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Abstract: This paper puts philosopher Jacques Rancière's paradoxical materialist account of modern aesthetics in dialogue with the combines of art and design produced by contemporary artist Andrea Zittel. Drawing on Rancière's formulations, the paper will explain, in historical and philosophical terms, why Zittel's design art disrupts ontological divisions and hierarchies between different spheres of practice, while also asserting the autonomy of aesthetic experience.

Key words: Materialism, aesthetics, design, art

Material Thinking: the aesthetic philosophy of Jacques Rancière and the design art of Andrea Zittel

Introduction

An early version of this paper was presented in 2007 at a workshop at the University of New South Wales. Of concern to the participants was the social role of creative research in art and design, within an Australian university context where such research is regularly treated with scepticism or incomprehension. A key starting point for this conversation was Paul Carter's book *Material Thinking* (Carter, 2004). Here, Carter makes a case for the distinctive character of creative research in art and design, or what he calls 'material thinking,' in contrast to research directed by instrumental goals, or the empirical and objective claims of scientific investigation. Carter's account of 'material thinking' includes a privileging of collaborative and cross-disciplinary practices, as well as 'inventive' research attuned to open-ended, unpredictable outcomes. This process-orientated mode of thinking is taken to impart a sense of social formations as themselves eternally 'unfinished' and evolving structures (Carter, 2004, p. 13). These aspects of Carter's argument provide a useful starting point for my discussion of a contemporary art practice and a recently emergent aesthetic theory that echo aspects of Carter's brand of materialism. Andrea Zittel's combines of art and design, and philosopher Jacques Rancière's account of modern aesthetics share Carter's eschewal of ontological divisions between different spheres of creative practice. Moreover, Rancière, like Carter, builds a spirited defense of the socio-political importance of creative work in art and design.

Carter insists that creative practices serve society's needs in a number of ways. They workshop alternative forms of social relation; they reconfigure outdated collective mythologies, and responding to the recent prominence of ecological issues, they may figure different kinds of environmental 'interactivity' to those that have prevailed in modern industrialised societies (Carter, 2004, p. 11). Implicitly informing Carter's argument is an ethos of equality, where material thinking is aligned with a democratising impetus. For example, creative collaborations are said to foster inter-subjective relations of give and take, such that collaborators are likened to lovers willing to be plastically moulded or transformed by the other's desire (Carter, 2004, p. xiii). In similar vein, material thinking is said to model a non-dominating relationship with the sensate world. This is echoed by the way in which 'material thinking' projects a certain agency onto the material supports of creative practice, an agency that resists or diverts the untrammelled will of the creator. Although the theoretical resources of Paul Carter's argument are multiple and varied, his materialist approach lacks an historical and philosophical awareness of the aesthetic theories that inform the modern tradition of art, including the democratising gestures of his version of 'material thinking.' Indicative of this blind spot is Carter's claim that material thinking's 'dismembering' of prevailing mythic structures is 'not aesthetic, but social and political' (Carter, 2004, p. 11). I suspect that what lies behind this assertion is a now familiar postmodern negation of the concept of aesthetic autonomy, and with it the tradition of artistic modernism.

The following brings into question the hierarchical division between aesthetics and politics that Carter and much postmodern thought assumes. It will show that features of Carter's material thinking, as previously itemised, are in keeping with ideas, practices and possibilities opened up by what Rancière calls the 'aesthetic regime of art' (Ranciere, 2002). Rancière locates the seeds of this episteme of art, roughly congruent with modernity, in writings on aesthetics by Kant, Hegel and the German Romantics, including Schelling and Schiller. He offers an historical and philosophical account of the link between modern aesthetics and democratic maxims, as well as the prevalence of discipline crossovers in art since Romanticism. Drawing from his formulations, I shall examine how the art of Andrea Zittel paradoxically initiates interfaces between art and design, while also asserting the autonomy of aesthetic experience.

The hybrid genre of design art

Andrea Zittel's practice exemplifies a trend towards discipline crossovers between art and design that gained prominence in international art during the 1990s. Because her art ranges across interior, furniture, architectural, clothing and industrial design, it is included in a recent book by British critic Alex Coles that announces the advent of the new, hybrid genre of *DesignArt* (Coles, 2005) Other contemporary artists associated with design art include Liam Gillick, Jorge Pardo, Tobias Rehberger, Angela Bullock and Atelier Van Lieshout. Coles was one of the first to identify design as a preoccupation in contemporary art, and his book provides a useful account of how such art relates to an earlier history of avant-garde engagements with design. However, I wish to question Coles's claim that design art, such as Zittel's, simply abandons those traditions of modern art that asserted art's autonomy from adjacent cultural fields, or the wider culture of modernity.

In an interview with Stefano Basilico of 2001, Andrea Zittel implies that she was attracted to design as a way of invigorating the social purchase of her art, especially since design has become such a pervasive aspect of contemporary life (Basilico, 2001, p. 72). The idea that design comprises a fecund medium (in the broadest sense) for engaging with larger social issues is echoed in a short piece written by Zittel for *Artforum* in 2004. In 'Shabby Chic,' she worries that contemporary art has 'dropped into a monotonous hum of personal themes, interests and technical specialities, which may bring commercial success but do little to inspire the larger social mechanism of art' (Zittel, 2004, p. 211). She also expresses a slight nostalgia for earlier avant-gardes engaged in collective endeavours of social transformation; and certainly the streamlined geometry of many of Zittel's works pays homage to the design-orientated avant-gardes of Soviet Productivism and the Bauhaus. Yet, Zittel also cautions in the *Bomb* interview that 'before I make it sound like I'm promoting design over art I have to say that although I like design issues, a lot of design gets confused with corporate marketing' (Basilico, 2001, p. 72). Here she may well be referring to a gap between an earlier history of design committed to social and political reform, and design's currently prominent role in the commercial expansion of global capitalism. The recent escalation of design's expansion into every facet of contemporary life, and its complicity with commercial culture has been the subject of a number of recent commentaries.

In his recent article 'From Visual Culture to Design Culture,' Guy Julier uses the term 'design culture' to designate the 'massification' of design production and consumption in the last three decades. He notes that during this period design products and services have attained an unprecedented role in 'articulating value, in structuring the circulation of information and forming everyday practices' (Julier, 2006, p. 72). In another recent edition of *Design Issues*, Gui Bonsiepe speaks of a turning away in design practice from functionality and practical problem solving, towards the ephemeral, the fashionable and the luxurious, (Bonsiepe, 2006, p. 28). Within an art context, Hal Foster echoes such claims in his book *Design and Crime*, (Foster, 2002b). This text describes a contemporary world engulfed by all manner of designed identities and products, with design cast negatively as the primary lubricant of the commercial imperatives of globalisation. In a supplementary publication Foster writes: 'Today everything—from architecture and art to jeans and genes—is treated as so much design. Those old heroes of industrial modernism, the artist-as-engineer and the author-as-producer, are long gone, and the post-industrial designer rules supreme' (Foster, 2002a, p. 192). Responding to design's increasingly intrusive role in the aestheticisation of everyday life, Foster reanimates Adolph Loos's analogy between decorative excess and criminality, and calls for the reassertion of art's autonomy. This represents a dramatic about face on Foster's part. In the 1980s, his writings zealously promoted the interdisciplinary impetus of postmodernism, precisely in order to negate the modernist doctrine of aesthetic autonomy. But nowadays, Foster views postmodern hybridity as 'routine,' and worse, as complicit with the penetration of design, as agent of neo-liberal capitalism, into every aspect of life (Foster, 2002b, p. 25). While I have no wish to criticise Foster for raising the issue of aesthetic autonomy, the moralistic tenor of his polemic, where the integrity of art is simply annexed from the degraded realm of design, is of little use when broaching a practice such as Zittel's. At the same time, Alex Coles's more optimistic take on the interdisciplinary logic of design art also demands critical scrutiny.

In line with postmodern discourse, Coles sees design art as seeking to overcome a division between fine art and design sustained in modern culture at least since the 19th Century (Coles, 2005, p. 10). Although Helmut Draxler has observed that the hardening of this categorical division actually occurred in the 1950s in design education as much as fine art. Draxler cites the example of the influential Ulm School of Design, which during the 1950s ‘tolerated no artists within the strictly scientific and functional canon’ (Draxler, 2006, p. 155). Rejecting any clear separation between art and design, Coles quotes the 20th Century philosopher Vilém Flusser, who speaks of *techne*, the Ancient Greek word for art, and its relation to the Greek term for carpenter (*tekton*). Flusser contends: ‘The basic idea here is that wood is a shapeless material to which the artist, the technician, gives form, thereby causing form to appear in the first place,’ (as cited in Coles, 2005, pp. 8-10). In other words, the work of artist and carpenter (as surrogate of the designer) is the same in that both instantiate a human formalising power to actively mould the passive sensuousness of matter. This definition of design and art as processes that make form appear recalls the concept of *disegno* in Renaissance art theory, where drawing (or design) was considered fundamental to all of the arts. Coles recommends Flusser’s argument because it speaks of design and art as broadly synonymous with each other. I want to propose, however, that this particular conflation of art and design takes no account of historical shifts regarding the thinking of form, and the specificity of aesthetic experience that are part of the modern tradition of art. While Coles’s account of design art has much to recommend it, his cursory treatment of the issue of aesthetic autonomy is as unedifying as any other postmodern negation of modernism.

A more nuanced historical and materialist account of the issues of aesthetic autonomy, and discipline hybridity in modern art occurs in Jacques Rancière’s writings on aesthetics. His studies of aesthetic philosophy, art and politics remark a difference between a modern thinking of art, and the Aristotelian framework adopted by Flusser and Coles, which conflates art and design. The following section details the contradictory logic that Rancière attributes to what he calls the ‘aesthetic regime’ of (modern) art. Here, art’s autonomy is asserted, even as distinctions between art and other disciplines (such as design) are regularly brought into question. Put simply, Rancière speaks of art within the aesthetic regime as oscillating between the contradictory impulses of autonomy and heteronomy (Rancière, 2002, p. 150).

The ‘aesthetic regime of art’

Focussing on the Western tradition, Rancière has proposed that at least three different regimes have informed what is possible or doable in art since Classical Antiquity. As Gabriel Rockhill proposes, in Rancière’s writings: ‘a regime of art is a mode of articulation between three things: ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and ways of conceptualising both the former and the latter,’ (Rancière, 2004a, p. 91). While these different regimes (or paradigms) may have prevailed during particular historical periods, Rancière implies that all three are still at work, sometimes in combination, during what is known as modernity. The first schema of artistic possibility he denominates is the ‘ethical regime of images,’ epitomised by Plato’s *Republic*, and reprised in Hegel’s vision of Ancient Greek culture. Here art is judged according to its utility for reflecting the collective ethos of a society or people. As Rancière puts it: ‘In the ethical regime, works of art have no autonomy. They are viewed as images to be questioned for their truth and for their effect on the ethos of individuals and the community,’ (Rancière, 2002, p. 135, note

1). While these ideas may be traced back to Platonic philosophy, obviously the demand or expectation that art represents the unifying ethos of a people has maintained some purchase within the modern period.

The second horizon of creative practice that Rancière identifies is the ‘representative regime of art,’ which refers to a set of artistic protocols codified during the European Classical Age from the Renaissance through to the 18th Century, but which inherits and refines Aristotle’s formulations about art. The representative (or poetic) regime allocated art a distinct function, that being the activity of imitation or mimesis. It also established a network of norms that defined fine art’s proper duties and forms. These maxims maintained a hierarchical ordering of different genres and subject matters, including rules regarding the correct matching of types of artistic expression with subjects represented, and the authorisation of subjects considered sufficiently dignified for artistic representation. For Rancière, a feature of the representative regime is its organisation according to sets of oppositional categories, rules and hierarchies, which he views as roughly analogous to an oligarchic ordering of society, (Rancière, 1998, p. 27). Importantly, Rancière views any social formation as a field of hierarchy and domination that functions according to the managed distribution of socio-economic differences, identities, roles and qualifications etc.

Another key aspect of the representative regime, isolated by Rancière, places the formalising activity of the creator above the material resources of his art and the phenomenal world. Here form (what the artist does) signifies the active power of consciousness that shapes or *designs* matter. As we see in Vilém Flusser’s account of what art and design share, this Aristotelian idea of the creator imposing their conceptualising, formative agency on the chaotic sensuousness of matter continues to enjoy wide currency. Indeed a basic dictionary definition of *design* allies this term to active verbs of intention or destiny such as: *to contrive, plan, intend, to destine a person or thing for a service*, and so on.

The third artistic paradigm identified by Rancière is the ‘aesthetic regime of art,’ which has only prevailed in Western culture for the last two centuries or so. The aesthetic regime displaces without entirely surpassing the representative and the ethical regimes of art. Rancière locates intimations of this displacement in writings on aesthetics by Kant and Hegel, as well as the poets and philosophers of German romanticism, including Schelling and Schiller. But in keeping with his eschewal of a narrative of clean historical breaks, Rancière also discovers certain elements of the aesthetic regime in earlier philosophies, such as Giambattista Vico’s reinterpretation of Homer in the 18th Century.

Central to the aesthetic regime in Rancière’s discourse is the assertion of art’s *autonomy*, a term that does not refer, as is often assumed, to the reasoning powers of a ‘disinterested’ rational subject. Rather, one dimension of autonomy refers to art’s presumed freedom from prescribed content or normative criteria, and its disruption of classical hierarchies of subject matter, form and style. By promoting the *equality* of subjects, genres, themes, forms considered appropriate to artistic production, by seeking to displace a hierarchical conception of art where tragedy sits above comedy, or history painting’s status exceeds that of still life, the aesthetic regime opens up the possibility of the beautiful being discovered everywhere and anywhere (Rancière, 2004a, p. 32). Rancière also reminds us that the blurring of boundaries between art

and other activities, or between different representational genres has been part of art's agenda at least since romanticism. For example, in the last years of the 18th Century one of the founders of the Jena Romantic group Friedrich Schlegel recommended a form of literary pastiche that mixed poetry, prose, history, philosophy and science. The early romantics further proposed that the most canonical traditions of classicism be connected with the lowest of cultural forms or subjects. Thus, as Rancière suggests, the inaugurating gestures of the aesthetic regime instigate a redistribution of the given artistic genres and their oligarchic ordering within the representational regime.

On the permeability of the boundary between art and non-art, or between distinct genres of art, Rancière refers in 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes' to Honoré de Balzac's novel *La Peau de chagrin*. He cites the moment in the novel when Balzac's hero enters a curiosity shop where 'old statues and paintings are mingled with old-fashioned furniture, gadgets and household goods' (Rancière, 2002, p. 144). Balzac writes of this motley collection of discarded art works, historical relics and redundant accoutrements of everyday living as providing the resources of an 'endless poem.' Thus, as Rancière puts it: 'In the showrooms of Romanticism,' the power of art can be transposed 'to any article of ordinary life which can become a poetic object, a fabric of hieroglyphs, ciphering a history' (Rancière, 2002, p. 144). The proposal that discipline cross overs have been a feature of modern art from its earliest days brings into question any idea that this tendency arose with a postmodern turn in art. Instead, Rancière shows that from the early 19th Century a staging of conjunctions between contradictory artistic categories, and an incessant redrawing of the boundaries between art and non-art have been hallmarks of the aesthetic regime. In social and political terms this horizontal pressure brought to bear on the hierarchies of the representative regime parallels various political revolutions of the 19th Century, and efforts to open up and democratise the social order (Rockhill, 2004, p. 67).

There is, however, an additional connotation of the concept of autonomy emphasised by Rancière. In the essay 'The sublime from Lyotard to Schiller: Two readings of Kant and their political significance,' he observes that Kant's 'Analytic of the Beautiful' presents a new idea of aesthetic form, one that differs from the Aristotelian formula where form is treated as 'the active power that shapes matter' (Rancière, 2004c, p. 9). Rather, the main property of aesthetic form for Kant is that the free appearance of the object of aesthetic judgement is *unavailable* to the subject's powers of cognition or desire. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* asserts that 'we regard the beautiful as the exhibition of an indeterminate concept of the understanding,' which suggests a suspension of the normal categorising and schematising procedures of conceptual reasoning that would impose its law upon the sensible manifold (Kant, 1987, p. 91). From the reverse perspective, the affective dimension of aesthetic form for Kant also differs from human activities based on the gratification of appetite, where reason is overcome by the life of sensation. Rancière (2004c) summarises the double aspect of Kant's rethinking of aesthetic form in the following way:

The beautiful is beautiful as such to the extent that it is neither an object of cognition, subjecting sensation to the law of the understanding, nor an object of desire, subjecting reason to the anarchy of sensations. This unavailability of the object with respect to any power of cognition or desire allows the subject to feel an experience of autonomy, a 'free play' of the faculties (Rancière, 2004c, p. 9).

Having accented the *neither...nor...* logic of Kantian beauty, a logic that describes a specific kind of experience where neither mind nor matter, neither reason nor sensation are placed above each other, Rancière attends to the political reading of Kant developed by Schiller. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1795), Schiller interprets Kant's proposition that the free appearance, or free form of the beautiful 'is unavailable to the domination of knowledge or will' as the experience of a 'specific sensorium' that cancels out 'the oppositions of understanding and sensibility, form and matter, activity and passivity' (Rancière, 2004c, p. 9). Schiller therefore conceptualises aesthetic experience in terms of the subject's encounter with a 'heterogeneous sensible' that undoes hierarchical, and ontological divisions between categories. Rancière also stresses that Schiller differentiates this kind of experience from the normal structural relations that govern human societies. Instead of a division of labour between the powerful and powerless, between those who will and those who obey, between those deemed active makers and those cast as the inert material of this making, the aesthetic for Schiller 'carries the promise of equality, the promise of a new way of sharing a common world' (Rancière, 2004c, p. 12). Rancière thus concludes that the aesthetic regime figures works of art as 'belonging to a specific sensorium that stands out as an exception from the normal regime of the sensible, which presents us with an immediate adequation of thought and sensible materiality' (Rancière, 2004c, p. 13). In a departure from the representative regime, art is no longer conceived solely as the expression of the power of human consciousness (analogue of the state for Schiller) to subjugate, manipulate or fully *design* matter. Rancière remarks that this shift in thinking about the aesthetic also finds expression in Hegel's reflections on art's uncertain role in his own time. Hegel translates the equal standing of form and matter that defines aesthetic experience for Schiller into a property of the (modern) work of art, which is now conceived as linking together consciousness and unconsciousness, will and unwill, the intentional and the involuntary. For Hegel, writes Rancière: 'Art is living as long as it expresses a thought unclear to itself in a matter that resists it' (Rancière, 2002, p. 141). In this respect, the aesthetic describes a particular mode of thinking where thought is inhabited by the heterogeneous power of the unthought, or where the chaotic dimensions of experience are acknowledged alongside the procedures of consciousness.

In studies that span literature, theatre, film, design and visual art, Rancière has examined the myriad ways and means that modern art has employed to save the 'heterogeneous sensible,' thus activating points of heterogeneity within the prevailing perceptual orders of modern life. In the aesthetic regime, art is viewed as distinct from given distributions of the social, while also being conceived as a means for allowing new forms of life to come into view. In this respect, art has some connection to Rancière's formulations regarding the socially disruptive gestures of political dissent, premised on the democratic maxim of equality. Contrary to any idea of democracy as a form of collective life that expresses a unified character or ethos, Rancière speaks of democracy as 'the name of a singular disruption of society's orders of distributing bodies as a community' (Rancière, 1999, p. 99). Political acts conducted in the name of equality are interventions in the social order that separate society from itself, thereby challenging any presumed natural ordering of the communal whole. While Rancière finds no direct relationship between democratic politics and modern aesthetics, he does see both as part of what he calls the same plot. In keeping with the social implications of political gestures, the aesthetic regime

configures art's function (without predetermining the means) as reorganising accepted perceptions of reality. This thinking of modern art's contribution to life is not particularly unusual or controversial. The novelty, and the challenge of Rancière's thinking issue from his account of how often modern art asserts the autonomy of aesthetic experience, while also participating in inter-disciplinary activity. In short, in the aesthetic regime 'what is proper to art, and finally nameable as such, is its identity with non-art (Rancière, 2004d, p. 220). Before turning to a manifestation of this contradictory logic in Andrea Zittel's design art, a point should be made about where design sits in relation to the previous commentary.

In other contexts, Rancière makes a convincing case for an overlap between modern artists and designers in their separate or collaborative endeavours to create new symbols or forms of everyday life premised on an egalitarian perspective (Rancière, 2007). On the other hand, the spirit of the 'heterogenous sensible' that the aesthetic regime makes a consistent preoccupation of art of the last two centuries or so, has not for various and understandable reasons had much of a presence in design as it is typically taught, practiced and applied. There are of course exceptions to this, but it seems fair to say that normally the productions of design do not testify to a contradictory equality between form and matter, or between human understanding and its undoing. Rather, Flusser's Aristotelian inflected conception of design as the active formation and manipulation of the material world seems to hold sway in much thinking about design. This orientation may unfold towards functionalism or aestheticisation, a combination of both. It seems therefore, especially in a current cultural context obsessed with lifestyle creation and management that design too often affirms a modern form of ordinary experience co-ordinated by instrumental reason.

Instrumental thinking defines systems that operate according to principles of calculated advantage, efficiency and means-ends strategies. Frankfurt School Marxists such as Theodor Adorno allied instrumental reason with consumer society's creation of standardised behaviours and uniform tastes. While efforts to save the 'heterogeneous sensible' as an antidote to instrumental reason may be everywhere in modern art, it is difficult to imagine them becoming so in design. Of course, this is not to say that sectors of design education or practice should not or cannot partake of the issues and possibilities opened up by the aesthetic regime of art.

The design art of Andrea Zittel

Californian born Zittel began her professional career in 1990, with the completion of an MFA in sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design. Since 1991 she has designed and constructed prototypes ranging across multi-functional furniture, clothing, foodstuffs, camper vans, portable homesteads, and accessories for the home, from chamber pots to carpets. Many of these projects have resulted from the artist's research and testing of scenarios for living based on her own experiences, needs and desires. Her designs are typically accompanied by anecdotes about their gestation, whether as advertising type materials, as commentary on her proficiently designed website, or as communicated in interviews. These narratives link the works to shifts in the artist's living and working environments, from three different studios in Brooklyn during the 90s, to her current homestead in the Mojave Desert, on the outskirts of Los Angeles. From the early years of her career, Zittel's design solutions for her own living environments, as well as her exercises in DIY self-sufficiency have

became exhibition components of her art. Since 1993 most of her output has borne the signature of an impersonal corporate identity: 'A-Z Administrative Services.' I shall start, however, with a cluster of Zittel's early works that do not bear the A-Z moniker.

For the *Repair Work* series of 1991, Zittel collected broken and discarded household objects culled from the streets around her first home/studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. These unexceptional utilitarian and ornamental items were diligently repaired by the artist, but in a way that openly declared the fractures of their previous damage. A shabby plaster statue of one of the three wise men was given a new blob-like head in *papier mâché*, and the shattered faux bronze of an ornamental elephant was patched up with intrusive white plaster. The *Repair Works* recall many instances from the history of modern art where prosaic or discarded objects have crossed over into the aesthetic realm. Cubist collage, the surrealist found object, and Arman's trash sculptures immediately come to mind. But, as previously mentioned, Jacques Rancière finds earlier indications of this now common artistic gesture in the genre mixing of Romantic poetics, and in the attention 19th Century realism devoted to an empirical world of insignificant actions and commonplace objects (Rancière, 2004a, p. 36). In each case, the power of the 'heterogeneous sensible' is transferred to ordinary articles of everyday life, including outdated or decommissioned commodities. To recall Rancière's account of Romantic poetics, Zittel's *Repair Works* suggest that the allure of the discarded, orphaned commodity arises precisely because it is no longer of service to everyday consumption or commercial exchange (Rancière, 2002, p. 144). These unwanted relics of commodity culture witness the relentless disposal logic of consumerism, while signalling a point of heterogeneity within it. They are aesthetic, not because they are formally finessed or exceptional in any way, but because they represent the detritus of both commercial transactions, and their previous life as functional or decorative items. The patched up surfaces of the *Repair Works* also incarnate an unreconciled tension, or contradictory equivalence, between formal unity and material disintegration. They thereby bring into question Coles's claim (via Flusser) that art equals design in that both are defined by the artist/designer's active power to give form to passive matter.

Relations between form and matter, or design and its undoing are also at issue in another series of works that Zittel conducted from the early 1990s. With the animal breeding experiments collectively titled *Breeding Works*, Zittel sought to influence the reproductive behaviour of animals through habitats that she designed and built. Some of the breeding experiments were hypothetical, some actualised, and many were unsuccessful if judged according to their stated aims. The fauna that Zittel made part of these works included Cortinix quails, houseflies, and chickens of various kinds. The *A-Z Breeding Unit for Averaging Eight Breeds* (1993) was built for a hypothetical experiment with bantam chickens, although at the time Zittel was actually raising bantams in her Brooklyn studio.

Historically, the bantam has been bred as a domestic pet and for the purposes of competitive exhibition and display. It has therefore been the object of breeding regimes intent on exaggerating decorative genetic features such as contrasts of feather density, elaborate topknots, and variegated colours. These artificially enhanced features have become hallmarks of distinct varieties of bantam, such as the black and white patterning of the Silver Sebright, or the fluffy topknot and fan shaped tail of the

Black Silkie. The breeding unit that Zittel created for the purposes of ‘averaging 8 different breeds’ of bantam was exhibited minus feathered residents in the *Aperto* section of the 1993 Venice Biennale. Made of steel, wood and glass, the unit consists of four rows of enclosed wooden nesting boxes with circular glass viewing windows at the front. Each box is equipped with an automatic egg turner and an electric light incubating heater. The overall structure suggests an inverted pyramid with eight units forming the top tier, four making up the second, two comprising the third, and a single module at the base. At the back of the structure a series of flexible plastic tubes are attached to each unit in order to channel eggs from the upper to the lower levels of the structure. The inverted pyramid format gives a clue to the aim of the experiment, to put the evolution of human tweaking of bantam design into reverse. Zittel’s notes for the experiment outline a plan to encourage progressively more intensive interbreeding between eight different breeds of bantam so that the recessive genes responsible for the unique features of each variety would gradually disappear. The final result, presumably deposited in the single module at the bottom of the structure, was to be an ‘average chicken’ devoid of any outstanding features to set it apart from others.

The style of the bantam habitat recalls the forms, materials and functionalist ethos of early modernist architecture and design. While its serial structure, industrial materials and reduced geometry also recall Donald Judd’s Minimalist sculptures of the 1960s. Although the construction components are low-tech and basic, the overall finish of this glorified chicken coup is quite refined. The breeding unit might therefore be apprehended as an item of designer furniture, or a sculptural form, as well as an apparatus in aid of animal husbandry. In an interview with the Zittel, Mark Wigley observes that a number of her designs have a ‘Charles and Ray Eames Storage Unit quality’ about them, and this quality is indeed conveyed by the stacked modular compartments of the breeding unit (Colomina, Wigley & Zittel, 2005, p. 51). Condensing the aesthetic and the functional, the histories of modernist art and design, as well as the hobbyist activity of bantam breeding, the breeding unit offers a number of avenues of interpretation.

First, we might notice that Zittel’s plan to homogenise eight different breeds of Bantam, evacuating superfluous signs of decoration to produce a ‘common’ bird recalls the aspirations of the design orientated avant-gardes of the early 20th Century. It is well known that the Russian Constructivists and the Bauhaus drew on the resources of both art and modern industry to design new forms of collective life in tune with an egalitarian, socialist (or communist) ethos. In this context, excesses of ornament, along with the uniquely crafted object were associated with both religious and aristocratic privilege, and the ornamental clutter of the affluent bourgeois home at the close of the 19th Century. One motivation for Adolf Loos’s infamous equation between ornament and crime was his view of luxuriant ornamentation as a sign of socio-economic inequality. As Rancière reminds us, in search of alternative ways of living to those associated with both the *ancien regime* and 19th Century capitalism, the avant-garde engineer-designer sought to create furnishings of everyday life that drew on developments in industrial production and projected a political vision of collective equality (Rancière, 2002, p. 140). Zittel’s quest to *design* an average bantam, devoid of decorative signs of distinction, allegorises this utopian project. However, her comic reframing of this earlier vision of design and art serving the creation of an egalitarian world decants such aspirations of any heroic teleology.

Instead of a successful translation from modernist habitat to an ‘everyman’ bantam, Zittel’s plan to redesign animal life never actually gets off the ground. The significance of the bantam breeding project may well hinge on its remaining suspended as a fantasy of the artist-designer. For if it were successfully realised, it would be difficult to see any difference between Zittel’s idea to design a ‘natural’ bantam, and the aestheticising aspirations of bantam breeders everywhere. In each case, what Rancière describes as ‘the motto of the politics of the aesthetic regime’ – where art is given the task of saving some ‘heterogeneous sensible’ that exceeds the designs of human consciousness – is no longer in play.

There is, however, another way of approaching the bantam experiment. Zittel has said in interview that all of the breeding works were partially motivated by her interest in ‘the human desire to create the defined identity of a “breedz”’. (Basilico, 2001, p. 74). She elaborates this claim in the following way:

I was really interested in the fact that breeds in domestic chickens or dogs are not natural. We assume that the categories have existed much longer than they really have. It’s only been about 120 years since the idea of breeds came about. They’re totally artificial categories and it’s odd how we cling to them, and how easy it is to make new ones. I was just trying to make new breeds to show what pure fabrication it all is (Basilico, 2001, p. 74)

Obviously Zittel is not simply talking about varieties of chicken or household pet here. Her reference to a ‘human desire’ to organise and partition animal life into distinct identities brings to mind the sociological categories that invariably operate within human societies. On this matter we might return to Rancière’s formulations regarding the inevitable hierarchical partitioning of society that the aesthetic regime of art is in dispute with. Rancière observes that from Plato’s account of the ideal city state through to liberal and utilitarian discourses on democracy, the well functioning society is conceived as organised into distinct orders of interest, status, occupation, natural aptitude and so on. As he asserts, Plato’s *Republic* ‘does not exclude anyone from the community by reason of the baseness of his job, but simply establishes the impossibility of holding more than one job at a time’ (Rancière, 2004b, p. 272). This model of society suggests that the healthy community depends on each person or group occupying their own place, where each identifies fully with his or her socially anointed badge of identity. Such identities are commonly taken to define an essential nature or destiny. Alternatively, the blurring of boundaries between given identities, the crossing over of different competencies that characterises the art of the aesthetic regime disassociates socially inscribed categories of identity and their oligarchical ordering from any sense of permanence or naturalness. As Zittel suggests, the breeding works were also about demonstrating the historicity of animal breeds, and their susceptibility to mixing and modification.

Zittel has acknowledged that the breeding works were an important catalyst for making design a constitutive component of her art. She says the animal breeds she worked with were ‘just like designs, like car models. And then I started to think, if these designs upset or reflect people’s patterns of thinking, what other designs will show people’s basic assumptions about how the world works’ (Basilico, 2001, p.74). This desire to make salient, and upset prevailing realities regarding design, also informs Zittel’s prototypes for human use and habitation. Like the breeding units these works often recycle the forms and materials of modernist design. But significantly, citations of modernism are regularly amalgamated with pre-modern

formats. Thus in a number of A-Z pieces the contradictory temporalities of historical progression and regression are linked together rather than polarised or disjoined. This temporal heterogeneity is starkly displayed in Zittel's *A-Z Body Processing Unit* of 1993.

The *Body Processing Unit* combines the functions of kitchen and toilet in a vertical cupboard arrangement that folds up into a vinyl covered carrying case. In theory the purchaser of the product can carry these minimal props of domestic survival from place to place. The top half of the unit supplies the minimum technological requirements for the preparation and eating of food. These include storage shelves stocked with cooking and eating utensils, a two ring stove and a sample of the *A-Z Food Group*: a 'delicious' multi-coloured potpourri of cooked and dehydrated grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables. Below the stove is a pull out food preparation and eating shelf for one person. The bottom half of the structure services waste disposal requirements, and incorporates a metal sink for washing up that sits above a pull out wooden toilet seat placed over a metal bucket. The modest size, stylistic simplification, and linear sequencing of function stations in the unit reference the modernist doctrine of compactness, efficiency and maximum utility as it came to be widely applied to suburban kitchen design from the 1930s.

In an essay on Zittel's art, Mimi Zeiger refers to a salient expression of this doctrine in a 1932 book by Karel Teige that promotes the 'minimum dwelling' model of modernist domestic architecture. Tiege's *The Minimum Dwelling* traces the historical development of the modern kitchen as a triumph of industrial engineering over pre-modern disorganisation and dubious hygiene. He writes: 'The modern kitchen has become a model workshop, as a result it is no longer used as a living space. The elimination of all functions not related to food preparation has helped reduce its dimensions and at the same time has increased its functional utility, hygiene, and cleanliness' (Teige, 2002, 218). The style of the *Body Processing Unit* echoes the organisational compulsiveness of the modern kitchen celebrated by Tiege, as does the promotional material that Zittel penned for the product:

Although the kitchen and the bathroom are similar to each other, traditional architecture always segregates them in the home. It always seemed that it would be more convenient to create an integrated but well-organized hygienic system: the A-Z Body Processing Unit. The intake functions are on the top and the outtake functions are on the bottom (Morsani, Smith & Sachs, 2005, p. 118).

However, as this advertising rhetoric suggests the unit dispenses with one vital convention of modern home design: the segregation of spaces allocated to different household and bodily functions. Additionally, despite the unit's referencing of modernist style and doctrine, it simultaneously harks back to a pre-plumbing era where customs of cooking, washing and waste disposal revolved around portable tubs, pails and chamber pots (Lupton, 1992). The result is a psychically disconcerting combine of rustic modern design, where the uncomfortably close proximity of kitchen and toilet has prompted one critic to observe that most people prefer not to shit where they eat (Cash, 2006, 124). Like much of Zittel's work, this kitchen cum porta loo presents a not entirely serious instance of practical design. It operates more as an interruptive gesture directed towards the codified layouts of modern domestic environments. At the same time, as Zeiger has argued, the 'minimal existence'

supported by modernists such as Teige, and hyperbolically refigured by Zittel is a long way from contemporary lifestyle culture or the market that contours and feeds it (Zeiger, 2003, p. 114). Zittel's designs for radically simplifying daily living seem outlandish in a context where, as Gui Bonsiepe suggests, contemporary design is principally engaged in 'the "boutiquization" of the universe of products for everyday life.' According to Bonsiepe, 'the lifestyle centres of today pursue exclusively commercial and marketing aims to provide orientation for consumption patterns of a new—or not that new—social segment of global character, that can be labelled with the phrase: "We made it"' (Bonsiepe, 2006, p. 28). By condensing the aseptic and the scatological, Zittel's *Body Processing Unit* introduces a touch of perversity into the increasingly crowded market for lifestyle products and services.

The repeated gesture of linking together dichotomous categories recurs in a slightly more luxurious A-Z prototype of domestic furniture. From 1994 onwards, Zittel designed a series of *A-Z Comfort Units*, which could be customised by their purchasers. One example is the *A-Z Comfort Unit Customized for the Cincinnati Art Museum* (1994). The advertising spiel for this design goes as follows: 'The A-Z comfort Unit features a large, fort like bed with roll up service carts. With two carts docked at either side of the bed, two people can perform different activities in the Comfort Unit at the same time. One can perform all of the day's tasks without ever leaving the security and comfort of bed.' (Morsani, Smith & Sachs, 2005, p. 134). The modular bed and units are built from pale birch plywood set in steel frames, while the interior walls of the bed frame, the foam mattress and pillows are covered in velvet. The four service cart satellites are basically plywood boxes set on steel legs and coasters so that they may be moved to and away from the rectangular cocoon of the bed. Three of the service stations here are designed as office, library and vanity unit respectively. The fourth has been customised as a display case for china and pottery items from the Cincinnati Museum collection.

The *Comfort Units* attest to the mobilisation of design as way of mastering and controlling one's environment. Here the fortress structure of the bed installs a metaphor of home as a protective armature that repels external impingements of social, civil, or working life. The design's formal articulation of rationalisation and compactness suggests a subjective state of self-contained comfort and security. All of this paints a picture of the one or two inhabitants of the comfort unit as autonomous agents subtracted from the outside world, and secure in their self-enclosure. But the comfort unit simultaneously projects a deeply passive subjective state: that of an agoraphobic invalid permanently confined to bed. As Zittel has reflected, the psychically comforting aspects of the work may seem 'truly liberating', but these are contradicted by the projection of a state of extreme constriction or enervation, akin to death (Colomina, Wigley & Zittel, 2005, p.52).

I want to conclude my discussion of Zittel's art with a work of 2000, which extends the fantasy of a therapeutic retreat from the rigors of contemporary life that informs a number of her designs. This is the *Prototype for A-Z Pocket Property* of 2000. Here Zittel designed and oversaw the fabrication of a fifty-four ton, floating concrete island that she planned to inhabit for one month at its anchorage in the archipelago off Denmark. Zittel has said of the project: 'I had fantasised about being completely alone on the island to recover from a really hectic year. I had this idea, I was making my own private world and I'd be totally autonomous and outside the jurisdiction of other people's rules' (Basilico, 2001, p. 75). Despite the personal, anecdotal tenor of

her commentary, Zittel's reference to the idea of autonomy is obviously art historically charged. Here, it seems, autonomy refers to an absolute state of subjective freedom from the impingements of others, or given social rules. This is precisely how the modernist value of aesthetic autonomy is commonly, and erroneously understood. As the *Pocket Property* project unfolds, however, it becomes apparent that the work is more about the insolvency of this conception of autonomy.

The desire for an autarkical existence behind Zittel's creation of this artificial 'desert' island is undercut from the beginning and in a number of ways. The artist's experience on the *Pocket Property* was hardly solitary, since it was photographically documented, and a camera crew spent time on the island to interview Zittel about her experiment in self-sufficient living. These documentations and the artist's published comments about her island sojourn form part of the work. One of the photographs taken shows Zittel at the door of the 'fully equipped' living quarters built into the island. She wears an example of her *A-Z Single Strand Uniform* series that she made especially for the occasion using a system of finger crocheting that dispenses with the technology of the crochet hook. Zittel has designed and hand-made many items of clothing for her own use, and for exhibition. Like her furniture prototypes, these garments are hybrids of incongruous historical and generic categories. For example, the *A-Z Personal Panel Uniform* series of 1995-98 brings together the look of haute couture minimalism, the abstract formats of Russian Constructivist clothing, and the uniforms of Amish pioneer women. Like the *Single Strand Uniform* made to be worn each day of Zittel's stay on the *Pocket Property*, the *Personal Panel Uniforms* conjoin abstract modernist designs with invocations of a pre-modern time of hand-made clothing production without zippers, buttons, sewing machines, or even crochet hooks. Similarly, while the building of the island may have been a feat of advanced engineering, the stagey photograph of a resolute Zittel at the door of her temporary home is one of folksy, Arcadian regression. She looks like a figure from a Brothers Grimm fairytale. All of this confirms the heterogeneity of design categories, historical phases, and creative activities registered in Zittel's works. To recall my earlier discussion of Jacques Rancière's account of the aesthetic regime of art, Zittel's practice, in keeping with this system, manufactures effects of the 'heterogeneous sensible' that undo hierarchical relations between categories, temporalities, and disciplines. Yet, the *Pocket Property* endeavour conveys another dimension of the 'heterogeneous sensible,' this time in relation to and the simple conflation of art and design mentioned earlier. Here, in line with Rancière's account of the representative regime of art, art and design are both encompassed by the Greek work *techné* understood as the imposition of form on sensible experience or existence.

In the guise of designer, the goal that motivated Zittel to undertake the *Pocket Property* project was to create a fully self-contained and controlled environment resistant to any irruption of unpredictable or erratic contingencies. However, as with many of the artist's 'designs,' the failure of this aim is a constitutive component of the work. This foundering of intent finds expression in Zittel's account of how her island holiday actually panned out, a tale of woe that has been published in a number of contexts. She recounts that far from providing a functioning retreat from unwanted social encounters, when she got out to the island: 'It seemed like every single boat owner in Denmark came out to circle my island while drinking a six pack of Danish beer. Every time I came out, they would all wave and ask what I was doing. I was like a freak show out there' (Basilico, 2001, p. 75). This situation, along with some rough

weather, forced Zittel to cut her holiday short. Thus, the artist herself was subject to an experience that suspended her goal to actively control her material environment, to predict in advance how her time on the island would unfold. All of this suggests that while Zittel's version of design art may connect the formalising powers of artist and designer, it also attests to chaotic interruptions, inconsistencies of aim and outcome, affects of heterogeneity that undo that power. As Rancière affirms, within the aesthetic regime, art is construed as an 'identity *between* an artistic process produced solely by unregulated artistic will, and a mode of existence of art objects as "free" objects, not the projects of will' [my emphasis] (Guénoun, Kavanagh, Lapidus, 2000, p. 22). Zittel's art regularly incarnates the equivocation of this formulation where boundaries between will and unwill, the intentional and the involuntary, the designed and the chaotic are placed in suspension. In other words, art (or design) are no longer solely conceived as an expression of the power of human consciousness to subjugate, manipulate, or fully *design* life. While Zittel's practice crosses over into the world of designed products and programs, it also affirms aesthetic experience as in excess of determinate forms and conventions. Thus, the material thinking of Zittel's art and Rancière's account of modern aesthetics comprises a double movement: a receptiveness to what separates art from given social relations, and an acknowledgement of historical developments that enable or circumscribe any assertion of aesthetic autonomy.

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