

## The unspeakable compromise of the economical object of art<sup>1</sup>

Right now I'm in an airplane flying from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Airplanes can crash. Since that one event in 2001, the thought continues to haunt me. Now too, though it may not last more than a few seconds: a brief moment of awareness during the first minutes after takeoff. I look out the window. We're still flying above San Francisco and the Bay Area, its layout of streets clearly visible. Without any difficulty I've spent two days walking about the city, Market Street being my continual point of reference. If Stanley Broun were to ask me for directions for *This way Broun*, I would draw a long horizontal line with many vertical intersections and, on that, a route involving dozens of markings for all of the 'must-see' shops and small businesses – hybrid forms combining the studio, garage and house – scattered through the city.

In 1965 Anni Albers writes and publishes *On Weaving*, which continues to be the standard reference on weaving to this day. One of the chapters in her extremely detailed and fascinating study is called 'Designing as Visual Organization'. She begins with the following words: "It is safe, I suppose, to assume that today most if not all of us have had the experience of looking down from an airplane onto this earth. What we see is a free flow of forms intersected here and there by straight lines, rectangles, circles, and evenly drawn curves; that is, by shapes of great regularity. Here we have, then, natural and man-made forms in contra-distinction. And here before us we can recognize the essence of designing, a visually comprehensible, simplified organization of forms that is distinct from nature's secretive and complex working."<sup>2</sup>

It seems that both in San Francisco and in Los Angeles I meet only 'makers' and 'microproducers'. In Europe, the 'old country', I rarely think of words like 'workmanship', 'traditional trades' or 'handicraft', as if these are too antiquated for use. On the West Coast the word 'craftsmanship' is given meaning, in my view, by cycling enthusiasts who rig together their own mountain bikes; by cabinetmakers who produce gorgeous rocking chairs; by a serigrapher who owns only one old-fashioned press; by the miniature ceramic sculptures of Ron Nagle, from the seventies; by landscaping designs in which botanical passion rouses all the senses, as well as countless computer businesses where graphic and other smaller software programs and games are developed. A visit to an ordinary branch of an American do-it-yourself hardware store can scarcely be put into words: our Belgian 'Bricocenter' bears no likeness at all to this. Is it the jet lag, exhaustion, sunstroke, some extreme form of subjective delusion? Or is the idea of craftsmanship, in all its forms, closely intertwined with the widely held views on entrepreneurship and individuality? What, in fact, has happened to the old stronghold Europe? What do we call Europe's equivalent to the fascinating American Center for Land Use Interpretation? All of these ill-defined thoughts

continue to plague me as I quietly sit through the flight. The Center for Land Use Interpretation concerns itself with, among other things, the gathering and dissemination of information on how the American landscape is perceived, used and appropriated. The intellectual legacy of Robert Smithson, who died in a plane crash in 1973, is among the center's points of departure. On their website he is quoted: "One is liable to see things in maps that are not there. One must be careful of the hypothetical monsters that lurk between the map's latitudes..."<sup>3</sup> In Washington there is a man who answers to the name George W. Bush. That, too, is and always will be America, the birthplace and home of visual artist Joe Scanlan. From this point on, I wish to allow the latter American citizen to be heard.

On January 22, 2005 'things that fall' gives a press conference at Galerie De Expeditie on the Leliegracht in Amsterdam. Forty-eight hours prior to this, George W. Bush has been inaugurated for his second term of office. In Amsterdam, *The Massachusetts Wedding Bed* is presented to the world for the first time. Donelle Woolford, Greg Scanlan and Joe Scanlan lie in bed together, responding to questions – on the United States, on their fellow citizens and their shopping habits – posed by the press and attending art viewers. According to the invitation's text, *The Massachusetts Wedding Bed* is an average queen-sized bed that is "made to order by hand in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, just twelve miles from where the pilgrims first landed." The text reads like an advertising brochure, praising it as "a nice, sturdy, elegant bed, capable of providing a lifetime of rest and intimacy for a man and a woman or a woman and a woman or a man and a man." After this comes a detailed technical description of its parts, assembly and wood-finishing instructions.<sup>4</sup>

"Commerce breeds acceptance," writes Joe Scanlan. First of all, he uses every civil-rights campaign and demonstration to bring important topics to the attention of a broad public. That being completely legitimate in Scanlan's view, he nonetheless sees these campaigns arising from frustration and often becoming negative, thereby causing them to be met with hostility. This generates new conflict situations and makes matters worse. He then comes to the conclusion: "After the high ideals and lowdown nastiness have run their course, however, it is commerce that ultimately accomplishes what piety and aggression could not. Americans, as a majority, are against gay marriage. But an even greater majority - and one with a much deeper conviction - is for the sale at a profit of shoes, gowns, tuxedos, rings, flowers, cakes, flatware, decorations, champagne, pajamas, hotel rooms, airline tickets, almonds, lace and candles. In the long run, the dull routine of commerce - of money exchanged for goods and services, the taxes paid on that income and the goods and services consumed - does more to persuade the American public of what is right and decent than sophisticated rhetoric ever could." The purchase of *The Massachusetts Wedding Bed* becomes, in other words, a

political statement, this being the only bed on the market by which the buyer expresses support for and defends the right of anyone who wishes to marry, regardless of sexual preference.

The description 'things that fall' happens to be a significant point of departure for the investigation of Joe Scanlan's recent activities and individual stance – all of this seasoned with scepticism and a healthy dose of absurd humor. In the summer of 2005 he uses it as the title of a solo exhibition at Galerie Chez Valentin in Paris. The exhibition and the gallery serve as a platform for the official opening of the website of the same name: [thingsthatfall.com](http://thingsthatfall.com). In an interview with the French critic Elisabeth Wetterwald, Scanlan explains, "The title of the show is *things that fall* and that is the proposition: to think about sculpture and art through this idea. There has been great interest in the subject throughout the history of art, from the Dying Gaul to Brueghel to Mike Kelley. Things that fall often have beautiful consequences. Either their fall is beautiful, or their impact is, or their life at the bottom, or their ability to rise again. Falling is as essential to beauty and philosophy as it is to economics and physics."<sup>5</sup> He then goes on to say, "Americans love destruction. Since September 11, 2001, it has become ever more apparent that things that fall present unrivaled opportunities for emotional manipulation, economic profit, and political gain. (Even the phrase itself, 'Since 9/11,' is a reliable preamble to issues worthy of being exploited.) Whether world leaders, stock prices, Martha Stewart, or the World Trade Center, each thing that falls marks a downward motion that inspires widespread speculation about its eventual rise. It is a kind of blood lust. Not for the destructive event itself, but for the profits to be made after the destruction has taken place. Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter called this cyclical capitalist drive creative destruction. By his definition, capitalism cannot advance without perpetually destroying itself in order to profit from its own regeneration." Scanlan's reasoning has an aesthetic point of anchor, as it were, while it proceeds into politics, economic analysis and opinion, and ultimately comes back to art: "This reflex has become so natural to American culture that its media, its citizens, its politicians and its stockbrokers all crave things that fall solely for the gains that are certain to follow. Even Robert Smithson, the conscience of American Art, understood that re-organizing entropy into containers for distribution and sale was not only a way to make the concept of entropy visible, but to profit from it as well. Just before he died, Smithson said as much when he told Moira Roth it was time for artists to stop trying to transcend the corruption of commercialism and industry and bourgeois attitudes. His current hagiographic treatment to the contrary, when Smithson drew a comparison between the rosy escapism of art and the cruddy workings of commerce, he sided with commerce."<sup>6</sup>

Everything is for sale on the website *thingsthatfall.com*: entropy, snowflakes, nesting bookcases, forsythias. Joe Scanlan uses the website as a conceptual framework and, at the same time, as a commercial display case for the distribution of his ideas. DISTRIBUTION. The lofty word has fallen. According to this American artist, the term distribution refers to the most off-limits zone in the art world. The subject cannot be broached. In February 2005 he writes the following in an e-mail: "I have felt for some time that economics underpins every important gesture since Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine. But no one wants to talk about art that way because its too demeaning and debasing. That is, unless Andy Warhol is doing it, and then it's okay. But I remember Marcel Broodthaers said that all commentaries on art are really about shifts in the economy. And he was right."<sup>7</sup> With the words 'things that fall' he explicitly refers to such economic change. While, for the last forty years, American society has strongly relied on the notion that wealth and fame are within everyone's reach – that everyone has a right to his/Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame – it is now obsessed with the awareness that everything and everyone will meet with disaster one day. About the significance of this change in the American consciousness, Scanlan writes: "(...) not only has America's mood changed, but its profit motive has as well. The dawning of the Smithsonian Era is not something to be sad or uncertain about, it's something to be invested in."

The thoughts underlying *things that fall* go back to Joseph Alois Schumpeter's notion 'creative destruction'. This originally Austrian economist (1883-1950) fled Central Europe due to the rise of Nazism and became a professor at Harvard University. Though lesser known, he is considered the most important rival of John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) and was an advocate of integrating sociological models into his economic theories. Joe Scanlan adopts his text 'The Process of Creative Destruction', first published in 1942 in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. Adopting is, I believe, the correct word here, since the artist has touched up the original text in various ways. With this he uses a color-based method that is transparent to the reader. The majority of Schumpeter's text remains unchanged in black print. Green indicates a shift or displacement of a word. Blue sentences and words are additions by Joe Scanlan. Red stands for the rewritten passages, and finally purple means an addition. The rewritten parts subtly refer to the art world, and the text as a whole becomes a linguistic weave, a composition in which creative destruction seems to be synonymous with creative creation. Scanlan finds support in Schumpeter's theory and thereby ventures to articulate an alternative to the avant-garde question: what can I do to be unique? Roland Barthes and Clement Greenberg always argued that the avant-garde movements are driven by authorship, by each artist's wish to say something new. Rosalind Krauss regarded the modernist urge for innovation as a myth: how can the new still, in fact, be new if it is being repeated by every generation? But Krauss, too, continues to seek the motive in terms of

authorship, particularly in the desire of each generation to contradict, to destroy the previous one in order to be able to distinguish itself from it. And that is the point at which Joe Scanlan introduces the Austrian economist: “Schumpeter is interesting to me because, while he agrees that each succeeding generation needs to contradict and destroy what came before it, he locates this drive not in authorship but in economic survival. Destruction is not an intellectual critique of previous forms and institutions, but a necessary process for making those forms and institutions profitable again. The conventional view of artistic change (the avant garde) is: what can I say that is unique? My view, supported by Schumpeter's theory, is: what can I do that is profitable?”<sup>8</sup>

*“Moi aussi, je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose et réussir dans la vie” “L'idée enfin d'inventer quelque chose d'insincère me traversa l'esprit et je me mis aussitôt au travail,”* explains Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1976) when he decides to conjugate the ranks of visual artists. The words have a familiar ring to an art audience; he has silkscreened them onto the invitation card of his very first exhibition, held at Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels from the 10th to the 25th of April 1964. Joe Scanlan shares Marcel Broodthaers's concern for invitation cards, posters and texts of announcements, for what we have come to call ‘artists’ ephemera’ since the mid nineties. (A fascinating exhibition could be made with Marcel Broodthaers's invitation cards alone, but that aside.) The invitation card, the press release, the poster, the website (*and* the e-flux mailings that draw attention to the website): each is part of the distribution puzzle, the dissemination of ideas. From the manifestoes and press releases, Scanlan's affinity with and interest in language and literature – another possible link with Broodthaers – can be detected. The revised text of J. Schumpeter is not an isolated case. The Brussels publishing house of Thorsten Baensch, named Bartelby & Co., produces *The Window Stunt* in 2003. An edition of sixteen copies is published in connection with Joe Scanlan's lecture held in the library of the Van Abbemuseum. *The Window Stunt* (the 2003 edition) is his second rewritten version of the famous short story ‘Bartelby, the Scrivener’ by Herman Melville (1819-1891). The first version dates from the late eighties.<sup>9</sup> According to the legend at the back of the latest edition, he rewrote the first version in nine consecutive days. Joe Scanlan plans to rewrite and to refine Melville's story time and again, in an attempt to arrive at a perfect version. Each new version reflects the changes in the thought and the life of the artist. Differences arise in the mood as well as in the setting, the surroundings in which the story takes place. In the first version Scanlan changes all of the descriptions of New York streets found in the original short story and replaces them with exact details on Chicago, the city to which he moves in 1986. The Brussels publication has then been given back New York as the literary map and surroundings, but here the year is 1989. In the original story the protagonist Bartleby looks

out the window of his office, at a brick wall. The countless analyses on Melville's short story from 1853 – ranging from “the first existential and absurdist narrative in American literature” to “one of the first examples of ‘corporate discontent’” – could fill a small library. On one particular day, for no evident reason, Melville's copyist refuses to carry out any further assignments. His now classic pronouncement with this act of insubordination is “I would prefer not to.”<sup>10</sup>

At [www.thingsthatfall.com](http://www.thingsthatfall.com) yet another text adaptation by Joe Scanlan can be found: *Lament for the Makers*. In a brief introduction we come to know more about the author William Dunbar (ca.1460 – ca.1513). This Scottish poet and Franciscan monk connected with the royal court preferred to call his poems ballads and to consider himself a maker rather than a poet. Dunbar's original work is an elegy dedicated to all of the prominent writers who preceded him. In the new version, an update in computer language, Joe Scanlan incorporates his own influences: the leading architects and designers of the twentieth century. Midway through the work he (re)writes:

The Constructivists could not prevail,  
Slain with a shower of mortal hail,  
Even the Futurists could not flee-  
*Fear of death unsettles me.*

It claimed the Werkstätte Viennese,  
And brought De Stijl to its knees,  
Truer forms will never be-  
*Fear of death unsettles me.*

Anni Albers, reft above,  
That did so lively weave in love,  
So short, so quick, of shuttle she-  
*Fear of death unsettles me.*

Among the products offered at [www.thingsthatfall.com](http://www.thingsthatfall.com) is the *Nesting Bookcase*, perhaps the very *pièce de résistance* of all Scanlan's work to date. He has been producing the wooden bookcase/object since 1989. It may be his only serial design, though small variations and slightly different versions have come about over the years and with successive trends. At the same time, each new bookcase is unique. On this subject Michael Newman has written the

fascinating essay 'Joe Scanlan's Nesting Bookcase: Duchamp, The Eameses and the Impossibility of Disappearing'. It can be found at the back of the first book produced by Scanlan's publishing company Commerce. The publication provides a ten-year survey of his *Nesting Bookcase*. Both the graphic design of the cover and the subtitle refer to the house style of *October*, an 'authoritative' art-historical magazine.<sup>11</sup>

Over the past few months – and partly owing to the effects of initial orders on the website – Joe Scanlan has been contemplating the option of not simply continuing to develop new designs and new materials for his *Nesting Bookcase*. Interested buyers can now indicate a preference for a particular period or model, from as early as 1989: “ (...) old school, threaded insert with collar, orthagonal, delta wing, thread strap, loop strap, plastic . . . so many choices.” In a highly elucidating manner, he adds, “What I like about this idea is that it is one small way that a micro-producer like myself can distinguish his commercial practice from the corporations. It is a way to make the fact that I need other people's money in exchange for what I make in order to live more personal, more particular, more political.”<sup>12</sup>

On initial consideration Scanlan's latest decision seems to be based on the old functionalist saying 'less is more', but nothing could be farther from the truth. During the past eight years he has endeavored to propagate his ideas by way of an overt and, at times, fairly aggressive distribution strategy. The reasoning behind this has always been: the best way to circulate an idea consists of actually distributing an object, the representation of an idea. This strategy has worked well – several hundred copies of the *Nesting Bookcase* have already been produced by him, but it requires a great deal of time and energy to manufacture a sufficient number of copies and then, personally, to distribute them far and wide. That is why the artist is left with less time and energy for the development of new ideas.

In keeping with the conceptual tradition, he is now shifting to the articulation of a new proposal injected with a strong dose of 'pop art'. What would happen if he were to develop as many ideas as possible in as short a time as possible? Then, perhaps, an idea would become successful in a different way, namely as a unique prototype. For it no longer needs to circulate literally, as a physical object. The idea alone is enough and serves as potential for objects to come.

To what sort of solo exhibition would this provocative and astute reasoning lead? And following this line of thought, how would it affect the prospects of the museum of contemporary art and, more specifically, the *Département des Aigles - Section XXI siècle*? Perhaps the exhibition space would then become a literal *showroom*, filled with as many ideas as possible, a marketplace for ideas where only the 'best' idea wins: things that fall. Beneath the impudence of Scanlan's statements lie consistently clear, substantial and obstinate (ideas for) 'designs'. In his body of work the critical, metaphorical and practical components form a coherent whole. He defends the individual position of the artist, as well

as the necessity and self-evidence that his ideas must have in order to determine value. There is moreover a 'consistent slowness' in the pace at which he wishes to send his contrivances into the world. Ultimately Agnes Martin and On Kawara are more valuable role models than their celebrated countryman Andy Warhol.<sup>13</sup> On being asked what gives political meaning to his work in general, Joe Scanlan answers, "Skepticism on the one hand, and humor (absurdity) on the other, both of which are rooted in individualism. We live in a time of competing belief systems, but with no room for skeptics. Belief systems are not only blind to contradiction and deaf to doubt, they are social structures bound by common values and thus averse to individualism. In any system, be it religious or cultural or economic, the end of individualism is the end of dissent, and the end of dissent is the end of progress. I want as little as possible to do with this kind of peer pressure, this kind of group restraint."<sup>14</sup>

Let us go back to the layout of San Francisco, or to be more precise, to the complexity and richness of 'grid' systems and compositions. The many small workshops and stores scattered throughout the city have both metaphorical and practical value as production models. Flying (figuratively this time) from the West to the East Coast, we arrive at graphic designer Stuart Bailey's recently opened *Dexter Sinister – Just-In-Time Workshop & Occasional Bookstore* in New York. In an enlightening declaration of intent, he reports that the production of printed matter still follows established lines: from the writing of the manuscript, to the design, then to the production and finally the distribution of a book. Throughout the chain of production, one specialist takes over where another stops. Essentially, this is no different from the assembly line at the start of the twentieth century, from the first real mass production of automobiles in Henry Ford's factory. The 'Just-In-Time' model constitutes an alternative to this and was developed, still according to Stuart Bailey, by Toyota in Japan during the 1950s. The assembly model requires space, a supply of parts and many specialists along the line. The 'Just-In-Time' model involves the parallel production of parts, an infrastructure based on communication, demand and supply. Smaller stocks are formed, thereby allowing for a quicker response to change. Adjustments can be carried out by more and less specialized personnel.<sup>15</sup> *Dexter Sinister*, situated in a basement on Ludlow Street, corresponds to the Japanese model and is a 'Just-In-Time' workshop and bookstore: production and distribution take place at one and the same location. With this Stuart Bailey wishes to define an alternative to the economic models that are generally based on overproduction, on large scales and almost automatically resulting surplus. There may not be many differences between a manual silkscreen press, a stencil machine and a laser printer. Today anyone who has a good software program can put together a book; with a cell phone and an internet connection, you can be your own publisher. There are internet printing companies where one or five copies of a book can be ordered. Two days later this arrives on

your doorstep. In his announcement Stuart Bailey borrows, from Norman Potter's *Models & Constructs*, a paragraph that may not be out of place as a conclusion to this article: "There are many roles for your own future workshops, and I hope you will occupy them with devotion, intelligence, and high good humour. Good luck with your inheritance!"

Phillip van den Bossche

translation: Beth O'Brien

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<sup>1</sup> The title is an amalgamation of and an addition to Daniel Buren's phrase 'the unspeakable compromise of the portable work of art' from 1971 and the title of the exhibition on conceptual art *reconsidering the object of art*, held in Los Angeles in 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Albers, Anni, *On Weaving*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1965, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> [www.clui.org](http://www.clui.org)

<sup>4</sup> The bed is delivered unfinished, and can remain that way if you wish. Otherwise, a clear varnish or low-lustre oil finish is recommended - preferably two coats - with a light sanding (220 grit) in between. The bed can also be finished with 'milk paint,' a rich, flat, and extremely durable paint used by the American Shaker communities. For the complete text, see:

[www.thingsthatfall.com/sleep.php](http://www.thingsthatfall.com/sleep.php)

<sup>5</sup> It is almost impossible, within the Parisian context of the solo exhibition, not to think of the motion-picture film *La Haine* from 1995. The film tells the story of a man who falls from the fiftieth floor of an apartment building and, during his fall, gives himself courage with each floor: "*Jusqu'ici tout va bien, jusqu'ici tout va bien, jusqu'ici tout va bien... L'important c'est pas la chute, c'est l'atterrissage.*"

<sup>6</sup> [www.galeriechezvalentin.com/fr/expositions/2005/scanlan](http://www.galeriechezvalentin.com/fr/expositions/2005/scanlan)

<sup>7</sup> Quote from an e-mail written by Joe Scanlan, dated February 8, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Quote from an e-mail written by Joe Scanlan, dated January 4, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> The first version of *The Window Stunt* was published in: Heynen, Julian, *Joe Scanlan*, Krefeld: Krefelder Kunstmuseen, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> For a good introduction to Melville's story, see:

[www.gradesaver.com/classicnotes/titles/bartleby](http://www.gradesaver.com/classicnotes/titles/bartleby)

<sup>11</sup> The original title of the publication is *October: The Second Decade, 1986–1996*. Joe Scanlan's *Commerce 1* was given the title *Nesting Bookcase: The First Decade, 1989-99*. Above the title stands the row of words that leave little to the imagination: Art, Theory, Criticism, Politics.

<sup>12</sup> Quote from an e-mail written by Joe Scanlan, dated June 20, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> See "THE BEST: A Manifesto" signed by Joe Scanlan, Donelle Woolford en Steve Canal Jones at [www.thingsthatfall.com/manifesto.php](http://www.thingsthatfall.com/manifesto.php).

<sup>14</sup> Statement made by Joe Scanlan in an interview with Anaïd Demir for *Le Journal des Arts*, July 2005, see [www.thingsthatfall.com/utopias.php](http://www.thingsthatfall.com/utopias.php).

<sup>15</sup> See [www.dextersinister.org](http://www.dextersinister.org)