THE CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF DESIGN IN ART

by

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1. Introduction

Do we live by design? Certainly many of us will live out the majority of our lives in environments that are almost entirely 'human-made'. If the apparent orderly functionality of nature is likely to remain, for the time being, philosophically controversial, the origin of our human-made environment in design is surely beyond dispute. If this is indeed the case, then the claim by Dianne Pilgrim, director of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, that "design affects our lives every second of the day", may not be as immodest as it appears to be at first (2000: 06). Perhaps then, it is with some justification that eminent art critic Hal Foster refers to the notion of "total design" to describe what he sees as contemporary culture's state of comprehensive investment in design (2002: 14). For Foster, we live in a time of "blurred disciplines, of objects treated as mini-subjects", a time when "everything…seems to be regarded as so much design" (2002: 17). Ours, Foster suggests, is a "consumerist world" where "the designer… rules" (ibid).

Foster's rhetorical language may be somewhat hyperbolic, but there are certainly signs that designers presently enjoy an unprecedented level of influence and recognition in contemporary cultural discourses. Consider, for example, the prominent case of 'super-designer' Karim Rashid. As the culmination of what has, and continues to be, an extraordinary international career in design Rashid recently published a biography with the somewhat presumptuous title: "I want to change the world"[1]. It is a title that is indicative, as much as anything, of the extent of designers' influence, at least in their own minds, on the lives of ordinary people around the world. Like Rashid, more and more designers are beginning to enjoy the visibility, status and acclaim that had once been reserved for artists. In fact designers are being treated today as if they were artists. Rashid, for instance has exhibited his commercial prototypes in a number of prominent contemporary art galleries such as Elga Wimmer Gallery and Deitch Projects. But it is not merely a question of status and recognition. Many designers have developed a professional ethos that allows them access to social privileges conventionally associated with, and reserved for artists. The Brazilian design studio of the Campana brothers, for instance, specializes in creating one-off designs that overtly expresses their views on social issues. Another well-known example is the Dutch design cooperative "Droog". Droog also makes unique, one-off pieces. Its creative approach is critical, radical, ironic and anti-establishment. One of the founders of this cooperative, Gijs Bakker insists that they are "free artists" who refuse to be dictated to by the demands of the market (Kirwin-Taylor, H. 2004:50).

A growing number of contemporary artists have also begun to explore design as creative idiom in their work. Vito Acconci, for instance, started his creative career as a poet and performance artist, but began in the 1980s to design public spaces. His work in this area was so well received that he now finds himself at the head of a very successful

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[1] Rashid, K. (2001), <u>I Want to Change the World</u>. New York: Universe Publishing Inc.

architectural design consultancy. Jorge Pardo has designed houses, bars, piers, and boats. He has also made books, tables and lamps. While his works are "presented as artworks, and while some of them remain as such, others end up being used according to their apparent function or even as something else" (Lafuente, P., 2004: 74).   Artists whose oeuvres explicitly and perhaps even intentionally exploit the current disciplinary aporia between art and design are rewarded for their efforts with considerable international recognition and acclaim in art circles. Artists such as Andrea Zittel, Atelier Van Lieshout and Lucy Orta, to name but a few, are routinely cited in international surveys among the most influential artists of our time. What is clear from all of this, is that design as creative idiom has penetrated deeply into the consciousness and practices of contemporary artists. As such, the apparent willingness of contemporary artists to explore and exploit the creative protocols of design has become an important theme and pressing issue in contemporary visual art discourses.

The intimacy that currently exists between art and design is of course not without precedent in the Modern epoch. The constructivists, with their fervent revolutionary desire to insert art into the realm of production, represents perhaps one of the most salient modern examples of an attempt to abolish the disciplinary boundaries between art and design. The Bauhaus movement, founded by Walter Gropius in 1919, is another movement whose interests and priorities were of an inter-disciplinary nature. The Bauhaus distinguished itself primarily through its efforts to unite art, architecture and design. The Arts and Crafts movement was configured around the notion of introducing utility into art production, a consideration that had conventionally been associated with design. De Stijl was yet another creative movement in which artists and designers like Piet Mondrian and Gerrit Rietveld found themselves pursuing very similar aesthetic objectives. While a considerable body of work has been devoted to describing and interpreting these historic movements, the precise nature of the contemporary relationship between art and design is proving to be a somewhat more elusive affair.

Studying the interpolation of design into art in its contemporary manifestations is complicated by the fact that it often appears to be an uneven, fragmented, widely dispersed and apparently incoherent phenomenon without any clearly defined, unitary objectives. In consequence, most commentators prefer to limit their contributions to formal observations about specific works by particular artists/designers. While this approach is worthy and valuable enough, it rarely allows critical reflection to develop very far beyond the ubiquitous references to notions of functionality, intentionality and relative degrees of autonomy that have become the staple of this interdisciplinary debate. Perhaps under the impression of its undeniable complexity, many commentators seem to have resigned themselves to securing the relationship between art and design in the gravitational field of an ultimately unapproachable aporia. However, the very insistency with which the compulsion to explore design, impresses itself upon a wide range of disparate individuals across various creative contexts suggests that there are social dynamics at work here that are coherent enough to elicit a similar, if not identical response from those who detect its reverberations. If this is indeed the case, then it may be worth reconsidering the feasibility of developing a meaningful interpretation of the contemporary convergence of art and design.

According to the respected art historian, Jonathan Harris, specific trends in visual art should always be related to the "material resources" that facilitate their emergence within particular historical contexts (2001:22-28). "Material resources", in this conception, may be of a political, economic, technological, intellectual and cultural nature. In what is to follow, this historical materialist paradigm will be adopted in an attempt to develop an account of the contemporary significance of design in visual art. This inquiry thus proceeds from the belief that an adequately coherent and sufficiently comprehensive interpretation of this complex and wide ranging development in current art production can be meaningfully developed on the basis of such an historical contextualization.

More specifically, this line of enquiry will be pursued on two discursive fronts. The first of these has to do with what American theorist Arthur Danto has referred to as an "enfranchising theory"(1981: 135). According to Danto, every new development in creative production needs an enfranchising theory in order for it to be accepted as art. Although it is certainly not proposed that the perplexing heterogeneity, which currently characterizes artistic production, can be accounted for in terms of any single comprehensive creative manifesto, an attempt will be made to describe and characterize the *broad epistemological climate* in which artists are currently functioning. No direct causal connection or simple correlation can or will be claimed between the broad hermeneutic currents that sweep through artistic production as a whole and the specific creative acts of individuals, but it is hoped that a general typology would, at the very least, raise into relief the conceptual resources that are available to artists at this particular historical juncture.

The intellectual currents that inform and influence the creative endeavours and interests of visual artists find their articulation in the turbulent confluence of influential creative traditions and powerful competing epistemologies. According to Jon Bird and Michael Newman (1999), the intellectual resources upon which contemporary art production is predominantly predicated are of a decidedly conceptualist order. The broad denotation "Conceptualism" is of course not to be confused with the more circumscribed set of intellectual priorities and creative strategies, which reached its apotheosis in the late sixties and early seventies of the previous century, and which came collectively to be known as "Conceptual Art". However, "Conceptualism", as a broadly inclusive and continually shifting tradition of more or less related critical-creative priorities, does have its roots in this moment and it continues to draw upon it in significant ways.

Newman and Bird identifies Conceptualism with "a tendency or critical attitude toward the object as materially constituted and visually privileged" (1999:05). The historical and contemporary coherency of Conceptualism, as conceived of by Newman and Bird, therefore resides in an ongoing tradition of critical reflection about the relationship between art and the aesthetic. The notion of the 'aesthetic' is derived from the Greek word "aesthesis", which denotes the whole region of human perception and sensation. It enters modern discourse in the mid-eighteenth century when the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten begins to employ it to enforce a distinction between "the material and immaterial: between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas" (Eagleton, T. 1990:13). It is essentially this distinction that conceptualists mobilized in the early 1960s

in order to oppose Modern art's exclusive emphasis on sensual perception and the material expression of latent emotional content (i.e. on 'the aesthetic'). Although those associated with the Conceptual Art movement were critical of the exclusive identification of art with the aesthetic, and although they tried to oppose it by emphasizing cognition in their creative endeavours, they never really questioned the validity of 'the aesthetic' and 'cognition' as epistemological categories. This is because they were still participating in the epistemological ecology of Modernity. It would not be until a gradual mutation in the general hermeneutic sensibility associated with Modernity began to announce itself that the coherency of epistemological dichotomies such as 'the aesthetic' (i.e.: sensual experience and emotion) and 'cognition' (i.e.: ideas, rationality, language) would come under pressure. When these epistemological categories did begin to lose their authority however it had profound implications for what would become the central tropes in Conceptualism's ongoing critical-creative enquiry- the relationship between the aesthetic, cognition, as well as ethico-political life and art. At a time when the Conceptualist tradition has, as Newman and Bird suggests, become dominant in international art circles, it is the way in which these relationships are conceived of that determines, to a large extent, the creative possibilities that are open to contemporary artists. Our exploration will therefore include a brief enumeration of the ways in which a gradual mutation in the general hermeneutic sensibility of Modernity over the last number of decades has come to transform our understanding of the nature of, and relationship between, art, aesthetics, cognition and ethico-political life, and therefore of how art could potentially function in our individual and collective consciousnesses.

In addition, the study will attempt to show how these broad epistemological developments have registered more particularly in contemporary art practice through the coagulation of two distinct sets of conceptualist priorities. It will be argued that these two sets of priorities both accommodate, if not facilitate, in their own ways, the adoption of design as creative idiom in contemporary art.

The second front along which the study will pursue its attempt at historical contextualization has to do with the fact that artists respond in their work, not only to the discursive currents within their own professional field, but also to the *social conditions* within which their creative practices are situated. A historical account of the significance of design as creative idiom within visual art cannot ignore the social conditions that may have contributed towards its poignancy and currency. In order to elucidate the social dynamics that may be at work in artists' current fascination with design, the study will utilize the insights of a number of prominent scholars from the field of sociology. What will emerge from this exploration is a significant transformation in the material basis of social life, over the last number of decades, under the combined influence of a number of important technological and economic developments. Together, these developments have conspired to produce a dynamic and disorientating world full of uncertainty and insecurity. What the study will attempt to argue is that this fluid situation may have contributed, in various ways, not only to the current prominence of design in social life, but also to the apparent willingness of artists to explore design as creative idiom in their work.

This study is based on the belief that critical inquiry into artistic production can, and perhaps should, at times, be pursued beyond the solicitation of isolated remarks about specific works by particular artists. It proceeds from the supposition that significant relations can be drawn between the work of individual artists based on the shared intellectual climate and social dynamics within which it is developed. However, if the singularity of artistic expression is not to be overestimated, it should, by the same token, also not be undervalued. There are always significant differences in the ways in which individual artists interpret and respond to their environment. Critical inquiry therefore needs to be flexible enough to accommodate particularity and an element of the poetic. In lieu of these considerations, the study will attempt to ground its observations in the concrete singularity of individual artistic practice. In the final section of the study, the work and interests of American artist Andrea Zittel will be examined and interpreted in order to develop some appreciation for the complex ways in which personal motives, social forces and intellectual currents meet at the intersection of art and design. It is hoped that what will emerge from the discussion is not a description of a unified, unequivocal cultural trend, but one that is nonetheless sufficiently coherent to be meaningfully articulated in critical discourse.

2.The conceptual climate of contemporary art production

Commentators like Michael Newman and Jon Bird (1999) suggest that the broad creative-critical tradition of Conceptualist enquiry has become the preeminent paradigm in terms of which artists and their audiences produce, interpret and evaluate contemporary art. Any attempt to give an account of the 'opening' that has become available, in contemporary art practice, for the exploration of design as creative ethos is therefore compelled to situate its analysis within the context of Conceptualism's critical-creative tradition.

 'Conceptualism' is an inclusive term that denotes a continually developing tradition of disparate creative strategies and interests, but its coherency resides in the critical interest of successive generations of artists in the relationship between art, aesthetics, cognition and ethico-political life. Since the initial refusal of artists associated with the so-called 'Conceptual Art ' movement in the 1960s to accept the narrow aesthetic definition of art that was dominant at the time, this critical interest has been expressed and explored in many different ways by a variety of different artists. It is not possible to relate this history of critical-creative enquiry and exploration in terms of a simple, coherent progression. There were simply too many different approaches and priorities that sometimes coalesced and sometimes competed to allow for the construction of such an even narrative trajectory. In the long line of conceptually orientated artists that has emerged over the last four decades there have, for instance, been those who, like the coterie of artists associated with the composer John Cage (Joko Ono, Allan Kaprow etc.) were interested in resisting the notion that an artwork had, by definition, to be materially constituted. Others, such as Joseph Kosuth and the artist's collective 'Art and Language' were interested in analysing the conceptual suppositions upon which the existence of art was predicated. Still others were interested in removing the aura of elitist connoisseurship with which abstract Modernist art had become associated and making it more accessible and democratic by

foregrounding the simple conceptual protocols that were operationalized in their construction. One thinks here of Minimalists like Soll Le Witt and Donald Judd, among others. Then there were those, like Robert Raushenburg, who, in a related programme, attempted to dismantle the distinction between so-called 'high' art and popular culture. And that is, of course, not to mention artist, like Victor Burgin, Gordon Matta-Clark, Hans Haacke, Bruce Nauman and a host of others who sought to develop some sort of socio-political role for art.

The common denominator between all these disparate moments of creative endeavour however, lies in the shared participation of their authors in a gradual and uneven mutation, over the last four decades, of the epistemological climate that informs not only cultural production, but all social life. Ultimately it is this broad epistemological shift that has shaped, and continues to inform, Conceptualism's evolving understanding of the relationship between art, aesthetics, cognition and ethico-political life. As such, this broad epistemological mutation has a significant bearing on what those who defer to the Conceptualist paradigm are willing and able to accommodate within contemporary art production. It is impossible therefore to adequately appreciate the acceptance of design as creative idiom within contemporary art without understanding how this shift in general epistemological orientation, over the last number of decades, has, in a sense, prepared the way for its occurrence.

The relationship between art, aesthetics, cognition, and ethico-political life, as it is predominantly understood within contemporary Conceptualism, differs significantly from the way in which it was configured by both Modernists and the first generation of conceptual artists. The initial confrontation between Modernist and conceptual artists took place at a time when the epistemological suppositions of Modernity remained largely intact in cultural discourse. Modernist artists and critics were able to insist that art should limit itself exclusively to aesthetic concerns and strategies because Modernity's epistemology allowed, and even compelled everyone to think of aesthetic experience as something different and distinct from cognition and ethico-political life. This separation between aesthetic experience, cognition and ethico-political life did not always exist. It is a categorical distinction that was introduced, according to Terry Eagleton, at the onset of Modernity in the seventeenth Century (1990: 366-367).

For a number of reasons that relate to social, political and economic currents in the seventeenth century, a new epistemological paradigm developed that effectively separated the "ethico-political", "cognitive" and "libidinal-aesthetic" modes of existence into specialized, autonomous zones (Eagleton, T., 1990:366). It is a development that had profound implications for the way in which art would subsequently be understood and produced. Art is subjected to an epistemological re-designation to the realm of the libidinal –aesthetic in a way, which effectively uncouples it from cognition and ethico-political life. It is no longer allowed to fulfill its traditional social functions within church, court and state. Instead it is marginalized in an ostensibly 'autonomous' or independent sphere of libidinal-aesthetic investment.

During the next two centuries artists would be involved in various attempts to overcome (Romanticism), turn to their advantage (Modernism) or dispute (the various historical avant-gardes) art's marginalization within a rigidly conceived and supposedly 'pure' libidinal-aesthetic existential modality. Eventually certain technological developments, a transformation in the dynamics of capital investment and post-structuralist thinking would combine to produce a substantial assault on Modernity's historical separation of the cognitive, ethico-political and libidinal-aesthetic. The technological and economic developments at work here will be dealt with in the next section, but suffice to say at this point that what distinguishes this assault on Modernity's epistemology from less successful previous attempts is the fact that it is registering simultaneously in all those aspects of life that have been kept so meticulously separated for more than three centuries.

The critique that Post-structuralist theorists mounted against the epistemological presuppositions of Modernity has had important implications for the kind of exclusive identification of art with aesthetics that the early conceptual artists so vehemently opposed. Post-structuralist thought effectively disputes the validity of Modernity's categorical separation of the cognitive, ethico-political and libidinal aesthetic aspects of life by challenging the autonomy of cognition. The autonomy of cognition was often articulated, in Modernity, in terms of the notion of "pure" rationality or reason. Using this formulation as reference, post-structuralist thinking's challenge to Modernity may be described as the 'contamination' of 'pure' reason or cognition with the relativity of the ethico-political and the subjectivity of the libidinal-aesthetic. In simple terms, this 'contamination' involves the following: In the first place, post-structuralist thinking proposes that cognition (i.e.: knowledge or understanding) is relative. It suggests therefore, that our understanding of things is influenced by our various particular interests. We are, quite simply, biased in the way we interpret. We believe, in a sense, what we want to believe. Recognizing the role that competing interests play in the construction of our cognitive representations or ideas, effectively pries open the sacrosanct precincts of cognition for ethico-political considerations to enter. The ethico-political is, of course, the region to which Modernity assigned the messy business of organizing and regulating competing interests. In post-structuralist thinking however, the two are comprehensively imbricated. Secondly, post-stucturalist thinking contends that cognition is subjective. It insists that our interpretation of things are coloured by our sensory and affective experience. The experience of physical and emotional gratification or discomfort produces associations that inform our ideas in significant ways. By recognizing the role of subjective corporeal experience and emotional association in the way we think about things, post-structuralist thinking bridges the divide between cognitive and libidinal-aesthetic life.

By disrupting the autonomy of cognition in relation to the ethico-political and libidinal-aesthetic, post-structuralist thinking facilitates a kind of reunification of these three aspects of life. If it is no longer possible to think of cognition in isolation from the ethico-political and libidinal aesthetic aspects of life then, by implication, it also becomes difficult to justify the kind of isolation of the libidinal-aesthetic with respect to the ethico-political and cognitive that had served as rationale for modern art's privileged

'autonomy' and social liminality. This shift in epistemological orientation clearly has significant implications for our understanding of art. Art can no longer be conceived of as something, which functions in an autonomous libidinal-aesthetic realm. Art's isolation and marginalization with respect to ethico-political and cognitive life is therefore potentially suspended in and through post-structuralist discourse.

There are signs, in contemporary art production, of a loose convergence of interests around two distinct, though related, sets of representational priorities. These broad areas of interest and concern represent two different ways in which the unification of the libidinal-aesthetic with the cognitive and ethico-political is manifested and exploited in contemporary Conceptualism. This divergence and consolidation of interests within recent conceptualist art is something that a number of observers have commented on.

 Peter Osbourne, for instance, establishes the main priorities in contemporary conceptualist art in terms of a broad interest in "cultural-political intervention", on the one hand, and "formal-critical concerns of artistic definition", on the other (2002: 19). Newman and Bird propose a similar distinction. They articulate it in terms of a broad "issue-based conceptualism", which they oppose to a more "self-reflexive conceptual art" (1999: 9-10). Paul Wood's reading of the forces at work in shaping contemporary Conceptualism suggests what might loosely be termed 'contextualist' and 'anti-essentialist' currents (2002:14). Further confirmation of the existence of distinct sets of interests and priorities in contemporary Conceptualism comes from Tony Godfrey. Godfrey observes a divergence between artists who develop "broader investigative procedures" and those who's interests lie with "the experiential and autobiographical", as well as issues of "identity and representation" (Newman and Bird 1999:10). It is also interesting to note a certain broad correspondence of these critical categories with Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss' definition of "Conceptualism" and Conceptual art" respectively. In their interpretation, Conceptualism is identified with "a reimagining of the possibilities of art vis-à-vis the social, political and economic realities within which it… [is] made", while Conceptual art" is seen as "an essentially formalist practice" (1999:vii). While the work of any particular artist may encompass aspects of both areas of interest and concern and although individual works may express more than one set of priorities, these broad discursive categories do raise into relief what may be taken to be the two principle sites of intellectual orientation and creative endeavour for contemporary artists.

The set of artistic priorities broadly oriented towards, in Osbourne's terms, "formal-critical concerns", finds its primary definition in its subscribers' opposition to Modernity's reified Enlightenment rationality. It is an orientation with its roots in the anti-representational irrationalism and performativity of avant-garde movements such as Dada, Surrealism and Fluxus. When conceptual artists in the sixties began to use language as an ostensibly accessible democratic medium through which to displace the specialist, privileged spectator who typified the conventional art audience, it "became 'language like'" (Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss 1999:ix). In time this investment in language would turn into a preoccupation with representation itself. It is for this reason that Osbourne describes its concerns as "formal-critical". Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss'

identification of "Conceptual art" with "an essentially formalist practice", also relates to this tradition of investigation into the nature of representation.

Under the influence of post-structuralist ideas many conceptual artists have become interested in the relativity and subjectivity of representation. They are guided, as Paul Wood's comments suggest, by an 'anti-essentialist' representational orientation. This orientation is manifested in the interest of many conceptual artists in issues of identity. Godfrey describes the post-structural, anti-essentialist understanding of identity that informs this creative agenda as one, that is "defined through a Foucaldian lens of regimes of visibility and power/knowledge" (cited in Newman and Bird, 1999: 09). From this perspective, social identification is often equated with essentializing, and therefore potentially oppressive or restrictive, representation. Representation is thus ineluctably tied in with issues of social power or power relations. Artists who deal with gender, sexual or racial identity often draw on these disruptive discourses in their work[2].

This post-structuralist orientation is one that opposes, in hermeneutic terms, the transference of the particular to the general in representation. It is for this reason that so much emphasis is placed on the particularity of subjective experience. The representational maximization of particularity is often ensured by the introduction of an autobiographical perspective. The subjective representation of personal histories and memories is a way of resisting semantic cooptation into conventional social representations.

Another strategy that is often adopted by conceptual artists who are interested in resisting the semantic closure associated with social representation is signification through the facilitation of experience. It is here that Toney Godfrey's identification of the "experiential" with this particular strand of conceptualist interest becomes intelligible. Paul Wood associates it, in similar fashion, with an interest in the body and "performance related activities" (2002: 75). He also includes the use of video technologies and installation with this creative strategy. What all of these mediums have in common, of course, is the incorporation of time in the process of signification. Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that some truths cannot be spoken, they can only be shown. This is essentially the rationale behind the introduction of time into signification. It is a way of avoiding, on the one hand, semantic closure in representation and, on the other, an attempt to facilitate the hermeneutic particularity of subjective sensory experience. This strategy allows art to become what Jack Burnham called a "real-time" activity (Morgan, R.C., 1994: 105). The focus is consistently on "the ephemereality of experience, its particularity, the ineffability of its moments" (Godfrey, T., 1998: 412).

This concern with the particularity of subjective emotional and sensory experience is also extended to artistic practices that do involve the creation of material objects. As is often the case with conceptualist video and photography, the object becomes, in effect, a mere material residue of what is really significant: the process of creation. It is for this reason that Peter Osbourne (2002: 16), Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss (1999:ix) and Newman and

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[2] Thembinkosi Goniwe is an excellent example of an artist who resists racial stereotyping by drawing on anti-representational post-structuralist thinking.

Bird (1999: 10) all identify this form of contemporary Conceptualism with a processual approach to art making. In the production process the artist does not deliberately work towards the realization of a preconceived representation, but allows the particularity of the experience of physical engagement to guide the work's ultimate form.

With its anti-essentialist antipathy towards hermeneutic closure and its predilection for the maximization of semantic plurality, this form of conceptualist investment represents a primary interest in the semiotic enactment of deconstructive, post-structuralist hermeneutic protocols. The polymorphous, non-specific, nature of this form of artistic signification is, in a sense, its content. It would be contrary to the spirit of this creative enterprise to speak of intent beyond its open resistance to the essentializing and universalizing tendencies of Modernity's cognitive representational regimes. It is, after all, first and foremost a hermeneutics of resistance. However, to the extent that this deconstructive, post-structural, hermeneutic logic has managed to insert itself within various social discourses, its general drift and concrete cultural implications have begun to announce itself in no uncertain terms.

It is clear that the primary points of reference for this hermeneutic orientation reside in the ineffable particularity of subjective emotion and corporeal experience. In this respect it relies heavily on a libidinal-aesthetic mode of engagement in its approach to cognition and ethico-political life. In fact, it all but subsumes cognitive and ethico-political representation under the sublime dynamics of libidinal-aesthetic signification. Desires, beliefs and commitments are drawn together in an existential modality that is considered beyond the scope of conventional representation. It is a region that, like libidinal-aesthetic experience itself, is simply too thick in its particularity and too fluid in its dynamics to allow critical penetration or conceptual containment. As a result political life and morality is transformed into a matter of style, pleasure and intuition while cognition finds its apogee in the graphic expression of opinion.

If this set of hermeneutic priorities, by its very nature, does not readily submit to the formulation of a preconceived objective, the success of its cultural realization allows us to remark, at the very least, on its likely implications. Judging then by its comprehensive transformation of social-cultural dialectics into a colloquial, libidinal-aesthetic idiom, it seems reasonable to suggest that artists who subscribe to this set of hermeneutic priorities are likely to facilitate, through their efforts, the aesthetic expression of unrestrained desire in social life.

The other major source of intellectual orientation for contemporary artists has to do with what Peter Osbourne describes as "a general …interest in the strategic uses of both traditional and mass-media visual forms" (2002:46). It revolves around a set of priorities that effectively casts art's representations into an instrumental mode. A comment made by Hans Haacke in an interview in 1979 is instructive in this regard: "Part of my message is that art should have a use-value rather than be seen as the commodity produced by an entrepreneur" (Morgan, R.C., 1994: 157). One of the earliest antecedents of this representational tradition is Constructivism. The revolutionary Constructivist believed that art could and should contribute to social-political change. In its Conceptualist mode,

these instrumental priorities had its genesis in the charged political atmosphere created by radical student movements in the 1960's. It initially manifested in calls for changes in the social relations of art production and use. These calls precipitated a revision of the status and meaning of the art object. Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss express it well when they suggest that the artwork underwent a shift "from object to subject" (1999:vii). If art, in Modernity, ostensibly represented the one non-instrumentalized form of signification, it now resolutely discarded this dubious distinction. An entire tradition of Conceptualist intervention was thus initiated and those who threw their lot in with it began to dream of a whole new function, purpose and capacity for art.

In time, this instrumental Conceptualist tradition has evolved into various forms of cultural activism and social critique. Osbourne has proposed that these activities can be divided into three categories:

> i)   *Works that use as their primary means interventions into, and the refunctioning of existing cultural forms of publicity ('media') in order to transfigure, and thereby help to transform, **the structures of everyday life**.*
> ii)   *Works that explicitly focus on **political –ideological conflicts** and promotes awareness of particular alternative or subaltern ideological positions.*
> iii) *Works that direct their attention to the relations of power at play within **art institutions** themselves.* [3]

Every one of these categories suggests a certain participation in a more or less dynamic constellation of compulsions, obligations, limitations and enticements. What this analysis reveals then, is a fascination, on the part of artists who explore these avenues of enquiry and endeavour, with the structures and dynamics of social power. Many of the creative oeuvres developed around this theme has to do with the ways in which social power is acquired, secured and exercised in and through representation. As such, it is a set of artistic priorities that simultaneously draws together the cognitive, ethico-political and libidinal-aesthetic. In this conception it is ethico-political life that becomes the primary focus since it is here that libidinal-aesthetic and cognitive existential modalities merge to produce social power. What is at stake here is the ability to differentiate, identify, describe and evaluate, in short- all those precious hermeneutic tools on which the individual relies for his/her social orientation. Artists who willfully set out at the turbulent confluence of powerful cognitive and libidinal-aesthetic currents do so in a bid to secure a sense of social agency. It is in the abiding desire for a sense of social agency that this set of instrumental artistic priorities therefore finds its unifying logic.

Contemporary art production is a complex and multifaceted affair. However, the two sets of critical-creative priorities described here arguably pronounce themselves with sufficient force, both in the historical record as well as in their contemporary realizations, to allow us to develop a more or less meaningful critical differentiation for discursive purposes.

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[3] The emphasis here is my own.

Given the current dominance of the Conceptualist paradigm it is likely that one or the other, or perhaps even both of these two forms of contemporary conceptualist investment are facilitating the current gravitation of artists towards the creative ethos of design.

3. The social context of contemporary art production

If the meaning and significance of specific acts of creative endeavour are ultimately decided by whether or not they represent imaginative engagements with the life-world of their intended audience, then it is likely that a number of historically significant social developments over the last two decades will weigh heavily on the shape and direction of contemporary art production. A rapid transformation in the material basis of social life during this period has altered the dynamics of our world. A technological revolution, centered on information technologies and the profound restructuring of Capitalism has been largely responsible for a reconfiguration of social life around a new set of opportunities and challenges. In order to try to understand the potential effect of these new social dynamics on artistic production, it is necessary to engage in a brief exploration of the material forces that are at work in our world today and of the ways in which their operations have penetrated and shaped contemporary consciousness.

There has occurred, over the last thirty years, what sociologists refer to as an '*information technology revolution*'. It involves the rapid development of microelectronics, computers, software, telecommunications, broadcasting and optoelectronics. These are all technologies of information processing and communication. Sociologist Manuel Castells compares the impact of these new technologies to that of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century. Like that great historical moment, it is inducing a "pattern of discontinuity in the material basis of economy, society, and culture" (1996:30). Revolutions of this nature penetrate all domains of human activity. Their technologies do not merely enhance the performance of existing functions; they generate new forms and patterns of activity.

The information technology revolution has facilitated the emergence of a comprehensive new communication system. Utilizing a universal digital medium, this system is able to facilitate the global integration, customization and distribution of cultural production. It has allowed an intimate relationship to develop between the symbolic processes of cultural life and the productive economic forces that produce and distribute goods and services. Castells succinctly expresses the unprecedented implications of this new relationship: "For the first time in history, the human mind is a direct productive force, not just a decisive element of the production system" (1996:32). By orchestrating, in a sense, the integration of mind and machine, computers and communication systems allow us to express what we think and how we think, not only in intellectual and material output, but also in goods and services.

New information technologies are also inducing new forms of interaction and cooperation. Its use tends to generate a networking logic in systems and relationships. This pattern increases the complexity of interaction, which, in its turn leads to unpredictable patterns of development. The networking configuration also allows a far greater measure of flexibility in relationships and processes. Because their material basis

is digitized, processes are now reversible and organizations and institutions can be comprehensively modified without fatal disruption. Their components are simply rearranged or reprogrammed.

In addition to the information technology revolution, there has also emerged, over the last thirty years, a *new global economic dispensation*. It is an economic system for which the information technology revolution has provided the indispensable material base. By transforming the processes of information processing, the new technologies have made it possible to establish endless connections between different domains of human activity, as well as between the elements and agents of these activities. In consequence, a networked, deeply interdependent global economy has gradually come into being. The core activities and components of production, circulation and consumption are now being organized on a global scale, either directly or through a network of linkages between economic agents. Productivity is thus generated through, and competition played out in, a global network of interaction.

Business firms are organized, in this new economy, in dynamic networks. The business networks cut across sectors, and connect economic clusters in different geographic locations. Small and medium businesses link up in networks among themselves and with large corporations. Large firms develop complex networks involving strategic alliances, subcontracting agreements and decentralized business units. These networks are based on cooperation and allow their participants to share costs, risks, and to keep up with constantly renewed information. Networks of this nature have a greater degree of flexibility, which allows them to generate and process information more efficiently and to adapt better to the unpredictable dynamics of the global economy. As a result, "networks, not firms, have become the actual operating unit [of the global economy]" (Castells, M., 1996:171).

The information technology revolution has also facilitated the emergence of *a new form of capitalism* that is thoroughly global and structured around a network of financial flows. Capital now works globally as a unit in real time; and it is realized, invested, and accumulated mainly as finance capital. Profit that is generated from various economic activities is continuously reinserted into global capital markets where it undergoes a process of qualitative abstraction and equalization in the faceless, electronically manipulated accumulation process. As this global capital network goes through its various erratic cycles and unpredictable turbulences, the fate of corporations, household savings, national currencies, and regional economies are decided. Although the excitements and anxieties of the global capital market may seem far removed in the minds of many ordinary individuals around the world, its effect reverberates right down to the world of jobs, salaries, taxes, and public services.

Together, the information technology revolution, the new global economic dispensation and the comprehensive restructuring of capitalism has had a profound effect on the *social reality* of most populations around the world. It has facilitated the widespread de-structuring of organizations, de-legitimization of institutions, de-valuation of major social movements as well as the dynamization of cultural expressions. These developments

have led to a substantial *disruption in traditional sources of meaning*. Systems of meaning generated by and surrounding family, work, church, politics, nationality and ethnicity enable social actors to symbolically identify the purpose of their actions. It is these that have come under severe pressure in the new social dispensation:

The traditional or *patriarchal family* is currently undergoing a major transformation. These changes are being induced, to a large extent, by the new pressures, opportunities, limitations and information that individuals are adapting to in their daily lives. If marriage and family life was structured, until recently, by fairly defined traditional expectations, it is now a far more open system. Beck points out that: "Families are becoming constellations of different relationships" (1999:113). Grandparents and grandfathers, for instance, are being multiplied by divorce and remarriage. As a result, they are randomly excluded and included in their sons and daughters' family lives. The meaning of grandparents therefore becomes a matter of individual choice. Children are often expected to choose whom their main father, main mother and their grandfather and grandmother will be. The parameters and structure of the family has become, to a large extent, a matter of subjective perspective and choice. Family relationships have become optional relationships. For Castells this amounts to a crisis in the traditional patriarchal family. It disturbs the orderly sequence of transmitting cultural codes from one generation to another, transforms the mechanisms of socialization, sexuality and therefore of personality systems and shakes the foundations of personal security. As the family system, in its more or less stable and defined traditional form is disrupted and rendered fluid under the dynamizing influence of new social forces, men, women and children are forced to develop new ways of living.

Work is also losing its ability to act as a secure and stable site of orientation for individuals. In the era of industrial capitalism, the meaning of work for the individual had been predicated on collective effort, shared goals, mutual interests, defined roles and entrenched hierarchies. In the world of global informational capitalism however, this structured environment with its defined expectations has become severely disrupted. Because of the networking and flexibility of business organizations, work has become far less of a collective activity. Although individuals interact and cooperate more with one another in the networked business environment of outsourcing, subcontracting and specialization, their activities and contributions are far more autonomized and individualized. The vertically structured hierarchical business organization has also given way to a far more flat, open and egalitarian organizational structure. Although this allows employees a far greater degree of autonomy, it dissolves the prospect of defined career development. Because of the instability of demand for goods and services in the world markets, workers are also exposed to far more risk. The kinds of skills and knowledge that are required within this environment is constantly shifting and highly skilled workers can find themselves redundant almost overnight as the demands of the market undergoes its restless mutations. Labour organizations are unable to assist workers and intervene on their behalf because the internationalization of finance and production means that capital is increasingly global, while the interests of particular labour forces remain tied to local realities. Labour organizations also have difficulty in dealing with the networking of firms and the individualization of work. As a result, they are fading away as a major

source of social cohesion and workers' representation (Castells, M., 1999:354). With their working environments being transformed into dynamic, flexible and autonomous spaces, individuals are finding it increasingly difficult to discover meaning and orientation in their professional lives.

Organized religion has always been a major source of orientation for many people around the world. However, the capacity of most religions to function as a source of meaning is predicated on the unquestioning, uncritical acquiescence of its devotees to a set of immutable doctrines. In contexts where populations are relatively isolated, either geographically or because of the absence of communication technologies, and where the conditions of life follow a relatively fixed pattern, it is arguably far easier to acquire and sustain this kind of support. However, when people are exposed to ideas and values other than their own on a more regular basis and when their lives are subjected to significant change, a re-evaluation of beliefs become far more likely. Information technology and the restructuring of global capitalism have created just such a situation for many populations around the world. Mainstream churches have tried to adapt as well as they can to these new realities. Many have begun to practice a form of secularized religion that casts them in a position of dependency on either the state or the market. In the process many of these organizations lose their capacity to provide individuals with a credible source of existential orientation.

Politics has historically been a site for purposive social action and meaningful collective orientation. However, it too has undergone somewhat of a transformation under the influence of new social dynamics. The globalization of capitalism and the interconnected world economy that has arisen in the wake of new information technologies has changed the role and significance of the nation state. Because networks of wealth, power and information extend across and around political borders, national governments have been forced to surrender much of their sovereignty and power to transnational corporations and organizations. As governments try to intervene and position themselves internationally, they lose their capacity to represent their territorially rooted constituencies. In addition, the privatization of public agencies and the demise of the welfare state in many parts of the world over the last few decades, has removed the social safety net and thereby also much of the remaining significance of government for ordinary people. Within this context, political parties seem to have declined significantly as autonomous agents of social change. Many political organizations are becoming ever more invested in a personalized, informational form of politicizing. They have become, as Castells (1996) suggests, influential brokers rather than powerful innovators. As such, they no longer function as rallying points for collective social action and orientation. Politics, in the minds of many around the world, hardly seem relevant anymore.

There was a time when markers of *ethnic identity* functioned as the parameters of entire social universes for populations around the world. That is slowly beginning to change for many people. The constant circulation of information through dense social and cultural networks has the effect of altering and transforming the social significance of race. It removes it, in a sense, from its historical context, and inserts it into other influential social discourses and signifiers. In the process, it loses some of its original significance.

Although some people's social experiences may therefore still be significantly influenced by racial prejudice, others are discovering in it a somewhat less compelling source of personal meaning and identity.

It would appear then that the conditions created by the combined effect of the information technology revolution, the new global economic dispensation and the restructuring of Capitalism have had the unforeseen effect of releasing individuals from traditional meaning structures. Individuals are effectively forced, under these circumstances, to find a way of redefining their contexts of action. However, the same dynamics that are responsible for the dissolution of traditional meaning structures are also creating conditions of great *insecurity and uncertainty*. Individuals have to act in the absence of established patterns of social identification and differentiation and without the ability to calculate what the consequences and significance of their actions are likely to be. Under these conditions, the notion of *significant action* becomes exceedingly problematic.

Anthony Giddens describes the precarious situation that the social actor faces under contemporary conditions: "While the relationships between people and their environment in traditional social orders were determined by standardized rules of behavior and activity, which guaranteed something like 'ontological security', members of modern society's have nothing left except the hope that functional systems might fulfill expectations. Lurking at the bottom, however, is the knowledge of their instability and endangerment" (quoted in: Beck, U., 1999:115). Today's social actor seems to inhabit a world where meaning is negotiated and contested in the complex interplay between markets, networks, individuals, and strategic organizations. It is a world apparently driven by "basic instincts", "power drives" and "self-centered strategic calculations" (Castells, M., 1997:355). Under these circumstances patterns of social communication are constantly subjected to stress. In consequence, social groups and individuals gradually become alienated from each other. Identities are transformed into something more specific and are increasingly difficult to share. Thus *social fragmentation* spreads. These entropic social tendencies seem to be contributing to a situation where collective meaning is declining to the point of becoming 'scarce' (Turner and Rojek, 2001:36-37).

The *dissolution of collective meaning* is happening within the context of stepped up global economic competition and rising productivity. Meanwhile, the geographic and cultural differentiation of settings for capital accumulation is expanding exponentially due to a new communication system, which is not only integrating globally the cultural production and distribution of words, sounds and images, but also customizing them to different tastes and moods. Driven by global competition and productivity, an increasing abundance of symbolic material is created which stimulates *multiple taste cultures*.

These are conditions that promote *conspicuous consumption*. Current high levels of consumption are in a sense the manifestation of *unregulated desire*. However, a simplistic association of desire with the consumption of commodities and services alone obscures its true locus. The consumption of commodities and services is not an end in itself, but ultimately expresses the individual's *desire for social identity and meaning*. Within the new logic of informationalization and the globalization of cultures and

economies, money becomes, as Giddens suggest, a "symbolic medium with global validity" (Beck, U., 1999: 112). Its use in the acquisition of commodities therefore has symbolic meaning. As Turner and Rojek succinctly remarks: "…exchange value has social use for consumers…"(2001: 50). People's purchases are, in part, calculated status-placing strategies, which are intended to symbolize both cultural and economic value to others.

In the global circulation of cultural material, new symbolic composites are created. These constructed composites function as *cultural codes within commodity culture*. They restore patterns of meaningful communication and association between otherwise anonymous, autonomized individuals. They come to represent shared social meanings. Through their voluntary association with the desires, values and sensibilities that particular products come to stand for, consumers are able to enjoy instant recognition and a sense of belonging. 16

The Marxian concept of commodity fetishism therefore seems inadequate to account for the way in which the commodity functions under present conditions. It assumes that the meaning and value that is invested in the commodity represents a form of covert manipulation of the consumer by the capitalist producer. What it does not recognize however is that contemporary consumers use the commodity's associations in a strategic, reflexive way for their own social purposes. The contemporary consumer is anything but a passive victim of social manipulation. Giddens' reminder that "people do not simply react reflexively to systemic processes, they also adjust their social practices over and over again to changed information and circumstances" seems particularly appropriate in this regard (Beck, U., 1999:112).

The *informationalization and commodification of meaning* under present conditions have very significant implications for large parts of the world's population. The ability to consume and participate in the circuits where information is generated and disseminated have become prerequisites for social recognition. New "rules of inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion are negotiated and established" on this basis (Beck, U., 1999:117). What has happened, is that the prerequisites for social recognition and meaning have become elevated to such an extent that many people now effectively find themselves socially excluded and marginalized. Contemporary social dynamics seem therefore on the whole to be radicalizing *social inequality*. Its effect is felt all the way to "the new fate of the 'outcasts', the 'dropouts' or the homeless, who slip through all the safety nets" (Scott Lash in Beck, U., 1999:117).

It would seem that the transformation of the material base of society by the information technology revolution, the new global economic dispensation and the restructuring of capital, have produced a number of unforeseen consequences. To the extent that it has negatively impacted on the lives of many people, through its dissolution of collective meaning, its problematization of significant social action and its radicalization of social inequality, it has given rise to various *forms of resistance*. According to Manuel Castells (1997), a number of powerful expressions of collective identity have begun to manifest over the last number of decades in response to the perceived detrimental social effects of globalization and cosmopolitanism. These movements challenge the entropic dynamics of

the new informationalized global dispensation on behalf of cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment. Castells refers to them as 'defensive' or 'resistance' identities. Resistance identities are generated by those who find themselves occupying positions that are somehow devalued within the prevailing currents of signification. Their purpose is to galvanize resistance and secure survival on the basis of principles that differ from or are opposed to those that permeate the dominant circuits of society (Castells 1999:08).

The new processes of domination are embedded in information flows. People who attempt to resist the loss of identity and agency within these circuits therefore often take their recourse to strategies that rely on "reverse information flows"(Castells 1999:66). It essentially involves securing the known against the unpredictability of the unknown and uncontrollable. Individuals and communities try to shrink their world back to a size that is comprehensible and controllable. Those forces that tend to subsume individuals and cultural communities in the anonymous and erratic dynamics of a global network of information flows are thus excluded or allowed only limited purchase in the individual or group's hermeneutic transaction with their social reality. In this way, *a sense of limited agency and identity* is claimed and secured. For Castells these forms of social resistance represent a primary site of contemporary social signification. Castells believes that it is from the ranks of those who now entrench themselves from the disorientating and disempowering dynamics of a thoroughly informationalized global dispensation that the most insistent voices in the process of social transformation will emerge in the future.

There arises then, on the social horizon, two opposing social dynamics. The one has to do with the circulation and constant mutation of social representation within a highly dynamic global network of cultural production and distribution. The other revolves around efforts to establish and secure points of collective orientation that facilitate meaningful social action. Together these apparently opposing social trends constitute, in broad terms, the prevailing conditions under which individuals and communities function, and to which they responds in different ways. As such, it is conceivable that these social dynamics could, in combination with the prevailing trends in Conceptualism, provide a significant source of impetus for the adoption of design as creative idiom in contemporary art.

4. The adoption of design as creative idiom in contemporary art

Our brief analysis of the social context of contemporary art has revealed a number of factors that may contribute towards the current social prominence of design. We have seen that new developments in information technology have made it possible to translate ideas into products and services in a way that have never been possible before. Information technology facilitates the development of a seamless cycle of conception and production. It allows the mind to freely express itself in concrete terms. Ideas are now swiftly and easily materialized and circulated in the form of commodities. It is clear that design, as creative discipline would have been one of the prime beneficiaries of these developments. Greater flexibility in the production process allows, and even compels manufacturers to develop more product ranges and to update them more frequently in

order to stay competitive. Within this context of flexible production, design as discipline assumes a new importance. It is designers who are responsible for the translation of new ideas, needs and technologies into viable commodities. In a world where commodities have become far more than functional, they provide that indispensable 'added value' that ultimately decides the fate of a new product on the open market. As such the designers' skills become crucial in sustaining the cycle of production and consumption on which the capitalist economy relies.

We have also seen how developments in information technology and the restructuring of capital have brought about a great deal of social disorientation. It has dissolved many traditional meaning structures, making significant social action difficult and suppressing shared social meaning. Bereft of the existential comfort of traditional sources of orientation, many people around the world have turned to the consumption of commodities as a source of pleasurable escapism and as a form of social communication and identification. It seems fair to suppose then that as the social role of commodity consumption is amplified, the processes that are involved in their conception and production would enjoy a parallel trajectory. Design thus rises in prominence and importance as people come to rely more and more on commodity consumption for a sense of meaning, importance and identity.

From our brief exploration, it appears that there are also currents within contemporary thought that would facilitate, if not encourage the emergence of design as a prominent site of social exchange. We have seen that these lines of thinking tend generally to support the unification of cognitive, ethico-political and libidinal-aesthetic existential modalities in representation. One current of thought within contemporary Conceptual art revolves around strong anti-essentialist sentiments. Because of this emphasis, the unification of Modernity's autonomized existential modalities is effected in a particular way; cognitive and ethico-political aspects of life are drawn into and subsumed under a libidinal-aesthetic mode of engagement. As such this strain of thought tends to facilitate the aesthetic expression of unrestrained desire. In its relentless anti-essentialism it is a paradigm that is well aligned with the restless mutation of social signification in a global network of complex interactions. However, as a hermeneutic approach that privileges a form of libidinal-aesthetic engagement, it is also exceptionally accommodating of a ceaseless cycle of commodity production and consumption. If this line of thinking does not overtly encourage people to turn from all forms of social structuration towards a libidinal investment in the consumption of aesthetic artifacts, it certainly does not discourage it either. There is also a close parallel between the profit-driven production of commodities and their desire-driven consumption. The profit motive that rules the market and the aesthetic desire that fuels commodity consumption both manifest as a self-sustaining, self referential and conceptually unaccommodating drive. It stubbornly resists representational containment. It is in this respect that it finds such a supportive paradigm in the anti-representationalism of certain strands of poststructuralist thought. What all of this suggests then is that strong anti-essentialist elements in contemporary thought may contribute to the existential investment of individuals in the consumption of commodities. Because design plays such an important role in articulating the focus of this libidinal-

aesthetic mode of existence, anti-representational currents of thought effectively accentuate the social significance of design.

 The other major strand of thought in Conceptualist art may also find itself in a special sort of relationship with design. In this line of thinking the unification of Modernity's autonomized existential modalities is effected in a way that tends to privilege ethico-political consideration. As we have seen, the concerns of those who's thinking are informed by this hermeneutic agenda tends to revolve around notions of social power and agency. Our exploration so far suggests that people tend to assess and establish their relative social significance in terms of their consumer behavior. People may use commodities to strategically align and identify themselves, to compete with one another, and to signify their power and success. Patterns of commodity consumption are therefore punctuated by discourses of power. In addition, commodities are carriers of value associations. A particular product may come to stand, in the popular imagination, for a whole way of living. By purchasing a particular product, the consumer aligns him/herself with the values that are aesthetically expressed in it. Although the consumer is ostensibly free to choose any particular product and to thereby align him\herself with its specific constellation of associated social dispositions, these value composites remain, for the most part, pre-packaged. The consumer has simply to slip into the mode of being that the product represents as if it were a tailor made jacket. Commodities may therefore play, in contemporary culture, a certain regulatory role as far as the conditioning of behaviour and attitudes are concerned. As such, they are intimately linked not only to discourses around social power, but also to issues of personal and collective agency. Designers are in a sense the formulators and articulators of consumerist regimes of socialization. Given the central role of design in contemporary social dynamics then, it would hardly be surprising to find artists, who are interested in notions of agency and power, attracted to design as an important arena of aesthetic social contestation. Design is the site where relations of power are aesthetically negotiated and articulated in contemporary consumer culture. It is here that the individual, who seeks to differentiate him/herself socially, is compelled to register the terms of his\her autonomy.

It seems then that there may be reason to suspect that artists who subscribe to both of the major strands of Conceptual investment in contemporary art may be motivated, in different ways, to accommodate and exploit the aesthetic codes and creative procedures of design in their work. We inhabit a social world where people have begun to think, believe, negotiate, contest, associate, dissociate and even act aesthetically. Whether individual artists are interested in resisting social structuration or actively participating in it, it seems increasingly difficult to pursue a serious representational programme with any degree of social efficacy (as the conceptualist of the sixties and seventies believed it necessary to do) without giving some account of it in terms now dominated by the discourses of design. Artists have always had to negotiate the social role and significance of art within the various historical settings in which they have functioned. Given current trends of thought and contemporary social developments, many artists may be destined to become 'designers' of artworks. In what is to follow we shall explore the work of American artist Andrea Zittel in an effort to gain some understanding of what it might mean to 'design', rather than 'create' as an artist in today's world.

5. The Artist as Designer

The creative oeuvre of Andrea Zittel represents a particularly pertinent case in terms of the interests and priorities that we have been reflecting upon so far. If there are currents of conceptualist thought in contemporary artistic practice that stresses, on the one hand, resistance to all forms of semantic structuration through an investment in libidinal-aesthetic experience and, on the other, the importance of claiming some sort of personal agency within the dynamics of social structuration, then Zittel's work, in a sense, encompasses both.

Zittel was trained both as an artist and as an industrial designer. Her early works show a pronounced interest in the dynamics of social conditioning and the notion of personal agency. In order to construct these works, she began by studying breeding protocols. Armed with this expertise, she developed a series of so-called "Breeding Units" (See Figure 1). With these she carried out a series of experiments on flies and chickens aimed at demonstrating how physical structures could induce behavioral patterns, which would contribute towards the definition of mutations. As Heidi Fichter (2000:120) has pointed out, these early experiments were but the first signs of an abiding interest in the ways in which humankind is conditioned and, one might add, the implications that this has for the notion of personal agency or autonomy.[4] Zittel's experiments seems to have left her with little doubt that "the physical structures we live in, such as architecture, interior design, and urban layouts, influence our perceptions and actions" (Andrea Zittel, 2002:102). It is perhaps in this observation that one of the basic motifs of her entire oeuvre is to be located: "Design has a direct, if forced, consequence upon our lives. Every once in a while, good design may in some way improve our situation…" (Andrea Zittel quoted in Weil, B., 1994:22). What this "improvement" might involve, we shall discover in due course.

Zittel's interest in social conditioning through the structuration of the aesthetic environment, has led her into an ambiguous position somewhere between the conventional disciplinary boundaries of art and design**.** She sees herself as a designer working from the position of an artist (2002:181). Despite her interest in the strategies of aesthetic structuration conventionally associated with design, she continues to maintain a strong sense of allegiance to what she perceives to be the essential goals of artistic endeavour: "…there is a tendency to blur the boundaries between architecture and product design and art. And in some way all these things are art…but I still think a lot about my own personal criteria for what makes something 'art' and I believe that art really should change the way somebody experiences something" (Andrea Zittel, 2002: 130). The artist, from Zittel's perspective, is someone who is somehow able to identify and intervene in the social-aesthetic structures that condition our experience and

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[4] One of the more recent manifestations of Zittel's interest in the dynamics of social conditioning is a body of work entitled "Time Trials" (See Figure 2). In these works, Zittel addresses time as an imposed social structure. Through various strategies, she attempts to alter her audience's perception of time in order to discover how it might influence everyday thought patterns and practices.

perception of the world. It is not difficult to see how this emphasis aligns her with the strand of conceptualist practice that revolves around issues of social power and personal agency. Zittel is acutely aware of the unprecedented social influence of design in contemporary consumer culture, but as an artist she also seems determined to claim some sort of critical autonomy or personal agency for the individual within this all-encompassing theatre of social-aesthetic imbrication.

It is no surprise then, as Jan Avgikos has noted, that: "[n]othing about Zittel's art suggests itself as a remedy for what ails the masses. Rather… the configuration constantly generated is that of the individual…" (2000:15). What is particularly interesting about Zittel's work however, and what allows it to expand its scope towards the relativizing and subjectivizing, libidinal-aesthetic mode of engagement so often associated with strong anti-essentialist priorities, is that the individual, who is the focus of most of her investigations and creative interventions, is "a lot like the artist herself." (Avgikos, J., 2000:15-16). She explains this creative strategy in the following terms: "I've often thought that by examining myself, I try to comprehend the world…I'm sort of a sample citizen of culture at large. I find that I often tend to embody ideas as a form of critique" (Andrea Zittel, 2002:118).

 In order to facilitate her subjective investigations and interventions into the 'objective' conditions that structure consciousness independent of individual perception and experience, Zittel takes her own personal and practical needs and circumstances as a point of departure. She is, in effect, her own primary client as a designer, the one for whom all her design solutions are ultimately intended. For instance, the so-called 'Living Units' (See Figure 3&4) were developed in response to the living and working conditions of her life in New York. At the time, she had little space, few belongings, and she was often forced to move from place to place. The goal of these units then, was to take the unavoidable limitations of her situation and convert them into something positive

Many of Zittel's projects address what may be seen as her own pressing personal needs, such as the need for security, personal autonomy, and a sense of agency. Sometimes these needs are simply expressed as a need for control over her own life. Zittel often describes her life as chaotic and frantic. For this reason she places a premium on simplicity and efficiency in the environments that she designs. Jan Avgikos describes the aesthetic sensibility that informs her work as "a pared down, minimal means for maximal living attitude" (2000:15). By simplifying and streamlining her environment, Zittel is able, in a sense, to maximally structure her own experience around her need for a sense of agency.

 Another way in which Zittel attempts to gain a greater degree of control over her life, is by subjecting her activities to self-formulated rules or parametres. The imposition of rules on an activity has a very similar effect to the functional consolidation and aesthetic simplification of a living or working environment. It gives the artist a greater sense of security by allowing her to insulate herself more effectively against that which she cannot consciously and deliberately control. "I found myself doing this sort of self-systematizing long before I started to make art", writes Zittel, "and I always thought that it was sort of

interesting. I think my most controlling impulses often came when I was feeling the most vulnerable and the least powerful" (Andrea Zittel, 2002:121).

An early example of this kind of legislative impulse in Zittel's work is her so-called "Personal Panels" (See Figure 5&6). The Personal Panels are garments that Zittel created for herself using certain self-imposed design guidelines. More specifically, she limited herself to making garments in the shape of rectangles because, as the constructivists once pointed out, fabric is woven in rectangles and should therefore not be cut and sown into 'alien' shapes. Zittel is perfectly willing to admit that rules of this nature are arbitrary and slightly absurd, but this, for her, is not the point. "[S]ometimes", she explains, "we actually need limitations more than we need liberation" (2002:108). These rules then are able, as well as any, to serve as a vehicle for consolidating the process of aesthetic structuration.

 A more recent and particularly interesting instance of Zittel's desire to eliminate those aspects of her life, which she cannot readily subject to her own direct control, is her so-called "Raugh" philosophy. In the "Raugh" cosmology, the messy and chaotic aspects of daily life are accommodated within a proposed 'natural' order of things, allowing it to assume a sort of non-threatening, serendipitous quality. Clothes, for instance, would find their proper location where they fall, as they are stripped from the body after a long day. From the perspective of the "Raugh" philosophy then, accidents and transgressions are effectively legislated out of existence. Spontaneous, inadvertent or unconscious actions can no longer disturb the proper order of things; they can only contribute towards its manifestation. For Zittel, "inventing categories creates an illusion that there is an overriding rationality in the way that the world works" (2002:114). She has developed an entire line of products to facilitate the incorporation of this comforting philosophy into daily life (See Figure 7). These include, among other things, floor surfaces that are designed to accommodate and hide dirt instead of resisting it.

Many of Zittel's projects are aimed at securing a sense of personal autonomy in the face of social pressures that would, in her estimation, compel and entice the individual to conform, to an unacceptable degree, to a mode of existence not of his/her own design. Zittel uses the term "Small Liberties" to define "the small ways that one [can] carve out personal freedoms and autonomy in an overwhelming bureaucratic society" (Andrea Zittel, 2002:11). According to Zittel, people today generally feel themselves socially disempowered and in consequence they "attempt to free themselves from social conventions or governmental restrictions by shrinking down to fit into the cracks of larger systems- or by turning inward toward some sort of private or personal realm" (ibid). She creates for herself a sense of personal autonomy by creating and living by a set of personally imposed rules that fit 'inside' of larger regulations imposed by society. For her this represents an effective strategy for "slip[ping] in between the cracks of larger authoritative systems" (2000:121). She constructs "smaller, more enclosed systems that are even more restrictive than those in the outside world" (ibid). "You can become so cocooned in these little self –invented structures", she claims, "that you almost believe the larger systems don't actually exist anymore" (ibid).

One of Zittel's projects that express this need for a sense of personal autonomy within a limited personal sphere is the "A-Z Pocket Property" (See Figure 8&9). It consists of a small ocean- faring island constructed from wood and fiberglass on which the artist and a number of close friends lived for a few weeks while floating in international waters. It was designed, according to Zittel, "as a place with unique potential for security, autonomy, and independence" (2002:20). She describes the impulse that prompted the design in the following words: "As the world around us becomes increasingly complex, it is not surprising that the most human reaction is to try to shrink it back down into manageable proportions- to go live on a deserted island, so to speak. In this case the ultimate luxury is not a limitless palette but a small, intimate universe in which to explore the parameters of one's own personal options. The A-Z Pocket Property is in a sense then, a manifestation of Zittel's need to create and inhabit her own personal, 'intimate universe'. It is a private, independent space where the artist enjoys almost absolute control. It is in its isolation from, and insulation against that, which would structure her experience in a way that is beyond her own direct auspices, that this little floating enclave's peculiar potential for providing a sense of personal security lies for the artist.

Zittel's "A-Z Escape Vehicles" (see figure 10) respond to a similar need. They satisfy, as Jan Avgikos suggests, the desire "to disappear, to get away, to escape, to hibernate from a world that's perceived to be too big and threatening" (2000:16). These "pod-like" vehicles "have uniform metal exteriors, but the interiors are customized to reflect the "personal needs and individual styles" of their owners (Rochelle Steiner, 2002:552). In her promotional material Zittel describes the rationale behind these strange vehicles: "Have you ever felt like the whole world is pressing in on you? You need to escape from it all…[?] This is the kind of situation to which the A-Z Escape vehicle has been designed to respond, The Escape Vehicle reduces the world to manageable proportions and allows you to escape to your own personal 'inner' world…" (2002:104).

The "Escape Vehicles" should also be understood within the context of other statements by Zittel. She writes: "I am fascinated by how people see the interiors of their homes as the one place where they are free to be whoever they 'really are'…and also [by] how [the way in which] they decorate their interiors can somehow reveal their soul or character" (Andrea Zittel, 2002:132). Zittel's remarks underscores an observation by Yvonne Volkart about her work: "[It]…unmasks the individual, neurotic picture that many of us in Western capitalist society have of security: when you're in possession of your own four walls, the world is in order and you have a sense of yourself as a subject" (Yvonne Volkart, 1997:97). The environments that Zittel creates allow her to insulate herself from a world that would draw her into its disorientating complexity and dynamic fluidity. Afraid that she may somehow have to surrender her sense of coherent selfhood, she chooses instead to subject her 'self' to a clearly defined set of conceptual parametres or to insert her 'self' within the confines of a tightly controlled aesthetic environment. It is a clear indication that, for Zittel, her desire for a sense of personal agency ultimately takes precedence over her anti-essentialist sympathies.

This desire for a sense of self-possession also finds expression in the portability of virtually all of her design products. Avgikos relates this aspect of her work to the notion

of mobility. On this basis he draws relations between Zittel's design mentality and the 'do- it- yourself tradition' of 70's 'nomadic furniture'. This do-it –yourself attitude was practiced both as an aesthetic and as an ethic. It was perceived, according to Avgikos, as "constituting a form of resistance to the excesses of full-blown consumer culture and ratifying self-reliance as the best defense against death by commodification" (Avgikos, J., 2000:16). For Avgikos, the theme of autonomous mobility and self-reliance, that is such a consistent feature throughout Zittel's oeuvre, is emblematic of a certain "subversiveness… in relations drawn between the individual and dominant culture" (ibid). The basic idea appears to be that one can shape one's own life and environment without having to subject oneself to the constant impositions and manipulation of others. Zittel's "A-Z 2001 Homestead Unit" (See Figure 11) is perhaps one of the best examples of this attitude. These 'units' consist of small, portable structures that evade the regulatory control of bureaucratic restrictions such as building and safety codes. Because the unit is less than 120 square feet, it is zoned as a 'temporary structure' and does not require building permits. The entire unit breaks down into as series of panels and can be transported and erected by two people in a very short period of time. Zittel herself connotes this project with what she refers to as "the original pioneering spirit of the frontier" (2002:60). It is an attitude that she describes in terms of the notions of "autonomy and self-sufficiency" (ibid). Zittel is quite explicit about the purpose of her mobile structures. "The A-Z 2001 Homestead Unit reflects", she writes, " the qualities that we feel create independence for the owner and user: compactness, adaptability, and transportability" (ibid). Projects like the "A-Z Homestead Unit" are emblematic of the priority that Zittel gives to the ability of the individual to evade that, which would impose upon or limit his/her capacity for self-structuration.

If a lot of Zittel's work is aimed at addressing her need for a sense of security, control and autonomy, her design programme as a whole also attempts to accommodate and facilitate creativity and productivity. Zittel's priorities in this regard relates to what she calls her "forward motion theory" (2002:99). She writes: "I believe that we are most happy when we feel that we are moving forward toward something that we have not quite attained" (Andrea Zittel, 2002:100). Elsewhere she indicates how this need for purposefulness is translated into her creative programme: "Initially, when we were resolving the design of the first Living Unit, we imagined that we should create a perfected structure that would solve all of our problems. Although the final design was quite successful, we found that instead of feeling content, we actually felt rather bored and directionless. We then came to a theory that it is actually direction, or the idea of progress, that makes most of us happy, not a perfect end result. In light of this we set up a programme for continuing to reinvent the Living Unit infinitely" (2002:62).
What Zittel is in effect articulating here is a need for meaningful action. Meaningful action, within the context of Zittel's artistic oeuvre, is, more often than not, expressed as the desire for some form of agency within a limited, empowering personal sphere. In a thoroughly networked world the forces that shape social life have become complex and dispersed to such an extent, that the actions of individuals often seem to vanish, within its dynamics, without a trace. Within this context, it is hardly surprising that Zittel should place such an emphasis on meaningful action, or that she should seek to compensate for its potential dilution in the infinitely open world of digital interpolation through the self-

imposition of clearly defined aesthetic parametres upon her private sphere of existence. Zittel needs to be creative and productive, but she can ultimately only proceed within the context of a clearly defined telos. It is perhaps this aspect of her creative sensibilities that attracted her to, and continues to draw her into the purposive paradigm of industrial design.

The persistent reference, in Zittel's designs, to her private needs and desires suggests that her products' functional structuration may in fact represent no more than an aesthetic articulation of the artist's personal libidinal dispositions. In other words, the functionality of her work may lie in the fact that it facilitates experiences, for the artist, which somehow satisfy or address her various personal needs and desires. In an interview with Benjamin Weil (1994:22), she admits that, although she initially saw her design activities as a "service", she ultimately realized that she was only able to design for herself. Zittel's employment of herself as primary point of reference in her work cannot however simply be dismissed as evidence of a self-indulgent egocentrism. It stems, in part, from her genuine belief in the relativity and subjectivity of all signification. For her, the best way to deal with this inescapable bias is to acknowledge and exploit it. Under no circumstance however, should the individual attempt to unilaterally impose structure on another person's life. When Zittel does design for others, as in the case of her "A-Z Escape Vehicles", she insists that her customers become co-authors of the final product in its various customized manifestations.

Zittel's position in this regard sets her work apart from the forms of imposed social structuration that is sometimes associated with commercial design in its more Modernist manifestations. It also seems to align her, in important respects, with those, among the ranks of contemporary art practitioners, who regard any attempt at social representation with suspicion. "Modern design", Zittel muses, "evokes the innocence of childhood when you would construct a house out of a blanket or fantasize about living in a dome-shaped structure or completely reconstructing the world, based on your own principle of geometry. It is the need to validate these early experiments that created the oppressive morality that we react to now " (Andrea Zittel quoted in Weil, B., 1994:22).

It could also be argued however, that Zittel's championing of a strict anti-universalistic design imperative is simply a somewhat covert form of individualistic liberalism. From such a perspective, her adoption of this position is a fairly logical concession to make for someone who is interested in securing a social space within which to indulge her apparently essentialist desire for personal autonomy and agency. Furthermore, her own design methodology suggests strong affinities with the construction of the kind of fantasy worlds of which she speaks here. It is perhaps this aspect of her work that has prompted Matthew Ritchie (1998:81) to suggest that Zittel does not make 'real' spaces or 'real' things. He proposes instead that what she creates is "alternate realities". In Ritchie's view then, Zittel's achievement lies in "constructing 'functional' alternatives that are as 'real' as reality itself…"(ibid).

The precise meaning of Ritchie's remarks comes into clearer focus when one considers it in conjunction with another statement by Zittel herself: "I think about the physical

experience of being in [a] place rather than the practicalities of day-to-day life in that space. I know that this must seem weird, given the seemingly functional nature of my work" (Andrea Zittel, 2002:131). If Zittel's work is in some sense not 'real', as Ritchie suggests, it is perhaps because it is often not particularly functional in terms of the requirements of 'real' day-to-day living. It is a quality on which a number of commentators have remarked. For Jerry Salz, for instance, her work suggests "a pre-modern condition without plumbing, toilets, zippers or buttons ", which "leaves you puzzling over whether her objects are as functional as she claims they are" (1994:100-101). In consequence, Salz interprets and evaluates her work not as innovative functional design, but as "wonderfully quirky, immaculate poetry" (ibid). Gregory Vogel likewise interprets her oeuvre, not in terms of its practical value, but within the context of what he calls Zittel's "oddball visionary bent" (1998:95).

On the other hand, if Zittel's work seems as 'real' as 'reality' itself, despite its apparent disregard for mundane utility, it may be because 'reality' itself appears to have become 'unreal'. According to Manuel Castells (1996: 169), we have moved beyond the notion of 'virtual reality' towards a world of 'real virtuality'. It is a world that is shaped and constantly transformed by the feverish push and pull of unrestrained fantasy and desire. In this world, designers are no longer required to create products that merely *work* well; the market wants things that *feel* good too. The primary function of contemporary consumer goods then, is to serve human *desire*, rather than *need*. Within this context, the apparent ability of Zittel's design products to satisfy her desire for security, autonomy and agency allow them to appear not only as 'real' as 'reality' itself, but also perfectly 'functional'.

6. Conclusion

The world that artist-designers like Andrea Zittel inhabit is a complex and dynamic one driven by a breathless cycle of libidinal productivity. It is a place where a sublime desire for profit, particularity and plurality compete with the compulsion to attain some sense of self-possessed subjectivity, personal agency, and social identity. Taken as a whole, it represents no less than a comprehensive imbrication of cognitive, ethico-political and libidinal-aesthetic existential modalities in contemporary consciousness. It is a sensibility that has announced itself in every field of human endeavour. Our analysis suggests that it has registered in contemporary conceptualist art in what seems to be a consolidation of interests around two distinct, though related representational agendas. The one centres on resistance to hermeneutic closure and the facilitation of semantic polysemy, and may be interpreted as an aesthetic enactment of a broader societal obsession with incessant, unfocussed proliferation. The other is primarily concerned with the social distribution of power and the efforts of those associated with it are often aimed at somehow intervening in the flow of information through the powerful circuits of public perception. The apparent synergy between this set of conceptualist priorities and the growing need of many individuals to somehow resist or contain the entropic technological and capitalist forces that threaten to overwhelm and strip them of their social agency and identity is surely not coincidental.

In the popular imagination art is often still associated with the free articulation of ineffable desire. As such, it is drawn upon, and drawn into the wider cycle of libidinal production that drives contemporary social dynamics. In addition, Conceptualism's traditional investments in cognitive analysis and ethico-political activism compel it to engage with those productive forces that shape and transform social relations and hermeneutic sensibilities. It is therefore driven, if only by the shear weight and trajectory of its own critical-creative traditions, to insert itself within the feverish circuit of transactions that energise contemporary social subjectivity. Together these dynamics have the effect of setting into motion a process of reciprocal attraction between contemporary conceptualist art and the world of commodity production and consumption. At the point where they meet, the artist-designer/ designer-artist is born.

This liminal figure occupies a unique position within society's restless operations. Those, like Andrea Zittel, who, in a sense, claim and assume the privileges and responsibilities of both the artist and designer, are left with a unique opportunity to mediate, modulate and moderate between all the disparate elements that animate contemporary consciousness. It is a daunting prospect and almost too demanding a responsibility to bear. There are moments in the work of Zittel and other artist-designers/ designer-artists that the compromises necessary to maintain this precarious balancing act seem almost desperate.

Zittel, in particular, appears mostly unwilling to risk her carefully constructed and delicately nurtured sense of self-possession by subjecting it to the crucible of inter-subjectivity. "On the one hand", she admits, "I really desire to be part of something greater than myself, to reach outward to share, nurture, and develope the common goal of a larger community. But an equal desire to expand inward, to build a complex and self-sustaining private universe, always complicates the impulse. My inner world makes me feel safe and in control, but it is also limited to a very strict set of parameters" (Andrea Zittel, 2002:133). Zittel always remains more of a simplifier that a synthesizer or mediator. In her own ongoing negotiation with a world full of contradictory desires it is mostly her impulse to contain, restrain, isolate and insulate that takes precedence. It is perhaps precisely this quality that gives her work its peculiar poignancy. The instinct for self-preservation that Zittel's work articulates so succinctly is one that resonates well in a world that seems always to be veering towards a catastrophic condition of social entropy. Zittel's experiments however also serve to confirm a long-standing tradition of casting the artist in the position of the 'outsider'. This is particularly unfortunate at a time when the intimate association of art and design allows the artist at last to assume the position of the "insider' in society's discourses.

Perhaps the kind of creativity that is called for in the time of the artist-designer/ designer –artist is of the precarious kind that is born of unresolved tensions. The challenge for the artist-designer/designer-artist then is to harness society's contradictory desires and make them productive. The promise that this new creative role in society holds out is one that is perhaps still to be fully exploited. Be that as it may, today's artist-designer/ designer-artist stands as an emblem of all those forms of messy mutual imbrication to which life in our time seems to have become so uniquely prone.

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Figure 1.

"A-Z Breeding Unit for Averaging Eight Breeds", 1993.
Source: Riemschneider, B. & Grosenick, U. (Eds) (1999:557).

Figure 2.

"A-Z Time Tunnel: Time to do nothing productive at all"
Source: Zittel, A. (2002: 102-103)
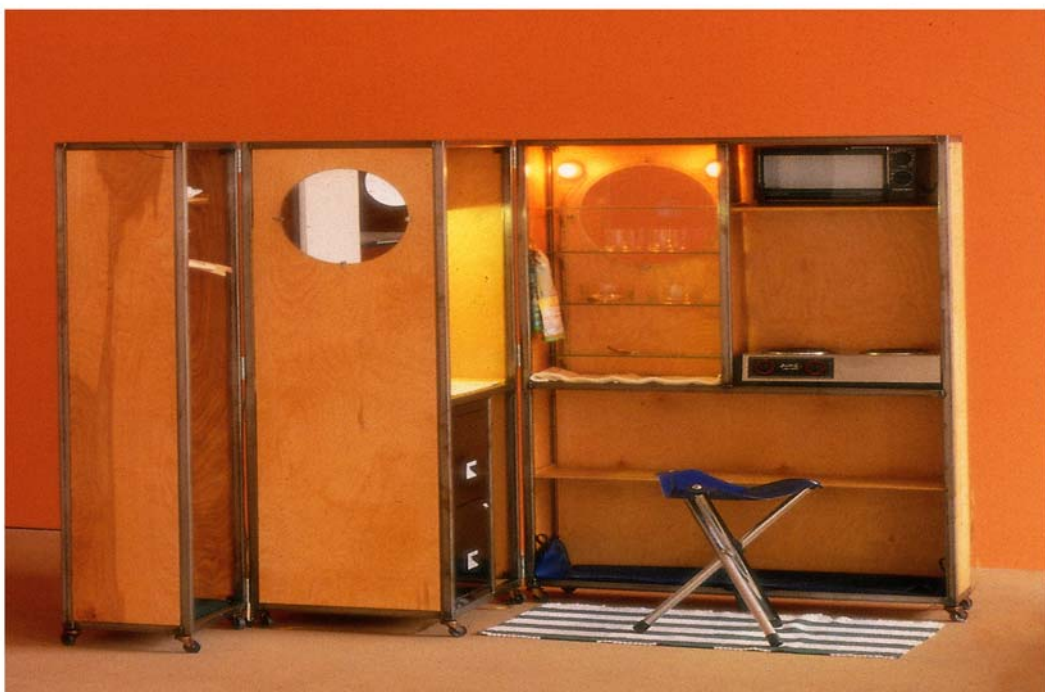
Figure 3.

Figure 4.

"1994 A-Z Living Unit", 1994.
Source: Zdenek, F. (Ed) (2000:29).

"1993 A-Z Living Unit", 1993.
Source: Zdenek, F. (Ed) (2000: 20-21).

Figure 5.

"Dress Fall 1993" and "Dress Spring-Summer 1994", 1993-1994.
Source: Zdenek, F. (Ed) (2000:29).

Figure 6.

"Olive, Red and Black 'Window Pane' Personal Panel", 1995-1998.
Source: Zittel, A. (2000:78).

Figure 7.

"Raugh Poster", 1998.
Source: Zdenek, F. (Ed) (2000:60-61).

Figure 8 & 9.

"A-Z Prototype for Pocket Property", 1999.
Source: Zitttel, A. (2000: 21-23).

Figure 10.

"A-Z Escape Vehicle customized by Andrea Zittel; A-Z Escape Vehicle owned and customized by Andrea Rosen; A-Z Escape Vehicle owned and customized by Robert Shiffler", 1996.
Source: Zittel, A. (2002:105).

Figure 11.

"A-Z Homestead Unit", 2001.
Source: Zittel, A. (2002:61).