1. The return of the material

The cinematic essay *Monument of Sugar: - How to Use Artistic Means to Elude trade Barriers* (2007) opens with a dictum: “The return of the material.” This adage resonates with recent developments in theory that are indicative of a renewed interest in the physical world. In *Ecology without Nature*, for example, Timothy Morton demonstrates that the concept of nature behaves as a transcendental category of thought that has little to do with the entangled reality. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett proposes an opposite critique, in this case with regards to matter. Matter, she puts forward, is not inert and passive, as modernity conceives it, but pulsating and forceful.

Why did we choose to make the return of the material our epigram? To explain this, we must revert to neoliberal postindustrial society as it existed before the recent economic crisis. The production and assembly of goods had been transferred to the periphery and was considered anachronistic—something we had left behind. The reality of things, how they were manufactured, and which landscapes they connected no longer seemed relevant. The focus was on publicity, the creation of fictions to lure audiences into a dream world. Similarly, artists were expected to produce artworks with a press release to match in which these works were framed and fraught with the references of the day. Increasingly, artistic production was turning into a matter of linguistics. Had artworks really become so powerless that they were unable to attract their own audience?

As artists who derive pleasure from the encounter with the material and the search for unexpected entanglements, we felt slightly ill at ease in the so-called knowledge economy—which had disconnected itself from the physical world and was no longer interested in the folds that connect times and places. We felt more...
affinity with Michel Serres’s crumpled handkerchief. According to the French philosopher, a linear understanding of time entails that the last event on the timeline is perceived to be the most contemporary and relevant, but it cannot explain why certain events or inventions from the past are still material today. He therefore proposes the model of the bunched up handkerchief: two points that are far apart when the cloth is flattened out can be very close once it is crumpled up. These ontological considerations were the starting point for a practical experiment, aimed at making banished matter return. That sugar became the protagonist of this experiment was the result of an off-the-cuff remark made by a Polish farmer whom we met near the Polish-Ukrainian border on May 1, 2004—the day it transformed from a national into a European border. While offering us homemade sausages and coffee, he told us that Polish cukier had become “twice as sweet” since the country’s entry into the European Union: its price had doubled overnight. It had even become cheaper to buy Polish sugar in the Ukraine than in Poland itself. Economic paradoxes such as these are commonly referred to as the 47th Street Photo Phenomenon. How does this phenomenon work? Europe’s sugar beet manufacturers are protected from global price level fluctuations by a fixed minimum price many times higher than the prevailing world market price; simultaneously, substantial trade tariffs ward off foreign competitors and export subsidies help to make expensive European sugar competitive worldwide.

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Cargo ship unloading Brazilian raw bulk sugar in Lagos
16mm film still Monument of Sugar, 2007
The installation *Monument of Sugar* consists of a silent 16mm film of 67 minutes and a floor sculpture of 304 sugar modules, built into two groups. One group was made in Nigeria, the other one in Europe. The difference in quantity between the two groups shows the price difference. Each module is one Rhineland foot long, and proportioned according to the Golden Mean. In the film, documentary sequences are interspersed with a narrative in scrolling titles.

2. *Empirical method? First lesson in realism*

How could we make sugar return to a society living in the illusion that it has banished matter forever? The operation *Monument of Sugar* consisted of inverting the subsidized flow of sugar by molding it into a monument. As a monument, sugar could be imported under heading 9703 of the European Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System, which ensures duty-free import for “original sculptures and statuary, in any material.”7

United Nations commodity trade statistics showed that the bulk of Europe’s subsidized sugar was exported to Nigeria. Armed with this information, we departed for Lagos. But even after weeks of fieldwork, we still hadn’t found a trace of European sugar. Our experiment threatened to grind to a halt. The Nigerian artists with whom we shared a studio asked us why we were so adamant to find sugar originating from Europe. Now that we were in Africa, could we not adopt the African approach and work with the materials at hand?8 We had assumed that by reversing the flow of sugar, we would make matter return, but our Nigerian colleagues pointed out to us that this approach was not yet materialistic enough. After much deliberation, we figured that the flow of white sugar leaving Europe (at least on paper) could be inverted using the sugar that was present in abundance on Nigeria’s markets. This sugar was imported from Brazil as raw bulk, to be refined in Lagos into white sugar.
The Nigerian sugar behaved quite differently from the sugar we were accustomed to in Europe. Artists like to speak of a “resistance in the material,” but Nigeria’s sweet crystals were outright rebelling against our will to form. The fine grains could barely be compressed into a stable substance. Due to the tropical humidity, the brittle blocks failed to dry. The casts, which emerged sharp and white from their molds, gradually morphed into grimy, sagging lumps with little trace of right angles. Only through endless postprocessing did we eventually obtain more or less firm and uniform shapes. Alas, during the overseas travel by cargo ship, the process of decay began anew. When the sugar blocks arrived in Europe after their long journey, they were softer than butter and almost impossible to extricate from their packaging.

Initially we intended to pile them up into a three-dimensional chart, but because of their frailty, they could merely be placed on the floor next to each other. Moreover, as a floor sculpture, the monument did not come close to the generic modular composition we had in mind: the entropic Nigerian sugar blocks broke out of the grid. Each time the work was displayed, a certain amount of material stayed behind in the exhibition space: the monument was steadily working to deconstruct itself.

Had we succeeded in making matter return? Or had we still approached sugar too much as a neutral, passive substance that could be turned into a monument to invert a trade flow? Perhaps the experiment had succeeded because we failed, because the sugar effectively revolted and resisted our desire to mold it. So how can we make matter return? How can we encounter things in such a way that they are not subjected to our form-will, but are rather attended to as the rebellious beings that they are?

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3. Drifting studio practice

When we discussed our experience of the crumbling monument with Bruno Latour, he remarked that, through their journey, the sugar modules had been changed from modernistic “objects” into “things” that had entered into relations with the world. It seemed that the sugar blocks—quite like ourselves—were moving in a world of relations and that these relations were also part of thingness.
Perhaps we can bring this being-in-the-world of things into closer focus by looking at Graham Harman’s theory of tool-being, which is based on Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology of the broken hammer. Heidegger remarked that we forget the hammer when we are hammering: in everyday use it seems self-evident that the hammer does what we want it to do. Only when the hammer breaks or falls from our hands, we become aware that it is more than a mere tool for our use. According to Harman, this insight stretches beyond the practical realm of hammers and chisels. Both human and nonhuman things have a side that withdraws and refuses
to be known or put to work. Things are deeper than our theoretical or practical understanding of them, or as Harman puts it: “Staring at a hammer does not exhaust its depths, but neither does wielding that hammer on a construction site or a battlefield.”11 Because there is no such thing as “an equipment,” and each individual piece of equipment forms part of a bigger collectivity of “equipment,” the hammer-that-hammers cannot be seen as separate from the network of things working together. The work is connecting the user with the hammer, the hammer with the nails, the nail with the wood, and vice versa. All things, including people, are entangled in such a collectivity, but they are not “standing reserve” for the purpose of the network. At any time things can retreat from service. Harman therefore proposes a “weird realism” in which things can only enter into contact with one another indirectly.12

Where does this understanding leave us as artists who are aiming for a more realistic encounter with things? At the end of the cinematic essay Monument of Sugar, we invoke the notion of a drifting studio practice. In trying to avoid the familiar pitfall of mistaking the knowledge circulating about matter for the circulating matter itself, we envision having a studio onboard a ship transporting sugar. This would allow us to follow the material as it moves across the world’s surface. Although we eventually abandoned the idea of a sugar ship as concrete setting for a drifting studio, we kept the speculative notion of an artistic practice that is not guided by representations but moves along with things. What could such a drifting studio practice look like? However, since the studio is a space for aesthetic formation, we first needed to find out how we could present rather than represent things.

In Leo Tolstoy’s pamphlet Shame! we found an approach that allows things to be capricious and expansive. Denouncing the custom of flogging thieves, Tolstoy describes the punishment as though he witnessed it for the first time: “The highest authorities of an enormous Christian empire. . . can devise nothing wiser and more moral than to take the transgressors—grown-up and sometimes elderly people—undress them, lay them on the floor, and beat their bottoms with birches.”13 Then he asks, “And why choose just this stupid, brutal method of causing pain, and not something else? Why not stick needles into people’s shoulders or other parts? or squeeze their hands and feet in vices? or do something of that kind?”14
By questioning and describing, Tolstoy makes the familiar appear unfamiliar, showing that what is experienced as self-evident is by no means obvious. Similar alienation techniques are found in Brechtian theater, where they are summed up under the term Verfremdungseffekt. To clarify that the capitalist order is a social construction and not an ahistorical truth, the performance of a play is intentionally disrupted by things that are out of tune, such as contradictions, imperfections, and indeterminacies. Instead of trying to immerse the spectator in the seductive illusion of a virtuous performance, the play induces actor and spectator to work together in a common process. By doing so, it offers us a material portent of a coming community in which more equal relations of production will prevail.15

Perhaps it is possible to appropriate these aesthetic approaches, which were developed for ideological projects such as class struggle or anarchism, for our drifting studio practice—not as a harbinger of a coming utopian order, but for their material practice, for their realism. After all, these techniques not only deconstruct existing fictions, but also replace them with antagonistic images. Rather than concealing their inadequacies, these counter-images openly remain on the surface of things and represent things fragmentarily. It seems that these deficient images violate things less and show them more as they are: entangled in a network of relations and yet—on another level—autonomous, resisting, and retreating.

However, a drifting studio practice entails more than an encounter with circulating, unstable matter, since not only objects are strange: we ourselves are among the strange things that we can never fully understand, possess, or control. If we are all part of a community of strangers in which everything and everyone is strange, how does this shape our encounters?

It was the cinematographer and anthropologist Jean Rouch who, filming a possession ritual of the Songhay-Zarma in West Niger, observed that not only those taking part in the ritual were under a spell, but also that he and his crew appeared to be in the grip of a strange force from the outside: “I now believe that for the people who are filmed, the ‘self’ of the filmmaker changes in front of their eyes during the shooting. He no longer speaks, except to yell out incomprehensible orders (‘Roll!’ ‘Cut!’). . . . paradoxically it is due to this equipment and this new behavior. . . . that the filmmaker can throw himself into a ritual, integrate himself with it, and follow it step-by-step. It is a strange kind of choreography, which, if inspired, makes the cameraman and soundman no longer invisible but participants in the ongoing event.
“Had they only been dry on the surface? Maybe the container was not waterproof, and rain or ocean water had found its way in. Or had it in fact been too well insulated, like a condensation cube, with the sealed-off tropical air expelling moisture and raining onto the cargo when it started to cool down? It would be no easy matter to reverse the entropy that had set in. [...] Like ‘Trauerarbeiter’, we peeled the sticky packing paper away from our tormented sugar loafs and once again tried to dry out the soggy lumps.” Quote and film stills from Monument of Sugar, 2007

Next page: Photo close up of grid with crumbling block as displayed in World of Matter, HartWare, Dortmund 2014, Photograph by Hannes Woidic
For the Songhay-Zarma, who are now quite accustomed to film, my ‘self’ is altered in front of their eyes in the same way as is the ‘self’ of the possession dancers: it is the ‘film-trance’ (ciné-transe) of the one filming the ‘real trance’ of the other.” 16 The experience of the vicissitude of the self led Rouch to develop participatory cinema as a self-reflexive practice that does not leave the anthropologist out of the picture—as was then common to do—but acknowledges his or her entry into the world of his or her subjects.” 17 Rouch’s aim was to arrive at a shared anthropology—one that bears witness to a cultural encounter in which both sides play a part. Perhaps we could expand participatory cinema to include the nonhuman and thus turn drifting studio practice from a moving along with things into a shared practice in which human and nonhuman things, all similarly unstable, play a part.

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4. Second lesson in realism

An opportunity to experiment with drifting studio practice offered itself when a regional museum invited us to conduct artistic fieldwork in the fishing community of Urk. 18 Who could be more accustomed to instability and things that retreat than fishermen who, generation upon generation, confidently let their nets down from the sea’s restless surface into unknown depths? Up until the mid-twentieth century, Urk was an island in the Zuiderzee, then a large inland sea, but in the period when the Dutch colonies began their struggle for independence, the internal sea was closed off by the construction of a long dam and largely drained. The island of Urk suddenly found itself surrounded by reclaimed land. Its inhabitants were expected to switch from fishing to farming. But Urk’s fishermen exchanged their small wooden boats for iron cutters and sailed out to the North Sea. They found new fishing grounds on Dogger Bank, a full day’s sailing from the coast. Thus, their daily fishing excursions turned into weeks at sea. Within a few decades, Urk’s fishermen, whether skippers or deck hands, were earning as much as high-ranking government officials.

We visited Urk for the first time in spring 2011. The Dutch government had just announced a stiff package of budget cuts for cultural spending, and cultural producers were cast as scroungers for relying on subsidies. 19 When we introduced
ourselves to a group of fishermen as artists, we therefore discreetly added that the reputation of our sector had recently suffered some damage. The fishermen nodded that for them too, the days when they were “heroes of the sea” were long gone: nowadays, they were seen as pirates who were fishing the world’s oceans dry. Together we sighed that we shared an image problem—this is how our collaboration started.

We were welcomed as “strangers.” This, it appeared, was the name given to anyone who wasn’t from Urk. Although the former island has been part of the mainland for more than half a century, its inhabitants still speak their own distinct language. The Urker tongue is marked by an archaic, biblical vocabulary pronounced in a wondrous, singing tone. After several bad experiences with journalists who had quoted them out of context to illustrate their own preconceptions, the fishing community had become wary of curious outsiders. But by doing our rounds through town and visiting the outer docks and fishing industries, we gradually managed to win their trust.

We envisioned creating a film in which the fishermen would show their material practice and we would show ours. We would be loyal to the material that surrounded us and insert ourselves as moving bodies into the universe of ropes, nets and water. The words would not be dissociated from matter, but we would allow voices to speak and let bodies be. As outsiders, who see things for the first time, we would ask the fishermen to describe their habits. We would thicken these descriptions into polyvocal deliberations and would ask the fishermen to perform these on the ships’ decks. The camera would not be an extension of ourselves, but would stand on its own legs. Its picture frame would be full and layered, to prevent that those who spoke would be isolated from their environment. Sentences would be interrupted so that what withdraws in the background would be able to emerge. All participants would speak for themselves, bound together by the filmmaking process to a temporary community. Wouldn’t such a wide-ranging co-authorship allow everything to have its otherness acknowledged and tell its own story?

We visited the fish factories, the auction house, the wharfs, and the docks, both when work was being carried out and when they were deserted. Our cine-eye filled itself up with working bodies, surfaces eroded by the saltwater, nets spreading, and lifeless fish being measured, weighed, and filleted to be delivered straight to the shops or to be frozen into stiff boards. And then there was the sea—just being there,
Film stills *Episode of the Sea*, 35mm film transferred to 4K and HD, 2014
without a reason. We placed sound recorders in the docks to record the waves smacking against the quay wall when the sea was rough, or softly lapping when it was quiet, at high tide and at low tide. Microphones in shelters captured the rustling, whining, and ghostly moaning of the wind and the screams of omnipresent seagulls. Occasionally, our instruments and ourselves were invited on board to go out to sea with the fishermen. Then we adopted their rhythm of two hours of work, followed by a short nap. We tried not to fight against the heaving of the ship and eventually got used to the thumping of the ship’s engine. We learned that the whipping of ropes and creaking of cables announced that full nets would be hauled onboard, and that when the pin was removed from the railing, we had to stand back because then the heavy nets would soon drag violently across the deck, only to careen back into the sea moments later. We never got a firm grasp on what we were witnessing. It was not possible to distance ourselves and take a vantage point outside the ship. While dutifully feeding film after film into the camera, we sensed that we, too, couldn’t entirely avoid having an instrumental relation to things.
The most disruptive experience, however, was the endless flow of struggling fish gasping for water, gutted one by one with the flick of a knife. When we asked the fishermen about this cruel aspect of their practice, they explained that this was what they had been taught by their fathers, who had in turn been taught by their fathers: “Nowadays people aren’t used to that; nowadays you are expected to have feelings with everything you do.”\(^{22}\) How could we account for such cruelty in their material practice, in which we were implicated as collaborators? In *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, Alphonso Lingis describes how in mercantile port cities of Greece, strangers arrive who ask the Greeks, “Why do you do as you do?” To which the Greek answer, like all groups who express their distinctness: “Because our fathers have taught us to do so, because our gods have decreed that it be so.”\(^{23}\) Lingis describes how a new community emerges when the Greeks begin to give a reason that the strangers, who do not share their ancestors or gods, can accept. Because reason speaks in a language which is the same for every lucid mind. It is the language of an anonymous universal community, which exceeds the local community. But behind this anonymous community, which we know and which is the work of reason, there still lies this *other* community that has no reason and is formed when the work ends or is interrupted—the community of those who have nothing in common. Like the visitors to Greek trade ports, we asked the fishermen why they did what they did, and the fishermen, like ancient
Greeks, pointed to their ancestors. Had we, in our focus on material practice, perhaps forgotten Serres’s crumpled handkerchief, which allowed the forefathers to infiltrate today’s world? And were these forefathers not co-authors as well, then? But would the ancestors agree with the local catch of flatfish being transported over the world’s oceans to be offered on the global market as generic white fish?

On Saturdays we visited the fishermen in their homes and had long conversations about their trade, and sometimes about our own. Much as we struggled to understand why they work like they do, the fishermen had difficulty grasping why we were so attached to our obsolete 35mm camera, which had to be reloaded every four minutes. And just like them, we invoked our forefathers to explain ourselves and told them about Robert Flaherty’s *Man of Aran*, Luchino Visconti’s *La terra tremata*, Jean Rouch’s *Bataille sur le grand fleuve*, and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub’s *Klassenverhältnisse*. The fishermen’s stories drifted from the role of religion to the behavior of the fish, and from technical aspects of fishing gear to the geopolitical divisions of the sea. For them, as for us, human and nonhuman actors were part of the same ongoing process. Still, it wasn’t the sea, the fishing gear, or the fish that predominated in their stories, but the out-of-control mechanism of demand and supply. Although confident in handling nets, the fishermen found themselves entangled in an intricate network of relations. The European Commission had decreed fishing rights, but with the quota allocated to them, the Urkers could not cover their costs. To increase their quota, they had bought ships in other member countries (fishing quota were included in the purchase of a ship). Thus, they became Englishmen, Danish, Belgians, and Germans, with all the paperwork that comes with multiple identities. But even the administrative escape route was unable to turn the tide: massive imports of Asian farmed fish, the sector’s damaged reputation, and rising fuel prices meant that two-thirds of the local fleet already lay idle. Sons wouldn’t succeed their fathers. Increasingly, fishermen needed to rely on foreign workers to accompany them on their trips to the sea.

We had expected the fishermen to teach us how to deal with instability and with things that withdraw themselves; that we might deduce from their material practice a “language of real life,” and we were prepared to include all ancestors in the co-authorship. But what were we to do with their complaints about falling fish prices, blacklisting, the power of the big players, and the scourge of endless inspections?
These unearthly, and disliked actors exerted a notable influence on the fishermen’s material practice. Where they also co-authors and part of the temporary community of those who collaborated in the film? Indeed, where authorship unfolds to include many, some authors may tell stories that others don’t want to hear. Was this yet another lesson in realism?

An island that is no longer an island, old trades that have lost their self-evident nature, a market that is no longer ruled by supply and the demand, a sea that no longer gives, but is emptied out, and sons breaking with family tradition. Was the “broken hammer” the new condition here? Or were we witnessing the drama of the hammer breaking, and did we see, in the last flicker of a dying star, everything that had once been connected by the tool falling apart? What should we do when tools break, when they set loose from their networks of relations and become obtrusive in all their strangeness? Should the fishermen put down their fishing gear? Is fishery, like analog cinema, irreparably obsolete and part of a bygone era?
Or do things, when they have fallen out of use, claim our solidarity in the name of a pact we have made with them, of the history we share, of the work we performed together? For the fishermen, hauling is always followed by mending.

With a near-Calvinistic faith in the cleansing power of work, we wrote down everything we heard and turned hundreds of pages of transcript into a script. With great dedication, and while instructing each other how to achieve the most convincing delivery, the Urkers performed the script in front of our camera. For two years we immersed ourselves in the world of fishing. But how could we make a film from the material we had collected? We looked for visual, narrative, or rhythmic analogies to connect one recording to another; step by step, we assembled the sea, the seagulls, the roar of the engines, the wind, the fishermen’s and fisher-women’s recitations, and the stories of our mutual encounters into a multivocal composition. The resulting film, *Episode of the Sea*, is a patchwork that bears the signature of those who toiled and those who didn’t move, those who passed away long ago and those who died before our eyes, those present on the set and those acting from a distance.
Notes
1 Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan, *Monument of Sugar: How to Use Artistic Means to Elude Trade Barriers* (16 mm, silent, color, 67 min, 2007).
5 The scrolling titles of the film, were also published in Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan, *Monument en sucre: comment utiliser des moyens artistiques pour échapper aux barrières douanières / Monument of Sugar: How to Use Artistic Means to Elude Trade Barriers* (Paris and Brussels: Palais de Tokyo and Argos, 2007).
6 The phenomenon was named after the famous retail street in Manhattan where, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese cameras were consistently cheaper than in Japan. See James Fallows, “Containing Japan,” The Atlantic Monthly, May 1989.
7 Council Regulation (EEC) No 2658/87 of 23 July 1987 on the tariff and statistical nomenclature and on the Commons Customs Tariff, Official Journal of the European Communities (September 7, 1987), 657,
8 We were given hospitality by the artist collective Universal Studios of Art. They offered us a workspace in their studio complex situated in a former garage of the National Theater. The suggestion to work with the materials that were readily available was made by the sculptor Fidelis Odogwu and our assistant Richardson Ovbiebo, a young artist at the time.
9 Conversation during the conference Concerning Knowledge Production, BAK, Utrecht, December 2006. Latour’s remark was subsequently included in the last chapter of the film essay *Monument of Sugar: How to Use Artistic Means to Elude Trade Barriers*, where he is simply referred to as “a philosophical Frenchman.”
10 For the purpose of clarity this essay uses the word *thing*, but Harman himself prefers to speak about *objects*, as the former emphasizes relations. See Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and Peter Erdélyi, eds., *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman* at the LSE (Ropley: Zero Books, 2011), 9.
13 Leo Tolstoy, “Shame!” (1895), trans. Nathan Haskell Dole,
14 Ibid., note 13. Tolstoy’s techniques of defamiliarization are discussed by Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” (1917), reprinted in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and
Marion J. Reiss (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3–24.


18 We were initially commissioned by Museum de Paviljoens in Almere, but during our first stay in the fishing community, the gallery’s existence was jeopardized by severe budget cuts. It withdrew the commission and closed down in 2013.

19 During the press conference following the cabinet council of June 10, 2011, in which the budget cuts were adopted, the Prime Minister motivated the cuts with the remark that “artists are turning their backs on creativity and holding their wallets up to the government.”


21 We here follow Bazin’s “Man himself is just one fact among others, to whom no pride of place should be given a priori” and Rossellini’s call, concerning a boulder that was a cameraman proposed to remove: “if nature put it there, art has no business removing it.” Walsh, ‘Political formation in the Cinema of Jean-Marie Straub’ in *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema, essays by Martin Walsh*, Keith M. Griffiths, ed. (BFI publishing, 1981) p. 42; Bazin, What is Cinema? Vol. 2, translated by Hugh Gray (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971), p. 38.

22 Conversation with fisherman Tjeerd de Boer, Urk, September 14, 2011.


24 On Rouch, see also note 10. During a workshop at the local theatre club Urk op de Planken (Urk threading the Boards), we screened fragments of these films to the fishing community and discussed their different approaches.

25 The metaphor of the dying star was borrowed from Walter Benjamin. “Benjamin believed that at the birth of a given social form or technological process the utopian dimension was present and, furthermore, that it is precisely at the moment of the obsolescence of that technology that it once more releases this dimension, like the last gleam of a dying star. For obsolescence, the very law of commodity production, both frees the outmoded object from the grip of utility and reveals the promise of that law.” Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 41.