

# **Mis-design: Art in a consumer landscape**

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**Vol. 1**

Submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2007

School of Culture and Communication

The University of Melbourne

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the collusion of ‘art’ and ‘design’ in contemporary artistic practices as a means to investigate the possibilities of critique in a commercially driven cultural landscape. It proceeds through an analysis of the work of Takashi Murakami, Andrea Zittel, Adam Kalkin and Vito Acconci, four contemporary artists who claim to be working in the field of commercial design rather than the traditional sphere of artistic practice. As I argue, this turn away from the institutions of art signals an attempt to address the increasingly commercial directive of contemporary art. The work of Murakami is presented as a counterpoint to illustrate the ways that contemporary art reinforces the systems of capitalist exchange. By contrast, the work of Zittel, Kalkin and Acconci is explored for its capacity to reactivate the critical practice of art in a more direct engagement with commerce through what I term ‘mis-design’. The work of all four artists reveals a fracture in contemporary society – the displacement of human desire in consumer culture. Engaging with design in a consciously provocative manner, I argue, opens up the potential to produce active objects that exploit the internal irrationality of late capitalism and insert difference into the homogenised sphere of consumer production. In this way, artists can make consumers aware of the alienating effects of capitalist exchange, the design of human life in our post-industrial landscape and the potential for becoming-human in a designed world.

In this thesis I trace a move away from ‘oppositional’ practices toward work that emerges from within commercial systems. Contemporary art, in this context, is considered as a critical engagement with capitalist systems of production, misdirecting the product-based methodology of commercial design. This examination of design responds to commercial design’s cannibalisation of art. Moving critical and conceptual practices into overt fields of architectural, landscape, interior and fashion design, art becomes a critical practice within the commercial sphere. By acknowledging the inherent complicity of art with design, this thesis begins to conceive of and affirm a future for art within the complex socio-economic and cultural predicament of late capitalism. Can mis-design provide the means for artistic critique within the designed spaces of contemporary cultural production?

## **Declaration**

This is to certify that

- (i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
- (ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
- (iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Adam Kalkin for taking me into his world and sharing the exquisite beauty of a New Jersey shopping mall. I would also like to thank Vito Acconci for his generosity in offering full access to his personal archive, and for taking the time to explain to me why he is not an artist. I consider myself very lucky to have been under the supervision of Dr. Anthony White, who has surprised and amazed me with his sharp and rigorous insights, his overwhelming compassion and support and most importantly his dry sense of humour. Prof. Sean Cubbit graciously agreed to enter the project at a late stage and has provided invaluable feedback. This project was significantly sidetracked in 2005 when my mother, Mary McQuilten, was diagnosed with cancer. Seeing her journey toward health provided significant perspective for me at an important stage in this project and helped me to understand the significance of doing nothing. Finally, I would like to thank my friend Shanaka Fernando for his provocations, profound wit, and encouragement while leading me completely off track.

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## Introduction

When the conveners of a recent forum on design dramatically declared, “design appears to have replaced nature as the dominant presence in human experience,”<sup>1</sup> they pointed to an important shift in the understanding of design as an aesthetic discipline. Commercial architectural design, fashion design, product design and industrial design shape and make the contemporary environment. As a result, the contemporary western landscape is designed. Education is designed. Politics is designed. Landscape, architecture, food, biology and ethics are all designed. Computer technologies have introduced a virtual world that is similarly shaped and framed by various forms of graphic, software and interface design. In *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, design theorist Vilem Flusser describes the emergence of design in modernist discourse as a means to bridge the gap between technology and art. Where design used to be a means to formalise production, he argues that now design has the capacity to “produce alternative worlds.”<sup>2</sup> This reconfiguration of design beyond its stylistic and formal associations is symptomatic of the expansion of late capitalism to encompass non-material production. The prevalence of design across many forms of social production reflects the increasing commodification of the post-industrial world. Design is deeply entwined with capitalism, for design is a means to create industrial products; it is harnessed to conceive of and produce commodities. As design theorist Tony Fry writes, “design serves the product, production, the producer, commodification and consumption.”<sup>3</sup>

The proliferation of design in the field of contemporary art therefore brings into question the ever-escalating commodification of art in the hands of a capitalist economy. Art is often distinguished from design by the concepts of autonomy and aura. As popular

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan, eds., *Discovering design: explorations in design studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) p. xii

<sup>2</sup> Vilem Flusser, *The shape of things: a philosophy of design*, (London: Reaktion, 1999), p. 28. Of modern art and technology, he writes, “In the gap, the word design formed a bridge between the two.” pp. 18-19

<sup>3</sup> Tony Fry, “Stepping back and looking forward” in Willis, Anne-Marie, ed. *Design Philosophy Papers: Collection One*. (Ravensbourne, Qld.: Team D/E/S, 2004), p. 82. Judy Attfield puts forward a similar suggestion, writing “Strictly speaking design is both the product and the process that conceptualises an aesthetic and functional solution to industrially produced goods – from garments to potato peelers and from cars to buildings.” (Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2000), p. 4

design theorist Judy Attfield argues, “Whereas art enchants the ordinary object and makes it special, design disenchants it.”<sup>4</sup> Yet in our contemporary economy, where it can be argued that all objects are ‘enchanted’ through the process of commodity exchange, and where artists are simultaneously de-emphasising the aura of the work of art to avoid the effects of commodification, such a distinction between art and design is hard to maintain. This thesis is concerned with the increasing design, by which I mean planned production of commodities, of contemporary artistic practices. Questioning the aesthetic collusion of ‘art’ and ‘design’ is a means by which to investigate the possibilities of critical artistic practices in a planned and commercially conceptualised cultural landscape.

Takashi Murakami, Andrea Zittel, Adam Kalkin and Vito Acconci are four contemporary artists who claim to be working in the field of commercial design rather than the traditional sphere of artistic practice. As I argue, this turn away from the institutions of art does not signal the end of art as a critical practice, but rather represents an attempt to avoid the neutralising effects of the art market. The claim to ‘design’ by these contemporary artists constitutes an acknowledgement of the relationship between cultural production and capitalist production. The distinction of art and design is not as significant, in this context, as the issue of criticality. As I argue, particular artistic interactions with design reactivate the critical practice of art in a more direct engagement with capital through what I will term ‘mis-design’.

While design as an aesthetic discipline has been intimately connected with the production of commodities, the term design also refers to a process of deliberation, conceptualisation, debate and critical thought. With origins in the Italian term ‘designo,’ referring to drafting and drawing practices in art since the Renaissance, the term design is intimately connected with creative conceptualisation. From the mid-nineteenth century, design developed into a field of its own, closely associated with the planning of products in an industrialised society.<sup>5</sup> Its current dictionary definition is “mental plan,”<sup>6</sup> again emphasising a process of conceptualisation. The effectiveness of late capitalism lies in its

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<sup>4</sup> Judy Attfield, *Wild Things*, p. 4

<sup>5</sup> As Thomas Hauffe describes, “With the coming of industrialisation, the history of design also begins.” (Thomas Hauffe, *Design: A concise history*, London: Lawrence King Publishing, 1998, p. 10)

<sup>6</sup> H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, eds, *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English*, London: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 330.

ability to accommodate creative conceptual thinking, while nevertheless turning all such activities towards economic (rather than social) ends, towards the production of commodities. In this sense, capitalism uses the conceptual processes of both art and design to create the most effective products. Yet there remains a tension within this process between conception and outcome, between critique and product. While in one sense design seems to be turning all of our experiences, sensations, thoughts and desires into commercial products, it also provides a ground for political discussion. Issues relating to construction, production, the environment and social relations are being vigorously debated in the context of design studies and specific fields of commercial design. This critical potential of design is evident, for example, when design theorist Richard Buchanan suggests, “Design is the art of shaping arguments about the artificial and human-made world.”<sup>7</sup>

The increasing overlapping of art and design has provoked serious concern from art critics who fear that it signals the demise of critical space. At the same time, an increasing number of artists are using the intersection of art and design as a site for experimentation, exploring how the interchange might provide a unique vehicle for critical intervention in the commercial sphere. In the context of a globalised economy shaped and controlled by the design of cultural commodities, artistic practices employ many strategies associated with the aesthetic field of design. Contemporary art, in its various manifestations, involves the conception and production of objects, experiences, performances, concepts and images, which like other designed products are easily appropriated and distributed by commercial processes. As Alex Coles suggests in *DesignArt*, “all art is designed even if it endeavours to appear otherwise.”<sup>8</sup> Even spontaneous and unexpected artistic production, in this sense, is designed in the sense that it is planned for the space and audience of its reception, which easily falls into the hands of commercial interests. The problem is no longer the difference between art and design, therefore, but rather the collusion of art, design and commerce. As artists and theorists working in a capitalist economy have long known, commodification endangers

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Buchanan, “Rhetoric, humanism and design,” in *Discovering design*, p. 46

<sup>8</sup> Alex Coles, *DesignArt*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), p. 10. While Coles does not account for the complicity of commerce in this development and its impact on critical space, he clearly demonstrates the futility of trying to hold art aloft from the world of contemporary design.

the critical capacity of artistic practice. In Theodor Adorno's words, "Monopoly is the executor: eliminating tension, it abolishes art along with conflict."<sup>9</sup> In the grasp of commerce, art is redesigned and repackaged, relentlessly turned toward commercial ends.

This thesis maps the possibilities for critical artistic practice in an environment marked by the design of commodities, asking whether it is possible to distinguish design as a conceptual practice from its commercial end product, in order to find a means for critical practices to emerge within the systems of late capitalism. I use the term "systems" here to encompass the network of economic, cultural, social and institutional bodies that through their differences coalesce into the stunning effectiveness of contemporary capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary art, in this context, is considered as a critical engagement with these systems, misdirecting the product-based methodology of commercial design. This argument is traced across four chapters, each focusing on the practice of one contemporary artist who is overt in engaging with commercial design.

In chapter 1, I examine the relationship between art and design in the context of historical debate about the commodification of art. I trace a move away from 'oppositional' practices toward work that emerges from within commercial systems. In the current condition, as critics from Naomi Klein to Slavoj Žižek argue, the sphere of politics has been displaced into the world of marketing.<sup>11</sup> In an art world infected by consumer desire, overt ideology has a negligible effect, with a desire to consume overwhelming the political content of much contemporary artwork. While theorists such as Daniel Miller have turned to the politics of consumption to understand this situation, I argue in this chapter that practices based on consumption can only console, rather than activate, the designed subject of consumer culture.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, I turn away from the convivial practices put forward by critics such as Nicholas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*, arguing that such practices inadvertently mask the relations of commercial

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<sup>9</sup> Theodor Adorno, *The culture industry: selected essays on mass culture*, JM Bernstein (ed.), (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 67

<sup>10</sup> For the use of the term systems in the plural, see Bela Banathy, *Designing Social Systems in a Changing World, Contemporary Systems Thinking* (New York: Plenum Press, 1996.).

<sup>11</sup> See Naomi Klein, *No Logo, No Space, No Choice, No Jobs: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, (London: Flamingo, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> See Daniel Miller, *Material culture and mass consumption*, (Oxford; New York: Blackwell, 1987).

exchange in the space of the art gallery.<sup>13</sup> I examine contemporary artist Takashi Murakami's practice to tease out this argument. Murakami's work overtly celebrates the commodification of the contemporary art market, reinforcing the systems of commercial design. Reflecting the current commercial landscape, his position captures the critical impasses of postmodernism, where critical autonomy vanishes amid a kaleidoscope of depthless imagery. This study of Murakami's work is a means to consider the possibilities of criticality in contemporary cultural production.

In contrast to Hal Foster's recent attack on design in *Design and Crime*, I argue that turning away from design only renders subversion futile, suggesting that it is more effective to harness the process of design to misdirect commercial production. That is, to mis-design. I draw upon the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and their move away from oppositional critique to consider how subjects are entwined with social production through desire. It is from a position 'within' commercial production, I argue, that social subjects can be positioned as producers of the systems of design, and not merely as passive consumers. This approach has been taken up to some extent in web and software design, as put forward by Nigel Thrift for example, where user interaction can result in co-creation.<sup>14</sup> While this kind of user interaction is still guided and directed by the commercial producer, it opens up possibilities for negotiation. This has not been explored adequately in the context of commercial and industrial production processes. This is where the convolution of artistic and commercial practice gathers critical traction.

Unleashed in the field of commercial design, artists have a unique capacity to mis-direct the commercial directives of social production. This means reconsidering art as a critical practice occurring within the field of commercial design. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 look at specific examples of this practice in the work of Andrea Zittel, Adam Kalkin and Vito Acconci. As I argue, these artists use commercial design to critique the unconscious aspect of production, revealing how subjects become ensnared by their desire for the seductions of a consumer landscape. In these chapters I reconfigure artistic practice as a moving, changing and unpredictable process occurring on the inside of commercial

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<sup>13</sup> See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, (Paris: Les presses du reel, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> See Nigel Thrift, "Re-inventing invention: new tendencies in capitalist commodification," (*Economy and Society*, vol. 35, no 2, 2006), pp. 279-306

culture, suggesting that practices inhabiting the systems of commercial design can present a complex critique of the psychological dynamics of social production.

Chapter 2 examines Andrea Zittel's engagement with design. Over the last decade Zittel has become a significant figure in the contemporary art world, despite her embrace of interior design, fashion design and architecture. In her practice, Zittel revives modernist concepts of utilitarian design as a means to find emancipation from the systems of capitalist production. Zittel creates idealistic products, such as complete housing and clothing structures that promise to solve, and therefore absolve her of all consumer needs. This work has been received by art and design discourse as an ironic appropriation of modernist design principles turned toward the idealistic redesign of consumer life. As Robert Cook writes in the catalogue for her 2006-2007 touring retrospective, "Ruminating across and expanded and interiorised frontier, she is engaged in the redesign of so much we take for granted... with a neat balance of ironic suspicion and optimism about the whole enterprise."<sup>15</sup> In this chapter I turn away from this reading of Zittel's work and argue that her repeated attempts to find freedom and autonomy through commercial design involve a necessary failure. Zittel's failed idealism comes to demonstrate, I argue, that the systems of design implicitly repress the body, desire and all attempts at finding freedom. This flawed design makes the consumer aware of the controlling and oppressive structures of social production. Zittel's practice is considered in this chapter in the context of modernism and the failure of Marxist revolution. What was overlooked in both cases, I suggest, was the role of psychological desire in driving and shaping social production. Zittel's futile products lead consumers to consider the personal, subjective and psychological mechanisms of capitalist production, creating a critical space in the field of design that revives the potential of art as critique. Design is used to implicate consumers as both producers of culture and participants in capitalist production. By reenacting the futility of modernist idealism in her design, Zittel comes to embody the alienating effects of capitalist production, which as I argue provides a complex critique of the psychological structures of social production.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Cook, "New Deeds; A frontier practice" in *Andrea Zittel: Critical Space*, eds. Paola Morsiani and Trevor Smith, (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2005), p. 31

Adam Kalkin's architectural production is the focus of Chapter 3. Like Zittel, Kalkin employs interior design and architecture as a means to examine the role of human desire in production. Here, the intersection of art and architecture provides a unique space to explore the total design of cultural space. Where Zittel's critique occurs through the futility of design, however, Kalkin is overt in mis-directing the systems of design. He takes a position that is engaged and Dionysian in humour and energy, combining irrational products such as melted marshmallow with large-scale industrial architectural works such as public museums, government housing development and private estates. Kalkin's practice, I argue, employs a rationalised madness in order to explore and simultaneously disrupt the complex flows of late capitalism. The resulting spaces and products make consumers aware that capitalism is not a coherent entity, or in Deleuze and Guattari's words, that capitalism "is mad from one end to the other and from the beginning, and this is the source of its rationality."<sup>16</sup> In this chapter I examine how Kalkin expands this insanity, opening up spaces within for reflection on the social processes of commercial production. Kalkin's experimentation, I argue, drives the logic of the industrial process to a level of irrational 'excess' and thereby brings Karl Marx's critique of capitalism into dialogue with the subversive ambitions of Georges Bataille. Kalkin's critique thus occurs on two levels. Firstly, design serves to uncover the repressed and fetishised forms of desire already present within commercial production. It then turns the inherent irrationality of late capitalism toward disruptive mis-design. This chapter thus presents an argument for excessive and irrational human production as a means to undermine the commercial foundations of design.

Chapter 4 turns away from Kalkin's irrational production to explore the idea of gradual evolution as a means to overcome the design, by which I mean commercial directive, of contemporary art. This proceeds through an analysis of Vito Acconci's transition from artist to architect over four decades of practice. Acconci is best known as a notorious and provocative performance artist from the 1960s, made infamous for masturbating under the floor of a gallery and projecting the sound into the public space above in *Seedbed* (1972). Yet in the late 70s he abandoned the spaces of art and for

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<sup>16</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 408

nearly three decades has been engaging with commercial design and architecture. Feeling that he had exhausted the possibilities of critical art in a consumer world, he renounced overt idealism along with the art world and began collaborating with trained architects on public design projects. Acconci's reframing of his artistic practice in terms of architecture, I argue, is a tactical manoeuvre that acknowledges the reframing of contemporary art within commercial design. Acconci attempts to overcome the impasses of postmodernism through an evolution of artistic practice which I explore through Nietzsche's theory of evolution. Acconci takes the Nietzschean sense of overcoming through a 'will to power' that encourages the consumer to react against their control by design, thus encouraging social differentiation, becoming and transformation. Actively resisting the outcome-based methodology of design, Acconci's practice demonstrates a disavowal of purpose along with a misguided sense of function that is characteristic of art. He thus encourages difference, play and critique within the field of architectural design, undermining its commercial directive. As I argue, this sets up a dialogue between the material conditions of architecture and the critical practices or intentions of art.

What emerges across these four contemporary artistic projects is not the relationship between art and design but the viability of artistic practice within a commercially driven and thereby designed landscape. Such a configuration of design runs parallel with, and responds to, commercial design's cannibalisation of art. Moving critical and conceptual practices into overt fields of architectural, landscape, interior and fashion design, art becomes a critical practice within the commercial sphere. By acknowledging the inherent complicity of art with design, such work begins to conceive of and affirm a future for art within the complex socio-economic and cultural predicament of late capitalism. This thesis thereby attempts to imagine a future for critical art in the sphere of contemporary cultural production. In the hands of artists, I ask, can commercial production provide a means for capital's mis-design?



## Chapter 1

### Art, design, mis-design

This chapter examines the work of Takashi Murakami, a contemporary artist who openly exploits the conflation of art, design and commerce, as a means to set up the terms for understanding the critical role of design in recent artistic practices. Murakami's work presents a show-bag of contemporary culture, influenced heavily by Japanese consumerism, and encompasses toys, t-shirts, action figures and posters as well as more traditional media such as painting, photography and sculpture. The aesthetic of his work derives from *anime*, or Japanese animation, in all its popular variations, from the cute 'Hello-Kitty' style of consumer decoration to the more confronting pornographic variations of *manga*. The work provides a visual feast, caters to all subcultures and seduces viewers, critics and consumers alike. Importantly, Murakami's artistic practice takes design as a medium in the production of graphics, products, corporations and exhibitions. As one theorist, Hiroki Azuma, comments, "I can remember Murakami replying that it 'didn't matter much' when told that one of his works had been run upside-down in a newspaper article. Such a stance plainly places Murakami more in the realm of designer or illustrator than artist, and he himself intentionally emphasises this aspect."<sup>17</sup> Murakami describes his practice in terms of a 'superflat' aesthetic, working in two-dimensional space with simple shapes and characters that are repeated across various canvasses in seemingly endless variation and morph into three dimensional design products. There is an empty, disheartened quality to this production which is elucidated when Murakami describes one of his anime characters: "*Oval* has eyes all over his body, showing that he watches everything, without caring about anything"<sup>18</sup> (Figure 1). Produced in the climate of postmodern cynicism, Murakami's fantasy world is offered as consolation to the alienated subjects of late capital, reduced to shells of human character. Yet this should not be mistaken for critique. As I argue, this conflation of art and design is perfectly postmodern, celebrating the collapse of traditional binaries and the resulting

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<sup>17</sup> Hiroki Azuma, 'Super Flat speculation,' in *DOB in the strange forest*, ex. cat. (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-Sha, Ltd, 1999), n.p.

<sup>18</sup> Takashi Murakami, 'Life as a creator' in *Summon monsters? Open the door? Heal? Or die?*, eds. Kaikai Kiki Co. & MCA, (Saitama-Ken: Kaikai Kiki Co, 2002), 134

homogenous consumer world. In this space, art is twisted into commerce, and commerce into art.

In the contemporary, global sphere of cultural production, the embrace of design as an artistic medium is not especially surprising. In the wake of 1960s conceptualism, as Rosalind Krauss has observed, the modernist idea of a materially specific art medium has given way to artistic practices that dive into the heart of mass culture and use all media at hand. Artists, Krauss writes, “have recourse to every material support one can imagine, from pictures to words to video to readymade objects to films.”<sup>19</sup> Murakami’s unapologetic embrace of art as commercial design, however, touches on the problematic outcome of this experimental turn – the tendency for art to seamlessly blend into the glittering façade of consumer culture, often serving commercial interests and evacuating critical content. Murakami’s practice thus provides a perfect window for exploring the complex history of the interplay of art and commerce in post-industrial society, and allows consideration of the recent embrace of design in the sphere of contemporary art.

The relationship of art and consumer culture has been an ever-present issue in art practice in the twentieth-century, most notably in the work of Pop artists in the 1960s, and recent attempts to grapple with the relationship between art and commerce represent a continuation, rather than a renewal, of these concerns. There is a key difference, however, in recent works that implicate themselves in the functioning of consumer culture. This difference involves a complex play of production, consumption and use in artistic practice that questions the very concept of artistic autonomy and critical thought in the context of our global, postmodern world. Starting with a survey of the relationship between art and consumer culture, this chapter will consider Marxist and Neo-Marxist readings of capitalism, focusing particularly on the work of Theodor Adorno. This will lead to an analysis of the tension between art and commerce in the context of contemporary consumer-capitalism in light of the writings of Deleuze and Guattari.

The issue of complicity is fundamental to an analysis of contemporary artwork that seeks a position internal to the mechanisms of consumer culture. As I will argue, the difficulty of analysis from ‘outside’ requires an artistic position necessarily inside

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<sup>19</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *‘A voyage on the North Sea’: art in the age of the post-medium condition*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 15

contemporary culture, and therefore potentially in ‘collusion’ with it. Yet there is a vast difference between collusion and critique, between design and mis-design. The ways in which the work of Murakami overlaps, exploits, mimics and diverges from commercial design sets the terms for this discussion of critical artistic practice in the context of contemporary consumer culture. I argue that Murakami embodies the double-bind of late capitalism – the way in which consumers unconsciously come to desire and ensure their own oppression within its systems – by undermining his own interests within the field of art through his embrace of design. This predicament sets the terms for understanding the experimental practices of Andrea Zittel, Adam Kalkin and the Vito Acconci studio, artists who configure design as a means to critically examine social production in the contemporary sphere.

### **The fashion of contemporary art**

Twenty years ago Andy Warhol declared, “Lock up a department store today, open the door after a hundred years and you will have a Museum of Modern Art.”<sup>20</sup> The infiltration of consumer culture into the world of visual art is neither surprising nor novel to a contemporary art audience. In fact, it seems that we could now reverse Warhol’s statement to declare instead, “Lock up a Museum of Modern Art today, open the door after a hundred years and you will have a department store.” This increasing similarity between the spaces of art and commerce casts a shadow on Warhol’s emphatic statement, suggesting not a democratisation of art so much as the gradual disappearance of art practices that do not fulfill commercial interests. While the experimental approach to artistic media, evident in Warhol’s embrace of popular commodities, was staged by postmodern artists as a critique of the modernist elevation of art above everyday life, it also had the effect of homogenising artistic practices and lending them to the service of capital. In this context, as Krauss observes, “every material support, including the site itself – whether art magazine, dealer’s fair booth, or museum gallery – will now be

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<sup>20</sup> Andy Warhol, cited in Grunenberg et al., *Shopping: a century of art and consumer culture* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), p. 9

leveled.”<sup>21</sup> Perhaps it would be more pertinent to change Warhol’s phrase altogether, and ask instead, “What is the difference between the department store and the Museum of Modern Art today?”

The prominence of publicity, sponsorship and celebrity in the current art market is hard to deny. As one prominent contemporary curator writes: “Celebrity and photography are well-matched and important subjects for a contemporary portrait gallery.”<sup>22</sup> Museums herald the ‘cross-over’ of art and fashion in recent exhibitions such as *Fashioning Fiction in Photography Since 1990*, held at the Museum of Modern Art – Queens in New York in April 2004 and *WILD: Fashion Untamed*, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2005. The trend continues with the exhibition *Breaking the Mode: Contemporary Fashion from the Permanent Collection at the LA County Museum of Art* in January, 2007.<sup>23</sup> The assumption that disciplines of design and fashion are ‘breaking’ into the field of fine art reveals the conundrum – by maintaining supposed distinctions between ‘fashion’ and ‘photography’ or ‘commercial’ and ‘artistic,’ these projects disguise the underlying and constant interconnection of these fields in our global and postmodern consumer world. As Naomi Klein argues, it is precisely in marketing their supposed difference and diversity that corporations disguise their homogenising effects. She writes, “By embodying corporate identities that are radically individualistic and perpetually new, the brands attempt to inoculate themselves against accusations that they are in fact selling sameness.”<sup>24</sup> It is by asserting the distinction between ‘fashion’ and ‘art’ that the commercial systems of the art market disguise their effective sameness in the contemporary marketplace. Even a position that asserts the distinction between art and commerce, in this sense, can ultimately serve commercial interests, disguising the connections between art and the commercial world. This points to an underlying issue for contemporary artists: if this is a postmodern world where the difference between culture and economics is fast disappearing, what exactly is wrong with the commercialisation of art?

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<sup>21</sup> Krauss, ‘A voyage on the North Sea’, p. 15

<sup>22</sup> Magda Keaney, ‘Fashion: art and fashion photography,’ *Photofile*, no. 65, May 2002, (Sydney: Australian Centre for Photography)

<sup>23</sup> See also Alice Mackrell’s publication *Art and Fashion* (London: Batsford, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Klein, *No logo*, p. 118

There has been no shortage of debate around the issue of corporate art collections and the corporate appropriation of art to legitimise business interests since the art-market boom in the 1980s. This has been evident in discussions by prominent art theorists, and various artists have used their work to stage institutional ‘critiques’ of the collusion between art and business.<sup>25</sup> Despite their oppositional premises, such works have nevertheless proven to be easily reappropriated by the very systems they critique – whether indirectly in the form of advertising and marketing, or more directly in their sponsorship and in their adoption by corporate art collections. Hans Haacke’s work, *On Social Grease* (1975) (Figure 2), for example, was purchased as part of a corporate art collection by Gilman Paper Company. The work, featuring commentaries on corporate involvement in the arts, from business and political representatives, was pointedly critical of the relationship between art and commerce. Its title used the comparison between social ‘grace’ and corporate marketing, or ‘grease’ to highlight the cultural legitimisation of business through its involvement in the arts. This critical foundation did not deter Gilman Paper Company from purchasing the work, however, to promote their operations as open and socially transparent. It is very difficult for an artwork such as *On Social Grease* to remain unaffected by this kind of appropriation. As Chin-tao Wu writes, “Gilman Paper’s ownership of Haacke’s work has not only minimised the critique that the artist was attempting to make in his works, but has actively, and radically, redefined the very meaning of the piece.”<sup>26</sup> This paradoxical situation, wherein corporations can adapt to absorb subversive tactics aimed against them, can largely be attributed to the complex movements of postmodernism.

In the process of disavowing modernism’s ‘grand narratives’ and essentialist ideals of artistic autonomy, it is evident that postmodernism also eradicated the modern artist’s subversive potential. Fredric Jameson, for example, accuses postmodernism of “discarding a modernist politics with a modernist art, and thereby leaving us politically

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<sup>25</sup> See Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: art and spatial politics* (Chicago; Cambridge: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; MIT Press, 1996) and Hal Foster, *The anti-aesthetic: essays on postmodern culture* (New York: New Press, 2002)

<sup>26</sup> Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, (London; New York: Verso, 2002), p. 267

aimless.”<sup>27</sup> Jurgen Habermas has likewise argued that postmodernism, despite its subversive premise, in fact reinscribes the values of bourgeois art and capitalism, going so far as to suggest that postmodernists tend toward neoconservatism. He writes:

More or less in the entire Western world a climate has developed that furthers capitalist modernisation processes as well as trends critical of cultural modernism. The disillusionment with the very failures of those programs that called for the negation of art and philosophy has come to serve as a pretense for conservative positions.<sup>28</sup>

And Jean Baudrillard provides a similarly disheartened view, suggesting that in contemporary society postmodern tactics of subversion are all but meaningless. He laments, “transgression and subversion never get ‘on the air’ without being subtly negated as they are: transformed into models, neutralised into signs, they are eviscerated of their meaning.”<sup>29</sup> Such critical resignation helps to explain the tendency toward cynicism in contemporary artistic practice.

In recent times, partly in response to this impossible situation, often referred to as the impasse of postmodernism, the very concept of ‘criticism’ has receded under the bright lights of sensation. These issues were at the fore in a round-table discussion about the fate of criticism in the arts, published in *October* in 2002. Hal Foster described the decline of critical spaces in recent art, suggesting that in the past: “There was a space for art and for critical practice to work out conflicts and contradictions that were in play in

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<sup>27</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Notes on Globalisation as a Philosophical Issue,’ in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 74

<sup>28</sup> Jurgen Habermas, ‘Modernity - an Incomplete Project,’ in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 2003), p. 1130

<sup>29</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin, (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), p. 173. Benjamin Buchloh also describes the effect of the postmodern globalisation of the art market, arguing that the embrace of techniques from the consumer world can easily lend itself to affirmations of capitalist systems, claiming “It implies that even the mere thought and the slightest gesture of opposition appear dwarfed and ludicrous in the face of the totalitarian control and domination by spectacle.” (See Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-avantgarde and culture industry: essays on European and American art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000, pp. xxi-xxii)

that order... Today art doesn't serve that purpose anymore."<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Buchloh echoed his sentiments, describing the traditional role of the art museum and art critic as follows:

Both of these elements of the public sphere of art have become mythical and obsolete, since nobody really wants to know and nobody has to know any longer what the context, the history, the intentions, and the desires of artistic practice might have been.<sup>31</sup>

This situation has been further complicated by the conflation of art discourse within generalised critical fields such as 'visual culture' and 'material culture.'

While commercial appropriations may not seem particularly surprising in the context of a world overtaken by corporate influences, the field of visual art has always maintained at least a pretext of critical distance, if only in the guise of artistic freedom. Critical distance, in a contemporary context, does not have to reinscribe the modernist value of artistic 'autonomy.' Rather, it is a matter of thinking critically about the convoluted culture that both artists and critics are currently implicated in, of harnessing the conceptual possibilities of design practice without directing it toward a commercial outcome. Or, in Deleuze and Guattari's words: "It is a question of keeping at a distance the forces of chaos knocking at the door."<sup>32</sup>

Takashi Murakami's practice throws open this critical door and launches straight into the heart of commerce. His work is cute, seductive, exceptionally marketable and consumable, wide-ranging and successful both critically and commercially. He has become a formidable capitalist and a formidable influence in the art world, most particularly in the context of contemporary Japanese art. How can such an overt surrender to the systems of capital have been so well embraced by the art world, and what are the effects on critical artistic practice? Or, in the words of Yusuke Miname, "Will he show us the future of art or will he destroy it?"<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hal Foster, 'Round table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism', *October*, no. 100, Spring 2002, p. 31

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, in 'Round table,' *October*, p. 29

<sup>32</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 352

<sup>33</sup> Yusuke Miname, 'Takashi Murakami strikes back,' in *Summon monsters?* p. 63

## The meaning of the nonsense of the meaning

Among Murakami's most celebrated works is the sculpture *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998) (Figure 3), a life-size depiction of a naked boy, proudly spouting a stream of white semen that circles around him in the style of a lasso. The work is an appropriation from the popular genre of erotic manga, *otaku*, transformed into an 'art' object through the title's reference to Andy Warhol's 1968 film *Lonesome Cowboys*. With bright plastic blue hair and cartoon features, it is cute and colourful enough to appeal to a general audience at the same time as carrying off a semblance of social critique through its exaggerated sexuality and references to 1960s Pop art. Yet to what extent does *My Lonesome Cowboy* simply reproduce a popular fetish, thereby reinforcing the socio-economic conditioning of consumer desire, as opposed to providing insight or critique?

The design of the figure was modeled after a similar character in *otaku* animation, and in order to be as faithful to the genre as possible, Murakami employed commercial manufacturers to produce the piece. There is no sign that Murakami was attempting to challenge or modify the *otaku* stereotype, with its abstraction of human desire and affirmation of sexual fantasy according to social constructs. The trail of semen that encircles *My Lonesome Cowboy* is the most obvious example of this fetishism – the human bodily fluid is stylised and converted into a static, plastic model of imaginary dimensions. Human experience is thus transformed into an object that emits other-worldly qualities, with a dollar price to match. It becomes a commodity that fuels the drive to consume unnecessary goods, or in Marx's terms, "a contriving and ever-calculating subservience to inhuman, sophisticated, unnatural and imaginary appetites."<sup>34</sup> The commodity is not produced to satisfy primal needs or desires, in this sense, but to enhance an unnecessary cycle of production and consumption, abstracted from human necessity. Marx writes, "commodities have absolutely no connexion with their physical

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<sup>34</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), p. 109



properties and with the material relations arising therefrom.”<sup>35</sup> The single feature of the work that might remind us of human desire and bodily experience is brandished, cowboy-style, as a social weapon.

Murakami’s celebration of the reified commodity is even more evident in the design for *Hiropon* (1997) (Figure 4), the female counterpart to *My Lonesome Cowboy*. *Hiropon*’s adolescent body is precariously balanced on one pointed foot, her tiny frame completely dwarfed by two bulbous breasts that explode from a tiny bikini. Only her elaborate blue hair competes with the presence of the breasts, from which milk spouts. The milk forms a complete circle around her, doubling as a skipping rope. Like *My Lonesome Cowboy*, *Hiropon* was not created as a critique of the objectification of the female body in *otaku* culture. Instead, it directly appeals to the market. Murakami admits, “Because making a life-size figure is really no different than making a sex doll (a dutch wife) in the context of the *anime* figure, it’s safe to say it ours was a fairly shameless plan from the start.”<sup>36</sup> This desire to conform, rather than challenge, the *otaku* market was made even more transparent when Murakami decided to remodel *Hiropon* as a new character, *Miss Ko2*, to be more in line with the sexual fetishism of the popular genre and less ‘unpalatable.’ Indeed, when Murakami approached a leading contemporary *otaku* designer about using one of his computer-game characters as the model for *Miss Ko2*, Murakami received a skeptical response. The designer, who is known simply as ‘Bome,’ replied, “This game is an utterly artless pandering to stereotypical *otaku* fetishism. Nor is it original – rather it was created with a complete understanding of the tastes of the entire *otaku* market for uniform fetishism.”<sup>37</sup> To which Murakami said, “That’s what I want.”<sup>38</sup> Placing examples of social fetish in the context of an art gallery might arguably open them to some form of critical reflection. Yet when the art gallery is simultaneously configured as a commercial space, for example when Murakami uses it as a means to promote and sell a variety of merchandise, then the space for critical reflection gives way to general consumption. The problems associated with

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<sup>35</sup> Marx, *Capital: a critique of political economy*, vol. I, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), p. 83

<sup>36</sup> Takashi Murakami, ‘Life as a creator,’ in *Summon monsters?*, p.138

<sup>37</sup> Bome, cited in Murakami, ‘Life as a creator,’ *Summon monsters?* p. 139 Murakami describes Bome as “the king of the figure character world.” (*Summon monsters?* p. 139)

<sup>38</sup> Murakami, ‘Life as a creator,’ *Summon monsters?* p. 140

this critical ambivalence become more apparent in the context of Murakami's subsequent forays into overt commercial production.

Murakami's status in the contemporary art market escalated in 2003 when he collaborated with Marc Jacobs on a range of designer handbags for elite fashion brand Luis Vuitton (Figure 5). Working with his own iconography, he created two monograms – one based on round, colourful flowers animated with smiling faces, the other featuring floating eye motifs taken from his *anime* characters. While clearly maintaining links to his visual art practice and its pretext of criticality, all traces of content, including the subtext of cultural critique, was evacuated from the resulting design. The thoroughly friendly pattern served simply to highlight and ornament the traditional Luis Vuitton monogram, 'LV', which remained within the pattern, transformed from brown and gold into Murakami's more colourful primary palette. Of course, there is nothing illogical about this kind of decorative design emerging in the context of fashion. When simultaneously embraced by the art world, however, the issue of the artwork's 'design' becomes more complex. In this case, Murakami's aesthetic was a vehicle for commercial advertising both inside and outside of the gallery. The effect was obvious and at the same time insidious. For example, when Murakami's Luis Vuitton monogram was subsequently used on the cover of the critical publication, *DesignArt* (Figure 6), as an illustration of the interplay of art and design, the graphic design ceased to be considered in purely commercial terms.<sup>39</sup> Yet it did not stop advertising Luis Vuitton to an elite market of art consumers.

Placing him within the tradition of American Pop art, Amanda Cruz reads Murakami's lack of criticality as expository, suggesting 'With his uncanny ability to mirror his culture he is more the equivalent of Andy Warhol than someone intent on critiquing things.'<sup>40</sup> This statement is revealing for what it overlooks. Not only does Cruz assume that Warhol was "not intent on critiquing things," but she also fails to address the fundamentally different context in which each artist's work emerged. In 1964, for example, Warhol filled a gallery space with cardboard boxes printed with Brillo

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<sup>39</sup> The publication, a critical survey of the relationship between design and art over the last century, thus inadvertently advertised a leading fashion brand on its bright and colourful cover. See Coles, *DesignArt*.

<sup>40</sup> Amanda Cruz, 'DOB in the land of otaku' in Takashi Murakami et al., *Takashi Murakami: the meaning of the nonsense of the meaning* (Annandale-on-Hudson, New York: Center for Curatorial Studies Museum Bard College; In association with Harry N. Abrams, 1999), p. 14

branding, apparently identical to the boxes in which the Brillo soap scourers were commercially stored. Warhol's presentation of serial imagery disturbed the widely held modernist view of the originality of the work of art. This overt display of the infiltration of consumer culture in the art world of the 1960s provided a juxtaposition of art and mass culture to an audience who perceived a clear division between the two.

While works such as the iconic Campbell's soups cans and Mickey-Mouse prints appeared to be simulating the uniformity of mass culture, the effect was of individuation: not only between each (slightly different) print, but in pointing to the concept of serialisation itself. Rosalind Krauss insists that Warhol's seriality was not a celebration of homogeneity. Instead, she suggests, it was "the endless insistence on the fact of difference within the same."<sup>41</sup> Each print in his Marilyn Monroe series, for example, was slightly different; traces of ink on each image marking the failure, even in reproduction, to completely conform to the model (Figure 7). In his own claim, "I haven't been able to make every image clear and simple and the same as the first one," it is hard to tell whether he is lamenting or celebrating the originality this implies.<sup>42</sup> Benjamin Buchloh argues that despite Warhol's claims of uncriticality, his work retained a critical function: it pointed to the reified existence of the art object, showing the disappearing distinction between art and commerce in spectacle culture, as well as revealing the appropriation of the avant-garde by the institutions they traditionally challenged. Buchloh writes that Warhol "unified within his constructs the views of both victors and the victims of the late twentieth century."<sup>43</sup>

Murakami's work, on the other hand, lacks this tension; art retains no space from consumerism to provide contrast or juxtaposition. Where Warhol filled the gallery with replicas of existing consumer imagery, in the form of Brillo boxes for example, Murakami paints without referent his own branding. Murakami is the Brillo

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<sup>41</sup> Krauss, 'Carnal Knowledge,' in *Andy Warhol*, ed. Annette Michaelson, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 117

<sup>42</sup> Warhol, 'Interview with Gene Swenson,' in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000*, p. 748. Contrasting his commercial images of sameness with his films is useful here; his films do not celebrate mainstream culture, instead proliferating marginal characters and reveling in the edges of social conduct and lifestyle. When he lamented, "Everybody just goes on thinking the same thing, and every year it gets more and more alike. Those who talk about individuality the most are the ones who most object to deviation," his desire for differentiation becomes evident. ('Interview with Gene Swenson,' p. 749).

<sup>43</sup> Buchloh, *Neo-avantgarde and culture industry*, p. 514

manufacturer. His trademark character, 'DOB' is one such product (Figure 8). A large, round, panda face with big friendly eyes rests on a petite mouse-like body, resulting in a cute combination of Astro-boy, and – in true Warholian style – Mickey Mouse. Where Warhol displayed the existing consumer fetishism of Mickey Mouse in his reproductions, Murakami prints his own logo, exploiting the fetishistic character of consumer imagery to create his own commodity. DOB can be found on keychains, on clothing, on postcards, in department stores and also, naturally, in most art museum stores. Where traces of ink in Warhol's work pointed to the means of its own production, suggesting a self-conscious replication of existing imagery, Murakami is meticulous in technique, creating seamless images that blend perfectly into the commercial landscape.

The question of whether there is room for criticality in Murakami's artistic position becomes rhetorical when examining his overt commercial operations. His Luis Vuitton collaboration was a huge commercial success, as described in this *Time International* review:

After whipping up a hive's worth of buzz at the Louis Vuitton fashion show in Paris last fall, and receiving rhapsodic reviews from the likes of *Vogue* and *Women's Wear Daily*, the art world's favorite son has suddenly found himself fashion's "It" boy too.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, Murakami is open about this approach to the commercialisation of art. He proudly claims that one of his objectives, for example, is "not so much to think collectively about Pop Art as to create 'art products'."<sup>45</sup> There is potential to explore the murky depths of the postmodern condition in this kind of commercial project, and it is this kind of complicity that signifies the 'internal' position of many artists involved in contemporary culture. Yet Murakami's work plays with surfaces.

In his designer handbags, the Murakami monogram became an artistic logo in a commercial world. Likewise, its appearance in the space of the gallery became a signifier

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<sup>44</sup> Jim Frederick, 'Move over, Andy Warhol: Painter, sculptor, cartoonist and handbag king Takashi Murakami hits it big by marrying art and commerce.' (*Time International*, vol. 161, no. .21, 2003), p. 42

<sup>45</sup> Murakami, cited in 'Interview with Takashi Murakami by Helen Kelmachter,' Kaikai Kiki, ex. cat., ed. Takashi Murakami, (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 2002)

for Murakami as artist. As Klein so clearly describes in the introductory paragraph to *No Logo*, consumer culture does not create products anymore: “successful corporations must produce brands, as opposed to products.”<sup>46</sup> In the realms of both art and commerce, Murakami’s DOB functions as commercial branding, and in both realms this façade celebrates the depthless nature of consumerism. There is not much room for consumer agency or alternative modes of production and consumption in Murakami’s model – he appropriates the signs and symbols of popular culture, reiterates them in an art context, and then is re-appropriated in return. If the product of consumer capitalism is now obsolete, as Klein suggests, and what is advertised, sold and distributed in the marketplace is now branding itself, then Murakami is indeed the perfect corporation. Murakami’s logo spreads across museums, commercial galleries, fashion advertising and into the street.

The commercial functioning of the gallery likewise remains unchallenged. Murakami is happy to exploit the status of art as a precious commodity, at the same time as manufacturing popular commodities on a larger scale under the umbrella of ‘design.’ Rather than pushing the limits of the cross-over of art and commerce, he retains and exploits their boundaries. This points to Michel Foucault’s understanding of transgression, which he sees as entwined with, rather than subversive of, the limit that it seeks to transgress. He writes, “Perhaps it is simply an affirmation of division.”<sup>47</sup> Asked about the blurring of his identity as an artist and fashion designer, Murakami responded: “I need to rebuild the wall between the commercial art and the fine art I do.”<sup>48</sup> In a mimetic affirmation of consumer capitalism, he keeps his commercial and ‘fine art’ operations divided, so as to capitalise on both. In this way he mirrors the strategies of corporations such as Gilman Paper Company, whose appropriation of Haacke’s work depended on a distinction between the work’s status as ‘fine art’ and their own corporate interests.

This was made most evident when Murakami recently battled a rival manufacturer, Narumiya International, for infringing his copyright. Claiming that the

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<sup>46</sup> Klein, *No logo*, p. 3

<sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault, “Preface to transgression,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Ed. Donald F Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977)

<sup>48</sup> Frederick, ‘Move over, Andy Warhol,’ p. 42

children's clothing brand had used *anime* characters with similar mouse-like characteristics to his cherished DOB, Murakami reverted to an assertion of the value of his work as 'art.' After the case was settled, he released a statement claiming, 'The concept of originality is the lifeline of contemporary art... The characters that I create are not just characters; they are also art.'<sup>49</sup> Rather than exploring the interplay of his appropriations with the exchanges of late capital in a critical way, Murakami instead defended his commercial territory, claiming tens of millions of yen in compensation.<sup>50</sup>

Murakami's references to Andy Warhol and American Pop provide historical legitimacy for his commercial interests. Historical context is one of the key differentiators used by critics to disentangle art from the problems of postmodernism. Boris Groys, for example, argues:

But while art is consuming consumption and *archiving* scenes of this consumption, it succeeds in escaping simple subjugation under the constant changes in fashion, and simultaneously creates new, critical variants of consumption.<sup>51</sup>

While Warhol claimed to celebrate artistic commercialism, his work consistently provided a juxtaposition of art and consumer culture, archiving a period in consumer history and opening a space, if nothing else, for questioning. In *The Consumer Society*, Jean Baudrillard dismisses the possibility of subversion in Pop art, yet acknowledges its analytical function:

Quite logically, it has nothing to do with subversive, aggressive humour, with the telescoping of surrealist objects. It is no longer a question of short-circuiting

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<sup>49</sup> Kaikai Kiki Co., 'Press release regarding the amicable settlement of contemporary artist Takashi Murakami's lawsuit regarding a breach of copyright,' [Website] (Kaikai Kiki Co, [cited August 8 2006]; available from [www.kaikaikiki.co.jp/regarding\\_the\\_amicable\\_settlement](http://www.kaikaikiki.co.jp/regarding_the_amicable_settlement))

<sup>50</sup> See 'Designer Takashi Murakami settles copyright lawsuit with clothes maker,' (*Mainichi Daily News*, April 25, 2006)

<sup>51</sup> Boris Groys, 'The Artist as Consumer' in Christoph Grunenberg et al., *Shopping: a century of art and consumer culture*, p. 59-60. [My emphasis]

objects in their function, but one of juxtaposing them to analyze the relations between them.<sup>52</sup>

Murakami's work, however, lacks this juxtaposition. It does not archive consumer culture: it produces it. Where Warhol attempted to make art that was "exactly the same" as popular culture, Murakami goes one step further.<sup>53</sup> He makes popular culture that is "exactly the same" as art.

When Murakami's designer handbags were exhibited at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, for example, one reviewer responded to a comparison between Murakami's work and Warhol's *Flowers* with the following observation: "Murakami has, however, carried Warhol's idea to another level. He has not 'appropriated' the LV label, but is actually working for the company."<sup>54</sup> Murakami's mimetic affirmation, in this sense, contains only the 'victors' of the late twentieth century. In this sense, his practice of art-design is a perfect statement of the postmodern paradox, where all resistance seems to be futile and no outside position seems to be available.<sup>55</sup> It is important to question the popular and critical embrace of this apparent surrender to consumerism, and to think carefully about what the lack of critique – both in the production and reception of his work – signifies for the art world more broadly.

Despite the claim on one hand to provide a mirroring of contemporary life, Murakami's work revels in fantasy. He has declared, "I like to immerse myself in thinking and talking about things in the fantasy world that have no role in society whatsoever."<sup>56</sup> This is evident in decorative paintings such as *Superflat Jellyfish Eyes 2* (2003) (Figure 9), where bright circles of colour float around in a black expanse, creating a two-dimensional space that unites its wallpaper-print aesthetic with science-fiction fantasy. It does not present existing consumer imagery, and Murakami does not provide an opportunity to examine consumer culture. Instead, his work feeds the commercial fire. His claim to "have no role in society whatsoever" is obviously trite when his art is

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<sup>52</sup> Baudrillard, *The consumer society: myths and structures* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), p. 121

<sup>53</sup> Warhol claimed, "I want it to be *exactly* the same," in Luthy, "The Consumer Article in the Art World: On the Para-Economy of American Pop," in *Shopping: a century of art and consumer culture*, p. 152

<sup>54</sup> Paul Mattick, "Takashi Murakami at Marianne Boesky", *Art in America*, vol. 92, no. 1, 2004, p. 107

<sup>55</sup> This is clear in Cruz's statement, "Murakami's uncritical stance toward capitalism is perhaps typical of his generation." Cruz, "DOB in the land of Otaku," p. 16

<sup>56</sup> Cruz, "DOB in the land of Otaku," p. 18

promoted and received as Pop, deeply connected with the play of contemporary life. When contemporary society is understood as a play of fantasy and spectacle, as argued by theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord, it is futile to dismiss the social function of ‘fantastical’ imaginings.<sup>57</sup> Hyper-reality keeps consumers in a state of passive consumption.

Murakami’s artistic success rests on a guise of critical depth – hence his desire to keep his commercial projects separate from his artistic practice. While this complicity does not necessarily negate the function of his work, it poses a problem. Does his complete absorption in the consumer market reveal the inseparability of art and capital in contemporary culture, or is it nihilistic, aiding the total appropriation of art by the systems of consumer capitalism? It is not surprising that appraisals of his work are contradictory. Midori Matsui, for example, describes his work on the one hand as an example of postmodern poetry, using “metonymic chains of association that disrupt rational order and the schizophrenic juxtaposition of fragments that collapses time and draws one’s attention to the materiality of signs.”<sup>58</sup> In the same analysis, Matsui describes Murakami as inspired by the “creation of an autonomous aesthetic space within the framework of realistic representation.”<sup>59</sup> Not content with simply encompassing postmodern practice, apparently Murakami successfully unites this position with the ideals of the modern avant-garde. Perhaps more notable in Matsui’s analysis was the following description of his sculptural piece *A Very Merry Unbirthday!*:

the sphere’s golden glitter captures our puzzling fascination with the chimerical ‘nothing’ called art. Like the design of the wheel in water, it is a beautiful rebus suspended between meaning and nonmeaning.<sup>60</sup>

It is not Murakami’s artistic position that poses a problem so much, in this sense, as the inherent acceptance of the “chimerical ‘nothing’ called art.”

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<sup>57</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) and Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983)

<sup>58</sup> Midori Matsui, ‘Toward a definition of Tokyo Pop: The classical transgressions of Takashi Murakami,’ in Murakami et al, *Takashi Murakami: the meaning of the nonsense of the meaning*, p. 27

<sup>59</sup> Matsui, “Toward a definition of Tokyo Pop,” p. 23

<sup>60</sup> Matsui, ‘Toward a definition of Tokyo Pop,’ p. 28



Murakami's corporation, the Kaikai Kiki Corporation, has locations in Tokyo and New York. In addition to a prolific commercial and artistic output, the organisation also produces a stream of commercial artists. The Warhol-inspired factory employs numerous assistants who are, in turn, exhibited as artists in their own right at private galleries under Murakami's curatorial direction. In 2004, for example, Murakami staged a themed exhibition called *Tokyo Girls Bravo* at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York. The show featured the work of ten of his assistants, claiming to provide "insight into Tokyo Pop art from the female perspective by presenting it as a form of escapism, distraction and entertainment within a culture known for its strict social codes."<sup>61</sup> In keeping with Murakami's personal aesthetic, fantasy was presented as critique and directed at the consumption of more products. Despite the pretext of showcasing emerging artists, it is important to note that the exhibition foregrounded Murakami himself. Not only did the show border on exoticism in its exploitation of the artists' cultural identity, but their practices were subsumed in the midst of the Murakami marketing. The press release for the show, for example, contained three introductory paragraphs featuring Murakami, with two paragraphs at the end encapsulating the work of ten artists. Adding some commercial glitter, the gallery also sold artist-designed T-shirts for \$40. This effect was mirrored in another Murakami-curated exhibition held in January 2004 at the LFL Gallery in New York, where the three featured artists were described first and foremost as "members of the Kaikai Kiki Corporation created by Takashi Murakami."<sup>62</sup> While there are obvious similarities between Murakami's corporation and Andy Warhol's factory, there is a significant difference. In the context of early postmodernism, Warhol's work presented a direct challenge to the elevation of fine art above everyday life. In a contemporary setting, Murakami's work does not challenge, but rather profits from and reinforces the elevation of his artistic practice in a lucrative market.

Apart from raising obvious issues of commercialism, these exhibitions also point to the simple issue of curatorial credibility. If curators are corporate directors displaying the work of their employees, then what capacity is there for diversity, creative freedom

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<sup>61</sup> Press release for *Tokyo Girls Bravo* (Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York: February 16 – March 13, 2004)

<sup>62</sup> Press release for *Gallery Swap: Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin* (LFL Gallery, New York: January 21 – January 31, 2004)

and critical reflection in their artistic practice? Murakami is not so much a curator, in this context, as a designer. In addition to designing products, he is designing the shape and future of contemporary artistic practice. Speaking of Kaikai Kiki, for example, he has stated: “It’s possible to make an art-idol in the same way the music industry or the movie industry produces pop stars.”<sup>63</sup> He has a particularly noticeable influence on the perception and reception of contemporary Japanese art by the Western art market. This was most evident in his 2005 curatorial blockbuster exhibition, *Little boy: the arts of Japan's exploding subculture*.<sup>64</sup> Held at the Japan Society in New York, the exhibition was staged, in true Hollywood style, as the final part in a trilogy of projects. In keeping with this spectacular theme, the exhibition presented an overload of sensorial and visual material from film, sculpture, drawing, painting, merchandising, popular television, design and illustration. Murakami’s ambition for the project was nothing less than “the project of defining the true nature of postwar Japanese culture.”<sup>65</sup>

The title *Little Boy* refers to the nickname given to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. It is also supposed to allude to a sense of cultural emasculation that pervaded in Japan’s popular media in the aftermath of this devastating attack. It is unclear, however, how Murakami’s sampling of Japanese popular culture actually addresses this sense of emasculation. In fact, it is nothing short of reductive to suggest that the enjoyment of children’s games, television and literature evident in Japanese consumer culture is related to the trauma of 1945, particularly in the context of the worldwide explosion of the culture industry around the same time. The two-dimensionality of *Little Boy*’s cultural critique is perhaps best encapsulated in Murakami’s own artistic contribution to the show, a painting titled *Time Bokan – Pink* (2001) (Figure 10). A smooth, hot pink acrylic surface dominates the painting, which provides a backdrop for the clean, white form of a mushroom cloud at its center. Ringed

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<sup>63</sup> Murakami, ‘Life as a creator,’ *Summon monsters?* p. 146. He has also stated, “Not only must we create artists, but we must also create a fan base for their art.” (Cited in David Pagel, ‘Takashi Murakami: Meet Japan’s Pop Art Samurai’ *Interview*, March 2001, p. 90)

<sup>64</sup> The exhibition, *Little boy: the arts of Japan's exploding subculture*, was held at the Japan Society Gallery, New York from April 8 – July 24, 2005. Murakami also relates the project to a Hollywood-scale production, claiming “Curating this exhibit was like filming a movie... all of my stars have very strong personalities. I needed to get them to bring my screenplay to life.” (Cited in ‘Takashi Murakami is all the rage,’ in *Metro*, April 8 – 10, 2005)

<sup>65</sup> Murakami, ‘Superflat trilogy: greetings, you are alive,’ in *Little boy: the arts of Japan's exploding subculture*, ed. Takashi Murakami, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 158

with fluorescent yellow, the cartoon-curved cloud is also formed in the shape of a human skull. The image was appropriated from a popular children's show from the 1970s called, naturally, 'Time Bokan.' The iconic form was made 'Murakami' through the use of bright colour, clean form and the addition of his signature flower motifs in the shape of eyes. It also contained a smaller version of the same form in black, mirrored and turned upside down at the top of the canvas, giving a symmetrical effect to the overall piece. The resulting image was decidedly friendly. Despite its reference to human atrocity, it was not so much disconcerting as absurd, collapsing the enormous social and political implications of nuclear warfare into a mushroom-shaped illustration of pop culture. This is the danger of a 'superflat' aesthetic – collapsed boundaries result in a loss of history, a loss of identity and a loss of difference.

Similarly, the exhibition as a whole conflated potentially revealing imagery from *otaku* subculture with a generic celebration of popular consumption. This was most evident in the work of Mahomi Kunikata, for example, with her violent and disturbing interpretations of erotic manga (Figure 11). Caught in fragments between 'Hello Kitty' merchandise and large colourful anime sculptures, the potentially critical effect of this material was evacuated, subsumed in the overall Murakami-effect. As Roberta Smith noted in her review of the exhibition, "*Little Boy* is Mr. Murakami's show from beginning to end, to such a degree that it might almost be considered an extended artwork."<sup>66</sup> This was also evident in the exhibition's catalogue, which failed to provide a full list of exhibited artists and artworks, yet featured several texts and interviews by Murakami.<sup>67</sup> The critical content of the exhibition was turned away from specific works themselves and toward Murakami's curation, which was so overloaded with competing influences that it became virtually indecipherable. This leads back to Krauss's verdict on the unanticipated effect of mixed-media practices, wherein specific forms are "reduced to a system of pure equivalency by the homogenising principle of commodification, the operation of pure exchange value from which nothing can escape and for which everything is transparent to the underlying market value for which it is a sign."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Roberta Smith, "From a mushroom cloud, a burst of art reflecting Japan's psyche" (*The New York Times*, Friday April 8, 2005)

<sup>67</sup> See *Little Boy*, ed. Takashi Murakami.

<sup>68</sup> Krauss, 'A voyage on the North Sea', p. 15

Murakami's work is described in terms of a breakdown of meaning – the title of his major solo exhibition in 1999 was *Takashi Murakami: the meaning of the nonsense of the meaning*. This breakdown, however, does not challenge or penetrate the surface of consumer branding, advertising or merchandising. It does, however, disrupt the very 'meaning' of art within a context of rampant consumerism. Murakami thus embodies a critical impasse in contemporary art. Appropriating the signs and systems of both modern and contemporary culture in order to disrupt their distinctions, his work faces the fundamental paradox of postmodernism itself – that the breakdown of structural meaning is used to provide an illusion of meaning for the systems of late capitalism. In the process of eradicating distinctions between art and commerce, the very spaces from which art emerges erode.

## **Shopping!**

In 2002, the Tate Gallery Liverpool held a major exhibition called *Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture*. The exhibition catalogue, a flashy, colourful and delectable visual experience in itself, encapsulates some of the problems, issues and paradoxes involved in any examination of the seductive world of consumer culture. This problematic territory is the ground of this thesis, and negotiating the various temptations provides an interesting and difficult critical challenge. It is easy to browse the pages of *Shopping* like a magazine, lapping up the images and skipping over essays to read instead double-page features of pithy quotes in cartoon bubbles. Marilyn Monroe's enticing, "I've found out it's fun to go shopping. It's such a feminine thing to do," sits alongside Duchamp's "Art lies in the street and it is to be found on the shelves of the department store," which lies in close proximity to equally digestible quotations from Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin and Andy Warhol. This array of one-liners, a perfect postmodern sampling of art, politics and popular culture, eradicates historical and social context, seeming to flirt with the shortened attention span required of a magazine. Aside from its superficial allure, the catalogue does contain some very interesting explorations of both current and past connections between art and consumer culture. Notably, some of the

most interesting observations are made in historical surveys of Pop, Fluxus and Surrealism; suggestive of the importance of historical context in effectively analyzing the social function of art. Perhaps it is in the archives of art that possible resolutions to some of these issues may arise.

The merging of the art object with popular culture was not simply an act of democratisation for many Pop artists, but more importantly signified a unification of art with lived experience. For Claes Oldenburg, the merging held the promise of a surrealistic union of subject and object, a utopian harmony of art and life. In his 1961 project, *The Store* (Figure 12), Oldenburg rented a shop in New York City and, using plaster and other materials, filled it with sculptural objects that replicated consumer merchandise. Describing his fusion of the art object with popular culture, he proclaimed: “Then the magic inherent in the universe will be restored and people will live in sympathetic religious exchange with the objects surrounding them.”<sup>69</sup> Oldenburg’s blending of commerce and art was not an act of eradicating difference, but rather represented an attempt to try to locate differentiation itself. As Oldenburg explains, “The original idea of *The Store* was a simple one – to fill a space with objects such as those in any kind of store, but this was not satisfactory as I proceeded. The problem became how to individualise the simple objects, how to surprise them.”<sup>70</sup> Oldenburg’s works were anything but homogenous – brightly coloured, roughly moulded objects bearing the expressive marks of their creation were strung from the ceiling and spilled across the store. His documentation of the project, *Store Days*, contained inventories and theoretical observations alongside expressive drawings, surrealistic observations and poetic notations. Rather than reflecting or reproducing contemporary culture, in the style of Murakami, Oldenburg dipped the consumer world into the depths of the human psyche.

Focusing on objects of consumption, however, lends itself toward reappropriation. In contemporary artistic continuations of Pop concerns, neither the art object nor the commodity is infused with difference. Instead, it seems both art and commodity have been subsumed entirely, with the contemporary subject appearing more alienated than ever before. We live in Baudrillard’s world of the ‘hyper-real,’ in which the object of

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<sup>69</sup> Claes Oldenburg, *Store Days* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), p. 60

<sup>70</sup> Oldenburg, *Store Days*, p. 51

representation has been lost altogether, rather than in Oldenburg's Pop version of the surreal. This difference is elaborated by Baudrillard in "The Hyper-realism of Simulation," where he writes:

The secret of surrealism was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only at privileged moments, which still derived from art and the imaginary. Now the whole of everyday political, social, historical, economic reality is incorporated into the simulative dimension of hyperrealism.<sup>71</sup>

The alienated object of contemporary culture is evident in the work of many recent artists and it is interesting to trace how artists are conceiving paths around, and through, this condition.

In the final essay of the *Shopping* catalogue, Julian Stallabrass reiterates Theodor Adorno's questions about the commodification of art in his critique of the culture industry, and suggests that internet art could provide a possible alternative in the search for artistic position. While this may be true, it also confronts the danger of marginalisation, not to mention restricting artistic diversity. Looking at the issue of the commodification of the art object, Stallabrass briefly raises another interesting point; the apparent lack of attention paid to the production of art in these discussions. He suggests that while there has been a keen focus on consumption, the production of art and consumer products has been a blind-spot. He writes, "The exclusive focus on consumption in much of the art world is an ideological matter, one that flows from the prominence of advertising and other corporate propaganda, for which the less that is thought about production... the better."<sup>72</sup> This is where the discourses of art can benefit from a closer engagement with the means of production and its relation to consumption. The field of commercial design, by contrast, is transparent in its engagement with the production process.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the complex interplay of production and consumption reflects the complex nature of late capitalism. Capitalism expands, they argue, by

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<sup>71</sup> Baudrillard, 'The Hyper-realism of Simulation,' in *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*, p. 1018

<sup>72</sup> Julian Stallabrass, "Shop Until you Stop" in *Shopping: a century of art and consumer culture*, p. 227

breaking down borders and territories on the one hand, and reorganising them within its systems on the other. This also relates to the sphere of artistic production, where subversive critical practice emerges only to be reappropriated by capitalist systems. They describe this process in relation to smooth and striated space in *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (1988). Smooth space, usually the space of art, is described as global, expansive, organic and revolutionary. In smooth space, they write, “life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new paces, switches adversaries.”<sup>73</sup> Striated space, in contrast, is described as the space of social systems, it is local and ordered, a space of control. This is normally the space of production. It is tempting to consider the two in oppositional terms, yet Deleuze and Guattari maintain that they are not mutually exclusive, instead feeding into each other (much as postmodern subversion feeds into capitalist homogenisation). They write, “Even the most striated city gives rise to smooth spaces.”<sup>74</sup> They suggest that global capitalism is both striated (in its organisational control of populations and spaces) and smooth (in its ability to spread globally and encompass a diversity of cultural and social spaces).

Just as capitalism is both striated and smooth, they suggest, revolutionary or subversive movements need to use the progressive and organisational capabilities of striated space in conjunction with the opening of smooth spaces: “Perhaps we must say that all progress is made by and in striated space, but all becoming occurs in smooth space.”<sup>75</sup> Where artistic practice has tended to avoid the sphere of production in the past, in order to retain its autonomous, smooth function, this has inadvertently allowed it to be more easily appropriated by capital. Late capitalism is understood in this analysis as fundamentally postmodern. The reappropriation of artistic subversion by commercial culture is just a symptom of capital’s constant process of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, where boundaries and differences are broken down in order to be incorporated back into its systems

For artists, then, the use of striated space in the form of commercial production can be seen as a strategy to enable the production of smooth spaces – critical spaces in

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<sup>73</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 551

<sup>74</sup> Deleuze and Guattari describe, for example, the homeless and the nomad as presenting smooth spaces within the striated space of the city. See *A thousand plateaus*, p. 551

<sup>75</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 537. The term “becoming” refers to a process of transformation in perception, and is fundamental in enabling difference.

which to reorganise and reevaluate life, to mis-design the consumer sphere. A potent artistic example of this concept can be found in the work of Gregor Schneider, who in *Dead House u r* (1985-1996) (Figure 13) actively deconstructed (deterritorialised) and reconstructed (reterritorialised) the space of his childhood home, placing sections on display in various galleries and museums. Using the foundations of striated space, he created a dysfunctional, distorted and claustrophobic space that aroused both spatial and psychic anxiety. This anxiety is clear in the following description:

Only a few people can experience *Dead House u r* at one time because of its narrow corridors and tiny crawl spaces. The effect is as if you have entered a series of isolation chambers or black holes. As you move from room to room, you perceive the formidable history and legacy of the house itself and the family that occupied it.<sup>76</sup>

In effect, this reconstruction opened the striated space of the family unit, with its social construction of identity, to the smooth space of the body and the psyche, enabling a reconceptualisation of the familial and domestic realm.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, it was an overt example of mis-design – of breaking down and re-designing architectural space with no commercial purpose.

## **Collusion**

Artistic projects emerging in the field of design have the potential to open up smooth spaces in the field of social production. Yet there is an important distinction between collusion and critique, between design and mis-design, as evident in Murakami's practice. When Murakami described *My Lonesome Cowboy* as "my first marketing creation in the art world," he demonstrated what could be considered an 'ironic' approach

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<sup>76</sup> Exhibition pamphlet, *Gregor Schneider: Dead House u r*, (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; MOCA at the Geffen Contemporary, Oct 12, 2003 – June 7, 2004)

<sup>77</sup> Of course, this contradictory practice of construction can likewise give rise to mimetic affirmation. If this practice is *ambiguous*, then perhaps it is a necessary ambiguity. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari write, "The undecidable is the germ and locus par excellence of revolutionary decisions." *A thousand plateaus*, p. 522



to the contemporary market.<sup>78</sup> In the context of contemporary art, his project depends on this sense of irony. By being self-conscious in his appropriations, Murakami suggests that his work is more culturally-specific, and more historically meaningful, than fashion. At the same time, his project is configured as an attempt to re-brand art in the postmodern world. Art is present, apparently, even though it is serving the commercial interests of companies such as Luis Vuitton. Murakami thus provides a world of consumer fetish for those who understand the problems of consumer capitalism, but have given up thinking it might change. The premise is that self-aware consumption somehow negates the alienating means of production.

This forms the basis of Daniel Miller's advocacy of positive consumption in *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), where he suggests that mass industry and its alienating effects are unavoidable and inevitable. The only recourse for the consumer, he argues, is to transform commodities through personal and social acts of consumption and an active participation in 'culture.' In contrast to Stallabrass's focus on production, Miller suggests "the site of potential social self-creation has moved increasingly into the sphere of consumption."<sup>79</sup> While this embrace of engaged consumption provides a positive outlook on ways of overcoming the oppressive effects of mass production, Miller's model relies on consumers conforming to social groups, identifying with 'culture' and forging identities through models that are created and distributed by systems of mass production.<sup>80</sup> While consumers may feel less alienated within a particular social group, their capacity for true differentiation is subsumed in this identification with commodities. Moreover, it relies on an assumption that the means of production is hopelessly alienating and beyond transformation. Miller writes, "The key criteria for judging the utility of contemporary objects is the degree to which they may or may not be appropriated from the forces which created them, which are mainly, of necessity, alienating."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Murakami, 'Life as a creator,' in *Summon monsters?* p. 142

<sup>79</sup> Miller, *Material culture and mass consumption*, p. 205. He is very specific in arguing that consumption can redeem the effects of alienation, writing: "Consumption is considered here as a process having the potential to produce an inalienable culture." p. 17

<sup>80</sup> This involves conforming to, rather than challenging, social systems. This is evident, for example, when Miller describes the effects of such social consumption: "They help provide equalising and normative mechanisms promoting solidarity and sociability." (Miller, *Material culture*, p. 199)

<sup>81</sup> Miller, *Material culture*, p. 215

Aimed at a disaffected society, this is a theory of consolation that should not be mistaken for critique. Late capitalism operates on precisely a level of cynical consumption. This issue is at the heart of Peter Sloterdijk's philosophical text, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1987), wherein he describes an enlightened false consciousness, characterised by cynicism, as the defining feature of the contemporary world. He writes:

In the neocynical attitude, world-historical learning processes of bitterness come to fruition. They have stamped the traces of the coldness of exchange, of world wars, and the self-denial of ideals in our consciousness, which have become sick with experience. Hey, we're alive; hey, we're selling ourselves; hey, we're arming.<sup>82</sup>

The effect, Sloterdijk suggests, is not an enlightened participation in the systems of a new world – as Miller might claim – but instead the repetition of the very historical conditions that elicited the cynical attitude. He writes, “In this way cynicism guarantees the expanded reproduction of the past on the newest level of what is currently the worst.”<sup>83</sup> In this sense, rather than providing a creative alternative to the consumer market, cynical consumption only reinforces the oppressive nature of capitalist production.

The term ‘irony’ is used repeatedly in discussions of contemporary postmodern appropriation, and there is a danger that it is easily conflated with the cynical condition of the contemporary postmodern subject. This conflation of cynicism with irony threatens the potential subversive dimension of ironic humour, rendering it impotent in the face of a lethargic shrug. As Baudrillard suggests in *The Consumer Society* (1970):

let us not forget that a *certain smile* is one of the *obligatory signs* of consumption: it no longer represents a humour, a critical distance, but is merely a reminder of that transcendent critical value which today is given material value in the knowing wink. This false distance is present everywhere... It is not really clear in the end

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<sup>82</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of cynical reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 546  
See also William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

<sup>83</sup> Sloterdijk, *Critique of cynical reason*, p. 546

whether this ‘cool’ smile is the smile of humour or that of commercial complicity. This is also the case with Pop, and its smile ultimately encapsulates all its ambiguity: it is not the smile of critical distance, but the smile of *collusion*.”<sup>84</sup>

While artists such as Oldenbergh and Warhol clearly challenge Baudrillard’s dismissal of Pop as a means of critique, he articulates an important link between cynicism and collusion in acts of ‘ironic’ consumption. The question of collusion is central to Theodor Adorno’s theorisation of the role of the ‘culture industry’ in the 1960s. While Adorno’s reading of consumer culture was totalising in its critique, at the heart of his examination lay the very question of critical space that contemporary artists are now grappling with. For Adorno, the loss of the modernist distinction between mass culture and art did not spell the beginning of an era of democratisation, but instead signified the subject’s total domination by capital. As capitalism sought to control every aspect of the subject’s life, Adorno argued, its main source of production became cultural: “Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through.”<sup>85</sup> Capitalism thus proved itself capable of appropriating all aspects of avant-garde artistic practice. Adorno described how even an ironic celebration of the complicity of art and capital could be absorbed in the logic of the culture industry, where “The information communicated by mass culture constantly winks at us.”<sup>86</sup>

According to Adorno, the result of this breakdown between art and mass culture is the production of a standardised, repetitive and average culture in which the consumer is reduced to a state of passive consumption, radically alienated from the products they consume and held in an eternal present without conflict or the possibility of transcendence. Adorno’s fatalistic view is evident, for example, when he describes the “exploitation of the ego-weakness to which the powerless members of contemporary society, with its concentration of power, are condemned.”<sup>87</sup> The predicament is not much

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<sup>84</sup> Baudrillard, *The consumer society: myths and structures*, p. 121

<sup>85</sup> Adorno, *The culture industry*, p. 86

<sup>86</sup> Adorno, *The culture industry*, p. 71

<sup>87</sup> Adorno, *The culture industry*, p. 9

better for art, where the possibility of criticality is given a terminal prognosis: “Monopoly is the executor: eliminating tension, it abolishes art along with conflict.”<sup>88</sup>

Adorno’s perspective is almost perfectly reversed in Murakami’s ‘Super flat manifesto’, where he describes the simulacra-effect of contemporary culture as the incentive for his two-dimensional aesthetic. He observes, “Society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional.”<sup>89</sup> Rather than considering the alienating effect of such a flattened contemporary space on the contemporary subject, or how it might be reconfigured, Murakami instead uses this observation to advocate a similarly flat aesthetic in contemporary art. He supports the argument with references to the history of Japanese art, drawing attention to the two-dimensionality of traditional painting and equating this with the surface-obsessed nature of contemporary culture. He writes:

One way to imagine super flatness is to think of the moment when, in creating a desktop graphic for your computer, you merge a number of distinct layers into one... The reason I have lined up both the high and the low of Japanese art in this book is to convey this feeling.<sup>90</sup>

What Murakami fails to account for in ‘Super flat’ is why art should be attempting to convey this feeling. The theory, like the aesthetic, lacks content. Where Adorno’s theorisation served as a warning for the serious implications of a homogenous consumer landscape, Murakami simply observes the loss of history, context, and meaning that has resulted. In this sense, he resembles *Oval*, watching everything *without caring about anything*.

Just as conscious links to Warhol lent credibility to his practice in the context of the New York art market, observations about the ‘flatness’ of traditional Japanese art and culture are used in ‘Super flat’ to elevate his practice above the realms of merchandising. It is difficult to establish, however, if these references to the populism of Japanese art are supporting the super flat aesthetic, or whether Murakami is actually condemning this

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<sup>88</sup> Adorno, *The culture industry*, p. 67

<sup>89</sup> Murakami, ‘The super flat manifesto,’ in *Superflat*, ex. cat., (Tokyo: MADRA Publishing, 2000), p. 5

<sup>90</sup> Murakami, ‘The super flat manifesto,’ p. 5

tradition. While he associates himself with this lineage in ‘Super flat’, he has also been clear in expressing disdain for the very populism he champions:

I have explained and denounced many times, that in Japan, the societal recognition and understanding of art remains low. Japan, as a country, displays a striking lack of cultural consciousness among its citizen, and is often utilitarian and lacking respect for the development of art and ideas.<sup>91</sup>

This condemnation doesn’t seem to fit with his own commercial practice, which espouses a very ‘utilitarian’ approach to the market. Murakami’s position in ‘Super flat’ can therefore only be accounted for by cynicism; the cynical perspective of his consumer, and his cynical approach to the conditions of contemporary art. This is a condition, in his words, defined as “The flat reality left when Pop fizzled; a flattened, self-mocking culture.”<sup>92</sup>

Murakami’s insistence on the elimination of divisions between “the high and the low” is similarly contradictory, most especially in the context of his views on artistic authorship. Describing a typically ‘Super flat’ painting, for example, he comments: “As it is done in a ‘super flat’ style, though, it is also extremely ‘avant-garde’ and ‘original.’”<sup>93</sup> In a sense, ‘Super flat’ also refers to the modernist flattening of the picture plane in search of pure form. Yet Murakami’s work is not interested in the formal space of the canvas – his super flat painting employs a variety of iconography that refers beyond itself. Instead, flatness becomes style. What Murakami does take from modernism, however, is the idea of style equating with innovation. An elevated sense of artistic authorship became particularly transparent in the case of his lawsuit against Narumiya International. When challenged by the very systems that he has openly colluded with, Murakami vociferously defended the authorship of his *anime* designs and espoused the

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<sup>91</sup> Kaikai Kiki Co., ‘Press release regarding the amicable settlement of contemporary artist Takashi Murakami’s lawsuit regarding a breach of copyright,’ [Website]

<sup>92</sup> Murakami, ‘Superflat trilogy,’ in *Little boy*, p. 153

<sup>93</sup> Murakami “The super flat manifesto’, p. 20. In a separate interview, the theme of high-handed authorship emerges when he describes the process of designing *anime* characters including *Oval*. He claims, for example, “I wanted, I think, to create my own ‘gods of art.’” (Cited in ‘Interview with Takashi Murakami by Helen Kelmachter’)

need for society to “recognise the value of the originality of art.”<sup>94</sup> His position is particularly reactionary in the context of his own appropriations, for example his relentless mining of Warhol’s practice, from DOB’s mickey-mouse features to the art ‘factory’ to the title of *My Lonesome Cowboy*. He was overt in using *otaku* characters as models for sculptures such as *Hiropon* and in his use of the *Time Bokan* mushroom cloud. ‘Super flat’ thus justifies a cynical approach to consumer culture while simultaneously elevating Murakami’s practice above that culture. And rather than empowering the alienated, empty subjects of the Super flat condition, Murakami’s design exploits and profits from them, bringing Adorno’s nightmares to life.

While providing important insights, Adorno’s reading of the culture industry is hard to use productively. Andreas Huyssen suggests that a classical reading of the culture industry “can only lead to resignation or moralising about universal manipulation and domination.”<sup>95</sup> Huyssen also criticises Adorno for relegating the consumer to passivity, arguing that his reading focuses so much on exchange-value that it fails to acknowledge the potential use-value of commodities. It is easy for the term use-value to be randomly applied. In Marxist terms, use-value refers to the material qualities of a commodity, as opposed to its economic or social value. It is simply “the satisfaction of wants,” in terms of real, physical desires (rather than the constructed desires of consumer culture).<sup>96</sup> The use-value of an object, in this sense, is unrelated to the abstract process of exchange. Marx writes, “A thing can be useful, and the product of human labour, without being a commodity. Whoever directly satisfies his wants with the produce of his own labour, creates, indeed, use-values but not commodities.”<sup>97</sup> This is not to suggest that artworks escape commodification simply by having a use. Instead, it is important to consider how they might focus on a more direct engagement with consumer desire in order to resist the commodity’s commercial function and reification.

Huyssen suggests that Adorno’s over-emphasis on spectacle and exchange is at the expense of considering the agency of ‘real’ or material needs and production. This

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<sup>94</sup> Kaikai Kiki Co., ‘Press release regarding the amicable settlement of contemporary artist Takashi Murakami’s lawsuit regarding a breach of copyright,’ [Website]

<sup>95</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the great divide: modernism, mass culture, postmodernism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 19

<sup>96</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 150

<sup>97</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 48. Marx writes, “the use-value of objects is realised without exchange.” (Marx, *Capital*, vol. I., p. 87)

reference to use-value signals the possibility of an engaged and active, as opposed to cynical, consumption of commodities. Thinking about artworks in terms of use-value attempts to avoid the exchange-based consumption of art. While there are clear links between Miller's position and this sense of engaged consumption, Huyssen's criteria for a work of art being 'emancipatory' is its "practical uselessness."<sup>98</sup> Like Miller, he thereby falls short of considering an artistic participation in the spaces of production. He limits the productive use of design and architectural devices in art practices that question and might mis-design the systems of consumer culture.<sup>99</sup>

In this context it is interesting to look at Adorno's influential paper, 'Functionalism Today', first presented to a group of architects in 1965.<sup>100</sup> In the paper, Adorno argues that the art object is beyond an antithesis of use and uselessness, that it has both social and aesthetic value. He doesn't, however, disregard the conflict between function and aesthetics in art, proclaiming, "The obscure secret of art is the fetishistic character of goods and wares. Functionalism would like to break out of this entanglement; and yet, it can only rattle its chains in vain as long as it remains trapped in an entangled society."<sup>101</sup> Again Adorno presents a somewhat impossible predicament in reconciling functionalism with art production, and exchange with use. He does, however, present a moment of hope in his brief discussion of the relationship between use-value and exchange-value, where he suggests that freedom lies in individual desire, which he relates to use-value. He suggests, "Even in the false needs of a human being there lives a bit of freedom. It is expressed in what economic theory once called the 'use value' as opposed to the 'exchange value.'<sup>102</sup> In this sense, use-value signals the desire for liberation from the alienating systems of capital, although still within the terms of capitalist production.

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<sup>98</sup> Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. 152

<sup>99</sup> Like Huyssen, Benjamin Buchloh argues for a dialectical reading of the culture industry and art production. Drawing on Guy Debord's description of the *Society of the Spectacle*, he warns against a revival of modernist distinctions or investing in the isolated subjectivity of the artist and the "sacred" value of art. Buchloh is also reluctant to accept the prescriptive nature of an Adorno-style critique. He writes, "resentment against contemporary culture at large could be linked with a leftist prejudice against any form of aesthetic deviance and transgression that did not comply with the prescribed patterns of the political models of critique." (Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-avantgarde and culture industry*, pp. xxv-vi )

<sup>100</sup> Adorno, "Functionalism Today," in *Rethinking architecture: a reader in cultural theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997)

<sup>101</sup> Adorno, "Functionalism Today", p.17

<sup>102</sup> Adorno, "Functionalism Today", p. 16

For Marx, of course, use-value can never be realised in the systems of capitalist production, which will always abstract real needs and desires. His socialist revolution, however, did not see beyond the systems of industrial production, and so the concept of use-value has persisted as a mirage. As Baudrillard observes in his critique of Marx *The Mirror of Production*, “Marx made a radical critique of political economy, but still in the form of political economy.”<sup>103</sup> Adorno suggests at the end of ‘Functionalism Today’ that the work of art should not shy away from its conflict between function and autonomy. He argues: “A work must cut through the contradictions and overcome them, not by covering them up, but by pursuing them.”<sup>104</sup> Faced with a somewhat uncompromising artistic position, it is not surprising that contemporary artists might be prepared to compromise a degree of critical autonomy in order to engage more openly with systems of production.

In his recent text, *Art Incorporated* (2004), Julian Stallabrass also champions the potential of use-value in navigating a way out from the cynical postmodern condition. Arguing that artistic ‘freedom’ is no longer possible, he suggests the only way to escape the convoluted contemporary market is through art that has a direct political use, at the direct expense of artistic freedom. He moves away from Marx’s definition of use-value as the satisfaction of wants, aligning it instead with an ambiguous political directive. He writes, “In these circumstances, it is works of evident use that press on the contradictions inherent in the system of art, that seek to liberate themselves from capital’s servitude. To break with the supplemental autonomy of free art is to remove one of the masks of free trade.”<sup>105</sup> Stallabrass turns again to internet art in demonstrating his point, citing only one non-net artist in his discussion. This emphasis on art with political use has been embraced beyond this specialised media, however, as evident for example in the exhibition and publication *Interventionists: users' manual for the creative disruption of everyday life*. While the curators claimed that the politics were ‘subdued,’ they nevertheless compared the project to that of the Russian Constructivists, and described, “this new wave of useful artistry functions as an ideal model for acts of civil disobedience.”<sup>106</sup> While these

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<sup>103</sup> Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975), p. 50

<sup>104</sup> Adorno, “Functionalism Today”, p. 19

<sup>105</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *Art incorporated*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 201

<sup>106</sup> Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *Interventionists*, Mass: MASS MoCA, 2004, p. 137. For a similar approach in the field of graphic design, see Milton Glaser, *Design of dissent*, (Gloucester, Mass: Rockport Publishers, 2005).



positions are certainly more productive than artistic resignation, the advocacy of no less than ‘propaganda’ overlooks a few complexities.<sup>107</sup> In the current condition, as Naomi Klein so effectively argues, the sphere of politics has been displaced into the world of marketing.<sup>108</sup>

This is a world of desire, not overt ideology. As Slavoj Žižek observes in his examination of contemporary ideology, “The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally.”<sup>109</sup> Artists can advocate political agendas as much as they like, but the effect is likely to be muted unless moved into a political context, particularly if the gallery next door is showcasing the merging of art and fashion using imagery of semi-naked fashion models. More problematically, this stance puts art at the service of any political agenda, thus evacuating its critical, reflective capacities. This was a lesson learnt nearly a century ago through the utopian endeavours of modern artists such as the Constructivists.<sup>110</sup> Just as the *Interventionists* might offer ‘how-to’ guides for civil disobedience, other artistic groups can similarly configure ‘how-to’ guides for less appealing political agendas, an obvious example in the current political climate being the instructional guides of various terrorist groups. More subtly, Murakami’s project might be configured as a ‘how-to’ guide for consumer-capitalism. Eliminating the tension between function and aesthetics, such projects eradicate the critical space needed to question, rather than determine, the complex motivations and desires that drive the contemporary social machine. Again, they cut short the productive manipulation of design and architectural practices that create critical spaces inside – rather than in opposition to – the commercial sphere.

One of the common criticisms of Adorno’s analysis is that it belies a modernist nostalgia for the separation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, and the essentialist concepts of aesthetic autonomy that such distinctions imply. Adorno acknowledges this contradiction,

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<sup>107</sup> Stallabrass is explicit, writing “such art has clear propaganda value.” (*Art incorporated*, p. 199)

<sup>108</sup> See Klein, *No logo*.

<sup>109</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology*, (London ; New York: Verso, 1989), p. 26

<sup>110</sup> Briony Fer makes this point through a description of Tatlin’s infamous *Monument to the Third International* (1920), writing, “Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*, envisaged as a great iron structure spiraling high over the Petrograd sky, a symbol of liberation. Yet we end with the metaphor of the ‘iron cage’ of modern culture.” (‘Constructivism,’ in *Realism, rationalism, surrealism : art between the wars*, eds. Briony Fer, David Batchelor and Paul Wood, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 167). See also Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

however, in an interesting question that he raises, but does not answer: “It is a delicate question whether the liquidation of aesthetic intrication and development represents the liquidation of every last trace of resistance or rather the medium of its secret omnipresence.”<sup>111</sup> Huyssen, for his part, disputes the assumed opposition of the two, arguing that art and mass culture have always been dialectically related. He presents the merging of mass culture and art as a ground of potential opportunity rather than loss, and attempts to provide a reading that is both critical and affirmative. Refuting that this implies a revival of the concept of the avant-garde, he suggests that contemporary artists should instead, “take up the historical avant-garde’s insistence on the cultural transformation of everyday life and from there develop strategies for today’s cultural and political context.”<sup>112</sup> Rather than suggesting a revival of modernism as a solution to the postmodern condition, he promotes instead the spaces between modernism and mass culture, maintaining a distinctive space for art. He writes, “the point is not to eliminate the productive tension between the political and the aesthetic... the point is to heighten that tension.”<sup>113</sup> This dialectical position, between political resistance and participation in mass culture, is also the starting point for Miller’s advocacy of consumer agency. In his terms, “the means of living with an inevitable contradiction.”<sup>114</sup> Both Miller and Huyssen overlook the possibilities of production, or design, in shaping a critical space within the systems of late capital. Taking the alienating effects of production as an inevitability, consumption can only console, rather than challenge, the contemporary consumer.

As Murakami’s work demonstrates, design often sidesteps criticality by emphasising form and style, as evident in the aesthetic focus of ‘Super flat’. This reflects a wider problem in design discourse, which tends to take commercial collusion for granted. As Abby Mellick Lopes writes, “Design and its concomitant discourses, schools, and commissions developed within a market model whereby designers became collaborators with industry for the purpose of manufacturing and promoting goods for sale.”<sup>115</sup> This tendency for design to uncritically serve the interests of commerce is

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<sup>111</sup> Adorno, *The culture industry*, p. 67

<sup>112</sup> Huyssen, *After the great divide*, p. 7

<sup>113</sup> Huyssen, *After the great divide*, p. 221

<sup>114</sup> Miller, *Material Culture*, p. 14

<sup>115</sup> Abby Mellick Lopes, ‘The politics of design conversations,’ in Willis, ed., *Design philosophy papers*, p. 73

dangerous not only for design. In the context of a cultural sphere where art is rapidly losing ground to the money and appeal of commercial production, it signals the potential obsolescence of critical artistic practices altogether. Accused of resignation in the face of total domination, Adorno maintained that there is a possibility for change within the totality of the culture industry, but that it lies in the practice of critical thought rather than in opposition or reform: “Open thinking points beyond itself. For its part, such thinking takes a position as a figuration of praxis.”<sup>116</sup> Admittedly, the concept of ‘open thought’ is a vague starting point for artists wanting to engage with the complexities of current socio-economic systems. Yet Adorno points to a productive compromise between autonomy and practice. In the context of contemporary art, I argue, this is emerging in critical practices that inhabit the systems of production, that is, design.

### **The crime of design**

The distinction between art and design has been a contentious issue throughout the twentieth century, from early attempts to unify the disciplines, found in movements such as De Stijl and the Bauhaus, to Minimalism and Conceptualism’s questioning of the art object itself. Recently, it is the lack of distinction between art and commercial design that seems to be at issue, as exemplified in this comment from a reviewer in *ArtReview*: “This state of affairs is making it very difficult to decide what should be put in a home or in a design museum; at a dining-room table or behind bullet-proof glass for safekeeping.”<sup>117</sup> A brief survey of recent major international and local exhibitions certainly demonstrates the increasing presence of design forms, ideas and concerns in the context of the visual arts. For example, the 2004 Venice Biennale contained a whole curatorial project devoted to the experimental design of objects from everyday life, titled ‘The Everyday Altered.’<sup>118</sup> The press release for the 2002 Liverpool Biennial likewise listed “totally

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<sup>116</sup> Adorno, *The culture industry*, p.175

<sup>117</sup> Helen Kirwan-Taylor, "Art by design," *ArtReview*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2004), p. 50

<sup>118</sup> Curated by Gabriel Orozco, this section did not overtly define itself with the label “design.” All six artists, however, exhibited “redesigned” objects, including an umbrella, a cigarette case, a fly electrocution device, a car and a tent. See Francesco Bonami and Maria Luisa Frisa, *Dreams and conflicts: the*

designed environments” as a key area of its thematic content.<sup>119</sup> 2004, a major survey of Australian contemporary art, not only contained a proliferation of works informed by design aesthetics and concepts but also cited numerous works by those explicitly labeled ‘designers,’ including fashion designers Breathless Selfh, Easton Pearson and Toni Maticevski.<sup>120</sup>

To return to the basic definition of design as ‘mental plan’ provides an important reminder of the inherent relationship between design and conceptual thought. This broader sense of design, beyond the aesthetic discipline shaped by modernism, is of increasing importance in the context of a global, digital landscape that is constantly in a process of being conceived and planned. This understanding of design, as Margolin observed, “can now be seen at the core of all our conceptions and plans for our personal and collective social lives.”<sup>121</sup> Similarly, contemporary art involves the conception and planning of objects, experiences, performances, spaces and images. Even in the case of artists emphasising a certain spontaneity, such as in the case of interventionists and fluxus artists, most artistic situations are designed and framed for a gallery or artistic audience and are used by systems of commercial art for publicity and marketing purposes. While such practices might provide an apparent escape from the systems of art, the illusion of escape actually disguises the underlying branding, marketing and commodification of art in the economic systems of cultural production. Contemporary art is design, as Alex Coles argues when he writes “all art is designed even if it endeavours to appear otherwise.”<sup>122</sup> In *Design and Crime* (2002), Hal Foster launches an attack on this proliferation of design in recent art, architecture and cultural practice. Revisiting Adolf

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*dictatorship of the viewer: 50th international art exhibition* (Venice: Marsilio: La Biennale di Venezia, 2003), pp. 301-315.

<sup>119</sup> The Liverpool Biennial press release states: “Some of the issues addressed by the artworks are - viral contamination, 'spin' and the propagation of misinformation; media obsession and celebrity culture; identity manipulation; fantasy and hedonism; totally designed environments; privatisation; terrorism and catastrophe anxiety.” See Liverpool Biennial, *2002 Liverpool Biennial* [Website] (Liverpool Biennial, 2002 [cited October 8 2004]; available from [www.biennial.org.uk/site.htm](http://www.biennial.org.uk/site.htm))

<sup>120</sup> See Charles Green, *2004*, ex. cat. (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2004). The recent exhibition of contemporary works at the NGV Australia, *Living together is easy*, likewise demonstrated the influence of design, most notably in the design objects of the Japanese artist Tetsuya Nakamura, and to a lesser degree in the photographic work of Rosemary Laing and the sculptural work of Fiona Hall and Ricky Swallow. See Eriko Osaka and Mizuki Takahashi, *Living together is easy*, National Gallery of Victoria; Contemporary Art Center, Art Tower Mito, August 26 - November 7 2004.

<sup>121</sup> Victor Margolin, ‘The product milieu and social action’ in *Discovering design*, p. 141

<sup>122</sup> Coles, *DesignArt*, p. 10

Loos' influential modernist essay of 1908, 'Ornament and Crime,' he looks at the dangers posed to art and criticism with the increasing interconnection of art, architecture and design in contemporary consumer culture.

Foster likens this recent interdisciplinarity to Loos' criticism of excessive ornamentation in Art Nouveau, suggesting:

This old debate takes on a new resonance today, when the aesthetic and the utilitarian are not only conflated but all but subsumed in the commercial, and everything – not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genes – seems to be regarded as so much *design*.<sup>123</sup>

He doesn't advocate a puritanical stance of artistic 'autonomy' in response to these changes, however. Instead, he proposes "some sense of the historical dialectic of critical disciplinarity and its contestation – to attempt again to provide culture with running room."<sup>124</sup>

Foster recounts the effects of the combination of design and life in Art Nouveau, describing how it "commingles subject and object," and leads to a profound lack of difference or distinction.<sup>125</sup> The confusion of art and design in contemporary art practice, he suggests, is likewise leading to a "regressive indistinction," compromising subjectivity itself. He argues, "design seems to advance a new kind of narcissism, one that is all image and no interiority – an apotheosis of the subject that is also its potential disappearance."<sup>126</sup> Foster's analysis hits on many truths, especially in describing the disappearance of criticality within contemporary art practice. His accusations, however, seem to sideline the underlying issue of concern; that the all-encompassing homogenisation of culture has been brought about under late capitalism, not by the aesthetic field of design. It is not design that is the culprit, in this sense, but capital. Using Adolf Loos' essay on ornamentation is misleading. Loos' essay mentions nothing of artistic autonomy or criticality. Instead, it laments the negative effects that ornamentation

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<sup>123</sup> Hal Foster, *Design and Crime: And Other Diatribes*, (London: Verso, 2002), p. 17

<sup>124</sup> Foster, *Design and crime*, p. xiv

<sup>125</sup> Foster, *Design and crime*, p. 17

<sup>126</sup> Foster, *Design and crime*, p. 25

had on modernist progress and defends capitalist productivity. Loos wrote, for example, “The worker’s time and the material employed are capital goods that are wasted.”<sup>127</sup> While Foster’s re-reading was more a literary device than a detailed analysis, his equation of ornament with design was misplaced. There is a fundamental distinction between ornament and design – design is entwined with use and production.

Foster’s dismissal of the utilitarian stands at the other end of the spectrum from Stallabrass’ total advocacy of use-value. It denies a potentially productive artistic engagement, between design and ornament, between use and uselessness, and with the design process. How, for example, might design be reconfigured by artists to create the very ‘running room’ that Foster suggests its presence destroys? By overlooking how the presence of design in contemporary art is an artistic response to the contemporary socio-economic system, Foster’s analysis reduces all design to critical impotence. While acknowledging that “it is difficult to imagine a politics today that does not negotiate the market somehow,”<sup>128</sup> the artistic strategies Foster proposes in response do not involve engaging with the market. Instead, the aesthetic qualities he describes include traumatic experience, spectrality, nonsynchronous forms and the incongruent, as artistic means of “living on” and as “making-new or simply a making-do with what-comes-after.”<sup>129</sup> This somewhat melancholic view resonates with Benjamin Buchloh’s analysis of spectacle culture, particularly in his readings of Gerhard Richter.<sup>130</sup> Yet Foster presupposes that such effects cannot be found in objects of design.

It is reductive to dismiss a work on the basis of its function and likewise on its engagement with design. While the presence of interior design, fashion design and architecture in contemporary art does signal the pervasiveness of consumer culture, the temptation to react by reducing the field of design to commerce denies the underlying similarity between art and design in the commercial sphere. Pinpointing design as the ‘criminal’ in the breakdown of the distinction between art and commercial spheres misplaces the underlying issue of the total design of contemporary culture. It is

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<sup>127</sup> Loos, ‘Ornament and Crime’, in *Programs and manifestoes: on 20<sup>th</sup>-century architecture*, (Ulrich Conrads, ed., London: Lund Humphries, 1964), p. 22

<sup>128</sup> Foster, *Design and crime*, p. 61

<sup>129</sup> Foster, *Design and crime*, p.129

<sup>130</sup> Buchloh suggests that resistance to spectacle is to be located in the use of mnemonic structures, such as those employed by Gerhard Richter. (Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-avantgarde and culture industry*, p. xxiv)

important, however, to identify where this represents the ‘loss’ of critique and freedom of production. A critical evaluation of the role of design can thus be configured as a means to salvage the field of critical art from complete subsumption in the commercial sphere. The issue is not what separates art from design but how, in a landscape where design morphs into art and art morphs into design, critical artistic practices might be producing unexpected and potentially subversive effects. In other words, does the future of critical art lie in the terms of non-commercial design?

### **Rehabilitation?**

Out of the paradoxical ashes of postmodernism rises the neo-Marxist manifesto, *Empire* (2000). In this influential text, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri use the term to describe the current global world order. In their analysis, the current version of Empire is not presented as a repetition of the traditional patterns of the historical empire. It is, they argue, a new condition, one that “not only manages a territory and a population but also creates the very world it inhabits. It not only regulates human interactions but also seeks directly to rule over human nature.”<sup>131</sup> In many ways, despite its appearance as a radical new insight into the current social condition, *Empire* is an extension of Adorno’s theorisation of the culture industry, repositioned in the context of the early twenty-first century and therefore taking into account the effects of globalisation. The influence of Adorno is clear, for example, when they write:

In the postmodernisation of the global economy, the creation of wealth tends ever more toward what we will call biopolitical production, the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. xv

<sup>132</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p.xiii

Unlike Adorno, however, Hardt and Negri maintain that while this system may seem all-defeating and oppressive, there lies within its structure room for resistance. Liberation, they suggest, can be effected through the internal reorganisation of its processes.<sup>133</sup> In this sense they make no pretext of opposition, suggesting “postmodern liberation must be achieved within this world, on the plane of imminence, with no possibility of any even utopian outside.”<sup>134</sup> It is from this internal position that contemporary art practices emerge.

The exact means of reorganising Empire are not presented by Hardt and Negri. Instead they anticipate an internal resistance, one that they describe as both individual and collective. They write, “We need a force capable not only of organising the destructive capacities of the multitude, but also constituting through the desires of the multitude an alternative.”<sup>135</sup> Is it possible that through opening up existing modes of consumption to scrutiny, and by producing alternative modes of consumption, artists could have a part to play in salvaging postmodern subjectivity? At the very least, this more optimistic appraisal suggests that artists can carve out spaces within contemporary culture to pause and think. In their focus on production, individual agency and desire, Hardt and Negri effectively reconcile Adorno’s resigned critical stance with Deleuze and Guattari’s traversal of capitalist space. This is evident in their statement, “Production becomes indistinguishable from reproduction... Social subjects are at the same time producers and products of this unitary machine.”<sup>136</sup> If social subjects can be positioned as producers of the systems of consumer culture, and not merely as passive consumers, then creative production can, in this sense, result in more than the prevalence of “so much design.” Further, they argue that it is through ‘material existence’ that the structures of Empire can be renegotiated. Using the metaphor of the barbarian, they write: “The new barbarians destroy with an affirmative violence and trace new paths of life through their own material existence.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Hardt and Negri describe the impossibility of an oppositional stance, writing “the mere refusal of order simply leaves us on the edge of nothingness – or worse, these gestures risk reinforcing imperial power rather than challenging it.” *Empire*, p.217

<sup>134</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 65

<sup>135</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 214

<sup>136</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p.385. [My emphasis].

<sup>137</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p.215



A new sense of political optimism has been prevalent in recent artistic practices that focus on human agency and the realisation of utopian visions. This has translated into a focus on the relations between people, as evident in the popular embrace of Nicholas Bourriaud's text *Relational Aesthetics*. Bourriaud advocates artwork that enables human interaction and engagement.<sup>138</sup> Building upon the ideals of the modern avant-garde, he suggests that by turning art toward a humanistic use-value, contemporary artists can actualise their utopian ambitions. He writes, "the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real."<sup>139</sup> Bourriaud's theory finds form in artistic practices that configure art spaces as a means for social enfranchisement, for example in the work of Rirkrit Tirvanija, well known for configuring the space of the gallery as a communal kitchen. While certainly more hopeful than Murakami's cynical approach to consumer agency, Bourriaud's analysis falls prey to the same modernist dilemmas regarding function and autonomy. As with the problem of use-value, artworks that rely on a harmonious engagement from the viewer tend to eliminate the critical space needed to consider and reflect upon the work. This forms the basis of Claire Bishop's critique of relational aesthetics, where she argues that artistic enfranchisement results in the loss of democratic debate. Bishop writes, "a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased."<sup>140</sup> Like Huyssen, she argues that artwork should maintain a tension between engaging with culture and reflecting upon it.

Importantly, Bourriaud's idealistic position overlooks the ways in which the relations between people are also subject to late capitalism's design. And these human relations are designed through products. An emphasis on relational aesthetics, on strategies of social enfranchisement, is emerging in the context of commercial design. The directive, however, has been far from emancipatory. Rather than configuring human

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<sup>138</sup> See Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics*.

<sup>139</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics*, p. 13. Bourriaud argues, "Art is the place that produces a specific sociability," before asking, "How is an art focused on the production of such forms of conviviality capable of re-launching the modern emancipation plan, by complementing it? How does it permit the development of new political and cultural designs?" (p. 16, Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics*.)

<sup>140</sup> Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and relational aesthetics,' (*October*, no. 110, 2004) p. 66. Bishop puts forward a model based on antagonism rather than enfranchisement, arguing: "This relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony. It would thereby provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other." ('Antagonism and relational aesthetics,' p. 79)

relations as a means to escape the alienating effects of the consumer world, design discourse has been considering how such strategies can be employed to capture consumers all the more completely within the cycle of consumption.<sup>141</sup> For example, design theorist Gianfranco Zacconi recently boldly redefined design aesthetics as “the appropriate and harmonious balancing of all user needs and wants within technical and social constraints.”<sup>142</sup> This conception of relational aesthetics is hardly utopian - *within technical and social constraints* – pointing to the role of design in controlling human interaction. Commercial design is thereby using relational aesthetics as a means to shape the way people consume. This has been a focus of technological design for some time, as evident in the emergence of messaging and communication technologies. As Mellick Lopes notes, “The lives of products are more cultural than technical and have more to do with engineering relationships and situations between people than in delivering functions.”<sup>143</sup>

Artistic practices that focus on human engagement thus provide a utopian mirage, with the positive relations produced in the space of the gallery inadvertently masking the ways that human relations are manipulated and shaped by commodities elsewhere. As Žižek argues, it is the products of contemporary culture and “the social relations between things” that now carry and demonstrate the social power relations between people.<sup>144</sup> It is therefore through production that social systems can be most effectively examined, questioned, and critiqued. After all, systems of production are ravenously examining, questioning and profiting from human relations. This is evident across the fields of design, art and architecture. As Julia Schulz-Dornburg writes, “We are all now objects of desire. Our daily routines are analysed, every little escapade the object of investigation. Our histories are researched and our desires annotated.”<sup>145</sup> In this context, relational art

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<sup>141</sup> Strategies of social enfranchisement are evident across the board in marketing discourse relating to commercial design. There was much discussion on this topic, for example, at *Futureground*, a conference of the Design Research Institute held at Monash University in 2004. See *Futureground: International Conference 2004*, (Melbourne: Monash University, Faculty of Art and Design, 2004)

<sup>142</sup> Gianfranco Zacconi, ‘Art and Technology,’ in *Discovering design*, p. 6

<sup>143</sup> Abby Mellick Lopes, ‘The politics of design conversations,’ in *Design philosophy papers*, p. 73

<sup>144</sup> Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology*, pp. 25-6

<sup>145</sup> Julia Schulz-Dornburg, *Art and architecture: new affinities*, ex. cat., (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, SA, 2000) p. 19

faces the danger of being used by systems of production to disguise the design of soul, body and mind.<sup>146</sup>

Other artists have been exploring these issues through design, combining relational aesthetics with the creation of products. Lucy Orta, for example, designs clothing that attempts to solve social problems. Her *Refuge Wear* series of clothing, developed in the 1990s, consisted of clothing that converted into tent-like temporary shelter (Figure 14). In addition, the works could be connected together, relational-aesthetics-style, to encourage human interaction, in the form of *Collective Dwelling* (1998/1999). For such artists, use-value points to that little bit of freedom that Adorno likewise alluded to in “Functionalism Today.” It holds the promise of liberating consumers from the fetishised realms of consumer culture, focusing on addressing fundamental human needs such as shelter. While still conforming to systems of “value” and production, as discussed in relation to Marx, such projects at least acknowledge the political and conceptual foundations of design. This is an important and often overlooked point. As Richard Buchanan observes, “Design is the art of shaping arguments about the artificial or human-made world.”<sup>147</sup> Design discussion in the contemporary sphere all too easily turns to methodology and style instead of considering these sociological and political foundations. Artistic encounters with design are unique in foregrounding the critical and conceptual possibilities of the field.

Yet artists such as Orta still fail to resolve the problem of autonomy and function. Capitalism is very adept at manipulating the idea of use-value in order to perpetuate the cycle of production and consumption. What may begin as an affordable, humanitarian design in an art context easily morphs into an exclusive commodity in the hands of the market. Socially useful design is easily appropriated by capital and transformed into consumer products, elevated in status by their circulation within the art market. For Marx, once an object enters the market it loses all sense of use-value. He writes, for example, “Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects... In the eyes of each other we are nothing

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<sup>146</sup> As Stallabrass argues, social powers “look to art as a social salve, and hope that socially interactive art will act as bandaging for the grave wounds continually prised open by capital.” (Stallabrass, *Art incorporated*, p. 182)

<sup>147</sup> Richard Buchanan, ‘Rhetoric, humanism and design,’ in *Discovering design*, p. 46

but exchange-values.”<sup>148</sup> And so Orta’s work, regardless of its intended use, is easily abstracted from this premise, as evident in Maria Cristina Tommasini’s comments about the increasing ‘product reality’ of her practice:

Without belying her social commitment, the proposals seem to probe technical detail and to open up to a more concrete product reality. Her collaboration with an Italian clothing manufacturer also suggests that Orta’s work is departing from its experimental phase.<sup>149</sup>

The problem with design, in this sense, is that it necessarily implies the creation of a commodity – commodification is the earth from which design practice emerges. As design theorist Victor Margolin acknowledges, “we cannot imagine a world without products.”<sup>150</sup> Just as capitalism strengthens and expands through the process of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, the consumer world expands through the constant de-design and re-design of the industrial world. More and less humanitarian versions of design are therefore going to emerge according to more and less humanitarian versions of capitalism.

If use-value cannot salvage design from its complicity with commerce it is because it overlooks the role of desire in determining consumer behaviour. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, “Desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather the contrary; needs are derived from desire.”<sup>151</sup> Configuring desire in terms of needs and wants follows traditional understandings of desire as lack. The concept of desire has been of central importance to philosophy since the inception of psychoanalysis. Both Freud and Lacan interpret desire in terms of lack – for Freud, through the model of castration, and more explicitly for Lacan as *manque*, for which the English translation is ‘lack.’ This conception of desire can be traced to Plato, who suggested “man is not perfect *because* his Being is incomplete.”<sup>152</sup> Where desire is conceived of in these terms, it is neither productive nor liberatory. Instead, it is subjected to a constant search for, and failure to

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<sup>148</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I., p. 87

<sup>149</sup> Maria Cristina Tommasini, ‘Body architectures, survival clothes,’ (*Domus*, March 2000) p. 74

<sup>150</sup> Margolin, ‘The product milieu and social action,’ in *Discovering design*, p. 121

<sup>151</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 28

<sup>152</sup> See Silverman, *Philosophy and desire*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 186.

find, satisfaction. This is exploited by capitalism, which creates artificial desires in order to constantly produce new and ultimately unsatisfying consumer products. While making useful, humanitarian products might appear to provide an alternative to the proliferation of unnecessary designer goods, it still relies on the logic of capitalism – that needs, gaps, and absences should be filled with commodities.

In the introductory paragraph of this chapter, I raised Krauss’s criticisms of the tendency for works of art that cross different media to homogenise artistic practice and inadvertently serve the interests of capital. In her terms, “becoming prey to the law of commodification, the separate work of art, as well as the separate mediums of art, enter the condition of general equivalency, thereby losing the uniqueness of the work.<sup>153</sup>” For Krauss, the reason for this turn away from a modernist and ‘pure’ art form came down to a reaction against the supposed self-sufficiency of the modernist medium. This autonomy, she argues, denies a fundamental insufficiency in both the material form of the medium and within the viewer. Any medium, Krauss suggests, is incomplete without some form of layering, even if only a single layer of paint on the surface of a canvas. Similarly, the viewer looks to an artwork in a desire to fill “an unappeasable lack of self-sufficiency,”<sup>154</sup> and thereby attain an experience suggestive of wholeness. Like Foster, Krauss turns her gaze to artworks that capture a sense of their own obsolescence – in this way, she suggests, they reveal the fundamental lack of both artwork and subject, thereby exposing the many layers that are involved in the artwork’s creation. The problem with directing desire and artistic practice to addressing an inherent lack, however, is that both art and desire lose their productive potential. Art becomes the end point in a search for fulfillment, rather than an active process of creation, and desire becomes “no more than the production of fantasy.”<sup>155</sup> This shortcuts their potential to actively transform the material world.

In *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (1984), Deleuze and Guattari overhaul this understanding of desire. Desire, in their terms, is not the satisfaction of a lack, but instead is a positive and productive flow, connecting bodies to the socius and the socius to its environment. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is behind and within all

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<sup>153</sup> Krauss, ‘A voyage on the North Sea’, p. 46

<sup>154</sup> Krauss, ‘A voyage on the North Sea’, p. 53

<sup>155</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 122

aspects of social production. Capitalism, they argue, attempts to control and structure desire, to turn it into lack. This is its secret – it makes us desire our own oppression – and accounts for the apparent futility of external attempts to ‘oppose’ it. They describe, for example, “capitalism’s supreme goal, which is to produce lack in the large aggregates, to introduce lack where there is always too much.”<sup>156</sup> By controlling our desires in this way, we come to desire its oppressive grasp. Capitalism, they write, is “a machine that is not only technical but social, and through which desire desires its own repression.”<sup>157</sup> Escaping capitalism, they argue, can only occur via the liberation of unconscious desire. In their words, “returning production itself to desire.”<sup>158</sup> This opens the possibility of engaging with commercial production in creative and unexpected ways. And so they describe art, not in terms of obsolescence and memorialisation, but as “so many local fires patiently kindled for a generalised explosion.”<sup>159</sup>

It is important to note that Deleuze and Guattari are purposefully elusive when it comes to pinpointing a definition of desire. Where capitalism attempts to determine and direct desire, Deleuze and Guattari deterritorialise the concept.<sup>160</sup> As a flow that connects everything, it is physical, machinic, social and productive. While it is sexual and bodily, it does not merely imply chaotic sexual energy – it compels production, it is creative and social. In this sense, desire is real and physical, and it produces real material objects.<sup>161</sup> Most importantly, it does not refer to the fetishised desires of consumer culture; constructs which feed and reinforce lack. In *Anti-Oedipus*, they interrelate Marx’s examination of capitalism with Freud’s examination of the unconscious, arguing that the social field is invested with psychological drives. As a result, effective revolutionary

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<sup>156</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 256

<sup>157</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 379

<sup>158</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 402

<sup>159</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 148

<sup>160</sup> Like much post-structural theory, this is a *necessary* elusiveness. In order for desire to retain its disruptive function it needs to be unresolved, which presents a critical challenge. As Patrick Fuery writes, “A major concern therefore is the problem of representing desire, given that by its very definition desire is beyond representation.” (Fuery, *Theories of desire*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1995, p. 2) Dorothea Olkowski argues that Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of desire is described abstractly to *ensure* its creativity and diversity. (In “Flows of desire and the body,” in *Philosophy and Desire*, p.187)

<sup>161</sup> They are explicit about this point, writing: “If desire produces, it’s product is real... Desire always remains in close touch with the conditions of objective existence.” (*Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 28-29)

activity will not be found in violent uprisings, as Marx proposed, but in analysing the psychological drives invested in social production, or in their terms, “schizoanalysis.”<sup>162</sup>

Art presents itself as a natural ally in this endeavour with its unique capacity to explore and uncover social investments of desire. This potential was hinted at, for example, in Murakami’s works *My Lonesome Cowboy* and *Hiropon*. Flows of desire, in the form of seminal fluid and breast milk, were made literal in the production of a commodity. Murakami’s works did not liberate human desire, however, by destroying or challenging the fetishism of *otaku* culture with real manifestations of bodily drives. Instead, the bodily fluids were made plastic, stylised into a lasso and rope. In this sense, the characters became ensnared within socially manipulated desire. They were then placed before the consumer as objects of consumption, perpetuating the consumer’s sense of lacking. Lusting after such distorted objects of fantasy, desire could only be experienced vicariously through the consumption of images and products.

Murakami found himself similarly ensnared by his desire to participate in the free-for-all of the consumer market. This was most evident when he battled Narumiya International. Seeking the riches of late capital, Murakami sacrificed the critical autonomy of his artistic practice for commercial viability. This, in turn, made him vulnerable to reappropriation, such that his ‘art’ became Narumiya’s next range of merchandise. When he discovered his powerlessness in this cycle, he reverted to an assertion of the value of the originality of art and culture. In turn, he negated the premise of his artistic practice, which in fact relies upon appropriation. Trapped in a machine of his own making, he had no choice but to turn to another social system – the law – to find salvation. The legal case stopped Narumiya International from using one DOB-like character, however it did not prevent them using four other characters with very similar characteristics. Murakami thereby exemplifies the insidious power of late capitalism; inadvertently desiring his own oppression, he fuels the system that devours his work. Uncovering this trap is one of the functions of Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalysis, which aims “to analyse the specific nature of the libidinal investments in the economic and political spheres, and thereby to show how, in the subject who desires, desire can be

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<sup>162</sup> They write, “The task of schizoanalysis is therefore to reach the investments of unconscious desire in the social field.” (*Anti-Oedipus*, p. 383)

made to desire its own repression.”<sup>163</sup> The cycle of commercial appropriation exposed in the Narumiya lawsuit could have opened up an interesting point of critique – providing a starting point for an exploration of late capital. Instead, Murakami limited this engagement with the commercial sphere by denying his role as a producer and reverting to his affirmation of the originality of his art.

Art’s tendency to repress its relationship with production by asserting autonomy, in this sense, limits its capacity to truly engage with, and misdirect, these systems. Artistic practices positioned within the systems of production, however, are in a unique position to mislead the design process and shift the focus of production away from its commercial outcome. For Deleuze and Guattari, this involves inserting an element of natural dysfunction into production. They write, “The artist is the master of objects; he puts before us shattered, burned, broken-down objects, converting them to the regime of desiring-machines.”<sup>164</sup> So how might artists configure design as dysfunction?

## **Mis-design**

It is important to acknowledge that ‘design’ implies a predetermined result, namely the creation of a product, and this determining aspect has an impact on its critical potential. No matter how creative and misleading the idea behind a design might be, the resulting product can be used to perpetuate the systems of capital. As Denis Hollier writes, “Nothing that has anything to do with plans counts, because plans fall short of desire and suppress it.”<sup>165</sup> Yet design is first and foremost a process of conceiving and creating, and this process has the potential to disrupt its premised result. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, “the specificity of the product tends to evaporate, while at the same time the possibility of another outcome, another end result of the process appears.”<sup>166</sup> The critical potential of art’s collusion with design, I argue, lies in the capacity for the design process

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<sup>163</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 115

<sup>164</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 34

<sup>165</sup> Denis Hollier, *Against architecture: writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) p. 46

<sup>166</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 26. Further, they argue, “Production as process overtakes all idealistic categories and constitutes a cycle whose relationship to desire is that of an immanent principle.” (*Anti-Oedipus*, p. 5)



to subvert the commercial outcome of production. When plans give way to the process of conceiving and thinking, then desire can disrupt the systems of production in unexpected ways. Susan Yalevich alludes to this when she discusses design that maintains a degree of uncertainty. She writes, “Uncertainty has its virtues: it breeds iconoclasm, opening up space for the personal, the crafted, and, most thankfully, in our paved-over world, the unpredictable.”<sup>167</sup> Indeterminacy is another means by which to misdirect the outcome-based focus of production. Marx has also described this capacity for dysfunction to reveal the systems of production, writing “A knife which fails to cut, a piece of thread which keeps on snapping, forcibly remind us of Mr. A, the cutler, of Mr B, the spinner. In a successful product, the role played by past labour in mediating its useful properties has been extinguished.”<sup>168</sup> It is the unsuccessful products, therefore, that expose the role played by labour.

Elizabeth Grosz likewise alludes to a sense of mis-design in *The nick of time: politics, evolution and the untimely* (2005), her recent examination of the relationship between politics, culture and history. Arguing that political change needs to be considered in terms of the unexpected, she describes “a future we cannot directly recognise, a future that does not simply extend our current needs and wants *but may actively transform them in ways we may not understand or control.*”<sup>169</sup> Here, Grosz shares Deleuze and Guattari’s adoption of a more Nietzschean approach to utility, where use-value gives way to the unexpected and productive possibilities of biological drives and desire. Nietzsche advocates, for example, “The absolute necessity of a total liberation from ends... Only the innocence of becoming gives us the greatest courage and the greatest freedom.”<sup>170</sup>

Unleashed in the field of commercial design, artists have a unique capacity to mis-direct the commercial directives of social production. This involves disregarding the

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<sup>167</sup> Susan Yalevich, ‘Safety nests,’ in *Safe: Design takes on risk*, ex. cat., ed Paola Antonelli (New York, London: Museum of Modern Art and Thames & Hudson, 2005) p. 25

<sup>168</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 289. See also Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, for an analysis of labour in capitalist production (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>169</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *The nick of time: politics, evolution and the untimely*, (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), p. 260 [My emphasis]

<sup>170</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The will to power*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 417, #787. Furthermore, Nietzsche proposes “Utility and pleasure are slave theories of life: the ‘blessing of work’ is the self-glorification of slaves.” (*The will to power*, p. 398, #758)

formal distinction between visual art and design, and instead looking at art as a critical practice within the designed landscape of both art and commerce. Where Krauss argues that intermedia practices necessarily collude with the homogenising tendencies of capital, Deleuze and Guattari see art as inherently disruptive, regardless of the medium. Deleuze argues this point in *Negotiations*, suggesting that disruptive art practices can traverse several media. It is not the form that counts, in this sense, so much as its effect. He writes, “Different modes of expression may have different creative possibilities, but they’re all related insofar as they must counter the introduction of a cultural space of markets and conformity.”<sup>171</sup> While projects may appear under the guise of commercial design, this does not negate their function as critical artistic practices. Art is self-sufficient, in this sense, not as a discipline, medium or aesthetic category of its own, but as a moving, changing and unpredictable process occurring on the inside of commercial culture. A practice that turns away from concerns about function, utility and form, and toward the domain of dysfunction, experimentation and creative production.

Contemporary art’s inter-relationship with design, I argue, does not negate its creative and critical spirit. In order to distinguish between critique and Murakami-style cynicism, however, each case of apparent ‘collusion’ needs to be evaluated on its own terms. This involves a contextually and historically specific style of analysis and critique. In a world where all art can be considered design, this approach is also needed in the traditional institutions of art, where collusions between art, fashion, design and commerce are equally prevalent. The key to escaping the alienating effects of contemporary consumer culture, with its hyperreal landscape, abstraction of needs and apparently all encompassing immanence, does not lie in ignoring or refusing production. Likewise, contemporary art cannot retain space for critical thought and independent practice by ignoring its commercial complicity. While an ‘alternative’ to late capitalism is hardly imaginable, artists are working within its systems to question its manipulation of social, human and object relations. This does not involve opposing consumerism from an ‘outside’ position, but rather exploring its internal operations and misdirecting its outcomes. At times this results in collusion, as evident in the example of Murakami. Yet in the contemporary marketplace, collusion and subversion are necessarily intertwined.

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<sup>171</sup> Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 131

This allows for other, more productive artistic practices that maintain the tension between art and culture, refusing to give way to the cynical sway of contemporary consumer-capitalism. In the following chapters, I explore the ways in which Zittel, Kalkin and Acconci are mis-directing the design process to reveal the psychological dynamics of social production, thereby creating critical spaces within commercial culture for consumers to question the systems and effects of capitalist production.

This involves a shift in perspective away from the politics of consumption and the emancipatory capacity of use-value toward the potential of engaged production that uncovers the psychological role of desire in the systems of late capitalism.

## Chapter 2

### **Playing Zittel: Andrea Zittel's design for living**

When Andrea Zittel first began her design company *A-Z: Administrative Services (A-Z)*, she idealistically claimed: “I give you a small nucleus of harmony. You are calmer, more relaxed, peaceful.” Yet the ricochet effect of encountering her guise, *A-Z*, with its utopian products, points not to idealistic solutions, but instead to the alienating effects of late capitalism. The objects of Zittel's production unsettle *A-Z's* harmonious façade, tracing her seemingly impossible struggle to obtain a sense of place, freedom and difference within the systems of the contemporary consumer world. Zittel's utilitarian production is a mask, and what lurks beneath is the dysfunction of late capitalism. Like its modernist predecessors, *A-Z* claims to seek liberation from capitalism through material production, emphasising use-value as a means to overcome the alienating effects of commodification. The idealistic ambitions of *A-Z Administrative Services*, however, cannot be realised. Each design system that Zittel creates is ultimately reinvented, prompting renewed production. This flawed design process serves to make the consumer aware of the alienating effects of contemporary consumer culture. *A-Z: Administrative Services* is not a design studio but an elaborate, autobiographical experiment. Products such as *A-Z Personal Uniforms* (1991-1994) are not commodities so much as costumes, evoking both the physical body of Andrea Zittel and her movement through the world. They are markers of a performance, utilitarian stage props. This chapter examines how Zittel uses design to explore and disrupt the systems of commercial production.

Zittel takes commercial design to the limits of control and function, attempting to create a life based on the satisfaction of needs, both emotional and physical, without abstraction or excess. This experiment repeatedly fails, enacting the failed ideologies of Marxism and the modern avant-garde. Rather than providing a perfect design system, her production makes the consumer aware of the subjective and psychological effects of design. The objects of *A-Z Administrative Service* seduce consumers into experiencing Zittel's social and psychological environment, enticing them to participate in her attempt to design life. This utilitarian premise quickly mutates, however, into an expression of frustrated desire. In this experiment with the systems of commercial design, Zittel is

neither complicit nor oppositional. She forges a critical position that disruptively engages the internal mechanisms of the commercial market. Just as the title, *A-Z: Administrative Services* disguises Zittel's personal identity, the design premise of her work belies a critical artistic practice. Her claimed ambition to satisfy consumer 'needs' is a means to explore the way desire is constructed, controlled and repressed in consumer capitalism. Desire, in this sense, differs from the 'wants' of consumer culture, which tend to feed a cycle of consumption and production. This discussion therefore draws upon Deleuze and Guattari's conception of desire, as discussed in chapter 1, configuring it as a productive and creative force underlying social production.

This chapter will firstly explore Zittel's work through Freud's idea of 'play' and its relationship to desire. This leads to consideration of the role of desire in Zittel's autobiographical production through the writings of Deleuze and Guattari. In particular, I consider the role of autobiography in examining the alienating effects of capitalist production. Finally, the chapter turns to examine Zittel's re-enactment of failed ideologies in relation to 1960s idealism and the writings of Marx.

### **House of play: *A-Z Living Units***

Andrea Zittel's design studio, *A-Z: Administrative Services*, is an experimental playground. It unites a rational game, determined by specific design 'rules,' with a play of critical artistic practice, where irrationality and subversion undermine its serious façade. The concept of 'play' has been an ongoing preoccupation of philosophy since Socratic times. In early philosophical writings it was considered an ethical issue, posed in opposition to 'seriousness.' In modern times, it was an aesthetic concern, considered as a counterpoint to 'work.' For post-structuralist thinkers, playfulness has been used in a disruptive sense, to question signification and undermine structural thinking.<sup>172</sup> 'Play' is often been divided into 'rational' and 'irrational' counterparts, not unlike Zittel's studio. The rational side of play falls within the spheres of anthropology, sociology and science. Games, for example, are means through which subjects are socially conditioned. Children

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<sup>172</sup> Generally, it has been configured as the 'Other' to reason. See Mechtild Nagel, *Masking the object: a genealogy of play* (Maryland; Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002). See also Rodrigo Perez de Arce, "The Stuff of Play: The Architectures of Play," (*ARQ*, no. 55), 2003.

learn how to socialise through play, while organised sport institutionalises playful behaviour. Yet 'play' also encompasses cheekiness, subversion and the disruption of social order. This more irrational sense of the concept abounds in artistic, literary and philosophical discourses – it has been embraced by recent philosophers from Nietzsche to Derrida, and accords with post-structural theory.

In both its institutionalised and subversive forms, play provides a unique means through which to reveal the functioning of society. As Mechtild Nagel writes “Play may have its own realm of truth (Gadamer), but nevertheless it can shed light on philosophical ‘noble’ lies.”<sup>173</sup> This is the underlying function of Zittel’s design. In its ‘seriousness,’ it positions her practice within the commercial design world. Simultaneously, it acts as a playful mask, unleashing a critical artistic practice into consumer culture that exposes some of the ‘noble lies’ of capitalist production. The products of A-Z enact the failure of design to satisfy human need and through this dysfunction they shed light on the alienating effects of late capitalism.

Zittel’s reorganises her personal environment through design to create a more satisfying existence. Each object of design, in this context, manifests Zittel’s psychological wishes. In “The relation of the poet to day-dreaming,” Sigmund Freud examines children’s play as a means to understanding adult fantasy and repressed desire. Freud describes children’s play as a serious, rather than frivolous, undertaking. Children at play, he suggests, are serious about it. What they do not take seriously, however, is reality. Instead, they create their own version of reality by rearranging objects from the real world. The child, he writes, “creates a world of his own or, more truly, he rearranges the things of his world and orders it in a new way that pleases him better.”<sup>174</sup> It is this use of real objects that separates play from mere fantasy, and it is this attempt to create a fantastic reality that shapes Zittel’s work.

Zittel’s first experiments in furniture design evolved while she was living in a cramped studio in Brooklyn, New York. While working full time as a gallery assistant,

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<sup>173</sup> Nagel, *Masking the object*, p. 109. See also Mihai Spărișu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989)

<sup>174</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The relation of the poet to day-dreaming," in *Collected papers*, ed. Joan Riviere, *The International Psycho-analytical Library; no. 10* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1934), p.174

Zittel was creating sculpture at the time by producing ‘designer’ bantam chickens. Restricted by both her physical environment, which she was sharing with the animals, and by the time limitations of working, Zittel felt the need to restructure her life. She began by designing habitats for her animals, employing minimal materials and space to create an environment that would encourage their best possible development. A modern and minimalist construction resulted, composed of wooden boxes and stacked to form a pyramid (Figure 15). It became a model for her personal social conditioning.

Zittel was influenced by the process, and began to experiment with the organisation of her own domestic space, configuring herself as the subject of a contemporary design laboratory, *A-Z: Administrative Services*. She began by designing the interior of her apartment in the form of the *A-Z Living Unit* (Figure 16). The *Living Unit* was a stand-alone item of furniture. While it was designed for her apartment, the result was a single, self enclosed world. The work was 10-metre square in size so it could fit inside a single small room while catering for all possible domestic needs. The small, geometric structure contained miniature kitchen, sleeping, dining, bathing and working areas, all within its small steel frame. It was collapsible so it could be packed and moved from home to home, in accordance with a contemporary, nomadic lifestyle. The result resembled a cross between a campervan and a doll’s house. Providing the consumer with a miniature world, the first product of *A-Z* was essentially an urban cubby house, a fantasy world designed to promote the best development for its creator.

While adults pretend not to play, Freud suggests, they continue the activity in the form of daydreaming. Both play and the daydream are determined by desire, by the fulfillment of wishes. He writes, “Unsatisfied wishes are the driving power behind phantasies.”<sup>175</sup> Adults are conditioned to be ashamed of their personal fantasies. Through public displays of daydreaming, however, such as literary works, the repulsion towards our personal desires can be overcome. Through art, he suggests, “we can enjoy our own day-dreams without reproach or shame.”<sup>176</sup> The *A-Z Living Unit* is not subtle in its indulgence of personal fantasy, and in its attempt to fulfill Zittel’s psychological needs. *A-Z* claims, “the ambition of this unit goes far beyond the desire to satisfy practical

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<sup>175</sup> Freud, “The relation of the poet to day-dreaming,” in *Collected Papers*, p. 176

<sup>176</sup> Freud, “The relation of the poet to day-dreaming,” in *Collected Papers*, p. 183

necessities – it also strives to fulfill a human craving for security, stability, freedom, and autonomy.”<sup>177</sup> Yet while the *Living Unit* claims to indulge human cravings, the resulting product actually organises and contains its subject within a tightly-defined structure.

The *A-Z Living Unit*, with its small and modular form, socially conditions Zittel’s imaginative play, converting her fantasies into a commodity. This is one of the key aspects of capitalist production – directing and containing human desire within a cycle of production and consumption. As Marx observes, commodities come to have power over people, such that the product of the labourer becomes “an alien object exercising power over him.”<sup>178</sup> This is most evident in the *A-Z Body Processing Unit*, one of the features of the *Living Unit* (Figure 17). The small compartment, which is about the width of an oven in size and less than two metres high, combines kitchen and bathroom requirements into a single “organised and hygienic system” that aims to process all bodily needs.<sup>179</sup> The body is treated as a machine that is integrated into the architectural environment and conditioned by the design system. In this case, the product of Zittel’s labour ends up controlling her environment and behaviour, enacting the way that capitalist production comes to control the individual labourers that it employs. As Marx observes in *Capital*, “It is now no longer the labourer that employs the means of production, but the means of production that employ the labourer.”<sup>180</sup> In the unit, Zittel becomes a bantam chicken, shaped and moulded toward an ideal social existence. Each inhabitant of an *A-Z Living Unit* is, in turn, conditioned toward this *A-Z* model of living.

The *Living Unit* has been a major preoccupation of *A-Z*’s design. It has inspired endless variation, and has been developed consistently to accommodate a changing physical and imaginative environment. In addition, it has been modified to integrate the personal preferences of clients. While Zittel emphasises the collaborative nature of these commissioned projects, collaboration is in fact more a matter of ‘customisation,’ where objects originating from Zittel’s wishes are altered slightly to suit their prospective inhabitants. As part of a major solo exhibition in Germany for the Goetz Collection in 2003, for example, Zittel customised an *A-Z Cellular Compartment Unit* (Figure 18), an

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<sup>177</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, ed. Simona Vendrame (Milan: Tema Celeste Editions, 2002), p. 62

<sup>178</sup> Marx, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, p. 72

<sup>179</sup> Zittel, *Personal Programs*, ex.cat, ed. Zdenek Felix, Hatje Canz Verlag, (Hamburg: 2000), p. 36

<sup>180</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 310



elaborate version of the *A-Z Living Unit*. The structure was composed of numerous small rooms, or compartments, which were stacked in close formation. From the outside, it resembled a kind of wooden Rubik's Cube. Inside, each room was connected through a circular porthole, and due to the restricted size it encouraged crouching, climbing and crawling.<sup>181</sup> The resulting labyrinthine environment was even more cubby-like than its predecessor, the *A-Z Living Unit*, and created a fantasy world that could be transported and constructed within the size of an average apartment. By 'customising' such performative design products, Zittel seduces consumers into experiencing the childlike and fantastical effects of her production.

The design of the *Cellular Compartment Unit* encouraged an interior, private existence, cut off from the outside world. Unable to stand inside the unit, the inhabitants were kept close to the ground, only able to see out by peering up through windows pitched above eye-level. The cramped and boxy environment alluded to both prison detention and the enclosed space of a monastery, as evident in the use of the word 'cellular' in the title. Yet the environment was attractive, adorned with fashionable accoutrements, presenting a strange stylisation of what would otherwise be considered a restrictive, uncomfortable design. This stylisation was heightened by the collaboration with Zittel's client. The Goetz interior was designed according to the specifications of Ingvild Goetz, who was inspired by Japanese traditions of interior design. The customisation was documented in detail in the exhibition catalogue, which included lengthy emails detailing carpet colour, light fittings and furniture arrangements. Despite this apparent personalisation, the resulting construction was every bit *A-Z*, from its wood paneling, furnishings and colour scheme to the intimate and contained atmosphere of the overall environment.

The idea of personalisation in a commercial context is misleading. As Jean Baudrillard describes in *The System of Objects* (1968), 'personalisation' is a means by which consumerism further incorporates and dominates its consumers. Rather than allowing for individuation, it merely promotes conforming to a prescribed set of

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<sup>181</sup> This childlike movement through space was also encouraged in the *A-Z Living Units*. One reviewer described the effect, writing "you can also crawl and slither around the Ikon piece, snuggle in the beds and experience how the size of the spaces is both restraining and liberating.... definitely infantilising if not womb-like." (Catherine Croft, "Home affairs," *Building Design*, November 23 2001, p.18)

‘individual’ characteristics. He suggests, “What we are left with in the end are successive limited series, a disjointed transition to ever more restricted series based on ever more minute and ever more specific differences.”<sup>182</sup> In this sense, the *Cellular Compartment Unit* reinforces the systems of commercial production, guiding consumers with a promise of freedom toward a closed and practically uninhabitable environment. How could a consumer realistically expect to live in a house without ever standing up? The claustrophobic nature of the resulting space exaggerates the way design dominates its subjects. Considered in a performative sense, Zittel’s client-collaboration was thereby a form of recruitment, wherein consumers were incorporated into a social experiment.

The complicated function of the cellular unit draws attention to the relationship between the human psyche and design of the environment. As the official line of A-Z describes:

It would seem that a natural human reaction to complexity is to create categories and compartments, but here at A-Z we are never sure if it is the architecture that affects our perceptions - or if it is those mental ‘compartments’ which we use to shape our environments.<sup>183</sup>

This kind of design realises a psychological reaction to the insular nature of contemporary society. Rather than presenting a blank designer object to be integrated into the collector’s world, as promised for example by the modular forms of *Ikea* furniture, Zittel draws her clients into the psychological experience of her design. This is the insidious effect of A-Z’s experiment; under a mask of rational production, it absorbs inadvertent consumers, including influential art collectors, museums and galleries, into an autobiographical, psychological performance of the dysfunction of late capitalism. In effect, Ingvild Goetz customised an expression of alienation when she customised the A-Z Cellular Compartment Unit, despite its cute appearance and references to child’s play. The products of A-Z are traces of human struggle with capitalist systems, manifested in the autobiographical experience of Zittel. As David Gleeson describes, “She has worn the

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<sup>182</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The system of objects* (London; New York: Verso, 1996), pp. 142-3

<sup>183</sup> Zittel, *Andrea Zittel's A - Z Administrative Services* [Website] (A - Z Administrative Services, 2004 [cited October 30 2004]); available from [www.zittel.org](http://www.zittel.org)

clothes and lived in the units, and they evoke her so strongly that they appear not to be autonomous objects, but mute, dependent witnesses to her presence.”<sup>184</sup>

The promise of the *A-Z Living Unit* was nothing short of perfection. Zittel describes, “we imagined that we could create a perfected structure that would solve all of our problems.”<sup>185</sup> The unrealistic nature of the claim led to the inevitable failure of the design to achieve such results. Instead of resolving Zittel’s need for physical space, the obsessive compartmentalisation instead divided, structured and controlled her body further. Zittel describes the first unit in ambivalent terms: “I lived with my first *Living Unit* for a little over a year, sometimes loving it and sometimes hating it.”<sup>186</sup> This effect was also experienced by visitors to the space. Zittel describes, for example, “once a friend was just too overwhelmed by my confines of the unit that he just had to leave.”<sup>187</sup> Another review describes, “If you can face the claustrophobia, you can also crawl and slither around the Ikon piece, snuggle in the beds and experience how the size of the spaces is both restraining and liberating, both very nasty and quite beguiling.”<sup>188</sup> Its failure to achieve ‘perfection’ and to satisfy her cravings has resulted in the constant reinvention and modification of its design – just like capitalist production, which is constantly revolutionising its processes in order to expand. Despite the promise of the *Living Unit* to simplify material necessities, the product instead fuels a cycle of consumption and production. This flawed process ensures continued production, as evident when Zittel claims, “I believe that we are most happy when we are moving forward towards something that we have not quite attained.”<sup>189</sup> *A-Z* is about identifying and highlighting capitalist systems by attempting to escape them. Its failures are therefore pertinent to its production – its flaws are part of the experiment.

The *A-Z Living Unit* was an expression of Zittel’s imaginative world, a

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<sup>184</sup> David Gleeson, "Andrea Zittel: Sadie Coles Hq, London and Ikon Gallery, Birmingham," *frieze*, no. 65 (2002), p. 86

<sup>185</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 62

<sup>186</sup> Zittel, cited in Theadora Vischer, "Questions addressed to Andrea Zittel," in *Andrea Zittel: Living Units*, ex. cat., (Basel; Joanneum Graz: Museum for Gegenwartskunst & Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum, 1997) n.p. This dissatisfaction fuelled her production process. After completing the first *A-Z Living Unit*, she described, “instead of feeling content, we actually felt rather bored and directionless...In light of this we set up a program for continuing to reinvent the *Living Unit* infinitely.” (Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 62)

<sup>187</sup> Zittel, cited in Vischer, "Questions addressed to Andrea Zittel," in *Andrea Zittel: Living Units*, n.p.

<sup>188</sup> Croft, “Home affairs,” p.18

<sup>189</sup> Zittel, "Sufficient Self," [Transcript], (See Appendix I) n.p.

manifestation of her psychological wishes. The function of children's play, in Freud's account, is to express this kind of fantasy. In adult life, on the other hand, desire is repressed and manifests only in the disguised forms of the day-dream and dream and in the imaginative world of literature. It is not expressed through real objects, as it was for the child, but in these worlds of representation, where "we can enjoy our own day-dreams without reproach or shame."<sup>190</sup> Zittel, however, persists with child's play. Her wishes leave the world of representation and her imagination, and are embodied in real objects such as the *A-Z Living Unit*. In this way, she repositions desire away from Freud's realm of fantasy and into the sphere of material production. Her continuation of child's play also manifests a persistent desire for liberation from social controls. This wish for freedom is, of course, appropriated by contemporary capitalist production in the form of an industry of play – from computer gaming to corporate team-building exercises – which uses this desire for escape, only to capture people even more effectively in its systems. As Nigel Thrift argues:

what is being attempted is continuously to conjure up experiences that can draw consumers to commodities by engaging their own passions and enthusiasms, set within a frame that can deliver on those passions and enthusiasms, both by producing goods that resonate and by making those goods open to potential recasting."<sup>191</sup> p297

Zittel's playful claim to "solve all of our problems" points to Freud's description of play as the fulfillment of "unsatisfied wishes."<sup>192</sup> Freud configures desire in terms of lack. This is the very logic of capitalist production, which, as Deleuze and Guattari write, "involves deliberately organising wants and needs (*manqué*) amid an abundance of production; making all of desire teeter and fall victim to the fear of not having one's needs satisfied."<sup>193</sup> While Zittel's design is caught in this conceptual framework, of attending to needs and wishes, it continually fails to provide fulfillment, instead

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<sup>190</sup> Freud, "The relation of the poet to day-dreaming," in *Collected Papers*, p. 183

<sup>191</sup> Thrift, "Re-inventing invention," p. 297

<sup>192</sup> Karl Marx's view of use-value as "the satisfaction of wants." (Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 150)

<sup>193</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 30

provoking further production. In this way, Zittel's design enacts the way that human desire is repressed in consumer culture.

Failing to solve her problems, products such as the *A-Z Living Units* become subversive manifestations of late capitalism's 'noble lie' – that it might satisfy desire. For Deleuze and Guattari, contrary to Freud, desire is manifest in all aspects of human production. In *Anti-Oedipus*, they suggest that it is through examining the repression of desire that the mechanisms of capitalism can be shifted. They write, "The task of schizoanalysis is therefore to reach the investments of unconscious desire in the social field." By exaggerating the relationship of frustrated desire and social production through design, Zittel's practice begins to 'schizoanalyse' consumer culture, revealing the way it relentlessly produces lack in the place of desire.<sup>194</sup> This occurs through the mis-design of objects such as the *A-Z Living Unit*.

### **A trial with time**

The dysfunction of Zittel's production is characterised by an internal struggle between liberation from social conditioning and psychological self-conditioning through design. As she acknowledges, "I am always looking for the grey area between freedom – which can sometimes feel too open-ended and vast – and security – which may easily turn into confinement."<sup>195</sup> The rational side of A-Z's production involves the creation of utopian design systems to liberate Andrea Zittel from the constraints of the contemporary world. The irrational, playful side of this production lies in A-Z's repeated failure to achieve such ambitions. The *A-Z Time Trial* (2000) experiment captures this dynamic. The premise of *A-Z Time Trials* was to free Zittel's internal bodily rhythms from social structures through the design of a 'timeless' environment. In the experiment, Zittel housed herself in a small room in Berlin, and lived for one week without clocks, external sounds or natural light. She documented her behaviour and domestic patterns during this time with a time-lapse camera that recorded the time, and at the end of the project she

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<sup>194</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 383

<sup>195</sup> Zittel, cited in Robert Storr, *Art 21: art in the 21st century*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), p. 213

presented an exhibition. The show displayed a series of wooden panels, each containing photographs that documented her waking, sleeping, eating and working habits (Figure 19). The project culminated in the design of *A-Z Time Tunnels* (Figure 20), four small cabins proposed as ‘time capsules’ to facilitate the same experience for consumers inspired by Zittel’s adventure.

The stainless steel frame of each cabin was adorned with wood paneling, nostalgically reinventing a 1950s science fiction aesthetic. In this way, they simultaneously referenced a travel back in time, along with the proposed journey into no-time. The small, windowless structure of the *A-Z Time Tunnel* was simultaneously evocative of the claustrophobic space of a coffin, reflecting the increasing spatial introversion and enclosure of contemporary society. While the differences between inside and outside, private and public are being effaced by the speed of information and technology, individuals are becoming increasingly isolated and house-bound. As Paul Virilio observes in *Polar Inertia*, his prediction of the effects of technology on our understanding of space, “We are thus heading towards a situation where the key feature will be control over ego-centric (introverted) space”<sup>196</sup> Without engines or wheels, the cabins were designed for conceptual rather than physical travel. Their minimal façades provided the consumer with transport into a fantasy world, apparently outside of the constraints of time.

*A-Z* described the experiment as follows: “What would it be like to live without any source of imposed time? You could sleep whenever you felt tired and eat whenever you were hungry. How would your body react to such total freedom?”<sup>197</sup> Yet this ‘freedom’ was not achieved through escape or liberation, but rather through the creation of a set of conceptual restrictions. Zittel divided her activities into 19 specific categories, from crocheting and socialising to drinking coffee and thinking, each attributed with a different colour code that was then used to map her behaviour over the course of the week. For example, eating was categorised by a shade of green and crocheting the colour brown, while thinking was designated with a dark shade of blue. These colours were then placed in bands above the documentary photographs, correlating to Zittel’s movements at

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<sup>196</sup> Paul Virilio, *Polar inertia*, Thousand Oaks; London: Sage, 2000, p. 68.

<sup>197</sup> Press release, “A-Z Time Trials”, *Andrea Rosen Gallery*, New York, April 22 – May 27, 2000

the given times. While such an obsessively controlled and ordered experiment may not seem playful, it is not in conflict with the experimental and fantastical nature of play. In Roger Caillois' study of games, he suggests that play is characterised by rules. The coexistence of rules and freedom are inherent to all games. He writes, "The confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced, in this fixed space and for this given time, by precise, arbitrary, unexceptional rules that must be accepted as such."<sup>198</sup> The organisation of life characteristic of Zittel's experiment, in this sense, became a replacement for – rather than an escape from – the constraints of contemporary life.

In *A-Z Time Trials*, Zittel's week of freedom entailed an obsessive structuring of every aspect of her life. Rather than providing a sense of liberation it instead exacerbated Zittel's stress, as evident in her comment, "I keep thinking about deadlines and things I need to be doing."<sup>199</sup> Instead of creating more time to contemplate, as Zittel had hoped, the space for critical thought was subsumed in the ordering of both environment and activities. Despite the removal of the social structure of time, activities such as coffee drinking, internet surfing, beer drinking, eating and telephone conversations all became means through which to compartmentalise time. What emerged was not a liberated biological rhythm, but instead the obsessive habits, addictions and routines that are used in daily life as distractions from free thought. Zittel created a closed world, and by controlling it, she aimed to somehow gain control over the world at large. She states, "We don't control the larger world, but we can control intimate spaces."<sup>200</sup> Rather than providing freedom, however, her game revealed her own social conditioning.

Failure occurs on a number of levels. The documentation for the project, for example, failed to present a cohesive account of the passage of time. This led observers of the project to become equally obsessive about structure and systems. Rainald Schumacher, writing about the project, presented an account of the experiment that was as detailed as Zittel's own documentation. Rather than examining the conceptual nature of the project, he instead recounted in minute detail all of her activities over the seven-day period. He noted, for example, "At 21:19 she goes online and drinks coffee. At 21:24

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<sup>198</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, play and games*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), p. 7

<sup>199</sup> Zittel, cited in Rainald Schumacher, *Andrea Zittel, 18 May - 8 November*, ex. cat., Munchen: Ingvild Goetz, Sammlung Goetz, 2003, p. 82

<sup>200</sup> Cited in Brown, "Fine terrain for scorpions and artists," *The New York Times*, 29 August 2002, p. 1

she does some more washing and drinks coffee.”<sup>201</sup> Concerned with accurate recording, he experienced consternation when dealing with the inconsistency of the records. When the times written on the panels did not coincide with the times in the photographic footage, he noted:

This is surely an error, and should read 23:47, by which time she is back drinking beer with her visitor... This puts them outside the time allocated for the official end of the experiment. Occasionally, the times for the video stills do not coincide with the time-scale.<sup>202</sup>

Schumacher, like Zittel, became so absorbed in trying to account for the absence of time that the actual effect of the project – the behaviour and emotional responses of Zittel in this extraordinary environment – was overlooked. Yet these gaps of time actually indicate liberation from its structures. In this sense, a minimal amount of freedom only emerges in the failure of the experiment to accurately identify and document the passage of time.

Zittel’s premise in this experiment was that time is external to the natural rhythms of the body, as evident when she asked, “How would your body react to such total freedom?” Removing the referent of the clock, she attempted to discover a more internal understanding of her daily patterns. To achieve this, however, she needed to block out all natural light, creating an artificial, rather than natural, environment. The self-imposed timetable of activities and reliance on technology (electricity, telephone, computer) heightened this artificiality. She sought interiority through external means. In *The System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard describes the clock not as an object designed to impose an exterior structure on the body, but rather as a medium through which to connect to interiority. He uses the metaphor of the heartbeat to demonstrate how the clock unites external space with the space of the body. He writes, “The clock is a mechanical heart that reassures us about our own heart.”<sup>203</sup> He then suggests that modernism rejected the clock because of this reference to interiority, describing its absence in much modernist design as follows, “It is precisely this process of infusion or assimilation of the substance

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<sup>201</sup> Schumacher, “How do I get inside a Trojan Horse?” in *Andrea Zittel, 18 May - 8 November*, p. 83

<sup>202</sup> Schumacher, “How do I get inside a Trojan Horse?” in *Andrea Zittel, 18 May - 8 November*, p. 86

<sup>203</sup> Baudrillard, *The system of objects*, p. 24



of time, this presence of duration, which is rejected, just like all other returns to inwardness, by a modern order based on externality, spatiality and objective relationships.”<sup>204</sup> By removing the clock, Zittel modeled her experiment on a modern, and thereby exterior sense of space. In this space, it was impossible to obtain freedom from the constraints of social regulation, and she did not obtain a closer connection with either her internal rhythms or her internal self.

In this sense, the failure of Zittel’s game of time was inevitable. While she attempted to design an external environment that could liberate her interior self, the removal of time resulted in stronger self-conditioning, heightening her stress. In this way, the experiment revealed the absurdity of turning to external structures to liberate internal rhythms or find freedom from social structures. No utopian design could overcome the effects of the contemporary world. The resulting objects, the *A-Z Time Tunnels*, become silent markers of this failure.

Zittel’s failed attempt to find interiority through external systems in *A-Z Time Trials* reflects the continual futility of her rational production. Her products embody the dysfunction of capitalist society, which regulates time in order to increase production at the expense of individual labourers. As the popular modern Taylorist approach to management advocated: "It is only through *enforced* standardisation of methods, *enforced* adoption of the best implements and working conditions, and *enforced* cooperation that this *faster* work can be assured."<sup>205</sup> This link between capitalist production and the organisation of time is reinforced in Marx’s analysis of capitalism, where he writes “the greed for surplus-labour appears in the straining after an unlimited extension of the working-day.”<sup>206</sup> Zittel reveals the alienating effects of this kind of control of human labour through products entering the marketplace that fail to achieve their aims. In this way, Zittel’s experiment uses a subjective universe to play with social systems, revealing beneath the rational surface of capitalist production a cycle of frustrated consumption.

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<sup>204</sup> Baudrillard, *The system of objects*, p. 24

<sup>205</sup> Frederick Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management*, (New York: Harper Bros) 1911, p. 8

<sup>206</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 237

## Becoming A-Z: Unmasking desire

Zittel has described the *A-Z Living Units* as “the cure for a life out of control.”<sup>207</sup> They provided her with a feeling of control over her body and her material life, and the *A-Z Time Trials* provided a means through which to contain the speed of contemporary life, and thereby gain control over the anxiety-provoking postmodern world. As an exercise in self-control, however, Zittel’s game provides little more than temporary comfort. In other words, “It is consolatory rather than transformative.”<sup>208</sup> In this rational sense of play, Zittel’s products offer only a limited cathartic escape that, like child’s play and sport, actually perpetuate social conditioning. The repeated failure of these designs, however, subverts this consolatory effect, eliciting frustration and critique over complacency and comfort. Design, in this context, frames an anxious subject struggling to find freedom from the systems of late capitalism. This subject is unable to satisfy her needs and is desperate for a system that will relieve her sense of alienation. This dysfunctional production reveals a contradiction at the heart of consumer culture; amid a landscape saturated with promises of satisfaction, consumers are estranged from themselves and in particular, from their desires. Zittel reveals Marx’s argument that the products of capitalism feed “imaginary” desires.<sup>209</sup> Her products enact this aspect of capitalism in various guises.

The disconcerting effect of Zittel’s designed environment, as evident in both the *A-Z Living Unit* and the *Time Trials*, points to the creation of a closed and personal imaginative world, one at odds with reality. They are both examples of psychological dysfunction embodied in objects of design. A confused identity is at the core of the very title, A-Z, both an acronym for Andrea Zittel and a corporate title for her production company. At times Zittel promotes her work in the first person, at others in an officious corporate tone, and yet at others she encompasses ambiguous others under the term ‘we.’ Because the division between Andrea Zittel and *A-Z: Administrative Services* has been

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<sup>207</sup> Andrea Zittel, "Auto interview by Andrea Zittel," *Transcript*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1995)

<sup>208</sup> Marcus Verhagen, "Micro-utopianism," *Art Monthly*, no. 272 (2003 - 2004), p. 2

<sup>209</sup> To repeat Marx’s description, “the extension of products and needs becomes a *contriving* and *ever-calculating* subservience to inhuman, sophisticated, unnatural and *imaginary* appetites.” Marx, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, p. 109

lost, her identity is alienated twice over; first through capitalist exchange, and secondly through her response to this in the form of controlling designs. For Marx, alienation is an inherent effect of capitalist production. For the capitalist worker, he argues, alienation occurs several times over; through the product of labour, which is “an alien object exercising power over him” and through labour itself, which “belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.”<sup>210</sup> These estrangements then shape capitalist society at large. Zittel performs this subject through her design – despite numerous attempts to return production to use-value, which in Marx’s terms is “the satisfaction of wants,” the objects of her production only disconnect her from her body and her sense of self. Meanwhile, her personal identity is lost within the capitalist identity of A-Z, which becomes indistinguishable from the worker employed in its service. Both capitalist and labourer, experimenter and subject, Zittel is lost in the terms of her production. Marx describes this as a fundamental aspect of capitalist production, wherein “The capitalist robs his own self.”<sup>211</sup> Products such as *A-Z Time Tunnels* point to this dysfunction while circulating as ‘functional’ objects in capitalist systems. The alienation expressed by *A-Z: Administrative Services* extends into people’s homes, into gallery spaces, into the Californian desert and as far as an island in Denmark.<sup>212</sup>

The inherent psychological dysfunction of A-Z’s production borders on madness. For Caillois, the blurring of game and life liberates ‘disciplined’ instincts from social convention, resulting in a form of madness: “Left to themselves, destructive and frantic as are all instincts, these basic impulses can hardly lead to any but disastrous consequences.”<sup>213</sup> Freud also links overly powerful imaginative play with madness, writing, “If phantasies become over-luxuriant and over-powerful, the necessary conditions for an outbreak of neurosis or psychosis are constituted.”<sup>214</sup> In both formulations, fantasy taken to the extreme results in the release of desire. Zittel’s design

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<sup>210</sup> Marx, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, p. 71. He writes, “An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of labour, from his life activity, from his species-being is the *estrangement of man from man.*” (p. 75). This leads to alienation from the social realm and the world at large, which comes to be “an alien world inimically opposed to him.” (p. 71)

<sup>211</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 597

<sup>212</sup> Zittel’s *A-Z Pocket Property* was constructed in the form of a deserted island, and positioned off the coast of Denmark. She lived on the island for six weeks in 2000, along with several friends.

<sup>213</sup> Caillois, *Man, play and games*, p. 55

<sup>214</sup> Freud, “The relation of the poet to day-dreaming,” in *Collected papers*, p.178

is confused with the realm of her imagination, and in this way constitutes a kind of play that is disruptive in the sense of both Caillois and Freud. Her alienated identity as *A-Z* commodifies its attempts to escape commodification. This madness forms the commercial premise and function of her design, leading to the “disastrous consequence” to which Caillois alludes. Zittel reveals that in capitalist systems, desire is unconsciously repressed on both a social and individual level. As Deleuze and Guattari write, capitalism is “a machine that is not only technical but social, and through which desire desires its own repression.”<sup>215</sup> Zittel’s hopeless idealism demonstrates this complex situation, where her utopian production implicitly represses her body, her needs and her wishes, even in spite of itself.

The failed utopian premise of *A-Z* clearly references modernist predecessors whose idealism is the inspiration behind her design facade. Her failure to achieve her aims reenacts the idealism of earlier movements such as Constructivism and the Bauhaus. Importantly, it illustrates the paradox of this Marxist tradition. Based on utilitarian production, it was impossible to escape capitalist systems without disrupting the logic of production itself. As Baudrillard writes: “Comprehending itself as a form of the rationality of production superior to that of bourgeois political economy, the weapon Marx created turns against him and turns his theory into the dialectical apotheosis of political economy.”<sup>216</sup> Zittel’s production captures this paradox again and again; using the foundational rationalism of capitalist design to attempt to find freedom, she instead finds herself locked in a vicious cycle. By reproducing capitalism’s systematic control of desire in such an obviously neurotic personal manner, the dysfunctional design of *A-Z* thereby makes consumers consider production as a psychological process. As Deleuze and Guattari argue in *Anti-Oedipus*, capitalism attempts to disguise this psychological function and survives by unconsciously controlling desire. Making this function conscious, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, schizoanalyses social production. As tools in a social experiment, Zittel’s products exaggerate capitalism’s irrational logic. From this position ‘internal’ to commercial design, she interjects a critique into its cycle and provides a critical shift in perspective. In her words, “I often tend to embody ideas as a

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<sup>215</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 379

<sup>216</sup> Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, p. 50. In Baudrillard’s account, Marx’s materialism avoided the issue of symbolic exchange – the concept at the core of his own examination of late capitalism.

form of critique.”<sup>217</sup> The potential for this to change the consumer’s perspective is perhaps best captured in the evolution of *A-Z* garments.

The design of *A-Z Living Units* revealed a body repressed by the spatial structures of the contemporary world, and similarly, *A-Z Time Trials* showed a body struggling to be liberated from external structures. Zittel’s *A-Z* garments also capture this transition from utilitarian design to psyche, and from psyche to social critique. *A-Z Personal Uniforms* were promoted as a design solution for the overabundant consumer world (Figure 21). Promising to deliver an easy system of dress, they aimed to eradicate simultaneously the dictates of fashion and the difficulty of consumer choice. As traces of the *A-Z* corporation, however, and designed according to the rules of Zittel’s systematic life-regime, they carried their own set of personal, psychological and social restrictions. The description of *A-Z Personal Uniforms* captures both the officious guise of *A-Z* and its more playful underpinnings:

Starting in 1991 I designed and made one perfect dress for each season, and then wore that dress every day for six months. Although the garments were utilitarian in principle, I often found that there was a strong element of fantasy or emotional need invested in each season’s design.<sup>218</sup>

The series of mostly-black, pinafore style dresses were tailored to include particular features for the climate, season, Zittel’s daily activities and comfort needs. After several years of living under the regime of *A-Z Personal Uniforms*, Zittel shifted gear and developed *A-Z Personal Panels* (1995-98) (Figure 22). As with all of Zittel’s systems, the rules changed in accordance with the failure of each design to achieve its aims. When the personal uniform system failed, it was subjected to reinvention.

Struggling with the constant task of designing a new and ideal garment every six months, Zittel decided to employ panels of fabric that could be modified, mixed and matched at will. In her words, “I decided to create some guidelines to make the decision a

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<sup>217</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 118

<sup>218</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 76

little easier.”<sup>219</sup> Where the *Personal Uniforms* were single, fully designed items of clothing, the panels were less designed and thereby more versatile. Inspired by the Russian Constructivists, who suggested that design should complement the natural state of fabric, A-Z decided to use nothing but rectangular pieces of fabric, tied in place over the body. In their ‘Program of the First Working Group of Constructivists,’ for example, Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova described a practice of construction where design material is changed as little as possible, calling it *Faktura*. They wrote, “Faktura is the organic state of the worked material or the resulting new state of its organism.”<sup>220</sup> Working from this logic, Zittel decided to use geometric patterns to complement the rectangular weave of her fabric. She describes, “As a way of pushing this rule to its absurd yet logical conclusion, I decided to take the position that all dresses should only be made from rectangles.”<sup>221</sup> Like all of A-Z’s experiments, the clothing used the rules of a prevailing system and extended them to their limit. The resulting costumes resembled colourful aprons of seemingly endless variety. This apron/pinafore aesthetic emphasised the disciplinarian, totalitarian nature of A-Z, reinforcing the importance of work and efficiency, regulation and order in Zittel’s life.

In addition to functioning as uniforms, relieving Zittel of the difficulties of both consumer choice and design, they also metamorphosed into other forms – the fabrics could be hung on the wall or positioned in a room as sculpture. The designs themselves were presented as artworks in the form of painting, and with their repetition of geometric patterns in simple colour schemes they recalled modernist abstraction. This was more than an appropriation of Constructivist aesthetics, for Zittel was not simply advocating socialist ideology. In *A-Z Time Trials*, Zittel turned to the structure of time to liberate her internal biological rhythms and failed, revealing the falsity of trying to access interiority through external systems. Similarly, the design of the *A-Z Personal Panels* exposes the concept of use-value as a false means to find freedom from the reified clutter of contemporary consumerism.

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<sup>219</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 78

<sup>220</sup> Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, “Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists,” in *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*, p. 342

<sup>221</sup> Sadie Coles HQ, “Press release,” *A-Z Personal Panels 1993-1998*, n.p.

A-Z claims to focus on the utilitarian value of commodities as a means to resist the abstraction inherent to the process of exchange, with its homogenising effects.<sup>222</sup> As soon as an object is produced in order for it to be exchanged, Marx suggests, it attains an exchange-value that is based on an abstraction of its intrinsic use-value. In this process of reification, the material basis of the commodity diminishes and its inherent qualities and differences are lost. Marx writes that commodities “don’t contain an atom of use-value.”<sup>223</sup> Like modernist predecessors, A-Z claims to seek liberation from capitalism through material production, emphasising use-value as a means to overcome the alienating effects of commodification. Yet Zittel’s ‘alternative’ production is framed in suffocating, totalitarian terms.

With fabrics that metamorphose from clothing into furniture, systematically structuring material life, works such as the *Personal Panels* design a life-regime. This process occurs in seemingly rational steps, yet is presented in exaggeratedly systematic terms, lending a certain absurdity to the project. From the *Personal Panels*, for example, Zittel developed panels of carpet to be used as versatile flooring. This was then developed into carpet furniture (Figure 23). While the furniture consisted of nothing but panels of carpet, and could not comfortably be used for sleeping, eating or working, it was marketed as a utilitarian product: “The *A-Z Carpet Furniture* is luxurious, easy to store and versatile. One room can serve several functions and the furniture can be hung on the wall when not in use.”<sup>224</sup> While the driving motivation behind this production is an attempt to find freedom from the systems of late capitalism, its exaggerated logic defeats this purpose.

Like the *A-Z Living Units*, the idealistic ambitions of both the *A-Z Personal Uniforms* and *A-Z Personal Panels* cannot be realised. Zittel’s life-long clothing requirements aren’t solved in a single design. Each system of clothing is ultimately unsatisfactory, prompting renewed production. Simply ‘replacing’ capitalism with another form of production, this flawed process reveals, ends up perpetuating its very

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<sup>222</sup> See Marx, *Capital*, vol. I.

<sup>223</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 45

<sup>224</sup> Zittel, cited in Schumacher, “How do I get inside a Trojan Horse?” in *Andrea Zittel, 18 May - 8 November*, p. 65

conditions.<sup>225</sup> And so Zittel's various clothing systems do not liberate her from the cycle of consumption. Premised on 'need' and thereby on lack, each design only fuels her cycle of production. Instead of creating a neo-Constructivist revolution, Zittel enacts its failed idealism, revealing that capitalist production easily bends to accommodate 'oppositional' forms of production. This stance is not as programmatic as *A-Z* wants consumers to believe. As Zittel states, "Now people attempt to free themselves from social conventions or governmental restrictions by shrinking down to fit in between the cracks of larger systems – or by turning inward to some sort of private or personal realm."<sup>226</sup> The futile products of *A-Z* thus lead consumers to consider the personal, subjective and psychological aspects of capitalist production.

In an exhibit of *A-Z Personal Uniforms* at Andrea Rosen gallery in 2004 (Figure 24), rows of dresses, nearly identical, were lined up like soldiers, with barely enough room between each mannequin for the viewer to walk through. Walking through the space became a game, involving delicate action, ducking, dodging and sidling in order to view all of the pieces. This process forces the viewer to encounter the works in close proximity. Each dress represents a period in Zittel's life, and each mannequin presents a silent Zittel. The repetition of slightly different dresses documents a changing self. Walking through Zittel's uniforms, in this sense, is to retrospectively witness Zittel evolving over time. 'Becoming,' for Deleuze and Guattari, involves transformation. It is the result of the productive and positive movements of desire, and is revolutionary because it enables radical shifts in perspective. It provides the ability for people to change and to see the world through other eyes. Revolutionary movement is composed of exactly this, "the connection of flows, the composition of nondenumerable aggregates, the becoming-minoritarian of everybody/everything."<sup>227</sup> The main motivation of all art, they suggest, is to unleash such moments, which involves entering into the proximity of something else, of participating in the activities that constitute it.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> This points to Baudrillard's argument that "Marx made a radical critique of political economy, but still in the form of political economy." (Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, p. 50)

<sup>226</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p.11. More explicitly, she states, "We are now of an era that is so well versed in critical thinking (or critical nonthinking) that we know better than to have any grand hopes or to start up any collective movements." (Zittel, "Shabby clique," *Artforum*, 42, no. 10 (2004), p. 211)

<sup>227</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 522

<sup>228</sup> This involves a move away from mimicry, allowing for variations on the original identity, rather than reproducing a stereotype. They describe becoming-woman as "emitting particles that enter the relation of



In this sense, it is in wearing Zittel's dress and in moving through her furniture that viewers can approximate her experiences. To purchase an *A-Z Personal Uniform* is to transport oneself into Zittel's world, to live her life, to 'become' Zittel. This is ensured by a contractual requirement that the consumer of *A-Z Customised Uniforms* discard all other items of clothing. The *A-Z* requirement is that "the client must agree to wear the garment exclusively and to store or discard all other garments of like type."<sup>229</sup> A similar effect occurs in simply viewing the work. Walking through garments that signify her body, the viewer enters into Zittel's physical world. Each *A-Z Personal Uniform* represents six months of a person's life, providing a sense of transformation over time. Viewers do not imitate Zittel by walking through her installation, or by wearing her clothing. Instead, they differentiate from their pre-existing identity by communicating with this 'other.'

The *A-Z* identity is one that tries to evade the domination of exchange. In this sense, Zittel's rigid structure for living is a means to think 'other' than fetishised consumerism, to undo the subject's identification with the systems of late capitalism, a system that seems to have no outside. The disruption of capitalist systems, for Deleuze and Guattari, involves this process. It is a means of internal transformation, rather than external 'opposition,' provoked by a shift in perception.<sup>230</sup> In this sense, Zittel disrupts capitalist systems by transporting her viewers and consumers into her own world of production, where the dysfunction of capitalism is laid bare, and a space is opened to consider the possibility of its otherness. This is not to propose an alternative, but rather to initiate change. Such transformation is evident in *A-Z's* gradual move away from the singular, systematic design of the *A-Z Personal Uniforms* toward garments that have more of an accordance with their environment.

The system of *A-Z Personal Uniforms* gave way, in one step, to the slightly more flexible system of *A-Z Personal Panels*, which offered a multiplicity of fabric and colour

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movement and rest, or the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity, in other words, that produce in us a molecular woman, create the molecular woman." (Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 304)

<sup>229</sup> Zittel, cited in Lynn Zelevansky, *Sense and sensibility: women artists and minimalism in the nineties*, ex. cat., New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994, p. 32

<sup>230</sup> Putting oneself in the place of another involves taking on a radically different perspective, and in this way becoming transforms established perspectives. It enables the formation of communities because it involves finding accordances with others. (See Deleuze and Guattari, "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible," in *A thousand plateaus*, pp. 256 - 341)

variations. This led, in turn, to the development of *A-Z Rough Garments* (1998) (Figure 25), where the concept of the *A-Z Personal Panels* went a step further. Rather than cutting out pieces of fabric and sewing them into geometric patterns, Zittel simply tore off rectangles from a roll of fabric and fastened them onto her body using safety pins.<sup>231</sup> These subtle changes in production reflect Zittel's ongoing attempt to think 'other' than a producer of exchange-values, to make objects that draw attention to the personal and psychological nature of production. Most recently, in her *A-Z Fibre Forms* (2002-2003) (Figure 26), she has abandoned 'systems' of dress altogether, focusing on the fabric itself. The *Fibre Form* garments are made by directly felting wool into a shirt or dress, constructing garments in whole pieces and without seams. The resulting material is full of holes of various sizes and shapes, and its naturally haphazard surface evokes the desert environment from which it has emerged. Soft ochre tones, varying across the fabric, and irregular edges summon the rocky and expansive surface of the landscape of Joshua Tree, California, where Zittel's interest in natural forms found fruition. It expresses desire in both an abstract sense – in its flowing form and organic production – and in a more literal sense – the fabric opens to the space of the body through actual holes that reveal flesh. *A-Z Fibre Forms* appear as scarred tissue, bearing in the fabric a sense of Zittel's stretched and ever-failing attempt to negotiate personal freedom in the contemporary consumer world.

*A-Z: Administrative Services* engages imaginatively with production, like a child at play, to make the consumer aware of the false promise of desire proffered in capitalist production. Simultaneously, the products of this experimentation provide a means for consumers to 'become-Zittel,' to experience her psychological oppression through design and to conceive of escape through her idealistic eyes. Each object of Zittel's design, from the *A-Z Living Units* and *A-Z Time Trials* to the *A-Z Personal Uniforms*, is an example of mis-design. The products diverge from and disrupt their conceptual plan, which in turn highlights the psychological nature of social production. The psychological nature of Zittel's practice is crucial to appreciating the necessary 'failures' of her design, and is

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<sup>231</sup> The term *Rough* is Zittel's amalgamation of the terms "raw", and "rough." As a design strategy, it attempts to accommodate the inevitable messiness of life by creating furnishings that disguise dirt and hold things as they accumulate most naturally. This signifies a shift from her obsessive control of environment.

increasingly evident in her recent works, *diary #01* (2002) and *Sufficient Self* (2004), which both emphasise a personal struggle with design amid a desert landscape.

## **Being Zittel**

There is an implicit performance occurring in the process of *A-Z*'s production that makes the consumer aware of the personal and psychological dynamics of production. This has become increasingly overt since Zittel's move to the desert in 2000. The desert landscape has challenged *A-Z*'s restrictive approach to design, rendering her various attempts to control her environment even more obviously futile. In turn, these harsh conditions have encouraged a more open engagement between *A-Z*'s styling of life and the natural environment. This has manifested in products that are openly fragile, flawed and locationally specific. Zittel's property in Joshua Tree, California has the evocative name of *A-Z West* (Figure 27). The property frames *A-Z*'s production while carrying the autobiographical narrative of Zittel's recent struggles within capitalist systems. It provides the setting for the autobiographical text *diary #01*, and was exhibited, in itself, as part of the Whitney Biennial in 2004.<sup>232</sup> This move from the confines of an ordered urban life to the extremes of the desert is a means to further complicate and obstruct the design process, and to make the subjective trials of Zittel's design all the more poignant and futile.

Zittel's house lies at the center of the property, an original homestead that she has transformed from the inside, redesigned according to the local climate and emphasising both efficiency and comfort. The interior is minimal in every aspect, from its small, open layout to its peculiar kitchen table, the *A-Z Food Prep Station* (Figure 28). The table is designed to facilitate quick and efficient meals, and contains a cooking element at its center with crevices carved on either side to function as bowls. It is designed to minimise the task of cleaning and to create a fair division of labour. With the central hot plate, diners can cook and serve their own meals while sitting together. At the rear of the

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<sup>232</sup> See Chrissie Iles, Shamim M. Momin, and Debra Singer. *Whitney Biennial 2004, Ex. Cat.* New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004.

property a U-shaped studio/work shed sinks into the earth. It is embedded in a slight hill so as to avoid the full glare of the sun, making the most of the hot working day. Scattered around the property are works-in-progress including portable shelters and caravans that may or may not be completed. In front of the house is a field of pedestals, each one bearing a square of recycled paper pulp, material that is ‘regenerating’ under the fierce heat of the sun to be used for future building projects.

What is most striking about *A-Z West* is the sparseness of the landscape, where dirt roads in the distance are virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding hills, and human movement is apparent only in traces. A visit to *A-Z West*, as encouraged by Zittel for the Whitney Biennial, is to enter a kind of void. Lost between the vast and timeless landscape of the desert, the nostalgic time of utopian modern design, the contemporary time of slick consumer surfaces and the future time of Zittel’s experimental production, the experience of visiting *A-Z West* is all the more disquieting for Zittel’s physical absence. When the property is ‘exhibited,’ Zittel leaves the environment, leaving it empty but for gallery minders and visitors. Like the mute mannequins of her *A-Z Personal Uniform* exhibits, the place silently speaks her presence. Half-built structures suggest her physical labour, food scraps on her *A-Z Food Prep Station* trace her bodily movements and the impeccably ordered environment suggests her attempts to attain mental control. Like abandoned props, these various objects are lifeless without Andrea Zittel, whose body is their stage.

*A-Z West* is a marker for Zittel and it frames her autobiographical presence. Zittel’s works have always been deeply related to her body and her movement through the world. Each object of her design represents a solution to a personal problem. Lack of physical space in her apartment in Brooklyn led to the production of the *A-Z Living Unit*, and lack of time resulted in the *A-Z Time Tunnel*. This autobiographical production was acknowledged early in Zittel’s career by Lyn Zelevansky, who observed, “Zittel uses her body to test the authenticity of her art in the world.”<sup>233</sup> Performance has been an importance tool for artistic practices that seek to challenge the commodification of art since the 1960s, for its de-emphasis on the materiality of the art object and its potential to

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<sup>233</sup> Zelevansky, *Sense and sensibility*, p. 33. This observation was made at the time of Zittel’s first major show in 1994 at MoMA in New York.

create spontaneous artistic encounters. Where the influential critic Michael Fried famously lamented the theatrical turn of modern art in his 1967 essay, “Art and objecthood,” artists have nevertheless embraced performance with all its theatrical connotations as a means to question concepts of selfhood, identity and artistic authorship, while more broadly exploring the construction of social codes.<sup>234</sup> As Amelia Jones writes, “The newly re-emerging bodies from around 1960 to the present *enact* the dramatic social and cultural shifts we now define as indicative of a ‘post’ Modernist episteme.”<sup>235</sup>

Zittel’s performance involves two ‘actors’ – Andrea Zittel, the experimental subject, and *A-Z: Administrative Services*, the design ‘authority.’ The tension between these two characters creates a performative identity that distinguishes Zittel-as-artist from the alienated subject of her design experiment. This distinction is important – the exploration of material living embedded in her work is not an expression of self-aggrandisement. Instead, she explores the alienation of contemporary society through a constructed identity that relies on a degree of apparent autobiography. In this sense she references artists such as Andy Warhol and Yves Klein who inflated their sense of authorial self to question the status of art, for she constructs a flawed alter-ego whose artistic and design ambitions are rarely, if ever, achieved.<sup>236</sup> Autobiography is used as a tool to draw attention to the personal and subjective nature of production. Recently, Zittel has been explicit in this connection between production and her performance of identity, claiming, “I’m sort of a sample citizen of culture at large.”<sup>237</sup> *diary #01*, for example, is a published photographic journal that presents this sample subject for social scrutiny, during a period in which she struggles to find freedom from her design of life.

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<sup>234</sup> In Fried’s notorious essay, “Art and objecthood,” he lamented, “Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre.” (See Fried, “Art and objecthood,” in *Art in theory: 1900-2000*, pp. 835-46.) Fried associated Minimalist sculpture with this theatrical turn, yet performance has similarly been observed as a feature of abstract expressionism. Jackson Pollock’s paintings, for example, can be seen as markers of an implicit performance, where each drip of paint is a gesture of his body in the act of painting. (See Amelia Jones, “The ‘Pollockian performative’,” in *Body art*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.)

<sup>235</sup> Amelia Jones, “Survey,” in *The artist’s body*, (London: Phaidon, 2000), p. 20. [Her emphasis]

<sup>236</sup> Like her performance predecessors, Zittel questions the role of authorship in artistic production. With statements such as, “By making household objects, mundane objects, I can still immortalize myself,” she clearly references predecessors such as Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni and Andy Warhol. (Zittel, cited in “Andrea Zittel: Mental Composure,” in *Art on the edge and over: searching for art’s meaning in contemporary society, 1970s-1990s*, Litchfield: Art Insights Inc., 1996, p. 188.) Yet Zittel’s performance is not focused so much on the status of art as on the subjective aspects of commercial production.

<sup>237</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 118

## *diary #01*

In *diary #01*, Zittel details her life and work at *A-Z West* between June 14 and September 6, 2001. During this time, Zittel was working at the property, preparing a number of *A-Z Homestead Units* for an exhibition in New York. In the diary, Zittel's personal narrative is interspersed with the more officious tone of *A-Z*, which provides 'promotional' summaries of past and present projects. The text is full of photographs, documenting Zittel at work, the desert community and the landscape around her. Zittel is the focus of the text, and she appears center-stage on the cover, where she is presented on the ground, barefoot, crouching over a gouache painting and bearing an expression of innocent intensity like a child at school (Figure 29). The image provides a good entrance into the diary, which acts as a kind of playground. Within its pages, the subjective figure of Zittel emerges from underneath the objective costume of *A-Z: Administrative Services*, appearing earnest, innocent and vulnerable in her experience. Ultimately, the journey presented in *diary #01* is one of displacement and isolation from contemporary culture. Just as the *Living Units* resonated with Freud's analysis of children's imaginative play, the diary form resonates with the concept of identity-play. As Penelope Franklin suggests, "A diary can be a 'safe place' where new roles can be tried out."<sup>238</sup> *Diary #01* provides such a safe place, in which Zittel experiments with and documents her attempt to escape the trappings of a metropolitan, consumerist lifestyle. Ultimately, the journey presented in *diary #01* is one of displacement and isolation from contemporary culture. Despite the vastly different contexts of New York urban life and Californian country-life, it therefore naturally extends from her previous struggles with commercial design. The desert landscape serves to exacerbate her struggle to find freedom through design, as the natural environment constantly impedes her design process.

Zittel's journey in *diary #01* begins with her arrival in the desert from New York, and concludes with her departure back to New York for an exhibition. The space of the

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<sup>238</sup> Penelope Franklin, cited in Cinthia Gannett, "Gender and journal keeping traditions" in *Gender and the journal: diaries and academic discourse*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 139

desert is encompassed temporally, like two book ends, by the metropolis of New York City. From her first entry it is clear she perceives herself as an experimental subject, and she writes, “Right now I’m trying to figure out if the human need to be alone is inherent or conditioned.”<sup>239</sup> This impartial, scientific tone is then countered with the personal observation, “By sunset it felt totally surreal to be back in the desert again.”<sup>240</sup> This oscillation between personal and objective observation continues throughout the diary as Zittel documents the most mundane of her daily activities, such as installing gates and fixing her cooler, with more general observations about life in the desert, including local stories and personal encounters. *diary #01* samples Zittel’s psychological experience of isolation and displacement, while simultaneously providing a portrait of the world around her. When she describes, for example, how locals are trying to “figure out what I’m up to,” she reveals a sense of mistrust and isolation in the local community that contradicts the utopian premise of leaving the urban community of New York for a more harmonious social environment in the desert.<sup>241</sup> This is reinforced when she describes the locals who visit her property to assist her with her work. She notes, for example, “I told Jim that I was living in Joshua Tree alone and he said I should buy a gun.”<sup>242</sup> Without stating any explicit feelings of vulnerability or isolation, such simple observations nevertheless communicate the artist’s personal struggle.

The diary is predominantly visual, each page littered with images of the desert, of her property, of A-Z production and of the people she interacts with. Minimal text is far outweighed by the dominance of photography, which lends a documentary quality to the account, contextualising her subjective voice and situating the work historically. *diary#01* narrates Zittel’s frustrated attempts to create a life without surplus, experimenting with a production process devoted to the satisfaction of basic needs. One of Zittel’s major projects at *A-Z West*, for example, involves discovering new materials that require little or no resources. Fed up with the physical and material toll of producing works with expensive materials, Zittel decided to experiment with recycling her rubbish, trying to transform it into a new design material. This new process was posed as an answer to her

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<sup>239</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 6

<sup>240</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 6

<sup>241</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 13

<sup>242</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 24

problems working in the desert. She writes, “Proposed solution: ‘Composite’ furniture that I would make from salvaged scraps and the detritus of my own lifestyle.”<sup>243</sup> Rather than looking to consumer products to ease the difficulties of her daily life, she creates inventive solutions to problems.

Through this narrative of life based on minimal exchange, *diary #01* presents, in turn, a more elusive trial of individuation from the homogeneity of the consumer world. This is evident in Zittel’s relentless personalisation of her environment. She lives on an A-Z property, in an A-Z house, eating at an A-Z table, while customising everything that enters this environment. After purchasing a new table saw, for example, she spray-paints it orange before commencing work. *diary #01* shows a subject reacting to and coauthoring the consumer world through her production of A-Z goods. Yet this reaction becomes an escape from reality; a departure into a world of extremes, of hardship, of experimentation. And it nonetheless results in the production of design objects that cannot control their environment.

Just as she turned to the aesthetic strategies of the Constructivists to help systematise her urban life with works such as the *A-Z Personal Panels*, this alternative desert lifestyle is modeled on the utopian ideology of 1960s hippy communes. Zittel describes, for example, abandoned *Geodesic Domes* in the local area. Invented by the utopian modernist designer Buckminster Fuller, these architectural structures promised to maximise energy efficiency, while uniting architecture with the environment.<sup>244</sup> Such social idealism is the basis of Zittel’s own experimental production, where she attempts to produce building materials that don’t impinge on the environment.<sup>245</sup> Recalling the numerous idealists who abandoned city life in the 1960s for an ‘alternative’ and environmentally conscientious existence, Zittel has shifted her production from the urban chaos of the city to the quiet landscape of the Californian desert.

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<sup>243</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 46

<sup>244</sup> See J Baldwin, *Buckyworks: Buckminster Fuller's Ideas for Today* (New York: John Wiley, 1996)

<sup>245</sup> Zittel recalls architectural projects from the 1960s such as the architectural group Superstudio. See Felicity Scott’s insightful revisiting of Superstudio in “Superstudio,” in *Artforum*, vol. 42, no. 7, 2004. This revival of utopian idealism is expanded further in Zittel’s collaborative art project, *High Desert Test Sites*, an annual series of arts events held at different sites, including A-Z West, across Joshua Tree National Park. See Lisa Anne Auerbach, John Connely, Andy Stillpass, and Andrea Zittel, *High Desert Test Sites, Vol. 1*, (South Pasadena: High Desert Test Sites, 2002).



## *Sufficient Self*

Zittel's experimentation in the desert also informs her project for the 2004 Whitney Biennial, *Sufficient Self*. The installation at the Whitney Museum consisted of a documentary slide show, presenting still images from *A-Z West*. The images were interspersed with textual narrative detailing Zittel's recent experiences living and working on the property (see Appendix I). The images were presented in a small room containing Zittel's work desk from *A-Z West*. The desk was not presented as an object for sale and instead provided seating from which to view *Sufficient Self*, to physically 'become-Zittel' while viewing her desert journey. The slide-show format, in which still images and text were presented sequentially, evoked the textual form of a diary, but translated into a temporal and physical space. In turn, this physical and temporal specificity rendered it more overtly performative than *diary #01*. In addition to the installation and slide-show, *Sufficient Self* involved a series of open days at *A-Z West*, in which people were invited to travel to the property and experience the desert, view Zittel's works in progress and obtain a closer understanding of her existence. *A-Z* not only encourages a becoming-other through its products, but here Zittel encourages a literal escape from urban consumer culture.

Located out in the middle of the desert, far from the reach of museum security guards, and on a street with no name, the only direction provided by the museum was to turn right at the 'bail bonds' sign.<sup>246</sup> At the center of *Sufficient Self* is Zittel's production of *A-Z Homestead Units* (Figure 30). The narrative describes the 1940s government initiative of giving away free land in the area to those who would agree to improve it by building properties. This resulted in a proliferation of homesteads – small, poorly constructed buildings that only just fulfilled the government requirements. Most of the old homesteads in the area were ultimately abandoned by their inhabitants, suggesting a historical victory of the environment over the State. Inspired by its apparent futility, Zittel re-lives the struggle of these homesteaders, and their ramshackle buildings are the inspiration behind her production of the *A-Z Homestead Unit*. The fully portable cabin is

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<sup>246</sup> Directions provided at time of open day by Whitney Museum.

only 120 square feet in size, small enough to be erected without a building permit. Each of the new constructions recreates the shadow of their precedents; the idealism of their owners, their struggle to control the environment and their search for independence and freedom.

Like *diary #01*, the recurring theme in *Sufficient Self* is the failure of any attempts to lead a constructive, rational life in the extremities of the desert. The unpredictable nature of the landscape and environment constantly emerges, with a greater emphasis in *Sufficient Self* on stories of past failures. She recounts the discovery of an old hippy squat, for example, and describes a local resident who spends his time carving political sayings into the desert rocks. A failed resort community from the 1950s provides particular fascination for her. Developed at the Salton Sea, it inadvertently caused salination, flooding its holiday-makers. Zittel's reaction to this story explains her persistence with her own failed experiments: "I love the Salton Sea because it represents another grand plan of epic proportions. The fact that it failed just makes it that much more poignant."<sup>247</sup> Autobiography, with its referential quality, offers a version of history that accounts for the subjectivity of historical interpretation and the multiplicity of perspective. Shirley Neuman suggests that even self-consciously constructed autobiography still presents a historical account. She writes, "both the performance and the invention are still held to have referential significance."<sup>248</sup>

Zittel's autobiography therefore presents a subjective history of the effects of modernisation on the rural areas of America, supported by photographic documentation. Recounting, on the one hand, a history of failed colonisation, Zittel simultaneously presents a history of individuation and artistic experimentation within a barren sociological context. In both her experiences and the history she re-enacts, it is the presence of determined differentiation that stands in contrast to an otherwise totally commodified contemporary landscape. It would be easy to be misled by Zittel's various disguises – the commercial *A-Z* or its constructed experimental subject, Zittel. It is the imbalance of Zittel's constructed identities that draws attention to the alienating effects of capitalist society. The journey of both *diary #01* and *Sufficient Self* points to the

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<sup>247</sup> Zittel, "Sufficient Self," [Transcript], (See Appendix I) n.p.

<sup>248</sup> Shirley Neuman, "Autobiography," in Marlene Kadar, *Essays on life writing: from genre to critical practice*, (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1992) p. 215

breakdown of *A-Z: Administrative Services*, a capitalist entity promising freedom through design. The struggle of its subject to achieve freedom turns the focus of its production away from control and order toward questions of place, history and difference. At the end of *Sufficient Self*, Zittel presents two possible futures: continuing her production of *A-Z* goods at her property in Joshua Tree, or ‘taking off’ and embarking on a nomadic escape, moving into a campervan and exploring the world. Her inability to choose between both possibilities characterises her production and signifies the critical function of her work. Zittel, a split personality, wrestles freedom and control, negotiating between the systemised world of production and the imaginative world of the psyche.

Zittel’s performance enacts the dysfunction of contemporary consumerism while also re-enacting the failed idealism of past artistic and social movements. Her move to the Western frontier recalls a tradition of American artists leaving the city in a search for freedom. While this narrative is linked with entropy, as evident in Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970), for example, Zittel’s project differs from this tradition in its continued involvement with, and interest in, commercial design. She creates a performative space in the desert in which to experiment with the design of her life and explore the effects of capitalist production. Yet she clearly references historical attempts to find liberation from consumer life. This repetition of history is a means to avoid simply succumbing to the current condition and perpetuating a state of timeless cynicism. As Andreas Huyssen writes, such work “preserves and embodies the utopian moment in an otherwise totally reified culture.”<sup>249</sup> Zittel does not simply reiterate past social idealism or entropic deterioration. It is the struggle of her project, its oscillation between freedom and control, liberation and oppression, that underpins the narrative of *diary #01* and *Sufficient Self*, a narrative that forces us to consider the terms of contemporary production.

Just as *A-Z Living Units*, *A-Z Time Trials* and *A-Z Personal Uniforms* presented examples of dysfunction in the process of design, Zittel’s desert journey draws attention to the failure of design to provide liberation from the structures of capitalist production. Her practice re-enacts this failure in order to draw attention to the psychological, subjective and malleable nature of industrial production. Failure and futility become

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<sup>249</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight memories: marking time in a culture of amnesia*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 99.

critical tools that make the consumer, in a commercial context, see through the reified allure of commodities to the production process. Cornelia Butler, for example, observes that Zittel's design "is possibly only through hard, manual labor, perseverance, and force of will."<sup>250</sup> Drawing attention to the difficulty of production reveals the role of labour in the production of consumer goods. As Marx observes in *Capital*, describing the knife that fails to cut, "it is by their imperfections that the means of production in any process bring to our attention their character of being the products of past labour."<sup>251</sup> In the context of the desert, it is a difficult and flawed production that makes the consumer aware of the alienating effects of Zittel's overly designed life.

In *diary #01*, the desert environment of *A-Z West* constantly disrupts the production process of *A-Z*. Metals warp in the heat, wood dries out and cracks, glues dry before objects are attached. The desert literally destroys consumer objects. It becomes too hot in the afternoon to work, and Zittel has to wear gloves to be able to handle metal materials. The environment causes other unexpected problems, such as cars getting stuck in sand and delays in the delivery of water. Even the CD player melts in the sun. The *A-Z* enterprise is constantly under threat. Arduous labour, frustration and perseverance against the elements disrupt its rational and systematic facade. The desert insists on temporality and intangibility. This is particularly evident when Zittel laments, "my feelings of impermanence are driven home by the burning sun and the wind and the dust that will ultimately destroy everything I build."<sup>252</sup> Zittel's production has always been motivated by the discovery of problems, rather than the resolution of them, and so the theme of personal struggle is integral to her desert narrative.

An acknowledgement of the futility of both her current idealistic project, and those of her predecessors, emerges in her theory, 'Small Liberties.' Describing how people have given up on grand ideals and the pursuit of change on a large scale, she suggests that the search for freedom now manifests in the small ways people try to evade social restrictions. While the theory legitimates her attempts to find freedom through her individual experimentation and the control of her environment, it does not provide a solution. In a frustrated moment, she writes, "I want to find a way to spend more time

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<sup>250</sup> Cornelia Butler, "Live/Work space" in *Andrea Zittel: Critical Space*, p. 63

<sup>251</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol 1, p. 289

<sup>252</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 91

thinking, reading, and learning.”<sup>253</sup> Recalling the *A-Z Time Trials*, she demonstrates the futility of her attempt to obtain freedom from materiality through material objects. This is the necessary failure of her experiment. Zittel chose the desert for its extremes, as a means to complicate her design process, to intensify her experimentation, to increase the personal struggle. For Zittel, the desert is a testing ground. Not only does it embody many of the oppositions in her work – freedom and constraint, idealism and pragmatism, community and isolation – but it also provides a relentless challenge. Constantly impeding the design process, it inflects the slick surfaces of contemporary consumerism with a layer of dust. Historical references are an extension of this ‘dust,’ complicating the cynical surfaces of the present.

*A-Z West* is a test of endurance that emphasises the isolating effects of contemporary consumer culture. At one stage in *diary #01* Zittel writes, “I feel lonely here in a deep and profound way. Maybe I am drawn here because I am actually so incredibly afraid of being alone.”<sup>254</sup> In this reflection, her position as a ‘sample citizen,’ displaced from contemporary culture and embodying contemporary alienation, is made painfully evident. Zittel’s diary documents the flaws in her products, the problems in her production and the various subconscious controls conditioned in her by contemporary society.

At another point in *diary #01*, Zittel asks, “What can I do to slow things down?”<sup>255</sup> This acknowledgement of her inability to control temporality reflects her ultimate inability to control her environment. This necessary failure is acknowledged in her final diary entry, which contains the line, “All materials ultimately deteriorate and show signs of wear.”<sup>256</sup> A photograph of the desert at sunset follows this entry. The vast space, with barely a trace of human inhabitation, betrays no sign of control, design, order, or rationality. And this is ultimately the story of *diary #01* – not the attempt to colonise the desert, tame the wilds of nature or commodify alienation, but instead the discovery of the elusive and uncommodifiable aspects of human existence and the environment. This is subtly articulated in a series of photographs portraying abandoned homesteads

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<sup>253</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 46

<sup>254</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 15

<sup>255</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 108

<sup>256</sup> Zittel, *diary #01*, p. 114

scattered throughout the desert (Figure 31). The broken-down, ramshackle buildings, covered in dust, signal past attempts to colonise the land, to control the environment, and the ultimate futility of these ambitions. This implicit acknowledgement repeats in another, simple photograph of a street sign that reads, “Road not maintained.”<sup>257</sup>

## Conclusion

*A-Z*'s failed production, from *A-Z Living Units* to the struggles of *A-Z West*, enables a critical artistic space to form, distinct from the commodified space of the commercial design and art markets, in which to question the claims of contemporary capitalism. This chapter has explored the way Zittel has used design critically to make the consumer aware of the psychological and subjective nature of commercial production. In Zittel's words, “looking at the issues that are in design and starting to use art to explore those issues.”<sup>258</sup> The basis of Zittel's design is not the production of commodities. Instead, she has designed an elaborate domain of critical play that she takes very seriously. Through her products and her autobiographical performance, viewers experience Zittel's constructed life. Watching her journey, while simultaneously experiencing it through her products, they are encouraged to consider the effects of contemporary design on the subjects of late capitalist society.

Zittel's failed design endeavours revisit avant-garde idealism and expose remnants of historical failure. Even her attempts to create ‘new’ materials involve the recycling of the past in the form of waste. For Slavoj Žižek, it is balance and history that threaten the continued expansion of late capitalism. He writes, “capitalism, which can survive only by incessantly revolutionising its own material conditions, ceases to exist if it ‘stays the same,’ if it achieves an internal balance.”<sup>259</sup> Zittel pushes the internal imbalance of capitalism to its limits, creating an unhappy ‘Intimate Universe’ of

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<sup>257</sup> The sequence of eight photographs appear on pp. 56-59. It is one of the only two sequences in the diary without any text. The photograph of the street sign appears on p. 36. Zittel, *diary #01*.

<sup>258</sup> Zittel, cited in Louisa Buck, "Home, sweet unit: Artist's interview, London," *Art Newspaper*, November 2001, part II, p. 24. It is important to note that design is a conceptual process, and its dictionary definition is “mental plan.” (Fowler and Fowler, eds, *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English*, p. 330)

<sup>259</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology*, p. 52

production within. She adopts an internal position, producing commodities that expose the mechanisms of late capitalism by enacting its failed promises. Struggling to satisfy her needs, Zittel exposes capitalism's masquerade – under the alluring façade of fetishised desire, it instead produces lack.

*A-Z Administrative Service's* products are circulated in the commercial market, imparting their critique within its systems. Through this experiment, Zittel creates a critical space within production and encourages a change in perspective. For Zittel, freedom emerges in the failure of her design and in the failure of her systems. These failures, like the failures of idealistic predecessors, point to the implications of Adorno's 'false needs.'<sup>260</sup> Zittel's performance indicates that within false hope resides the elusive and productive force of freedom.

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<sup>260</sup> See also Ernst Bloch, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing" in *The utopian function of art and literature: selected essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1988.

## Chapter 3

### Adam Kalkin's Architectural Wonderland

Adam Kalkin proudly declares, "How much anarchy is good for a building? A good architect courts anarchy."<sup>261</sup> His architectural design practice matches this claim, embracing seemingly reckless processes within the terms of serious design. Kalkin's artistic practice encompasses architectural construction, design, drawing and text as well as collaborative video performances, sculpture and conceptual projects. Working under the guise of Kalkin and Co., a commercial architectural studio, Kalkin creates 'products' such as the Quik House, a mass-producible mail-order house, along with more dubious commercial goods such as "marshmallow ragout surprise," an abject mass of melted sweet goods, while simultaneously working on refugee housing for the UN.<sup>262</sup> In this eclectic practice, architecture becomes the pretext for an examination of human desire in the consumer world. Combining brash aesthetics with serious intent, Kalkin unleashes the body and the psyche in architectural spaces, exploring the internal irrationality of late capitalism. When asked whether one of his projects was sincere, he replied, "It's a real house and a conceptual house."<sup>263</sup> As a result, navigating the complex juxtapositions within his work proves to be a surreal journey. A journey in which real and imagined distinctions give way, the banal is rendered extraordinary and anything seems possible.

In this chapter, I venture into this architectural wonderland to examine Kalkin's internal critique of late capitalism. Accepting that late capitalism appropriates artistic practice, Kalkin reverses the dynamic to explore the disruptive effects of art embedded within its systems. This involves a shift away from the traditionally 'external' or 'oppositional' stance of critical theory and avant-garde artistic practice, and the adoption of a position within capitalist production. One of the side-effects of this 'internal' position, however, is that it has all but escaped artistic criticism. In this analysis, I argue that Kalkin 'mis-designs' the systems of late capitalism through an artistic practice that is embedded in commercial architectural products. As I argue, he unites the critical

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<sup>261</sup> Adam Kalkin, "100 comments on architecture and hygiene," in *Architecture and hygiene* (London: Batsford, 2002), p. 137

<sup>262</sup> See *Architecture and hygiene* [Website] (Kalkin and Co., 2004 [cited November 5 2004]; available from [www.architectureandhygiene.com](http://www.architectureandhygiene.com))

<sup>263</sup> Ruth Graham, "Suburban outfitters," *New York Sun*, February 12 2004, p. 21



perspective of Marx with the subversive ambitions of Bataille, thereby entering the critical territory of Deleuze and Guattari.

In their groundbreaking critique of late capitalism, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari account for its compelling and limitless hold on the contemporary world by its ability to capture individual and collective ‘desire.’ Their analysis brings together economic critique with psychoanalysis in an attempt to understand the psychological nature of social production. Similarly, Kalkin’s design practice sets out to explore the psychological and subjective dynamics of architectural space and commercial design. This venture, I argue, involves a two-fold critique. Firstly, Kalkin uncovers the repressed and fetishised forms of desire already present within commercial production, examining the sociological effects of capitalist exchange. Secondly, it takes the inherent irrationality of late capitalism to its limits, enabling desire to erupt in unexpected and disruptive ways.

The chapter proceeds through an examination of three major conceptual projects. The first project, *Bunny Lane*, emerges in the context of architecture. I will take a tour of this suburban property, unmasking the critical conceptual practice that resides within Kalkin’s commercial architecture. In particular, I examine the role of ‘desire’ in capitalist production. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Kalkin understands desire as both social and natural, as a disruptive force that is within and behind all forms of social production. When controlled and directed by capitalist production, it manifests as fetish. At the same time, however, desire can provide a means of rupture. As Deleuze and Guattari write, “If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society.”<sup>264</sup> This double function of desire, as both a means of social control and transformation, explains the two-fold nature of Kalkin’s critique. As I argue, this involves examining capitalism’s control and repression of human desire, at the same time as allowing desire to erupt in unexpected and uncontrolled forms. In this section, I examine Kalkin’s position through two figures presented by Deleuze and Guattari as antagonists to the systems of late capital; the schizophrenic and the nomad. Both of these concepts feature in Kalkin’s architectural space as means to tease out the contradictions of late capital.

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<sup>264</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 127

The next project, *Suburban House Kit*, directly engages with the commodification of contemporary art, combining art, architecture and design in the context of an exhibition in a contemporary gallery in New York. In this section, I argue that *Suburban House Kit* both analyses and disrupts the alienating effects of capitalist exchange through artistic dysfunction positioned within commercial design. Here, Kalkin's practice follows the path of late capitalism, which branches across new and varied territories in order to expand its limits. Deleuze and Guattari describe this in terms of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation; the breakdown of systems and borders in order for capitalism to grow, and the subsequent reorganisation of territories and identities within capitalist systems.<sup>265</sup> As a result, they argue, all capitalist space oscillates, to some degree, between disruption and control. This inherent conflict represents an internal irrationality in the systems of capitalist production, an irrationality that I argue is exploited by Kalkin to critical effect. An exhibition from 1963 titled *Living with Pop – A Demonstration for Capitalist Realism*, orchestrated by Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg, provides a critical counterpart for this analysis. I compare the two projects in order to account for Kalkin's shift away from the 'autonomous' position of avant-garde art, at the same time as examining the role of historical memory in the context of postmodernity.

The third project examined in this chapter, *Adam Kalkin: Day Trader*, enters the field of economics in a direct experiment with capitalist 'surplus-value.' Surplus-value, Marx argues, is the defining characteristic of capitalism. It represents the 'excess' value of a commodity, which accumulates as capital. *Day Trader*, I argue, plays with the idea of surplus-value in order to critique the 'excess' of capitalism. Kalkin's playful engagement with financial capital, I argue, takes the internal logic of capitalism to what Deleuze and Guattari term the 'schizophrenic' limits of production. A tension between Marx's writings on capitalism and Bataille's notion of natural 'excess' is explored in this section, which serves to highlight the accordances between Kalkin's 'internal' position and the critical perspective of Deleuze and Guattari.

As I argue, working within the three systems of art, architecture and economics enables Kalkin to impart a two-fold critique of the systems of late capitalism. Firstly, he examines the alienating effects of capitalist exchange, the repression of desire by the

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<sup>265</sup> See "The smooth and the striated," in Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, pp. 523-551.

systems of social production and the commodification of artistic practices. From there, he resuscitates the disruptive potential of art in the commodified sphere of contemporary culture.

### **Bunny Lane: dysfunctional architecture**

An unresolved tension between commercial activity and critical thought is evident in Kalkin's abject, dysfunctional performances, installations and drawings as well as in his commercial, contracted architectural projects. His architectural work emerges from this tension, and internal dualisms infiltrate all levels of its production. These oppositions, I argue, create a dysfunction that undermines the systems of their commercial production. Use and function are underlying principles of industrial production, and have infiltrated modern art and design in various ways from 'functionalism' in design to 'minimalism' in painting and sculpture. Yet in the context of capitalism, as Marx argues, the use and function of any given commodity is abstracted. He writes, "Its existence as a material thing is put out of sight." In this context, functionalism acts as a kind of mirage, inadvertently disguising the process of commodity fetishism. In 'Functionalism Today,' Adorno observes this problem, writing "But in present society all usefulness is displaced, bewitched. Society deceives us when it says that it allows things to appear as if they are there by mankind's will. In fact, they are produced for profit's sake; they satisfy human needs only incidentally."<sup>266</sup> Kalkin's critique occurs, I argue, by infusing an unusual degree of irrationality into the apparently 'functional' practice of domestic architecture, in order to make the consumer aware of the abstraction of use-value in capitalist exchange.

In order to shed light on our opening riddle, I would like to explore the unusual suburban property that is *Bunny Lane* (Figure 32), constructed in New Jersey, USA in 2001. The 'tour' would be better described, however, as an Alice-in-Wonderland pursuit. Like the rabbit of Carroll's infamous tale, Kalkin is nearly impossible to pin down, as he adopts various guises including those of designer, architect, capitalist, performer and

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<sup>266</sup> Adorno, "Functionalism today," p. 17

disaster relief worker. His response to the increasing commercialisation of contemporary art was to go commercial. He took up architecture, set up a company called Kalkin & Co. and now produces disturbing, useful and desiring commodities, objects that examine and disrupt the commercial systems from which they emerge.

One of the first of these commodities was *Bunny Lane*, a property shaped by internal juxtapositions. The most striking is the overall structure. A large building, constructed from prefabricated, industrial steel shipping containers, envelops a suburban cottage, which lies completely intact and unaltered at its core. The steel frame does not merely enclose a garden. Instead, couches and dining tables reside outside the cottage – on its deck and around its edges – while still ‘inside’ the outer walls (Figure 33). Several rooms are mounted, like offices in a city skyscraper, along a rear wall, while its actual office slides along the wall of the cottage, in the narrow passage between the cottage and its house.

In theory, it sounds like an imposing, even oppressive structure. Yet the outer building, despite being composed of industrial steel, creates an atmosphere of light and space. Not only are the ceilings extremely high – they have to accommodate a two-storey cottage, after all – but the walls are either composed of floor-to-ceiling windows or enormous roller-doors that open completely to expose the interior. In this way, the outer building acts as a kind of shell; partly transparent, partly protective, encasing the cottage while opening its spaces according to need and environmental change. At the same time, the cottage provides a space for enclosure and privacy, as an alternative to the exposed exterior. Embedded within the vast space, its interior becomes labyrinthine. These unresolved dualisms do not impede the property’s habitability. Instead, they reflect the world from which it emerges. Creating a space both insular and public, *Bunny Lane* caters for the increasingly virtual, fragmented, and global sense of space experienced in contemporary culture.<sup>267</sup> At the same time, *Bunny Lane* holds on stubbornly to its historical foundations. It retains a sense of its domestic past in the form of its internal cottage; a construction that is not ‘sampled,’ fragmented or timeless, but instead maintains its structural integrity.

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<sup>267</sup> Anthony Vidler anticipates this kind of architecture in *Warped space* (2000), where he describes the “shell-like environments...that are being prepared for our new identities as digital subjects.” (Vidler, *Warped space: art, architecture, and anxiety in modern culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000, p. 256)

*Bunny Lane* does not attempt to resolve the tension between past and present. Instead, its design accounts for both, providing a place to retreat from the outside world while simultaneously inviting an open perspective outward, and an engagement with exterior space. Indeed, *Bunny Lane* does not attempt to resolve any tensions. They activate the space. When the garage doors are raised, for example, the exterior of *Bunny Lane* vanishes, exposing its entrails to the world outside. When they are lowered, it becomes a tight steel enclosure. To further confuse matters, wall-sized curtains can be used to create a half-open, half-closed interior world. This manipulation of interior and exterior space does not signify a move toward either modern or postmodern transparency. Instead, Kalkin holds inside and outside space in a productive tension. This is evident when he claims, “The interiors are considered part of the architectural whole.”<sup>268</sup> And so in *Bunny Lane*, one interior is embedded within another while spaces of enclosure are made interchangeable through roller doors and the use of external wall curtains. This use of curtains to fold together inside and outside space can be likened to skin; the curtains unite the organs of the house with the wind, while maintaining their structural differences. This purposeful interplay of inside and outside, like the juxtaposition of past and present, mirrors the ongoing interplay in Kalkin’s work between art and commerce, reality and fiction. He refuses to break down oppositions, instead folding them together.

The doubling of interiors in *Bunny Lane* confounds perspective. This confusion of reality is acknowledged by the presence, on an upper balcony, of a small doll-house (Figure 34). The inversion of scale complements the constant confusion between interior and exterior, undermining any preconceived perceptions. We become Alice, one moment small in a vast space, the next a giant in a child’s universe. It is not surprising that on encountering *Bunny Lane*, one reviewer asked simply, “So what is this place?”<sup>269</sup> Kalkin’s own account is revealing:

I did it as a total joke... to destabilise your ideas of what a domestic space is, see how kind of insane the suburbs can get if you play around a little... I want to go

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<sup>268</sup> Kalkin, cited in “Adam Kalkin,” *Architectural Digest*, vol. 48, no. 9 (1991), p. 137

<sup>269</sup> Pilar Viladis, “How to hide a house,” *New York Times*, May 20 2001, p. 60

back to the original American ideal of independence, the individual's right to pursue their own sense of happiness.<sup>270</sup>

We must be careful not to be misled by Kalkin's use of the word 'joke.' This joke is a serious one; not only is *Bunny Lane* a permanent home, but it forms a conceptual 'house' for a much broader critical project. Ideas, rather than any architectural material, are the substance of Kalkin's practice: a combination of brash aesthetics with serious intent, the exploration of the 'insanity' of contemporary culture, and the search for individuation within a homogenous consumer landscape. Entering the spaces of *Bunny Lane* – virtually or physically – is to enter into a world of performance, sculpture, economics, philosophy and clowns.

At the heart of the property, for example, lies a formal sitting room, decorated with nineteenth-century furnishings and lined with hundreds of copies of Kalkin's artist's book *Addiction* (Figure 35). Written in collaboration with Aernout Mik, *Addiction* explores the obsessions and compulsions of contemporary society through an eruption of desire. Within its compact A5-sized pages, a body dipped in chocolate swarms with ants, bodies are buried in the earth, hands and lips are disembodied and food is consumed while objects are destroyed. *Bunny Lane* thus provides an architectural portal into a conceptual practice. And so the real tour of *Bunny Lane* begins.

### *Inside Bunny Lane*

*Addiction* encapsulates the double-function of Kalkin's architectural practice and is worthy of a detour. Its vivid red cover carries only the word 'Addiction' in small lettering on the front cover and the spine. Upon opening the book and passing the title page, the reader encounters a simple architectural design. It is presented in two parts, with an aerial-view floor plan and a side view, rendered in simple black line with minimal text. The design is for a caravan constructed out of a single large shipping container (Figure 36). The floor plan shows that it is divided into two rooms, separated by a wall of glass. The first is labeled 'visitors' and the second 'addictions.' 'The caravan is established, in

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<sup>270</sup> Kalkin, cited in Tom Dyckhoff, "Boxing clever," *The Guardian*, August 10 2002, p. 56

this sketchy design, as a stage for artistic performances. Over the page, the reader is presented with a spreadsheet that gives a timeline for a series of 91 eclectic events, apparently to be enacted in the space of the caravan. The proposed performances involve a variety of social settings and an eclectic mix of characters, and it is unclear exactly how they will unfold. Each event explores, to some degree, the absurdity of the consumer world. The opening sketch is a façade, like Kalkin's architectural studio, and it encloses a conceptual space uncovers and disrupts the machinations of consumer culture.

As the pages turn, each 'event' is presented with a brief heading and a number that corresponds to the opening timetable. These headings are presented in an officious, type-writer style font, which stands in contrast to the free-hand, pen and ink drawings that illustrate the text. A garish aesthetic is employed in these sketches to give the scenes a chaotic and irrational sensibility. Disjointed lines and marks combine to present human figures that are unattractive, messy and grotesque. The drawings are child-like in style but dark in content. Body parts appear disconnected from the figures, which are often distorted so that hands appear five times the size of their arms, breasts hang down to the figure's waist, heads appear without bodies and bodies without heads. The sequence begins, for example, with an hour-long massage, illustrated with nothing but a black square of ink that obscures a block of text. The shape of the square is marked roughly, in such a way as to reveal traces of the page below. The text is illegible but for a few words that read "and brings... and... old is... drawn." At the bottom of the page are the handwritten words "combination shiatsu/swedish." Throughout *Addiction*, illustrations such as these appear, which sometimes bear explanatory text but often the explanation is left to the reader's imagination. Similarly, the publication ends with a bare line drawing. It presents a figure hunched over on a chair, in the corner of a room, and appears underneath a newspaper clipping. The title for the page is simply, '93) Old man sits on chair all night long (specifications for second hour)' with no further explanation.

The introductory timetable therefore serves as a rationalisation for these illogical events. There is little sense in the way the events are timetabled, for example an event with the mysterious label "a pot of dandruff" is allotted four hours in the schedule with no further explanation.<sup>271</sup> Such inconsistency is the substance of the work as a whole,

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<sup>271</sup> See Adam Kalkin and Aernout Mik, *Addiction* (Hong Kong, China: Chinese Smokers, 1999), no. 2, n.p.

where images bear little correlation to their conceptual outlines and sit in strange proximity to found texts. Newspaper clippings, headlines and other documents from popular culture are randomly scattered throughout the pages, documenting the absurdity of the contemporary world. Truth and fiction are rendered interchangeable as images are pulled apart, scrubbed out, alluded to, and replaced. The spontaneous combination of concepts and images that emerge is suggestive of Surrealist juxtaposition, and just as the Surrealist project attempted to unleash the unconscious through aesthetic experimentation, Kalkin and Mik use the pages of *Addiction* to bring the social unconscious to life.

*Addiction* attempts to articulate and unleash desire in the elusive space between obsession and consumption. The desires presented are not simple reiterations of the constructed desires of consumer culture. Instead, desire emerges in uncontained and unpredictable forms. Consumer objects are demolished, inanimate objects are dressed in designer clothes, figures enclose themselves in shopping bags, and antique vases are smashed. These apparently irrational acts are then contrasted with newspaper articles that document events from contemporary life. The reality that is documented in *Addiction*, however, is no more rational than its fictions. A company executive in China is executed for fraud. A female employee is fired for having a moustache. Putting socially illegitimate desires on display while exposing strange and restrictive social codes, *Addiction* suggests that an irrational and destructive capacity is already embedded in the social unconscious.

Importantly, the tone of *Addiction* is active, engaged and performative with little trace of cynicism. In Baudrillard's conclusion to *The System of Objects* (1968), he resigns himself to the inescapable predicament of a rampant consumerism that cannot be moderated. "Consumption is irrepressible, in the last reckoning," he laments, "because it is founded upon a *lack*."<sup>272</sup> Where Baudrillard takes the psychoanalytic reading of desire as lack (or in Freudian terms, *castration*) *Addiction* assumes that the foundation of desire is positive and productive. Architecture becomes the site of roasting marshmallows and teenagers making love. *Addiction* finds desire within all aspects of consumer culture, just as Deleuze and Guattari posit desire as the basis of all production. Reconciling the

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<sup>272</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The system of objects*, p. 205



disparate fields of psychoanalysis and social production, Deleuze and Guattari write that “the order of desire is the order of production: all production is at once desiring-production and social production.”<sup>273</sup> In the context of capitalism, however, human desire is controlled and repressed, turned toward a perpetual cycle of consumption and unsatisfied needs. Locating the social control of desire is therefore central to understanding the logic of the consumer world. *Addiction* does just that – it encourages the reader to consider the way capitalism represses desire in one movement, only to reconstruct it as fetish the next. Hence *Addiction* explodes with primal desire at the same time as unmasking socially ‘legitimate’ investments of desire.

Condoned acts of consumption are rendered strange. This is evident, for example, in an event where elderly people drink endless cups of coffee. The socially ‘legitimate’ act of drinking coffee is presented in the form of a spreadsheet. The names of twenty-two ‘elderly people’ are listed, along with how many cups of coffee they have consumed. For example, ‘Ethel’ is listed with ‘4 cups,’ ‘7 cups,’ and ‘3 cups.’ The table is then contrasted, by way of collage, with a documentary article that bears the headline “Coffee craving ‘as bad as heroin’” (Figure 37). The normal consumption of coffee is compared to the desire for the excessive and illegitimate pleasure of heroin, thereby highlighting the fine line that separates the apparent rationality of social consumption and ‘illegal’ desire. This subtly demonstrates how society redirects primary desire toward consumption, in this case the consumption of coffee. Importantly, it suggests that there is an underlying subjective desire invested in ‘simple’ social activities.

Compulsive consumption may not seem particularly unusual in relation to coffee. In another context, however, the same compulsive action is rendered absurd. This is evident in an event where a man simply eats eggs (Figure 38). How could eggs be invested with social desire, let alone be fetish objects in commodity culture? While they may be consumer products, their consumption is usually presumed to satisfy use-value. In *Addiction*, however, the compulsive consumption of eggs abstracts their practical use. They are eaten without regard to either hunger (physical need) or pleasure (desire). Exaggerating the process of capitalist consumption, this renders commodity fetishism strange, bringing into question the whole process of exchange.

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<sup>273</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 325

The performance recalls a work by the Italian artist Piero Manzoni, titled *Consumption of Dynamic Art by the Public Devouring Art* (1961) (Figure 39), in which he ‘signed’ 70 boiled eggs with his thumbprint, before inviting a gallery audience to join him in consuming them. In addition to making the ‘consumption’ of art literal, Manzoni similarly revealed the commodity as an object abstracted from its use. Manzoni’s theatrical consumption of eggs, however, extended a broader performance of ‘life,’ an artistic practice concerned with the body as an art object that transcended material form. His performance therefore involved an exploration of the limits of self and authorship over a critique of commodity culture.<sup>274</sup> In contrast, the ‘consumer’ of *Addiction’s* performance has no overt identity nor authorial role. The event is described simply as “Man eating eggs (45 minutes),” and is accompanied by a simple pen drawing of an empty chair, which sits beside a vaguely human figure. The distorted figure is alluded to with scattered lines, and the ink is uneven so that parts of the body vanish. Within this form, the shape of an egg appears against a dense mass of line. The strange depiction is further complicated by the placement of ears on top of the figure’s head. Three handwritten words and an arrow help to explain the disparity between the ears and the human figure. They read, “Head of cat.” This minimal description and bizarre illustration serves to undermine the ‘ordinary’ act of consumption.

In another performance in *Addiction*, utilitarian objects are dipped in chocolate. Here, Mik and Kalkin are more explicit in dramatising commodity fetishism. A bucket, filled with chocolate, is depicted in the foreground of the illustration. Behind the bucket is a table covered in objects. The objects are drawn with blobs of ink, suggestive of items that have been covered in chocolate. While each form is hard to discern, nearby labels such as “cookies, fruit” and “old record” help to establish that they are consumer objects, both literally and figuratively. In the background, a human figure is shown, first standing behind the bucket, then dipping its head into the bucket, and finally standing with its face

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<sup>274</sup> Gerald Silk describes how, despite the “destruction” of the work of art when the eggs are consumed, Manzoni’s work *Merda d’artista* (“Artist’s shit”) symbolically restores and elevates the artistic act, and in this way it extends Manzoni’s authorial privilege. He writes, “In this regard, Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista* bizarrely exalts, rather than defies, commodification.” (Gerald Silk, “Myths and meanings in Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista*,” *Art Journal*, vol. 52, no. 3, 1993, p. 69) Manzoni’s physical being became the work of art, and in this sense his artwork transcended form. In his artist statement, “Free Dimension”, Manzoni suggested that art would move beyond form toward “being”. (Manzoni, “Free Dimension,” in *Art in theory, 1900-2000*, p. 724).

covered in chocolate. Literally dripping with pleasure, the objects retain no trace of use-value – they cannot satisfy material or physical wants or needs. Despite their desirability, the resulting commodities can't be eaten. At the same time, the whole scene – including the 'consumer' – is invested with the sensuous pleasure of chocolate and is imbued with a 'magical' quality.

This is precisely what Marx refers to when he describes commodity fetishism as “the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour.”<sup>275</sup> Failing to satisfy both physical needs and desires, inedible objects such as the 'old record' instead produce lack, feeding the cycle of consumption. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is the production of lack, not desire, that characterises late capitalism. They write, “Lack (manqué) is created, planned, and organised in and through social production... while at the same time the production of desire is categorised as fantasy and nothing but fantasy.”<sup>276</sup> Fetishistic attachment to commodities, in this sense, is shown as displaced and contained desire.

Mik and Kalkin's processes do not simply negate consumerism, but rather work from within the irrational logic of consumer culture to performatively enact the way consumers are captured. *Addiction* therefore presents its critique in two ways. Firstly, it unmasks the fetishistic nature of commodities, such as the chocolate-covered objects, which elicit desire for the purpose of containing it within commodity-production. The second part of this critique involves releasing desire from this cycle, presenting it in unpredictable and productive forms. Tongues appear licking legs while whole figures disintegrate, only to re-emerge in parts and dance.

The rationalised madness of *Addiction* is employed to explore and simultaneously disrupt the complex flows of late capitalism. This is evident from the outset, with the juxtaposition of random events inside a structured timetable. The elusive definition of desire given by Deleuze and Guattari configures it as an entity beyond the social constructs of the consumer world, while simultaneously *within* it. If desire is already present in all social production, then unleashing bodies, physical drives and sexual desire in the spaces of *Addiction* is not as crazy as it appears.<sup>277</sup> Inside the caravan, a chaotic

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<sup>275</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol I, p. 87

<sup>276</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 29-30

<sup>277</sup> Escaping capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari argue, involves liberating desire by “*returning production itself to desire*.” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 402 [Their emphasis])

proliferation of bodies, pleasure and excess erupt. A naked man hangs upside down and plays cards, while another blows smoke through a wall. One pregnant woman shaves a man's head while another gives birth, bodies are buried in the earth, hands and lips are disembodied and food is consumed while objects are destroyed. Desire ceases to be controlled.

*Addiction* works from the understanding that capitalism is not a coherent entity. It is in fact through this internal incoherence, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, that it constantly expands to accommodate its limits. "The capitalist machine does not run the risk of becoming mad," Deleuze and Guattari write, "it is mad from one end to the other and from the beginning, and this is the source of its rationality."<sup>278</sup> While capitalism works on an internal madness, it is not the kind that promotes freedom. Instead, it is exploitative and controlling, a main feature of which is the control and repression of desire. Inverting the consumer world to locate its latent and displaced forms of desire, Mik and Kalkin expand the insanity of consumer culture to its limits, opening up spaces within for critical thought. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, late capitalism will not be transformed from a position of radical negation, but instead through this kind of 'internal' analysis of social desire, which they describe as "a political and social psychoanalysis, a militant analysis."<sup>279</sup> This helps to account for the double nature of the critique presented in *Addiction* – it involves both a careful examination of social repression, at the same time as a release of more productive and uncontained forms of desire. This militant critique resides inside a caravan inside *Addiction*, which in turn resides inside *Bunny Lane*.

### *Out of the rabbit hole*

The chaos of *Addiction* is housed in a bookshelf in the site of this detour; *Bunny Lane*. Like *Addiction*, *Bunny Lane* employs an architectural façade to enclose artistic practice. Similarly, the division between fiction and fact is purposefully eluded. This emerges most vividly in *Bunny Lane*'s 'documentation' in the text *Architecture and Hygiene*, where the

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<sup>278</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 408

<sup>279</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 108

property becomes a kind of stage. The text, a survey of Kalkin's work, opens with a sequence of nineteen images relating to *Bunny Lane*. At first glance, the images seem to be documentary, recording the architectural process behind the construction of the property. After several photographs and a couple of architectural plans, however, the sequence diverges in unexpected ways. An image appears of a man, naked but for a trench coat, wig, and mask (Figure 40). He sits in a tiny pink room on the upper floor of the cottage, and stares blankly at the camera from a purple bed. Next he appears again, doubled, sitting near a small door embedded in a wall. The erratic appearance of this figure unsettles its domestic environment, arousing a bodily and psychological sense of space, and suggests that in the production of domesticity there is a simultaneous production of marginal, alienated subjects.

This is reinforced by a sketch that appears next in the sequence. It contains a telephone connected to a gun, aimed at an animal-human figure, and it reads: "Better... phone rings, gun misses unemployed clown (number is listed)",<sup>280</sup> (Figure 41). Here, the social tendency to repress marginal, subversive identities – the unemployed clown evokes the figure of the artist and philosopher – is made literal through the violence of the gun. Following this drawing are photographs showing a mask attached to a wood-panel wall. It is the same mask that was worn by the man in the pink room, only this time a penis emerges from its mouth. Desire is thus unmasked within the realms of architecture. Suburbia is not merely a space of feminine domesticity; it erupts with a multiplicity of bodily experiences, all of which appears to be quite a diversion from commercial architectural practice.

The masked man of the documentation, emerging incongruously, is symptomatic of an emergence of alienated desire. In *Bunny Lane*'s landscape, the central spaces of suburbia, domesticity and architecture become sites for transformation. While our protagonist might be adorned in a trench coat as if ready to 'flash,' he is displaced from his urban laneway, as might be expected, and inserted instead in the space of a suburban cottage. His sinister potential is thus evacuated. He becomes absurd and slightly pathetic, transformed from 'perpetrator' into 'victim.' This transformation is made complete, in the sequence of photographs, when the human figure disappears altogether, emerging in

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<sup>280</sup> Kalkin, *Architecture and hygiene*, p. 24

pieces embedded in the wall. Becoming mask and penis, the social forms of architecture are also transformed – in this case the architectural space literally ‘becomes’ the body. Such transformations also occur in *Addiction*, where performances depicting “women with large boobs moaning” are confluent with others that feature transvestites drinking brandy and women with moustaches.

The bodily, psychological and subjective qualities of architecture are emphasised in *Bunny Lane* in order to disrupt the cynical impasses of consumer culture. Architecture is not an incidental medium in examining the relationship between society and the body. Elizabeth Grosz asserts the relationship between architecture and the body, writing “Bodies are absent in architecture, but they remain architecture’s unspoken condition.”<sup>281</sup> The body has informed architecture since classic times, when the ‘ideal’ human body was the model for architectural proportion. This is vividly captured, for example, in Vitruvius’ model of a man with arms outstretched. In contrast to such overt bodily projections, modernism signaled a turn toward exteriority, mechanisation and the decentralisation of the human form. Yet references to the human body still infused architectural discussion, emerging implicitly in debates about ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority,’ for example, and more overtly in Le Corbusier’s discussion of modular man and Frank Lloyd Wright’s organic architecture. The bodily nature of architecture is not implicit in *Bunny Lane*– it emerges abstractly, for example in the curtains that fold inside and outside like skin, and more overtly in the semi-naked figure and penis that ‘document’ *Bunny Lane*. Describing architecture, Kalkin states, “No point in fighting its bones, in trying to hide its genetic code.”<sup>282</sup>

For Anthony Vidler, a recent architectural interest in the human body, or ‘biomorphic’ architecture, represents an extension of these historical concerns. He accounts for this new interest in the human form, in part, as a response to the sense of ‘loss’ that the abstracted body of modernity effected, describing it as “the return of the body into an architecture that had repressed its conscious presence.”<sup>283</sup> Kalkin’s

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<sup>281</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the outside: essays on virtual and real space* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), p. 100

<sup>282</sup> Kalkin, cited in Paul Walters, "A home to steel your heart," *The Gazette*, September 1 2001, p. 11.

<sup>283</sup> Vidler, *Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (MIT Press, 1994). p. 79. Vidler relates this re-emergence with Freud’s discussion of the “uncanny,” as a return of the repressed. Vidler’s account of the body in architecture is one of the most clear and comprehensive. See also Joseph Rykwert, Robert

architecture remembers the human body while housing the fragmented subject of postmodernity. He proclaims, for example that “For me, buildings operate as surrogate bodies which I can contort, disguise, insult or embrace at will.”<sup>284</sup> In this authorial overstatement, he utters an unspoken premise of architecture – the control of the body. He also alludes, inversely, to a sense of physical vulnerability heightened by an increasingly technological, virtual social sphere. As Paul Virilio writes, “whereas it used to be just a question of arranging our environment to house our bodily activities, the point now is to control that environment.”<sup>285</sup> This apparent contradiction between modern authorship and postmodern subjectivity is purposeful, creating a critical dysfunction within the architectural space of *Bunny Lane*, as evident in its masked protagonist, which disappears into and is thereby embedded in the pre-modern cottage’s walls.

The body that manifests in Kalkin’s architecture is active; it moves through the spaces of *Bunny Lane* and performs in the pages of *Addiction*. This undermines architecture’s attempt to control and contain the body, an extension of capitalism’s attempt to contain desire. The presence of bodily imagery and references, in this sense, refers to repressed and displaced social desire. For Grosz, architecture is a form of thought rather than practice. The space ‘in-between’ architecture and society is a site for critical thought and provides a place in which to examine and reconstruct subjectivity. This ‘in-between’ is the space of Kalkin’s architecture, and helps to account for his refusal to resolve spatial and conceptual oppositions. Architecture is configured as a site between the socius and body, between commodity fetishism and desire. In this space, divergence appears against the ‘hygienic’ backdrop of commodified domesticity.

The term ‘hygiene’ in *Architecture and Hygiene* is duplicitous. It does not relate to social sanitation, but rather acts as a metaphor for sublimation. For Kalkin, it is a process in which psychological drives are transformed into artistic and architectural production, or “a purgative to clear his mind of unwanted detritus.”<sup>286</sup> Such a surrealistic ambition to release the unconscious through art is evident in the pages of *Addiction* and *Architecture and Hygiene* and is reflected in statements such as, “Architecture is the

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Tavernor, and George Dodds, *Body and building: essays on the changing relation of body and architecture*, (Cambridge; London: MIT, 2002)

<sup>284</sup> Kalkin, “100 comments on architecture and hygiene,” in *Architecture and hygiene*, p. 138

<sup>285</sup> Virilio, *Polar inertia*, p. 62

<sup>286</sup> Deitch Projects, “Press release: *Suburban House Kit*,” February 7 - March 27 2004, n.p.

wordless exegesis of the dream.”<sup>287</sup> Importantly, this use of the term ‘hygiene’ undermines its ideological associations with the control of unconscious desire, and thereby social repression. Culturally, domestic hygiene is usually implicated with the process of modernisation. As Kristin Ross observes in relation to post-war France, an emphasis on domestic cleanliness mirrored a social turn toward privatising the domestic sphere. She writes, “Through reconquering and modernising the domestic interior, rural women accomplish their own psychological modernisation.”<sup>288</sup> This, in turn, increased the drive to consume and reinforced the value of a technologically modernised future. By turning the concept of ‘hygiene’ toward the release of unconscious desire, rather than its repression, Kalkin performs another disruption of capitalist systems by extending, rather than negating, internal mechanisms of social control.

Kalkin’s inversion of the general use of the word ‘hygiene’ parallels a series of inversions in his work and that litter the pages of his texts. There is no temporal or thematic logic, for example, in the layout of *Architecture and Hygiene*. Instead, a seemingly random mix of architectural plans, body parts, photographs of completed works, documents from performances, sketches for conceptual projects and expressive drawings sprawl across the pages. Rather than creating an increasing sense of confusion, however, these ideas and motifs begin to inform each other, creating a network of concepts and aesthetic forms. This reflects the complexity of Kalkin’s critique, which uses various signs and codes of social domination and takes them to their illogical limit, destabilising their function. He ‘mis-designs’ the word ‘hygiene’ just as he mis-designs suburban spaces of *Bunny Lane* in order to counter the repressive effects of social conditioning.

Similarly, he inverts the idea of architecture to include the construction of conceptual, critical spaces. He is unapologetic about conflating his architectural practice with performative experimentation. Just as he folds together the opposition of inside and outside space in architectural form, he folds together the role of architect with that of artist, relishing the tension this produces. He has had feature articles published in *Architectural Digest* and *The New York Times*, for example, without any reference to his

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<sup>287</sup> Kalkin, “100 comments on architecture and hygiene,” in *Architecture and hygiene*, p. 136

<sup>288</sup> Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), p. 108



conceptual or artistic practice. He responded to this oversight by treating the *Architectural Digest* review to a satirical sketch and performance in *Addiction*. Titled ‘Decorator’ rearranges room (Figure 42), the sketch featured a collaged fragment of the article, a caricature of the artist pronouncing, “Taste is the foundation of civilisation” and a sketched floor plan with three arrows, presumably signaling a rearrangement of furniture. Despite such irreverence, Kalkin is engaged in both public and private commissions and he has managed to find a position within architectural discourse. The irrationality of his production from this ‘internal’ position, therefore, exploits a weakness in the logic of late capitalism – in its process of breaking down existing systems in order to expand, there is space for disruption. Deleuze and Guattari describe this as the “schizzes that turn against capitalism and slash into it.”<sup>289</sup> It is this space that Kalkin inhabits, openly unleashing desire between production and critique.

If architecture is figured as a site of undoing identities, as Grosz suggests, then Kalkin’s architecture frames a critical space in which social investments of desire are destabilised and examined. As Tom Dyckhoff eloquently states, “He wants to infiltrate the suburbs through the free market, and to infect them from within, spreading beauty and nonconformism among the dumb boxes.”<sup>290</sup> This was evident in *Bunny Lane*, for example, when Kalkin revealed the half-masked, half-naked figure that turned the contained desires of domesticity inside out. For Deleuze and Guattari, the social and psychological spheres are inseparable and the very effectiveness of capitalism lies in its control of subjective desire.<sup>291</sup> Essential to any reconfiguration of social production, therefore, is an analysis of the social unconscious, which they refer to as ‘schizoanalysis.’ They write, “the task of the schizoanalyst is ultimately that of discovering for every case the nature of the libidinal investments of the social field... and the repression of desire.”<sup>292</sup> In their analysis, they present two antagonists to the ordered madness of late capitalism; the schizophrenic process and the nomad. Kalkin inhabits both guises, to different extents, in his exploration of the internal irrationality of the contemporary economic sphere.

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<sup>289</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 376

<sup>290</sup> Dyckhoff, "Boxing clever," p. 56

<sup>291</sup> Deleuze and Guattari write, “desire represses itself in the great capitalist aggregate. Repressing desire, not only for others but in oneself... is economy.” (*Anti-Oedipus*, p. 380)

<sup>292</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 417

While Deleuze and Guattari complicate the relationship between psychoanalysis and social production, drawing parallels between the symptoms of schizophrenia-as-illness and the logic of late capitalism, they are careful to distinguish individual cases of schizophrenia from “schizophrenia as a process.”<sup>293</sup> As Eugene Holland writes:

Schizoanalysis does not romanticise asylum inmates and their often excruciating conditions of existence; it construes them in broad socio-historical rather than narrowly psychological terms, as the result of a generalised production of psychosis pervading capitalist society (a process no single psychiatric patient could possibly embody).<sup>294</sup>

The point of interest, for Deleuze and Guattari, is the way society constructs and contains the idea of schizophrenia, and what it thereby reflects about society. They describe schizophrenia as an extension of the madness of capitalism. It represents the limit of capitalism, the absolute limit, and as such it is disruptive. “Schizophrenia is not the identity of capitalism,” they write, “but on the contrary its difference, its divergence, and its death.”<sup>295</sup> The masked man of the *Bunny Lane* documentation, emerging incongruously in domesticity, is symptomatic of this schizophrenic divergence. Created by capitalism and lurking in its organised, suburban arena, he nevertheless inhabits it with an uncanny and disruptive force. With a confused identity that is part naked body and part masquerade, he introduces a schizophrenic sense of fragmentation into the sanitised domestic sphere. This strange figure also conjures references to Sloterdijk’s satirical ‘kynic’, who brings the cynicism of the dominating order to light through enthusiastic humour. This kynical quality is present, for example, in the playful Groucho Marx mask of the figure in *Bunny Lane*, which brings irreverence into the domestic environment he inhabits. Where Kalkin asks, “Who removed the clown from the

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<sup>293</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 398

<sup>294</sup> Eugene Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus: introduction to schizoanalysis*, (Routledge: London, 1999), p. 2. This helps to explain the emphatic claim in the final pages of *Anti-Oedipus*: “Finally, schizoanalysis is something that does not claim to be speaking for anything or anyone [...] Someone asked us once if we had ever seen a schizophrenic – no, no, we have never seen one.” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 415)

<sup>295</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 267. See “Introduction to schizoanalysis,” pp. 301-417

mythology of architecture?”<sup>296</sup> he places this clown, literally and figuratively, inside architecture.

While unsettling his architecture with body parts and cynical characters, he continues to design and construct architectural form. This tension between affirmation and destruction is purposeful. Kalkin’s exploration of the social body works within the systems of the commercial market to explore its limits. This is the ingenuity of his position. By appearing in a commercial guise, he inhabits the center of the architectural and consumer worlds. *Bunny Lane* is located in suburban New Jersey, and Kalkin claims, “it’s somehow more freeing out here. It’s anonymous.”<sup>297</sup> This description is revealing. Rather than describing a space of social order, he alludes to a space that is open and indeterminate. It is within and between the serialised picket fences of suburbia that he resides. Rather than disavowing the consumer market, he suggests that it is innately irrational, and takes it to its illogical limits.

### *Inside-out: the public version*

*Bunny Lane* has a public counterpart in *The Collector’s House* (2001) (Figure 43). The commissioned project heightens Kalkin’s engagement with the consumer market, turning the suburban irrationality of *Bunny Lane* into a public experiment. The work resides at the Shelbourne Museum in Vermont and was commissioned as an exhibition space for the display of folk art from the Museum’s collection.<sup>298</sup> Bearing a striking resemblance to *Bunny Lane*, the construction is not a typical museum exhibition space. The combination of prefabricated industrial materials and shipping containers creates a vast, open interior. This openness is exacerbated by an exterior that refuses to enclose the building – the front patio section, for example, is framed by large outdoor curtains made from sails. This combination of contemporary, industrial materials provides a vivid contrast to the antique objects exhibited inside, emphasising (rather than masking) historical specificity.

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<sup>296</sup> Kalkin, “100 comments on architecture and hygiene,” in *Architecture and hygiene*, p. 138

<sup>297</sup> Kalkin, cited in Dyckhoff, “Boxing clever,” p. 56

<sup>298</sup> See press release in Shelbourne Museum’s website, [www.shelbournemuseum.org/htm/museum/buildings\\_collections/buildings/collectors\\_house/collectors.htm](http://www.shelbournemuseum.org/htm/museum/buildings_collections/buildings/collectors_house/collectors.htm) (accessed August 11, 2004).

Like *Bunny Lane*, the architectural form of *The Collector's House* is characterised by a fundamental opposition – in this case between commercial design and aesthetic reflection.

Kalkin worked collaboratively on the project with a well-known modernist interior designer by the name of Albert Hadley. Together they tailored the space so that it could be configured as a 'home' for a fictional folk-art collector (Figure 44). Adorned with expensive 'designer' appliances and furnishings, the project seemed to embrace commodification, and was sponsored by various companies including Sub Zero, Butler Manufacturing and General Electric. Within the museum, the overt sponsorship served several critical purposes. Firstly, it contrasted the practices of designers such as Murakami, who carefully attempt to disentangle their 'commercial' and 'fine art' operations – working with commercial brands 'outside' of the museum, while placing un-commercial 'artwork' inside. The appearance of such clear and loud branding inside the museum, by contrast, insists that it is already commodified.

This effect was heightened by creating the fictional art collector. Defining the space as an individual patron's 'house,' and bringing museum visitors into a 'private' domestic space, Kalkin emphasised the privatised nature of art collections, drawing a link between public art collections and the influence of wealthy collectors. This 'fiction' suggested that all museum display is by nature illusory, and unmasked the overvaluation of the art object in a traditional museum context. As Kalkin declares, "It is difficult for me to distinguish between the art object and the fetish object. Perhaps the art object is becoming morally obsolete. It is a question of belief."<sup>299</sup> In combination with overt sponsorship, the fictional collector pointed to the overt commodity-value of museum objects, even those considered 'authentic' historical artifacts. Kalkin similarly undermined the 'authenticity' of the sponsored goods by placing the industrial design products in the context of historical objects.

The purpose of *The Collector's House's* commodification was not to sell Butler Manufacturing, but to displace it from the consumer market and into the realm of antiques. Such fragile and eclectic objects are imbued with historical traces and provide a stark contrast to the mass-produced, commercial objects of contemporary design. In this

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<sup>299</sup> Adam Kalkin, "100 comments on architecture and hygiene," in *Architecture and hygiene*, p. 138

sense, the commercial ‘sponsorship’ of the space only served to undermine the authenticity of the sponsor’s goods, rendering them absurd and somewhat kitsch. In a formal sense, the architectural space of *The Collector’s House* also provided a critique of modernist design and its relationship with capitalism. Like *Bunny Lane*, the building used curtains to fold together inside and outside space (Figure 45). This manipulation of a fundamental spatial opposition captures the way Kalkin maintains – rather than resolves – social manifestations of irrationality.

Traditionally, the function of the curtain is to enclose interior space from the external world. Kalkin subtly renegotiates this function, using it as a large and fluid external wall. As a result, the exterior of *The Collector’s House* cannot be entirely closed. At the same time, the heavy fabric provides a thick barrier that encourages a sense of retreat and privacy. Modern architecture was defined by a move from enclosure to transparency, signified by the use of glass walls and open-plans. Its ambition was to open interior spaces, challenging a bourgeois sense of privacy and reflecting a desire to unite the interior space of the psyche with the public sphere. Despite such ambitions, however, transparency in the postmodern sense has instead come to signify the domination of all space – both private and public – by capital. As Victor Burgin writes, “The transparent wall, used by such socialist modernists as Gropius to unite interior with exterior, was destined to become the very index of capitalist corporate exclusivity.”<sup>300</sup> *The Collector’s House* refuses this transparency by insisting on the opacity of its external fabric.

Partly in reaction to this overexposed capitalist landscape, postmodern design has seen an increasingly insular turn, exacerbated by technology. Paul Virilio, for example, presents a phobic account of the turn of contemporary society, predicting a world dominated by introverted space, resulting in an alienated contemporary subject, one who “‘under stress’ from the contemporary environment shuts himself away not just at home but inside himself.”<sup>301</sup> In a design sense, this has manifested in the phenomenon of increasingly privatised suburban areas. Gated suburbs, for example, cater for this sense of introversion, providing a mask for the alienating effects of capital while exacerbating the

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<sup>300</sup> Victor Burgin, *In/different spaces: place and memory in visual culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 146. Vidler provides an insightful account of this move from enclosure to transparency in *Architectural Uncanny*.

<sup>301</sup> Virilio, *Polar inertia*, p. 64. See also Paul Carter, *Repressed Spaces: The Poetics of Agoraphobia*. (London: Reaktion, 2002).

condition. In one sense, Kalkin's design makes these repressed anxieties literal. In *Bunny Lane*, the internal 'cottage' literally retreats within its industrial shell. It brings the social unconscious to the surface of commercial design while also providing sanctuary. At the same time as offering retreat and consolation, however, *Bunny Lane* insists on an engagement with the outside world. The external walls can be rolled up completely, leaving the inhabitants free to traverse the border between inside and outside. The dining area, living room, office and several small bedrooms all reside outside of the cottage and in this open, semi-external space.

This manipulation of interior and exterior space does not signify a move toward either modern or postmodern transparency. *The Collector's House* uses sail-curtains to resist the transparency of the glass wall and *Bunny Lane* employs a fluid curtain to bridge the over-exposing effect of completely opening the side walls. In this way, both properties provide for a complex interplay of enclosure and exposure. The roller-doors can be half closed, with the curtains completely open – or else the roller-doors can be completely open with the curtains half-closed, and vice-versa. In this sense, they allude to a more nomadic engagement with space. In Deleuze and Guattari's critique, the figure of the nomad emerges as a counterpart to the figure of the schizophrenic. Nomads, they argue, are naturally resistant to the codes and systems of capital because they occupy a territory without organising, controlling, or claiming ownership of it. They write, "The land ceases to be land, tending to become simply ground (sol) or support."<sup>302</sup>

Nomads live in acknowledgement of their relation to the overall outside world, which manifests in the finest details of their habitats. The weaving of the nomad, Deleuze and Guattari write, "indexes clothing and the house itself to the space of the outside, to the open smooth space in which the body moves."<sup>303</sup> While it would seem that nomadism, the traversal of vast spaces without fixed territory, would seem the antithesis of suburban architecture, Kalkin revels in such unlikely propositions. Both *Bunny Lane* and *The Collector's House* open up nomadic space where it seems quite circumspect – in suburbia and in the institutionalised space of the historical museum. Nomadism, for Deleuze and Guattari, does not refer to having 'no place,' the relative condition of

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<sup>302</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 421

<sup>303</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 476

globalisation.<sup>304</sup> Nor is it simply about movement between global locales. Instead it involves the occupation of local spaces, destabilising the social through inhabiting smooth spaces within it. Like the curtains of *Bunny Lane* and *The Collector's House*, nomadism “distributes people (or animals) in an open space, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating.”<sup>305</sup>

A nomadic understanding of body and space is thus evident when Kalkin claims, “The interiors are considered part of the architectural whole.”<sup>306</sup> In *Bunny Lane*, one interior is embedded within another, and in *The Collector's House*, spaces of enclosure are made interchangeable through the use of the curtain. Kalkin thus provides a critique of the binary of inside and outside space in modern architecture without collapsing the concepts. Inside and outside are not opposed but ‘folded’ together like skin; they unite interiority with the external world while maintaining their structural differences. This purposeful interplay of inside and outside, like the juxtaposition of past and present, mirrors the ongoing interplay in Kalkin’s work between art and commerce, reality and fiction.

He takes the structural logic of capitalist systems to their illogical and natural limits, thus unmasking its internal irrationality. In his words, “I want to use the language of utility to create a kind of hyper-rationalised non-sense.”<sup>307</sup> This emphasis on irrationality makes it hard to distinguish the realised from the fictional, and so Kalkin and Co. combines overt commodification, such as the sponsorship of Butler Manufacturing, with commercially insane products such as “marshmallow ragout surprise,” an abject mass of melted sweet goods.<sup>308</sup> A funeral casket as a portable home might sound completely absurd, yet he is currently seeking patents for equally bizarre projects, and it would be dangerous to dismiss these endeavours as unrealistic.<sup>309</sup> Rather than

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<sup>304</sup> Deleuze and Guattari describe global space as relative, writing “The nomad, nomad space, is localised and not delimited. What is both limited and limiting is striated space, the *relative global*.” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 422)

<sup>305</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 420

<sup>306</sup> Kalkin, cited in “Adam Kalkin,” *Architectural Digest*, vol. 48, no. 9 (1991), p. 137

<sup>307</sup> Kalkin, “100 comments on architecture and hygiene,” in *Architecture and hygiene*, p. 136

<sup>308</sup> See *Architecture and hygiene* [Website]

<sup>309</sup> For example, Kalkin has designed a sneaker with a sole composed of layered images, such that a slow motion film emerges as the shoe wears. In another design, Kalkin proposes to place electronic strips along a highway so that they play melodies as car tyres traverse them. He is currently seeking patents for both of these designs. See Kalkin, *Architecture and hygiene*.

disavowing the consumer market, Kalkin inhabits it. The emphasis on utility is important, for Kalkin's architectural design involves the construction of spaces that are habitable as well as conceptual. Producing architecture that is infused with the disruptive and positive force of desire, Kalkin turns the concept of utility away from lack, creating an 'escape' from commodity fetishism within the consumer world.

*Bunny Lane* infuses the central spaces of suburbia, domesticity and architecture with a multiplicity of bodies and identities. And so it resembles an adventure into wonderland. Deleuze describes the apparent irrationality of Lewis Carroll's tale through the analogy of games. It is by their very contradictions that the games of Wonderland challenge the supposed 'rationality' of society. He writes, "These games have the following in common: they have a great deal of movement, they seem to have no precise rules, and they permit neither winner nor loser. We are not 'acquainted' with such games which seem to contradict themselves."<sup>310</sup> Kalkin's design practice is such a game, leading social production toward its irrational limits.

The subject of Kalkin's landscape, like the rabbit in Alice's story, is elusive. Emerging in fragmented parts, it suggests that architecture, not an individual human subject, carries the body. This signals a crucial aspect of capitalism – as a result of the alienating effects of exchange, it is objects that convey the real exchanges between humans. In commodity fetishism, as Marx describes, "it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things."<sup>311</sup> This is even more important in a contemporary context, where the cynical subjects of consumer culture pretend not to believe in anything while the objects they consume and exchange reinforce a complex social and economic system. As Slavoj Žižek argues, participation in commodity exchange, no matter how socially 'aware' the consumer may think they are, nevertheless constitutes participation in an ideological system that exploits human labour for economic gain. Žižek writes, "They no longer believe, but the things themselves believe for them."<sup>312</sup> This is the story that *Bunny Lane* begins to tell. Kalkin's transference of psychological and bodily experiences onto objects

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<sup>310</sup> Deleuze, *The logic of sense*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) p. 58

<sup>311</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 72. The commodity, Marx writes, "is only the material envelope of the human labour spent upon it." p. 90

<sup>312</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology*, p. 34.



of exchange, in the form of architectural commodities, is an attempt to explore the social production relations between subjects.

Objects, imbued with desire, carry the subjective body. Circulating such objects within the commercial design market places emphasis on the ‘desiring’ nature of production. Expecting a typically commodified domestic environment, the consumer is led into the unusual space of *Bunny Lane*, which is in turn embedded with products that overtly erupt with desire. This reminds us that all products are invested with desire. In the context of capitalism, such desire is usually directed toward ‘wanting’ and ‘needing’ new products – in other words, desire is presented as lack. Yet in Kalkin’s landscape, objects embrace the immediate experience of the body, disrupting capitalism’s manufactured desires while simultaneously reconfiguring the field of ‘design’ to enable eruptions of the body and psyche. *Bunny Lane*, opening onto *Addiction* and morphing into *The Collector’s House*, thus provides a conceptual and material critique of the existing links between psyche and world, desire and production.

### **Suburban House Kit**

I will now shift my discussion from the architectural wonderland of *Bunny Lane* to a world of dysfunction in the art gallery, *Suburban House Kit* (2004). Kalkin’s artistic practice, I argue, maintains its criticality through a position ‘internal’ to the commercial design market and thereby ‘troubles’ the traditional institutions and systems of art. The website for Kalkin and Co is called ‘Architecture and Hygiene,’ and like the publication, it presents an unapologetic combination of art and architectural products, all for sale. Along with commercial architectural products including full scale buildings and interior decoration services, it offers products of more ambiguous commercial appeal, such as the opportunity to confess by telephone for \$1 per minute and instructional videotapes for improving tennis technique and “intermediate instruction in dog lifting.”<sup>313</sup> Kalkin freely admits, “You confront a whole other set of problems when you try to turn an artistic thing

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<sup>313</sup> See *Architecture and hygiene* [Website]

into a multiple commercial product.”<sup>314</sup> This is not a problem of how best to profit from the distinction between art and architecture. As discussed in chapter 1, Takashi Murakami’s assertion of the difference between his ‘fine art’ and ‘commercial’ operations only served to increase the commodification of his artistic practice. In contrast, Kalkin makes the commercial function of both art and architecture troubling, drawing attention to the overtly commercial nature of much contemporary artistic practice while also invading the commercial market with dysfunctional products.

This approach to the cultural commodity is simultaneously critical and pragmatic, and therefore perplexing. As a result, it elicits frustrated responses from commercial designers and art critics alike. In a forum discussing prefabricated building design, for example, discussions of Kalkin’s work resulted in aggravated questions about the nature of art. One architect suggested, “Well, if it’s an installation in an art gallery, it probably wouldn’t be of much interest to most of us here, I suppose.”<sup>315</sup> This confusion of commercial practice with artistic experimentation is deliberate, reacting against the neutralising effects of commerce. Yet as this response demonstrates, there has been a tendency for critics to avoid dealing with Kalkin’s work. Projects such as *Bunny Lane* and *The Collector’s House*, for example, have all but eluded the attention of the contemporary art world.

In 2004, Kalkin confronted this problem by invading the space of Deitch Projects, a gallery located in one of the contemporary art hubs of New York. The project, titled *Suburban House Kit* (Figures 46), presented a collaborative exhibition that was part art installation, part curated exhibition and part design store. Configured as an ironic design show-room, the garish orange facade of *Suburban House Kit* presented a ‘suburban environment,’ every aspect of which was offered for sale (Figure 47). Art was a blatant commodity, including elusive conceptual performances such as a “DNA induced dinner” prepared by the artist and available via mail order.<sup>316</sup> *Suburban House Kit* appeared to work within the logic of mass consumerism, feeding its expansion and enveloping the

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<sup>314</sup> Kalkin, cited in Alastair Gordon, “Absolutely prefab,” *New York Times*, April 18 2004, p. 100

<sup>315</sup> Gary, *Adam Kalkin's Quik build kit house forum* [Website] (Fab Prefab, 2004 [cited October 15 2004]; available from [www.fabprefab.com](http://www.fabprefab.com)), posted 21 November 2003. Another speculated, “Perhaps that is what Kalkin is doing – not really doing fine architecture by any means, but rather a sort of ‘ready made’ art with architecture as its medium.” Gregory La Vardera, *Adam Kalkin's Quik build kit house forum*, posted April 24, 2004

<sup>316</sup> Kalkin, *Quik House catalogue* (New Jersey: Kalkin & Co., 2004), p. 3

individual and aberrant objects of contemporary art, the modular and repetitious forms of mass-produced architectural design, and the space of the gallery alike. The glaring façade was that of a project well and truly implicated in the relativism of postmodernity, where authorial and artistic privilege are not only questioned, but actively on sale. For artists faced with a world in which, as Baudrillard decries, “all negation becomes impossible,” such surface affirmation is the logical starting point for a negotiation of both consumption and artistic practice in this complex contemporary climate.<sup>317</sup> And so Kalkin claimed a position that was both complicit and critical, or in his terms, “freely ambivalent.”<sup>318</sup> Like *The Collector’s House*, however, internal tensions in the formal and conceptual structure of the project served to undermine its commercial premise, drawing attention to the inherent commodification of contemporary art.

The overall premise of *Suburban House Kit* was to market and sell designer wares to the suburban consumer. The ‘Quik House,’ a new architectural product from Kalkin and Co, formed the architectural core of the project (Figures 48 and 49). The prefabricated house was marketed as an affordable, fully customisable and nomadic domestic space catering for a minimal budget. Adorning the walls and yard of the Quik House was a variety of designer accoutrements, including furnishings, interior decoration and products for the garden. The simplicity of the shipping container structure of the house drew attention to the objects contained inside and around its architecture. The house itself was half-exposed, for best display, and the objects within brought minimal design to an extreme. Despite the Quik House’s commercial premise, the products that filled its spaces were characterised by dysfunction rather than sale-ability. The kitsch domestic environment did not house Barbie and Ken, for example, but contained a video installation by Aernout Mik, *Pulverous*, in which a warehouse was systematically taken apart and reconstructed by its inhabitants.

The suburban garden was not composed of turf and roses, but fragile fluorescent origami-leaved trees, and its yard did not contain a pet, but a single ball swinging in the wind. Even the red sports car parked out front, a perfect suburban icon, was slightly askew; the personalised license plate did not display a nickname but rather bore the

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<sup>317</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The system of objects*, p. 155

<sup>318</sup> Deitch Projects, “Press release: *Suburban House Kit*,” n.p.

image of a baby breastfeeding. The cupboards contained miniature dysfunctional bathroom fixtures designed by Haim Steinbach, the bookshelves one thousand copies of Kalkin and Mik's artist's book, *Addiction*. These jarring juxtapositions of art and commerce were accentuated by the bright russet colour of the prefabricated outer wall as it clashed with garish orange couches and equally garish carpets within. Each individual component of *Suburban House Kit* was available to order, either on-site or through a mail-order catalogue, from the steel staircase and skylights to Steinbach's sculpture.<sup>319</sup>

The catalogue offered a range of packages to suit differing budgets, all containing Kalkin's basic affordable prefabricated Quik House, which promised to take no longer than three months to complete. The Quik House slogan was "Quik satisfaction." Like all successful consumer products, it allowed for a small degree of personalisation, in the form of exterior door and rooftop variations as well as in the choice of accessories.<sup>320</sup> Not only was the gallery configured as a show-room, but art-goers were actively solicited as consumers. A friendly salesman was present in the gallery's opening hours to discuss various consumer options with the audience. This serious presentation, however, was uncannily displaced by encounters with the products inside.

Haim Steinbach's miniature bathroom fittings, for example, subverted the 'minimal' aesthetic of contemporary bathroom design (Figure 50). The tiny, fragile objects lost all sense of utility on account of their dysfunctionally small size. Escaping their function as architectural commodities, they carried the fetishistic character of the work of art. This undermined the premise of the whole project as a design show-room; the viewer was reminded of the circulation of the works in the space of the gallery, emphasising the similarities between commercial and artistic commodification. If the suburban ideals embodied by the red sports car parked out front and expensive kitchen utilities housed within were not upset by the strangely familiar sight of a lone ball blowing in the wind, or the artificial, fluorescent garden creeping around its edges, then the viewer's encounter with Aernout Mik's video, *Pulverous* (Figure 51), ensured a disruptive encounter.

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<sup>319</sup> Adam Kalkin, *Quik House catalogue*, p. 3

<sup>320</sup> These personalisations and artistic accoutrements do not amount to an alternative form of consumerism. As Jean Baudrillard writes, "Personalisation and integration go hand in hand. That is the miracle of the system." (Baudrillard, *The system of objects*, p. 144)

After entering the house, climbing the stairs and passing an empty wardrobe, the viewer entered the living room on the second floor, where *Pulverous* was projected both into the space and onto the exterior of the building. The video portrayed the interior of a stock warehouse, littered with consumer products. Inside, several figures are seen systematically destroying the objects around them, and then reconstructing their own creations from the wreckage. The work was inspired by the Native American tradition of potlatch, whereby leaders of various communities would give each other elaborate gifts in grandiose displays of waste, as a form of competitive rivalry. As George Bataille describes, “Hence *giving* must become *acquiring a power*.”<sup>321</sup> Initially, such a display of irrational destruction seems at odds with the fetishistic acquisition of consumer objects characteristic of capitalist society. Yet, there was something disquieting in the systematic logic demonstrated by the subjects in this consumer environment. Their wreckage increasingly came to reflect, rather than contradict, a consumer society characterised by the excessive consumption of goods, without regard of need, desire, or use.

Bataille understands the ritual of potlatch as a display of prosperity and power rather than a disregard for material wealth. Describing the act of destruction as a sign of material abundance for the owner, he writes, “The waste is an ostentatious squandering to this end, with a view to a superiority over the other that he attributes to himself by this means.”<sup>322</sup> While destruction may not appear to easily correspond with a society defined by accumulation of capital, it is interesting to consider that surplus-value is inherent to the expansion of capitalist systems. As Karl Marx writes, “Excess and intemperance come to be its true norm.”<sup>323</sup> In this sense, the ritual of potlatch is not so alien to the excessive production of goods characteristic of contemporary consumerism. In the context of a suburban consumer paradise, Mik’s incongruous installation drew attention, like Steinbach’s bathroom fittings, to the displacement of use-value in the reification of the commodity. The compulsive behaviour of the subjects in *Pulverous*, for example, did not satisfy physiological needs or desires. This consumption of goods was therefore

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<sup>321</sup> Georges Bataille, “The gift of rivalry: ‘Potlatch,’” in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), p. 203

<sup>322</sup> Bataille, “The gift of rivalry: ‘Potlatch,’” p. 205

<sup>323</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, p. 109

abstracted from use-value, or in Marx's terms, the satisfaction of wants.<sup>324</sup> In this way it enacted the irrationality of commodity fetishism, which displaces both use-value and desire. In this process, products become distanced from both the means of their production and their intended use, obtaining a strange, abstracted quality. Marx describes this quality as fetishism in *Capital*, resulting from the fact that "commodities have absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom."<sup>325</sup>

*Pulverous* did not contradict capitalism, showing an anarchic disavowal of consumer products, but rather pushed its logic to the extreme, demonstrating that it contains a systematic excess.<sup>326</sup> *Suburban House Kit* thus signals a key strategy at play in Kalkin's artistic and architectural practice – the exploration of the abstraction of use-value and desire in capitalism. For Roberta Smith, Mik's representation of the excesses of consumer culture in *Pulverous* served to accentuate the use-value of Kalkin's Quik House design. She observed, "Parodying the concerted wastefulness of twenty-first century America, it makes the need for designs like Mr. Kalkin's seem all the more urgent."<sup>327</sup> Smith's observation captures the way Kalkin works within the systems of late capitalism, exploiting its internal tensions to create commodities that satisfy real, rather than socially constructed, needs and desires. What Smith overlooks, however, is the way that Kalkin's design complicates the idea of use-value, introducing an important element of dysfunction into production.

On the one hand, Kalkin's architectural projects are affordable, easy to construct and mass-producible. This is the utilitarian side of his work. He employs limited materials to create space and functionality. The Quik House, for example, was a prefabricated house composed of recycling shipping containers. Using pre-existing industrial materials to create portable, affordable and transient homes, Kalkin seemed to counteract the excess and surplus of capitalism, employing its very systems of production in the process. As Nick Mamatas writes, the use of such materials "complement the

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<sup>324</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol I, p. 150

<sup>325</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol I, p. 83

<sup>326</sup> It is important to distinguish this *systematic* excess from the excess of desire, however, which Deleuze and Guattari argue is disruptive of capitalism: "capitalist society can endure many manifestations of interest, but not one manifestation of desire." (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 414)

<sup>327</sup> Roberta Smith, "Adam Kalkin: Suburban House Kit," *New York Times*, March 12 2004, p. 33

inevitable booms and busts of globalisation; they're a creative construction made from the leavings of Schumpeterian creative destruction."<sup>328</sup> Despite this apparent utility, however, the internal world of *Suburban House Kit* unsettled the functionality of the Quik House. Its utility was rendered absurd, firstly by being placed in the space of a gallery, and secondly in the kitsch context of the design 'show-room.'

The dysfunctional nature of its 'products' only emphasised this effect. Its garden, for example, was made of a complex network of fluorescent origami-leaved trees, designed by Tobias Rehberger, and destined to deteriorate in the elements. Its bookshelf contained nothing but a thousand copies of *Addiction*, and its cupboards contained fragile bathroom fixtures that could only belong to a dolls-house. In these subtle aberrations, *Suburban House Kit* ruptured the assumed rationality of consumer products. Usefulness, in this sense, was a means to highlight the excesses of capitalist production, forcing the viewer to question the necessity of commercial design along with the commerciality of art. Nevertheless, Kalkin was enthusiastic about selling the architectural space of the Quik House, along with its errant products. This enthusiasm did not indicate a desire to profit from the conflation of art and design, but rather a determination to spread commercial dysfunction throughout the suburban and metropolitan landscape. Where Theodor Adorno lamented the 'entanglement' of functionalism with commodity fetishism in 'Functionalism Today,' Kalkin turns their proximity into a tug-of-war, entangling the concept of 'utility' with critique.<sup>329</sup>

A review of *Suburban House Kit* by Ruth Graham demonstrates the disconcerting effect of this strategy. Graham initially approached *Suburban House Kit* as a chic design show, describing the artists involved in the show as "a team of designers."<sup>330</sup> Graham was not anticipating the critical nature of the project, and her responses thereby provide insight into the effectiveness of the critique, which is aimed at unsuspecting consumers. In the review, she grappled with internal contradictions in the project, details such as the presence of 1000 copies of Kalkin and Mik's artists' book, *Addiction*, which undermined the seriousness of the show's commercial premise. Graham struggled most notably with

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<sup>328</sup> Nick Mamatas, "Contain yourself!," *Village Voice*, vol. 49, no. 10 (2004), p. 58

<sup>329</sup> Adorno claimed, "Functionalism would like to break out of this entanglement; and yet, it can only rattle its chains in vain." (Adorno, "Functionalism today," p. 17)

<sup>330</sup> Graham, "Suburban outfitters," p. 21

*Pulverous*, which she could only describe as an “obligatory video” and as one of Kalkin’s “gifts to the artistic in-crowd.” In spite of these eccentricities, she nevertheless praised the project for its “mix of innovation, cynicism, hope, and excellent carpeting.”<sup>331</sup>

Graham’s response shows Kalkin’s ability to capture the commercial market while simultaneously unsettling it. It is clear through her consternation that Kalkin’s strategies complicate the project’s commercial surface and reception. Yet these disruptions are not self-destructive; the work retains a commercial viability in order to extend its effects into the systems of production.

*Suburban House Kit* used the vocabulary of commercial production to locate the subjective spaces it hasn’t yet captured. It employed an apparent functionalism, which it unsettled through subtle manifestations of dysfunction, in order to emphasise the human and desiring aspect of all social production. When Adorno proposed that there is freedom in false needs he pointed to the fact that even within the process of commodity fetishism, which turns human needs toward fantasy and ‘lack,’ there is an aspect of human desire that resists social systems of control.<sup>332</sup> In order to liberate such ‘false needs,’ the majority of Kalkin’s projects have involved a close relationship with his clients, customising architectural spaces to suit their lived experiences. This relationship is reciprocal, allowing a degree of critical freedom within the terms of commercial design.<sup>333</sup>

A sense of disturbed utility was evident, for example, in a privately-contracted apartment conversion in New York from 1991.<sup>334</sup> In collaboration with the client, Kalkin connected the two floors of the space with a rope-ladder. In order for the upper space to have any ‘use-value,’ the inhabitant had to grapple with a rope, pulling themselves up to the second floor with their own arm strength. Making the use of domestic space more difficult and complicated, the rope-ladder contradicted the emphasis of modern design on ‘labour-saving’ devices and technology. This domestic ‘functionalism’, of course, goes hand in hand with the logic of capitalist production, which relies on improving

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<sup>331</sup> Graham, “Suburban Outfitters,” p. 21

<sup>332</sup> Adorno, “Functionalism today,” p. 16

<sup>333</sup> As Stephanie Whitlock describes, “He thus places great importance on establishing a just, even moral relationship with his clients that will allow both parties’ expectations to be met.” (Whitlock, “Architecture and hygiene: Lecture delivered by Adam Kalkin,” New York: Graham Foundation, 2002)

<sup>334</sup> See Suzanne Slesin’s review of the work in “This Loft Doesn’t Rock, but It Sure Does Roll,” (*New York Times*, June 20 1991)



technology to reduce labour-time and increase profit. As Marx writes in *Capital*: “The technical and social conditions of the process, and consequently the very mode of production must be revolutionised, before the productiveness of labour can be increased.”<sup>335</sup> Kalkin’s design, by contrast, involved a regression from the technology of staircases, elevators and lifts to a much more basic, physically intensive mode of transportation.

In addition to complicating the modernist emphasis on function, Kalkin’s design confounded the post-modern turn toward virtual space by activating the body of the inhabitant. In the context of an urban New York apartment, the rope-ladder provided a subtle yet striking reminder of physical presence and embodiment, in contrast to post-industrial space and its ‘de-materialised’ body. Theorists from Marshall McLuhan to Paul Virilio have examined this shift in the perception of human subjectivity, associating an increase in technology with a de-emphasis on the human body, resulting in cultural problems from social isolation to obesity.<sup>336</sup> Insisting on presence, Kalkin’s rope-ladder undermined both the modernist drive for functionality and the postmodern turn to virtuality. At the same time, it allowed for the experience of the physical body. This is the two-fold nature of his critique; his design both analyses the effects of late capitalist production while simultaneously allowing for internal disruptions of its control of human desire.

Through client partnerships, Kalkin directly implicates his consumers in the production of social and cultural space. It is not through the act of viewing that they are reminded of their participation in the consumption of art. Instead, they actively purchase, modify, and negotiate the terms of the work itself. This explains why every aspect of *Suburban House Kit* was offered for sale, either through the mail-order catalogue or in discussion with the on-site salesman. An overt contractual engagement with the art audience serves two purposes. In the context of the gallery, it exposes the dynamics of

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<sup>335</sup> Marx, *Capital: a critique of political economy*, p. 315

<sup>336</sup> In 1964, for example, McLuhan wrote “Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man - the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media.” (Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, London: Sphere Books Limited, 1964, p.11) More recently, Virilio has described the effects of this expansion into the virtual spaces of technology in terms of introversion and isolation. See, for example, *Polar inertia*.

exchange embedded within the reception and appreciation of art. As Kathy O'Dell argues in *Contract With The Skin*, such performative practices “dramatise the importance of a transaction that is often overlooked or taken for granted.”<sup>337</sup> By extension, this emphasises the network of underlying psychological and social negotiations that shape social subjectivity. O'Dell's relates her discussion to 1970s performance art, which often used masochism and physical vulnerability to dramatise the relationship between artist and audience. This very 'drama' however, often served to sensationalise the artwork at the same time as alienating its audience. Kalkin's practice, following from this tradition, is less confrontational in drawing attention to the contractual nature of artistic exchanges. In turn, this opens up the possibility of negotiation.

In the sphere of commercial design, Kalkin's performative contract encourages 'consumers' to enter a conceptual world. In this environment, they encounter dysfunctional objects, such as Steinbach's tiny bathroom fittings and a fragile origami garden. Through the subtle physical vulnerability of these products, *Suburban House Kit* suggests the the negation of 'use-value' in commodity culture. The apparent formality of Kalkin's design process thereby acts as a mask for a critical artistic practice. This practice operates by making consumers aware of commodity fetishism at the same time as bringing excess and irrationality into the consumer sphere. Difference and divergence emerges in a domestic context, the site from which psychological and social contracts are first formed. As O'Dell observes, “It is the site to which one must return to uncover the psychic structural elements worthy of critique in all other social institutions modeled after it.”<sup>338</sup> Domestic space thus forms an integral part of Kalkin's critique of the effects of social production.

### *Suburban space*

The domestic landscape of suburbia is Kalkin's territory, turning its serialised identity upside down to focus on underlying psycho-social dynamics. While suburbia would seem the last place to find freedom from social conformity, Kalkin's experimentation grows

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<sup>337</sup> Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the skin: masochism, performance art, and the 1970's* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p. 2

<sup>338</sup> O'Dell, *Contract with the skin*, p. 28

from the serialised spaces that suburbia engenders. His office is located in suburban New Jersey, and he claims, “it’s somehow more freeing out here. It’s anonymous.”<sup>339</sup> Kalkin’s description is revealing. Rather than describing a space of social order, he alludes to a space that is open and indeterminate. Yet surely a suburban landscape presents a space of containment, of social order? Space is divided into a grid, which is in turn compartmentalised into individual homes, each home divided in turn into a series of living spaces. Streets organise properties into numerical identities. In the midst of similar facades on similar terrain, there seems to be little room for multiplicity and change, let alone escape from social systems.

As Deleuze and Guattari observe, however, capitalism operates by constantly transforming such conditions in order to expand, in their terms ‘deterritorialisation’ and ‘reterritorialisation.’ Within this complex process, there is room for unexpected and subversive practices. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they elaborate this argument through the analogy of ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’ space. Smooth space is open, free, creative and transformational. Striated space, in contrast, refers to social organisation and control. The dynamic between the two is complex, and cannot simply be defined in opposition. They write, for example, that “smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space.”<sup>340</sup> Nevertheless, they argue that smooth space is unique in its transformative and subversive possibilities. In smooth spaces, they write, “the struggle is displaced in them, and life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new paces, switches adversaries.”<sup>341</sup> Kalkin’s description of suburbia conjures this kind of space, wherein artistic practices thrive and systems are transformed. Just as capitalism expands through the interplay of smoothing and striating space, Kalkin locates and unleashes smooth spaces within and between the serialised picket fences of suburbia. His domestic designs do not celebrate stability. Instead, he sets the suburbs in motion.

This was made literal in *Movable House* (2001) (Figure 52), for example, where Kalkin designed a suburban home with a crane that literally moves the house around its block. Here, Kalkin took the systems of suburban development to an irrational limit.

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<sup>339</sup> Kalkin, cited in Dyckhoff, “Boxing clever,” p. 56

<sup>340</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 524

<sup>341</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 551

Rather than perpetuating the movement that is characteristic of capitalist development, Kalkin introduced it without any apparent aim or limit. *Movable House* could be moved at the whim of its inhabitants, who thereby transform their domestic enclave into a transitory, nomadic habitat. Kalkin's suburban motion is perhaps most subtly evident in his use of recycled shipping containers, or in his words, "maritime detritus."<sup>342</sup> Objects that are no longer considered to be 'useful,' shipping containers are inherently connected to transportation – movement between spaces rather than the inhabitation of a singular place. Each container carries traces of its past circulation in social seas.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the sea, along with the desert, is an embodiment of the conflicts of smooth space. They write:

The sea is perhaps principal among smooth spaces. But the sea is also, of all smooth spaces, the first one attempts were made to striate, to transform into a dependency of the land, with its fixed routes, constant directions, relative movements, a whole counterhydraulic of channels and conduits.<sup>343</sup>

On the one hand, these architectural containers are suggestive of movement, bringing global flows to the local space of suburbia. On the other hand, they also represent the attempt to control such movement, to colonise the smooth space of the sea. The nature of smooth space, however, is unpredictable; and thus, Deleuze and Guattari argue, attempts to striate the flows of the ocean involved a deterritorialisation that simultaneously unleashed a 'new nomadism' in the form of transients and refugees.<sup>344</sup> And so Kalkin describes his containers not only as places for suburban comfort, but also as spaces in which to find "all the people who try to stow away."<sup>345</sup> Here, his reference to hidden subjects recalls the masked man and unemployed clown of his *Bunny Lane* documentation, alienated figures of contemporary society.

In themselves, shipping containers capture both the smooth and striated aspects of late capital, conforming to commercial systems of production while simultaneously

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<sup>342</sup> Mamatas, "Contain yourself!," p. 58

<sup>343</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, pp. 426-7

<sup>344</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 427

<sup>345</sup> Kalkin, cited in Mamatas, "Contain yourself!," p. 58

carrying a disruptive element. They have become popular in commercial design, considered to be “one of today’s hip, progressive, economical building components.”<sup>346</sup> At the same time, however, their use involves ‘recycling’ capitalism’s residue, resisting the drive of capitalist production to expand by producing new commodities. By re-using materials already in circulation, Kalkin’s design impedes capitalism’s growth. Moreover, shipping containers are readily available, fast to construct and easy to modify. Quik Houses, for example, promise to cost no more than US\$99,000 to construct, which Kalkin claims is half the cost of an average US house.<sup>347</sup> Such houses can emerge wherever there is space for them; from middle class suburbs to run-down ghettos and even as far as refugee camps.<sup>348</sup> Caught in the tension between smooth and striated space, Quik Houses thereby explore the unexpected deterritorialising effects that accompany capital’s expansion. In this sense, Kalkin’s artistic production uses the stable form of architecture to ‘mis-design’ the central spaces of commercial production. Carrying domestic cargo, his containers travel suburban seas.

On account of this affordability and flexibility of design, the Quik House has been quite a commercial success, prompting Kalkin to establish a factory to produce the numerous commissions. In itself, this points to capital’s ability to bend and twist with the contemporary marketplace. After all, late capitalism is characterised by its ability to follow irrational trajectories. In one sense this signifies its strength – its ability to expand across various borders, cultures, and ideologies. In the context of art, it signifies capital’s ability to profit from the most radical of critiques. Yet deterritorialisation, the breaking down of systems, simultaneously opens up spaces for disruptive practices to emerge within its systems.<sup>349</sup> Kalkin exploits this weakness. His critique lies in precisely this tension, which he creates by carefully embedding drawings, performance works, and texts within commercial architecture and design. While the DNA dinner has not gone into mass production, for example, it is nevertheless deeply intertwined with the commercially popular Quik House.

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<sup>346</sup> Toni Schlesinger, "Suburban House Kit," *Village Voice*, vol. 49, no. 10 (2004), p. C91

<sup>347</sup> Kalkin, *Quik House catalogue*, p. 3. See also Kalkin’s publication *The Butler Variations*, where he provides a manual detailing seven different housing plans from prefabricated industrial materials that can be mail-ordered from Butler Manufacturing Co. (Kalkin, *The Butler variations: seven utopian houses*, Shelbourne, VT: Nice Nietzsche Press, 2001)

<sup>348</sup> Kalkin has recently been developing housing designs for the UN, for example, to use as refugee shelter.

<sup>349</sup> See “The smooth and the striated,” in Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, pp. 523-551.

## *Living with Pop*

A comparison of *Suburban House Kit* with a similar project from the 1960s helps to account for Kalkin's adoption of a position 'internal' to commercial production. *Suburban House Kit* explores the disruptive effects of art unleashed, under the guise of 'design,' within the consumer world. This involves a shift in position away from the supposedly 'autonomous' category of art, while nevertheless maintaining its critical perspective. There is a striking parallel between this endeavour and an exhibition held over four decades ago in Germany, 1963. Devised by Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg at the time that Pop art was spreading across the globe, *Living with Pop – A Demonstration for Capitalist Realism* (Figure 53) was part performance, part exhibition and part institutional critique. In the case of this 'demonstration,' a commercial furniture store was placed on display, divided into three spaces. The main show-room was displayed in its entirety, unaltered but for the addition of a few of the artists' works on the walls. Above the store, the artists set up a 'waiting room' with an austere aesthetic. The room, awash in cold fluorescent light, was adorned with mounted antlers, empty chairs and copies of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper. Evoking the officious environment of a doctor's surgery or corporate office, the formal space was complemented by the life-size, papier-mâché figures of John F. Kennedy and the German art dealer, Alfred Schmela.

The presence of these dual 'authorities,' the American president and a prominent avant-garde art collector, referred to the interplay of culture, politics and society in the shaping of artistic practice at the time. Like *Suburban House Kit*, the parodic demonstration maintained an absurd façade that served to make the viewer aware of the social dynamics underlying cultural production. The waiting room led into a third space – the 'exhibition room' – which was set up to emulate a domestic lounge room. Emphasising the 'everyday,' it contained a television, table, couch, coffee and cake. The artists were also on display, reclining on the furniture. A homely feel was created through warm lighting, objects of domesticity and devices such as "a persistent smell of air-

freshener.”<sup>350</sup> This lived-in feel was enhanced by the contribution of Joseph Beuys, who added a wardrobe containing his signature costume; shirt, pants, shoes, and hat. Despite these efforts to simulate everyday life, the ordinariness of the environment was subverted by the placement of all objects, including the artists themselves, on pedestals.

This elevation of the banal was a clear reference to the Duchampian readymade. Martin Hentschel, for example, describes the whole project as “a radicalisation of the ready-made concept.”<sup>351</sup> At the same time as dramatising this expansion of art into life, however, Richter and Lueg also commented on the loss of art in such confluences. This was most evident in the dispersion of the artists’ original paintings within the commercial space of the furniture store below. *Living with Pop* thereby contained a double demonstration: it ‘demonstrated’ the readymade artwork, at the same time as showing its impact on the future of the art object. In other words, it pointed to ‘capitalist realism,’ the reality of the consumer world’s appropriation of art. As Benjamin Buchloh describes, it was an attempt “to radicalise the concept of the readymade *under changed historical conditions*.”<sup>352</sup> A conflation of art, politics and culture was thus evident in the juxtaposition of objects. Winston Churchill’s writings were placed with home decorating magazines, and a news program was broadcast while Richter read detective fiction. Within the context of the ‘store,’ the artists suggested, politics and art became equivalent to fiction and fashion.

The most ‘subversive’ aspect of the demonstration occurred when the audience was introduced to the store. The exhibition opening was elaborate, involving a prescribed sequence of events. Viewers were directed first to the waiting room where they were given individually numbered programmes. They were then ‘summoned’ in groups into the exhibition room and taken on a guided tour of the furniture store by the artists. This performative treatment of the exhibition space unsettled the audience’s engagement with the commercial function of the store. Richter described, for example, that “some of the contents of the cupboard are looted,” and observed that one viewer stripped off their

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<sup>350</sup> Gerhard Richter, *The daily practice of painting: writings and interviews 1962-1993*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist (London: Thames and Hudson: Anthony d’Offay Gallery, 1995), p. 20

<sup>351</sup> Martin Hentschel, “Konrad Lueg and Gerhard Richter, *Living with Pop*,” in Grunenberg et al., *Shopping: a century of art and consumer culture*, p. 179

<sup>352</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-avantgarde and culture industry*, p. 370 [My emphasis]

clothes in protest.<sup>353</sup> In this sense, the exhibition went well beyond ‘equating’ ordinary life with art. It destabilised everyday social conventions, transforming the ordinary space of a store into a live artwork. This served to reinforce the status of art above and beyond the everyday – both the artists and the audience transcended the commercial logic of the store environment. Moreover, the presence of Richter and Lueg’s paintings within the space pointed to an affirmation, rather than disavowal, of the role of art in examining the systems of consumer culture.

Yet *Living with Pop*’s displacement of art into the commercial store also risked affirming the disappearance of art in the realms of commerce. As Richter acknowledges: “Yes, we were rather playing with fire – to find out just how we [sic] could go with the destruction of art. But in principle I never had the remotest desire to allow painting or art to dissolve into anything else.”<sup>354</sup> *Living with Pop* focused on the realities of capitalism in commodifying art. What it did not explore, however, was the possible effects of art on capitalism. The ‘demonstration’ was temporary and confined to an art audience. It used parody to undermine the commercial function of the store, thereby turning the store into a theatrical space that did not actually ‘sell’ any products. In this sense, the artistic endeavour served to reinforce, rather than subvert, the division between art and commerce. Parody, as Benjamin Buchloh observes, often serves to reinforce, rather than undermine, its intended victim: “Its ambiguity and balance can be tilted at any moment, and it can easily turn from subversive mimicry to obedience.”<sup>355</sup> *Suburban House Kit*, on the other hand, was ‘serious’ in its conflation of art, design and critique. It focused on the disruptive effects of art embedded in the consumer world.

Inserting dysfunction into ‘ordinary’ production to make the consumer aware of its inherent irrationality, the products of *Suburban House Kit* thus pose a more direct challenge to the irrational logic of the consumer market. In this sense, the paintings dispersed throughout Richter and Lueg’s furniture store form the starting point, rather than end-point, of Kalkin’s critique. Reversing the dynamic of *Living with Pop*, *Suburban House Kit* placed commerce in a contemporary art gallery, not a commercial store. In this way, it unsettled the opposition between art and market by insinuating that the space of

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<sup>353</sup> Richter, “Programme and report,” in *The daily practice of painting*, p. 21

<sup>354</sup> Richter, “Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 1993,” in *The daily practice of painting*, p. 255

<sup>355</sup> Buchloh, *Neo-avantgarde and culture industry*, p. 364



the gallery is already a commercial store. It similarly reversed the question of modernist subjectivity. At stake in *Living with Pop* was the privileged position of the bourgeois individual, manifest in the physical presence of the artists and also in the caricatures of Kennedy and Schmela. Reducing these socially prominent figures to comic puppets, *Living with Pop* undermined the privileged status of the individual subject. The fragmented and unstable subject of postmodernism, by contrast, lives in the melancholic aftermath of this admission. It is interesting to note that there were no great individuals, no artists, no famous figures, and not even a suburban family on the Quik House stage. The only protagonist was an average, middle-aged, nameless salesman who hovered on the edges of the showroom, uncomfortable in the gallery environment.

Where the two projects coalesce, in this sense, is in the poetic form of Beuys' lonely costume. Pinned to the wall, it marked the space of an absent human figure and seems to anticipate the melancholic subjectivity of *Suburban House Kit*. The disembodied clothes were a discordant addition to *Living with Pop*. For Hentschel, Richter and Lueg's mimetic representation of capitalism was salvaged only through this addition, which he describes as a spiritual inversion of the commodity. The materiality of consumer goods, Hentschel suggests, was transubstantiated through the small brown crosses that marked the items of clothing. This, he argues, represented a "conquering of the capitalist ideas of value."<sup>356</sup> Perhaps more notable than the small crosses, however, was the 'used' quality of the clothing, suggestive of an ephemeral, physical and psychological quality that exceeds the object as commodity. Each item of clothing thus signaled traces of lived experience, emphasising the use, rather than exchange, of consumer goods.

Despite vastly different historical contexts, for both artistic projects, it is this sense of past use that puts kinks into the surface of consumer culture. Kalkin claims "Art is the provocation of memory,"<sup>357</sup> and his practice is infused with historical references and traces of the past. Beuys' used clothing reemerges, for example, in the form of Kalkin's recycled containers. Where Beuys' clothing was stained, bearing traces of his physical movement through the world, the containers were marked with scratches, rust

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<sup>356</sup> Hentschel, "Konrad Lueg and Gerhard Richter, Living with Pop," in *Shopping: a century of art and consumer culture*, p. 181

<sup>357</sup> Kalkin, "100 comments on architecture and hygiene," in *Architecture and hygiene*, p.139

and remnants of past signage (Figure 54). Infused with memory, such materials contrast a contemporary world where both the autonomous sphere of art and the material sphere of the everyday are devoured in the domain of consumption. Importantly, *Suburban House Kit* makes reference to modernist artistic practices, remembering the ‘critical’ function of art. Echoes of Minimalist sculpture resonate in sculptural objects, modernist abstraction is overtly remembered in Iserman’s carpet design and *Addiction* recalls the Surrealist ambition to unite the psyche with objects from life. *Suburban House Kit*’s endeavour, as a whole, is a reminder of an avant-garde tradition concerned with the status of art and its relationship to the everyday.

In both projects, the resurfacing of memory presents an affirmation, rather than disavowal, of art in the face of the realities of capitalism. As Andreas Huyssen writes, “The reliance on memory in the social sphere marks the desire to resist the delimiting of subjectivity and the disintegration of social cohesion.”<sup>358</sup> Kalkin is careful to maintain the integrity and context of historical sources in all of his work, distinguishing his appropriations from postmodern ‘pastiche.’<sup>359</sup> This is evident in his embrace of antique materials. *The Collector’s House*, for example, is a container for antique folk art, filled with artifacts that remember societies and cultures prior to global capitalism. *Bunny Lane* has an old cottage at its core, recalling the past in two ways; in the outer shell, an industrial form that suggests modernist efficiency and technological advance, and in its internal cottage, a homage to the kinds of architecture that were abandoned in modernism’s progress. Kalkin’s architectural form integrates these historical references while maintaining their integrity. It is this retention of internal difference, as strange as its results may seem, that enables his design to sidestep the homogeneity and relativism indicative of postmodernity. In *Suburban House Kit*, therefore, mnemonic traces of modernism are used to resist the current disintegration of art within the homogenous sphere of commerce.

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<sup>358</sup> Huyssen, *Twilight memories*, p. 100. Buchloh shares this view, advocating “the mnemonic experience as one of the few acts of resistance against the totality of spectacularisation,” while Hal Foster promotes works that “restore a mnemonic dimension to contemporary art.” (See Buchloh’s *Neo-avantgarde and culture industry* and Foster’s *Design and crime*)

<sup>359</sup> Fredric Jameson is pointed in his critique of pastiche, suggesting that it is “a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter.” (Jameson, *The cultural turn: selected writings on the postmodern*, London; New York: Verso, 1998, p. 17)

For Kalkin, the intersection of art and architecture provides a unique space to explore the total 'design' of cultural space alluded to in *Living with Pop. Suburban House Kit's* irrational juxtaposition of commerce and art produces a critical space from which to evaluate the irrational nature of capitalist production. Like the surrealist ambition to unleash the unconscious, the project attempts to release utility from its abstracted state in consumer culture. Žižek argues that the simple act of acknowledging the process of exchange can have quite a profound effect. He writes, "if we come to 'know too much,' to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself."<sup>360</sup> *Suburban House Kit* 'pierces' the true function of art and design in the context of late capitalism, redirecting the focus of production from reification, exchange and homogeneity toward use and differentiation. This occurs through encounters with its dysfunctional products.

The absent subjects of the Quick House landscape seem to have been infused into these strange, lively objects. The cover of the mail-order catalogue features neither artists nor models (Figure 48). Instead it carries the blank silhouettes of a suburban couple with their dog. In a contemporary world where identity is consciously constructed from a limited palette of consumer options, and as homogeneity spreads across the postmodern globe, the faces of these subjects are unidentifiable. Indeed, all the subjects of this world seem to be missing. This is an absence that resonates in details, such as Martin Kersels' sculpture of a ball aloft in the wind. Subjectivity, it whispers to the wind, is not to be found in the inhabitants of *Suburban House Kit*, but in its dysfunctional objects. This displacement from subject to object is significant. As Bruno Latour observes, "objects are suddenly highlighted not only as being full-blown actors, but also as what explains the contrasted landscape we started with, the over-arching powers of society, the huge as/symmetries, the crushing exercise of power."<sup>361</sup> *Suburban House Kit* understands this landscape and disturbs consumer culture with active objects that exploit its internal irrationality.

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<sup>360</sup> Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology*, p. 21. For Žižek, contemporary consumer culture operates in complex denial of the process of exchange. While consumers are aware, in one sense, they still "proceed as if the commodity is not submitted to physical, material exchanges." (*The sublime object of ideology*, p. 18)

<sup>361</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network-theory*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 72. This points to Žižek's suggestion that real human relations to be found in the objects, not subjects, of capitalist society. See Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology*.

## Adam Kalkin: Day Trader

The rules of Kalkin's design game are constantly changing. Our venture into *Bunny Lane* proved that Kalkin's commercial architecture disguises a much broader conceptual engagement with the systems of cultural production. *Suburban House Kit* then re-entered the art world with an extravagant example of dysfunctional design, exaggerating the inherent excess of all capitalist production to the point of rupture. In response to the enthusiastic embrace of the Quik House by the systems of capital, Kalkin has adopted a new artistic guise – that of 'economist.' *Adam Kalkin: Day Trader* extends these explorations of capitalism's excess, this time focusing on the deliberate creation and distribution of 'surplus-value.' 'Surplus-value', as Marx describes it, is the value created whenever a commodity is sold for more than it costs to produce. This additional amount is accumulated and turned into capital.<sup>362</sup> As such, surplus-value characterises and defines the economy of capitalism. Marx writes, "the production of surplus-value is the chief end and aim of capitalist production."<sup>363</sup> *Day Trader* therefore signifies an explicit confrontation with capital, clarifying the apparent ambivalence of Kalkin's position, which I argue is carefully employed to critically 'mis-design' capitalist production.

Just as Kalkin embedded the conceptual project of *Addiction* within the architectural space of *Bunny Lane*, the *Day Trader* project is encountered incidentally. It exists both as a conceptual project, and as a publication downloadable from Kalkin & Co's website (Figure 55). This simple publication, presented on sixteen A4 pages, unfolds into a larger performance that encompasses industrial production, financial capital and museum display. *Day Trader* involves, for example, the production of a large architectural work, a video installation, the transformation of a museum space, exhibition at design fairs and numerous activities in public spaces. Each of these components, encountered by members of the public, designers, art viewers and financial organisations,

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<sup>362</sup> Marx explicitly defines surplus-value in terms of "excess." He writes, "This increment or excess over the original value I call 'surplus-value.' The value originally advanced, therefore, not only remains intact while in circulation, but adds to itself a surplus-value or expands itself. It is this movement that converts it into capital." (Marx, *Capital*, vol I, p. 150)

<sup>363</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol I, p. 220

is an incomplete fragment that leads the audience back to the foundational concept of *Day Trader* – experimenting with excess capital.

The project began through the creation of money on the stock market, which was then distributed into the capitalist economy in unexpected and profitless acts of expenditure. This experiment is documented in a text called *Day Trader*, containing bank accounts and brief financial reports (Figure 56). *Day Trader* is framed by two key images. On the front cover is a photograph of a large blackboard, covered from top to bottom with hand-written notes, lists and tables, marked in white chalk and highlighted with a few lines and circles in brighter colours. The last page concludes with a small colour photograph of *Push Button House*, a new architectural work to emerge from the project. The two images form conceptual book-ends, one presenting the origin of the project and the other its resolution, thereby structuring an abstract game of economics.

The form of the blackboard, as featured on the front cover of *Day Trader*, is unmistakably reminiscent of a child's classroom, and in this sense confounds the technological sphere of contemporary economics, usually charted through complex computer programs, spreadsheets and electronic calculations. In keeping with this school-room theme, Kalkin's blackboard features an unusual combination of work and play. Scrawled across the top of the board, for example, are the words, "Creating disassociated forms within capitalistic language/ Misuse of capitalist linguistics." Beneath this proposition are a mixture of lists, flow-charts, diagrams and graphs along with a proudly oversized barcode. Overall, the image seems to be presenting a process of corporate brainstorming. While similar devises of strategic planning are favoured by workplace meeting-rooms throughout the business world, the contents of this session diverge significantly from typical corporate management-speak. Instead of delving into the fine points of 'human resources,' 'organisational restructuring' or 'key performance indicators', *Day Trader* refers to DNA, a cheese farm, clothing sizes, sperm, fire and black market body parts. Such references to human experience are juxtaposed with economic concepts, suggesting that social and financial capital are not so far from one another.

Any apparently rational narrative within this process is subverted by unusual leaps of logic that are charted in paradoxical diagrams. For example the text

“public/private equity,” is linked in a flow-chart to “short action film - sales” and “satan.” These seemingly bizarre connections form the basis for a project that unfolds into equally unexpected, yet perfectly legitimate, economic activities. The surface irrationality of the blackboard scrawl highlights the ‘real’ irrationality of an economic sphere where finance capital is increasingly disconnected from the ‘real’ circulation of objects. Fredric Jameson describes this abstract capital, for example, as “a play of monetary entities which needs neither production (as capital does) nor consumption (as money does): which supremely, like cyberspace, can live on its own internal metabolism and circulate without any reference to an older type of content.”<sup>364</sup> *Day Trader* plays this system to successfully generate over fifty thousand dollars, which is subsequently returned to the irrational system from which it came.

The first step in realising the project involved creating surplus. To this end, Kalkin borrowed \$1,000,000 (US) from a US Trust Company to trade on the stock market. He opened the account in February 2005 and began trading in March. By the end of May, he had accrued the remarkable sum of \$51,458. Despite its success, this endeavour involved a substantial degree of personal risk. The loan accrued interest, for which Kalkin was personally responsible. Moreover, the money was actively ‘gambled’ in short-term, high-risk trading, multiplying the potential debt and increasing the personal risk. Kalkin exacerbated this reckless approach to money in the way he used the profits, distributing the money in four unusual ways. Firstly, he donated \$10,000 to a Tanzanian orphanage, an amount representing approximately 20% of the total profit. He then left \$1,000 in a brown paper bag on a public bus in New York City. While both of these acts demonstrated a benevolent and optimistic approach to manipulating the systems of capital, the next sums of money were channeled into slightly more aberrant acts of expenditure – an online auction to entice a stranger to change their name to ‘Jerry Lewis’ and the manufacture of a new piece of architectural design, the *Push Button House*.

The simple publication *Day Trader* thus unfolds into a much larger project, each aspect of which engages a different (and often unsuspecting) audience, leading them back to Kalkin’s experiment with capitalist economy. This is evident, for example, when social commentator and ‘brand strategist’ Josh Spear describes his encounter with *Push Button*

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<sup>364</sup> Jameson, *The cultural turn: selected writings on the postmodern*, p. 161

*House*, observing, “the shipping container with a luxury lining is really only the beginning of this story.”<sup>365</sup> The generous nature of the first two acts of expenditure made them look remarkably like artistic ‘gifts’ to society. The concept of a ‘gift economy,’ drawing upon the theoretical studies of primitive gift economies by Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille, has had appeal in postmodern artistic practice. In *The Gift* (1979), for example, Lewis Hyde writes that “the primary commerce of art is a gift exchange,”<sup>366</sup> and describes all artistic practice in terms of this economy of giving. From the Situationists to more contemporary practices focusing on relations of exchange, the artistic gift has been seen to provide an alternative to capitalism.<sup>367</sup> Recently, the concept has had extra appeal for its ability to create enfranchising social relations in the context of art, as evident for example in the survey *What We Want is Free*, edited by Ted Purves. For Purves, such artwork is unique in its ability to generate communities and form relationships.<sup>368</sup> Despite the apparent accord between *Day Trader*’s first two ‘gifts’ and these practices, Kalkin’s economic project diverges significantly from the idealistic promises of an artistic economy of giving.

*Day Trader* did not configure art as a means to form community or to create forms of social bonding. Providing a harmonious mask in the space of the gallery, artistic benevolence can inadvertently disguise continuing political and social problems outside of the terms of the art exchange. As Claire Bishop observes, it “gives up on the idea of transformation in public culture and reduces its scope to the pleasures of a private group who identify with one another as gallery-goers.”<sup>369</sup> *Day Trader*’s first two gifts, on the other hand, actively resisted forming any social bonds. The \$10,000 sum was given to an international organisation, not an individual, and the paper-bag was distributed

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<sup>365</sup> Josh Spear, *Architecture* [website] (Josh Spear (cited October 25, 2006), available from <http://www.joshspear.com/item/adam-kalkins-push-button-house/>)

<sup>366</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The gift: imagination and the erotic life of property* (New York: Random House, 1983) p. 273

<sup>367</sup> This understanding of the artistic gift is perhaps best encapsulated by Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ piles of sweets and paper-stacks from the early 1990s. These practices are similarly evident in the context of “relational aesthetics.” See Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*)

<sup>368</sup> Ted Purves writes, for example, that such artwork “holds out the prospect of weaving an alternative fabric, an instant or gradual community, through the inherent power of the gift’s ability to create bonds between giver and receiver.” (Ted Purves, “Against Empire,” in *What we want is free: generosity and exchange in recent art*, ed. Ted Purves, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005, p. 28). The publication emerged from a series of artist projects in 2002.

<sup>369</sup> Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and relational aesthetics,’ p. 69

anonymously, without an intended recipient. These ‘gifts’ were not received in the context of an art audience and they were not established as exchanges between artist and viewer. Both the charitable donation and the anonymous paper-bag gift were instead distributed directly into the economy. By denying person-to-person exchange, the two acts eradicated interpersonal relations within economic exchange.

Contemporary financial exchanges increasingly involve virtual transfers rather than material exchanges between people. *Day Trader* did not create forms of social connection, in this sense, but rather participated in the alienating process of capitalist exchange. This proved that all capitalist exchange involves, in Marx’s words, “the estrangement of man from man.”<sup>370</sup> In the context of late capital, moreover, benevolence serves strategic financial interests. *Day Trader*’s donation to a third-world charity, for example, reflects the strategies of large corporations who regularly donate token amounts of profit as a sign of goodwill, with the purpose of generating a better public image and fostering their capital growth. As Chin-tao Wu observes, “it serves not only to improve the company’s marketplace position, but also to create and maintain business people’s position within their elite circles.”<sup>371</sup> On a broader political scale, social forms of charity serve to reinforce the ideological authority of economic powers. Žižek is scathing in observing this dynamic:

More generally, charity is, today, part of the game as a humanitarian mask hiding the underlying economic exploitation: in a super-ego blackmail of gigantic proportions, the developed countries are constantly ‘helping’ the undeveloped (with aid, credits etc), thereby avoiding the key issue, namely, their complicity in and co-responsibility for the miserable situation of the undeveloped.<sup>372</sup>

Acts of charity, in this sense, further separate the realities of industrial production – now increasingly located in undeveloped countries – from the glittering world of commodities.

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<sup>370</sup> Marx, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, p. 75

<sup>371</sup> Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, p. 11

<sup>372</sup> Žižek, *Organs without bodies: Deleuze and consequences*, (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 179



In this sense, benevolence only heightens the fetishistic nature of capitalist production, which involves disguising the labour process.<sup>373</sup>

The Jerry Lewis auction further undermined the benevolent premise of these artistic gifts. Rather than restoring a sense of social connectedness through artistic exchange, the recipient of Kalkin's \$750 had their social identity 'taken' from them. This less benevolent expenditure involved reversing the traditional auction format, creating what is commonly referred to as a 'dutch auction.' Rather than placing a product on sale and seeking the highest sum from a buyer, Kalkin did the bidding, seeking to pay the least amount of money for a person to 'trade' their name. The bidding started at \$400 (US) and climbed, with the 'winning' bid closing at \$750, taken from a person in Columbus, Ohio. Kalkin thereby equated the concept of the gift with that of loss. This presents a more accurate version of primitive potlatch than the charitable gifts. As Bataille has shown, the 'giving' of potlatch usually involves a sense of gain for the bestowing person, rather than the recipient. He writes, "Thus the gift is the opposite of what it seemed to be: to give is obviously to lose, but the loss apparently brings a profit."<sup>374</sup> The Jerry Lewis auction thereby complicates the idea of capitalist exchange by embedding within it an act of potlatch. Moreover, there is no financial return involved for Kalkin in this exchange, contradicting the logic of capitalism, where exchange is supposed to result in the generation of profit.

In a further defiance of capitalist logic, the Jerry Lewis auction confused the roles of 'producer,' 'seller,' and 'buyer.' It did not involve, for example, a producer receiving money for the products of their own, or their workers', labour. The reversed auction structure transformed the 'consumer' into both producer and 'product.' Selling their name, they became estranged from their identity at the same time as profiting from this estrangement. The 'new' Jerry Lewis thus became the perfect subject of capital, a person, in Marx's words, "estranged from the product of his labour, from his life activity, from his species-being."<sup>375</sup> Specifically, it asked the consumer to attribute an exchange-value, in the form of an auction bid, for their social subjectivity. In the realm of capitalist

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<sup>373</sup> Marx writes, "as soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent." (Marx, *Capital*, vol I, p. 82)

<sup>374</sup> Bataille, "The gift of rivalry: 'Potlatch'," p. 204

<sup>375</sup> Marx, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, p. 75

‘value’, the monetary amount of \$750 became equivalent to subjectivity. Like the charitable gifts, *Day Trader*’s third act of expenditure participated in the alienating effects of capitalist exchange, exaggerating the irrational logic that leads people to equate human experience with monetary value. The *Day Trader* project was not an artistic means to create new forms of social relations, in this sense, but rather presented a critique of the social relations already present within acts of financial exchange.

The sense of unprofitable loss inherent to *Day Trader* recalls the work of Yves Klein, a French artist who famously threw seven ingots of gold into the river Seine in 1962. The weight in gold represented half of the total payment for one of Klein’s paintings, and the action was witnessed by significant figures from the art-world including a museum director, the dealer who purchased the artwork and several other witnesses. Like Kalkin’s artistic expenditures, the theatrical action did not serve any benevolent purpose, and it certainly subverted the prevailing logic of capitalism, which is to save and accumulate profit. As Marx describes, “Accumulate, accumulate! [...] Therefore, save, save.”<sup>376</sup> And like the Jerry Lewis auction, it enacted an exchange more akin to potlatch. Yet Klein’s performance differed from *Day Trader*’s profitless expenditure in an important aspect – it generated an artistic profit. Klein’s action, which was presented in the context of the artist’s search for immateriality, served to elevate his authorial position. The critic Alain Buisine describes the work as “Immateriality as resurrection.”<sup>377</sup> The expenditure of gold, in the context of Klein’s practice, served to re-inscribe the status of the artist within a tradition of the sublime.<sup>378</sup> Kalkin’s acts of expenditure, on the other hand, were unannounced, they occurred outside of the systems of the art world and they did not elevate the artist’s authorial status. They engaged the systems of capital rather than the systems of art.

The final act of expenditure embedded this critique within a design product – the *Push Button House* (Figure 57). *Push Button House* was a complex piece of engineering. A single small shipping container formed the basic structure of the design. This self-

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<sup>376</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 595

<sup>377</sup> Alain Buisane, “Blue, Gold, Pink: The Colours of the Icon” in *Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial*, ed. Gilbert Perlein and Bruno Cora (Nice; New York: Delano Greenidge, 2000), p. 25

<sup>378</sup> Klein stated, for example “This period of blue monochromes was the product of my pursuit of the undefinable in painting which that master, Delacroix, was able to indicate even in his day.” (Yves Klein, *Selected writings, 1928 – 1962*, trans. Barbara Wright, London: Tate, 1974, p. 33)

contained unit was ‘wired up’ with hydraulic mechanisms so that the four walls unfolded, at the push of a button, to create a spacious living environment. Upon activation, the two longer sides of the container folded down, one of the shorter ends folded up and the final wall opened out (Figure 58). The house, traditionally a site of stability and permanence, was transformed into a live performer, activating its surrounding environment. Kalkin describes *Push Button House* in just these embodied terms: “It works like a flower – you push a button and the thing transforms itself.”<sup>379</sup> In a world of alienated subjects, *Push Button House* focused on the active and interactive possibilities of the industrial ‘object.’

Like *Bunny Lane* and *The Collector’s House*, the space combined a high-tech, industrial surface with a historical sense of domestic privacy. This was effected through strange adornments including a chandelier, dark furnishings and a richly coloured woven floor rug. Despite its compact size and nomadic form, the container was equipped with the furnishings of a full house. One of the long fold-down walls, for example, contained a double bed, subtly divided from a mini-bathroom complete with bath and toilet. When folded down, the wall formed the space of a double bedroom and ensuite. On the second fold-down wall, Kalkin attached a leather couch and two small side tables to form a complete lounge area. All of these furnishings were permanently fixed so that when the container closed-up, they remained attached to the walls. In the middle ‘floor’ of the container, a picnic-bench was used as a dining table, and this was placed with a small kitchenette. Both were centrally located to avoid crashing against the wall-fixtures. Wood-paneling covered all surfaces, making for easy transitions between wall and floor when the container was activated to fold in or out. At the same time as carrying a novel and contemporary conceptual premise, the push button mechanism and the purposefully antiquated interior decor made the contraption seem like a science-fiction dream, recalling modernist functionalism as an absurd historical ideal. This effect was only exacerbated on its first ‘unveiling’ when it unfolded to display Kalkin’s elderly father reclining on a leather couch.

In keeping with Kalkin’s previous architectural projects, dualisms characterised the structure of *Push Button House*, creating a sense of irrationality that worked to

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<sup>379</sup> Kalkin, cited in Alastair Gordon, “Heavy metal jacket with a luxe lining,” *New York Times*, December 1 2005, p. 1

undermine the functional design premise. The metamorphic space, for example, had a fixed interior. Homely furnishings suggested long-term inhabitation and stability, yet the overall form was suggestive of easy and fast transportation. When closed, the container formed a dark, tight space with no natural light, suggestive of an introverted realm of private sanctuary. In this state, however, it was uninhabitable. It had to be unfolded for the bedroom, bathroom and lounge to be functional. And when opened, *Push Button House* was completely exposed to the elements, negating the primary function of domestic space to provide ‘shelter.’ A picnic-bench kitchen table only exacerbated this tension between indoor and outdoor space. The ‘house’ couldn’t be occupied in either its closed or open form. By refusing to resolve these internal oppositions, *Push Button House* became functionally useless.

The very concept of ‘dysfunction,’ of course, contradicts the logic of industrial production, which relies on function to maximise profit. In the context of art, this functionalism manifested in modernism’s preference for pure form and the elimination of excess adornment in design. Adolf Loos, for example, famously championed the removal of all ornament from design, declaring: “This evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects.”<sup>380</sup> This apparent ‘function’ goes hand in hand with capitalist production, which increases its surplus-value by reducing labour-time. As Marx writes, “all wasteful consumption of raw material or instruments is strictly forbidden, because what is so wasted, represents labour superfluously expended, labour that does not count in the product or enter into its value.”<sup>381</sup> Kalkin’s irrational design product, therefore, contradicts the ideology of capitalist production.

As a design product, it was extravagant and dysfunctional, not to mention dangerous. The whole construction weighed over 10,000 pounds and the complex electronic mechanisms required users to familiarise themselves with a 24-page manual on hydraulic engineering. As Kalkin stated, “This could crush you. The mechanisms wouldn’t even register the fact that they were crushing you.”<sup>382</sup> Despite the utilitarian premise of the compact space and ‘push-button’ mechanism, the design was far from

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<sup>380</sup> Adolf Loos, ‘Ornament and Crime’, in *Programs and manifestoes: on 20<sup>th</sup>-century architecture*, (Ulrich Conrads, ed., London: Lund Humphries, 1964), p. 20

<sup>381</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol I, p.196

<sup>382</sup> Kalkin, cited in Gordon, “Heavy metal jacket with a luxe lining,” p. 1

being user-friendly. The dysfunction of *Push Button House*, along with the unprofitable treatment of money in the initial three expenditures, all contradict the usual seriousness to which financial exchanges are treated. While *Push Button House* didn't provide a habitable domestic space, it remained a unique and engaging object – it could be inhabited, played with and enjoyed outside of its 'function' as a house. The form itself was dynamic and transformative, with the rusty metal surface flowering to display a homely interior.

This playful treatment of capitalist production is alluded to in the *Day Trader* publication. At the beginning of the text, Kalkin presents an 'epigraph,' from a well-known child psychologist, Erik Erikson, and it reads:

It is true that even the most strenuous and dangerous play is by definition not work, it does not produce any commodities. Where it does, it 'goes professional.' But this fact from the start, makes the comparison of adult and child's play somewhat senseless; for the adult is a commodity-producing and commodity-exchanging being, whereas the child is only preparing to become one.<sup>383</sup>

Just as Kalkin inverts the epigraph to make it a preface, *Day Trader* turns Erikson's assumption upside down. Kalkin's play is strenuous, dangerous, professional, it involves the production of commodities and it stubbornly refuses to be 'work.' Importantly, it insists on a comparison of adult and child's play. The project was premised, from the outset, on this combination, directed at the 'misuse' of capitalist language.

The most obviously 'playful' aspect of the *Day Trader* project was the degree of risk involved. Borrowing the amount of \$1,000,000 dollars from a US Trust Company is a serious undertaking, by any measure. Failing to repay the debt could result in bankruptcy, with careless accounting leading to breaches of law and criminal consequences. At the same time, this kind of serious gambling is fundamental to capitalist economics, where existing capital is invested in order to generate more profits.

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<sup>383</sup> Erik Erikson, "Childhood and Society," cited in *Adam Kalkin: Day Trader*, [Web book] (Kalkin and Co., [cited September 15 2006]; available from [www.architectureandhygiene.com](http://www.architectureandhygiene.com)), p. i

Kalkin embraced this risk with an affirmative enthusiasm that insisted on triumph.<sup>384</sup> If *Day Trader* was a capitalist game, it followed the rules of economics only to throw them out the window, disavowing the money-accumulating directive of late capitalism. Importantly, it used capitalist systems to contradict the logic of capitalism, which directs production toward further accumulation of capital. As Bataille observes, capitalism “prefers an increase of wealth to its immediate use.”<sup>385</sup> *Day Trader*, on the other hand, did not invest or increase its profits. Instead, it spent money lavishly and uselessly.

The manufacture of *Push Button House* involved an excessive waste of resources, including expenditures of energy in the form of design, engineering, materials and human labour. An eight-person project team was required to navigate the complicated hydraulic system alone. And all this energy was directed toward producing an eccentric, impractical, and complicated commodity, a product that undermined the conventions of domestic habitation, architectural design, and innovative technology. The expenditure did not serve as an investment for further production – the *Push Button House* did not go into mass production. Instead, it presented the excessive tendencies of contemporary design, and by extension, of capitalist production in general.

The fact that *Push Button House* doesn’t function – it can’t be inhabited, either open or closed – highlights the complicated processes, labour and materials involved in its design and production. As Marx observed long ago, functionality masks the complex labour involved in creating industrial products. Failure to function, in turn, shatters this disguise, as evident when the knife fails to cut.<sup>386</sup> Importantly, this negates the effects of commodity fetishism, which serves to disguise this process. The failed utility of *Push Button House* demonstrates all the efforts involved in its production, and thereby subverts its commodification. It also suggests that industrial manufacturing involves a large degree of material excess and waste.

Despite his observations about the illuminating nature of failed utility, Marx did not advocate dysfunctional production as a means of escaping the alienating effects of mass industry. In his analysis, the only means of emancipation was the communist

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<sup>384</sup> There is a Nietzschean sensibility in this risk-taking. Nietzsche writes, “The devotion of the greatest is to encounter risk and danger and play dice for death.” (Nietzsche, *Thus spake Zarathustra: a book for everyone and no one*, Harmondsworth; Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1969, p. 138)

<sup>385</sup> Bataille, *Essential Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (London: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 82

<sup>386</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol I, p. 182

revolution, wherein industrial labour would be reorganised under communal governance. Rather than critiquing industrial production itself, he focused on the way it was managed. For Jean Baudrillard, Marx thereby remained trapped within the terms of capitalist production.<sup>387</sup> Kalkin's experimentation with surplus-value, on the other hand, plays with the logic of the industrial process itself, driving it to a level of irrational 'excess.'

### *Limits and excess*

*Day Trader's* useless design, in the form of *Push Button House*, is suggestive of an excessive and irrational form of human production, one that has little regard for subsequent exchangeability, utility or monetary value. Bataille's understanding of the natural 'excess' of human production provides a means for understanding this apparently irrational waste of resources. Where Marx configured the dynamics of industrial production in terms of exchange, Bataille described economy in terms of expenditure (depense), and therefore helps to understand the unreciprocated spending of *Day Trader*. Bataille saw the natural world, and all human production by extension, as defined by the expenditure of energy. "In a general way, apparently, humanly speaking," he wrote, "the sum of energy produced is always greater than the sum necessary for its production. Hence the continuous and overly full churning out of energy, leading us endlessly to some summit."<sup>388</sup> This understanding of human labour thereby accounts for the role of desire in generating production.

Useless and extravagant expenditure, for Bataille, defines the "general economy" of the natural world, from eating and sex to religion and production. It characterises life: "The amounts expended uselessly allow life to harness solar energy and this effortlessly procures the excess of the living world."<sup>389</sup> While it is the natural world's inclination to expend energy, capitalist economy attempts to accumulate and contain human excess, directing it toward more production and ever-more accumulation. In this sense, the economy of natural human energy that Bataille describes is controlled and manipulated

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<sup>387</sup> See Baudrillard's *The Mirror of Production* for a critique of Marx's analysis of capitalism, (Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, 1975)

<sup>388</sup> Bataille, from *Oevres Completes*, vol. vii, translated in *Essential Writings*, p. 74

<sup>389</sup> Bataille, from *Oevres Completes*, vol. vii, translated in *Essential Writings*, p. 74

within the economy of late capital, turning it into ‘surplus-value.’ In Marx’s terms, surplus-value is the monetary equivalent of unpaid, and therefore ‘excess’ labour.<sup>390</sup> It therefore represents the systematic exploitation of the natural ‘excess’ of human production that Bataille describes. Capitalism harnesses, controls and profits from this “overly full churning out of energy,” converting it into surplus. Marx describes the result of this process as the negation of human desire and subjectivity.<sup>391</sup> This control and manipulation of human labour is the secret of capitalism’s overwhelming effectiveness. This helps to account for Kalkin’s emphasis on the human body in his architectural form, and his attempt to connect human experience with economics in the *Day Trader* project. Here, traces of human desire are acknowledged as integral to social production. The main difference between the economy of the natural world and the economy of social production, as both Bataille and Marx observe, is that capitalism doesn’t spend its surplus. While capitalist production results in an over-abundance of goods, this surplus is always converted back into capital. True ‘waste’, therefore, is severely restricted – hence the modernist emphasis on functionalism and productivity. In Bataille’s account, this hoarding of wealth is the cause of worldwide poverty and deprivation. While wealth accumulates in the abstract realm of financial ‘capital,’ it is not used to benefit the lives of the people who create it.<sup>392</sup>

*Day Trader*, with its four different modes of spending, presents a conscious attempt to reverse this trend. Quite simply, it wastes money. It spends money on a profitless cause, it disposes of money in a paper bag that may or may not have been discovered, it spends money on the ‘sacrifice’ of identity, and it channels capital into a dysfunctional design object. In the context of late capital, this is madness. Importantly, this disruption of the logic of capitalism does not involve ‘oppositional’ tactics. *Day Trader* does not present an alternative utopian economy or return to a primitive economy, nor does it revel in primal excess and consumption. Instead it generates excess capital by legal means through the stock market, and then distributes this excess capital inside its

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<sup>390</sup> Marx writes, “surplus-value results only from the quantitative excess of labour, from a lengthening-out of one and the same labour-process.” (Marx, *Capital*, vol I, p. 197)

<sup>391</sup> Marx writes, “Self-renunciation, the renunciation of life and of all human needs, is its principal thesis.” (*Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*, p. 112)

<sup>392</sup> Bataille writes, “Even today it is accepted that the world is poor and it is necessary to work. However, the world is sick with riches... In respect of the surplus, current famines are the consequence of an excess of energy.” (Bataille, from *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. vii, translated in *Essential Writings*, p. 78)



systems. Instead of transgressing the limits of capitalist economy with natural, primitive acts of expenditure, *Day Trader's* surplus was circulated within an already overabundant economy in such a way as to suggest that it too, like all human production, works from an inherent excess. This avoidance of transgression is deliberate. As Bataille acknowledges, “transgression has nothing to do with the primal liberty of animal life. It opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually observed, but it maintains these limits just the same.”<sup>393</sup> This is even more evident in the context of late capitalism, which constantly ‘transgresses’ itself, in order to expand.<sup>394</sup>

Instead, Kalkin took the mechanisms of capitalist production to extend its internal irrationality, exploring the paradoxical relationship of human desire and social production. *Day Trader* was therefore a case of mis-design. Kalkin describes the distribution of profits in *Day Trader* as being “recycled into the economy.” This reference to recycling, along with his preference for recycled architectural materials, demonstrates his manipulation of the systems of late capitalism from within. *Day Trader* thereby contains a double critique; it presents both an examination of the alienating effects of capitalist exchange, at the same time as disrupting the process of capitalist production with excess. Holding Marx and Bataille in an unresolved opposition, through a tense relationship between ‘surplus-value’ and ‘excess,’ *Day Trader* examines the way capitalism controls human energy and converts it into surplus-value, while at the same time allowing irrational, profitless disruptions of this process.

This strategy was evident, for example, when Kalkin’s father appeared in *Push Button House*. Embedded in the architecture, his presence emphasised the importance of the family in forming and defining social space. In the context of traditional psychoanalysis, of course, the figure of the father is inseparable from social law. Yet on the occasion of the ‘unveiling,’ Kalkin described his father as ‘my progeny.’ Inverting their relationship, he transformed ‘father’ into ‘child.’ Not only did this emasculate the father figure’s authority, but it also destabilised the assumed normality of the domestic unit. Kalkin showed a refusal to submit to the conventional Oedipal family structure,

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<sup>393</sup> Bataille, from *Eroticism*, in *Essential Writings*, p. 58

<sup>394</sup> As Žižek writes, “capitalism, which can survive only by incessantly revolutionising its own material conditions, ceases to exist if it ‘stays the same,’ if it achieves an internal balance.” Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology*, p. 52

which for Deleuze and Guattari serves “to humble us, demean us, and to make us feel guilty.”<sup>395</sup> By presenting the father figure as a child in a dysfunctional, evolving and transformative house, Kalkin suggested that the traditional domestic sphere is an unstable and irrational construction.

If late capitalism is constantly in a state of expansion, then Kalkin’s economic game explores how this very limitlessness might provide its undoing. The “absolute limit” of capitalist production, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, is schizophrenia. The concept of schizophrenia, as opposed to the medical condition, stands as the most extreme extension of capital’s madness. It is a social construct, conventionally understood to signify breakdowns of meaning, the confusion of reality, fragmentation and delusion.<sup>396</sup> In *Day Trader*, this extreme limit is most evident in the alienated identity of the ‘new’ Jerry Lewis. Becoming Jerry Lewis, the winning bidder of the auction enters into a fictional reality. At the same time as enacting Marx’s sense of self-renunciation, the ‘new’ Jerry Lewis subject comes to inhabit an absurd, cynical and comical identity. Jerry Lewis is famous, after all, for impersonation. His persona is therefore an amorphous mass of caricatures, stereotypes and multiple subject positions. The reverse auction forces this schizophrenic social identity on the ‘new’ Jerry Lewis. Directing capitalist surplus toward this extreme breakdown of social subjectivity, it takes Marx’s sense of ‘alienation’ to the sphere of schizophrenia.

In keeping with this sense of ‘limitlessness,’ Kalkin has continued to extend the Jerry Lewis project. Some time after the *Day Trader* project seemed to have been resolved, a new video installation appeared, unannounced, in *The Collector’s House*. The work carried the title, *Jerry Lewis Palimpsest* (Figure 59), and it featured an ‘endless’ sampling of Jerry Lewis video clips. A 90 minute loop of images and sounds, the piece claimed to incorporate all of Lewis’ solo performances through a complex process of digital layering. The resulting cacophony of images made the proliferation and multiplicity of Deleuze and Guattari’s schizophrenic process quite literal. The work was encountered by museum-goers, probably expecting an exhibition of antique folk-art.

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<sup>395</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 53-54

<sup>396</sup> For example, the Oxford Dictionary of English defines schizophrenia as “a breakdown in the relation between thought, emotion, and behaviour, leading to faulty perception, inappropriate actions and feelings, withdrawal from reality and personal relationships into fantasy and delusion, and a sense of mental fragmentation.” (See *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English*)

‘Palimpsest’ is a literary term that refers to a process of layering. In its original sense, it describes “a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing.”<sup>397</sup> More generally, it refers to a process of multilayered inscription that results in the erasure of the original.

As each new Jerry Lewis character appears in *Palimpsest*, therefore, the accumulation blurs and confuses the original footage, creating a distorted sense of time and character. Running on a continuous loop and containing a barely legible stream of footage taken from Lewis’ entire life’s work, *Jerry Lewis Palimpsest* takes a sense of social irrationality to its most chaotic, unintelligible state. Meaning becomes confused as more and more information accumulates. And it is through this conflation of multiple images that the work emulates a kind of structural limitlessness. Schizophrenic limitlessness, for Deleuze and Guattari, disrupts the expansion of late capital, representing “its difference, its divergence, and its death.”<sup>398</sup> When they describe schizophrenia as a means of escape from capitalism, it is not presented as an alternative to capitalism. Like the chaotic proliferation of *Jerry Lewis Palimpsest*, embedded within *The Collector’s House*, it presents an internal transformation.<sup>399</sup>

Bataille also identifies a paradoxical ‘limit’ to capital’s expansion. Because endless hoarding is anathema to the organic process of expenditure, he argues, it cannot continue indefinitely. “That is an obvious dead-end,” he writes, “since in the long run we can’t continue spending to gain – and as I’ve said, *the sum of energy produced is always greater...*”<sup>400</sup> It is important to note that Bataille trails off at this point in the sentence, lending emphasis to the word ‘greater.’ This failure to conclude is not incidental. Bataille’s writing often contains a disruptive function, misleading the systems of language.<sup>401</sup> Bataille’s argument becomes a literary palimpsest of its own by refusing to conclude and looping back to its beginning. This helps to understand the chaotic structure

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<sup>397</sup> Fowler and Fowler, eds, *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English*.

<sup>398</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 267. See also “Introduction to schizoanalysis,” in *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 301-417

<sup>399</sup> They write, “the schizophrenic escape itself does not merely consist in withdrawing from the social, in living on the fringe: it causes the social to take flight through the multiplicity of holes that eat away at it.” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 374)

<sup>400</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 42-43

<sup>401</sup> As Dennis Hollier explains, “Writing is the plan frustrated on its own territory. It destroys the book, precludes its closing up (and what is left a book that could not close up again? Its opening... of which it is least in possession.)” Hollier, *Against architecture*, p. 46

of Kalkin's video. By looping back to a beginning that itself presents a kind of 'end point' of profuse layering, both Bataille and *Jerry Lewis Palimpsest* destroy themselves as 'products.' The internal layering of *Jerry Lewis Palimpsest* frustrates the commodification of Jerry Lewis as performer, the medium of video, the architectural space in which it resides along with the museological space that houses the architecture. Moreover, it is an 'unplanned' expenditure that emerges as an offshoot from the reverse auction, thus disrupting the limits of the *Day Trader* project.

The identity-exchange of *Day Trader's* auction became a web of interchanging identity in the video, which in turn transforms the architectural space of *The Collector's House*, returning to a site of Kalkin's earlier artistic production. In addition, the name of *The Collector's House* changed to *Kalkin House* at the same time that *Jerry Lewis Palimpsest* appeared, refusing its prior identifications. As an extension of *Day Trader*, *Kalkin House* exceeds its positioning as museum space and exceeds itself as an example of architectural design. *Jerry Lewis Palimpsest* thereby configures artistic critique as an absolute limit for the systems of late capital. Deleuze and Guattari also configure art as a unique vehicle for this internal critique, which they describe as "that which places an explosive device in its package, fabricating a counterfeit currency, causing the superego and its form of expression to explode, as well as the market value of its form of content."<sup>402</sup>

*Day Trader* uses the logic of capitalist economics – producing a substantial amount of surplus capital, then circulating it as 'excess' – in order to undermine the assumed rationality of the consumer market. Each of the four acts of expenditure negates the function of 'surplus-value,' referring instead to the excess inherent in all human production. Refusing to invest, hoard or accumulate its profits, *Day Trader* disrupts its origin in the systems of late capital. At the point of this irrational conclusion, the project leads back to its blackboard premise: the childish and playful "misuse of capitalist linguistics." Kalkin's play seriously exploits the internal contradictions of late capitalism, which feeds on creative experimentation to entangle consumer desire all the more within its web. This internal critique is indicative of artistic production. As Deleuze writes,

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<sup>402</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 146

The more our daily life appears standardised, stereotyped and subject to an accelerated reproduction of objects of consumption, the more art must be injected into it in order to extract from it that little difference which plays simultaneously between other levels of repetition... Art thereby connects the tableau of cruelty with that of stupidity, and discovers underneath consumption a schizophrenic clattering of the jaws.<sup>403</sup>

*Jerry Lewis Palimpsest* encapsulates the complex dynamic of Kalkin's artistic position, which employs a profuse and seemingly irrational layering of performance, sculpture, text, architecture, design and economics. The resulting palimpsest is embedded within commercial design products in order to continually push the 'ever greater' limits of useless artistic expenditure. This process takes the irrational logic of late capitalism and turns it against itself in a double critique that firstly examines the sociological consequences of capitalist production, and then ruptures its irrational limits. Traversing the complex territory of late capitalism, locating its latent and displaced forms of desire, Kalkin opens up spaces for critique within commercial production in order to salvage the critical possibilities of contemporary art in a 'designed' commercial world.

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<sup>403</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 293

## Chapter 4

### Overcoming design: Vito Acconci / Acconci Studio

In the picturesque city of Graz, Austria, a proposition floats on the river Mur (Figure 60). It is made of glass and steel. It has sunk into the water, half drowned. Yet it swims, as if it could drift away into the surrounding trees. It curves and twists around itself, an inorganic mussel on the surface of the water. Two long tendrils unfold from its belly and tether it to the shore – one to the north, the other to the south. It is an island. At the same time, it acts as a bridge, connecting the two sides of the city, ordinarily divided by social circumstances and water. It is a passageway, a temporary meeting place and a site for chance encounters. The smell of the river permeates while the wind channels through to remind its inhabitants that they are outside. Yet it spirals inward to house a café, a playground and a theatre. Teenagers mingle and smoke on its plaza, which is formed out of rings of seats that circle around a stage. This plaza is also an amphitheatre, with a café for its stage, whose patrons become actors for the gaze of the public. Is this a private or a public space? Is it natural or built? Is it inside or out? A quiet city is now tense. How can a building create such tension? Is this a construction or a provocation?

*Mur Island* was built in 2001. The architectural anomaly was designed by Acconci Studio, established by the artist Vito Acconci in 1988. Acconci's artistic practice began in the 1960s, during a time of utopian imaginings for the potential of art and architecture. After two decades of artistic practice, however, he felt he had exhausted the critical potential of art in the consumer world. "Was I becoming an interior decorator for a gallery," he asks, "in effect camouflaging its function as a store?"<sup>404</sup> He renounced overt idealism along with the art world and began collaborating with trained architects on public design projects. As evident in the peculiar design of *Mur Island*, the architectural company works with, rather than against, the confused spatial condition of the late postmodern world. Acconci Studio describes this as 'bad topology':

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<sup>404</sup> Vito Acconci, "Vito Acconci: February 7, 1989. Studio, Dumbo, Brooklyn" in Judith Olch Richards, ed., *Inside the Studio* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2004) p. 64

A topological space mixes inside and outside, and warps boundaries. We're interested in this space because it's the space of the present: in a world where a plane can come in and crash through a building, then boundaries must not exist. We hope this present is only bad topology, only a misguided practice for a future.<sup>405</sup>

Social idealism has been abandoned for the designed landscape of the contemporary world, a world that is increasingly privatised and determined by the movements of capital.<sup>406</sup> In such an era, it is not surprising that Acconci is overt in his engagement with the commercial market. But it raises the question: does the misguided practice of Acconci Studio simply pander to this condition?

In his wide-ranging practice, Acconci has continuously reacted against the commercialisation of art and the reframing of subversive practices by the art market. At first glance, his move into commercial design therefore seems unlikely. If contemporary art is itself reframed within the concept of design, however, then Acconci's own reframing of his artistic practice can be seen as a tactical manoeuvre. It is not the issue of form that is at stake in his work, but rather the issue of criticality. In *Earth Moves*, Bernard Cache describes architecture as a conceptual 'frame.' By framing space, not only does it shape the physical spaces of society but it also encompasses, selects, shapes and informs art.<sup>407</sup> After continually reframing himself within the conventions of art, Acconci has decided to negotiate the frame itself. An unlikely mix of conceptualism and phenomenology has informed his work, which has consistently arrived in the form of propositions, provocations and ideas, posed in terms of language yet nevertheless emphasising physical space and the lived experience of the body. Architecture, mediating

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<sup>405</sup> Acconci Studio, "Statements and Responses: Denver Art Museum," in *Acconci Studio Archive* (New York: 2003)

<sup>406</sup> Gilles Deleuze describes this "bad topology" in terms of control, suggesting that power has moved from the enclosure of institutions and into the global world of technology. This makes for uncertain politics and economics: "The conquests of the market are made by grabbing control and no longer by disciplinary training... by transformation of the product more than by specialisation of production." It is an age where "even art has left the spaces of enclosure in order to enter into the open circuits of the bank." (See "Postscript on the societies of control," in *Rethinking architecture*, ed. Leach, New York: Routledge, 1997)

<sup>407</sup> In the introduction to *Earth Moves*, Bernard Cache writes: "Architecture, the art of the frame, would then not only concern those specific objects that are buildings, but would refer to any image involving any element of framing, which is to say painting as well as cinema, and certainly many other things." (See Bernard Cache, *Earth moves: the furnishing of territories*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995, p. 2)

between conceptual ideas and physical place, is a natural extension of this practice. Acconci's architecture thus sets up a dialogue between the material conditions of architecture and the critical practices or intentions of art.

The architect Bernard Tschumi has alluded to the dangers of Acconci's position, cautioning:

I don't think he's an architect and shouldn't try to be one. He has more freedom to ask more architectural questions by not being an architect, not being stuck with architecture's emphasis on function and the other cuffs it places.<sup>408</sup>

Acconci's determination to overcome limitations only makes architecture all the more appealing, however, and he has embraced the role of architect along with its associated chains and cuffs. As I will argue, the projects of Acconci Studio do not represent a break away from his earlier artistic practice, but rather its evolution into the sphere of design. This evolution has involved, on Acconci's part, some misleading disavowals. Initially, he gave up poetry for performance. He then abandoned performance for sculpture, before transforming sculpture into design. Each of these refusals can be seen as attempts to overcome the limitations of art – particularly its modes of cultural domination and its complicity with late capitalism. If architecture is Acconci's new form, then art remains the attitude. As he says, "I love the idea of art as an activity or attitude."<sup>409</sup> His entire practice can be conceived of as a sequence of problematic events leading to this current provocation of design.

Acconci's conscious play with artistic and architectural authorship is considered in this chapter in terms of Nietzsche's 'will to power,' as a means to take hold of the systems of art and architecture in a gradual overcoming of the designed spaces of contemporary society. I take Nietzsche's sense of 'will' to mean an internal motivation for change that has no directive or outcome. This is evident, for example, when Nietzsche

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<sup>408</sup> Bernard Tschumi, cited in Aric Chen, "Coming of age," *ID Magazine*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2002), p. 41

<sup>409</sup> Acconci, cited in Anne Barclay Morgan, "A conversation with Vito Acconci: Revolution is Sneakier," *Sculpture*, vol. 21, no. 7 (2002), p. 50 As Mark Wigley writes: "Architecture, then, plays a curious strategic role. It is able to pass between philosophy and art in a unique way. It is involved in a kind of translation." (See Mark Wigley, *The architecture of deconstruction: Derrida's haunt*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993, p. 91)



writes “‘Willing’ is not ‘desiring’, striving, demanding: it is distinguished from these by the affect of commanding. There is no such thing as ‘willing’, but only a willing *something*: one must not remove the aim from the total condition.”<sup>410</sup> In this sense, I take Elizabeth Grosz and Gilles Deleuze’s more liberal approach to Nietzsche, shifting focus away from his associations with suprematism toward the democratic potential of his approach to evolution. For Grosz, the will to power provides a means to empower and overcome existing values and systems. In *The Nick of Time*, she turns Nietzsche’s seemingly individualistic and patriarchal gaze toward the project of contemporary feminism.<sup>411</sup> For Deleuze, Nietzsche’s alternative evolutionary model affirms becoming and differentiation rather than control and elitism. He writes, for example, that Nietzsche’s philosophy puts forward “The lightness of that which affirms against the weight of the negative; the games of the will to power against the labour of the dialectic.”<sup>412</sup> Importantly, Nietzsche offers a shift away from outcome and purpose toward process and change, while embracing human agency. In Acconci’s case, I argue, the agency of the ‘will to power’ is wielded against the privilege of artistic authorship and the product-outcome based methodology of design.

This chapter examines how Acconci has reframed art within and against the field of architecture in order to frustrate design. Acconci Studio resists conforming to the systems of late capitalism, I argue, by misdirecting the outcome-based methodology of design. The first section traces Acconci’s evolution from poetry and performance into commercial architecture. The chapter then evaluates Acconci Studio’s design process and methodology. Finally, it considers how this practice might be misdirecting the future of art in the designed world. If design is not subordinated to the demands of the market, to the production of a ‘product,’ then it becomes a unique field for thinking about space and society. As Richard Buchanan observes, “Design is the art of shaping arguments about the artificial or human-made world.”<sup>413</sup> Acconci’s embrace of design affirms art as a misguided practice that redirects use, disavows purpose and provides space for critical reflection. In the misguided hands of art, design becomes conceptual, organic and critical.

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<sup>410</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #668, p. 353

<sup>411</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz, *The nick of time*.

<sup>412</sup> See Deleuze, *Nietzsche and philosophy*, London: Athlone Press, 1983, p. 197

<sup>413</sup> Buchanan, “Rhetoric, humanism and design,” in *Discovering design*, p. 46

At the same time, outside of the designed art world, critical art evolves into a productive practice.

## **Evolution**

In 1971, Vito Acconci spent three hours in a basement in New York, blindfolded and wielding a crowbar and lead pipes. Chanting his internal thoughts, he asserted his claim to the space, daring anyone from the outside to impinge on his territory. He was seated at the base of a set of stairs, behind a closed door. Upstairs, a video monitor projected his utterings to viewers outside. The performance, titled *Claim* (Figure 61), pointed to the implicit domination of the viewer by the conventional viewing modes of modern art. By extension, it exposed underlying relations of power in culture more broadly, questioning the democratic nature of the so-called ‘public’ space of art. Importantly, the work involved a focus on the temporal relations of bodies in space, with no knowledge of the outcome of the performance. If a viewer were to enter the space, would Acconci swing his weapon and attempt to kill them, as he threatened? In addition to unsettling the conventions of modern art, *Claim* reconfigured the artwork itself as an unpredictable event rather than an object, thereby undermining the fetish of the art object and the commercialisation of art. By contrast, design has a predetermined outcome; the production of objects for consumption. How did Vito Acconci move from his blindfolded position in 1971 to the directorial seat of a design studio three decades later?

Acconci Studio can only make sense in relation to the development of Vito Acconci’s critical artistic practice. His transition from poetry into art, and from art into architecture does not represent a conceptual break in his practice. Instead, his artistic identity has mutated in direct response to the increasing design of art within the late capitalist sphere. In his first museum retrospective at the MCA Chicago in 1980, the curator, Judith Russi Kirshner, seemed to anticipate his evolving career, writing “Acconci’s career is a continuum of ideas that flows from piece to piece.”<sup>414</sup> This evolutionary aspect of his work has been widely observed in terms of a personal shift in

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<sup>414</sup> Judith Russi Kirshner, *Vito Acconci: a retrospective, 1969 to 1980* (Chicago: MCA, 1980) p. 4

practice, from poet to artist to architect. It has not, however, been considered as the overcoming and evolution of art.

In 1967, Acconci published the following poem:

I lie down on the land.  
I had it  
I have it  
I did it  
I do it  
I will it  
I lay him down on the line.  
I had  
I have  
I did  
I do  
I will <sup>415</sup>

Intention and will have been central concerns in Acconci's work since he began his experimentation with the systems of language in the 1960s. His move off the written page and into performance, from performance into video, from video into sculpture, sculpture into public art and most recently from art into architecture, have all been driven by a motivation to overcome the systems of representation, to find liberation from the domination of cultural forms. Each shift in his practice marks an attempt to overcome his subordination to a system – the system of representation, the patriarchal system of culture and the commercial system of art. Each new stage in his artistic practice, in this sense, can be seen as a form of Nietzsche's will to power, an attempt to seize control of a prevailing system and overcome it. As his poem asserted: "I did / I do / *I will*." <sup>416</sup> His work takes on a new light through a Nietzschean lens.

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<sup>415</sup> Acconci, *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, ed. Corinne Diserens, exhibition catalogue, (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2004), p. 53

<sup>416</sup> Acconci, *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, p. 53 [My emphasis]

In the notorious philosophical text *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche describes biological evolution not in terms of ‘natural selection,’ but instead as the result of an internal force, or will.<sup>417</sup> This ‘will to power’ explains the history of natural and human evolution, while also providing a model for transforming social systems. A desire to overcome the present only arises in certain individuals, Nietzsche suggests, for whom the will to power is particularly strong. This manifests in a capacity for self-overcoming and a drive to evolve rather than an oppositional or alternative form of social organisation. He writes, “the feeling of increase, the feeling of becoming stronger, is itself, quite apart from any usefulness in the struggle, the real *progress*: only from this feeling does there arise the will to struggle.”<sup>418</sup> Nietzsche’s evolutionary model therefore entails an unapologetic privileging of individual agency. Yet it does not rely on the concept of a centered, whole, and stable construction of the subject. Instead, the Nietzschean subject is a combination of active forces that are constantly in flux, changing, growing, becoming, and integrally part of a biological process. He writes, “The individual itself is a struggle between parts (for food, space, etc.)” While this subject is not unified, it nevertheless contains an internal force, or will: “the essential thing in the life process is precisely the tremendous shaping, form-creating force working from within which *utilises* and *exploits* ‘external circumstances’.”<sup>419</sup> This subjectivity therefore avoids the relative and fragmented associations of the postmodern subject, characterised by Victor Burgin as “the schizophrenic anxiety of the body in pieces.”<sup>420</sup>

Nietzsche’s model, despite dubious social implications, provides a unique angle from which to conceive of the ‘overcoming’ of current social and political impasses. Acconci harnesses this affirmative position of agency, while diverging from the errant philosopher in at least one significant aspect – he turns the will to power to a focus on community and democratic debate. Acconci’s various attempts to overcome his subordination within conventional cultural systems have all involved a rigorous examination of authorship and an emphasis on the transparency of artistic intention. This transparency was achieved through literalism, clearly inspired by the minimalist tradition

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<sup>417</sup> See Nietzsche, *The will to power*.

<sup>418</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #649, p. 314

<sup>419</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #647, p. 344

<sup>420</sup> Burgin, *In/different spaces*, p. 158

in sculpture. Where Acconci differed from his minimalist predecessors, however, was in making evident his authorial position. He states, "If I know something about my intentions, everybody else should know, too."<sup>421</sup> Embracing the authorial position was a way of acknowledging the construction of meaning within systems of representation. Importantly, it also served to make the audience aware of their subordination by modernist structures.

Acconci's initial experiments with poetry involved a literal use of language in order to refuse signification, and thereby to overcome the structure of representation. He described words as 'props for movement,' the page as 'thing' and explored writing as a spatial, territorial act. He wanted representation to account for the experience of the lived body in space, and so he focused on the physical aspects of writing, such as "how to travel from left margin to right; how to make it necessary, or not necessary, to turn from one page to the next."<sup>422</sup> Testing the physical limits of the page was a means to test the representational limits of language. This was an act of will that embraced the authorial position. He notes, "I loved the notion of writing as intention, of writing as will."<sup>423</sup> But Acconci wielded the privilege of authorship against itself, willing an escape from language altogether. In this sense, 'will' incited action but did not depend on an elevation of individual privilege. In order to fully overcome the limits of representation, he abandoned the page and moved into physical space.

His authorial voice thus moved from the white page of poetry and into the performative space of art. In *Claim*, Acconci's voice was imperative to his assertion of territory. A live video monitor projected him uttering a threatening monologue to the audience outside. In a hypnotic tone, he asserted his claim to the territory of the basement, defying anyone to challenge his ownership of the space. Recalling his poem *I lie down on the land*, and making his authorial position patently evident, he intoned: "I'm alone down here in the basement... I want to stay alone here... I don't want anyone with me... I'll stop anyone from coming down the stairs..."<sup>424</sup> For the majority of the three-

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<sup>421</sup> Acconci, cited in Joseph Ruzicka, "Lines to be filled in later," *On Paper*, 1, no. 6 (1997), p. 30

<sup>422</sup> Acconci, *Language/Body/Sound/Cities*, (New York: Cooper Union School of Art, 2002), p. 10

<sup>423</sup> Acconci, "Interview: Mark C. Taylor in correspondence with Vito Acconci" in Frazer Ward, Mark C Taylor, and Jennifer Bloomer, eds., *Vito Acconci* (New York; London: Phaidon Press, 2002), p. 10

<sup>424</sup> Acconci, cited in Christine Poggi, "Following Acconci/Targeting Vision," in *Performing the body/performing the text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (London: Routledge, 1999)p. 269

hour performance, he was passively seated. He would only become active, swing his weapons and engage with the viewer if they trespassed upon his territory by entering the stairwell. This aggression required, on his part, an act of will, as expressed in his monologue: “I have to keep talking... I’ve got to believe this... I’ve got to make myself believe this...”<sup>425</sup> With the affirmations *I have to* and *I’ve got to*, he pushed himself beyond social conventions, willing himself to perpetrate violence. This also involved risk – he made himself vulnerable by sacrificing his vision and by expressing his internal thoughts to the viewer outside. But the test of will was two-fold. He also tested the will of the viewer, by antagonistically daring them to take possession of the artwork, to enter the space and encounter the artist. In this way, he made the viewer aware of a certain hostility in the act of gazing, drawing attention to complex power structures in the conventions of modern art, with an oscillation of power between viewer and subject.

In both his poetry and performance, Acconci positioned himself within an established system to expose its implicit power relations. In other words, he laid bare underlying social codes. Theoretical interpretations of his work have tended to focus on this ‘deconstructive’ function. In her monograph of 1994, for example, Kate Linker described his evolving practice as a replication of the move toward a post-structural perception of self, writing “This shift from a ‘pure’ self to one that is subjected to the forces of society is replicated in Acconci’s work.”<sup>426</sup> Acconci’s use of literal forms, along with his embrace of an internal motivation or ‘will,’ however, complicates a purely deconstructive reading. His work does not break down systems so much as exaggerate them. While this is deconstructive in Jacques Derrida’s sense – he deforms structures from the inside – Acconci also maintains the possibility of change, of re-construction. Mark Wigley elaborates Derrida’s concept of deconstruction through the idea of ‘frustration,’ suggesting that he inhabits structures in a way that unsettles them, writing “The rhythm of the dance calls into question the house by inhabiting space in a way that frustrates

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<sup>425</sup> Acconci, cited in Poggi, "Following Acconci/Targeting Vision," p. 269

<sup>426</sup> Kate Linker, *Vito Acconci*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), p.7. For another deconstructive reading, see Philip Auslander, "Vito Acconci and the politics of the body in postmodern performance," in *After the Future: Postmodern Times and Places*, ed. Gary Shapiro (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990)

inhabitation.”<sup>427</sup> Yet Acconci also foresees a potential beyond systematic disruption, maintaining a hope for revolution. This is evident for example when he describes his conceptual process: “I start with the body, the way I start at home, go to the mind, then to the extended mind. First the center, then break it, then try to bring things together. You have a superstructure, then a critique, *and then you have a revolution.*”<sup>428</sup>

While such ideals for revolution are now disguised in a more pragmatic approach, it is clear that Acconci has always had a focus beyond the destruction of systems. His work is ‘misconstructive’ on a path to transformation and is therefore more Nietzschean in its attempt to overcome through evolution rather than destruction.<sup>429</sup> Acconci accounts for *Claim* as an attempt to “think of art as an exchange, an occasion of meeting, a place where the person in the role of artist comes face to face with the person in the role of viewer.”<sup>430</sup> By revealing the power relations of the space of the gallery, he hoped to encourage more democratic exchanges in public space. Nietzsche may seem an unlikely counterpart to this democratic idealism. He openly detested the ‘herd type,’ instead advocating privilege and superiority, even proposing the need for a new form of nobility. Yet his ideas were not directed toward a specific political condition, a social program or the reinforcement of existing social codes. Instead, he attempted to completely overturn the predominant system of values. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche describes modern humanity as a kind of disease on the earth: “The earth (he said) has a skin; and this skin has diseases. One of these diseases, for example, is called ‘Man.’”<sup>431</sup> A critique of the present state of the human species thus underlies his emphasis on evolution. For Bataille, Nietzsche’s philosophy contradicts the very concept of a political program, and therefore cannot be taken as advocating anything. He writes, “proposals for activity and temptation to work out a goal or politics end up as a maze. His last completed work, *Ecce*

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<sup>427</sup> Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction*, p. 162. Architectural critic Lilian Pfaff questions the deconstructive reading of Acconci’s work. She writes, “for Acconci it is far less a question of De-Architecture than a construction of a fictive history.” (See Pfaff, “The building is a text. Vito Acconci / Acconci Studio” in *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, p. 400)

<sup>428</sup> Acconci, cited in Paola Iglioni, ed., *Entrails, Heads and Tails* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), n.p.

<sup>429</sup> In the past, Acconci has referred to his public art as “de-design.” (See Acconci, “Public space in a private time,” *Critical Inquiry*, no. 16, 1990, p. 915) This reference to deconstruction is misleading. He does not de-design so much as *mis-design*.

<sup>430</sup> Acconci, cited in Morgan, “A conversation with Vito Acconci,” p.46

<sup>431</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus spake Zarathustra*, p.153

*Homo*, affirms absence of goals as well as the author's complete lack of a plan."<sup>432</sup> For Bataille, this failure of completion represents Nietzsche's success – he undoes the very idea of 'purpose,' a fundamental characteristic of social domination. His writings are therefore not programmatic but philosophical, providing a means to rethink existing social values.

Acconci's evolution from writing into performance involved an idealistic attempt to overcome the impasses of postmodernity, where the conflation of art and commerce appeared to be inevitable and inescapable.<sup>433</sup> This sense of affirmation, along with the attempt to overturn perceptions and existing values, is particularly Nietzschean. Indeed, Nietzsche describes his whole philosophical project as an attempt to "overcome pessimism."<sup>434</sup> And so Acconci has been consistently attempting to harness social systems in order to incite reaction against their oppressive tendencies, as seen in his over-emphasis on authorial privilege in the language of poetry and in the space of performance. As Acconci observes, "All my life, I've never had particular skills, particular talents; I've just had will."<sup>435</sup> This will emerges most clearly in his antagonistic provocation of the viewer.

In *Claim*, he set up a situation that was dangerous for both himself and the viewer, provoking struggle as a precondition for (r)evolution. Nietzsche suggests that the best conditions for the evolution of a new and better humanity are not to be found in a nurturing, comfortable environment, but rather in

the reverse conditions: that the dangerousness of his situation must grow to tremendous proportions, that his power of invention and dissembling must struggle up beneath protracted oppression and compulsion, that his will to live must be enhanced to an unconditional will to power and to overpower.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. xxviii. While Bataille and Nietzsche are both considered "bad boys" of philosophy, infamous for their provocative explorations of concepts such as evil, eroticism and death. they both hold a particular fascination for a variety of liberal philosophers including Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Elizabeth Grosz.

<sup>433</sup> See his comments in "Performance after the fact", in Luigi Pecci, ed., *Vito Acconci*, Exhibition catalogue, (Prato: Museo D'Arte Contemporanea, 1991)

<sup>434</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #103, p. 532

<sup>435</sup> Acconci, in Richard Prince, "Vito Acconci," *Bomb Magazine*, (1991), p. 56

<sup>436</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #957, p. 502



In this light, evolution and progress can only occur through struggle. Similarly, Acconci used danger in *Claim* as a means to incite change in the art world. The performance was unpredictable, undetermined, and relied on risk to both the artist and viewer. Firstly, he placed himself in a defensive position in the basement. He then impaired his reflexes by placing a blindfold over his eyes. He openly invited the audience to challenge him. The use of video, conjuring references to surveillance and security systems, was wielded against the artist, exposing his position to the viewer. Acconci thus established the conditions he required to react against the systems of art, at the same time as demonstrating the vulnerability of both artist and viewer in a socially constructed setting of human exchange.

He has often described the space of the gallery in militaristic terms. In an exhibition catalogue from 1976, for example, he described the space of the gallery as follows: “Assuming that the space can function as a call to arms; assuming that a space can be treated as a terrain to get the feel of, a terrain for battle.”<sup>437</sup> And so *Claim* did not invite participation, but rather lured the viewer into a war-zone. Just as Acconci’s poetry emphasised the physical space of the page, *Claim* made the territorial function of art literal. Deleuze and Guattari describe the inherently territorial function of art through the analogy of a stagemaker bird, which instinctively lays down a bed of leaves, establishing a territory, as a stage for song. Through this description, they relate all artistic expression to the act of demarcating space, of claiming a territory. All territories, in this light, extend from art. They write:

Can this becoming, this emergence, be called Art? That would make the territory a result of art. The artist: the first person to set out a boundary stone, or to make a mark. Property, collective or individual, is derived from that.<sup>438</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Acconci, *Think/Leap/Re-think/Fall* (Dayton: University Art Gallery, Wright State University, 1976), n.p.

<sup>438</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, p. 348. This passage helps to account for their insistence that artistic practice can have profound social and political consequences – it establishes and also breaks down territories.

Not only did Acconci reveal this territorial function, but he embraced it, just as he embraced the authorial voice, as an expression of his will to power and to overpower the prevailing structure.

At the same time, he incited the will of the audience by placing them in danger. When a viewer accepted his invitation and transgressed the territorial boundary, he would rise from his seat and swing the crowbar, increasing the pitch of his voice and proclaiming his determination to inflict physical harm. Chanting his ownership of the space, he thus made the viewer aware of their subservient position. There was a very real possibility that he might act on his intentions, and he has gone so far as to suggest, “The work can be seen as attempted murder.”<sup>439</sup> Acconci’s overpowering tactic revealed implicit relations of power within the viewing modes of modern art, explicitly challenging the viewer as a means to overcome these conventions.

Despite this provocation, however, the work did not incite revolution, and no viewers accepted his challenge. Instead, it only enhanced the victimisation of the viewer and reinforced Acconci’s authorial power. As Donald Kuspitt has observed: “To create a sense of being trapped – situations of no escape – and terrorised by the feeling of entrapment: this is the ultimate goal of Acconci’s art.”<sup>440</sup> The minimalist approach, whereby Acconci overstated the relationship between artwork and viewer, literally refused engagement. The work also failed to overcome the fetishisation of the artwork. Acconci’s notoriety as a ‘shock’ performer only served to increase the profile and marketability of the art systems he was trying to undermine. Such apparent ‘failures’ did not dampen his determination, however. If anything, they only provoked him further. Acconci states: “It seemed everything I disliked about art – art as religion, artwork as altar, artist as priest – was enhanced or confirmed by my work. *There had to be a way out.*”<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Acconci, "Some notes on illegality in art," *Art Journal*, vol. 50, no. 3 (1991), pp. 69-70

<sup>440</sup> Donald Kuspitt, "Vito Acconci: The hunger artist in the lonely crowd," *Artscribe International*, (1988), p. 65. In a damning critique of his performative practice, Robert Pincus-Witten suggests that Acconci’s anarchic intentions were curtailed by his use of minimalist form, resulting in a kind of “autistic vacuum.” He writes, “In this sense he approaches social indifference – despite the enormity of the social implications of his work – and remains as elitist and infra-referential as Duchamp always was and as the general tenor of New York Dadaism in its heroic period was as well.” (See Pincus-Witten, “Vito Acconci and the conceptual performance” in *Postminimalism*, (New York: Out of London Press, 1977), p. 147

<sup>441</sup> Acconci, cited in Morgan, "A conversation with Vito Acconci," p. 46 [My emphasis]

In true Nietzschean style, struggle provided an incentive for change. Feeling he had reached the limits of performance in the early 1970s, Acconci set about overcoming the privilege of the artist by removing his body from his works altogether. In his words, “In order to give ‘you’ more room to move, I had to get out.”<sup>442</sup> He began to make interactive sculptures that forced the viewer to engage with the work, continuing his explorations of social relations in public space. He thus shifted ground and entered the realm of design. From the confined space of the white page, to the space of his own body, to the social space of the art gallery, and finally into the urban realm, Acconci’s practice slowly widened its territorial range. Ever so gradually, his will to transform was infiltrating and overpowering the systems of language, art and public space. The approach was not so much oppositional as insidious, encourages internal reactions against systems to motivate change. Acconci has directly linked this subversive tactic with the idea of evolution, writing, “But this method of subversion demands patience, cynicism, and a blind trust in evolution.”<sup>443</sup> Just as Nietzsche argues that progress and evolution are marked by the eternal return of the past in new variations, Acconci’s own evolution is circular; and each phase of his work circles back to core concerns with the body, space and language. The body in *Claim* might have been displaced from the artwork, yet his provocations did not go away.

### ***Maze Table: Provoking design***

*Maze Table* (Figure 62) was designed and constructed in 1985. It resides, both chronologically and conceptually, between Acconci’s early experiments with interactive sculpture and the beginning of his more ‘serious’ architectural practice. *Maze Table* was an expansive sculptural work, approximately 3.6m square with a height of 75cm, that filled its small exhibition space at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Connecticut, USA. Constructed entirely out of glass, its form was barely visible. This indiscernible quality was enhanced by the complexity of the overall structure, where nine interconnecting

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<sup>442</sup> Acconci, “Notes on peopled space, 1977,” in Ward et. el., *Vito Acconci*, p. 102

<sup>443</sup> Acconci, “Coming out (notes on public art)” in Pecci, ed., *Vito Acconci*, p.142

tables formed a maze-like communal sitting space. A zig-zagging bench joined the tables to one another, enabling participants to slide from one table to the next. The work thereby encouraged interaction, forming a social space in the gallery.

With its gleaming form and geometrical construction, it clearly referenced minimalist sculpture. It fused Robert Smithson's use of glass in works such as *Mirror Stratum* (1966) with Donald Judd's strict use of cubic form in works such as *Box* (1975-77). *Maze Table* recalled minimalist sculpture, however, only to unhinge it. It was not an object so much as a space of engagement. The barely visible surface drew visual attention away from its objecthood and onto the inhabitants sliding through its spaces. It literally framed the viewer. This interactive quality emphasised the tension between the purity of the minimalist art object and the human exchanges it encouraged. *Maze Table* seemed to put forward a space for communal interaction. Even this was a mirage, however, as the work was not enfranchising. Acconci carefully manipulated its dimensions to create a sense of tension, even anxiety. The nine tables were crammed into a 3.6m square space. This claustrophobic premise was enhanced by internal measurements so narrow that the inhabitant had to half-crawl, half-slide in order to move from one table to the next. The table was only 75cm high, with the bench positioned low enough to the ground that the viewer also had to bend down significantly to enter. Despite the use of 1cm thick material, the viewer had to walk on, sit on, and climb through glass, a form that is inherently associated with fragility, fracture and physical harm. This was not a meeting place. It was a glass trap.

Visually disoriented by the three-dimensional, transparent surface and physically vulnerable, the inhabitant of *Maze Table* was placed in the same defensive position that Acconci had occupied in *Claim*. Just as the artist was blindfolded, confined and awaiting an unknown threat, they were constricted in a claustrophobic space, unsure of the terrain and trapped in a construction associated with collapse. Acconci's sculpture thereby retained the performative tension between viewer and work, while shifting the spotlight from performer to audience. As Dean Sobel describes, "Acconci has swapped his body for ours."<sup>444</sup> While the threatening voice of *Claim* was not directly present, *Maze Table*

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<sup>444</sup> Dean Sobel, "From thought to monument," in Dean Sobel and Margaret Andera, eds., *Acts of Architecture*, Exhibition catalogue. (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2001), p. 40

presented the viewer with a similar territorial provocation. Its kaleidoscopic, seductive surface attracted the viewer only to intimidate them, pointing to the manipulative character of supposedly 'public' spaces.

Acconci was commissioned to create the work by the Lions Gallery of the Senses at the Wadsworth Atheneum, taking into consideration the experience of the visually impaired.<sup>445</sup> This helps to account for its physically charged nature. While responding to the issue of visual disability, Acconci did not create a work that advantaged its blind participants. Again, he chose an aggressive tactic to heighten the fraught cultural conditions, creating a physical environment that was difficult for all to negotiate. In this sense, he overpowered both sight and senses in order to provoke a reaction. Making both sighted and blind participants vulnerable, *Maze Table* revealed that the gallery could not be a 'public' space, a space for reconciliation or a space for social accord. Despite such promises, Acconci suggested, social relations within the gallery always occur under the terms of the institution, which carefully determines the way its 'public' interacts. The manipulation of bodies in space is an inherent characteristic of sculptural design. As Acconci notes, "By designing space, you inevitably impose behaviour on those who are going to use it."<sup>446</sup> *Maze Table* thus created a discordant relationship between design and subject, foregrounding implicit power relations of control and subservience. *Maze Table* forces us to consider the terms of its design and how this impacts on those that inhabit it, and as a result it has little commercial viability.

By establishing a structure and then mis-designing it, *Maze Table* encouraged the participant to react, resist, and revolt against *their* design by the space of the gallery. The fact that the participants did not become revolutionaries only emphasised the effect of the design. *Maze Table* trapped its participants in the framework of design, revealing the domination of designer over designed subject. This relationship is of increasing importance in the contemporary, technological sphere. As Vilem Flusser describes in *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*:

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<sup>445</sup> See Andrea Miller-Keller, ed, *Lions Gallery of the Sense Presents: Vito Acconci/Matrix 87, Exhibition Catalogue* (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1985)

<sup>446</sup> Acconci, in "Vito Acconci and Yvonne Rainer, Interviewed by Christophe Wavelet" in *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, p. 29

It looks, accordingly, as though the society of the future without things would be split into two classes: those programming and those being programmed. Into a class of those who produce programs and a class of those who behave according to programs.<sup>447</sup>

Acconci's overpowering design, in the case of *Maze Table*, points to more than the relations between viewer and artwork in a gallery context. It reveals the subordination of the public within designed spaces. While the viewer may not have smashed *Maze Table* to pieces, Acconci nevertheless exposed their vulnerability in the designed world. In this sense, 'overpowering' was a means to reveal the subordination of their will. This key feature of Acconci's participatory sculptures has also been observed by Roberta Smith. She writes, "It is particularly fruitful to consider how these works bring the viewer up against questions of will – its use, its abdication – through encounters with various spaces, structures and language."<sup>448</sup> *Maze Table* was not presented as an artwork or sculpture, but as an example of design, constructing a public space for communal integration.

Acconci's provocative engagement with the viewer, however, frustrates his product as an example of commercial design, a field that aims to mask its implicit relations of domination and manipulation. At the same time, this antagonistic approach differentiates him from the utopian enterprises of architectural and artistic predecessors, for example Archigram and *Sculpture in the Environment*, as well as more recent artists concerned with 'relational aesthetics.' Acconci has never configured architecture as a means to engender social harmony or the gallery as a space for community formation. Instead, he takes minimalist form to its alienating extreme. This strategy is overt, and he argues "Art that results in empathy is a failure. Empathy is inactive. Empathy doesn't lead to action."<sup>449</sup> This distinguishes Acconci from Nicholas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, which as discussed in chapter 1, foregrounds harmonious social interaction as

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<sup>447</sup> Flusser, *The shape of things: a philosophy of design*, p. 93. Acconci's own attempt to avoid being programmed is evident in the comment, "we have to write our own program; we search desperately for functions to provide." (See Tom Finkelppearl, *Dialogues in public art: interviews with Vito Acconci*, John Ahearn, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000, p. 175)

<sup>448</sup> Roberta Smith, "A 20-year look at Vito Acconci's art of opposition and provocation," *New York Times*, January 1 1988, p. 29

<sup>449</sup> Acconci, cited in Linda Weintraub, "Vito Acconci: sound," in *Art on the edge and over*, p. 224

a means to alleviate the alienating effects of a commodity-driven society.<sup>450</sup> In her critique of relational aesthetics, Claire Bishop suggests that true democratic relations rely on public debate, disagreement and dissensus. In contrast to viewer inclusion and enfranchisement, she advocates ‘relational antagonism’ as a better tactic for creating political and social engagement within the field of art.<sup>451</sup> Of course, Acconci precipitated such criticisms a long time ago. Antagonism has always been at the core of his practice, and he comments, “My work always seems to be about making walls, pushing a person up against the wall.”<sup>452</sup>

*Maze Table* clearly provoked both the viewer and the gallery to reveal the manipulative underpinning of sculptural and spatial design. There was a certain futility, however, in creating such a scenario within the contained space of the gallery. By the 1980s, provocation had become part of the design of art, and Acconci was aware of this. In order for the critical function of his work to persist, Acconci departed the designed space of the gallery, entering design itself. In his words, “I realised that I should be starting to bring art into the rest of the world.”<sup>453</sup> The blindfolded artist of *Claim* thus mutated into the director of a commercial architectural company, stubbornly refusing to submit his tenacious practice to the systems of the art world. In the historical context of the art market’s transformation, Acconci’s evolution therefore attempted to overcome the design of art. It demonstrated his attempt to misconstruct art as a critical practice within the broader field of design.

## Acconci Studio

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<sup>450</sup> See Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.

<sup>451</sup> Claire Bishop advocates, for example, works that retain “a more complicated imbrication of the social and aesthetic.” (See Bishop, “Antagonism and relational aesthetics.”)

<sup>452</sup> Acconci, cited in Sylvère Lotringer, “Vito Acconci: House trap,” *Flash Art*, no. 147 (1989), p. 125

<sup>453</sup> Acconci, “Vito Acconci and Yvonne Rainer, Interviewed by Christophe Wavelet” in *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, p. 35 Acconci acknowledges the futility of trying to create true public space within the gallery: “I had this nagging doubt about pretending a gallery or museum is a town square. it is not; it is a gallery or a museum. If I really want a town square or a plaza so badly, I can’t pretend all my life. Sooner or later I better go there.” (Acconci, cited in Morgan, “A conversation with Vito Acconci,” p. 46)

The real political message is not in the poster but in the wall that supports the poster, in the ground that supports the person who reads the poster. It is this wall and this floor that is the proper arena for a radical public art.<sup>454</sup>

*Mur Island* is a mis-designed architectural space. It does not blindfold the viewer, or suffocate them, or unleash the author's inner thoughts. Yet it does present a number of provocations. The steel structure, shaped like a mussel from the sea, is both incongruous and confluent with the river on which it floats (Figure 63). Like *Maze Table*, it throws the viewer's perspective off-balance. A faceted glass exterior creates a confounding visual effect. Partly visible, partly transparent, it catches light from the sun and the river, throwing it back in a dazzling array. When deflecting light, the structure seems to converge with the landscape, like a ripple in the water. When the light shifts, however, the glass surface reveals a spiderweb of steel beneath. The island is then inorganic, a machinic growth on the surface of the city. From a distance, it looks different again. With its spherical form, it could be a UFO landed from the far reaches of space. This galactic mood continues inside the transparent dome, where the curving glass surface reveals the surrounding trees and sky. In the evening, when the stars appear and the city dissolves, it could be adrift in the universe.

As *Mur Island* reveals, the architectural works of Acconci Studio are simultaneously insidious and absurd. This is purposeful. In the text, 'Coming out (notes on public art),' a kind of manifesto for urban design, Acconci proposes two analogies for the critical function of public art. One is the spaceship, which he suggests presents an external form of critique, and the other is the curb, which is associated with a subliminal, internal critical function. *Mur Island* has both of these qualities. "The spaceship," Acconci writes, "lands in an alien place; it revels in its look as if it came out of nowhere, it makes no attempt at camouflage to fit its surroundings."<sup>455</sup> When the sun retreats behind a cloud, and the steel structure of the island emerges, the island's alien form seems to mock the natural landscape in which it resides, and it certainly carries the qualities of Acconci's theoretical spaceship. When the island catches the light, however,

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<sup>454</sup> Acconci, "Coming out (notes on public space)" in Pecci, ed., *Vito Acconci*, p. 142

<sup>455</sup> Acconci, "Coming out (notes on public space)" in Pecci, ed., *Vito Acconci*, p. 143



its glass framework and organic design lend it a confluence with the surrounding environment. It converges with the surface of the water, and in this sense is more fitting with the 'curb' analogy, a structure that "goes almost unnoticed; its as if it's always been there."<sup>456</sup> *Mur Island*, it would seem, resists the very oppositional model from which it has emerged. It is precisely such unresolved oppositions that define Acconci Studio's architectural design.

*Mur Island* is an outdoor space that folds in on itself to create an interior. It sinks into the river while floating on its surface. It is a public space that twists into a private one. It is a place of passage, from one side of the river to the other, from the economic hub of the city to its working-class counterpart. It is a place of inhabitation, for people to loiter on the public plaza or dine in the café. And it is a playground, with a mesh of ropes for children, and a theatre for adults (Figure 64). A tension between dysfunction and utility is evident in the reception of the work by critics. Rob Gregory, for example, suggests that *Mur Island* "serves as both an urban prop within the city as theatre and as a practical and functional cultural catalyst: a new confluence where both functions and forms inventively combine."<sup>457</sup> This mixed sense of function is deliberate, as amplified by the studio's description. They describe how, for example, "Where dome and bowl intersect, and where the dome is transformed into a bowl and vice versa, a playground is formed by the collision and by the melting."<sup>458</sup> Such a playful approach to architectural language translates into the space itself, which actively untethers the viewer's perception.<sup>459</sup> At the same time, however, the island is anchored into its environment. The smell and sound of water permeate its form so that the physicality of space and the island's spatial context is not subsumed by architectural form. Again recalling *Maze Table*, *Mur Island* emphasises the viewer's own body in space and time through spatial disorientation.

Acconci's provocative literalism is now unleashed in architecture. Just as language, the artist's body and the viewer were used to test the limits of self and society

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<sup>456</sup> Acconci, "Coming out (notes on public space)" in Pecci, ed., *Vito Acconci*, p. 143

<sup>457</sup> Rob Gregory, "Island in the stream: an ingenious floating structure brings drama to the heart of this year's European Cultural Capital." *The Architectural Review*, (June 2003), p. 36

<sup>458</sup> Acconci Studio, "The island in the Mur," *A + U*, no. 396 (2003), p. 30

<sup>459</sup> See, for example LB. "The Island That Wasn't." *Domus*, (no. 860 2003) and Diana Lind, "On the Shores of the Mur, a Steel and Glass Plaything," (*Architectural Record* 191, no. 5 2003)

in *Claim*, the architectural forms of Acconci Studio systematically test out the limits of design. While this clearly extends from his earlier artistic experimentation, there has been a strange kind of critical disengagement with his work since he has assumed the role of ‘designer.’ This cannot simply be attributed to his renunciation of art. The art world, after all, has hardly renounced him. His work, both past and present, proliferates in solo and group exhibitions as well as the discursive spaces of contemporary art. Despite this, most analysis of Acconci Studio’s design is left at either a surface examination, or else it is cursorily included as part of a survey of Acconci’s earlier work. What this distancing reveals is a widespread tendency for design to evade critical debate. As the design theorist Victor Margolin observes:

Design and its concomitant discourses, schools, and commissions developed within a market model whereby designers became collaborators with industry... the discourse has continued to support that objective.<sup>460</sup>

The projects of Acconci Studio might be commercial, yet so is contemporary art. Architecture, if anything, takes the concerns of Acconci’s earlier practice to their logical extreme. He now harnesses the privilege of architectural authorship and manipulates lots of bodies in lots of spaces. Design, it seems, is just more adept at masking its antagonistic relations.

In a world of collapsed spatial, temporal and social boundaries, *Mur Island* holds onto its oppositions in a tense embrace. It is an illogical and somewhat *dysfunctional* design of public space. This begins from the point of entry. The island does not provide easy passage from one side of the river to the other, and thereby disturbs its function as a walkway. Pedestrians, on their path from shore to shore, are diverted through to the interior of the island. They pass through various social spaces, including adult and children’s playgrounds, before being guided to the other side. Function is purposefully misguided into the domain of play. Such contradictory functions continue. It is an

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<sup>460</sup> Victor Margolin, “Revisioning design practice” in Willis, ed., *Design philosophy papers*, pp. 75-6 Abby Lopes Mellick observes the same thing, arguing: “Design is already political...It is this power of design, and consequently the responsibility that designing entails that is mostly invisible.” (Abby Lopes Mellick, “Design as politics” in Willis, ed. *Design philosophy papers*, p. 78)

artificial ‘island.’ It is an ‘island’ connected to the shore. Yet it is not grounded, but rather floats on the surface of the water. Its public space does not really cater for communal social gatherings because the plaza hovers around a private café. The private café cannot really be enjoyed, however, because it is encircled by the voyeuristic gaze of the public. And the architecture does not provide shelter from the elements. While it folds over itself to form an indoor space for the playground and café, its walkway, plaza, and stage are all exposed.

Overall, the island is imbued with a sense of permeability, as if the river could rise up at any moment and carry the whole thing away. This sense of instability, of unsure ground, is Acconci’s own measure of critical success. He claims,

A floor is something that, in normal life, you assume is solid, you know where you stand, you have a sure, secure footing, but in some pieces of mine, when pieces work, it’s like under that floor, something comes up. So the floor isn’t as certain as you thought. You thought it was a whole and then suddenly it tears apart, suddenly a little freak comes up from below and it’s an incredible thing for me.<sup>461</sup>

While such a purposeful destabilisation of structure could easily reinforce a contemporary state of spatial confusion, Acconci Studio is explicit about working with ‘bad topology’ as the starting point for evolution.<sup>462</sup> *Mur Island* has no obvious freaks tearing it apart, yet it undermines the certainties of architecture. It is a provocation in space, a conceptual meditation on contemporary social relations. It teases its viewer, and its functions are literally misguided.

Despite all this, the structure exists. And it is used. And it still floats on the river Mur, in the picturesque city of Graz. Architecture appeals to Acconci for precisely this reason – it has a persistent, tangible quality that resists the indistinction and indifference characteristic of postmodernity. He comments, “Architecture persists when clothing

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<sup>461</sup> Acconci, cited in Iglioni, ed., *Entrails, Heads and Tails*, n.p.

<sup>462</sup> Describing, for example, the inversion of interior and exterior spaces in their design, Acconci states “once a space is turned inside out, it functions as a principle of – a possibility of – a model of overturning.” (Acconci, cited in Ward et. el., *Vito Acconci*, p. 60)

elapses into furniture, and furniture elapses into house, and house elapses into city, and city elapses into landscape...”<sup>463</sup> This persistent quality encapsulates Acconci’s own evolution. His practice has persisted with its relentless mission to find liberation from dominating social systems, despite the limitations of language, authorship and the art world. His will to overpower the design of art does not manifest as a goal for total control, for the wielding of architectural power.<sup>464</sup> Instead, actively resisting the outcome-based methodology of design, Acconci’s practice retains a Nietzschean disavowal of purpose and the misguided sense of function that characterises art.

## Process

Acconci’s transition from world of art to design involved taking a number of risks – financial, conceptual, philosophical and political. As he remarks, “A project begins in fear, with fear – maybe even from fear, because of fear. Fear of place, fear of context, fear of a city, fear of city authorities, fear of people, fear of a time, fear of history.”<sup>465</sup> Just as earlier ‘failures’ only provoked artistic transformation, this sense of fear provides impetus for the studio’s development. While risk, in one sense, compromises the outcome and potential success of a project, it also enables progress, a moving beyond the impasses of the present. This gamble goes hand in hand with Nietzsche’s sense of overcoming. He argues, “The devotion of the greatest is to encounter risk and danger and play dice for death.”<sup>466</sup> The critical risk for Acconci’s current practice, of course, is the extent of the studio’s collusion with capitalism.

Design and criticality form an uncomfortable alliance, particularly when financial concerns come into play. In order to participate in the commercial systems of design,

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<sup>463</sup> Acconci, “Interview: Mark C. Taylor in correspondence with Vito Acconci”, in Ward et. el., *Vito Acconci*, p. 13

<sup>464</sup> While Nietzsche’s will to power has certain negative associations, it is nevertheless characterised by an affirmation of change and becoming. Deleuze configures Nietzsche’s whole philosophy as an attack on the negative tradition of philosophy, particularly in relation to Hegel’s dialectic. He suggests, “The negative changes quality, passes into the service of affirmation... Affirmation remains as the sole quality of the will to power.” (See Deleuze, *Nietzsche and philosophy*, p. 198)

<sup>465</sup> Acconci, cited in Ruzicka, “Lines to be filled in later,” p. 29

<sup>466</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus spake Zarathustra*, p. 138

certain compromises must be made. As Vilem Flusser argues, there is simply no such thing as utopian design. “Whoever decides to become a designer,” he writes, “has decided against pure good.”<sup>467</sup> Acconci has decided to engage with design, and accordingly he dances with the devil of commerce. The studio makes money, takes corporate clients and designs corporate spaces, shops and commercial products. Their systematic and participatory approach retains little of the confrontational, aggressive, even militaristic approach of Acconci’s earlier artistic practice. This apparent collusion, however, does not negate their subversive potential. For Nietzsche, the overturning of values involves a disregard for all values; good and bad, moral and immoral. Those with the capacity to overcome, he asserts, “live beyond the rules, freed from all bonds; and in the rulers they have their instruments.”<sup>468</sup> The criticality of Acconci Studio’s practice depends on how effectively they use these instruments to change commercial systems – how they use architecture to misdirect the usual design outcome: the ‘product.’ To gauge this complex situation, it is worth looking closely at the studio’s design process.

Despite Acconci’s obvious domination of the conceptual side of the studio, a democratic undercurrent is evident in the collaborative emphasis of the studio. Argument is pivotal in the conceptualisation of each project, as well as in the studio’s negotiations with clients. After Acconci comes up with an initial concept, this proposal is subjected to a rigorous process of debate with the other members of the design team. This is an important stage in the development of the projects. As Acconci says, “the work had to start from a discussion, it had to start from a composite of privates.”<sup>469</sup> In contrast to Nietzsche’s marked distaste for the ‘herd’ kind, Acconci’s individual will is thus directed toward the formation of community – first within the studio, and then in public space. Having evolved from Acconci’s antagonistic negotiations of the social spaces of performance and sculpture, however, this ‘community’ is characterised by disagreement and dissensus rather than accord and unity. Each idea is developed through debate and this manifests in the questioning and contradictory nature of the studio’s plans, proposals and descriptions.

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<sup>467</sup> Flusser, *The shape of things*, p. 33

<sup>468</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #998, p. 519

<sup>469</sup> Acconci, “Vito Acconci” in Thomas Boutoux, ed., *Hans Ulrich Obrist Interviews, Volume 1* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2003), p. 55

An end result does not motivate the studio's design methodology. This manifests in several ways. Unbuilt, unrealised projects provide the main source of inspiration for new projects. Acconci often cites among his influences the text *Unbuilt America*, for example, a survey and history of unrealised American architecture.<sup>470</sup> Despite this conceptual basis, physical context is of primary importance to the studio's actual design process. Every project begins with a site visit, and the initial design concept is developed in this specific context. As a result, the works of the studio do not have universal application. They are marked by the time and place in which they were designed, and this can make them somewhat incongruous. The studio's focus on context also attempts to avoid the abstraction and elevation of architecture from the everyday. This democratic impulse is important, signifying their attempt to refocus spaces on the people that inhabit them. The studio is therefore not selective or elitist about the kinds of projects, environments or spaces that they work with, claiming "We want to deal the occasions and materials of the everyday world."<sup>471</sup>

A tension between Acconci's individual will and the collaborative ideology of the studio nevertheless persists. In an interview with Christophe Wavelet, Acconci made an unusual slip of the tongue while describing the collaborative set-up of the studio. Talking about the recruitment process for new architects, he said, "Ever since I my studio acquired a certain reputation as an architectural bureau, they've applied to me."<sup>472</sup> His correction of 'I' to 'my studio' reveals this fundamental tension in his practice. While on the one hand attempting to overcome the construction of the authorial self, the poet retains his voice. This is not incidental. Acconci's experimentation with systems has always been contingent, in a Nietzschean sense, on an individual sense of agency, on a refusal of collective harmony and on a misdirection of any sense of program. He has always employed a differentiated, local and individualistic approach in order to incite debate, difference and transformation. In other words, he has embraced authorial privilege in order to initiate argument.

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<sup>470</sup> See Alison Sky and Michelle Stone, *Unbuilt America: forgotten architecture in the United States from Thomas Jefferson to the space age*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983).

<sup>471</sup> Acconci Studio, "Statements and Responses: Denver Art Museum," in *Acconci Studio Archive*.

<sup>472</sup> Acconci, in "Vito Acconci and Yvonne Rainer, Interviewed by Christophe Wavelet", *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, p. 36

Lilian Pfaff is explicit in accounting for the studio's architectural works as literal acts of authorship. In 'The building is a text: Vito Acconci / Acconci Studio,' she describes their architecture as 'dramatic poetry,' writing:

Text fragments launch a discussion within the team about a project... Acconci's architectural projects can therefore be described, as Heinrich Klotz did for Rem Koolhaas's works in the eighties, as dramatic poetry.<sup>473</sup>

At first glance, this poetic analogy seems appropriate. Poetic language epitomises the studio's paradoxical position in design – poetry uses the structure of language and representation in an inherently disruptive way. Through fragmentation and abstraction, it redirects language away from its primary function – signification.<sup>474</sup> A refusal to submit to the structure of architectural signification certainly characterises the studio's approach, as evident in *Mur Island*. Yet Acconci's language has never disrupted language in this poetic sense. It was neither abstract nor fragmented. It was so literal that it had to leave the space of the page, entering the physical environment. If anything, his poetry was always architectural rather than literary.<sup>475</sup>

A kind of negotiation between language and design nevertheless persists in his practice. Acconci is well aware of the effects of architectural authorship, and he suggests:

I love architecture because it deals with the materials and processes of the everyday world, but I hate architecture because architecture is inherently fascist, architecture determines human behaviour.<sup>476</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Lilian Pfaff, "The building is a text.," in *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, p. 401

<sup>474</sup> As Julia Kristeva writes, "It is poetic language that awakens our attention to this undecidable character of any so-called natural language, a feature that univocal, rational, scientific discourse tends to hide." For Kristeva, poetic language is nothing less than revolutionary. It is both "the enemy within and without," destabilising the system of language by revealing its *undecidable* properties. (See Kristeva, "Desire in language," in Oliver, *The portable Kristeva*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 49, 103)

<sup>475</sup> His performance and sculpture was similarly literal, exaggerating and provoking the systems of art so that they, too, might be overcome. As he acknowledges, "I don't think I have a subtle bone in my body." (Acconci, cited in Burke and Hare, "Vito Acconci: The man with the voice," *Interview*, (1990) p. 2)

<sup>476</sup> Acconci, cited in Zoe Ryan, "Profile: Vito Acconci," *Contemporary*, no. 60 (2004), p. 27

As a result, the studio is careful in its attempt to misdirect the determined nature of design. This was evident in their interest in unbuilt projects and in their argumentative conceptual development process. It is also characteristic of the language of their proposals. Speculation takes precedence over planning, and each project is initiated through a play of language, rather than the assertion of a single concept. In a project for the New St Square in London, for example, Acconci began by developing a novel-length list of words relating to ‘roof’ and ‘floor.’<sup>477</sup> These words were arranged in a systematic yet illogical scheme. While they were listed under letters of the alphabet, the words and headings did not correspond. The letter D, for example, contained the words “alarm, beacon, call and summons.” Not one of them begins with the letter D. In addition, it is hard to see how they relate to the overriding concepts of ‘roof’ and ‘floor.’ This experimentation with the systems of language was empirical in a completely misguided sense. It applied a pedantically methodological approach to illogical ideas, an absurd literalism. In this sense, it misconstrued the presumed logic of design. The design of the New St Square development, a ‘master plan’ or authorial statement, was subsumed in the process of thinking about spatial concepts. Misleading the outcome of design occurs through this emphasis on process.

While Acconci’s architecture retains performative and literary traces from his earlier practice, it can hardly be considered ‘dramatic poetry.’ Not only did he leave the space of poetry altogether by entering performance, but he also abandoned the dramatic stage. He discovered that a position on the limit of representation is somewhat of a trap; the position of extremity is alienating for both performer and audience. As Derrida asks, “But does not the theater which is no longer a colony succumb to its own cruelty? Will it resist its own danger?”<sup>478</sup> To account for Acconci’s architecture as an act of dramatic poetry, then, is to return his practice to two frames of representation that he has clearly attempted to escape: poetry and performance. Within these frames, his practice is

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<sup>477</sup> Acconci Studio, “New St Square project,” in *Acconci Studio Archive*. A play with language initiates all of the studio’s concepts. Acconci states, “I start a project by naming the conditions and playing with words, punning on those names.” (Acconci, in “Interview: Mark C. Taylor in correspondence with Vito Acconci”, in Ward et. el., *Vito Acconci*, 2002, p.10).

<sup>478</sup> Jacques Derrida, “La parole soufflée,” in *Writing and difference*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 190. Derrida is referring to Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty” which has a number of similarities to Acconci’s early performance. Where Artaud used physical danger in the theatre to liberate the body repressed through language, Acconci uses antagonism to liberate the body repressed in design.



divorced from the public space that he seeks to engage and vitalise. Provoking a reaction and engaging with others is at the heart of his wielding of authorial privilege. Acconci has commented, “I can only prove that I am thinking if I see someone suffering from that thought.”<sup>479</sup> The word ‘suffering’ points again to his emphasis on the physical experience of thought, his attempt to resist the abstraction of conceptualism. This is the appeal of architecture – it is a means to literally and physically test out concepts. Most importantly, it involves a tense exchange with other people, including collaborators at the studio, clients, and the wider community.

Perhaps his misdirection of the question of collaboration, describing Acconci Studio as “I my studio,” wasn’t a slip of the tongue at all. Perhaps, like the unresolved tensions that proliferate in his built projects, it was a linguistic proposition. His description of the studio maintains the dichotomy between individual agency and the democratic impulse that informs it. He inhabits the ‘I’ of Vito Acconci in order to will an ‘us’ in public space. Acconci’s practice has evolved from poetry and performance into the field of architecture, where debate, dissensus, and the process of design have the capacity to ‘misguide’ the author’s intentions. The risk of wielding authorship against itself is the necessary undertaking of Acconci’s practice. In the works of Acconci Studio, it reveals itself in a focus on process, unpredictability and undetermined outcomes.

### **Irresolute: Ontario Science Center proposal**

The studio’s proposal for the redesign of the Ontario Science Center in Canada in 2004 exemplifies their organic sense of process, their focus on conceptual evolution over determined results. In the three-page document, vivid imagery of an exploded whale’s body is used in speculative, rather than methodological language, to articulate ideas about possible ways of transforming the building. It does not outline a program for the construction of architectural form. Instead, design is a pretext to play with concepts. The proposal is overt in acknowledging the improbability of many of its proposed ideas:

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<sup>479</sup> Acconci, cited in Lotringer, “Vito Acconci: House trap,” p. 126

But we don't know how to do this yet; so, in the meantime, let's do this: from where we stand in the room, outside the belly and below it, from the perimeter of the belly, let's pull the insides out...<sup>480</sup>

Here, the body of a whale – in this case its 'belly' – makes philosophical speculations physical, imaginable, visible. The body is used, along with architecture, to mediate a dialogue between thought and world.

In a modernist world, Acconci played with the social relations of space through embodied, physical performances. These concerns are now explored in architectural form, in the social relations between objects of design. This is an age, after all, where objects and bodies cannot be so easily distinguished. As Bernard Cache writes, "Objects, which are those solid parts of our actions, are but a moment of densification in the folds of our behaviour that is itself fluctuating."<sup>481</sup> A conflated understanding of object and body is characteristic of contemporary architectural language. In *Warped Space*, for example, Anthony Vidler describes the proliferation of terms such as 'parasite' and 'virus.' It is as though, "following the tradition of urban pathologies since the eighteenth century, the object were infected with the same illness attacking the subject."<sup>482</sup> And so the forms of Acconci Studio are embodied, alive. Shaped like a mussel from the sea, *Mur Island* thrives with bodies that move in and out of its spaces as it breathes with the wind.

This shift in focus from body to object was gradual, evolutionary. Acconci firstly removed his own body from performances by taking up sculpture. He then removed the viewer's body by working with architectural form. In part, this was an attempt to focus on people rather than self, on community rather than identity. It also accompanied a general perceptual shift in society. With the rise of a post-industrial, technological world came a simultaneous dematerialisation of the body and move away from the essentialist perception of self as central, whole and unified. Anthony Vidler vividly describes this effect in postmodern architecture, writing:

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<sup>480</sup> Acconci Studio, "Ontario Science Center Proposal," in *Acconci Studio Archive* (New York: 2005)

<sup>481</sup> Cache, *Earth moves*, p. 96

<sup>482</sup> Anthony Vidler, *Warped space*, p. 135

We are contorted, racked, cut, wounded, dissected, intestinally revealed, impaled, immolated; we are suspended in a state of vertigo, or thrust into a confusion between belief and perception.<sup>483</sup>

This perceptual shift has been an increasing source of anxiety, as evident in Vidler's description, associated with enhanced privatisation and control rather than perceptual liberation. Yet Acconci's shift in focus from body to object did not embrace this sense of a relative subjectivity, a fractured self or a virtual body. Despite the absence of his physical body, he nevertheless maintained an underlying emphasis on the materiality of the body and the relations of bodies in space. By emphasising the physical qualities of writing, for example, he drew attention to the body trapped in language. In *Claim*, he used the threat of physical violence to assert the corporeality of his own body as well as the viewer's. This was extended in *Maze Table*, which used visual and spatial disorientation to draw attention to the body trapped in design. The body was thus configured as both a locus of physical forces and a product of cultural relations. As Sanford Kwinter writes, "For world and self, Acconci has tirelessly shown us, are generated together. This means that the one can always be dismantled through the other as well."<sup>484</sup> The self put forward in both Acconci's performance and architecture was therefore less postmodern than Nietzschean. The body was a locus of agency, with an internal will, at the same time as being produced in and through external biological forces. This conception provides for agency, change and becoming rather than postmodern dissolution and loss, as referred to by Vidler.<sup>485</sup>

Fittingly, the design of Acconci Studio now imagines a future body, in an overt attempt to overcome the effects of postmodernity. They claim, "Our new starting point, however, is not the body so much but the body already dissolved: a field for a new body, or re-body."<sup>486</sup> Starting from the point of a contingent, dismantled body, they focus on its

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<sup>483</sup> Vidler, *Architectural uncanny*, pp. 78-9. [His emphasis]

<sup>484</sup> Sanford Kwinter, "Saint architect of Sodom" in Sobel and Andera, eds., *Acts of Architecture*, p. 44

<sup>485</sup> Nietzsche critiques Darwin for placing too much emphasis on external forces. At the same time, he emphasises the organic, writing "the body is a more astonishing idea than the old 'soul.'" (Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #659, pp. 347-8). As Derrida writes, Nietzsche affirms "the noncenter otherwise than as loss of the center." (See Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 292)

<sup>486</sup> Acconci, "Frames for life: the public organisation of private experience," *Art + Text*, no. 42 (1992), p.

re-generation. The future body of Acconci Studio's design does not necessarily emerge in human form, just as Nietzsche emphasised the biological over the human in his non-humanist stance. Consider, for example, the studio's description of the whale's body in the Ontario Science Center proposal:

We want to turn the belly of the whale inside out, we want to stretch the skin of the whale down like plasma, plasma that oozes over the windowed walls, plasma that lets you see outside as if you're inside saliva, inside a circulatory system, inside a body with transparent skin.<sup>487</sup>

Here, graphic descriptions of animal flesh are used conceptually to outline the organisation of exhibition spaces, windows and walkways. Biological form is not privileged over architecture. The body of the whale becomes architectural, and architecture becomes the body of the whale. At the same time, the body is not abstracted. The proposal revels in the specific matter, sensation, and flesh of the form. The gratuitous proposal for the Ontario Science Center is a manifestation of, and attempt to literalise, a physical body in the midst of a virtual, technological world.

As the description progresses, it becomes increasingly speculative. Any sense of a plan gives way and questions proliferate:

(Since it's the outside of the whale's belly that hovers above us, what if we treated the air – as if it were water? What would be changed then in the paragraph above... what if this empty space were filled with water... )<sup>488</sup>

What would? What if? As if it were? The studio thus fuses philosophical meditations with the physical design of space. If design is considered as a process of conceiving and thinking about the world – its literal definition is 'mental plan' – then this irresolute proposal serves to undermine the functional, purpose-based methodology of much

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<sup>487</sup> Acconci Studio, "Ontario Science Center Proposal" in *Acconci Studio Archive*.

<sup>488</sup> Acconci Studio, "Ontario Science Center Proposal" *Acconci Studio Archive*.

contemporary design practice.<sup>489</sup> It places emphasis on thought over outcome, shifts in perspective over design and changes in structure over determination of form.

As the proposal nears its conclusion, its attempt to de-program design becomes increasingly clear:

Now what if we did the unthinkable?...

(Think the unthinkable, make it thinkable...) <sup>490</sup>

Just as Acconci set up the systems of language and then performance in the 1960s in order to misconstruct them toward revolution, Acconci Studio sets up the structure of design and then misconstructs it toward the transformation of design. Where the language of culture was once seen as the locus of socio-political relations of power, the language of design is now seen as the economic and political language of the contemporary world. Acconci's critical practice has therefore evolved according to the social landscape.

The prominence of process is also evident in the studio's architectural drawings, which are often haphazard and contradictory, rarely providing a 'master plan.' Instead, drawings document the process of conceptualising each project. The Ontario Science Center proposal is a case in point. The proposal was divided into two sections, with the text running along the left side of the pages. A series of twelve rough sketches accompanied the text, appearing on the right hand side of the page (Figure 65). In this way, the proposal did not privilege text over images, or images over text. The drawings were not simply illustrative and if anything they presented a proposal of their own. They contained no visual references to an exploded whale. Instead, they presented a side-on view of the building's interior space. Each of the twelve images contained the same basic outline, with variations on the arrangement of the exhibition spaces and passageways. Each image mutated from the preceding one, with no single outline or clearly resolved idea signifying the actual plan for the site.

There was nevertheless a correspondence between the images and the text. The first sketch, for example, seemed to allude to the "plasma that oozes over windowed

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<sup>489</sup> F Fowler and H Fowler, eds., *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English*, p.330.

<sup>490</sup> Acconci Studio, "Ontario Science Center Proposal" *Acconci Studio Archive*.

walls.” It was symmetrically balanced with a series of smooth, organic forms that ‘dripped’ from the ceiling. The third sketch, by contrast, contained angular lines and was suggestive of “the inside of a shell of spines.” The next sketch changed in form again. It depicted two oval spaces with people walking inside and over, “as if you’re floating on air.” The spheres then twisted and morphed to become spirals in the next sketch, before stretching out to form one whole circular room. By the eighth sketch the room had splintered into small individual spheres, such that each individual person was in their own private hub. By this stage, the drawings were narrating their own tale. The spheres multiplied and proliferated in the final sketches until forming a chaotic mass of bubbles that floated on the surface of a spiral, as if “inside a volcano.”<sup>491</sup>

The sketches conceptualised a transformation in public space. Just as the exploded whale form pointed to an architectural imagining of a ‘re-body,’ the drawings pointed to a re-imagining of the relationship between private and public. They traced a transition from a modernist conception of space as whole and unified, transparent and rational, as in the fifth image with its open, symmetrical form, to a postmodern conflation of subject and object, of virtuality and insularity, as in the eighth sketch with its disconnected individual spheres. Like the ‘re-body,’ however, the proposal did not end on a relative sense of space. Describing the introverted turn of contemporary society, where the public has become “a mix of capsules,” Acconci has optimistically asserted: “But those millions of capsules are going to make public space, though I am not sure exactly how.”<sup>492</sup> And so the speculative drawings trace this attempt work out how, evolving from a disjointed, private space to the final depiction of public space as a mass of individual bodies, or ‘bubbles.’

The studio’s speculative design language, collaborative debate and seemingly absurd planning do not inhibit projects from developing. Every proposal is considered to be viable, and Acconci clearly states: “They might be difficult, they might cost more, but none of these things are impossible.”<sup>493</sup> For Nietzsche, the ‘end’ is just a way of taking control of the process, and is not considered an outcome in itself. It is, “a pale image sketched in consciousness beforehand that serves to orient us concerning events, even as

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<sup>491</sup> All quotations from Acconci Studio, "Ontario Science Center Proposal" *Acconci Studio Archive*.

<sup>492</sup> Acconci, cited in Morgan, "A conversation with Vito Acconci," p. 49

<sup>493</sup> Acconci, in Cathy Lang Ho, "Curriculum Vito. Interview.," *Architecture*, 90, no. 1 (2001), p. 54

a symptom of events, *not* as their cause.”<sup>494</sup> The rough concepts, plans, drawings and models of Acconci studio, in this sense, are a means to drive the process of design, without determining its outcome.

This irreverence toward outcome, in turn, encourages designers to think in terms of change and becoming, rather than system and order. The studio’s architectural models are particularly provocative. In contrast to the highly designed, unpeopled, futuristic models preferred by most contemporary architects, Acconci Studio prefers aesthetically naive, toy-like forms that include small, clunky human figures. Acconci claims “our models don’t look like architectural models. Our models look as if they belong in a model railroad... our models are the kind that children would understand.”<sup>495</sup> Not only do these seemingly absurd models mock the austerity of architecture and undermine their commercial promotional value, but they also provide for strange artistic exhibition, subverting their function as art objects.

Unexpected results are encouraged and embraced through the organic process of Acconci Studio. Describing *Mur Island*, Acconci has observed, “Our goal was to make an island as fluid as the water it’s in (it isn’t – the water wins).”<sup>496</sup> The use of parentheses in this statement does not diminish the significance of its admission – their goal was not realised, *the water won*, the process defeated the outcome. The design process of the studio thus plots the project’s conceptualisation, as opposed to determining its result. ‘Plot’ is an appropriate word and one that Acconci often embraces. “Art”, he claims, “is just a way of thickening the plot.”<sup>497</sup> If architectural structure is considered the new plot in Acconci’s experimentation, then it is indeed thickened by his origins as an artist. This emerges in the tactical, rather than strategic, practice of the Studio.<sup>498</sup> The misdirected and complicated design of their projects represents nothing other than the manifestation

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<sup>494</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #666, p. 352

<sup>495</sup> Acconci, “Vito Acconci” in Thomas Boutoux, ed., *Hans Ulrich Obrist Interviews*, p. 56. As Andrew Gellatley comments, “The models are rough; they look like *Thunderbirds*’ Tracey Island – a bit too rough to pass in most free-spending New York practices.” (Andrew Gellatley, “Andrew Gellatley talks to Vito Acconci,” *frieze*, no. 58 (2001), p. 76)

<sup>496</sup> Acconci, in Angela Melkisehian, “Vito Acconci: Island on the Mur,” *Sculpture*, 22, no. 6 (2003), p. 26

<sup>497</sup> Acconci, in Lang Ho, “Curriculum Vito. Interview,” p. 54

<sup>498</sup> This distinction is at the core of Michel de Certeau’s theorisation of the contemporary consumer sphere, which he considers a dominating system that renders all consumers “marginal.” Where “strategies” reinforce existing forms of social power, he argues, “tactics wander out of orbit, making consumers into immigrants in a system too vast to be their own.” See Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, *The practice of everyday life*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

of a critical artistic practice. Unleashing art in the design field, Acconci Studio misdirects its function, creating a critical space from which to affirm transformation.

## **Futures**

If the practice of Acconci Studio can be considered artistic, then it is art in a Nietzschean sense. For Nietzsche, an artist is characterised by their “indifference to ‘eternal values,’ their seriousness in ‘play’ – their lack of dignity; buffoon and god side by side; saint and canaille.”<sup>499</sup> The moment the work becomes ‘serious,’ therefore, the moment it subordinates its playful provocations to the purpose of design, is the moment it compromises its criticality. Commerce then signals its triumphant victory, yet again, over the subversive tactics of artists. A critical test was provided for Acconci Studio in a design project in 2001. The studio was commissioned by the limited editions department of the MAK Museum in Vienna, Austria to design a billiard table as part of a group project including the likes of prominent designers Eric Owen Moss, Zaha Hadid and Coop Himmelb(l)au. The ensuing exchange between the studio and MAK captures Acconci’s risky provocation of commercial design.

After deliberating for some time about the project, and coming up with several preliminary ideas, the studio decided to stray from the design brief of the Museum. Instead of working with the horizontal, rectangular format of a traditional billiard table, Acconci Studio put forward a design with a trapezoid shape. And in contrast to the initial brief, which had specified an exact height of 80cm from the ground, the studio’s table was positioned on an angle, slanting toward the ground on one side. This slope, of course, would affect the movement of the billiards, complicating the function of the game. To overcome this, Acconci inquired as to whether he could change the rules of the game to accommodate the new table format. Despite the fact that the studio was commissioned by an art museum for an ‘experimental’ project, the response was not favourable. The Museum wanted a design that conformed to the traditional conventions of the game. The redesigned table, with its new rules, was perfectly functional, and so the issue was not the

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<sup>499</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, p.432, #816



literal function of the product. What was at stake was its commercial function. A product with a misdirected sense of use might not sell.

In correspondence between the artist and the Museum, this preference for commercial function was evident:

Certainly a convincing design by a world class architect – as you are – has value by its own, yet a knife not fit for cutting, a chair you can't sit on and a golf club you can't hit a ball with may be intelligent and surprising pieces of art, but a billiard table is such a large object, *that nobody would acquire this thing when he can't use it.*<sup>500</sup>

The Museum had chosen the studio on account of Acconci's profile – an artist notorious for provocative acts including public masturbation, self mutilation and confrontational politics. And they could not claim to be unfamiliar with Acconci Studio's methodological and ideological approach. The studio had worked with them eight years earlier, completing a temporary renovation of MAK's main exhibition hall in 1993 (Figure 66).

This renovation had been provocative and explicit in trying to destabilise the institution. In Acconci's overt style, the Museum literally collapsed on itself; the existing exhibition hall was replicated and then re-installed on a drastic angle, so that the wall and ceiling of the main hall sank into the ground. Its skylight then bulged out of the floor in an adjoining room, accompanied with a tree and grass to form a sloping park inside. Not only did the design attempt to shake the foundations of architecture, but it also presented an outright challenge to the Museum itself.

Acconci openly declared, "Once a room falls, then people can rise."<sup>501</sup> Within the frame of the museum walls, however, Acconci's provocations were accepted and neutralised. This was most evident in the exhibition catalogue. In the preface, the curator Peter Noever firstly acknowledged the subversive nature of the project, suggesting "Vito Acconci's entire Vienna exhibition presents, as it were, an act of vehement spatial

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<sup>500</sup> Correspondence between MAK and Acconci, *Acconci Studio Archive* (New York: 2002) [My emphasis]

<sup>501</sup> Acconci, cited in Peter Noever and MAK, eds., *Vito Acconci: The City Inside Us* (Vienna: MAK, 1993), p. 24

intervention, an uncomprising renunciation.”<sup>502</sup> He concluded, however, by suggesting that that the work presented “in an unexpected light, the image of an anticipated reconciliation.”<sup>503</sup> Noever thus transformed Acconci’s renunciation of the museum into an embrace. This easy assimilation probably had something to do with the fact that the renovation was temporary, and not permanent. It was more curatorial than architectural, testifying to the Museum’s innovative approach without impinging on its long-term capacity to institutionalise its viewers and artworks. Acconci’s resentment toward art is not surprising, and his claim, “I hate every inch of the art world,” makes some sense in the light of such critical neutralisation.<sup>504</sup>

In the case of the MAK renovation, misguided functionality had limited commercial impact on the Museum. When Acconci Studio attempted to “thicken the plot” of the Museum’s commercial operations, however, in the form of the misguided billiard table design, it impeded on the potential sales value of a product. The Museum’s real priorities became clear. The table could easily have been constructed, packaged and sold. The only design factor that was complicated by the studio was the way in which the product would be used. In addition to testing the limits of commercial design, this points to another threat posed by the irreverent design: the game might activate the designed subject. What happens if we don’t have to play by the rules? Acconci has always been enthusiastic about the misuse of space. In an interview with Tom Finkelpearl, for example, he explains: “I get thrilled when I see, in a corporation plaza, a person sitting not on the bench that’s been provided but, instead, on a step.”<sup>505</sup> For Acconci, misuse signifies active and engaged participation in public space, and this has been characteristic of his design projects. Visual disorientation, for example, along with the confined physical measurements of *Maze Table*, provoked the viewer to consider the terms under which they moved in public space.

By questioning the very idea of use, such design affirms variation and difference. For Nietzsche, the concept of utility is inherently linked to social values. In *The Will to Power*, he challenges Darwin’s emphasis on ‘use’ in the evolution of the species, asking:

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<sup>502</sup> Peter Noever, *Vito Acconci: The City Inside Us* (Vienna: MAK, 1993), p. 7

<sup>503</sup> Noever, *Vito Acconci: The City Inside Us*, p. 7

<sup>504</sup> Acconci, in “Vito Acconci and Yvonne Rainer, Interviewed by Christophe Wavelet”, *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, p. 37

<sup>505</sup> Acconci, in Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in public art*, p. 182

What, after all, is ‘useful’? One must ask ‘useful in relation to what?’ Eg, that which is useful for the long life of the individual might be unfavourable to its strength and splendour; that which preserves the individual might at the same time arrest and halt its evolution. On the other hand, a *deficiency*, a *degeneration*, can be of the highest utility in so far as it acts as a stimulant.<sup>506</sup>

Nietzsche argues that natural ‘usefulness’ has no bearing on what is considered socially useful, and ‘utilitarianism’ only serves to reinforce existing moral and social codes. It is a means to dominate and control. He therefore undermines utility, just as he disavows purpose, in order to affirm change, variation and becoming. By embracing a deficient sense of use in works such as *Maze Table*, and a misguided sense of function as in the MAK billiard table, Acconci Studio attempts to activate the designed subject, to incite change.

Such a misguided sense of use is characteristic of the studio’s practice. As Frazer Ward observes:

Acconci Studio has developed a tendency towards the opening up of the uses of public space, though one could as well say the breaking down of its uses, in so far as many of their designs for spaces with specified purposes – bus shelters subway stations, transit lounges, etc – seem to hold out the possibility of some *other* use.<sup>507</sup>

And so the MAK design attempted to reinvent the rules of the game, to create a new use for the old billiard table. Not only to revolutionise the concept of billiards, but to encourage the very thought of breaking the rules. A terrifying thought for any system, even the apparently limitless system of late capitalism. It is most challenging, of course, to the system of design, which tends to operate according to specific rules with set outcomes. Such an outright challenge, however, entails risk. In this case, the design was

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<sup>506</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #647, p.343

<sup>507</sup> Frazer Ward, “In private and public,” in Ward et. el., *Vito Acconci*, p. 53

not approved and table was not constructed. By refusing to submit to the rules of the game, the studio confirmed their pursuit of mis-design. The price for this, however, was exclusion from a commercial design project, and thereby an inability to actively misdirect a product.

Emphasising the end product, however, misses the point. Acconci has been systematically testing the limits of the social construction of bodies, self, space and community since he took up the pen in the 1960s. He has consistently set up propositions and tested them against the social forms at his disposal – performance in the case of *Claim*, the gallery in *Maze Table* and public space in *Mur Island*. Similarly, the MAK billiard table project was a test of the systems of design. It revealed the determined and oppressive nature of the design market, demonstrating that designers, even in the context of experimentation and ‘art’, are subject to the demands of commercial production, becoming slaves to the product. The MAK billiard table project tested this product-based methodology, emphasising instead the critical and conceptual possibilities of design. In *Unbuilt America*, Alison Sky writes “With contemporary art and architecture we are again at a point when the idea of a Tower of Babel, a Noah’s Ark, or a Holy Jerusalem could mean more to us as idea than as built form.”<sup>508</sup> The fact that there was no end product only highlights the studio’s emphasis on idea over built form.

A Nietzschean form of art thus resides within Acconci Studio, having evolved from Acconci’s artistic practice, turning its products into toys and its plans into questions. Sometimes slick, sometimes ugly, and most of the times simply absurd, these designs rear up out of the ground and descend from ceilings, willfully traversing boundaries and defying spatial and aesthetic logic. Titles alone give a sense of this – recent projects include *See-Saw Lawn (2000)*, *A tunnel that burrows in between buildings, (2002)*, *Sitting in a room of sky (2003)* and *A skate park that glides the land and drops into the sea (2004)*. Finalised, built objects are secondary to conceptual propositions, each of which is specific to the location of the project at the time it is being designed. Acconci Studio is a testing ground for spatial and social concepts. It designs seemingly undecidable architectural propositions, testing these against the systems of the

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<sup>508</sup> Alison Sky, *Unbuilt America*, p. 9. See also Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Unbuilt Roads," (*Contemporary Visual Arts*, no. 20 (1998))

commercial market. This simple act of asking questions, in the field of design, is groundbreaking. It implies a critical distance from the market, an active designer and the potential activation of the designed subject. As Flusser argues in *The Shape of Things*, it reconsiders the very future of design practice: “Design means, among other things, fate. This process of asking questions is the collective attempt to seize hold of fate and, collectively, to shape it.”<sup>509</sup> How is Acconci Studio shaping, or mis-shaping, the future of design?

## Garbage

In *Mur Island*, divisions between private and public, inside and out, up and down, water and earth were twisted, painful, evident. Acconci Studio worked with rather than against the conditions of late capitalism, where the blurring of boundaries signals its all-encompassing grasp. In the past, idealistic architects could propose alternative utopian designs. Buckminster Fuller, for example, once proposed the Geodesic Dome as a viable architectural model for the future. The simple, transparent, harmonious and environmentally friendly structure promised to provide a self-sufficient world for its inhabitants.<sup>510</sup> Now, when such visions seem poignantly futile for their inability to create alternative social realities, the Geodesic Dome emerges in fragments. *Mur Island*'s glass frame takes Fuller's utopia, twists it inside out to form a half-open, half-closed, simultaneously commercial and public structure. Not surprisingly, Acconci does not espouse utopian visions for the future. Instead, he prefers the landscape of *Bladerunner*, where “the future is built on top of the past, where the future is a parasite.”<sup>511</sup> In the design of Acconci Studio, this future is garbage. Literally.

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<sup>509</sup> Flusser, *The shape of things*, p. 107

<sup>510</sup> Buckminster Fuller's idealism knew no bounds, and he proclaimed, “I see that it is now feasible to institute a millennial ten-year design revolution that could take of all humanity at a much higher standard of living than anybody has ever known and could do so on a sustainable basis. During those ten years, we could also phase out forever all further use of fossil fuels and atomic energy. We can live entirely on our energy income from the sun.” (R. Buckminster Fuller and Kiyoshi Kuromiya, *Cosmography: a posthumous scenario for the future of humanity*, (New York; Toronto: Macmillan, 1992, p. 116)

<sup>511</sup> Acconci, in “Interview: Mark C. Taylor in correspondence with Vito Acconci”, Ward et. el., *Vito Acconci*, p. 15

Acconci Studio proposed a design for a city to be constructed on the Bavel Garbage Dump in Breda, the Netherlands in 1999. With the poetic title, *A city that rides the garbage dump* (Figure 67), the project began with bad topology. The studio proposed to transform the existing site into ‘A city of magic carpets’ spanning 28 acres with a height of 45m.<sup>512</sup> Acconci’s ongoing interest in unsteady ground found perfect expression in the site. The ground of a garbage dump, it turns out, is by nature unstable. Methane gases are constantly being released from the rubbish. In turn, these gases change the shape of the dump, creating a shifting terrain. The prospect of building anything on top of a constantly morphing surface is intimidating, to say the least. But as Anthony Vidler has observed:

nothing is stable in Acconci’s world; underneath the ground, which is no more than a quagmire, there are forces always ready to rise up, swallow up, and submerge what is above ground.<sup>513</sup>

The garbage dump was therefore perfect territory for the studio’s Nietzschean sense of function, and as a result they did not propose to even out its surface or neutralise the effect of the methane gas. Instead, *A city that rides the garbage dump* would employ a structure that could ‘ride the tide’ of the moving surface and actively feed off the gases.<sup>514</sup>

The studio’s complicated solution to the problem of moving ground involved placing three separate ‘rugs,’ or land surfaces, over the existing rubbish. One land surface would contain buildings, such as factories, offices, shops and housing. Another would house a more natural landscape, including fields, crops, trees and plants. The third would contain water-forms, such as fish farms, swimming pools and fountains. By maintaining clearly divided territories, the design furthered the studio’s emphasis on presenting conflicted spatial propositions, as opposed to utopian solutions. This tri-partite structure seems simple enough. It was complicated, however, by the placement of a public space in the center of the city. Aspects of the three land areas would be combined to form a plaza,

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<sup>512</sup> Acconci Studio, “A city that rides the garbage dump,” in *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, p. 411

<sup>513</sup> Vidler, *Warped space*, p. 141

<sup>514</sup> Acconci Studio, “A city that rides the garbage dump,” in *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio*, p. 411

complete with water-fountains, plants and light from the built city. While separated from the three rugs of the city, this space would also connect them. This confusing double-function – both separating and connecting the city – is not helped by the unexpected nature of the landscape and the proposal. I will do my best to describe it in more detail. As a garbage dump is naturally a moving ‘mound,’ the three rugs would follow this shape, rising up along the mound of garbage to its tip. The public space would then be situated below this apex. When the mound is elevated, as a result of the gases, the plaza would be connected to the city by columns. People could travel up and down these columns via stairways and elevators. When the garbage mound lowers, the city and public would join on an even plane.

The natural environment would thereby determine the social and spatial movements of its inhabitants, who become fish on a sea of their own pollution, subject to tides of methane gas. The problem of actually constructing buildings on uneven ground received an equally incongruous (or ingenious) solution. The entire site would be composed of bowl-like forms that rest on the ‘rugs.’ These bowls tilt in accordance with the slope of the ground, and the contents in turn ‘swivel’ to stay horizontal. Recalling the Ontario Science Center proposal, the future of public space was therefore configured as a mass of bubbling, individuated forms. *A city that rides the garbage dump* attempts to work cooperatively with its problematic ground. In accordance, it would also harness the unsavoury surface as fuel, methane gases providing a natural source of power for the self-sustaining urban environment. This hypothetical city, in all likelihood unrealisable, completely unhinges both modern and postmodern attitudes to technological progress. It does not move toward a new and rational future space, a modernist utopia. Nor does it spiral into a purely virtual future of collapsed spatial and physical boundaries. Instead, its future involves a strange devolution into filth in an affirmation of change, becoming, and the future of urban inhabitation. Again, the studio takes the idealistic principles of predecessors such as Fuller, wrenches them from their utopian origins, splits them apart and throws them into the filth of a chaotic future.

This future design, like the ground on which it rides, is constantly in motion and therefore open to modification, speculation and becoming. It does not assert a program or manifesto for the future. It questions the future of design, and in this sense captures the

design program of the studio. Acconci asks of architecture, “Can you cast a doubt, show hesitation, insert a parenthesis, a second thought?”<sup>515</sup> This reference to doubt, hesitation and second thought implies a moment of exchange between designer and designed. Acconci states, “I can’t know how a frame of mind is affected. I can only set up what I hope is an occasion for a change of mind.”<sup>516</sup> The studio thus produces occasions more than products. Each design of the studio points, temporally and spatially, to a specific proposition in space and time. Each proposition, in turn, is a test of the systems of contemporary design, just as each swing of the crow bar in *Claim* was a test of the dynamics of public space. A project such as *A city that rides the garbage dump* may never be physically constructed. It does, however, configure an event, in the form of a critical proposition in the field of design. In the case of this project, the “occasion for a change of mind” involves rethinking the troubled environmental present.

Acconci’s Nietzschean artistic practice thus affirms the subversive potential of the event. An event, by nature undetermined, is a perfect antagonism of design. Design, of course, insists on outcomes, ends and products. By contrast, the dictionary definition of ‘event’ includes “Undesigned or incidental result.”<sup>517</sup> Inserting undesigned or incidental results into the field of design is an oxymoronic undertaking that Acconci happily embraces on his path to overcoming the critical impasses of the present. Of course, Acconci has been designing events since the 1960s. Drawing attention to the literal space of the page in his poetry, writing became a spatially and temporally specific action. Photography provided retrospective documentation of temporal events. His performances involved the literal staging of events and sculpture involved the active engagement of the viewer, configuring repeated events in the space of the gallery.

The concept of the event has particular significance in the context of contemporary politics. Where political overhaul seems futile in relation to the limitless reach of global capital, such ideals have been abandoned in favour of more tactical practices. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, describe the future of radical politics as undetermined and naturally arising from a sequence of events:

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<sup>515</sup> Acconci, in Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in public art*, p. 176

<sup>516</sup> Ward, “In private and public,” in Ward et. el., *Vito Acconci*, pp. 60-61

<sup>517</sup> See Fowler and Fowler, eds., *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English*.



new figures of resistance are composed through the sequences of the events of struggle. This is another characteristic of the existence of the multitude today, *within* Empire and *against* Empire. New figures of struggle and new subjectivities are produced in the conjuncture of events.<sup>518</sup>

Elizabeth Grosz is more explicit in configuring the event as transformative in itself, writing “Events erupt onto the systems which aim to contain them, inciting change, upheaval, and asystematicity into their order.”<sup>519</sup> The ‘art event’ has a long history in itself, and has been an integral part of subversive artistic practices from Brechtian theatre to Dada and Fluxus. Michael Erlhoff writes about the utopian associations held by avant-garde artists who constructed events within the realms of art, describing these events as “the projection of a concrete utopia.”<sup>520</sup>

The very attempt to ‘construct’ an event contradicts its unexpected and unpredictable nature, however, and idealistic practices have been victim to this paradox. Art events are often contained and neutralised by art systems, and this history has cast a melancholic shadow on the very concept. It was this sense of futility that incited Acconci to first give up performance, and then sculpture, before disavowing art altogether. Describing the promise and futility of performance, he writes:

performance imposed the unsaleable onto the store that the gallery is. On the other hand, performance built that store up and confirmed the market-system: it increased the gallery’s sales by acting as window-dressing and by providing publicity.<sup>521</sup>

His current design practice has displaced the utopian goals of this earlier artistic practice, focusing instead on the unanticipated, unexpected process of designing. *A city that rides the garbage dump* provides an occasion for a change of perspective without determining

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<sup>518</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 61

<sup>519</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *The nick of time*, p. 8

<sup>520</sup> Michael Erlhoff, “Eventually events – some unjudged sentences” in Stephen C. Foster, *“Event” arts and art events*, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1988), p. 289

<sup>521</sup> Acconci, “Performance after the fact,” in Gloria Moure, ed., *Vito Acconci* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2001), p. 150

or constructing the event itself. *Mur Island* configures a similarly undefined occasion, in public space, for the inhabitants and visitors of Graz. These occasions are unleashed within the field of design rather than the closed and self-referential field of art. They present contemporary problems without attempting to solve them. For Gilles Deleuze, this is precisely what characterises an event. Neither the cause nor the effect of a specific situation, events emerge out of and help to define problems. He writes, “The event by itself is problematic and problematising.”<sup>522</sup>

Acconci’s artistic evolution can be seen, in itself, as a sequence of problematising events, leading to an antagonism of both art and architecture. As Bernard Tschumi comments, “Vito has been a major irritant in both the art and architecture scenes, and I mean that as a real compliment.”<sup>523</sup> Acconci Studio, designing “undesigned or incidental results” in the field of commercial architecture, is defining problems that both art and design would like to ignore. These Nietzschean tactics affirm the misdirected practice of art, outside of the designed art world and within the uncritical world of design.

## Recurrences

Acconci Studio provokes the designed world in order to overcome its increasingly determined and controlled future, just as Acconci provoked the viewer in his early performances in order to activate their subordinated will. It is of little consequence if the commercial projects of the studio succeed or fail. Indeed, repeated failures have defined Acconci’s own evolution, where each critical impasse has been embraced a part of a process of overcoming. As Fraser Ward observes: “One thing to be said about Acconci from the outset, however, is that he seems to be an artist who is – however precariously – unafraid of failure.”<sup>524</sup> Such an embrace of failure is characteristic of Dionysus, the cheeky character from Greek mythology celebrated by Nietzsche for his artistic affirmation of life, a character who “grows stronger through the accidents that threaten to

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<sup>522</sup> Deleuze, *The logic of sense*, p. 54

<sup>523</sup> Tschumi, cited in Aric Chen, "Coming of age," p. 41

<sup>524</sup> Ward, "In private and public," in Ward et. el., *Vito Acconci*, p. 18

destroy him.”<sup>525</sup> Acconci’s absurd aesthetic, along with his literal and provocative approach, certainly resonates with the cheekiness of Dionysus. He actively resists cynicism, affirming change at the risk of failure. As Sanford Kwinter observes, the work of Acconci Studio “is not so much a critique as a detonation of social space, a setting it *wild* with jokes, mischief, obscenity and dance.”<sup>526</sup>

New, in Acconci’s sense, does not imply a spontaneous break from the past or radical originality. His affirmation of the new has instead been arrived at through a persistent and systematic literalism. It involves the repeated affirmation of the past in the effort to will a future. For example, visual disorientation was used in *Claim* to emphasise the vulnerability of the body and to exaggerate the disjuncture between artwork and viewer. When performance did not incite revolution, it was employed again in the design of *Maze Table*, which this time confounded the viewer’s perception of space in order to reveal their manipulation within the terms of sculpture. When the terms of the gallery proved too limiting, Acconci employed a similar strategy in *Mur Island*, employing a confusion of spatial boundaries to destabilise the conventions of architecture, emphasising the experience of the body in space. As Acconci claims, “But if you repeat and shift, the repetition gradually transforms itself into an explosion.”<sup>527</sup>

This repetition of old patterns to reconfigure the future encapsulates Nietzsche’s overriding concept of evolution, or ‘the eternal recurrence.’ At the end of *Will to Power*, Nietzsche affirms his vision of a world that is constantly changing by repetition. This world, he writes, is “a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, with tremendous years of recurrence, with an ebb and a flood of its forms.”<sup>528</sup> If critical art, over the last three decades, has been gradually subsumed in the designed art world, then Acconci has willed for it to recur, via mis-design, in the evolution of his practice. In 1967, Acconci wrote the following poem:

I have made my point

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<sup>525</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #1003, p.520. Dionysus is also put forward by the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk as an alternative to the cynical postmodern condition. (See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of cynical reason*, 1987)

<sup>526</sup> Kwinter, “Saint architect of Sodom” in Sobel and Andera, eds., *Acts of Architecture*, p. 54

<sup>527</sup> Acconci, cited in Noever and MAK, eds., *Vito Acconci: The City Inside Us*, p. 9

<sup>528</sup> Nietzsche, *The will to power*, #1067, p.550

I make it again  
It  
Now you get the point.<sup>529</sup>

In these four simple lines, he anticipates the willful, repetitive trajectory of his practice.

His evolution has involved a sequence of artistic and architectural occasions that repeat, with insistence, the necessity to challenge the increasing design of contemporary society. Similarly, Nietzsche's eternal return is strangely linear, composed of a sequence of unpredictable, changing events. As Deleuze explains, "The eternal return is not a theory of qualities and their circular transformations, but rather the theory of pure events and their linear and superficial condensation."<sup>530</sup> The unpredictable nature of events means that 'recurrence' is always new. Acconci's critical tactics might be driving in the same point, but this point, he insists, is relevant. As the final line of the poem asserts, "Now you get the point."<sup>531</sup>

And so Acconci's evolution does not involve a break away from art. Nor is it simply the repetition of performance or poetry in architectural clothing. Instead, his move from the increasingly commercial art world and into design represents his attempt to overpower the design of art, to will a critical future for artistic practices. Not only does this present a critique to the art world, but it encourages design to think in terms of misuse, play and speculation. The extent to which Acconci Studio affirms a critical practice will depend on the seductive lure of the instruments of design, on the studio's observance of commercial limitations and on their capacity to persist without a clear purpose. Trapped in the system of commerce, like the basement of *Claim*, blindfolded and anticipating an unknown event, Acconci Studio has only the will for art to evolve in the direction of a more critical and less designed future.

Like Acconci's practice, this chapter has been circular. It began with the design of *Mur Island*, a repeating motif. It then circled back, tracing Acconci's evolution from his poetry to the establishment of Acconci Studio. It proceeded to explore the design process of the studio and how they purposefully misdirect the outcome-based methodology of

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<sup>529</sup> Acconci, cited in Ward et. el., *Vito Acconci*, p. 9

<sup>530</sup> Deleuze, *The logic of sense*, p. 178

<sup>531</sup> Acconci, cited in Ward et. el., *Vito Acconci*, p. 9 [My emphasis]

design which led to a consideration of how they might be mis-shaping the future of design. It then returned to the issue of critical art in a designed world, where Acconci's practice emerges as a will for art to evolve in the direction of a more critical and less designed future. Acconci's evolution from art to design, I argue, traces the increasing design of the contemporary art world and the simultaneous criticality of contemporary design. This might be bad topology. Hopefully it will give rise to something unexpected.

## Conclusion

The critical potential of art's collusion with design, as I have argued, lies in the capacity for the design process to subvert the commercial outcome of production. This means misdirecting the outcome-based focus of capitalist design so that critical spaces might open up from within the sphere of commercial production. Such provocations, in the form of artistic practices within commercial production, provide a means for consumers to consider the psychological and social effects of production. As Marx argued, it is in the mistakes of capitalist production that subjects become aware of human labour and the controls of the production process.<sup>532</sup> A mistake in design, or 'mis-design', thereby helps the product-based methodology of design give way to the process of conceiving and thinking, producing spaces for human desire and agency. Artists, as I argue, have a unique capacity to unleash human desire in the field of commercial design in order to make consumers aware of the subjective nature of industrial production and to shift focus away from the fiscal directive of the capitalist machine. To embrace art in this way, as a practice of critical design, involves disregarding the formal distinction between visual art and design, and instead turning to art as a critical practice within the designed landscape of both art and commerce.

In Chapter 1, I examined the collusion of art and commerce through the work of Takashi Murakami, taking into account a historical analysis of modernist attempts to escape the collusion of commerce and art. In some cases this emerged in an embrace of Marx's sense of use-value, that is, turning away from the commodified product toward its actual utility. Yet as I argued, use-value is a mirage that can never be realised within the systems of capitalist production, which necessarily abstracts human labour, need and desire. The concept thus persists as a false utopia that disguises our implication within the systems of late capital. Similarly, the recent interest in 'Relational Aesthetics' reflects a concern over the alienating effects of a designed world that inadvertently disguises the way in which the relations between people are also subject to late capitalism's design. As I have argued, it is the products of contemporary culture that now carry and effect systems of power in contemporary culture and it is therefore through production, rather

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<sup>532</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 289

than idealistic alternatives, that social systems can be most effectively examined, questioned, and transformed. While Murakami's practice understands the futility of escaping the design of art, his approach demonstrated that the distinction between art and design has become secondary to the question of criticality in cultural production. In this practice, I argued, art and the consumer world met on a level of decoration, eradicating difference and leading to a flattened sense of space and subjectivity. Murakami's practice thus encapsulates the contradiction of maintaining the discipline of 'fine art' within a design market and how this lends itself to the systems of late capitalism. By contrast, Zittel, Kalkin and Acconci use this contradiction as an overt starting point in order to explore the critical possibilities of design and how it can be configured as a critique of commercial production.

As I argued in Chapter 2, Zittel reenacts the failure of modernist design in order to reveal the alienating effects of industrial production. The idealistic ambitions of Zittel's design, like the attempts of Constructivist artists in the early twentieth century, can never be realised. Every design system reveals itself in Zittel's practice as fundamentally flawed, prompting renewed production and fuelling the cycle of consumption. Zittel's attempts to revive alternative forms of production only end up perpetuating the very conditions that she is trying to escape. The products of Zittel's design therefore fail as commodities and succeed as powerful carriers of social critique. The futile objects embody psychological struggle within capitalist production, thereby encouraging consumers to consider the personal, subjective and psychological mechanisms of production. Struggling to satisfy her needs, Zittel exposes capitalism's mask and demonstrates that consumer desire only produces lack. The failure of Zittel's work, as I argue, elucidates an unrealised, ungraspable desire for freedom which undermines the very concept of design.

Kalkin's critique does not rely on the failure of design but successfully exploits the 'madness' of capitalist production in order to effect his critique. His work celebrates the irrationality of commercial design as a means to examine the psychological nature of design. Where Zittel showed the futility of turning to utility to find emancipation from the controlling effects of industrial production, Kalkin openly deranges and disrupts the function of his design in order to pierce the manufactured wants and needs of the

consumer world. Problems abound in his work and it is in this problematic confusion of commerciality with critical artistic practice that he disrupts the slick surface of a consumer world that appears to have absorbed all problems, all criticality and all space for differentiation. Kalkin's production brings the realms of human desire and social production together to tease out the internal tensions of late capital and its capture of the social psyche. This emphasis on the psychological nature of production distinguishes his project from the history of modernist design, which as Andrea Zittel's work shows, failed to consider how capitalism's subjects might be conditioned to 'want' social oppression. Kalkin's work analyses how subjects come to desire their own control and simultaneously extends the psychological irrationality of capitalism to a point that releases human desire from its control within systems of design.

By embracing a deficient sense of use and a misguided sense of function, Acconci Studio attempts to activate the designed subject and to incite change. Mis-design, in this context, signifies active and engaged participation in public space, provoking the viewer to consider the terms under which they move in public space. As I have argued, Acconci's move toward design represents an evolution rather than disavowal of his earlier artistic practice, which was always concerned with testing the limits of the social construction of bodies, self, space and community. In order for the critical function of his work to persist, Vito Acconci departed the designed space of the gallery, entering design itself in a stubborn refusal to submit his tenacious practice to the systems of the art world. Setting up propositions and testing them against the systems of design, Acconci makes consumers and designers aware of the determined and oppressive nature of design. Unleashing questions in the design field, Acconci misdirects its function, creating a critical space from which to affirm a future for art.

From Murakami to Zittel to Kalkin to Acconci, this thesis traces a move away from the immanence of the postmodern condition, which obliterates history and difference, to the conception of a future for critical art. While Murakami's work is characterised by its superflat disregard of both past and future, Zittel's project nostalgically re-lives past idealism in order to acknowledge its futility, contextualising such idealism in relation to the present. Kalkin remembers the past only in order to affirm difference in the present, while Acconci points to 'overcoming' and evolution. Tracing



this movement from present to past to future, from Murakami to Acconci, this thesis maps the current condition of critical artistic practice.

Despite their differences, the work of all four artists reveals a fracture in contemporary society – the displacement of human desire from subject to object. In an overwhelmingly designed landscape, this suggests that objects bear the weight of human relations. Engaging with design in a consciously provocative manner opens up the potential to produce active objects that exploit the internal irrationality of late capitalism and insert difference into the homogenised sphere of consumer production. The work of Zittel, Kalkin and Acconci makes consumers aware of the alienating effects of capitalist exchange, the design of human life in our post-industrial landscape and the potential for becoming-human in a designed world. The simple act of asking questions, in the field of design, is groundbreaking. It implies a critical distance from the market, an active designer and the potential activation of the designed subject. As Vilem Flusser writes, “Design means, among other things, fate. This process of asking questions is the collective attempt to seize hold of fate and, collectively, to shape it.”<sup>533</sup>

This thesis poses a question in the designed field of contemporary art, asking whether mis-design can provide the means for artistic critique within contemporary cultural production. The displacement of artistic practices from the art market, as I have argued through my analysis of the work of Murakami, Zittel, Kalkin and Acconci, indicates an attempt by artists to engage with cultural systems more directly in order to find spaces for critique. In turn, this thesis would like to incite a shift in focus away from the question of what distinguishes the fields of design and art toward a more critical examination of how this landscape, where design morphs into art and art morphs into design, is providing the ground for unexpected, engaged and reflective forms of social production.

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<sup>533</sup> Flusser, *The Shape of Things*, p. 107