

# If the Shoe Fits: *Prada Marfa* as Cultural Capital

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Created by Berlin-based artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset in 2005, *Prada Marfa* has become a pop culture spectacle in the middle of the West Texas desert (Figure 1). The sculpture was ostensibly created as a readymade critique of consumer culture by appropriating signs of high-end luxury brands and using strategies of minimalism as display. Despite these intentions, the sculpture produces cultural capital for the global corporate identity of Prada.

There is a tension in the public reception of *Prada Marfa*—a work of site-specific public art—between the work's intention and effect. This paper will argue that, despite the work's critical intention, *Prada Marfa* has the effect of producing cultural capital for the Prada brand by offering itself through its own semiological initiative. The work becomes interchangeable with any other commodity, in a network of consumption. Although visitors to *Prada Marfa* are denied access to Prada commodities, they are able to consume the brand's image through the sculpture's semiological currency within the hyperreal system of consumer signs.

As a contemporary public artwork, *Prada Marfa* has become appealing to populist tastes. While the work's post-modern conceptual sentiments and elitist content might portray the sculpture as the taste of a privileged few, this paper will contend otherwise. The public loves *Prada Marfa*. The semiotic influence of the "Prada Marfa" as a symbolic sign overwhelms Elmgreen and Dragset's attempted subversive application of the logo. "Prada" as symbol signifies high-end fashion, luxury, and elite taste. When coupled with "Marfa," "Prada Marfa" signifies all of the previously mentioned compounded with the liberal values and creativity associated with contemporary art. *Prada Marfa*'s public ascribes meaning to the sculpture based on its relationship with the "Prada Marfa" symbol, not on any prerequisite conceptual knowledge of the critical angle of the work. The public reception of sculpture illuminates the desire that signs can evoke within the public and the influence they carry in the public sphere. Using Jean Baudrillard's theories of *sign-value* and *fetish*, this paper will consider how *Prada Marfa* is not merely a representation of consumer culture but a simulation and an active participant.

Working together since 1995, Elmgreen and Dragset's practice draws from various disciplines, often including institutional critique, social politics, performance and architec-

ture in the content of their work. In 2001, the artists created an intervention/installation at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York City, *Opening Soon, Powerless Structures*, Fig. 242. In this work, the artists covered up the front windows of the gallery and installed a large sign that announced Prada would be opening a new store at the location (Figure 2). *Opening Soon, Powerless Structures* is a playful commentary on how art galleries contribute to the process of gentrification in urban areas. More often than not, the galleries themselves have to leave the same neighborhoods because of an influx in fashion shops and chain stores, which drive the rent up. Elmgreen and Dragset's spoof anticipated *Prada Marfa*.

*Prada Marfa* is a hyperrealistic reconstruction of a Prada boutique, located outside of Valentine, Texas, just over two hours southeast of El Paso. The sculpture is often mistaken for an actual Prada boutique. This misconception stems from Miuccia Prada's own contributions to the project. When Elmgreen and Dragset used the Prada logo in *Opening Soon, Powerless Structures*, Fig. 242 at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, the duo did not ask permission because of the short duration of the installation. Because their installation in West Texas was to last longer, Elmgreen and Dragset reached out to Prada to seek consent. Not only did Prada agree, she provided information about corporate design, from paint colors to carpet. She also donated twenty pairs of Prada shoes and six Prada handbags (Figure 3). Even though *Prada Marfa* was intended to be critical of the brand, Miuccia Prada still offered her services. She explained her part in its creation as a recognition that it was "an intelligent work, and rather than shy away from it, we recognize the strength of its statement."<sup>1</sup> From the outset, the complicity between Elmgreen and Dragset and Prada jeopardized the sculpture's subversive function.

*Prada Marfa* was constructed from adobe brick so that it would naturally decay over time, but the spirit of ephemerality was short lived. Just two days after the work's formal opening reception, it was vandalized and burglarized. The sculpture was spray-painted, the glass windows shot, the door was pulled off with a truck and a chain, and the merchandise was stolen. The producers of the work and Elmgreen and Dragset made a decision to repair the sculpture. Restoration of the sculpture was justified because the vandalism was deemed premature and because so few people had seen

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<sup>1</sup> Nicky Ryan, "Prada and the Art of Patronage," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 11, no. 1 (2007): 9.

the work in its original state. Prada donated six identical new bags and the left-foot shoes were taken out of their boxes to be displayed in place of the former right foot shoes. While the actual restoration of the structure was costly and time-consuming, the act of vandalism's effect on *Prada Marfa* was invaluable. Just after the incident, a deluge of press coverage poured down on the project. The artists themselves were even accused of committing the vandalism as a publicity stunt to attract media attention. The incident marked the beginning of the sculpture's rise to pop culture stardom.

Due to subsequent acts of vandalism, some claiming to be artworks in themselves, additional and ongoing repair and renovation is carried out on *Prada Marfa*. The sculpture continues to be a palimpsest for graffiti, a target for firearms, and a canvas for artists. The producers of *Prada Marfa* received much criticism for the decision to maintain the work, but their response was that restoration of the sculpture remains true to the spirit of Elmgreen and Dragset's original proposal. This paper contends otherwise. *Prada Marfa*'s construction, display, and its destruction ARE the piece. Then it is supposed to be over. Like Robert Smithson's *Destroyed Shed* and Gustav Metzger's *Auto-Destructive Art*, destruction was meant to be one of the defining elements of the work. The principle of degradation was integral to the sculpture's critical conceptual framework; the meaning of the work was indivisible from its inevitable decay. When maintenance began on *Prada Marfa* a new work came into being, one that sacrificed the priorities of critique and communication for an enduring structural presence.

In 2013, the permanence of *Prada Marfa* once again came into question, this time by the law. After 8 years of existence, the Texas Department of Transportation declared the sculpture an illegal roadside advertisement. The scrutiny came with the appearance of another work of public art located on the same stretch of highway as *Prada Marfa*, commissioned by Playboy Enterprises from artist Richard Phillips. Phillips' installation featured the trademark Playboy Enterprises bunny logo on top of a tall pole, towering forty feet above a black spray-painted 1972 Dodge Charger on a concrete platform (Figure 4). The artwork was soon declared an illegal outdoor advertising sign after a local resident and artist filed a complaint about the forty-foot tall neon bunny. The hype that surrounded Phillips' installation placed *Prada Marfa* in the same controversial spotlight. Shifting their attention from the Playboy Enterprises piece, the Texas DoT questioned why *Prada Marfa* was an exception to the rule; after all, it uses Prada's real logo. After a year of negotiations, *Prada Marfa* was finally allowed to stay. In order for Elmgreen and Dragset's sculpture to remain, it was given museum status, with the building as their single art exhibit. The fate of the Playboy Enterprises commission was not as

fortunate. Phillips' roadside sculpture was removed within a year of its construction.

*Prada Marfa*'s vandalism, extensive press coverage, television cameos, legal controversies and celebrity visits have all augmented the popularity of the sculpture paving the way for it be fetishized as a sign (Figure 5). The notion of fetish has an extensive and multifaceted history. Missionaries, anthropologists, psychoanalysts, art historians, and Marxist theorists have all appropriated the term throughout history with varying applications. To analyze the fetishization of *Prada Marfa*, this paper is concerned with the application of the term fetish as it applies to our contemporary information society, to the extent that it combines critical Marxist analysis with the hyperreal theories of French social theorist Jean Baudrillard.

In chapter one of *Das Capital*, Karl Marx borrows the anthropological notion of fetishism to make sense of what he terms "commodity fetishism." Fetishism in anthropology refers to the primitive belief that godly powers can inherit inanimate things such as totems, stones, and for Marx, commodities. Marx used this term to describe how the value of commodities in capitalist societies seems to be inherent and is derived not from their use value but from exchange value.<sup>2</sup> Value is realized by social process. Fetishism is not just an ideological perception of commodities; it becomes a way of organizing social relations and the distribution of power in society.

Jean Baudrillard believed that Marx's theory of commodity fetishism needed to be advanced with semiological theories of signifier, signified and sign to account for contemporary society. He argued that in advanced consumer societies a commodity's symbolic value supplants exchange value, and constitutes the object's status and power. Drawing inspiration from Roland Barthes' semiotics, Baudrillard believed that objects are always tied to fetish because they have social signification. For Baudrillard, the development of sign-value is a byproduct of consumerism and mass consumption. In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard claims that consumption functions as a language and serves as a means by which we communicate.<sup>3</sup> Consumption is the manipulation of signs and symbols to produce cultural and social meaning. In the system of mass consumption, commodities are no longer defined by their use, but rather what they signify, and what they signify is defined not by what they do, but by their relationship to the entire system of commodities and signs. Because sign-value is divorced from any real content or utility, commodities are exchanged only in relation to other signs and the system of signs.<sup>4</sup> Referential value is destroyed. By dissolving any connection to real or referential value, the commodity becomes simulation, like *Prada Marfa*. In Baudrillard's consumer system where value is

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," *Das Capital: Vol 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 164. First published in German in 1867.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage Publication, 1970), 6-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

purely symbolic, there is no room for the real as referent and the disunity of the sign and the real is an inevitable outcome.<sup>5</sup>

Baudrillard's emphasis on the dissolution of the real is at the core of what separates his theories of fetishism from those of Marx and what makes *Prada Marfa* an ideal subject to bring out the intricacies of his thought. Baudrillard argues that Marx's notion of fetishism is archaic because it is attached to a form, the commodity. In Baudrillard's theory, the fetish is not of the object but of the sign. Ideology is not propagated through the object itself, but through the code, which identifies its place within society.<sup>6</sup>

Visitors to *Prada Marfa* participate in the artificial, encrypted, and hieroglyphic aspect of Prada, not in the materiality of their products. Visitors are denied access to the Prada merchandise. They are unable to consume commodities. They consume sign and symbol. Their experience becomes representation. The shared social relations of visitors are not mediated through commodities, as in Marx's theory of fetishism, but through signs. The fetishism is not a passion for objects, but rather it is a passion for the code. This fetishism is not the sanctification of Prada goods or of the *Prada Marfa* building itself. The simple adobe brick building would not draw crowds of people without the iconic Prada logo. What is being sanctified is the abstraction of the commodity as a sign system.

*Prada Marfa* as a sign system is consumed by visitors through selfies and through photographs. Then the commodity as sign is reproduced and disseminated through Internet blogs, Facebook, Instagram, and other media outlets including cable television. Because of advances in information technology, *Prada Marfa* can generate symbolic and cultural capital for Prada solely through its semiological agency within the networks of consumerism.

One example of *Prada Marfa's* semiotic complicity with mass media took place in 2008 when a *Prada Marfa* mileage print created by Elmgreen and Dragset was featured on the hit CW TV show *Gossip Girl*. The cameo placed *Prada Marfa* in the pop culture spotlight and made its existence known internationally to many outside the art world. The semiological power of the signifier "Prada" radiates from the effect that the *Gossip Girl* cameo has on the work.

From July of 2008, the date of the *Gossip Girl* appearance, to March of 2009, the total number of Google searches for "Prada Marfa," relative to the total number of searches carried out on Google, grew sixty-eight percent.<sup>7</sup> What is remarkable about this sudden rise of popularity is that the mileage sign that was featured on *Gossip Girl* is pure text. There is no image of the actual sculpture, just the words "Prada Marfa" and the accompanying mileage. Yet, regardless of this visual omission of the art work itself, the signage poster is incredibly popular. Here the fetish of the signifier

is apparent. It is the fetish of the differential and encoded aspect of *Prada Marfa*.

Like many destination art works such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, most people who see *Prada Marfa* do so through a digital screen (Figure 6). The sculpture's remote location, coupled with the widespread dissemination of *Prada Marfa* images on social media and the Internet, means that the work is primarily viewed from a screen. Experiencing the sculpture through an image exemplifies Baudrillard's notion of simulation. According to Baudrillard, simulation is "no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real."<sup>8</sup>

When someone views an image of *Prada Marfa* they are looking at a representation of Prada signage that functions as simulacrum for a simulation of a Prada boutique. Then this simulation, the sculpture in its entirety, is captured in another form of simulacrum, the image. Here the signifier becomes its own referent; the hyperreal transcends representation because it is entirely simulation. This image is most likely in the form of digital photography (Figure 7). Now the code literally becomes binary in digital form; reduced to zeros and ones. In this binary state, its possibility of reproduction is limitless. The code perpetuates itself through media outlets continually reinforcing its creator: Prada. The hyperreal systems of production and consumption within which *Prada Marfa* operates are freed from the traditional capitalist bounds of labor and supply and demand. No commodities are sold at the site, no new commodities need to be produced, and there are no employees hired for labor needs. It is just the code operating under the guise of a work of contemporary art.

The polemical tone of this paper is not meant to devalue the art historical importance of *Prada Marfa*. The work is not only an important piece of public art, but it is also a national pop culture landmark. The level of public engagement that *Prada Marfa* stimulates is high, both through primary experience and online interfacing. The continual vandalism, past legal complications, and pervasive Internet presence are testaments to the work's capacity to elicit reactions. A visitor might take a photograph of the sculpture or shoot it with a rifle—both are manifestations of the sculpture's public reception. The success of public art should be defined by its ability to incite these ardent responses. Often statues and architectural follies in urban environments are completely overlooked as public art. They are passive and predictable historical objects that blend into the urban context; rarely do they become obligatory locations for selfies or evoke questions about the difference between art and advertising. *Prada Marfa* stands in contrast to these quieter works of public art and has secured a position in the canon of art history.

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<sup>5</sup> Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publishing, 1976), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 1981), 87-88.

<sup>7</sup> Google, Google Trends, accessed 15 February 2016 <https://www.google.com/trends/explore?q=prada%20marfa>.

<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.



Figure 1. [above] Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, *Prada Marfa*, 2005, 15 x 24 x 12 feet, Valentine, Texas. Courtesy Ballroom Marfa. Photo credit: James H. Evans © 2005.





Figure 2. Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, *Opening Soon/Powerless Structures*, Fig 242, 2001, New York, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Courtesy the Artists. Photo credit: Mark Lutrelle.



Figure 3. Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, *Prada Marfa* (2005 line of Prada merchandise inside sculpture), 2005, Valentine, Texas. Photo credit: Peyton Gardner.



Figure 4. Richard Phillips, *Playboy Marfa*, 2013, Marfa, Texas. Courtesy Marfa Public Radio. Photo credit: Megan Detrie.



Figure 5. Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, *Prada Marfa* (with Boyd Elder), 2005, Valentine, Texas. Courtesy Art Production Fund and Ballroom Marfa. Photo credit: Liz Kabré.



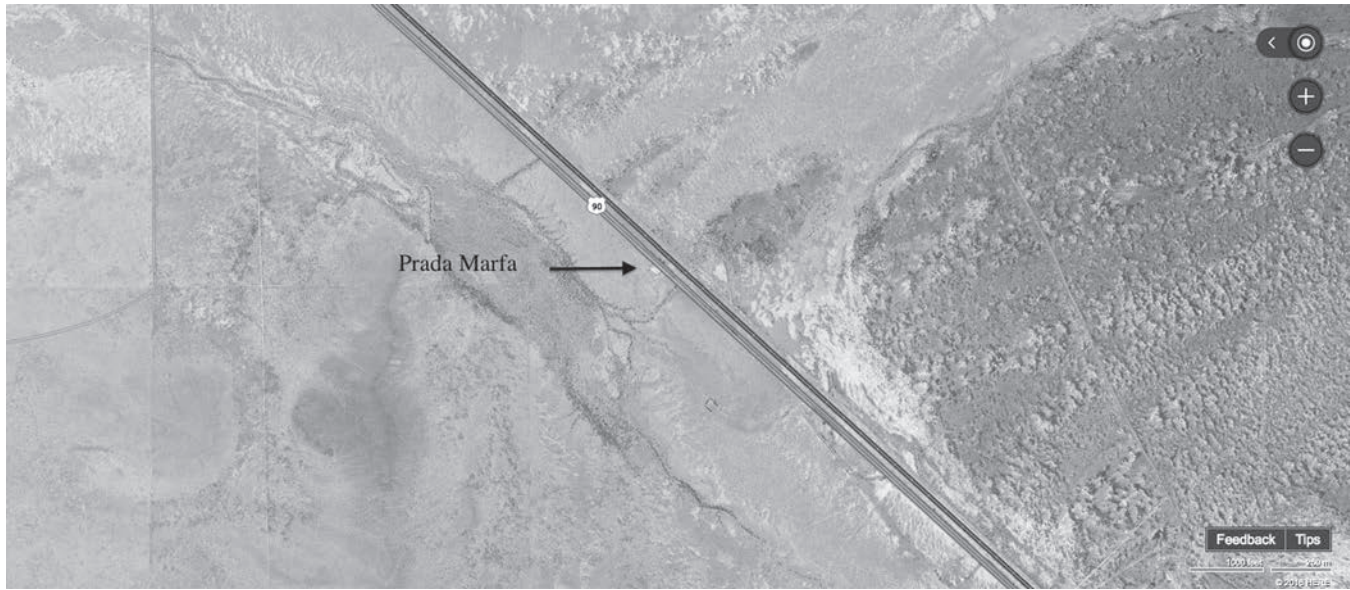


Figure 6. Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, *Prada Marfa* (aerial view of sculpture), 2016, Valentine, Texas. Photo credit: Bing Maps.



Figure 7. Digital image of a smartphone screen that displays a digital image of a laptop screen that features a digital image of *Prada Marfa*. Photo credit: Peyton Gardner.