



MONASH University

***Causing the Present to Pass: Autonomy, Criticality & the
Impasse of Contemporary Art***

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Table of Contents

Copyright Notice	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Declaration of Originality	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	x
Preface	4
1: Be Positive! Being critical in a post-critical condition?	6
Contemporary Art.....	9
Communicative Capitalism	14
Post-Critical	20
Post-Negational	28
2: The Paradox of Autonomy	36
3: The Problematic Nature of Art	47
A Concept of Thought.....	52
The Production of Sense.....	54
Thought is Pre-Conscious?.....	57
Art's Effects.....	61
4: Practical Autonomy	66
Art Praxis.....	70
Appendix 1: Studio Practice	71
The Administration Office for Such Causes as; the rights of walks or—	73
Jacques Tati.....	81
Rhetorical Device	90
Robert Propst.....	98
Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options	104
Adam Kalkin	117
A Plant is a Plant	126
A Constructed World.....	144
Find Your Endless Encounter.....	148
Conclusion	156
Bibliography	158

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Abstract

Contemporary art has become the automatic context in which all art made now has to operate. Once an empty temporal signifier, it is now clear that contemporary art—as the dominant configuration of art practice and institutions—imparts presuppositions at all levels of the art world. These presuppositions, while sometimes obvious, are otherwise transmitted implicitly through the operations of gallery networks, art discourse and educational institutions. Any artist practicing today is subject to the principles of contemporary art, and consequently must engage with them.

Drawing on work by art historians and theorists Rex Butler, Suhail Malik, Andrew McNamara and Peter Osborne, this exegesis contends that contemporary art, through its misunderstanding and subsequent rejection of the principle of “autonomy,” and encouragement of non-oppositional forms of “criticality,” renders itself both incapable of critical efficacy, and susceptible to the incorporation of neoliberal ideology.

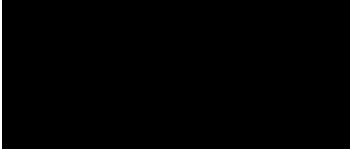
Approaching this discourse as an artist, I seek to address the gap between historical accounts and practice, specifically asking how artists can retain a sense of autonomy and effective critical function for their artwork, without succumbing to reductive or simplified interpretations. Through a revision of autonomy, I suggest that the critical capacity of art practice can be reinstated, but that this entails artists re-engaging with art discourse, and re-affirming the institutional nature of art practice. Furthermore, I suggest that a re-interpretation of Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy—whose dominant interpretations have to some extent abetted contemporary art’s obsession with dissolving boundaries—enables a productive method for thinking the autonomy of the artwork.

Keywords:

A Constructed World, Action Office 2, aesthetics, art institutions, autonomy, contemporary art, criticality, critical art, Gilles Deleuze, installation, Adam Kalkin, The Logic of Sense, politics, post-critical, post-negational, Robert Propst, sense, sound, Jacques Tati, thought.

Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.



Marnie Edmiston

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List of Figures

Figure 0: Brief outline of Deleuze's ontological structure.

Figure 1: Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, PDF document, (detail: front cover).

Figure 2: Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, PDF document, (detail: back cover).

Figure 3: Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, PDF document, 1–2.

Figure 4: Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, PDF document, 3–4.

Figure 5: Entrance to Collins Place showing space-frame ceiling. Case Mealan, Collins Place, digital photograph, 2007, accessed October 25, 2016, http://xvkjc2tqpxzx5u5g3wwmx5xz.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/AMP-Collins-Place-35-Collins-St-2620V_1400x900_web8-600x386.jpg.

Figure 6: Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, digital photograph.

Figure 7: Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, digital photograph.

Figure 8: Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, Adobe Illustrator file.

Figure 9: On the streets of “Tati-ville.” Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).

Figure 10: Monsuier Hulot encounters the modern workplace. Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).

Figure 11: Stylish rubbish. Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).

Figure 12: Cleaning demonstration. Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).

Figure 13: The Arpel house. Jacques Tati, *Mon Oncle*, (Specta Films, 1958), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2001).

Figure 14: Open house at the Arpel residence. Jacques Tati, *Mon Oncle*, (Specta Films, 1958), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2001).

Figure 15: Various faux-modernist designs by Tati and Larange. Jacques Tati, *Mon Oncle*, (Specta Films, 1958), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2001).

Figure 16: Marnie Edmiston, *Rhetorical Device*, 2015, Speakers, amplifier, USB audio interface, Mac laptop and battery, power board, camera, sound, audio channel splitter, table, digital photographs, electric motor, styrofoam, pen, rubber bands, balsa wood, glue, extension cord. Monash Caulfield Project Space, Melbourne.

Figure 17: Marnie Edmiston, *Rhetorical Device*, 2015, Speakers, amplifier, USB audio interface, Mac laptop and battery, power board, camera, sound, audio channel splitter, table, digital photographs, electric motor, styrofoam, pen, rubber bands, balsa wood, glue, extension cord. Monash Caulfield Project Space, Melbourne.

Figure 18: Preliminary photograph. Marnie Edmiston, 2015, digital photograph.

Figure 19: Herman Miller, *Action Office 2*, promotional image, c. 1968, in Knobel, 1987, 77.

Figure 20: Herman Miller, *Action Office 2*, promotional illustration, c.1968, in Leslie A. Piña, *Classic Herman Miller*, (Atglen: Schiffer Publications, 1998), 147.

Figure 21: Herman Miller, *Action Office 2*, promotional pamphlet, c. 1969, in Leslie A. Piña, *Classic Herman Miller*, (Atglen: Shiffer Publications, 1998), 148.

Figure 22: Propst, "The office and the human performer," in *The Office: a facility based on change*, (Zeeland: Herman Miller, 1977), 19.

Figure 23: Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, archive boxes, Bus Projects, Melbourne.

Figure 24: Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, archive boxes and gravoply, Bus Projects, Melbourne.

Figure 25: Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, (1 of 5) engraved gravoply Bus Projects, Melbourne.

Figure 26: Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, earthenware sound dome, speaker, speaker wire, oregon pine, pine ply, foam, fake velvet, buttons, Bus Projects, Melbourne.

Figure 27: Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, earthenware sound dome, speaker, speaker wire, oregon pine, pine ply, foam, fake velvet, buttons, archive boxes, Bus Projects, Melbourne.

Figure 28: Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, Adobe Illustrator file, Bus Projects, Melbourne.

Figure 29: Acoustic conditioner. Herman Miller, *Action Office 2*, promotional photograph, date unknown, in John Pile, *Open Office Planning: a handbook for interior designers and architects*, (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1978), 138.

Figure 30: Donald Judd, Chair, 1989, oak, Judd Foundation, Marfa.

Figure 31: Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Comfort Unit*, 1994, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati.

Figure 32: Adam Kalkin, *Bunny Lane House*, 2001, New Jersey. © Peter Aaron/OTTO.

Figure 33: Adam Kalkin, *Bunny Lane House*, 2001, New Jersey. © Peter Aaron/OTTO.

Figure 34: Adam Kalkin, *Bunny Lane House*, 2001, New Jersey. © Peter Aaron/OTTO.

Figure 35: Four separate dwellings seen from street level, affectionately known as the “aquarium” apartments. Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).

Figure 36: Adam Kalkin, “Multi-Family Housing,” (printed 2002), CAD drawing, in Kalkin, *Architecture and Hygiene*, (Batsford: London, 2002), 118–119.

Figure 37: Adam Kalkin, “Electrical Tower Conversion,” 2001, CAD drawing, in Kalkin, *Architecture and Hygiene*, (Batsford: London, 2002), 40–41.

Figure 38: Adam Kalkin, “Car Museum,” 2001, CAD and freehand drawing, in Kalkin, *Architecture and Hygiene*, (Batsford: London, 2002), 98–99.

Figure 39: Adam Kalkin, *Push Button House 2*, recycled shipping container with hydraulic alteration and fit-out commissioned by illy Coffee, 2007, Time Warner Center, New York.

Figure 40: *Four Corners*, “Jackson and Lawler: Inside the Eye of the Storm,” directed by Caro Meldrum-Hanna, Klaus Toft and Elise Worthington, aired October 19, 2015, on ABC.

Figure 41: Harry Caul’s hideout in *The Conversation*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (The Directors Company, 1974), DVD (Paramount Pictures, 2000).

Figure 42: Parabolic listening device constructed from cardboard and gaffer tape. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.

Figure 43: View from street level. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.

Figure 44: Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Cardboard, digital photographs, hooks, carpet, gaffer tape, ceramic earthenware speaker houses, speakers, speaker wire, glue, pine ply, material, sound recorder, microphone cable, USB power cable, extension cables, power board, amplifier, headphone to RCA cable, tripod, microphone, microphone stand, sound, Gravoply, cans, rope, washers, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse

Figure 45: Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

Figure 46: Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.

Figure 47: Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

Figure 48: Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.
Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

Figure 49: Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.
Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

Figure 50: Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.
Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

Figure 51: Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.
Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse

Figure 52: Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.
Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

Figure 53: Marnie Edmiston, flyer for *A plant is a plant*, 2016, digital image.

Figure 54: Front cover of issue 8. *A Constructed World*, *Artfan: contemporary art review magazine to read* 8, (Melbourne; A Constructed World, 1996).

Figure 55: Marnie Edmiston, *Find Your Endless Encounter*, 2016, ACCA: The City Speaks, Melbourne.

Figure 56: Marnie Edmiston, *Find Your Endless Encounter*, 2016, ACCA: The City Speaks, Melbourne. Photo credit: Zan Wimberley.

Figure 57: Marnie Edmiston, *Find Your Endless Encounter* (detail), 2016, ACCA: The City Speaks, Melbourne.

Figure 58: Marnie Edmiston, *Find Your Endless Encounter* (detail), 2016, ACCA: The City Speaks, Melbourne.

Figure 59: Open plan office design. Quickborner Team, GEG-Versand, Karmen, 1963–1964, in Pile, *Open Office Planning: a handbook for interior designers and architects*, 12.

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A focus on “in-between spaces” is key: in terms of our interaction with the digital world, the blurred boundaries between art forms and the interconnection between politics and financial power structures.

—Stephanie Rosenthal, curator of the 20th Biennale of Sydney:

The Future is Already Here — It's Just Not Evenly Distributed, 2016

The 19th Biennale of Sydney: You Imagine What You Desire offers itself as a grand multiplicity. It is in its nature multiple, and contains within itself a set of singular multiplicities.

—Juliana Engberg, curator of the 19th BoS:

You Imagine What You Desire, 2014

We are moving on from a century in which the radical in the arts largely adopted principles of separation, negativity and disruption as strategies of change. Based on oppositional thinking, such modernist principles proved tenacious and acted as a default criticality in a world in which the drive to progress became more complicated and the consequences more ambiguous.

A changing reality is apparent in a renewed attention to how things connect—how we relate to each other and to the world we inhabit. Art is a part of this growing awareness. Where once there was an emphasis on alienation and distance, there are now concurrent shifts of thinking that are informing the work of artists and writers across the world.

—Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster, curators of the 18th BoS:

All Our Relations, 2012

More importantly, the idea of distance expresses the condition of art itself. Art is of life, runs parallel to life and is sometimes about life. But, for art to be art (a medium of numinous, sometimes symbolic power), it must maintain a distance from life. Without distance, art has no authority and is no longer special. [...] Contemporary art is one of the most important activities in which we can be engaged. If it is any good, it balances enjoyment with wisdom by offering creative, free and open perspectives that are desperately needed in complicated and dangerous times.

—David Elliott, curator of the 17th BoS:

The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age, 2010

In politics, 'revolution' is a term often considered obsolete, ominous and associated with violence—abrupt and sudden change is seen as impossible or dangerous. We are told that change can only occur as a series of micro-changes or through evolution, not revolution. The idea of revolution has become a lifestyle choice, co-opted into the latest software upgrade. The history of the word “revolution”, however, reveals its ambivalent and paradoxical nature.

—Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, curator of the 16th BoS:

Revolutions — Forms that Turn, 2008

There is nothing offered here to suggest ways to resolve conflict or disorder, or the right paths to be taken, or five-year plans to be drawn up; no alternatives proposed.

—Charles Merewether, curator of the 15th BoS:

Zones of Contact, 2006

I have worked with a concept that has guided my choices, although the works and artists cannot be reduced to this; they overcome it in an enriching manner, above all being neither illustrative nor derivative of that concept alone.

—Isabel Carlos, curator of the 14th BoS:

On Reason and Emotions, 2004

These developments provide a context in which to consider the works that make up (The World May Be) Fantastic. However I hope that the works do not contain or illustrate themes, as the exhibition is intended to work as a proposition rather than as a diagnosis.

This holds true both for each work's relationship to the ideas I have outlined here and to the show as a whole. It is a hypothesis. It does not claim that these are the artists and practices who are 'setting the pace' right now. Or that this is the best art from around the world of the last two years. Or that the work represents movements that are defining the future (or the present) as Biennales often tend to do... This Biennale intends to provide a platform for certain works by certain artists at a certain time.

—Richard Grayson, curator of the 13th BoS:

(The World May Be) Fantastic, 2002

There are now only artificial divides between robust contemporary art and that of the past. The last century thrived on the ideology of progress and hierarchy, with one movement succeeding another and one centre dominating the periphery. That will not be the case in the new century. The Biennale of Sydney 2000 presents, in the words of Gerhard Richter, “the collective experience of the age” through the vision of a number of artists, so necessary as an antidote to existing hegemonies.

—Selection panel of the 12th BoS:

Biennale of Sydney 2000, 2000

Preface

Like many projects, the beginnings of this research emerged from personal experience. Concentrated around schools of avant-garde and post-structuralist discourse, and encouraging me towards critical, inter-disciplinary practice, my undergraduate fine art education was unapologetically *contemporary*. Like inheriting a chronic medical condition, an education in art inescapably locates one in an opaque chain of history. My own inheritance was a mixture of antagonism, criticality and social awareness, alongside an endlessly generative approach to meaning. For me, the artwork existed in its discourse; the incorporeal and combinatory space of “text” where cumulative subjective experience, interpretations and re-interpreted interpretations wound together and mutually determined one another.¹ Constructing and expressing meanings through an artwork became a matter of coincidence—a difficult position to coherently maintain in the context of mandatory exegetical texts, artist statements, exhibition blurbs and discussions. I began to question why I was making art if I couldn’t express what it meant; and (overwhelmingly), why insist on being an artist in a culture that would prefer graphic designers? The ethics of choosing to be an artist—of dedicating my life to making something “useless,” rather than pragmatic—weighed on my mind. *Should artworks be more than just art?* Intention and interpretation were an early interest for me, and they appear here again in another form.

For the following essay, I have taken liberties with the permissive nature of practice-led research. Although an exegesis generally comprises an exposition of the studio research in relation to influential practitioners, art history and theory, this text is instead an attempt to determine the pre-conditions of current art practice. As such, I have intentionally avoided providing specific artworks as examples; the following is an attempt to discuss the *idea* of art. Not quite art history, nor sociology or philosophy, this text is an attempt to trace one line through these fields, and is accordingly partial.

¹ My Honours project was a specific engagement with Roland Barthes’ idea of “text,” derived from his essay “From Work to Text,” in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977).

² Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, 4

Chapter one considers contemporary art's fixation on "repairing" the divide between art and life, questioning whether a return to "reality" in its current form results in the heeding of art to capitalist logic. Developing connections between contemporary art and Jodi Dean's idea of "communicative capitalism," I discuss the critical efficacy of contemporary art via recent debates on the "post-critical."

In chapter two I posit a renewal of art's autonomy in order to maintain the critical potential of contemporary art practice. Drawing heavily on two recent reconsiderations of the term by Andrew McNamara and Peter Osborne, I insist on the complexity of autonomy beyond formalist conceptions, and develop an approach to the concept that maintains a meaningful connection between art and its wider cultural context.

Chapter three marks a turn towards the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Explicating the connection between art and thought developed in *The Logic of Sense*, I argue that his ontology provides a technical understanding of art's ability to enable access to the universal through the generation of sense.² I suggest that the autonomy of the artwork can be understood as its capacity to operate in a pre-personal mode of address, engendering a critical stance for the artwork in the current context of contemporary art.

By engaging with debates surrounding the logic of "contemporary art"—understood as both the eclectic art-historical term and the current system of art's distribution—this exegesis aims to give an interpretation of the context in which I unavoidably engage with as an artist. This approach is in part an endeavor to ensure that this writing holds relevance outside of my own practice—a decision that presupposes the "ordinariness" of my own artworks.³ But it is also part of a wider argument that concerns the position of the artist in contemporary art, and the position of contemporary art in an increasingly neoliberalised society.

² Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, (London: Continuum, 2003).

³ That is, I hope the following text will be of more use to others than if I focused singularly on explicating my studio practice.

Be positive!**Being critical in a post-critical condition?**

If the past 16 years of Sydney Biennale curator statements is anything to go by, the question of art's relation to society is still at the forefront of the art world's consciousness. These types of statements—part art-historical or theoretical rationale, part PR—are difficult to negotiate. The curators' task is to explain their over-arching concepts without making undue generalisations about the huge number of participating artists. They must stand by their curatorial decisions without emphasising the inclusion and exclusion inherent in organising an exhibition. They have to make the event sound enticing to the wider community while maintaining their artistic credibility by not appearing to pander to popular opinion. Anyone tasked with being the conduit between artists and the wider public is likely to upset one or the other (or both). Nonetheless, the variety of attempts to make this large art event relevant to a public audience highlights the elusive and often contradictory nature of art's role in a wider social context. The attempts to differentiate current art practices from past conceptions of art—specifically the “autonomy” of modernism and the “criticality” of postmodernism—necessarily leads to trying to find apparently new ways to argue for the value of art, avoiding the absorption of art into entertainment or the abandonment of art for more pragmatic and political activity.⁴ The situation can be (somewhat reductively) schematised:

Modern:	Art is independent from society and presents a criticism of its culture.
Postmodern:	Art is independent from society and presents a criticism of its culture.
Contemporary:	Art is independent from society and presents a criticism of its culture.

⁴ This is not to reduce modernism only to the concept of autonomy, but rather to acknowledge it as one of its constitutive features. John Berger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), demonstrates the complexity of the issue. As will be seen in chapter two, asserting autonomy for an artwork does not have to result in an indifference to its social context.

But is it necessary to dispense with ideas of autonomy and criticality in trying to establish a renewed social importance of art? Undeniably, we have seen over the past 20 years a tendency in the art world to motivate itself towards worthy ambitions of education, collaboration, participation and inclusivity. The viewer's experience has come to the forefront of contemporary art practice and engaging the public has become more important than ever, especially in response to the rising attendance numbers at museums and global art events. Even if Nicolas Bourriaud's conception of relational aesthetics has been disavowed as exploitative and unnecessarily concerned with consensus, its legacy of interpersonal encounters between artists and their public/s has continued to occupy a prominent place in contemporary practice.⁵

Concurrently, neoliberal ideologies are working to reformat the terms of subjectivity and inter-personal relations, and even foreclose the possibility of a future different from the present.⁶ Although this situation extends to all facets of life, the visual arts have found itself particularly susceptible to the incorporation of capitalist logic. Perhaps by accident, it has begun to approach the perfection of neoliberal labour relations: a surplus of individual freelancers working in a highly competitive field, wherein there is no guarantee of income or workplace, and career pathways are constantly changing; systems whose terms are defined, but not disclosed, by a small number of powerful individuals. Each artist becomes the embodiment of her own brand, and the act of *choosing* takes precedence over the act of *making*. The artwork itself, which can be anything, is consequently placed third or fourth in importance, after whose curatorial support it has, where it is being shown and the reputation of the artist who made it.

⁵ See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110, (2004): 51–79; Toni Ross, "Aesthetic Autonomy and Interdisciplinarity: A Response to Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 5, no. 3 (2006): 167–181.

⁶ The effect of late-capitalism on subjectivity has been the focus of numerous works of radical criticism. See for instance Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, ed. Jason Smith, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009); Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: O Books, 2009); Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2015).

In response to this contradiction, I contend that autonomy and criticality are in fact integral to preserving art from full collapse into the “creative industries,” and that they enable art to maintain its valuable position, both inside and outside of current cultural conditions—the unique position of art and art alone. By looking to two recent revisions of the idea of autonomy, and by investigating recent debates surrounding the idea of the “post-critical,” I aim to establish the ongoing importance of both autonomy and criticality to contemporary practice.

This is not to claim that autonomy and criticality as they were developed in both modernist and postmodernist accounts apply wholly unchanged to today’s practices. Historical, political, social and technological developments have impacted greatly on how art is made, received and valued—not least of all because these developments significantly alter subjectivity itself. Although postmodernist discourse has been said to dispense with grand narratives, it could be said that there is only one grand narrative left: that of capitalism. Floating exchange currencies, networked communications, computer-assisted finance and the neoliberalization of health, education, humanitarian and environmental policies all work to reorganise and reformat our relations towards each other and ourselves. Resisting these changes as a subject is difficult because they are often presented as the only available option, as “reality;” the professionalization of art is perhaps one of the best examples of how a field can be re-oriented towards neoliberal ends.⁷ Accordingly, in this chapter I examine the current context of contemporary art and its claims to criticality and political potential. I argue that the particular type of critical and political claims encouraged in contemporary art are a symptom of

⁷ This appears in many forms: consistency across artworks; consistency between artwork and artist; more time spent on PR than the actual work; grant and exhibition applications becoming the form of legitimation; increasingly large-scale exhibitions become the standard and thus artists must rely on their dealer or private sponsorship to front the funding—but in the service of a work that will provide “returns;” artist collaborations as “branding” with another “brand;” the artist as service provider—whether through relational aesthetics, performance or institutional critique; the artwork providing design trends for shops; artist literally as designer. Consider also: completing higher study as a way to legitimize one’s practice and network—this is in part down to how universities operate: finding the right niche for an academic’s work, quantification of research output, specialized and narrow research projects. One of the main effects that this approach creates is the equation of an artwork to the artists’ own subjectivity, sometimes as an expression of it, and sometimes even as the direct equivalent.

developments in the wider society, and that current debates regarding the “post-critical” or “post-negational” tendency of contemporary art highlight the need to renew a position of autonomy in order to reinstate art’s critical capacity.

Contemporary Art

What is most apparent since the beginning of the 21st century is a palpable disappointment that the techno-information revolution hasn’t delivered anything close to better living conditions globally, but has instead exacerbated inequality. Addressing itself to these changing global conditions, artists have tried to bridge the gap between the public and art in a variety of ways. The resonance of relational aesthetics, collaboration, performance, the politics of labour, institutional critique, new materialisms and the increasing emphasis on inter-disciplinary approaches underscore a desire to reconnect art with life, moving against the deconstructionist tendencies of postmodernist practices and aloof modernist dispositions. Contemporary art, whether taken as a coherent category or merely an ever-expanding designation of current art practice, definitely resonates with the Australian public—or at least contemporary art museums, with their impressive architecture, child-friendly exhibitions and air-conditioning.⁸ But it is a fickle appreciation; it only takes a small prodding to lose the affection that was so hard to cultivate, the result of so many compromises. Recent cuts to the funding of the Australia Council for the Arts (and establishment of an alternative funding body under ministerial control) can be understood as a response to the “ingratitude” of protesting artists from

⁸ According to ABS statistics from 2013–14, 4.98 million Australians aged 15 years and over visited an art gallery in the 12 months prior. The National Gallery of Victoria recorded 2.27 million visitors for the 2014–15 period, while the combined Queensland Art Gallery and the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane recorded 1.2 million visitors for the same period. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events, 2013–14*, (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Accessed December 2016.
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<http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/documents/tableOffice/TabledPapers/2015/5515T1154.pdf>.

the 2014 Sydney Biennale, a move that is difficult to ignore.⁹ It seems that direct—political—criticality on the part of artists is only socially acceptable if it occurs through the adequately obscure medium of art itself. And on the government's part, any rejection of private philanthropy is taken as a serious offence; jeopardising the privatisation of funding for a cultural activity (from which it is inherently difficult to gain financial returns) threatens to restore the burden to the government ledger.

Regarding the actual artworks of Biennales, public audiences seem somewhat baffled by contemporary art, and continue to hold an expectation of visually engaging or exciting artworks. In reviews of 2016's iteration *The Future is Already Here—It's Just Not Evenly Distributed* it was easier for critics to conceive of the overwhelming amount of art on offer effectively as a summative artwork by its artistic director Stephanie Rosenthal. Anne Finegan wrote for *Artlink*:

Thirteen co-curators were brought on board, as if to flesh out the depths of this vast tableau. And if, at times, the biennale felt as if it was less about the quality of the artwork than realising Rosenthal's vision, the more you saw, the better it got. Rather than being characterised by standout works, the collective vision was strong and best appreciated through a process of steady accumulation of minor notes.¹⁰

Meanwhile John McDonald, art critic for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, lamented that once again this large art event chose to prioritise critical theory over visual impact. He began his review with the praise "[t]here's a lot to like about the 20th Biennale of Sydney, but it isn't necessarily the art."¹¹ Speaking from the self-designated position of the people's voice, McDonald declared that:

⁹ See Ben Eltham's account of the funding changes in *When The Goal Posts Move*, (Sydney: Currency House, 2016).

¹⁰ Ann Finegan, "20th Biennale of Sydney: The Future Is Already Here, It's Just Not Evenly Distributed," *Artlink*, accessed November 18, 2016, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4457/20th-biennale-of-sydney-the-future-is-already-here/>.

¹¹ John McDonald, "Big Ideas but Obscure Art at the 20th Biennale of Sydney," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, March 26, 2016, accessed November 18, 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/biennale-20160320-gnmxx6.html>.

[t]he Sydney Biennale, despite its intentions of reaching the broadest audience, is very much an insider's affair. Works that are visually slight, or so obscure that one needs a user's manual, are presented as if they were transparently important. Maybe one needs to meet the artists, read the background information, and consider all the issues involved, yet this is not viable for a mass audience. There has to be an immediate visual lure before we feel compelled to dig a little deeper.¹²

Andrew Taylor's extended review discussed the implications of the 2014 protest on the funding situation of the Sydney Biennale, and addressed the proliferation of international biennales. Quoting an interview with art historian Chris McAuliffe, Taylor wrote:

McAuliffe says biennials offer an exciting alternative to schlepping around galleries. "You're going to go to curious venues, you're going to have exciting after-dark events, there's going to be value-add everywhere you turn," he says. "There'll be artists speaking, performances, movies, controversy, good coffee."¹³

Although none of these remarks are especially surprising, they highlight the way that large event-based exhibitions do not adequately serve the needs of artworks. Rather, the sheer *amount* of artworks makes it impossible for viewers to avoid sensory overload; individual works are absorbed into the curator's overall vision. No matter how impressive an artwork is, it can't compete with the curator's daring attempt of administration on a grand scale. If curators are the new artists, at least their medium is familiar and understandable: a dedicated work ethic, ability to delegate, commitment to deadlines and facilitating mutually-beneficial working relationships.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the *experience* on

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Chris McAuliffe in Andrew Taylor, "Sydney Biennale 2016: Big, Brash and Still Grappling with Refugees and Migration," *Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday, March 11, 2016, accessed November 18, 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/sydney-biennale-2016-big-brash-and-still-grappling-with-refugees-and-migration-20160307-gncl5e.html>.

¹⁴ This is the first thing McDonald praises about the most recent biennale: "Curator Stephanie Rosenthal, born in Germany but employed by the Hayward Gallery in London, has proven herself to be one of the most committed of all Biennale directors. Previous incumbents have tended to fly into Australia for quick visits, but

offer is too boring for the general public and too populist for the art crowd. It seems that the more contemporary art wants to find its place within society, the more it has to adapt itself to public tastes, and perhaps change into something other than art. The proliferation of late night events, workshops and design stores within major art institutions are all hallmarks of the value-adding of event-based programming. The jostling for acknowledgement of art's *usefulness* returns, more often than not, disappointment. Worse than being derided is being ignored. In his 1996 book *Kant After Duchamp*, Thierry de Duve accurately summarises, and in some way predicts, the trajectory of art in the wake of Duchamp's readymades in which anti-art loses its subversive power:

Today, and this largely since the apparent success of the dadaist liberation, that is, since Dada's reception, since Dada has been 'recuperated' by and in the history of modern art, the public at large has lost all interest in contemporary art, in which it sees nothing but the reign of the whatever, while the art establishment works hard to prove to the public, or to itself, that this whatever is not just anything whatever. As for the feeling of the whatever, it is now rarely composed of fear and indignation; most often it is made up of indifference.¹⁵

Some would argue that the Sydney Biennale cannot represent, or is not indicative of, the current state of contemporary art. This argument is at its most incongruous when originating from the curators of the exhibition itself; take for instance Richard Grayson's 2002 Sydney Biennale curatorial statement, in which he writes that "[t]his Biennale intends to provide a platform for certain works by certain artists at a certain time." While the format of the Sydney Biennale is not explicitly a survey show, it is implicitly so—why

Rosenthal has been resident in Sydney since September. She has been assiduous in visiting galleries and studios. She has scouted around for unorthodox venues that connect with the social fabric of the city. She has brought in an architect to help design and finesse exhibition spaces. The director has impressed everyone with her work ethic and her comprehensive vision for the show, which takes its theme from a line by science fiction writer, William Gibson: *The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed*. The only problem is that after trawling through the works of 83 artists from 35 countries, one is left with very few memorable impressions."

¹⁵ Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 330–31.

bother organising an art show for a wide public audience in order to feature art that isn't deemed significant? The unwillingness to address the content of the Biennale represents a larger hesitancy to suggest any fundamental principles of contemporary art and a resistance towards corralling multiple artworks under an overarching concept.¹⁶

What to make of this situation where art tries to win the hearts of the public, only to (again) be met with silence? Engagement with large public art events like the Sydney Biennale mimics that of internet-based interactions; we primarily connect with the systems used to distribute contemporary art rather than engaging with a specific *artwork*, let alone the question of its meaning. The importance and success of these events are measured via visitor statistics—the same quantitative method used for website visits, retweets or likes, which replicate the same inability to measure the quality of a person's engagement. But how much of this situation is caused by the way we organise and present art, an individual's willingness to engage with a work, or the artworks themselves? I suggest that all three dimensions of this situation are themselves symptomatic of a larger problem that extends outside the art field and concerns the state of communication and political engagement in the wider public.

¹⁶ Although widespread, Terry Smith's inexpressible heterogeneity of the contemporary, developed in *What Is Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), is only one of many philosophical investigations into the logic of contemporary art. Justin Clemens provides the following summary of the most popular positions on contemporary art: "Contemporary art is an institution, entirely the effect of its local site ('institutional critique', from Arthur Danto to Pierre Bourdieu). Contemporary art is a matter for descriptive engagements, which goes at once this way and that, beyond any possible consistency, which is to be tracked by historians (Terry Smith and company). Contemporary art is about media that express or exhibit their mediality, beyond any traditional definition of what a medium is or does (Rosalind Krauss and several Octoberites). Contemporary art is a negotiation of strange cosmopolitan relations, ranging from the antagonistic to the supplicatory, and drawing on the latest post-industrial techniques for handling representations (Nicolas Bourriaud or Nikos Papastergiadis). Contemporary art sustains the same regime as modern art, as if Balzac and Baudelaire still had a place insofar as the confusion between art and life they installed remains irreducible (Jacques Rancière). Contemporary art is the art that shows modern art was a proper name (Thierry de Duve). Contemporary art is a singularity that unworks all law in the exposure of other potentialities (Giorgio Agamben). Contemporary art is anti-art insofar as it exposes the absolute equality and conventionality of all imagery whatsoever (Boris Groys)." Justin Clemens, "Contemporary Art as Minimal Domination," *Discipline* 3, Winter (2013), 24–5.

Communicative Capitalism

It has become a common sentiment voiced amongst Australian media that elected politicians are failing to listen to the Australian public; that what counts as political debate has, at some point, become vacuous repetition without engagement, where truth and fiction mingle together ensconced in opinions. While organised politics stagnates, the political dimensions of contemporary art practice are emphasised so often as to be ubiquitous—the political disappears from politics itself and re-appears in contemporary art.¹⁷ Presented as an antidote to flagging political systems, contemporary art exhibitions are styled as temporary spaces for individuals to connect to each other, participate and to speak. Art is a place of protest, but simultaneously, not a place of opposition, nor of organised resistance. Contemporary art does not exist independently from the context in which it is made, but rather it strives to collapse the distance between art and life, or between art and the individuals who make and experience it. Gearing itself towards open access and inclusivity, contemporary art is contestably seen as the democratisation of the art field—an apparently global network with no discipline boundaries and ever more participants.¹⁸ This desire to provide open spaces in the current divisive global context is understandable, but this “supplementary” approach to art and the wider culture gives a false sense of traction. The same system that promotes democratisation and connectivity neutralises the critical claims made through the artworks themselves and makes it more difficult for people to work together towards a common goal. But how could an increase in the amount of critical art being produced have the opposite effect, and lead to ineffective political claims? I suggest that Jodi Dean’s theorisation of “communicative capitalism” can provide a way to understand how the structure of contemporary art prevents the formation of effective politics.

In her 2005 article “Communicative Capitalism: circulation and the foreclosure of politics,” political theorist Jodi Dean argues that contrary to popular opinion, increased

¹⁷ This is not to suggest that contemporary art is the only place where politics reappears.

¹⁸ See Anthony Gardner, *Politically Unbecoming: Postsocialist Art against Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015).

access to networked communications does not automatically increase democracy, but rather results more often in the foreclosure of politics.¹⁹ Highlighting a disconnect between public discourse and political policy in the US, Dean argues that “communicative capitalism designates that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies.”²⁰ Although Dean’s main focus is arguing against the assumption that the internet provides a more flexible, far-reaching and effective form of political organisation, it is her analysis of how network communications affect the format and purpose of communication itself that is most relevant to this discussion; the effect of what she calls communicative capitalism is the inability to situate events in “larger signifying chains.”²¹ Being able to understand personal issues as part of larger systemic problems is what Dean takes to be politicisation as such, determining it as “the difficult challenge of representing specific claims or acts as universal.”²² What is most striking about this article is the way in which we are now seeing clear demonstrations of Dean’s predictions. In 2005 communicating on the internet was something done mostly at home, or at least tethered to a powerpoint and ethernet cable. Now that the internet overlays and inserts itself in almost all aspects of life, discussions of its parasitical nature paradoxically not only go without saying, but are usually viewed as somewhat paranoid. The space between the internet and “real life” is of decreasing importance. Dean is careful not to suggest “that the world serves as a space for communicative capitalism analogous to the one the nation provided for industrial capitalism.”²³ Rather, she situates it on the internet. However, the more pervasive the internet becomes, the greater the extent of communicative capitalism, and in turn the wider the impact on communication in general. What I’m suggesting is that if connection to the internet via communication

¹⁹ Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” *Cultural Politics* 1, no. 1 (2005).

²⁰ Ibid., 55.

²¹ Ibid., 56.

²² Ibid., 57. As we will see below, this conception of politics is in direct opposition to the individual-centred approach that Johanna Drucker advocates for contemporary art.

²³ Ibid., 67.

devices consistently reformats how we go about our daily lives, then communicative capitalism—existing as it does on the internet—also modifies how we make sense of events in other spheres of life. Specifically, I want to draw out similarities between the operating features of communicative capitalism and conceptions of the dominant format of contemporary art. I am aware that directly equating art with communication is contentious, but I want to demonstrate how difficult it is to avoid doing so in the current situation *in order to* develop non-reductive ways of thinking art. What will become more clear below is how no one specific example of an artwork can stand in to represent the contemporary art condition; rather it becomes about how contemporary art—as a system of distribution—operates en masse to pre-format artworks and practices. In this sense it becomes a problem about how we *think* art, requiring not only a descent towards ontology, but an attempt to talk of art at a meta-level.

As mentioned above, communicative capitalism denotes the state of affairs in which networked communications embody the merging of democratic and market values. Open access to information is combined with free-market ideology, which designates popular choice as the method through which the will of the people is expressed. What Dean's analysis tries to describe is the way in which an increase in networked technologies simultaneously hinders and commodifies communication, reformats spheres of life according to market values and enables the "hyper mobility of capital and the devalorisation of manufacturing."²⁴ Despite the common narrative of networked communications increasing democracy, Dean outlines several different "fantasies" of network communications in order to demonstrate how they prevent politicisation—the understanding of an event in relation to another. The "fantasy of abundance" is the claim that the internet grants individuals more opportunities to voice their opinions and have them heard. The overwhelming amount of individual posts, tweets and updates is said to represent a flourishing of communication, but the system in which these opinions are sent prevents the vast majority of them from being

²⁴ Ibid., 55.

meaningfully received.²⁵ Instead, messages are converted into “contributions” that merely circulate in the information flow.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid., 58.

²⁶ Ibid., 58. Wes Hill gives an interesting account of contemporary art and circulation in *How Folklore Shaped Modern Art: A Post-Critical History of Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 153:

The visible role of the art market and an ever-increasing circuit of biennales and international exhibitions in the 1990s built upon the earlier transformations of art patronage within a global economy in the 1980s. While on the one hand globalisation transformed art patronage into corporate financing of smash hit exhibitions and turned the art market into a financial instrument for currency hedging, the art that circulated in this context nonetheless appeared to resist the cultural hegemony that many theorists had feared. Susan Buck-Morris states:

There is something remarkable about this shift in the position of big business from being the visible content of Pop art to being the invisible producer of global exhibitions, from being the scene to being behind the scenes. [...] But before concluding that globalisation is the problem, we need to recognise that reorientation rather than rejection is the best political strategy. [...] The global art world’s inclusion of the vibrant, new work of non-Western artists is quickly overwhelming the traditional story of art as a Western narrative.

Coinciding with the expansion of a Western lineage of fine art into a global phenomenon that encompassed the traditions of cultures once seen in the West as “other,” there emerged an influx of wealthy collectors, populist art magazines, and large-scale curatorial exhibitions with an international focus. In the 1990s, the notion of art as a culture industry brought with it the awareness that modernist and postmodernist art pursued only an illusion of internationalism.

What is problematic about this statement is the way that it falls too well within Suhail Malik’s idea—which I will discuss in more detail below—that the contemporary art world, primarily concerned as it is with finance, can at once disarm, subsume and sell critical artworks, even those that directly criticise their context. It also follows Dean’s idea of the ineffectiveness of circulating contributions, wherein the artworks can continue to be critical of the “cultural hegemony,” but also remain addressed to no one. Even further, it equates the creation of a financial market for “non-Western” artists with real legitimisation. In the same way that global access to the internet is heralded as the way to ensure emancipation, the globalisation of contemporary art—despite its homogenising effects and proliferation of new financial markets—is presented as a form of empowerment.

This differs from the conception of communication being based in understanding, as circulation prioritises a contribution's exchange value over its use value:

In communicative capitalism...[a] contribution need not be understood; it need only be repeated, reproduced, forwarded. Circulation is the context, the condition for the acceptance or rejection of a contribution. Put somewhat differently, how a contribution circulates determines whether it has been accepted or rejected.²⁷

Because what makes a good work of art partially eludes expression, the contemporary art system relies on quantitative measures to determine the impact of an artwork, such as the frequency of exhibitions, number of artworks made, number of countries shown in or the artwork's selling price. The extent and duration of a contribution's circulation becomes the means to assess its value rather than its actual content.²⁸ In this sense then, any one particular contribution becomes exchangeable for another, and there ceases to be an obligation for those in positions of power to actually respond. Instead "...they counter with their own contributions to the circulating flow of communications, hoping that sufficient volume...will give their contributions dominance or stickiness."²⁹ What Dean strives to emphasise is that the *context* in which a message is communicated provides its impact and the impetus to foster a sense of antagonism that she believes is necessary to politics.³⁰ If the vast majority of messages are converted into isolated chunks of opinion that never quite arrive at a destination, the ability to understand personal opinions as symptomatic of a larger issue becomes far more strained. From her

²⁷ Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," 59.

²⁸ It is possible to consider the ascendancy of Donald Trump and "post-truth" in the context of circulation. His ability to get his message across—regardless of its truth value—is practically summarised by Dean when she states: "The value of any particular contribution is likewise inversely proportionate to the openness, inclusivity or extent of a circulating data stream—the more opinions or comments that are out there, the less of an impact any one given one might make (and the more shock, spectacle or newness is necessary for a contribution to register or have an impact)." (58.)

²⁹ Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," 53.

³⁰ This means that even though networked communications can facilitate political movements in one context—such as the central role Twitter played in the Arab Spring—it may become oppressive in openly democratic societies. *Ibid.*, 57.

point of view “[s]pecific or singular acts of resistance, statements of opinion or instances of transgression are not political in and of themselves; rather, they have to be politicised, that is articulated together with other struggles, resistances and ideals in the course or context of opposition to a shared enemy or opponent.”³¹ Shared history and communal understanding of critical points in a discourse thus become in Dean’s account necessary for registering a message as critical—but the overarching suggestion of her article is that the capacity for connecting events together in a “larger signifying chain” is impeded through the overwhelming amount of content on the internet.³²

Contemporary art is increasingly oriented towards bringing people together, not so much as a collective but rather as a grouping of individuals. As indicated by the curatorial statement of the Sydney Biennale of 2000 (and repeated in vaguely Deleuzian parlance in that of 2014), the new formation of contemporary art would comprise a multitude of singular artistic voices, which would dispense with the 20th century ideals of progress, hierarchies and distinctions between central and peripheral locations, heralded by the increase in global art events and the expansion of art markets. There is a sense that artists are moving on from out-dated modes of opposition and negativity, and creating new methods for being critical that don’t rely on the idea of distance. This sense of disjointed renewal forged by contemporary artists—despite the perceived lagging of art criticism and theory—has been expressed recently by discussions surrounding the term “post-critical.”

³¹ Ibid., 57.

³² Ibid., 56.

Post-Critical

A broad collection of ideas that originated as unintended effects from postmodernist theory, but collected under the term in publications by Wes Hill, Hal Foster and Rex Butler, post-criticality refers to the contradiction in contemporary art wherein critical positions are abstained from, while a general sense of critical engagement is considered obligatory for contemporary practitioners.³³ To this I would add that post-criticality can also refer to a merging of communicative capitalism and contemporary art, which imposes a particular format over the way art is received, made and thought in relation to wider cultural conditions. By mimicking the operations of networked communications at an institutional level, contemporary art encourages radical individualism via the marketisation and professionalization of art.³⁴ Not only does this mean that specific artworks are pre-formatted as content to be circulated, and that artists and their oeuvres become micro-brands, but that any critical capacity that art enables is immediately neutralised. In the same way that networked communications destabilise a common understanding of events, the apparently heterogeneous nature of contemporary art as a historical term hinders the construction of a shared space of debate in which to analyse and contest abuses of power not just within the art world, but also in its name.³⁵

³³ The main texts I will be referring to include: Wes Hill, "On Post-Critical Art," *Broadsheet* 41.1, March (2012); Wes Hill, *How Folklore Shaped Modern Art: A Post-Critical History of Aesthetics*; Hal Foster, "Post-Critical," *October*, no. 139 (2012); Rex Butler, "GoMA, the APT and the Contemporary," *Eyeline* 63, Winter (2007), Rex Butler, "Really Post-Critical," *Broadsheet* 45.2, (2016). Suhail Malik also approaches the same condition in a series of lectures delivered at Artspace, New York in 2013, but under the term "post-negational."

³⁴ Although art production has historically been connected to a market in the form of religious service or patronage, relatively recent changes in the buying and selling of artworks mark a distinct change in model. Whereas traditionally an artwork would be commissioned or purchased in order to be *displayed*, the contemporary art market disassociates itself from the physical object. A prime example of this is use of freeports to store vast amounts of important (and expensive) artworks. See Graham Bowley and Doreen Carvajal, "One of the World's Greatest Art Collections Hides Behind This Fence," *Arts*, *The New York Times*, Saturday, May 28, 2016, accessed November 8, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/arts/design/one-of-the-worlds-greatest-art-collections-hides-behind-this-fence.html?_r=0.

³⁵ Gentrification, the creative economy, the construction of new art markets etc.

An early example of post-criticality is well encapsulated by Johanna Drucker in her book *Sweet Dreams*.³⁶ Drucker argues that there is a discord between contemporary art and its discourse, proposing that contemporary artists' engagements with mass visual culture are being overlooked by an academic culture that retains outdated ideas of "opposition, negative criticality and esoteric resistance."³⁷ Published between 9/11 and the GFC, and responding to artworks mostly from the 1990s, Drucker's critique exists in a strange state of limbo; it is at once imbued with residual optimism from the late 90s, but was yet to feel the full impact of networked communications and global finance. Nonetheless, Drucker's positive critique of the "anything-whatever" of contemporary art can be taken as an exemplary instance of the post-critical condition.³⁸ Recognising that the avant-garde tradition has become orthodoxy itself, and that political art practices perpetuate the system they critique, Drucker is at pains to note the hypocrisy of both obscure and didactically political art.³⁹ But rather than recognising this as a problem to be addressed, Drucker ultimately relegates contemporary artists to acknowledgment of their position of complicity, stating that "[c]omplicit aesthetics acknowledge the beneficial relation of artist and fine art in the system in which they function."⁴⁰ Instead of modernist autonomy and postmodernist contingency, Drucker proposes a somewhat reserved place of complicit art within contemporary society:

Fine art performs a mediating function whose efficacy resides entirely in its ability to register the difference between the lived and the represented with some significance. The transformation of experience into aesthetic artifact carries no requirement that it serve the social conscience of the culture in an instrumental way. But the act of

³⁶ Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2005).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁸ Generalising the art of the 1990s Drucker states: "The stingy imagery sensibility that had often starved the sensual appetite in the 1980s has given way to luscious, sometimes irreverent, but highly inventive use of 'stuff' taken from every zone of material culture." (46.)

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 55. I can only assume that Drucker posits late capitalism as the system in which artists and fine art function.

filtering experience into form is itself inherently political, if by political we mean the creation of a space in which individual subjectivity is marked, expressed, and preserved with all of its ideological complexity.⁴¹

Art turns inwards in this definition. Individual subjectivities become the central turning point and the artwork functions as an intermediary vessel that facilitates communication. Either art's power or the power of art's function is the capability to produce some kind of meaning by pointing out differences between lived experience and the existing regime of images, figures, and forms, etc. There is no necessity for art to accomplish anything in particular, least of all articulate itself in a critical relationship with its culture. It is enough to give form to personal experience and subjectivity, and for the artwork to be (reducible to) an extension of a subject, suggesting that artists no longer engage with mass visual culture via irony or a sense of externality, but rather through "full-blown affection for the materials and images of mainstream media culture."⁴²

Although the tendency in art to use political modes and avant-garde techniques has not decreased since the mid-2000s, the subject-oriented practice that Drucker advocates has resonated more strongly. Drucker writes: "[c]ritical opposition and resistant aesthetics, so intimately bound to the principle of autonomy, have been replaced by a reflective, self-conscious artifice."⁴³ This theme of disconnection between what is happening in artistic practices and what occurs in art discourse is a continuing theme of contemporary art. Two articles published around the same period in early 2012 address and historicise the contemporary condition as that of the post-critical. In his compact article "On Post-Critical Art" Wes Hill argues that the term post-critical refers not to the disregard for criticality, but rather the "reconsideration of what it means to be critical."⁴⁴ Rather than any sort of solid reconsideration of what criticality might mean, or any particular style, post-criticality represents a fracturing and perhaps the

⁴¹ Ibid., 88.

⁴² Ibid., 33.

⁴³ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴ Wes Hill, "On Post-Critical Art," 67.

announcement of a general semantic instability. It is an approach and way of thinking that Hill identifies with “the actualization of many of the liberal political advancements attributed to postmodern thought.”⁴⁵ Dominant features of post-criticality for Hill include a turn towards “anti-essentialist, particularised and performative associations,” as well as an emphasis on pragmatic approaches and the dismissal of “critical rigour” as the basis of value judgements.⁴⁶ In this way, postmodernist acknowledgments of fetishistic gazes no longer have to be marked through the lens of irony; an artist simply liking their subject matter is enough to justify their choices.

This sentiment is also evident in Hal Foster’s *October* article simply titled “Post-Critical,” in which he maps out a turn against established modes of criticality in the American public sphere, and in the contemporary art context.⁴⁷ Foster stresses the foundational role that critique plays in the development of ideas—essentially as the starting point for a re-interpretation of events—but he also identifies how this crucial step has necessarily fallen victim to its own critique:

Over the years, most of the charges have concerned the positioning of the critic.

First, there was a rejection of *judgment*, of the moral right presumed in critical

⁴⁵ Ibid., 67. In his subsequent publication *How Folklore Shaped Modern Art: a Post-Critical History of Aesthetics*, Hill charts these developments as the move away from philosophical accounts of aesthetics towards cultural studies and sociology developed predominately by Arthur Danto and Pierre Bordieu. Hill characterises the 1990s as the point at which “[c]ontemporary art theory and criticism moved away from a preoccupation with language and deconstruction to an interest in subjectivities, bodies, and the notion of art as an individually politicized expression of one’s life and personality...a younger generation of intellectuals embraced the politicisation of everything via an all-pervasive notion of culture.” (141.) Following pivotal artists and movements like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, the YBAs and Relational Aesthetics, Hill traces the increasingly intractable nature of critical distance.

⁴⁶ Hill, “On Post-Critical Art,” 67. In “A Hipster History: Towards a Postcritical Aesthetic,” Hill suggests the 1990s were the initial collision point between culture in general, art and neoliberalism, reconfiguring subjectivity towards radical individuality. In culture generally, we see in the 1990s the promotion of creativity as a pre-requisite of successful entrepreneurs, and simultaneously, the rise of “‘alternative’ identities that are no longer diametrically opposed to the mainstream.” *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, 6, no. 1 (2015): 49, 51. This tendency is continued in the visual arts, with the singling out of the YBAs and Relational Aesthetics as pivotal movements. Hill characterises the YBAs as a “move away from the commodity critiques of postmodernism,” as well as the intersection of conceptual art, commerce and mass entertainment, while Relational Aesthetics is the “neoliberal avant-garde.” (50.) These two movements replay the modernist paradox of autonomy and socially-based art; albeit only on the right side of politics.

⁴⁷ Hal Foster, “Post-Critical.”

evaluation. Then, there was a refusal of *authority*, of the political privilege that allows the critic to speak abstractly on behalf of others. Finally, there was scepticism about *distance*, about the cultural separation from the very conditions that the critic purports to examine.⁴⁸

To this list, Foster also adds more recent postmodernist varieties, including the “critique of representation” and the “constructed nature of identity,” both of which he maintains have been unwarrantedly cast aside because of their misuse by the right and corporate marketing.⁴⁹ What becomes clear in Foster’s article is the sense of collapse or disintegration of a public space of discourse, not just in relation to art, but in the wider society. This is consistent with Dean’s idea that networked technologies have exacerbated the breaking down of public debate, and it is most stark when Foster states that “most academics no longer stress the importance of critical thinking for an engaged citizenry and most curators, dependent on corporate sponsors, no longer promote the critical debate once deemed essential to the public reception of advanced art.”⁵⁰ From today’s position, the idea of there being an engaged and wide enough audience for contemporary art to actually *have* a public reception—other than in the form of visitor statistics—is glaringly outmoded. Following Dean, the conventional chain of communication entails a message being sent, received, understood and responded to.⁵¹ Contemporary art’s treatment as content then is in part enabled by the lack of public discourse, but also because the responses to artworks either don’t aim at giving a critical response, or can too easily *themselves* become content and thus, avoid again any necessity of response. Funnily enough, although there is a lack of critical discussion surrounding contemporary artworks, Foster highlights the comparative “blossoming of ‘critical art’” within practice, stating “[i]t is common to speak of ‘social-practice art,’ but

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 3–4. The first refers to the ability to construct reality at will, while the second is more easily observed as the conversion of identities into niche markets.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁵¹ Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” 59.

this rubric underscores how removed art is from everyday life even as it attempts to close that divide..."⁵² But how far removed is contemporary art really from everyday life?

In a 2007 review of the 5th *Asia Pacific Triennial*, Butler outlines a history of the post-critical condition in which contemporary art becomes unmoored from an internal or external history via the unavoidable dissolution of modernism.⁵³ Essentially a meta-analysis of the effects of "the historical collapse of the Enlightenment" on art and museology, Butler suggests that contemporary art is "caught up in the paradox of criticality attempting to overcome 'criticality.'" ⁵⁴ That is, by trying to overcome postmodern criticality via physical spectacle and irony via sincerity, contemporary art inadvertently begins to revert back to a more traditional understanding of cultural practices.⁵⁵ The difficult position that this places contemporary art in—as well as the secondary practices that both rely on and support it—is that art tries to become socially embedded once again, this time in the wholly different circumstances of the entertainment industry and global capitalism. Using the then newly built Gallery of Modern of Art in Brisbane as a way to discuss the possible future for art in the 21st century, Butler states:

In all of this we witness the historical collapse of the Enlightenment—European in origin, but ultimately involving the whole world—of which Communism was

⁵² Foster, "Post-Critical," 3.

⁵³ Unlike McNamara's position in the following chapter, Butler confirms the end of modernism: "Some time around 1970, the modernist narrative comes to a halt in Australia, either because of its own internal exhaustion (1968, the date of the well-known *The Field* exhibition, held at the National Gallery of Victoria, is the date usually given) or because the pressure of non-European art upon it can no longer be denied (1971 is said to mark the date of the birth of the Western Desert dot painting movement in Papaya)." "GoMA, the APT and the Contemporary," 33.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 41, n. 8.

⁵⁵ By this I mean traditional as opposed to the specific cultural practices of modernity. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Butler states this quite clearly: "And yet, just as apparently 'traditional' art can now be read as post-traditional, so post-traditional art can also appear strangely traditional. That is, one of the uncanny things about walking through the APT—and undoubtedly one of the things accounting for the show's critical and popular success—is that Asian art in its 'traditionalism' can appear so contemporary. The seeming non-artness of much of the work in the show, its connection to 'real life', its use of a popular or vernacular artistic language, the fact that it does not need to be mediated through a whole prior history of some particular medium—all of this is exactly what the most 'advanced' art in the West is currently attempting to do." *Ibid.*, 37.

perhaps the ultimate political expression. In its absence, these works seem to be suggesting, we no longer have any way of connecting with our history, not only our social and political history, but also our artistic history. Without the essentially modernist notion of aesthetic form and its gradual refinement, we no longer have an internal history of art. And without the imposition of European values on to the rest of the world and the resistance against them, we no longer have an external history of art.⁵⁶

Rather than arguing *for* Eurocentrism, Butler suggests that the “empty category of the Eurocentric” provided a shared point of contention that could produce tradition *through* resistance.⁵⁷ Without this common link, curatorial decisions become necessarily problematic because they have to rely on “visual coincidence” rather than a critical understanding.⁵⁸

As an art historian, Butler’s prerogative would be to preserve the historical development of art. I agree with this position because without any solid history of art, we can’t *reinterpret* the meanings of these developments. Instead, with the loss of a common history, transgression is rendered unattainable and the acknowledgement of past injustices and our inextricably complicated history becomes mutable. In this way, the reinterpretation of events is a crucial step towards understanding art in its wider social context; linking particular styles, trends or ideas together across singular art practices allows the generation of a common history. This connection does two things: first, it attempts to circumvent what Dean proposes as the effect of post-politics where “[m]atters aren’t represented—they don’t stand for something beyond themselves.”⁵⁹ Here Dean is referring to the way in which individual problems are addressed as specific and isolatable cases, rather than irreducibly part of a larger picture. We can understand this in relation to contemporary art’s apparent radical heterogeneity, where it becomes

⁵⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 35, 39.

⁵⁹ Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” 56.

impossible to construct meaningful connections between art practices, other than through arbitrary categories. It has become increasingly common to foreclose the possibility of identifying patterns in or across artworks or practices, and to instead consider each artwork as an irreducible singularity connected to the individual artist. Although this is often done to attempt to maintain the integrity of the artwork, it also has the unintended consequence of isolating each artwork, practice and artist as a single entity; converting each artwork into circulating content that is “linked to other content, but never fully connected.”⁶⁰ As Butler states, “[a] true world art would be the impossibility of any world art,” in the sense that singular practices would cease to coalesce into anything other than “an endless series of perspectives on to the world.”⁶¹

Secondly, the construction of a shared opponent is essential to maintaining the political efficacy of artworks. Without the shared terms of a critical history, we lose the ability to maintain meaningful debates about how the art world operates. Butler suggests at the start of his article that contemporary art is “not finally interrogative or critical.”⁶² Drucker encourages this dissolution by claiming that artists no longer share an opposition to the art market, and even further, that the general principles of opposition and resistance cannot be sustained because of the compromise inherent in participating in contemporary art.⁶³ At the end of his review, Butler goes so far as to say that there is an imposing divide between contemporary art and its secondary operations of museology, criticism and history, stating that:

It is precisely, as we began by doing here, to think the internal break or split that characterises our contemporaneity: the fact that our museums must necessarily seek to give meaning to that which no longer has any. And the same self-contradiction

⁶⁰ Ibid., 61.

⁶¹ Butler, “GoMA, the APT and the Contemporary,” 38.

⁶² Ibid., 32.

⁶³ Drucker, 10, 66.

would apply to writing about contemporary art, which necessarily seeks to criticise art that is no longer ‘critical’, to historicise art that is no longer historical.⁶⁴

Without the internal or external grounding of history, artworks cease being able to generate meanings as *artworks*. In a more recent article, he suggests that in the context of contemporary art, criticality does not designate an engagement with any particular issue, but rather is “about a topic.”⁶⁵ Post-critical stances go one step further than this, ceasing to be about anything; they do not have to represent anything beyond themselves, but can exist merely as “an object or the price paid for it.”⁶⁶ In this way, post-critical artworks are not really *art*; they don’t need to be interpreted but rather stand on facticity. In an appraisal of the time elapsed between 2007 and 2016, Butler reflects “[p]erhaps the post-critical was never anything more than our ability to remark upon a certain exhaustion of post-modern irony, which is also itself soon exhausted.”⁶⁷ This statement indicates a certain shift between art practices of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the almost all-pervasive emphasis today on criticality for art practices.

Post-Negational

If Butler’s position is that artists no longer have any impetus to make “properly” critical work, Suhail Malik extends this proposition even further, suggesting that criticality—as a pre-requisite for current art practices—proves to be systematically ineffective when enacted in the field of contemporary art. This is at once because the form of criticality encouraged by contemporary art is limited in itself, but also because critical approaches are taken to be a central value of the professionalization of art. Malik’s argument is directly related to the impositions of contemporary art, understood as a network of institutions and power relations. In opposition to claims that contemporary art is indefinable and heterogeneous, Malik attempts to develop a logic of contemporary art

⁶⁴ Butler, “GoMA, the APT and the Contemporary,” 41.

⁶⁵ Rex Butler, “Really Post-Critical,” 36.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

that accounts for the contradictory situation wherein critical and political claims within artworks are so readily absorbed into the larger systems that these works seek to negate. In a series of lectures given at Artists Space in New York, Malik outlines his conception of contemporary art as operating according to two principles: that contemporary art is “a meta-genre of indeterminacy” which follows an “anarcho-realist maxim.”⁶⁸ Concerned with the system of contemporary art rather than its content, several similarities between Malik’s account and that of Dean’s approach to networked communications can be drawn out. From the outset, Malik justifies his objective and broad approach by asserting that “art is no longer organised or constituted by productivist requirements—that art has to be made. I don’t think that is the condition for contemporary art, or art now. Rather, it’s organised or constituted by circulatory and distributional conditions and circuits. Art is coevally discursive, networked.”⁶⁹ If, as Malik argues, the current formation of contemporary art displaces *artworks*, it is necessary to engage with the claims of his research in order to recognise how this formation affects art practices.

In many ways, Malik’s conception of the field of contemporary art can be taken as an outline of the current “dogmatic image” of art.⁷⁰ The first maxim that he suggests is that contemporary art implicitly enforces indeterminacy at all levels, in its “mode of address, addressee and criteria.”⁷¹ Thus it can be made by whatever means, for anyone and judged without criteria—effectively the anything-whatever of De Duve’s analysis.

⁶⁸ Suhail Malik, “Exit Not Escape: On the Necessity of Art’s Exit from Contemporary Art,” (online lecture), published May 3, 2013, accessed September 24, 2015, <https://youtu.be/fimEhntbRZ4>; Malik, “The Problem with Contemporary Art Is Not the Contemporary,” (online lecture), published May 17, 2013, accessed September 28, 2015, <https://youtu.be/RJkHb0YsdLM>; Malik, “A History of Negations,” (online lecture), published May 31, 2013, accessed September 28, 2015, <https://youtu.be/yrfk904kKo>; Malik, “Institution,” (online lecture), published June 14, 2013, accessed October 2, 2015, <https://youtu.be/ACucp0WIG0E>. These lectures inform his forthcoming book titled *Exit Not Escape: On the Necessity of Art’s Exit from Contemporary Art* (London: Urbanomic, forthcoming).

⁶⁹ Malik, “Exit Not Escape: On the Necessity of Art’s Exit from Contemporary Art.”

⁷⁰ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 131. This term is derived from Deleuze’s term “dogmatic image of thought,” which designates the presuppositions accumulated over philosophy’s history as related to thought.

⁷¹ Malik, “Exit Not Escape: On the Necessity of Art’s Exit From Contemporary Art.”

Rather than being openly understood as a result of art history, Malik suggests that this indeterminacy is usually attributed to the temporal definition of contemporary art—as a conceptually contentless catch-all term for any art being made at the present time. Thus the indeterminacy of contemporary art is conflated with the indeterminacy of present experience, and becomes a fetishisation of the present.⁷² While a direct consequence of this fetish is a proliferation of time-based and performance art, the wider effect of this implication is the conception of contemporary art as irreducible. The so-called indeterminacy of contemporary art is correlative to an endless series of individual viewpoints parsed through the temporal confusion of digital technologies, much like when Hill states “[t]he contemporary art world—itself a notion that appears increasingly enigmatic and fragmented—could be said to resemble a living system of values, motivated by an image of pluralism that is impossible to actually represent.”⁷³ Although this indeterminacy is being continually encouraged by the institutional structures of contemporary art, Malik also understands contemporary art as an unavoidable consequence of internal art history. Much like Butler’s account, Malik sites the rejection of modernist criteria as the introduction of contemporary art, and as we will see below, a result of the avant-garde legacy of negation. For Malik, the enforced indeterminacy of contemporary art and its temporal fetish entails significant consequences for the possibility of critical art, in that it isolates individual artists and renders the claims made within art ineffective.

Responding to the state of art criticism, Malik maintains that an insistence on treating artists and artworks as “singularities” prevents politicization by inhibiting the formation of groups or movements with a collective aim, as well as the possibility to envisage any fictional horizon or temporary unity that is essential to inducing political change.⁷⁴ “Singularity” in this case refers to the expectation that every encounter

⁷² Ibid. A clear example of this can be found in the 2000 Sydney Biennale statement: “The Biennale of Sydney 2000 presents, in the word of Gerhard Richter, ‘the collective experience of the age’ through the vision of a number of artists, so necessary as an antidote to existing hegemonies.”

⁷³ Hill, “On Post-Critical Art,” 9.

⁷⁴ Malik, “The Problem with Contemporary Art Is Not the Contemporary.”

between an artwork and viewer is entirely unrepeatable, due to the subjective dimensions of interpretation.⁷⁵ Although I maintain that this approach is the foundation for an encounter with an artwork, I don't think it should be an end in itself; rather it should be the basis for the formation of critical discourse and responses, the creation of common points of reference. In the same way that Dean highlights the movement from message to contribution in communicative capitalism—as no longer requiring any understanding, any *response*—the organisation of contemporary art on the basis of singularities generates an overwhelming number of singular visions, but stops short of linking these instances together in a meaningful way.⁷⁶ Contemporary art's emphasis on the subjective dimensions of experience leads Malik to argue that contemporary art exemplifies neoliberal thought because “the subjective dimensions always set the terms for and eclipse collective interest or objectives...”⁷⁷ This apparent indeterminacy or incommunicability of the contemporary art experience is for Malik entirely contradictory to the administration that enables its organisation—the determined choices of “what art gets to show where and when.”⁷⁸ He suggests that contemporary art's emphasis on indeterminacy at the level of content willingly obfuscates the (nonetheless obvious) power operations enacted at a structural level.

The second maxim that Malik outlines concerns the current image of criticality within contemporary art, which he terms the “anarcho-realist maxim.”⁷⁹ This maxim operates according to a double set of idealisations; the first, as mentioned above, is a fetish of the present. The second idealisation is a fetish of the real, referring to the habit of critical practices to continually idealise a version of art that is more real, just and

⁷⁵ It could be argued that this is the main form of understanding that the term singularity takes in relation to Deleuze's philosophy in a visual arts context. However, I argue below that this is a misapplication of the term.

⁷⁶ Dean writes “[i]n sending a message, a sender intends for it to be received and understood. Any acceptance or rejection of the message depends on this understanding. Understanding is thus a necessary part of the communicative exchange. In communicative capitalism, however, the use value of a message is less important than its exchange value, its contribution to a larger pool, flow or circulation of content. A contribution need not be understood; it need only be repeated, reproduced, forwarded.” Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” 59.

⁷⁷ Malik, “Institution.”

⁷⁸ Malik, “Exit Not Escape: On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art.”

⁷⁹ Malik, “Institution.”

egalitarian that what we have at the moment.⁸⁰ That is: art is too exclusive, academic, instrumentalized, populist etc. We can connect this maxim with the critical directive of modernity's avant-garde, as it positions the current formation of art or art systems to be in some way lacking, and seeks to negate and replace it.⁸¹ Malik claims that the problem with this constant lament directed towards actually existing art is that it indefinitely postpones any possibility of this *more real* occurring, because it can only be formed as an idealised non-existing art. That is, the faith or belief that we assign to art will always surpass the artefact that we're left with. We can consider the rise in socially-based art practices that has occurred in the wake of relational aesthetics as one form of this deliberate attempt to make art more inclusive and democratic. Malik also identifies the consistent dis-identification from power and rejection of judgements as another common idealisation of the real. This idea is elaborated more clearly in a subsequent publication on the topic of art education and criticality, where he states:

Critical discourses demonstrate a continued disidentification from power that is usually validated if not celebrated through claims of non-instrumentality. This disidentification generates a necessary inability of art that is taken to be necessary if [artists] want to be considered as "political", understood in the sense that I'd say is almost definitional of contemporary art.⁸²

Through the constant disavowal of power, the ability to make decisions shifts from artists to those who control and administer the distribution of art—be it museums, gallerists, curators, collectors etc.⁸³ Not only does contemporary art disown the idea of originality *in* artworks, but the act of dissemination is privileged over the act of creation.

⁸⁰ Malik, "A History of Negations."

⁸¹ He makes explicit in his first lecture that a return to autonomy is also not desired, but I think Malik is referring to autonomy as the state of being completely separate from society. "Exit Not Escape: On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art." Autonomy, as it is developed by McNamara (as we will see below), is still consistent with Malik's argument.

⁸² Suhail Malik, "Art Education and the Predicament of Professionalised Criticality," in *Politics of Study: 5 (Occasional Table)*, ed. Sidel Meineche Hansen and Tom Vandeputte (Denmark: Open Editions, 2015), 53.

⁸³ Surely the rise in mega-curators is symptomatic of this.

Additionally, the increase in institutional critique in contemporary art as an almost *a priori* position results for Malik in leaving the inequality of existing institutions in tact. The goal for Malik becomes to re-establish art as an institutional practice, with a caveat that an institution's form does not have to mimic those already in existence. In doing so, he maintains that re-affirming art as an institutional practice will re-invest the genuine critical potential that he argues is conditionally absent from contemporary art.

It is the combined effects of these two maxims that causes Malik to designate contemporary art as "post-negational." This term doesn't just refer to the particular art being made, but how contemporary art as a system pre-formats artworks as circulating content. Although contemporary art coincides with particular traits of communicative capitalism—exchange value over use value, radical proliferation of content, claims of democratization that occlude depoliticisation—it also embodies the rejection of modernist values. Malik establishes his conception of contemporary art as being an effect of (rather than continuation of) the avant-garde tradition. Drawing on the work of De Duve and his argument that Duchamp's readymades effectively dissolved any distinction between art and non-art, Malik contends that negational judgements within art are no longer possible. In brief, De Duve suggests that the readymade lays bare the foundation of art as a series of personal aesthetic judgements, transmitted under "Art" as a proper name. Duchamp's readymade is claimed to have set the terms for artistic innovation in art thereafter, as the dissensual naming (or designation) of anything as art.⁸⁴ Thus the avant-garde tradition is to extend and escape the bounds of the current state of art—negating art—by dissensually naming something outside of art as art. For Malik however, this idea of a dissensual judgement presents a problem in the contemporary situation, because any negation presented as a dissensual judgement through contemporary art can only elicit an accepting judgement of "this is art."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 86.

⁸⁵ De Duve writes "*The readymade* [...] is a work of art reduced to the statement 'this is art.'" (413, original emphasis).

That is, if contemporary art is considered the indeterminate generation of conflicting opinions, attempts to escape it by dissensually designating something as art, results in the production of yet more contemporary art, or what Malik terms as contemporary art's "growth mechanism."⁸⁶ Furthermore, if dissensus is considered the true form of politics, and if each isolated, individual gesture is considered political in and of itself, contemporary art can continue to function as it is, and contemporary artworks can only act as "indexes or references of the cause of indignation."⁸⁷ Malik formulates the solution to contemporary art as an "exit." This exit would entail negating post-negational art without recourse to an idealized real: essentially understanding art as an artificial practice, one that is institutional, cultural (in the social sense) and ordered. Rather than trying to make art more real by continuing to resort to non-art as a transgressive act, an exit from contemporary art would entail understanding art as something that is *constructed* but also a practice that requires some kind of institutionally provided "semantic security" to be effective.⁸⁸ Malik draws on Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski's idea that critique produces semantic instability within institutions, in order to re-develop these institutions from within.⁸⁹ As with Foster, Malik highlights the integral role of critique as the first step in the construction of better institutions. But he also demonstrates the way that contemporary art is consistently occupied *only* with semantic instability, through its preference of internal indeterminacy via the rejection of judgement, and its consistent expectation of institutional critique.

Thus far we can see that contemporary art as a system encourages a kind of political engagement that prioritizes individual concerns over the formation of a critical engagement with a shared history. Rather than sustaining engaged discussion around art and its operations, contemporary art forecloses debate by maintaining a resistance to antagonism and disagreement. As a post-critical or post-negational art, contemporary art strives to differentiate itself from previous iterations of art by rejecting autonomy, and

⁸⁶ Malik, "A History of Negations."

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

in a reactionary move, tries to re-establish itself as useful to the wider culture by providing a supplementary arena for political actions. In the context of communicative capitalism however, this move results in the production and circulation of “content;” the merging of art and life in communicative capitalism means the merging of art and communication, each now as isolated and ineffective as the other. In the following chapter, I will discuss two complimentary accounts of artistic autonomy that aim to revise the idea for use in a contemporary context.

2

The Paradox of Autonomy

Chapter one considered contemporary art as a historical term, the current system of the distribution of art, and as an effect of the post-critical condition. In an eagerness to differentiate contemporary art from modern and postmodern forms, the idea of autonomy has been gradually eroded, while the critical function of art is emphasised. In the current context of communicative capitalism, this creates a strange situation where the critical claims made within an artwork are effectively neutralised by conversion into circulating content. This chapter argues that in order to re-instate an effective critical capability of artworks, a concept of autonomy applicable for the contemporary context must be revised. By engaging with two recent discussions of autonomy, I will demonstrate how—rather than indicating a withdrawal from society—the autonomous nature of artworks actually constitutes their connection and relevance to the wider culture.⁹⁰

In *An Apprehensive Aesthetic: the legacy of modernist culture*, Andrew McNamara develops an approach to contemporary art practice and criticism through the lens of a revised modernism, arguing that a renewed approach to critical apprehension is required to adequately respond to the ambiguous nature of much contemporary art.⁹¹ Working against the belief that the contemporary situation presents an altogether new problem for art practices, McNamara instead turns to re-evaluating the history of modernism in a wider cultural sense to argue that dynamic tensions inherent in modernism persist not just in postmodernism, but in contemporary art as well.⁹² His argument is premised on understanding the complicated relation and tension between

⁹⁰ It is important to note that the following chapter does not aim to establish a broad overview of the relation between art and autonomy, but rather follows a narrow path. Consequently direct engagements with other prominent art historians on this topic—most notably Theodor Adorno and Berger—are not included.

⁹¹ Andrew McNamara, *An Apprehensive Aesthetic: the Legacy of Modernist Culture* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).

⁹² For McNamara, following Jean-François Lyotard, postmodernism is not understood as a paradigm break, but rather “the term that denotes the excessive state of modernity to itself.” (52, 47.) In this sense, postmodernity can be considered in opposition to traditional culture, rather than modernity.

modernity in the *specific* and *general* senses—between what we might think of as cultural modernism, and sociologically as a modern *society*. Drawing this dynamic from the philosophy of György Márkus, McNamara emphasises the idea of an inherent tension by stating that “[m]odernity is a complex configuration from the outset because it initiates a cultural counter-momentum that persists alongside the more generic understanding of culture (which precedes it).”⁹³ As opposed to traditional societies wherein culture is understood as all-encompassing and unchangeable, modernist culture in the wide (general) sense understands itself as one culture among many, as a set of social practices that are able to be changed. An important consequence of this plural, mutable sense of culture is the constitution of a specific set of cultural practices at once connected to *and* removed from the wider culture. McNamara explains that:

Modernist cultural activities by contrast remain, as Márkus puts it, socially dis-embedded. They are not viewed as God-ordained, nor are they performed constituted in accordance with traditional expectations or rituals at specific times (on the calendar or religious events) or places (temple or church sacristies, religious processions, memorials or tombs). Modernity introduces and valorises the idea of cultural autonomy, meaning that cultural activities can be evaluated according to (and prized for) an immanent value independent of these kinds of ritual or social specifications. The emphasis in modernity switches to creativity as originality, to critical evaluation and the testing of assumptions, experiment or innovation, at the expense of the priority of precedence. Thus creativity in modernity is purportedly at a remove from received standards or routines, which are traditionally regarded as being normatively valid and culturally binding.⁹⁴

There are complex problems embedded in a culture of modernity; the specialised practices of art and science (in particular) are imparted with a “transgressive” imperative,

⁹³ Ibid., 43.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 45.

establishing an iterative cycle of critique and re-construction of the wider culture in which they exist.⁹⁵ This wider culture attempts to tolerate constant change in the hope that it will lead to a range of benefits—economic, social, technological, medical etc. In addition, the democratic ideals that modernity incorporates provide a certain amount of leeway for critique.⁹⁶ Simultaneously, these specialised practices are not immune to their own critique, and they engage in their own tumultuous attempts to overcome the instability inherent in the emphasis on originality. Autonomy in this sense comes to designate the way in which specific cultural practices become socially dis-embedded, while critique is the function that cultural practices enact. We can infer from this that change occurs not via art itself, but in the wider cultural context *in response* to it. The tie between autonomy and criticality in McNamara's account is the bond that keeps art both from being wholly unrelated to its social context or wholly subservient to pragmatic ends. Attempts to negate one side of this paradoxical relation leave art open to either its dissolution, or its full instrumentalization. This link between aesthetics and utility is one of the most persistent animating principles of modernist art discourse, continuing to resurface in response to different social conditions.

Despite already being a paradoxical relation, the bind between aesthetics and utility is made even more difficult by modernity's uniting of two different, yet complimentary cultural practices. Both art and science are tasked with delivering innovations to their communities; compared to art however, science has the distinct advantage of being able to produce tangible and widely demonstrable outcomes from its research—generally in the form of technology. From the outset, this imbalance was a

⁹⁵ In this way, modernity does not necessarily have to entail an end point (telos), but rather a continuous, dialectical development. What becomes clear is the way in which this line of reasoning is susceptible to being exploited in the name of "progress." The mixed history of modernism is pointed to by McNamara on page 43: "Modernity, in other words, extends from a specific Western set of circumstances to become a worldwide phenomenon; these circumstances include the lofty and the inventive, the bloody and the desperate (an awkward baggage of possibilities that is traditionally characterised as including the Enlightenment, the French Revolution but also its ensuing Terror, the development of the modern bureaucratic state, secularisation, the market economy, industrialization, civil rights, colonization, the Holocaust, applied science and technology)."

⁹⁶ McNamara, 30.

point of contention. McNamara points to Friedrich Schiller's work on modern aesthetics as the catalyst for this ongoing tension:

Schiller's influential account argued that modernity initiates a chronic imbalance between the relative evaluations of the cultural and the material, or art and utility. Because specialisation and utility constitute the primary driving forces of the industrial era, the cultural diminishes in comparative evaluation and is rendered literally useless. It is possible to conceive of the foundation program of the Bauhaus of 1919 as a long delayed response to Schiller's diagnosis of this central problem presented by modernity. Whereas Schiller perceives it produces a cultural-industrial chasm, [Walter] Gropius anticipates a solution to the isolation of art in circumstances determined by demands of utility...Art will be subsumed within a new, unified realm of creativity that brings art back to everyday reality...⁹⁷

If this idea sounds familiar, it's because we're still grappling with this dynamic today: science and technology have a far better grip on *immediate* pragmatic value than art does. What might be a relatively new development in this imbalance is the emphasis on creative thinking as an essential component of "business acumen" and the transference of values once associated with specific cultural pursuits espoused as those now central to business: creativity, innovation, agility and disruption.⁹⁸ Almost in a role reversal, artists become skilled in the art of bureaucracy and report writing, while the entrepreneurs of internet start-ups are heralded as today's avant-garde. Separated by over a century, Schiller and Gropius's contrasting responses to the art and utility split highlight the need for a changing position towards artistic autonomy in relation to the social and cultural context. Establishing a unified creative field was a progressive

⁹⁷ Ibid., 35. This idea of unified creativity has a long history, appearing for example in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854, reprint. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), and the work of Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1880s.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 35. Also see Fiona McIntyre, "Is a Master of Fine Arts the new 'MBA'?", ArtsHub, accessed November 23, 2016, <http://www.artshub.com.au.ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/education/news-article/opinions-and-analysis/arts-education/fiona-mcintyre/is-a-master-of-fine-arts-the-new-mba-252641>.

response for the Bauhaus, but it was underpinned by the modernist ideal of social cohesion. Without this link to an emancipatory project, repeating Gropius's approach to the problem in today's circumstances can slip too easily into a celebration of the commodity form. Hence, the second account of autonomy that I will discuss shortly deals specifically with the connection between politics and the autonomy of the artwork. Next though, I would briefly like to turn to McNamara's analysis of how this paradoxical tension appears in contemporary art.

For McNamara, the paradoxical relation between autonomy and heteronomy still persists in contemporary art, although in each iteration of its history the relationship becomes more complicated. What he terms as an "apprehensive aesthetic" is the result of this relation. It entails a renewed sense of criticality, and a rigorous attempt—and necessary failure—to grasp the altogether puzzling contemporary work of art.⁹⁹ Emphasising the tension between the subjective and objective components of an artwork, he provides an illuminating proposal of this apprehensive aesthetic:

The apprehensive, on the other hand, stresses not simply distance (though it does necessarily encompass it to a degree). It also accentuates an incongruous relatedness—a relatedness of among other things, art and life, without any presumption that they might fold into one another. This in turn implies that the apprehensive must be distinguished from estrangement as well as from the more recent account of the relatedness evoked by relational aesthetics. The incongruous relatedness evoked by the apprehensive instead signals a barb-like relation because it highlights both what it is connected to as well as how it is torn from what it connects to; it urges a double-take in which one is prompted to consider again what we presume to be self-evident and naturally related.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ McNamara, 55.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 276, original emphasis. A more concise elaboration of this barb-like relation is as follows: "The aesthetic barb catches hold where the aesthetic idea endures but this tells us that the barb tears at the very same points where it connects." Ibid., 236.

This barb is essentially the unexpected—for both the producer and receiver—because it can't be summoned at will or forced into apparition. But it takes hold once it appears, rupturing one's perception and forcing thought. Criticality in this case involves "accentuating cultural quandaries" rather than revealing to an audience their own capture or complicity.¹⁰¹ It is the creation of problems rather than a simple affirmation of the current state of affairs. This critical potential is stressed as needing to be "constantly revived and renewed, perhaps with every generation, or according to each new circumstance—without each time having to insist that art has entered some wholly new paradigm or has encountered some wholly different question."¹⁰² Accordingly, the first chapter of this exegesis aimed to understand the current conditions of criticality, while the following chapter will seek ways in which the "critical" in art can go beyond a didactical function; the ungraspable nature of art must be retained, in spite of conscious and unconscious attempts to reduce artworks to content. But McNamara is careful not to prescribe a form or set of properties that he thinks art should follow. As an art historian he is aware that his task is that of attending critically to the artworks being produced. From an artist's perspective however, there is a gap between the act of making art and his account of the autonomy of the artwork. The second interpretation of autonomy that I will discuss presents a similar problem, but nonetheless provides another account of the complicated relation between autonomous art and its social context.

In his text "Theorem 4: Autonomy *Can It Be True of Art and Politics at the Same Time?*" Peter Osborne suggests that a dialectical relationship between autonomy and heteronomy within an artwork is the basis through which politics can insist within artistic forms.¹⁰³ Working through the four main conceptions of autonomy in art history—that of aesthetic autonomy (an interpretation of Immanuel Kant's account of aesthetic

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 287.

¹⁰² Ibid., 262.

¹⁰³ Peter Osborne, "Theorem 4: Autonomy *Can It Be True of Art and Politics at the Same Time?*," open 23, (2012). Osborne writes in response to the perceived tendency for art discourse to shun autonomy, only to have the concept resurface in politics via the resurrection of Italian *Autonomia*. Although his article does not so much deal with the idea of "criticality" directly, it implicitly makes its way into his discussion.

judgement), self-referentiality (Clement Greenberg's medium-specificity), freedom of the artist (conceptual art) and freedom from social determinations (literal separation from the wider society)—Osborne locates the beginnings of this dialectical relationship in the suggestion that Schiller's conception of autonomy is drawn not from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, but from the *Critique of Practical Reason*.¹⁰⁴ He argues that Kant's aesthetic autonomy, a pure aesthetic judgement, cannot guarantee artistic autonomy precisely because it cannot establish the art/non-art distinction, that is, discern art from nature, or any other "thing."¹⁰⁵ Osborne suggests that Schiller's appropriation of Kant's autonomy of practical reason was his way to account for and maintain the distinction between art and non-art:

In the Kallias Letters, Schiller transposes this problematic from the domain of practice to the domain of the appearance of objects, viewing objects from the standpoint of pure practical reason—what he calls the "adaption" or "imitation" of "the form of practical reason." "The analogy of an appearance with the form of pure will or freedom", he writes "is beauty (in its most general sense). Beauty is thus nothing less than freedom in appearance," or "autonomy in appearance." (Freedom and autonomy are synonymous in this tradition). Beauty, then, for Schiller is the appearance of the free or "autonomous" determination of form. Autonomous art—which gets its first philosophical definition here—is an art that so appears.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Following Osborne, the position of *art for art's sake* is not argued by Kant, but is rather drawn from Schiller's interpretation of Kant. This will be discussed in more detail below. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, (1790. Reprint Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, trans. Mary J. Gregor and Andrew Reath, (1788. Reprint Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁰⁵ Osborne, "Theorem 4: Autonomy *Can It Be True of Art and Politics at the Same Time?*," 118. The ability to discern between art and non-art is instead the activity of the understanding. This will be addressed in more detail in chapter three, in a discussion of Deleuze's own engagement with Kant's faculty of understanding.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 122–23. Osborne quotes from Schiller, "Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gotfried Körner," in J.M. Bernstein (ed.), *Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 145–183; 151–152.

Thus the sense of autonomy changes from a literal (and unachievable) separation from its social context, to only the impression of autonomy. This has several consequences for understanding past conceptions of autonomy that are based on Schiller's philosophy—in effect the lineage of autonomous art as anti-art, and in Osborne's article specifically Jacques Rancière's aesthetic regime of art—in that it turns the autonomy of an artwork from actual freedom to the ability of an artwork to set its own terms or to “figure freedom”; to the *appearance* of freedom.¹⁰⁷ In Kant's terms, this type of self-governing freedom is determined as a positive form, whereas the escape or withdrawal from a set of social conditions is freedom in the negative sense. This move allows Osborne to renew Adorno's conception of the artwork's dialectical core, as both autonomous and socially dependent, by positing this not as a mutually exclusive choice, but as a tension in which one or the other determination takes dominance. Not having to choose one or the other doesn't result in the evaporation of the dialectic, but rather accounts for how the social context of an artwork can alter its dynamics by affecting which determination seems most prevalent.

In this sense, not only does the dialectic account for changes in context, but also how the specifics of the autonomous and dependent elements do not have to be pre-designated, rather they morph over time in relation to the social context.¹⁰⁸ The changing social conditions and complications of this dialectic are the history that Osborne wants to assign autonomous art to, rather than Rancière's aesthetic regime of art.¹⁰⁹ This dialectical structure is also the way in which for Osborne politics can be said to operate within autonomous art. These different methods of inherence include a politics of form, in which the apparent freedom of the artwork is taken as a critique of the non-freedom of its social context. Further, a political meaning can be derived from the artwork's apparent unity of determinations, which can avoid affirming the present state of affairs by integrating an internal critical function that in some way acknowledges the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰⁸ Osborne takes a similar position to McNamara regarding this dialectic: “The history of autonomous art is the history of the development and increasing complication of this dialectic.” (122.)

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 122, 123.

artwork's mere appearance of autonomy. Osborne suggests that this critical function has historically been the incorporation of an "element of anti-art," but that politics could fulfil this role if the anti-art element is incorporated into tradition.¹¹⁰ Lastly, politics as such can be considered a variant of the social context of the dialectic—an artwork made in a specific political climate can appear less radical over time, or in a different social condition. Osborne ends on a paradoxical note, comparing the arguments from aesthetics—that autonomy can only appear "analogically" in the world—and politics—that true autonomy can be achieved, but only through a withdrawal from the current state of affairs.¹¹¹ Osborne thus suggests that autonomy can only appear exclusively in either aesthetics or politics, at any one time. As a result, autonomous politics are ineffective political movements—requiring as they do the withdrawal from their current context—but are "critically redeemable primarily only as art."¹¹² By the same token, autonomous artworks—as only the appearance of freedom of a singular subject—cannot guarantee any political efficacy. This last point calls for a brief explanation.

While Osborne's article redeems Adorno's dialectic, he also identifies certain limitations of the autonomous artwork in the context of capitalist societies. He writes:

The conceptual and political limits of Adorno's conception of autonomous art derive from the individualistic assumptions behind Kant's application of the concept of pure rational will. Adorno's notion of autonomy continues to pertain to *individual subjects*; autonomous art thus provides no more than an *immanent criticism of liberal capitalist societies*, through which it figures the possibility of a free *individual praxis*. [...] [F]or [Adorno] *the work of art images the political freedom of the ideal liberal individual*: this is its 'enigmatic', subject-like, singular object status.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 124. As argued in chapter one, the cementing of avant-garde practice into tradition has increasingly become problematic for contemporary art practices.

¹¹¹ Osborne, "Theorem 4: Autonomy *Can It Be True of Art and Politics at the Same Time?*," 126.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 125, original emphasis.

The claims expressed by Osborne concern two different (although interrelated) issues. The first is no doubt beyond the scope of this project, and refers to the subject's relation to Kant's categorical imperative.¹¹⁴ The second claim however concerns the efficacy of autonomous art as Adorno conceived it, namely that the "immanent criticism" enacted by autonomous art falls short of the requirements of a collective politics—an immanent critique relies on the form of singular experience. Consequently, in its limited extension to singular subjects and praxis, autonomous art mimics the form of an "ideal liberal individual."¹¹⁵ Based in a response to *Autonomia* and post-*Autonomia* political movements, Osborne's interpretation of Adorno's conception of autonomous art is necessarily an explanation of its consequences, rather than an attempt to extend it. Thus while Osborne's aim is to accurately relay Adorno's theory without altering it, the same does not apply to this text. My aim is instead to develop a useful understanding of autonomy suitable for the contemporary situation. Accordingly, going back to a key point from McNamara's discussion of autonomy, we should remember that there is no requirement on the artwork *itself* to enact practical change. The criticism put forward by the artwork through the generation of a problem occurs at a different level to the solution of the problem, located as it is within the general culture. Furthermore, Osborne posits that the kind of freedom that Adorno's autonomous artwork figures is a "political freedom of the ideal liberal individual." It is possible, however, to modify the type of freedom figured by the artwork; it does not necessarily have to be in guise of politics (although that is one way to consider it). Concurrently, the subject—whose freedom the artwork figures—also does not have to follow the model of an ideal liberal individual. But what alternative subject might be proposed? This question motivates the following chapter, in which I suggest that Deleuze's extension of Kant's transcendental account of

¹¹⁴ That is, whether the universal structure of the categorical imperative—formulated as it is by the independent faculty of reason—can ever actually be applied by a psychological subject in a specific context.

¹¹⁵ Osborne, "Theorem 4: Autonomy *Can It Be True of Art and Politics at the Same Time?*," 125. Osborne acknowledges that this form may be a consequence of the artwork's operation in a capitalist context, rather than originating entirely from Adorno's argument. (125.)

subjectivity can provide an expanded approach to the autonomous artwork's figuring of freedom.

Despite approaching the problem in quite different ways, both McNamara and Osborne are trying to disentangle the idea of autonomy from previous conceptions (and misconceptions) in order to insist on autonomy's continuing importance to contemporary art. Importantly, what they both demonstrate is that the idea of autonomy is conditional. In these two accounts, art's position is entirely configured within society, yet must be allowed a certain illusionary, provisionary or limited amount of self-legislation. For McNamara, criticality is engendered by the provision of autonomy, linked as it is—at least historically—to the positive program of the Enlightenment. Autonomy enables not only the critical function of art, but also the very ability to continue to have a field called art. Similarly, Osborne considers criticality or politics as capable of inhering within the dialectical configuration of artworks, without having to pre-determine the form of this politics. Both arguments maintain that a paradoxical or dialectical relation between autonomy and the social conditions of an artwork must be traversed without eliminating either side. In the next chapter, I readdress the question raised by McNamara and Osborne's accounts, essentially: *how might an artist maintain this tension between autonomy and heteronomy in their art, in order to "figure freedom"?*

3

The Problematic Nature of Art

The very foundation of inter human discourse is misunderstanding.

—Jacques Lacan, *Seminar III*

There is only involuntary thought, aroused but constrained within thought, and all the more absolutely necessary for being born, illegitimately, of fortuitousness in the world.

—Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

This Game, which can only exist in thought and which has no other result than the work of art, is also that by which thought and art are real and disturbing reality, morality, and the economy of the world.

—Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*

So far we have seen how the gradual devaluation of cultural autonomy, along with the critical capacity it supports, has led contemporary art into a paradoxical situation wherein it seeks political efficacy at the same time as it disavows its own power. The internal momentum established by the avant-garde—the gradual dismantling of a field from within—which was once progressive, is now antithetical to today's requirements. To retain art's critical function today, we have seen, means to re-establish the tension between the specific and general (sociological) concepts of culture, understanding art as an ordered and socially disembedded practice that exists within—but is independent from—its wider social context. This requires uncoupling art from the directives of business and instead, through a re-engagement with the institutional nature of art, maintaining a common discourse and critical evaluation of both the history of art and the art of the present. Fundamental to this task is recognising the need to move away from the full-scale professionalization of art, promoting as it does an individual-centred approach in which the artist becomes a brand. But it is also about re-instating a scene

or public sphere around art production, without having to necessarily involve the audience literally *in* the artwork itself. Understanding art as both a social product and dependent on institutions shifts the approach to the art world from a totally uncontrollable force of consumption to a set of relations and processes that are created by people, and therefore capable of being re-made.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the question of what the term “autonomy” might connote in relation to art practice, and the form that the artwork’s critique might take, is complex and difficult to discuss in concrete terms. Part of this complexity stems from the relation between objective and subjective accounts of art practice—how to maintain a balanced interrelation between the singular and universal without simplification? McNamara’s proposal of the “aesthetic barb”—distinct from direct antagonism, but also from manufactured consensus—is one way to consider the autonomy of the artwork. However, there is no singular way to go about producing this “aesthetic barb;” it is often unforeseen by artists themselves. So the first question that this chapter addresses is: how might this creation of the “aesthetic barb” be approached from a practice-led perspective? Osborne raises a slightly different question in his account of autonomy as the figuring of a “self-determining universal form.” The apparent limit of Adorno’s conception of autonomous art pertained to the artwork itself; only the *appearance* of freedom could be achieved by the artwork, and even then, only in an individual mode. An artwork’s true autonomy can never be fully realised, nor would this be beneficial; as seen in McNamara’s account, the tension between an artwork and its context is its animating feature. The artwork then is only one half of the issue; the other is the subjective interpretation of the artwork. The singular artwork may figure only an individual freedom through the personal 1:1 ratio between artwork and individual viewer. This is the nature of viewing art. However, what kind of freedom is figured in the subject when viewing (or hearing etc.) the artwork? With this shift of focus from the artwork itself to the subject, does freedom have to remain illusory?

This chapter focuses on the relation between art and thought in Deleuze’s philosophy as it appears in *The Logic of Sense*, proposing that an engagement with this

48

text can provide a radically de-personalised account of sense generation. What I mean by this is that the ontological structure that Deleuze develops in this book provides an account of how a subject comes to be a conscious being in the world, capable of making sense of their affections and communicating with others. Art's positioning in this structure however, and its connection to thought and sense generation, locates art's effects at another level than that of conscious subjectivity. I propose that through a consideration of art's placement within this structure, it is possible to develop not only guiding points for the creation of autonomous art, but also a technical understanding of the way in which this art can induce an actual type of freedom in the subject.

I've intentionally limited my engagement with Deleuze's philosophy to *The Logic of Sense*, and also to a lesser extent *Difference and Repetition*. This limitation is partly pragmatic, but it is also part of a wider argument that concerns the preference within visual art scholarship to refer to the later works written with Felix Guattari. The first chapter's investigations into the state of autonomy, criticality and contemporary art found the unmistakable influences of Deleuze and Guattari's thought: "singularities," "multiplicities," "differences," "becoming," "flux" and "flows." Deleuze's philosophy obviously resonates with visual artists, not least of all because of the power that he assigns to the artwork and its affective qualities. That being said, even Simon O'Sullivan—a prominent academic in the field of contemporary art practice and Deleuze and Guattari scholarship—stated in 2013 that "this 'Deleuzian aesthetic' has, in many ways, become a new hegemony, and, as such, strange and contradictory strategies might be required—not least, perhaps, a turn back to the thinkers I pitched myself against in my essay."¹¹⁶ The essay referred to here is "The Aesthetics of Affect: thinking art beyond representation," in which O'Sullivan suggested a turn away from both the transcendent aesthetics of Kant and the negativity of Adorno.¹¹⁷ Accordingly, the focus

¹¹⁶ Simon O'Sullivan, "Affective Turns: A Conversation between Jorella Andrews and Simon O'Sullivan," in *Visual Cultures as Objects and Affects*, ed. Leah Whitman-Salkin (London: Goldsmiths, University of London, 2013), 67.

¹¹⁷ Simon O'Sullivan, "The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation," in *Visual Culture as Objects and Affects*, ed. Leah Whitman-Salkin, *Visual Culture As* (London: Goldsmiths, University of London,

in visual art discourse has related mostly to the operations of art at the material level—what Deleuze calls in *The Logic of Sense* “the depths.”¹¹⁸ However, the material field is only one portion of Deleuze’s overall ontology: “flux” and “becoming” (and the proliferation of similarly Heraclitean terms found in Deleuze’s work) are certainly crucial concepts in his philosophy, but they designate a point of beginning, not an end to be celebrated. What this chapter seeks to do is to understand art in the context of Deleuze’s philosophy of *transcendence*.

First and foremost, it is precisely the *positioning* of art in his ontological structure that enables us to understanding why art enjoys such precedence in Deleuze’s philosophy (see fig. 0). That being said, I have neither intention nor space to explicate the full diversity of ideas contained with this book. Instead I single out four main points of Deleuze’s conception of subjectivity as they correspond to thinking art:

1. Deleuze provides a concept of thought as such.
2. Sense is produced, rather than pre-established.
3. The production of sense is a pre-individual event and it operates prior to conscious subjectivity.
4. Art’s effects are located at the production of sense.

2013). O’Sullivan states of Deleuzian art theory “[i]t is, in fact, a reconfiguration of aesthetics away from Adorno and the whole Kantian heritage.” (17.)

¹¹⁸ “The depths” in *The Logic of Sense* refers to the material field as perceived by the subject through bodily sensation and affect. In this sense it is corporeal: “Everything is a mixture of bodies, and inside the body, interlocking and penetration.” (99.) A parallel could be drawn between contemporary art’s fixation on the present and the preference in visual art discourse for remaining in the depths of bodies.

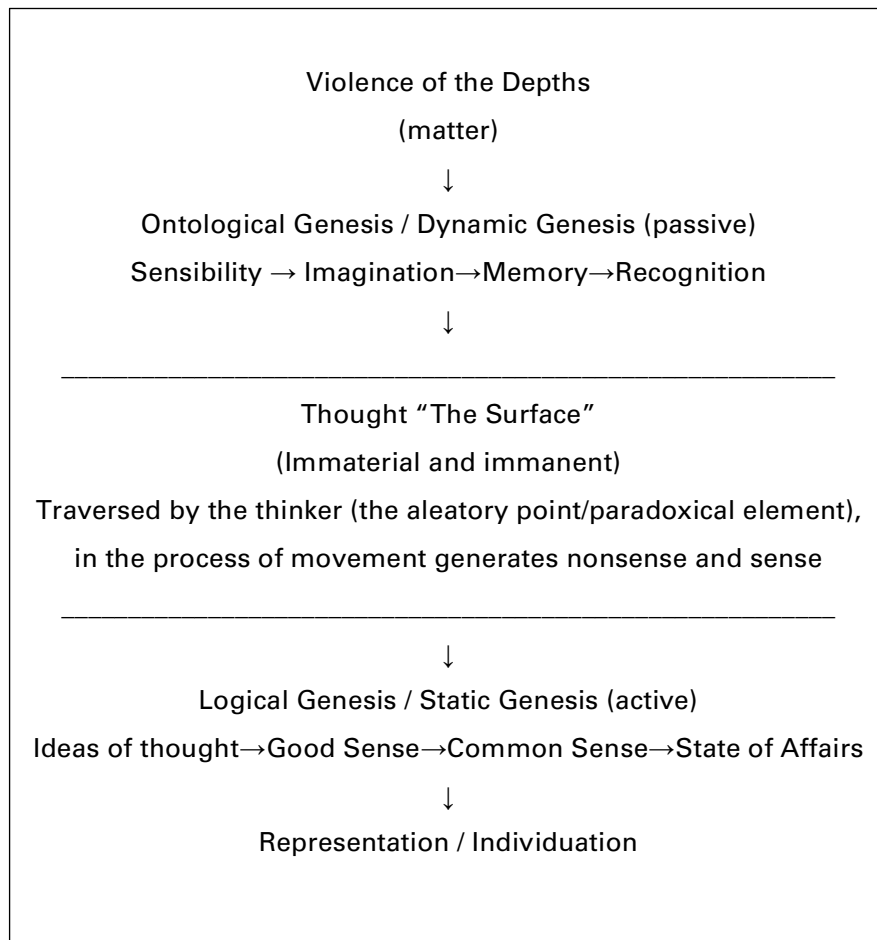


Figure 0. Brief outline of Deleuze's ontological structure.

In the course of the book, terms like “sense,” “nonsense” and “absurd”—all of which are commonly invoked to discuss obscure artworks—are given new meanings through their positions and connections in the ontology. This, combined with the very *structure* that he proposes—necessarily entailing as it does a motion towards representation (transcendence)—provides a contrasting reading to many Deleuzian-influenced theories of art, such as Affect Theory or New Materialism.¹¹⁹ My primary motivation is to demonstrate how a focus on Deleuze's placement of art within the genesis of representation at a pre-personal level enables us to understand how art exceeds its particularities and provides, through the production of thought, a way for the universal to

¹¹⁹ “Representation” in this context should not be confused with its use in the fields of cultural studies, media studies or social science to refer to the presentation of a particular group of identities. Rather, in this context it refers to the “end” of the ontological structure; the point at which a subject is conscious.

emerge from the singular. That is, to recognise art as a pre-individual mode of address.¹²⁰

A Concept of Thought

It might be easiest to begin with what thought is *not* for Deleuze. Thought is not something that occurs at the level of consciousness (subjective experience), nor does it deal specifically with things of consciousness such as perceptual representations or linguistic propositions (empirical reality). It doesn't refer to a process that is always ongoing, nor is thought any kind of single transferrable product of the mind (as in facts). Nor is it a transportable collection of differing opinions or positions on a topic, such as it is in the phrase "school of thought" (historical discourse). Thought for Deleuze is not even really what is produced when thinking. So how *does* Deleuze understand thought if not through the interpretations above? In *The Logic of Sense* he approaches it as an operation conducted on a "problematic structure," "metaphysical surface" or "transcendental field."¹²¹ Its properties remain the same regardless of its name, with Deleuze often invoking the image of a thin layer, film or surface to refer to the dividing or frontier-like nature of thought.¹²² But what exactly is this thin surface separating? This is important point number one: Deleuze maintains that there is a fundamental divide between matter and our perception of it—there are "bodies" (the material world), and there are "events" (our mental thoughts). In one of his many reiterations of this idea, Deleuze states:

[t]he line-frontier brings about the convergence of divergent series; but it neither abolishes nor corrects their divergence. For it makes them converge not in

¹²⁰ "Pre-individual" and "pre-personal" are terms used by Deleuze to describe two different states of a subject other than consciousness. They will be described in more detail below in relation to thought, but for now we can understand "pre-individual" as describing a state prior to the separation of objects in our perceptions (including our own body), but also as prior to the form of the subjective individual. "Pre-personal" instead describes a state prior to conscious subjectivity.

¹²¹ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 216, 125, 165.

¹²² Ibid., 13, 38, 99.

themselves (which would be impossible) but around a paradoxical element, a point traversing the line and circulating throughout the series. This is a displaced center which constitutes a circle of convergence only for that which diverges as such (the power of affirming the disjunction).¹²³

It would be impossible for thoughts and things to properly “converge” because of the difference in their nature—a physical object cannot be materially affected by thoughts (as in telepathy). But we can nonetheless pair an object to a word, or a piece of text to a sound, or our own bodily movements to a proposition etc. We are so used to this process of pairing that we do it without thinking—teeth brushing, grocery shopping, driving. There is no need to generate new links between series, because they have already been established through our day-to-day experience. This is operating on the level of representation. It is the point where objects and subjects have been individuated, and can be said to occupy space and possess attributes. As Joe Hughes suggests, these two attributes—extension and quality—are “the basic units of ‘propositions and consciousness.’”¹²⁴ Representations allow us to differentiate between the various physical-sensory stimuli that we experience every day and to generate coherent meaning from that stimuli. In this way, representations enable communication; text, images, objects and speech all allow a shared experience of the world. But art is not always about this direct form of communication. And, as I suggested above, thought does not occur on the level of representation. It isn’t until we come across something unfamiliar and problematic that we suddenly need to start generating these convergences. In this way, thought has to be forced through an encounter with a problem—whether that be through a strange sign, unknown language, odd physical movements, sounds or difficult text. This displaced centre that traverses the surface of thought—what Deleuze refers to as the “paradoxical element” (or aleatory point)—is, as

¹²³ Ibid., 210.

¹²⁴ Joe Hughes, *Philosophy after Deleuze: Deleuze and the Genesis of Representation II* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 54.

Hughes points out, “the action of our own minds whenever we try to make sense of something.”¹²⁵ It is what generates new connections between the two different series of bodies and events, by running through each series and bringing elements from each momentarily together. Deleuze often describes this operation as an unceasing movement, where the paradoxical element “circulates without end in both series,” but is “always displaced, in the two series, in relation to itself.”¹²⁶ While the two series of thoughts and things are always designated as either signified or signifying, the paradoxical element, because it belongs to both, is “both word = x, and thing = x.”¹²⁷ Thought as Deleuze uses it in *The Logic of Sense* designates a field where the thinker can take their incoming physical stimuli, separate it from its physical form and relate it to other incorporeal events.

The Production of Sense

The aleatory point produces sense by forcing two differing series to communicate, but sense is not to be confused with signification. The connections that the aleatory point makes do not adhere to any particular order, but are necessarily composed of erratic and pre-logical movements. This is because the movement of the aleatory point occurs *before* sense is produced—the function of the aleatory point is to produce sense. Deleuze thus terms the aleatory point’s movement as nonsense: “The instant = x...is determined as nonsense and circulates endlessly throughout the series. Sense is actually *produced* by this circulation as sense which affects both the signifier and signified. In short, sense is always an *effect*.”¹²⁸ Nonsense in this system refers not to an absence of sense, but to an overwhelming amount of it.¹²⁹ Rather than sense being

¹²⁵ Joe Hughes, *Deleuze and the Genesis of Representation* (London: Continuum, 2008), 39.

¹²⁶ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 48.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 45, 78. This idea is similar to the Kantian object = x (noumena), in that we can never really know what matter is because we only ever experience it through our own bodies.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹²⁹ This leads Deleuze to claim that “sense and nonsense have a specific relation which cannot copy that of the true and false.” *Ibid.*, 83, 79. This will be explained further below.

something that pre-exists and that one is granted access to, sense is generated as an effect of the aleatory point's constant movement across series.

In his discussion of the logical proposition, Deleuze maintains that sense is itself both independent from the other elements of the proposition, but also something that “inheres or subsists in the proposition.”¹³⁰ The three elements of the proposition include denotation (the state of affairs designated by the proposition), manifestation (the relation of the proposition to the “desires and beliefs” of the person who expresses it), and signification (the relation between the proposition and the “universal or general concepts” that it refers to).¹³¹ Depending on which way the proposition is examined, each element takes on a founding role—the state of affairs is primary in experience, manifestation is primary in speech and signification is primary in language. But each dimension of the proposition is dependent on each other in order to generate meaning, however sense cannot be attributed specifically to any one of the proposition's elements. Sense is instead the “fourth dimension of the proposition,” neutral, independent and yet an incorporeal effect of the play between denotation, manifestation and signification.¹³² It is described as neutral because as an incorporeal entity *produced* by bodies, sense is by nature unable to undergo physical actions or passions. It is also independent from the different elements of propositions, in that sense is prior to logic (i.e. contradiction), truth, falsity, possibility, impossibility. Thus we can say the following about sense in regard to its connection to the proposition:

- Sense cannot exist without its expression through the proposition.
- The sense of the proposition is not the same as the proposition itself.
- Sense is not attributed to the proposition, but to the thing that is denoted by the proposition.
- Sense does not have a physical form.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹³¹ Ibid., 17, 82.

¹³² Ibid., 22.

Deleuze also discusses nonsense and the absurd at the level of logical propositions. Nonsense operates according to two laws: the regressive and the disjunctive. The first indicates that a word that is properly nonsense is one that “says its own sense.”¹³³ It is a word that cannot have its sense denoted by another proposition. The second law is one in which each part of a word corresponds to the other, and as such “denotes the sense of the other or expresses the other part which in turn denotes it.”¹³⁴ The absurd on the other hand is a word or phrase that has a sense but is without signification, and is therefore unable to be determined as either true or false.¹³⁵ But this is all still on the level of representation. Deleuze states early on:

The logic of sense is necessarily determined to posit between sense and nonsense an original type of intrinsic relation, a mode of co-presence. For the time being, we may only hint at this mode by dealing with nonsense as a word which says its own sense.¹³⁶

What Deleuze is referring to with this “original type of intrinsic relation” is the idea of genesis—of how the surface of thought can be generated by what was once “just” cells (the factitious, fleshy human body coming to think). Sense and nonsense take on different meanings here, where sense refers to incorporeal entities and nonsense to corporeal bodies. The thing that is between them then is the aleatory point—which can be said to have an “intrinsic relation” to both sides, because it is at once produced *by* physical matter, but is entirely an incorporeal effect of it. This statement points towards the second part of *The Logic of Sense*, where Deleuze moves from discussing sense generation at the level of logical propositions, towards the origin of sense generation.¹³⁷

¹³³ Ibid., 79.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 80.

¹³⁷ This origin is the question of how the surface of thought is itself generated: “[a]t the heart of the logic of sense, one always returns to this problem, this immaculate conception, being the passage from sterility to genesis.” (110–11.)

This change in focus and positioning leads to the development of thought as a pre-conscious event.

Thought is Pre-Conscious?

Although it sounds somewhat counter-intuitive to say that thought is pre-conscious, remembering the ordinary nature of dreams is enough to put this statement in perspective.¹³⁸ So why does Deleuze assert that thought is pre-conscious, and by virtue of this, a pre-individual operation? Referring back to the ontology diagram, the material depths are at once the basis of experience, but also inaccessible in themselves. The surface of thought and ideal events are created in order for the infant to extract itself from these material depths, to constitute and coordinate its own body and to free itself from physical determinism by generating mental images of its perceptions. Furthermore, the level of representation, which is the end point of the whole ontology, is itself consciousness—so it follows that everything that happens beforehand has to be prior to it. Hughes suggests that the unconscious for Deleuze differs from that of Freud, in that:

[t]he Deleuzian unconscious is not the conflictual unconscious of repressed *meanings* but is simply the body, its affections, and its drives or its syntheses. This is not a critique of the Freudian unconscious. It bears on something entirely different: the conditions for the possibility of anything resembling a meaningful unconscious.¹³⁹

In this way, the primary organisation of material depths and the dynamic genesis is entirely inaccessible to us as thinking subjects, but rather something that we experience as bodily sensations. This also means that material depth is itself the basis for the formation for the next layer of unconscious—the preconscious. The term preconscious

¹³⁸ The effect of unconscious thoughts on consciousness is of course psychoanalysis' main focus:

"We have found—that is, we have been obliged to assume—that very powerful mental processes or ideas exist...which can produce all the effects in mental life that ordinary ideas do (including effects that can in their turn become conscious as ideas), though they themselves do not become conscious."

Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, ed. James Strachey, trans., Joan Riviere (New York: Norton, 1962), 4–5.

¹³⁹ Hughes, *Philosophy after Deleuze: Deleuze and the Genesis of Representation II*, 46.

follows Freud's differentiation between two types of unconscious: the preconscious which is "latent but capable of becoming conscious," and the unconscious, which is "repressed and which is not, in itself and without more ado, capable of becoming conscious."¹⁴⁰ If we follow the structure of Deleuze's ontology, the unconscious is incapable of becoming conscious on its own because it requires the production of the metaphysical surface in order to be communicated to the subject's consciousness—thus becoming irrevocably other than itself in this mediation. Meanwhile, sense as the product of the metaphysical surface can become conscious much like the latent thoughts of the preconscious. In the same way that the preconscious is the layer between the unconscious and conscious, the transcendental surface sits between the dynamic and static geneeses. Remembering that sense is itself different to signification, but that it is produced by the aleatory point's pre-logical connections between divergent series, sense production occurs on this in-between surface. Deleuze writes:

We seek to determine an impersonal and pre-individual transcendental field, which does not resemble the corresponding empirical fields, and which nevertheless is not confused with an undifferentiated depth. This field cannot be determined as that of a consciousness...A consciousness is nothing without a synthesis of unification, but there is no synthesis of unification of consciousness without the form of the I, or the point of view of the Self. What is neither individual nor personal are, on the contrary, emissions of singularities insofar as they occur on an unconscious surface and possess a mobile, immanent principle of auto-unification through a *nomadic distribution*, radically distinct from fixed and sedentary distributions as conditions of the syntheses of consciousness.¹⁴¹

The metaphysical surface can't be considered conscious, because consciousness is not only already dependent on the pre-existing field of sense, but consciousness also

¹⁴⁰ Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 5–6.

¹⁴¹ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 118.

requires a continued sense of self to exist, and is thus precisely personal and individual. The metaphysical surface is impersonal in the sense that it is accessed without this unity of particular subjectivity, but this is not to say that subjectivity is lost. Rather, in the same way that the impersonal operates in a grammatical sense—for example: “it thinks”—there is a subject present, but its particularities are left open. As I already noted in this chapter’s previous section, the “mobile, immanent principle” is the aleatory point or paradoxical element, or our minds being presented with a problem. The newly introduced term of “singularities” is not unfamiliar to this discussion either; singularities are another name for ideal elements, incorporeal events or thoughts.

To elaborate the characteristics of singularities-events, I’m going to use a somewhat commonplace example: imagine you are preparing dinner in your kitchen. As you are cutting some vegetables, you perceive something moving quickly along the skirting board, between the cabinet and the fridge. As an unexpected surprise, in the moment of perception you have no idea what it is. “In the first place, singularities-events correspond to heterogeneous series which are organised into a system which is neither stable nor unstable, but rather ‘meta-stable’.”¹⁴² So at first, the event is you registering your perception of something moving quickly. The meta-stable system composed of differing series—which as we recall is the split between matter and thoughts—is your mind taking note of dark–quickness.

“In the second place, singularities posses a process of auto-unification...enveloping the corresponding singular points in a single aleatory point.” Your mind (the aleatory point) “automatically” registered the unity of the perceived event, in that the moving thing (a particular thing) can, retroactively, be said to have properties—*it* was dark, *it* was quick, and *it* went from A to B. There is no doubt that it was the same thing that moved from the cabinet to the fridge. Auto-unification refers to this “itness.”

“In the third place, singularities or potentials haunt the surface...events do not occupy the surface, but rather frequent it.” Again, this third point relates to the divide

¹⁴² Ibid., 119–120. All the quotes in the following paragraph are from these two pages.

between bodies and events—the properties that you attributed to this thing do not *belong* to it. The properties given to this physical thing are not themselves physical. Rather, these incorporeal properties can be used to describe other events; the thing you saw was described as quick, in the same way as a tram trip or professional athlete.

“As a fourth determination, we will say therefore that the surface is the locus of *sense*: signs remain deprived of sense as long as they do not enter into the surface organisation of which assures the resonance of two series...this world of sense, with its events-singularities, offers a neutrality which is essential to it.” You would be unable to determine what this moving thing was or what it was doing, if you didn’t have both the physical stimuli *and* the mental event of it with which to compare. Or again, the moving thing would remain without sense precisely if no-one was there to register its movements as effect. There would be no-one present to generate the sense. The world of sense then is “neutral” in that it only requires someone—not someone in particular—to generate sense from this fast moving thing. But it is also neutral in that someone could generate sense from another singularity—if the fast moving thing was a different colour, or if it was in a different location.

“And this is why (determination number five) this world of sense has a *problematic* status: singularities are distributed in a properly problematic field and crop up in this field as topological events to which no direction is attached. As with chemical elements, with respect to which we know where they are before we know what they are, likewise here we know of the existence and distribution of singular points before we know their nature.” So at first all you knew was that *something* moved quickly between the cupboard and the fridge. You were presented with a problem by witnessing something that you couldn’t identify. You automatically grouped together its constitutive events—dark, small and fast. In response, your mind was propelled to the surface of thought, to produce sense through the ramification of bodies and effects. Only after this do you realise what the something was; only then can you determine that the sensations, now properties, of this quick-moving small dark thing belong to a mouse. When you were confronted with this event, for the brief moment that it took for you to

60

make sense of it, your mind was not concerned with your own subjectivity. And because you now recognise that the fast moving thing was a mouse, the next time you see it there is no failure of recognition, and consequently, you won't need to go through this process again. Instead, you can stay on the level of representation and already know that is a mouse.

I've chosen this banal example because it readily illustrates the failure of recognition in terms that are nonetheless readily understandable. However, the basic structure of the failure of recognition and the recourse to thought is essentially the same in the unsettling aspect of an artwork. Consider the perturbing unaccountability of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donnés* (1946–66), or the admixture of the banal and the monstrous in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch.¹⁴³ Ultimately, I contend the estrangement or the uncanniness we encounter in works of art is reducible to a failure of recognition, but one that is incapable of being supplanted by a simple representation.

Art's Effects

So far we have seen that in *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze has developed a concept of thought that is different from the word's standard acceptance. We have seen how thought is developed as the pre-conscious and impersonal action of one's mind when one encounters a problem. Thought takes place on a metaphysical surface; a thin frontier between corporeal bodies and ideal events.¹⁴⁴ When we are forced to thought, our mind becomes the aleatory point, characterised by endless movement and displacement. Its "job" is to force connections and variations between divergent series—that is, bodies and events—which are themselves composed of sets of singularities. Sense is produced or generated as an effect of the aleatory point's disjunctive connections. The aleatory point is effectively nonsense, as its movement (as distinct from its result) is not required to make these connections according to any pre-

¹⁴³ Marcel Duchamp, *Étant Donnés*, 1946–66, Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art, Philadelphia.

¹⁴⁴ This terminology is of course ultimately metaphorical; in no way is Deleuze attempting a neurological or biological or even psychological account—his terms remain on an ontological level.

determined rules. Nonsense in this case then refers not to the absence of sense, but an abundance of it; the aleatory point as nonsense “enacts the donation of sense.”¹⁴⁵ In a pivotal chapter of *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze makes the connection between this understanding of thought and the work of art, by posing thought as an “Ideal game”:

The Ideal game of which we speak cannot be played by either man or God. It can only be thought as nonsense. But precisely for this reason, it is the reality of thought itself and the unconscious of pure thought...If one tries to play this game other than in thought, nothing happens; and if one tries to produce a result other than the work of art, nothing is produced...This game, which can only exist in thought and which has no other result than the work of art, is also that by which thought and art are real and disturbing reality, morality and the economy, of the world.¹⁴⁶

This is still the same play of singularities and events that we looked at in the previous sections, but expressed in a different manner. The “game” cannot exist in the physical world, but only in incorporeal thought. It is only played by the aleatory point, whose moves produce an excess of sense (nonsense). What implications are there for considering art as a result of this very particular movement? And more broadly, where is art situated in this production of sense? At the end of *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze suggests that it replays the dynamic genesis, by operating between the level of unindividuated bodies and the metaphysical surface:

What can the work of art do but follow again the path which goes from noise to the voice, from voice to speech, and from speech to the verb, constructing this *Musik für ein Haus*, in order always to recover the independence of sounds and to fix the thunderbolt of the univocal.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 83.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 286. The term “Musik für ein Haus” seems to be referring to the 1968 compositional work by Karlheinz Stockhausen. Stockhausen was a well-known composer of the mid-twentieth century, whose compositions

We have seen how this form of thought can be considered transcendent in two different ways. The first is that this incorporeal surface has emerged out of physical matter, but it establishes itself as a double of this matter through perception. Secondly, from the perspective of subjectivity, thought is a process of self-transcendence because its operation is impersonal; it requires the overcoming of one's ego to occur. So thought transcends matter, but it also has to transcend the subject to which it belongs as a faculty. It is through this self-transcendence of the individual subject in thought that the universal or infinite can be accessed.¹⁴⁸

But as I've pointed out, thought is something that has to be prompted by the failure of recognition—of not being able to understand what something is or signifies. When an artwork presents itself as a problem—when it is unexpected, confusing and appears to operate outside of the “rules” of representation—it forces the viewer to thought. It forces our mind, in response to some kind of “stimuli = x,” to connect the singularities presented, to hold onto or join these connections and then to allow our mind to produce sense through the disjunctive synthesis of the previous two steps. In this way, the artwork can *retrace* the dynamic genesis, not because we start all over again constituting our body, but because we are propelled to the metaphysical surface in response to physical matter. We have to generate sense in response to this encounter, because we are unable to rely on the denotation, manifestation or signification located on the level of representation.

sometimes involved a group of performers reacting to short meditative texts that Stockhausen provided. He emphasised that this open-ended, intuitive music was “not indeterminacy, but intuitive determinacy.” Martin Iddon, “The Haus That Karlheinz Built: Composition, Authority, and Control at the 1968 Darmstadt Ferienkurse,” *The Musical Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2004): 91, 92.

¹⁴⁸ As Hughes points out: “This *cogito* [the aleatory point] marks a paradoxical point in the genesis of the subject: it arises out of the series of passive syntheses and is thus linked directly to a passive subject; at the same time, however, it describes an *impersonal* power of thinking in which this subject now lives. [...] Deleuze clearly considers this capacity to operate an ideal synthesis a *faculty*: the first passive synthesis is the operation of the imagination, the second belongs to memory and the ideal synthesis is operated by “thought.” (What is more, the rigor of this connection between the personal and the impersonal is further intensified by the second part of the genesis which I will describe below: the Ideas which thought thinks in its communion with the impersonal are actualized in *my* body.)” *Philosophy after Deleuze: Deleuze and the Genesis of Representation II*, 46, original emphasis.

This isn't going to be the experience of all art, but it is nonetheless something to aim for. An experience of art as wholly connected to thought, as its producer and result, would mean the ability of singular artworks to allow access to the universal—as an experience of the impersonal operation of thought. But art is also an object and a social process, made and conducted by people. What is role of the artist in all of this? When Deleuze asserts that “[t]he artist is not only the patient and doctor of civilisation, but is also its pervert,” he attributes to the artist three functionally different positions.¹⁴⁹ Artists are the “patients” of civilisation in that they are subject to its influence. They may present with symptoms and be under the observation of society. But they are also “accorded the benefit of sublimation”: artists are given a place within society in which their socially unacceptable instincts and base experiences can be used—and transcended—creatively.¹⁵⁰ More generally however, this could describe the process of art: of taking everyday things, events and perceptions and making them mean something different, perhaps greater, than they did previously. Artists are the “doctors” of civilisation because they group its symptoms and diagnose its ills. They attempt to mend what they diagnose through their art, through the redistribution of emphasis, attention and value. But artists are also society’s “perverts” because they subvert that which is taught or taken for granted. They are a threat to established order. They renounce “reality” for fiction by investing art with a kind of potency, and with this, perhaps lead their viewers astray.

¹⁴⁹ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 274. I interpret these terms in a general, more colloquial sense, rather than the more strictly psychoanalytic sense one might (on account of Deleuze's analytic influences) suspect is intended.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 273. This interpretation of the process of sublimation is from Freud: “Another technique for fending off suffering is the employment of the displacements of libido which our mental apparatus permits of and through which its function gains so much in flexibility. The task here is that of shifting the instinctual aims in such a way that they cannot come up against frustration from the external world. In this, sublimation of the instincts lends its assistance. One gains the most if one can sufficiently heighten the yield of pleasure from the sources of psychical and intellectual work. When that is so, fate can do little against one. A satisfaction of this kind, such as an artist's joy in creating, in giving his phantasies body, or a scientist's in solving problems or discovering truths, has a special quality which we shall certainly one day be able to characterise in metapsychological terms. At present we can only say figuratively that such satisfactions seem ‘finer and higher’.” Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans., James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1969), 28.

The irreconcilable dynamic between these three positions is clearly a difficult one, but one that we are familiar with from the discussion of autonomy in the previous chapter. The artist has to at once be part of society in order to best diagnose it, but they themselves are subject to its influence. They try to mend the symptoms they've diagnosed from an external position, but in the process they distort what they are given. And because of their corrupting influence, they have no place in society—or rather, they are always displaced within it.

This dynamic provides a loose outline of my exegesis, but also of my project in general. I felt there was a pressure being applied by the configuration of contemporary art on my practice, and on other artists and their work. This pressure—to make artworks that are consumable, sellable, logically consistent, indeterminate, but also to market yourself as a professional—appeared to me as an impetus to stop making art. I then tried to take this impulse and make it into something else—to try to diagnose the symptoms of the industry of contemporary art, whose effects were limiting how I thought about art, and which may be indicative of a wider systemic problem. The question of art's autonomy, its critical function, the post-critical state of contemporary art and its relation to communicative capitalism are all, in one way or another, a variation on the same theme. In this diagnostic attempt, I've endeavoured to alter what was pre-given. By separately considering the effects of art and the role and action of the artist through Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, I have tried to suggest that artists must take on a critical response to the current formation of contemporary art *in order for* the artwork to re-attain its capacity to force thought.

Practical Autonomy

This project was formed in response to my own experience as an artist, but it arose from fundamental questions that every artist faces: why should I be an artist? Why should I make art? What kind of art should I make? At first this was a personal question, relating to my own practice and the art I made. From my own position, I was concerned by the reification of artworks (through the constant explanation of what an artwork means) and the professionalization of artists (treating each artistic decision as a career decision) involved in contemporary practice. I felt torn between wanting to make art that was decidedly “useless,” and making art that was in service to an end outside of itself—to use art towards a political end. Although this problem originally concerned my own specific situation, it began to incorporate wider questions regarding the context that I was making art in, and what kind of pre-determined expectations were incorporated into current art practice. If my work was going to be automatically classified as contemporary art, I felt it necessary to investigate the entailments of this context.

Contemporary art’s systems of distribution and its periodization, while external to the art itself, have a huge impact on how art is made and received. Artists have a major interest in not only keeping track of the discourse on contemporary art, but determining and re-interpreting it. The act of periodization—of engaging categories—does not have to be limiting if it is used to go further than naming and grouping, if it is used as the material for debate and the re-interpretation of events. Instead of seeing categories as possessing pre-given meanings that designate fixed concepts, artists can take preceding interpretations, combine them in different ways and generate new meanings from them. This is why I have focused on re-engaging with the supposedly over-exhausted terms “autonomy,” “criticality” and “contemporary art”—not because I endorse entirely what they connote already, but to generate new ways of seeing things under their domain and how they can relate to thinking art practice.

Especially since the dissolution of Soviet communism, contemporary art has presented as a new movement in art, characterized paradoxically by a move away from oppositional positions towards the wider culture, while still maintaining anti-hegemonic sentiments. Ideas of connection, participation and inter-disciplinary approaches are positioned as the democratization of the art field, alongside the primacy of the viewer and the singularity of the art experience. Concurrently, contemporary art is also a global art network that facilitates the accrual of wealth and power for a small number of participants, mostly gallerists, curators, collectors, patrons, and the “chosen few” artists. Constituted primarily by systems of distribution rather than artworks and artists, contemporary art enables the easy flow of capital, tax breaks and the accumulation of cultural capital for ethically questionable companies. With the incongruity between the content of contemporary art and its concrete social-economic context so apparent, moving away from autonomy and criticality in the form of the post-critical will surely make maintaining art outside of a neoliberal logic difficult, if not impossible.

As a collection of ideas and positions, the term post-critical cannot be wholly attributed to a single event or source. It emerges as a gradual effect of developments within art, namely the dissolution of modernism, the indifference of the “anything-whatever,” the pre-incorporation of ostensibly radical claims, the professionalization of artists and the marketization of the art field. It refers to a disparity between the amount of artworks being shown and the amount of artworks being engaged with through criticism. But it also is linked to external movements in the wider community, through the expectations of entertainment and the experience economy, the rise of “post-truth,” neoliberalism and the disengaging of communication from understanding via communicative capitalism. What post-criticality results in is a sense of disconnection: from other artists, from historical events, from political events. It is the loss of traction and the ability to communicate and work together for a common cause.

But context is everything. If at one point merging art and life together was a progressive aim, now more than ever it is time to maintain the two distinct senses—the specific and general—of culture. What was in one situation a revolutionary ideal is now

the opposite: art is too much like life! The *anything-whatever* means that anything can be art, which in itself is not a problem. But it is because of this that we as artists have to be *more precise* with our selections and decisions. It becomes *even harder* to make art when anything can be art. And when there are no rules, we have to become *even more* willing to put forward judgments and criticisms, to discuss them, debate and argue for it, and to accept that we can be wrong. There is antagonism here, but it's needed. If no-one responds, it's like no-one cares or feels obliged or even willing to talk about the very thing many of us dedicate our lives to.

The autonomy of the artwork must be reaffirmed, but with the acknowledgement that it never really meant that art was *fully* separate or independent from the wider culture. Art must be maintained as socially dis-embedded, but from this position enact a critique; this is the tension that keeps art at once connected yet independent. This is the artwork setting its own terms. In this way the artwork itself doesn't have to be the agent of change, but rather the artists and audiences themselves. "Autonomy from..." is not the way I want to pose the question, but rather: how to figure freedom? Freedom is figured through the artwork; the ultimate freedom of pure thought, spurred by an encounter with a problematic sensation. The universal faculty that is each and every time singular in its instantiation. Art addresses all, not because it "addresses all individuals" as if it were a contribution being sent out to circulate to everyone, but in that its mode is pre-personal in the very specific sense. That is, in response to a thing=x someone generates sense by collating unrecognizable and disparate elements and making them converge in thought. And although this act is unrepeatable and singular—connected every time to the specificity of the context—this doesn't prevent its use in the construction of a discourse, its recombination with other experiences, or subsequent re-interpretations.

But for an artwork to engender this production of sense, we can't rely on given representations, everyday objects or easily summarized works. The artwork has to, in one way or another, elude exhaustion. But this also doesn't mean that each and every artwork must be a huge event; a painting can give as much power to someone as an

68

immersive installation. As seen through the Sydney Biennale model, a large-scale event doesn't necessarily correlate to a memorable art experience. The active relation between the artist and the artwork can't be seen as a fully logical process, and further, perhaps not even entirely conscious. There is no point denying that an artwork is made by a particular person, and that it will bear particular traces of its maker if looked at in a particular way. But we should go further than treating the artwork as directly equivalent to the artist, their opinions or identity; art does not have to communicate directly, and should exceed the person of the artist toward some grander horizon.

Consequently, drawing from my research, I have devised a set of guidelines for my subsequent practice. These are proposed under the recognition that setting one's own conditions can be liberating, and conversely, that breaking with these rules may eventually be necessary. But—as with tradition and the avant-garde—conventions need to be in place before they can be transgressed.

Art Praxis

- Artworks should try to prompt the failure of recognition by introducing unfamiliar sensory stimuli, but this does not automatically have to result in a spectacle.
- There is no established distinction between art and non-art, but because of this artists have to carefully consider what they show as art.
- In the era of communicative capitalism, art should avoid direct, representational communication.
- Wilful indeterminacy on the part of the artist evades the difficult (yet essential) exercise of developing a position in relation to others.
- Politics must occur at the level of representation, but this is not the only or primary domain applicable to artworks. Artists on the other hand, must be involved in the politicization of their field.
- Artworks can only in and of themselves give the appearance of freedom, but they can induce in the subject a type of actual freedom through the prompting of thought. Art can be a pre-personal mode of address.
- Art is an ordered, organized and artificial social practice, and as such, artists are obliged to engage in the discourse surrounding art and re-affirm the creation of better institutions for art.
- Change does not have to occur *in* the artwork itself, but rather, *in response* to it.

Appendix 1: Studio Practice

While I have devoted the main portion of this exegesis to exploring contemporary art and its relation to the concepts of autonomy and criticality, this appendix focuses on the other component of the research project—the studio practice. Developed concurrently with the written component, the artworks I have produced are not the creative embodiment of the theoretical ideas covered in this thesis, but are instead creative responses to these problems—modes through which I tested my ideas as the written argument progressed. As stated at the beginning of this exegesis, the scope of this study stemmed from the problems that arose while I was making art, but that which could nonetheless not be adequately addressed within the creative practice itself. From my own position as an artist, I wanted to investigate what contemporary art might have meant beyond a temporal signifier. I wanted to know what its relation to the wider social and political realm was, and what continuing relevance there was in terms like autonomy and criticality. I wanted to further investigate how artworks are interpreted and how they generate meaning. Using historical and philosophical modes of research to approach these problems, the theoretical argument can now be applied to my own practice as an evaluative criteria.

It must be noted however, that as artworks rather than political, historical or conceptual arguments, they operate at a different level and through a different mode than that of the main portion of the exegesis. The artworks are experienced rather than read; they take on a more oblique, and sometime humorous approach to their problems, and operate with a certain opacity and recondite attitude that would be infuriating as a written document. In light of this, this appendix takes on a more anecdotal style than the previous discussion, with my aim being an analysis of the artworks made alongside a discussion of my technical processes, artistic decisions and influences.

My method of working as an artist is fairly different to how I work as a writer. When making art I try to follow my intuition, finding and making objects, images and situations that feel right and that I think resonate with each other. Often, the beginning of an artwork will stem from a chance encounter: an accidental meeting, an encounter with a cultural product (like a movie) with which I am unfamiliar, or perhaps a (day-)dream. Seldom does the development of a work proceed rationally like the construction of an argument, but rather progresses via a series of unconscious associations and repetitions.

A recurring theme throughout my recent art practice has been to examine the relationship between human perception and technology, and to satirize late-modernism through a combination of sculpture, sound and image making. Drawing inspiration from both art and design based practices, the artworks emphasize Lacan's nomination of misunderstanding as the basis of communication through the creation of problems and proliferation of sense.¹⁵¹ Rather than aiming for clarity, the artworks attempt, in the wake of communicative capitalism, to provoke a failure of recognition and thereby positioning themselves in a liminal space of understanding and interpretability. Rather than directly relaying a message, the artworks develop a visual language informed by the field of communications, simultaneously inflecting the form of designed objects through mimesis and scrambling their meaning. The following chapter chronologically discusses my artworks in relation to key influences including filmmaker Jacques Tati, designer Robert Propst, and artists Adam Kalkin and A Constructed World. Developing a reading of these practices in response to my theoretical argument, I argue that these practices actively work to leave space for human irrationality in the face of technological and bureaucratic regimes of organisation.

¹⁵¹ The original quote reads, "misunderstanding is the very basis of interhuman discourse." Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: book III The Psychoses 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, (London: Norton, 1993), 164.

The Administration Office for Such Causes as; the rights of walks or—

The first artwork made for this project was a site-specific, temporary exhibition held within a public shopping centre and facilitated by the experimental online art directory *some.center*.¹⁵² Titled *The Administration Office for Such Causes as; the rights of walks or—* this project involved a downloadable PDF map and the surreptitious installation of a sculpture, series of digital prints and a sound work within a disused space inside the building. Described in the email invite as being “located somewhere between the CBD and your subjectivity,” this project sent viewers out on an art expedition within the confines of the mixed-use Collins Place precinct, relying on an obscurely rendered map of the space in order to locate the project’s eponymous Admin Office. As the only concrete form of communication between artist and viewer, I wanted the pamphlet to be visually enticing, but somewhat useless. The pamphlet was at a surface level professionally designed—featuring an appealing graphic style and austere colour choice—but its content was at crucial points off-kilter (see fig. 1–4). As a document the map is clear and legible, but when compared with the actual location at the point when one would need it the most, it is decidedly unhelpful. The diagram compressed multiple levels of the centre into one plane, while the legend used a combination of metonymical descriptions, icons and dotted lines as directions. In effect, the pamphlet looked good, but didn’t function normally or as expected; it functioned according to its own logic and its own mode of revealing.

¹⁵² *some.center* operates as a online network for connecting art audiences with projects. It uses this decentered approach to show artworks that are site-specific or site-less, without time constraints. The original website address is *some.center* but a record of events can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/Some.centre/>.



Figure 2. Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, PDF document, (detail: front cover).



Figure 2. Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, PDF document, (detail: back cover).

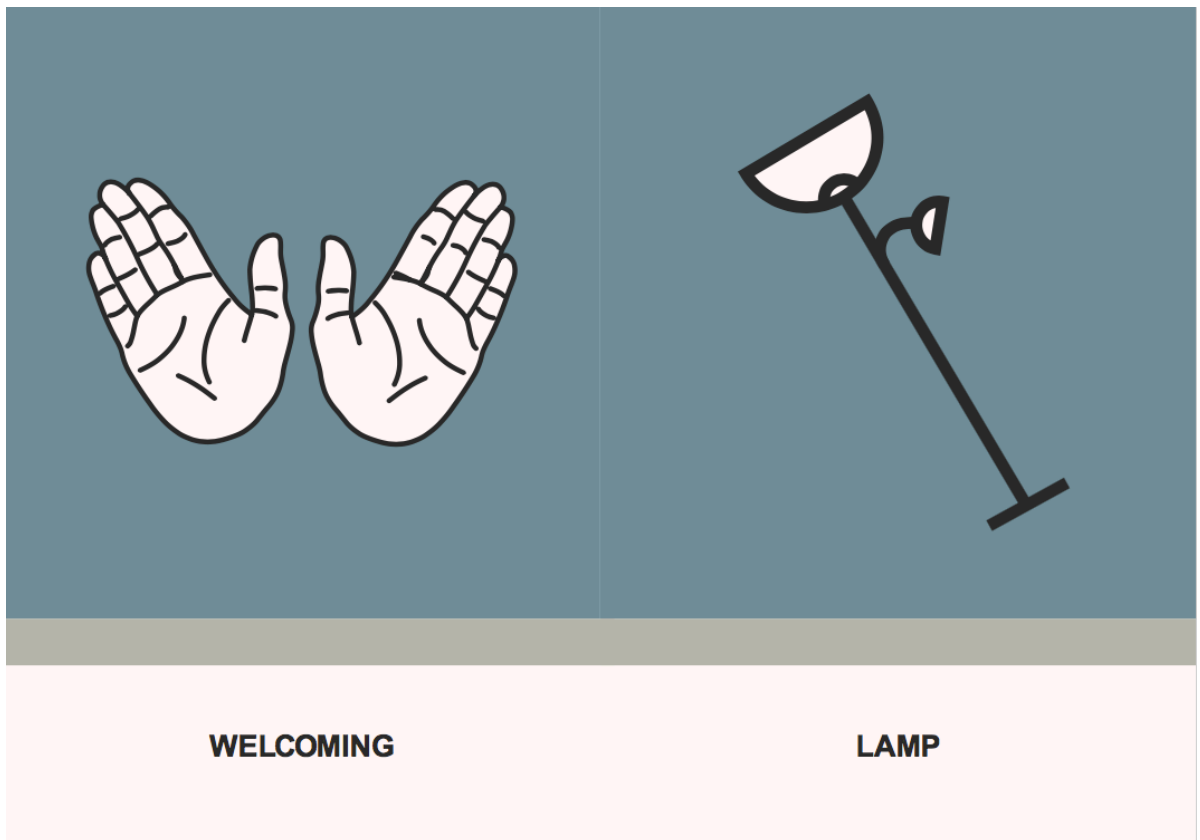


Figure 3. Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, PDF document, 1–2.

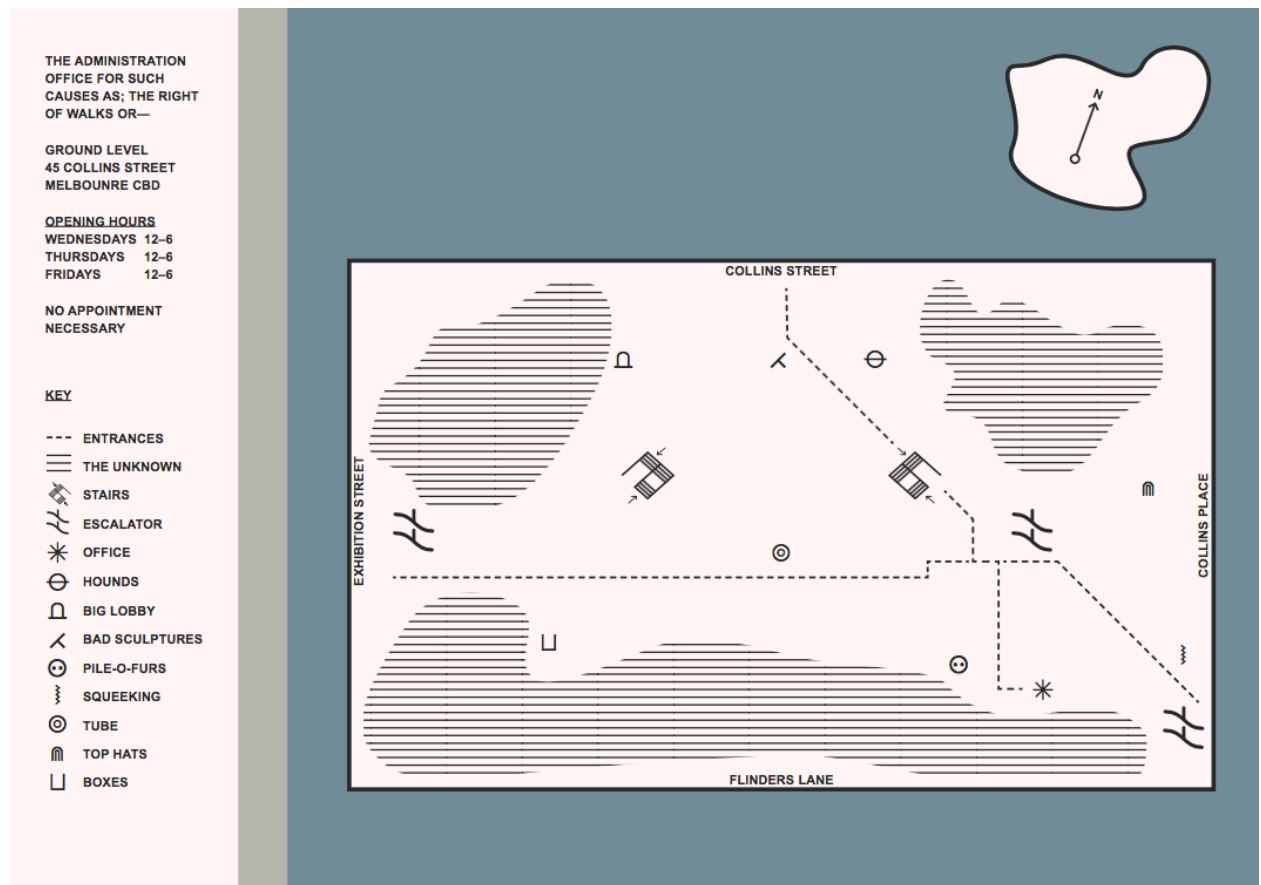


Figure 4. Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, PDF document, 3–4.



Figure 5. Entrance to Collins Place showing space-frame ceiling. Case Mealan, Collins Place, digital photograph, 2007, accessed October 25, 2016, http://xvkjc2tqpxzx5u5g3wwwmx5xz.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/AMP-Collins-Place-35-Collins-St-2620V_1400x900_web8-600x386.jpg.

The misread directions and detours that resulted from this pamphlet were key to this project, as was the viewer's heightened perception from trying to "find" art within the space. Being left to wander the building in search of an office that seemed increasingly less likely to exist, and without any idea of what form the art would take, the viewer was directly confronted with the "anything-whatever" nature of contemporary art. This process left the viewer to double guess if what they just witnessed—this object, that action—had any "art-like" qualities. Raising more problems than it solved, the map positioned the viewer to ask *how do I know what I am looking for?* or, *to what should I attribute significant aesthetic meaning?*

As a significant piece of architecture in Melbourne's history of globalization, Collins Place is a late-modernist project developed in part by the influential architect I.M. Pei, whose other projects include the Louvre redevelopment. Built over a ten-year period from 1971–1981, the centre is one of the first multi-purpose shopping complexes in the city, and houses the offices of Telstra, global finance companies and the international hotel chain Sofitel. Centred around two skyscrapers set at 45 degrees from the city grid, the interior comprises a sunken atrium covered by an elaborate space frame structure that supports a roof covering of transparent glass panels (see fig. 5). Using a traditional plaza motif at the main entrance to the building—replete with an air curtain rather than doors—the main interior is generous and open, becoming more intimate as the high ceilings give way to tiered levels, profuse greenery and diagonal walkways that sprout from the middle of the centre, mimicking the skyscrapers' angles and leading to the more private areas of the building.

Directing the participants' heightened "art mode" of viewing towards a contemplation of Collins Place, the map gave the viewer a sense of purpose outside of economic participation and enabled a more thorough and relaxed aesthetic engagement with the space. Being "on assignment" allowed one to notice and reflect on the private nature of this ostensibly public meeting place—a theme I would revisit in one of my later works for

76

this project. The plaza form operates at a superficial level; its perimeter is occasionally traced by security guards and its occupants are not meeting with each other, but instead conducting private business on their mobiles. In looking for an office, one can't help but notice all the rogue administrators working in the open on their lunch breaks. Instead of a literal office, one comes into contact with the conversion of everywhere as an extensive, open-plan office. This change is visible architecturally elsewhere in the building: the space was refurbished in the mid-2000s. With Telstra as one of the central occupants of the centre, Collins Place contains a publicly accessible yet secluded telephone room.

What was once a place to conduct private phone calls is now a basically disused and bare room, containing a single public pay-phone, purple feature wall, a no-smoking sign and a communications cupboard (see fig. 6). Made obsolete by mobile phones, this kind of generously sized, private area—separated from its containing corridor by sound-proof glass doors—was obviously no longer desired by centre management, who had made the room as unappealing and cold as possible. It was in this room that I had located the “Administration Office.”



Figure 6. Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, digital photograph.

Taking advantage of the low level traffic that this room received, I installed artworks that operated under business camouflage so that they could be seen from the outside of the room without raising any attention. As opposed to the PDF map—which was only likely to be accessed by those already involved in art—the “Admin Office” was more likely to be visited by members of the public wanting to use the phone. In this role reversal, the initiated art crowd who were looking for art were unable to find it, and members of the public who were going about their own business unknowingly came into contact with art. Taking advantage of this inconspicuous non-gallery setting, I aimed to create a sense of growing imbalance or confusion that would build gradually over the duration of the occupant’s phone call. I wanted to exploit the enclosure provided by the glass doors to make an unexpected experience of stepping into another version of reality, perhaps like a comedic or theatrical double.

One component of this installation was a redesign of the payphone’s communication and advertising panels, literally replicating and then scrambling the original design in the vector software Adobe Illustrator (see fig. 7–8). The purpose of these panels was expanded and rearranged through the distortion of their visual elements. As instructional images, the appropriate responsive action became unclear, not because of a lack of sense but rather an over-abundance of it: iconographic directive simplicity became a complex semantic whirl, problematization and interpretability replaced the immediately recognizable. The second component that I installed in the phone room was a fake bamboo pot plant filled with fresh pine bark that covered over a small speaker system. What appeared as a legitimate decorative addition to the space actually quietly emitted an ambient sound work that shaded between quasi-choral harmonies and running water. Set in the key of C-major—the people’s key—the sound work used tropes from meditative sound tracks to create the sound equivalent of “hotel art.”¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Music intended for public participation is often written in the key of C, as it is the easiest key for amateur singers to hit; it is often used in religious songs. There is an automatic feeling of comfort to this key, but it is nonetheless strange to hear running water coming from a pot plant. This situation



Figure 7. Marnie Edmiston, *Admin Office*, 2015, digital photograph.

is reminiscent of the Commonwealth Bank's use of opera as a deterrent of rough sleeping at their CBD store entries overnight. Soft or "polite" measure are used to alienate "inappropriate" users of space, but it was intended with *Admin Office* that the technique would be used for its comic effect.



Jacques Tati

These kinds of false leads, accidental occurrences and comical pranks were influenced by the idiosyncratic films of Jacques Tati, whose flowing and comedic depictions of everyday encounters with systems of bureaucracy, efficiency and standardization provided a satirical counterpoint to the often serious process of modernisation in post-WWII France. Essential to Tati's comedic approach was his commitment to the human element of everyday life. When asked about his approach to comedy in a 1958 interview with François Truffaut, Tati stated "[w]hat I have tried to do, for my part, is to prove and to show that, all things considered, everyone is entertaining. There is no need to be a comic to perform a gag."¹⁵⁴

This approach permeates his work and appears in several aspects of his films, including characters, cinematography and narrative. A reoccurring character in almost all of his work is the oblivious, bumbling and mostly mute Monsieur Hulot, played by Tati himself. An old-world Parisian, Hulot is not a comedic genius like Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp; the havoc that he causes, while central to Tati's gags, are never intentional, nor delivered knowingly for the film's audience. Thus when Tati stated that he "does not construct a system or instigate an action; *he undergoes an experience*", the audience too undergoes this experience.¹⁵⁵ Consequently, the audience simultaneously experiences the same situation and time of Hulot, and are provided with the same amount of information. This simultaneity is further emphasised in Tati's choice of framing—rather than theatrical camera movements, extensive editing and close-ups, Tati preferred to use mid-distance, static framed vignettes with the majority of movement provided by the bustling human characters. The camera stays still like a silent observer on the street, catching "by chance" amusing and spontaneous situations.

¹⁵⁴ Bert Cardullo, "An Interview with Jacques Tati by Andre Bazin, with the Participation of Francois Truffaut," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 19, no. 4 (2002), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509200214854>, 288.

¹⁵⁵ Original emphasis. *Ibid.*, 291.

In Tati's epic *Playtime*, the immobility of the camera allows Hulot to weave in and out of the film, allowing Tati to pursue his vision of a film that felt more like life—driven by a series of moments rather than an overarching narrative.¹⁵⁶ *Playtime* loosely follows a day-in-the-life of Hulot and the inevitable mix-ups and faux pas that he and his fellow humans incur in their interactions with the wonders of a technologically advanced environment. The city of Paris is presented as a cacophony of tourists, businessmen, consumer object fairs, endless entertainment and traffic, with its sense of overwhelming restlessness emphasized by Tati's meticulously over-dubbed sound design (see fig. 9 and 10). One very rarely hears a complete sentence or an ongoing conversation during this 119 minute film. Instead, partial phrases float in the sonic mix of murmuring, traffic and gadgets, with each character endlessly moving around and conducting only one-way conversations. In this world of missed communication, the main plot event is Hulot's attempts to connect with an American tourist.

¹⁵⁶ *Playtime*, directed by Jacques Tati (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).

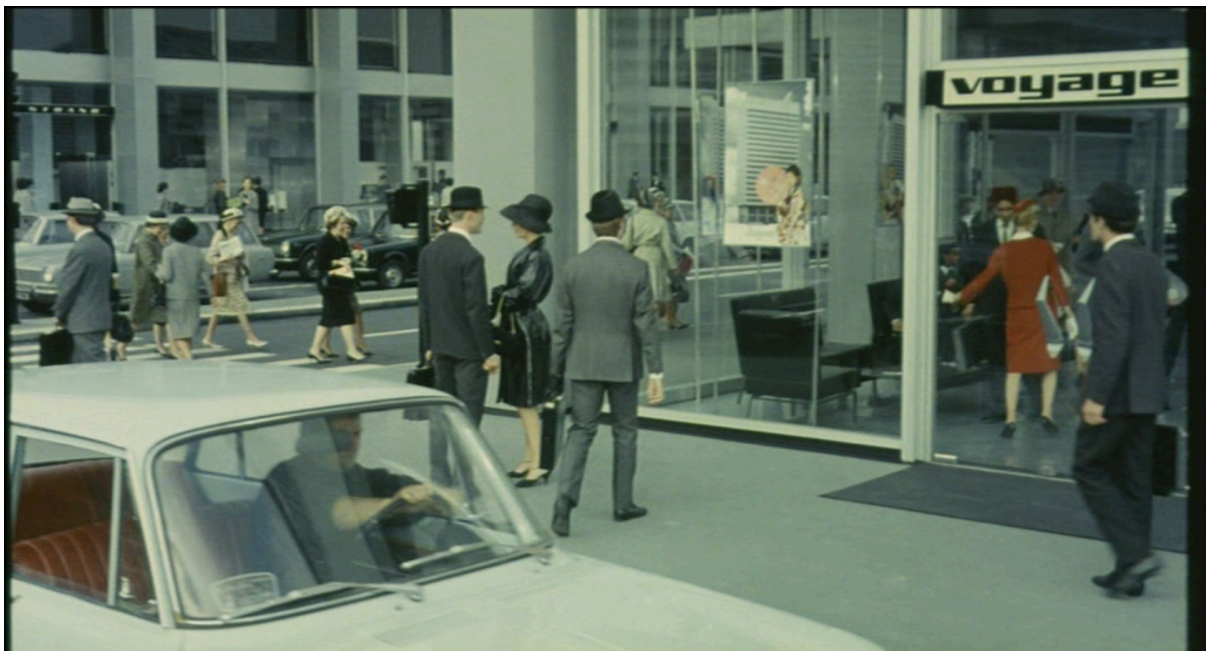


Figure 9. On the streets of "Tati-ville." Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).



Figure 10. Monsiuer Hulot encounters the modern workplace. Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).

Hulot is consistently marked as existing in a different world than the film, set apart by his conspicuous dress and mannerisms; he is a visitor in this world of efficiency that the other characters seem so enamoured by. The majority of characters that populate *Playtime*'s universe are presented as so pre-occupied with the latest gadgets on offer that they remain blank—almost like badly-generated AI bots in a computer game. A running gag throughout the film includes a gaggle of American tourists who repeatedly exclaim in astonishment at how modern and efficient everything is, even if their object of praise is ludicrously useless—such as a rubbish bin shaped like a roman column or a broom with headlights (see fig. 11 and 12). These somewhat lifeless characters are routinely subjected to the dominating impersonalities of the International Style architecture and modernist design objects housed within. Tati emphasizes the effect of over-design or over-determination, by populating *Playtime* with objects that are so demanding, forthright and inflexible that they themselves become the film's main characters.

Rather than a wholesale repudiation of modernist design, Tati's main insistence is noting that technology makes people work for it by changing their behavior to accommodate new devices without them necessarily being asked to participate. Tati complained that "[e]verything we have in life today, it is made first by the engineers. The one who designs decides that you have to go there and push that button. They do not ask if you want to."¹⁵⁷ Tati's comical demonstration of how technology can mold human behavior and the reversal of dominance between human and object in *Playtime* strongly influenced my *Admin Office* work. Through the loose, but static, cinematography Tati insisted that watching *Playtime* required an ambivalent mode of viewing, where one had to be semi-attentive to the situation to get the joke, but that one may also allow the on-screen movement to flow and pass by one's gaze. Trying to follow the apparently rational map through Collins Place required a similar approach of inattention and slowing down,

¹⁵⁷ Jacques Tati, interview by Gavin Miller, "Jacques Tati in Monsieur Hulot's Work," *Omnibus*, aired 1976 on BBC, in *Playtime*, directed by Jacques Tati (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Criterion, 2006).

walking without a direct purpose and being open to accidents. In doing so, the shopping centre opens to the viewer like a scene in *Playtime*; snatches of conversation float by as one observes distracted people almost running into each other and scurrying businessmen make their way around the atrium. Being directed to slow down and observe the space, one sees directly how mobile phone technology restructures human behavior; the inhabitants in *Playtime* were constantly in a state of efficient, enjoyable distraction, while *Admin Office* encourages approaching the centre as a vast tableau of distraction and comical efficiency.

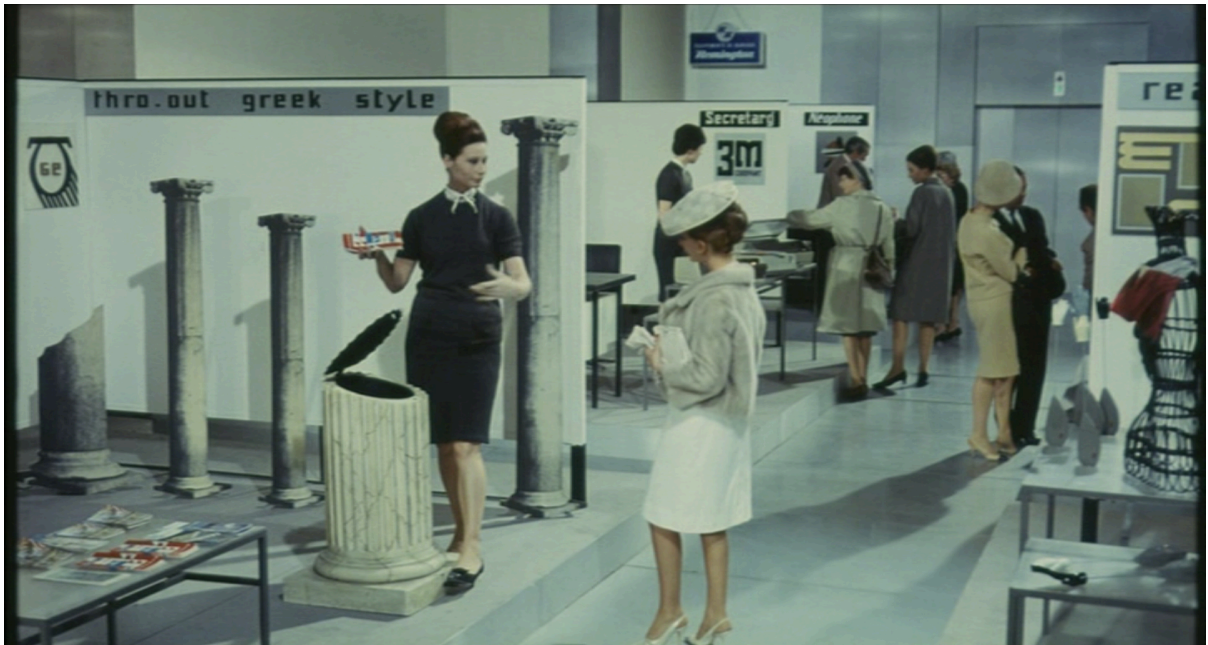


Figure 11. Stylish rubbish. Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).



Figure 12. Cleaning demonstration. Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).

Tati's commitment to individual independence, shown through his objections to the imposition of technology, also extended to his approach to the filmmaking process itself. A meticulous perfectionist, Tati fashioned himself early on in his career as an auteur and complained of what he viewed as an industrial approach to filmmaking, in which each aspect of the film was outsourced to a professional in order to ensure commercial success.¹⁵⁸ In light of this, it is not surprising that Tati controlled every aspect of his films. For the elaborate sets of *Playtime* and his earlier film *Mon Oncle*, Tati operated as a mimetic designer, creating satirical versions of popular architectural styles and household objects.¹⁵⁹ Rather than simply purchasing pre-existing designs, Tati and his collaborator Jacques Larange created their own versions of high-modernist designs by imitating examples they researched in design journals (see fig. 13, 14 and 15). As noted by Yelena McLane in the discussion of Tati's domestic interiors, the pair worked via a process of collage, filtering and combining actual designs into a strange hybrid of the serious and the ridiculous,

[t]here was nothing accidental about [*Mon Oncle's*] La Villa Arpel or the "aquarium" apartments of *Playtime*. For each film, Tati spent month in pre-production perfecting his own derivative buildings and imaginary appliances. Every detail of the exteriors and interiors was meticulously designed and fabricated into functioning elements of actual places that could pass as features in *Architectural Digest* magazines.¹⁶⁰

Tati was not a master or specialist of modernist designs, but a serious amateur. By using publicly available magazines as sources for his design, Tati constructed his critique from the same sources and level of specialization available to any member of the public. I

¹⁵⁸ Cardullo, "An Interview with Jacques Tati by Andre Bazin, with the Participation of Francois Truffaut," 298.

¹⁵⁹ *Mon Oncle*, directed by Jacques Tati (Specta Films, 1958), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2001).

¹⁶⁰ Yelena McLane, "New, But Not Improved: defective domesticity in Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* and *Playtime*," *Interiors* vol. 1, 1–2 (2010): 65.

found this deliberately amateur approach inspiring as his resourcefulness and ambivalence to formal training encouraged a DIY mentality that presented an alternative to using professional fabrication services.¹⁶¹ Tati's willingness to engage with disciplines outside his own left a strong impression on me, informing my approach to making subsequent work, especially in my engagement with Robert Propst's designs in the exhibition *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*. My next work, however, focused on the question of site specificity that had arisen from the *Admin Office* work.

¹⁶¹ At the time, I was reading about the return to studio practice in the wake of conceptual art and the post-studio movement. Teams of fabricators, researchers and multi-employee businesses under the name of individual artists can be read about in Alex Coles, *The Transdisciplinary Studio* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).



Figure 13. The Arpel house. Jacques Tati, *Mon Oncle*, (Specta Films, 1958), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2001).



Figure 14. Open house at the Arpel residence. Jacques Tati, *Mon Oncle*, (Specta Films, 1958), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2001).



Figure 15. Various faux-modernist designs by Tati and Larange. Jacques Tati, *Mon Oncle*, (Specta Films, 1958), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2001).

Rhetorical Device

When making *Admin Office* I had been thinking about the division between public and private space and had been operating under a false assumption that locating an artwork “outside” of a gallery space meant that the artwork was somehow more real and engaged. Reading Jacques Rancière’s “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics” caused me to reconsider the way I was framing this issue.¹⁶² In this essay Rancière argues that attributing a more real quality to an art that consciously makes reality-as-it-is its object, ignores the *actual* reality of other art existing in the world. He writes,

In recent years many artists have set out to revive the project of an art that makes real objects instead of producing or recycling images, or that undertakes real actions in the real world rather than merely “artistic” installations. Political commitment thus is equated with the search for the real. But the political is not the “outside” of a “real” that art would have to reach. The “outward” is always the other side of an “inward.” What produces their difference is the topography in whose frame the relation of in and out is negotiated. The real as such simply does not exist. What does exist is a framing or a fiction of reality. Art does not do politics by reaching the real. It does it by inventing fictions that challenge the existing distribution of the real and the fictional. Making fictions does not mean telling stories. It means undoing and rearticulating the connections between signs and images, images and times, or signs and space that frame the existing sense of reality.¹⁶³

Thus my attempt to make an artwork that was embedded within a real, public context was in some ways a misunderstanding of both of these terms in that, as Rancière suggests, this real is no more or less existent within a gallery than it is outside of it. Malik also makes a similar point when he suggests that prioritizing a “more real” of art over the art that exists now enables the fetishization of a forever deferred reality, essentially

¹⁶² Jacques Rancière, “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics,” in *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Beth Hinderliter et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

¹⁶³ Ibid., 49.

alleviating the need to address the work being made now. On reflection, I realized that in trying to emphasize the “embeddedness” of the work within the “real” world—its worldliness—was the *modus operandi* of contemporary art, and could in many ways continue to prioritize and fetishize non-art over art. Additionally, I realized that the distinction I was making between public and private, or real and fake, was the wrong way to construct the problem. In the twenty-first series of *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze points out that even the most public events exist privately and the most private feelings originate from public coordinates.¹⁶⁴ With these problems in mind, I tried with the next work to occupy a more liminal position within this duality by making a dioramic replication of a busy street in Melbourne, showing a main road, train station and rotating billboard.

Rhetorical Device consisted of a table at the far back of the exhibition space, displaying a small 30 x 20cm balsa wood box containing a cut-out on either side that made way for a rotating object on the inside (see fig. 16). On either side of this construction was a photograph of a street scene and emerging from the sculpture was an electrical cord that began a long chain of electronic devices that lined the left-hand side of the space (see fig. 17). These devices amplified a microphone within the sculpture, which picked up the mechanical sounds of its internal rotating motor. This electronic device replicated an actual rotating billboard on the site, but I had replaced its ad with the words *JUST STOP*.

I originally became interested in the site shown in the work because of the large spinning advertising board that loomed over the intersection. When waiting for the train or as a pedestrian waiting to cross at the intersection, I had been struck by the similarity

¹⁶⁴ “Which war, for example, is not a private affair? Conversely, which wound is not inflicted by war and derived from society as a whole? Which private event does not have all its coordinates, that is, all its impersonal social singularities?” Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (London: Continuum, 2003), 173.

between the sign's endless and pointless spinning, and the never-ending traffic that passed on this main road. I had been interested by the large amount of advertising in the single space of the intersection and the corresponding blankness of the empty sky (see fig. 18), and had been thinking about the deliberately inescapable nature of outdoor advertising. Unlike digital advertising that relies on specific demographic targeting to dissuade the consumer from closing the tab or navigating away, outdoor advertising is increasingly valued for its intrusiveness. There is an element of non-choice when it comes to being out in public and seeing a billboard, and this strategy is used by advertisers to give the appearance of an expensive and far-reaching ad campaign for relatively little cost.



Figure 16. Marnie Edmiston, *Rhetorical Device*, 2015, Speakers, amplifier, USB audio interface, Mac laptop and battery, power board, camera, sound, audio channel splitter, table, digital photographs, electric motor, styrofoam, pen, rubber bands, balsa wood, glue, extension cord. Monash Caulfield Project Space, Melbourne.



Figure 17. Marnie Edmiston, *Rhetorical Device*, 2015, Speakers, amplifier, USB audio interface, Mac laptop and battery, power board, camera, sound, audio channel splitter, table, digital photographs, electric motor, styrofoam, pen, rubber bands, balsa wood, glue, extension cord. Monash Caulfield Project Space, Melbourne.



Figure 18. Preliminary photograph. Marnie Edmiston, 2015, digital photograph.

Placing large billboards at every major entry and exit point to a city centre gives the impression of mass coverage, but to be effective this strategy requires the relative positioning of ads in relation to the movements of a city's citizens.¹⁶⁵ I felt that this approach to the general population as the source of both the advertisers' data set and source of profit emphasized a closed loop, with the only point of the public's existence being to compose the target groups for advertising—a concern that reappears in the

¹⁶⁵ See Ann M. Cronin's discussion of the organising effects of outdoor advertising in her paper "Advertising and the Metabolism of the City: urban space, commodity rhythms," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24, (2006): 615–632. Cronin analyses the change in British outdoor advertising approaches from the targeting of specific demographics to the targeting of particular modes of inhabitants at any one time. She states "This loosening of meaning, linked to the targeting of city rhythms, allows advertising to impact upon people and the lived routes into and around the city in new, ambiguous ways. [...] Outdoor advertising in cities attempts a strategic ordering, a kind of biopolitics, but in a rather expanded sense than that outlined in Foucault's (1990) classic account. It attempts to coordinate and align populations of people with populations of commodities by creating a consonant relation between their respective rhythms. This is a form of biopolitics that organises not only around the life course of people—birth rates, disease, death—but also around the *biographical connections* between people and commodified things in the rhythmic spaces we know as cities." 629, original emphasis.

final work for this project. For *Rhetorical Device* however, the specificity of the advertising billboard and its local history dominated the reading of the work.

For many years, this iconic billboard had featured advertising for the Men's Gallery (an adult entertainment club), the Sex Party and had recently been changed over to a Bank of Melbourne campaign. Although not having seen the long-running ad for the Men's Gallery on location, traces of the billboard's history can be found online, including several different accounts of public complaints against their ad, as well as responses from the business itself and the Advertising Standards Board.¹⁶⁶ The disparity in style and tone between the original complaint, business response and board response was quite humorous. The writing progressively escalated in its jargon and became more vague and absurd as the formality increased and the perspective become more impersonal as it moved from first-person to third. Notable examples include the Men's Gallery PR claiming that the large, conspicuous, spinning billboard would not attract most people's attention and that "[l]ike all advertising it is pitched only at our potential customers."¹⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the Board stiffly suggests that the ad's "overall tone is one of entertainment and fun."¹⁶⁸ I found the Men's Gallery response funny; as with most PR, the convincingness of the text is somewhat irrelevant and the speaker knows it. Meanwhile the methodical nature of the Board's reviewing process was an overwrought visual analysis, rendering the "meaning" of the ad static.

This level of ridiculous was repeated again in the Bank of Melbourne ad, developed by the ad agency Saatchi and Saatchi. Using the phrase "We're for the Makers" the campaign promoted the Bank of Melbourne as Melbourne's local bank and the source and embodiment of its creativity, by emphasizing the bank's financial support of "does

¹⁶⁶ Advertising Standards Board, "Case Report 0178/15," Advertising Standards Bureau, accessed October 9, 2015, <https://adstandards.com.au/cases?ref=0178/15>.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 2.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 3.

and makers.” This particular campaign is an excellent example of the way in which the content of advertising is fairly irrelevant to its effectiveness. While the wholesale exploitation of “creativity” by a bank to raise its profile is obviously contentious, more importantly the campaign links an essentially incorporeal and abstracted process to physical and material processes that are, to the most extent, irrelevant to finance. The great advantage of contemporary finance—what has made it so successful—is its ability to be completely abstracted and withdrawn from physical reality. Even further, the idea of a “local” bank that operates within global finance is an oxymoron; the whole point of incorporeal, digital finance is its dispersal across the globe and its ability to be traded abstractly. As with the discussion of outdoor advertising, the “creative” practices funded by the bank become absorbed as only a rationale for the bank’s core product, which is finance.

Unlike the work in Collins Place, I wanted to avoid directly situating work within the actual location pictured. Instead, I wanted to play with the idea of site-specificity by constructing a model diorama of the Richmond intersection that was part replica, part sculpture, thereby confusing the categories of reality and fiction. By taking the form of a model however, the “intervention” in the site was not read as such, but rather a future proposal—a reading further emphasized by the sculpture’s visual similarity to a hobbyist’s re-creation. This meant that my replacement of the model billboard’s content with the phrase “*JUST STOP*” was read as coming from my own position as the artist, rather than my original intention for the phrase to originate from an impersonal space, or as a kind of public announcement. Without a clear division between who the work was directed at, the overbearing statement was directed to viewers in the gallery, rather than those driving on Punt Road or the Bank of Melbourne.

The mode of communication used in this work was too direct and takes itself too seriously. Taking the form of a proposition, the criticism within the work is ambiguous, and part of my dislike of this artwork related to the question of autonomy as discussed

96

in chapter three. As both intrinsically linked to its social context, but also independent from it, autonomy understood as straddling this polarity is not as effectively played out in *Rhetorical Device* as with my other works. This is in part because the artwork, in its fairly straightforward use of the social context of a particular site, is dependent on a familiarity with the location cited. The photographic replication of the site and its physical recreation with minimal artistic intervention meant that the references were not generated sufficiently “internally” in the work to operate efficiently without a prior knowledge of the site’s context. In effect, the content of this work hadn’t been formally processed enough, but was merely pointed to or represented.

Similarly, the sound that was the product of the long line of technology in the space was only an amplification of the model’s internal motor, churning in a dull roar that mimicked the road noise at the intersection. Rather than being integrated into the aesthetic of the exhibition itself, the sound devices occupied a large percentage of the gallery space without adding anything of interest apart from the use of a camera in the chain. As with the elaborate recreation of the spinning billboard that displayed a poorly thought through statement, the ceremonious display of the technological components used to make the work served an ambiguous function.

Although ultimately an unsuccessful work, *Rhetorical Device* was a useful test and stepping stone towards other artworks that better negotiated the use of criticality and autonomy. The research into advertising methods I had conducted for this work would end up being re-incorporated into another work later on in the project. What I immediately drew from this work, however, was an increased interest in the similarity between art and advertising. With so much stimuli competing for people’s attention, advertisers don’t aim for sensical communication, but rather they have to remind people that they exist through repeated encounters. An effective tactic for holding people’s attention is to draw a viewer in with a problematic visual statement, either something that doesn’t make sense or that requires an engagement to solve that problem. Rather

than aiming to communicate a message, advertisers want to give the viewer enough information to solve the problem, using ambiguity and its attendant increase in brain usage to embed the brand into someone's memory. Invariably, what the advert is selling is the solution to the problem. But what about art? Deleuze suggests that we only encounter the world through a problematic structure—that is, as a series of problems—and this seems consistent with McNamara's suggestion that art should aim to highlight cultural quandaries rather than present solutions. In one way, the distinction between art and advertising lays within each discipline's approach to problems and solutions, and it became important to me that the artworks I was making would only go so far in this chain. Perhaps an artwork could be more interesting if it "stopped short" by presenting the viewer problems without solutions. To emphasize this "stopping short" I wanted to begin deliberately using the visual language of graphic design to give the impression that the artwork was simple, light and enticing, but then, on further inspection progressed to becoming opaque. Drawing the viewer in through a kind of bait-and-switch technique could be one way to encourage an imbalance in perception and cognition. This approach would directly inform the subsequent artworks I made, including the next artwork—an installation drawing inspiration from the 1960s office furniture designer Robert Propst.

Robert Propst

Following on from *Admin Office* and *Rhetorical Device*, the next group of works I exhibited looked at similar ideas, revisiting and extending my interest in the ability of communications technology to fill every moment of time with information and thus fundamentally alter the experience of physical, mental and communal spaces. *Entropy is Just A Lack of Storage Options* satirized how approaches to digital data and information management had begun to restructure the way that sensations and interactions with the world are interpreted. While I was making this work, I was thinking specifically about modes of research that considered physical sensations and social interactions as data, reducing the unpredictability of experience and communication to structured and

98

transferrable packages of consumable information. Inspired by Robert Propst's research publication on office furniture systems—titled *The Office: a facility based on change*—I consider this exhibition as a farcical representation of the mind as an office and main workspace for information processing and archiving.¹⁶⁹

Propst was the director of Herman Miller's research department from 1958 and the primary designer of the *Action Office 2*, a revolutionary total office system and unintentional precursor to the workplace cubicle.¹⁷⁰ Rather than focusing of single object design, Propst's approach was to completely reevaluate the function of modern offices and the needs of their users (see fig 19, 20 and 21). A flexible system that catered to individual preferences and a diversity of professions, *Action Office 2* was noted by Lance Knobel in his history of office furniture to have “marked an important philosophical shift in office furniture.”¹⁷¹ Ahead of its time, Propst's comically jargon-filled publication responded to what he identified as the exponential increase in the amount of information passing through American offices.

His thesis was that the office as physical environment had failed to keep up with the changing purpose of the office, and his solution was to overhaul the entire design of modern workspaces by crafting not just individual pieces of furniture, but *environments* and *situations*. As with Tati, Propst reacted against the International Style approach of “impersonal solutions” and took what can be understood as a “humanist” approach to design, in that he set the needs of the user as the basis of his design. As Ralph Caplan noted in a 1975 *Design Quarterly* feature, the attention that Propst paid to organising the workplace around the very act of interpersonal communication was at the forefront of design—varying seating options for different types of conversations, organising

¹⁶⁹ Robert Propst, *The Office: A Facility Based on Change* (Zeeland, Michigan: Herman Miller, 1977).

¹⁷⁰ See Nickil Saval's discussion of the cubicle's history in “Birth of the Office,” *n+1* 6, (Winter 2008), accessed January 16, 2016, <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-6/essays/birth-of-the-office/>.

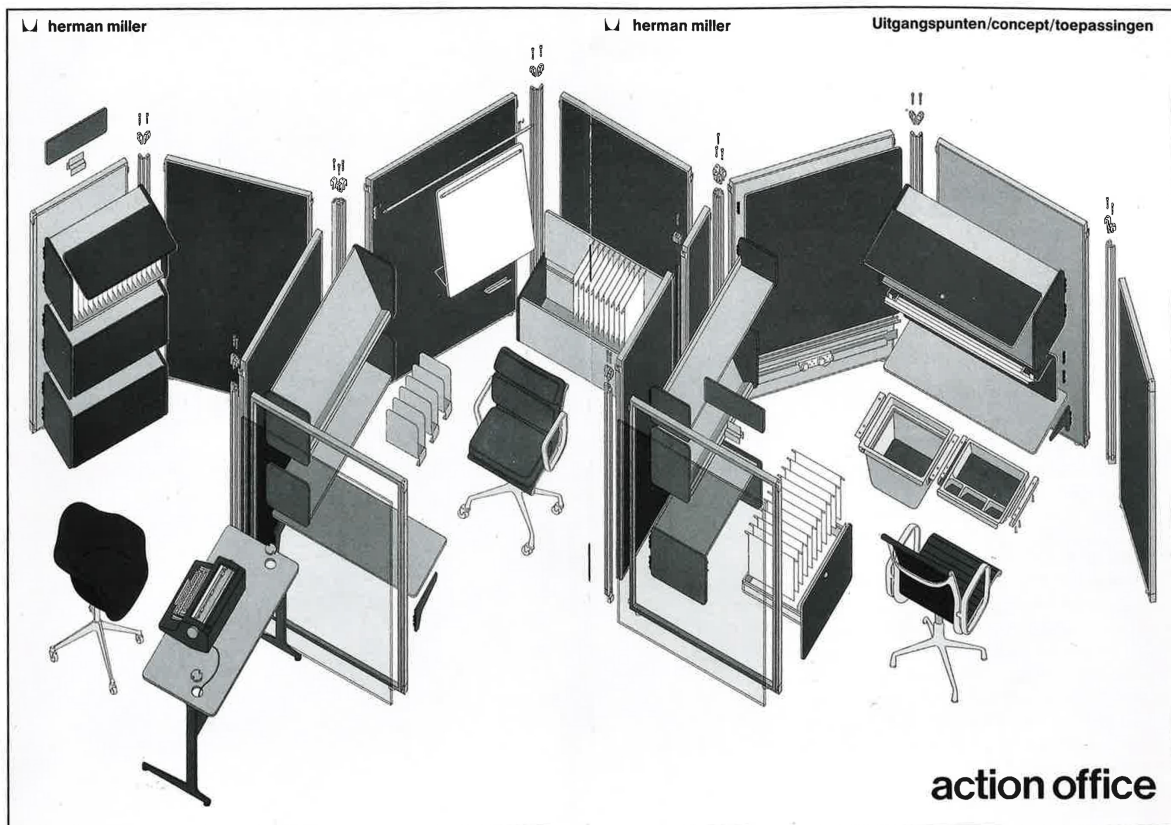
¹⁷¹ Lance Knobel, *Office Furniture* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987)., 78.

workstations according to charted communication networks and addressing the worker's desire for a balance between enclosure and access.¹⁷²



Figure 19. Herman Miller, *Action Office 2*, promotional image, c. 1968, in Knobel, 1987, 77.

¹⁷² Ralph Caplan, "Robert Propst," *Design Quarterly* 98/99 (1975), 47–49.



Isometric drawing of Action Office.

Figure 20. Herman Miller, *Action Office 2*, promotional illustration, c.1968, in Leslie A. Piña, *Classic Herman Miller*, (Atglen: Schiffer Publications, 1998), 147.

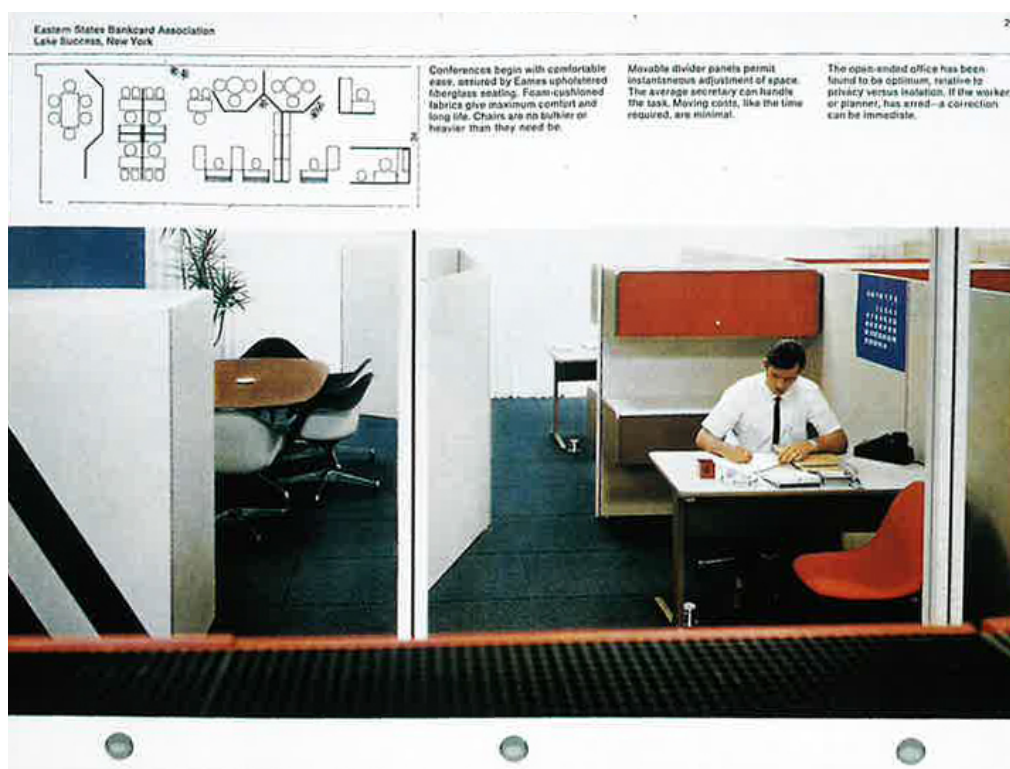


Figure 21. Herman Miller, *Action Office 2*, promotional pamphlet, c. 1969, in Leslie A. Piña, *Classic Herman Miller*, (Atglen: Shiffer Publications, 1998), 148.

Propst's starting point for *Action Office 2* system was the human mind, specifically considering how creativity and motivation could be best supported during the move towards intangible and communications-based office work (see fig. 22).

D The office and the human performer

1 The office as a thinking place

The real office consumer is the mind. The subject starts there. More than anything else, we are dealing with a mind-oriented living space.

Through its own invention, the mind has been busily obsoleting its less unique abilities. In the last fifty years, in the most dramatic contrasts, activity has moved from tasks of rote to tasks of judgement.

It is the random novelty-dealing capability of the mind that causes man still to be useful in the office.

2 A place for transacting abstractions

The office in its short evolution has adopted every kind of communication abstraction. Resultantly, we are concerned with reality simulation.

The management of symbolic representation of reality is the function of offices.



Figure 22. Propst, "The office and the human performer," in *The Office: a facility based on change*, (Zeeland: Herman Miller, 1977), 19.

Pre-empting late-capitalism's ideal worker as creative, flexible and self-motivated, Propst recognized that the physical office environment's role was ultimately to support those abstract processes yet to be made obsolete by technology and to be the site of reality's representation. Propst was designing the physical setting of the abstract fields of communications, marketing and finance. The sole remaining relevant human ability identified by Propst was the capacity for thought—the ability to encounter and solve unexpected problems—but he also identified how the increase in communications and information necessary for work also negatively impacted the worker's ability to think.¹⁷³ Thus *Action Office 2* can be understood as a real-life, physical information display that worked to *limit* the amount of information presented at any one time.

Strikingly, Propst was designing *Action Office 2* at the cusp of the information boom, before the widespread introduction of fax and far before the introduction of the internet. The implanting of computers into Propst's design has completely diverted his goal of limiting information and has progressively replaced the physical office space. Propst's balanced physical design, which allowed movement within and amongst workspaces, as well as varying types of settings for face-to-face communication, have been replaced by screen interfaces that allow infinitely expanding virtual space and access to information. Following Propst's suggestion that human's make their "less-unique abilities" obsolete, we no longer need to remember anything as all information is stored elsewhere. My next exhibition considered the full-scale integration of technology into most aspects of our lives.

¹⁷³ Propst, *The Office: A Facility Based on Change*, 20.

Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options

As a homage to Propst, *Entropy* as a whole tried to limit the amount of information available to the viewer. Each component was in some way obscure, and absorbed interpretations without giving immediate comprehension as a “reward.” The wall of archive boxes—whose outsides were noticeably blank and without branding, and whose contents were never disclosed—worked at first to block an immediate and all-encompassing view of the exhibition (see fig. 23). Functioning as a sound-muffling device, these boxes prevented the sound component from being readily heard outside of the exhibition space, while simultaneously preventing incoming noise. The repetition and simplicity of construction suggested that this wall could extend forever, and could provide an infinitely expandable storage solution or memory bank.¹⁷⁴ The five plaques initially concealed by the archive boxes were displayed prominently along the left-hand side of the space and at first glance appeared to provide the answer to what the exhibition meant (see fig. 24). In a style reminiscent of instructional diagrams, replete with smooth curves and labelling text, these overtly displayed “signs” gave the hope of information and clarity. But for all the precision of the diagrams, the visual language was confounding. Stark crosses, circles and arcs placed with such accuracy formed odd images that openly accepted and conformed to the viewer’s overlay of meaning without giving any reassurances that they were correct (see fig. 25).

¹⁷⁴ Initial plans for this sculpture were done in two-point architectural perspective, making it appear as if it continued until the horizon line.



Figure 23. Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, archive boxes, Bus Projects, Melbourne.



Figure 24. Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, archive boxes and gravoply, Bus Projects, Melbourne.

In the middle of the room, a chair and parabolic speaker system allowed access to strange and unlabelled music. A mottled black and white dish similar in shape to a light shade hung above the chair and quietly emitted a continual loop of a singular jazz track (see fig. 26). When standing next to this sculpture one could faintly hear the music wash out into the air, but it became louder when sitting directly underneath in the chair. A mixture of mambo percussion, bongo drums, xylophone, glockenspiel and piano, the song builds as it progresses from a restrained and polite rendition towards free flowing instrument solos. The xylophone's notes meld together to create a feeling of lightness, as if the sun shone on objects and turned them to liquid or shimmers in a pool-side reflection. The music was reminiscent of the type of filler sound played in elevators or phone line holds and was recognizable as an old recording, but its bizarre jauntiness made it appear as if originating from another dimension altogether.¹⁷⁵ This other worldliness was emphasised by the sound's literal source being hidden; following the speaker wire from the speaker, it wrapped its way indirectly from the sound device along the overhead pipe, and once at the wall took a sharp 90-degree turn and finally disappeared into a hole in the wall to a place inaccessible to the public (see fig. 27).

The last component of this exhibition was another "diagram," this time displayed on the room sheet alongside a short description of Propst's *Action Office*. The image was made with Illustrator and contained a worm's-eye view perspective rendering of the exhibition's room and contents (see fig. 28).¹⁷⁶ Rather than with most technical renderings of architectural space, whose purpose is to accurately convey a sense of what the space is like, this drawing surveyed the exhibition's contents from an unknown time, space or state. Elements not immediately present in the real-life exhibition are

¹⁷⁵ The track itself was Bobby Montez Quintet, "Summertime (Bolero-Mambo)," by George Gershwin, recorded 1958, on *Jungle Fantastique! Jubilee JGM 1085*, 33 ½ RPM, rereleased 2001, Cubop CBCD036, 33 ½ RPM.

¹⁷⁶ A worm's-eye view—as its name suggests—describes when a perspective drawing's standing-point is far below the rendered object. Its ability to imbue a sense of overwhelming scale makes it useful for the production of high-rise drawings.

shown swirling around each other without gravity. The state of entropy referenced in the title was not within the physical exhibition itself but appeared here in this double, while the actual exhibition itself is neat, ordered and somewhat lifeless. The combination of these objects, images and accompanying text made the exhibition appear as hermetically sealed, limiting the amount of information given to stating or declaring a situation for which the viewer would have to generate their own set of problems that they thought the artwork was addressing or their own over-arching concept with which to make sense of the work.



Figure 25. Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, (1 of 5) engraved gravoply Bus Projects, Melbourne.



Figure 26. Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, earthenware sound dome, speaker, speaker wire, oregon pine, pine ply, foam, fake velvet, buttons, Bus Projects, Melbourne.



Figure 27. Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, earthenware sound dome, speaker, speaker wire, oregon pine, pine ply, foam, fake velvet, buttons, archive boxes, Bus Projects, Melbourne.

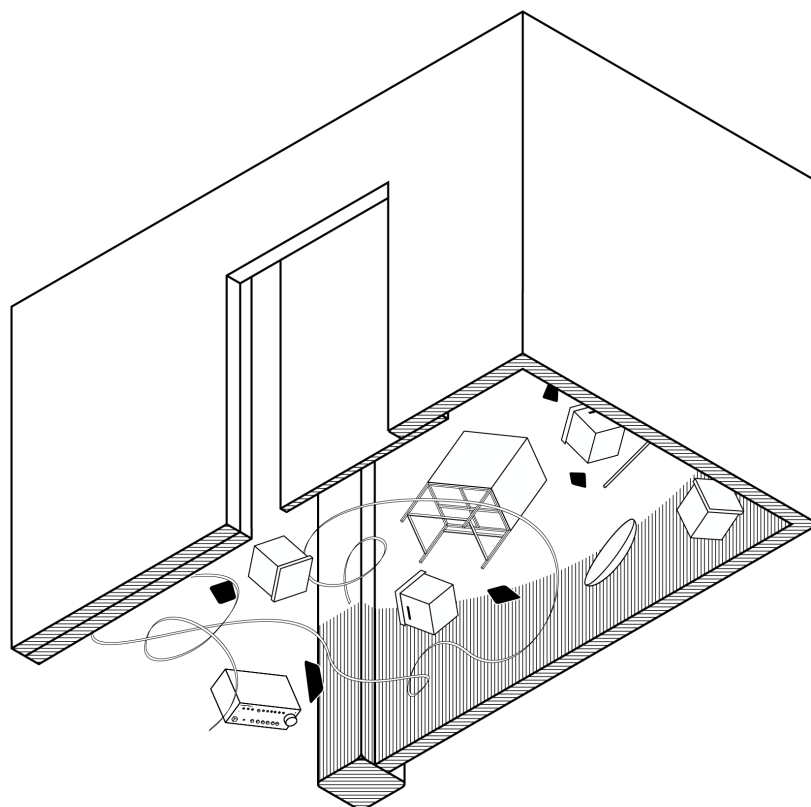


Figure 28. Marnie Edmiston, *Entropy is Just a Lack of Storage Options*, 2016, Adobe Illustrator file, Bus Projects, Melbourne.

Unlike *Admin Office*, this was a relatively permanent and controlled exhibition; the viewer did not need to play the role of designator nor did they need to “find” the office. As a staged situation, the deliberate sparseness and preciseness of the objects made the room’s contents appear as purposive, resolute and independent from the viewer. Reinterpreting the directional pamphlet idea from *Admin Office* in sculptural form, I wanted this work to be visually enticing and to operate to its own logic, rather than directly relaying information. Unlike in *Rhetorical Device*—which relied too heavily on the display of devices and a familiarity with the pictured location, *Entropy* tried to be self-sustaining and site itself within a “non-place.”¹⁷⁷ The stillness of the objects, the hidden nature of the sound system, the starkness of the fluoro light and the endless repetition of the music track suggested a perpetual present without development or progression, much like the never ending “contemporary” situation of contemporary art, or the feeling of stasis or stupefaction produced by too much internet use.

Ruminating on the overwhelming intake of information provided by personal technology, the main focus of this exhibition was to humorously consider the psychological effects of constant stimulation, specifically regarding the abilities of memory, concentration and thought. As digital theorist Nicholas Carr argues, the repetitive and compulsive use of digital technology is actively re-structures psychical reflexes. In his study of automation *The Glass Cage*, Carr discusses how digital technologies can prevent the development and ingraining of physical and cognitive abilities, through the bypassing of repetitive actions necessary to encourage “automaticity.”¹⁷⁸ Essentially the way in which the brain learns to automate a mental or physical skill by practicing it to the point of embedding it in unconscious thought, automaticity frees up conscious mind space for other processes. Carr points out that in the case of mental abilities, automating these lower

¹⁷⁷ Rather than straightforwardly locating the work in a real site as with *Admin Office* or featuring a real location as with *Rhetorical Device*.

¹⁷⁸ Nicholas Carr, *The Glass Cage: How Our Computers Are Changing Us* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 84.

level processes through technology will only aid higher thought processes if one already understands what is being automated, while physical abilities decrease without use.¹⁷⁹ Another thought process affected by automatization is the “generation effect.” An active rather than passive process, generation involves precisely that: the generation of information rather than a reliance on a recording or supplement. This process assists with memory, but also supports higher-order operations like reason and judgement.¹⁸⁰ Importantly, Carr makes the distinction between storing information externally and internally, writing

For millennia, people have supplemented their biological memory with storage technologies, from scrolls and books to microfiche and magnetic tape. Tools for recording and distributing information underpin civilization. But external storage and biological memory are not the same thing. Knowledge involves more than looking stuff up; it requires the encoding of facts and experiences in personal memory. To truly know something, you have to weave it into your neural circuitry, and then you have to repeatedly retrieve it from memory and put it to fresh use. With search engines and other online resources, we’ve automated information storage and retrieval to a degree far beyond anything seen before. The brain’s seemingly innate tendency to offload, or externalize, the work of remembering makes us more efficient thinkers in some ways. We can quickly call up facts that have slipped our mind. But that same tendency can become pathological when the automation of mental labor makes it too easy to avoid the work of remembering and understanding.¹⁸¹

As Propst suggested, the mind works to make its less unique abilities obsolete. If we know that our perceptions and experiences are recorded, and that information is readily accessible via internet search engines, we are no longer compelled to commit things to memory. In response to this, *Entropy* is slow moving, and requires the concentration of the viewer and a sustained mental interaction in order to develop possible interpretations. The chair provided an individual space for reflection and suspended the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 73.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 79–80.

immediate surroundings by providing a tall, semi-enclosed space. Hanging above was the parabolic dish which directed sound via reflection onto the chair's occupant; the act of concentration was physically inscribed in its form. Combining this with the tall booth-like structure and plush faux-velvet cushions of the chair, this sculpture was a single-occupant zone that encouraged entry into the *mind-territory*. This expression of a psychological space as physical location was an idea extrapolated from Propst's emphasis on the workspace as a place for the mind, requiring the "reconciliation of privacy" through "a new language of enclosure and access" and as a visual environment that affects cognitive abilities.¹⁸² This idea of private thinking space also appears in Sherry Turkle's recent book *Reclaiming Conversation*.¹⁸³ Described as "mindspace," this mental zone for Turkle is each person's right to "think and communicate in private," a place for ideas to develop over time without being relayed to anyone else, and where you can "change your mind about important matters."¹⁸⁴ Developing this idea from the US's historic laws regarding the privacy of mailboxes and library lending records, Turkle emphasises the need for a basic level of privacy when it comes to what one is reading, thinking or saying, and how this privacy is structurally prevented when using the internet and communication devices.

¹⁸² Propst, *The Office: A Facility Based on Change*, 26. Months after finishing this sound dome and researching open-plan office maps for *Find Your Endless Encounter*, I found a curious Herman Miller promotional image depicting one of Propst's acoustic privacy devices—an orb-like speaker whose purpose was to emit "a masking sound level of 45 to 55 decibels." (62.) See figure 29.

¹⁸³ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015).

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 303.



Figure 29. Acoustic conditioner. Herman Miller, *Action Office 2*, promotional photograph, date unknown, in John Pile, *Open Office Planning: a handbook for interior designers and architects*, (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1978), 138.

Entropy gives the most when the viewer inhabits their private mindspace, mulling over the exhibition's components and allowing its diversions to come to the fore. At first strikingly neat and ordered, on further inspection all the exhibition's elements are awry. The archive boxes, although mass-produced, show signs of dents and marks from their construction and jostle next to each other, never quite lining up perfectly. The parabolic dish, whose performance relies on mathematical accuracy, is approximated through rudimentary casting techniques.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, while the chair's cushions are a soft and seductive aubergine, the outside construction was essentially a pine box; a handmade approximation of Donald Judd's *Chair* (1989), Andrea Zittel's *A-Z Comfort Unit for the Cincinnati Museum* (1994), or an office cubicle cum coffin (see fig. 30 and 31).¹⁸⁶ All these components strive towards perfection or commercial design quality and fail. Conversely, the info-graphic signs are accurately made, but their content is faulty. Made from the industrial material Gravoply (a popular signage material used before digital

¹⁸⁵ The original form for the mould was an iron wok.

¹⁸⁶ Donald Judd, *Chair*, 1989, oak, Jud Foundation, Marfa. Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Comfort Unit*, 1994, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati.

printing), the works are directly screwed onto the wall at the same height and equal distribution, their thin, saturated forms seemingly embedded into the wall's surface. Engraved by computer-controlled laser to reveal a contrasting coloured under-layer, the arcs and circles shown on the plaques are *actually* perfect. They display a series of images and text that in their simplicity seem to be trying to communicate a specific instruction, process or direction, while each phrase sits oddly underneath, neither directly describing the scene above, nor completely unrelated. In trying to understand the texts' relation to the exhibition viewers would rely on their smartphone to find the definitions of some of the more obscure words, but this process would only yield more confusion.¹⁸⁷ Through their proliferation of sense, the tangential nature of these plaques mimicked the overall exhibition's mode of address.



Figure 30. Donald Judd, Chair, 1989, oak, Judd Foundation, Marfa.



Figure 31. Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Comfort Unit*, 1994, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati.

¹⁸⁷ See: *perturbatory* as a detour or diversion, *fandangled* as a useless thing, *render* as in to render someone into a state or condition, *jojoba* as a cosmetic ingredient that is a “close approximation” of the chemical composition of human skin, and *beagle* used figuratively as a spy or informer, or someone who tracks down information.

The disparity between the design of the plaques and the content conveyed by them was an effect of the process used to make them. The images and text were effectively made without directed thinking; I tried to make these by instinct, rather than planning; I made them according to what resonated with me. This erratic process, reliant on unconscious mental associations, was composed on the vector-image program *Illustrator*, which allows the infinite scalability of images by composing them not as pixels, but as mathematical relations. These files were then used to direct a computer controlled laser cutter to engrave and cut the plaques. This closed loop meant that no information was lost during the entire process, nor was there any deviation from the original files. The “arbitrary” process was completely preserved.

In retrospect, another way to consider these plaques is to consider them through the concept of a rebus, generally understood as “an enigmatical representation of a name, word or phrase by figures, pictures, arrangement of letters etc.”¹⁸⁸ More specifically however, Freud uses the concept of a rebus as an illustration of how he approaches the analysis of “dream-content.” He writes:

The dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages. Or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. The dream-thoughts are immediately comprehensible, as soon as we have learnt them. The dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the character of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts. If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error. Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, in front of me. It depicts a house with a boat on its roof, a single letter of the alphabet, the figure of a running man whose head has been conjured away, and so on. Now I might be misled into raising objections and

¹⁸⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “rebus,” accessed August 20, 2016.

declaring that the picture as a whole and its component parts are nonsensical. A boat has no business to be on the roof of a house, and a headless man cannot run. Moreover, the man is bigger than the house; and if the whole picture is intended to represent a landscape, letters of the alphabet are out of place in it since such objects do not occur in nature. But obviously we can only form a proper judgement of the rebus if we put aside criticisms such as these of the whole composition and its parts and if, instead, we try to replace each separate element by a symbol or word that can be represented by that element in some way or other. The words which are put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance.¹⁸⁹

By using unconscious association deliberately, I was attempting to access the kind of ingrained “art abilities” that I have learnt via repetition as per Carr’s concept of automaticity, as well as actively trying to refrain from using logical processes in art making. I had been considering how recording experiences via technological devices simultaneously records and erases them; on the one hand pictures and videos give a more accurate and tangible account, but it also impedes the long-term capture of those experiences in the biological storage device—the human brain.¹⁹⁰ I liked the idea that the human brain was prone to skew and misremember situations, and that it is this inefficiency and inaccuracy that makes for art’s variety. Rather than directly relaying reality as it is captured through digital recordings, *generating* reality through intuition became an important idea for this exhibition. Although this process translated into

¹⁸⁹ Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume X*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974), 277–8.

¹⁹⁰ This idea also influenced the inclusion of archive boxes and the choice of title. Archiving as a process is to “transfer to a store containing infrequently used files, or to a *lower level in the hierarchy of memories...*” Own emphasis. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “archive,” accessed August 20, 2016. The infinitely expandable archive boxes connected to the constant influx of sensory stimulation, and the joke that one would need a lot of *Apartment Therapy*-style home-organizing techniques (or Information Management processes) to accommodate this “data.” Additionally, the term entropy also names a unit of measurement integral to the compression and transference of digital data; it gauges how much “information” is contained within a message, regardless of its specific content. See Claude E. Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” *Bell System Technical Journal*, 27 no. 3 (July 1948): 379–423.

confusing “content,” it also presented a more loose, playful and confident style of work that, when combined with the material choice, made for an enticing kind of “problem.”

With this work I was trying to avoid directly relaying and representing reality as it “is,” and was instead trying to create a semi-fictional space that was nonetheless real. Influenced heavily by Propst’s idea of the workspace as a physical information-limiting device, my intention was to create an artwork that actively deprived the viewer of readily-accessible information or content while still trying to give the impression of a space that was humorously off-kilter, much like Tati’s own amateur designs. By doing so, I was attempting to emphasise the pre-existing strangeness of the human and the perverse, non-logical operations of the mind and unconscious that are still unable to be repeated or replicated, even by the most-advanced technology. This interest in the physical representation of psychical space and use of unconscious processes was also heavily influenced by my research into Deleuze’s assertion that thought is an unconscious process, and I became interested in finding other art practices that explored this working method.

Adam Kalkin

Making work from the early 1990s onwards, Adam Kalkin’s practice sits between the disciplines of art and architecture and is guided by an over-arching engagement with capitalist systems of production. Kalkin’s practice repurposes the logic and physical excesses of consumer culture and pushes them past the point of sensibility via serious acts of satire. As with Tati’s lampooning of modernist efficiency and Propst’s mind-centred design of workplace environments, Kalkin produces works that speak of a decidedly *human* aspect, but in this case he does so by preserving all of the irrationality of the unconscious. It is this commitment to the strange, displaced and seemingly erratic operations of the unconscious that makes Kalkin’s work so effective at forcing a failure of recognition. Using the pretext of architecture to make his work—arguably the most professional, risky and costly form of art—Kalkin is able to strategically orchestrate

elaborate gags, which are all the more funny and effective for being built in the world. By doing so, his work presents a nuanced critique via satire, one that energetically and humorously draws attention to the pre-existing bizarreness of “reality” and the inconsistencies that develop when the demands of capitalism and free-enterprise are followed to their extremes. In the context of this project, Kalkin’s work provided a demonstration of three different ideas that I had been developing within my own work, which I will briefly elaborate.¹⁹¹

The first point relates to the disjunction between the kind of language that Kalkin deliberately places his work within, and the *internal* language that the practice itself develops. Kalkin is able to surreptitiously introduce his designs under the banner of functionality and utility by working as an architect and developing projects for actual clients—both individuals and companies. Seemingly straightforward modes of domestic and commercial projects, patents, CAD architectural drawings and hand-drawn “sketches” are used in his practice to create a dispersed constellation of work that requires one to look across a range of repeated motifs to begin to piece together a potential operating logic. Of his method he states, “I want to use the language of utility to create a kind of hyper-rationalised non-sense (see also: semantic incontinence.”¹⁹² We can see this in action when Kalkin combines traditional interior design and furnishings with aviation-sized sheds and repurposed shipping containers, to create spaces that reappropriate the industrial for domestic use. In doing so, Kalkin takes industrial theories of scalability and modular, all-purpose systems and deliberately applies them to the intimate and tailored space of the private house. The “big-box” mentality of commercial/industrial architecture and the refuse of global trade is

¹⁹¹ I first became aware of Kalkin’s work via Grace McQuilten’s detailed study of his practice in her book *Art in Consumer Culture: mis-design*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 85–139. As such, my interpretation of his work is largely indebted to McQuilten’s reading.

¹⁹² Adam Kalkin, *Architecture and Hygiene* (London: Batsford, 2002), 136.

humorously absorbed into his work, emphasising rather than overtly negating late-capitalism's reformatting of everyday life.

Take for instance *Bunny Lane House* where Kalkin has encased a pre-existing cottage within a gigantic steel shed to create a series of internal spaces akin to a babushka doll (see fig. 32). Part of the house has been demolished, with one of its freestanding fireplaces and chimneys left intact, making the shed appear as an act of selection or a very deliberate delimitation of personal space (see fig 33). Reminiscent of recent developments in suburban architecture—where the aim is to build the largest house possible for any given plot—the shed demarcates a private space that gives very little in its external architecture, but works to convert the outside world into content to be seen from its inside. A liberal use of glass windows and doors gives the appearance of being outside without ever having to leave the compound. A series of windows tracing the cross-section of the cottage marks one side of the shed while large glass roller doors are installed on the length of the building opposite each other, creating a vast open space through the middle of the residence. At the opposite end of the “house,” nine rooms are practically—yet comically—stacked in a three-by-three grid and are constructed with un-rendered cinder-blocks and commercial style windows and doors (see fig. 34). Kalkin suggests that these cubicles were “an homage to the office buildings of the 1950s,” but interestingly they are also reminiscent of a set of apartments featured in Tati’s *Playtime* (see fig. 35).¹⁹³ With this strange enveloping of a pre-existing structure, Kalkin literally melds the interior and exterior of the building and in doing so, mimics the psychological act of generating sense; an operation that is difficult to determine as wholly internal, or as a reaction to external physical stimuli.

While these designs seem ridiculous, they are not overwhelmingly different from his realized works, such as the series of *Push Button Houses* in which he converted

¹⁹³ Kalkin, “Bunny Lane,” Industrial Zombie, accessed December 5, 2016, <https://www.inzombie.com/bunny-lane?lightbox=image1t5x>.

shipping containers into hydraulically-powered collapsible dwellings (see fig. 39).¹⁹⁴ Marketed as a fully collapsible house, the complicated hydraulic system obscures the fact that this is in many ways a completely useless design. The dwelling is non-operational when closed or open; either one would be trapped in claustrophobic darkness or open to the elements without a roof or privacy. Even further, the novelty of being able to “set-up” the house with the push of a button solves a problem that doesn’t exist; why would one need a house that literally compresses itself? Similar to how he presents his other works, Kalkin does not focus on the strangeness of this work, stating rather seriously “[t]his could crush you. The mechanisms wouldn’t even register the fact that they were crushing you.”¹⁹⁵ In this way, Kalkin takes what is at first a completely odd idea and treats it with such seriousness that it becomes even funnier. As opposed to Tati, who tried to do serious things as an amateur, Kalkin goes in the opposite direction and does amateurish things seriously, situating his work within architecture practice and securing corporate financing for his projects.

¹⁹⁴ The first of these were financed through a performance work titled *Adam Kalkin Day Trader* where he borrowed \$1,000,000 (US) to trade on the stock market, investing in various stocks including Pfizer, Hershey Foods, Tootsie Rolls and Apple Computers. He distributed the eventual profit of \$51,458 amongst four different projects including donating \$10,000 to a Tanzanian orphanage, \$37,258 into the manufacture of the *Push Button House*, leaving \$1,000 on a NYC public bus and \$1,200 for a “reverse Jerry Lewis auction.” The reverse Jerry Lewis auction involved a member of the public bidding via the internet for the lowest price to change their name to Jerry Lewis. *Push Button House 2* was financed in collaboration with illy Coffee for the 52nd Venice Biennale.

Kalkin, “Adam Kalkin, Day Trader,” *Architecture and Hygiene*, accessed December 10, 2016, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/36494707/adam-kalkin-day-trader-architecture-and-hygiene>.

¹⁹⁵ Kalkin in Alistair Gordon, “Heavy metal jacket, luxe lining,” *Arts and Entertainment, The New York Times* Thursday December 1, 2005, accessed December 9, 2016, <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CA139286166&v=2.1&u=monash&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&authCount=1>.



Figure 32. Adam Kalkin, *Bunny Lane House*, 2001, New Jersey. © Peter Aaron/OTTO.



Figure 33. Adam Kalkin, *Bunny Lane House*, 2001, New Jersey. © Peter Aaron/OTTO.

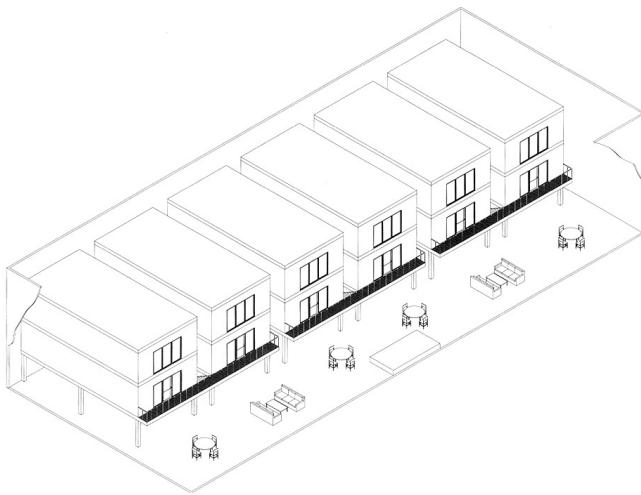


Figure 34. Adam Kalkin, *Bunny Lane House*, 2001, New Jersey. © Peter Aaron/OTTO.



Figure 35. Four separate dwellings seen from street level, affectionately known as the “aquarium” apartments. Jacques Tati, *Playtime*, (Specta Films, 1967), DVD (Madman Entertainment, 2004).

[₍₁₁₈₎ multi-family housing]



(119)

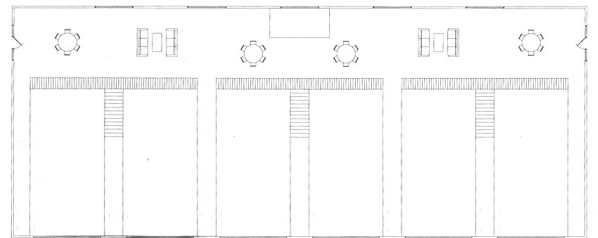
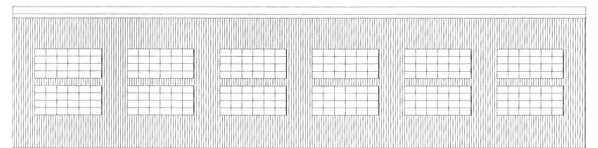
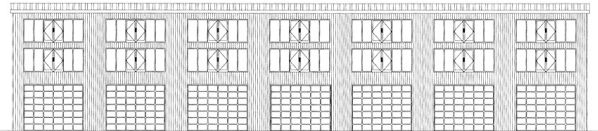


Figure 36. Adam Kalkin, “Multi-Family Housing,” (printed 2002), CAD drawing, in Kalkin, *Architecture and Hygiene*, (Batsford: London, 2002), 118–119.

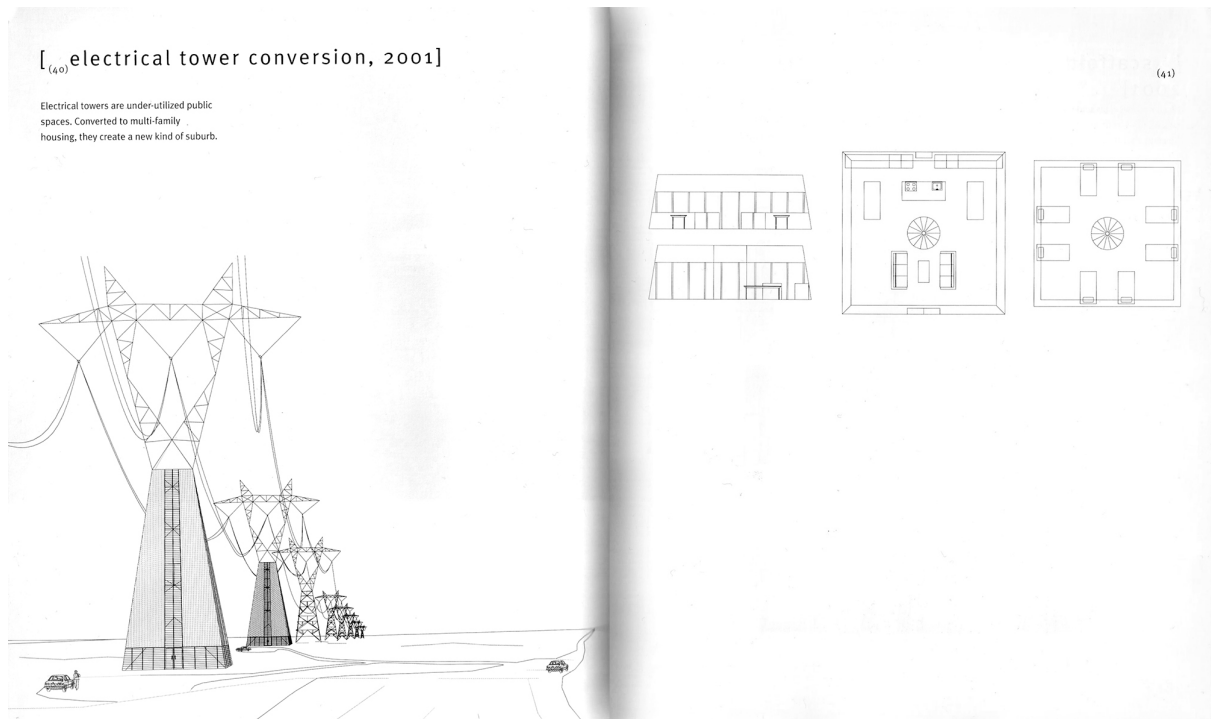


Figure 37. Adam Kalkin, "Electrical Tower Conversion," 2001, CAD drawing, in Kalkin, *Architecture and Hygiene*, (Batsford: London, 2002), 40–41.

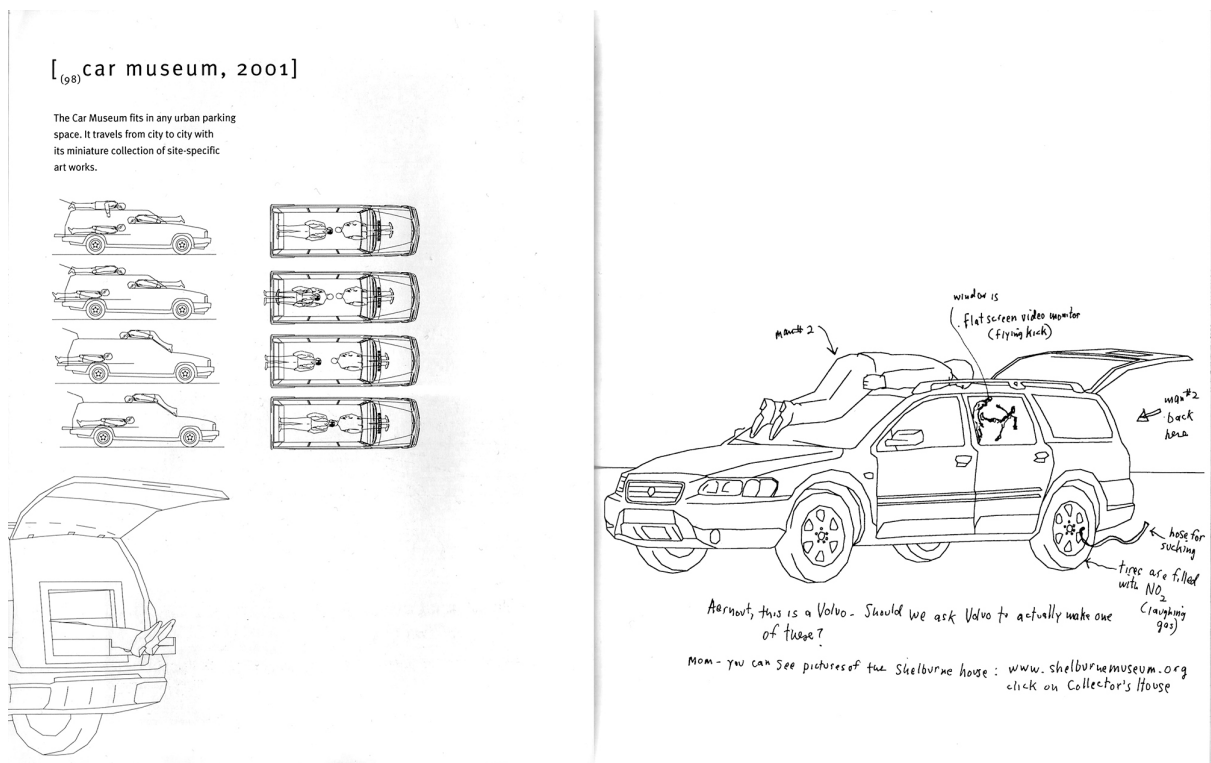


Figure 38. Adam Kalkin, "Car Museum," 2001, CAD and freehand drawing, in Kalkin, *Architecture and Hygiene*, (Batsford: London, 2002), 98–99.

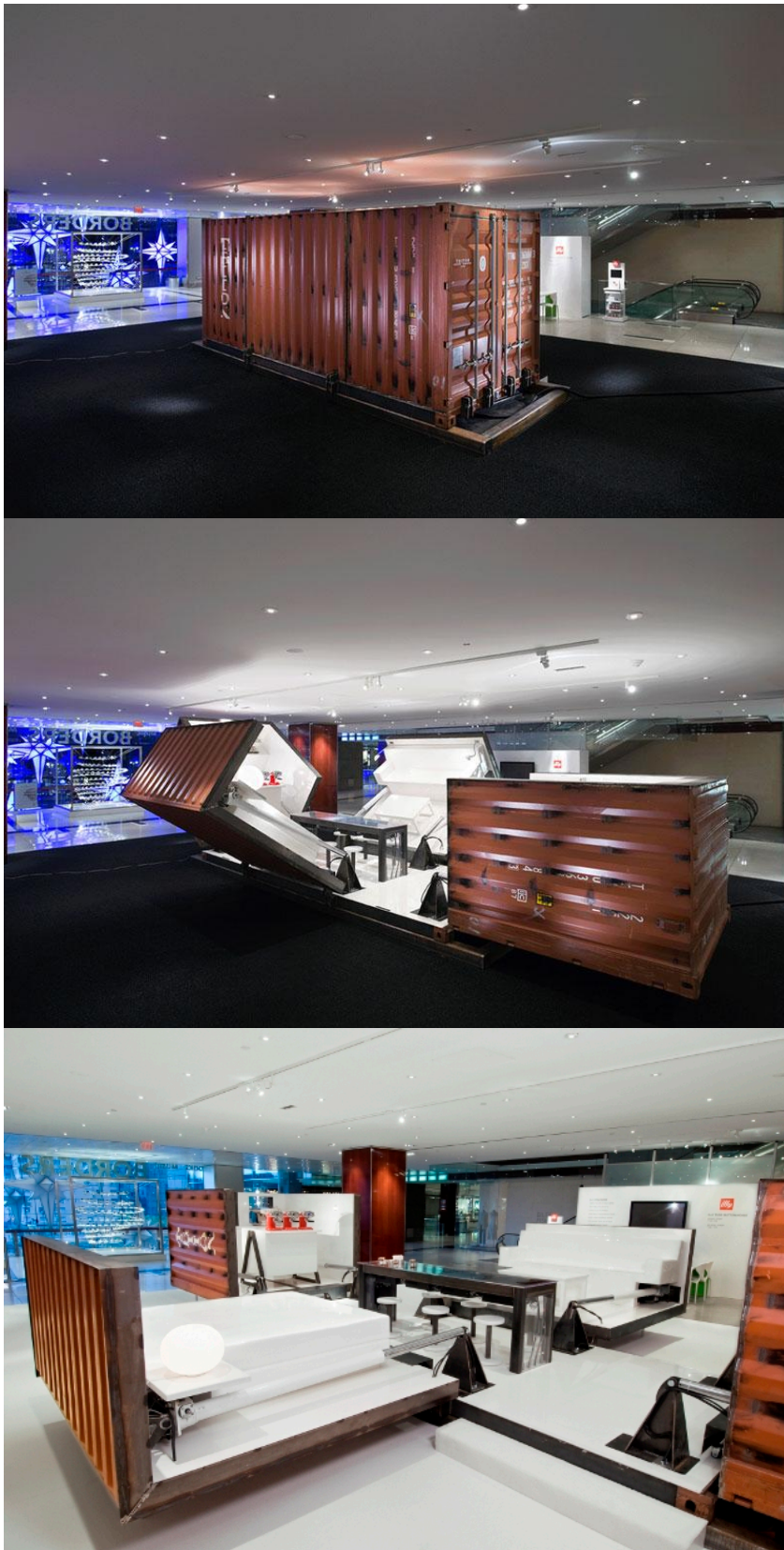


Figure 39. Adam Kalkin, *Push Button House 2*, recycled shipping container with hydraulic alteration and fit-out commissioned by illy Coffee, 2007, Time Warner Center, New York.

A Plant is a Plant

Continuing my interest in the potential trade-offs automatically involved when using digital services, and how they might alter one's experience, this exhibition was centred around the concept of data surveillance. I had initially been drawn to this theme when watching an ABC *Four Corners* program on the Fair Work Commission vice-president Michael Lawler and his partner, ex-Health Services Union boss, Kathy Jackson.¹⁹⁶ This program comprised an hour-long interview of the pair, during what can only be described as a tense period. Jackson was in the process of defending herself in court over allegations that she had misappropriated funds from the HSU, and Lawler, who at the time was on paid sick leave from his taxpayer funded position, was helping Jackson prepare her defence.¹⁹⁷ The program was predominantly filmed in their mutual home, wherein Lawler revealed that he had been secretly recording phone calls with his employer Iain Ross since 2012. Usually a rigorous and objective program, this particular episode conveyed a palpable sense of claustrophobia and impermeable relations between the pair. Where these two lovers falling victim to shared psychosis, or *folie à deux*, as the following exchange suggested?¹⁹⁸

CARO MELDRUM-HANNA (voiceover): In a five-hour monologue, Michael Lawler claims that he and his partner, Kathy Jackson, are the victims of a sophisticated, complex conspiracy against them beginning in 2012.

Led by individuals high up in the ALP, working in concert with corrupt union officials to smear them both, ruin their credibility and destroy them completely.

¹⁹⁶ *Four Corners*, "Jackson and Lawler: Inside the Eye of the Storm," directed by Caro Meldrum-Hanna, Klaus Toft and Elise Worthington, aired October 19, 2015, on ABC.

¹⁹⁷ It was unclear at the time if the two had been in a relationship when Lawler, in his professional position, was questioning Jackson over the HSU case.

¹⁹⁸ Shared psychosis is included under the title of "Induced Delusional Disorder" in the ICD-10: "A delusional disorder shared by two or more people with close emotional links. Only one of the people suffers from a genuine psychotic disorder; the delusions are induced in the other(s) and usually disappear when the people are separated." World Health Organisation, "F24: Induced Delusional Disorders," ICD-10 Version: 2016, accessed July 11, 2017, <http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2016/en#/F24>.

He calls it 'The Machine'.

MICHAEL LAWLER: It is a thing that is concerned with the way in which power is acquired and maintained within unions and acquired and maintained within the ALP. It is a thing that is concerned with the relationship between the unions and the ALP and the manner in which the factional system in the ALP operates.

(Montage ends)

CARO MELDRUM-HANNA: Why is no-one listening to your conspiracy theory?

MICHAEL LAWLER: Because nobody has read the material—or they're too scared.

KATHY JACKSON: And more importantly, they've, um, they've jumped to the tune of the media. The media runs a story about Kathy Jackson; the royal commission then investigate.

CARO MELDRUM-HANNA: You're not delusional?

KATHY JACKSON: Definitely not.

MICHAEL LAWLER (laughs): No. No.

KATHY JACKSON (laughs): No.¹⁹⁹

Later on in the program, Lawler demonstrates how he surreptitiously recorded his phone calls. Rather than an elaborate digital setup, he is shown holding his phone and a small voice recorder in an extremely awkward angle with his arms raised over the top of his head (see fig. 40).

¹⁹⁹ *Four Corners*, "Jackson and Lawler: Inside the Eye of the Storm," directed by Caro Meldrum-Hanna, Klaus Toft and Elise Worthington, aired October 19, 2015, on ABC.



Figure 40. *Four Corners*, “Jackson and Lawler: Inside the Eye of the Storm,” directed by Caro Meldrum-Hanna, Klaus Toft and Elise Worthington, aired October 19, 2015, on ABC.

While this is shown, Lawler narrates the process:

MICHAEL LAWLER: So let me explain how the recordings are made.

CARO MELDRUM-HANNA (voiceover): Later, Michael Lawler shows me how he makes his covert recordings.

MICHAEL LAWLER: If one holds the recorder close to the earpiece on the phone but not touching, and then you lift it all and hold it to your ear...

CARO MELDRUM-HANNA (voiceover): Secretly recording phone conversations is generally illegal. Michael Lawler says he has a defence: he did it for the protection of his own legal interests.

MICHAEL LAWLER: Alternatively, you can hold the recorder with your fingers.

CARO MELDRUM-HANNA: How do you think Iain Ross will react when he discovers you have made those recordings?

MICHAEL LAWLER: I imagine he will be, ah, er, very annoyed indeed.²⁰⁰

The formal nature of the *Four Corners*' report made this act even more ridiculous; it was a completely bizarre thing to watch. Lawler was so serious and earnest that he failed to recognize how farcical his actions were. This was his patented method that he had been performing for *four years*. I began to wonder where the move to digital left technologically-inept spies. But I also began to consider what comic potential was concealed in the huge amount of data automatically collected from everyday interactions with digital services. Surely the increase in data capture and storage was leading to excesses of overwhelmingly boring data, a shadow of all of our mundane actions? In Lawler's monologue against "the machine" I couldn't help but see some of my own anxiety surrounding the integration of digital companies into everyday actions, as well as the taint of conspiracy theories that always seem to surround discussions concerning big data.²⁰¹ But data is the new renewable resource (although that doesn't mean that it's carbon-neutral); everyday activities have been realigned as productive sources of data. In *Platform Capitalism* Nick Srnicek proposes a thorough definition of this resource. He writes

In the first place, we will distinguish data (information that something happened) from knowledge (information about why something happened). Data may involve knowledge, but this is not a necessary condition. Data also entail recording, and therefore a material medium of some kind. As a recorded entity, any datum requires sensors to capture it and massive storage systems to maintain it. Data are not immaterial, as any glance at the energy consumption of data centres will quickly prove (and the internet as a whole is responsible for about 9.2 per cent of

²⁰⁰ *Four Corners*, "Jackson and Lawler: Inside the Eye of the Storm," directed by Caro Meldrum-Hanna, Klaus Toft and Elise Worthington, aired October 19, 2015, on ABC.

²⁰¹ In his editorial to the first edition of the journal *Big Data*, Edd Dumbill defines big data as "data that exceeds the processing capacity of conventional database systems. The data is too big, moves too fast, or doesn't fit the strictures of your database architectures. To gain value from this data, you must choose an alternative way to process it. Notwithstanding this and other attempts at definition, public discourse around big data has agreed on a common kernel: the notion that we might compute our way to better decisions." Edd Dumbill, "Editorial," *Big Data* 1, no. 1 (March 2013): 1–2.

the world's electricity consumption). We should also be wary of thinking that data collection and analysis are frictionless or automated processes. Most data must be cleaned and organised into standardised formats in order to be usable. Likewise, generating the proper algorithms can involve the manual entry of learning sets into a system. Altogether, this means that the collection of data today is dependent on a vast infrastructure to sense, record, and analyse. What is recorded? Simply put, we should consider data to be the raw material that must be extracted, and the activities of users to be the natural source of this raw material. Just like oil, data are a material to be extracted, refined, and used in a variety of ways. The more data one has, the more uses one can make of them.²⁰²

By inserting themselves between our intentions and our actions—as the way in which we accomplish tasks—digital service providers have managed to integrate the production of data as a by-product or excess of living. In effect, the constant collection of data can be thought of as a collection of the overabundant sensory data that humans filter out of daily consciousness. For *A Plant is a Plant* I wanted to highlight this conversion of daily acts into the generation of sellable content, but I wanted to try to refrain using the overtly direct method of communication that featured in *Rhetorical Device* in order for the exhibition to avoid being read simply as pointing out the viewer's complicity, or addressing them through the mode of "harbinger." Additionally, as this work was addressing a less abstract subject than *Entropy*, I tried to make a less obscure installation that used the exhibition blurb to directly set-up the exhibition as a work of satire through the deployment of the well-known shtick of an "inept spy."²⁰³ Moving away from the idea of a mind-territory or mindspace of the previous exhibition, this work presented a user-friendly and glossy experience through a series of digital images, ceramic sculpture and interactive sound equipment.

²⁰² Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 2016), 24.

²⁰³ Rhetorical questions in the blurb included "what happens when the majority of data collected is overwhelmingly boring?" and "does universal spying increase paranoia to a Pynchon-esque level, to the point where one's beverage preference must be protected at all costs?"

Located on the third floor of the Metro Arts' building in Brisbane, the exhibition-space provided an excellent vantage point to the street below. One of the few remaining Victorian-era buildings in Brisbane's CBD, I had always been enamoured by Metro's heritage listed floorboards and oddly positioned structural pillars—a setting reminiscent of Harry Caul's warehouse hideout in Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation* (see fig. 41).²⁰⁴ Taking advantage of Brisbane's weather, a large parabolic listening device was planted in front of the open window, indiscriminately collecting the sounds that rose from the street below. As a sculpture, the listening device took on an absurd human quality as the dish—amateurishly constructed from cardboard and gaffer tape, and weighted by unlabelled food cans—was attached to the ungainly legs of a camera tripod (see fig. 42). From the street it looked like an eye, but from the entrance it appeared to have its back turned to the audience and was caught unawares by the approaching viewers (see fig. 43 and 44). Next to this sculpture was a microphone held in a stand, positioned to capture the reflected sounds at the dish's focal point and relay them to a sound recorder attached to an adjacent wall (see fig. 45). The conspicuous size of the dish and its hasty construction immediately suggested that this set-up was not the result of complicated electronic spyware research and development.

The sound's path could be physically traced by following the lines of cord between devices. From the dish to the sound recorder, the cords then entered a Harman/Kardon PM655 amplifier that rested on the floor in the middle of the room.²⁰⁵ Its output fissured as left and right channel, emerging from the amp as excessively long, bright-red cords that looped around hazardously on the floor as they made their way to their final stop.

²⁰⁴ *The Conversation* follows Caul—an expert spy who builds his own listening and recording equipment—as he comes to suspect that the content of one of his assignments will lead to a murder.

²⁰⁵ An imposing chunk of analogue audio equipment, the PM655 is an integrated amplifier produced in 1986 during the plateau of the high-fidelity craze. One of the last amplifiers to be produced with discrete components rather than integrated circuits, the PM655 allowed audio enthusiasts and amateurs to open, fix and upgrade the device by themselves.

This was located closer to the entrance, where a large black square of carpet was positioned diagonally to face the doorway, taped down along its perimeter by gaffer tape. Laid out like an offering on this carpet were two low-lying pine stands with electric blue felt lining their base; each presented identical white glazed ceramic objects that tapered at their top where the audio cables entered (see fig. 46). Listening to the parabolic microphone involved picking up one of these strangely ergonomic forms and placing it to one's ear, mimicking the act of listening to a conch shell, a rudimentary tin-can communication system or a drinking glass placed to a wall. On close inspection—or instantly, depending on one's eating preferences—these sculptures are recognized as cast forms of halved sweet potatoes. Listening intently to them gave an amplified sound of one's own body moving, layered over sounds from the street, including car horns, pedestrian signals, occasional laughter or hollering and most frequently, the dull roar of traffic. The amateur construction of the parabolic dish meant that the amplified sound was only partially focused, leaving it up to chance what was funnelled through the space and out of the speakers. The elaborate system of transmission was only as exciting as the street below and provided access to the sonic version of “life static”—all of those sounds usually filtered out or ignored.



Figure 41. Harry Caul's hideout in *The Conversation*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (The Directors Company, 1974), DVD (Paramount Pictures, 2000).



Figure 42. Parabolic listening device constructed from cardboard and gaffer tape. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.



Figure 43. View from street level. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.



Figure 44. View from street level. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Cardboard, digital photographs, hooks, carpet, gaffer tape, ceramic earthenware speaker houses, speakers, speaker wire, glue, pine ply, material, sound recorder, microphone cable, USB power cable, extension cables, power board, amplifier, headphone to RCA cable, tripod, microphone, microphone stand, sound, Gravoply, cans, rope, washers, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

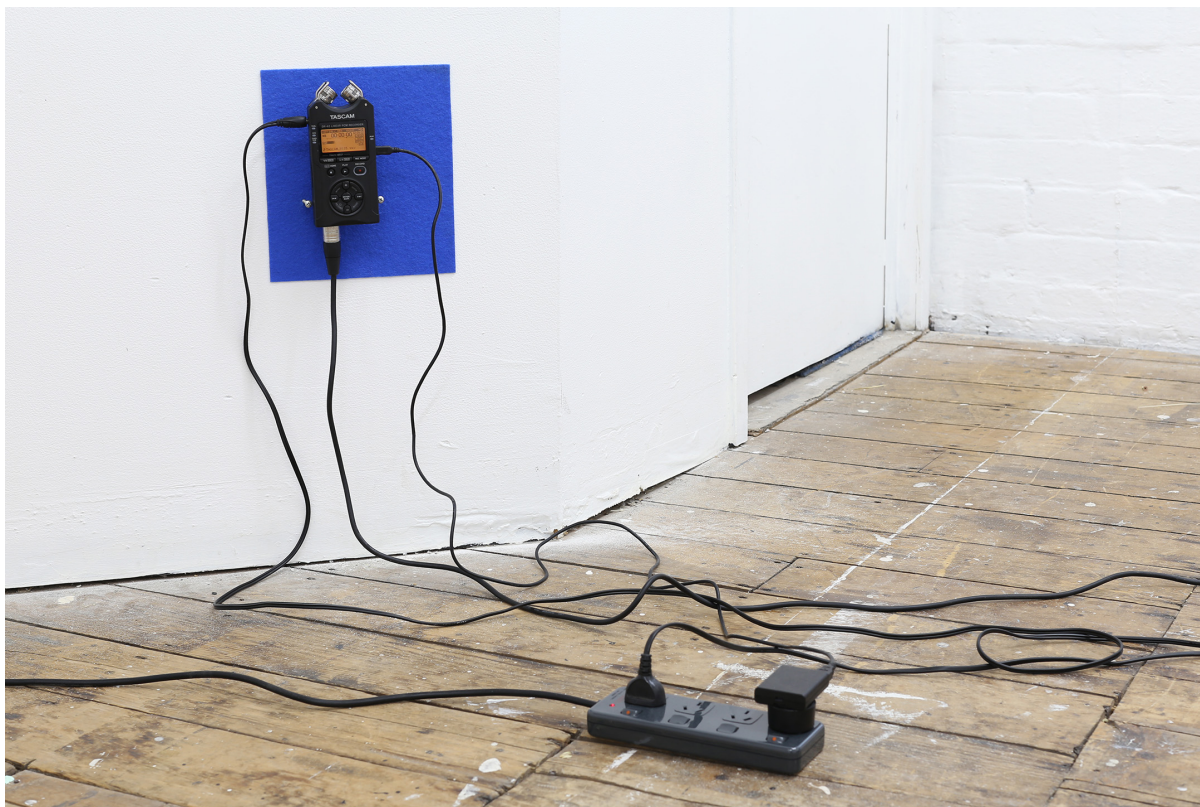


Figure 45. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.



Figure 46. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.

Surrounding the cords and equipment on the room's floor were a series of six digitally-made and printed images mounted to cardboard and installed around the exhibition via small golden hooks at each corner (see fig. 47–52). Giving the impression of floating near the wall's surface, the printed images were framed by a generous amount of cardboard, and each depicted a different iteration of the same architectural drafting process. Using two-point perspective, single rooms were generated from detailed floor plans and elevations; plants, furnishings, entertainment devices and knick-knacks were noted in the 2d renderings but were replaced in the 3d versions by photographs of these interiors. Intricately detailed and in the clean and polished style afforded by Illustrator, the 2d renderings gave the most sense of the depicted spaces, while the viewpoints in the photographs were obscured by the blurry green splotches of a fake plant. Only through accumulation did these works start to coalesce; the plant that obstructed the lens in every photo looked the same and it became clear that each of these plans were documenting different lounge-rooms, benign spaces of relaxing, music listening and television watching. As with the sound from the sweet potato speakers, the emphasis was placed on the broad capture of general content rather than specific scenes, and the content itself was legitimately boring. Although these spaces appeared real and lived-in, the techniques used to render the spaces didn't place these rooms in any particular location or site. The drafting technique focused only on one isolated room, rather than a whole house, and the 3d renderings were shown floating, surrounded by a flat cream-coloured background. The seriality of these works made them read as extracts, catalogued documents, single files or single "cases," each part of a larger, consistent yet indifferent, data management program.

The specific and individual lounge spaces have been collected and fed through a process, one that gives similar visual results, but that is neither automated nor accurate. Instead of aiming for a precise reconstruction of these spaces, I wanted the making of these works to have the potential for mistakes embedded within its process. Rather than the accuracy of digital recording, I wanted these images to be a skewed recording

136

conducted through “faulty” human memory. Asking friends if I could photograph their lounge room (see fig. 53 for the invitation), I sketched a brief floor plan of their spaces and then reconstructed it in Illustrator from memory and the single semi-concealed photograph. While I was trying to transcribe the lounge rooms as faithfully as I could, by the time I had taken one photograph and gotten to the point of drafting it, I had practically forgotten what the physical spaces were like. This whole process was somewhat uncomfortable as it involved literally and physically intruding on the private space of others in order to conduct the fairly ridiculous process of holding a plastic branch in front of a camera. But it also involved staring at each picture for several hours, scouring the image for “clues” to the room’s architecture and cataloguing small objects.

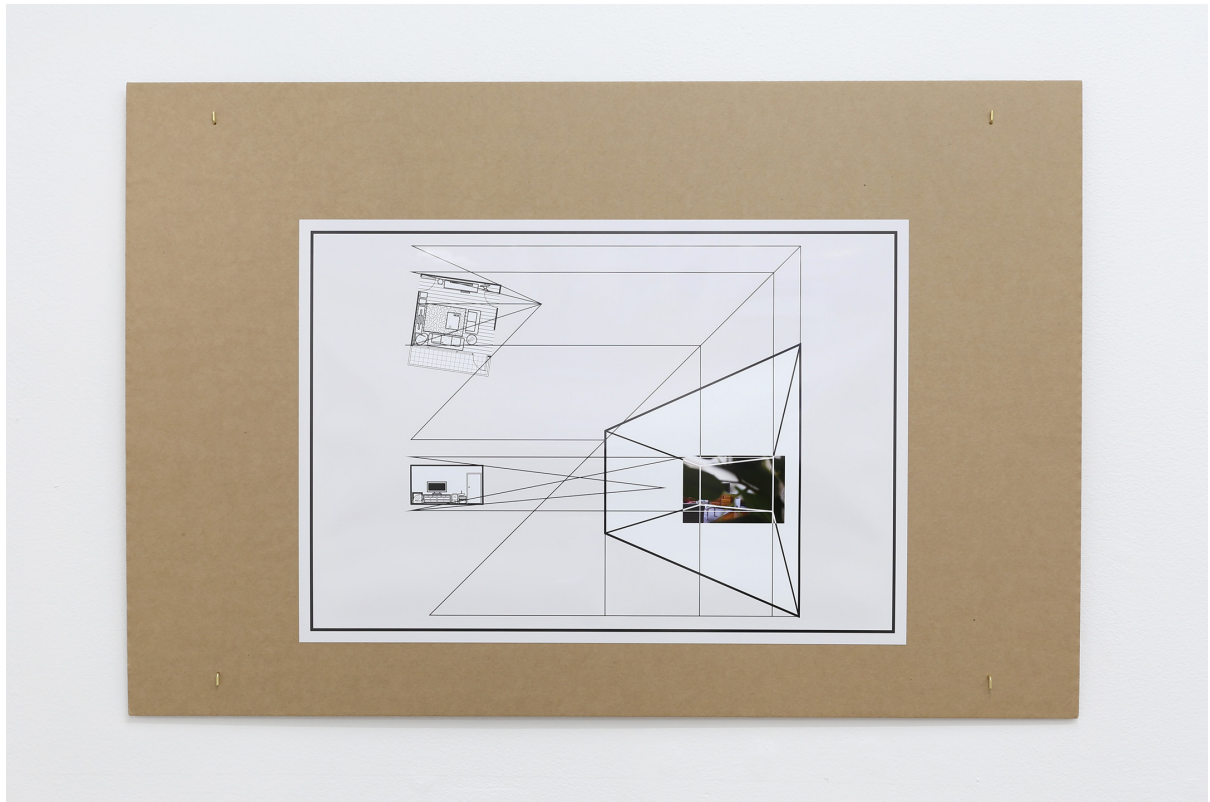


Figure 47. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

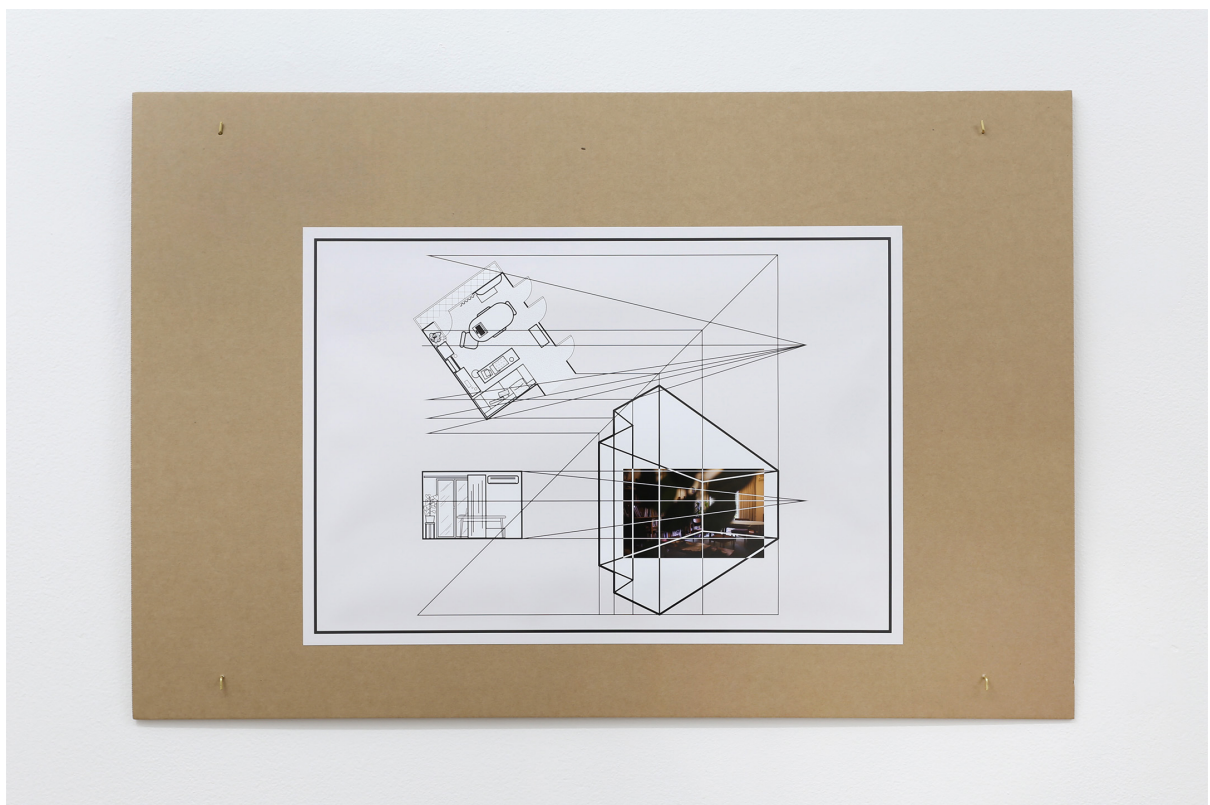


Figure 48. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

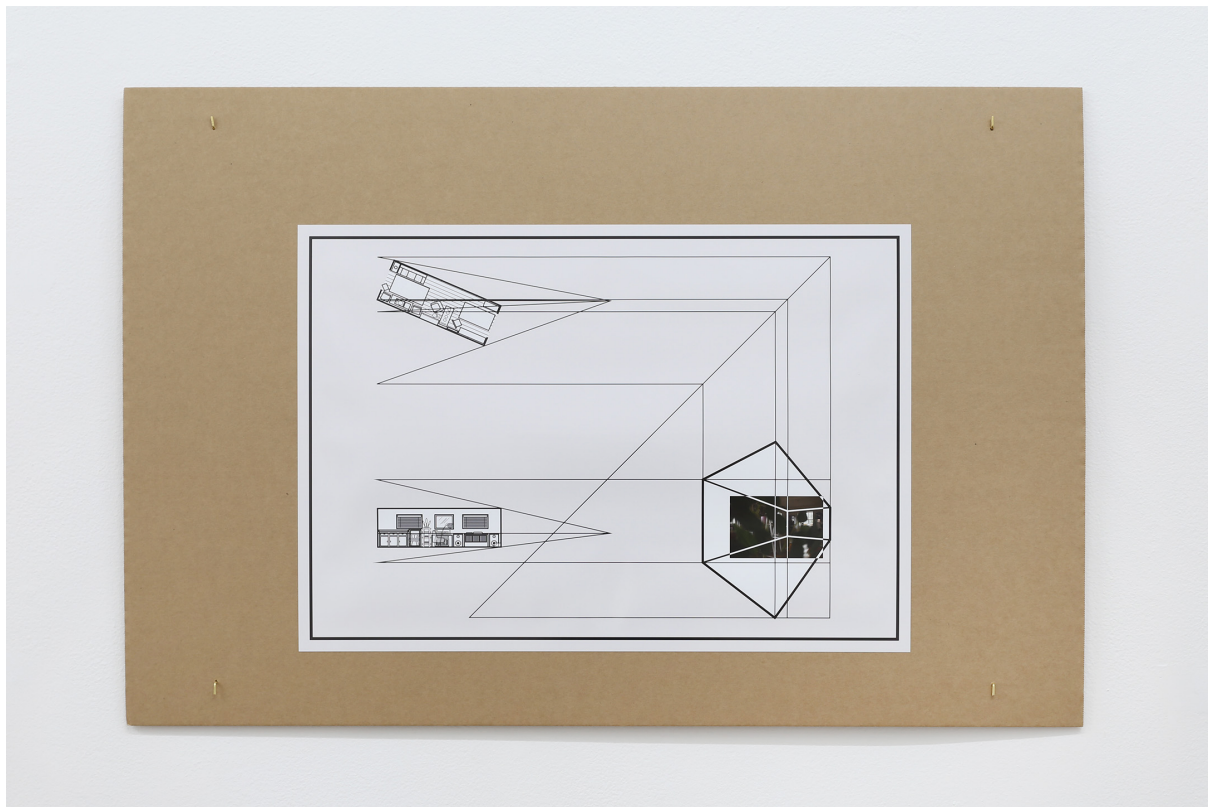


Figure 49. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

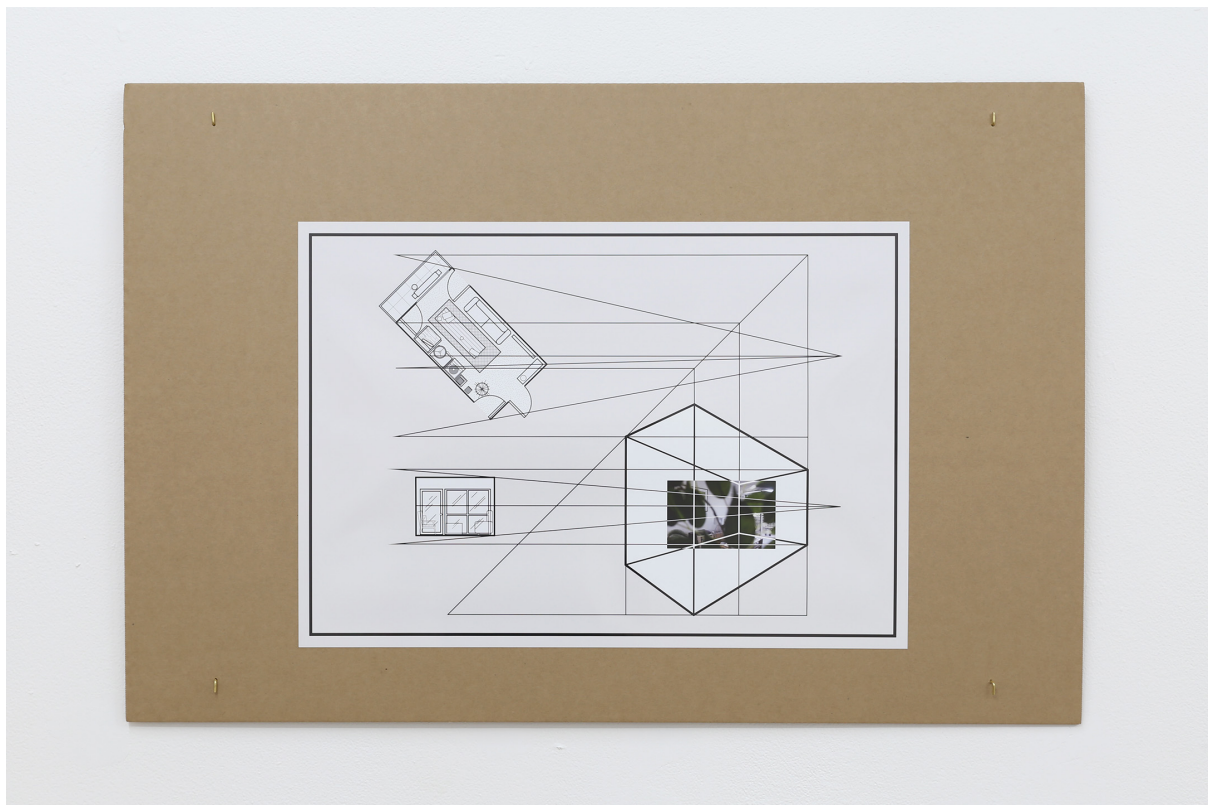


Figure 50. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

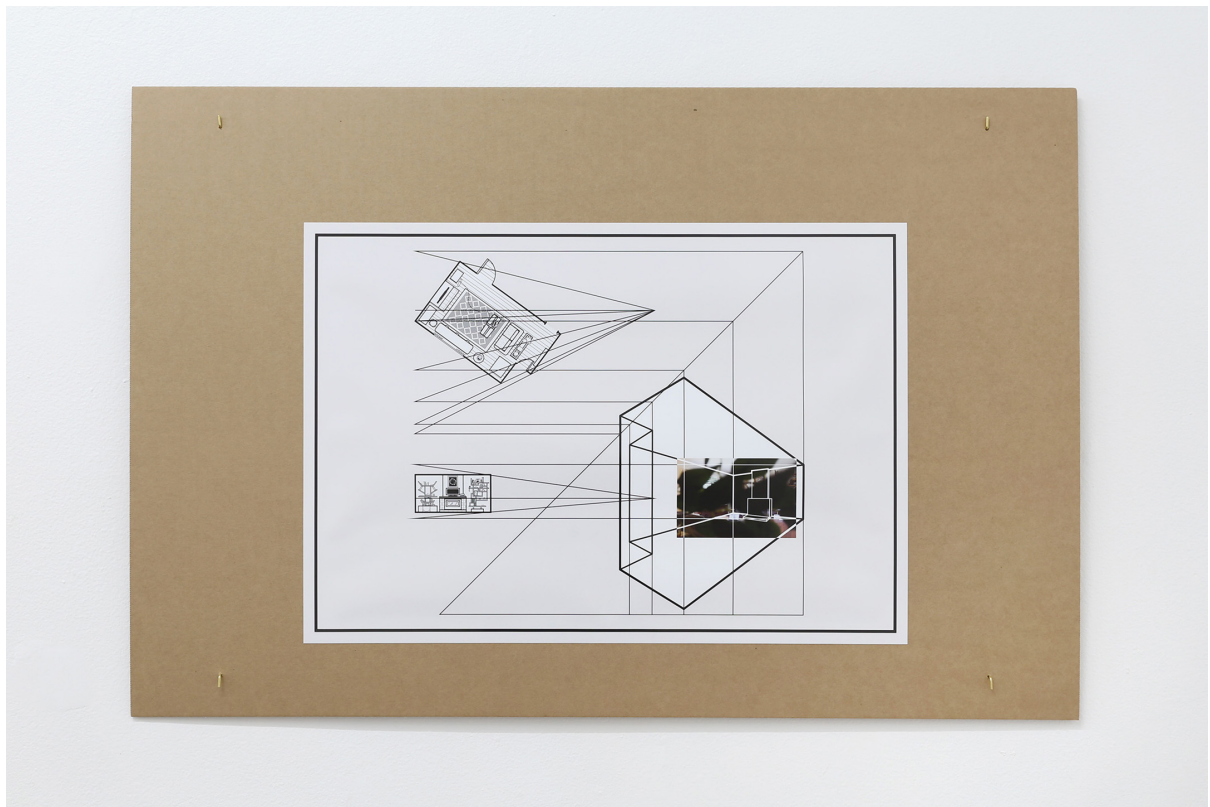


Figure 51. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane.

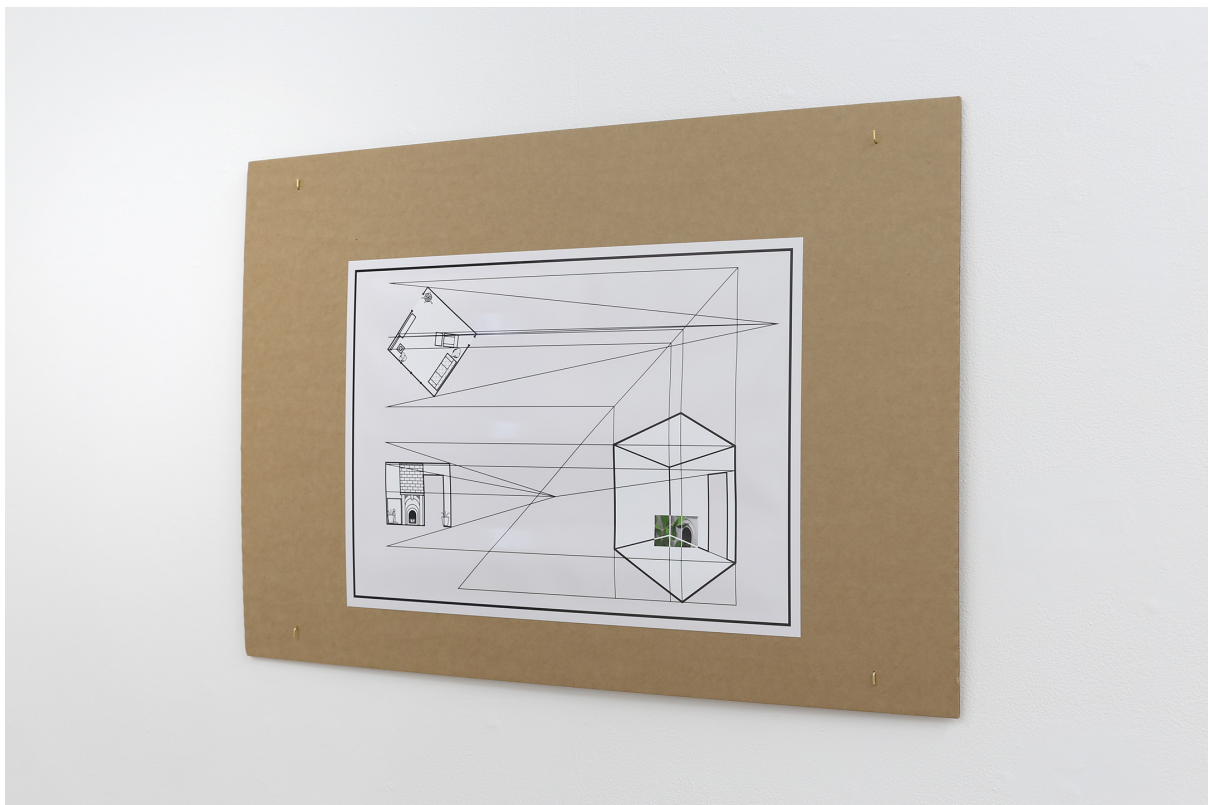
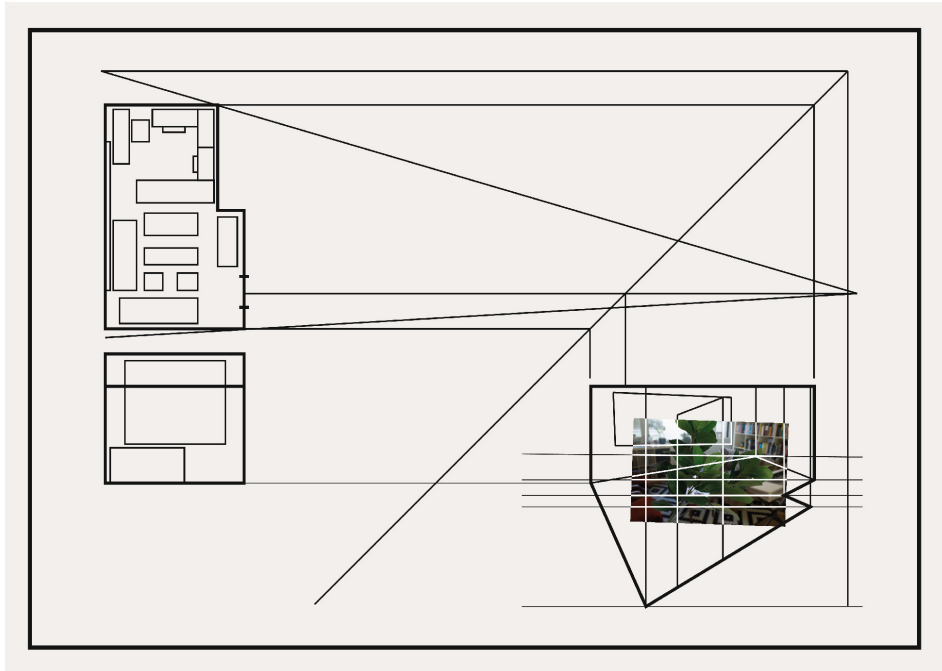


Figure 52. Marnie Edmiston, *A plant is a plant*, 2016, Fake Estate ARI, Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photo Credit: Llewellyn Millhouse.

May I photograph your loungeroom?



Work in progress

I am preparing for an art exhibition in August, and would like to make a series of photographs and drawings that focus on the increased extent of surveillance in Australia, in response to recently introduced data retention laws. One aspect of this project focuses on the semi-comical idea that the majority of 'intelligence' collected would be overwhelmingly boring.

You may be thinking that having your personal space photographed and included in a public exhibition is antithetical to the idea of privacy...a fair point. The image shown above is an example of the end result. By photographing living rooms from behind a plant, I am trying to invoke the idea of a technologically inept spy; much like in *Get Smart* or Monty Python's 'How Not to be Seen' sketch.

Please note that the photograph will:

- be anonymous
- not require you to actually be present
- obscured by a plant in the foreground
- not require you to tidy your living room
- be only one portion of a wider space mapping project

If this sounds like something you are comfortable with, please let me know so I can arrange a time to come over that suits you. I estimate that the process will take approximately half an hour.

My contact details are:



Cheers,
Marnie

Figure 53. Marnie Edmiston, flyer for *A plant is a plant*, 2016, digital image.

This kind of direct one-on-one spying is less likely—and less accepted—than the large-scale collecting of information, even though one’s identity and movements can easily be reconstructed through apparently anonymous data. The audio equipment’s overt collection and relay of sounds, readily audible from street level, made some viewers uneasy, and at the artist talk some relayed their experience of paranoia in thinking that the exhibition space was itself “bugged.”²⁰⁶ Why did this highly public and satirical act seem so invasive when we so often readily agree to carry around potential recording and tracking devices, or have our own electronic communication collected and stored? In discussing the normalization of self-surveillance, Turkle points out that we are often put in a position of bargaining off our privacy for the use of and participation on digital services without consciously realising it:

Now, participation in the life of the data-gathering web has given “self-surveillance” a new twist. We do more than actively give up information by reporting our preferences or by taking surveys or by filling out forms. *These days, the most important data to those who watch us are the data trails we leave as we go about the business of our daily lives.* We feed databases as we shop, chat, watch movies, and make travel plans. Tracking one’s fitness, keeping in touch with friends on social media, using a smartphone—all of these make surveillance and social participation seem like the same thing. Every new service on our smartphone, every new app, potentially offers up a new “species” of data to our online representation. The goal for those who make the apps is to link surveillance with the feeling that we are cared for. If our apps take “care” of us, we are not focused on what they take from us.

In the world as Foucault analyzed it, when you put cameras on street corners, you want people to notice them and build a self that takes surveillance as a given. Knowing that the cameras are there makes you “be good” all by yourself. But in our new data regime, the goal is for everyone to be unaware, or at least to forget in

²⁰⁶ The recording device used to convert the microphone’s signal coincidentally displayed a flashing red light when on stand-by, even though none of the sounds were being recorded. I was not however averse to people thinking that the space was being recorded and didn’t confirm or deny it.

the moment, that surveillance exists. The regime works best if people feel free to “be themselves.” That way they can provide “natural data” to the system.

So these days, while I might have only a general sense of where I’ve spent my day shopping, my iPhone knows, and this means that Apple knows and Google knows—a development I was not thinking about when I was thrilled to discover that, with GPS, my phone could double as an interactive map and I would never have to get lost again.²⁰⁷

It is this concept of “natural data” and the realignment of everyday activities towards maximising the amount of data available for extraction that links in to my initial point of inspiration—the idea of shared psychosis and conspiracy theories. If the point of data collection is to obtain the most natural data, this would involve the seamless integration of digital technologies capable of reformatting routine tasks in order to allow the production, sensing and storing of this newly generated data. Even further and even more worryingly, from the user’s and data collector’s viewpoint alike the least obtrusive user interface would be considered the most convenient. Thus with a service like Facebook, it could be posited that the convenience of connecting with friends is only an inconsequential by-product of the company’s larger aim to collect natural data and to enable ever-more targeted advertising. With this exhibition, I aimed to draw attention to the changing scopes of both governments and advertisers; while the former works to collect and monitor as widely as possible, the latter aims for the most specific selection.

²⁰⁷ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, 306. Original emphasis.

A Constructed World

The inability to fully capture and represent communication is at the core of A Constructed World's (ACW) practice.²⁰⁸ Comprising painting, sculpture, live performance, video, installation and the publication of art writing both in print and online, ACW's work is a rambling and proliferating mass of repeated motifs that refuse to congeal into a graspable whole. This resistance to summary arises from a dispersal inherent in their work: over time, space and people. ACW is the combined effort of Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva who, since beginning the group in 1993, have involved a huge swathe of participants in their work. Having been based in Melbourne, Turin and Paris, ACW's collaborators are spread across the globe, some appearing only in one performance, others appearing repeatedly over the years. Encountering the work of ACW is like encountering the live enactment of one of art's most enduring questions: is the art made for the life, or is the life lived for the art? ACW work in a wholly different way to me, but there are some key ideas to their practice that have influenced my thinking on this project, specifically regarding their approach to the professionalization of art, critique and the institution.

As with filmmaker Tati, ACW actively eschew the idea that one needs professional instruction to be creative. As Lauren Bliss states in her review of the group's partial retrospective held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art in 2012, "[t]he corner-stone of ACW's work is the figure of the amateur: the lover who toils away without ever attempting to justify, or even subscribe to, his or her own actions."²⁰⁹ Indeed, the amateur does not master their craft in the hope of recompense; they do it for love not money. To continue being an amateur means to be in a perpetual state of learning and not-knowing, never quite attaining the specialised knowledge that would allow one to speak from a position

²⁰⁸ ACW comprises Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva, although they often involve others in their work.

²⁰⁹ Lauren Bliss, "A Love Story: A Constructed World, Speech and What Archive, The Telepathy Project," *Discipline* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 119.

of authority. Thus when ACW raises the audience or general public to the level of the artist—at the same time as they declare their own position of amateur—it does not become a mere role reversal, but a tactic through which ACW encourages the speech and participation of those who proclaim not to know. Rather than an act of relational aesthetics—where immaterial social relations are the artwork—ACW mixes art, artist and audience together to the point where it is difficult to state where one starts and the other stops.

This continuity—this inability to separate, pinpoint and define what something “is” or “means”—is integral to ACW’s approach. Their work doesn’t just talk about communication, but takes its structure from it. Consider some of Lacanian psychoanalysis’ vital points regarding communication: it exists *between* people, it’s based on misunderstanding, it is the most unrestricted form of oral speech (an act in which the speaker does not know what they are saying), it is an act that is always moving and is made sense of retroactively. And to compare, ACW’s work is made by a minimum of two people, is utterly confounding, takes the form of performances, lectures and singing, it repeats and grows over time and its main organisers often admit that they don’t know what their work will mean or why they are doing it until afterwards. Even further, what their work *does* is create a discourse around art. Several projects including *Artfan*, *SPEECH* and *errors deceits mistakes* give a space for critique (critical discussion) of artworks, with participation not restricted to professionals.²¹⁰ In one of his many comments on the online blog *SPEECH* Lowe states, “[a] proposition has been made in the form of a show and the work of the audience is yet to be done.”²¹¹ ACW’s understanding of the necessity for critical responses to exhibitions—combined with their wry acknowledgement that without disagreement people are not telling the truth—ACW actively constructs shared points of reference around art.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Geoff Lowe, comment on “New08,” *SPEECH*, comment posted April 24, 2008, accessed November 12, 2016, <http://speech2012.blogspot.com.au/2008/04/new08.html#comment-form>.

A primary example of their commitment to creating a shared history is one of their first projects titled *Artfan*, an art fanzine devoted to exhibition reviews by a variety of professionals and amateurs (see fig. 54). Developing a novel approach to contributors, each *Artfan* review had a roughly 100 word response from four different categories of audience members, including an art critic/historian/theorist, an artist, someone representing another profession and a member of the general public who declared not to know anything about art. Running for ten issues from 1993–2002, the fanzine presented a variety of differing approaches to seeing and interpreting exhibitions, but also talking



Figure 54. Front cover of issue 8. A Constructed World, *Artfan: contemporary art review magazine to read* 8, (Melbourne; A Constructed World, 1996).

about them—ACW didn't edit any of the contributions. The power of this project was in asking those “outside” of art to talk about it. Even now the idea of getting someone uninterested in art to write a review is somewhat shocking, let alone juxtaposing them directly with “informed” opinions. At many points throughout the issues, theory-laden, enthusiastic readings of exhibit ions would sit aside blunt criticisms—usually about a lack of skill—and open declarations of confusion. In the editorial to the project, ACW

146

wrote that they were reacting to the isolation of contemporary art and its audience's subsequent shrinking to those who know or those who can pay. Responding to what they saw as the adoption of a "streamlined corporate image" by galleries, magazines and institutions in order to sell work, ACW wrote, "[t]he response to art is its greatest capital and what people say freely, conversationally, and without fear is the only communication we can bank on."²¹² Thus, ACW's critique of the exclusive nature of the institutions of art and the often specialised knowledge use to interpret contemporary art is not a rejection but a reformation. Rather than suggesting that art be more accessible to its audience, ACW brings the audience closer to art by showing that professional and amateur opinions can sit together and give a more comprehensive and enriching reading of an artwork.

Two additional disparities lead me to claim that ACW are not anti-institutional artists. The first is that while they encourage active participation in their work, the work itself is as frustratingly obscure as any other kind of avant-garde contemporary artwork. Rather than trying to dismantle art or place it under the directive of "usefulness," ACW integrate the social and the artistic together. As pointed to by Dylan Rainforth, ACW's emphasis of communication is acutely present in the act of viewing or making sense of their work. Making a comparison between ACW's work and Lacan's symbolic chain, Rainforth describes their output as "a process that doesn't necessarily support a viewer's interpretation or decoding but that promotes an active engagement in *constructing* meaning and the pleasures of uncertainty."²¹³ By refusing to make their art easy to understand, or to answer questions about what it definitively means, ACW's work forces the viewer to thought; their work does not immediately operate under a guiding concept.

²¹² Geoff Lowe and Jacqueline Riva, "Editorial," *Artfan: contemporary art review magazine to read* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 1.

²¹³ Dylan Rainforth, "Increase Your Uncertainty: A Constructed World," *Artlink* 27, no. 3 (2007).

The second disparity that causes me to claim that ACW are not anti-institutional is that they don't conduct their "difficult" artworks away from established galleries or museums. Instead of shunning the artworld, ACW insert their self-proclaimed amateurism into these institutions in order to open them to others who may not usually enter a gallery. In the accompanying catalogue of *Increase Your Uncertainty* Jacqueline Riva reflected,

I have never seen our project being 'outside' of the establishment. I see our project as a valuable contribution to what the establishment offers its audiences and its public. I was quite surprised at a comment made a while ago by an Australian museum director who referred to our work as being 'radical' — which I interpreted as too radical to show or buy. The Serpentine is not a radical organisation, nor is the Guggenheim.²¹⁴

It's through this commitment to actively engaging with common spaces of institutions that ACW demonstrate that their intentions are not merely to be reactive.

Find Your Endless Encounter

The final artwork produced during the project considered how public institutions had gradually been converted into privatised industries. I had been asked by a Melbourne-based gallery to participate in a public art project where posters designed by artists would be circulated on public billboards in the Melbourne CBD for a period of two weeks. It seemed that an opportunity to actually have artwork *within* an advertising space—rather than just making work *about* advertising—was going to be possible.

Attracting far more incidental viewers than intentional art-seekers, I decided to make a work that pooled elements from my previous works. I combined elements from the directional map from *Admin Office*, the advertising research from *Rhetorical Device*, the perspectival drawings from *Entropy* and the bright vector aesthetic from *A Plant is a Plant* to create a kind of confusing and useless way-finding system. The design itself

²¹⁴ Jacqueline Riva in Jen Budney, "Not beyond recognition, but beyond redemption," in *A Constructed World: Increase Your Uncertainty*, (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2007), 129.

(see fig. 55 and 56) featured the floor plan from the recent redevelopment of the Emporium shopping centre located in the Melbourne CBD that, compared to the design of Collins Place (the site of *Admin Office*), is fairly lifeless and sterile. Over the top of this floor-plan was a series of insets and pop-outs that jumbled together, akin to a computer screen overcrowded with browser windows. Each inset depicted a deliberately confusing scene that I had made using the same kind of undirected process as in the plaques for *Entropy*, with some of the images containing their own magnification insets. In figure 57, an empty nightclub scene is shown with spherical CCTV cameras hanging from the roof. A magnifying pull-out surrounds one of these camera and inside this is an image from its viewpoint, seemingly focused on a drinking glass below. But then in figure 58 the consistency of this system is called into question as a high-rise building is shown from a worm's eye view with another camera on its roof, but when it is zoomed in on a yucca plant is shown, and its view is of a traffic jam below. Furthermore, each image is labelled with an incongruous and mismatching industry name: the nightclub is "industrial," the high-rise "sport" and the traffic jam "correctional." While confusing in isolation, when considered together each name denotes a particular market for some kind of product and conjures the impression of "multi-purpose" spaces and applications, akin to Kalkin's use of industrial materials for domestic spaces. Adding to the confusion, the background featured an office layout appropriated from early open-plan office designs that I had found when researching Propst's designs (see fig. 59), while in the foreground two people are being transported mid-air by a saddle and pulley device.

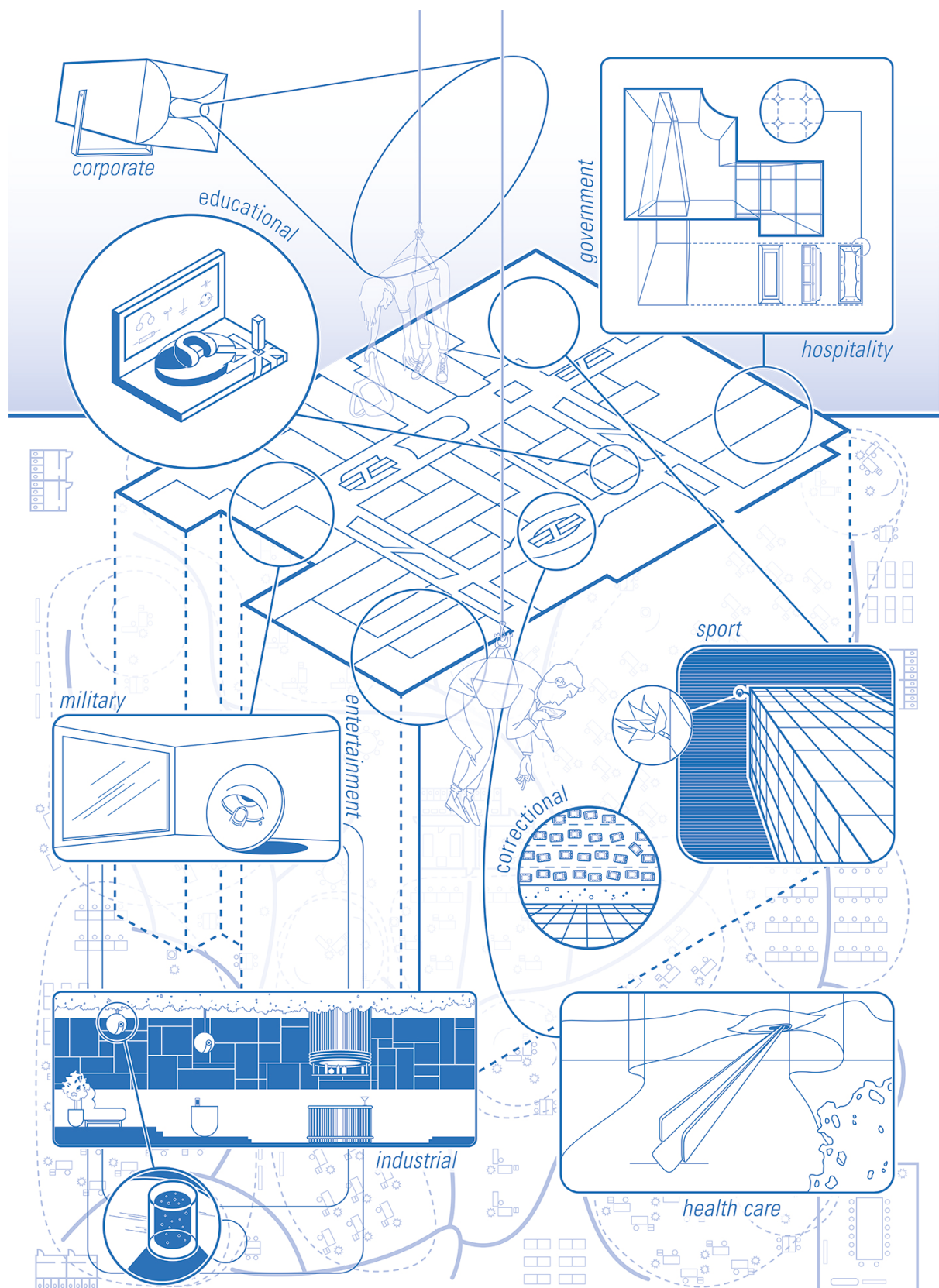


Figure 55. Marnie Edmiston, *Find Your Endless Encounter*, 2016, ACCA: The City Speaks, Melbourne.



Figure 56. Marnie Edmiston, *Find Your Endless Encounter*, 2016, ACCA: The City Speaks, Melbourne. Photo credit: Zan Wimberley.

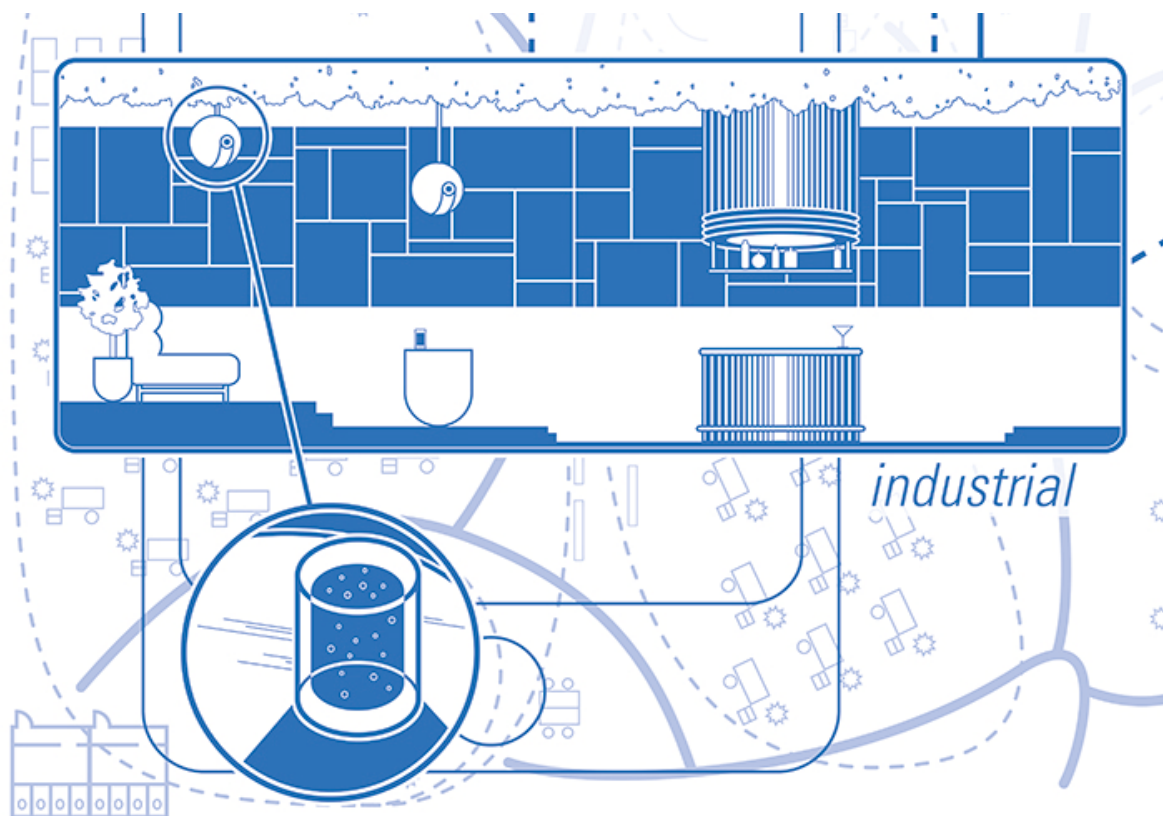


Figure 57. Marnie Edmiston, *Find Your Endless Encounter* (detail), 2016, ACCA: The City Speaks, Melbourne.

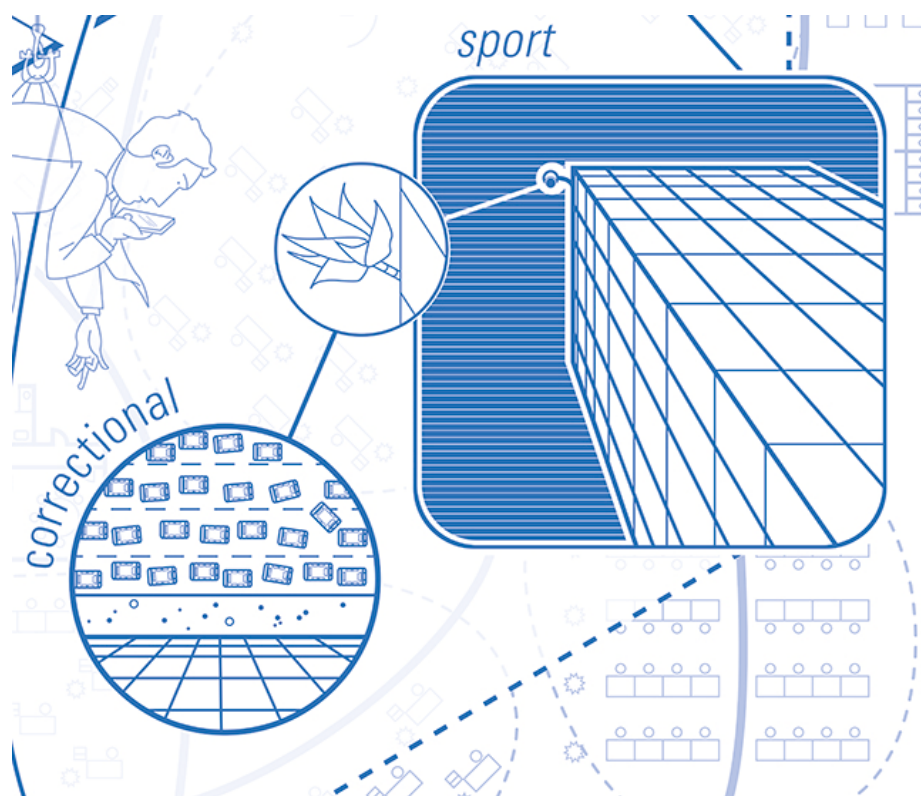


Figure 58. Marnie Edmiston, *Find Your Endless Encounter* (detail), 2016, ACCA: The City Speaks, Melbourne.

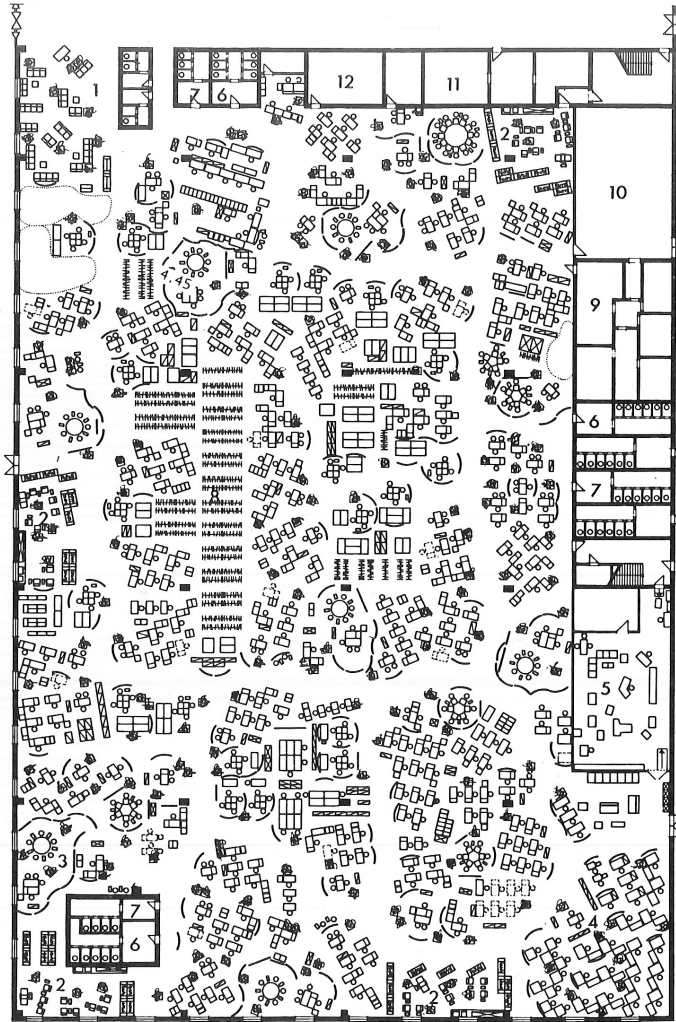


Figure 59. Open plan office design. Quickborner Team, GEG-Versand, Karmen, 1963–1964, in Pile, *Open Office Planning: a handbook for interior designers and architects*, 12.

Almost the inverse of *Rhetorical Device*—which transplanted a fictional site into a gallery space—this project would be shown outside a gallery but would depict fictional spaces. In this way it circumnavigated the problem of relying on audience members to consciously make the decision to visit a gallery to seek out art. As with all forms of outdoor advertising, physical posters are in effect unavoidable; a member of the public does not get to choose what they see in advertising spots. As this work was going to be shown in a literal advertising space, I was wary of using a simple graphic style that could be easily misread as another advert. Reusing the clean vector style of the *Entropy* plaques or perspective images from *A Plant is a Plant* in this context would only work if

they were combined with a deliberate overload of visual content that aimed to present only problems; the irrational was inserted into the normal space of advertising.

In addition to building on the research that I had done for *Rhetorical Device*, I was also thinking about the idea of the public and institutions from my interest in the work of ACW. These two themes became more important as I started to consider the use of space in the Melbourne CBD, and how lacking in public space the city was. Historically, Melbourne as a city has consistently lacked adequate public space for civic meetings and protests. Designed without public space from the beginning, Graeme Davison has observed that “Melbourne was unique among the Australian capital cities in being a pure creation of free enterprise. Free settlers founded it, and government only arrived in their wake.”²¹⁵ This characterisation of Melbourne as a product of individual wealth is concurred by Andrew May in the *eMelbourne* entry for City Square, the first purpose-built public square constructed in Melbourne. He writes

That Melbourne lacked a square or squares may be put down, not to a planning tradition that had no place for them, but to the absolute allegiance of its architects to commercial forces. Darling's Regulations, dedicated to a democracy of personal profit, had no provision for squares and Hoddle had no reason to vary this prescription. Subsequent calls for the creation of a square foundered both on the absence of an unencumbered site and the fear of its possible uses. A recommendation by Peter Kerr for the demolition of the White Hart Inn and Salle de Valentino on the corner of Bourke and Spring streets to form a forecourt to Parliament House, and a similar attempt in 1929, were reputedly frustrated by the fear of such a square being used for public protest.²¹⁶

The history of City Square suggests a continuation of a somewhat resistant approach to providing open sites for civic rather than economic use. Seemingly unable to provide a

²¹⁵ Graeme Davison, “Public Life and Public Space: a lament for Melbourne’s city square,” *Historic Environment* 11, no. 1 (1994): 4.

²¹⁶ Andrew May, “City Square,” *eMelbourne: the city past and present*, School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, accessed April 10 2017, <http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM00353b.htm>.

space in the city that did not provide enjoyment via economic activity, the original design of the site included retail areas and restaurants, which would eventually be extended in redevelopments of the site. Opened only in 1980, by 1994 one-third of City Square's land area on the eastern side was sold off to private investors who by the late 1990s had used it to partially build an international hotel chain on the site.²¹⁷ After the opening of Federation Square in 2001, City Square's function as a default meeting and protest location was gradually and informally replaced, which in the tradition of public space in Melbourne contains tourist retail outlets, restaurants and a large television screen. In itself a great meeting place and tourist destination, Federation Square is not geared towards encouraging a civic engagement outside of entertainment—it only resembles public space. Are shopping centres the closest thing we can get to public space?

What was this idea of civic engagement? Aren't we all already severely engaged, connected and plugged in 24/7? When I was making this work, I also attended a seminar by Janina Gosseye on her research into the introduction of the shopping centre into Europe post-WWII.²¹⁸ Much like the misappropriation of Propst's office designs, the first shopping centres were actually intended as civic hubs, supporting the citizens of the European welfare states. The idea was to provide a single public space that encouraged and shaped the ideal citizen of the future, through a diverse interaction with social, artistic and economic stimuli. With many of the cities needing to be re-built after the war, it was possible to build these centres actually *in* the centre of townships—a far cry from the approach in America, and our current and immediate perception of shopping centres as isolated and dislocated boxes. One particular architectural project stuck out to me—

²¹⁷ Davison, "Public Life and Public Space: a lament for Melbourne's city square," *Historic Environment* 11, no. 1 (1994): 4. Notably, both City Square and Collins Plaza opened in the same year, the former representing a step towards the development of a local meeting place and sense of community, while the latter project—as the first major international development in the city—represented the beginning of growth and globalization of what was then a comparatively small city.

²¹⁸ Janina Gosseye, "Shopping Towns Europe, 1945–1975: the architecture of commercial collectivity," lecture, Monash Art Design and Architecture Talks, Melbourne, October 5, 2016.

the Milton Keynes Shopping Centre in the United Kingdom. Apparently designed as an all round public hub, the centre was intended to be open to the public 24/7 with its doorways symbolically fitted with air curtains rather than doors—a decision reversed a month after its opening “much to the dismay of the architects and planners involved in its design.”²¹⁹ In this sense, the architects felt that their physical design really could have an emotional impact on the users of the space. This idea of an enriching communal space is the approach that websites like Facebook aim to mimic—a global agora, but without face-to-face contact and despite appearances, privatized. While on the surface an attempt to create a communal space, Facebook’s approach is somewhat hollowed by its reliance on algorithms to determine who should be in contact with another person, leaving less chance for a truly random encounter with another person outside of one’s usual sphere.

Conclusion

My approach to art and art making has changed significantly over the course of this project, despite still making artworks about the connected topics of perception, technology and the social sphere. Beginning from a position that valued the dissolution of art into everyday life, I have gradually reversed my opinion and approach because of my research into the context of contemporary art within the written component. Currently, I think it is important for my work to continue to “make strange” what is taken for granted, while trying to persist with making artworks that try to join humorous and serious approaches to the point of being unable to tell them apart. Emphasising unconscious associations would comprise one part of this approach, alongside more directed attempts to understand the psychological effects of technology use from a scientific and psychoanalytic perspective. Another fruitful line of research would be to continue trying to emphasise a disconnect between the appearance of my artworks and their apparent “functionality.” Reflecting on my influences, there is a strong tendency for

²¹⁹ Gosseye, “Milton Keynes’ Centre: the apotheosis of the British post-war consensus or the apostle of neo-liberalism?,” *History of Retailing and Consumption* 1, no. 3 (2015): 214. Note 31.

humanist design in both Tati and Propst, while Kalkin and ACW on the other hand maintain human irrationality via repeated motifs and seemingly irrational connections. I believe that this tension between wanting to develop an optimally effective artwork and allowing a more undirected approach will be a central animating point for my practice, as it intersects with a more fundamental question relating to the purpose of art within a highly mediated society.

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