestra*. [Oil on canvas]. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.

[Figure three]- Kelley, M. (1999-2011) *Kandors*. [Glass and resin] Hauser & Wirth (21 Oct- 21 Jan 2018). Available at: <https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/5933-mike-kelley-kandors-1999-2011/>

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Exhibition Map of MASS MOCA:



